

Kirov Saga



Book XIV in the Kirov Series

Hammer of GOD

*The war opens a dangerous new front in this continuing
Alternate History of WWII by:*

John Schettler



Kirov Saga:
Hammer Of God

By

John Schettler

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MAP LINK: <http://www.writingshop.ws/html/k-14-maps.html>

Author's Note:

For readers who might be dropping in without having taken the journey here from book one in the *Kirov Series*, this is the story of a Russian modern day battlecruiser displaced in time to the 1940s and embroiled in WWII. Their actions over the many episodes have so fractured the history, that they now find themselves in an alternate retelling of those events. In places the history is remarkably true to what it once was, in others badly cracked and markedly different. Therefore, events in this account of WWII have changed. Operations have been spawned that never happened, like the German attack on Gibraltar, and others will be cancelled and may never occur, like Operation Torch. And even if some events here do ring true as they happened before, the dates of those campaigns may be changed.

This alternate history began in Book 9 of the series, entitled *Altered States*, and you would do well to at least back step and begin your journey there if you are interested in the period June 1940 to January 1 1941, which is covered in books 9 through 11 in the series. That time encompasses action in the North Atlantic, the battle of Britain, German plans and decisions regarding Operations Seelöwe and Felix, the action against the French fleet at Mers-el-Kebir and Dakar, and other events in Siberia that serve as foundations for things that will occur later in the series.

Three Kings was a “bridge novel” leading you into 1941 with the British Operation Compass and the coming of Rommel and his Afrika Korps. But three timely reinforcements arrive for Britain—from most unexpected places! In *Grand Alliance* those forces join the action on land and sea in two major engagements to stem the Axis tide. *Hammer of God* now takes us to the decisive months leading up to the German attack on Soviet Russia, and the war now takes a decided new turn into the ancient lands of the Middle East. Here two vital campaigns were fought in Iraq and Syria to secure Britain’s tenuous position in Egypt, only this time the Germans have a few surprises of their own as another thread of Fedorov’s beloved history begins to unwind.

-J. Schettler

Part I

Strokes of Heaven

“The hardest strokes of heaven fall in history upon those who imagine that they can control things in a sovereign manner, playing providence not only for themselves but for the far future—reaching out into the future with the wrong kind of farsightedness, and gambling on a lot of risky calculations in which there must never be a single mistake.”

English Historian Sir Herbert Butterfield

Chapter 1

Fedorov had been dreading the meeting in Alexandria, but the presence of Admirals Tovey and Cunningham, and the support of both General O'Connor and Brigadier Kinlan had conspired to make it much more bearable. They had come to initiate a new member into the grey priesthood of the knowing—those who grasped the full truth concerning *Kirov* and the newly arrived 7th Brigade. The ability to speak directly to Wavell in Russian eased the language barrier, but it was still difficult to simply come out with the story of all that had happened in the desert.

Wavell displayed the expected surprise and disbelief, but here he had Admirals, Generals and Captains off strange Russian ships in front of him, and they all held fast to the same belief. Beyond that, he knew very well that he had no armored force in the southern desert. It had been all he could do to send a single battalion from the 6th Australian Division there to cover Siwa and try to scout out the enemy position at Giarabub. In the end, the argument that had finally won him over was the simple fact of Rommel's retreat. The Germans had been set to roll in on his last strategic reserve in theatre, the 2nd New Zealand Infantry Division. The battle had been joined, and he had also sent the Carpathian Brigade in to try and backstop the position at Bir el Khamsa. As the first reports of the action came in, he soon received an urgent communication from O'Connor.

“Presently on the enemy flank and with good force in hand. I propose to attack at dawn. The lack of details had proved to be most aggravating, and Wavell could not imagine what O'Connor was talking about. What force might he have scraped up that could threaten the enemy flank? That said, the intrepid O'Connor had appeared like a mad Jinn on the blood red dawn, and something had come surging out of the southern desert with a vengeance. It had struck the enemy like the Hammer of God, and sent the entire German Afrika Korps reeling with shock, and Wavell could not argue with that result. By the time he had thought to get forward to see what was happening, he had a message in hand that an urgent meeting had been called in Alexandria.

There he heard the combined testimony of all these other respected officers, all serious minded men. Tovey and Cunningham were fresh from battle at sea, and here before him now was a man he had no knowledge of whatsoever, Brigadier Kinlan. There he stood, his odd uniform soiled by the desert, looking like a sensible, competent British serving officer—from a distant future that Wavell could not even begin to imagine.

Six hours later he was a different man.

They had gone over everything together, and then another strange gentlemen was introduced, and Director Kamenski had a long, quiet chat with Wavell. This moment had come to them all, each man present. They had all suffered the same shock, the wrenching disorientation, the disbelief. Yet they had all come to accept their fate in time. They were now believers.

It wasn't until the discussion turned to plans and strategy that Wavell could even begin to gather his thoughts. The realization finally struck him like that same Hammer of God, but he suddenly realized that he had that hammer in his own strong hand now, and could wield the most powerful weapon any man had ever been given in this world. So he put aside all his shock and disbelief and pressed his thoughts on what they might now achieve with this godsend.

"Gentlemen," he said. "What, then, do we propose to do? And how in the world are we to communicate all this to our government? I have been in receipt of cables from the Prime Minister every other day. If he has not already been informed, he will want a summation of the current situation in the Western Desert from me forthwith. What in the world am I to tell him? Just last week I was stressing the lack of transport and the complete inadequacy of our current armored forces. He was proposing every sort of counter to the enemy advance, right down to naval landings on the coast road behind Rommel's lines. In short, he had no effective understanding of what we were facing here, and could not imagine why we were not able to prevent Rommel's advance. He insisted we chop off the turtle's neck, as he put things."

"Well," Admiral Tovey smiled. "It seems you have done exactly that. The details may not be important—only the result. The Prime Minister will certainly take heart in knowing we've set Rommel back on his heel. But I cannot imagine that we can continue on without him knowing what has happened here. Captain Fedorov has stressed the grave importance of

restricting the knowledge we have shared with you, and I am in full agreement with that. But the Prime Minister must be informed. It is a hard hour, when we come to the realization that the world we are living in is not what we thought it was. It takes courage and time to stand up after that. Yet we need only focus our minds and hearts on one thing now—how can we prevail?”

“That will be the same question the enemy is asking,” said Cunningham. “They have seen the rockets fly, and smelled the burning steel. Though they may have no idea what really befell them, both at sea and on land, they will still be set on finding a way to redress that situation.”

“So we must be resolute,” said Tovey, “and we must press our advantage to the fullest while we can. The support of both Admiral Volsky, Miss Fairchild, and Brigadier Kinlan has been decisive. We have turned the enemy back on both fronts, but this struggle is far from over.”

Wavell nodded gravely as he spoke up now. “As I am in regular communication with the Prime Minister, perhaps I can handle the matter of his briefing. But realize that what happens to that information after it is disclosed will not be a matter I can control.”

“That is the dilemma,” said Fedorov after he heard the translation. “The more this knowledge spreads, the greater the chance that it will act like a poison in this world. It must be restricted, the most closely guarded secret of the war. Surely a man like Churchill can understand that.”

“I believe he will,” said Wavell. “In the short run he is likely to send Foreign Secretary Eden here to investigate and report. I can’t see how we can avoid his knowing about all of this. And what about the War Cabinet? The list goes on and on. Who do we include in this little club, and who is to be shut out?”

“Perhaps it would be best if we arrange a meeting with Churchill here, away from the hubbub of the War Cabinet and the politics involved,” said Tovey. “Might we persuade him to come out and have a look around himself?”

“I would be delighted to make the invitation,” said Wavell, “and I suppose if we all put our names to it, with the strongest possible request that he come here, good old Winston will likely be so curious as to what this is all about that he would swim here, if he couldn’t fly.”

That brought a much needed round of laughter, though it was short-lived

when Wavell revealed the most recent message he had received from Churchill. “More than a simple communication, this is a directive, dated Feb 14, 1941. The Prime Minister stresses the importance of taking every advantage of our recent victory, and states that every effort must be made to cut the enemy’s lines of communications by sea to North Africa.”

“He had undoubtedly heard the results of our recent battle,” said Tovey, “though he has not yet received my full report. I have received that directive as well, and Mister Churchill seems adamant that we are to mount the most aggressive naval campaign possible. The Admiralty wants us to bombard Tripoli, and that failing, to block the harbor by sinking a ship.”

“That was undoubtedly Admiral Pound’s suggestion,” said Cunningham. “Hasn’t he learned of the condition of my fleet?”

“He knows we lost *Queen Elizabeth*, and that *Malaya* is damaged,” said Tovey. “Yet he still strongly suggests that every effort must be made, and went so far as to say that any losses must be accepted to achieve this aim—the strangulation of enemy supply routes to North Africa—even if we lose another battleship. They suggest we should commit *Warspite* to the task.”

“That is out of the question,” said Cunningham, and Tovey was quick to agree.

“I will inform them of the true condition of *Malaya*,” he said. “The ship is holed beneath the water line, and badly beaten up. I doubt it will be serviceable for at least a year, and that leaves only *Invincible* and *Warspite* available until I can move new forces here from Somerville, though they’ll take some time getting round the cape.”

“Yes? Well my latest communication from Churchill is most alarming. He is now proposing to try and kill two birds with a single stone by sending both *Rodney* and *Nelson* through the Straits of Gibraltar as escorts for a convoy of reserve tanks for Wavell.”

“Through the straits?”

“Quite so. The Admiralty seems to think the recent engagement has the enemy in as bad a condition as we are. They believe the convoy has a good chance of winning through—tiger convoy, or so the Prime Minister is now calling it.”

“Well, the enemy battleships may be in the shipyards of Toulon for the moment, and taking repairs, but don’t they realize the German still have U-boats? Somerville says he tried to slip a fast destroyer through and it never

came back. Now *Rodney* and *Nelson* are fine ships, but at a little over twenty knots top speed, they will make fine targets in those constricted waters.”

“I’m afraid this is probably my fault,” said Wavell. “I was bellyaching to the Prime Minister over our lack of serviceable tanks here, and their importance in any operation of any consequence. He was none too happy about our inability to send any meaningful reinforcement of Greece.”

“That will be on my plate,” said Tovey. “Given the ferocity of the engagements we have recently fought, it should not be difficult to explain the consequences we would have faced in losing a division at sea. We’ve beaten the enemy off for now, but at significant cost. While the Italians have withdrawn to La Spezia for the moment to lick their wounds, and the Germans and French to Toulon and Taranto, they are nonetheless capable of posing a serious challenge, and the enemy air superiority in the Central Mediterranean makes any move as the Prime Minister suggests a rash endeavor.”

“Yes? Well he will consider every enemy convoy that gets through to be a serious naval failure,” said Cunningham. “It says as much in his directive. He seems convinced the deck armor on the *Nelson* class is impervious to the bombs delivered by German *Stukas*.”

“Well I have made arrangements to get us more help here,” said Tovey. “If we are to have any chance of doing what the Prime Minister directs concerning Tripoli, then we’ll need aircraft carriers first. The rocket defense put up by our friends from tomorrow was formidable, but German planes come much cheaper than the missiles they’ll be forced to use if we rely on them too often. I’ve already ordered *Glorious* to join us with more fighters, and she is en-route. I’ll settle the matter of *Rodney* and *Nelson* as soon as I can communicate with Somerville. We still have *Richelieu* and *Jean Bart* to worry about at Casablanca, and if we take those battleships he’ll have only *Valiant*. The battlecruiser squadron is getting back on its feet after that beating we took up north, so we may be able to pull that off if I send Somerville a battlecruiser. The Prime Minister will have to be patient.”

“Patient?” said Wavell. “He’ll be like a bulldog with a rope in his mouth, and this directive will not be the last. His most recent communication informs me the Americans have taken up patrols in the Denmark Strait zone, and that this should relieve our concerns in the North Atlantic.”

“True, but he drafted that some weeks ago, before having the information

we are now preparing to disclose,” said Tovey. “Once he sees the big picture, then we can settle things down to a real plan.”

“Yes,” said Wavell. “The disintegration of 2nd Armored on the retreat east was a mystery to him. He simply has no conception of the conditions here, and how unreliable our equipment is.”

“It would seem that my brigade can redress that,” said Kinlan.

“Well you are a most welcome knight at our round table here,” said Wavell. “Arthur has come back from Avalon at the eleventh hour. Yet knowing Churchill, the moment he learns we have the services of Brigadier Kinlan, he will stop at nothing to put them to good use.”

“We are more than willing to fight,” said Kinlan. “While I have no doubts about my brigade, and what it can accomplish, realize our power is limited. I’ve tallied the ammunition expended in this surprise attack we made at Bir el Khamsa. We used about ten percent of our available main gun rounds for heavy tanks and artillery. For the moment, then, we remain very potent, but I’m told the Germans are reinforcing their position even as we speak, which is probably why the higher-ups are adamant we choke off their sea lanes.”

“Intelligence we’ve received indicated they are moving another motorized infantry division and two other brigade groups,” said Wavell. “We also believe that at least two other units are scheduled for deployment here, a mountain infantry division and another Panzer division. Mister Churchill proposes we do everything in our power to stop this buildup. He directs us to use the Glen Ship infantry carriers set aside for the Rhodes operation to land commando units on the coastal road to interdict enemy land convoys. He even suggests that landing a few tanks and letting them ‘rip their way along the coast’ as he put it, to inflict damage far exceeding their own value. And once he learns of Brigadier Kinlan’s force his imagination will be further fired. I would not be surprised to find he wishes us to launch an immediate attack aimed at destroying the Afrika Korps altogether, and capturing Tripoli outright! Well, it will be at least a month before I can effectively occupy Cyrenaica and take Benghazi from the Italians. At the moment I have the ANZAC forces committed to that task, but it will take time.”

“And Libya is only one front in this theater,” said Fedorov. “You’ll soon have to consider Crete, Syria, Iraq and even Iran.”

“So we’ll simply have to set our priorities and use whatever force we

have as best we can.” Wavell folded his arms, the burden of facing threats on every flank had been wearing on him for some time now. He knew that as soon as Churchill found out what they all knew, he would leap right in as a newly appointed general and take charge with one directive after another, and he did not believe the Prime Minister fully appreciated the military realities of his situation.

There was a moment of silence as they considered that, then O’Connor asked the same question that Wavell had opened with.

“And this puts the whole matter of disclosure firmly on the table again. So what do we do now, gentlemen?”

Chapter 2

Fedorov took advantage of the pause, clearing his voice to add a comment. “Excuse me, Generals and Admirals,” he began. “I know the opinion of a Russian sea Captain may not count for much here, but I am no ordinary Captain.” Volsky and Kamenski smiled as Fedorov continued, and just as they expected, he began to relate facts he knew from the history.

“The effort to bombard Tripoli was successful in the history I know. No British ships were lost, but that said, interdiction by sea had no real effect on the Axis supply effort. Over ninety percent of their convoys continued to get through for the next year. In fact, it was only the limited capacity of Tripoli that restricted their buildup, and they will soon realize this and begin to seek alternatives. This could be why the Italians have decided to hold out at Benghazi, and I expect they will soon consider Tunis, Bizerte, or even direct coastal landings if need presses them, and it will. It was difficult for the Germans to supply the two divisions Rommel already has, and it will be even more difficult trying to provide for any new troops. Therein lies a brief advantage. Yes, it will take time to re-occupy the lost ground and take Benghazi, but I believe that must be your first priority. As to the question of interdicting Tripoli, remember you have more than *Warspite* and *Invincible* here. My ship can assist, and at considerable range.” He looked at Admiral Volsky now, wondering if he should say anything of *Kazan*, but decided to leave that to the Admiral.

“While I do not believe our missiles would be a good choice against enemy merchant ships, we can definitely assist any naval interdiction effort. Yet I must caution you that this could again precipitate another major engagement, and the enemy seems to have air superiority in the Central Mediterranean.”

“They do,” said Tovey. “This is why I’ve ordered in more carrier support. It can’t all be laid on you, Admiral Volsky, and I thank you, Captain Fedorov, for the benefit of your... foresight concerning these events. In my opinion we are at a most delicate juncture here. It seems we have decided that Mister Churchill can no longer be kept in the dark, and that will have to be our next move. We must have our meeting with the Prime Minister and see if

we can talk some sense into him. Once he is led to see the elephant, then he must also be convinced that the resources we have must be carefully applied. Brigadier Kinlan's force needs support. It cannot act alone in a vacuum any more than your ship can, Admiral Volsky. This will take careful planning."

"I agree," said Wavell. "Until I have the troops in theater to contemplate an offensive, our best and only play is to stand on the ground we've lately won. I've moved the Aussies to invest and take Benghazi, but for the moment that leaves me only the 2nd New Zealand Division and Brigadier Kinlan's force to watch Rommel's buildup at Agheila and Mersa Brega. The 7th Australian Division is in reserve, but I have a feeling it will be needed elsewhere. As for the Germans, it should take them some time, but they'll soon learn we are not as strong as they believe, and eventually they will contemplate a move east again. So I'm recalling the 4th Indian Division from East Africa, and looking into getting a South African Division, but we have a good deal on our hands now, and the butter is spread fairly thin."

"We've worked out a possible plan to support and supply the new 7th Brigade," said O'Connor. "General Kinlan suggests we move water, food and fuel to Siwa. From there his own support columns can take over, and he proposes to move on our southern flank."

"But the Italians still have Giarabub," said Wavell, "and they show no signs of leaving."

"Because they have yet to see my tanks," said Kinlan. "But I think I can easily persuade them to yield the place. I already have a battalion of light infantry at Siwa to reinforce your Australian cavalry reconnaissance unit. We've discovered the Italians have reinforced Giarabub, so I propose to take it with my brigade at once. I'll then move west, drawing supplies from depots established at these oasis sites. This will serve two purposes. First off, my troops will always be on the enemy southern flank. Any move they make east will have to consider the presence of my brigade as a foil on their exposed right flank, and I think they will remember what happened at Bir el Khamsa. This also has another advantage, because operating in this manner limits the exposure of my force to other units, and that helps us keep this genie in the bottle."

"But surely the army knows something of you already," said Wavell.

"We never got close enough to your left flank at Bir el Khamsa for other units to really get a good look at us. After that, I withdrew south to regroup

and consider the matter of Giarabub.”

“That will only go so far,” said Wavell. “Rumors are already spreading. The boys know we’ve just given Rommel a good pasting. Talk is that we’ve new armor, which was some surprise to me. The men working those docks out there also know damn well what comes and goes. We haven’t received so much as a single new tank for weeks.”

“We’ve thought about that,” said O’Connor. “We can say the unit was moved in piecemeal, from other Red Sea ports, or the Sudan, and then moved west through Fafarah Oasis.”

“Clever, but anyone who took the time would get to the bottom of that.”

“True, but that is where we come in. Discouraging others from digging up what amounts to top secret troop movements should not be difficult for us. It’s a big world, and a big war. A thousand things happen out there every day, and I daresay that most of them are secret, known only to those that take part in the operation. This is no different. If anyone gets uppity, then we can tamp that down with a secrecy order.”

“But we can’t keep Brigadier Kinlan’s force down south indefinitely. What will we tell the army when a real bar fight begins out here again? Rommel will be back at us in a few weeks time, a month at the most.”

“We tell them the 7th is back—a new brigade formed and delivered as I described. That’s all they need to know.” O’Connor was in full agreement with Fedorov, and eager to get back in the field with those marvelous tanks as soon as possible. “I propose that I operate directly with General Kinlan, as a strong link to your overall command here, General Wavell.”

“Good enough,” said Wavell. “So unless the Prime Minister gets uppity when he realizes he never sent me this new brigade, we have the makings of a good plan there.”

“It’s clear that Churchill will have to be briefed,” said Tovey, “which is why we should see to that as soon as possible. The question is how do we get him here safely? Failing that, we shall have to meet with him in England, and we all have rather pressing duties here.”

“Takoradi,” said Cunningham. “In my jousting with Churchill over the order to bombard Tripoli, I suggested that Wellington bombers would do the job just as well, and save us a few ships. Could Mister Churchill fly to our base at Takoradi, and then sneak through on a Wellington?”

With Gibraltar lost, the air route to Egypt now began at the port of

Takoradi on the coast of Ghana. From there, planes would fly inland over central Africa to the Sudan, and the British had numerous bases established along that route. From Khartum, the last leg would fly north over friendly territory to Egypt.

“Yes,” said Tovey. “Takoradi. Let me draft the request, if you will, gentlemen. I’ll use the strongest possible wording, and then we can all sign in blood. My bet is that Churchill will be here soon enough, and then we can get on with these plans in earnest, because the enemy is also making plans, and we’ll have to keep our wits about us.”

“Yes, we will,” said Wavell. “We’ve Benghazi to take and hold, Rommel to watch. Beyond that I have the Golden Square and this rebellion in Iraq to worry about, and the situation of the Vichy French in Syria. The Prime Minister keeps nudging me in the ribs about Rhodes, and he’s still lashing me over the lack of support for Greece.”

“If I may, sir,” Fedorov spoke again. “I hate to add insult to injury, but Greece is a lost cause, as I argued earlier. No reinforcement of Greece could have made any difference there. It will be lost within the week, and Crete will soon follow.”

“Crete?” said Wavell. “I’ve received no hard intelligence on that, though I’ve certainly considered that the place is vulnerable.”

“In the history we know it was strongly attacked by German airborne forces, and barely lasted ten days before the order was given to evacuate. That was even with several brigades sent, and subsequently evacuated from Greece, already reinforcing the garrison there. You would not have that 2nd New Zealand Division in hand now if that had been done. Those troops are here, and not on Crete, and so the situation on the island is even more in jeopardy. Perhaps Mister Churchill’s thinking could be counseled by our knowledge of how this war once played out. This is not to say we are omniscient, only that we can provide a useful guidepost as to what the German war plan might soon be, and what their capabilities are. Yet we are speculating. Crete may be next on their list, but they are also certainly planning a major operation against Soviet Russia, or even Turkey.”

“Churchill will demand we hold Crete,” said Wavell.

“Unless he can be persuaded that it is a lost cause,” said Fedorov. “Could you move a full division there now? Even if you did that, the Germans would prevail. They will have three divisions for immediate use, two airborne and

one mountain division to come by sea. Your Royal Navy had something to say about their arrival schedule, but we don't know what will happen this time around. We could make the effort, but the island held for only ten days, and I believe that will be the most likely outcome, no matter what we do."

"We still have good inventory on our air defense missiles." Elena Fairchild had been listening closely, assessing the situation, but now she spoke for the first time. "We could hamper the air drop by targeting the transport planes. Would that help?"

Fedorov looked over his shoulder, speaking in Russian quickly to Nikolin, who translated.

"My Captain asks exactly how many Surface to Air missiles you still have?"

Fairchild had the details from MacRae before she left for this meeting, and was not shy about revealing them. "We have 26 Aster-30 and another 80 Aster-15 remaining. That's 106 missiles."

"And it would take a very good bite out of the enemy air operation, but the troops will be delivered by no less than 500 JU-52 transport planes. There will also be several hundred other planes in support, Ju-87s, Bf-109s, Bf-110s, He-111s and Do-17s. The Germans assembled over 1100 planes for this operation. Even if you used every missile you had, they would still have over ninety percent of that left."

"A rather grim assessment," said Tovey.

"Air power," said Volsky. "That has long been my main concern here. I believe we can prevail at sea, but the enemy air power is their real strength."

"Well," said Tovey. "Our best course of action is to see to this business with Churchill first. He'll have to weigh in on any further plans we make here, particularly anything in regards to Crete. You raise a good point, Captain Fedorov."

"We'll keep our ears to the ground on that situation," said Wavell. "Churchill may already know more on that than we think. He has been feeding me Enigma decrypts. The information is spotty—we don't get complete decrypts of these messages—but it does suggest a German plan is in the offing for Crete."

"General," said Fedorov. "I have a device in my cabin that can read the German enigma code to the letter. If you would entrust me with those messages, I can decode them reliably."

Wavell raised an eyebrow at that. "You can decode them?"

"Yes. The device I have was based on the work of your own Bletchley Park, except I have the benefit of their entire wartime effort in that regard, and all the work that followed it. I have already used it to decode German fleet orders earlier in the Atlantic. I can do the same now regarding their intentions here."

"So you've stolen our Mister Turing's thunder," said Tovey with a smile. "He would be most gratified to learn that."

"It may not be wise that he should ever know," said Fedorov. "It might impede his own effort at decryption, and that could cause ... complications. Do you see how knowledge of our real identity and capabilities is dangerous? What if Mister Turing simply suggests that I lend him my device? Then he would never do the work that allows that device to even function! We face a paradox in that, and there is a darkness there that I would not like to contemplate at the moment."

"Paradox, paradox," said Director Kamenski. "Your warning is well given, Mister Fedorov. Every disclosure we make, every bit of knowledge we let slip, every missile and round we fire is ripping at the history we once knew, and shredding it. I daresay Mother Time is not happy about this, and there will be consequences, complications as you put it. We have already seen what our earlier interventions have done to this world. Yet we are here! The temptation to try to act, and control the course of events, is overwhelming. Yet we must be very careful. It was your own British historian, a Mister Butterfield, that put this very well when he said: 'The hardest strokes of heaven fall in history upon those who imagine that they can control things.' Mister Fedorov is correct. We are not omniscient, and we must proceed with caution and careful planning here. For mistakes are easily made, and in that we may reap the whirlwind of our own doom."

Chapter 3

Tovey's message to Churchill was pointed enough to create a sense of urgency, yet with a hint of mystery that aimed to hook the Prime Minister's curiosity. After a full report on the naval engagements recently fought, and the current situation, he strongly urged that the planned "Tiger" convoy not attempt to transit the Mediterranean. This allowed him to take up the matter of Wavell's need for armor, and he indicated a most startling development had occurred that was directly related to the victory achieved in the Western Desert, and one that required the Prime Minister's immediate personal attention—a matter of the highest level of secrecy.

Churchill sat with that for some time, his eye straying over the words even as he held the image of Tovey himself in his mind. *"...a discovery of the greatest importance in the southern desert..."*

What could that possibly be about? And I'm urged to come forthwith to witness this development personally, as no description would be adequate or advisable given the supreme importance of this moment in the history of our nation. Laying it on a bit thick, isn't he? Just who was supposed to be the Prime Minister here? In one breath this man dismisses my plan for the Tiger convoy, gives brief lip service to the need to interdict Tripoli, and then summarily summons me to a secret meeting in Egypt concerning this discovery. What, have they been raiding ancient ruins and tombs in Luxor? Yet there were the signatures lined up in endorsement, Wavell, O'Connor, Cunningham, Tovey and two others that he did not recognize, a man named Volsky and another named Fairchild. That was a good family name, but he could think of no one in the current government in any position that mattered with that name, but this only added to the mystery at the heart of the Admiral's message.

He gave the matter some thought, reading over the proposed travel itinerary with some interest. It spoke to his youth, hopping from one wild desert airstrip to the next as he leapfrogged across Africa. He had first seen Egypt and Sudan as a very young man of 24 years. There he had served in the 21st Lancers under Kitchener and seen the wonders of the ruins at Luxor. This intimation of some new discovery in the southern desert of Egypt tugged

at him, and fired his imagination, just as Tovey had intended. Yet what could be there that was of any importance to the fate of the nation as Tovey implied? It simply made no sense. He had a mind to summon Tovey home at once, but his eye kept straying over all the other signatures.

The message had been deemed so secret that it could not be transmitted over normal channels. It had been flown all the way to England on a much needed Wellington bomber, and Tovey suggested that, on the return leg, two or three more might make the journey to Egypt in compensation. And as if to head off Churchill's first inclination to send a man like Foreign Secretary Eden in his place, the message stressed that the nature of discovery was so volatile, and of such weighty importance, that no one other than himself could be privy to the matter—not the war cabinet, nor any other minister of the government, not the Admiralty, nor Michael and his archangels. While that seemed completely preposterous, it nonetheless appealed to his ego on one level.

He took a long look around the stuffy confines of his war room office, and the matter was settled. He was determined to go and see what was brewing in Egypt for himself. After all, it was the central front in the war insofar as England was concerned. If nothing else, he would learn much about the real situation there, and be able to get a grip on the necks of all his senior commanders and get them marching in the direction he wanted.

The journey was every bit as exciting as it was arduous, though no mention was made of it at home. Churchill's schedule was made up as always, and a list of fictional meetings was posted to make everything seem as though he was there and about his business as usual. He determined to fly first to Britain's newly won Atlantic outposts in the Canary and Cape Verde Islands, and have a brief chat with Somerville regarding the situation in French West Africa and Casablanca. From there he would fly to Takoradi where a squadron of newly arrived *Hurricane* fighters were to accompany three Wellington bombers for the journey east across Africa. He eventually landed in Khartoum again, smelling the air of the Sudan for the first time in decades. It was a balm to his soul, and filled him with the energy that was often characteristic of his endeavors when he was fired up like this.

After a brief rest they flew on to Wadi Halfa, right on the Egyptian southern border with Sudan, where Churchill transferred to a smaller Blenheim for the final leg of his journey. It was only then that he was

informed the destination would not be Alexandria, but the distant desert oasis of Siwa.

The scene of the crime, he thought. What could be there that would be of any import? He knew there was a ruined old town there, and little more than bleached mud huts baked in the desert sun to an ochre hue. They were actually built from a material called Karshif, which was a mixture of salt and clay worked by the ancient Berbers. Palm trees graced the otherwise barren terrain, in stark contrast to the jagged remnants of stone ruins and dilapidated towers. When he finally got there, however, his eye would have no time to wander among the crumbling, roofless mud walls of the abandoned ruins about a solitary weathered hill. There, stretched out for what seemed to be miles on end, was the footprint of a large military formation.

Siwa had been the site of an ancient oracle at the temple of Amoun that dated from the 26th Dynasty. It was there that Alexander the Great came to be anointed “Son of Amoun,” and Protector of Egypt, but there was another man waiting to meet the Prime Minister who would rightfully usurp that title now, Brigadier General Kinlan. With him were the host of conspirators who had arranged this meeting, Wavell, O’Connor, and Admirals Tovey and Cunningham.

“Well met,” said Churchill, hefting his meager traveling bag. “Never has a man gone so far, with so little, for so many!” They all had a laugh at that, warmly shaking the Prime Minister’s hand. It was there, within that very hour, that Churchill’s life was forever changed, when he learned that the units assembled here had come an even greater distance to make this fateful rendezvous, from decades hence, brave soldiers from a distant future returned to Britain in her hour of greatest need. It was the most shocking and exhilarating moment of his life, but before that day ended, he had been helped up onto the massive metal back of a Challenger II, and taken for a thrilling ride through the assembled ranks of the 7th Brigade.

And after that, nothing was ever the same.

* * *

Amazingly, Churchill took to the notion of time travel with great interest and enthusiasm. He had been a long time reader, and was now a personal friend of the famous English science Fiction writer H. G. Wells. In fact, he

would later borrow the phrase “The Gathering Storm” for the title of his opening volume on the war, a phrase that was originally penned by Wells in his novel *War of the Worlds*. The Prime Minister was also much influenced by Wells, shaping several ideas about the relationship of the governed state to its citizens around the writer’s work.

“This is classic science fiction,” he said, “something that old H.G. Wells himself might have dreamt up with his Time Machine. I am not ashamed to say I have read every word that man has ever written, and could pass an exam on his fiction, but seeing his ideas take such a formidable shape, and at such a desperate juncture in this war, is most astonishing. What a mighty sword we have here in this brigade!”

Churchill had read Wells’ story, *The Land Ironclads*, in 1903 about 100 foot long machines equipped with remote controlled guns and able to carry troops of riflemen. “The captain . . . had look-out points at small ports all round the upper edge of the adjustable skirt of twelve-inch iron plating which protected the whole affair,” wrote Wells, and Churchill had embraced the concept as a hearty early proponent of tank development. Now he saw his Land Ironclad realized in a way that would have dazzled the mind of Wells himself.

“Who knows,” he said jubilantly. “Perhaps old HG. is one of your own, slipped through some other crack in time to lay out all these stories of days to come.”

After the exhilaration and amazement, the meeting then finally settled down to what must be done now with the gift of iron and steel sent to them from afar. Tovey was pleasantly surprised to learn that Churchill would not take much convincing.

“You were completely right to insist on this meeting here,” said Churchill, “and to keep this force segregated from the rank and file of Wavell’s army. I know in time that may change, but for the moment this must all be considered a matter of the most urgent and darkest secrecy. No one else must know of this, not even the war cabinet, or God forbid, anyone in Parliament. The knowledge is simply too shocking for the common man to hold in the palm of his hand. It would unhinge the world and haunt the dreams of men and women who would not understand it, even as it will likely fire my own imagination as to how we can put this mighty champion to the best good use.”

Wavell and O'Connor shared the plan they had devised, the reason the Brigade had assembled here at Siwa, and the operation soon to be launched against the Italians at Giarabub. Churchill agreed that it was a sound plan to place this mighty axe right at the edge of Rommel's neck.

"Let him try running half way across Cyrenaica again with his tanks," said Churchill. "With Brigadier Kinlan's force poised on his flank, we can chop off his head in one fell swoop! Now then... what this buys us in the short run, gentlemen, is a most needed currency, and ironically, that coin is time. I now see that my plan to try and get Wavell his tanks by pushing the Tiger convoy through the Mediterranean is not necessary. He'll still need them, but they can go round the cape with any other naval reinforcements Admiral Tovey might choose to assign here. This foil we can hold at the enemy's throat will keep him at bay while we get back on our feet here."

"My thoughts exactly," said Wavell, and he detailed the operation planned against Benghazi, and related other concerns concerning Crete, Iraq and Syria. "I had planned to send the 7th Australian Division out west with the rest of the ANZAC Corps, but given these ominous warning about Crete, and the rumblings of Rashid Ali and his golden Square rebellion in Iraq, I have second thoughts. We also have the Vichy French stronghold in Syria to worry about."

"We could not help Greece, and I have paid a political price for that," said Churchill, "but what about Crete? The Joint Intelligence believes that a combined sea and air attack is imminent there, and it must be stubbornly defended."

"That intelligence may be accurate," said Wavell, "but may I now introduce a new arrival to this conference, the Captain of the Russian ship that has been operating in league with our naval forces here, Anton Fedorov. He made some very telling points on this matter that I think you should hear."

Fedorov had travelled to the conference on the KA-40 with the others, but was meeting Churchill for the first time now, and was greatly awed by the moment. He had been relieved that Churchill saw the need to maintain the secrecy of this small group of confederates, now how could he convince Churchill not to take the wrong turns in the long war ahead that could waste time and cost lives. After some discussion of his ship, its operations in both the Atlantic and Mediterranean, they finally returned to the issue of Crete, and Fedorov shared the same warning he had given Wavell earlier.

“All the forces presently at Crete were reinforced by two full brigades of tough Australian infantry, veterans of the Greek campaign, yet they could not stop the German attack, and the whole affair lasted no more than ten days time. The Germans will also be emboldened by their success at Malta in making this attack.”

“But might they not be over emboldened by that same success,” said Churchill? “Isn’t this an opportunity for us to face down and come to grips with this elite German airborne force, and put our best troops on the line against it? Breaking it would surely give the Germans pause, for if we were to yield the island without a fight, the Germans would turn their glaring eyes on Cyprus next, and from there it is only one short airborne hop to Palestine.”

“In that you are correct, sir, and in the history I know, the forces committed to Crete made the Germans pay a very high price for the island, so high in fact that Hitler forbade the use of the airborne divisions in any other similar assault for the duration of the war.”

“Then that alone is sufficient reason for us to do everything possible to defend the place.”

“You could do so, but without the guarantee that the Germans would again sustain heavy losses. I must tell you now that we are not the only men that may be tampering with the course of these events. There are others, and one other man is of the gravest concern. While we stand here with you, he has instead chosen to ally himself with Hitler and his Nazi regime, and may be advising the Germans even as I offer this foresight in your planning. I am speaking of Ivan Volkov, and what I will tell you now will be every bit as shocking as the presence of General Kinlan’s brigade in this distant desert outpost.”

“Ivan Volkov? My God,” said Churchill. “Is anyone else coming to dinner? Out with it man, I want to hear everything you have to say.”

Part II

Uncertainty

“Certainty about prediction is an illusion. One thing that history keeps teaching us is that the future is full of surprises and outwits all our certitudes.”

Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.

Chapter 4

The door opened slowly and he entered, the dark shiny band of his hat catching the light as he strode boldly forward. The click of his boots on the hard wood floor echoed a confidence that also stiffened his posture, and hardened the lines of his shoulders. At his side he carried a ceremonial baton, with a jeweled handle of the finest leather and a metal tip. His uniform was immaculate, charcoal grey trimmed in black, and his breast was gilded with the gold and silver of medals.

He was born in the heart of the capital, Berlin, Fritz Erich Georg Eduard von Lewinski, the son of a Prussian general, but raised more by his aunt than his own parents. Unable to have children, she had all but adopted the young Fritz Erich as her own son, even to the point of giving him the name she had borrowed from another Prussian general when she married Georg von Manstein. And so the man who might have grown up to be General Lewinski, instead was christened General Erich von Manstein, and he soon distinguished himself as one of the most able and capable generals in the German Army.

The son of two generals served in the first war, taking part in the capture of the citadel of Namur, being wounded at the battle of the Masurian Lakes, and later was at Verdun and the Somme. He was so talented that he was one of the select group of only 4000 officers the German Army was permitted to retain after the First World War. When Heintz Guderian proposed dramatic new changes to German war doctrine, Manstein became a bridge between the old infantry tactics and the new emphasis on the slashing maneuver of armor. When then Chief of the Army General Staff, Ludwig Beck, opposed Guderian's ideas about tanks, Manstein proposed the creation of the Sturmgeschutz self-propelled assault gun to work in direct support with the infantry.

Many thought Manstein would soon take Beck's place, but the politics of OKW saw another man rise to that post, Franz Halder, and the incident embittered the relationship between Halder and Manstein for years to come. Yet as a skilled planner with a sharp strategic mind, Manstein was at the heart of all the early German successes at war. It was he who had guided the plan

for operations against Poland, and it was his decisive change to the German *Fall Gelb* plan to attack France that resulted in the swift defeat of that nation.

Halder was none too happy about that. He had drafted a plan for a sweeping attack in the north, but Manstein instead insisted that the armor could emerge from the unexpected axis of the Ardennes forest in a “sickle cut” behind the enemy that would unhinge the entire defense. Halder had Manstein transferred to get rid of the man and his ideas, but they prevailed when Hitler ordered a version of the plan that was much in accord with Manstein’s thinking. The result was now history.

It was no surprise then, as Hitler now contemplated an array of many options in the months ahead, that he summoned Manstein again, much to Halder’s chagrin.

“Greetings, General.” The dark eyes flashed with energy, but the handshake was cold, as if the man had no soul. Manstein never forgot that observation he soon made about Hitler, though he would nonetheless serve his country to the best of his considerable abilities. Now he wondered what this meeting was all about, and why he would be privileged to be granted an audience with the Führer himself. Hitler wasted no time getting to the reason.

“My generals in OKW are still debating the future course of the war,” he said flatly. “They are full of numbers and statistics, analyzing all the deployments of the enemy, but never seem to add those numbers up to the same sum. So I have called you here to listen to your thoughts on the matter. I was very impressed with the alterations you proposed for *Fall Gelb*. You have seen the plans for Barbarossa?”

“I have, my Führer.”

“Your thoughts?”

Manstein wanted to be careful here, as he knew his arch rival Halder most likely had his hand on the tiller where Barbarossa was concerned. “It is top heavy again,” he said with confidence. “The emphasis on taking Leningrad, and then Moscow, commits the bulk of our forces in Army Group North and the central attack.”

“Yet Leningrad is the seed bed of Bolshevism,” said Hitler.

“It was, but as we have seen the seeds have spread considerably. Taking Leningrad is merely theater. The same can be said for Moscow. We should instead focus on the south, moving north only after we have effectively joined with the forces of the Orenburg Federation.”

“Interesting,” said Hitler enthusiastically. “I am surprised to hear you say this, as you are presently assigned to 56th Panzer Korps in Army Group North. Your forces would be leading the way there.”

“Correct,” said Manstein, removing his cap and tucking it under his arm to reveal his closely cropped white hair. “While taking Leningrad removes a strong economic and production center from Kirov’s control, it would not be decisive in and of itself, and it would eventually pull the axis of our attack towards Moscow. Where else? While a prominent political center and symbol of Soviet power, its capture really affords us no military strategic value. That fruit is all in the south, in the Crimea and the Caucasus.”

“Precisely,” said Hitler with a smile. “Finally I hear a general I can agree with. My thought is to overwhelm the Soviets west of Moscow, and not commit the same mistake Napoleon made by trying to drive on the city itself.”

“Yet the Soviet Army may be more resilient than you believe, my Führer. It is my understanding that they have lately concluded an accord with the Free Siberian State. In this event, they now have all of Siberia in their back yard, a place to retreat if we press them hard.”

“Siberia? There is nothing there but endless forest and the backward Tartar cavalry the this Karpov has been mustering. They flit about in those obsolete Zeppelins, with no air force of any consequence. They are no threat.”

“Yet one of those obsolete Zeppelins bombed Berlin the other day, if the reports I received are true.”

Hitler gave him a dark look. “That was a fluke,” he said. “It will not be repeated. Yes, I have been told it was the Siberians—the same man who recently met with Sergei Kirov to seek his friendship. Rest assured, he will be held to account for that little stunt.” Hitler folded his arms, looking at the map table now as he often poured over it alone, his mind quietly moving his armies and ships about in the long hours of the night.

“And what of the British?” he suddenly changed his tack. “They are clearly beaten but remain as stubborn as that old Bulldog Churchill.”

“It was always my thinking that we should have proceeded with Operation Seelöwe,” said Manstein. “If we had done so, we would not be discussing the British any longer. They would already be under our heel.”

“That was Goering’s fault,” Hitler said with an obvious edge of bitterness.

“He promised me he would crush the RAF to allow for our invasion, and then never delivered.”

“That plan was flawed from the outset,” said Manstein.

“Oh? Then why did you not say so? Explain.”

“Our fighters could not range far enough over England to protect the bombers. This is why I believed the issue of air superiority should have been decided over the English Channel, during the actual invasion operation, and not over London, or god forbid, Birmingham.”

“They bombed Berlin,” said Hitler hotly. “I had to return the favor over London.”

“And we have seen the results. By that same logic we should be trying to bomb Novosibirsk to punish the Siberians, but we can both see how impractical that would be.” Manstein knew he was skirting a sore spot with the Führer now, but he was determined to speak his mind.

“All that said, the issue is moot. We lost our chance to eliminate Britain in 1940, and now the possibility of another front opening against us in the West remains a real possibility.”

“From the British? They have done nothing more than seize a few useless islands in the Atlantic. They have not even moved to try and put troops into Portugal, because they know I would crush them in a heartbeat if they tried.”

“Oh? With what, my Führer? It is my understanding that you have moved the heart of the Gibraltar garrison to North Africa, or that you are planning to do so.”

“16th Motorized Division remains there, along with the 76th Infantry division.”

“And if the British do land troops in Portugal? Would they be enough to stop them before they got established there? I think not. Why have you sent all these forces to North Africa?”

“Ask Raeder, and when you are done with him, you can then hear the same story from Paulus, Keitel, Jodl and even Halder. Raeder’s Mediterranean strategy has infected the thinking of everyone at OKW, even Halder. They insist I must deal with the British before I open a new front against Soviet Russia. Do you agree?”

“You will not knock Great Britain out of the war in North Africa. Look what happened to Rommel! The British were much stronger there than he thought, and now he is right back where he started from, at Agheila and

Mersa Brega. The man is a good officer, bold, aggressive, but he is often rash. He did not have the strength to move east with the forces he had. He should have waited.”

“He was ordered to do exactly that,” said Hitler with a wag of his finger, “but ran off half-cocked on his own. Paulus reports he has finally talked some sense into Rommel. Yes, he was inadequately supplied, so I have sent him more troops.”

“A waste of time and resources,” said Manstein. “Yes, they will present a growing threat in the Western Desert of Libya, but a threat that is still a thousand kilometers from the Suez Canal.”

“I have considered this,” said Hitler, “But it was not mere a supply problem that led to this recent setback. Have you heard the reports about these new British tanks?”

“I cannot say that I have, my Führer.”

“That was the shock Rommel got when he moved east. I am told the British have new heavy armor, better than anything we have—a tank twice the size of their old Matildas, and my panzer commanders tell me even that old tank was difficult to kill. Very well, we will get new tanks soon enough, but in the meantime Rommel will be doing little more than trucking in fuel and supplies for the next two months. In the meantime, OKW is urging me to eliminate the British outpost on Crete.” Hitler pointed at the map. “Do you agree?”

Manstein considered this for a time, then began pointing with his baton. “You could take Crete easily enough. Student’s troops showed what they could do at Malta. But it would be weeks mopping up there before the Fliegerkorps was ready to operate again. In the meantime, what will the British do? They are watching Rommel in Libya, but must also look over their shoulder at the trouble stirring in Iraq. Frankly, I am amazed that they have not moved against the French in Syria yet, but this is most likely because they do not have the troops in hand to do so.”

“This is what Ivan Volkov tells me,” said Hitler.

“Volkov? I was not aware that you have met with the man.”

“He communicates with me regularly, as he is very fond of making predictions about this war—a self styled prophet, or so I am told. OKW is set to attack Crete, but Volkov tells me this is useless. In fact, he has gone so far as to warn me it will likely result in very heavy casualties. Do you believe

this?”

“I have not seen the intelligence on the British defenses on Crete, but every airborne operation is inherently risky.”

“Then what to do, Manstein?”

Manstein had a quick answer. “Why does the southern axis for Barbarossa offer us the real prize? The answer to that is simple—oil. Once we push through to join with Orenburg, then we have everything we need to end this war favorably. Yet how do we get those resources home to Germany? We cannot ship anything across the Black Sea until we control it, and it seems Raeder’s little plan for *Hindenburg* and *Bismarck* has met a recent setback.”

The look on Hitler’s face told Manstein that he had hit a nerve with that. “He tried to cover up the damage to *Hindenburg* and explain it all away,” Hitler said hotly. “It seems the British have more than new tanks! They also deployed some kind of new naval rocket bomb that was able to strike our ships from well over the horizon.”

“Oh? I have heard nothing of this.”

“You have been up north with your Panzer Korps.”

“It hardly matters,” said Manstein. “Raeder will not be able to move ships into the Black Sea. The Turks will not permit it, yet that is of no concern. If Barbarossa does take the southern axis, we can eliminate all the bases the Soviet Fleet must use to contest the Black Sea. Orenburg already controls everything from Novorossiysk to Batumi on the eastern shore, and with Barbarossa we will take Odessa, Nikolayev, and Sevastopol in the Crimea. After that, the only place the Black Sea Fleet can go is Istanbul.

“That is a neutral state,” Hitler cautioned.

“Well enough, but do not worry about the Black Sea Fleet. Frankly, I believe we can neutralize it with our air power, even if the Turks open their arms and invite them to Istanbul. It should not be a concern. That failing, we can simply take Istanbul, and the Dardanelles and Bosphorus with it. We already have troops on the Turkish frontier. That is a scant 230 kilometers to Istanbul. Terrain favors the defense there, but an aggressive and imaginative plan could prevail. The Turkish Army is no match for us, and once we link up with the Orenburg Federation, Volkov’s forces in the Caucasus can be moved to the Turkish border. That will give them more than enough reason to shun Sergei Kirov. They may even be persuaded to join with us, and no further

campaign would be necessary.”

“The British would do everything in their power to prevent that. What should we do about them, Manstein? Should I take Crete as OKW suggests?”

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

“You propose I send German troops to stop them? How would I get them there?”

“There are only two ways,” said Manstein. “You can either wait for Rommel to build up enough strength to move again on land, or go there by air and sea. The former will take months, the latter is complicated by the fact that we cannot fly troops from airfields in Greece, because Tripoli in Lebanon is beyond the range of our Ju-52 transports. This means we must seize a new outpost first, to become a staging zone within range of Palestine and Syria.”

“This is why OKW suggests this plan against Crete.”

“Well enough, but it will take time, and will most likely hand the British Syria, Lebanon and Iraq—possibly even Iran. If OKW is really serious about this axis of attack on Egypt, then they should see the bird they already have in hand! We already have Rhodes, or at least the Italians occupy that place. That is well within the range of our JU-52s from bases around Athens. Move Student’s troops there, and use that as your springboard to land anywhere you choose—Crete, Cyprus, even Lebanon or Syria. Yes, it is over 700 kilometers to the Levant from Rhodes, but remember, the planes do not have to return. They can land at Vichy held air bases, all within range of our Ju-52s.”

“Yet only Student’s troops?”

“They might do in the short run to bolster the French, particularly if Rommel builds up and rattles his sword in Libya to keep the British preoccupied there. Another infantry division might be added. Yet two or three divisions isn’t much, no matter how good the troops are. Don’t expect the Fallschirmjagers to march on Alexandria. And moving anything more substantial through the Eastern Med by sea is risky, even if we could find the ships to do so. The Royal Navy demonstrated that in these recent engagements, and Raeder has not been able to guarantee naval supremacy yet. That may change, these rocket weapons the British have aside, but then again it may not come to pass. This means anything you send to Syria will have to be supplied by the French. Don’t you see, my Führer? The problem of attacking the British in Egypt is simply a matter of logistics. Neither axis of attack is promising in that regard. We cannot adequately supply and sustain the forces necessary to defeat the British there, as they will make it their major war effort, and send everything they have to the Middle East—unless...”

Hitler’s dark eyes were on him now, waiting, the question obvious on his face.

“Unless you tackle the question of Turkey, my Führer. Barbarossa will join hands with Ivan Volkov. Or will it? If Halder gets his way we will be off chasing the Russians through the streets of Moscow. But if we pursue the southern strategy, with the principle aim of securing the oil in the Caucasus, then only Old Man Turkey stands between the Wehrmacht and the British position in the Middle East.”

“You advise I attack Turkey?”

“That may be a difficult campaign. The terrain is very rugged, the road network impossible, but so was Greece and the Balkans, and you have seen what we accomplished there in little time. So I lay my baton upon Istanbul because if you ever really want to drive the British from the Middle East, you will need secure lines of communications to do so, by land, and not simply air or sea. A move as I have suggested here would see German and Axis allied forces encircling Turkey on every border. We may not have to lift another finger there. This alone could compel the Turks to submit, or at the very least sign a treaty of non-aggression with us. Careful negotiations could even secure passage for German troops and supplies through that country.

That said, the Turkish rail system is not modernized. It may, at best, support no more than one or two Korps, perhaps five or six divisions, but the right divisions might just do the job. Don't forget Baba Gurgur! If you continue to pursue your Mediterranean strategy without Turkey, the only other way to get at the British in Egypt is through the Western Desert. But that will take time we do not have, unless Barbarossa is delayed."

Hitler's eyes were a well of thought now, with a light slowly kindling there as these thoughts fed the fires of his determination. Manstein smiled, tucking his baton beneath his arm, the lesson in strategy now over. He left the Führer with one last note of caution.

"This is a bold and imaginative plan," he said. "It would augment the southern emphasis for Barbarossa very well. Yet would even this knock Great Britain out of the war? I do not believe so. It may knock them out of the Middle East, but they will continue to fight on. The British Empire would still have strong outposts in India and the far east. Taking Egypt would be a severe setback, but they will fight on no matter what, and wait for the Americans to get involved. Then we will be moving troops west again, because instead of us planning to invade England as we should have last year, they will be planning to invade French colonies in West Africa, or even France itself. You see, my Führer, Ivan Volkov is not the only man who can make predictions."

Chapter 5

They were some time discussing all the ramifications of what Fedorov had told them—that Ivan Volkov was not a man of their own world, but a dark angel from another. What he had whispered in Hitler’s ear, no man knew, but Fedorov stressed that, at key junctures in the war thus far, the Germans had taken decisions that they never made in the old history, and that they were slowly but surely leading them to victory. It was clear to all present that Volkov was now acting as a source of intelligence for Hitler and his regime, using his knowledge of future events to shape the present as best he could. It was therefore necessary for Fedorov to stand in opposition to Volkov, and be light where the other man cast his shadow.

He had discussed all this with Admiral Volsky and Kamenski before he was sent to this meeting, and they had expressed their confidence in his judgment.

“I can think of no other man with more respect for the history, Mister Fedorov, or so dedicated to preserving its integrity,” the Admiral had told him. “But realize that anything you reveal to the men of this era may have unforeseen consequences, no matter how well meaning your advice may be. You might warn them of operations doomed to failure, for example, like the ill fated landing at Dieppe by the Canadians. Yet that defeat taught the Allies valuable lessons that they put to good use at Normandy, and remember, we cannot foresee every possible outcome of these events, or of the changes we may cause here. That said, you must use your best judgment.”

So Fedorov was here, standing in this discussion with Generals and Admirals and heads of state that were glowing figures in the history he so loved, at once in awe of them, and amazed that he should have the temerity to speak as an equal.

Yes, he could not predict what might come of the decisions they would now make, but he had to try. Things had gone too far, and he and his ship were now too deeply enmeshed in the weave of this terrible tapestry of war. Now, with the arrival of Kinlan’s brigade, the necessity to act in a way that could guide the power they possessed was more essential than ever before.

And so he made the difficult decision to use the knowledge he had, the store of all the many hours he had spent with his nose in the history books, come what may. He knew the campaigns that were now on the near horizon, and spent long hours reading from his library before he departed for this conference.

So they talked for many hours, deciding what must now be done to further their interests in this war. They spoke of Crete and Iraq and Syria, and the prospects ahead for them in the Western Desert. Where might Kinlan's force be best employed? Should it remain together as one unit, or might it be better to saturate other British forces with a hard core of these resolute and terrible new warriors from the future. In the end, the need for secrecy guided their thinking as much as anything else, and for the moment it was decided that the Desert Rats would stay where they were, in the southern desert, the deadly foil on Rommel's flank.

Yet the impending demands of those other battlefronts would delay any real British offensive against Rommel. The British needed time, and they had been given a brief measure of that in the victory lately won. Now they had to use that time to their best advantage. After the meeting it was Churchill who caught Fedorov's elbow, asking if he might join Wavell for a quiet chat later that evening.

The darkness came, with stars crowding bright in the sky, and a crisp chill on the air. Fedorov was outside the mud walled meeting room, smelling the smoke from a wood fire and listening to the distant calls of wild things in the desert. The night seemed to weigh on him, a leaden feeling that darkened his mood with a sense of foreboding. The weight of all he had studied, and all he knew about what might happen next, was also heavy on his mind. And over it all hung the enormous girth of the war itself, a world war that was still in its adolescence in early 1941. It would go on for years, and so many would die before it ended.

He had read about them, from generals and statesmen, down to corporals in sergeants in small unit actions that were now lost in the stream of events. Yet for the men who fought them, they were the hard edge of life and death itself, moments of supreme personal effort, heroism and courage, cowering and fear, and all soiled with the soot of battle and blood. In those little lost actions of the war, groups of men, comrades all, struggled and fought for places that seemed insignificant in the general scheme of things—a bridge, a

hill, an enemy redoubt that had to be taken by storm. They saw their friends die, lost brave officers, rose to the hour and did things they never thought they could, and all that remained of those desperate hours they fought was now but a few lines in an old history book. Yet here he was now, walking along those lines, seeing it all in the finest detail, smelling it, breathing it in...

That thought mated with the distinctive scent of tobacco, and he knew that someone had lit up a cigar. There was a movement behind him, and General Wavell came out from the sitting room to find him. He turned to see the tall, stalwart figure, weathered by the long years in Egypt, but still strong, his cap on, eyes catching the light of the stars.

"Captain Fedorov, would you care to join us now?" Wavell said in perfect Russian.

"Certainly, " said Fedorov, and he followed the General past the two standing guards and into the shadowed room beyond. There he was thrilled to see one of the great pillars of the war years, one of the truly great men the century had given birth to, Churchill himself, sitting quietly in an chair by the fireplace with a brandy in one hand and a cigar in the other. Fedorov soon found himself under the heavy gaze of the Prime Minister, and he had an inner sense of dread as to what he might now be asked.

"You are a remarkable young man, Captain," Churchill began, as Wavell translated. "I listened to you very closely in the general meeting, and I can see that your grasp of the situation here is secure."

"It may seem that way," said Fedorov, "but nothing is ever certain, Mister Prime Minister."

"Very true, but yet you have had a peek around the corner of tomorrow, young man, and that is something that few, if any, can claim with any hope to be taken as a sane man. That, plus the fact that you seem intimately acquainted with the events now unfolding, make you a most remarkable asset. I hope you do understand that. And here you have come to us like a guardian angel, and I am told that in your day, our two nations were adversaries. To see you here now, and realize you have taken it upon yourself to try and reverse that outcome, is most commendable. With the knowledge you have of days to come, we can stand advised of every crooked jab of the enemy's lance, and know when we must thrust and where to parry."

"Possibly," said Fedorov, a note of caution in his tone. "I do know what happened once, but that is as much a burden as it is an advantage. And I

cannot predict what may or may not result from the decisions you might make. I can only advise you in the light of what I already know.”

“Because you’ve walked the long path ahead. You’ve climbed that hill I put into my speeches to bolster up the people back home.”

“No sir, I haven’t walked it, and I’ve done no climbing at all. That has been, and will be, your privilege and task. I have only read about it, though being here like this makes me feel very odd—as if I were inside one of my books, if you can understand that.”

“Yes... I do understand. I do quite a bit of reading myself,” Churchill said with a smile. “And seeing you here leads me to feel that you have walked right out of some very good tales where I’ve lost myself for many a long hour. Our H.G. Wells, for example, always seemed to me to be a man who saw tomorrow. Now that I know there are really such men alive on this earth, and charting the course of events here, it is somewhat chilling. So here you are in my book, and here I am in yours. That’s the way this life is, my good young man. Everyone you meet is walking out of the story of their own lives, coming to you after a journey of many thousand steps. Some stay with you but a while, a brief chapter or two, but others are at your side for many long volumes, even to the end of your story. I am only glad we have met, and shaken hands here, but tell me, Mister Fedorov, what compelled you to stand with us?”

The question pricked at that deep seed of guilt in Fedorov, for he still believed that it was his meddling, that impulsive whisper in Sergei Kirov’s ear, that had caused the breakup of his homeland and shattered the history of WWII. But he did not want to get into all of that with the Prime Minister, so he gave an answer that seemed fair enough in his mind.

“The war, sir. Not this war, but the next one that follows in our time. And I suppose the long enmity that befell our two nations after this conflict concluded.”

“I cannot imagine it, for the war we have in front of us now demands my whole being in attention. But tell me... We win it, do we not? The Grand Alliance between Britain, the United States and Soviet Russia prevails?”

Fedorov knew this question would be one of the first to be asked. Tovey had asked it, and O’Connor, so it was no surprise that Churchill would want to know as well, and keep the certainty of that outcome in his pocket.

“That is true, sir, The allied forces prevailed.”

“Then why did it fall apart?”

“I suppose because winning the peace is sometimes the more difficult victory. In that, I think we failed, on both sides.”

“A pity.” Churchill relit his cigar, savoring another breath of the heavy tobacco, exhaling slowly. “You know a very great deal for a man so young.”

