

Kirov Saga



Book XV in the Kirov Series

Crescendo of Doom

An Alternate History of WWII by:

John Schettler



Kirov Saga:
Crescendo Of Doom

By

John Schettler

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Mailto: john@writingshop.ws
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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, and they may occur earlier or later than they did in the history you may know.

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.

To faithful crew members, my readers who have been with me from the first book, this volume concludes *Grand Alliance* trilogy the fourth trilogy in the series. It begins right where I left you at the end of *Hammer of God*, with the machinations and ambitions of one Vladimir Karpov. Fedorov still tries to find that all important “mission” for Troyak and his Marines, Rommel returns and Brigadier Kinlan is again called to arms. Lots of action here, and this novel will soon be followed by the trilogy sequel in the 16th book of the series, *Paradox Hour*.

-J. Schettler

Part I

Vengeance

*“Vengeance, retaliation, retribution, revenge are deceitful brothers;
vile, beguiling demons promising justifiable compensation to a pained
soul for his losses.”*

— Richelle Goodrich

Chapter 1

Karpov stood in the dining hall, the light of the newly lit fire warm and ruddy on his drawn features, a look of profound realization in his eye. The words of Tyrenkov still resonated in his mind, like the clarion call of an alarm that summoned him to action... *“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...”*

All the time he can get... Yes, every second that passed for him there was one second he could not use to carry out the plan that now exploded in Karpov’s mind like a well aimed Moskit-II. From here he could change everything again, rearrange all the chess pieces on the board with one brilliant fianchetto of doom. He could see it all in his mind, smell it, hear the rising crescendo of calamity and change, like the sound of his own pulse quickening at his temples.

He decided.

“Yes!” he said jubilantly. “If that was Volkov, then what you say is correct, Tyrenkov! We have him—right by the scruff of his neck. We have the moment of his demise in the palm of our hand, and not a second to waste there at the top of those stairs. Your decision to get back here with this news as quickly as possible was the very reason I sent you there. I needed a man who could think on his feet, not some dullard of a corporal who would not have had the slightest idea of what he was looking at.”

“Then we must hurry, sir. I’ll call Sergeant Konev and have him fetch a sniper rifle. We have no time to lose. It appeared he was lingering near the train with his security men, but that could change quickly.”

“Don’t worry, Tyrenkov, we have all the time in the world. Don’t you see? We could sit here and have a long brandy by the fire, sleep the night away, rise tomorrow to a hearty breakfast, and then even go hunting in the forest to the north for our pleasure. We could do this for a month if we so desired. Don’t make the mistake of thinking time passing here is also running out there in the future. You could go back up those stairs a month from now and find yourself exactly where you left things, in that moment of supreme opportunity. At least that is what I’m counting on now. So we need not be hasty. We must think this through carefully.”

Tyrenkov gave him a knowing look. Karpov was not stupid. He understood that time might move with a different gait at both ends of the stairs. He realized that he must never underestimate the Admiral, and he could see that this news had precipitated a decision in his mind. He would wait to learn what Karpov intended.

“What is that you have there?” Karpov had noticed the book in Tyrenkov’s hand for the first time.

“It was on the table by the window on the upper landing.” He handed the slim book to Karpov. “There were a few oddments with it ... a candle, and one other thing that looked quite familiar.”

“Oh? What was it?” Karpov was curious.

“Well sir, I only just glanced at it, but now I recall that it looked to be a compass, very much like the one Bogrov squints at all the time on the bridge.”

“A ship’s compass? Very strange.”

“It was quite old, sir, and obviously damaged and worn by time. The glass was all soiled, and cracked. I picked up this book, then I heard the train coming into the station and my attention was drawn there. It was then that I saw the man I believe we are looking for—Volkov. We can settle everything now, sir. The next time I take a good sniper rifle with me.”

“All in good time, Tyrenkov.” Karpov’s attention was on the book now, a plain hard bound volume that was obviously meant to be a showpiece. He opened the cover, his eyes narrowing when he read the title: *When Giants Fell. The End of the Siberian Air Fleet*, by Yuri Rudkin. What was this? He began to read, eyes darkening with each passing second, until a light of anger kindled there.

“*Sukin Sim!*” he breathed.

“What is it, Admiral?”

“Volkov! That bastard didn’t get enough of a lesson the first time. So he tries again!”

“What do you mean?”

Now there was an odd look on the Admiral’s face, and he held up a hand, quieting his security chief as he continued to read. “Very strange,” he said at last. “This is a fiction—the author says as much right here in the introduction. Yet how could this be?” He read aloud now, his eyes flashing quickly over the pages of the old book.

“It was April when the rain fell, a hard spring rain in Siberia, but that did

not stop him. Nothing would stop him. He was driven, compulsive, and determined to win the day at last. And he was more than that, Admiral of the greatest fleet that had ever darkened the skies, Ivan Volkov, Air Commandant, Supreme Leader, the Eagle of the East. And today he would put an end to the last of the Siberian Fleet, now that its Admiral had gone missing in that terrible storm. Yes, his old nemesis, Vladimir Karpov, was dead and gone from this world, and the fleet he had built was doomed without him—no more than a headless snake. Now there was nothing to stop him—nothing but these last three airships that gathered in the grey skies above the endless taiga, hanging in the heavy clouds like the great beasts they were...” He stopped, clearly shocked by what he was reading, then looked at Tyrenkov, as if waiting for his intelligence chief to explain everything. “What in God’s name?”

“It says that sir? It names Volkov like that? It names you personally?”

“You heard what I read.”

“But how is that possible, sir? Is it a history? Are you certain the work is fictional?”

“So the author claims...” Karpov’s eyes narrowed. “That damn stairway,” he hissed. “Who knows how many men may have gone up those stairs, Tyrenkov? Who knows how many came down? Clearly that stairway existed in the future—in the world Volkov and I came from. People may have used it, and we have already established that there is a definite connection between that time and at least two other eras in history. One is that damn war, your time, the 1940s. And another is this time before the revolution. You proved that connection exists by taking that journey there to the future and returning here safely just now. What if this man was another traveler, this Yuri Rudkin?” he stared at the name on the spine of the book. “Yes, that is the only possible explanation. Look here!” He showed Tyrenkov a sketched plate in the volume, where airships duelled in the stormy skies.

“Look at the caption! It reads: ‘Volkov’s fleet in the great air duel above Ilanskiy, and the wreck of the last Siberian Airship *Krasnoyarsk*—‘Old Krasny.’ The fall of ‘Big Red’ marked the end of the rebellion in the east, uniting all of Siberia under Volkov’s rule.”

Karpov gave Tyrenkov a dumbfounded look. “Now how in God’s name is that possible? I can see that this man might have dreamt up such a tale, but with these names? My God! He even calls the *Krasnoyarsk* Big Red, just as we do! That is too much of a coincidence. This man had to have seen the past

he was writing about.”

“Yet you say it is a fiction, sir—just a story.”

“A very clever story,” said Karpov, flipping one page after another, thinking. “A very clever man... What if he came from the future, just as Volkov did, and saw things—learned things about that past. Only this time he gets back home again. Yes... He returns safely home to his own day. Who knows what he thinks about his experience? But it is clear that he saw things from the time of the Great Patriotic War. Yes, he learned enough to gather the fodder for his tale. He used the things he discovered to create this story.”

“But how is that possible, sir? Suppose he did as you suggested, and saw the 1940s. He would be writing about the very same man I saw getting off that train. Volkov was there, if I am not mistaken—but the book was there as well! So none of the history this other man saw was even written yet, because, at that moment, Volkov had not yet discovered that stairway.”

Karpov nodded, eyes shifting about the room, and back to the book in his hand. “Unless...” He paused, as if uncertain, feeling his way forward in his thinking, trying to grasp at something that might explain this strange anomaly. “Unless Volkov’s journey was *inevitable*.”

That word seemed leaden as he spoke it, weighing on his very soul. Yes, he thought, inevitability—fate—doom. That notion was deeply seated in the Russian psyche. A man’s fate was his fate, and nothing could change it. Was Volkov fated to go down those steps? Was it inevitable? Dominoes of thought tumbled one after another in his mind, the click and clatter of their fall harrowing him inside.

If it was inevitable, then anything he had planned now for Ivan Volkov was doomed to fail. Tyrenkov may go back up those stairs to try and kill the man, but it would fail. Otherwise how does this author ever learn of the events he describes so chillingly in this story? Every page he turned was riveted with things from the world that Karpov knew—the world he had come from until that storm over the English Channel sent them here to 1909—here to this place where he thought he could rewrite all history. Was it still possible? Was this book a clear and evident sign that he would also fail? Was his own fate as inevitable as the words this man used to describe it here... *Vladimir Karpov... dead and gone from this world...*”

“What do you mean, sir? Inevitable? Then you are saying that Volkov *must* go down those stairs, and reach the time before the revolution?”

“How else could this writer have come up with this tale? It is too

pointed. He named the ships perfectly—*Abakan*, *Angara*, *Tomsk*—all engaged in the battle by Volkov’s 1st Air Division. My God, look here! He even says that this Division had been mauled earlier in an unsuccessful raid on the Trans-Siberian Rail, when *Oskemen* and *Alexandra* were destroyed by the rebellious Siberian fleet led by Admiral Karpov.” His finger ran along the lines as if chasing impossibility itself. It was the battle he had fought earlier, Volkov’s raid on Ilanskiy after the Omsk Accords, the treachery that reignited the conflict on the eastern front. And it was all described here in this little book of history, posing as a fiction, for it was now obvious to him that Tyrenkov’s objection had to stand.

“Yes,” he began. “this book could not exist, at least not as history, in that future world before Volkov ever came to Ilanskiy. And I think the world you saw had to be the one I came from. Otherwise why would Volkov be there, just as he was ordered by Director Kamenski, looking for Fedorov along the Trans-Siberian Rail? In that world none of the days you and I have lived out together ever happened! Don’t you see? In the world I came from there was No Free Siberian State, no Orenburg Federation. And yes, there was no Admiral Karpov leading his fleet of airships over the taiga—and no Ivan Volkov in Orenburg either!” He smiled, finally getting the tiger by the tail. Yet what would happen if he pulled on that tail? There was still a light of uncertainty and fear in his eyes, even as he spoke.

“Yet this book could not exist,” he mused, “even as a fiction, unless those events occur. It is too detailed in its depiction for this man to have imagined it. The events described in this prologue, as far as I have seen, are exactly those we lived through.”

“Then what about the rest of the story, sir? What if the rest is inevitable?”

Karpov nodded. “Yes... If this book was on that table than it certainly means one thing—Volkov goes back in time. He goes there and this man, Rudkin, saw the things he did to change the history. So we fail to kill him here and now. We fail! Otherwise how can this book ever be written? This man filched the entire story he passes off as a fiction here—he stole it right from the history we were writing.”

Tyrenkov had a crestfallen expression on his face now. “Then we are defeated sir? Volkov wins?”

“This book seems to recount that outcome, but I am not prepared to let that stand. Look here, Tyrenkov, look what I hold in my hand, the book of

fate itself! Yes, it lays out the tale of my own undoing. It describes this last desperate battle between the airships of Orenburg and Siberia. Facts that riveting send a chill up my spine, for right alongside them is that little line about my own death. You see? It's right here... 'today he would put an end to the last of the Siberian Fleet, now that its Admiral had gone missing in that terrible storm.'

"That can only mean the storm we encountered over the English Channel," said Tyrenkov.

"Exactly! It removed me from that time, and then all the things you warned me about must have come true. Without my leadership Volkov is able to win the day, right here in this battle Rudkin describes." He looked at the title again, "*When Giants Fall...*"

"But can't we prevent all that," asked Tyrenkov? "Can't we stop him now, sir. Perhaps I lingered there too long. It could be that Volkov is no longer in sight when I go back to that window on the upper landing. That could be the reason we failed. Perhaps there simply wasn't time for me to get there and take aim before he slipped away. Well, we can plan this very carefully now. Forget that sniper rifle. I can pick a squad of our very best men. We will leave nothing to chance or fate."

Karpov gave him a riveting look, torn between the sense of impending doom laid down in this writer's tale, and the heady feeling that he was bigger than that, impervious, invulnerable, and the master of fate itself. Which was true? He had already acted to prune his own family tree, and prevent the untimely death of his Great Grandfather. That was likely to change things, though he could not know how. Was this book a real harbinger of his own doom, or merely a relic from a world that might never come to be?

Then he realized what he had here in his hand, not the certainty of his own demise, but a grand glimpse of what might be, a timely warning. This journey here had unsettled everything, like that bad pudding festering in the gut of Ebenezer Scrooge. Without even knowing it, Tyrenkov had played the role of the Ghost of Christmas Yet To Come! He had inadvertently picked up this book, which purported to be a tale of mystery and imagination, but was really one that relied on the history of events its author had seen in the past, events that might be underway at this very moment.

Yet it was clear to Karpov now that there were two worlds in play here, not only one. The world that saw Volkov arrive on that train at Ilanskiy with his security detail knew nothing of the one he had been living in before that

storm sent them here, otherwise why would the book be described as a fiction instead of actual history? Two worlds, yet strangely connected by that rift on the back stairs. Did actions taken in one world affect the fate of the other? When *Kirov* moved forward to that blackened future, the evidence seemed plain enough. Karpov looked at his security chief, seeing the urgency in his eyes.

“Your ardor is not merely loyalty, Tyrenkov. It is driven by something more—the line of my own fate! The world tried me before—tried to get rid of me just like those traitors on my ship. But it failed. I survived, and returned to write my own story, and no stupid fool of a writer is going to get rid of me that easily. Yes, we can prevent this man’s little fiction from ever being written. We can do exactly what you suggest, and leave nothing to chance.”

Chapter 2

“Gather your men, Tyrenkov. We’re going to see to this matter right this instant!”

“Sir!” Tyrenkov rushed off to find Sergeant Konev, leaving Karpov alone for a moment. He stood there by the fire, eyeing that door to the stairwell with a mix of anger, determination, and indignation. Nobody tries to write me out of the story—not Vladimir Karpov!

He thought that as if his own name would ring through the halls of history like the peal of a church bell. Yet even as he asserted his own importance, inflated as it was by the hunger of his own ego, he could still perceive that lingering thrum of uncertainty within his chest, that flutter of adrenaline that was more than his own body preparing itself for action. Fight or flight—every creature had to make that choice when confronted with imminent danger. In his earlier life, the life of the mouse living beneath the floorboards of the mansion the Russian Navy had built, he had always chosen the safe course, always slipped into hidden little holes. He preferred the darkness of subterfuge as his primary means of advancing himself, the slow gnawing at wires and cables, the subtle undermining of those he saw as obstacles to his own advancement.

As Captain of *Kirov* he had become something else, something dark and powerful. Ever since he took that first step, locking Volsky away in the sick bay with Doctor Zolkin, that darkness had been growing, feeding on every opportunity it could find for violence against his enemies. When you fling a nuclear warhead at your foe, something changes inside. You become more shadow, and less light, slipping into that darkness, but finding there a realization of absolute power. You don’t hesitate to do the small things after that, and what he had before him now was a small thing as it seemed. Just send Tyrenkov back up those stairs with a submachine gun squad and take care of the matter.

A small thing, a single life, yet it would reset the entire scheme of the world, rearrange all the pieces on the chessboard. The only catch was an irritating one. He was here, in 1909, and even if Tyrenkov returned with the grin of satisfaction, reporting the job was done and Volkov was dead, the new world that might give rise to was beyond his grasp. He could not see it, not from here, or reap the benefit of all this operation might bring about.

And another thing bothered him. He could not do this thing himself. He could not go up and pull that trigger, for he was already in that world. Another version of himself was out to sea, leading the Red Banner Pacific Fleet in a bold sortie against the powerful American Navy. Many thought that enterprise was doomed from the start. He could almost see that in Volsky's eyes when he gave him the order to deploy. Yet I beat them, he thought stubbornly. I took the brash swagger out of that Captain Tanner. Yes? I wonder how he felt when he saw those missiles coming in on his precious aircraft carrier?

He allowed himself a moment to gloat, forgetting the fitful eruption of that Demon Volcano that had so clotted the skies with its sulfur and ash that Tanner's air squadrons had to fly widely divergent, and clearly predictable, flight paths. That allowed him to concentrate his long range SAM defense to blunt one pincer of the American counterattack, while the fighters off the *Admiral Kuznetsov* had been just enough to fend off the other horn of the bull.

You were lucky, an inner voice of warning reminded him. If that air group had been able to concentrate in one coordinated attack, something would have gotten through. Something always gets through... Yes, you showed the Americans what wrath and fire was, but look at what happened! That damn volcano blew half your fleet into the past, into this damnable war, and you got your chance again, only this time it was 1945. You thought you could handle things easily there, but found out differently. Yes?

Volsky had handed him that barb when he intimated that any man who had to resort to the use of a nuclear warhead was one who had already lost his battle, and clearly, Karpov had already lost his battle with Admiral Halsey and Ziggy Sprague. The *Admiral Golovko* was sunk, and the skies were darkening with flights of American planes in the hundreds. The American Pacific Fleet in 1945 was enormous, and it was coming for him. As the missiles fired, and his remaining SAMs diminished, the outcome was inevitable, so he reached for the Hammer of God, and he sought to crush his foe in another mighty blow.

That was a heady thing, to push that button and send that warhead on its way, knowing what it would do. It was the second American battleship he would destroy, yet he knew that if *Kirov* had not slipped again, into the pre-revolutionary days of 1908, that battle might have ended quite differently. God only knows what happened to Captain Yeltsin on *Orlan*....

This time it was different, not the searing fire of a nuclear warhead, but instead a single bullet that would change everything. That must now become the rattle of small arms in ambush, if he carried out the plan Tyrenkov suggested. Just send a squad up those stairs... It seemed so simple, and yet something about it gnawed at his pride.

It won't be my hand on the trigger, he thought. Tyrenkov would do the deed, or perhaps Sergeant Konev, or even one of the men he selected in the assault team. Yes, I will be the one to give the order and set this plan in motion, but I will not really be the man who changed the world. That honor and fortune would fall to another, and what if he realizes it one day, and becomes a little bigger in his mind than he should?

That thought bothered him, along with the thought that Volkov would never know he had his revenge. The Ivan Volkov of 2021 was an unknowing fool at the moment. He was nothing more than a suspicious, meddling henchman, out doing the bidding of another. He only became his own man after he went down those stairs. Yes, with his service jacket at his disposal, and the sure knowledge of all that would come, it was inevitable that he would outmaneuver Denikin and seize control of the White movement. The Orenburg Federation was the result, but the Ivan Volkov that built that little empire in the hinterlands of Kirov's Soviet Union would never know that he would meet his end on my order. That bothered him even more.

Revenge was a dish that was best served cold. Yes, he had repeated that well worn phrase to Volkov's face when they first met for lunch aboard *Kirov*, during the inspection at Vladivostok. Even then he could see that Volkov would be a problem, a nuisance, a stone in his shoe. That bastard thought he could sneak in here with a couple airships and take this place. What an arrogant fool he was.

As he flipped through the pages of the book in his hand, he could see there the unfolding of Volkov's final revenge. Look at the way he handled things, thought Karpov. He rounded up every airship he could pull off the line and came for Ilanskiy with one thought in mind—to destroy my fleet, and by extension to destroy me personally. The title of the book goaded him, *When Giants Fell...*

That bastard could see an opportunity when it presented itself. The instant he realized *Tunguska* was lost, and I was out of the picture, he came here to wreck everything I was building. Something in him wanted to get back there and say 'not so fast!' Something wanted to meet Volkov eye to

eye, defeat him right there in a glorious battle, and then see his face when he realized he was beaten at last. Handling things on this back stairs was the work of a submarine Captain, quiet, secret, sinister, yet in some ways the work of a coward.

Karpov hated submarines....

Tyrenkov was back, the boots of his assault squad clumping hard on the floor as they came after him, the first swelling sounds that would rise in a crescendo of doom. The light of battle was in his eyes, and his cheeks were flushed with his urgency. Karpov's eyes narrowed as the men came in, as he looked at Tyrenkov, and an odd thought occurred to him.

He knows entirely too much now, Tyrenkov. He knows who I am, where I've come from. He's even been to that world, a place I can no longer go. And now he knows about Ilanskiy, this humdrum railway inn, that back stairway. He can go up those steps any time he chooses. Lord knows, I can't keep my eye on him 24 hours a day. Yes, he can go up those stairs and do things, and doing this thing is going to darken his shadow, and feed the fire of his own hungry soul. Perhaps he'll be the one who pulls the trigger, just as he was the one who pulled the trigger when it came time to kill Petrov.

Karpov remembered the look on Tyrenkov's face when he strode in and handed him that pistol, still warm from its firing. That was all I had from the Petrov incident, the warmth of that pistol in my hand. It was Tyrenkov's finger on the trigger, and he knows that now. He knows entirely too much... He seemed just a little bigger, a deeper shade of sinister grey, when he returned. After this, his soul will deepen to charcoal black, and he'll be as big as I am, as dark and cinder hot as I am, the man who changed everything.

And Tyrenkov was smart enough to realize that...

"Ready sir! I have five good men here, our very best. We'll get the job done, I assure you."

"Just a moment, Tyrenkov," Karpov said quickly, his eyes still scanning the pages of the book, eyeing the line drawn plates where he saw the air duel that became the destruction of the Siberian Fleet, Ivan Volkov's great victory, and the sweetness of revenge heavy on his tongue. "Just a moment... We must think carefully here... Something has occurred to me that I had not considered before. Send the men away."

"Sir?"

"You heard me! Get them out of here. I need to think this through."

Tyrenkov hesitated, ever so briefly, then gave Sergeant Konev a nod to

send the squad off. That was something that Karpov did not fail to notice. He was no longer the coiled spring that would enact his commands without a moment's thought. Yes, when I first told him he was the one to go up those stairs, he had the temerity to quibble the matter with me. I had to suggest I would get a Corporal to go in his place. He put his own fear and desire for self-preservation ahead of my interests, and my orders. Yes, he acquiesced in the end, and did as I ordered, but he hesitated, just as he hesitated again just now, when I told him to dismiss the men.

A moment later they were alone, and Karpov stood there, realizing Tyrenkov was holding a submachine gun, standing there by the fire with a look on his face that clearly revealed his displeasure.

"What is it sir? What have we not considered?"

"We? Don't get too big for your britches, Tyrenkov. I'm doing the thinking here. Now put that damn machinegun away. I have things to consider, things you cannot possibly understand."

"But sir, I thought—"

"You? Don't think, Tyrenkov. This involves a good deal more than you may realize. I can't expect you to grasp it all, but there are factors in play here that I must consider very carefully."

Tyrenkov perceived a sea change in Karpov's mood, and he knew enough of the man to realize that was dangerous. So he did what he knew he should, and assumed the role he had so carefully played out in the past, that of a dutiful servant, the Devil's Adjutant. He was like a submarine on the surface, lined up on his target, just a witless tramp steamer named Ivan Volkov, but now he could hear the drone of aircraft over head, and he knew it was time to dive, submerge, get beneath the swelling waves of the sea and move in that muffled quiet and darkness, time to lurk. Time to renew the slow, stealthy approach, the stalking of the hunter, who works from the shadows and shuns the light.

Karpov had told him a great deal in these last few days, confided in him to a degree he never did before. Yet now, for the first time, Tyrenkov could sense that the Admiral looked on him with a wary eye. He could sense the edge of resentment in Karpov's voice, and the tinge of suspicion. He's just realized I'm a threat to him, thought Tyrenkov. Now he's thinking everything through again. I must be very careful here...

"Volkov." Karpov spat the name out, the disdain clearly evident in his tone. "So this is what he has planned, is it? He thinks he's going to swarm in

and destroy my entire fleet! In fact, that is exactly what he does, if this fiction is truly based on facts the author became aware of. Is that so, or is this simply what it appears, a story? I wonder just who this fellow is, this Yuri Rudkin. Well, he's not collecting royalties on my account! I won't become the fodder that fuels his pen, nor will I allow him to enshrine Ivan Volkov as he does here, making that man the proud victor who tramples the Free Siberian State beneath his boot. No! We'll do this another way."