“Too much, I’m afraid.”

“Then I hope you will unburden yourself with me here. I have always had a yearning to get with our Mister Wells and his Time Machine and spring forward for a good long look. Perhaps we can talk about that later, but for now, the world we’re sitting in is more than enough to manage.”

“Very true, sir.”

“Then tell me, if you will, of the three campaigns that now seem imminent, which road is the most promising? We spoke earlier of the defense of Crete. You seemed to believe that was a lost cause, and yet you indicated the Germans also paid a dear price for that island in the shattering of their airborne corps.”

“True, sir. Whether that will happen again, I cannot say. So in spite of anything I might tell you, the decision remains a gamble. I should point out that Crete was defended by a much stronger force than you have there now. In our history, General Wavell sent the bulk of the 2nd New Zealand Division to Crete, yet it is now moving west into Libya. That leaves you only the 14th Brigade of the 6th Infantry Division, and a few troops that evacuated from Greece, and this is a much weaker defense. It could be that the Germans will not sustain the casualties that your larger force inflicted in the history I know.”

“Everything is a trade off,” said Wavell. “If I had sent the 2nd New Zealand to Crete, then I would have nothing to watch Agedabia while the Australians have a go at Benghazi.”

“Well, what about this General Kinlan’s wonder brigade?” asked Churchill. “They sent Rommel packing once already. Can’t they hold that line?”

“After Giarabub is cleared, we’ll likely have a good number of prisoners to transport back to the Nile,” said Wavell. “Then the 7th Brigade plans to move west to overwatch the German buildup at Mersa Brega. But I still think it wise we leave 2nd New Zealand in Libya for the time being.”

“Which brings us to Syria and Iraq,” said Churchill. “I’m still inclined to

give Crete the benefit of anything we can send there, but not at the expense of losing Syria and Iraq! Securing them now before the Germans get the same idea and begin to move troops is paramount. The Captain here says the loss of Crete is a foregone conclusion. We must not allow that line concerning Syria and Iraq.”

“Agreed,” said Wavell, “but all I can make available in either case might be the 7th Australian Division, and I wouldn’t even have that if not for the victory at Bir el Khamsa. They’ve been training up at Mersa Matruh and are now ready. That division, and two brigades of the 6th British division in Palestine, are all that we have in theater. I can add in the 5th Indian Brigade arriving from East Africa now as well, but securing both Syria and Iraq is a tall order for those forces.

“I know you are hard pressed as it stands, General, but we must do something. I’ve spoken to general Auchinleck in India, and he’s of a mind that we can quickly move the 10th Indian division to Basra. In fact, I’ve ordered him to do exactly that. The War cabinet has already agreed on a plan to deal with the Vichy French in Syria, very secret. But perhaps I can persuade Captain Fedorov to advise us on this?” Churchill gave Fedorov an expectant look.

“Yes, this was a most dangerous period, with threats and operations on every side. In our history Crete was lost, as I have said, but I can tell you that both Syria and Iraq were cleared and held.”

“Splendid,” said Churchill. “Then I think we can safely commit the 7th Australian Division to the task, General Wavell. I’m told the Vichy French may not have much fight in them. It may only be necessary to press them hard, and once they see the Aussies come marching in on them, perhaps they’ll come to their senses and join us.” Again, the sideward glance at Fedorov, the raised eyebrow carrying the question.

“Well sir,” said Fedorov. “As to Operation Exporter, which is what your Syrian campaign was called, your first advance committed two brigades of the 7th Australian Division, the 5th Indian Brigade you have mentioned, and the Free French force.”

“You see,” said Churchill, latching on quickly. “He even knows the code name of the operation, something known only to the war cabinet at this point. Good enough. Four brigades do the job in Syria, leaving us all the rest for Iraq.”

“Not quite,” said Fedorov, recalling the research he had read on this campaign just the previous evening. He could see that Churchill was full of vigor and would push units around on the map to pursue his objectives with the assurance of victory given what he had already revealed. He needed to impress upon the Prime Minister the real nature of the struggle that might lay ahead. So he took a deep breath, and spoke.

“Those were the forces committed at the outset to Operation Exporter, sir. It required much more to win through in Syria. The Vichy French will fight, and possibly more vigorously now than they even did in our history. The force I mentioned swept over the border into Lebanon and Syria easily enough, until they encountered stronger enemy resistance on the Litani River and at Damascus. Let me give you a small glimpse of what may lie ahead. You needed that coastal road, and the bridge over the Litani, but you had to pay a price for it. Number 11 Commando was sent in north of the bridge to try and seize it for the Australians, only a third of that force, under major Keyes, failed to land correctly, and found itself a half mile south of the target. Then everything began to unravel.”

“In what way?” Churchill took a sip of his brandy, waiting expectantly.

“Captain More was well to the north, but his radios were contaminated by sea water and he was out of communication. Lt. Colonel Pedder’s force landed right opposite the French barracks east of the road, and he was killed, along with many others. The bridge was blown, Keyes force was forced to try and use boats to cross the river, and all under intense enemy fire from machine guns and mortars. His detachment left many good men there, cut down near the mouth of the river. The forces to the north were counterattacked by enemy armored cars and tanks and driven back. Some were forced to surrender, others made it back to join the Australians. The battalion lost 45 killed and another 84 wounded, about a third of its total force... And this was just the beginning. A battalion of the Royal Fusiliers would be lost in action at Quneitra, outnumbered three to one by an unexpected French counterattack, and fighting to the last round before they finally surrendered. Your forces were held up in the center for some weeks by stiff resistance, and the 5th Indian Brigade also suffered heavily at the doorstep to Damascus. It was soon realized that the force allocated was totally inadequate.”

“My thoughts exactly,” said Wavell. “Three or four brigades to take the

whole of Syria? Not bloody likely.”

Fedorov continued. “So the last two brigades of the British 6th Division in Palestine were thrown in, and a good portion of the forces that had been sent to Iraq were also recalled and entered from the east. It was the hardest fighting your army suffered during this whole period, five long weeks against a determined French defense—and this is likely to happen again, or be even worse if the Germans manage to send troops to support their ally in Syria. I do not mean to try and discourage you, but war is hell, and men are going to die in these operations. It took a good many Victoria Crosses for you to win this one.”

Churchill sat in silence, a look on his face that reflected the torment of his mind, and the pain of carrying the burden that was now on his shoulders. Yes, he thought, war is hell, and I am the man who has to order all these good men to fight there.

Chapter 6

“I understand your impulse to caution me, Captain,” said Churchill. “You might think me no more than an old windbag, out to meddle in the planning of all my Generals. Certainly General Wavell here must put up with more than his fair share of my temperament. But someone must drive home a winning strategy, and that task seems to have fallen to me. I listen well to the advice I receive from many quarters, but in the end, a decision has to be made, and that falls to me, and I know full well what I am asking of the men who so bravely put on those uniforms. So you will forgive me if I look for any signpost on the road now, to guide my thinking in this most decisive hour.”

“Of course, sir,” said Fedorov.

“Well, as I look at things now I see Syria and Iraq as the most important front, Libya aside. We must keep Rommel in check, and I hope we never see him rampage across Cyrenaica like that again soon. Crete and Cyprus remain important frontier outposts for us. Certainly the Germans will be able to extend their air power much further into the Eastern Mediterranean if they were to seize those islands. But in Iraq we have significant airfields, not to mention the oil from Kirkuk and Basra. It must not fall under Axis control. As for Syria, if the Germans get their foot in, we shall have a wolf at the back door. The Vichy French may not be strong enough to invade Palestine or threaten Egypt, but they provide a den of iniquity for the Germans to feed in planes and men, and that could grow to something much more dangerous. If they are heavily reinforced, it may make the campaign we have been discussing even more arduous. So I am inclined to say we must now make Operation Exporter our principle offensive action in the months ahead.”

“And the plans for Battleaxe?” Wavell had been urged to prepare an offensive against Rommel at the same time.

“You have made it abundantly clear that you haven’t the resources to conduct an offensive on two fronts, General, and given the Captain’s sobering warnings, I am beginning to agree. Let us set a guarded watch on Rommel, invest Benghazi and take that place if possible, and then throw everything else we have against the Vichy French. Iraq must also be given

the highest priority. Rashid Ali has the allegiance of four prominent Sunni Arab nationalists, all military officers in Iraq, and we all know the real power lies with the military there. He calls them the Golden Square, and he has a mind to overthrow the current pro-British government.

“The Germans have been meddling as well, stirring up trouble by sending old Fritz Grobba as their ambassador. They would like nothing more than for Iraq to go up in arms against us, which would threaten our major oil concerns there, and cut the air bridge to India we have in those airfields. Beyond that, to allow this uprising to succeed would also encourage Arab nationalism throughout the Middle East, and I daresay our position in this regard is none too sound, even in Egypt. So perhaps we must rethink Operation Exporter, and see it as a broader operation aimed at securing both Syria and Iraq.”

“Thus far the Iraqis haven’t done much more than sit on the plateau overlooking our RAF base near Fallujah,” said Wavell.

“Habbaniyah? Yes, it’s held out, but we’ll have to do something. We have the old Cavalry Division in Palestine, do we not?”

“More or less,” said Wavell. “Some units still have horses, the others have been converting to trucks and carriers, but there are all too few of those to go around, and we’ve been cherry picking most of their artillery and heavy weapons for other units.”

“Fancy having a mobile division without trucks,” said Churchill, exasperated. “I can see we need to do a great deal more for you, General Wavell, and I fully appreciate that you have utilized the resources in hand to the fullest. Yet Captain Fedorov makes a good point about this windfall we have with General Kinlan’s 7th Brigade. We must use that power while it remains strong. Is it wise to leave it sit down here in the southern desert in a defensive role, when we might draw that bright flashing sword and put it to use in the attack?”

“Realize I have no armor to speak of beyond that unit,” Wavell reminded him. “Our own 7th Armored Division is merely a shell. The only tanks we can give it come from the repair dens, and that takes time. We’ve been cannibalizing badly shot up vehicles for spare parts.”

“And yet we have all these splendid tanks just sitting here and contemplating a joust with the Italians at Giarabub. Surely we might reconsider using some of this force for other operations.”

“And the question of security?” Wavell cautioned. “It will be hard to keep

a lid on what has happened here if we try rolling those monsters up through Alexandria to Palestine.”

“True,” said Churchill. “But perhaps we could get them there by some other means. What about the Glen ships?”

“We have one or two available. *Glengyle* is operating with our Layforce Commandos at the moment. But they are largely for infantry transport, sir, and have only a single LCM in the forward deck that can transport a tank to shore, and then no more than 16 tons.”

“That won’t do to move a Challenger II,” said Fedorov. “Those tanks are over 60 tons each.”

“Amazing,” said Churchill. “But I’ve seen scores of smaller armored vehicles here. What about those?”

“Many are the Warrior Armored Fighting Vehicle. They may appear as tanks to you, and in fact they have armament similar to the tanks you now deploy, but they are really designed to be infantry transport vehicles.”

“All the better,” said Churchill. “Why didn’t we think of that earlier, Wavell—an infantry carrier with a good gun on it like that.”

“Might these move by sea?” Wavell asked Fedorov in Russian, but soon learned that the Warriors were still too heavy at 25 tons.

“Only the light scout tanks could move by sea with the ships you presently have,” said Fedorov. “The Scimitars weigh just under 8 tons, so depending on the size of your LCM, you might take two at most on the *Glengyle*.”

“Hardly an armored force capable of doing much, even if these are good vehicles.” Wavell pursed his lips, thinking. “But I’ve had a good look at those tanks. They have the look of a vehicle the men might easily accept as something we could have built ourselves. I’ll admit, one look at those heavy tanks out there boggles the mind, but the Scimitars are on a scale and of a design we can grasp. We might move a unit of those tanks quite openly by land without ruffling anyone’s skirts.”

“Would General Kinlan be persuaded to make us a loan?” asked Churchill.

“I don’t see why not. He’s a British serving officer, and though it has been our intention to keep his force segregated from the main army, we just might pull this off.”

“Then let’s propose this, if it will not unduly weaken his force. It would

strengthen our situation in Palestine immeasurably until I can get a convoy of armor round the cape for you. It's underway now, but will be some weeks in transit."

"At least you've given up on trying to send Tiger Convoy through the Mediterranean," said Wavell. "That would have been a disaster."

"Yes, I'm a stubborn old bulldog at times, General, but I can be made to see reason on occasion." Churchill smiled, taking another sip of his brandy. "Well then, let us see what General Kinlan can do for us in these operations. We'll need a relief column for RAF Habbaniyah immediately, and then anything we can possibly put together for Operation Exporter. Do you agree with this, Captain Fedorov?"

"Yes sir. I believe strengthening your eastern and northern flanks now is paramount. Rommel is in check for the moment. Now is the time to secure Iraq and Syria. You did so before, odd as that may sound to you, and without our help. Yet I think we can assist you here, and General Kinlan will cooperate at your request. In fact, remember that we have helicopters that can get some relief to Habbaniyah very quickly. I have a small Marine contingent on my ship, and what about the three helicopters on the *Argos Fire*? I'm told they have troops aboard as well."

"A capital idea," said Churchill after Wavell translated. "I think we have the makings of a good breakfast here. We'll provide the milk with everything General Wavell can spare—you stir in a little honey with any detachment that seems practical and suitable for this operation. But I'm not really happy about the name. Operation Exporter seems too pedestrian. What about the name of that tank we've been discussing—Scimitar! That has a bit of fire in it, yes? Let's call this combined plan for Iraq and Syria Operation Scimitar."

And they did.

Kinlan was brought in and it was soon decided that he could easily spare the Scimitar scout troops that were attached to his two mechanized infantry battalions.

"It's only two troops of eight tanks each, but I suppose I can take another troop from 12 Royal Lancers and beef this up a bit. That would make for a company sized force of light armor."

"Light to you," said Churchill, "but I'm told those vehicles are every bit as good as our own medium tanks, and at the moment we have nothing to send into Syria. The French will have 90 tanks against us there, so this would

be of great assistance.”

“Consider it a plan,” said Kinlan. “And I can do you one more service if you need additional troops. Isn’t there an Indian brigade coming?”

“The 5th,” said Wavell. “A good outfit, veterans from the fighting in East Africa.”

“Well I have a full battalion of Gurkha Light Infantry here. They might be able to fit right in with that division, if we brief them appropriately.”

“Excellent,” said Churchill. “On that note, I’m seeing what we can get from India. Auchinleck says he can get the 10th Indian Division to sea in short order. The first of its brigades was going to Malaya, but it can be diverted to Basra. There are good Gurkha battalions in those units as well.”

Fedorov was listening to all this, as Wavell was kind enough to keep translating for him. One worrisome note entered his mind that he thought he should voice. “On the Gurkhas,” he said. “I wonder if any men in General Kinlan’s battalion might be related to those being sent in these Indian forces. It might be odd if they were to meet their great grandfathers, and heaven forbid if....” He hesitated for a moment, not sure of what he was saying here. “Well, I was just thinking that if one of these grandfathers were to be killed in these operations, what effect would it have on the men in Kinlan’s troops?” It was the grandfather paradox in full boom in Fedorov’s mind, but he knew they might not solve that here.

“Interesting point,” said Churchill. “I might run that by our resident expert on time travel, Mister Wells, and see what he thinks. In the meantime, we could take a roll call of all troops assigned and see if any names match up. If we do find a match, it might be wise to see that those troops are assigned elsewhere, and leave their line of fate untouched by this business.”

Yet Fedorov realized all this was entirely beyond their grasp. He knew this division, and others from India, had been sent to secure Iraq. If men were reassigned to other duty, that decision could change their fate, and this alone could introduce a variation that might have unforeseen consequences. What if one of these great grandfathers serves here and came through undaunted, but if he was transferred elsewhere and killed in action? What then? This thought passed darkly through his mind like a storm front, but he knew it was beyond his means to control.

That was the dilemma they now faced. Once his ship and crew took up sides here, and now with Kinlan’s forces in this time, they were irrevocably

committed to the here and now—this present war—and they were going to have to realize that the history they would write here might not look anything like the chapters in his books. They were again reaching a profound point of divergence here. Who knows what this operation could lead them to down the convoluted road ahead? He thought all this, but said nothing, his mind and heart still heavy.

Then the quiet of the night was broken by the sound of a motor car or jeep rushing in to the village. It was an officer from the communications section with a message from Alexandria for Wavell. The man rushed in, saluting crisply, obviously in awe to see the Prime Minister sitting by the fire with his brandy and cigar. Wavell took the message, and leaned in to whisper something in the man's ear.

"The gentleman you have just seen is not here. In fact you've seen nothing at all, Sergeant. Understood?"

"Yes sir. Of course."

Wavell sent him on his way, reading the message slowly in the dim light. "Gentlemen," he said quietly. "These deliberations turn out to be very timely. The forces Rashid Ali has sent to overwatch our airfield at Habbaniyah have just begun shelling the base. There were over 40 casualties and twenty two planes were hit, mostly the Oxford trainers and a few old Hawker Hart light bombers. Many were not even in any shape to fly."

"I was expecting this," said Churchill quietly. "In fact, I gave Air Vice Marshall Smart there an authorization to use all necessary force to move the Iraqi army off the plateau overlooking our base. Yet this should put the fire to our feet. Captain Fedorov, I should be grateful to take your offer and see troops ferried there as soon as possible."

"I'm sure I can get an order off within the hour, and Admiral Volsky will certainly agree. Our Sergeant Troyak is a most capable man, but perhaps we should send Popski along with that contingent given the language barrier."

"Popski?" Churchill did not know the man, but Wavell smiled, and soon explained who he was. The General had a love for these ad hoc detachments out on special operations like this, and now Wavell was getting fired up himself, his reluctance to take on all these other operations burning away like the log in the fireplace. So it was decided that Popski would go with the Scimitar company, and join up with Troyak and his Marines in Palestine. As for the X-3 Helicopters, they would have to contact the *Argos Fire* to make

the arrangements.

“Just how many Marines can you send us,” Churchill asked.

“One platoon,” said Fedorov. “But it has firepower worth many times its number in men. The same could be said for any troops off the *Argos Fire*, and the helicopters also can have a dramatic impact.”

“Helicopters,” said Churchill with a smile. “I should like to have a ride on one of those one day, but military necessities have the hour.”

“There’s one more thing,” said Wavell, handing the message off to Churchill now. “It seems Bletchley Park is picking up a lot of chatter concerning new German troop movements. Several more divisions have moved to the Turkish frontier, and there appears to be a buildup of air units and troops on Rhodes.”

“I can’t say as I like the sound of that,” said Churchill. “The Germans know full well what a prize they may be able to take in Iraq and Syria. Rashid Ali has already thrown in with them and is asking for German assistance. We must do all in our power to prevent that. The Germans must not be allowed to steal a march on us here. It’s time for bold action, gentlemen. We must strike now, or fail to live up to the victory Captain Fedorov indicated we should rightfully have.”

“Agreed,” said Wavell. I thought we might reach a political solution that would precede the need to tap our already overstrained forces with a mission to Iraq, but I see now that we must liquidate this tiresome business there quickly. Yet what about Crete, Mister Prime Minister? And with this movement to Rhodes, what about Cyprus?”

“Why would they reinforce the Italians on Rhodes, General?”

“They may have gotten wind of our earlier plans to take that island. Then again, this could be a prelude to their planned operation against Crete, or even Cyprus.”

“Cyprus was never attacked in the history I know,” said Fedorov.

“Glad to hear it,” said Churchill. “Given this new plan of ours for Operation Scimitar, Cyprus may even be more important to our immediate success than Crete. In fact, it has better deep water ports than Crete, and from Rhodes wouldn’t the Germans be able to put fighters over that island?”

“They would,” said Wavell.

“And here I’ve let it sit with no more than a token garrison all these months.” Churchill shook his head. “I can see more in this message than I

want to for the moment,” he said with a somber tone. “The Germans are moving troops to the Turkish frontier, and to Rhodes. Cyprus is a pearl for Turkey. It could be that they are trying to put pressure on the Turks to submit. Heaven knows we’ve been courting them for months now. I’ve even considered ceding them territory in northern Syria in exchange for active cooperation with us.”

“Don’t let De Gaulle hear of that,” said Wavell. “He’s been talking about making Syria independent as a carrot to try and persuade them to our side and avoid having to fight the Vichy forces there.”

“De Gaulle will have to stay in line and leave off ceding territories he has yet to conquer,” said Churchill.

“We need the Free French, sir,” Wavell cautioned.

“Indeed, but at the moment, we need the Turks even more. Gentlemen, I think we had better launch this operation like a bolt of lightning. Time to draw our curved steel and settle the issue of Syria once and for all. Because if we do not act swiftly, I fear we may lose an even greater prize—Turkey.”

Part III

Forgotten Few

*“The tale must be told of the 'Forgotten Few',
of the Pupils, Pilots and Planes that flew...*

*Of intrepid deeds and a lonesome stand,
to 'Hold Habbaniya' in Hostile Land.”*

-- Maurice Skeet, RAF Habbaniyah

Chapter 7

The first of the oil wars that would end civilization in the year 2021 began soon after its discovery, and even this early action in WWII saw both sides maneuvering to control its supply and delivery. Sergie Kirov had already sent his army through the ‘Rostov Gate,’ into the Caucasus, where they were now besieging the Black Sea port of Novorossiysk, and battling to secure the oil fields at Maykop. Now the British heard the growing dissent in Iraq and saw the rise of Rashid Ali and his Golden Square.

Rashid Ali al-Gaylani was born in Baghdad, of a wealthy secular family, and was active in politics as Minister of Justice, and eventually Prime Minister in 1933. A staunch nationalist, he resisted British efforts to make Iraq an oil protectorate, again becoming Prime Minister in 1940, where he defied the pro-British Regent Abdul Illah, and secretly began to negotiate with both Italy and Germany. Forced to resign, he soon staged a coup to regain power in 1941, and again attempted to rid Iraq of the British pestilence.

Seeking military support, his vision was to now create a combined Islamic state that comprised both Syria and Iraq, wiping out the artificial boundaries Britain had imposed after WWI in the Sykes–Picot agreement. It was that declaration, which drew national boundaries for Lebanon, Syria, Jordan and Iraq without regard to ethnic, religious or tribal loyalties, that would lead to a century of conflict in the Middle East. After the Arab Spring in 2010 and beyond, groups like the radical Islamic fighters of ISIS would again reach for this vision, a Grand Caliphate embracing both Syria and Iraq. Now Rashid Ali hoped to achieve that with the support of the Axis powers, and he thought to trade access to Syrian ports at Tartus and Latakia as part of the deal he was brokering.

For their part, the British Petroleum concerns near Basra had to be protected. And so even as Brigadier Kinlan had been sent to Sultan Apache in 2020, the British already had established bases in Iraq to protect their oil interests there, and guard the facilities and pipelines. It was an experiment put forward by Churchill to hold the country through the application of air power

alone. The British had no permanent forces in Iraq, except two R.A.F bases and small detachments of local Assyrian troops to guard them. Yet now they had lost control of the long pipelines extending from the oil fields at Kirkuk, through Syria to Tripoli and Lebanon, and they intended to get them back.

The Anglo-Iraq war that resulted now would not be the last time Western military forces fought for the black gold beneath the sands of a hostile desert. One of the ancestors of a most troublesome man was even now numbered among the conspirators—Talifah Khairailah, the uncle of Saddam Hussein, who was then only a young four year old boy. He and his clan would continue to bedevil the Western thirst for Iraqi oil for decades to come.

The French had already closed the pipelines through their territory, except for local use. Only the long line through the Trans-Jordan, known as the 'Haifa Line,' was still bringing oil to the British in Palestine. It was there, at one of the pumping stations labeled H4, (Haifa 4) that the makings of a relief column was being assembled. It was going to cross 300 miles of desert to the Euphrates, a Flying Column of British Cavalry, the 1st Essex Battalion, and some Royal Air Force armored cars that came to be known as Kingcol after its irascible, Brigadier Joe Kingstone. A tall, stocky officer with a burly build and rough disposition, Kingstone was the perfect man for the job. He would drive his force through relentless heat, over barely marked desert tracks, to reach his beleaguered British comrades, but he was about to get some very unexpected help.

The chief British base projecting air power in the central area was at Habbaniyah, between Fallujah and Ramadi, northwest of Baghdad. As such it was also an important air link on the route to British India. Fedorov knew these events were happening a few months earlier than they did in his history, as the whole war seemed slightly off its kilter. He wanted to brief Troyak and the Marines, and let them know what they might be facing.

"The air base is just south of the Euphrates River," he said, and it is overlooked by a high plateau where the Iraqi army has taken up positions. They have a large force, at least a brigade in strength, and artillery. The base itself is now being held by no more than 2200 men, mostly RAF service personnel, with some British troops and Assyrian and Kurdish levees. Your mission will be to support the British garrison in securing that base."

"Then we will want to take out that artillery immediately," said Troyak.

"Agreed," said Fedorov. "As we will also be getting help from the Argos

Fire, they will have three more helicopters. The British also have aircraft, mostly obsolete, but they might suppress those guns.”

“The helicopters should be enough,” said Troyak. “Then we should take that plateau as soon as possible.”

“You’ll have to work with the security detachment from *Argos Fire*,” said Fedorov with a note of caution in his voice. They call them Argonauts, a 40 man team to augment yours, all well armed. These are ex-British SAS and commandos from our day, so they will know their business. But will this be a problem?”

“No problem,” said Troyak flatly “as long as they are fighting with us, and not against us.”

“Let’s be certain we keep things that way, Sergeant. I want no incidents here. We left the last war behind us when we came here, and we’re fighting this one now to see that it never happens.” He looked at all the Marines now. “Understood?”

“Aye sir.”

“Once the situation is secure, we will arrange to move your force into the main offensive against the Vichy French. At that point you can operate with an ad-hoc force we’re putting together—code named Sabre Force. Brigadier Kinlan has provided three troops of British Scimitar tanks, 24 in all. There will be trucks supplied by the British, and even a few AFVs and light scout vehicles, so you will be mobile. We’ll move supplies of ammo for you in the KA-40, and the food and water will come from the Brits. I don’t need to tell you how important that helicopter is, so keep it safe. What weapons loadout would you recommend for this mission, Sergeant?”

“The 12.7mm Minigun on the gun pod, the 30mm Shipunov autocannon, air-to-air defense missiles, and the 9K114 Shturm pods for some AT defense.”

“I’ll see that it is done. The X-3 helos from the *Argos Fire* will have good weaponry as well, and that force should be all we need to silence that artillery. After Habbaniyah, you will join with the Argonauts, and become part of Sabre Force. One other thing... Popski will be with you from the outset to act as liaison with the British and serve as an interpreter. He will be regarded as your senior officer, and report directly to me. Any questions?”

“None sir,”

“Very good then.” Fedorov smiled. “Go secure that airbase.”

The Marines were more than ready. After having to sit about in an old truck for nearly 48 hours in Egypt, they were finally getting what they really lived for, a hot combat mission. Troyak selected the weapons, adding auto-grenade launchers, two 82mm Podnos mortars, and the deadly RPGs to the team's inventory. *Kirov* put out to sea on the night of March 10, 1941, moving from Alexandria to a point due east of Jerusalem, just off the coast. They lifted off on the 11th of March, making an in flight rendezvous with the three X-3s over the Mediterranean before heading inland. This would cut over 400 kilometers from the distance the helos had to fly, which was considerable. From there it was still another 875 kilometers to Habbaniyah, and the KA-40 could only range out 1200 kilometers.

To solve that problem they planned to make an initial ferry mission to the deserts of Jordan, where a small base designated "Tango-1" was established near the border of Iraq, about 425 kilometers inland, or half the distance to the airfield. The helo offloaded the first ten Marines, containers of aviation fuel, and reserve ammo before returning to the ship to run that same mission again. Zykov pulled the lead team duty with nine other Marines. They would wait for the main mission to land there before heading to Habbaniyah, and in this way they would still have two thirds of their fuel, which was more than enough to operate and still be able to return to Tango-1 to refuel before heading west again. The mission was well coordinated with the X-3s, which also had very long range, but they would need to ferry in ammo and fuel for their teams as well.

* * *

The tension that had led to the Iraqi artillery barrage at Habbaniyah had been mounting for some time. An independent "Mechanized" Brigade, with a light tank company, an armored car company, two battalions of lorried infantry, a machine-gun company, and 30 towed artillery pieces had moved to the plateau overlooking the British base some days ago. They vastly outnumbered the British garrison, which was composed of only 300 British regulars of the Kings Own Royal Regiment under Colonel Roberts, who had been Chief Of Staff of the 10th Indian Division, now en-route to Iraq. His small force had been rushed to Habbaniyah by air the previous day, flown in from airfields near Basrah in the south. Now they joined the Number 1

Armored Car Company, 18 old Rolls Royce armored cars and a pair of antiquated “tanks,” which were little more than Mark VIB MG tanks the locals dubbed “Walrus” and “Seal.” A few hundred native levees fleshed out the defense.

The British sent up a light reconnaissance plane to have a look at what they were facing, and soon knew that they were opposed by a force ten times their size, over 9000 men.

“They have at least twelve old Crossley armored cars up there,” said the pilot, referring to the 6-wheeled vehicles dating back to 1927. “And they’ll match Walrus and Seal with a fist full of what looked to be CV-35s.” That was an old Italian tankette, also armed with machineguns.

“What about the artillery,” said Roberts. “That’s our real worry. We’ve only a few mortars to answer them, and one good hit on the water tower or power station and we’re out of business here. We’d have no choice but to give up the ghost when the good water runs dry.”

“Let’s hope they’re just making a show of force, sir,” said the pilot, “and it’s a good one at that!”

Air Vice Marshall Smart was taking the report with Colonel Roberts, his eyes narrowed with the sun, skin browned by long months in the desert beneath his white pith helmet. “We’ll simply have to use the planes,” he said. “We’ll get every plane that will fly ready to go and arm them with anything we can find.”

“Should we hit them now, sir?” Roberts knew he was at great disadvantage here. He could rely on his own men, but the loyalty of the Assyrian Levees was as yet untested. One look at the list of guns noted by the recce pilot gave him a chill, even in the desert heat. “Look, they have at least twelve 18 pounders, a couple of 4.5 inch howitzers and several small 3.7s, but it’s enough to hurt us badly if they get to it.”

Smart was senior officer on base, and the call was his. “No,” he said after some deliberation. “Given our situation, I don’t think it would be wise to provoke them. We’ve a message in hand from their envoy stating this is nothing more than a training exercise.”

“Not bloody likely, sir. That’s a big desert out there, and they came all the way from Baghdad.”

“Of course, but we can play along for time if possible. They’ve also demanded we cease all air operations, but I’ve told them we have training to

do as well, and any attempt to interfere with it will be treated as an act of war. Ambassador Cornwallis in Baghdad fully supported that response. Let's see if they have the temerity to do anything more with those troops up there, but for the moment, we'll keep to Middle East Command policy and not interfere with them."

"Very well, sir, but we may regret our propriety here. They could be merely waiting for darkness before launching an attack."

"Make any prudent defensive preparation, Colonel. If things take a turn for the worse we can still use the planes."

"Yes sir, assuming they aren't all blown to hell."

Smart gave Roberts a nod, understanding his concern, but willing to give it time. Unfortunately, the situation was not winding down. They received a note from Baghdad stating that a protest had been made to the Iraqi government, and that the "maneuvers" were been looked upon as an act of war, which would require a response if the troops were not withdrawn. Realizing they already had the cat by the tail, the Iraqis would not back down.

A guarded night passed, with the men at the watch for long, sleepless hours. Thankfully, no attack came, but by dawn Air Vice Marshall Smart was having second thoughts. He stood on the tarmac, seeing the trainers of the 4th Service Flying Training School. With them there were three Gladiators, thirty Hawker Audax "fighters," seven Fairey Gordon light bombers, a number of Hawker Harts and one Blenheim. He had eighty-four planes, but only thirty-nine trained pilots. The rest of the nearly 1000 R.A.F. contingent were service personnel. Yet now he learned that a squadron of Wellingtons had been moved to southern Iraq, and that they had received authorization to launch "air strikes" from Churchill himself!

"Help is on the way," came the message. *"If you have to strike, strike hard. Use all necessary force."*

With authorization from the Prime Minister in hand, Smart gave the order to begin operations, and the crews were rolling out the planes, the first fitful sputter of the engines greeting the dawn. He could get 56 planes operational, but would fly off squadrons of twelve at a time to try and keep near continuous operations over the enemy positions. The planes were to drop their small 20 pound bombs and strafe the enemy gun positions in the hope of driving them off. As the first planes took off, he got word that eight

Wellingtons were on the way to add some real thunder to his planned attack, and he took heart while the troops under Colonel Roberts sat in their positions, continuing to sand bag and dig in.

The morning call of the Muezzin had been answered by the Iraqi troops that day, and many were still bent in prayer when the sound of the engines came rolling on the clear desert air. They were soon shocked to realize that the tiny garrison aircraft were attacking them, and the whole encampment soon erupted with the sound of battle. Men leapt up from their prayer mats and ran for their rifles, tents emptied as bleary eyed officers came out from their breakfast to see what all the commotion was. A troop of camels bolted when the first planes roared in, their small bombs opening what would become a century of oil wars in Iraq and the Middle East. The planes wheeled overhead, Lewis guns rattling and chewing up the dry desert loam as they made their strafing runs.

Men were running in all directions, but soon the officers managed to get crews to their artillery and they began to return fire on the airfield. Colonel Roberts flinched as the first 18-pounders landed on the flat, dry field. Then he saw a salvo land right in the midst of a flight of trainers, the explosions sending one plane cart wheeling up as the rounds came in. He tightened his helmet strap, running past a Vickers heavy machinegun position and down the line to the mortar teams. He had six 2-inch mortars and two 3-inch trench mortars which would seem a feeble reply, but he got them firing just the same.

That same day the news would reach the Grand Mufti in Baghdad, and he was so outraged at the British attack that he immediately spoke the word that would haunt Western powers for decades after—*jihad!* Hands were quickly on the wheels controlling the valve to the pipeline that stretched all the way to Haifa where the British took delivery of oil from Iraq, and it was shut down, stopping the flow. British pounds sterling would no longer be accepted for this vital resource. It would now have to be paid for in blood and steel. By nightfall the damage was tallied on both sides. The British had lost 22 aircraft, 8 dead, and 32 others wounded by the Iraqi shelling. It was news of this event that came to the fireside meeting with Churchill, Wavell and Fedorov, and galvanized the plans for Operation Scimitar.

“Another few days like that and we won’t have a single plane air worthy here,” said Roberts to Sergeant Jeffers. “To make matters worse, Air Vice

Martial Smart drove out to the field last night, headlights off, and ran right into a ditch. He took a hard knock, and will have to be evacuated to India. I'm to assume overall command of the garrison. I hope your men are ready, Sergeant."

"The men are digging in, sir. But there's little in the way of timber available for top cover on the trenches, and those damn 18 pounders will be on us again at first light."

"We took out three yesterday, but the Iraqis are bringing up reinforcements. Damn! We need artillery. What about those two 4.5 inch howitzers outside the Officers Mess?"

"Those date back to the Great War, sir. Haven't been fired for decades. They're just for show."

"Yes? Well, we've a new great war to fight now laddie. Get them squared away for action. The Wogs have two bloody divisions in and around Baghdad, and this lot here is already more than enough to finish us off if we just sit here like this."

"It won't be the first time a British garrison has stood up under tough odds, sir. Shall I have the men tear down that old shed for wood to strengthen our positions?"

"No Sergeant, we aren't going to sit here watching the planes fluttering about while we take another pounding tomorrow."

"Then what will we do, sir?"

"We're going to do just what well trained British infantry is paid for. As soon as the sun sets, we're going to attack!"

Chapter 8

RAF Habbaniyah was a sprawling complex tucked away in a wide bend of the Euphrates River west of Fallujah, some 500 acres of land surrounded by seventeen miles of steel fencing, studded with block housed machinegun positions every 300 yards. Yet the base was very vulnerable to any determined attack, being dominated by a low plateau that was now seething with over 9000 Iraqi soldiers. The tiny garrison there was as far from help as any in the British Empire might be, or so they thought. The sign at the main gate to the base pointed in one direction to Baghdad, listing the distance at 55 miles. Below this another arrow pointed out the Mecca of the empire, reading: "London 3287 Miles."

The base was laid out in typical British efficiency, between the river and a water canal that ran along its southern perimeter, and marked a thin boundary between the facility and the ground rising to the plateau. It had a Civil Cantonment for the service personnel families and wives, a hospital, mess halls for officers, sergeants and rankers, all laid out in a patchwork connected by roads with proper names: Grantham, Kenley, Cranwell, Andover. On Tangmere Road there was a cool cluster of shade trees known as the "Command Garden" near the HQ building, and opposite this, on the north side of the base near the river, was the Air House, now absent commanding officer Smart. There was even a racetrack, polo pitch, and golf course for recreation to finish off this little island of civility in an otherwise desolate and wild land. Now these open spaces had been used to disperse planes from the crowded airfield on the southwest quadrant of the base.

Colonel Roberts had men haul away the old WWI howitzers that had been sitting as show pieces out in front of the Officer's Mess, and they had been put to good use that day. And the men of the Number 4 Flying School had an exhilarating day as well, proud that they were now renamed "Habbaniyah Air Striking Force." They were pressing everything that could fly into the battle the following day, and dusk found the base still in a hustle of feverish activity.

Flight Lieutenant Maurice Skeet was in charge of a flight of old Vickers Valentia biplanes, a round nosed transport with an open cockpit and room for

twenty people in the long enclosed fuselage. He had been looking for Air Vice Marshall Smart to see if he could get permission to move his flight to a safer location on the polo pitch earlier, but in the heat of the moment he had gone away unsatisfied. The resulting Iraqi artillery bombardment that day had riddled his Valentias with shrapnel, rendering them all unserviceable. As the planes had been rigged out as makeshift bombers, they now were a liability sitting there with live ordnance.

“Come on then, he said to his crews. We’d best get those bombs off and back into the magazines. One of the Wogs might just get lucky and put a round right on top of us. Start with number 2792—that one has four 500 pounders—then on to the rest. Then it’s into the nearest ARP for the lot of us. We’ll get no digs in the billets tonight. Too much of a target.” The A.R.P. was short for the “Air Raid Precaution” trenches that had been dug all around the base.

The crews set to work, but down south on the perimeter, Colonel Ouvry Linfield Roberts had the men of the King’s Own Rifles, and several companies of Assyrian Levies, ready to go ‘over the wire’ and make a night attack on the plateau. The Iraqis had been bringing up reinforcements, occupying and closing the bridge over the Euphrates to the east at Fallujah, and even sending a small force of armored cars up to Ramadi to the west. Slowly but surely, they were sealing off the base to isolate it from all outside contact or supply.

Now Colonel Roberts had to decide what to do about the situation, and he had a mind to take aggressive action in spite of the disparity in force. They were lucky their air strike had not provoked a general attack by the enemy. Earlier that day eight Iraqi armored cars and three tankettes had approached the Fallujah gate, but when confronted with three of the British armored cars mounting AT rifles, they turned away. But they’ll soon realize that’s about all we have to stop them, thought Roberts. I can’t let them sleep on it tonight. We’ve got to move them off that plateau.

As the sun set, Roberts gave orders to black out the entire base. Any light might only serve as a beacon for enemy planes, and the order seemed to produce good results. As darkness settled over the base they heard the sound of an aircraft overhead, but it passed on by uneventfully. Some minutes later they heard bombs falling and exploding in Ramadi to the west, which the enemy had mistaken for their own encampment.

Captain Cottingham came over from one of the native companies to complain about a gun position north of the river that had been shelling the Cantonment that day.

“Then take your company across and get after them,” said Roberts, sending No. 8 Kurdish Rifles to their first action of the war. For his own part, Roberts was taking two companies of the Kings Own Rifles, and he had the No. 4 Assyrian Company in lorries ready to sortie out should his small force get into trouble. The men assembled to either side of a perimeter blockhouse, moving out with all the stealth they could manage. It was soon found that the enemy had patrols out as well, and the chatter of a machine gun broke the hushed darkness.

Three British Armored Cars, nicknamed “Coffee Pots,” led the way out the Uxbridge Gate and across a narrow bridge over the canal. They then swung off to the right to find a way up onto the plateau while the Kings Own Rifles fanned out. No sooner had they assembled for the move up the furrowed gullies of the plateau flank, when they were taken under withering machine gun fire.

“Bloody Hell!” said Lt. Colonel Everett. “They’re dug in, and with Vickers guns.” The British had armed much of the Iraqi army that was now made their enemy, and the attack planned by Roberts soon became a difficult situation, with men pinned down on the dry slopes and casualties starting to mount. Everett got to a telephone and reported this to Roberts, who quickly sent up a truck with a Vickers MG and a 3 inch mortar for support. The night was soon thick with the sound of rifle fire and machine guns, and Major Cooper was desperately trying to get the two old 4.5-inch howitzers into shape to fire again. It would take an artificer flown in from Basra to sort those guns out now, so for the moment, they had only a few trench mortars and anything they might capture from the enemy.

Two squads of A company made a rush on one Iraqi position, driving off the Wogs with a bayonet charge and taking possession of two 3.7 inch guns, which they promptly turned on the enemy farther up the slope. But it was clear that Colonel Roberts’ attack was not going to get up that hill tonight, and might not even make it safely back over the canal to the base.

“This is no good,” he said, exasperated as a runner brought in the casualty count. “We’ve too few men to see them picked off like this on that slope. Everything depended on our getting up there unseen.” At that moment there

came an odd thumping sound in the distance, and he turned his head, listening.

“Those aren’t guns,” he said, first thinking he was hearing shell fire. Then he thought it must be bombs falling again on Ramadi, but he was very wrong.

Just south and east of the plateau, four helicopters were coming in very low over the waters of the wide Habbaniyah lake. Their lights darkened, they were heading for the wrinkled shore at the base of the plateau, where wadis and gullies had been cut into the dry ground. Thus they were below this undulating terrain, heard but not seen, when they reached the shore and hovered in billowing clouds of dust. Men in dark uniforms and Kevlar body armor leapt from the open doors, sliding down ropes on either side of the helos and then fanning out to immediately establish a perimeter on the LZ. The heavy weapons caches were lowered last, and what amounted to a light company in actual numbers was soon assembling into five man teams.

Troyak had command on the right flank with four squads of his Black Death Marines. Their faces were streaked and blackened with war paint, eyes mounting infrared night optics under their dark helmets. Two men were already setting up the 82mm mortars, and others were sorting out the remaining heavy weapons and getting them off to the rifle teams. On their right, squads of the Argonauts had deployed off the three X-3 helos, which were now loudly revving up to begin their attack from above. The helicopters were going to bring the considerable weight of their firepower against the enemy first, and the men of the King’s Own Rifles were soon treated to an amazing display.

Dark, noisome shadows thumped and hovered over the plateau, the night optics and thermal imaging clearly seeing the enemy gun positions, their barrels still hot from the day’s long work in bombarding the base. Now the deadly fire of modern precision weapons began to rake the positions with terrible effect. The hiss and roar of ground attack missiles split the night as they lanced in. The four *Shturm* AT missiles found old Iraqi Armored cars and blew them to pieces in a heartbeat. Then the gunners on the ‘Big Blue Pig’ rotated the long barrel of the 30mm autocannon, and its rapid pulsing fire punctuated the night, sending hot streaks of tracer rounds down on the enemy below.

The rocket pods of the X-3s soon joined the action, their missiles blasting into the enemy machine guns and 3.7-inch howitzer positions. Several guns

were blown into the air, and went tumbling down the slope, and the whole scene on the plateau dissolved into utter chaos. Then Troyak heard the snarl of the four barreled rotating Minigun on the KA-40, a grim smile on his face as it began raking the unseen enemy. He waited, eyeing his service watch until the hands struck midnight, which was the time designated for his advance. The seconds ticked off, and then he shouted to his men in a hard voice.

“Marines! Follow me!”

The Black Death surged up the furrowed wadi, reaching the crest of the plateau where they saw the chaos of the battle. Fire of burning trucks and tent sites was masked by rolling smoke, and there came an enormous explosion as the autocannon hit a supply dump and ignited the ammunition there. The helicopters were now well to the east, having raked their way along the entire enemy position with their lethal guns and missiles, and now swerved off into the sky, like evil black fire-breathing dragons.

They heard the full throated shout of the teams on their left: “*Argos Fire!*” Then the Argonauts charged up the slope, their assault rifles soon barking out fire as they advanced. Between the two forces there were no more than sixty men, but each man carried a modern assault rifle, and every squad had a machinegun. They had firepower exceeding that of the entire battalion of the King’s Own Rifles on the north side of the plateau, and they were using it.

Troyak worked his way forward, crouching low and leaping into what was once an enemy dugout. He whistled for his Marines to move up, establishing a line, and then using his night optics to surveill the situation. There was one brave Vickers MG position that had survived the helo assault, and it was chattering at the Argonauts as they advance with wild indiscriminate fire.

“Zykov! RPG!”

The corporal was ready with the weapon, and quickly blasted the bunkered position with a thundering roar. Then the sound of the auto grenade launcher the Russians had used so effectively in their mission to Ilanskiy cut through the night, and a hail of deadly bomblets saturated the ground ahead of their advance. The Iraqi soldiers that caught a glimpse of the Marines were terrified by these big men looming out of the night, with faces blackened and studded with night vision equipment that looked like devil’s horns, eyes that

seemed to glow with an ungodly light. They heard them speaking and growling in a strange language, then saw the horrific fire erupting from their weapons.

One officer, trying to rally his men, instinctively fired a pistol at Troyak, but the heavy reinforced Kevlar body armor took the glancing round, and he was unharmed, gunning down the man in reprisal. The word soon spread that demons from hell had risen in the night, men so fearsome that they could not be killed. Hundreds dropped their rifles and simply fled, their eyes wide with fear.

This was the last resistance of any consequence. There were upwards of 9000 men on the plateau, but they were all wildly streaming to the east, abandoning their guns, leaping onto any truck that would still run, or atop horses and camels as their officers vainly shouted at them, waving curved Scimitars in the night. The rout had begun, and the line of sixty men moved forward, driving it relentlessly on with withering automatic weapons fire cutting down any group of the enemy who had the thought to turn and fight.

On the north side of the plateau the King's Own Rifles watched the helicopter assault in utter disbelief. Some first thought that the planes had been sent up to support them, but Colonel Roberts knew that was not so. He gaped at the fireworks in the sky, hot missile fire, the rattle and pock of the auto cannons, the howl of the miniguns. It was as if a host of wild Jinn had swept in from the dark lake, breathing terror and death as they came.

When Lt. Colonel Everett saw the enemy lines break and run, he finally took heart. His men would have braved their task in spite of the odds, wearing down the will of the Iraqis to resist, day after day, as the Tiger Moths bombed from above, and he continued to mount aggressive night forays against the flanks and shoulders of the plateau. But they did not have to work quite so hard this time around. Men from another world were coming up the high, stony plateau like banshees in the night. Though he could not see the commandos and Marines, he could hear their assault, and when the Iraqi troops turned and fled in terror, he blew hard on his whistle and gave the order to charge on up the hill.

Up above, one of the X-3s was observing and putting in additional fire support when they noted the movement by the British troops. Popski was just behind the advancing Marines, listening on a headset that had been given him, delighted with the gizmo. Troyak had showed him how to pinch off the

send button when he needed to communicate with the Sergeant, and now he called up with the news that friendly troops would soon be on their left.

Troyak stood up, raising a fist to halt his men, and he looked to see the Argonauts had done the same. He took a look at the enemy troops fleeing madly before their advance and knew the hour was won. There was no point pressing the attack now, and it was decided to leave the action to the Kings Own Rifles, and the Number 4 Company of the Assyrians who came rushing in for support. He ordered his men to go to ground, dark shadows that suddenly seemed to be swallowed by the earth. Then, with precise and well coordinated movements, the fire teams broke off and withdrew towards a pre-designated position where they were to meet up with the helicopters.

Their work here was done.

Twenty minutes later they boarded in a storm of dust, rising up into the desert night. Popski's cheeks were red with the cold night air and the exhilaration of the action he had witnessed.

"Damn good MGs on these birds," he said to Troyak. "And where can I get me one of those handy rifles of yours?"

The Sergeant handed him his own assault rifle. "I'll have to show you how it operates, but with a little training you'll fall in love with that in no time."

Popski nodded, looking down onto the plateau that was now a broiling, smoking scene of devastation. Of the thirty guns the Iraqis had brought in to shell the base, twenty seven were destroyed or captured. The three that escaped had been moved earlier by trucks to the far side of the Euphrates. The Kings Own Rifles reached the scene in utter amazement, and groups of weeping Iraqis fell at their feet to beg for mercy. Colonel Roberts two companies quickly had over 500 prisoners, and the rest were fleeing madly east, their war on the British over for the moment.

The four helos turned west into the night, their mission plan now calling them back to Tango-1 just across the Jordanian border. There they would suck up the last of the aviation fuel they had ferried in earlier, and begin the ride to Palestine. Along the way they saw the long column of King Column en route to the relief of RAF Habbaniyah. They would leave the rest of the action there to the British who would now try to use the tiny garrison and these small flying columns to good effect, relieving the base, and then toppling the incipient rebellion of Rashid Ali and sending the German

Ambassador fleeing to Mosul.

But it was far from over. When he got news of the rout of the Iraqi Army at Habbaniyah, he could hardly believe it. He was immediately on the phone to higher authorities, his voice angry in the night. "It's the British!" he exclaimed. "They have driven off all the troops we sent to capture Habbaniyah, and now I have word more units have arrived from India at Basra. They will be coming for Baghdad next! You must launch your operation immediately, before we lose everything here!"

Then he stormed away to his motor car and the long ride to Mosul. But "Operation Anvil," a plan that had been simmering in the mind of the Führer for some days now, would become a timely reprisal to face the emergency, and the hammer was about to fall.

Chapter 9

The mobile force arrived in Palestine amid the final preparations for Operation Scimitar. It had taken two weeks to move all the troops into position. The entire Australian 7th Division, all three brigades, was now positioned south of the Lebanese border. The troops had been advised to lay low, with all leave cancelled, and even told to remove their characteristic hats so as not to be identified as Australians. Fedorov knew this force was now a third stronger than the old history, where only two brigades of the division had been available for Operation Exporter. It would be the main advance on Beirut up the coast road and as far inland as the Jordan River. Additional support here would come from the Royal Scots Greys and Stafford Yeomanry battalions, moving up the road from Haifa in universal carriers and trucks.

Further east, the 5th Brigade of the 4th Indian Division was assembling in Jordan near the town of Irbid. Its mission was to cross the Syrian border and seize Daraa, the town where the fabled Lawrence of Arabia had been captured and tortured by the Turks in the First World War. From there they would drive north, providing the right flank defense for the central column, where the Free French had two brigades.

This column would drive through Golan and up the main road to Damascus, but Fedorov knew these units had not been as effective as hoped, and so the troops sent by Brigadier Kinlan for “Sabre Force” would be assigned here. The French column would be led by Kinlan’s tough Gurkha battalion, and the three troops of Scimitar tanks. It was here also that the X-3s would operate as a fire support unit, and both the Argonauts and Troyak’s force would advance on the ground with the Gurkhas. Kinlan had provided some Dragon AFVs for transport for the Fairchild men and the Russian Marines by pulling from HQ troops in his brigade. The Gurkhas were going in British trucks. The Attack was set for the pre-dawn hours of March 12, and began with every hope of achieving a rapid success.

They would be up against about twenty battalions of French Colonial troops. Fedorov had been able to lay out the entire order of battle for the Vichy French in Syria. It was a mottled collection of troops from Morocco,

Algeria, Tunisia, local Circassian cavalry, and other tribal forces. There was one regular regiment of French Infantry, and four good battalions of the Foreign Legion that would prove to be tough, veteran troops. They also had many battalions of artillery, mostly 75mm howitzers, and 90 R-35 French tanks in the 6th and 7th African Chasseurs. Another 36 older FT17 tanks dating back to WWI were also available from the training schools. These added to a good number of old “White” armored cars, gave them a little mechanized punch, and there were plenty of trucks in the Levant to give their forces good mobility.

All in all, the Allied force had been strengthened by no more than a single Australian brigade and Kinlan’s troops, so Fedorov still expected a tough fight. He had every confidence that the British would now master the situation in Iraq, but did they have five weeks to slug through the rugged terrain of Syria and subdue the Vichy French? These were the last questions discussed before Churchill departed for England, a new lightness in his step with the godsend he had received from a distant future.

As for Fedorov, he was now back aboard *Kirov* at Alexandria on the eve of the operation, where the British fleet was consolidating and replenishing. Admiral Cunningham would be assigning two small task forces to support the operation as it moved up the coast. Two light cruisers would operate on the first days of the attack, designated Force A for the lead cruiser *Ajax*, along with *Phoebe* and six destroyers. They would escort the *Glengyle*, with three sections of Royal Marine Commandos, the No. 11 Scottish Commando tasked with trying to seize the coastal bridge over the Litani and interdicting the movement of enemy reinforcements down that road. It was this ill-fated operation that Fedorov had shared with Churchill when he tried to advise him on the difficulties of this campaign. Now he hoped the troops would fare better this time around.

If heavier support was needed, the heavy cruisers *Kent* and *York* were assigned as Force K, with four more destroyers. The battleships would stand ready at Alexandria to sortie in the event there was any sign of heavy units operating on the other side, though intelligence still had most of the Axis capital ships in Toulon and La Spezia. Tovey viewed the movement of *Jean Bart* and *Richelieu* to Toulon with some misgiving, as he knew there was yet another day of reckoning with the French Fleet, and the question of who ruled the waters of the Eastern Mediterranean had not yet been decided.

With only *Invincible* and *Warspite* now operational at Alexandria, the enemy still had a considerable advantage in big ships, even if several were still mending bruises and damage sustained in the last confrontation. For the moment, the presence of *Kirov* and *Argos Fire* was heartening, though he did not know how long he could hope to rely on those ships. So he took Churchill's suggestion and decided to send for both *Rodney* and *Nelson*, leaving Somerville only the *Valiant* in Force H, as there was no longer a major threat from the French at Casablanca. The plodding battleships would be ten days steaming to Cape Town at 18 knots, and then another twelve days to Alexandria. With time for refueling at Cape Town, they would not arrive until the 5th of April.

* * *

The first word that British intelligence had of "Operation Anvil" had come from wireless intercepts from the *Hindenburg*, when Lütjens had used the name. Analysts thought it might refer to Crete, as the course set by the Franco-German fleet had been heading that direction before the recent engagement. Yet now the sudden buildup of planes on the Italian outpost island of Rhodes gave them second thoughts.

The Italians had controlled the Dodecanese Islands off Turkey since a treaty had ceded them the territory in 1911. Rhodes had been built up into a major aerodrome and military base, and there were fine airfields on Karpathos, and also on Leros, along with an excellent deep water port that prompted Mussolini to call the place "The Corregidor of the Mediterranean."

JU-52 transport planes had been flocking to these islands, heavily escorted by German fighters, and landing at Klathos in the south, and at Maritsa in the north. British *Gladiators* had a look at the airlift, but were quickly driven off, and with only six operational *Hurricanes* on Crete, the R.A.F could not impede the operation, which looked to be a prelude for the German invasion of their own island. The force being moved was considerable, and there was also frenetic activity now observed at airfields all over Greece, and in the Dodecanese Islands at Kos.

That same night a number of fast cruisers and destroyers had sortied from Toulon, where the Vichy French fleet had been reinforced with the recall of ships from Casablanca. That far distant port was still a valuable outpost on

the Atlantic, but after the losses they had sustained in the action against the British, Admiral Darlan had decided to consolidate his naval strength at Toulon. So it was that the powerful battleships *Richelieu* and *Jean Bart* slipped out of the harbor and raced north to Gibraltar, too fast to be caught by *Rodney* and *Nelson*. With HMS *Glorious* ordered south around the Cape of Good Hope, there was no Fleet Air Arm to speak of with Somerville's Force H, as his relief carrier, *Ark Royal*, had not yet arrived from Home Fleet. The French took advantage and stole a march on the British, moving the two battleships, several cruisers and many super-destroyers to Toulon. There they made hasty preparations for the operation now underway, a plan that was to shift the history of the war in a sudden new direction.

So it was that the pieces were set for the opening of the battle that would soon decide the fate of events in the Middle East. Operation Scimitar was just about to begin, but the Germans had not been sitting idle, at least not the Führer, and he now had grand ideas of his own.

* * *

Hitler had fretted over the strategy for some time, with the whispers and urging of Ivan Volkov in his ear, and the irritating disagreements of his senior officers at OKW. He became so frustrated at one point that he very nearly decided to call off the entire operation, preferring to husband all the units assigned for Barbarossa. It was then that he spoke with Erich von Manstein, listening to his cogent appraisal of the situation, and his assessment of the southern flank on the Black Sea wing of the big invasion plan. Then he determined that by using a few divisions now, before Barbarossa launched, he might make some considerable territorial gains, and intimidate the stubborn Turks into submission.

When I have Turkey in a vise of steel, he thought, with troops secure on every quarter, then we will see if they continue to equivocate. He gave orders that another Korps from the southern wing of Barbarossa would stage on the Turkish frontier, and then assembled OKW to order a new operation, bearing the same old code name to fool the British—Anvil.

The Germans still had a strong hammer that had already proven itself against the obstinate island of Malta. Student's 7th Flieger Division had taken the British stronghold in seven days. Now only Crete and Cyprus remained as

strong British outposts in the Eastern Med, and all the territory of Greece and her many islands in the Aegean had fallen under the Axis shadow. Rommel had been driven back, an annoyance that still embittered the Führer, but the bold plan in his mind had fired his imagination again. When German intelligence got word that the British were shifting an infantry division from Mersa Matruh east towards Palestine, Hitler decided to act. He called in all the senior officers and staff of OKW, his eyes glaring at the map table as he spoke.

“The 1st Mountain Division scheduled for deployment in North Africa will not be sent there,” he said firmly. “I want it on the trains at once, and move it to Athens. As for the 5th Mountain Division, already in Greece, move it here.” He pointed to the deep water port of Lakki at Leros. “I have already secured rights from Mussolini, and we have captured all the shipping we need from the Greeks. The convoy will operate at night to forestall any interference from the British.”

“Rommel was expecting that division,” said Keitel.

“He already has two elite motorized brigades with Grossdeutschland and Goering’s troops,” said Hitler. “That, with the 90th motorized should be more than enough, and even that may be too much. He is sitting a thousand kilometers from Suez at the moment, and it will be some time before he can get these new forces situated and supplied for an offensive. We must make good use of that time to keep the pressure on the British. So now I will move Student’s entire Fliegerkorps to Rhodes.”

“What?” Halder was shocked by the sudden news. “As an occupation force? But my Führer, that island is already garrisoned by the Italians. We do not need German troops there.”

“Do not argue with me, Halder. No. This is not an occupation force. The troops are merely staging there for the operation I will now describe to you—Operation Anvil.”

Keitel looked askance at Halder, for that was the code word that had been assigned to the aborted bombardment run against the British held ports on the coast of northern Crete. Now he spoke to support Halder. “The Navy is still making repairs at Toulon. They are not ready to attempt such a mission again.”