"Another way sir?"

"We do it man to man. I was wrong to send you off to settle the matter of my Great Grandfather. I should have gone and handled it myself. It was a small thing, yet it was personal, but this is something quite more. It's a very big thing, Tyrenkov, and it is also personal. This little war is a duel in heaven, between men from a world you have but barely glimpsed. I can't expect you to understand, but I have decided that I also can't order you to be my agent of doom in this matter. I must handle the matter myself."

"Yourself? But I thought you said you could not go up to that world any longer, sir. I don't understand. That was the only reason you are sending me in your place."

"Yes, you don't understand, do you. Well understand this: Volkov isn't going to get away with his little plan!" He held up the slim book that Tyrenkov had fetched from that other world. "Nor is this man Rudkin going to feast on my bones for his little fiction here. No! This is personal now. Get down to the bridge. Tell Bogrov to collect the ground crews and make the ship ready for operations. It looks grey out there, and I want the latest weather report on my ready room desk in ten minutes."

Tyrenkov had a head full of questions, but an inner instinct, and his own devious intelligence, told him this was not the time to ask any of them. This was the time to simply salute, stride away, and carry out Karpov's order, which is exactly what he did. It was time to recede, get back in the shadows, observe, wait, think. He saluted and was off to the bridge leaving the Admiral alone.

Karpov watched him go, satisfied. That was the quickstep I want to see in Tyrenkov, the unhesitating gait of compliance. I pull the trigger, he fires. I've used him to be the bullet of my intentions many times before, but this time things will be different. This time it was personal.

And so, my old nemesis here is going to soon get a nice little surprise. My plan may not work. I may be doomed to fail, and remain lost in time here,

as this Rudkin has it. But by god, I'll raise hell before that happens.

He sat down by the fire with his book, opening it again to begin reading it more carefully. Half way through the prologue he realized that the author wasn't going to give him any more than a passing mention... *Vladimir Karpov, was dead and gone from this world, and the fleet he had built was doomed without him...* That was all he would get, a single line in the entire book! All the rest was Volkov's. That ass would bask in the limelight of his treacherous little victory here, the "Battle of Ilanskiy," as Rudkin came to call it.

Well I have news for Rudkin, and news for Volkov, and news for the entire world. Damn them all, I'm going back! I'm going to take *Tunguska* up into the darkening skies and head for the biggest goddamned thunder storm I can find. I'm going to sail head first into bedlam and chaos, but one way or another I'm going back, if Time will have me, and I'm going to settle the matter myself. Vengeance, after all, was a very personal thing.

That was something Karpov knew very well.

Chapter 3

Karpov thought, and as he did so he had the satisfaction of knowing his instincts had been correct. The heat of his emotions had led him to this sudden change, but now his mind began to find reasons and justifications, walling off his choice to protect it from any threats. It all seemed so easy. Just send Tyrenkov and his men up those stairs and put an end to Volkov once and for all. But the more he thought, the more he came to see that his own personal time line, his own fate, might be irrevocably entwined with that of Volkov now.

After all, he thought, why am I even here? I was on my way to London, my second stop in a little diplomatic tour that began when I paid that visit to Sergei Kirov. And why was I there? To forge an alliance that would strengthen my position against Volkov. So the very fact that I find myself here depends on Volkov and his treachery. Otherwise, I might be doing something else entirely.

So if I eliminate Volkov in 2021, how would Time account for my presence here? Am I safe, invulnerable to the sweeping changes Volkov's death would cause? Perhaps here, in these years, I would be immune, but what would happen to me if I did manage to return to the 1940s? I came to Siberia and slowly rose to the top of the power structure there in that distant breakaway republic. There would never even be a Free Siberian State this time! So who would I be there? Would anyone recognize me, or acknowledge my authority? The position I built for myself there all depends on Volkov. Would it mean I could not enter that era again? Would I be forced to live out my life here, live through the Revolution, the First World War, the long civil war of Red on White?

While a part of him thought he had found himself in the perfect place to eliminate his last potential rivals, and seize the history of his nation, that outcome was not certain.

It would be long years of murder and struggle here before I reached the time I have just come from. By then I would be much older, and I might not even live to see the conclusion of the Second World War, or know what happens to Russia when it all ends. After all, isn't that what I must set my mind on? I must assure Russia is not marginalized, ostracized, entrenched behind an iron curtain and guarded by the prison warden that came to be

called NATO. To settle those years favorably, I must live to see the end of WWII. If I stay here, that will be a long 34 years to wait, and I would not have much time to live in the post-war era. If I get back to the 1940s, I'll still be young, vital, with long decades ahead of me to settle the affairs of the world.

Yes, I must return.

"Weather report, Admiral. Cloud Master is calling for increasing overcast, and a storm front building to the northeast."

"Very well, send to Bogrov that we are to make ready for operations. Prepare to cast off lines and make our ascent within fifteen minutes."

A storm brewing.

Karpov did not get the details in that report, but the storm was emanating from a massive low to the northeast, over the Stony Tunguska River. A hard wind was blowing, the skies mushrooming up in tall thunderheads, their flanks rippled by lightning. It was as if some power was at work, stirring the airs to fitful wrath, even as Karpov's own thoughts rose on the winds of his anger and determination. Soon the ship would rise to meet that storm, driven as much by that anger as it would be by the wind. Karpov and *Tunguska* would surge forward, sailing into the outermost squalls of doom itself.

He steeled himself, knowing he could be off on a wild bear hunt, with no hope of ever achieving his objective now, but he had to try. It was a storm that sent me here, and so now I'll look for another, he thought. A voice within him chided that it might take many days, weeks or even months to find a storm with the power he needed to move *Tunguska* again. And what if he did? Where would he go? At least on the stairs of Ilanskiy there seemed to be a method to the madness of Time. The dots of distant eras were connected by the line of those stairs, but this was a casting of his fate to the wind in the most literal way imaginable.

Yet another voice, the place in his head that did the planning and scheming and reckoning, rose with his anger to still the inner warning. I have been a most unwelcome guest in the homes I've broken into all through this saga, he thought to himself grimly. I tortured Mother Time with my doings, and here I was about to cause her grief and torment yet again. She doesn't want me here. I can feel it. Eliminating Volkov from here causes so many changes to the history that she'll be long years, decades sorting out the trouble I cause. So my guess is that she will do everything possible to send

me on my way.

He stepped out of his heated stateroom, his eyes looking down the long central corridor of the airship, looking up at the lattice of her duralumin skeleton, seeing the cold steel ladders rising into small voids between the massive gas bags. Men moved there, like shadowy spiders in a metal web, spinning out wires and rigging cables.

He turned for the bridge, the hard clump of his boots on the metal grating of the decking. Aboard *Kirov* he had always climbed up to reach the place of command, but here the inverse was true. He looked for the ladder down, descending through the mass of the ship to reach the lower gondola. Even as he went, he could hear the movement of other men echoing through the massive structure of the ship. That always gave him a quiet little thrill—the sound of other men rushing off to do his bidding. He was down the last ladder and onto the bridge, announced by the boatswain as he arrived.

“Admiral on the Bridge!”

“As you were,” he said tersely, looking for his Air Commandant.

“The ship will be ready for lift in ten minutes,” said Bogrov. “Linesmen are working the land anchors now. May I ask our destination sir?”

“Up,” said Karpov. “Climb for that weather front on this morning’s report.”

Bogrov gave him a puzzled look. “Climb for the weather front? I thought you were taking the ship up so we could avoid that storm.”

“Just the opposite. The crew will stand to battle stations. Rig the ship for bad weather and rough air. Secure all equipment. We’re going to chase lightning.” Karpov smiled. “I want all lightning rods deployed, but take the Topaz radar systems off line. I can’t risk any damage to that equipment. Make sure the antennae are retracted into their bad weather ports.”

If Bogrov was puzzled before, he was truly perplexed now. “You mean you want me to steer directly into this storm front?”

“Exactly.”

“Didn’t we get enough of a ride over the English Channel?”

“More of a ride than I have had time to explain to you, Bogrov. Just get the ship aloft and headed northeast. Understand?”

Bogrov did not understand, but he knew an order when he heard one, and he also knew that when Karpov had this mood on him he was a very dangerous man. One question after another piled up in his mind, all unanswered. Tyrenkov had teased him earlier, yet explained nothing. And he

could clearly see that something was very different here at Ilanskiy. Where was the Siberian Rifles? That whole division should be here, God only knows why. Karpov left them digging in all around the town when we were last here, but there's no sign of them now.

The Admiral has been ashore, down by the rail station, but that looks all wrong too. In fact, the town itself doesn't seem even half the size it should be. What's been going on here? Did Karpov have the place demolished? There's that old railway inn, but it looks as though the work crews have been very busy. That entire west wing of the building is completely restored, good as new. Very strange... What is so damn important about that railway inn? He knew enough not to voice all this, but this other business had him worried. Deploy the lightning rods and head for the storm? What was Karpov thinking?

With a shrug, he pulled a line to the air horn that would sound the alarm for battle stations. "All hands, all hands, battle stations! Rig the ship for rough air. Deploy all lightning rods and secure all storm ports. Ballast control—prepare to lighten the ship. Up elevator five degrees on my command."

"All lines away sir," said a watch officer. "Tethers secure and land anchor cables are stowed."

"Very well. Ahead one third on forward engines, and ease us on up." He looked to Karpov now. "Admiral," a question was in his tone, but it would concern ship's business, and leave all his other speculations aside. "You've ordered battle stations, but we're rigging for storm. Do you still want men on the upper canopy? Those gunners up topside are going to have a very rough ride."

"Topside gun crews may take station on deck five," said Karpov. That was one deck below the top of the ship, where the ladders that extended up between the massive gas bags opened on a small platform just beneath the outer shell. *Tunguska* had three twin 76mm recoilless rifles there, and numerous 20mm guns and lighter 50 caliber machine guns. There was space on deck five for crews to move laterally along the length of the airship, to repair torn canvas, secure lines or do other maintenance. And there were also hardened storage areas for ready ammo that could be passed up to the gunners on the upper platforms.

"Very well," said Bogrov, turning to a watchstander. "Send word topside, that all crews may take station on ready deck five. Watch your altimeter and variometer, Mister Kanev."

“Passing through 200 meters, sir.”

“Then ahead slow. Rudderman will make a gradual turn north by northeast—five points at three minute increments.”

“Aye sir, coming five points to starboard now.”

The airship was always kept with enough buoyancy to make an easy ascent without having to resort to jettisoning much ballast. When land anchored, as opposed to taking station off a mooring tower where it was easy to secure lines, the anchors were actually steel harpoons that were fired to penetrate the ground itself, with a head designed to deploy after impact to create enough resistance to keep it securely anchored in the ground. Grappling hooks could also be tethered to any suitable feature on land, and like a bee sting, when the airship cast off to ascend, the cables would simply be released from the harpoon heads, leaving them embedded in the ground. This made land anchoring expensive, as it slowly used a finite number of harpoon anchor heads. The only way to avoid their use was to find an open field big enough to actually ground the ship on its landing gear, where crews could then drive stakes to secure lines and hold the ship in place. This had not been the case here, as Karpov wanted to hover at some elevation, very near the rail station, another little irritating request that Bogrov never understood.

Why did they have to take station here at Ilanskiy when there was a perfectly good mooring tower at Kansk, just a few kilometers to the west? Then he got his answer when *Tunguska* overflew Kansk on approach—the mooring tower was gone, which led Bogrov to believe it might have been bombed by the enemy, though he could see no sign of damage when he looked. It was all very strange. It was as if the tower had never even been built!

Tunguska rose into the grey sky, untethered and free again, which always had a way of calming the Commandant. He was born to fly, eschewed the ground and all land lubbers as he called them. Once the ship was climbing and through the first deck of lower clouds, he always breathed easier. There the world was a much simpler affair, pristine, clean, clear. Looking down on the cottony cloud tops was still a thrill, and he had come to think of the sky as his private domain, where he could waft with a gentle breeze, or cruise with the trade winds wherever he liked. There on the bridge, his gaze extended out for miles, unfettered by trees or hills or the ugly, squarish shapes of man made things. There was no mud to soil his boots, and no crawling along bumpy dirt roads to get from one place to another.

He took a deep breath, calming himself. The endless sky, and the steady drone of the forward engines were a comfort. "Ahead two thirds," he said to the telegraph operator, the man who would tap out the signal that would go by wire to the engine pods, where the engineers would actually set the speed.

But it was a deceptive calm in the air now. As the big nose of the ship slowly inclined upwards, turning another five points as he had ordered, he could sense that the weather ahead would be rough indeed. That had been a very hard ride over the English Channel. The ship had been badly shaken, though she bore the stress well. That said, the engineers had to reset interior cables, and even weld three segments of the duralumin frame that had been unduly stressed. Why was Karpov chasing another storm, particularly one that looked like this?

He was in the observation room now, his eyes darkening as he scanned the grey flanks of the clouds ahead. This one looks big, he thought, another goddamn bag buster. Look at that lightning! We'd be wise to get well above those thunderheads, but how high will they climb? I've seen storms out here in Siberia that would shake a man's dreams for days after they passed, and this one looks bad.

And what was this order for the men to stand to battle stations? Was Karpov at war with the sky itself? We're deep inside our own airspace here, though there had been no sign of any other fleet airship, and not a whisper on the radio set. What was happening? Was the fleet off west at the front? Was the Grey Legion making another big push on our Ob River line defenses? Karpov always left at least one airship here at Ilanskiy, which was another thing the Air Commandant never understood. It was too far from the front, and there was nothing here of value that he could think of. But the Admiral seemed intent on building out a major operations hub here. He had gathered troops, engineers, airships to this place, but now it was quiet and forlorn. What was really going on here?

"Thunderheads ahead sir," said his navigator. "Shall we steer to avoid them?"

"Steer directly for them," Karpov intervened. "Take us right into the heart of the storm. Find the worst air possible. If you see lightning, steer directly for it. Yes, I know this is dangerous, but we survived a storm like this easily enough over the English Channel, and we can ride this one out as well.

"Aye, sir, but why would we want to do this? Are you testing the integrity of our skeleton? Engineers tell me they have good solid welds on

those damaged frame girders. There's no need to air test. Why steer for the storm and put the ship at risk again?"

There, he had finally done it. Bogrov had directly asked the Admiral why he should carry out the orders he had received. He knew that was risky, always risky with a man of Karpov's temperament. One could never predict how he would react, but Bogrov would go unsatisfied. Karpov merely looked at him, then stared quietly out the viewport at the rising wall of thunderheads. Bogrov watched as the Admiral slowly adjusted the fit of his black leather gloves, and he knew better than to say anything more.

Part II

Lightning In The Sky

“What tongue does the wind talk? What nationality is a storm? What country do rains come from? What color is lightning? Where does thunder go when it dies?”

— Ray Bradbury

Chapter 4

Raqqah on the upper Euphrates was the ancient capital of the old Abbasid Caliphate dating from the year 796. Centuries earlier it was known as Leontopolis under the Greeks, the “City of Leon,” where emperor Leo I reigned. The Greeks and Romans came and went, and then came the Muslim warlord Iyad ibn Ghanm, who took the city in 639, for there were already holy Muslim monasteries there, where companions of Muhammad himself once lived. At one time it was bigger than Damascus, the center of an empire that reached into Central Asia, and stretched all the way to the deserts of North Africa.

In modern times Raqqah was also the seat of the dark Islamic rose of power that the West came to call ISIS. First arising as a resistance movement against the Assad regime in a shadowy evolution of the “Arab Spring,” ISIS soon morphed into the most effective paramilitary Islamic militant group yet seen, sweeping out of their strongholds in northern Syria and into Iraq, where the thin national boundary drawn by the post WWI Sykes–Picot Agreement was declared null and void, and a new modern Caliphate was pronounced. Utilizing brutal terror tactics that were flashed across the world’s computer screens on the Internet, ISIS soon drew a hard response from the U.S., and flurries of ship fired Tomahawk cruise missiles found targets in and around the city.

In 1941, the only cruise missiles in the world were still aboard the battlecruiser *Kirov*, a strange new mercenary for another empire that was trying to claim the place as its own. British and commonwealth troops were striving to bring the once great domain of the Abbasid regime under the authority of the Crown, but here their enemies would not be the dashing Sindi horsemen of the 9th Century, nor the swarthy, armored Azarbayjani infantry beneath their black banners. Instead they would be facing the tough, battle tested troops of *Fallschirmjäger Sturm-Regiment 1*, commanded by Oberst Hermann-Bernhard Ramcke.

He was a short, cheeky, round faced man, eyes alight when he smiled. A newcomer to the Luftwaffe, he had first entered military service through the navy as a ship’s boy in 1905. Ramcke also fought with German Marine-Infanterie near Flanders in WWI, wounded five times. As if he could not get enough of the harsh cruelty of war, he joined Western troops attempting to

interfere in the burgeoning Russian Revolution, fighting against Bolshevik forces led by Sergei Kirov in 1919. He had only just transferred to the Luftwaffe, less than a year ago in July of 1940, when Kurt Student picked him to join his 7th Flieger Division.

It was a fateful move for him, for he would later go on to command the elite 2nd Fallschirmjäger Division in Italy and Russia, one of the toughest fighting German divisions of the war. He already had a taste of this new war in the lightning swift assaults that took both Malta and Cyprus from the British, and was now thinking Crete might be his next assignment when news came that his unit had been selected for a new deployment.

“The Führer has authorized increased German support for the Vichy French in Syria,” Student had told him. “The British have been busy putting down the rebellion of Rashid Ali and his so called Golden Square over in Iraq. To do this they moved considerable forces from India, at least two divisions. Now, with this big operation underway against Damascus and Beirut, they think they are going to swing up the Euphrates, take Aleppo, and cut the major rail links into Turkey. So your men will go here, to Dier Ez Zour.”

“The entire regiment?” Ramcke thought it was a long way to move his troops on such short notice. “We are still consolidating on Cyprus at Nikosia.”

“Don’t worry about that. What’s left of the Cypriot resistance has fled to the highlands. I will dispatch a battalion to see about them. Pull together your recon battalion, and a company of engineers. That is all you need take. Von Sponek already has the 65th Airlanding Regiment south of the river. You will land to the north. There is a road there that extends up to Mosul, and the British may come from that direction. They must not be allowed to move up the river further towards Raqqa, or to cross the river to attack Dier Ez Zour. Things did not go so well for the 65th in Holland, so put some backbone in the men. If necessary, blow the bridge over the Euphrates.”

It had been necessary.

Within hours of his arrival on the scene north of Dier Ez Zour, Ramcke learned that the British were, indeed, pushing two columns toward the city. One advanced directly up the Euphrates, and the 65th Regiment was soon engaged so heavily that its commander was killed, leaving Ramcke as the senior officer on site. Yet he realized he was on the wrong side of the river. So he made the decision to take his troops south of the Euphrates and have

his engineers demolish the bridge. Then word came that a third British column was now advancing on the town along the road to Palmyra, and Ramcke knew his forces would soon be badly outnumbered, and under attack from three quarters.

It was then that he received Von Sponek's orders to withdraw to Raqqah. "Use any vehicle you can get your hands on," he told him on the radio. "But get your men north as soon as possible. There are British commandos at Raqqah! Take the place and hold it."

The transport available was fairly lean, but given casualties sustained against the British 10th Indian Division, they had collected enough trucks to move most of the men. For those that had no vehicles, a special night operation was mounted by landing nine JU-52s on the desert roads north of the town, as the airfield was now under British artillery fire. It was a daring operation, but "Auntie Ju" would not fail her men that day, and the nine planes all got safely away, including Ramcke and most of his Recon Battalion.

The last troops to leave the position at Dier Ez Zour, he would be the first to arrive up north that night at Raqqah. Word had come that British commandos were already at the airfield, so the JU-52s that carried them also stored fresh parachutes for the men.

"Well, this is a real bitter cup of tea," said Ramcke to Oberleutnant Adolf Feldmann, a special agent of the Abwehr attached to his unit. He had been in Iraq, trying to organize resistance against the British in coordination with the Brandenburgers, and he had a troop of twenty of those elite commandos with him when he arrived at Dier Ez Zour to join the Germans there.

"A night parachute landing northeast of the airfield—what a nightmare. Have a look at this map! There are hills there. We'll have to land well beyond those, and well away from the river. The last thing I need is to have half my men in the water and marshes. It will take us an hour to find the men in the dark and get organized. In the meantime, god only knows what the British will be doing. They had the pluck to mount this very same operation last night, and they've taken the airfield."

"Then they'll have men on those hills as well," said Feldmann. "They overlook the airfield and town. You'll have to take them as your first objectives."

"I don't like it," Ramcke shook his head. "We'll have until dawn to

secure the place, but we don't know what we're up against."

"It cannot be much," Feldmann reassured him. "My Brandenburgers would be more than a match for any commandos the British may have sent there. Your battalion is just along for the ride!" His smile conveyed his confidence, but Ramcke was not so certain.

The drone of the JU-52 was little solace as the planes flew north in the dark. All the men were busy getting into their parachute harnesses, and stuffing weapons and equipment into landing canisters. Ramcke watched them, undaunted by the fact that this was a retreat, and already seeing it as a new attack on just another objective.

"You there, Sergeant," he said watching the men with the canisters. "No rifles there—every man is to carry his own weapon. Use the canisters only for the machineguns, mortars and ammunition. I want the men ready to fight as soon as they hit the ground. Understood?"

He had learned a few things from the action on Malta and Cyprus. It had been German doctrine to drop all weapons in canisters, which left the men with only their sidearm when they hit the ground. That wasn't going to happen this time. He knew the remainder of the 65th Luftland Regiment, and the other two companies of his battalion, would be moving all night, but did not expect they would reach the town until well after dawn given the condition of the roads.

At least we managed to slip away without the British realizing what we were up to, he thought. They damn near caught the whole of the 65th Regiment in a nice little cauldron. We might have held, but for how long? I've little in the way of artillery here, and only a few mortars and recoilless rifles for heavy weapons. This whole operation was mounted with too much haste and too little thought.

"Don't worry," said Feldmann. "I had men through that town some months ago. The whole place sits north of the river. There are escarpments to the south, and that terrain will be all but impassible for the British lorries. See here..." He fingered the map to indicate a position southeast of the town along the river. "See how the river bends close to the escarpments? The flood plain narrows there, and that will make a nice bottleneck for the boys from the 65th Regiment to hold up the British. This place is very defensible."

"I suppose so, after we take it. Remember the British are there now. I thought the French had left a garrison, but they pulled all those troops south towards Damascus when they heard we were coming. And I'll say another

thing,” Ramcke shook his head. “Things aren’t all rosy to the south either! Have you heard what happened to 9th Panzer Division?”

“I read the reports. I’m Abwehr.”

“Yes? Well what was in your reports about these new British tanks? They went right through our boys, and Rommel got the same treatment a month ago in North Africa.”

“A new tank,” said Feldmann. “I’ll admit we knew nothing about it, and I’m told it is considerably bigger than their old Matildas. But don’t expect any here, Ramcke. Wolff held off the British at Palmyra easily enough, and you can do the same.”

“Wolff had the entire 16th Regiment come up behind him as a timely reinforcement,” said Ramcke. “Those were the troops that actually got the job done in Holland, so it’s no wonder the British left us Palmyra.”

“And your boys were the troops that got the job done at Malta and Cyprus. Why the long face, Herr Oberst? Remember—the 7th Machinegun Battalion is also coming up from Homs through Aleppo. In fact, they might be very near the town now. You have the leading edge of Sturm-Regiment One here. Lightning at the edge of the storm! This will be no problem, I assure you.”

Yes, it all sounded good on paper, Ramcke thought, and the map, sketchy as it was, did show favorable terrain for the defense once they had control of the town. After all, how many commandos could the British have there? Feldmann was probably correct. Yet something in his belly remained unsettled that night, an uncomfortable feeling as the amber lights winked on in the long cabin, indicating the planes were nearing their planned dropping point.

“Ten minute warning,” said Feldmann. “I have just one section of my Brandenburgers here. The rest are on plane nine. May I have the honor of taking my men out first, Herr Oberst?”