“The navy? I’ve said nothing of the navy.” Hitler rankled at the mention of the Kriegsmarine, the damage to both *Hindenburg* and *Bismarck* still sore

spots. "Let the ships sit in port for all I care. We will use the Luftwaffe this time, and the results will be far better."

Halder shook his head. "Student's troops can reach Crete easily enough from our existing bases in Greece. There is no need to stage them on Rhodes. 8th and 11th Fliegerkorps are all poised for *Unternehmen Merkur* at this moment. This will only cause delays and upset the entire timetable."

"Because we are not attacking Crete!" Hitler nearly shouted at him now, the glow of fury in his eyes. "My Generals sit and argue with one another, and make all these plans to move my troops about as they wish. Yet they often do so without thinking first! Do you think I am blind and deaf? I have listened to your bickering and scheming for too long, Halder. Your plans have infected the entire General Staff! You wanted a repeat of the Von Schlieffen plan in France, until Manstein voiced his opposition and designed the stroke through the Ardennes that was the undoing of the entire French defense. Now you plan the very same thing for Barbarossa! The forces are too heavily allocated to the north, and I see you have gotten rid of Manstein by sending his 56th Panzer Korps there. Well I have news for you. I am moving that Korps to the southern wing as well, and appointing Manstein as the senior commander for the drive on the Crimea. That is to be our primary objective for the first phase of Barbarossa, not Moscow. We will not turn north until we have linked up with Ivan Volkov's troops."

Halder reddened under the insults Hitler had flung his way, and was galled to hear the name Manstein come up again in these deliberations. The mention of Volkov rankled as well. It was enough that Raeder had laid out this whole plan for the conquest of the Mediterranean, and now Volkov was poisoning the Führer's mind with his constant predictions and pleas for assistance. This sudden change in the plan threatened to unhinge all the careful deliberations they had made concerning Barbarossa.

"Then what do I take Leningrad with?" Halder allowed just a touch of anger into his own voice now.

"Do not concern yourself with that. All our goals for Barbarossa will be met, and that operation will not be delayed. The operation I am planning is just a preliminary to secure and support our southern right flank, but it will also open a few other doors you may not have considered."

Another 'But my Führer' soon followed, and Keitel pointed out that this was precisely the purpose of the planned operation against Crete. "Once that

is taken, the last British outpost of any consequence on that flank will be eliminated.”

“Oh?” Hitler wagged a finger at him now. “I have intelligence that the British have designs on Iraq and Syria. Yes! It seems this thought has never even entered your minds. Well, they must not be permitted to waltz in and take these countries for a song and dance. If we allow this, we would be fools. So we must make arrangements to stop them, and we cannot do so from Crete. It is a thousand kilometers from the airfields of Crete to Syria—as far away as Rommel is from Suez. By the time our JU-52 transports got there they would be falling into the sea off the coast! So we will move these troops to Rhodes instead—a strong knight in the center of the board. From there, they can leap in any direction, but what does Crete give me?”

“A strong base to attack North Africa and support Rommel,” said Keitel.

“Perhaps, but Rommel is not yet ready for an offensive, so an attack there is a move in the wrong direction. At the moment, Crete simply leads us to a dead end.”

There was a moment of silence before Keitel offered one last argument. “The British will then simply continue to build up at their bases on Crete,” he said. “It is from there that they will be able to bomb the oil fields at Ploesti.”

“Let them try. Once we link up with Orenburg we will have all the oil we need.” Hitler looked to Keitel, then Halder and each other officer in turn, as if daring any one of them to say another word. Then he folded his arms, his voice hard and stern.

“*Unternehmen Merkur* is officially canceled as of this minute. At the very least it will be postponed and re-evaluated pending the outcome of this new operation—*Unternehmen Anvil*. We are heading east soon, Drang Nach Osten! I have a hammer in my hand now, gentlemen, and I intend to put it to good use before we move on to Barbarossa—and there is the anvil.

He was pointing at Cyprus.

Part IV

Scimitar

“Those who play with the devil's toys will be brought by degrees to wield his sword.”

-- Buckminster Fuller

Chapter 10

March 12, 1941

The Australians of the 7th Division had done their best to conceal their presence near the Lebanese border. Vehicles had been hidden beneath the cool shade of olive groves, their tracks rubbed out in the loamy reddish soil. The infantry went without their slouch hats, or bent them into odd shapes, but the locals were not fooled. To them they were “Ostralees” from top to bottom, the big men from a far away land who called them the “Wogs” like the British did, though they were an amiable sort. It was a term of deprecation reserved for those not privileged to be among the landed gentry and citizens of the British Empire—white citizens—but such prejudices had not been burned away in the crucible of time yet. There was Jerry out there for the Germans, the Macaronis in Italy, Ivan in Russia, the Japs out east. And the enemy these brawny young men would now face were the “Frogs.” They thought they would just simply walk in, wave their hats at the French, and walk on to occupy the territory, but they were wrong.

Zero hour was to be 01:00, under a nearly full moon, and some hours before this, the engineers of 2/6th Field Company slipped across the border led by local guides. One man there was a member of the Jewish underground militias, Moshe Dayan, who would later become famous in Israel’s many wars. It was in this campaign, while peering through field glasses that were struck by a bullet from a French sniper, that Dayan injured his eye, forcing him to wear the signature eye patch for the rest of his life.

The engineers mission at the outset was to find and cut the telephone lines from the outpost at Ras en Naqoura to a second post further up the coast where the French had a demolition team ready to interdict the narrow coastal road. There the terrain rose steeply to a 385 meter hill called Chamaa, and one good landslide there could close the road to vehicles for hours.

The engineers, under Captain Gowling, were led by Jewish and Arab guides, making their way over the hushed stony ground, through thickets of thorn bush. They pushed on over the hills to the coastal road, finding and cutting the wires before circling back inland to try and get to a point north of

Iakandaroun, where the demolition charges were believed to be. Posting three man teams on the road to stop any vehicles from heading south, other teams scouted through culverts and low bridges to look for the mines, but none were found.

“It has to be further south,” said Lieutenant Allen. “There, where the road hugs the side of that hill. That’s where I’d place my charges.” So they moved south until they came within sight of a block house, and at that point a single shot broke the quiet of the night, the first shot fired in this private little war to be fought between the British Empire and the Vichy French and their allies.

“Spread out,” said Lieutenant Allen, “and get down through that culvert. We’ll provide cover fire, and Kyffin can have a go at them from the left.”

And so it began. The Australians rushed the strong point and took it by storm and fire, the sound of that little fight echoing from the high hills and setting off the chatter of a machine gun in a nearby orchard. This was attacked and silenced by a grenade from the hand of Private Henderson, who captured the Hotchkiss gun and a mortar in that position. But others had heard the commotion, and reinforcements were drawn to the scene in small groups. When a French column was seen coming from the north, Lieutenant Kyffin and his men mounted the captured Hotchkiss and mortar on the blockhouse and now it was Australian troops firing from the position at an enemy from the north.

They came in small groups, a few mounted tirailleurs, then two armored cars, which were stopped by a well aimed round from the captured French mortar. Twelve more horsemen were scene and fired upon with the Hotchkiss, and sent galloping away into the hills seeking cover. It was soon found that there were more French in the nearby orchard than first thought, and Lieutenant Allen was sent with his men to root them out. While this action was fought, Captain Gowling heard a loud explosion behind them. His eye caught that of Lieutenant Kyffin with the obvious look of frustration.

“The charges were further south,” he said grimly. The demolition they had been sent to prevent had been carried out by the French somewhere on the road behind them, and now the small team of engineers was cut off until their comrades could clear and break through along that road. They held out, until they had collected some 30 prisoners and an armored car from forces wandering in to the scene unaware of the action underway.

Further south, 2/27th Battalion was leading the attack across the border.

When the demolition went off, Lieutenant Rudd was sent with six light MG Mark VI tankettes and a pair of 2-pounder AT guns with more engineers. He pushed his small column up through Naqoura without incident, encountering a small group of French infantry blocking the road beyond the town, which forced him to stop and deploy his 2-pounders. The tankettes engaged point blank with their machineguns, while infantry flanked the position from the hillside above. It was soon discovered that the demolition had produced a large crater in the road, and a small landslide. The roadblock would have to be flanked.

The job went to the men of the 2/16th Battalion under Lieutenant Colonel MacDonald. He pushed two companies of infantry across the border to converge on the village of Bent Jbail, where they drove out a detachment of French Spahis cavalry. The pioneers cleared a track to the road leading north, and the carriers of Lieutenant Mills, 6th Australian Cavalry, pushed on, intending to move along the winding mountain road to Tyre, which was well north of the blocked coastal road. They reached the old Turkish castle at Tebnine, clearing it of enemy troops that had gathered there from posts further south.

It was then that the Arab mayor of the town approached the British waving a white headress, which he had removed. He was taken to Mills, where he welcomed the "Ostralees" as liberators and said he had friends in Tyre ahead that he could call to check on the enemy defenses. To the surprise of the Australians, he was soon informed that Tyre was not yet held by the enemy in any strength, and that they would be welcomed there.

"Then let's get on with it," said Mills enthusiastically. This was more of what they had expected of this offensive, a quick advance with little opposition and welcoming locals. The column set off, through the furrowed hills until they reached a point where they finally overlooked the ancient crusader town of Tyre. There they saw British naval units off the coast, but they were under attack by French planes, and the sharp pock of the anti-aircraft batteries punctuated the stillness. It was Force A, with the destroyer *Kimberly* close inshore, looking to shell French positions. When the infantry pushed in through the bleached white stucco buildings, they were soon greeted by a throng of locals, and an Arab ovation, the trilling tongues of the women accenting the cheers.

Lieutenant Colonel MacDonald decided to send a troop of Rolls Royce

armored cars from the Royals north from Tyre, heading up the coastal road towards the vital bridge over the Litani River. By this time, the long night had passed, and the sun was up as the column approached the bridge, where they saw the French had set up a roadblock south of the river. A few men dismounted to clear the obstacle, and the “Battle of the Litani” started when French troops near the bridge opened fire with both field guns and 47mm AT guns. Well registered mortar fire came in as well, forcing the armored cars to make a hasty withdrawal. They had to abandon two cars that had been hit by enemy fire, and the shelter of a nearby wadi provided little cover to Lieutenant Dent’s troop of infantry in universal carriers. Dent’s own carrier broke down, and the situation looked difficult.

“Better get word back to Mac,” he said to his driver, Trooper Judd. “We’re in for a fight here.” It was clear that the main enemy line of resistance was now the Litani. The crater on the coast road was found to be thirty feet deep, and it was late afternoon before engineers could get it filled to permit the passage of vehicles and finally link up with the men hold in the block house further north. By day’s end, the 21st Brigade had taken all the ground south of the Litani, but it was clear that the real battle was now about to begin.

* * *

Further inland, the Australian 25th Brigade was to advance from the roads flanking the high cliffs above the Jordan, take the town of Merdjayoun, and push on through the highlands beyond and into the valley to take the vital French airfield at Rayak. The first major obstacle they encountered was an old stone fort beyond a bridge, over a swift mountain stream just south of Khaim. “Fort Khaim,” as it was called, was manned by about 100 French infantry, and protected by 75mm field guns, mortars, machinegun posts and wire. The job of taking it was handed to Captain Cotton’s company, and he sent Lieutenant Connor’s platoon to take the bridge and then push on to survey the fort.

“We’ll have to come at it on a wide front,” Connor whispered to his men. “Get the lads well dispersed, and when we move, make it quick. The sooner we cut through that wire the better.”

It was approaching noon on that first day when the Aussies rushed

forward, their advance soon being opposed by heavy fire. The dispersal of the troops allowed them to push on until they reached the wire, some 50 yards from the squarish fort. There they fired everything they had to silence the two machine guns that were raking the wire area, and Lieutenant Connor rushed forward with five other men and wire cutters. This small squad was able to get through and work their way to the base of the fort, where another machinegun on an opposite corner took them under fire.

Amazingly, there was an unguarded door there, and Conner shouldered his way in, hefting his sub-machinegun as he did so. A Sergeant and two Corporals followed him as they climbed another wall that led to a long barracks. Connor ran the length of the room, which opened on the inside of the fort, firing his sub-machinegun the whole way until he and his men reached a bastion at the other end. There they took refuge, finding a French officer, who quickly raised his hands and wisely told them in English he now wished to join the Free French forces of de Gaulle!

“This one has a head on his shoulders,” said Connor. “Alright mate, you can throw in with us if you mean to. But one false move and I’ll have Sergeant Sweetapple there throttle you. Understand?”

Sweetapple wasn’t a very intimidating name, but the man who had it looked more than capable of carrying out that threat. Connor found a rifle slit in the wall of his little toe hold on the fort, and called out to Captain Cotton, who sent men forward to try and cut a hole in the dry sandstone wall at the base of the bastion. Little by little, they opened a breach, put men through to reinforce Connor, until a full platoon had occupied the barracks and began pouring a withering fire at the remaining French positions on the interior of the fort.

By nightfall, Fort Khaim had been taken, and the little action there presaged the events that now lay ahead. Just up the road from Khaim was the main enemy position on the upper Litani. It stretched from the town of Merdjayoun in the northeast, where there was yet another fort, then southwest to the Litani itself where the famous imposing walls of the old Crusader castle, Chateau Beaufort, overlooked the main road. The approaching slopes to these redoubts were bare and open, offering little cover. Pill boxes and mortar pits connected the two forts anchoring the line, which was strongly held by men of the French Algerian Rifle Regiment.

A Free French liaison officer was sent forward under a flag of truce to try

and talk their way through the obstacle, but the request to join the Aussies was denied, and he got a bullet in his shoulder on the return journey for good measure. Machine guns and mortars opened up, and within minutes the three companies of Australian troops under Captains Byrne, Brown, and Houston were pinned down, and Brown himself was wounded.

“This is no good,” said Byrne. “They held fire until we were right in front of them on this exposed ground. Send back that we need bloody artillery support!” The runner was off, a stream of enemy MG fire in his wake that almost cut him down, but he made it back. Soon the 25-pounders of 2/6th Field Regiment responded, laying down a well sited barrage of covering fire to allow 2/31st Battalion to fall back.

It was some time withdrawing, and at one point three Mark VI tankettes were brought up to provide more covering fire. The two lead tanks were hit by hot enemy fire, the third tank under Sergeant Groves bravely charging to their side to rescue the surviving crewmen. But the incident was enough to allow Captain Byrne to get his company back another 400 yards, harried by enemy mortar fire the whole way. Houston’s last company had to cling to its position until dusk, under fire the whole time, with casualties mounting.

“So much for waving our hats at these fellows!” said Byrne when he reported to the battalion commander. The Vichy French were going to fight, and Brigade commander Cox knew he would now have to make a deliberate attack, well supported by artillery fire. After watching this preparation some time, the artillery commander made a suggestion that an armored troop of the cavalry be sent up to the village of Khirbe to draw enemy fire so he could better target his guns. It was to be a reconnaissance that they would come to regret.

Lieutenant Millard got the assignment in 1/6th Australian Cav, and he led his troop, consisting of one light Mark VI tankette and six carriers with infantry, up the narrow road. The detachment planned to split into two groups of three carriers each, with the tank in the middle, and with this modest force they thought to take the town by storm. Lt. Millard deployed his men on the left, and Lt. Florence had the right flank, but both groups immediately came under fire by mortars and machineguns when the men began to deploy.

“Better tell the lads to get back,” he said to his wireless operator, Corporal Oswell. But when he looked at the man he could see he was clutching a wounded arm with a bloodied hand, and was unable to send the signal. So

Millard waved for the men in Lt. Florence's squad to fall back, then got on the Vickers MG to lay down covering fire on the French positions.

"I hope the bloody artillery spotters are having a good look at this mess!" he shouted. "Driver, get us back!"

As the carrier tried to back off, a small caliber mortar shell landed right near the front of the vehicle, rattling it with shrapnel and blowing off a track. Millard and his remaining crew leapt from the damaged vehicle, the ground around them peppered by enemy fire. They made it to a low stone wall, unable to so much as raise their heads further against the enemy gunnery.

"We're in the soup now," said Millard. "Where's that artillery?"

"I've good legs on me, sir," said Corporal Limb, his driver. "I think I can sprint back to the carrier and call them on the radio."

They waited until the French fire slackened, then Limb ran for all he was worth, shots ricocheting off the carrier even as he leapt inside. Amazed that he was still alive, the Corporal reached for the radio set and found it dead, shot through by a machinegun round. Then, as if in answer to the call he had hoped to make, the Australian artillery fire began to register in on the French positions.

Lt. Florence got his men safely back, but saw that Millard was still trapped. He jumped into his carrier, gunned the engine, and made a mad dash right up the road towards Millard's damaged carrier, with no more than a pistol in his hand for a weapon. He reached the scene, finding the carrier empty, as Corporal Limb had used those good legs of his to make it safely back to the wall.

"Come on!" he shouted to Millard and the others, maneuvering his carrier closer. The men were up and into the vehicle, still under heavy fire, but they all made it safely in, and Florence backed off. By the time they got back, a third of the men in the troop had been hit and wounded, and the carrier itself had taken heavy damage. But they were alive, and glad for at least that. Lt. Millard wiped the sweat from his brow with a bloodied arm.

"Message from battalion," said a runner. "We're to make ready to support the infantry attack."

"With what?" Millard exclaimed. He had one carrier and the Mark VI operational, and twelve men.

Chapter 11

The German reprisal was swift, as if perfectly timed to counter the launch of Operation Scimitar. The hammer Hitler had spoken of as he berated his Generals was Kurt Student's veteran 7th Flieger Division. The paratroopers had been at Gibraltar as ground forces, seized Malta by storm, and now had been ferried forward from their bases in Greece to the Italian outpost on Rhodes. From there the Ju-52's refueled, and the troops made ready to spring on to their real objective, the island of Cyprus.

A backwater outpost in the early war, Cyprus had seemed isolated from the fires that were burning through Greece and the Western Desert. There the East met West in a mix of Greek merchants, shopkeepers and Turkish farmers, fishermen and craftsmen, though each group huddled in well segregated settlements made of adobe like mud walled buildings. The arable lowlands were covered with fields of barley, wheat and rye, and wild flowers that lent their color to the landscape. Peasant farmers worked the land, carrying their harvest along thin, dusty roads in Ox carts, or on the backs of camel troops. Hills rose in green terraces, dotted with thick vineyards, peach orchards, olive and fig groves, dotting the flanks of higher mountains in the south and west. There were deep shady forests of oak, eucalyptus, cedar, pine, and of course, cyprus.

In the larger towns of Famagusta, Larnaca and Nicosia, the people mixed in commerce, black-robed Greek Orthodox Priests, tall Turks wearing their distinctive red fez hats, veiled women selling woven blankets at street concessions. The people seemed oblivious to the hardships and privations the war had forced upon others. They lazed in the warm Mediterranean sun, sipping black coffee in the cafes. Over the years the Greek Hoplites had come, and the Roman Legions, and finally the swarthy Arabs and Moors. Ancient ruins of these old empires still jutted from the high hills, old Crusader castles built by the dour Knights Hospitaller, who once held the island as a fortress outpost against Islam, keeping watch on the Holy Lands to the east. The people had seen them all come and go over the long ages, but now men were coming the like of which they had never imagined, tall fair skinned Aryans falling from the sky itself with canisters of rifles,

machineguns, and mortars to bring war to this sleepy island.

III/7th Fallschirmjager Regiment would land west of the capital at Nicosia, seizing two vital airfields. II/7th would land at Famagusta to storm that city and its port facilities, and I/7th would be split, with a single battalion targeting the airfield at Leftonika northeast of Nikosia, and two more landing on the southern coast between Famagusta and Limasol, where there were landing strips at Dkekalia and Kophinu. The R.A.F opposed the landings as best they could, but with so many *Hurricanes* up in support of the ground operations for Scimitar, the German air assault could not be stopped. Only one formation of Ju-52s was forced to abort when planes off Crete caught it en-route, and successfully dueled with the three Bf-109s in escort. Yet it was an important little victory, for the planes turned back had been carrying the artillery.

Unlike Crete, Cyprus was not well garrisoned, nor did it have any significant Cypriot militia force beyond a few security companies watching the airfields. The only planes on the island were the remnant of an F.A.A. unit at Larnaca, five *Swordfish* and five *Albacores*. The island was defended by only two battalions of British troops, the Sherwood Foresters and 2/7th Australian Cavalry. Being hit by a full division of crack paratroops, they would have little chance of stopping the operation, or even impeding it for very long. Churchill heard of the operation while still en route back to England, and remarked that he hoped the garrison would simply take to the rough mountain country in the southwest of the island and organize a guerrilla campaign from there, but it was not to be.

There were two companies of the Sherwood Foresters at Nikosia when the skies darkened with parachutes. Their commander could see that he had no chance of holding the town with what looked like a brigade sized force landing to the east and west. So he elected to try and get south on the main road to Larnaca, leading his men out in any lorry they could make operational. Second company at the head of the column made it 42 kilometers until they ran into a battalion of German paratroopers blocking the road near the village of Aradhippou, just north of Larnaca. The 4th company veered off the road and tried to bypass the German position, circling to the west to try and reach a company of Aussie cavalry still holding the port.

1st Company of the Sherwood Foresters, and a company of the 7th Australian Cav, were surrounded at Famagusta by a well designed German

landing on every side of the town. Further west at Limassol, the last company of Sherwood Foresters got the order to take to anything that would float and try to reach Palestine. With this inadequate defense collapsing, it would now come down to how quickly the German troops could occupy the key turf they wanted with leg units.

Another unit was also on the move that first night, the 85th Regiment of the 5th Mountain Division that had been in Rodos as part of the forces staged there. The convoy put to sea with the French *Comandante Teste*, a large seaplane tender that had been converted to a troop transport, two captured Greek steamers, and a pair of French Destroyers in escort. They were the real naval thrust to be made at the opening, a small, quiet task force that sped on its way in the shadows, while a second French task force of fast cruisers and destroyers demonstrated by racing through the Straits of Messina and heading west of Cyprus. The smaller task force hugging the Turkish coast wasn't seen, and made its way inexorably down to the port of Tartus. German infantry were now in the Levant, though the British did not yet know this as they deployed for the battle on the Litani River south of Beirut.

* * *

On the inland desert flank, the 5th Indian Brigade had assembled at Irbid, Jordan, and stormed over the border to Daraa. When it became clear that the French were not open to negotiation there either, 3/1 Punjab and 4/6 Raj battalions took the town in a pincer operation, overcoming the resistance quickly and turning the area over to the Frontier Horse companies, many manned by Arab troops. They then pushed on up the road to Sheikh Meskine, intending to take that place and the larger settlement of Ezraa further east near the rugged lava beds of the Jebel Druz. Their mission, as they advanced north, was to cover the long desert flank on the right, and screen the advance of the center column.

There Kinlan's "Sabre Force" of Gurkhas and Scimitar light tanks was joined by Popski and the Mobile Force returning from Habbaniyah. Major Popski found the commander of that force, a Colonel Rana Gandar, and told him he was leading a contingent of Russian Marines that would join this action.

"Russian Marines?" The Colonel wasn't sure what to make of that.

“Right-o, mate. I understand you chaps don’t take to one another in your day, but this is our time here, and the Russians are our allies. Make them your allies too. I’ve seen them fight, along with those black suited commandos yonder. They call that lot the Argonauts, and they know their business behind these machine guns as well.” He hefted the assault rifle Troyak had given him.

Colonel Gandar listened, and said nothing. He was a professional officer in one of the premier fighting units in the world of 2021. The Gurkhas had had a long history in the British Army, tough men all, hardened first by the high mountains of Nepal where they were born, and these were the best of the best. They were ‘bloody good soldiers,’ an understatement, for the Gurkhas had made a sport of war for countless generations. This unit was designated a Light Infantry Battalion, as they did not fight from armored fighting vehicles. Instead they carried the steel in their impregnable souls, and on their back right hip, where each man carried the dread curved Kurkuri long knife in a brown leather sheath.

Popski knew good soldiers when he saw them, and these men filled the bill. They were not big men like the Russians or Australians, and the British had often taken to calling them the “little Gurkhas.” But they were hard as the hills that spawned them, fierce as the wild wind on the high snowy peaks, though quick to laugh and with a warm, amiable spirit. The Gurkha Sergeants, called Halvidars, were not the bawling haranguing sort with their men. They didn’t have to be that way. Each and every Gurkha was motivated from within, not by the hard hand of a drill Sergeant, and would serve and obey unflinchingly, even unto death. There was no arrogance among the officers, and the unit was a collective of equals at heart, and the officers led only by virtue of their experience and time in the service.

Popski had known Gurkha infantry in his time, finding them among the fiercest and most steadfast fighters he had ever seen. They seemed to have no fear in battle. They would either live or die, and many in his day still wore a top knot of hair so their Hindu god could reach down and pluck them into the nirvana of some heaven if they fell, but it was never theirs to decide that fate. That quality of fatalistic ardor when it came to battle, and the modern weaponry Colonel Gandar’s troops would carry with them, made them a formidable foe indeed.

“Where do you want us?” Popski asked.

The Colonel said nothing, simply nodding and pointing with his chin to a dry hollow some ways off. A Gurkha never pointed, particularly with his finger. He might use a thumb if necessary, or simply his chin.

His introductions made, Popski went back to Troyak's squads and spoke to them in Russian. "We're signed on here with the Gurkhas," he said. "You men respect one thing in another fighting man, and you'll see it the minute you lay eyes on this lot—tenacity and skill. They've got both in abundance, and you should be proud to stand with them. So any rubbish you may still have in your pockets from your own time needs to be buried, here and now. Today we fight as one."

"We had no trouble fighting with those Argonauts," said Zykov. "It's what a man does in a fight that matters now, not who he is. They did right by us, and we did right by them. If these here fight alongside us, they'll be no problems—except for anyone who gets in our way."

That produced a swell of approval from the Marines, and they quickly settled in for a field cooked meal, glad to have their feet on dry earth for a time, instead of the swaying deck of the ship. They soon got the word from Popski that they were "going in" through the Golan heights.

"Tough bones there," he said. "Hard, stony ground, and beyond that the lava beds of the Jebel Druz country. We'll turn north before that, and head for Damascus. Our lot is to lead in the Free French, and then we're to let them have a go at the city and see if they can take it. The Frogs may not want to mix it up, but from initial reports I've heard, they're fighting on the coast road."

"We're ready," said Troyak, chewing the last of his meal and swilling down a long swallow of water behind it. In another hour they mounted the trucks the British had provided and moved out as a ground force. The Argonauts drew a better ticket and got Dragon IFVs from Kinlan, though no one would say he was playing favorites, even if he was. The helicopters, particularly the three X-3s, would be held in reserve, or used as fast, mobile fire support when called for, or as scouts. The KA-40 would standby as a medical unit and supply ferry asset, though the Russians didn't care much for that.

"Think the Big Blue Pig could outgun one of those fancy hybrids the British have?" a corporal asked.

"Stow that, Rykovich," Troyak reminded him. "The British are allies

now, remember?”

They moved out, part of the central force that was comprised of six Free French battalions, the Gurkhas and the Scimitars of Sabre Force. The main opposition was from the Vichy 17th Senegalese Infantry Regiment, three battalions, and these units fought nothing more than brief delaying actions as they fell back towards Damascus. One battalion thought to hold the gateway town of Kuneitra, but did not have the strength to occupy the heights of Tel Abu Nida to the west, which were eagerly taken by a company of the Gurkhas. From this wooded height, they could put well placed mortar fire down on the French positions, a development that did much to discourage further defense.

At the first sign of a ground attack organizing, the Senegalese pulled out, heading northeast, then east towards the rail line to Daraa. It was there that they ran afoul of the Free French 4th Senegalese Battalion, and a troop of 8 Scimitars that had been leading them up from the Yarmuk River Valley. There was a brief firefight, with Senegalese riflemen on both sides starkly outlining the nature of the little civil war that was now underway. The Scimitar tanks weighed heavily in the outcome, quickly suppressing the enemy MG positions with their 30mm autocannons, and allowing the Free French troops to push on through.

So while the Aussies fought their way over the Litani River on the coast, “Sabre Force” had crossed the hard ground of the Golan and was now preparing to move into the cultivated land beyond. B Company of the Gurkhas raced ahead and took the bridge over the narrow, winding river Awaj north of Sassa, which flowed east below Kiswah. This allowed two troops of Scimitars to cross quickly over. In time, the whole Gurkha battalion reassembled there, in a good position to outflank the growing French defense further east at Kiswah.

There the Vichy French blew both the road and rail bridges and dug into well prepared positions. The town itself was on the north bank of the river, and directly behind it there was an imposing hill, Jebel el Kelb, rising to the 840 meter mark. Moving west from there, across a flat valley, was more high ground over 900 meters known as Tel Afar and Jebel Madani, and it was this sector that was now being scouted by small patrols of Gurkhas. If it could be taken, it would unhinge the entire French defense at Kiswah.

The ground here was strewn with boulders, and very rugged, which made

it impractical for the Scimitars. But the Gurkhas were right in their element, accustomed to the high peaks of Nepal, and found the hill no obstacle. It was therefore decided that two companies of Gurkhas would advance under cover of darkness to take Jebel Madani, while the third company and the Scimitars would take the road further north to attack the village of Aartouz. Holding the extreme left flank of Centerforce were the Argonauts and Popski with the Russian Marines. They found themselves on rising ground, and approaching the village of Qatana.

It seemed a good plan, putting the strong, modern troops on the left to outflank the French river defense at Kiswah, but this vulnerability had not escaped the Vichy French planners either. Jebel Madani was therefore garrisoned by 2/6th Battalion of the French Foreign Legion, and a second battalion of these hardened troops, the 4/6th had come down on the train from Homs the previous day. It was positioned in the key town of Aartouz. Legendary for their tenacity on defense, the Legionnaires were in good positions, with mortars, Browning Automatic Rifles, and the whole defense was to be supported by a full regiment of artillery.

Yet this was not the worst of it. Unbeknownst to the allies, the German mountain troops that had debarked at Tartus had quickly boarded French trucks waiting for them there, and raced south to Tripoli. There they boarded the trains to make their way south along the coast to Beirut, then east through the mountain passes to the principal Vichy French Aerodrome in Syria at Rayak. There they met up with two battalions of the Luftland Sturm Brigade that had been airlifted the previous day. The third battalion of that force had been forced to abort when the transports were jumped by *Hurricanes* just off the Lebanese coast, and a swirling dogfight ensued with the escorting Bf-109s.

Yet these two battalions of tough paratroopers were now added to the whole of the 85th Mountain Regiment of the 5th Giebergs Division, making what now amounted to a heavy brigade of veteran German infantry coming through the pass at Jebel Mazar to defend Damascus. It would bring them into direct confrontation with the warriors from 2021, and the battle that ensued would be one for the new history books these events were now about to write—with blood and fire.

For a map of these dispositions and other battles in this novel, please visit:

<http://www.writingshop.ws/html/k-14-maps.html>

Chapter 12

News of the swift German counterstroke against Cyprus was troubling, to say the least. General Wavell had barely been able to muster an adequate force for the enterprising Operation Scimitar, and now the words of warning Fedorov had tried to convey about the campaign returned to haunt him.

Things on the Litani had gone well enough after that first day. Forewarned about the difficulties the 11th Commando had experience, Wavell had the three section officers well briefed, and this time Pedder, More and Keyes made much better landings. The Aussies pushed over the Litani, brought up engineers to get to work on the bridge, and slowly unhinged the French defense when the Royal Scots Greys and Stafford Yeomanry attached to support this attack were able to cross.

The French decided to play for time, swinging their defense back like a gate to reform along the Zahrani River south of Sidon. They were encouraged by the stubborn defense they had mounted in the center near Merdjayoun, which they still held, along with the old fort that defended that road. The Aussies eventually took the redoubt, but now the operation was days old, and their mission to swiftly break through here and race up the valley to cut communications between Damascus and Beirut had been foiled.

“Rayak,” said Wavell despondently to O’Connor when the two men met to discuss the situation. “Given the hindsight of what has happened, I can see that was the key axis of attack now. If we could have pushed on through Merdjayoun to take that place, we would have the enemy’s principle airfield, while also cutting the road and rail connections between Beirut and Damascus. Now that the Germans are in it, they’ll use those lines of communication to move troops to either flank. We should have put our main thrust up that valley, with at least two full brigades.”

“It’s a pity the Russian Captain couldn’t clue us in,” said O’Connor.

“That’s just the thing, this may not have even happened insofar as they know the history. This Captain Fedorov seemed well bothered about the changes being made. In time the war will look like nothing he’s ever read about, so we’ll have to feel our way forward on our own. The only question now is, what to do about this mess? It’s looking to be the long slog this

Fedorov warned us about.”

“This news from Sabre Force is somewhat alarming,” said O’Connor. “It seems they’ve spotted German troops in the high passes near Jebel Mazar. They have to be staging from Cyprus and flying in under cover of darkness, or coming by convoy at night.”

“Yes, and we’d better have a word with Cunningham and Tovey about that. The Royal Navy has to do more to interdict any further movement of German troops by sea. The R.A.F. has its hands full trying to duel it out with the Luftwaffe. As it stands, they’re flying in troops from Cyprus and Rhodes—a battalion here, another there, and they all seem to be concentrating on Rayak.” He tapped the map to point out the airfield, some 50 kilometers east of Beirut. “If we had rolled everything up that valley we might have Beirut outflanked by now.”

“If wishes were horses,” said O’Connor. “We’ll need more than the two divisions we have there now if the Germans build up any strength.”

“I’ve already sent for the other two brigades of the 4th Indian Division,” said Wavell. Things went off without a hitch after Habbaniyah, and the Golden Square is on the run in Iraq. So that will give us the troops General Slim has there in the 10th Indian division, but they’re a long way from Damascus as it sits now.”

“Don’t send them there,” said O’Connor. “You’ll want them to run right up the Euphrates into Syria. We’ll have to take the north as well before this ends, so we might as well get started. Once Habforce can pull itself back together, get them back to Habbaniyah. Then I’d have them backtrack and turn north to Palmyra. We’ll need to secure the pumping stations and oil pipelines. Send Slim and the 10th Indian Division right up the Euphrates an on to Aleppo. If nothing else it will force the French to send more troops there, and might take the pressure off down south at Damascus.”

“Yes? Well it might also prompt a further reaction from the Germans.” Wavell had a worried expression on his face. “This bloody operation is becoming much more than we realized. It could develop into the major theater of the war effort here. Thank god Rommel is playing a game of sitskrieg for the moment. He hasn’t moved from his positions near Mersa Brega, but the Germans are building up there as well, and we’re still fighting for Benghazi.”

“Damn unsporting of the Italians to finally put up a good fight,” said

O'Connor. He was restless, being assigned to the Western Desert in Libya with no clear operation beyond consolidating and taking that port.

"Well, what about Kinlan's troops? They've taken Giarabub as planned, and we've got a good supply run down to Siwa as agreed. Yet to leave those marvelous tanks just sitting there on the flank when they could do so much good elsewhere..."

"What are you proposing?"

"Why should we just sit here watching Rommel build up strength? He has us at a disadvantage. With both Australian divisions at Benghazi, that leaves us only the New Zealand Division and Kinlan's force watching Rommel. We can't go on the offensive, and we have to truck supplies, food and water all the way from Tobruk. Meanwhile Rommel sits at Mersa Brega getting fatter every day with a steady stream of trucks coming down from Tripoli. We might reverse that situation."

"How so? The Royal Navy is in no shape to try and interdict that coastal road. I've spoken to Cunningham. Churchill wanted him to bombard Tripoli, but it would only be a temporary stay, and any disruption along the coast road would be equally short lived."

"You mistake my meaning," said O'Connor. "We have Tobruk, and Rommel couldn't take it earlier. Why stand out west? We could pull back the 6th Australians into the Jebel country between Marawah and Derna, and post the 9th Division centered on Machili."

"But we give Jerry the airfields at Benghazi, Musus and Soluq."

"True, but we'll still have good fields at Marawah, Al Baydah, Cyrene, Derna and Machili. I'll pull together 2nd Armored now that we've fleshed it out with the 22nd Guards Brigade, and I'll screen the approach to Tobruk south of Michili. 2nd New Zealand Division can back me up at Bir Hacheim southwest of Tobruk. Then we put Kinlan's brigade here, south of the airfield at El Adem, or anywhere to the east for that matter. Let it stand in reserve—a fire brigade behind our three infantry divisions."

"So we give up Benghazi?"

"It's not ours to give!" O'Connor smiled. "We haven't taken it yet, but if we re-deploy as I suggest, we get back the 6th and 9th Australian Divisions, which gives us a full infantry Corps with Kinlan's Brigade. Then the shoe is on the other foot. If Rommel wants all that desert between Mersa Brega and Tobruk, he'll have to pay for it in gasoline, food and water. If he comes in

strength, our prospects in a fight are much better near Tobruk than they would be if it comes to blows out west.”

“Interesting,” said Wavell. “But Churchill will see it as defeatism. He won’t like us leaving Benghazi to the enemy, as they’ll use it to improve their own supply situation.”

“Well it was no bloody good to us when we had the place,” O’Connor argued. “You can only get three or four ships in at any one time, and under a good steady pounding from the air that port was all but useless. If we can’t interdict Tripoli yet, we can damn well bottle up Benghazi. I say it’s a worthless asset. We don’t need it. We can’t use it, even if we do take it. So we shouldn’t spend our two best infantry divisions there trying to take the damn thing. Strategic withdrawal, General, not defeatism. This is a bit of a boxing match out here, and we’ve driven Jerry back to his own corner. Now he’ll cover up and wait out the round, resting on the ropes. Let’s get back in the center of the ring and see if he comes out after the bell. We can’t go on the offense yet, not against a position like Mersa Brega, and not while Operation Scimitar is likely to soak up any reinforcements we might receive. I say we get some breathing room by moving back a bit and freeing up those two Australian Divisions, then we might even be able to pick a few cherries off that tree for Palestine if need be.”

“You mean Kinlan’s troops?”

“I know we’ve the issue of secrecy and all, but a few of those tanks might make all the difference. Kinlan’s force shouldn’t be out on a limb at Giarabub, or heaven forbid as far west as Jalu. We won’t get anywhere near there unless we’ve already thrown Rommel out of Mersa Brega, and are prepared to move on Tripoli. You and I know that is simply not in the cards. So I believe we should move Kinlan’s boys up north, where they can get to the coast road if needed. It’s a fast, mobile force, and it could serve to reinforce either flank when necessary—the Western Desert, or Palestine.”

“Which would mean we’d be running them back and forth through Alexandria, for all those eyes to goggle.”

“We could manage it,” said O’Connor. “They could move up to the rail head at Mersa Matruh, and we could get them on the trains. The rail bridge over the Suez Canal at Kantara will take the weight easily enough, and that’s a good heavy gauge rail line all the way to Haifa. They’ll have to move at night, of course, and we could use the Military Police to clear the roads and

rail stations. We could even use tarps to camouflage the tanks while in transit! We could pull it off. I'm sure of it."

Wavell was quiet for some time. Then he said a single word that summed up the one real problem with this proposal. "Churchill. He's thinking we've the Hammer of God in hand now, and I'm already getting suggestions about a new offensive he wants to call Battleaxe. He won't take another backward step on our part well."

"Yes, but he can be made to see reason. From the position I describe, Cyrenaica would become a vast no man's land between the two camps. We'd be at Tobruk, and Rommel at Mersa Brega and Aghelia. Both sides would push out patrols. There might be a bit of thrust and parry there, and that's a fight I think we can win. I'll wager my hat that I can hold Rommel at bay, and if he does get up enough steam for an offensive, why, we'll have Kinlan's boys and those bloody tanks of his to stop him, just like they did at Bir el Khamsa. Given the resources we have, this is the better position, General. We should withdraw to the line I've detailed, and see what Rommel does. If he takes the bait, all the better. Then we get a mobile fight, with good flanks and an open desert. I'd prefer that any day to trying to slug it out through that badland country near Mersa Brega. It's the best defensive position in Libya."

It made perfect sense. The British would shorten their supply lines, and force the enemy to lengthen his if he wanted a fight. Everything O'Connor said about Benghazi was true, thought Wavell. And Kinlan's force positioned up north, perhaps near Sidi Barani, could get to Tobruk in a flash, or see select units discretely peeled off for use in Operation Scimitar. O'Connor was right. Just sitting out west watching Rommel was no good.

"I'll take it under consideration," said Wavell. "Which means I'll spend the whole night drafting a note to Churchill about what we propose to do. Perhaps we could get the Russian Captain to weigh in on this with us. The Prime Minister seems to have taken quite a liking to the man."

"Yes, I noticed that. Well it's understandable. He has the answer to so many questions in his head that I would think Churchill would have him locked away in the tower by now, and having tea with him every afternoon. Letting on that we win this damn war was heartening, to say the least."

"It was, but three more years, Richard. It's going to be a long hard slog, and I don't think this Fedorov told us but a thimbleful of all he knows. He

was right about the Germans. If they get serious and find a way to supply a large force in the Middle East, we can't match them. This is why these developments concerning Cyprus, and troops landing at Rayak, are so bedeviling. We've got to prevent them getting a firm hold in Syria. A stitch in time saves nine. We need to sweep them out of the Levant and link up with Turkey... before they do the same to us."

"Agreed," said O'Connor. "And we've just the tool we need in Kinlan's force. Shall I have a chat with him about another deployment? He still has four battalions now, but each one has the fighting power of one of our brigades, if not more. Suppose I ask him for one good battalion, stiffened with a troop of those tanks."

"They'll have trouble on the inland roads through those mountains in Lebanon, and I doubt if any of the bridges along that coast road would handle them well."

"He has engineers. Have you had a look at some of their other vehicles? He's got a real monster called the Trojan. Damn thing looks like a crab out of hell, with a massive mine plow forward and three metal arms. Another is called the Titan AVLB—that's for Armored Vehicle Launched Bridge. Looks like we did a few things right in the decades ahead. It can bridge a 60 meter obstacle in minutes!"

"Damn amazing. Well I'd put whatever force General Kinlan may part with on the coast road, or right in the center for the drive on Rayak. The resistance has been very tough there. Once we get Rayak, and cut the roads and rails between Damascus and Beirut, things might look a little better for us. Alright, let's see what Kinlan thinks."

"You could simply order the deployment," O'Connor gave Wavell a look, curious as to his reaction to that.

"Yes, I could order it, but as things stand I think we'd best get his opinion on the matter first."

"Well you might have asked for mine before you yanked on the leash during Operation Compass and shipped my 4th Indian Division off to East Africa!" O'Connor smiled.

"They're back now. With the Germans thickening up here, I'm going to order both the 7th and 11th Indian Brigades in with the 5th to support the attack on Syria."

"That's the ticket! Then with Kinlan's troops on the coast road, or in the

center going for Rayak, we have a good left hook to go with that right cross. Speaking of Kinlan's troops—any word from the Gurkhas?"

"They're going to put in an attack tonight," said Wavell. "Now we'll see if they've kept their backs straight all those years on. They'll be up against the French Foreign Legion."

Even as he said that, a runner came up in a huff, his cheeks red with haste. "Message from Sabre Force," he said. "Major Popski reports German troops coming on the line west of Damascus, and they look to be in good strength!" he handed off the message, and Wavell looked it over with concern.

"Fallschirmjagers," he said. "Get me that map over there, General. Where is Qatana?"

It was right on the road to the high pass at Jebel Mazar. "That's the left flank of this business the Gurkhas are about with tonight. Who do we have there? Have the Free French come up on that flank?"

"No. They're southeast at Kiswah. As far as I know that flank was just being screened by Popski and those Russian Marines, and the chaps off the *Argos Fire*—the mobile force we sent to Habbaniyah."

"Well, they did a bang up job there," said O'Connor. "Started a stampede and sent a full Iraqi brigade packing in less than an hour."

"If you could call that rabble a brigade," said Wavell. "This time they'll be facing down some of the best the Germans have. Popski has good eyes, and he seems to think they're up against two full battalions."

"I see," said O'Connor. "Let's hope they have those helicopters handy."

Part V

Lap Of The Gods

“Whether and in what way it may be possible to wreck finally the English position between the Mediterranean and the Persian Gulf, in conjunction with an offensive against Suez Canal, is still in the lap of the Gods...”

-- Adolf Hitler: Führer Directive 30

Chapter 13

The Germans had done everything possible to move men and equipment to the shores of the Levant. In spite of the sudden turnaround forced upon planners by Hitler, the OKW staff adapted with characteristic efficiency. Much of the work for the assault on Crete would form a sound basis for Operation Anvil. They already had obtained good aerial reconnaissance photos of Cyprus, and identified the best potential landing sites for Student's troops. The men of the 5th Gieberg's division had already been assigned to makeshift convoys from Greece, where the Germans had scraped together small flotillas of Greek "Caiques," wooden motor cutters used for fishing and other commercial purposes. The engineers had skillfully adapted them by adding wooden ladders, iron reinforced ramps, and rope nets to allow them to function as landing craft. A few old captured steamers were added to this to move the infantry in what one soldier called "an assortment of scarcely seaworthy Greek coasting tramps and some larger rusty death traps."

Yet there had also been extensive planning and preparation for the invasion of England, and there an aircraft designer named Fritz Siebel had been working at an airfield in northern France when a Lieutenant Colonel from a Pioneer battalion asked him if he could haul off a store of old gasoline containers.

"What in god's name for?" Siebel asked. "Tell me that and you can have the entire lot."

"We need a way to get over that damn channel," said the officer. "Maybe we can get these to float beneath some light welded beams and wood planks. We're trying everything we can find, wine barrels, canvas sacks, even tree trunks."

"Why not just use river bridging pontoons?"

"We tried, but the beams and bolts are too weak and they can't stand up to the wave action."

"I see..." Siebel had a sudden idea. What about the *schwere Schiffsbrücke*, he thought to himself? These were much bigger heavy bridging pontoons, and the army had accumulated a good number. So Siebel got hold of a few and joined them with beams and a wood plank deck to build a kind of catamaran

raft. He mounted a couple surplus aircraft engines, but found them inadequate. But he kept strengthening and modifying his design, improving the deck and adding four more diesel truck engines. In time he doubled the speed to 8 knots and had a platform that could stand up to force 6 wave strength.

The “Siebel Ferry” had been born, and twelve of them had been constructed and moved to Greece by rail for this mission. They would prove themselves in Operation Anvil as stable ferries to move the artillery, flak guns, and light vehicles of the 5th Mountain Division to the Levant. The only question was whether they could slip past Royal Navy patrols, particularly with the moon still near full.

The first convoy of wooden Caiques made it through undetected, landing at Tripoli. The Siebels followed soon after, narrowly running afoul of a British destroyer, which had the crews unlimbering several 88mm flak guns to use in defense, but the destroyer was hotly attacked by *Stukas* flying night cover, and driven off. This allowed the 5th Mountain Division to get its 85th Regiment to Tripoli, along with the division recon battalion and a battalion of twelve 105mm howitzers. They were onto the waiting trains and quickly en route to Damascus to arrive in the nick of time. The 100th Regiment, formerly with the 1st Mountain Division at Gibraltar, was re-assigned to the 5th and soon followed. Their assignment would be to backstop the French defense before Beirut, another full regiment of veteran troops, with the division Pioneer battalion and flak units.

While this was going on, the Ju-52 transport planes had not sat idle. A massive air ferry operation was constantly underway, with planes returning to Rhodes from their successful air drops on Cyprus, refueling and then flying on to Greece, where the crack 22nd Luftland Division was waiting in reserve. They would then reverse this journey, hopping to Rhodes, refueling, and then flying by night to the big French Aerodrome at Rayak in northern Lebanon. Situated midway between the two anchors of the French defense, Damascus and Beirut, the base would be a perfect mustering point for the steady buildup of German troops.

Like a fire that was slowly building in strength, the plan for a “quick campaign” in Syria to dispatch the Vichy French was now becoming a growing vortex of war. The German plan called for the whole of the 22nd Luftland Division to be deployed, and as soon as Cyprus was secure, the Ju-52s would base there to make the 7th Flieger Division the new theater reserve.

On the British side, the 7th Australian Division had already been reinforced by one brigade, and the single 5th Indian Brigade was now to be joined by the rest of that division, the 7th and 11th Brigades. Beyond that, O'Connor's plan to discretely move elements of the 7th Armored Brigade was met with hearty approval from Kinlan.

"I like the plan," he said. "It certainly beats trekking through that damn desert. It will take some management, but that rail line is a godsend."

So it was that the 7th Brigade turned over its post at Siwa and Giarabub to the 18th Indian Motor Brigade, and returned to Bir el Khamsa, the scene of its first stunning victory over the Germans. From there, selected units could be moved to Mersa Matruh, the place Kinlan had thought to go to all along. The railhead was cleared out, and secured by Kinlan's forces, and a special train soon arrived from Alexandria.

Kinlan had decided to mix up his battalions into smaller combined arms combat groups. He took the 1st Highland Mechanized Infantry Battalion and split it into three companies of 15 Warrior IFVs each. To each of these he added a troop of five heavy Challenger II tanks for support, one Titan bridge layer and a Trojan engineering tank. A number of FV432s, several tracked Javelin ATGM carriers, and a maintenance and supply unit of Royal Engineers in Mastiff Armored trucks finished things off. It was basically a heavy Mech company with the addition of the armor troop, and he was sending all three companies.

Fifteen more Challengers went to strengthen the three companies of the Mercian Mech Battalion, but this unit was retained near Sidi Barani. That left him 30 more heavy Challenger IIs in the Royal Scots Dragoons, and this unit was also retained in Egypt, along with Reeves' 12th Royal Lancers. Whether the addition of the Highlanders to the order of battle for Operation Scimitar would make a significant difference was soon to be seen.

The French defense had been more tenacious and spirited than anyone expected, and now that German troops were arriving, they fought all the harder. By the time that the British and commonwealth troops began to approach Damascus, they found well entrenched positions behind the river, and occupying the heights beyond. To make matters worse there, the little civil war between Senegalese troops on both sides had begun to dampen the ardor of the Free French brigades. Wavell's decision to send in the last two brigades of the 4th Indian Division was both timely and necessary. These troops would

join the Free French to plan an attack across the river at Kiswah, but the real danger on this front was massing on the left flank near the small village of Qatana—a village that Popski and Troyak were now approaching in a thin column of trucks and jeeps.

* * *

The column sped along the rough dirt road, the engines of the jeeps and trucks laboring, gears shifting to negotiate the difficult terrain. Popski and Troyak were in the van, riding together with Litchko on the machinegun in the back of the lead jeep. They had approached the old village of Qatana on a winding mountain road, working their way around a high 1800 meter hill to a place where the original settlement had clustered around Jandal Castle. The name meant “stone,” and the old fortress was made of Jurassic limestone brick, with wrought iron bars on the windows. It had been built in a depression between the high brown hills, meant to bar the way to a pass that led west. There the mountains rose in steep, stony terraces to the icy peaks of Mount Hermon, ‘the Mountain of the Chief,’ which was the highest point in the region at 2,814 meters, over 9200 feet.

The main town of Qatana was on the lowlands below, a small settlement of fewer than 3,000 people in WWII, with orchards and vineyards on its southern approach, and the high ridge of Jabal al W’ar to the northwest. It occupied a very strategic position, for roads ran due east to Artuz in the valley leading up to Damascus, and due north where the main road and rail links wound through the high pass at Jebel Mazar.

“Stop here,” said Troyak, his eyes puckered with the dust kicked up by the jeep. He reached for a pair of field glasses, studying the terrain ahead and the town below.

“That’s Qatana,” said Popski. “Gurkhas will put a company in there within the hour.” They could see the column moving on the road below. “Their remaining two companies will deploy east to Artouz with some of those tanks.”

“We’ll need at least one troop here,” said Troyak. “Too open on the left flank, but I think we can cover it if we occupy that hamlet there.” He was indicating the small outlying village of Mabayya, a little over a kilometer west of Qatana. “See those orchards. They must follow a wadi bed or a stream

running off from this high ground. Put your Argonauts there. They can spread three squads along that orchard, and put the last two in the village on the right flank. We'll deploy in that other settlement just behind their extreme left."

"See those dust columns out there?" said Popski. "That will be the Germans coming from the last report I received—several battalions. "Nice to be out of the thick of things up here."

Troyak just gave him a hard edged smile. "German mountain troops coming? Well, don't get comfortable. This is where they'll try to flank that hamlet. We'll need the Scimitar troop between our position and the Argonauts. The Germans will come tonight and try to take this ground to flank Qatana. They'll get a nasty surprise if we're ready for them, and we will be. Then tomorrow they'll reorganize for a deliberate attack. So tonight you need to have those X-3 helicopters up looking for their artillery. That's the one thing we have to worry about."

"Good enough," said Popski. "I'll see if I can get through to their Lieutenant Ryan. "They did a hell of a job against the Iraqis."

"These aren't Iraqis," said Troyak with an edge of warning. "We fought these devils before, and they're good."

The column moved out, down the winding road to the villages they had planned to occupy. The 'orchards' were thin and scrubby at this time of the year, but they did offer the Argonauts some cover, and they dug in. The locals were none too happy to see these tough looking men in black appear in their strange vehicles. War was coming to their sleepy villages, and they hastened to gather up their animals and melted away in the dusk, off to find relatives further east towards Qatana and Damascus. There would be no peace either.

It started just after sunset, as Troyak predicted. Small squads of German mountain troops were rushing forward to occupy a few scraggly outlying vineyards north of Mabayya. Troyak could see the men moving on his night vision goggles, and told Popski they should hold their fire, until the enemy made a closer approach. He could see the Germans move in well coordinated groups. A machine gun team deployed, then a rifle squad moved up to scout the way ahead. These men knew what they were doing, but they had not yet taken the measure of the men they were now about to face.

The Germans waited until they had what looked to be two platoons forward, with a third back. Then they began to advance on the positions held

by the Argonauts. He watched, breathlessly, and the first assault teams began to move toward the long orchard straddling the wadi. The Argonauts were lying low, their black camo suits blending into the shadows beneath the trees, then at 200 meters they opened fire with their automatic weapons and the battle began.

Though they were few in number, these were no ordinary troops. Each five man squad had L85A2 Automatic Rifles with under-slung grenade launchers. Two men carried the L108A1 Light Machinegun, two others had the AT4 84mm Anti Tank weapon, and the fifth used the L115A3 Sniper Rifle. Each man had both H.E. and smoke grenades. They had tritium powered illumination sights on their assault rifles for daytime use, and Advanced Combat Optical Gunsights with up to 6x magnification. In darkness, the men were equipped with head mounted night vision systems, and VIPER 2 thermal imaging weapon sites. Three light laser modules allowed for pinpoint target acquisition. And every man wore both Kevlar reinforced helmets, body armor and a personal radio receiver. In terms of firepower, situational awareness and command control, they were an order of magnitude above even the very best of their enemies, but there were just those 50 men, backed by Troyak's 20 Russian Marines.

The advancing German infantry thought they had the cover of darkness, but they were easily seen, and the first German squad was cut down on the move. Most of the second squad went to ground and immediately began answering with rifle and SMG fire. It was soon apparent that they were outgunned, and too exposed, and they heard the harsh shouts of non-comms barking orders to fall back.

The fire died down, then ten minutes later Troyak saw a long line of troops on his night goggles. The scout platoon had done its job, sent to merely probe the position and find out if the village was defended, and in what strength. The Germans had assessed that they must have a heavy MG unit in front of them, and now they were coming in company strength, at least 150 men against the 50 men of the Argonauts. A second company was maneuvering to flank the hamlet on the defender's left flank, just as Troyak knew they would.

"Tell the Scimitars they can fire up their engines now," he said with a smile. The tanks had been lying in wait, engines off, waiting for Popski's signal. Then machine guns and rifle fire split the night, the hot tracer rounds zipping through the darkness.

“Now!” Troyak yelled, as the Germans were moving, going to ground, firing and then making short rushes, but the terrain was too exposed and the defensive fire from those 50 assault rifles was too withering. The company attempting to flank the hamlet ran right into the 30mm auto cannon and MG fire of the eight Scimitars that had been assigned to Popski’s flank. They could make no headway, and were eventually beaten off with heavy casualties, falling back in disarray, but then quickly re-assembling in small groups, still a cohesive, disciplined force.

“That was the surprise,” said Troyak. “They did not expect that kind of firepower here, nor did they think we might have armor. Now they’ll hit us with their heavy weapons.”

As if in answer, well aimed fire began to fall on and around the town from the German 50cm mortars. The Russians quickly put both their 82mm mortar teams into action in reply, and for some time the mortar duel continued, but no further ground attack materialized. When the first round of combat was over, the Germans had lost 27 men, with another 18 wounded. Two Argonauts had sustained shrapnel wounds from the mortar fire and were moved off the orchard line to the covered housing on the back right flank of the position. The Russian position had not yet been discovered or fired upon.

“It’s the tanks,” said Troyak. “They didn’t expect those, and they’ll have to haul up their AT gun teams tonight. I think we should see nothing more than a few scouting details further west into the high ground. I’ll have Zykov patrol out there tonight. The main attack won’t come until just before dawn, so now is the time to get those helicopters out after the German artillery.”

Popski was on the radio in a minute, sending the code word out for ‘Black Lightning,’ and it was a good name for what was now about to be unleashed on the unsuspecting German troops. The three helos moved like bats, swift and stealthy shadows looming overhead. A few German troops caught sight of them, dark noisome shadows in the starry sky as they ran with all lights off, scanning the terrain ahead with infrared optics. As before, they had little difficulty locating the battalion of German artillery that had been deploying much farther back, and soon the night sky was ripped apart with the hot streaks of the rocket pods.

Lieutenant Ryan and his sidekicks were having another field day, blasting away at the German gun positions and knocking out seven 105s in rapid succession before their pods were empty. The rattle of their machineguns went

on for a while, shooting up trucks and anything else on the ground around the three batteries. It was soon clear that the night had gone to the defense, and the X-3s broke off and swept south to their designated LZ where a Mastiff armored truck had been carrying their ammo reloads. They had been busy that day, and found the ammo running lean when they got there.

Popski got the word on the radio and passed it on to Troyak. "Lieutenant Ryan says they'll need to return to their ship for fuel and supplies, but they've done their job tonight. He reckons they took out a good number of enemy gun positions."

"Good to hear it," said Troyak. "Because anything they missed will be wanting a piece of us in the morning."

Chapter 14

Fedorov had been digging in the history books again, looking for anything that might serve British campaigns now underway against Iraq and Syria. He noted that the history of these events seemed to be blending into one overarching campaign, just as Hitler's latest directive he had decoded from Enigma intercepts seemed to be an amalgam of Führer Directives 30 and 32. The former was Hitler's initial order to support the uprising in Iraq, the latter a more sweeping directive that historians would later call "Operation Orient," Hitler's vision of operations in the Middle East aimed at decisively defeating the British there.

While he knew the British had prevailed in all these small campaigns in Iraq, Syria, and later Iran, those outcomes were far from certain now if the Germans decided to strongly oppose the British. He had already done what he could in the meetings with Wavell and Churchill to impress upon them the difficulties ahead in Syria. That had led to the strengthening of the British order of battle for Operation Scimitar, but early reports of that action still indicated that the going was tough, and the French were fighting hard.

Troyak and the Marines had been operating with the Mobile Force and the Argonauts, and the news that they had encountered German mountain troops west of Damascus was alarming.