“The honor? It’s all yours Feldmann. I didn’t know these were your men, but they can act as pathfinders.”

It was then that they heard it, a dull explosion far ahead, and bright light flashed in the sky. Feldmann pressed his head against the side window, trying to see what was going on. “We’re under attack!” He shouted, then was quickly up with a terse hand signal to his Brandenburgers.

Ramcke looked and saw that one of the lead transports had been hit, and was already falling from the sky, its wing blazing with fire, men already

leaping from the fuselage for their lives. How had the British discovered them like this in the dark? Could it be they moved fighters into the airfield at Raqqah for this very reason? He knew he now had only seconds to get his men to safety.

“Everyone up! Make ready to jump!”

He saw the gunner on the MG-15 machinegun, its black barrel pointed out one of the open square windows looking for targets, but seeing nothing to fire at. Then the sky lit up with another explosion, and this time Ramcke saw what was happening. Something was in the sky, moving like a sleek shadow and then disappearing into a cloud. It was unlike anything he had seen, and it had fired a searing rocket at the formation. Another plane had been struck, its right wing engine blown off and the wing itself careening away as the plane tipped over and fell.

“Come on!” he shouted. “Jump! Jump for your lives!”

The cabin light dimmed to deep red, indicating that they had just reached the edge of the intended drop zone. Then the wild moment came. The doors were slid open, and one by one the men darkened the portal with their bulk, tall, strong soldiers, young and proud. Out they went, jumping as if they were leaping from a sinking ship. As each man went, he fell into the chaos of the scene outside.

Feldmann was first out, just as he had wished. Behind him went the five black uniformed Brandenburgers, then the men of Ramcke’s HQ squad. His company was going to be scattered all over the desert below, those that survived. There were 18 men on each of the nine planes, and he had already seen two go down in flaming wrecks.

The men pushed forward, the urgency of the moment moving them on. Out they went, falling like leaves on the wind of a storm, into the black Syrian night. Ramcke reached the door, saw the chaotic scene framed there, then literally cast his fate to the wind in a tumultuous, harrowing fall.

You’re too old for this Hermann, he told himself, a man of 52 years in 1941. He had only just completed his parachute qualification course the previous year when he joined Student’s troops. Tonight he was supposed to make a nice bumpy landing on the desert somewhere, not go plummeting into the dark of a night air action. Then he felt the stiff jolt as his parachute deployed, his breath coming hard, and a moment of exhilaration. His life now hung by those long cords, buoyed by the fluttering chute, drifting on the wind.

Above he could see men streaming out of the last plane, and then he saw something come streaking in at the JU-52, plunging right into the fuselage like a fiery harpoon. The bright fire of the explosion lit up the night, sending ripples of color on the flanks of thin clouds. He saw the sky peppered with the dark shapes of other drifting parachutes, men dangling beneath them as they fell.

What was it Feldmann had just said to him? Lightning at the edge of the storm! A rallying cry to bolster his spirits, but to see his men there now, hanging there at the mercy of the marauding enemy, he realized it was someone else's lightning in the sky this time.

Off in the distance he could see the shadowy square shapes of buildings, and the glimmer of moonlight on the winding bend of the Euphrates. The evening crescent was just rising. Then the ground seemed to come up much faster than he expected, and he was tumbling down onto the hard desert floor in a bruising landing. His parachute scudded along before finally collapsing on itself as Ramcke struggled to get up, feeling the bite of pain from his left ankle. Thank god nothing was broken, and he was able to stand, alive and still in one piece as he slipped out of his parachute harness, struggling to get his wits about him.

One minute he was on the plane talking with Feldmann over the drone of the engines, then the wild fall, and now the relative quiet of the desert night. Three planes had fallen of the nine, and as cruel as his fate had been, it was better than that which had befallen the men on those stricken JU-52s. Two other men fell close to him, and he started for the nearest, knowing his job was now to collect his company as best he could, and get them into a position to make an advance on the town.

It was going to be a very long night.

Chapter 5

Fedorov heard the planes in the sky, his eyes squinting into the inky night as he saw the first rockets fire. The mobile force had landed at Raqqa several hours ago, ready to concentrate their full force to try and seize the airfield and bridges over the Euphrates. To their great surprise, they found the settlement largely empty of enemy troops. Most all of the French garrison there had been pulled south to the renewed fighting around Nebek, north of Damascus. Only a few desert cavalry units had remained, and when the sleek X-3 helos made their first runs over the town, this last remnant was soon taking to anything they could ride and hastening away as fast as they could.

After overflying the airfield, the team descended there, the Russian Marines storming out in four groups led by Troyak, Zykov, Chenko and Popski. They fanned out, quickly securing the tarmac and hanger area, and then making their way into a few buildings that served as an administrative facility, and a squat makeshift control tower. They found the base empty, but saw signs of recent occupation, even a cup of tea that was still warm in the admin building offices. Apparently the French authorities had also made a hasty retreat.

“We’ll need to make sure there’s no fifth column still in the town,” said Fedorov. “When the Argonauts land, we should sweep the whole place, but I want to see the bridges first.”

Troyak led the way, with Zykov’s team in support, leaving Chenko and Popski to hold the airfield and guard the vital KA-40. The X-3s lingered above, until they had satisfied themselves that there was no threat near the town. Then they made for the airfield to set down, and the Argonauts soon reinforced the ground teams with another thirty men led by Lieutenant James Byng. A distant relation to the storied Earls of Strafford who bore that family name, Byng was all military. He came to the Fairchild security team aboard *Argos Fire* after a five year stint with SAS, a tall, well muscled man, sandy haired, trim, and thoroughly professional.

Popski met the man at the airfield, admiring the black suited Argonauts as they assembled there.

“Half the Russians have gone off to have a look at the bridges,” said Popski. “The place was all but deserted when we arrived, but we can’t count on that for long. We may have surprised them, but they’ll know the value of

this town just as we do. So we'll need to plan our defense here. Word is that the Germans have had enough at Dier ez Zour, but that means they'll be heading our way, and they could be here by tomorrow. Have a look at my map, Lieutenant, and see what you think."

Byng removed his goggles and gloves, his automatic weapon still slung over his shoulder. The map was not the sort of well detailed document he might be accustomed to, but it depicted most of the key terrain features near the town.

"This high ground north of the airfield will have to be occupied," he said at once, and Popski nodded.

"I thought as much," he returned. "The rise northeast of the field looks to be a good place to set up our mortars. It overlooks both the town and airfield."

"Good enough, and you might post a squad on that hill as well." Byng pointed to an elevation due north from their position. "You've only twenty men?"

"Twenty-one, counting the pilots. We lost a man at Palmyra."

"Well I was thinking to take my Argonauts south to the river. We can put some defense into the town, and hold the bridges. Your men might best be held here to cover the airfield and that high ground. We were heavy on missiles this loadout, so I've only brought three ten man squads. But we'll be breaking into teams of five men each. I'll designate them Argo one thru six."

"We'll do the same," said Popski, "four fire teams. I'll post our team Chenko with me here to hold this field. Troyak and Zykov will occupy that high ground."

Byng looked over the hills again, the concern on his face obvious. "We won't be able to hold here for very long," he said frankly. "You can put ten men on that high ground, but they won't be able to stop any determined attack. And that town is the real problem. If they get men on the east side of the river, they'll be able to approach through this area here." He pointed to the map at a place labeled Samara. "They'll come through the town like water through a sieve. If I have a fire team covering each bridge, and one in reserve, that leaves me only fifteen men to watch that flank and cover the town itself."

"Yes, it's not a pretty picture," said Popski, "but we'll have to touch it up as best we can."

"Very well, Colonel. By the way, let me say it's a pleasure to meet you, sir. I've..." Byng smiled. "Let's just say I've read about you and that private

little army you set up in the western deserts.”

“What? Popski’s Private Army?” Popski always liked the sound of that. “Shan Hackett gave me that handle, though I’ve yet to sink my teeth into the business. This bit here is a good workout for the time being. One day I’ll get back to Egypt and Libya. If you’re ever at large there, look me up, Lieutenant. I’ve seen your blokes go at it. Damn good men.”

“That they are, sir.”

“I’ll let the Russian Captain know what we’ve planned, and fill his ear with your comments as well. For my money, I would rather see us concentrate the whole force available on one objective, like this airfield here. It’s really the principle supply point. Roads east and south are long and hard, and there’s no rail connection to this place. So any supplies will have to be flown in, and this field is vital for that. I’m sure he’ll agree. He’s damn touchy about that helicontraption of his there, and seeing what you lads can do in those little birds of yours, I can understand why.”

“Yes sir. Nothing like knowing LT Ryan is up in those X-3s on overwatch,” said Byng.

It was just after dusk when Fedorov returned with Troyak and Zykov, relieved at the bridge defense by Byng and his Argonauts.

“The Lieutenant says you have a plan,” he said to Popski.

“I suppose so, Captain. The thing is this—we’ve only fifty men here, the whirlybirds aside. When the Germans come, they’ll have an entire regiment, and that Lieutenant Byng is of a mind that the town presents too much cover to stop any determined advance. I’ll have to agree with him. If they get even as much as a company in there, they can move house to house, and it will be damn near impossible to hold them off for very long.”

“I understand,” said Fedorov. “But the British will be close on the heels of the Germans when they get here.”

“True enough,” said Popski. “But that road along the river is easy to hold. The escarpments to the west restrict any good ground for movement to a nice little bottleneck. Jerry can set up shop there and post small delaying forces that could hold our lads up a good long while.”

“Don’t forget Brigadier Kingstone’s column is to the south,” Fedorov reminded. “He’s well inland from the river approach, and chances are he may get here first.”

“That would be much desired,” said Popski, though he had real misgivings. “That’s hard ground south,” he said quietly. “Wouldn’t want

Kingstone to get lost out there, would we?” He gave Fedorov a knowing eye, and his point was well made.

That was the real question, thought Fedorov. Could the British get here with enough force in time? Would this be just another futile holding effort, waiting for relief that might never arrive? And how many men might we lose here tomorrow if we do try to hold? I’m counting on Kingstone’s flying column, but Popski is correct. It may never get here. Should I go up with the KA-40 and look for him tonight? Perhaps we could air ferry some of his troops here?

The falling sun was soon driving the first shadows of the evening in on his troubled thoughts and, just after dusk, the pilot of the KA-40 reported he had airborne contacts on radar from the south.”

“From the south?” Fedorov thought they might be British planes out of Habbaniyah, but he was wrong. The first appearance of the enemy would not come by the river road, or the thin tracks that led west to Aleppo, or north to Turkey. It would come from the flights of JU-52s that Ramcke had managed to collect for his recon battalion, and it was coming that very moment.

“We’d better get a couple X-3s up,” he suggested, and Popski ran off to Lieutenant Ryan to raise the alarm. Soon the fitful whirl of the sleek rotors was clouding the field with blown dust, and two helos rose into the gathering darkness like shadowy birds of prey. Some minutes later they saw the missiles in the air, the first bright explosion and fire of a kill, and they knew the fight was joined. The low drone of aircraft engines sounded hollow, and Fedorov pinched off his collar microphone to signal Troyak on the high ground overlooking the airfield, even as a second explosion ripped the darkness on the near horizon. The killing had started.

“Sergeant Troyak,” he said. “Get your men ready. They’re coming.”

* * *

Ramcke was some time getting his men together to see what he had left after the chaotic night drop in the desert northwest of the town. His engineer platoon was nowhere to be found, most likely on the first plane to be hit. Of the 162 men that had boarded the planes, he was able to account for only 96 in that first hour on the ground. He had a mixed force to begin with, mostly the recon platoons plucked from the Regiment’s companies for this special mission, and re-designated the Luftland Sturm Recon Battalion, a formation

that had never existed prior to his deployment here. In spite of the name, his platoons really only amounted to a good reinforced company when they set out, and now he had apparently lost a third of his force in the wild night drop.

Oberleutnant Jung's Platoon had come through unscathed, and Altman's Platoon was well accounted for. Hoefeld's pioneers were missing to a man, and Schulte could only present with twelve men from his platoon. Reinhardt had collected his men from the 8th Schwere Company, which was all the heavy firepower they would have that night, three heavy machine guns and three 81mm mortars, half of what that company was authorized to carry. The rest were gone, or lost in the darkness somewhere. He would not really know the score until sunrise, but there was no time to wait on the dawn. He had to get his men assembled and into that town, or up on that high ground overlooking the place, and that was what he set out to do. He found Feldmann and his Brandenburgers, all intact with a group of twenty men.

"Alright, Feldmann. You were so confident just a moment ago. What was in your damn reports about those new British rockets? I'll be lucky to have a hundred men alive here after that attack."

Feldmann gave him a disparaging look, clearly shaken by the experience of the night drop, though his morale was undaunted. "Let me take my men into the town," he said. "You'll want those hills as soon as possible. He pointed to the knobby high ground overlooking the place, his eyes still darkly scanning the sky when they heard a distant thrumming sound.

"What was that aircraft?" Ramcke asked. "Did you see anything when you jumped?"

"Just the toes of my boots," said Feldmann. "The ground came up much too fast."

"I got a glimpse of something, but it wasn't a British fighter plane. What is going on here, Feldmann? Tanks that can smash right through a panzer division, rockets launching from ships and planes—where did the British get these weapons? What has the Abwehr been doing for the last year? Why haven't we heard about any of this?"

"I would like to tell you I know everything Herr Oberst," said Feldmann, adjusting the strap of his sub-machinegun. "But my pockets are not quite big enough."

"Well," said Ramcke, "no one expects you to carry the whole world in your pockets, Feldmann, just a good bit of what we might be facing here would be sufficient. In another hour we'll see what we have in front of us.

Then we deal with anything you may have overlooked.”

He turned to a Sergeant and ordered the men to assemble by squads. “That hill,” he pointed to the shadow in the distance. “I want a recon team there at once. Hold three squads ready to assault. If the British have commandos here, they will not have overlooked the importance of that ground. Tell Reinhardt to get his mortar teams ready, and that will likely be his first target. I will follow Feldman to the edge of the town and set up my command post there. Send runners as soon as you can sort the situation out.”

The men moved now with well practiced urgency. This was what they had trained for, their stock in trade. For some it had been their third or fourth combat jump of the war, survivors of Holland, Malta and Cyprus. Ramcke watched them move, hefting their weapons and ammunition, tightening the straps of their characteristic helmets, lacing up a loosened boot. They were ready to fight, he thought, and woe betide the British tonight.

He looked to Feldmann, seeing the man nod and salute as he led his Brandenburgers off towards the town. “I will keep you informed, Herr Oberst,” he said over his shoulder with a wink. “This will not take long.” His irrepressible smile followed, and he was off, the black uniformed Brandenburgers following in a smart line that was soon swallowed by the night.

Ramcke put his hands on his hips, watching his unit unfold, the squads fanning out, harangued by the hard commands of the other officers and Sergeants. The men moved on instinct, a reflex for war and combat that was well honed. Perhaps Feldmann is correct, he hoped. After all, how many commandos could the British have here, twenty, fifty? He had made a very good guess, but his thoughts were still harried by that shadow he had seen slipping into the clouds, and the searing fire of those rockets that had taken down three of his nine planes.

We must get to that airfield, he knew. That is where those fighters must have come from, and that must be my principle objective here. I am told the 7th Machinegun Battalion is coming from Aleppo. When will they arrive? Don’t count on them doing your work for you, he chided himself. The airfield is north of the river, and the main road to Aleppo is to the south of that barrier. The 7th will have to take one of the two bridges if they want to get into the town, so all the real objectives of worth beyond that are mine for the moment.

Time to get busy.

Chapter 6

Troyak saw the Germans coming on his night vision goggles. He was noting the movement of the men carefully, seeing them deploy, luminous green shapes in the eerie dark. A recon team and three squads in waiting, he noted. He gave a quiet hand signal to his fire team, just five men here on the high knob of Hill 272, and another five under Zykov on Hill 264 to the northwest. Neither team was adequate to the task it had been given, but at least he had men on both hills, which was better than yielding one to the enemy without a fight.

Yet when he saw the forces deploying below, he knew his five man team was going to be easily flanked. They simply could not cover all angles and approaches to the hilltop, so he immediately called for Chenko to bring up his team from the airfield and cover the ground between the two knobs.

His own grim prediction was soon to be proven true. The Germans moved in Altmann's platoon, along with all the men in Reinhardt's Schwere platoon, which had assembled to support this attack. Troyak could see them moving, and settling into depressions in the ground below, and he instinctively knew what he was looking at. They were selecting good firing positions for any heavy weapons they might have, and once he had allowed the enemy to settle on ground of its choosing, he called Popski at the airfield.

"We'll be under attack soon," he said. "They'll probe my position first, and pay for that, but they'll follow with mortar fire soon after. I'll send you a grid position for our mortar team. Are the helicopters ready?"

They were.

Two of the three X-3s were revving up again to provide fire support that Troyak believed would be the decisive edge here. The third X-3 had departed south to reconnoiter the German advance, and pick up more fuel from their operating base. They would use only half as much as they could carry by making the flight down and back to the T3 Pump station, and so for the moment their airborne fire support was limited, though even one X-3 was a formidable addition to his firepower here.

On Troyak's order the Podnos 82mm mortars opened the game, the first rounds whining in to fall on the German positions below. He could see the men reacting as they should, going to ground, yet still advancing under any cover they could find. They know enough not to get stuck under that fire, he

thought. These are well trained men, and they'll outnumber us three to one or better for this first engagement. No matter. We have the firepower to stop them here.

His confidence was not unwarranted. Just as the enemy began to answer with their own 5cm and 8.1cm mortars, the first of the X-3s was up and over their position, quickly finding the enemy mortar teams and moving to attack. The hiss of the rocket pods soon followed, and would be a hard shock to the Germans when the missiles hit home.

The Hydra 70 had an old pedigree, developed from plans laid down for a distant cousin in the late 1940s after the war. The Mark 40 was a fin folding unguided aerial rocket made by the U. S. Navy, serving in both the Korean and Vietnam Wars, and the newer Hydra 70 had the same simple design. The Navy was now deploying a guided version using lasers, but the X-3s had the older rockets, all unguided, but with a good 8 kilometer strike range. They had two seven tube pods mounted that day, which could use single or ripple fire to engage targets. Unguided or not, the optics on the X-3 were going to get the missiles where Lieutenant Ryan and his sidekick Tom Wicks wanted them, and that was right on the three 81mm mortar positions in Reinhardt's Schwere platoon. They put three missiles on each position, getting all three mortars and then angling to look for other targets of opportunity.

"Good shooting Tommy!" said Ryan when he saw the results.

"Always aim to please," said Wicks in return. "What's that yonder at about three-o'clock?"

Ryan pivoted his X-3, the powerful high resolution optics and cameras painting the ground where Wicks was pointing. He could clearly see the Germans deploying another weapon, and then it fired, sending a round out toward the high ground that smashed into the shoulders of the hill.

"Looks like some kind of Recoilless Rifle. Take it down, Wicky."

"Right-O, LT." Wicks fired, three more rockets snaking in to the target in short order. The resulting explosions blasted the weapon, sending it careening up and away from its original firing position.

"A good hard knock, Tommy."

"That's why they call me Tommy Knocker," said Wicks. "Shall we give them a taste of the minigun?"

* * *

Troyak saw the rockets go in with lethal accuracy, and soon after the snarl of the minigun raked the ground below. It fell on the men of Reinhardt's platoon, inflicting heavy casualties where they scrambled on the relatively open ground. The Germans had finally recovered from the shock and were now directing machinegun fire at the helo, forcing Ryan to bank and climb away from the scene. But the job had been done, and the heavier support weapons in the Schwere platoon had been taken out, as Troyak expected. Now it would come down to guts and small arms fire, but the Russians had plenty of both, and now possessed the heavier mortars, the Germans having no more than a single light 5cm tube in each platoon.

Over on Hill 264, Zykov watched the battle begin with a big grin on his face. While a part of him whispered that the fight was unfair, offering due respect to the Germans who had to face their modern weaponry and firepower, the greater part sided with that grin. When men were out there with rifles, and coming to kill you, then any advantage on your side was welcome without scruples or any regrets. He knew that the enemy would hit them with any weapon they had, and so the Russians would do the same, no questions asked.

In that passing moment, he thought of Captain Karpov, the hard fighting commander of the ship through so many battles at sea. Karpov knew what Zykov accepted as a matter of course. You hit the enemy hard, knock him down, and if he gets up to fight again, then that's your fault. That was the cold rationale of war, and every warrior subscribed to it on one level or another.

* * *

When the X-3's climbed they suddenly saw something on the ground to the west, and Ryan veered in that direction. "Argo Leader, this is X-1 overwatch. Be advised of a truck column north of the river and inbound on your position, over."

"Copy on that, X-1. Care to form the welcoming committee?"

"Will do, Argo Leader. Ryan out."

The column Ryan had spotted were the first arrivals of the German 7th Motorized Machinegun Battalion, dispatched to this position some time ago by the division commander, von Sponeck. They had driven all day and into the night to reach Raqqah. One company had found a bridge just barely able

to support the weight of the trucks, and with a little shoring up from the engineer platoon, they made it across. The rest of the battalion was on the main road south of the river, which would lead to the better bridges now being held by the Argonauts.

Ryan decided to have a look around, signaling the other X-3 to scout south and then rejoin his bird over the river. They soon began to piece together a picture of the gathering fight, as all forces in the region were now sending troops to this place, marching to the sound of the guns. Due south, they spotted what looked to be another German force at first, but when Ryan reported the movement to Popski, the gritty Colonel simply smiled.

“No Germans will be coming out of that desert,” he said. “Take another look. That has to be Kingstone’s flying column up from Palmyra.”

It was.

The first elements of this scout force were arriving with the fast moving motorized cavalry units. Glubb Pasha had scouted the way, and was also leading in a detachment of his Arab Legion. This force would soon run afoul of the advancing companies of the 7th Machinegun Battalion south of the river, and another small action would begin there in the pre-dawn hours.

In the meantime, Ryan was rejoined by the other X-3 helo, designated X-2 for this mission, and together they applied the same deadly medicine to the oncoming truck column north of the river. The Hydra 70’s took out the lead truck, stopping the column in its tracks as all the infantry spilled out and bled onto the ground around the trucks, looking for cover. Wicks shot up two more trucks, and then the minigun took its pound of flesh out of the column, raking the snake’s back with its snarling bite.

The Germans were stunned by the attack, as it seemed that lightning was simply flashing out of the sky at them. They could hear some kind of aircraft overhead, the hard thump of the rotors and growl of the helo engines, but they could not see the beasts that were gouging them now. After those first moments of shock and awe, the Germans soon reacted by opening up with every machinegun they had, nine MG-32s in this single company, and they were raking the sky in all directions, the hot tracer rounds streaming up like a fountain of molten lead.

“That’s done it,” said Wicks.

“Good enough, Tommy,” said Ryan. “Let’s get round to the south along the river and see what’s there.” He knew that was the main axis of the German retreat from Dier ez Zour, and the helos swept across the river,

overflying the budding meeting engagement between Kingstone's men and the other two companies of the 7th Machinegun battalion. Off to the southeast, they soon saw another long line of an advancing column. A motorcycle platoon led the way, followed by what looked to be a full battalion of motorized infantry, the first arrivals of the 65th Regiment.

"How many rockets left in those pods, Wicky?"

"I fired four salvoes of three, so I've only got one left in each pod," said Wicks. "Time for a reload, but we've still got the minigun."

"Aye, two rockets won't do much good here. There will be more behind this lot too, but it'll be dawn before that column gets up north. Let's hold what we've got and get back to the fight near the airfield."

"What, and help the Russkies?"

"Our *allies* this time out me boyo, so see that you put those last two rockets on the Germans."

* * *

Ramcke's men reorganized and tried that hill while they still had at least the cover of darkness, but Troyak had more for them than they wanted. They had two RPGs, five AK-94K assault rifles, and one autogrenade launcher, and that weapon was enough to decide the issue and stop the attack. The rate of fire was almost as good as a heavy caliber machine gun, only the 30mm grenades packed a much greater wallop when they hit.