"They must have come by sea," he said to Admiral Volsky. "I think we had best speak to Tovey about stronger efforts to close off the ports in Syria. Most of the British naval units assigned are operating south of Beirut to support the advance along the coast. That leaves Tripoli, Tartus and Latakia all open at the moment."

"I will recommend a stronger covering force there," said Volsky. "Perhaps the *Argos Fire* could stand as a radar picket to find these convoys and vector in British forces. If not, we can do the job ourselves."

"That would be good," said Fedorov, a distant look in his eye that Volsky did not fail to notice.

"You have been doing a good deal of reading, Mister Fedorov."

"Just trying to see if I can find any fulcrums in the history that might give us some leverage."

“Fulcrums?”

“Professor Dorland called them Push Points.”

“Dorland? This is the American Physicist who wrote that thesis concerning time travel?”

“The same,” said Fedorov. “He defined a Push Point as some incident in the stream of causality that exerted a very strong influence on the course of events, and often these incidents were of a seeming insignificant nature.”

“Why insignificant events? I would think you would look for the big things.”

“As logic might seem to dictate,” said Fedorov. “But no. Dorland argued that it was often a much smaller incident that served as the real trigger to major changes in the history, and he pointed out numerous examples. Do you remember the assassination of Archduke Ferdinand that was a flashpoint in igniting the First World War?”

“Somewhat.”

“Well that was mere happenstance. His driver made a wrong turn, inadvertently leading the motorcade the wrong way, and directly into the path of the man who became the assassin, Gavrilo Princip. The motorcade had already been attacked once, by a bomb that failed to hit the correct car. So the route was changed, but the driver was not properly informed. He turned right to take the original planned route, instead of left, and when the security personnel shouted for him to stop and correct the error, he halted the motorcade directly in front of the assassin. The rest is history—that awful war—which might have started some other way given the tensions in the Balkans at that time. But that wrong turn just served as a catalyst to the onset of the war.”

“Mister Fedorov, you spend entirely too much time in those history books of yours. Is that what you have been doing, trying to ferret out a Push Point as you call it? Something concerning these operations?”

“I suppose so, sir. But things are already changing dramatically. There are reports of German troops near Damascus, and other units may be operating in Syria as well. I discovered that Brandenburg Commandos are already in Iraq organizing local disaffected tribes into an Arab Brigade. These events should have already concluded, but they remain in play. The British thrust to relieve Habbaniyah was much more timely with our help. Habforce has pushed on to Baghdad and sent the Golden Square to flight, but this operation in Syria is

happening much sooner than it did in our history, by at least three months.”

“Is this a problem?”

“That is hard to say. I do know that when resistance to the British stiffened on all fronts, the British reacted by recalling Habforce from Iraq, and the 10th Indian Division that had come up from Basra. They used these forces to cross Syria’s eastern border and secure the oil pipeline from Kirkuk to Mediterranean ports, and all the key pumping stations. This area was lightly garrisoned by the Vichy French, and the British did surprisingly well. They took Palmyra, pushed on to Homs on one axis, and the Indian troops pushed up the Euphrates to Aleppo. This had a good deal to do with the French decision to capitulate.”

“And now you are worried about these operations?”

“Yes sir... Small operations, undertaken by lightly armed units, no more than a brigade or two, but they had a dramatic impact on the course of events. Yet now, with the Germans introducing units into Syria, those objectives could be in jeopardy.”

“I am beginning to think you have another of your plans in mind. Yes?”

Fedorov smiled. “I do. You are very perceptive, Admiral. I was just considering the situation near Damascus. The British are moving more troops from Brigadier Kinlan’s brigade to counter the German buildup there. I don’t see that Troyak and his twenty Marines will make all that much difference, but they might be used elsewhere to greater effect.”

“Ah. Now we get to the heart of things. What is it you propose, Mister Fedorov? Out with it.”

“Well sir, I was thinking they might move quickly to Palmyra and secure a hold there in advance of the British move in that direction. There was only a small garrison there. The British did everything they could to mask the advance of Kingcol—that is short for King Column, which was commanded by Brigadier General Kingstone. It was just recalled from Iraq, as it was in the history from our time. Their mission is to drive on Palmyra, where there is an oasis site, airfield, and two key pumping stations on the Kirkuk to Tripoli oil pipeline to either side of this location. The garrison there is very light, only about 165 men. There were 87 Foreign Legion, 48 air field personnel, and 24 men from a desert camel company, all under six French officers.”

“You want Troyak to go after them with one helicopter and twenty Marines?”

“I know it sounds crazy, as most all my ideas are when I first hatch them, but I think it could be done, sir. There is an old castle on high ground overlooking the settlement. It commands the entire area, but the history tells me it was not strongly held. Most of the garrison preferred the cooled climes of the settlement and the orchards and groves there. They only used the fort for a few observation teams, so I think a quick night operation with the KA-40 could put Troyak’s men on that target easily enough. Once there, their mortars would command the entire site, and their hand held Ilgas could stop the French and Germans from using that airfield. That’s what caused the real trouble for the British, as they had no air cover at all. The French air force was constantly bombing and strafing their columns.”

“I see... But what if this garrison turns on Troyak and his men? They would be outnumbered eight to one.”

“But the Marines have tremendous firepower relative to the French troops, and would be sitting on a high stone fortress, protected by a deep trench that once served as a moat, and with only one entrance. They’ll hold, sir. I’m sure Troyak can handle this. He will be relieved by King Column, the units of the 4th Cavalry Regiment. They were stymied for twelve days trying to take Palmyra, but with Troyak’s firepower, and the KA-40, this might be a much easier battle.”

“Then you wish to move his unit for this operation?”

“With your permission sir. I was thinking I might replenish the KA-40, move some additional fuel supplies to Rutbah where it could be well guarded, and then brief Troyak. There’s one other odd thing about this situation that he might need to know—the French legionnaires there at Palmyra were composed of mainly German and Russian mercenaries.”

“Russians?” Volsky smiled. “I see where you are going with this. You found all this in your history books? Once again, you amaze me, Fedorov. And something tells me you have that longing look in your eye because you may just wish to see to things first hand there. Yes? Well, you have my blessing. I agree that this would be a much better way to use our Marines. Go and see to the KA-40.”

“You mean I am free to pursue this mission?”

“Free as a bird, Captain. If the ship needs to involve itself in this port interdiction business, I can handle the matter easily enough, and we will not have need of the KA-40. Besides, someone has to bring Troyak and his men

home safely, so it might as well be you. But be careful out there. I cannot afford to lose you. Let Troyak do the fighting.”

Fedorov’s eyes were suddenly alight with the blue fire of adventure. “Thank you sir,” he said with great enthusiasm. “I’ll handle everything.”

“Yes, I think you will do quite well. I have no doubt. But be wary, Fedorov. What if this garrison is reinforced? What if you find German troops there? Don’t forget, Volkov knows this history as well, and he may be advising the enemy.”

“All the more reason to stay one step ahead of them!” Fedorov smiled, and was soon on his way to the aft helo bay with his new mission in hand. He caught Nikolin on his way to the next shift on the bridge and told him to radio Popski with new orders. Then he went down to Chief Martinov to see what he could pull out of the Marine weapons inventory that might be useful.

The more he thought about this mission, the more excited he became. He had been pleased that they had been able to check, if only temporarily, the Axis fleet, but when it came to events in the land battles, he was frustrated, unable to do anything more than give his best advice. Now he would be right in the thick of things, really doing something that might matter, and putting all those facts and figures he had dug up in the history to work.

Palmyra... the ancient oasis site that was once colonized by Diocletian and the Romans... King Column racing through the desert to try and take it by storm before the French could react... The legendary figure of Glubb Pasha, the British “Lawrence” of this war, with his Arab legion galloping on the flanks... the Foreign Legion barring the way in their block houses by the airfield, and one more thing that suddenly darkened his muse. What about those Brandenburg Commandos? What might they be up to in all this business now? He knew they had set themselves the task of impeding Glubb Pasha by any means possible. What was he getting himself into here?

* * *

Far away, at that very moment, the men Fedorov was musing on were already busy making plans of their own. The Abwehr had already moved to carry out the Führer’s orders involving Iraq, albeit too late to stop the British operation then underway. News of the setback at Habbaniyah, and the British advance on Baghdad, set off alarms in Berlin, and now the elite

Brandenburgers were in the country organizing resistance, just as Fedorov had told Admiral Volsky.

They used the figurehead of the Grand Mufti as their lightning rod, filling his coffers with plenty of silver and gold to lure in the tribal leaders, and staging a massive rally north of Samara where as many as 30,000 tribesmen flocked to see the Grand Mufti, and hear his declaration of a word that would haunt western oil men for decades to come—*jihad*. The oil wars that would end civilization were now beginning, like the first stirrings of restless wind on the bleak deserts of Iraq—a wind that would grow to the massive storm that would one day consume the world.

With arms sent by the French, and flown secretly into Baghdad by the Germans, the Brandenburgers began to pick through the throngs of the tribesmen and select out the best and most experienced men for their own “Arab Brigade.” Some were Sunni, others Shia, but all shared a common hate of the British. Soon General Felmy had his brigade, which he divided into two units, one under Lieutenant Brecht, and a second under Abwehr Hauptmann Berger. They immediately hatched a plan to begin harassing British Operations in Iraq.

“They will need to supply the troops they send here,” said General Felmy. “So our first mission is to interdict the rail lines from Basra. This will force them to move by road, and that will take trucks, fuel and a lot more time. That is what we must buy the Führer now, so he can organize the rapid movement of more German troops to this theatre. And we must do all this before the planned start date for Barbarossa. After that the war will move east against the Soviet Union, so anything we accomplish must be done in the next 90 days.”

“What about the rivers?” said Berger. “We have information that the British are setting up river flotillas to move supplies all the way up to Fallujah and Haditha. They are using shallow draft barges and small river gunboats to guard them. We must stop those as well!”

“Just the sort of thing the Brandenburgers are cut out for,” said Felmy. Gentlemen, get to work!”

Hauptmann Berger was quick to the job. He selected his best commandos, and pulled a number of Arabs from his unit and set them to work harvesting reeds from the vast flood lands of the Euphrates. They wove these into small clusters that would float easily and serve to hide the commandos swimming beneath them with small tubes for air. They planned to attack a large, and

much needed, supply flotilla that was moving along the river to Fallujah, now in British hands. Once there it would be used to supply another British Flying Column for a secret mission that only Fedorov and a few other men knew about at that time.

On the evening of March 15, only a few days after the Syrian campaign was launched, and while Fedorov was still hatching his own plans, the commandos sprung a well planned ambush on the British supply flotilla. As darkness fell, the small islands of reeds slowly drifted out into the wide stream of the river, where the lines of tethered boats were linked to one another by lateral walking planks, and guarded by two small British crewed gunboats. As the primary means of defense, the gunboats became the first targets.

The sun set late at just a little after 18:00, and the gloaming dusk colored the river in deep vermillion hues as the shadows settled in. It was a quiet night, and the moon would not rise for another two hours, a perfect time for the attack. Twelve commandos, Berger's best men, slipped out of the water in their dark uniforms and silently climbed aboard, their hands wet on the low gunwales as they slipped onto the decks of the gunboats, quickly overpowering the two deck sentries with knife work. Then they moved like shadows, hastening to the forward cabins to seize the sleepy boat crews and man the twin Lewis guns on the boats.

Now the Iraqi Arab recruits joined the raid, quietly swimming to the tethered supply ships, anchored well out on the river. They were already onto the barges before a wary guard on one of the nearby bridgeheads opened fire with a rifle, rousing the small British contingent that was there to off load the supplies in the morning. The remaining Brandenburgers and their troops of Arab recruits now opened fire, and the sound of sub-machineguns suddenly burst upon the night. Someone threw a hand grenade, and the loud explosion resounded over the still waters of the river. Another little war had begun, just as Fedorov feared, like a rock in the stream of the history sending ripples in all directions.

Chapter 15

Hitler was pacing back and forth on the thick carpeting on the floor of his Reich Chancellery office. The massive doors were crowned by a gilded gold

eagle, and it was over 30 feet from his desk where the two staff aides were taking dictation, to the conference table near the hearth where a warm fire cast its yellow glow on the dark stone paneled walls. The Führer was dictating his next directive, the vision now in his mind for the future course of the war.

“The struggle against the British positions in the Mediterranean and in Western Asia will be continued by converging attacks launched from Libya through Egypt, from Bulgaria through Turkey, and in certain circumstances also from Transcaucasia through Iran.

“In North Africa it is important that Tobruk should be eliminated and conditions thereby established for the continuation of the German-Italian attack on the Suez Canal. The German Afrika Korps will be brought to the highest possible efficiency in personnel and equipment, and with adequate reserves of all kinds under its own hand, (by the conversion of 5th Light Division into a full armored division), so that it is not necessary to move further large German formations to North Africa.

“The preparations for the attack require that the tempo of transport be quickened by all means available, including the employment of ports in French North Africa and, when possible, the new sea route from Southern Greece.

“It will be the duty of the Navy, in cooperation with the Italian and French Navies, to arrange for the necessary tonnage by chartering French and neutral shipping. The possibility of moving German motor torpedo boats to the Mediterranean, or further German naval units, will be examined.

“Commander-in-Chief Air Force will transfer to the Africa Korps sufficient air units and anti-aircraft artillery for the operation, and he will also reinforce Italian protection of seaborne convoys by the use of German air formations.”

He paused, thinking to himself and holding the image of Goering in his mind. The Air Chief had sent his very own brigade to Rommel in North Africa, a sure sign that he will now do everything possible to support those troops with the Luftwaffe. But I must not allow too many resources to be bled away from Barbarossa. This business in Syria is still far from over, and it may not be possible to conclude the operation favorably before Barbarossa launches.

He turned, his slow pacing moving the other direction now, away from

the massive doors as he continued to dictate.

“In view of the expected British reinforcement of the near and Middle East, especially for the defense of the Suez Canal and Syria, a German operation from Bulgaria through Turkey will be planned with the aim of attacking the British position on the Suez Canal from the East. To this end, plans must be made to assemble in Bulgaria, as soon as possible, sufficient forces to render Turkey politically amenable or to overpower her resistance. This concentration will be made in conjunction with strong diplomatic overtures to Turkey. Should that state grant German forces free passage through Turkish territory, and renounce all affiliation and friendship with Great Britain, it may not be necessary to settle the matter by force of arms.

“To this end, Ivan Volkov and the Orenburg Federation must also do everything possible to assemble, on the northern Turkish Frontier, a force of sufficient size to pose a credible threat. Should Turkey fail to capitulate prior to the planned launch of Barbarossa, this matter will be deferred until the successful outcome of that operation, particularly insofar as the seizure and occupation of the Crimea is concerned, and the destruction of Soviet forces now operating in the Caucasus.

“If the collapse of the Soviet forces there has created the necessary conditions, preparations will be made for the dispatch of a motorized expeditionary force from Transcaucasia against Iraq, with the aim of further reinforcing the Vichy French position in Syria.”

Turkey will see the light soon enough, he thought, and once that obstacle is removed, and I have freedom of movement in Asia Minor, then the British will soon feel the full weight of German military power. The forces committed to Syria to stop the British offensive there must be sustained and supported, but we cannot yet rely on sea communications to the Levant. So everything depends on Barbarossa now—on Manstein and the southern wing. Halder will not like this, but he will be silenced, even removed if necessary. Keitel and the others will come along. He smiled, clasping his hands behind his back, and spoke again to the aides who struggled to transcribe his words.

“Whether and in what way it may be possible to wreck finally the English position between the Mediterranean and the Persian Gulf, in conjunction with an offensive against Suez Canal, is still in the lap of the Gods...” No, he thought. It is in my lap. The Gods will have nothing more to do with it once I have German troops in the Caucasus.

“Amend that last phrase,” he corrected himself. “Write instead... this is a question that can only be answered after Barbarossa.”

* * *

While the Führer was planning all these sweeping maneuvers on the field of war, the Russians were making plans as well—not in the drafty halls of the Kremlin, where Sergie Kirov nervously watched the buildup on his southern front, but near a small town in Syria, west of Damascus. Troyak was huddling with Zykov, who had just returned from his night patrol on the far left flank.

“I was up on the high ground to the west,” said Zykov. “They put out a few patrols looking for a way around our flank, but the ground is very open there. Nothing but goat tracks, stony hills, and bare earth. They aren’t stupid, and they know we’d see any movement in that direction easily enough. I don’t think they’ll try a major flanking maneuver.”

“Well, we won’t be here to find out,” said Popski. “They’re going to move in a heavy battalion from Brigadier Kinlan’s force to fight alongside the Gurkhas. We’re to move out tonight and return to the bridge at Sassa. Then we get a nice long ride on that helicontraption of yours. We’re joining Kingcol and Glubb Pasha out east, and they’ve a very special mission planned—just for us!” He smiled. “But I don’t think the French are going to like it when they get a look at your lot. Not one bit.”

“Where are we headed this time?”

“A mission in the desert again—something your Captain Fedorov dug up from his history books.”

“Good,” said Zykov, checking his assault rifle. I hope it’s a long flight. I could use the sleep! Any word from the Gurkhas?”

“They’re in Qatana, at least the one company on our right. I don’t think the Argonauts have to worry about that flank. That’s one tough outfit.”

* * *

One tough outfit was a bit of an understatement when it came to Colonel Gondar’s Gurkha Battalion. It was rigged out with all the weaponry and optics that the Argonauts had, along with the cold steel of those Kukri war knives. They had moved rapidly through the Golan heights, quickly overwhelmed the

3/17th Senegal Rifle Battalion at the vital town of Kunietra along the main road to Damascus, and then pushed north. Now they were preparing to attack the French defense at Aartouz, the next major settlement on that road. There they would encounter other determined men, well schooled in the art of war, the soldiers of the vaunted French Foreign Legion.

There, dug into positions in the sedate gardens, beneath poplar trees that lined the streets, and hidden in the white stone walled houses of the village, the Legionnaires of 1/6 Battalion were waiting behind their BAR machineguns, and MAS-36 bolt action rifles. They had loopholed the walls with bayonets to create view slits for firing, broken out any glass windows, and reinforced the wood doors. The low rickety fences around the gardens had been sandbagged. Behind their main positions, hidden in an orchard off the right side of the road, was the 2nd Company, 63rd battalion of the 7th African Chasseurs—17 Renault R-35 tanks and a number of White and Lafley armored cars.

Against this reinforced battalion, Colonel Gandar would now send his 1st Company of Gurkhas, supported by one troop of Scimitar tanks. They would be outnumbered three to one by the defenders, but it was to be a night attack, where the advantage of night vision and thermal optics would benefit the attackers.

The Gurkhas moved out along the right side of the main road, where another dirt track also followed the winding course of a small gully. There were small farms, a single house where the owner had planted a grove of 24 olive or date trees on his narrow lot, and beyond them a bigger field planted with melons and grape vines. Lance Naik, (Lance Corporal) Sundar was out on point with his squad, scanning ahead with his night vision set. He discovered a single outpost that looked to be a machine gun position and the decision was made to use the squad sniper to take it out without raising the alarm.

Sniper Rana Sunil was given the job, using the powerful night optics on his L1115A3 Long Range Rifle. He was camouflaged in his gillie suit, the ragged shreds bunched on his helmet and trailing down from his shoulders. He unfolded his stock, and crept stealthily to a good firing position, making a quick pinpoint check with his pocket Laser Range Finder. The target was just over 300 meters off, and his powerful night sights with their image intensifier function could clearly reveal targets over 750 meters out.

Sniper Sunil checked his noise and flash suppressor, not wanting to reveal his position. Then he sighted, and in one breathless moment the muffled snap

of his rifle became the first shot of the battle for Aartouz. There were two targets, and he fired twice—two shots, two quick kills, and the French Machinegun post was silent and still. Sunil pinched off his command liaison signal, which sent a single tone to his Halvidar, the Sergeant in command of his squad.

Dhruna Rai got the message and waved his men on with a slow, level motion of his arm. The Gurkhas moved like silent death, crouching low and using the considerable cover available to pick their way forward. They reached the farm house where the MG position had been posted, advancing in short, quiet rushes. Then trooper Resham heard voices from within, though it was nothing more than two men joking and talking in the soft early evening, a corporal and another French private, the relief team for the two men on the machinegun that were already dead. A single grenade would have settled that, but it would have been much too noisy, so Resham reached for the long curved Kukri knife slung behind his right hip, and slowly drew it out, holding it low so as not to catch the light of the waning gibbous moon.

Resham was up, his back to the whitewashed masonry wall by the sun bleached wood door. Then in a sudden motion he shouldered through the barrier, startling the two men inside who had been drinking liquor from small shot glasses. It was their last drink, one man caught with the glass poised at his lips when Resham became death in the night, his cold blade ending the little party in a blur of motion and violence.

The farm secured, Havildar Druna Rai got his squad positioned at a low hedge bordering the melon grove behind the farm house, and signaled his company Subedar. He knew that two other squads were moving on his right, the dark shadows of war creeping slowly forward over the landscape. Beyond this was a high, bare hill that had been scouted just after dark to eliminate a mortar team there. That flank secure, the attack was ready to move out in force. Druna Rai's platoon was coming in close to the road, but the main effort would be beyond that hill on the right, where the other two platoons would flank the town, approaching to either side of a secondary road. It was the Sergeant's job to open the attack and fix the enemy defense on his platoon. Behind his men, on the main road, a column of Scimitar scout tanks waited in reserve.

At 19:00 the company weapons teams opened the action up with their mortar fire, the rounds whistling in and exploding loudly as Druna Rai

hastened his squad forward. They rushed past a water cairn, across an open field into another scraggly orchard that washed against a huddle of low stone buildings by the thin dirt track. Then the harsh rattle of a BAR chopped out a challenge, and they heard the high whistles of the enemy being called to arms. Legionnaires seized their rifles, down from slung hammocks where they had just settled in for the night, ready to join the defense. A French Sergeant cuffed one man who was just a little too slow on the back of the head, but the soldier needed no encouragement. It was time to fight.

A squad of Gurkhas on Druna Rai's left had broken into a long, blue roofed barn at the edge of a flat empty field of bare earth. The French were on the other side, and that squad opened a hot firefight, their assault rifles spraying the white stucco walls and being answered by BARs and bolt action rifle fire. But the Gurkhas had no intention of simply slugging it out against these prepared positions. Druna Rai had two weapon's teams with the short barreled AT4 84mm light anti-tank weapon, which was also a perfect assault tool against a fortified position. It was a shoulder fired, recoilless weapon that could be fired by a single man, and his teams quickly blasted the white stucco walls that protected the French troops, the rounds penetrating easily to kill most every man within the small interior rooms.

The Gurkhas moved again, fire teams laying down suppressive fire in the event any of the enemy survived the shock of the AT4s. The troops were up at the run, across the bare field and over the position in a few seconds. They were entering the outlying blocks of the town, where similar houses sat in rows of three or five buildings between the gully track and the main road. In crisp urban fighting, they ruthlessly cleared the block, grenades taking out another French BAR team there. Another barren field was the real obstacle, and a French 37mm AT gun had been sited to cover the road over that good field of fire, protected by two machineguns that were now raking the positions the Gurkhas had just stormed.

It was time for the Scimitars.

The main road had been cleared of enfilading enemy to that point, and Havildar Druna Rai called back to the British troopers in the Scimitar troop under Lieutenant Miller. He tapped the turret top with his gloved knuckle, two quick knocks to indicate his intent, then slipped down through the open hatch, sealing it behind him. The AT4 fire teams had one more job to do before he got there. That 37mm French AT gun had blasted one of the buildings taken by the

Gurkhas, putting one man down with a shrapnel wound. The AT4 answered and silenced the gun position with a shuddering explosion. The growl of the light tanks on the main road was soon heard, the first tank halting right at the edge of the buildings occupied by the Gurkhas. It soon put its 37mm autocannon to work on those two French MG positions, and the Gurkhas moved forward over the open field, rushing the position as they now began to work their way into the center of the town.

But a squad of Legionnaires had been lying low in a line of huts to the far right of Druna Rai's audacious advance. Now they opened fire with their rifles, and a single BAR. The Sergeant could hear the sound of assault rifles off to the right, and knew the main attack was going in on that flank now. He did not want to waste time here, and ordered his men to suppress the enemy fire.

"Full automatic!" he shouted, and the assault rifles of his ten man squad put out withering fire on the enemy positions. Then, man by man, the Gurkha advance continued. When the firefight subsided briefly the Sergeant listened in the quiet and suddenly heard the rattle of enemy tank treads ahead.

The French were bringing up their Renault 35s.

Part VI

Catch 22

“Destiny is a good thing to accept when it's going your way. When it isn't, don't call it destiny; call it injustice, treachery, or simple bad luck... There was only one catch and that was Catch-22, which specified that a concern for one's safety in the face of dangers that were real and immediate was the process of a rational mind.”

— Joseph Heller: *Catch 22*

Chapter 16

John Bagot Glubb had “gone Arab” long ago, another desert loving Englishman like the fabled Lawrence of Arabia, who went off to the desert as a young man to seek his fame, if not his fortune. He soon fell in with General Frederick Peake, then known as Peake Pasha, and the founder of the Arab Legion. A fluent speaker of Arabic, and well schooled in the ways of both the desert and the Bedouin tribes that inhabited the place, Glubb proved most useful. He learned everything he knew the hard way, in the desert itself, where he had once taken a 500 mile camel ride with the tribes. Now he adopted their ways, earning their growing respect as he did so, a leader from the British Empire that was embraced as one of their own.

To look at him one would not think the man capable of the things history recorded in his name. He was a diminutive, almost impish figure, with a round bulbous nose, deep blue eyes, sandy hair and ruddy complexion, with a small mustache. A wisp of a smile was often on his lips, and he listened much more than he ever spoke. The wound he had suffered in WWI when a bullet grazed his chin gave him an odd, cheeky look, and he had a quiet disposition that belied the inner strength of the man.

It took a strong man to lead the Arabs, for they were a race of strong men, born to the harsh desert with the stones in their bones, the wind in their hair and the never ending sun in their eyes. Hard men all, they had been recruited into the legion, wearing British uniforms, but with Arab headdress and the legion badge, of a Royal crown above two curved scimitars. Their thick belts held a pistol on one side and a curved dagger on the other to augment their rifle or sub-machinegun. Bandoliers of ammunition were strung from each shoulder, the bullets jutting like sharp teeth to complete the appearance of a determined and threatening man. How Glubb had won their hearts is not entirely known, but they worshiped him, and would follow him anywhere.

Once the legion rode exclusively on swift camels, braving the sandstorms and sun to make their ceaseless patrols. Now, with this new war in the desert, some would take to trucks and armored cars, becoming “mechanized” as their British officers called it. They had six locally customized armored cars, with Lewis guns, Boys AT rifles and a Vickers machine gun. While not as colorful

as the gilded saddles and colored blankets of the Camel corps, the men still took to wearing the long robes over British kit, and their dark hair flowed in the wind when they were on the move, which prompted the Imperial soldiery to call them “Glubb’s Girls.”

But there was no mistaking these soldiers for ladies when it came to a fight. They had a singular ardor for battle, and could often be heedlessly brave, forsaking any thought of their own personal safety in the interest of honor, and sometimes, vengeance. They were a sharp sword that Glubb had somehow managed to sheath and carry on the hip of the British empire, even though he was not technically in the service of His Majesty’s armed forces any longer. He had resigned his commission to focus on leading the Arab Legion, and that force would later become the nucleus of the Army of Jordan.

It was this force that Fedorov was now planning to meet with at the desert hamlet of Rutbah, well out in the deserts of Anbar Province, Iraq. The place had been a frontier outpost where the Iraqi police once held forth in a stone fort, but it had been quickly seized by Kingcol on its advance to Habbaniyah earlier. That force had reached the airfield there, finding that the enemy had been cleared from the plateau and was fleeing to Fallujah. After linking up with the beleaguered garrison at the airfield compound, “Habforce” had been able to ferry troops across the Euphrates and surround Fallujah, which fell the next day.

In the history Fedorov knew, all this action had occurred during the flood season, which had delayed the advance on Baghdad considerably. Now, happening in the dryer month of March, the British forces were able to make a swift approach to the city, and the rumors of the terrible night on that plateau suffered by the Iraqi troops sent to lay siege to the airfield preceded them. In the real history, it was rumor as much as anything else that had enabled this relatively small force, a few battalions in strength, to topple the fledgling regime of Rashid Ali and his Golden Square. This had occurred when an Iraqi outpost was hastily abandoned, and the telephone system was not destroyed as it should have been, allowing the British to listen in over an open line to hear the dispositions and orders being given to the Iraqi troops defending the capitol.

An Arab speaking officer in the intelligence arm of the column had also played out a ruse by speaking over the line that the outpost could not be held, because the British were coming with a massive force of 50 tanks, when in

fact they had no more than a few home styled armored cars to support the trucks of lorried infantry. It was this rumor that spread like fire through the suburbs of Baghdad, and allowed the British to unhinge what could have been a stubborn Iraqi defense in this densely populated urban setting.

That captured open line telephone was a perfect example of a Push Point in Fedorov's research. Some Iraqi corporal in the detachment had simply dropped his telephone receiver on the desk and taken flight at the approach of the British, a small event, pure happenstance, that had enabled the clever British intelligence section in the column to use deception and eavesdropping to topple the Iraqi regime.

This time, however, that incident had not occurred. Instead the awful rumors of flying shadows of death, their wings beating the night airs like dragons, and spewing deadly fire that destroyed all before it—these were enough to do the same work. The Iraqis wanted no quarrel with these demon soldiers that had come upon them in the night, and the result of the terror these stories spread worked much the same result on the history. Rashid Ali and the German Ambassador had fled to Mosul, and the resulting collapse of central authority allowed the British to advance elements of their 10th Indian division from Basra much sooner.

Kingcol returned to Habbaniyah in a matter of days instead of weeks, where it waited for supplies being floated up river from the 10th Indian Division stores. Fedorov did not know that the Brandenburgers had already rewritten their raid on the river flotillas, and that those supplies were instead being carried off by the Arab nationalist brigade they had raised, a force loosely affiliated and sometimes led by a nefarious figure named Fawzi al-Qawuqji. The Russian Captain had planned to rendezvous with Kingcol at Rutbah, and brief them on the mission he had in mind for Palmyra, but Kingcol was nowhere to be seen.

When the big KA-40 came thumping out of the skies to the west, there was quite a stirring at Rutbah among the men of Glubb Pasha's Arab Legion. They were accustomed to flying machines by now, though they had never seen one like this. They shirked from the sound and billowing dust kicked up by the twin rotors, but otherwise stood by their horses and vehicles, watching the scene with great interest and curiosity. What was this new war machine the British were using?

Fedorov was out with Popski, looking to find Brigadier Kingstone, but

soon learning he was nowhere near. It was Glubb Pasha that held sway at Rutbah that day, for he and a detachment of his Arab Legion had been scouting down the long desert road from Habbaniyah as an advance guard. He came out, dressed in a great coat, for the desert chill was still on the land that morning. Fedorov saw a short man, his khaki coat fastened with five gold buttons and a flash of color over his breast pocket where his medals and decorations rode. He wore the traditional Middle Eastern headdress known as the Keffiyeh, tied off with a heavy twisted cord of silk that was called an Aqal. His English boots reflected his roots, but he had clearly blossomed to Arab ways in that headdress,

Popski had heard of the man, and thought him to be a confederate at heart—another wild desert scout and warrior like himself. “Well met,” he said. “Vladimir Peniakoff, but most chaps call me Popski—a little easier on the tongue. This here is Captain Fedorov, Russian Navy, and he’ll command that lot over there.”

He pointed to the helo where the marines were filing out to stretch their legs, as the ride had them bunched up tightly to get as many men aboard as possible. The helo might normally be full with sixteen men, but they had managed to squeeze in twenty, with weapons stowed in the exterior compartments or slung under the helo where the weapons pods and torpedoes might ride on a naval mission. The Big Blue Pig continued to serve well, fresh from the maintenance bays of *Kirov’s* fantail.

“Quite an aircraft,” said Glubb, as interested in the helo as any of his men were. Now they gathered round, eyeing the Marines with great curiosity, noting the assault rifles they carried with much interest.

“Something very new,” said Fedorov in English.

“He’s Russian thru and thru,” Popski explained, “but he’ll manage a little English at times. I’m signed on here as desert guide and interpreter, and I’ve even commanded that group there in battle once or twice. Fine good soldiers, every last one of them.”

“Glad to hear it,” said Glubb with that impish smile. “We can use all the help we can get.”

“That helicontraption will be heading out soon to make another supply run. They’ll be bringing in some canisters of fuel and ammunition.”

The helo had already landed here, before Glubb arrived, with reserve aviation fuel, munitions and food. Then it took off to fetch Popski and the

Marines, returning now for the briefing before they set out for their objective.

“We had hoped to meet up with Brigadier Kingstone here,” said Popski.

“He’ll be delayed,” Glubb returned. “In fact, the whole column is still gathering at Habbaniyah. It seems there was some trouble with their supplies from Basra. They were attacked on the river, and never got through.”

“Iraqis? Then they’re still fighting?”

“No, I think they’ve had quite enough of us. These were men from the Arab Brigade, insurgent raiders with little love of the British empire, and anything affiliated with it. They’ve been vexing us for years now, off and on. Berbers have a mind of their own, and take to pillaging anything that isn’t nailed down or well guarded.”

“Oh? We thought you had them all under your thumb, Pasha.”

“Not bloody likely,” Glubb smiled. “My men are among the very few in country that have stood by us here. Most every other Arab tribe thinks the British are finished. They thought as much as soon as Rashid Ali had the cheek to go and set up his Golden Square, but we’ve seen him off. He may be on his way to Mosul, unless he failed to get up north that way before my men cut the rail line. Otherwise he’ll probably head for Persia. As for the tribes, they aren’t going anywhere, and most think the British are finished here. They halfway expect the German army to come marching in at any moment.”

Popski translated all of this for Fedorov, who immediately asked a question.

“The Captain asks if you have seen any sign of German troops here yet.”

“Not outwardly, but they’re here. There were upwards of five or six thousand German nationals in country when all this business started. A good number of those were fifth columnists, to be sure. This little raid on the supply flotilla was very likely their doing. It was clear from the reports I had, that the Arab Brigade had help. Some say they were led by German officers.”

“The Brandenburg commandos,” Fedorov said to Popski. He knew they were here, the first storm crows of the German army, seeking to exploit the volatility inherent in the situation and harass the British as best they could.

“Brandenburg?” Glubb had not heard the name. “Well they’re here alright, no matter what they’re called. There are air units also operating from Mosul and Baquba, though they’ve abandoned the field at Baquba and redeployed north. But from Mosul its only 180 miles to the Euphrates, and a little over 300 to Palmyra where we’re headed next. You can be sure they won’t forget us.

Those Bf-110s are rather nasty. I have one report that a couple may even be operating from the airfield at Palmyra now.”

“We’ll see what we can do about that,” said Fedorov when Popski translated. “How long before King Column might return here?”

“That’s anyone’s guess,” said Glubb.” Fawzi and the Bedouins have been nipping at the heels of the column throughout the mission. We nearly got him in a good fight three days ago, but he slipped away. And Fawzi or no, the Bedouins are always a problem. Anything we leave here will have to be well guarded. Otherwise they’ll slip in at night and steal the whole lot. Well now... You can set your men up over there for the night. I’ve a spot of tea on the boil in the fort if you’d care to come along.”

Fedorov nodded appreciatively, then gave orders to Troyak in Russian to get the Marines sorted out. Glubb’s troopers looked from him, to Troyak and to any other man who spoke, listening to the harsh guttural tones of the Russian language, their curiosity never ending. A few seemed like they wanted to parley with the Marines, eager to get a closer look at their unusual rifles and other weapons.

They walked towards the fort now, where there was a room with table and chairs, and sat down in the cool shadows. Fedorov took some time to explain the mission he had in mind, and what he expected to accomplish at Palmyra.

“You’re going to fly there... in that aircraft?” asked Glubb.

“That we are,” said Popski.

“What about those German fighters?”

“We’ll slip in at night and get there before they know anything.”

“And then you’re going to seize the chateau? With twenty men?” He was referring to the castle of Fakhr-al-Din al Manni, built by a Druz prince in the 15th century, which the French simply called ‘the chateau.’

“We’ll take it in a flash.” Popski folded his arms, confident with what he had already seen of Troyak’s Marines.

“There’s Foreign Legion at Palmyra. Tough men, and block houses round that airfield.”

“Take a closer look at the lads out there,” said Popski. “We’ll handle ourselves. It’s the fortress we want. King Column can take the airfield. All we do is lay down fire so the enemy can’t use the field for operations or resupply.”

“You know that fort is on a high hill—very steep, and surrounded by a deep gully moat. There’s only a single bridge over that, beneath high stone

towers.”

“We won’t be taking the bridge, or even bothering to ring the bell at the gate. We plan to plop right down on top of them, or so the Captain here tells me. Once we get the fort, then we’ll turn our mortars on that garrison and airfield and give them a little misery. It will be nice to know that you chaps are coming along soon. This bit about Kingstone’s column still held up at Habbaniyah has set back the timetable, but we go tomorrow in any case, as soon as that bird out there returns with more supplies.”

Glubb Pasha took all this in, raising a sandy eyebrow, thinking. “Let’s hope Brigadier Kingstone gets his supplies and isn’t delayed. He was none too happy about these new orders to withdraw to Habbaniyah, and I dare say he won’t be happy to learn he’s got a new mission to Palmyra. It was a long haul across the desert from the shores of the Med all the way to the Euphrates. His was the first military force to pull that off since Alexander the Great. There was a lot of looting in Baghdad after the Golden Square took flight. I’ve heard the Foreign office was none too happy about it, and they’ll be less happy to see Kingstone pulling his troops out so suddenly. You realize this will tip our hand that Palmyra is King Column’s next target. That’s the most strategic town in the eastern desert. What if the French send in reinforcements?”

Writing new history always has its risks, thought Fedorov, but he said nothing more.

Chapter 17

Palmyra had been an important stop on the long caravan routes to Persia and beyond for many centuries. Dating to the second millennium BC, it was reputed to have been built by King Solomon as a fortress outpost. Centuries later the Romans came, with Marc Antony raiding the place in 41 BC until it eventually became just another pearl on the necklace of conquests made by Rome. Yet its strategic position between the east and west saw its merchants thrive, controlling ships in the Mediterranean, and pulling goods from the Silk Road and markets in India. Roman Legions were billeted there under Diocletian, and the site was walled off by the Emperor Justinian, making the place a sturdy fortress town.

In modern times it came to be known as “The Bride of the Desert.” The old Roman ruins still remain, like the elegant Corinthian style colonnaded portico at the temple of Ba’al, dedicated to the storm god who might bring much needed rain to the parched desert around the settlement. There the litany of deities worshiped were inscribed on the walls... *“for Bel and Baal Shamin, and for Aglibol, and for Malakbel, and for Astarte, and for Nemesis, and for Arsu, and for Abgal, the good and rewarding gods”*

It was perhaps Rome’s appetite for exotic goods from the east that kept the city a thriving place, where spices, silk, ebony, and even slaves were traded in the town. Monumental arches, long columns, elegant tetrapylons, and the remnant of the old Roman aqueduct still remain on the well preserved site, even though the Romans themselves destroyed the place when Queen Zenobia, a descendant of Cleopatra, rebelled and thought to break away from the empire. After that it became a barracks and fortified camp for the legion of Diocletian, and the armies of the Sassanids, Muslims, Mamlukes, and eventually the Mongols all swept over the site as the centuries passed, each leaving some remains in the ruins.

By 1941 the desire for exotic goods from the east had been distilled down to one primary thing—oil. The city sat right astride the long underground pipelines that carried the oil from Kirkuk, through Homs, to Tripoli and Banias on the Mediterranean coast. All along that route the British had set up pumping stations to maintain the flow of that oil, labeled T1 through T4 on the “Tripoli”

pipeline route. So now the armies of France and Great Britain would meet and struggle there, and men from a far distant future would watch from atop the high volcanic cone, crowned by the old stone fortress of Fakhr-al-Din.

At this time, Palmyra was a small settlement, graced by shady groves of palm trees. Fedorov was excited for a chance to see the ruins, which sat like the bleached skeletal bones of an old fallen empire. The history here was written in the sandstone, layered deep, and carved into the land over long millennia. Now the soldiers of another fading empire would come to do battle there beyond the ancient tomb sites, and remnants of the high stone walls of the old city. The coming of Troyak and his squads of Marines would be the first time the ancient site would hear the sound of Russian made assault rifles, but it would not be the last. Rebels clashed with the Syrian government in the years before *Kirov* first went to sea, and the blight of war would again leave its mark on the old ruins, which were also looted to provide artifacts for wealthy collectors when order broke down in Syria.

Now the ancient gods and goddesses would stir fitfully in the ruins of their temples. There slept Allat, the goddess of the underworld, and Nebo, the Mesopotamian god of oracles, who would hear again the din and rattle of war echoing through the weathered stone columns of Aswan granite. The Babylonians called him the Son of Marduke, Lord of Heaven and the scribe of the “Table of Destiny.” Today he would make a new entry in his ledger of fate, when the Russian Marines came thumping in from the south, emerging from the long shadowy ridges of Mount Atbar and Jabal al Khan, the ‘hill of the King.’

The KA-40 came in low, beneath the crests of hills rising over 500 meters just west of the palm groves. The chateau was situated on a high solitary hill overlooking the town, triangular in shape, with the longest wall facing west on the angle of approach. Surprise was complete, until the roar of the helo startled the observation teams settling in to sleep in the stony chambers beneath the towers. One man was bold enough to run up the stairs to the upper level, emerging to see a dark, shuddering shadow hovering in the sky. He had a brief moment of shock and awe before a sniper rifle in the hands of a Russian Marine cut him down.

Now the long ropes descended from the helo, and one by one the Marines slid down onto the hard stone roof of the fortress. Troyak led one team down the long west facing wall, seizing two towers there and leaving small two man

teams to guard the ramparts. Zykov took another squad along the first of the two east facing walls, until he reached a position right above the single stone bridge that led to the gate. He fixed an assault rope to the upper wall and rappelled down to take the main gate from above, while other Marines worked their way down the stone stairways and into hidden chambers within the heart of the fortress. It was just as Popski had told Glubb Pasha, they had simply plopped down from above and taken the entire fortress by storm.

They found three other men from the garrison there, one Belgian and the others a pair of sharp eyed Bedouin tribesmen, but did not kill them. Fedorov questioned the men through Popski, who could manage both French and Arabic. He learned that the units assigned to the garrison here were much as the history recorded, two companies of the French Foreign Legion, and a single Bedu Desert Company.

“What about Fawsi al Qawuqji?” Popski pressed them. “Are he and his men nearby?”

At this the captives pleaded their ignorance, and Fedorov could see that they really knew very little.

“And the Germans? Do they have planes on that airfield?”

They learned what Fedorov already seemed to know, that the leading planes to arrive here were from Zerstorergeschwader 76, which had been using the base as a transit stop en route to bases in northern Iraq.

“Two planes,” said the Belgian. “Only two.” He held up two fingers, his other hand over his heart to profess his oath of truth in what he was saying, eyes wide with fear.

“Two planes,” said Fedorov to Troyak. “They’ll be on the ground there now, so get your mortar teams in action right away. I’m afraid we’re going to have to wake up the rest of the French garrison, if the helo hasn’t already done that.”

“Kolnov,” Troyak barked. “Set up one 82 on the south tower, the other to the north. Use your map and register that fire as we trained.”

Fedorov had been able to give them a detailed map of Palmyra, but they could clearly see the airbase there between the hill and the town itself. In later years after the war, another airfield would be built well east of the town, but in 1941 it was just above the Roman ruins, over watched by the high Chateau. They could simply register the fire right on the field, and easily shut it down. The prisoners were taken to a chamber below the main courtyard, and the KA-

40 sent down the last of the supply and weapons canisters in heavy canvass satchels. Then the pilot saluted, and the dark noisome mass of the helo began to lift away, swooping down into the valley behind the high volcanic hill, and off to the north, all running lights dark.

There was no place big enough to land the helo on the fortress, and so it had been decided to move it to the gnarled hills to the north, where it could set down at elevation, unseen in a furrowed gorge. The advantage of having Google satellite maps of the whole region, and detailed navigation pilotage charts made the selection of an appropriate LZ for the helo easy enough. It would be out of sight and harm's way, but conveniently at hand should they need its minigun and missile fire support.

Ten minutes later the new masters of the Castle of Fakhr-al-Din began to put well aimed 82mm mortar fire down on the airfield, and there was a bright explosion and fire there when they hit one of the twin engine He-111 bombers that had been left there when their tires were damaged on landing earlier.

They soon heard the distant call of a bugle as the French Foreign Legion was called to arms. Troyak was on a high tower, surveying the mortar fire, and he peered through his hand held night vision field glasses, watching the scene. There he saw the movement of men on the ground, and they could hear the sound of trucks. Soon they saw several truckloads of infantry arriving at the edge of the town and spreading out in the palm groves near the ruins.

"They know they have uninvited visitors," said Troyak. "It looks to be two platoons at this point, about 40 or 50 men. They'll look us over first to try and determine who we are, and in what strength, but I doubt if they'll be foolish enough to try and attack this fort tonight."

"Agreed," said Fedorov. "But how would they attack if they decide to come?"

"The ground is too open to the east, and we have good fields of fire from all these towers. They would have to get north or south of us, and then try to come up that road that leads up here on the western flank of this hill. Even that is a long shot. With our firepower this fort is practically impregnable. You chose the position well. All they might do is try to put heavy weapons on us, if they have any artillery, and our mortars can answer that, or the KA-40. I think we can hold here."

"Then the only question is how long it will be before we are relieved by the British, or Glubb Pasha's men. He's promised to come here as soon as

possible. In the meantime, we've done what we came here to do so far, and shut down that airfield."

* * *

The Germans would be denied the use of the field as long as the Marines held the fortress, but phones were already ringing in Mosul, where *Fiegerführer Irak*, Werner Junck, was trying to muster more aircraft to counter the British offensive. He commanded the Luftwaffe component of Sonderstab F, the first responders sent by Germany to aid the Iraqi rebellion. *General der Flieger* Hellmuth Felmy's Brandenburg Commandos were the initial ground component, but plans had been made to use elements of the 22nd Luftland Air Landing Division, and deploy them through airfields in Syria. At present, Junck had only eight serviceable planes in Mosul, two Messerschmitts, four more Heinkels and a pair of Ju-52s that had ferried in the ground support crews. More planes were on the way, but at this critical moment, his force was not capable of preventing the British from undoing the Iraqi rebellion.

Junck had been briefed by Goering's personal Chief of Staff on this mission. He was to assess the overall situation in Iraq, select the best airfields for future Luftwaffe operations, and harass the British offensive there as much as possible. Now his overlords were clearly not happy. Palmyra had been chosen as a way station for future Luftwaffe deployments, and word had come that the airfield was already under attack.

"The British are in Palmyra!" Came the voice on the phone. *"They have taken the fortress there and they are shelling the airfield!"*

"Impossible," said Junck. "All our latest reports still have them at Habbaniyah. The Brandenburgers have taken their supply flotilla! There is no way they could have reached Palmyra."

"Well they are there now! Do something about it!"

"Do something? With what? I have eight planes left, and two of those are transports. Where are the fighters and bombers I was promised? Where are the Fallschirmjagers?"

"They are coming. Just make sure the British know we are onto them. The French garrison at Palmyra is still holding the town and airfield. It must not fall. Understood?"

The ripples in the stream from the rock Fedorov had dropped on the

Chateau had spread all the way to Berlin, where Hitler was none too happy to hear that the Iraqi government had collapsed, and that the situation in Syria was precarious, with the British now threatening both Damascus and Beirut. The only good news thus far had come from Cyprus, where Student's veteran 7th Flieger Division had secured every facility of any value on the island, and was now consolidating positions there.

Goring clucked with this news, seeing his prestige notch higher after the humiliation he suffered in failing to subdue the RAF in the Battle of Britain. Now he seemed very pleased with the results his Luftwaffe were delivering. They had redeemed themselves by taking Malta, and now Cyprus, bypassing and isolating Crete as the Germans moved to implement the Führer's plans. He had already sent his personal 'Herman Goering Brigade' to reinforce Rommel in North Africa, and now he was authorized to commit the 22nd Luftland Division to operations in Iraq and Syria.

The Reichsführer was taking a very personal interest in the campaign, as he had been one of the key men involved in the plans for Germany's oil production and economic development. The four year plan devised in 1936 included a comprehensive strategy for increasing Germany's oil production, and furthering access to new supplies. In 1938 the plan was revised in light of the wartime needs of the army, and renamed Plan Karinhall, after Goering's spacious mansion. Reliance on the Rumanian oil of Ploesti, and domestic synthetic production, would not be enough. New sources had to be secured, and the rich fields of Baku were at the top of the list. When the Orenburg Federation joined the Axis, securing this much needed oil was no longer a military problem, but now the Soviet Union was preventing shipments across the Black Sea, and the reckoning was nigh at hand.

In the meantime, the campaign in Syria and Iraq also afforded the Germans a dual opportunity. The French had already cut shipments from the terminal ports at Tripoli and Banias, and now German interest in Iraq was primarily focused on the oil facilities and airfields near Mosul and Kirkuk. In the short run, these objectives could not be held, but while Goering arranged for new reinforcements, at least some effort could be made at severing the pipeline from Haditha to Haifa. These were the facilities the British were desperately trying to secure with this offensive. Goering was under no illusions as to the real reasons for the British operation.

News that Palmyra was now a combat zone would make that airfield

unsuitable for troop deployment, but Goering already had his staff busy with plans to heavily reinforce Junck. The British may have stolen a march on the Germans in Iraq, but the issue in Syria was far from decided. Prompt intervention by German troops was now Goering's highest priority. Word had come that the British were approaching Mosul, and also assembling forces on the Euphrates. The vast eastern flank of Syria was wide open to their advance, but German planners knew there were only a very few routes they might take if they sought to move from Iraq.

Generalleutnant Hans Jeschonnek, Goering's Chief of Staff, chaired the final meeting before operational orders would be issued. The key problem under discussion was the stores of available aviation fuel to sustain operations.

"The British will chase Junck out of Mosul in a few days," he said. "In the short run he can redeploy to Dier ez Zour or Ar Rakkah on the Euphrates in Syria. We have the planes and pilots to reinforce him there, but what about the fuel? Most everything the French had is centered on their main aerodrome at Rayak. It may be possible to move something by train up through Homs and Aleppo, and we can use the airfields there as well. As for the troops, our initial deployment will be small enough to supply by air, but as we build up strength, it will take something more. We cannot rely on the French. So it comes down to either sea transit or overland rail," he concluded. "The former faces the constant threat from the Royal Navy, and the latter is impossible unless we solve the problem of Turkey."

"The Führer has plans for Turkey," said Goering. "The 17th Army has been moved to the Turkish frontier in Bulgaria, and Von Pappen has been dispatched to make one final effort at convincing the Turks that their future will be far brighter as our ally than it will be as our enemy."

"And if they remain adamant? What then? We already have the 5th Mountain Division in Syria, and we are about to send the 22nd Luftland Division."

"We should be able to supply those troops from the airfields in Syria."

"Granted, but they will not be enough to settle this matter. The best we can hope for is a stalemate, and if we have to get those troops out of Syria, it will not be easy."

"Do not lose heart," said Goering. "I've told von Pappen that he can send a personal message from me to the Turkish Ambassador. We are in Bulgaria, Greece, Rhodes, Cyprus and now Syria. Soon we will be back in Iraq. There is

a ring of steel around Turkey, and they must not think we will hesitate to use it if they do not cooperate. I will darken the skies over Turkey with my Luftwaffe in a massive show of force, and then my little message will tell them that if I have to send my planes there again, the next time they come with bombs. Begin moving elements of the Tenth Fliegerkorps at once.”

Chapter 18

Colonel Ferdinand Barre had the duty at Palmyra that night, commanding the 4th battalion of the French Foreign Legion. He was sitting listening to radio reports in the barracks the Legion had built just east of the main town, when he heard the odd thumping sound in the air, like the rapid beating of massive wings. He set down his coffee, listening, then walked slowly to the nearest window, eyebrow raised as he peered into the thickening darkness.

The sound lingered for a time, west towards the old Roman ruins and the Chateau, then it diminished. Thinking it may have been nothing more than a wayward plane, he was just about to return to his radio when the first rounds came crashing in on the nearby airfield. Now he rushed to the door, shocked to see three neatly placed explosions rake across the landing strip, and one round hit one of the two German He-111s parked there, resulting in an enormous explosion. The planes had been overloaded when they landed earlier, and both had damage to their undercarriage, and flat tires. They had just been sitting there for several days now, waiting for German service troops to arrive and fix the problem. A minute later they were no more than hot burning wrecks.

He heard shouts as Sergeants roused the men, and a bugle call summoned the Legionnaires to arms. Now the sound he had heard earlier became a plane in his mind, and he could only think that the British had staged a daring night bombing raid on the airfield to get at those two planes. Yet something did not click with that in his mind. No. Those rounds were too small to be bombs in the range of 250 to 500 pounds. They might have been 100 pounders, but his instincts, long honed by years of service to the Legion, told him this was mortar fire! What was going on?

He ran outside, collaring the first Sergeant Major he saw. “What is happening?”

“We don’t know, sir. But that fire seems to be coming from the west—from the chateau!”

At that moment a man came riding up on a braying camel, one of the Mehariste Cavalry in the Bedouin Camel Company that had been billeted near the Roman ruins. His headdress spilled down onto his broad shoulders, tied tightly about his neck to ward off the growing chill of the desert. Now he

pointed. "The fortress!" he said breathlessly. "The Castle of Fakhr-al-Din! Men came from the sky! They have taken the place!" He thumped the flanks of his camel and the animal bolted before Colonel Barre could get another word from the man.

Filthy animals, he thought. Men from the sky? What did this crazy Bedouin mean by that? "Sergeant Major," he said briskly. "Assemble your platoon and get over there to see about this. The British might be up to something. This could be a commando raid. I thought I heard an aircraft earlier. See about it and send a runner to my headquarters to report. I'll send 2nd platoon after you."

"Sir!" The Sergeant saluted crisply, and turned to his men assembling outside the barracks. "Alright you miserable scum, you heard the Colonel. Form up!"

The Colonel wanted to have a look at the airfield and find a working vehicle from the truck park. He had three platoons, two in the city, and one at the airfield. A couple of useless light desert camel patrols provided his only ranged reconnaissance, and those men were far from reliable. Occasionally Fawsi el Quwukji, the irascible desert guerilla, would appear with troops of his Bedouin raiders, but he had no news of him for some time. He had been listening to reports of the fighting around Damascus, growing more concerned each passing day as the British offensive continued. Now the war had come with sudden surprise out of the dark night, and his legionnaires were hastening west towards the Roman ruins.

Men from the sky? That could only mean paratroopers. Would the British be daring and foolish enough to launch such a raid here? The sound of the bugle calls roused his blood, and he stormed back into his headquarters to find his aide de camp.

"Get second platoon assembled and be ready to support Sergeant DuPois at once. I don't like the looks of this."

He soon learned that his suspicions, and the crazy Bedouin camel trooper, had both been correct. A runner came in with news that there were enemy soldiers in the high fortress of the Chateau, just as the Bedu rider had claimed!

* * *

News of the attack traveled quickly. The telephone line to Homs was still

open, and Colonel Barre reported the situation to his superiors there. The Regimental Commander was not present, as he had taken the train south through Rayak and then east through the Barada Gorge to Damascus several days ago, but word of the incident soon filtered through to French Operations HQ where General Henri Dentz was coordinating the defense from Beirut. An attack on Palmyra was the last thing he needed to hear about. The news that it had been made by an airborne force was equally disturbing.

He quickly concluded it must be a small raiding force sent in advance of a large ground movement, and reports from the southwest frontier soon confirmed this assessment. News came in that a column of British and Arab Legion forces had left Rutbah and were heading north into the desert. A second column had been sighted far to the east, advancing along the pipeline route from the vicinity of Abu Kemal on the Euphrates. Now he knew where they were going—Palmyra.

They want to secure the pipeline and pumping stations, he thought grimly. They think they are going to push us right out of Lebanon and open that line to Tripoli again. I was a fool not to establish a stronger garrison out east. A regiment posted at Dier Zour on the Euphrates could have gone south to Abu Kemal in this instance, and made certain the British would not get oil from their Haifa pipeline as well. Both the Tripoli and Haifa pipelines meet south of there. That is a principle reason for this business in Iraq, isn't it? The British need to protect their airfields and oil interests there. They could care less about Baghdad or anything else in the country, as long as the oil keeps flowing west.

Yet there was nothing he could do about that now. Most of the units from his Northern Syrian command had already been transferred south, and had been pulled onto the line. The situation was becoming serious around Damascus. That damn de Gaulle and his so called "Free French" brigades were taking up arms against their countrymen in a dishonorable attack south of the city. The British also had a strong force on his right, Gurkhas by all accounts, but they were well equipped, strong machinegun units, and they had been pushing relentlessly up the valley from Aartouz after storming that town in a night attack two days ago.

Thank God for the Germans arriving on that flank, he thought. Mountain troops had come in through the Barada Gorge by rail and taken up positions to screen the main road and rail lines to Rayak and Beirut. The fighting there had been rather intense. The British had some new aircraft, not a plane, but a

stealthy helicopter by all reports. There were not many, but they had been making devastating attacks, always at night, with accurate and lethal gunfire and a short range rocket weapon. There were tanks there too, and that had been a surprise.

He thought he could trump the British attack by sending in his Chasseurs, the units of the 6th and 7th Battalions, which he had distributed along the line to bolster his colonial infantry. Many times they had made all the difference in the defense when they appeared. The old Renault 35 tanks had a good 37mm gun, decent armor, and the British 2 Pounder AT Guns and AT rifles could not harm them. When they appeared, the enemy had to simply hole up in any trench or building they could find, and his Renaults could operate as they pleased, impervious to enemy fire.

But no longer. Now the British had tanks as well, some new vehicles with a fast firing main gun in the same range as his Renaults. Were these the fearsome new tanks that had been the undoing of Rommel in the Western Deserts of Egypt? From all accounts they were not the invincible warriors he had heard about, but they were very good. In a brief, hot action outside the main Damascus airfields northeast of Aartouz, the two sides had fought a pitched battle.

2nd Company 1/6th African Chasseurs had the old PT-17 tanks, relics from WWI, and had lost three in rapid succession, along with three White armored cars and two Panhards. A second troop of six PT-17s came lumbering up and they were cut to pieces, with all six tanks knocked out in a matter of minutes. The enemy had a gun that ripped out three quick rounds when it fired, and they were deadly accurate, with superb night optics from all accounts. This advantage, and the relentless night attacks made by companies of fierce Gurkhas, saw the defense in that sector crumbling.

Two battalions of Senegalese Rifles had been badly pummeled by these “Night Devils,” as the men now called them. They moved like shadows, until they opened fire with blistering automatic weapons, and some new kind of hand-held heavy weapon that was demolishing bunkers, block houses, gun positions and machinegun nests. A near panic ensued after Aartouz fell, and the airfield was hastily abandoned, the last of the planes taking off to flee north even as the enemy infantry swept over the airfield, their guns nipping at the tails of the lumbering Bloch 210 bombers. The only positions that had held were those of the 2/6th and 3/6th Foreign Legion, on the heights of Jebel

Madani. They fell back through the Chasseurs and joined another battalion of legionnaires already organizing a defense at the edge of Damascus.