So the men of Altman's platoon learned the same hard lesson that Wolff's men had been taught early when they tried to storm the high fortress at Palmyra. The fight had come down to firepower and guts, and though the Germans made a brave attack, firepower trumped their hand, and they were forced back with heavy losses.

Leutnant Jung's platoon attempted to flank the hill, moving to the south and making for the northern outskirts of the town, but Byng had been closely monitoring the fighting and had moved one of his two reserve fire teams into the town there to plug the gap. Jung's men ran into a well laid ambush, and the Argonauts stopped the flanking attempt, forcing the Germans to take cover in any building they could get to.

Further south, Feldmann's Brandenburgers were advancing through the suburb of Samara close by the river. A second platoon from the Schwere company, and the men from Schulte's platoon were on their right with

Ramcke's Headquarters unit. It was not long before the Brandenburgers realized that the British were in the main town ahead, most likely guarding a small foot bridge over a canal that bounded the town on the east.

"They'll be watching that bridge," he said after reaching Ramcke's HQ shack, an old, weathered barn just outside the east edge of Samara. "Shall I organize an attack while we still have darkness?"

"Don't bother. From every report I've received the British seem to have night eyes! Our men can't make a single move without being seen. No. I've just received word from the main column. The 65th Regiment has its first battalion just a few miles south. They'll be here by dawn."

"So we wait?"

"They have artillery, Feldmann. Thus far the British have bedeviled us with those fighter planes firing rockets. The game now is to get the Artillery into position and put fire on that airfield. There's also a battle forming south of the river. Donner's MG Battalion is there."

"Good!" Feldmann smiled. "Things will be going our way soon enough. The more the merrier! I'll get my men into position, and we'll be ready to take that footbridge. If you can get us a little support fire, all the better."

Ramcke returned the man's salute, shaking his head at his brash bravado. He was Abwher, not regular army, and not even a member of the Brandenburgers. Those troops were the best the Germans had, and Ramcke had every cause to believe they could deliver on Feldmann's boast. But the way the man associated himself with the commandos, as if he were one and the same, seemed just a little too much self-aggrandizement on Feldmann's part. The man wanted to run with the big cats, but I wonder if he has any teeth or claws himself? He wants to take that footbridge? Very well, at dawn he gets his chance.

In the meantime, I've lost twenty more men tonight. Come daylight we may finally get a look at these British planes that have been hurting us. Yet for now, there's no point contesting that hill. It will likely take my entire company to have any chance there given what I've heard from Altman and Reinhardt.

He looked at the map, seeing the town as the best possible place to get his men now. This should have been as simple as Feldmann said it would be, he thought. We were to have had surprise and cover of darkness on our side, but neither was our friend tonight. The enemy knew we were coming, and saw us plainly with little more than that sliver of a moon out there. Now

daylight removes the only cover we might have near those hills. So I'm bringing Altman and Reinhardt down here. We'll pool the entire company and try to infiltrate through that town now. It's our only play.

Even as he thought that, he wondered what cards the British still might hold in their hand. Time was also a key element here. The morning will be our only chance, he knew. By noon the British units following the 65th will be making their appearance. Then it comes down to the real fighting. For now, I need to get one of those goddamned bridges over the river, because something tells me the 65th will be needing it soon. We won't hold here. The enemy has the whole 10th Indian Division on the heels of our retreat. This is nothing more than a delaying action, and soon we'll find ourselves retreating yet again. Where this time, Aleppo, or back to Turkey?

In either case, von Sponeck won't like it, nor will Kurt Student. No, they won't like it one bit if they have to tell the Führer we could not hold as ordered. Who's ridiculous idea was it to fly us all the way from Cyprus to this god forsaken desert? Even as he thought that, he realized that it was the plaintive cry of every soldier who had ever found himself in a hard place. So tomorrow we fight, he steeled himself. Let's see what the men can do.

He looked at the dawn, shunning the coming sun. So much for lightning from the sky. All it really came down to was one man facing another with a rifle in hand. The rest is done with mirrors.

Part III

Vendetta

“Revenge is the sweetest morsel to the mouth that was ever cooked in hell.”

— Sir Walter Scott

Chapter 7

The ship rose into the slate grey sky, its massive shape casting a deeper layer of shadow on the ground. The rising wind blew fitfully, with cold fingers rippling the canvas. *Tunguska* was aloft, its great round nose inclined upward, rising into the sky as thunder rolled to greet her. Vladimir Karpov stood on the bridge, legs wide and one hand on the guide rail to steady himself. The storm in his mind seemed a reflection of the tumult in the sky above, and when lightning ripped the dark flanks of the clouds, its wrinkled fire seemed to gleam in his eyes.

Take me back, he commanded. Take me back to settle accounts and savor the vengeance I so roundly deserve. It was not a prayer, but an order, and even as the ship gained altitude, the winds rising with growing anger, so the fury in his own chest redoubled. Time was watching him, listening to him, waiting on his command as any other officer or member of his crew might. He could feel his own significance, a criticality in the nexus of this moment, and knew on some instinctive level that he would be obeyed. For he was not just anyone at that moment, not just a simple man subject to the whims of time as the ship might be buffeted by the wind. No, he was the master of all these events, sovereign of fate and time, Vladimir Karpov.

It is all my doing, he thought. I shook the foundations of Fedorov's history when I launched that first nuclear warhead against the American fleet in the North Atlantic. It was my knowledge and experience in combat that saved the ship and crew, and my victories that brought *Kirov* safely home to 2021. And it was my hand that spared *Key West*, though that does not seem to have mattered much in the scheme of things. The river of time was flowing on to the terrible rapids of a new war, and I would move with it, into the Pacific this time for another round of fire with the U.S. Navy.

I prevailed, until that Demon of a volcano sent the ship careening through time again. Who would have thought I would ever find myself in 1908, out to face our enemies yet again, and right the injustice of history, until I was betrayed yet again by the very same officers I fought for and saved. Yes! Volsky owes me his life, and Fedorov, and Orlov as well. Yet they came for me out of the depths of time in that damn submarine, traitors all.

And yet, had it not been for their duplicity, where would I be now?

Surely I would have mastered Togo and his decrepit old fleet, and restored Russia as a true Pacific power again. But I would be old now, thirty years on, as Volkov was when I met with him at Omsk. So all things have a way of guiding the flow of these events. I would not be here now if Volsky and Fedorov had not come for me aboard *Kazan*. Everything happens for a reason, and time has conspired to keep me always in the gyre of chaos, like a maddened conductor scoring the crescendo of doom.

So here I am, on another ship, a place I could never have imagined myself that night, so long ago now, when *Orel* blew up. And as for Volkov, that gutter snipe would be dead in 2021 if I had not opened the doors of fate that eventually sent him searching for Fedorov along the Trans-Siberian rail. So all of this was my doing, and to settle accounts I will start with Volkov. He thinks I am gone, lost, perished in that storm, but let him think again! Another storm awaits me, and I can feel the wind taking me as we climb.

Even as he thought that, there was a crackle of fire in the sky, as lightning rippled through the clouds. Karpov felt a tingling static, and something compelled him to look for the ladder up from the main bridge gondola.

“Admiral off the bridge!” called the Boatswain as he went, and the eyes of the crew followed him as he climbed, just high enough to gaze up into the massive interior of the airship. He perceived a tangible odor of ozone, sharp in the air around him now, and was awed to see a faint green glow emanating from the duralumin skeleton of the ship. It was happening again! It was happening just as he knew it would. Ahead full and on ‘til eternity!

The ship lurched in the heavy winds, and he steadied himself on the ladder, slowly descending to the main gondola again, announced by the Boatswain.

“Steady as she goes,” he said, and Air Commandant Bogrov gave him a wide eyed look. The elevator man was tensely laboring at his wheel, struggling to keep the ship aligned properly in the storm. The crack of lightning sounded again, a whiplash that sent the wind howling with pain. Tunguska shuddered as it rolled in the sky, climbing, climbing through decades to a future time, and a moment of destiny that Karpov was determined to write into Fedorov’s history books.

“All hands stand ready. Gun crews to battle stations!”

Karpov steeled himself for combat, knowing, with every fiber of his being, that he would lead the ship to a place in time that was precisely where

he needed to be to savor his moment of vengeance. A man was never adrift on the sea of time, he knew. He was always precisely where he belonged, and it could never be otherwise.

There came a dull roar, perhaps the wind, perhaps the cold draft of infinity. The ship trembled in that moment, and then slipped through to another, vanishing from the skies of 1909, an emerging somewhere else. There it hung in the skies above Ilanskiy, a massive, looming presence, until shadows formed in the sky beneath the ship, and the dull boom of thunder resounded like a kettle drum.

No, not thunder, Karpov knew, but the roar of cannon fire!

“Gunners, man all weapons! Crews deploy topside, and ready for action! Mark your targets on my command!”

Bogrov turned to Karpov, a look of surprise and astonishment on his face. What was the Admiral saying? He had been fighting to maintain control of the airship as it rolled in the livid sky, and suddenly Karpov was barking out orders as if they were going into combat.

Then the shadows around the ship congealed to solid shapes, long grey cylinders in the sky and his surprise was complete. Airships! Suddenly the sky below them was filled with airships! His eyes widened with shock as he saw the dark eagle wing insignia emerging from a sharp letter “V” on the tail of the nearest ship.

“Ahoy! Airships off the starboard bow!” His voice betrayed credulity as he instinctively shouted out the warning.

Karpov had already seen them, his field glasses raised to his eyes, and his voice was hard with an order. “Forward gondola. All guns to bear on targets ahead. Fire!”

Mother of god, thought Bogrov. What was happening? He knew that insignia as if it were branded on his own skin, the sharp “V” for Volkov, the black wings of an imperial eagle, dark on the dull grey canvas. These ships were Orenburg Federation vessels! Where had they come from?

The sharp crack of the recoilless rifles, all 105mm guns, punctuated the moment, and Bogrov knew that his next order would be to come about and bring the main guns on the command gondola to bear. The ship was in just the perfect position to attack the formation ahead, about 500 meters above the enemy airships, and just behind a squadron of four ships.

Off in the distance he thought he saw lightning in the sky, but the dull crack of gunfire followed the flash, and he could dimly see the darkened

shapes of more airships. A battle was raging there, and the dull red tint of one ship told him they were not alone in this fight.

“Ahoy! More ships off the port bow, and below. I think that’s Big Red out there!”

It was.

* * *

Old *Krasny*, Big Red, was fighting for her life at that moment. The news of the sudden incursion by the Orenburg fleet had shaken the morale of the Siberians. Karpov was gone, lost in that storm over the English Channel, and chaos had ensued. A big attack opened on the Ob River line, with at least five enemy divisions thrown into the fight. It was a major push to break through north of Novosibirsk, the place where Karpov had smashed the last enemy attack with his daring and innovative thermobaric bomb.

Then the airships came, the skies darkening with the first division of the Orenburg Northern fleet. The Siberians had only one ship in that sector, *Yakutsk*, and it was soon engaged by all of four enemy airships, the fleet flagship *Orenburg* among them. Brave *Yakutsk* but up a good fight, but was overmatched and blasted from the sky. Yet she had managed to make the enemy pay for her death, putting enough damage on two enemy airships that they were detached and sent home.

The remainder of that division hovered in the sky above the smoldering wreck of *Yakutsk*, as if they intended to feed on the carcass of the ship, watching until the hot fires laid the ravaged skeletal frame bare. Yet the ship had not died in vain. It put up just enough of a fight to buy the Siberian fleet a little time to rise for battle.

Aboard the *Orenburg*, Security Chief Kymchek had reported that the first enemy ship had fallen. With *Pavlodar* still burning when it was detached, and *Talgar* down at ground level with *Saran* to off load its troop contingent before returning home for repairs, Volkov’s main division was light, until reinforced by four more ships from the Caspian fleet. Two hours later, Admiral Zorki arrived with four battlecruiser class airships: *Armavir*, *Anapa*, *Sochi* and *Salsk*. They joined battlecruiser *Saran* and the fleet flagship *Orenburg*, and moved east in a massive formation of six airships, heading for Ilanskiy. Out in front of this formation, some 300 miles ahead, was the Southern Division under Admiral Gomel, with four more airships,

battlecruisers all about 100,000 cubic meter capacity. This force, *Sarkand*, *Tashkent*, *Samarkand*, and *Angren*, would soon find an engage the hasty defense mounted by the enemy northeast of Ilanskiy.