South of the airfield, the 63rd Battalion of the 7th African Chasseurs was in strength, with 45 Renault-35 tanks. The firefight there had seen the first kills on this new British tank, with one hit by three successive 37mm rounds from the Renaults, and another damaged and forced to withdraw. That success had cost the battalion five Renault-35s, but it appeared the enemy was simply standing by now, in good hull down positions, and daring the French tanks to advance on the airfield.

The local commander had seen enough. With the bridge south at Kisawah taken, and the enemy in the heights beyond, this daring and persistent attack by the Gurkhas in the north would now force a general withdrawal to Damascus. The flank had been turned, but the German Mountain troops were still screening the entrance to the vital Barada Gorge. Reluctantly, General Dentz sent the order to fall back and consolidate in the suburbs of the city.

Now, with this latest report concerning a raid at Palmyra, General Dentz had yet another problem to solve. He had posted the last of the Foreign Legion in reserve there under Colonel Barre. They should be more than enough to handle the matter, but he soon learned that the British had holed up in the near impregnable fortress called the Chateau. He knew the place well, and had often stood on those high stone towers atop the steep flanks of an old extinct volcanic cone, and gazed on the Roman ruins there. News that the British were now advancing on the place with two columns gave him pause. What could he send?

He had the 2nd and 4th Tunisian Rifles at Al Qusayr to the west. But they would be some time getting to Palmyra. Then the telephone rang and he was pleased to hear the German Ambassador to Turkey, Franz von Pappen, with news of the treaty concluded the previous day.

“We have obtained right of free passage through Turkish territory by rail, and use of several airfields! It may entail some concessions concerning your northern border, but I will discuss this with you later. Even now we have elements of our 22nd Air Landing division en route to Iskenderun in southern Turkey. From there they will take trains with their heavy weapons and artillery down through Aleppo to Homs. Other units will fly directly to the airfield at Homs itself. Can you have trucks waiting for them there?”

At last, thought Dentz, another German division! The 5th Mountain

Division had only two regiments, and these troops were split between the defensive fronts of Damascus and Beirut, where they had helped considerably. This second division was one of the German tough, veteran air mobile units, and he knew this was the same unit that had been sent ahead of the German advance through Belgium and the low countries. He promised to scrape up every vehicle he could find, and then asked the one real question on his mind.

“What about tanks,” he said. “Will there be anything more I can count on?”

There was a soft chortle on the other end of the line. *“I can say nothing more on an open telephone line like this. Messages will be sent to you in short order. Plan your defense, General. We are coming.”*

Those three words stuck in the General’s mind. Yes, just as you came at us through the Ardennes and toppled the honor of my nation with those damnable Panzer divisions. I didn’t get to see what happened in France, as I was here in the Levant, but now I would welcome the sight of German tanks, yes, for without them I do not think my Colonial battalions will hold the line much longer. Yet we will be opening the farm gate and letting in the wolves when the Germans come. It was a very odd feeling to fear the very same stroke that promised your salvation.

General Dentz soon learned the details von Pappen could not disclose on the telephone. It seemed Herr Hitler had big plans for the spring campaign before he set his mind on Russia. The Germans were coming alright. They were transferring XIV Motorized Korps from its positions in Bulgaria, through Turkey by rail, to Syria. Yes, the tanks he had hoped for would soon be coming. The German Korps was made up of two notable divisions, the 9th Panzer Division, which had been primarily tasked with linking up with the very same airborne forces von Pappen had just mentioned during the campaign of May 1940 in France. Out in front, it had the distinction of covering more ground than any other German Division in that campaign, unhinging the French defense, taking thousands of prisoners, and storming through Paris under Guderian. Now it would be sent to link up with the 22nd Air Landing Division here.

The other unit was something new. Apparently the Germans had collected many volunteers from the nations they had already conquered in the previous year. A new division was built from these men, volunteers from Denmark and Norway, and others from Belgium and the Netherlands. The new unit came under the control of the elite German SS, and the message indicated the

division was now designated “5th SS Motorized Division Wiking.” It was a collection of Germans, Finns, Dutch and Nordic troops, and it would go on to gain a reputation as one of the most fearsome German divisions in the war.

And so as General Dentz leaned over his map table, he could finally sigh with relief and think to himself that this little war might just be won. What we get afterwards, with the Germans casting their dark shadow here, remains to be seen.

Fedorov knew nothing of these plans and maneuvers as he sat that night in the high southern tower of the fortress of Fakhr-al-Din. His bold little plan had worked out quite well at the outset. They had swept in through the gathering night, stormed the Chateau, destroyed the two German planes on the airfield, and shut it down as planned. Now all they had to do was wait for the British in King Column, and Glubb Pasha’s men. The thought that he might soon be facing German troops here was the farthest thing from his mind, a “Catch 22” that he could find nowhere in all his laborious and detailed research.

For this was a new war now, writing a new volume in the history books in blood here. Gibraltar had fallen, along with Malta and Cyprus lately taken by the Germans—things that had never happened before. Now the Germans were coming to Syria to save the beleaguered Vichy French, and the hard stone walls of the fortress, and Sergeant Troyak’s 20 Marines, would soon come to feel all too thin a defense against the storm that was coming.

Part VII

Wolf in the Fold

“History never repeats, but attitudes and arguments, dilemmas and excuses, clichés and delusions recur with the inevitability of a sun setting on successive empires.”

—**Karl E. Meyer / Shareen Blair Brysac:** *Kingmakers*

Chapter 19

The evening passed uneventfully, as Troyak had predicted. They saw the French move what looked to be a few platoons of infantry into positions at the edge of the town. A few set up in the palm groves, and one squad had moved into the old Roman ruins, but otherwise no attempt was made to approach the Chateau. It was what he did not see that encouraged him most—enemy artillery. The troops assigned to this garrison did not seem to have much in the way of heavy weapons. He noted machineguns, and a few mortars, but no other guns. Mortars would be hard to aim and fire on a position like this, he thought. And our mortars will be much more accurate to take out any that try—as long as our ammunition holds out.

“Zykov,” he said to the Corporal. “How many rounds did they drop off for the 82s?”

“About a hundred each, but that includes ten smoke rounds and five illumination rounds.”

They had brought in a pair of 2B14 Podnos mortars, a lightweight system that was sometimes called the M82. A muzzle loaded, drop fired system, it could range out a little over 4000 meters with HE rounds and had a good rate of fire. Troyak had one on the north apex of the fort, and one on the south tower. The two AGS-30 autogrenade launchers were placed in the center, east facing apex of the fort, in the towers above moat bridge and gate. The hill they were on commanded the entire scene, and Troyak knew that any attempt to take this fort with infantry would be suicidal for the attackers. The flanks of the hill were too steep, and the towers had good fields of fire in all directions, with view slits on multiple levels.

No. This fortress could only be broken by firepower, which is why he was relieved that the French here seemed to have no artillery. The only other threat they had considered would be an air strike, and for that they brought along four Ilga ‘needle’ hand held SAMs, and one satchel held four replacement missiles. It was a thin shield, with only 8 missiles, but was more than any comparable force of that day could claim by way of air defense. If they got into real trouble from above, they could also call on the KA-40, which had been rigged out with pods of air-to-air SAMs as part of its mission loadout.

Around midnight, the watch saw a small squad of legionnaires moving quietly towards the flanks of the hill. The men watched with interest and the five man group labored up the hill, moving from one gully to the next, and trying to be as stealthy as possible. They could not know that they were being watched on infrared and night vision equipment, and seen as easily as they might be in broad daylight.

Zykov took two men down to the gate, and they took up positions in the shadows, thinking to surprise them. As the enemy approached, they heard them whispering to one another in Russian, and so he shouted down the hillside to give them a shock.

“Hey! *Pizda!* We’ve been watching you since you left the ruins down there. What’s wrong? Is the food bad in the French Army?”

The men immediately went to ground, and the Marines got a chortle as one man tried to work his way into a firing position near a rock. Zykov saw what he was up to and put two well aimed rounds right on the rock to dissuade him. “Not so fast,” he said again in Russian. “We’ve only black bread and cheese enough for our own men here. So the five of you get your sorry asses back down that hill right now, or I’ll put a bullet in each man’s head.” To further underscore his threat, he fired one more round a foot from the crawling legionnaire’s head, and shouted that the next one would knock off that funny looking cap.

That was enough to send the patrol scrambling down the hill, eating dirt most of the way down, and fearful they might be shot at any moment. Their report later to Colonel Barre that there were Russians, and not British, in the high Chateau, came as quite a surprise.

“Yes? Well we have Germans, Belgians, and even a few Hungarians here,” he said at last. “I guess the British collect trash as well when they have to fill out the ranks. Very well, get back to the barracks and clean the dirt off those uniforms. So much for your night patrol!”

Dawn painted the red desert hills with its ruddy glow, and the Russians were stretching their limbs and shaking off the cold night when Kolnov, on the early watch that morning, spied something from the west. A column of smoke rose on the horizon, and soon Fedorov was peering through his field glasses, wondering what was there. It was not long before the dust became a long column of trucks, the reinforcements that von Pappen had promised, arriving from Homs. The men of the 47th Regiment of the 22nd Luftland Division had

flown to Homs the previous day, where General Dentz had assembled close to 300 trucks, pulling in every available vehicle he could get from Homs and Hamah further north. It was enough to move the German regiment, though troops were crowded onto the trucks and a gaggle of civilian cars that had also been commandeered.

Colonel der Infanterie Ludwig Wolff was leading the regiment that day, living out a slightly different timeline in these Altered States. Already well decorated from the First World War, Wolff had somehow managed to avoid the wound he was to suffer in Belgium in this telling of events. He had also come to the 22nd Luftland Division early, as he was to rise to command of the entire division in October of 1941. Generalleutnant Hans Graf von Sponeck still held that post, but his replacement was already a Wolff in the fold, the newly promoted Colonel at the head of the 47th Regiment.

Wolff was eager to get into the war, and saw the deployment to Syria a much better chance than sitting around in Greece waiting for the Generals to finish their planning for Operation Barbarossa. Something had happened to energize the German war effort against the British, and the 22nd was the only division in the army trained for long range deployment by air, aside from Student's 7th, which was still consolidating on Cyprus.

Student already had taken two good plums in Malta and Cyprus, thought Wolff. Now we get our chance to trump his exploits—Syria! True, the French already hold the place, but not for long, by all accounts. They had been fighting hard, but the British were making gains now, particularly around Damascus. The news that there were now columns invading across the eastern frontier had sent his men in motion, flying from their bases in Greece to Iskenderun, Turkey, and then on to Homs in Syria. There they hastened onto the trucks, assembling the long column in a good order of march into the early hours of the morning. When they finally got moving, they made the 140 kilometer drive to Palmyra in a little over four hours on the thin desert road, arriving at dawn.

Approaching from the southwest, he could see the tall battlements of the Chateau ahead, and knew that was to be his first job with the regiment in combat. He stopped, glad to be out of the noisy truck and stretching his legs. Leutnant Lindel was at his side as the two men surveyed the area, looking at the maps they had been given by the French authorities in Homs.

There were three fingers of high ground that reached for Palmyra from the

west. The first was a long ridge, due west of the fort, and rising to about the same elevation at its highest point. The middle finger had two hills, one at about 540 meters where there was little more than a pole with a wind sock to gauge the wind direction. Just northeast of this was the Chateau, on a 520 meter hill, but with battlements rising as high as the other hill. The third finger of land was well south, pointing directly at the old Roman ruins. A quick assessment told Wolff he would want to occupy all this high ground at once.

“Get men up on that hill to the left,” he said. “It has a good field of fire on the Chateau, and with some effort they can drag their Leichtgeschütz recoilless rifles up there. As for that hill in the middle, it will be the only cover we have approaching from this direction. The high ground north of the fort should also be occupied. Get mortar teams up there, Lindel.”

“Yes sir, and what about the artillery?” They had a battalion of twelve 105mm howitzers with them, and another comprised of nine 75mm Infantry Guns, and six bigger 150mm IGs. It was all the artillery that could be moved on short notice, but more than enough in Wolff’s mind. He knew that this fortress would have to be broken by gunfire, and not infantry assault.

“The French say the British have mortars up there, and they hit the airfield last night and knocked out a pair of our Heinkels. So we will move the artillery south of this hill. That will put it out of range of their mortars.” He folded his arms, squinting at the high fort.

“Such audacity,” he said. “How in the world did the British pull that off and manage to get commandos in here last night?”

“I am told they have also raided the French aerodrome at Rayak, sir,” said Lindel.

“Oh? Too bad for them. The first units of 9th Panzer Division are deploying there by rail. The British will have the whole division recon battalion to deal with at Rayak, and the Pioneers.”

“Speaking of that, sir,” said Lindel. “Where do you want our own Pioneers?”

“Behind that hill in the center, the one masking the fort. If we do have to put in a ground assault, they will be the ones to do the job. But first, let us see how they like our artillery. We’ll be half the day getting into position, but I want the regiment deployed by noon. Take second and third battalions and move it through those palm groves to the east. The British columns will be coming from that direction, so coordinate with the French garrison there. We’ll

also need to block this road here as well.” He pointed to a desert track that approached the town from the south, the very route chosen by Glubb Pasha and his Arab Legion.

“The map shows one road up the back side of the hill with the fort. Shall I send up a reconnaissance? We need to assess their strength.”

“Go ahead, but don’t get careless. How many men can they have in that Chateau? A platoon? A company at best. It will not matter. The artillery will do the job, not the infantry. Understood?”

* * *

Troyak saw the Germans fanning out and disembarking with some misgiving. It looked to be a very large force, several battalions, and he could see the one thing he feared being towed by the long column of French trucks.

“They have artillery,” he said to Fedorov.

“And they probably will have a good number of mortars,” Fedorov replied, “or even good caliber recoilless rifles. This isn’t good. I didn’t expect German troops here at all!”

“In battle the things you don’t expect are usually the ones that will kill you,” said Troyak with a stolid expression. “So they will out gun us now, and they certainly have the troops to take this fort if they have a mind to. It will cost them dearly given our firepower, but if we hold, it will come down to trading our twenty Marines for as many men as they are willing to commit here.”

“We’ll have help soon,” said Fedorov, reaching for any straw at hand. “But how soon before they might attack?”

“A few hours—perhaps noon. They’ll be some time getting themselves sorted out. We should welcome them with some mortar fire.”

“Won’t that be like poking the beehive with a stick?”

Troyak smiled. “They’re going to hit us one way or another, whether we send down a cheesecake with a cherry on top, or a few 82mm mortar rounds. Those trucks make an inviting target.”

Fedorov nodded, feeling somewhat uncomfortable with this development and now about to open another infantry ground action. A few minutes later the Marines on the south tower had the honor of the first shot, three rounds that came whistling in on the German column. The explosions caused quite a stir,

and one truck was hit and burning , though it had already off loaded it's squad of infantry.

They saw men scattering in all directions, put in two more rounds for good measure, and then ceased fire, content to announce their presence and throw down a steel gauntlet from their high towers. The Germans would not forget to answer them in due course.

Come noon they were just finishing a meal of field rations when they heard the sharp crack of guns firing in the distance. Troyak knew a large caliber weapon when he heard one, and ordered the men to take cover in the inner chambers of the stone fort.

"Here it comes," he said gruffly. "Let's see how upset they are over those five mortar rounds."

The first rounds went right over the top of the fortress, falling harmlessly on the brown parched earth beyond the hill. Troyak was watching the fire from the south tower, heedless of the danger as he studied the enemy positions through field glasses. As the second barrage started, he went down the stone steps to the inner chamber of the tower.

"Someone over there has a head on his shoulders," he said. "They've positioned their guns well south, beyond the range of our mortars."

"How did they calculate that?" asked Fedorov.

"They knew we hit the airfield from here last night, and they can read a map," said Troyak.

The salvo fell short this time, striking the sheer hillside with a rumble of three rounds. "They are just bracketing now, but they'll have the range in another minute. I think their O.P. is on the hill to the west."

He pinched his collar microphone and gave an order for the mortar team on the north tower to put five rounds on that hill. A minute later the scene was a roar, with both incoming and outgoing rounds whistling and exploding. One round struck the fortress, shaking the old stone walls near the base of the south tower. Then another explosion sent a haze of dust and rock fragments down on the chamber where Fedorov and three other Marines huddled, his fingers in his ears.

"That was close," he said, noting that the other men took the development with cool nerves. They had been under fire many times before, and knew what was coming.

"I think we'll need the KA-40 to get after those guns," said Troyak. "These

are 105mm rounds, and if they have the ammunition, they can just pound this fortress all day. The stonework is solid, but it's old. They'll reduce the place to a pile of rubble in time."

The fire continued for some minutes, with another hit in the upper gallery of the fort. Then there came a pause before they heard the guns begin again. Fedorov braced himself, hands over his ears, eyes shut tight, but no rounds came at them. Troyak was up the stone stairs and onto the upper tower battlements again with his field glasses. He returned a moment later to report that the Germans had re-oriented their fire to the southeast.

Fedorov smiled. "The British!" he exclaimed.

"I saw a small dust column coming from that direction," said Troyak.

"It could be Glubb Pasha and his Arab Legion, but they didn't have many vehicles."

They soon learned that the British were arriving from two directions now, south and east. The sound of a bugle scored an interval of silence with its high call, and the Marines re-deployed to the top of the fort. There they could see the platoons of the French Foreign Legion withdrawing from their positions in the old Roman ruins, and moving off to the east through the town.

"I think they have bigger fish to fry," said Fedorov.

"Yes," said Troyak. "I make two German battalions off to the east now. They've left only one battalion here to cover the fort and stand as a reserve. They'll have their men on all that high ground by now, but I don't think we'll see anything more than mortar fire, unless we get them pissed off. They'll wait until after dark, and then they'll try to send in a few patrols to see what we have under our skirts. Until then, I think we will be watching a battle form up to the east."

"Should I contact the KA-40?" Fedorov asked.

"Not yet. Better tonight when they can't really see what will hit them. Let them heat up those artillery tubes today, and we'll see their positions on infrared tonight. At dusk we'll start a little mortar duel here to uncover their tube positions on these hills for the helo. Then they get a nice surprise after dark."

"Can we expect a ground assault here?"

"Possibly. I would at least probe the position if I were them. They can't want us up here with mortars able to hit their troops in the town if the fighting gets pushed there. They're ignoring us for the moment, but they haven't

forgotten we're here. Tonight we'll remind them."

Chapter 20

The British had convened a conference at Rutbah concerning the plan to capture Palmyra. General Clark had flown in from Jerusalem to brief Brigadier Kingstone on the overall operation in Syria, and he made a point of emphasizing the importance of this wide flanking maneuver.

“It’s not just the airfield and the pipeline route we uncover,” he said, “but this move could unhinge the whole of the French Defense at Damascus. I understand you have already sent an advanced detachment?”

“I’m not sure who they are, sir,” said Kingstone, feeling stupid for the remark. “They were sent all the way from Palestine, and must have come in by air. Apparently they caught the French napping. I’m told a Colonel Peniakoff from the LRDG was with them, a small party sent to scout the position before we arrived.” Kingstone folded his arms, a tall hard man with a high forehead and cheeks reddened by the long hours in the sun. He had come all the way from Palestine to Baghdad, and now his hastily assembled force was heading back to Syria, and there seemed to be elements scattered all over the desert from Rutbah to Habbaniyah.

“Colonel Peniakoff? Ah yes! That’s Popski. Wavell will vouch for the man, and I’d say that puts him in good company. Apparently his operation came from Wavell himself—and it’s very hush, hush. I was simply told that they were to have a free hand here, and was assured they would deliver results—much like your Arab friends out here. What have they been up to?”

“Glubb Pasha apparently left last night with his Legion. That leaves us here with my column, and anything Habforce can send us from Habbaniyah.”

“Well the situation in Iraq is still very fluid, but the Indian Brigades have taken up the burden of running the last of the Iraqi hostiles to ground. We’ve put one battalion into Kirkuk, and another in Mosul. The rest are consolidating and preparing to move up the Euphrates. Your action is the inside arc of this operation. You are to take Palmyra, then press on to Homs to cut the rail line there. We tried to put in commandos, but ran into a little more than we expected near Rayak.”

“The Germans?”

“Who else? They had the bald faced audacity to call our operation in Syria

an ‘unprovoked aggression’—as if the whole affair in France the Low Countries, Denmark and Norway was a garden party—not to mention Gibraltar and now Egypt. Well, we don’t mince words with the Germans any longer. Either we meet them on the field and win through, or they’ll have the last laugh, and I for one refuse to contemplate that.”

“What might we expect at Palmyra?” Kingstone wanted to know what he was up against.

“We’ve had word the Germans flew troops into Homs last night. They might be headed your way, and if not, you’ll have to be prepared to meet them there after you take Palmyra.”

“Very good, sir. Jerry has pulled a few rabbits out of his hat lately. That ambush of the supply flotilla on the Euphrates could have stopped us cold for a while. Luckily there was fuel at Habbaniyah, and the lorries should be here soon. We’ll be assembled and ready to move out soon after. I can brief Colonel Nichols with the rest of Habforce when we get to the T3 Pump station.”

That afternoon they pressed hard for Palmyra on three fronts. To the south, Glubb Pasha was already a day ahead, leading his Arab Legion, a force of about 300 men, across the border post at Al Walid, and across the rugged desolation of the desert. He skirted the edge of hard rocky basins of volcanic debris and desiccated lava, relying on the uncanny nose and ground sense of his experienced Bedouin scouts. The force was ‘mechanized’ now, which meant that the troops had moved from the backs of their horses to Ford 8cwt trucks that the Legion had purchased from America some time before the war. Smaller than a typical British Lorry, they mounted a Lewis Gun up front with a driver and two gunners. A squad of five riflemen road in the back, and a few of these had a Vickers heavy machinegun assigned. Otherwise the force had no heavy weapons, artillery, or even mortars, though Glubb Pasha had four home brewed armored cars with Twin Lewis Guns and a Vickers MG.

His first hard day took him to the village of Al Hulbah, a march of some 75 kilometers. From there a night march took him to some ruins a little over 15 kilometers south of the objective. He sent out a few patrols to scout ahead, and some of his men had been restless enough, and bold enough, to try and attack a battery of German artillery maneuvering into position south of the town. It was this action that had prompted the Germans to re-direct their fire, which spared Fedorov and Troyak what might have been a hard pounding that day. Unfortunately, it also alerted the Germans to the presence of British troops on

that flank, and Colonel Wolff disposed his men accordingly.

King Column was finally able to get its hands on the supplies and fuel needed to move and was rumbling northwest towards pump station T3, on the pipeline to Tripoli. There they met and quickly overcame a small garrison, and camped that night some 45 kilometers due east of Palmyra. This force, under the hard charging Brigadier Joe Kingstone, was comprised of the Essex Battalion of Motorized Infantry, the Household Cavalry Regiment with three squadrons of lorried troops, a battery of 25-pounders, some AA guns and a platoon of engineers.

On the morning of March 19, 1941 the British forces assigned to the operation against Palmyra were finally converging on the town. Fedorov had Popski make radio contact with Brigadier Kingstone to inform him that the place had been heavily reinforced, and this changed Kingstone's plan of attack considerably. He immediately summoned his intelligence officer, Somerset De Chair, and wanted to know what he knew about all this.

"Germans!" he said kicking a nearby canteen and sending it flying twenty feet across the road. "Where did they come from Somerset? Popski says they pulled in last night in a long column of French trucks."

"Well we haven't heard a word about it, sir," said De Chair. "At least not since General Clark's briefing. He mentioned they were flying in to Homs, but we've had no intelligence about this move to Palmyra." De Chair had been with the column since it left Palestine, a most useful man in ferreting out maps, and even helping to scout the way as he sped about in his blue staff car with an Arabic speaking interpreter, a man named Reading. Kingstone had taken a liking to him, and always referred to him by his first name, even in written orders. But the General was famous for his temper, and he hated surprises, especially ones that involved the sudden arrival of a regiment of German infantry! They were gathered around the Signals Truck, called "the Gin Palace" by the men, and Kingstone was clearly not happy.

"Well it's no good trying to envelop the place and get to Homs as we planned," said the General. "We had hoped to get quickly behind the French Garrison and leave it to wither on the vine, but we can't bloody well do that now. A force that large is too formidable to be bypassed."

"Agreed, sir," said Somerset. "We would be much wiser to wait for Habforce to link up from Iraq, and if this is a full German regiment, then I think we'll need anything else we can get moving our way from Habbaniyah.

Sir, with your permission, I'll see about getting a message off. The Kings Own Rifles are still there."

Yes? Well tell them we bloody well need them *here*, and the sooner the better?"

* * *

The French still had troops in the Roman ruins, and Colonel Barre's legionnaires were now occupying a series of block houses to defend the airfield. Barre began to deploy his men in a defensive perimeter, and as he did so, there were reports of fighting on the roads leading east, where the Desert Camel Company was screening the approaches from the T3 pump station. The Colonel was none too happy to learn the British were already in possession of that facility, but he was bolstered by the knowledge that he had German troops behind him now, and determined to fight.

"Let's show the Germans what the Foreign Legion is made of," he said. "We'll hold the airfield, and they will cover our backside."

One platoon was assigned to the airfield defense, and the remaining two took up positions on the northeast quarter of the town, where the roads led east to pump station T3. Soon the bedraggled men of the Desert Camel Company came riding back in scattered groups of two and three. They had been sent to block and delay the British, but were clearly not up to the task. The enemy was approaching, and deploying infantry into the outlying farms to either side of the road. The action began when a small column of four armored cars approached the town, prompting the legionnaires to open fire with their machineguns. Barre's men had no effective anti-tank guns, but their fire was hot enough to compel the armored cars to withdraw. Fifteen minutes later the artillery fire began. The British had opened up with a battery of 25-pounders.

Off to the south, Glubb Pasha and his Arab Legion had moved up close to the thick palm groves after the scouts gave up their attack on the German artillery. The enemy had simply lowered the barrels of the 105mm guns and blasted the detachment, knocking out one truck and sending the men scattering into the nearby trees.

A Naib of the tribe, Sergeant Salim, was shaking his head with misgiving, a disgusted look on his face. "Wein al nishawa?" he said disconsolately to a nearby Corporal. "Where are the gallants?"

Jazzi Ibn Isa of the Howeitat was there, with Salim. “Yes,” said Jazzi, “where are the gallants? Those were not French guns, or French troops behind them. They were Germans, and they clearly showed no fear when we surprised them. If we are to prevail we must be equally fearless here! Wein al nishawa?”

His words stiffened the morale of the men, and they were soon set upon advancing through the groves to get closer to the enemy. The Sergeant led them forward, until the rattle of a machinegun opened fire at the far side of a clearing. The Arabs returned fire with their rifles, and a Ford truck came rumbling up, quickly joining the action with its Lewis gun. The firefight grew, as the Arabs came to see that they had now washed up against a company sized force at the outskirts of the town. It was, in fact, the 1st Company of the German 47th recon unit accompanying the regiment, and as the battle widened, another squadron of the Legion came up in trucks, disembarking and rushing into the palm groves to support their brother Arabs.

Both sides exchanged fire for some time, until Sergeant Salim grew restless and shouted for his men to charge the enemy. They had done this many times before, against other tribesmen, and the colonial infantry recruited by the French. Always the fierceness of their ardor for battle, and the flashing silver handled knives they wielded were enough to terrify their enemies. But these were not other native tribesmen, nor African recruits from Algeria, Tunisia or Senegal. They were tough, hardy soldiers from the heartland of Germany, well trained and equally well armed. They sat behind their MG-34s and put down sharp, effective fire on the onrushing Arabs. The bullets zipped through the groves, cutting down the men in their long flowing robes.

Casualties mounted quickly, and it was soon clear that the Legion was not to prevail this day, gallant or not. The charge was broken and the men were driven back. Then up came Lash Bey, the Captain of the battalion, his face red with anger when he saw Sergeant Salim rushing back with three other men.

“What are you doing?” the Captain yelled in anger. “We are reconnaissance units, not assault troops! You will not get at those machineguns that way, and we have no heavy weapons. Leave one section here to keep the enemy under fire. Get the rest of your men back to the trucks. Our job is to screen this flank. Not attack the whole German army!”

Sergeant Salim gave the orders, and gathered what was left of his squadron that day, but Jazzi ibn Isa was not among them. He had joined the other gallants in heaven, where the maidens waited with honey mead and fresh

dates, and his beard would never darken the circle of brave men in this world again.

The failed action had served to do one thing, however. It alerted the Germans to a possible threat on their southern flank, a brave distraction from the main British advance coming from the east. Colonel Wolff had heard the gunfire, and the shouts of the Arab Legion when they charged. He had moved his headquarters company up the western edge of the sprawling palm groves, and set up his command post in the ancient Temple of Ba'al Shamin, the old sky god, who was often depicted with an eagle and lightning bolts in the carved stone relief.

Now another god had come from the sky, and a silver eagle flashed above the brow of his cap, descending from above with an iron swastika in its talons. He soon went into the town itself looking for the French garrison commander, and found Colonel Barre near the fortified barracks just east of the main settlement, a facility that would later be converted to a notorious prison in modern times.

Wolff could speak French, and he gave Barre a preemptory salute, which was returned. "It sounds like the British are coming from the south," he said.

"And from the east," said Barre. "There are no good roads from the south. The ground is too soft there for heavy trucks."

"My men are already engaged there," said Wolff. "But never mind, I will deploy one company and see to the matter. Where is your garrison?"

"On the north edge of the town, positioned to block the main road. That is where they will come."

"Good enough. We will cover your flank south of this position. Can you tell me who is in that fortress?" He pointed over his shoulder at the bleak hill that lowered over the whole scene.

"We don't really know. They came last night, possibly by parachute, because we saw no vehicles. They must be British commandos."

"I see." Wolff nodded, pursing his lips. "Well, tonight we'll see about that fort. I have a company of assault pioneers, and men on all the hills south and west. We'll cover the Roman ruins and move additional troops into the town. May I leave an officer with you here to coordinate?"

"That would be good," said Barre.

"And the British? Do you have any idea how large their force is to the east?"

“That remains to be seen. They have already toppled the Golden Square in Iraq, seized control of Baghdad and the rest of that place in a matter of weeks. Rumors fly that they had a big armored force there, but we do not yet know their strength. One thing is certain. Now they are here.”

Wolff smiled. “Yes, it seems so, but do not worry, Colonel. Now we are here, the German Army, and my regiment is just the leading edge of the forces to be committed to Syria. An armored force you say? Well, we have tanks too. The entire 9th Panzer Division is deploying by rail through Turkey to Aleppo and Homs to stop the British offensive, and the rest of my division will be deployed into Eastern Syria.”

“The British are moving up the Euphrates, or so we have heard.”

“That may be so, but our 65th Regiment will stop them in due course. As for me,” he removed his glove and extended a hand. “I am Oberst Ludwig Wolff, commander of the 47th Regiment. Our boys gave you fits in France, and now we’ll see about the British!”

Chapter 21

There were other things in the sky that night, not the wrathful god of Ba'al Shamin, bent on vengeance for the desecration of his temple site, but a whirling beast from another time. The Germans heard the odd thumping in the sky, unlike the sound from any aircraft they knew. They looked for planes, but nothing could be seen, as the KA-40 was up above a bank of low clouds that night. Yet the pilots could clearly see the positions of the German artillery on infrared, the tubes of the guns still hot from the rounds they had fired earlier in the day.

Troyak had also started a little mortar duel, risking heavier reprisal, and casualties, to see if he could draw enemy heavy weapons fire on his position. He wanted to pinpoint the locations of the enemy mortar teams, and soon found them returning fire. There was also an infantry gun that the Germans had positioned in the ruins of Diocletian's camp. All these positions were fed to the helicopter, which had been waiting in a well hidden canyon on the dry highlands to the north. Now the pilots were up in the Big Blue Pig, unseen by the enemy on the ground, but clearly heard. The thumping of the KA-40's engines resolved to a loud roar, and minutes later hot yellow fire streaked down from the grey clouds, as if Ba'al himself was throwing his thunderbolts on the heathens below.

The rockets came in on the artillery positions first, blasting the 105s, and the ammunition stored in the trucks nearby. There were huge explosions when one truck took a direct hit, setting off its hold of H.E. rounds.

Oberst Wolff was out through the entrance to the temple, where four tall stone columns held up a portion of the crumbling roof. Four more columns stood in a colonnade off towards the sound of the action, and numerous others had fallen long ago, their rounded weathered forms littering the ground, with others lined up like broken tree stumps in a long row.

"What is happening?" he shouted at a Sergeant.

"Air strike!" the man replied. "But with what? Those are not bombs."

Wolff stared at the scene, seeing more missiles streaking down and exploding on the hills south of the fortress. "What in god's name... Those are

rockets! It's some kind of flying Nebelwerfer! Listen to it!"

The roar of the helo's engines had awakened the whole regiment, and now machineguns were firing up at the sound, though the gunners could not see their target. Off near the artillery, a 20mm gun began to blast away, sending tracers up into the grey overcast. A minute later the sound subsided, and field phones were ringing inside the temple.

Wolff strode in to take the report from his signalman. The artillery and mortar positions had all been targeted and hit by a very precise rocket weapon. One battery had lost three of four guns, another lost two, and three mortar teams reported casualties. Anger flashed in his eyes when he went back outside, glaring at the stark, brooding hill, crowned by the stony fortress.

"Leutnant Hammel!" he said in a sharp voice, still edged with the lightning of his temper. "Get the pioneers ready. We attack that hill at once!"

* * *

An hour later they came for the fortress of Fakhr-al-Din, a platoon of assault engineers picking their way up the southwestern slope of the hill, accompanied by two rifle platoons. The ground there was more broken as it folded into another masking hill, where a barren road climbed its way up towards the summit. At places the slope covered their approach, but near the top they would be faced with a long rocky grade that led to a deep dry moat at the base of heavily striated rock that formed the foundation of the fortress.

Troyak shook his head when he saw the deployment on his night vision glasses. "It looks like a full company," he said to Zykov, "and they are carrying a lot of equipment—possibly demolition teams. We can't let them get satchels at the base of this fort. These walls won't survive that."

"Time for the AGS-30's," said Zykov, referring to the two autogrenade launchers they had positioned on the roof of the fort. They looked like a typical machinegun on a tripod, with a round mustard-green ammo canister on the right side. But they fired 30mm grenades in rapid bursts that hit like thunder. The weapon was light enough to be lifted and carried by a single man, making it a very agile weapon for close in combat defense. It could hit gun positions, buildings and bunkers with lethal, accurate fire, or be used to put down dense, effective suppressive fire over a wide area, out to 2100 meters.

The Marines fired at a quarter of that range, sending a shower of 30mm

grenades down on the advancing pioneers. They were quickly pinned down, with heavy casualties, but soon Troyak saw that small teams were crawling up the slope, dragging long tubes and satchels. He ordered the Marines to open up with all their automatic weapons, and the fire was deafening.

Wolff watched the action from the Roman ruins, seeing the hot tracers streaking down from the high battlements, grenades exploding, and something else like another rocket firing down the long slope. It was not long until the Captain of the Pioneers called on the radio to tell him they could not reach the summit of the hill.

“We can’t get anywhere near that fort,” he said. “The ground is too open—no cover—and my god, the enemy firepower is murderous. There must be a full machinegun platoon up there, and they have some kind of heavy weapon that saturates the ground with grenades. These are not the British we fought in France.”

“Very well, get your men back. We’ll use the Schwere Company, and give them a taste of their own medicine.”

Wolff was disheartened when he heard the reports on his artillery, and he ordered the men to move his remaining guns under cover of the palm groves, not realizing that would make little difference to the infrared sensor capability of the KA-40.

This group is a crafty lot, he thought. They deliberately initiated that mortar duel at dusk to find our gun positions. Luckily we did not hit back with the recoilless rifles. I can see that we will have to apply a much stronger hand to neutralize that fort.

He turned to a Sergeant, giving a curt order. “Signal 1st Company. Hit that damn Chateau with the recoilless rifles, and any mortar we still have. Keep their heads down up there! I want them under fire all night long. Then get a message to Fliegerführer headquarters at Homs. Tell them the British made a night air attack here, and we had better damn well have some air support tomorrow. Where are the Heinkels? Where are the Messerschmitts?”

There was a sudden chill in the air, and the call of a distant bird seemed a haunting jibe. He looked around at the ruins of empires past, and the thought came to him that this had once been a military encampment, and the ravaged stone columns were brought down as much by the travail of war as by time. Here he stood in the shadowed detritus of one of the world’s great empires, now fallen into ruin, a desolate landscape in an equally barren desert. The

stumps of what had once been old statues to the mighty who ruled here stood like broken teeth in the rubble about him, and he was briefly possessed by a feeling of his own mortality, and the brevity of life.

“It’s too exposed here,” he said. “We’ll move the regimental headquarters to the old amphitheatre. That area is well protected.”

He looked through his field glasses, scanning the distant hill, lips tightening. Let us see how well you sleep tonight under my guns, he thought.

* * *

It was a long, hard, sleepless night in the Castle of Fakhr-al-Din, at least for Fedorov. The Germans kept up light mortar fire from the 5cm tubes, a round every five minutes, and it was enough to keep Fedorov awake all night. Many of the Marines seemed unbothered, huddling in the weathered stone rooms of the fort, dozing as if nothing unusual was happening.

“A good solid fort,” said Popski, sitting with Fedorov in one of the lower chambers. “Too bad it’s going the way of all the other ruins here. The Germans are just firing to torment us now, but I think they’ll get serious in the morning.”

Fedorov had a listless look in his eyes, weary, and forlorn. This place had been built for war, the walls and much of the ruined area below them had been constructed by Hadrian and Diocletian. This had always been a military outpost as much as a commercial trade center, offering merchants a way station on the desert route that might avoid the heavy taxes imposed on goods shipped up the Euphrates.

He sat there, beneath those ancient stone towers and battlements, and thought of his own position as Captain of the battlecruiser *Kirov*. The citadel of the bridge was just another fortress at sea, he thought, and I am a warrior, as much as I might think otherwise, as much as I may hate war itself. Armies had fought one another for this place many times, and the blight of war would go on into the future, until our weapons finally make an end of us all.

He thought again of the things he had seen on this impossible journey, of those initial encounters with the British fleet and the inevitability of that first missile they fired to avoid being spotted. He remembered those harrowing moments in the night action in the Alboran sea, chasing salvoes from the massive 16-inch guns of *Rodney* and *Nelson*. He could still hear the awful

scream of the Japanese dive bombers in the Coral Sea, and the sight of the mighty battleship Yamato, stricken by their Moskit-II missiles and burning in the darkness of war. And always at the end were those memories of Halifax, burned and scalded by some terrible holocaust, and all the other blackened cities they had found.

What were we fighting for, he wondered? He knew the war in 2021 had started with a dispute over what seemed an insignificant speck of rock on the South China Sea, but beneath that rock were the lucrative rights to oil and drilling contracts in a world ever thirsty for energy. And the British were coming here to secure and clear the oil pipeline route through these ruins, as much as to flank the French defense at Damascus. Just east of this place they had already taken the T3 pump station, and an equal move to the west would give them T4.

“They sure didn’t like that Helicontraption when it was up there breathing hell on their guns,” said Popski. “Can we finish the job tonight?”

“We’ve expended all our rockets,” said Fedorov. “They have the miniguns, but I was thinking to keep that in reserve—just in case the Germans do get serious and try another ground attack. Troyak says they can’t take this place with ground troops, but that may not stop them from trying.”

“I wouldn’t worry about that,” said Popski. “Your Sergeant is right. Even if they did get men up this hill, have a look at that moat out there. They’ll never get over that. It’s fifty feet wide in places, and after that it’s a long way up these walls and towers. No. They’ll have to pound this fort to a pile of rubble like the rest out there... But that’s what they’ll do if they have the guns and ammo. Let’s hope the British can win through.”

Fedorov’s eyes darkened at that. “I don’t think we can count on that any longer,” he said disconsolately. “I had a good look at the German column, and Troyak says he’s already identified three battalions. So we have a full German regiment out there. The town and palm groves are going to provide them good defensive ground. Frankly, I don’t think the forces the British have can beat them here. They were supposed to push on to Homs, and that action, combined with the Indian division moving up the Euphrates, was enough to compel the French to throw in the towel.”

“Word is they have Foreign Legion down there in the town.” Said Popski.

“They do, and that force alone would make this place a tough nut to crack. Add in this regiment of German troops, and the British will be stopped here,

I'm sure of it. So they won't get to Homs, and the French will fight on. In fact, the presence of German troops here is a very serious matter. It never happened, you see, in the history I know. But I suppose all that has gone to hell, hasn't it."

"You look like it was all your doing," said Popski.

"In many ways it was."

"Oh? How do you figure that?"

Fedorov gave him a half hearted smile. "It's too long a story to tell, Popski. But from the moment we first appeared here, things have gone awry. We tried to avoid this, but no matter what we did, it always came down to one side or another firing weapons. Admiral Volsky was correct. If we build things like my ship, like that Helicontraption, as you call it, then we'll certainly end up using them one day. It's just like this fort. Here it sits, built centuries after the ruin of that Roman city down there, but did anyone learn from that? No. The sun sets on one empire, and rises on another. Men of war came here again, and built their battlements anew. And me? I'm Captain of a fortress at sea. I know the history of this entire war. I should know better than to think we could control its outcome, but still we fight."

He shook his head, weary as the next 5cm mortar round came down on the hillside. "Perhaps were all just fools, Popski. We thought we could do something to make an end of war before it makes an end of us all, but one thing leads to another here, and I'm not so sure we can do anything to prevent what's going to happen. Here we are, the warriors from the future, demigods for all we know, and with weapons no man of your day can really comprehend. But we sit in this fort like the men who first built it, and now it is only that steep barren hill out there, only these stone walls and that moat that will prevent the Germans from killing us. You see, we aren't demigods after all—we're just men like you and all the others here, and all men die."

"True enough, but don't sell yourself short. Kinlan's lads had something to say about Rommel's plans. Yes? You thought we could give the British a leg up here by taking this fort, but alright, the Germans surprised us—a wolf in the fold. They weren't in your history books—too bad for us. Yet those Marines of yours don't seem to care much about that. Damn good men, this lot. That said, we've only twenty here, gods or men, and the Germans have a whole lot more. If they do stop the British like you say, then they'll also have the time they need to pound this place to dust. That's what it will come down to. If they have

the rounds with them, they can break this fort. So it might be nice to have a few of those metal monsters Brigadier Kinlan brought along,” he sighed. “Think we’d better call in some help?”

“This place is too far away,” said Fedorov. “We can’t expect any help from Kinlan...” He stopped, thinking. “But we might get some help from the Argonauts.” The light of an idea was in his eyes again. “They could get out here on those X-3 helos, and with a lot more firepower.”

Popski raised an eyebrow at that. “I’ve seen enough of this war to know what the world is in for if it goes on much longer. But getting a look at the way you people fight is enough to chill any man’s bones. I’ve always had respect for a good machinegun, but something about the weapons on those things are... well, murderous. Just the same, if you plan to hold this fortress, then I think we’re going to need all the help we can get. Otherwise, it might be best to call that whirlybird of yours back and get the men out, if we can.”

Part VIII

Lock & Key

*“A man who is of sound mind is one who keeps the inner
madman under lock and key,”*

— **Paul Valery**

Chapter 22

The news concerning the German accord with Turkey fell hard when it reached Alexandria. Admiral Tovey immediately called for a conference with Wavell, Cunningham, and Admiral Volsky to determine what they might now do.

“This was the blow that Churchill really feared,” he said. “It is not as if we have lost Turkey, but the fact that they have signed this non-aggression pact with Hitler greatly complicates our defense of the Middle East. The Germans have obtained right of free passage over Turkish territory! We had the same right in Iraq, and it eventually came to blows there. Something tells me things will get very complicated for us, and very soon.”

Wavell took the news the hardest of all. “Look here, gentlemen,” he said gravely. “The Germans managed to get a couple regiments of their 5th Mountain Division in to Syrian ports in the north while we were still licking our wounds after that big naval engagement. This move against Cyprus was also a surprise. It seems that even though we have the foresight of what is to come from our Russian friends, we keep getting caught flat footed in the middle of the ring, and taking one on the chin! If the Germans can utilize the Turkish rail system, then they can move heavy divisions south into Syria, and I don’t have to tell you what that will mean. Bletchley Park says they have already picked up chatter concerning the movement of an entire German Motorized Corps, and here we are, working the repair shops night and day to try and put the semblance of one armored division back together for North Africa! These Scimitars Brigadier Kinlan sent us have helped offset the French advantage in armor in Syria and Lebanon, but can they stop a German Panzer Division?”

Admiral Volsky spoke now, in Russian, directly to Wavell. “If my Mister Fedorov were here he might address that question. And while he might also wish to apologize at failing to warn you of Cyprus, realize that none of these events took place in the history we know. Crete was the target of the German airborne operation—the last of the war—not Cyprus. So it seems the Germans may also be getting some good advice. I remind you that Ivan Volkov has seen

the future course of this war, and he could be guiding these moves by the Germans.”

“Of course I can affix no blame on you or your able Captain Fedorov,” said Wavell. “But the fact remains that the Germans now have an overland route to reinforce their position in the Levant by rail, and that will also solve a major logistical problem for them. I must say that I was not all that concerned with the arrival of that mountain division. I expected that we might also see some troops air lifted to Syria and Lebanon as well, particularly now that they Germans will have good bases on Cyprus. Yet in my mind this buildup could be no more than a holding action against us, because the Germans will have to supply anything they send, and the French can only give them so much. You see, it was really a matter of logistics.”

“Very true,” said Tovey. “Churchill has latched onto that as well. I’m sure he has communicated his desires to you, Admiral Cunningham—because he’s certainly given me an earful.”

“Yes,” said Cunningham. “What you say is not quite correct, General Wavell. Getting right of passage on Turkish rails is certainly a boon for Hitler, but those rail lines all begin in one place—Istanbul.”

“Precisely,” said Tovey. “The Prime Minister noticed that little detail as well, and he now wishes us to contemplate how we might cut that rail line at its root, lest the tree bear some rather bitter fruit, which is exactly how he put the matter to me.”

“You mean he wants you to interdict the Turkish Straits?”

“That he does,” said Cunningham, “and with no more than two battleships at hand, that will be a tall order. It would have to be battleships, of course. Nothing else really has the muscle to close the straits.”

“But that would mean we would have to fire on barge traffic across the Bosphorus!” Wavell exclaimed. “That traffic would all be owned and managed by the Turks. How could we train our guns there without so antagonizing Turkey that they would end up as another active belligerent against us, just like France after Mers el Kebir?”

“Agreed,” said Tovey, “on all counts. First off, we haven’t the naval power here yet to risk sending a strong force to the Dardanelles. They would have to transit the Aegean, past German occupied Cyprus and Rhodes, run the gauntlet of German air power in Greece and Bulgaria. It would be suicidal. Secondly, what General Wavell says is perfectly true. Suppose we did win through,

perhaps with the air defense umbrella that our friends from the future can provide us. What then? Yes, we would find ourselves in the awkward position of having to fire on those barges. It would not be a hot minute before Turkish shore batteries would be forced to reply, and then we've got another Mers el Kebir on our hands, just as Wavell has it."

"I pointed this out to the Prime Minister," said Admiral Cunningham, "but he appears adamant, and insists the navy must do everything possible to choke off those straits."

Wavell shook his head, with dark memories of Gallipoli rising in his mind. "He'll get us into a shooting war with Turkey with that line," he said. "We must find some other solution. Can't the Turkish government be made to see reason?"

"It seems the Germans have made some rather enticing offers, and brought both a carrot and a stick to the table," said Tovey. "They moved an army to the Turkish border, loaded up on Rhodes, and Ivan Volkov even began moving troops to the eastern Turkish frontier. That let the Turks in on what might soon happen if they failed to negotiate. Then, promises of a return of the Dodecanese Islands, or perhaps ceding certain territories in Northern Syria, were apparently enough of a carrot to conclude the negotiations in Germany's favor. "

"Churchill wanted to try the very same thing," said Wavell. "He was talking about that at the conference at Siwa, let alone the fact that we had not yet launched our operation to secure Syria. He still thought we might cede territory there in exchange for Turkish cooperation."

"The best we were ever likely to get was continued Turkish neutrality," said Tovey. "Even that much would be better than the situation we now face. So we have quite a thorny problem on our hands, gentlemen. If we do nothing to interdict those straits, then the Germans will certainly ferry units across to move by rail to Syria—units we will have a hard time matching, let alone defeating in the campaign now underway. Yet if we do commit the navy to this action, we risk further antagonizing Turkey, along with grievous losses that may also ensue."

"Well," said Admiral Volsky. "This is a difficult problem, but I believe I may have a solution for you."

They all looked at him when Nikolin completed the translation, and Tovey was the first to speak. "If you are proposing to take this task on yourself,

Admiral Volsky, I cannot ask you to shoulder this risk. The air power the Germans could bring to bear would be formidable, even for your ship. And given the fact that your missile count is running thinner and thinner with each engagement...”

“I thank you for your consideration, Admiral, but I do not propose to take my ship to the Turkish Straits. You are correct. We must husband our valuable air defense missiles whenever possible. I also have some very long range weapons we call cruise missiles. I suppose I could sail to a point northeast of Cyprus and fire them all the way across Turkey, but hitting a target in the straits would pose another problem.”

“You can actually fire at such ranges?” Cunningham was astounded.

“I have a missile that can range out 660 kilometers, but again, we must first see a target before we can hit it. In our day that was not difficult, because we had other means of observation, but we need not discuss that here. I have only ten such missiles, and again, they might be put to much better use elsewhere. But *Kirov* is not the solution I propose.”

They all waited, wondering what Admiral Volsky was leading to. “My friends,” said Volsky. “You will forgive me now if I seem like a poker player who has kept an ace hidden up his sleeve, but this is the case. We have another asset in theatre, and one I chose to keep secret unless it was absolutely necessary to disclose the information. This is because secrecy and stealth are some of the primary weapons this asset uses in waging war. The less known about it, the better. This was how I reasoned things through, and so I have said nothing about it. Gentlemen,” he smiled, “we have a submarine at our disposal—a Russian submarine from the year 2021, and one of the most dangerous and capable boats ever designed. It is called the *Kazan*.”

Tovey raised an eyebrow, but the news was too good for him to harbor any ill feeling over the fact that Volsky had concealed this information. “A submarine? Of course! How long has this vessel been operating here?”

“For some time. The movement we made to this time was to have been coordinated with *Kazan*, but things fell out of sync. In all truth, we were both simply trying to get home, to our own time. Lord knows both of our ships were dearly needed there—in another war—but that was not to be. So we fight this one instead. *Kazan* arrived some time after we did, using the very same means that permitted us to move in time. This is a long story, gentlemen, but may we suffice it to say that the submarine is here, and in fact it has already fought on

our side. All those missiles we flung at the Franco-German fleet did not come from my ship alone, and the *Strausbourg* did not sink because of wounds it received in that battle. It was *Kazan* that put it at the bottom of the sea.”

“I have also considered using our own submarines,” said Tovey. “Yes, they are the one asset that might avoid the key threat in any transit of the Aegean—enemy air power. Yet they are slow when submerged, and would have to travel on the surface most of the time, increasing the risk of air attack. With luck I thought we might get one or two through the Dardanelles undetected, but once they make their attack, the Turks would likely seal off that narrow passage behind them, and the subs would be trapped in the Sea of Marmara. It would likely be another suicide mission, and we have all too few in theatre to spend.”

“Churchill won’t be so miserly,” said Cunningham. “He’ll say the loss of one or two submarines would be a small price to pay. Just a few weeks ago he was willing to expend a battleship to try and interdict Tripoli!”

“Perhaps, but it would be a bill we have to pay each week. One attack would not close those straits, and after the first, a second attempt might be impossible.”

“It’s a capital idea,” said Cunningham, “but I certainly see the difficulties—undersea nets, minefields, and even deployment of destroyers and corvettes in the straits. Yes, it would be a gun we could only fire once, and we might not even sink enough enemy barges to make a difference.”

“*Kazan* could make a difference,” said Volsky, “I assure you. It is not slow, and can remain submerged, traveling at very high speeds, indefinitely.”

“But won’t it be subject to the same threats in those narrow waters?”

“No. It will not, because it can attack without even entering the straits, or transiting the Sea of Marmara. *Kazan* has more weapons than torpedoes. Our submarine also has missiles, similar to those I use on my ship, but even more advanced models. It can get into a good firing range in the Aegean Sea completely undetected, and unbothered by enemy air power. They will not even know it is there! Even my ship, with its advanced sonar systems, would have difficulty finding that submarine, and this even if we knew it was near us. Trying to time and target the ferry or barge traffic might be impractical, but we could destroy the rail terminals on the Asian side of the straits, and that would cause a considerable delay.”

“But didn’t you say you would have to see the target in order to strike?”

“Under normal circumstances, but *Kazan* has something we call an

advanced cruise missile. It has a special means of inertial navigation, and can therefore fly to any target where he have good spatial coordinates. We know exactly where those facilities are, and can therefore strike them with pinpoint accuracy. So in the short run, gentlemen, if I commit this asset to the task, it will get through any defense the enemy could possibly mount, and successfully strike any target we assign. Once we do strike, then fear becomes another weapon in our favor. Yes, I know that it may be a long and difficult struggle ahead, and *Kazan* may not have the munitions to keep those straits closed indefinitely. This is not what I propose. But it can strike *now*, to inhibit or stop the flow of German reinforcements and supplies at a most critical time. That is what *Kazan* can buy you, time to do everything possible at concluding your operations on land before the German buildup makes that impossible.”

“It would also satisfy the Prime Minister,” said Cunningham, “and likely save the Royal Navy a lot of misery. But won’t it cause political problems with the Turkish Government? They may have come to believe we have these rockets. After all, they have only been used against ships in battle with the Royal Navy, and who else could be using them?”

Tovey shook his head in agreement. “They would certainly believe it was a British ship firing those missiles, and this brings us to that same sore elbow. We would still be faced with the issue of committing a direct act of war against Turkey. Won’t that be the case here?”

“But *Kazan* is a Russian submarine,” said Volsky with a smile. “In this instance it could be rightfully argued that Great Britain had nothing whatsoever to do with this operation.”

“True,” said Tovey. “Yet something tells me that would become a question of mere semantics in time. Wouldn’t we complicate things for Sergei Kirov if you were to do this?”

“Perhaps,” said Volsky. “But the axe is about to fall on him in any case. The Germans are lining up on the borders of the Ukraine, and it is only a matter of time now before that operation begins. With such a storm of steel poised to fall upon Russia, the protest of Turkey over our actions will not be something we would worry about.”

“You have discussed this issue with Sergei Kirov?”

“I have, and he agrees with the plan. In fact, he will make a formal statement that the attack is a reprisal for Turkish violations of their own neutrality! Russia is a declared ally of Britain, and Turkey has permitted forces

hostile to Britain, and therefore hostile to Russia, to transit its borders. The Turks know damn well that war between Germany and Russia is imminent. Kirov was actually in favor of this little slap on the hand. If the Turkish government has a problem with it, Russia will take full responsibility for the incident.”

“Yes,” said Tovey, thinking hard about the situation. “We just may get away with that. Admiral Volsky, you have been as steadfast and true an ally as Britain could have in this trying hour, and I thank you again. I think I will vote here to accept your offer, as I think Admiral Cunningham will. General Wavell?”

“Assuming the Prime Minister has no objections, I agree. If this could be done, then I’ll move mountains, even if I have to make them out of mole hills first, and we’ll do everything possible to win on the ground in Syria.”

“Excellent!” Volsky smiled. ‘Then we are decided.’”

Chapter 23

Ivan Volkov was a very content man that day. His Intelligence Chief, Kymchek, had given him a most welcome report. Karpov was up in his new Zeppelin, cruising boldly to Moscow for that meeting with Sergei Kirov, and undoubtedly signing some accord with him. Then he was blustering about in the skies over Germany, and even had the audacity to bomb Berlin!

He smiled, reserving a small kernel of admiration for the man. He thought he was invincible now that he had Ilanskiy under control. Well, where is he now? His new airship couldn't even make it across the English Channel. To think that a simple thunder storm has rid me of that nuisance is most gratifying, but I have to know for sure.

"Anything more?" he asked Kymchek, wanting the very latest news on the incident."

"The BBC has confirmed that the Zeppelin went down," said Kymchek, "but there has been no sign of any wreckage in the channel."

"The BBC? You're getting your intelligence from a British news organization now?"

"Of course not. We have men on the coast there, and they also report nothing has come in to any port on the channel."

"What about *Potemkin*?"

"They confirm. There has been no sign of wreckage or survivors." *Potemkin* was one of Volkov's little secrets, a submarine sent all the way from Novorossiysk to keep watch on the comings and goings of English ships. The boat had made the journey months ago, secretly refueling in German controlled ports, and with license to also rendezvous with German oilers. With a 9600 mile range, *Potemkin* was most useful for long range intelligence like this, though it was one of only a handful of subs possessed by the Orenburg Federation.

"Very interesting," said Volkov, "but I don't like it, Kymchek."

"No news is good news in situations like this, sir."

"Not entirely. Assuming that airship went down in the storm, there should be some sign on the waters there. Those gas bags are very buoyant."

"Unless the ship burned, sir."

“Don’t be foolish. They aren’t using hydrogen any more than we are. Yes, they might have been struck by lightning, and could have had a fire, but even so, something should be found on the sea.”

“They might have been carrying another of those new thermal bombs,” Kymchek suggested.

“That would be poetic justice, wouldn’t it?” Volkov grinned. “That little rat of a man thought he had us reeling after that surprise attack at Novosibirsk. Well, he’ll soon find out different—or perhaps not, if the weather was kind enough to rid me of the man. Keep watching that situation closely, but now that the cat is away, it is time for action.”

“Sir?”

“Ilanskiy, Kymchek. Don’t forget Ilanskiy. With Karpov missing, this is the perfect time to mount a major operation there.”

“But sir... The place was demolished in that raid staged by the Soviets. What use is it to us now? In fact, what use was it ever to us, aside from interdicting the Trans-Siberian rail?”

“Kymchek, believe it or not, I don’t tell you everything. You probably thought it was Karpov I was after there, but there was much more to that raid than you knew about. It is not that I do not trust you, of course, but certain things must be kept very quiet. Frankly, my own left hand keeps secrets from my right. That is the way this business must be conducted. Yes?”

“I understand, sir.”

“Very well. You have that list of all airships available for operations?”

“We can form one division from the Northern Fleet, *Pavlodar*, *Talgar*, *Saran*, and of course the fleet flagship, the *Orenburg*. A second division is arriving from the Southern Fleet: *Sarkand*, *Tashkent*, *Samarkand*, and *Angren*. Caspian Fleet is sending four more airships, though Admiral Zorki was not very happy with that order. He claims he needs every airship he can get his hands on for the defense in the Caucasus.”

“He won’t have to worry about that for very much longer,” said Volkov. “The Germans will be hammering at Sergei Kirov’s back door soon enough. Very well, twelve airships overmatch the entire Siberian Fleet, particularly with Karpov out of the picture. Any change in their fleet dispositions?”

“No sir. They still have three airships near Ilanskiy, three more at intervals on the front, and two with Kolchak out east near Irkutsk. It is only 660 kilometers to Ilanskiy from Irkutsk, so it is likely those two could be sent as

reinforcements if we move as planned.”

“I’m counting on it,” said Volkov. “I want to destroy Karpov’s entire fleet. He may not be alive to get the bad news, but if the British do manage to pull him out of the sea, let’s hope they put him under lock and key. The news that he’s lost far more than *Tunguska* will be a nice barb. Yes, I would love to see his face when he learns I’ve smashed his impudent little fleet and have a full heavy division sitting on Ilanskiy! I’ll want a battalion on each ship.”

“We’ve pulled the entire 22nd division off the line, sir, and there are five more battalions trained for rapid deployment as well—one from each of the Guard Divisions.”

“Excellent. And the ground attack?”

“General Berenko says he has five divisions ready on the line, with one armored cavalry brigade in reserve.”

“That should be more than enough to break through north of Novosibirsk.”

“Yes sir, but it is 875 kilometers from the front line to Ilanskiy. We cannot expect any support from the land force element for some time—if at all.”

Volkov waved his hand. “That force is meant merely to pose a powerful threat to the enemy positions on the Ob River. Don’t you understand? The ground attack will precede the air operation, and it will pull in reserves from all along the front. I don’t care whether it succeeds or not, as it is only meant to engage as many enemy units as possible. Then the air mobile operation can proceed against Ilanskiy. It’s intent will be to move the 22nd Division as quickly as possible to that location, just as we did in that ill fated raid—only this time we will bring twelve battalions, not only two. Once the troops have landed, the air fleet will seek out and destroy any airship opposition, and we will also secure the airfields at Kansk, while interdicting the Trans-Siberian Rail in both directions. The fleet is to operate in a massed formation. I expect we will quickly destroy the three airships Karpov has near Ilanskiy, and any others will arrive piecemeal—and be destroyed the same way.”

“It is likely they will hold them back once they see the size of the force we are committing,” said Kymchek.

“In that event, one division will remain on station at Ilanskiy, and the other two will operate to seek out the remnant of the enemy fleet and destroy it. I want complete air superiority over Siberia when this operation concludes, and complete control of Ilanskiy.”

“Yes sir, but what will we do there? It’s just a tiny railway station in the

middle of nowhere.”

“No Kymchek, it is very much more than that. It is right in the middle of everywhere, and once I have it, then we will see what Karpov has been up to there. You say he has artisans and engineers working that site?”

“He has a significant group there, and they’ve been cutting fresh timber for some building project. I can’t imagine why he would want to expand that rail depot, unless he means to make it a major supply center—or perhaps a new weapons development site.”

“He intends neither,” said Volkov. “He already has what he wants there—that damn railway inn. That is the whole of it, Kymchek—the inn! It will be the principle objective of the air mobile force. They are to take and secure the town, and gain control of that inn. Care must be taken to prevent any further damage to the building. None of Karpov’s engineers are to be killed or harmed. I’ll want to interrogate each and every one personally. Understand? And plans or construction blueprints are to be highly prized and brought to me at once. This is of the utmost importance.”

“Very well, sir... But if I knew why this inn was so essential to you, I might be much more effective.”

“In time, Kymchek. I will brief you on this later. For now, see that these orders are carried out—to the letter.”

Volkov rubbed his hands together, and not because they were cold. At last he had the opportunity to completely eliminate Karpov’s airship fleet. As long as the crafty Admiral was on the scene, it had proven almost impossible to outmaneuver him. He always deployed his airships within close supporting distance, and his radar and air observation units would spot any incursion across the border, particularly after Ilanskiy.

Yet I was never able to free up a force this size—twelve airships. They were always tied down in ground support all along the front, and half my fleet is still committed to that duty. Yes, it will be risky to pull so many ships off the line like this. We need their capabilities as recon and fire support units, but Sergei Kirov will be happy to see them gone for a time. I wonder if he will alert the Siberians? I’ve planned it so that each division will withdraw intermittently, and any ships remaining on the line will double their patrol run duty so as to give the impression that nothing has changed.

Yes, a diligent enemy would see through that, but I am counting on the Siberians to be less than diligent at the moment. They undoubtedly have the

same news of Karpov's disappearance, and tomorrow it will be a full week since the *Tunguska* went missing. By now they will be wondering if they will ever see their little Admiral again, and getting to squabbling over who is in charge there. Another three days to pull my assault fleet together should do the trick.

The fleet will assemble over Lake Ubinskoye west of Novosibirsk, and swing up above Tomsk. They have only one airship patrolling there, and we'll brush it aside without a second thought. Then we run due west for 625 kilometers, and with favorable winds, we should cover that distance in just eight or nine hours. That will put us just an hour north of Ilanskiy, and we'll land the whole division north of the town by regiments, with at least eight airships on overwatch while each regiment lands.

Volkov smiled. Yes, Karpov knew an attack like this was coming one day or another. A pity he won't be there to join in the fight, but things will be much smoother this way. I suppose he thought I would never risk another operation like this after the debacle with Symenko and the *Alexandra*. It was a shame to lose Petrov and the *Oskemen* as well, but at least I found out what I wanted to know about Ilanskiy. It matters! Yes, it matters a great deal to Karpov, and so now it will matter a great deal to me.

Once the dust settles, and the area is secure, I think I may just go there and have a look for myself. Whatever Karpov was up to, it had something to do with that railway inn. Interesting that Sergei Kirov should also take enough notice of the place to support that raid with the *Narva*. Yes... Kirov knows that place matters as well. What will he do when he sees me pull this operation off right under his nose? Perhaps when I have a full division sitting on Ilanskiy, and the means of keeping it supplied with my airships, then Kirov might be inclined to talk about his little campaign in the Caucasus.

Now then... With Kirov in mind, what do I do about that ship? Kymchek has finally confirmed that it is Admiral Volsky commanding Kirov. That was quite a surprise, as the last I knew he was chained to a desk at Naval Headquarters Fokino. How did he manage to get to the ship? For that matter, how did that entire ship and crew manage to get here? I had my suspicions about that ship all along, and now they are confirmed. There must have been some top secret project underway with *Kirov*. Was Inspector General Kapustin in the know? Was Director Kamenski involved? He certainly went to great pains to get me out of the picture, sending me off on that bear hunt for Fedorov

—though that worked out much better for me than he expected.

Yet the ship remains a serious problem, not only for me, but for the Germans as well. It has already stopped operations in the north, and now it is in the Mediterranean Sea backstopping the Royal Navy. What has possessed Volsky that he should side with the British? Yes, I know Germany is about to wreak havoc on the homeland in short order, but the British and Americans will be the ones strangling us for the next eighty years, and they will be the ones firing ICBMs at us in 2021. I know what Volsky must be thinking. He's trying to change all that, and re-write the history after this war. But it isn't going to end with Great Britain and America calling the shots this time—not if I can prevent that.

No. The Germans are going to win this time, if I have anything more to say about it. After that, I'll deal with Hitler in the years ahead. This business at Ilanskiy may afford me many more opportunities that I cannot foresee just now. A man must have patience.

But the ship... that damnable battlecruiser. At the moment the Germans have no idea what they are dealing with. Yes, they've seen the missiles, and felt them as well. Perhaps this will spur them to get busy with their own missile development as I have been urging. Thank God they built those naval service jackets to last. I'm amazed that mine lasted as long as it did, and all those long hours extracting data, having things transcribed into my archive, will come in very handy in the days ahead.

I can help the Germans along with their own rocket technology. Is Volsky doing the same thing for the British? And what about the warheads? That ship is certain to have several operational nukes in the magazines. They haven't used any yet, not even to prevent the fall of Gibraltar, which was quite a surprise to me. Then again, they know this is going to be a long struggle, and perhaps they are sitting on those eggs for use later in the war.

My own project is taking more time than I had hoped. We have the materials, but those bumbling idiots in the research labs haven't been able to enrich enough fuel yet. I suppose I shouldn't complain. Look how long it took the Iranians to enrich the fuel for their first bombs, and that was in modern times. That said, it will be a few more years before I have a working bomb for testing. If the war goes as I foresee it, the bomb may not even be necessary. It remains to be seen how much fight Soviet Russia will have in it after I eliminate the Siberians.

Certainly once Operation Barbarossa begins, the clock will be ticking for Sergei Kirov. Kymchek tells me the Germans have transferred Manstein to the southern front early. That is a most capable general. I have no doubt that he will push into the Crimea within thirty days, and once that objective is secured, Kirov's Black Sea Fleet will be bottled up in the Sea of Azov, and useless to him. After that, I will see that the Germans drive on Rostov as soon as possible, and that will settle the matter.

So it is only a matter of time now before this little squabble in the Caucasus ends favorably for me. Then I do my part and the oil flows west on any rail lines the Germans manage to clear and keep operational—and by sea as well. The accord recently concluded with Turkey was a major plum! It will mean I will also have access to their rail system. The question remains as to where my armies would be best positioned for the fighting in 1942.

The British have had quite a few surprises this year. Losing Gibraltar, Malta and now Cyprus was quite a blow to their war effort in the Med. Now they think to redress the matter by securing Syria and Iraq, but with German troops able to move by rail, that is going to be much more difficult than they expect.

These reports of a new British tank were most disturbing. Rommel's setback was not foreseen at all. Kymchek hasn't been able to get me any hard intelligence on those tanks yet. All we have is hearsay from the Germans. Who is calling the shots for the other side? Did they produce plans for an new armored vehicle? How could the British have produced it so quickly, even if they did have good plans? Was Volsky behind this development, or that little gutter snipe navigator of his? Yes, most likely this Fedorov I was after all those years ago—all those years hence. Odd to think of it that way. I spent my youth in days I will never see now, in the far off future.

He settled into his chair, needing coffee, for there were still a great many things to plan and consider.

Chapter 24

Gromyko got the order to proceed into the Aegean Sea, scratching the back of his head as he looked over the charts. *Kazan* was already in the Eastern Med, and it had been useful in discouraging a flotilla of fast French cruisers and destroyers when they appeared off Cyprus, intent on reaching the Syrian coast. Two torpedoes had been used, wake homing on the speedy destroyers and taking out two ships before the flotilla scattered and reversed course for Taranto.

“What do you make of this one?” he asked his *Starpom*, Belanov.

“Restricted waters,” he said. “Particularly in the Dardanelles. Look at that bottleneck there,” he pointed at the chart, to a position just off Canakkale. “The channel is less than a mile wide there. Once we get into the Sea of Marmara there would be plenty of room to maneuver, but not there. What if they have anti-sub nets and minefields?”

“They probably do,” said Gromyko, “but we won’t have to transit the Dardanelles unless we want to use torpedoes.”

“You want to use cruise missiles?”

“Why not? We know they’ll need to board trains on the Asian side, right near the existing Marmaray rail terminal. We have those exact coordinates and we can program the missiles to target that spot. It would be no good lurking in the channel waiting for big fat ferry boats. We wouldn’t know the schedule, and what good would sinking a few ferries do? We would have to get out of there right after the attack.”

“I understand,” said Belanov. “So you are thinking we could saturate that rail terminal easily enough. I suppose that would do much more damage, but won’t it cause problems? There are already rumors that the British have been using Naval missiles. How would they be able to deny the attack? It would be a deliberate act of war against Turkey.”

“I raised that with Admiral Volsky,” said Gromyko. “He has communicated our intentions to Moscow, and they are going to issue a statement that the attack was a reprisal for allowing German military units to transit neutral territory.”

“The Soviet Union isn’t even at war with Germany yet,” said Belanov.

“I know, but I’ll let Volsky sort that out with the British and Sergei Kirov. All I know is that I have obtained permission for a missile attack, and that seems the safest way to get the job done. Volsky says the British need time, and we have to do something to slow down the German troop buildup in Syria. So this is what we will do.”

Gromyko pointed out a position on the navigation charts. “We can get here, between the Island of Lemnos and the Turkish coast. From there it is just about 300 Kilometers in a straight shot to the target. We can use the new Inertial Measuring Unit function on the guidance system. That chip can do absolute position tracking while the missile is in flight. I have no doubt that we can hit the target, even without GPS.”

“Shall we set course now?” Belanov looked over his shoulder at the helmsman.

“See to it. I’m going aft to check on the missile bays. This will be a night attack, so time our arrival appropriately.”

“Aye sir.”

* * *

Elena Fairchild was stewing in her executive suite when the knock on the door came that she expected. “Come,” she said quietly, and Captain MacRae entered, removing his hat. She gave him a long look, remembering that last fitful night here before they launched the mission to Delphi. That seemed so long ago now, though she knew she could count the days if she thought about it. Yet so much had happened, the discovery of that strange box at Delphi—the device—the unexpected time shift it caused.

Now it was that mystery that continued to haunt her, and she wanted someone to talk to, someone to share the burden she was carrying. Gordon was the only one she could take to heart, and she was glad to see his smile. It had been all business on the ship since the shift that brought them here, and she longed for a simple human moment where she could put this incredible situation out of her mind for a time and just live.

So she took this opportunity, saying nothing, and merely walking across the room, her eyes on MacRae’s the whole while, and embraced him. He took the opportunity as well, his Captain’s hat dropping unceremoniously to the carpeted floor, and the kiss long and deep. They would spend some hours

there, as they did before, and found the time and place a sanctuary that they both dearly needed to hide in, a refuge from war, and fate, and time itself. When it was over she felt whole again in a way that was hard to describe, grounded, joined to someone, and not trapped in the isolation of the solitary watch she had maintained these many years.

The Watch... She was still officially Watchstander G1, though now the very ship she had been told to look out for was riding at anchor with the British fleet, not 300 yards off their starboard bow. So I guess my watch is over, she thought. *Geronimo* has turned out to be a friend this time around, and not the demon ship that bedeviled us in the past. That alone strained her mind, because she realized something profound in coming to that conclusion. This wasn't the world she had left behind with her oil filled tankers off Delphi. In this place, none of the history that had led to her taking this position in the Watch had even occurred, though strangely, there seemed to be evidence and odd artifacts from that reality that still dangled like loose, errant threads in the tapestry of this world.

The box she had found... That note signed by Admiral John Tovey, and then the other box he had mentioned when they spoke here after that first tour of the ship. How did these things get here? Tovey had told her that Bletchley Park had come across a file box of evidence that could only have come from that other world—the world she left behind. He said it was found within the archives of BP itself, as if it had been there for years, covered in dust and long forgotten.

“Gordon,” she said after they had finished a light meal together, talking superficially of the workings of the ship at first, and getting assurance that all was in order.

“I know that tone well enough by now,” he said calmly. “So what are you worried about this time?”

“Not worried,” she said. “Just curious, I suppose. That box we found at Delphi... It's been nagging at me.”

“Aye, Mack and I have tried to get a handle on that, but he hasn't any ideas either.”

“Not something our Intelligence Master could help us with this time,” said Elena. “It's very odd. I told Admiral Tovey about it, and that note with his name on it. He seemed to take it in stride, as I suppose he's seen more than a fair share of the impossible in these last months. Yet he had no answer for me

either. The note said it would serve to keep us in a safe nexus, and I've some inkling of that, but I just can't figure how it might work."

"Safe nexus? The last time you brought that up, we ended up here."

"That we did. Mack came in with the report of that odd interference on all comm systems—couldn't raise anything, not even on AM or FM."

"Yes, and you said something very odd, Elena. You seemed to know some mischief was underway."

"I guess I could feel it," she said. "The shift was happening—the time shift that brought us here."

"Did you expect that to happen? Did you know about all of this?"

"Not at all. At least I didn't expect things to happen as they did. But I haven't told you everything, Gordon. That key I have, the one that opened that hidden chamber at Delphi, and the one we used on that box.... Well, it isn't the only one. There are others."

"Others? Other keys? Other boxes like that one?" He pointed to the back bulkhead that hid the secret inner office where the Red Phone was harbored.

"Other keys? Definitely. Other boxes? I'm not sure on that."

MacRae folded his arms, dark brows lowering as he looked at her. "So what about these other keys. Let's start with that."

"I don't know how many there are," she said. "Or even where they are, but I know there are more. We had one other in our possession, but it was lost."

"We? Who are you speaking of?"

"The Watch—the group I was a member of, a very secret organization within the highest tiers of the Royal Navy. Alright, you can look out that port hole there and what do you see? That damn Russian battlecruiser, and, believe it or not, we knew about it before the ship arrived here, because this isn't the first time we've had dealings with it.... Or is it?" She rubbed an eyebrow now, thinking, a perplexed look on her face.

"What I mean to say is that the Royal Navy first encountered that ship in the summer of 1941."

"Summer? It's March here, Elena."

"Correct, but that ship was not encountered until late July of 1941, in the Norwegian Sea. It was Admiral Tovey who had the pleasure of trying to sort out the mystery when it first came on the scene, and he was still Admiral of Home Fleet a year later when it appeared again." She shared the story with him in more detail, telling him of that second 'incident' in the Mediterranean

Sea, and how the ship vanished again just as it reached the Island of Saint Helena.”

“Very strange,” said MacRae.

“Yes, well when that ship reappeared off the coast of Australia a day later, Tovey eventually concluded that the ship had to be moving in time, as there was no way it could physically move from Saint Helena to the place it appeared next within that interval, some 24 hours. So there was that ship, moving in and out of our history, like a phantom, and raising considerable mayhem every time it appeared. Meeting that Admiral Volsky, and that young Captain Fedorov of theirs, put a human face on the demon. You see, the Watch was established to stand guard against any future appearance, but this time the Russians fooled us all, and they dropped in well before that first incident in July of 1941. That was quite a twist, but the odd thing has been these artifacts that persist here in this time, evidence from those earlier incursions. It’s mind boggling.”

“And what does it all have to do with those keys and that bloody box?”

“The keys... Yes... Well I was more than a Watchstander. I was also a Keyholder. There were others, or so I was told, and there would come a day and hour of grave emergency when the keys were to be used. At that time I was to be given specific coordinates, and I was to go there and utilize my key.”

“You mean Delphi? Then your superiors in this organization knew about that place?”

“Apparently so, and there were others—other places like Delphi in the world. How many there were, I don’t know, but we did have one other key once, until it went missing. It was found long ago, by a man named Thomas Bruce, the 7th Earl of Elgin, in 1801.”

“Elgin? The same fellow who made off with those Greek statues?”

“The same fellow. He was trying to simply document the remains of the Parthenon Marbles, but his ardor for the subject soon compelled him to remove a good portion of the marbles and bring them to Britain. They’re still in the British Museum, in the Duveen Gallery, and as strange as this may sound, a key was found embedded in the base of one particular piece recovered by Lord Elgin—the Selene Horse.”

“Well how in the world did it get there?” MacRae asked the obvious question.

“That we don’t know. In fact, we weren’t even aware that it was anything

of importance. It was an oddity, to be sure. What would an old key like this be doing in marbles dating to the time of the ancient Greeks? Who put it there, and why, was a mystery, but we later found out that it was quite significant, something to be guarded very carefully, and kept very secret.”

“You found that out? How?”

“We were told about it by others who knew.”

“And who were they?”

“We aren’t sure.”

MacRae rolled his eyes. “Well this cricket ball just keeps getting batted all over the field, doesn’t it. I don’t understand.”

Elena sighed. “Yes, it’s all very confusing. Do you remember I told you about those signals we were sent—with information that predicted events that had not yet happened.”

“Ah, yes, that tip off on the World Trade Center attack, and that information on the stock market.”

“Correct. Well, that was when we realized the information could not be coming from anyone in our time. No one could predict the events that were described that accurately, and so we came to the only conclusion possible—that the information was being sent from the future. Well then, we received information concerning these keys as well. They were apparently hidden away for a reason, because it seems there are other places like Delphi in the world.”

“You mean with hidden chambers like the one we uncovered?”

“Yes, but that was all we were told. The keys would open doors, and a day and hour would come when they must be used. That was all we learned.”

“What about the other key. What was it to be used for?”

“The key we found in the Elgin Marbles? We never discovered that, because it was lost, in May of 1941, the 27th of May, to be precise.”

“You know the exact day it was lost? How is that?”

“Because at that time some of the Elgin Marbles were being moved to safety in the United States, along with a considerable amount of gold bullion. They were loaded onto the battleship *Rodney*, which was scheduled to sail for an American port to have an extensive refit. She had boiler tubes crated all over her decks at that time. Well, then the Germans got in the back door with the sortie of the battleship *Bismarck*. The urgency of that chase forced the Admiralty to pull old *Rodney* off its leave and get the ship into the hunt. It eventually joined with *King George V* in that final battle that stopped the

Bismarck for good. But when those 16-inch guns fire they have quite a kick, or so I'm told. I suppose Admiral Tovey could tell us more, but the fact is that when the *Rodney* eventually did reach her port berthing at Boston, it was discovered that the key embedded in the Selene Horse had gone missing."

"Missing? Then we were trying to get the key to a safe port, and it was filched en route?"

"We aren't sure what happened to it. We only know it was there, imbedded in the base of the Selene Horse when *Rodney* set off from the Clyde, but it was missing when the ship reached Boston. Things were jostled around quite a bit in the course of that battle with *Bismarck*. Several of the crates were tossed about, and some broken. A chink came off the Selene Horse, right where that key was hidden. Oh, they searched the ship from top to bottom, very discretely, and we had people interviewing the whole crew, but it was never found. There are things about that incident that history does not record, but we knew about them. It's a nice little mystery, isn't it? So there are other keys out there, Gordon, and yes, they may open other hidden doors, or even other little boxes like the one we found at Delphi. And they may lead to some very unexpected places. This is all we know."

"Interesting," said MacRae.

"Yes, and now that I've got your curiosity up with my own, I was wondering something—whether that chamber under Delphi is still there."

"You mean you don't know when it was built?"

"Not at all. In fact, I'm not even sure it exists in this go round—in this world where we find ourselves now. But this damn key of mine exists, and for every key there's a locked door out there somewhere. I wonder..."

"Well you could satisfy yourself," said MacRae. "Delphi isn't very far away."

Part IX

Stalemate

*“Courage is in the air in bracing whiffs
Better than all the stalemate an's and ifs.”*

— **Robert Frost**

Chapter 25

King Column approached along a road scouted by Glubb Pasha's men, arriving at the outskirts of Palmyra from the southeast, with the Arab Legion screening their left flank. There was a dry, desiccated basin south of the town, but very sandy in places, and it was deemed unsuitable for the heavier British trucks. The lighter Fords used by Glubb Pasha's men could get through, and the Bedu scouts had a keen sense of the ground. They found the way through, tangled briefly with the Germans, and then withdrew to a position just south of the sprawling Palm groves.

King Column came up, with the three squadrons of the Composite Cavalry Regiment leading the way in their swift lorries. They still retained their old names, the Royals, Lifeguards, Blues, and Grays, the latter being with Colonel J.S. Nichols and the main column, still designated 'Habforce.' Behind the cavalry, the full Essex Battalion was deploying from their lorries, taking up positions in the farm country and lighter groves to the southeast of the town, four companies in all.

They would soon be joined by Habforce, with two full battalions of motorized infantry, the Wiltshires and Warwick. It also had another two batteries of 25-pounders, an AT troop, and the Number 2 RAF Armored Car Company from the airfield garrison. The battalion of the King's Own Rifles was still gathering necessary transport and awaiting elements of the 21st Indian Brigade to relieve them at the airfield, but they had received Somerset's urgent message asking for additional support, and they were getting ready to move.

Habforce had been angling down on another road from the northeast that passed through a lonesome village named Arak. A telephone line connected this hamlet to the T3 facility, and Brigadier Joe Kingstone was pleased to hear Nichols on the phone with news that the lead elements of his column were in Arak. But both men were still none too happy to hear about the sudden appearance of German troops at Palmyra.

"Looks like we'll have a fight on our hands," said Kingstone. "We aren't sure just what we're looking at, but the Russians there seem to think Jerry has a full regiment."

“The Russians?” came Nichol’s voice. *“What in blazes would they know about it?”*

“It’s a long story,” Kingstone explained, “and not one for the telly. We have an advanced force there now holed up in the fortress overlooking the town.”

“A good position. They can clue us in on Jerry’s movements and deployments, but I expect they’ll need our help soon.”

“That they will. Glubb Pasha is somewhere south of the town, but I don’t think his force is any match for the Germans.” Kingstone didn’t say what he was really thinking, that his own force might be no match for the Germans either, even with all of Habforce thrown in.

“Better if we all get sorted out and go in together,” said Nichols.

“That’s my thinking,” Kingstone agreed. “We’ll meet soon.”

Nichols pushed his men hard, and Habforce came rumbling up the long road to the T3 pump station on the 20th of March. The Number 2 Armored Car Company led the way, followed closely by the Warwick Battalion. By mid day they had passed an undefended blockhouse outside a fringe of the town, and deployed to attack. The riflemen hunched low as they worked their way across some cultivated land just outside the town. Then the BAR fire from the French Foreign Legion began, and the fighting was on.

The British went to ground, immediately answering with their Bren guns, and brisk rifle fire. The French had the advantage of better positions in the town, with stone and mud walls, but the British had greater numbers. The typical British Infantry battalion had four companies instead of only three, and soon they were deploying their heavier Vickers MGs to put down good suppressive fire while the infantry made a steady advance into the town. It was house to house fighting, but weight of numbers eventually forced the Legionnaires back, particularly after the Wiltshire Battalion came up and also deployed to attack this sector.

While this was going on King Column had pushed the Essex Battalion up a road skirting the east edge of the palm groves, to a position between the groves and the town. It led directly to the ruins of the Temple of Bel near Wolff’s headquarters in the Amphitheatre, and here the fighting was give and take. The four companies of the Essex Battalion pressed forward against Wolff’s III Battalion, only to be counterattacked by the German reserve Schwere Company.

The Household Cavalry, three Squadrons in all, came up on the left and got

embroiled in a bitter fight, again finding the Germans made sharp, local counterattacks backed by the reserve Schwere or Heavy company that had been detached from the 1st Battalion watching the airfield. At one point the Royals came under heavy fire from the MG-34s and fell back, but many men retreated the wrong direction into the thick palm groves, and soon found themselves cut off behind German lines.

“It’s those damn heavy weapons teams,” said a Sergeant. “We’ve nothing to match them, and not nearly enough artillery with us to settle the matter.”

The Germans Schwere Company fielded the heavier 81cm mortars, many more machineguns, and 7.5cm recoilless rifles that were proving very effective on both attack and defense. The British would press doggedly forward with their rifle teams as the Vickers MGs put in supporting fire, then they would be hit by four or five well directed MG-34s, and well aimed fire from those recoilless rifles. The Germans had only two batteries of artillery, pooling all the guns that had survived the KA-40 attack the previous night, but they still had plenty of mortars. With numbers equal on this front, it was the greater firepower inherent in the German TO&E per company that was making the difference.

By dusk, after a hard day of fighting, King Column had made little headway, and they had also lost contact with a company of the Cavalry Regiment, the Royals.

Near dusk on the 22nd of March Troyak called for Fedorov, leading them up to the south tower for a look at the road to the west. “Look there,” he pointed. “That looks like a motorized column, and a big one.” It was.

They were seeing the last elements of the 22nd Luftland Division, the troops of the 16th Regiment that had been held in reserve at Homs. The attack made by *Kazan* on the rail station at Istanbul had gone off without a hitch, but it had come too late to stop the rapid deployment of German troops into Turkey. The 9th Panzer Division had arrived at Rayak, along with other Korps level units, and von Wietersheim decided to send a reinforcement to Palmyra at Wolff’s request. If the British thought they were having trouble with just one regiment of German troops there, this new development would make it all but impossible for Brigadier Kingstone and Habforce to take the place as planned.

“Life is what happens to you after you make your plans,” said Fedorov in a low voice. His mission had sounded exciting in the beginning, just a little

Spec Ops icing on the cake he thought the British already had in the oven. Now he realized his foreknowledge of the history had led him to be overconfident. Yes, Kingstone's force should have been more than enough to take Palmyra against the single weak battalion of the French Foreign Legion. Yet even against that small force, it took them twelve days. He should have realized that victory here would come at a much greater price, or be beyond their grasp the instant he saw those German troops appear.

"This changes everything," he said darkly. "I don't think the British can win this now, and it may even come down to a question of whether or not they could hold off a German counterattack. We had better get word to Kinlan at once, but I don't think we can discuss things on the radio."

"We still have the KA-40 standing by in those hills," said Troyak. "They've enough ammo on the minigun to cover an extraction and get you safely aboard, sir."

"Not just me, Sergeant. I think we had better get the entire team out of here. Our ammunition is already running low, and I don't think we can hold on here much longer. They have numbers to take this place by storm if they press the issue. Our firepower is the only thing that has held them at bay—that and the appearance of the British to the east."

"What about the X-3s?"

"They're coming, but there was a delay pulling the Argonauts out of the line back west. Things have been hot on that flank, and they were waiting for British reserves to come up. Let's at least warn Kingstone by radio. Then I'll arrange a meeting, but we'd best plan for an extraction operation tonight.

The news was not well received.

"This is a damn sight more than we bargained for," said Kingstone on the radio, angry with the day's developments, and over the losses they had sustained. Habforce had made some progress, forcing the French back into the main town, but the battle was far from decided. The only good news that night was word that an additional battalion, The Kings Own Rifles, had left Habbaniyah that afternoon and might arrive the following day.

"But one more battalion on our side won't match another regiment, if that's what they have on the road out west. I agree. We'll have to conference and decide what to do."

Popski got on the radio and urged Kingstone to make one more try before the enemy reinforcements arrived. He asked if Nichols column might jog to his

right and try to swing down on the airfield from the north.

“Look here,” he said. “We’ve been watching Jerry for days now, and he’s shifted most of his strength south against your column. There’s no more than a company or two holding the field and points west. Don’t beat your head against the Legionnaires in the town when you can swing right around them. There’s nothing on that northern flank but the Desert Camel Company.”

It was good advice, and could only be given because Fedorov’s move to occupy that high fortress put them in an ideal position to monitor the German troop movements. So now, with the imminent arrival of the Kings Own Rifle Battalion under Colonel Roberts, the British might have enough strength building up northeast of the town to take that advice, and Nichols agreed. The lead was handed off to the eight Fordson Armored Cars of No. 2 Company, RAF. They swung north of the hospital, between the Desert Camel Company that was mostly positioned along a narrow wadi as a flank guard. Yet the news of the strange sounds in the sky had unnerved these men, and they were less than diligent.

The armored cars reported they had made it around the northern edge of the town, and the signal was given to send in the Warwick Battalion, which found only a single German platoon defending that segment of the line. Yet the tough men of the 22nd Luftland were in a well fortified old school house, and they fought tenaciously, forcing the British to send the support company around the position to reinforce the advance on the airfield by the armored cars. The Germans were also reacting with mortar fire, and a wild scene ensued when a line of eight armored cars dashed forward through the fire, their machine guns rattling away as the Bren carriers of the support company followed.

The airfield itself was held by the remainder of the same company, and a second company was further west with platoons investing the fortress. Chastened by their ill fated attempt to assault the place, the Germans had pulled back their pioneers and supporting forces behind Hadrian’s wall, and into positions in the Roman Ruins. Wolff was alerted to the sudden danger to his north, and he immediately sent word to move that second company back to establish a perimeter defense around the field. At the same time he gave orders that the two Heavy Companies that had put so much hurt on King Column the previous day, should be recalled to the north and stand as a ready reserve for the defense of the airfield. The Germans had a tightly concentrated force, and

the advantage of interior lines where they could easily shift troops from one threatened place to another, and Wolff was reacting with cool efficiency under fire. He soon redirected his mortar teams to the north, and a battle for the airfield was raging.

The German heavy companies were engaged at the northern perimeter of the airfield, having made a successful counterattack that drove back the rifle squads of the Warwick Battalion and the armored cars. As the sun rose on the 21st, it was clear that the attempt to take the airfield by storm had failed. The British had fallen back to the segments of the town north of the airfield, and they had also cleared the fortified barracks east of the town, but the Legionnaires of Colonel Barre were still in the heart of the city, holding their posts in a tenacious defense. To the south, it was also clear that King Column was not going to be able to push on up the road to the Temple of Bel and Amphitheater, where Wolff was directing the defense.

Kingstone met with Nichols in a captured blockhouse near the main road on the northeast quadrant of the town. There the two men discussed the situation.

“It seems we’ve bitten off more here than we can chew,” said Nichols, and it was a fitting metaphor. The British battalions were stretched in a wide arc all about Palmyra, from Glubb Pasha’s Arab Legion in the south near the palm groves, and up around the town to the north where the troops of the Warwick Battalion and the armored cars were licking their wounds after their failed attack on the airfield. They had taken a good bite out of the apple, controlling most of the northeast quadrant of the town now, but it was clear the hard core of the German defense here would not be easily overcome.

“It’s no good pressing the matter for that airfield,” said Nichols. “The Germans can’t use it—in fact it’s been under fire for two days, and the landing strip is badly cratered, and of no advantage to them.”

“Yes, but what can we do here now? Fight it out, with another bloody regiment of German troops arriving tomorrow?”

“We can try to slug it out here,” said Nichols, “but what have we got, five battalions in all, and the enemy has at least four now, perhaps three more tomorrow, and with the advantage of good prepared positions on defense. It’s been bloody house to house in that town so far, and we’ve paid dearly for every position we’ve taken.”

“This fight is looking like one fine stalemate,” said Kingstone.

“We could pull out while we can,” Nichols suggested. “It’s clear we can’t push on to Homs.”

“Yes, any further move east is impossible now, not with a force this size here. We’d have no way to get supplies through.

“Can we get more air support?” asked Nichols. “What in blazes has been flying about up there? What are they firing? Looked like rockets to me.” Neither he nor Kingstone were in the know as to the nature of the weaponry deployed on the helicopters, and neither man had even set eyes on the aircraft that had been tormenting the German heavy weapons positions.

“God only knows,” said Kingstone, “but we should be thankful for it. As it stands I don’t think a squadron of Wellingtons would even do us much good here. The enemy is simply dug in too well. We’d have to destroy the place to force them out, and see all those lovely Roman ruins out there pounded to dust.”

Nichols nodded grimly. “We’ll need a lot more reinforcements here to have any chance to take this place. I can ask my men to have another go, but it was a long slog here through that desert, and hard fighting ever since we got here. If you want my mind on it, we’ll need another full brigade—possibly two.”

“That would be nice,” said Kingstone, “if Wavell was a magician and could pull something out of his hat. The 20th Brigade of the 10th Indian Division is running up the Euphrates, and they’ve run into trouble as well. The Germans are at Dier-ez-Zour—another full regiment, just like this lot here. Word is they flew in to the airfield there, so this whole envelopment operation has ground to a halt. We took a good swing at them, but the pick axe has hit hard stone now, and we’ll have to re-think things. I’m requesting a conference with General Clark at T3. That Russian Captain can meet us there. This little war out here was going along swimmingly, but with the Germans in the thick of things now, it’s a whole new game. All I can see to do here now is to get the lads into a good position to pull out.”

Chapter 26

Wavell met with Brigadier Kinlan to discuss the operations now underway in Syria. They had implemented O'Connor's plan, moving not one, but two heavy infantry battalions north at night on the empty desert roads to the railhead south of Mersa Matruh. The area had been cleared out, and Kinlan was given free rein to supervise the loading operation for the waiting trains. It was a lot to move, but they would take one battalion the first night, the Highlanders, and the trains would return by day to load the Mercians on the second night. The trains could quickly move these vital troops all the way to Haifa, and Acre, where they again off loaded under cover of darkness and moved out along pre cleared roads to their assembly points.

Wavell's regret over not assigning stronger forces to his center column was now to be corrected. Both heavy battalions, as they were now being called, would assemble south of Merjayoun, where the French had put in a strong counterattack that had stopped the Australian advance cold. The appearance of Renault 35 tanks had caused a near panic, as the troops had no effective AT gun to oppose them—but that was about to change.

The Highlanders led the way, organized in three companies, each with fifteen Warrior AFVs mounting the improved 40mm gun. To back them up, five Challenger IIs had been added to each company, and this was a force the French were not prepared to face or resist for very long.

They never saw what hit them. In a sudden night attack, the Highlanders detected the enemy positions and vehicles using their sophisticated night optics and thermal sensors, and then they opened up in a sudden barrage of deadly accurate fire. The shock was stunning, and the Highlanders smashed through the enemy positions, making short work of the ten Renault-35s that had so bewildered the Aussies. Then they pushed on up the winding road that led them north into the Bekaa Valley, and a storm of panic preceded them. French rear area posts were flooded with alarming calls that the enemy had moved up a full armored division, and it could not be stopped.

After breaking through positions that had held for days against the Australian advance, the battalion found that the narrow road, more than any significant French resistance, proved their only obstacle. At one point the

French thought to use demolition charges to create a landslide and block the road, but the Highlanders also had an engineering tank section, and one of the massive multi-bladed Trojan AVRE tanks was able to power through and clear the way in little time.

Beyond that point there was little opposition, and the distance to the vital aerodrome at Rayak was no more than 75 kilometers. It was only about 25 kilometers on the narrow mountain road, and soon the lead elements had scouted forward to Lake Qaraoun, where the road descended to the broad cultivated farmland of the Bekaa Valley. Another five kilometers took them to Joub Jennine, where they encountered the first elements of a gathering defense.

Lieutenant Horton had the lead section, with five warriors, a Javelin ATGM vehicle, one up-armored FV-432, and a single Challenger II in support. Vehicle 1 out in front had picked up movement and thermals ahead and radioed back the position. The company had found the German recon battalion of the 9th Panzer Division. It had detrained north of Rayak, moved south just in time to stop a raid by British commandos attempting to sabotage the airfield, and then pushed south intending to reinforce the French armor, and lead a counterattack that following morning. The armor it found, however, was something entirely unexpected.

Horton brought up his five warriors in a line abreast along some broken ground between the Litani river and the slowly rising ground to the east. They assumed a hull down position, and watched as the German column emerged from the town ahead. "Let them come," Horton radioed his men. "Tommy? Are you in position?"

"*Roger that,*" came the voice of Lieutenant Tom Wilkes in return. He was in the sole Challenger II, ready near the road and blocking the route south like an implacable steel boulder that had fallen from the heights above.

"Mark your targets... You do the honors Tommy. Get that nice fat armored car out in front. We'll chime in with the chorus. On my word... *Commence Firing!*"

The sharp crack of the big 120mm gun on the Challenger split open the night, and the German armored car, an SdKfz 231 Schwerer Panzerspahwagen, was the first unfortunate victim. It was a 6.6 ton, eight wheeled vehicle, and it was literally lifted from the ground by the hit it took, the wreckage blasted off the road. Behind it came three smaller four wheeled SdKfz 221s, which veered

off the road and ran into a hail of 40mm fire from the Warriors. The British were over a kilometer away, easily seeing and hitting the vehicles in the column, and with deadly results. The whole point of the column was a flaming wreck in a matter of minutes, but now the Germans realized they had hit something much stronger than they expected, and Captain Weichert stopped his advance and immediately dispersed his remaining troops into the town.

Lieutenant Horton saw what they were doing, and wanted nothing to do with a deliberate attack in an urbanized setting. He wanted to keep his squads buttoned up in their vehicles, and keep moving. He radioed back to the AS-90 Braveheart battery assigned to the Highlanders, and immediately ordered artillery fire, watching the barrage fall right on target in the town ahead. Then he gave the go sign and moved his section up. Two more sections had already come up behind him, and the full company was now available. He knew the main infantry of this force would be in trucks behind these armored cars, and he wanted to get at them before they had a chance to deploy into the town. So he gave the order to move out, and the Warriors gunned their engines, tracks grinding on the broken ground and churning through the fields ahead.

His formation raced west and around the town, immediately seeing the long column of vehicles on the road behind the hamlet. There was good open farmland between the road and the river, and he ordered his section to advance in echelon, with the Challenger anchoring at the rear. They raced along, turrets rotated and firing as they blasted one truck after another. At one point the Germans frantically tried to deploy a Pak 3.7 AT gun section, and managed to get two of the three guns into action just as the Challenger II came into view. They fired, both gun positions seeing their shells hit and ricochet harmlessly off the heavy frontal armor. Then the big turret rotated ominously in their direction, and the enormous gun fired, ending the duel with fire and smoke.

Horton had no intention of stopping. He was going to press on with all speed, fighting anything he encountered on the run. Behind him came 2nd and 3rd companies of the Highlanders, and they passed the German column like the teeth of a buzz saw cutting into wood. The shock and speed of the attack was so fierce that the battalion was all but destroyed, its surviving remnants fleeing east to try and find a secondary road and get north by any means possible.

The Highlanders raced north up the Bekaa Valley, reaching El Marj in half an hour, where they had to fight a hot action in the village against a well

positioned German rearguard of two platoons of dismounted infantry. Their MG 34s made no impression on the British armor, and the return fire of the 40mm autocannons decided the action in short order. Now they halted, seeing the lights of two larger settlements ahead. These were the bigger towns of Zahle on the western fringe of the valley, and Rayak to the northeast. They did not know it at the time, but Zahle was strongly held by a battalion of the 5th Mountain Division that had arrived the previous evening from the coast. And up ahead, taking up a defensive position just south of the aerodrome at Rayak, was the first regiment of the 9th Panzer Division under Generalleutnant Alfred Ritter von Hubicki.

The division had been arriving piecemeal, and he had the 10th Regiment of Panzergrenadiers, and a single company of tanks from the 33rd Panzer Regiment, mostly 20mm PzKfw IIs with a section of better armed PzKfw IIIs, with 50mm guns. They were not going to stop the Highlanders any more than the recon battalion had been able to halt the lightning advance. But it would take a much more deliberate attack, and Lieutenant Horton radioed back the situation to battalion commander Holmes, and it was decided to deploy the entire battalion in the attack, behind an extended barrage from the AS-90s. The Bravehearts would pound the enemy with heavy, accurate fire before the attack would begin.

The battle for Rayak was now underway, and behind the Highlanders, the full Mercian battalion, each company also reinforced with five Challenger IIs, was racing forward up the long road in support. Behind Kinlan's force, Wavell had committed the whole of his last two brigades of the 6th Infantry division, which had been in reserve in Palestine. If Rayak and Zahle could be taken, it would shut down the main enemy aerodrome and cut the road and rail lines to Beirut.

To the right of this position, the Germans had also deployed the regiment of the 5th Mountain Division that had been fighting to screen the Barada Gorge where the rail lines and roads made their way from this region to Damascus. Now that Dentz had decided to pull out of the city and retreat north, the two battalions that comprised this regiment withdrew towards Rayak. Their brother regiment was arriving on the left from Beirut, leaving the defense there to the French, and so now the flanks of the Rayak defense were to be held by the mountain troops.

Brigadier Kinlan had a conference with Sims and the battalion leaders to

set up the attack. "This is the situation," he began. "We're in a nice little punch bowl here, with rugged mountains on either side of the valley that are all but impassible. The valley itself is open farmland, and the Litani River runs right down the middle. It's not much, but the ground west of the river is broken by a lot of irrigation canals that will slow movement too much. So I plan to put the attack in east of the river where the ground is more open. I'll want the Highlanders on the right, with your right flank against this thumb of high ground here." He pointed to the map. "The Mercians will be on the left against the river."

"Alright," he continued, "Both battalions will deploy two companies forward, one in reserve. The reserve companies will front their Challenger II sections into one heavy platoon of ten tanks, and these will be committed to the most advantageous point in the attack to effect a breakthrough. The entire action will be preceded by a good saturation barrage from the AS-90s. Ammunition is a factor here," he concluded. "We'll commit to 20% of available stocks, and then hold another 5% in reserve for opportunity fires if needed, but that finishes off over 30% of our artillery munitions, and we'll have to hold the rest tight. The British 6th Division is behind us, and they have 25-pounders to take up the slack. I'm sending over a liaison team with radio communications to feed them grid coordinates, but don't expect anything they throw to be spot on like our AS-90s."

"Where do we stop?" asked Colonel Sanderson, the commander of the Highland Battalion.

"Punch through and take that airfield, Sandy," said Kinlan. "Don't worry about mop-up. I want a hard, fast attack right in the center of their defense. Once you overrun the airfield, ascertain the strength remaining in the town behind it, and we'll determine what to do. If the opportunity presents itself, envelop that town with maneuver and cut the road and rail connections north to Homs. The Germans have been concentrating here, so there could be more troops arriving. Any questions?"

"What about that high ground on my right?" said Sanderson. "If they have positions up there it will give them good fields of fire as we advance."

"Don't worry about it," said Kinlan. "The Gurkhas are coming up to join us from Damascus, and they'll be in position on your right by midnight. They had some hard fighting in the city, so I'll rest them until 04:00. Then they'll begin pre-dawn infiltration on that ground to look for enemy positions and set

up OPs for the artillery. Your attack goes in at 06:00. That's zero hour."

"Then we won't be attacking this town?" Colonel Laws, commander of the Mercian Battalion pointed to the large settlement of Zahle on the left, hugging the knees of the folded mountains on the road to Beirut."

"That's not on our dance card," said Kinlan. "The British 6th Division will be moving one brigade up on the other side of the river, and that is their turf. Our exclusive objective is the airfield and town of Rayak, and I'll want a lightning fast attack here. Don't stop, gentlemen. Hit hard and keep moving. We'll use speed and sheer firepower to punch right through their main line of resistance. I want no infantry deployment until we get to Rayak. If, by chance, you should lose any vehicle in this action, either to enemy fire or for mechanical reasons, don't forget that the reserve company is right behind you. They'll be sanitizing the ground all around you as they move through, so if any vehicle is disabled, the orders are to sit tight, button up, and wait for the extraction team to come up with the Titan. We leave nothing on the field, gentlemen. After the reserve company, the Gurkhas will come in and sweep the ground behind the whole attack, along with the Titans, so any vehicle that has trouble will have plenty of infantry support."

"As to ammunition, sir," said Laws, "Any restrictions?"

"Tell your men to be judicious, but don't hold back, particularly if it comes to protecting your men and vehicles. I want you to knock the fight out of these characters and let them know who their dealing with. Understood?"

"Aye, sir, the lads are spoiling for a good fight. We'll get the job done, that's for sure."

"See that you do," said Kinlan. "Very well, gentlemen, dismissed."

The men saluted and left the briefing, leaving Kinlan with his Chief of Staff, Sims.

"They'll be expecting us this time," said Sims. "It won't be like Bir el Khamsa when we hit them completely by surprise. That recon battalion we brushed aside will have given their CO an earful by now."

"True," said Kinlan, "but aerial reconnaissance yesterday indicated that they aren't fully concentrated here. They've only one mechanized regiment up in the center, and perhaps a single battalion of tanks."

"And that second regiment?"

"Probably on the trains heading our way as we speak, along with the rest of their Panzers. This is where a couple squadrons of Tornados would come in

handy, wouldn't it. Well, we won't have them. The British are lucky to scrape together ten or twelve Wellingtons here for any strategic air interdiction on that rail. They won't close it that way, so we'll have to expect the Germans will continue to reinforce their positions to the north. For my money, I expect they'll deploy south of Homs."

"What are we getting ourselves into here, sir?" asked Sims, a warning in his question. "None of this happened in the real war."

"The real war?" Kinlan smiled. "You mean the one we read about in the academy? You can forget all that now, Sims. This is as real as it will ever get for these men, and they'll know it before this is over. We've two good battalions here, and the Gurkhas. This is a fight we'll win easily enough, but this lot in front of us is just one of over 300 German divisions out there, and it's only 1941."

Neither man said anything more.

Chapter 27

Generalleutnant Gustav Anton von Wietersheim stepped off the train at Homs, slowly pulling on his leather gloves to chase the early morning chill. Spring was at hand, but March in Syria still produced cold nights with mid-day temperatures eventually rising to about 65 degrees. A longstanding member of the General Staff, von Wietersheim was glad for his first real wartime command, and lucky to have it given his reputation as being “too outspoken” in strategy sessions with the Führer. An aristocratic officer who had come from a well placed Prussian family, von Wietersheim had been in the Reichswehr since 1902, having mostly non-combat oriented staff roles throughout the great war, but distinguishing himself enough to earn two Iron Crosses and other notable honors.

On two occasions, however, he had the temerity to openly question, and even criticize the Führer himself at General Staff briefings before the incursion into Czechoslovakia and the invasion of Poland. On both occasions, he endured the ire of Hitler, who was already very sensitive to questions from the senior officers concerning his directives. On the latter occasion, Keitel commented that Hitler was so upset that he subsequently forbade any senior officer to openly disagree with him at a strategy briefing. It was partly this perceived insubordination that saw him assigned here, to a post many others deemed a secondary role while preparations were hastily being made for the ‘big show’ in Russia.

Von Wietersheim was the commander of the XIV Motorized Korps, one of three assigned to Panzergruppe 1 in Army Group South. His Korps had been slated to be part of the big push to sweep to the Don and stop Sergei Kirov’s Caucasus operation against the Orenburg Federation, but the situation in the Levant had come to Hitler’s mind as a preliminary operation that might be easily concluded before Barbarossa launched in a few months time. When von Wietersheim learned that his Korps was to be assigned there he again shook his head, thinking it a most inappropriate use of his motorized divisions.

“I thought Kübler’s Mountain troops had the job in hand,” he complained to his Army Group commander, Eric von Manstein. The two men knew each other well, as Manstein had followed von Wietersheim, taking over his job as

Oberquartiermeister of the General Staff. Once junior to von Wietersheim in ranking, von Manstein had risen high to assume the new post as Commander of Army Group South, relieving von Rundstedt, who subsequently moved to command all German reserves for the coming eastern campaign. It was a move that had not happened in the history Fedorov knew, a strange quirk where Hitler had seemed to find some special relationship with Manstein. When asked what troops might best be sent south, it was Manstein who had directly asked for von Wietersheim's Korps.

"Don't complain," said Manstein, holding up a finger to admonish von Wietersheim. "Your main operations will be in northern Syria, where a couple good mobile divisions will prove very handy. And you will get good combat experience there before anyone else, and by the time I send for you to join us in Russia, your Korps will be well seasoned."

"Kleist wasn't happy either," said von Wietersheim. "He loses a third of his motorized divisions with this move."

"You'll rejoin him soon. Just get down there and stop the British before they overrun the whole damn country. Secure this airfield complex here." Manstein had pointed to the vital aerodrome at Rayak. "Now that the Turks have granted us free passage on their rail lines, you can move your tanks and vehicles easily."

"Rolling stock is limited," said von Wietersheim. "I'll be lucky to even get a regiment in place before the British get to that airfield. They are already in Damascus according to the latest reports."

"If you cannot get there, then assemble your troops further north and Homs, and then go take it." Manstein wanted results now, not arguments. "We have already moved much of the 22nd Luftland Division by air. And the 6th Mountain Division is coming by sea. Your job is to prevent the British from pushing into northern Syria, so it may mean you will have to use your motorized brigades piecemeal. There is fighting here," he pointed to Palmyra on the map. "Wolff is there with a regiment of the 22nd Luftland Division, and he's stopped the British in the fighting so far. But you will have to keep the road to Homs open, and get him supplies. Now is your chance, Generalleutnant. Shine here and Hitler may forget that you disagreed with him before."

"Oh? I thought he ordered me here to get me out of the Russian operation—to punish the man who dared question his orders."

“Not so,” Manstein said quickly. “I sent for you—because I wanted a man I could rely on to get the job done. So do not disappoint, either me or the Führer. A man doesn’t get a chance to deliver an entire country to the Reich very often, but that is exactly what you have here in Syria.”

This seemed to strike a note with von Wietersheim, and he put his misgivings aside. After all, he would be overall commander of the entire German presence in Syria. With Rommel idle at Mersa Brega in Libya, this would be the only command actively engaging the enemy. He now began to see the opportunity Manstein had pointed out.

“One more thing you should know,” said Manstein with a note of caution. “The British have new tanks. Rommel had a real problem with them in Egypt. The Panzer IIs are useless against them, and he reported his Panzer IIIs fared little better.”

This got von Wietersheim’s attention. “Another Matilda?”

“Yes, a heavy tank according to all reports, but much bigger. Even the 88’s couldn’t stop them.”

“I find that hard to believe.”

“As did I, but it is right in Rommel’s report. Then there is another cruiser tank, lighter, very fast, with what appears to be a fast firing gun in the range of 30 to 50mm. Those we can handle, but this new heavy tank had a lot of senior officers talking at OKW. Be cautious. Use your tanks in a support role until you can learn more, and let me know what you find out. For the moment, get in there and take up a good defensive line. Once you have your entire Korps in hand, then you can decide on offensive operations.”

Twenty-four hours later von Wietersheim was stepping off the train in the railway station at Homs. With him, in the long grey line of cargo cars, he had the bulk of the 11 Panzergrenadier Regiment, and the 2nd Battalion of the 30th Panzer Regiment, mostly the better PzKfw IIIs, with 50mm guns. By nightfall that day he would have the whole of 9th Panzer Division in hand, and behind it, the three motorized regiments of the 5th Viking SS Division were still in transit. It was a strong force, more than enough to do the job, thought von Wietersheim, but he had not yet heard the disturbing reports from south of Rayak, where a battle was now underway with the advanced elements of the 9th Panzer Division.

That night the clouds were low, and no air operations were scheduled from Rayak. A single squadron of BF-109s had flown in to assist the French there,

who were operating with one small fighter squadron of their own, and an assortment of perhaps twenty antiquated bombers. They had been enough to harass the British advance, particularly against the desert columns as they approached Palmyra.

All in all, von Wietersheim thought he had a good position. His 9th Panzer Division was now complete, arriving well ahead of schedule, and would be on the line by dawn occupying a central position in the Bekaa Valley well south of Rayak. Each flank would be anchored by mountain troops, the 5th division on his right, and the newly arrived 6th division on his left. Palmyra was well garrisoned now with the 47th Regiment of 22nd Luftland, and the 65th Regiment of that division, and elements of the Luftland Sturm Regiment from Cyprus, had been air lifted to Dier ez Zour, where another battle seemed to be shaping up against Indian troops that had pushed up the Euphrates from Iraq. Soon the 5th SS Viking Motorized Division would complete his Korps, though he had received one report of an attack on the rail terminal in Istanbul, and wondered what had happened.

As for the French, they had fallen back to Damour south of Beirut on the coast, with only a narrow coastal region good for any offensive by the enemy, and steep rugged mountains on the landward flank. To the east, Damascus had been abandoned, and the French were now consolidating at Nebek to the north. The British and Free French were still mopping up pockets of resistance in the city, and for the moment, that flank was not threatened by any aggressive enemy advance. It was only in the center that things seemed loose and fluid. The recon battalion of 9th Panzer had run into trouble and retreated north, but soon he would have the whole division on the line.

We will see what dawn brings, he thought. Let's see how much fight the British really have in them, now that they are up against a real army.

* * *

At 04:00 Colonel Rana Gandar got his Gurkhas up and moving through the foggy night towards their infiltration points. The hard fighting for Aartouz, Mezzeh, and then Damascus had not been concluded without losses. While they had lost only a single Scimitar tank, his aggressive soldiers were not so well armored, and there had been casualties. His first Company had taken the brunt, with only 8 of twelve squads now ready for action. The other

two companies still had ten of twelve squads available. He decided to hold 1st Company in reserve, and sent the other two forward with strong fighting patrols. Their mission would be to occupy the high ground on the right flank, a task they were well suited for due to their experience in mountain warfare. But there were other mountain troops in the hills that night.

The initial probe surprised a few outlying sentries, the flash of the Kukri knives in the dark coming like a whisper of death. Yet as the Gurkhas worked their way silently into the lowlands above the small village of Masnaa, it was soon evident that the enemy was in much greater strength than anticipated. They gained the top of a long ridge and sent reports back that the Armenian town of Anjar was the anchor of the German defense against the hills. An ancient site dating back to the Umayyad Dynasty of the 7th Century, its ruins were abandoned only to be resettled by Armenians fleeing Turkey in 1939. The old Umayyad palace was still there, now the headquarters of the 1st Panzergrenadier Battalion of the 10th Regiment, and the Gurkhas could see from the high ground that the German line was much more extensive than previously thought.

Sims came in with the report for Kinlan, an unhappy look on his face. "Gondar has men up on these heights," he said.

"That's well south of where I wanted them."

"And with good reason," said Sims hastily. "The German line starts here, at Anjar, and they can see lights from troop encampments all the way to the river. He estimates the Germans have at least four battalions between Anjar and the Litani. And there are infantry in the mountains to the east of those hills, in the region leading up to the gorge—at least two more battalions. To take his objectives he'll have to push right through those positions first, and for light infantry, that's a tall order. "

"Those are most likely the same troops that were screening the gorge earlier," said Kinlan. "So they'll outnumber us two to one," "That shouldn't stop us, not with our speed and firepower. But you are right about the Gurkhas. Tell Gondar to just screen that flank with his infantry companies. Then let's put in the main attack as planned, I doubt if the Germans have guns on that high ground yet. But get word out to expect the main line of resistance much farther south, and make sure the Bravehearts know of these positions before we start that artillery barrage."

It was a reasonable assessment given the information available, but what

Gondar's men had not seen in the misty morning, was the two battalions of German tanks consolidating behind the German lines in tactical reserve, or the battalion of Pioneers that had come in to join with the remnant of the recon battalion. Those troops were beyond another ridge, the thumb of high ground Gondar was tasked with sweeping earlier. But it was clear he could not get anywhere near that position in two hours—not with a couple battalions of German mountain troops to his front and flank.

Kinlan's three battalion force was not outnumbered two to one, but more like three to one in the Bekaa Valley east of the Litani, and the mountain troops were not those of the single two battalion regiment that had been screening the gorge earlier. Those troops had been moved west of the Litani to join the rest of the division arriving from Beirut. Instead the whole two regiments of the 6th Mountain Division had come down from Tripoli! The Gurkhas would actually be outnumbered six to one.

The British did not entirely know it at that moment, but after the fall of Damascus, the drama of Fedorov's thrust to Palmyra, and Kinlan's lightning breakthrough in the center to approach Rayak, the enemy defenses were stiffening in every sector now. The British were encountering strong resistance in Dier ez Zour, Palmyra, along the coast near Damour and now the center looked to be steeling up with Panzer troops. The scent of a stalemate was wafting on the 'an's and ifs,' and it was going to take a strong whiff of bravery to break through and prevail.

Part X

Petrov's Defense

“If you're completely off your rocker and have delusions of grandeur in which your personal existence is of special significance to the rest of the world, all hope is not lost. Mix in enough charisma and you have what it takes to start a religion... or become a serial killer.”

— Edward M. Wolfe

Chapter 28

It was a long flight back to Russia, over a continent of Europe that seemed strangely dark and quiet. No planes moved in the skies, and *Tunguska* was one of the only airships in the world at that time that was serviceable. Neither Bogrov, nor any of the senior officers, knew exactly what had happened. They had departed Moscow and made that daring overflight of Nazi Germany, dueling with the Luftwaffe's highest flying aircraft at the dizzy altitude of 15,000 meters. They had the audacity to actually bomb Berlin, and then snooped impudently over the German ports at Kiel and Bremerhaven before encountering that powerful storm over the North Sea en-route to London. They never got there, alighting on the coast of England to bemuse and startle the local residents, one of many sightings of strange craft in the skies that came to be known as the "Scareships" of 1909. Tyrenkov's men rounded up a stray traveler bearing an old newspaper, and it seemed to set Admiral Karpov off like a bomb. He immediately ordered all the men aboard the airship, and set course for home.

Karpov had locked himself away in his heated cabin, giving orders that he was not to be disturbed, while the new Captain and remaining senior officers fidgeted on the bridge, growing more and more perplexed when they could not pick up any of their normal radio traffic. The airwaves seemed lightly traveled, with the dot-dash signals of old Morse Code, but little radio traffic. It was bad enough when they found Konev dead on the ship, and the other two men, probably victims of that terrible storm. Now the odd silence, and the strange sense that something was wrong, had begun to permeate the young crew.

"What is going on Tyrenkov?" asked Bogrov when the Admiral's intelligence Chief was passing through the bridge.

"What do you mean, Air Commandant?"

"What do I mean? We fly all the way across Europe to England, only to make a twenty minute stop on a vacant field, and now we go home? What was all that business with the newspaper?"

"Don't worry about it, Bogrov. The Admiral just changed his mind, that is all. We have urgent business back home."

“Yes? Well kindly tell me why we cannot pick up any of our radio signals traffic?”

“Don’t worry about that either. The Admiral wishes to maintain radio silence, particularly over the continent. You may have noticed there was a war on. Just get us back to Russia, but I have a new destination for you, direct from Karpov.”

“New destination?” Bogrov rolled his eyes. “Where this time? Are we off to China?”

“Calm down, Bogrov. No, we will be stopping off at Saratov on the way home to Ilanskiy.”

“Saratov? But there is fighting there. The Federation may have a full squadron of airships assigned to that sector.”

“Forget about the Orenburg Federation. Just get us to Saratov.”

Bogrov shook his head. “One minute you remind me of the war, the next you tell me to forget about it. Which is it, Tyrenkov? After Saratov I will have to follow the Volga all the way north to Perm before turning east again. Am I to forget that there is tension all along that border as well?”

“To be blunt about it, yes. Do not concern yourself with security, Air Commandant. That is my job. You just navigate the ship and, at the moment, our destination is Saratov—by the most direct route possible. After that you will get new instructions. Now, if you’ll excuse me, the Admiral wishes to see me at once.”

“Very well, Tyrenkov. I should have known better than to complain to the Intelligence Chief, but I foolishly thought that if anyone might know what is going on here, it might be you.”

“In that you are correct, Bogrov. And when it comes time for *you* to be briefed, the Admiral will speak with you. Until then, simply do your job—and one other thing. The Admiral wishes you to steer wide of any electrical storm we may encounter. Coordinate closely with our weather man. He wants no more wild rides like the one over the Channel.”

“In that we finally find agreement,” said Bogrov. Then he turned to his navigator and gave him orders to plot a course to Saratov.

* * *

“Bogrov is none too happy over recent developments,” said Tyrenkov. He

had come up from the bridge to the upper cabin level where the executive quarters were, and was now meeting with Karpov in his private ready room. The Admiral had been musing over a game of chess, though Tyrenkov could not imagine who he might have been playing with. No one had been in or out of the Admiral's quarters, except for the orderlies bringing meals or tea. Yet something about that chess game had given the Admiral an idea, and now he would find out what it was.

"Strange the things that come to mind over a good game of chess," said Karpov. "This one certainly set me off in an unexpected direction, but I don't think you realize where I am going just yet, or why."

"We seem to be cruising at 5000 meters above Poland. A remarkably easy trip thus far. There hasn't been so much as a whisper of news concerning the war, which has Bogrov somewhat spooked. He's been asking a lot of questions."

Karpov smiled. "A curious man, Bogrov. But for the moment we will keep things the way they are. You are the only one I have fully briefed, Tyrenkov. No one else knows this is actually 1909, and quite frankly, you took the matter rather well, considering you have little more than my assertion this is so."

"You are not a man to trifle with nonsense, sir," said Tyrenkov. "If you tell me this, then I must assume you have given it careful thought and analysis. So of course, I accept your word on the matter, though I must admit it was somewhat alarming."

He was a quiet, careful man, with dark hair and eyes that seemed to smolder when he looked at you. Karpov appreciated his methodical nature, and calm temperament, and the seeming way he went about his job as Intelligence Master with no qualms. Tyrenkov was a man who would get things done, and not one to equivocate over useless things like morality, or consequences, and he made no excuses. He was just efficient, and somewhat ruthless when he needed to be, and this was a mindset that Karpov inherently understood, and respected. Tyrenkov didn't fully grasp the why or how of their present position, but he accepted it when Karpov first briefed him on the situation, and he immediately began to determine what he needed to do now if this were true.

Yes, if this were true then there was no war to be jangling on the airwaves with the codes and radio calls of generals on every side. If it was 1909, then

the revolution had not even happened yet! Ivan Volkov would not have risen to power, or started his breakaway war with the Bolsheviks. Russia was still whole, the single domain of the Czar, and the Romanovs held sway from the gilded palaces in Moscow and Saint Petersburg. Sergei Kirov did not even go by that name yet, and was a young revolutionary in the making. In short, it was an entirely different world, and Tyrenkov realized that, his present title aside, he was really master of nothing now.

His entire intelligence apparatus back in Siberia, all the agents he had posted throughout the world, had not yet come into being—he had not even come into being. Tyrenkov was a man of 28 years, and would not be born until 1913. The same could be said for every man on the crew, most still in their twenties, some even in their teens—except those three men they had found, Konev, Symkovich, Lavrov, all older men, in the service for many long years. Konev was fifty two, a surly Chief who ran the upper rigging crews. But he was dead now, and Karpov seemed to know why, though he had said nothing about the incident, until now.

“You want to know why Konev died,” said Karpov matter of factly, “and the other two? It is easy if you think about it—and no, it wasn’t their bad health or frailty. Konev was a hardy man, was he not? I checked the records on the others, and they were both in good shape. Well, I will tell you why they died now—simply because of their age.”

“Their age?” Tyrenkov took that in. “Konev was older, but the other two were only in their thirties, sir, and you just said they were also in good health.”

“They were in their later thirties, and that was their undoing,” said Karpov, holding up a finger. “Think, Tyrenkov. Konev was 52. That means he was born in the year 1889, and this year, 1909, he would be a young man of twenty years. The other two men were 38 and 39 respectively, born in the years 1902 and 1903. They would be young children now...” Karpov gave Tyrenkov a penetrating look. “In fact, they most likely *are* young children, and Konev is probably out there somewhere as that 20 year old man. You see? When Tunguska moved in that storm—to this year—those three men were already here. They already existed, so they could not survive the journey here. There cannot be two Konevs alive at the same moment in time, one a young man of 20, the other a grizzled Chief of 52 years. Understand?”

Tyrenkov raised an eyebrow, finally realizing what the Admiral was

telling him. Yes, he thought, it was a grim logic, but it made sense. Everyone else on the crew was just like him, unborn in this year of 1909. No one else on the ship was over 30, except Karpov himself, which prompted him to question the Admiral about that.

“What about you, sir? Surely you are more than 32 years, a well seasoned man in the prime of life.”

“Yes, but I’m creeping up on 40, Tyrenkov.”

“Then how is it you have survived? Is there not another young man out there—your very self?”

Now Karpov smiled, walking slowly over to the wetbar where he pour two snifters of brandy, handing one to Tyrenkov and gesturing that he should have a seat on the comfortable sofa.

“If you thought I was going to say I was an exception, you are wrong,” said Karpov. “I may be an exceptional man, but I am mortal like everyone else, and subject to the same laws of time and fate. No, if I had been born before this year, like those others, then I would be dead as well.” He gave Tyrenkov a wry smile.

“Excuse me, sir... You are saying you were not born before 1909? A moment ago you just said you were creeping up on 40 years of age...” Now Tyrenkov’s eyes widened, suddenly alight, and then he fixed his smoldering gaze on Karpov, the realization evident on his face. “Then you were born *later*... You were born in the future!”

“Excellent, Tyrenkov. I knew you would surmise the truth. Yes, either I was born, and died, well before this year, a lifetime earlier, or well after this time. Either case would allow me to survive here in this moment. In this case, however, the latter is true. If you want to know the truth, I was born in the late 20th Century, and now your next question is an obvious one. If that is so, then how did I come to be found in the middle of that century, in 1938 when I first came to Siberia? Well that, my friend, is a very long story.”

“The late twentieth century? Well after the conclusion of the war? Why, that would mean you know how it ended.”

“Correct. I know all the victories and defeats, and the course of days following that war.”

“Then you came here deliberately? But why?”

“I would think *how* would still be the main question on your mind. We will get to that soon, but as to *why*, the truth is, my arrival here was

completely unintentional. It was an accident, and one I do not yet completely understand, but here I am. And finding myself here, I have made the most of the knowledge I have to achieve this position—and this is only the beginning, Tyrenkov. There is so much more to be done. I do not yet know why time seems to favor me, but this is not the first time I have been here in these years before the revolution. I came from a distant year, all the way back to 1908. I was Captain of a powerful ship—in the future—with an advanced propulsion system. We believed some aberration in that engine was causing a rift in time, and the ship, and the entire crew, were sent to the past—to 1941 in fact—but our position there was very unstable. We kept moving back and forth and, the last time the ship moved, I was thrown free, arriving alone, in the year 1938. This time I seemed to stay put, for I was never able to remain in the past more than a few weeks before this occurrence. Yet here we have slipped again—not only me, but the *Tunguska* itself, and the entire crew, except for those three unfortunate men. It's a game of musical chairs, Tyrenkov. When an incident occurs, and the music stops, leaving you in another time, there had better be an open chair there for you. Those men died because their younger selves were already sitting in those chairs. I survived here because I have never lived in this year before, in 1909."

It was all very confusing, the how and why of it all still looming as huge unanswered questions in Tyrenkov's mind. Yet he intrinsically understood the advantages in Karpov's position, and the power he could wield given his knowledge of future days to come. "Then you have more in mind than simply power, Admiral. You have been using your position here to change things—change the history?"

"Quite so. In fact, it was all the previous blundering about that caused much of the dilemma we now face. I have tried to use the power I had many times to brighten Russia's future, but I was always opposed, by officers on my own ship, and by men like Ivan Volkov."

"Volkov? You mean the fighting over Omsk?"

"More than that. You see, Volkov is not a man from this time either. He was a petty Intelligence officer in my day, sent to inspect my ship when we finally made it home. Then something happened to him, and he slipped through one of the holes we must have poked in the history."

"Volkov was from your time? I see. Now it makes sense. He was able to outmaneuver Denikin so easily, and take power in Orenburg."

“That federation never even existed in the history I know from my time,” said Karpov. “In fact, this whole situation, the divided Russia we see, is an aberration. It was never supposed to happen. It was our meddling, perhaps my own doing, that may have led to it all. But Ivan Volkov certainly had a great deal to do with it. I thought to befriend him at one point, in that meeting at Omsk, but we have seen that a snake is a snake. His treachery is apparent, and now he has made a very bad mistake. He has made an enemy of me, and here I am, in 1909, by fate or chance, and in a perfect position to do something about Volkov before he ever gets started.”

Tyrenkov nodded his head. “He is here? Now?”

“Somewhere, even as we speak.”

“You say he slipped through a hole in the history, but how did he do that, really?”

“No one knows, exactly. It happened at Ilanskiy.” He told Tyrenkov the story Volkov had shared with him, and the other man slowly nodded, beginning to understand many of the strange things that had been happening concerning that railway station.

“I could never understand why Volkov tried to seize that station, or why anyone would want to try and destroy it.”

“Now you know. There is something there, Tyrenkov, a gateway of sorts.”

“Where does it lead?”

“I am not certain.”

“Ah...” Tyrenkov remembered now. “That back stairway. Something very strange happened there. You went up those stairs, and it seemed to me that you returned quite shaken. Even your uniform was soiled, though you tried to cover that up.” Now Tyrenkov remembered the cigarette he had noticed, still burning in Karpov’s hand when he returned. *Time...* Yes, that had to be it! That stairway was the hole in history. That was what everyone was fighting over at Ilanskiy, and that is why Karpov has been trying to rebuild it!

“Very observant,” said Karpov. “Do you understand where we are going now?”

“Yes sir. I think I do, at long last.”

“Excellent! Because I plan to take you with me, Tyrenkov. You and I have much to do! But first, we need to make a little side trip to Saratov, and

now I will tell you why.”

Chapter 29

Karpov looked again at his chess set, smiling. “Petrov’s defense,” he said. “It was played out by a namesake of mine against a young man named Magnus Carlsen—quite a chess prodigy. But never mind the game itself. I was merely passing time with it to rest my mind. It is what occurred to me while I was playing it through that matters now. It was nothing about the game itself, just the chance association of names.”

“I don’t quite follow you, Admiral.”

“Of course not... In that game, a man named Anatoly Karpov, no relation, was playing out the well known defense devised by a former chess master, Alexander Petrov. They call it the Russian Defense now. Well, those names suddenly struck a hard note in my mind—Petrov, Karpov. You see Petrov was also the name of a well known early revolutionary, and the reason I bother with this at all will soon be obvious to you. This man, Alexander Petrov, the revolutionary, not the chess master, seems to have his fate line tangled with my own. He was attempting to infiltrate the Czar’s secret police.”

“The Okhrana? That would be very dangerous.”

“Indeed! Well he very nearly succeeded. In fact, he was being actively recruited by high level officers in the Okhrana. They had arrested Petrov and had him in prison, when the man thought to ingratiate himself with the authorities, saying he wished to join and support the activities of the secret police. So he was approached by a man named Sergei, and slowly recruited. The Okhrana wanted to use him as an agent to uncover more activists in the revolution, and the inverse was also true. The revolution wanted to use Petrov to get a look at the inside workings of the Okhrana. A most unfortunate incident occurred, however, and it all came apart, the whole scheme. Petrov’s handler was in Saint Petersburg, and learning his protégé was there, he made a call, saying he would soon be there to meet with him. No one knows why, but Petrov used that brief interval of time to plant a bomb under the table where they were to meet, then he excused himself, and boom, the bomb went off, killing the handler, but also ending Petrov’s ploy at infiltrating any further into the Okhrana. That was apparently no matter to him, for he seemed to have accomplished what he set out to do. You see, the man he

killed was no mere handler, but really a highly placed officer in the Okhrana. His name was colonel Sergei Karpov, and he was my Great Grandfather...”

Tyrenkov was very surprised to hear this, but remained outwardly calm. “When did this happen?” he asked.

“A good question. I have found different sources with different dates, but they all agree that it was in the month of December, in this very year, 1909. So we are going to see about it. Because at this very moment that revolutionary is still stewing in Saratov prison, trying to finagle his way out to take the path that will eventually lead him to that meeting with my Great Grandfather. Only this time things will be different.”

“I believe they will, sir,” said Tyrenkov, and now he allowed himself a smile. Something told him that a good many other things were going to be different in the days ahead.

* * *

It was a simple matter to gain entrance to the prison at Saratov. Once the massive hulk of *Tunguska* appeared in the sky, the authorities in the city were quite shaken. The airship hovered low over the site, bristling with guns, and soon the cabled cargo baskets were used to lower squads of Tyrenkov’s security personnel. Karpov had given him his marching orders, and Tyrenkov did not disappoint. The men landed right inside the prison, and he sent several platoons of black-clad special service troops, well armed with sub-machineguns, to find the warden. Even as Orlov had found his target in the Prison of Baku, and as Sergei Kirov had found Stalin, the history was again to turn on another visit to a dank prison cell by knowing men from another time. Tyrenkov found the man in question, and without so much as a brief announcement, he concluded the matter.

“Alexander Petrov?” he said.

Petrov looked at him through bleary eyes, thinking that this could only be one of two things. Either it was yet another interrogation, and most likely a beating ordered by the local police, or perhaps, he hoped, this might be the authorities from Saint Petersburg he had appealed to, offering his services to the Okhrana in exchange for freedom.

It was neither. It was simply his most unexpected appointment with death.

“You are hereby condemned for the conspiracy and assassination of

Colonel Sergie Karpov.”

Petrov heard the words, but could not understand what was happening. “What?” he blurted out, his instinct for survival suddenly pulsing with the adrenaline in his chest. “What do you mean? I have killed no one!”

“Correct,” said Tyrenkov, “for the moment. But you will kill someone if left to your devices. But not this time.” He reached into his service jacket, drew out a pistol, aimed, and fired. The sharp report of the weapon in the confined space was deafening, but Tyrenkov hardly blinked. He took a long look at Petrov satisfied that the bullet hole he had put in his head was fatal, and then turned, his boots hard on the cold stone floor of the prison hallway.

Ten minutes later his men were ascending to the ship in the sub-cloud car, and history groaned as it turned over in its sleep. For Sergei Karpov had been slated to become head of the Okhrana in Saint Petersburg before Petrov’s bomb prevented that. Now he *would* become head of that nefarious organization, and like his grandson, he had a very long list of things he planned to do, and some of them were going to matter a great deal in the years ahead.

While Tyrenkov and his men were away on their mission of death, Vladimir Karpov had passed the time listening to the memoirs of Alexander Petrov as fetched from the library material he had stored on his service jacket computer. A shiver went down his spine when he began to hear names in the narrative that were all too familiar. The man who had first approached Petrov was called “Sergei,” the name of both his Great Grandfather as well as a certain other figure that had risen to prominence in the revolution—Kirov. One day Petrov was invited to Sergei’s house, along with other members of the nascent underground revolution. The moment he arrived a bomb went off with a roaring explosion, throwing Petrov to the ground. His legs had both been injured, but he still had the presence of mind to drag himself towards the door, managing to eventually reach the street outside, dazed and wounded.

The police arrived, pushing into a crowd that had gathered around Petrov, and added to his misery by kicking him with their boots. It was just another revolutionary, or so they believed, and they took Petrov off to the police station. There the local chief ordered the man taken to the hospital to see to his bleeding legs. In one of those strange twists of history, the doctor who operated on him was named Fedorov! Later, the Okhrana actually did recruit Petrov, and provided him with a false passport under the name Rodenko! So

there were the names of men who had served on the bridge crew of the battlecruiser *Kirov*—all strangely associated with this Petrov figure, a man who was planning to kill his own Great Grandfather! The dark implications of that did not go unappreciated by Karpov. If Petrov had done his deed just a few months earlier, he would have snuffed out the life line that now sustained him, as Colonel Sergei Karpov would have died before he had conceived his son.

The eerie echo of those names in the narrative unnerved him as he listened—Fedorov, working to sustain the life and mobility of Petrov, Rodenko, lending him his identity so that he might move unnoticed in the murky seas of the early revolution...

I was that close to annihilation, thought Karpov. But why did Petrov want my Great Grandfather dead? Was it his own doing, or was he put up to it by someone else? Was it merely revenge for the attack that injured him? Were these other men secretly involved, Fedorov? Rodenko? And who was this “Sergei” that had tried to kill Petrov himself that day? Was it really his Great Grandfather? Why would he do this if he was really seeking to turn Petrov as an agent, as all the other accounts had it in the history? Was it someone else named Sergei? Who? Why?

He sighed, switching off the computer in his service jacket that had been reading him the file, a cold, clammy feeling on the back of his neck. Something about this incident was entirely too personal now. It was not like the grand strategy he had been plotting, aimed at striking decisive blows to the history. No. It was darker, more devious, more sinister. People were moving through the waters of history, like submarines lurking beneath the thermals of time. People were out there trying to kill him!

The sound of a knock on the door shook him from his fearful reverie, and he sat up in his chair, eyeing the door with suspicion.

“Who is it?”

“Tyrenkov, sir. Here to report.”

“Come.”

The door opened, and Tyrenkov strode in, saluting as he came. He reached into his jacket pocket and drew out his pistol, handing it to Karpov. The barrel was still warm.

“The operation was successful,” said Tyrenkov flatly. “Petrov’s defense did not work this time. He is dead.”

Karpov took a long, deep breath. The assassin was dead, and now his Great Grandfather would live, or so he believed. His life line seemed more secure—at least for the moment. He breathed deeply, satisfied, and appreciating Tyrenkov's efficiency and calm yet again.

"That will conclude our business here," he said. "We will depart for Ilanskiy immediately."

"Very well, sir. I'll go to the bridge and inform the Air Commandant."

"Don't bother," said Karpov. "I have already informed him by telephone. We'll be underway shortly. Why don't you sit down for a moment. As to Petrov, you were certain he expired?"

"I put a bullet right through his head, sir," said Tyrenkov. "If he did survive I don't think his brain would have been of any further use to him. Why did he wish to kill your Great Grandfather?"

"An interesting question," said Karpov. "The thought did occur to me that he was put up to it by others."

"Who sir?"

"Don't think I reached this position without making enemies, Tyrenkov. I can think of several people who might want me dead now. This attack on my Great Grandfather always bothered me as a young man. My father told me about it, and I once thought that I might not even be alive if this man Petrov had done his dirty work a few months sooner, before my grandfather was conceived. It is a very sly way of completely eliminating someone from the line of fate. You just kill his ancestors! Who might wish to do this, I wondered? Ivan Volkov came to mind immediately."

"Volkov?" said Tyrenkov. "But how would he have any influence over Petrov, a man of this day and age?"

"I thought the same thing," Karpov replied. "If Volkov was behind this plot, then he would have had to have some means of traveling to this year in time to recruit Petrov for this task. I can think of no way that would be possible—except for one."

"Ilansky," said Tyrenkov quietly.

"Precisely. You are very sharp, Tyrenkov. Yes. If Volkov were to gain control of Ilanskiy, and learn of that back stairway, then he might send someone back and do something like this. He could not come himself, as he is already here—even as we speak, but as the impudent young officer who was sent to inspect my ship. He's still probably trying to figure out what

happened to him, and drowning his sorrows with some good vodka. But that Volkov would know nothing of my rise to power in Siberia, or of our enmity. Only the Volkov of 1941 would have that knowledge, and also the knowledge of Ilanskiy if he had mind enough to associate his fate with that place—and I think he did. Otherwise, why did he violate the treaty we signed at Omsk, and make that stupid attempt to seize Ilanskiy? You see? Volkov already tried to get Ilanskiy under his control once...”

Tyrenkov was silent for a time, thinking. Then he looked up and asked another question. “You think Volkov may have made a subsequent attempt—and one that succeeded this time?”

It was a dark thought, and still sent a shiver down Karpov’s spine. “That is a possibility,” he said. “But it would mean he was able to drive all the way to Ilanskiy, and I don’t like the sound of that. It would mean we were defeated on the eastern front by the Grey Legion.”

“You mean beaten by Volkov’s forces? At some future time?”

“A bit unnerving to consider that, isn’t it?” said Karpov. “Yet that is one scenario that would have to occur if Volkov were behind the plot to kill my Great Grandfather. It gave me fits for a time, until I realized that for Volkov to attempt this, I would have to still be alive, and a viable threat to him in that future time.”

“Why wouldn’t he just send someone back and shoot one of your ancestors, as I just shot Petrov?”

“Who knows? Perhaps he prefers a subtle touch, and one that does not directly implicate him... Yet all of this is mere speculation. I have come to conclude that Volkov was not the culprit. If someone did put Petrov up to this attack, then it was another man.”

“Who?” Tyrenkov was simple and direct, another reason Karpov admired him.

“That is what you and I will set our minds on now,” said Karpov. “If Petrov was a tool, then the man who sought to use him would have to have the means of traveling to this time to do so—this much we have already determined in considering the Volkov question. So that creates a very short list of names, Tyrenkov. First off, the man must have the knowledge that time travel is possible, and that is known to very few. Secondly, he must have the *means* to travel in time, and that is another major obstacle. Thirdly, and this is the part that is certainly bothersome, he must have a motive for wanting me

dead. Yes. This list is a very short one. As far as I know now, there are only a handful of men who might fulfill all these requirements.”

Who are they, sir? Give me the names and I will begin making arrangements to eliminate them. There are still five more bullets in that revolver.”

Karpov smiled. “That may take some doing,” he said. “But if you want to know, here is the list.”

Chapter 30

“**First** off,” said Karpov, “there is another man named Sergei who might want me dead, and his last name is Kirov, the head of the Soviet state and Bolshevik party in 1941.”

“Sergei Kirov?” This took Tyrenkov by surprise. “But didn’t you just conclude an armistice with him?”

“You mean like the accord I signed with Volkov at Omsk? Things change, Tyrenkov. Yes, I made the decision to support Kirov, but in doing so I had to reveal my true identity to him. Now he knows I am not from his time, and he also knows about Ilanskiy, giving him the means of sending someone back to the pre-revolutionary era where we find ourselves now.”

“Then you also told him about Ilanskiy?”

“No, and that was quite a shock to me when I learned about it. It seems Sergei Kirov discovered that back stairway all on his own—with a little help from one of the other officers aboard my old ship, a man named Fedorov.”

“The man you suspected as the doctor who cared for Petrov?”

“Yes, though I have not proven that connection yet. Now listen carefully, Tyrenkov. Sergie Kirov was never supposed to rise to the position he holds in your time—in 1941. No. He, himself, was the victim of an assassination plot, in 1934. This gets to be a long and convoluted tale, but suffice it to say that Soviet Russia, and the Bolsheviks, were led by another man in the history I know, a man named Josef Stalin. Kirov learned of Stalin’s rise to power, and took steps to change that.”

Now Karpov explained what he had learned, of Fedorov, and the chance meeting at Ilanskiy with the young Sergei Kirov, and of Kirov’s subsequent journeys up those stairs to glimpse the future Russia that Stalin built. Then he revealed that it was Kirov who killed Stalin as a young man, just as Tyrenkov had eliminated Petrov, while he languished in prison.

“Amazing,” said Tyrenkov. “To think that the entire history of our time, of my time, was shaped by these events. It’s very chilling. So now you think the man who attempted to recruit Petrov, the man name Sergei, was actually Sergei Kirov? But why would he want you dead?”

“That should be obvious. Because I represent the strongest possible

challenge to his power—indeed, to his very existence. He knows that I have learned the secret of Ilanskiy, and that I control that site in 1941. In fact, there were more than two airships involved in that incident at Ilanskiy when Volkov launched his raid.”

“The third airship...” Tyrenkov paused. “My intelligence apparatus eventually determined it was a Soviet ship, the *Narva*, dispatched from Murmansk.”

“Yes,” said Karpov with obvious anger in his voice, “and it was carrying a team of elite Naval Marines, the men actually responsible for the demolition of that back stairway.”

“Were they sent there by Kirov?”

“No my friend,” said Karpov. “Not the man, but the ship. They were the Naval Marine contingent aboard my vessel, a ship named *Kirov*. So it was obviously a plot hatched by the senior officers of that ship.”

“The same officers who opposed you earlier?”

“Correct.”

“What was their motive?”

“Obvious again—to prevent me from discovering or ever using that back stairway. To prevent me from ever being able to get here, Tyrenkov, to a time where I can now make truly decisive changes to the history. Don’t you see? Even as we just settled the Petrov matter regarding my Great Grandfather, I have more irons in the fire here. If Sergei Kirov wanted me dead, it is because he knew I could come here and hunt him down before he ever enacts his own plan to seize power in Russia. From here I can decide everyone’s fate—Stalin, Kirov, even the officers on that ship of mine who dared to oppose me. I can deal with them all!”

“Then they are also on your list of possible suspects,” said Tyrenkov, “these other officers.”

“A few might want me dead. They have already taken bold and aggressive action against me to prevent me from achieving my vision—betrayed me, after I fought and saved that ship more times than I can count. That is how I came to Siberia! I was betrayed, and left behind.” He said nothing of the real truth, of how he came to get that scar on his cheek, of that headlong fall into the sea that was as much fate, or happenstance, as it was any betrayal by the officers and crew of *Kirov*.

“Perhaps they have learned who the Karpov in Siberia really is—Vladimir

Karpov. If they cannot act to prevent my plans, then perhaps they would attempt to eliminate me altogether!”

“I see...” Tyrenkov thought about that. “But they are not here now, in this time. And how could they travel here?”

“Remember my old ship,” said Karpov quickly. “They meet all three conditions I specified earlier, the knowledge of time travel, the means to do so, and a motive to eliminate me. So yes. They are on my list—Admiral Volsky, and Captain Anton Fedorov. I haven’t decided about Rodenko yet, but the fact that his name came up in this Petrov business has me thinking about him as well. He was quite truculent when acting as my *Starpom* aboard the ship. He may also be involved in this conspiracy.” Karpov held up a finger, but Tyrenkov said nothing.

“So you see,” said Karpov. “We have quite a few things to do. We will be very busy in the days ahead, Tyrenkov.”

“I understand sir, but...”

“But what?”

“Well I was wondering about the war, the situation on the eastern front near Omsk, and our plans for the offensive. Now that we are gone—that *you* are gone—what will happen?”

“Don’t worry about that,” said Karpov. “First off, suppose we returned to 1941 right now, and arrive there an hour after we left? You see? We would not even be missed. But that doesn’t matter. Things we do here may rewrite all that history. What if we were to find Ivan Volkov here, and give him the same treatment we just gave Petrov? Think about that, Tyrenkov. Think long and hard. Who would we be at war with on the eastern front? There would be no Orenburg Federation when we returned—at least not under Volkov.”

“Interesting,” said Tyrenkov, though he did not speak his full mind on that subject.

“The same goes for Sergei Kirov. What if I find him here and return him to the dust bin of history where he belongs? Then who ends up ruling the Soviet Union?”

“This man you spoke of... Stalin?”

“Well I would certainly not leave that little matter unattended. Think again. Who rules if I eliminate Kirov?”

Tyrenkov allowed himself an appropriate smile. “Why, *you*, Admiral. That is evident. You would easily outmaneuver any opposition in this time.”

“Correct! And you will be my chief of state. I have big plans for you. Together we can accomplish a very great deal.”

“And the war? The Germans? What about that?”

“From here all that history is in play—the rise of the Nazi party. The life of Adolf Hitler himself—I hold all these things in the palm of my hand, and all I have to do is close my fist to crush anything I desire!”

The light in Karpov’s eyes could start a fire.

* * *

Tyrenkov did think long and hard about what Karpov had told him, and his logarithmic intelligence soon began to come to some very alarming conclusions. If all this were true, and he would accept as much for a starting variable in his thinking, then what if Karpov did eliminate Ivan Volkov now?

Just as Karpov said, it would mean there would be no Orenburg Federation if they ever did return to 1941. But how would they manage that? The Admiral had not given him any clear reason for their arrival here in 1909, though that storm obviously had something to do with their situation. He did not really know what had happened, but that did not matter. They were here, in 1909. He had seen that with his very own eyes when they reached Saratov. Instead of the long lines of entrenched positions around the city, there was no sign of any military activity. The city was much smaller, and the people clueless as to who he was. They were awed by the appearance of *Tunguska*, and not because it was an anachronism in a world that had largely abandoned airship technology. No. They had never seen a thing like *Tunguska* before, and that had made a strong impression on Tyrenkov’s mind.

The Admiral did not offer any clear explanation. In fact, he even stated that his own movement in time seemed to be accidental. If that were so, then the importance of Ilanskiy was redoubled. If there was a hole in the history there, then it was perhaps the only means Karpov had of returning to the future, to their own day of 1941 or even years beyond. That was why he was so eager to get there—this grandfather business aside.

But what would happen if Karpov used that stairway? Would he go forward in time again, or backward? He did use it once before, returning strangely shaken, his uniform soiled, and not by the dust and cobwebs of that

stairwell. Where did he go? Did he come here, to the past, or to some unseen future? He needed to know, needed more information, and so he asked his next question.

“Certainly all things are possible here,” he said. “Yes, you could become the head of the Soviet State. Of that I have no doubt. Does that mean you intend to stay here, and live out the remainder of your life from this year forward?”

Karpov’s eyes shifted, as if he had not yet thought that through himself. “That has not been decided,” he said. “We must first determine how to locate Volkov and the others, and that could take some time. He arrived here in 1908, but that was a year ago. He could be anywhere now, and nothing is known of him until after the October Revolution in 1917. So it may take a lot of sleuthing to find him.”

“Perhaps your Great Grandfather might help,” Tyrenkov suggested. “After all, he is a member of the Okhrana, and has their network as a resource. We have no intelligence net set up here at the moment, but he does, and he owes you his life.”

Karpov raised an eyebrow at that. “Interesting,” he said. “Yet I hardly think he would believe me if I came to him and told him who I was. That would not be possible. I would have to remain anonymous.”

“Yet you might ingratiate him by revealing Petrov’s plan to kill him, and telling him how we foiled that operation.”

“Possibly...” The thought of finding and speaking with his own Great Grandfather, a man he had never known, was suddenly compelling. Tyrenkov was correct. How would they find Volkov without an extensive intelligence network? It could take them years of fruitless searching. But the Okhrana already had that network in place, men in virtually every district and city in Russia. He considered that, and the other question his intelligence chief had asked him. Did he intend to stay here? Did he really want to hunt down Volkov and Kirov, and assume the role of head of the new Soviet State?

First things first, thought Karpov. I need to know if I can find a way back to 1941. It is clear to me that storm sent us here—time sent me here—and for some reason. It happened just like that incident with the Demon volcano, a massive, highly energetic natural event that opened a breach in time. But why do I always seem to fall through to these years before the revolution? Why did Fedorov appear here when he went down those stairs where he first met

Sergei Kirov?

Now he remembered how Kirov had described the inn at Ilanskiy to him... *Imagine a simple boarding inn, lost on some forgotten stretch of railway. Imagine the people boarding there all come from different places, which is not that unusual. Yet now throw in a most remarkable twist—say they all come from different pages in the history, different eras in time. The bottom floor houses guests who lived before the revolution, the middle floor is reserved for travelers from this day... and the upper floor? Suppose men from tomorrow board there.*

Yet the upper floor is gone, thought Karpov. I saw that with my own eyes. The war had begun. It was underway the moment I reached the top of those stairs. I saw the naval munitions depots at Kansk taking a direct hit from a nuclear weapon. So if I go up those stairs now, from this time, where will they take me? Every time we shifted on the ship, we seemed to get stuck in the 1940s, but Fedorov clearly demonstrated that Rod-25 could go farther back in time, to these years. That's how they came after me, using *Kazan*.

Now he began to feel very uncomfortable, the remnant of that mouse of a man he once was, longing for his safe little mouse hole. He had risked much, and taken bold action since he gnawed through that intercom cable outside the sick bay aboard *Kirov*, sealing Volsky and Doctor Zolkin inside. He had played with the big cats, and taken a scratch or two for his effort. Yet he was alive, a real player in this world now, and in a position to do some very significant things. Yet even as he thought this, he could still feel that thrum of anxiety in his chest. How would he get back to 1941? Could he do so? Where would another journey up those stairs take him this time?

That thought struck him like a thunderclap. *The stairway! It's gone! It isn't there in 1941! Fedorov destroyed it, damn his rotten little soul!* It was blown to pieces, and though I have the plans, and have men working the site in early 1941, he did not know when that job would be complete, or even if the stairway would still work once it was rebuilt. What if the alignment had to be absolutely perfect? What if it was a matter of inches, centimeters, and that stairway no longer angled into oblivion as it did before?

His heart beat faster, realizing that his mouse hole, his escape route, might no longer be there. In 1941 he had already had three years to acclimate himself, gain his footing, recover from the treachery that had nearly been his undoing. In 1941 he was in a very comfortable spot, and one he was very

familiar with. He was a rising star, scheming to further his position and eliminate potential rivals as he always did. Yet above him were men like Ivan Volkov and Sergei Kirov, already achieving their power and status by working hard for it from these pre-revolutionary years. In 1941 it had been much easier to cuddle up to Kolchak and work his way into power. From here it would be a long thirty years to take that last step up from where he was, and supplant Volkov and Kirov, and he would have to live through the tumult and travail of WWI and the revolution—the long civil war. It would take years to tame the wild beast Russia would become after the fall of the Romanovs. From 1941 he might still reach the top, and without having to spend thirty years of his life to do so. Kirov and Volkov were old men in 1941, and from there he was still young...

But how could he get back there if the stairway was gone? How?

Tyrenkov was watching Karpov closely, and could see the machinations of his mind working, and the sudden flash of anxiety in his eyes.

He isn't sure, he thought. The little Admiral with delusions of grandeur doesn't really know what he wants to do yet. Has he figured out what I concluded just moments ago? The stairway at Ilanskiy was destroyed in 1941, and might not ever be rebuilt. Has that finally occurred to him, or the fact that we're all living on a short lease here? He decided to voice the concerns in his mind, and asked another question.

"One other thing, sir. Suppose we do commit ourselves to look for Volkov here. We had better be quick about it, and we will need all the help we can get. Because what happens to me in 1913, four years from now, when I am scheduled to be born? Do I suffer the fate of Konev, Symkovich, and Lavrov? Will I just keel over and die on the day of my birth? Will all the crew die that way, one by one as they reach their year and day of birth?"

Karpov seemed surprised by that remark, his eyes narrowing as he thought. "An interesting dilemma," he said. "I have never considered that. Yet four years would be more than enough time for us to find Volkov, with or without help from my Great Grandfather and the Okhrana. Don't worry, we'll make sure you never have to face that paradox. As soon as we conclude operations here, we'll return to 1941 to see how things turn out."

"Can we return, Admiral?"

"Of course!" Karpov tried to sound confident, in control, but Tyrenkov could hear the edge of uncertainty in his voice.

“But then we’ll have another problem, sir. You said that first incident with the propulsion system aboard your ship sent you to 1941, and I can only assume that you arrived later in the year, because you were obviously alive and well in March when we departed for England. That said, what happens to you on the day your ship first arrived? Do you just keel over and die as well? I may have a four year lifespan if we remain here, but if we return, your candle may be burning very low.”

Part XI

Edge of Chaos

“Even a single grain of sand reveals a profound truth about the way the world works. Some of the most recent investigations related to chaos theory have centered on the critical point where a series of small variations produces a massive change of state. In the modern terminology, this is called “the edge of chaos.” One of the examples of this is that of a pile of sand... When the pile reaches this critical point, even a single grain would be capable of dramatically affecting all around it. This seemingly trivial example provides an excellent “edge-of-chaos model,” with a wide range of applications, from earthquakes to evolution; from stock exchange crises to wars.

— Alan Woods / Ted Grant

Chapter 31

The Knight's Cross of the Iron Cross was just settling on the chest of Generalleutnant Alfred Ritter von Hubicki, the commander of the 9th Panzer Division. He had received it for the exploits of his division in the recently concluded Balkan campaign, but its luster was suddenly dimmed that morning when Brigadier Kinlan's attack fell on his line like the Hammer of God.

There was only brief warning when the big 155mm rounds began falling on the forward positions. The guns were so far to the south that no one heard them fire, only the whine of the shells as they fell in the dark, then the hard thump and tremendous power of the high explosive rounds hit home. It was a brief, but violent barrage, and it was extremely accurate, walking right through his main positions and causing a considerable dislocation, and many casualties.

Then there came a distant rumble, which soon resolved to the telltale sound of mechanized vehicles on the move. Moments later dark shapes loomed in the distance, and the troops were experienced enough to know they were under attack by armor. Sergeants on the forward line called back to the Panzer Jager teams manning the 3.7 inch AT guns, those that remained intact, and hands tightened on weapons all along the line. Then the firing began, and a Sd.Kfz 251 was suddenly struck by a heavy round and ripped apart. The 8 ton vehicle keeled to one side, a burning hulk.

A wedge of five Challenger II tanks of the Highlanders 1st Company were in the vanguard, their massive shapes emerging from the smoke of the artillery barrage to the dismay of every man who saw them on the line. They were huge fast moving chariots of death, the massive turrets rotating and firing, machine guns spitting tracer rounds into the line as they came. The German division had fought in Poland, Holland, France, Greece and Yugoslavia, but had never encountered anything like the storm that was upon them now.

The troops expected the enemy tanks to stop and take up firing positions, but they did not stop. Firing on the move, the metal behemoths simply crashed right through the line, their machine guns cutting down men on every

side, and that long, terrible main gun belching fire at vehicles and gun positions to the rear.

There had not been a shock like this since the first appearance of tanks in the Great War, and in spite of the hard lesson given Rommel at Bir el Khamsa, the full realization of what the new enemy tanks could do had not yet trickled down through the rest of the army. It was a monster that simply could not be challenged, let alone killed. No anti-Tank gun possessed by the troops could harm it, and filled with the hubris earned from its previous victories, the men of the 9th Panzer Division had not sewn landmines as a defensive measure. In fact, they had been planning to assemble and move south that morning to attack, but their enemy had beaten them to the punch.

Behind the hard tip of the spear came the Warriors, also moving fast, their 40mm guns cracking away in sharp, well controlled three round bursts. Thank god there were not many, thought Sergeant Muller as he watched the scene in near shock. He was on the radio at once, calling for tank support from the 1st Battalion of the 33rd Regiment in position directly behind the line. The battalion had a strong group of 54 PzKpfw III, 18 PzKpfw II and 18 of the heavier PzKpfw IVD infantry support tanks, and now the Germans launched a sharp counter thrust, their armor churning forward through the open fields in attack.

“Tanks!” called Lieutenant Horton on the radio. “Front left!”

He keyed the position on his digital display, assigning the symbol for enemy armor, and within a millisecond every vehicle in the battalion had the threat information on their screens. They were able to turn and react immediately, groups of five Warriors rotating their turrets to engage the oncoming threat, and the big Challenger IIs opening the action at long range.

The Highlanders had pushed right through the lines of the Panzergrenadiers with both companies, and now Colonel ‘Sandy’ Sanderson committed his breakthrough force, the heavy platoon of ten more Challenger IIs. They surged forward with the Warriors of his third reserve company behind, to even the odds, and then some. His battalion was facing 90 German tanks, but now he had 43 Warriors and 20 Challenger IIs in the attack. Two Warriors had been damaged and were ordered back to the start line, but the bulk of Sanderson’s force was unscathed. The fire they put out, seeing their targets at long range with their thermal sensors, was devastating.

One by one the German tanks were hit and destroyed. It was the

Challenger IIs that wreaked the most havoc, their heavy rounds completely obliterating any target they found. A three round burst from a Warrior was enough to put serious hurt on the German tanks, though some survived to get off shots of their own—until a Challenger rotated that massive turret and blasted them to hell.

Generalleutnant Hubicki was stunned to hear the frantic calls of his tankers on their field radios. He knew his second tank battalion was on the right near the river, and barked an order that it should move to attack, but he was too late. The Mercian Battalion had swept over that ground, and had already engaged the German armor in another devastating, uneven armored duel.

The attack was so violent and swift that it smashed completely through the 9th Panzer Division, devastated the armored reserve battalions, and pushed right on to the north. The presence of the Challengers was unanswerable. Had the Warriors been alone, it might have been a difficult fight, but the Challengers could see and hit the enemy before they even came into firing range, and the British tankers were decimating the German armor, leaving the Warriors to engage anything they missed. It was about 15 kilometers to Rayak, and by mid morning the British were attacking the airfield, where they soon encountered fresh German troops that had been marching south in a long dark column on the main road.

Horton stopped, opening his top hatch to get a look with human eyes. He peered through his field glasses, seeing trucks and vehicles ahead, and troops rapidly deploying on defense. Suddenly a barrage of artillery fire began to come in and he knew this fight was far from over.

“Another column,” he said, quickly buttoning up. “Get word back to Kinlan. Black uniformed troops ahead, in force, north of the airfield. How’s our ammo Jimmy?”

“Running thin,” said his gunner, James Crocker. “Twenty rounds left. We’ll need to get to an ammo truck soon.”

“Not bloody likely,” said Horton. “The supply elements are thirty kilometers behind us by now. The Gurkhas haven’t even swept the ground we just rolled over. So make every round count.”

It was good advice, for the dark uniformed troops he had seen deploying were the men of 3rd battalion, Nordland Regiment, of the Viking Motorized Division. The trains had come in that night at Homs, and the men had

hastened to get their vehicles ready for a night march south. Behind them would come the men of the Germania Regiment, and the Westland Regiment in reserve. Von Wietersheim would have his entire Korps in the field, and the Vikings were a large formation, with three battalions in each regiment, a recon battalion, MG Battalion and Pioneers.

Now, after a long hard drive of nearly 75 kilometers from Merdjayoun, Kinlan's two battalions were coming face to face with a division that would establish one of the fiercest reputations for combat in the war.

* * *

A Bedouin in the Desert Cavalry Company that had moved to the extreme left of the French position was up on Jebel Aassafir, north of the airfield at Palmyra, when he heard the strange sound of beating wings in the dark. The hard thumping in the distance soon resolved to an evil sounding drone in the sky, and his eyes scanned the overcast cloud cover with fearful glances. He had heard entirely too much, and was convinced something was very wrong. A hasty withdrawal down the mountainside, to a place as far from the sky as he could get, was the only thing on his mind.

The KA-40 was up again that night, moving above the heavy clouds as before, unseen, but clearly heard. Fedorov had made the decision to extract the Marines and yield the fortress. It was either that or they would face a long siege, certain attack, and with dwindling ammunition in the face of heavy odds. Instead they would take to the helo, and fly east to the T3 pumping station for a meeting with the British senior officers.

"Getting back up those ropes might not be as easy as getting down them," said Fedorov.

"Don't worry," said Troyak. "There's a harness and winch. It's all motorized. Just hang on tight and they'll haul you right up."

"With the Germans firing at my hind end the whole way?"

In the end, that is nearly what it became. The Marines assembled on the roof of the fortress, gathering their equipment into the supply canisters. Two man teams were posted on either side of the fort, and then the helo was vectored in, roaring out of the north, a dark looming shape against the overcast sky.

The Germans in the ruined encampment below were quickly into fox holes,

as that sound had been accompanied by withering attacks from the helo's minigun, though few had ever laid eyes on the beast. They would hear it, up in the dark mist, and then the terrible fire would begin, with lethal accuracy, right on the mortar and gun positions. The enemy could see in the dark! So the mortar teams got as far from their tube emplacements as possible when they heard the thrumming in the sky that night.

Wolff heard it, still frustrated and angry that he had not been able to take that hill. He stepped out from his headquarters at the Temple of Bel, and raised his field glasses, studying the top of the hill closely where the hard stone walls of the old fort jutted like a broken tooth. What he saw next was as puzzling as it was alarming. There was clearly an aircraft of some sort there, but it was not moving! The roar of its engines was apparent, and he rushed to a field phone, finally realizing what was happening.

"A helicopter!" he shouted at a staffer. "The British have some kind of new helicopter." He had heard of them of course, and knew the Luftwaffe was testing some experimental models, though he had never seen one—until now.

"They are pulling their men out! I could see them on the ropes. Get hold of third battalion! I want them to attack that hill at once!"

His quarry had sat their impudently for days, answering his tormenting mortar fire with equal fire, and daring him to try another attack. They were obviously special forces of some kind, he realized, admitting a grudging admiration for the audacity of this attack. Now they were slipping away!

The field phones rang in Diocletian's camp, a jarring sound in the backdrop of the old ruins. Sergeant Hermann answered, taking the order that they were to attack immediately, and passing it on to his Lieutenant. Moments later the men were up, and moving across the open ground towards the hill. The MG-34 teams were already beginning to put out covering fire.

Up on the hilltop, Fedorov was in the harness Troyak had described, buffeted by the heavy downwash and deafening sound of the helo. Yet he heard something whiz past him in the dark, and then saw the streak of tracer rounds reaching for him. The overwatch teams began returning fire with their automatic weapons, with Troyak down on the crenulated wall barking orders and seizing a Bullpup machinegun. He stood there, implacable, like a part of the fortress itself, the weapon jutting from his hip as it belched hot gunfire on the advancing German infantry below.

He could barely hear the whistles of the enemy, signaling one platoon after

another to advance., and now the fire on the hill became more intense. He saw one round flash into the rotors of the KA-40 sending a shower of sparks down from above. Then he heard a deep growl, the minigun answering with its angry reprisal. He looked up to see the terrible stream of what looked like molten lead erupting from the spinning barrels of the gun, and could only imagine what it must be like to be under fire from such a weapon. Popski's words haunted him... It was murderous.

Then he felt a hard tug on the cable from above and he was pulled rapidly up to the helo. Four other ropes were down, and the Marines were up them with amazing speed. Then, to his horror, he saw one man fall, hit by enemy fire and shot clean off the rope. His body scudded against the edge of a stone tower, and he saw another man lunge for him, unable to reach the man as he fell. The sight of the Marine's body falling into the deep shadows of the trench was agonizing. Then, to his amazement, he saw that Troyak had fixed a rappelling line around a stony abutment and was quickly up and over the ledge!

My god, he thought. What is he doing? Three other Marines moved to the scene, with one man securing the line while the other two poured out fire from their automatic weapons. The German infantry was now half way up the hill, a dark tide on the pallid ground, advancing in slow rushes. If they could reach the brow of the hill before Troyak could get out of that trench...

Then he turned when the pilot shouted something from the main cabin. "Incoming aircraft!" In a pulsing moment he thought they were now under attack by German fighters. The minigun had finally expended the last of its ammo, the barrels slowly rotating to a stop in the smoke of their own fire. Now the enemy infantry was hastening forward, and the defensive fire was slackening as the bulk of the Marines were already aboard. To men fired their assault rifles from the open hatch of the helo, and an enemy round zipped past the door—another striking the sliding hatch with a whine. Then Fedorov saw dark shapes in the sky to the west.

Popski had been the first man up, and was in the forward cabin. Now he shouted back some most welcome news, a gleam in his eye. "I've just got word from those other fellows—the Argonauts! Here they come!"

Three black shapes appeared, moving swiftly through the night like angels of death. Then they erupted with fire, each one with another minigun that raked the oncoming German tide. The men had a long cable down to the trench

where Troyak had linked up the fallen Marine, Now the two men were hauled rapidly up through the downwash, and the three Marines on the tower above hitched up a canister, two men riding it up while the third, Zykov, took a last look over his shoulder before whistling for the final rope.

The X-3s had quickly broken the attack, their fire so devastating that the German assault company seemed no more than frozen corpses on the barren hill, like human magma that had issued from the stark volcanic cone. Zykov clipped the metal C-Ring to the cable, his boot in the bottom foot harness, and up he went, the motor whirring as it pulled the last man out. Then the heavy rotors growled with renewed power, and the helo began to climb away from the tower. They were up into the covering cloud deck, the three dark angels rising with them as the helos headed east.

Fedorov looked to where Troyak sat, with the fallen Marine still cradled in his arms. He met the Sergeant's eyes, and saw Troyak slowly move his head in the negative. The man's name tag was burned into Fedorov's soul that night—SYM KOV. It was the only man they lost, but one life too many. My fault, he thought. What possessed me to think I could use these men to win the war? What did Symkov die for? He was a long time thinking about that as the helos moved east.

Later that night, when the silence had again enfolded the land, Colonel Wolff went up the hill himself to the Fortress of Fakhr ad-Din. He had many more names to linger in his soul that night, their bodies darkening the stony hillside. He realized he had used his men like a lash, in a vain attempt to strike at his enemies as they fled. The thought that he had wasted these men was also heavy on him, but he was to receive one odd consolation when a young corporal came up the stone stairway, holding something he did not recognize.

"What is that?" he said as the corporal saluted, handing him a long tube with an ominous looking diamond shaped end that he knew was some kind of ordnance. The corporal explained that he had found it in a lower chamber, hidden in the shadows.

"I tripped on the damn thing before I saw it," said the Corporal. "What is it Herr Oberst?"

Wolff took the object, hefting it in his arms, and noting the small tube like eyepiece that was fitted on the long metal shaft. The whole thing was some three feet in length, and weighed no more than 25 pounds. He did not know what it was, but Fedorov would soon learn that it was missing—an RPG-7,

with a PG-7VR Tandem HEAT round mounted on the end.

Chapter 32

Brigadier Kingstone was a massive angry presence at T3 when he arrived there. His operation had run into much more trouble than expected, and now he had some difficult decisions to make. He sat with Nichols, Popski and Fedorov, not knowing quite what to make of this Russian Captain. As for Popski, General Clark's word was all he had to go on now, though the General had been taken ill in the desert, and had to be hospitalized in Palestine. So it was down to Kingstone in overall command of Habforce now, an irascible man on a good day, and this was not a good day.

"We saw that little theater at the old Arab fort," he said to Popski. "What sort of aircraft do you men have?"

"I call it a helicontraption—a helicopter, General, though I can't say I know much more than that. That big blue bird there comes off the Russian battlecruiser that's thrown in with the Royal navy at Alexandria. Don't know much about the others, but I'm sure glad to have them handy."

"Yes... We saw how they gunned down that German company trying to make that last assault."

"Bloody business, sir. They paid a high price for that one. The only thing is this—the damn things shoot so fast they run out of ammo in a pinch. Now they'll have to fly back to Rutbah where they've stowed supplies and reserve fuel. But they'll be back, sir. You can count on them."

Fedorov said something in Russian, and Kingstone gave him a sideways glare. "The Captain wants to know whether you plan to fight on here," said Popski.

"Does he now? And are the Russians to have their nose in all our business here?" Again the harsh look Fedorov's way.

Popski thought he might smooth things over, and did what he could. "Begging your pardon, sir. This man here is thick as thieves with General Wavell. As you know, Wavell speaks Russian, and to answer your question—yes sir—Captain Fedorov was right there at the table alongside the General for the planning of the Syrian campaign. In fact, sir," and now Popski leaned in very close to the General's ear, lowering his voice. "He's even met with the Prime Minister." He raised his eyebrows to emphasize that point, which

seemed to have some pull with Kingstone.

“Very well,” said Kingstone. “General Clark has vouched for you, Major, so I’ll give you some latitude here. If what you say of this man is true, and he stands well with General Wavell, then he stands well with me.” Now the general extended a hand to Fedorov, shaking it firmly.

“The Captain is fairly well versed in intelligence matters,” Popski put in.

“That so? Then he’ll want to meet our own man, Somerset DeChair. He’s about somewhere. The two of them should get on well. But the question now, gentlemen, is what to do about this mess we find ourselves in. Now, we just got up King’s Own Rifles, so that gives us four battalions of infantry, and what’s left of the cavalry. God only knows where Glubb Pasha is, but his men amount to another light battalion. As I see it now, and particularly from your report on that German column arriving, we’re up against two good sized German units.”

“Two regiments,” said Fedorov in English.

“Yes, well one was more than enough. Nobody expected them out here. We knew about the single Foreign Legion battalion, and we’d be half way to Homs by now if that was all the they had at Palmyra. But German troops are another kettle of fish. Now, Colonel Nichols here is of a mind that any further move west would be inadvisable, and I tend to agree. At the same time, we’ve got another battle to the east shaping up at Dier-ez-Zour on the Euphrates. Here’s the map our man DeChair sketched out.”

He briefed them on the Euphrates operation, indicating that two brigades of 10th Indian Division had pushed up from Iraq, with the intention of driving all the way to Aleppo, which is something Fedorov knew they had accomplished in this campaign.

“Now the Germans in front of me at Palmyra are the 22nd Luftland Air Landing Division. We know that much. It seems they also stuck their thumb in the pie over here at Dier-ez-Zour. Another full regiment flew in by air, and it’s been reinforced in the last two days. There’s been some thought given to the idea of our pulling out here, and getting northeast to the Euphrates to help out the Indian troops. At least between both forces we might trump the enemy in at least one spot, and then we can get up north.

“May I suggest alternatives?” said Fedorov, again in English. “Here, this town, Raqqah. It is north, yes? But any force at Dier-ez-Zour must be supplied—through this town.” He pointed to Raqqah, which was about 180 kilometers

up river from Dier-ez-Zour. "Can we go there?"

Kingstone eyed the map, thinking. "Yes... If we could manage to get up north, we'd cut Jerry's supply off alright, except for anything they can get in by air. That won't be much as soon as the Indian Division gets its artillery up and starts pounding the airfield at Dier-ez-Zour. I suppose if we do move north, even that movement itself might compel the Germans to withdraw up river. The problem is getting there. I see very little in the way of roads on this map, and that's Jebel country north of Sukhnah—rugged mountains, badlands, volcanic debris and stony ground. We could get the whole column lost out there, or stuck, and without a good rout of supply. We'd only have what we can carry. Without Glubb Pasha and his scouts, I'd hesitate to move my force north. Nichols?" Kingstone wanted another opinion.

"I like it better than trying to slug it out here. We're a desert maneuver force. That's our real virtue. We'll find Glubb Pasha, wherever he is now, and Major Popski is here, both well schooled as desert scouts. And we've got the Captain's helicopters out there."

"True, and no offence Major Popski, but have you seen that ground? It's no place for a wheeled column, and I've hundreds of trucks and vehicles to look after. On the other hand, there is a relatively good road from here to Dier-ez-Zour, and it's no more than 125 kilometers. If we leave now we could arrive there tomorrow, and possibly have a major impact on that battle. The 10th Indian Division is fighting there now, and, if we can't fight here, then my inclination is to march to the sound of the guns. I would, however, permit a flying column to try the roads north to Raqqah, but it would have to be fast, light, and well supplied. Would your Russian Captain care to volunteer to have a look up north. If there are any prospects, I'll hand this one off to Glubb Pasha when we find him. You can take Number 2 Armored Car Company, a battery of light AA guns on portees, and perhaps a company of the Essex Battalion. As for the rest. I think I have my mind set on Dier-ez-Zour."

"Very well sir," said Popski, translating all this for Fedorov. He nodded his understanding. Then told Popski that he and his helicopters would be honored to scout the way north.

"Good then. Let's pull out and get moving. If we can take these two places, it will cut off the whole limb of the tree where the Euphrates is concerned. The Germans will have to fall back on Aleppo, and the only question is whether they can get there before us when they learn what we're up to."

Kingstone folded his arms. "One last thing, gentlemen. What is to stop this German force here at Palmyra from getting into mischief?"

"Where would they go?" said Nichols. "Certainly not Rutbah down south."

"If they tried, they might cut the pipeline to Haifa," Kingstone cautioned.

"Yes," said Nichols, "but we still have troops near Fallujah and Ramadi, and we can get them there in time to stop such a move, or at least hold them off until we can do something about it."

"Alright," said Kingstone. "I'll inform Jumbo Wilson what we intend to do, and unless he's got something to say about it, then we're off as soon as we can pull the men together. Get anything you have north of that airfield back west. I'll post the Cavalry as a rearguard, and will somebody find out where the Arab Legion is?"

"We'll have a look about when we take off to fuel the whirly birds," said Popski.

And so it was that the battle of attrition that was in front of them would now evolve again into a battle of maneuver, and both sides would soon be in a race to control the upper Euphrates. Fedorov felt a little better in thinking he had given some sound advice here, even if it wasn't entirely taken, yet he had to rely on the experience of these men in the here and now. This wasn't just a reading exercise. He realized he was well outside his history books now. There's nothing written about this, he thought, nothing at all. But someone has to write the new book, and it may as well be us.

"Will you be departing to resupply immediately?" Kingstone asked Popski.

"More or less. We were four days up on that hill. The French tried us once, and Jerry tried us twice. They'll be regretting that for some time, but we lost a man during the extraction, and the Captain wants to have a burial ceremony here."

"I see... Sorry we couldn't do more. Damn Bedu raiders were nipping at the column the whole way here. "

* * *

Fedorov decided to move the supply cache at Rutbah to the T2 Pumping station along the pipeline to Tripoli. The line itself had been closed since the onset of hostilities, but as each pumping station had a makeshift landing strip, a small fortified outpost, and communications back to Iraq, it would serve as a

good local base for their next operation. Now they had the X-3 helos, and two platoons of the Argonauts, together with the Marines. The “Mobile Force” was reconstituted, and they could front what amounted to a well armed company, airmobile, and with the considerable support of the helicopters on attack or defense.

The conference ended, and the Argonauts, still well armed and fueled, departed to secure T2, while the Marines gathered for a burial ceremony for Symkov. It felt very strange to them to see their comrade, born and raised in 21st Century Russia, and now laid to rest in the empty desert of Syria in 1941. The thought that in that future time, should it ever come, he would be born again, and walk the earth while his remains still lay buried beneath those sands, was somewhat confounding in Fedorov’s mind.

The whole team was surprised by the unexpected arrival of Brigadier Kingstone, with a small rifle detail. He stood respectfully at the grave site and, when the burial was concluded, he nodded to the riflemen, who stood stiffly to attention. They shouldered their arms in unison, and fired three volleys into the open desert in tribute. When the salute was concluded, all the Marines felt something that they had not felt since coming to the Mediterranean sector again. They had fought, many times in this wild sojourn, but the sound of those rifles was a kind of bond between men of war that all understood, and felt deeply. Brigadier Kingstone turned to Popski, and asked him to thank the Marines for what they had done.

“Now we’re off to make that man’s life count for something,” he said, saluting before he turned and led the rifle team off.

Fedorov wasted no time. He wanted to depart for Rutbah immediately to load the supplies and remaining fuel, and move everything to the new base at T2. It was during that flight that Troyak decided to take inventory on the canisters they had used at the fortress.

“Chenko... Didn’t we bring four RPG-7s along with the RPG 32s?”

“Yes, Sergeant. But we didn’t get the chance to fire them.”

“Oh? Well I count only three.” He turned, eyeing the men where they sat in crowded rows in the helo. After batting it around for a time to find out who was carrying what, it soon became apparent that something had simply been overlooked in the hasty withdrawal under fire at the top of that fortress.

“My fault,” said Zykov. “I thought I had checked every room below, but it was dark, and things were heating up fast. I saw nothing, but that doesn’t

matter. I was the last man up the ropes. The blame is mine.”

When Fedorov got the news, he raised an eyebrow. “An RPG-7? Was there a round mounted?”

“Yes sir,” said Troyak. “I’m responsible. I should have double checked—”

“Never mind who’s responsible,” said Fedorov. “We all know you were preoccupied trying to save Symkov. Well... this is interesting. The Germans will certainly find that RPG. The only question is, what will they do with it?”

“If you want to go back for it tonight, I’ll lead the assault.”

“No. I think that would be most unwise, Sergeant. The Germans have learned what the sound of our rotors means. They most likely have men in that fortress now, and probably at least a company. Besides. If they found it, as I’m certain they did, then they would have passed it up the chain of command. It may not even be in the fortress now, and we certainly can’t land and politely ask for it back. We’d have to search the whole German encampment otherwise, so we just have to let it go. What it may do to the future course of events will remain unknown, but if anyone is responsible, it is me, Troyak. I led the mission, and we’re all in the thick of things now. God only knows what the history will look like in the years ahead for all we’ve done here. If it’s any consolation, remember there’s a full modern British mechanized brigade out there. So one RPG-7 doesn’t seem that much in the balance—a grain of sand in the wheelbarrow.”

It seemed logical, just a single device, with one round. But Fedorov was wrong again. In the summer of 1942 in the history Fedorov knew, an enterprising man named Doctor Heinrich Langweiler was dreaming up new theories of propulsion for weapons munitions, and in 1939 he had drafted a paper on what he called the “Impulse Propulsion Principle.” He was experimenting with hyper-velocity for small arms munitions, and would later go on to design the forerunner of the dread German *Panzerfaust* (Panzer Fist), a hand held AT weapon that was accounting for up to 34% of all British tank losses by the time the war ended.

Langweiler worked with a company called HASSAG in Leipzig, and one of his ideas involved the development of “rocket bullets” fired from a smoothbore weapon. His “Impulse Antrieb” theory would utilize a rod propellant that burned behind the round, increasing pressure, and muzzle velocity. One application would see the development of an 88mm air-to-air rocket known as the “Puppchen.” His *Panzerfaust* would one day see

production of up to 200,000 units per month, much to the chagrin of allied tankers on every side, as it could effectively kill any tank produced in the war.

Colonel Wolff knew he had something very unusual when the corporal brought the weapon in, and he had it crated up and immediately sent to division headquarters, with a letter explaining his find. *“Appears to be a new British hand-held anti tank weapon.”* He wrote. *“DO NOT FIRE! Contents and design of round must be examined by qualified personnel. Recommend immediate transport to Germany.”*

His instructions were followed, and the RPG would soon come to the attention of Langweiler himself, and have a dramatic impact on his thinking and design for the weapon that would soon threaten to rewrite history yet again. The *Faustpatrone 42* was going to move into development a whole year early, and its successor, the *Panzerfaust*, was going to be something no one on the Allied side expected.

It was a grain of sand that would soon start an avalanche.

Chapter 33

Von Wietersheim looked at the men he had summoned to this meeting at Korps headquarters in Homs, General Ritter von Hubicki of the 9th Panzer Division, Felix Steiner of the 5th SS Viking Motorized, and Graf von Sponeck of the 22nd Luftland Division. General Kübler, the overall commander of the Mountain Korps, had been scheduled to arrive, but was still on the trains at Hamah to the north.

“Well,” he began, looking at Hubicki first. “What in god’s name happened?”

“It wasn’t in god’s name,” said Hubicki. “It was something out of hell itself. The British hit my division just before dawn this morning, and practically destroyed my entire force.”

“Destroyed it? With what?”

“We all heard the rumors, the talk at OKW about these new British heavy tanks—well it is true! They are awesome! I thought I had seen everything when I saw that old French Char-2C tank we hauled off to Berlin— a real monster. Well these were just as big!”

The French Char-2C was actually the largest tank ever built, weighing in at 69 tons, it was over 33 feet long, and over thirteen feet wide, slightly bigger than the Challenger II, and about 9 tons heavier. The Germans would build a much heavier tank in the Maus at 188 tons, but it was not as long or tall as the Char-2C, giving it less overall volume. Only ten of the big French tanks were ever built, and a single Challenger would easily defeat all of them in combat, though they never really fired a shot in anger. Used mainly for propaganda movies as symbols of invincible tanks, they were being moved south of the action when the rail line was blocked, and so they were all destroyed but one—the vehicle named “Champagne.” That one was captured by the Germans and hauled off to Berlin as a trophy, and Hubicki had seen it in 1940.

“There weren’t very many of these big tanks, and thank god for that! They are operating with new fast moving medium tanks, about regimental strength, and they fight like demons. They hit the Panzergrenadiers and went right through them. Most of our AT gun positions were chopped up at long range by enemy fire, but even those that engaged were useless. Everything we have

heard about this new British armor is true. I had my 1st tank battalion in reserve behind the main line, and so naturally I ordered it to counterattack. You would not want to look at what is left of them now. The second battalion suffered the same fate. Decimation is not enough of a word for what happened to those boys.”

Von Wietersheim’s eyes darkened, a troubled look on his face. “Steiner?”

“You know the trouble we had trying to cross the Turkish Straits,” said Steiner. “My division arrived too late to stop the breakthrough, and many of my supply units failed to arrive at all. They were on those ferries that went down with that U-boat attack.”

“How did the British manage to pull that off?”

“The British?” said Steiner. “They are still denying any involvement in the incident. But who else could it have been? The Russians? It hardly matters. The fact remains that we have a hundred tons of supplies and ammunition at the bottom of the Bosphorus. Now we will have to fly those munitions to Turkish airfields, and then move them by rail, which is going to slow down the logistics. It will be at least another week before my division has adequate supplies. That said, I have posted two regiments at Rayak with the organic supplies we were carrying. We still hold the town, but the British have overrun the airfield to the south. What was left of 9th Panzer was able to move back through our lines and is reforming to the north. Believe me, it was not good for morale to see that.”

“Yes, and the British are attacking everywhere now. They are still pushing up the coast with the Australian division, but there has been no talk of unstoppable enemy tanks there. They are pushing to Nebek north of Damascus—and no unstoppable tanks lead that assault. Now we get word they are maneuvering in the east.”

“We stopped them at Palmyra,” said von Sponeck pointing to the map. “They seized the fortress overlooking the town four days ago, and used it to put mortar fire on the airfield. I’m afraid it’s useless for the moment. But we stopped their main column, and we still hold the town.”

“Yes? Well that is because the British have deliberately withdrawn, to move on Dier-ez-Zour. Their column was spotted and strafed by one of our planes, and it is clear where they are headed now.” Von Wietersheim folded his arms, clearly unhappy.

“They have obviously committed their strongest units against us in the

center,” said Hubicki.

“But the attack there has stopped,” Steiner put in. “In fact, British infantry has come up to occupy that line, and they are digging in. They seem to have pulled their armor back to regroup. What we need now is a good Pakfront. It is clear the 37mm guns are useless. We need something bigger.”

Now von Wietersheim remembered the warning he had been given by Manstein concerning these new British tanks. The reports from Rommel claimed that they were even impervious to a direct hit from an 88mm flak gun! “Something bigger,” he mused aloud. “Well, we don’t have anything bigger—not yet. So we will have to use what we do have, good troops, iron will, and proper tactics. Are you well dug in, Steiner?”

“Of course, but if we cannot stop this armor—”

“Then let it roll right over you and fight from your trenches. It is clear they have these tanks in small numbers, and use them in the *schwerpunkt* of their attack. So we must thicken the crust of our line, and defend in depth. I want minefields laid immediately, if you have not already done so. And the artillery must stand ready to saturate the point of enemy breakthrough. Be stubborn, gentlemen. And as for your remaining Panzers,” he looked at Hubicki now. “Disperse them into good hull down positions to support the infantry.”

“You ask us to fight as we did in the last war,” said Hubicki. “What will we do next, string up the barbed wire and hit them with gas?”

“We haven’t either in hand,” von Wietersheim replied curtly. But it would be a good idea.” He allowed himself the hint of a smile, letting the men know he was humoring them. But soon the seriousness of the situation darkened his features again. “Steiner,” he said. “Can you hold Rayak?”

“To the last man, sir.”

“Good. Then I will send what remains of 9th Panzer to Nebek to backstop the French. I do not think you will find these British tanks there, Hubicki. In any case. Pull together what you can and get over there. Now then... Dier-ez-Zour,” he leaned over the map, tapping the small town on the Euphrates with his finger. “It is clear the British were attempting a double envelopment on our left. They tried us at Palmyra, and Wolff stopped them there. Good for him. He even sent me a present—some kind of new hand held anti-tank weapon. Lord knows we could use something like that now. Alright... What do we have at Dier-ez-Zour?”

“The 65th Regiment landed there two days ago,” said von Sponeck, “and

elements of the Sturm Regiment came in by parachute on the north side of the river. The British have troops advancing from Mosul. Now we are getting reports of a full enemy division, the 10th Indian, and to that we can add this column that was at Palmyra. It will tip the balance there unfavorably.”

“Agreed,” said von Wietersheim. “We could hold, but the position is too exposed. How will we keep that force supplied?”

“We were using the airfield, but now they have that under artillery fire. We also have reports of more commando raids at Raqqah.”

“They are clearly trying to cut your overland supply route,” said von Wietersheim. “I don’t like it. What do you have in ready reserve that can move by air transport?”

“I have the 7th Machinegun battalion at the airfield now, Herr General. Student has also been landing troops from Cyprus at Hamrah to the north.”

“Good enough. Get that Machinegun battalion to Raqqah at once and see about these commandos. As for the troops you have at Dier-ez-Zour, I believe that position is untenable. It was a good blocking maneuver in the short run, but pull those units out and withdraw up river. That town is too easily outflanked, from both Mosul and now this column withdrawing from Palmyra.”

“I have two regiments at Palmyra, sir. We could follow right in the heels of that British column and give them something to think about.”

“And again, how would you keep your men supplied? We are already having difficulty finding enough trucks to get supplies to you at Palmyra. No. Do not move east—just hold Palmyra. 65th Regiment will fall back on Raqqah as I have instructed. In fact, I don’t think you will need two regiments at Palmyra now. Let the 16th relieve Colonel Wolff there, and send his 47th Regiment back to Homs. I will put it on the trains to garrison Aleppo. The main thing now is to screen and hold that town. That is where the principle rail connections through Turkey are, and undoubtedly the intended end point of this British operation. They will follow you up river as you withdraw, but it is not easy to outflank Raqqah, so we will fight them there. As they advance their lines of communications get longer, while ours shorten. Those are your orders, gentlemen. And as for the Luftwaffe, I want every JU-87 we can get our hands on here in Syria. The next time these British tanks appear, let us see how they like our Stukas!”

* * *

They took off at dusk, rising through the haze made red with the setting sun, a fat mother goose in the KA-40, but with three sleek eagles at her side. The helos climbed quickly into the crimson sky, moving swiftly north over the desert. On the way they overflew the long column of Habforce, now grown to over 700 vehicles strung out in the desert tracks below.

Fedorov had a feeling of real uncertainty in his gut now, particularly after seeing the consequences of his choices and decisions buried in the desert with Symkov. That is the least of it, he thought. God only knows how many other lives I'm responsible for. So where are you going now, he asked himself?

There was no fortress on a high hill at Raqqah, though the town itself did offer good prospects for defense. It sat on the north bank of the Euphrates, with two good bridges that they would have to control. To the east was hill 266, a good point to overlook the town itself, and the airfield was just north of this feature, on a low plateau bounded on the north by a canal and stream that reached down to the Euphrates.

Was the town defended? If so, how big was the garrison? They would be able to do an aerial reconnaissance, and if prospects looked good, they might put the men down and seize those bridges. There must be some German supply and logistics operation getting set up there. They had to make some arrangement to try and support those troops at Dier-ez-Zour. He shrugged, realizing that all his strategic and tactical advice came mostly from his extensive knowledge of the history, but now he was on a blank page of his own making.

I'm no more a General than I am a Captain. What was I thinking bringing the Marines out here? Yes, we're trying to help out in any way we can, but I feel like I'm bumbling about, trying to find some lever on the history, some Pushpoint that might move events unfolding here. Yet, for all our meddling, what have we really accomplished? We stopped Rommel—Kinlan did that, though I had a hand in convincing him. Yet that theatre is far from decided. Rommel has had over a month to fatten up at Mersa Brega, and soon he may be tempted to go on the offensive again. Then what? Most of Kinlan's Brigade is here in the Levant now. He cannot be everywhere. In some places the British will have to stand on their own. We thought the addition of Kinlan's battalions here might quickly unhinge the French defense, but now it seems all we've

done is bring down an avalanche of German troops to this theater.

And yet, this is the key battlefield right now. There are hundreds of desert kilometers between Rommel and the Egyptian border, and enough British troops there to hold him, or at least delay his advance again. Now, with German troops here in Syria, they simply must be stopped. If they were to break through and drive south into Palestine, that would be a disaster. And what about Iraq?

Even as he thought that, he realized that the Germans would have problems of their own. They would have to find the means of sustaining these forces in the field. Though the French could provide them with transport, petrol, food and water, they would have to bring in all of their own ammunition. A move on Iraq would not be easy for them at this stage. It's a long way to the lower Euphrates from places like Aleppo and Homs, and the British had significant forces in theater now with the arrival of the Indian divisions.

But that will be all, he knew. Unless Churchill has been planning another of his Winston Special convoys, the last Indian Division, the 5th, will be all they will have for some time—that and a couple brigades of the 1st South African Division. How many divisions do the German have in Syria now? How many more might they send? He realized that he could not see the road ahead any longer. The near prescient advantage he had in the past had slipped from him in the slow twisting gyre of these altered states.

He realized that if the Germans wished, they could continue to send more and more troops, but they would need those rail lines to do this, and to keep them supplied. Yes! Here he was flitting about like another Lawrence of Arabia. He thought he could use the mobility and firepower of his helicopters to have a dramatic effect—and he could! I'm simply picking the wrong targets, he thought. Yes, shutting down that airfield at Palmyra helped, and this reconnaissance is well planned, but what did Lawrence spend most of his time doing? He hit the Hejaz railroad the Turks needed to sustain their operations against Allenby. He tore up the tracks every chance he could get. The British can't do that here, because they can't get to the rail lines effectively. Look what happened to their commandos at Rayak. But I can! I can move like lightning and cut that line from Aleppo to Homs, and that is exactly what we will do after we see about Raqqah.

He was ruminating on all of this when a radio came in on the secure channel from *Kirov*. It was Admiral Volsky, probably checking up on me, he

thought as he took the headset and slipped it into place. A stab of anxiety rose in his chest. He would have to tell the Admiral about Symkov.

“Mister Fedorov? Glad to know you are alive and well. Was your mission successful?”

“Good day, Admiral. We had some success in shutting down the airfield as planned, but the Germans moved in too many troops, and the British could not take the town. I made the decision to extract the men and we are presently on aerial reconnaissance out ahead of the British advance on the Euphrates. I hope this is alright, sir.”

“I have no objection, Fedorov. Use your best judgment. We have not been idle here ourselves. I took the ship out with the *Argos Fire* and we kept watch on the French fleet. There was a flotilla thinking to slip through the strait above Cyprus, but Gromyko discouraged them. They had several fast cruisers and destroyers, and were not worried about submarines. Now they are worried. They have made the wise decision to turn about and return to Taranto, but there are signs that there may be bigger fish in the sea soon. I will keep you informed, but that aside, I do have some news for you, and it concerns Karpov. It seems he arranged a meeting with Sergei Kirov, and the two men came to some understanding.”

That sounded like good news, and Fedorov said as much, until the Admiral continued. “But then something happened. His airship overflew Germany, and he even had the audacity to bomb Berlin! That man will never change his stripes. Yet now Admiral Tovey tells me that he made arrangements to fly to London and conference with the British, but he never arrived. There was a bad storm over the channel as he was crossing, and they now believe his airship went down.”

“Crashed? In the English Channel?”

“This is what we believe. The British have been searching, but there has been no sign of the airship, or any wreckage on the sea.”

Fedorov sat with that a moment, then asked the Admiral to keep him informed. “I’m afraid I have a little bad news myself, sir. We lost a man in that last action during the extraction. Symkov...”

Volsky waited, then came back. “I am sorry to hear that. Very well, Mister Fedorov. So we both have shared our bad news. Let us hope something good comes of this whole affair in the end. Yes? Please let me know when you plan to conclude your mission there and return to the ship. We will be at Alexandria

with the British fleet—Volsky over and out.”

As he removed the headset Fedorov had a strange feeling about the news he had received. We believed he was gone once, he thought, yet that was not so. I can think of no reason, but something tells me Karpov is not dead this time either. If there is any man among us who might be thought of as a Prime Mover on all these events, it is Karpov. Yes, I mustn't shoulder all the blame. Something tells me he'll turn up somewhere again, and get himself into trouble.

He did not know whether the Admiral's news was good or bad at this point, but he was deeply troubled about it, and decided to say nothing of the matter to the others.

Part XII

The Precipice

*“Let the great world spin for ever
down the ringing grooves of change!”*

— **Alfred Lord Tennyson**

Chapter 34

The address was Number 25 Shkolnaya Street, one of the most common place names for streets in Russia. Other famous examples were the old district by that name in Moscow, where a free settlement of coachmen serving the mail route from Moscow to Vladimir was established in the 16th Century. Rows of old inns once lined the street, and at one time it was the haunt of an odd sect known as the “Old Believers,” an offshoot group separating from the Russian Orthodox Church in 1666. Another famous site was the Shkolnaya railway station in St. Petersburg, and so all over the country, the name “Shkolnaya Street” was often associated with inns and railway stations.

Karpov did not fail to notice the connection, for the address was also associated with another famous site, at least in his mind. It was the address of the old railway inn at Ilanskiy. How interesting, he thought, that the old Shkolnaya Street in Moscow should be associated with a road traveling to a city christened with my name—the road from Vladimir to the heart of Moscow, the heart of the nation itself in modern times.

As he stood in the muddy street outside the hotel, he realized that this conjunction of inns, railroads and the names Vladimir and Shkolnaya would again point directly at the heart of the nation. This out of the way nothing of a place is perhaps the most significant seat of power in Russia, if not on all the earth. And it is mine, he smiled. I control it in 1941, and now I will soon control it here, in pre-revolutionary times, where all manner of mischief can be accomplished. From here I can paint upon the vast canvass of Russia and create any image I like, and my brush can make, or end, the lives and fate of any man in Russia.

They had come to the site just an hour ago, the massive hulk of *Tunguska* looking in the mist above the town like a monstrous UFO. The townspeople below had come out from their shops and houses to gape in awe at the site, and Karpov smiled when he saw women rounding up their children, casting fearful glances at the airship, as it was a thing they had never seen before. One of the first airships in Russia, the PL-7, had not even been built yet in 1909, and it would have been tiny compared to *Tunguska*, so he understood the surprise and fear the site of his ship would instill in the little people below. That was as

it should be.

The airship hovered low over a field on the eastern fringe of the settlement, above the very same scattering of woodland that Sergeant Troyak and his Marines would use as cover when they approached the site on their daring raid in 1940. There Karpov would fight a duel in the skies aboard *Abakan*, blasting the *Alexandra* from the sky after apprehending its captain Symenko, and then chasing the second ship Volkov had foolishly sent, the *Oskemen*, under the truculent Captain Petrov. That name did not fail to register in Karpov's mind, which was now taking keen notice of all these odd associations since he first mused on the incident with his Great Grandfather.

Soon the cargo basket began to lower, watched by small gatherings of the brave, mostly men who had come over from the nearby rail station. Their fears were redoubled when they saw dour looking men in dark coats emerge with sub-machineguns. They were obviously military, or police of some kind, all in dark wool coats emblazoned with shoulder patches and insignia, and wearing black fleece Ushankas. They fanned out, waving the curious away, and then the last basket lowered with Karpov, Tyrenkov, and a select group of five hand-picked guards.

Karpov wasted little time, making his way directly to No. 25 Shkolnaya Street, the site of the old railway inn. His fifty man security contingent surrounded the building, guards on every side, occupying and clearing out the school building adjacent to the inn, which was largely empty that day in any case. Karpov strode up the main entrance, pleased to see the familiar lines of the building again, and the wooded park with the round stone fountain behind the inn. Then, at Tyrenkov's direction, two of his personal guard entered, making a quick security sweep.

"Be certain no one uses that back stairway for any reason," he said. "Just send a man up to the second floor by the main stairs to make sure there are no unsavory guests."

Moments later he entered to the main front desk, seeing a frightened man there with one of his guards.

"You are the proprietor?" he said tersely, and the man nodded. "Good. Then I wish to see your guest register. How many boarders are presently quartered here?"

"Only three, said the man sheepishly, thinking this had to be the Okhrana when he saw the dark uniforms and military insignia. Either that or some

powerful new general come at last. Someone must have been talking, he thought. He knew they could not keep the rumors from spreading for very long. Ever since that fateful morning a year ago, when the horizon was afire with the awful red glow of a second sunrise, and the terrible roaring sound came from the sky, his quiet life at the railway inn had never been the same.

That was when it had all started. That was when strange, uninvited guests would suddenly appear in the dining room, or on the upper hall on the second floor, and none of their names were ever in his register. He did not know that they had signed in at another register, in the book of time and fate, but tales had begun to circulate quickly in the town, saying the place was haunted. And being just a few blocks from the railway station, these stories eventually boarded trains with the passengers that told them. He had hoped nothing would ever come of it all, and he had even taken steps to restrict the use of that back stairway—yes—that was the center of it all, he knew.

But someone listened, he thought, and someone finally took notice. Now who are these strange, evil looking men come from that thing in the sky? Were they the dread secret police of the Czar, here to interrogate him? Karpov's next questions confirmed his deepest fears.

"Tell me," said the Admiral. "There are two stairways in this building. Yes? Have you noticed anything odd about the one in the back—the stairway from the dining room to the upper floor?"

"Anything strange?"

"Yes... People there who don't seem to belong. Interlopers—people in your inn who have not made any reservation, or paid for boarding."

"I assure you," the man said quickly, his eyes wide with alarm, "We do not harbor criminals here, or fugitives. We are loyal citizens!"

Karpov could see that the man believed he was here to look for renegade revolutionaries, which was what most official personnel or police might be doing this year, in 1909. "Let me see your register," he ordered, and the man nodded and quickly produced an old book.

Karpov opened it and flipped through the pages, scanning the names of boarders who had signed in over the years, his eyes narrow with thought. As might be expected in the isolated place, the inn, and the rail itself, was not well traveled. Occasionally there were entries involving troop trains that booked the entire inn, mostly for the officers. Otherwise, the entries were sparse enough to be listed on weekly pages, instead of daily entries. There was one segment, in

mid-1908, that seemed to be more heavily booked, and he took note of the names there closely. There were German names, Koeppen, Fuchs and Neuberger, and another labeled “American Team: Schuster, Miller, Hansen, MacAdam. One was labeled: “Thomas Byrne, Reporter,” and it was clear that some special event had brought all these people to this nothing of a place.

He knew that he would probably not find the name of Ivan Volkov here. No. If he appeared here, then he would probably have wandered outside and eventually hopped on a westbound train. Then his eye fell on a curious entry, a name that jogged some inner memory that seemed familiar, but one he could not place—Mironov.

“This name,” he said. “It was a man?”

The old proprietor looked at the book, squinting, and shaking his head. “Always men with the names,” he said. “No self-respecting woman would dare travel alone here.”

“Then this man Mironov... Do you remember what he looked like?”

Now there was little doubt in the proprietor’s mind. These men were Okhrana, and they were obviously looking for someone. God help the young rascals now, the men who came through from time to time, traveling under some pseudonym, Mironov was probably one of them, but he could not remember the man—until he remembered the light in the sky that day when he saw the date: June 30, 1908.

“Who can remember such things?” the man said, and Karpov knew he would be of no further use to him.

“You have other quarters nearby?” he said.

“For your men?”

“No, for you and any others who might be working here. I mean to commandeer this entire inn for my officers and staff. Don’t worry, you will be paid handsomely in gold, but you will make arrangements and leave within the hour. But before you do, I would like a meal served in the dining room for myself and one other. I will see to the security of the inn while we are here. Have no fears on that count.”

He dismissed the man, then realized he had a unique opportunity here. “Tyrenkov, summon the Chief of Engineers. Tell him to bring a team down here with measuring devices of every kind. I want them to survey this site top to bottom, and take exact measurements of that stairway—everything, angles, heights, exact position in relation to the hearth in the dining hall—to the

millimeter. Understood? That was the only thing that survived the demolition in 1940. It will serve as a foolproof reference point for the builders in 1941.”

“Then you mean to return there?” asked Tyrenkov. “By what means?” They walked from the front desk into the dining hall, and Karpov eyed the darkened alcove near the hearth with a suspicious look.

“There is one option,” he pointed. “That back stairway leads somewhere, doesn’t it?”

“But where, sir? How do we know it would take us back to our time? Why should it do so?”

“Good questions, Tyrenkov. It may not take us anywhere, but that is what I have come here to determine before we begin operations.”

“I see... Then you want to do a reconnaissance on the stairway to verify its... effects?”

“More or less.”

“Won’t that be dangerous, sir?”

“Most likely, which is why you will be the man on the stairs.”

“I understand, sir. Are we to begin immediately?”

“First let us eat our meal, and I will brief you.”

They waited until the proprietor returned with a hearty stew, seating themselves at a table by the warm hearth.

“From what I have learned, I believe a former associate of mine came down those steps to approximately this time. He didn’t bother to sign in to the register, because he did not stay long. But while he was here he met a most important man.”

Now Karpov opened the hotel register, pointing at a name entered on June 30, 1908, in the midst of all the other entries for that week. Tyrenkov looked at the name, but did not recognize it. “Mironov?”

“An alias,” said Karpov. “The man who used it was really named Kostrikov—Sergei Mironovich Kostrikov—the very same man who later adopted another alias—Sergei Kirov.”

“Amazing,” said Tyrenkov. “Then he was here, at this very inn just a year ago. I wish I could say that would help us find him, but it probably won’t.”

“Don’t worry about that. We’ll deal with Kirov later. For the moment we have the matter of that back stairway in front of us. I have a strong suspicion it may lead from here to the year 1942.”

“1942? Why do you believe this, Admiral?”

“Because this associate I mention—a subordinate really—came down those steps from the second floor, in September of the year 1942. This is a long story, Tyrenkov, but you must know some of what has happened to understand things here. That ship I mentioned—the ship named for Sergei Kirov—do you remember I told you our movement in time had something to do with the propulsion system?”

“Yes sir.”

“Good, well there was one particular component of that system that we determined to be the culprit.” Karpov knew he could not get into the design and concept of nuclear fission now, or what a control rod was and how it was used, so he kept things simple. “This component could be removed, and used in other similar engines, and while we were doing this in a test environment, there was another little accident. A man named Makarov vanished, and we later learned by scouring the history that he had re-appeared in September of 1942.”

“Reappeared?”

“Yes, in the very same location, but in a different time.”

“How thrilling, sir. What did you do?”

“We did something very clever, Tyrenkov. We used that test facility to send other men back, for at that time we were looking for a crew member that had been separated from our ship earlier in that same year. Yes. I told you that first accident sent us back to 1941, but we bounced around quite a few times, into 1942 in fact, before we finally realized that it was our own propulsion system, and this particular component, that was responsible for the strange effects.”

“And how does that relate to this place, Admiral? How does it relate to that back stairway? Was that component brought here?”

“No, but this associate I speak of was a member of my crew, a junior officer in fact. When we unraveled the mystery of that missing man, Makarov, we got the idea that we might send men back the same way, to retrieve the other missing crewman, a man named Orlov. We knew where he was, but I won’t get into that now. Suffice it to say that this junior officer, Fedorov, led a team back to 1942, and they traveled along this rail line heading west to find Orlov. In fact, he stopped at this very inn, in September of 1942.”

“And he came down that stairway?”

“This is what I now believe. Otherwise how could he have met this man—Sergei Mironovich Kostrikov—the man who called himself Mironov at that

time.”

“But how, Admiral? If he did not have that component from your ship’s engines, how did he move in time to 1908?”

“This we do not exactly know, but I believe it nonetheless, and it has something to do with that stairway, that hole in the history I told you about. It is obviously here, right on the other side of that door. Fedorov used it to get all the way back to 1908. Sergei Kirov told me so when I met with him, so that confirms it.”

Karpov smiled, pleased with his deductive reasoning on the matter, and continued. “Now then, you recall I went up those stairs myself when we first got to Ilanskiy after the Omsk accord was signed? At that time I was already beginning to suspect something about this place. So I took a little stroll myself—up that back stairway. Yes! I vanished for a time, didn’t I? And when I returned I did not seem quite myself, and now I will tell you why.”

Chapter 35

“**The** hole in time goes both directions, Tyrenkov.” Karpov finished his stew and took a long sip of his wine. “Just as that stairway goes both directions. I know this because Fedorov came down those stairs from September of 1942 and ended up on June 30, 1908. And I, myself, went up those stairs just after the Omsk accords, and ended up in a most alarming place. When I got to the top, half the upper floor was blown away, and in the distance I saw the telltale signs of a massive weapon—the terrible bombs we use in our time, and it was clear to me that another great war had begun—World War Three.”

“The second one we were fighting was not enough?”

“Apparently not. Each time we end these conflicts, we leave things unsettled. One side or another harbors grievances. Mistrust grows in the space between nations, and old enmities arise. You have seen only a little of the second war. It gets much worse. The Germans will soon invade our homeland. This time I believe they will attack through the Ukraine, as Ivan Volkov has sold out and thrown in with Hitler. But it all amounts to the same thing. Russia will be ravaged by war, her cities destroyed, farms bombed and burned, millions killed by the Nazi war machine. We get our vengeance, but it takes long years of bitter fighting, and millions more dead before that second war ends. Who knows if we will even survive this time. We were one nation in the history of the world I came from—not the three warring states we have here now. It took the united Soviet Union to eventually defeat Hitler’s armies. Whether that can happen again in the world you come from, the world we just left, remains to be seen, and believe me, I have my doubts.”

“We must believe it is possible, sir.”

“It will take more than belief. I tried to mend fences with Volkov, but we have seen the result of that. So instead I went to Sergei Kirov, and we reached an understanding. But our two states may not be enough. Volkov sits on all the oil, which is what the Germans really want. The situation we face is very difficult now.”

“I see...” Tyrenkov waited, seeing that Karpov was thinking about something. “Then you want me to go *up* those stairs this time?”

“I see no point in going *down* them from here,” said Karpov. “Even if they did lead us somewhere, the years before this time get somewhat tedious. Who knows where we would end up? So of course, from here our reconnaissance will be into some potential future. I need to know two things. First, does the effect still work from here. I know it worked from 1908, because my man Fedorov proved that. But we do not know if we can get anywhere from here.”

“We will find out soon enough,” said Tyrenkov. “I am ready any time you order it.”

“I would go myself, but what you said to me earlier has given me pause.” Karpov folded his hands.

“You mean my question about what might happen to you at the time your ship first appeared here?”

“Correct. What if we find those stairs do take us back to the 1940s? What day and year would it lead us to? It was March of 1941 when we left for London and ran into that storm. That was a freak incident, and one that may never repeat. So this stairway was my only bet at moving forward again with any chance of success. But I cannot take any unnecessary risk. Suppose this does lead to the 1940s? If I were to find myself there any time close to the date of my first arrival, then things could get difficult for me, as you suggested.”

“When was that, sir?”

“July 28, 1941. That was when it all started. So believe me, the thought that I may have only four months to live if I do return to March of 1941 is most unnerving.”

“Have you determined what would happen, Admiral?”

“Who can say? For me to be here now, I *must* survive that first experience and reach the past safely. Understand? So remember what I said about those musical chairs. If I am alive there in 1941 come July 28th, I just may find that I become my own assassin!”

“You mean you would have to die to be certain that the Karpov arriving from the future has a chair? Are there two of you?”

“No. That is the point you tried to make to me. There can be only one Karpov alive at any given point in time. And since I must arrive safely on July 28 1941 in order to be here now, then that instance of my life would hold priority.”

“Very strange, sir.”

“Indeed! To think you would be your own angel of death is most

frightening. Volkov did not have to worry about this. He went down those stairs and got all the way to 1908—”

Karpov stopped, his eyes suddenly registering some great discovery. “No!” he said. “That isn’t true! He went down those stairs *twice*. I have only just remembered what he told me when we met at Omsk and he realized who I really was. He had been sent to look for that junior officer I told you about—Fedorov. He said he went down the back stairway here and met several men in uniforms who claimed they were NKVD!”

“Soviet security forces?”

“Yes! But from the 1940s, WWII! They were no longer called that in the future. Volkov never gave me the details. In fact, he thought the men were playing a ruse...” Karpov tried to remember what Volkov had told him, the other man’s voice replaying in his head...

“The little railway inn just east of Kansk near the old naval munitions center. That's when the madness started. I was searching the premises with my guards, and thought I discovered a hidden stairway at the back of that inn. I found someone was hiding there, and herded the rascal down to the dining hall. The next thing I know I encountered men who seemed completely out of place... I was downstairs in the lower lobby, the dining room, with a suspicious character by the ear, when I ran into a group of men who held me at gunpoint and claimed they were members of the NKVD! Imagine my surprise—no, imagine my anger—a pair of fools, or so I believed. Well, I dealt with them easily enough. I thought they were just stupid idiots playing with fire, but this fire burns. And yet... when I walked out of that inn later, the rail yard looked strangely different, nothing like the place I had come to. Beyond that, all of my guards had simply vanished. I could not raise them on my jacket radio...”

“Yes,” said Karpov. “If those were NKVD, then it certainly was not 1908—or any year from the future he came from. This stairway seems to have some odd connection to the 1940s. Fedorov came here from the year 1942, and returned. I clearly remember Volkov telling me he arrived there by going down those stairs from 2021. So he must have landed in the 1940s, which means he had to go down those stairs a *second* time to get all the way back to 1908!”

“Sounds logical, sir,” said Tyrenkov.

“All the more reason for this reconnaissance,” said Karpov. “I need to determine what year and day we can reach from here, and from this reasoning

I must assume it will be some time in the 1940s.”

“But sir...” Tyrenkov had the odd look on his face now. “I was alive in 1941. How could I go up those stairs now in that case? What if I appear in January, before we even came here? Would I become my own angel of death, as you have just put it?”

“Yes, you were alive there until the day we ran into that storm. Then you vanished and you now find yourself here, in 1908.”

“You are assuming I will reach a day or time after that? After we hit the storm?”

“Correct. This is what I must find out—whether time makes allowances for this sort of thing or not. Whether it is all haphazard, a throw of the dice, or carefully watched and managed.”

“You speak of time as if it were a person—a god of some kind.” Tyrenkov folded his arms, clearly troubled. “Yet now you will ask me to go up those stairs and find out for you. You will order me to go.”

Karpov took a deep breath. “I could send one of the other men,” he said calmly. “I suppose I could tell him to just go up, and then turn right about and come back down. After all, you are somewhat valuable to me at the moment. I would not want to risk your life either. The only problem is that he might not know how to handle himself if this works. I need a man who can use his head, and determine clearly what time he reaches at the other end. This is why I have told you all of this.”

“But sir... I would have to reach a time after we vanished in the storm, and we both know that the stairway doesn’t exist. It was destroyed in August of 1940, and we haven’t rebuilt it yet. So how can I get anywhere in those years where I do not already exist. It seems I am doomed if I go. Where will I end up? Dead?”

“Perhaps you will reach a time after the stairs have been rebuilt. In fact, that is what I am counting on, so don’t be so gloomy, Tyrenkov.”

“But consider what has happened, sir. Everyone in Siberia will have heard the news that we have gone missing. That bombing of Berlin put us on the front page of every newspaper in the world. It is very likely that the news of *Tunguska* vanishing in that storm will also have been reported. Days will pass. There will be no sign of us—of you, sir. What will our people conclude—that we all perished in that storm? Then who takes over on the eastern front as the new operational commander? Will he have the same agenda as you? What if

he orders work on the inn at Ilanskiy stopped? In fact, no one else knows of the importance of Ilanskiy. What if he moves the troops we have there, and Volkov sneaks in as he did before and takes control of the place? Odds are that back stairway never gets rebuilt, which means that neither you, or I, can ever reach a time in 1941 where we do not already exist, because those stairs won't exist to hold us."

"This is all speculation, Tyrenkov. I must know to a certainty. Shall I send one of the Corporals?"

Tyrenkov sat in silence for a moment. Then he shrugged, taking a deep breath. "No sir. Send me. I will handle the matter."

"Very well," said Karpov flatly. "Then handle it. I hope you enjoyed your stew, Tyrenkov, as I would hate to think of it as your last supper."

* * *

They found the door to the back stairway was locked, but told the innkeeper to fetch the key. Now Tyrenkov stood before the door in the alcove next to the dining room hearth, his forehead hot, but not from the heat of the fire. He took one last look at the hearth, thinking how like a log of wood he was now, burning for a time, to give light and warmth to someone else. Karpov had said it himself. He said I was somewhat useful to him... for the moment. But look how he chooses to use me! I will be thrown on the fire of time for Karpov's pleasure, and face the scalding light of eternity here, come what may. Yet he was determined to carry on. He would show Karpov who he was, and what he was capable of. He would lay down his life...

Tyrenkov looked over his shoulder, giving Karpov one last look where he still sat at the dining room table, then he slowly reached for the key in his pocket, inserting it to unlock the door. His hand was cold on the door knob, turning it slowly, firmly, with a certainty born of his inner resolution. Then he quietly pulled the door open, feeling the cold waft out from the unheated space, with a dank, musty smell.

There was no light on the stairwell, but he would not need one. It was only seventeen steps, or so Karpov had told him. He would simply count them, one by one, and would reach the top in little time. Then it was only a matter of unlocking the door at the top and stepping into the upper hall. What would be on the other side of that door? Would there even be a second floor there, or

merely empty space for him to fall into. That might happen, but he could not know for sure. He could not even know if he would survive that short walk up those stairs to worry about it.

Yet thinking and worry was one thing, doing quite another. He stepped forward into the darkness, and immediately felt a heady feeling of terrible power. I am no mere mortal now, he realized. I have already moved in time once, just like Karpov himself, perhaps one of a small, select crew that has had that experience. Everyone aboard *Tunguska* has done the same, though many do not even know that yet. Now I make a willful journey to some other time if the stories about this place are true, and god help me as I go...

Seventeen steps. He counted them as the shadows enfolded him, hearing his boots hard on the wood, the creak of the old stairway under his weight. Half way up he began to feel strangely light headed. Was it the hand of death brushing his cheek? What if this stairway led to a place in 1941, the week before they left for Moscow. He could not go there, and also be tending to the business of the ship and his intelligence duties. Would he simply collapse there on that stairway, or vanish into oblivion?

No. He could not go to a place where he already existed. So that impossibility was not his enemy this day, but his friend. It would mean that his journey up these steps was either doomed to fail, taking him only to the upper landing of the year where he now found himself, or that it must take him somewhere else... somewhere else...

But where?

He would soon find out.

Fifteen... Sixteen... Seventeen...

The darkness of a solid door barred the way as he reached the upper landing. Was the journey ended, or did it require that he move through this door first? He ran his hand along the door frame, finding the old knob and seeing it was locked. He felt for the keyhole, wondering if both doors used the same key.

They did.

He did not know it at that moment, but he was now a member of a most exclusive club. He was a "keyholder." The proprietor of the inn had been holding his seat warm in that select group, albeit unknowingly. For the innkeeper, the key was nothing more than a means of locking those doors, and hiding the trouble and mystery those stairs had brought to his life ever since

that fateful morning in June of 19080—the day the sun rose twice—the day there was fire in the sky, and the rumble of war on the distant northern frontiers of Siberia.

With a hard click the key turned in the lock, and he slowly turned the knob. The light streamed in, chasing the shadows and he pushed forward, finding himself on a quiet, well lit upper hall—alive. His cold logic had been correct. Time could not take him to a place where he already existed. For him, the journey up those stairs would always lead to some safe upper landing, or to nowhere at all, and this had to be true of anyone who ventured to use that stairway.

He knew immediately, that it was not the upper floor of the place he had left in 1909. There was a strange music in the air, yet he could not fathom where it might be coming from. The hallway was carpeted, and off to one side a nook led to a window that he knew would face west towards the railway station. He closed the door behind him, ever so quietly, and then moved to the window. Find out where he was—*when* he was—that was the first order of business.

Chapter 36

Tyrenkov reached the window, peering out across the rooftops of single story buildings that extended for three short blocks to the rail yard. The town was much bigger now, so he reasoned that he had moved forward in time as Karpov expected he would. But this was not to any place in the 1940s. He looked and saw the sky streaked with the contrail of a fast moving aircraft. Out across the town itself, he saw strange vehicles moving on the main street, with shapes that were smooth and sleek compared to the bulky, squarish chassis of the cars and trucks he knew from his day.

So this was the future—some brave new world that was completely unknown to him. What year was it? He could go down to the front desk and find that out soon enough. For now he stood mesmerized to think that he must be in a time well beyond the span of his normal life. No man knows the hour or day of his own death, yet he is cursed to know he will die, unlike the other witless creatures he shared the earth with. Suppose he was fated to live out a normal life, seventy years or so. Then if he was alive here now, he must have traveled at least that far beyond the year when he was to die. Some quick math told him he could have moved into the early 21st century!

He knew that is where Ivan Volkov had started his journey back in time. He went down the stairs, not once, but twice as Karpov had deduced. So it was likely that this stairway would be rebuilt one day in the 1940s, because it existed to allow that passage by Volkov into the past. In fact, it had to be rebuilt before September of 1942! It suddenly struck him that he may have made that same journey in reverse. The odd music, shiny vehicles, strange craft in the sky, all conspired to tell him he was in the future—the world Karpov and Volkov came from.

There by the window he was a small table and two chairs. A book lay on the table near a candle, and he picked it up, curious. Then he heard a dull rumble, and the blare of a horn as a train began to pull into the rail yard. His attention was immediately drawn outside as the train arrived. These were not the old, weathered rail cars from his day, but sleek, rounded silver sided cars with many windows. He watched carefully, hoping to catch a glimpse of the people from this future world when they emerged from the train. There... he

saw the conductor in a dark, navy blue uniform opening the door of a train car and lowering a small stairway down. Then, one by one, people emerged, strangely dressed, most carrying some small bag that they set on the ground, and then dragged along behind them with a thin handle that they pulled out of the bag itself!

Then he saw them, the men in uniform, and his keen eye soon picked out the details that seemed oddly familiar to him. He had been Karpov's right hand man for some time now, always admiring the trim cut of the Admiral's uniform, and the jacket he always wore. These men wore the same! They were obviously military, and they were security men. He could see their careful movements, fanning out, eyes searching, scanning the other passengers as they detained. They were looking for someone, that much was obvious, and then another man emerged, taller, stiff backed, clearly the officer in charge.

His mind had flashed to a strange possibility. Could it be? If he was seeing what he thought he was, then time was of the essence now—every second. Instinct took over, and he turned and ran back to the upper landing of that stairway. He was through the door quickly, closing it firmly behind him, and then, with one hand against the wall to steady himself, he hurtled down, counting each heavy footfall as he went, his heart beating fast with the urgency of the moment.

He knew what he had just seen—*who* he had just seen—and the knowledge he now had in his head could change the entire world.

* * *

Karpov was waiting breathlessly at the bottom of the stairs, sitting at a dining table facing the door by the hearth, a service revolver ready in his jacket pocket. His mind ran along all the corridors of possibility. Would Tyrenkov return? Would he find a way safely into the future? If so, what year could he reach. He knew that if he could get back to 1941, it would have to be just after *Tunguska* disappeared in that storm over the English Channel. That was the only safe ground for him, days he had not yet lived in his own life.

There is just a narrow window there left for me, he thought. Tyrenkov was correct. I have only until July 28th of 1941, and then Time will be faced with an insoluble problem. *Kirov* could not arrive in the Norwegian Sea on that day without compromising his position there in time—yet the ship *had* to arrive for

him to even be where he was now. Look what had happened to the older crewmen aboard *Tunguska* when we shifted in that storm! That was what he was facing now—clear evidence that Time would not hesitate to snuff out his life to see her chess board remained tidy. It was just that way. No two chess pieces could occupy the same square on the board. One had to die, no matter how powerful it was, if any other piece could reach its square.

It was all too much for him to contemplate, and thinking about it left him feeling a deep sense of impending doom, a sense of dread that was now dogging his mind, ever since Tyrenkov had come out with that question.

Could I find a way to somehow avoid that awful moment when the line of my own fate might become hopelessly tangled? We were only there for a very brief time, twelve days before the ship vanished again into that bleak future. If I could find a way to be somewhere else for that brief, twelve day period, then it was another long year before *Kirov* appeared in the Tyrrhenian Sea—safe ground. It was August into September of 1942 when they fought in the Med, and eventually made their way out towards Saint Helena, and that harrowing sojourn to the Pacific. Again, the ship was active in that year for only a brief period of time. That was when Fedorov began to piece together the clues that began with that twelve day interval on the time shifts, which eventually led us to Dobrynin's maintenance procedure, and Rod-25. What was it about that control rod that caused it to open time?

By the time inspector Kapustin had determined the origin of the materials used in that control rod, Karpov was already well out to sea in *Kirov*, leading the red banner fleet in that impossible journey that saw him face down the powerful American Pacific Fleets, and in two different eras. So Karpov had no inkling yet that *Tunguska* had anything to do with Rod-25's unusual effects. Nor did he understand, really, why this time rift had formed on the plane of this stairway at Ilanskiy. He only knew that men who walked those stairs moved in time. He also knew that violent explosions could cause similar rifts. The Demon volcano had sent him to 1945, and nuclear explosions had also been involved in moving the ship to different eras.

That thunderstorm moved *Tunguska*, he knew. What else could account for my presence here in 1909 now? Could I move that way again, or was that a random event that might never repeat? Suppose I did get safely back to 1941 before the date of *Kirov*'s first arrival. Would I spend the next weeks and months reviewing weather reports and chasing thunder storms? Suppose I get

lucky and find one. What is to say it would not just simply return me to this year, 1909? Why should I assume I could get where I really need to go, to those days just after *Kirov* disappeared off *Argentia Bay*? That would give me another year free from this nagging paradox, but how can I get there?

He was thinking all this when there was a sound on the stairway that made him suddenly tense up. Footsteps! Someone was there, coming down from the second floor—or from some other lodging in infinity. He reached into his pocket, hand firm on his service pistol, waiting. Anyone might be coming down those steps, by design or by mere happenstance.

To his great relief, it was Tyrenkov, somewhat breathless himself, and flushed with urgency. The lower door opened, and he stumbled through, blinking in the light, and clearly disoriented. Then he saw Karpov sitting there just as he left him, and smiled, composing himself. The need for speed was over. He had plenty of time now—long decades, and he took a deep breath, relaxing.

“Tyrenkov!” Karpov was up on his feet. “Thank god you are unharmed. What happened? Did you get back to 1941?”

Tyrenkov shook his head. “No sir, not 1941, at least not any place in it that I recognized. But I did get somewhere else, somewhere much farther ahead in time, or so I believe. Everything looked ... clean. The inn itself was quite different, the walls, décor, the carpeting. There was music playing, but I could not see where it was coming from. I went to the window to have a look at the town, and it is much bigger than it was in 1941. I could see people, oddly dressed, and strange vehicles. Then the train pulled into the station and the real business started.”

“Not 1941? You are certain?”

“The train I saw looked nothing like the cars we used on the trans-Siberian rail. They looked all shiny and new. I saw a plane in the sky—moving so fast that it left a streak in the clouds.”

“A jet aircraft,” said Karpov matter of factly. “Then you did move much farther forward.” Karpov realized that Tyrenkov must have gone all the way to 2021, the place Volkov came from. There was already a clear connection to that year into the past, as Volkov had proven that. Yet Tyrenkov never lived in those years. He could get there safely, while when I went up those stairs, I had to appear in a time well after the onset of the war, before that battle in the Pacific against Tanner and his Carrier group. I saw only the ruin of the world,

and that terrible detonation over the naval armory at Kansk. But Tyrenkov.... He could theoretically get to any date in the future after the time we vanished in that storm.

"I see," said Karpov. "So our little experiment was successful, at least in one regard. Time *does* make allowances. You were worried you might appear in January of 1941, a time when you were already alive there, but I was not concerned. I knew you could not appear at such a time. The chair was already occupied, and by your very own self. So you see, Tyrenkov, do not think harshly of me. I was not throwing you to the wolves. I knew you would get somewhere safely, but I see that it was not where I expected."

"Where did you expect I would go?"

"1942—to a time after the stairway was rebuilt. That is where I must ultimately get myself. The years ahead are... problematic for me. I must find a way to avoid certain dates in the chronology—dates when I was already alive aboard my ship. But I see my experiment failed."

"But you can get home, sir. The stairway leads all the way to your time!"

"I have always known that," said Karpov quickly. "Otherwise how did Volkov get here? But I cannot get to any safe place there, Tyrenkov. I was in that world, fighting the Americans in the Pacific before I took the journey that eventually brought me here. So if I go up those steps, I must appear after I vanished from those years, and the war began in earnest at that time. I saw a glimpse of it, the utter destruction of Kansk, as I told you. Beyond that time I have also seen what happens to the world, and it is not pretty. It is no place to live. So you see, Tyrenkov, I am condemned to live out my days here in the past, if I want any semblance of a comfortable life, or if I ever hope to reap the harvest of what I know of days ahead. My only problem here are the days I already lived in the 1940s, like landmines on the road ahead for me if I ever do get back to that decade. That and the fact that I have enemies there—men like Volkov who know entirely too much."

Now Tyrenkov smiled. "Sir," he said. "I have some news you will be very interested to hear."

"Oh? Out with it. What have you learned?"

"While I was at that window, I told you a train pulled into the station. I watched the passengers exit, and I saw a group of uniformed men, clearly military, and security personnel. I could tell it immediately from the way they moved and acted, the way they surveyed the surroundings, watchful, looking

at all the passengers. It was immediately clear to me that they were searching for someone, and the odd thing is this—their uniforms looked very much like yours!”

“Like mine? You mean my service jacket?”

“Yes sir, the one you often talk to near the collar. A man appeared, tall, grey haired, clearly the officer in charge of this group, and he was doing the same thing—talking to his collar. So I immediately lunged for that stairway to get back here as quickly as I could. Don’t you see, sir? You told me that there were men searching for that associate of yours—the man named Fedorov. Isn’t that what Volkov told you?”

The light of shock and awareness was in Karpov’s eyes now.

“Volkov!” he said jubilantly. “You believe you saw Ivan Volkov and his security team arriving at Ilanskiy!”

“Yes sir,” Tyrenkov beamed.

“Why didn’t you stay to try and verify this?”

“That would have been very foolish. For one thing, I would be clearly out of place in that environment, and immediately suspect. But more importantly, I already knew that if that was Volkov and his security detail, then they were eventually going to search this inn. So I got back here as quickly as I could, to end my time line in that moment. Every second I spent there was a second I could not use when I go back.”

“When you go back?”

“Of course, sir. You see, we no longer have to waste days, weeks and months trying to find Volkov here in 1909, because now we know exactly where he is, and before he even traveled to the past! So I wanted every second possible available to me. I’ll need all the time there I can get, because next time I go up those steps, I can take a nice sniper rifle with me, and kill him—kill him right after he steps off that train, and from that very window!”

My god, thought Karpov. Tyrenkov is correct! If that is Volkov as he suspects, then we have the bastard—I’ve got him at my mercy now, at long last. Tyrenkov can do exactly that! He can go right back up those stairs and gun him down...

Yet even as he thought all this, his elation faded, replaced by that strange sense of impending doom again. Suppose I order Tyrenkov to do this. What then? What happens to the world they came from, the world where he spent those years from 1938 scratching his way into the position of power he now

held in Siberia?

If I kill Volkov here, then he never goes back... He never outmaneuvers Denikin, and it is then very likely that Sergei Kirov prevails over the Whites, and the Orenburg Federation never arises. That may be a most desirable outcome, insofar as our homeland is concerned. But how does it all happen? How do all the chess pieces suddenly get to new squares in the middle of the game?

He thought, and thought. What should I do? How does this affect my own personal line of fate? Does Siberia remain independent, or does Kirov defeat Kolchak as well, and unite the entire country as the Soviet Union? If all else holds true, and I arrive at Vladivostok as I did in 1938, then what? I would have to do a great deal more there to achieve the position I have now, and I would have the tall shadow of Sergei Kirov looming over me the whole time.

A queasy feeling stirred in his stomach now. When he first arrived here in 1909, he realized he was perhaps the most powerful man alive on earth. Yes, Volkov was here, but still unknowing, perhaps still wandering about in a fog. Sergei Kirov was here, but still a young buck, and easily managed given all I know. Yes. He was the most powerful man alive, a demigod. He could shape the contours of the world from this day forward.... He had come to the edge of a cliff in his mind, a precipice of doubt yawning beneath his feet. He had the power to change everything, but what to do?

Strangely, it was the words of an English poet that suddenly ran through his mind now, Alfred Lord Tennyson... *"Let the great world spin for ever down the ringing grooves of change!"*

He decided.

The Saga Continues...

Kirov Saga: Crescendo Of Doom

Tyrenkov's trip up the back stairway at Ilanskiy has led him to a most unexpected place, and now Karpov has a moment that could change all history within his grasp, and a means of getting his revenge on Ivan Volkov. Will he seize the day? Yet Tyrenkov has also brought something back with him that is of great importance, and Karpov soon learns more of the days ahead than any man alive could ever wish to know. Even so, Ivan Volkov has plans of his own, to take a massive airship fleet to Ilanskiy and seize the day himself. Can he succeed, or will Karpov become the ruin of all he had plotted and built in his long sojourn to the past.

Meanwhile, Anton Fedorov has a mind to become the next Lawrence of Arabia, and leads his mobile force in daring raids against the old Hejaz rail lines from Homs to Aleppo. It will bring him into contact with an old enemy, the wolf in the fold he frustrated at Palmyra. As the battle for Syria continues, Erwin Rommel launches a sudden new offensive in North Africa, and the Germans strive to crush the British defense in the Middle East in a mighty pincer attack. As these events play out, Hitler now plans to unleash his greatest attack of the war, Operation Barbarossa. The storm clouds of war darken the Russian border, and the thunder of the guns soon deafens the world, as the conflict rises in a dreadful Crescendo of Doom.

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 in *Altered States*, which begins the third trilogy in the series, which will extend to at least 16 volumes.

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 as sets of trilogies linked by what the author calls a “bridge novel.” 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. The bridge novel *Men Of War* is a second entry point which covers what happened to the ship and crew after it returned home to Vladivostok. As such it serves as both a sequel to the opening trilogy and a prequel to the next trilogy, the three novels beginning with Book V, *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 book 5, 6, and 7, featuring the outbreak of the war 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. This second trilogy also launches several subplots that serve to relate other events in the great war of 2021 and also deepen the mystery of time travel as discovered in the series. The trilogy 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 next bridge novel is *Armageddon*, Book 8 in the series, which continues the action as a sequel to Book 7 while also standing as a kind of prologue to the *Altered States* trilogy. In this third trilogy, *Kirov* becomes trapped in the world made by its many interventions in the history, an altered reality beginning in June of 1940. 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 new powerful ships from the German Plan Z naval building program as one consequence of *Kirov*’s earlier actions.

Altered States also covers 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 sequel to the *Altered States* Trilogy and the bridge novel leading to the next set is volume 12, *Three Kings*. It covers the action in North Africa, with a decisive intervention that arises from a most unexpected plot twist at the end of that novel. 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.

The Grand Alliance Trilogy continues with *Hammer of God*, covering the campaigns in Syria, Lebanon and Iraq, and *Crescendo of Doom*, the German response on the eve of Operation Barbarossa.

You can enter any of these trilogies that may interest you, though your understanding of the characters and plot will be fullest by simply beginning with book one and reading through them all!

The Kirov Series: (Military Fiction/Alternate History)

First Trilogy:

Kirov - Kirov Series - Volume I

Cauldron Of Fire - Kirov Series - Volume II

Pacific Storm - Kirov Series - Volume III

Bridge Novel:

Men Of War - Kirov Series - Volume IV

Second Trilogy:

Nine Days Falling - Kirov Series - Volume V

Fallen Angels - Kirov Series - Volume VI

Devil's Garden - Kirov Series - Volume VII

Bridge Novel:

Armageddon – Kirov Series – Volume VIII

Third Trilogy:

Altered States– Kirov Series – Volume IX

Darkest Hour– Kirov Series – Volume X

Hinge Of Fate– Kirov Series – Volume XI

Bridge Novel:

Three Kings – Kirov Series – Volume XII

Fourth Trilogy:

Grand Alliance – Kirov Series - Volume XIII

Hammer of God– Kirov Series – Volume XIV

Crescendo of Doom– Kirov Series – Volume XV

And coming in 2015...

Paradox Hour – Kirov Series - Volume XVI

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