There were two Siberian airships, the heavy cruiser *Tomsk*, a smaller 100,000 cubic meter ship, and the big battleship *Krasnoyarsk*, “Old Krasny,” as it was called by the Siberians. Big Red loomed over the scene, her massive bulk expanding with 180,000 cubic meter volume. That fight was raging in the sky when Volkov gave the order to begin air landing operations with the four ships of the Caspian Fleet. He would retain *Orenburg* and *Saran* on overwatch while he monitored both operations from the command capsule aboard the fleet flagship. It was an detachable armored chamber, hidden like an egg within the underlying bulk of *Orenburg*, just forward of the main gondola. From here Volkov could sit in relative safety, peering through observation ports, and receiving status updates from Kymchek over voice tubes and telegraph.

One day I will have to get a proper intercom system set up on this ship, he thought, but there were more urgent plans before him now. They were riding high, at 10,000 meters in darkening skies. Rain had followed them, a long cold front sweeping east in the wake of the fleet sortie. He had won his first battle, laying *Yakutsk* to rest easily enough, and the damage to his two heavy cruisers was not serious. But they would be out of the action for some time, though that was of little concern to him. He would now outnumber the enemy fleet ten to five in the immediate vicinity of Ilanskiy. They still had two more ships further east near lake Baikal watching the Japanese front, and he would deal with those in due course.

For now, two to one odds suited him very well, and so he ordered the Caspian Fleet to descend for troop deployment while the Southern Division dispatched the two enemy airships that had sallied out to challenge them. So there he sat, a cup of brandy in one hand, a pair of field glasses in the other, safely sheltered in the hidden armored sphere of his command capsule.

“*Kymchek here,*” came a voice through the tube to his right. “*The fight ahead is going well. Tomsk is hit, and burning badly, but two of our ships report damage.*”

That didn’t matter either. Volkov thought that he could lose all four ships in that division, and then still outnumber the Siberians six to three with his remaining ships. This was going to roll on to its inevitable outcome. It was simply a matter of having more men, material, and insurmountable odds

in his favor, and he knew he would prevail. What will they write about my little battle here in days ahead, he wondered?

“That storm astern is moving up on us fast,” said Kymchek.

“Never mind the weather, Kymchek. Just let me know when those two airships are destroyed.”

It was then that Volkov heard a tearing sound of lightning that was enough to send a chill down his spine. Perhaps I should mind the weather, he thought. This storm could complicate my troop landing operation, and if the wind rises too much it will scatter my airborne troops all over the taiga. Southern Division has all four battalions on the ground, but I’ll need the troops from the Caspian Division to have any chance of taking Ilanskiy. The men from the two airships I sent home will stand in reserve at Kansk.... Which reminded him, and he shouted a question at Kymchek through the voice tube.

“What about Kansk? Are my men there yet?”

“Kansk? Yes sir, they are outside the town now. We took the garrison there by surprise, and should have the place secured in a few hours time.”

“Good, Carry on, Kymchek.”

Again that searing lightning, sending a shudder through Volkov’s frame, and jostling his hand so much that he almost spilled his tea. I should be back in Orenburg in my study revising the plans for those new jet fighter craft I plan on selling to Germany. Yes, I have the plans, but they have the factories, a good marriage. I must go to Peenemunde to see how things are progressing with engine development. Once they get that right, then it will be much easier to apply that technology to missile development. That damn battlecruiser gave the Germans quite a shock, but that worked out well for me. Now that the Germans have seen what a good missile can do, they are much more interested in talking.

He smiled, then passed another moment of trepidation when he felt the ship shudder, the air quaver around him, and a strange crackling static infested a brief moment of hushed stillness. What was happening?

“Kymchek? What in god’s name is going on? Is the ship under attack? I thought you told me the zone was secure for this landing operation!”

Silence. No voice in return, but then the sounds of men yelling, their voices distended and hollow through the voice tube. There was some great commotion underway on the bridge, and Volkov leaned to the nearest viewport, straining to see what was happening outside.

The sound of a recoilless rifle barrage joined the thunder of the storm with a sharp report. Then came the voice of Captain Grankin, hard and fraught with alarm, through the voice tube. “*Ship off the starboard aft quarter! We are under attack!*”

Chapter 8

Tunguska was a truly massive airship, the largest craft that had ever flown in the skies above the earth. With 225,000 cubic meter volume, it was also the longest craft ever to fly at over 1000 feet. A modern day 747 jumbo jet would seem a small thing in passing. And the ship had power to match its size, with twelve 76mm recoilless rifles, and twelve more larger guns at 105mm. To these Karpov had added two missile racks, one with 36 RS82mm rockets, and one with 24 larger RS132mm rockets. For air defense the ship deployed six twin 20mm gun mounts and eighteen heavy machineguns, though these were mainly used against small aircraft of the day. In a duel between airships, it was the larger recoilless rifles that would do the real damage. The innovative self-sealing lining on the interior gas bags could only be frustrated by a round of at least 76mm, which could defeat the resealing effort and cause a permanent rupture. The 105mm rifles were even better, and came to be called “the bag busters” in the air service.

By fate, chance, or perhaps through the sheer effort of his own will, as Karpov believed, the ship had appeared in a perfect position to ambush Volkov’s Caspian Division as it was descending to conduct troop deployment operations. There, some 500 meters below the massive airship, a group of four smaller 120,000 cubic meter volume battlecruisers was gliding in a tight square formation. At lower elevation they would separate to gain adequate space for troop deployment, but now they made a perfect target. And Karpov’s eyes lit up with hot fire when he saw them.

“Thermobaric crews! Make ready to deploy forward weapon! Prepare to climb, Bogrov.”

The rifle crews were already opening fire on the enemy ships, but Karpov had another terrible surprise for them. He was carrying two of his prized thermobaric bombs, christened “Autumn Mist” in his code lexicon. They would eject from the ship, fall to a designated altitude, and then deploy parachutes to hover in the sky, dispensing a highly volatile mist that could be ignited by incendiary rounds. The Autumn Mist would then become a hot, all consuming fire, and it was a perfect weapon to attack the formation below and deal a heavy blow.

Reach for the hammer first. Karpov no longer hesitated to deploy the most powerful weapon at his disposal if he saw clear advantage in doing so.

The thermobaric bomb was *Tunguska*'s equivalent of a nuclear warhead, and as the undisputed master of the airship, and the fleet it led, there was no hand to restrain Karpov now, no key around his neck requiring another to turn in agreement. He could unleash hell with a single word, and did not hesitate a moment when he saw the opportunity beneath him.

"Sir, two more airships off the port quarter, about 100 meters above us!"

Karpov turned to look for them, seeing the long grey shapes in the sky, nearly as big as his own ship. It was the enemy flagship, *Orenburg*, and he clenched his fist, eager to engage.

"Bogrov! Climb! Get me elevation!"

"Aye sir, flushing number one and three ballast now!"

The order was given to deploy the forward thermobaric, and its weight in falling also helped to lighten the ship as *Tunguska* vented ballast in a rain of water. They could see that the other airships, *Orenburg* attended by the smaller battlecruiser *Saran*, were also venting ballast, and the race for elevation was on. Yet falling with the rain, Karpov's deadly weapon plummeted down, the parachutes snapping out to slow the fall just above the center of the airship formation below.

The gun crews on the ships below saw the chute deploy, yet it seemed deceptively harmless, perhaps a ballast weight dropped by the other ship, or a range marker for their gunners. The topside crews had only just reached their gun mounts, surprised as they were by the sudden appearance of the massive airship above them. It seemed as if *Tunguska* had just emerged from a cloud, its flanks rippled with eerie phosphorescent lightning that looked like Saint Elmo's fire. Then, on Karpov's command, the forward gondola loaded incendiary rounds and took aim on their own falling parachute. Karpov was lighting his match.

The resulting explosion was terrible to witness, a massive fireball that expanded to quickly engulf the nearest ship, the unlucky Battlecruiser *Salsk*. It was a ship about the size of Karpov's old command on the *Abakan*, at 120,000 cubic meter volume. Its gunners barely had the time to load and train their topside guns when the explosion engulfed the ship, expanding in a horrific plume of hot fire. *Salsk* was immolated by the weapon, and the shock of the pressure wave struck the other airships a heavy blow. The tail of *Armavir* was also on fire where a plume of flame caught it and spun the airship about. Both *Anapa* and *Sochi* rolled heavily, yet being forward of the main explosion, they were spared the all consuming fire.

Salsk had her canvas shell seared off in just seconds, gas bags exploding as the temperatures literally melted away the self-sealing linings. When the intense fireball diminished, Karpov could see the skeleton of the ship glowing hot from the blow he had delivered. Burned and savaged by the heavy shock wave, anyone alive on *Salsk* would soon be asphyxiated as the searing fire consumed all the oxygen in the immediate vicinity of the explosion.

It would have been a much heavier blow if the weather had been calm. As it was, the deadly Autumn Mist sprayed by the falling bomb was too dispersed on the wind, and the explosion was only half as intense as it might have been in calm conditions. But it was enough. Karpov had his first kill, as *Salsk* withered away and began to fall, all buoyancy lost, the ravaged frame of the airship bent and afire. Karpov could see that the tail of a second ship, *Armavir*, was also engulfed in flames, and he knew that airship would soon lose its ability to steer and maneuver.

“Come hard to port! Concentrate fire on those forward ships! Give them the bag busters!”

The gunners on *Tunguska* were quick to respond, feeding shells to the bigger 105mm breech loading rifles on the main command gondola and firing. The skies bloomed with the black roses of the explosions around the enemy ships, but the gunners were getting many direct hits against the ponderous targets below. Karpov could see the outer canvas of the forward ships torn by the shells, the glow of fire within, and then the trail of heavy smoke from the wound, the vaporous blood of an airship in distress.

One ship, the *Anapa*, was still descending, perhaps from loss of lift due to the many holes *Tunguska* had punched in her outer shell, the rounds penetrating to the gas bags within. Yet the second ship, *Sochi*, was trying to climb, hoping its lighter weight might outpace the elevation gain of the bigger dreadnought above it. For a moment it seemed as though the ship would succeed, blowing all its ballast in a desperate attempt to gain rapid elevation and get out from under the serried rows of the gondola mounted rifles on the massive enemy above. But Karpov saw what they were doing, and had a quick reprisal in mind.

“Forward gondola!” he shouted. “Ready on RS82 system. Target that ship and fire!”

Seconds later the hiss of the 82mm rockets filled the air as a stream of twelve fired out from the rocket mounting. With the rear of the firing tubes

venting to open air, the elevation gain of the enemy, quickly rising to come even with *Tunguska*, actually played in Karpov's favor. The rocket rack had limited downward angles of fire, or the hot fire of the engines might be directed back at *Tunguska*'s underbelly. It was meant to be fired dead ahead, with the rockets eventually falling on ground targets as a saturation artillery weapon, but in this case it proved a remarkably effective anti-airship weapon.

The rockets seared into *Sochi*, striking her brow as she climbed and shredding the canvas with the fire of their explosions. The upper girder structure of the interior frame was blasted apart, and the ship suddenly seemed to be breaking in two, with the intact nose section bending downward as the central frame failed. Then fire blazoned in the gash ripped by the rockets, and Karpov knew he had struck the ship a fatal blow.

Two enemy airships down, one wounded and possibly out of the fight. The battle was opening well for *Tunguska*, but the *Orenburg* had recovered from the shock of the surprise arrival, and was beginning to return fire.

* * *

Kymchek was on the main bridge, horrified by the scene below as he watched *Salsk*, and then *Sochi* die their agonizing deaths by fire. Rockets! Why didn't we think to mount Katyushas on this ship? Too late now. It will have to be up to the gunners, but we need more elevation. That monster out there just dropped heavy ballast, and it's climbing fast. Any advantage we had will be lost, and god help us if that beast gets above us. My god! Look at those guns!

As Security Chief, Kymchek also stood in as fire control officer on the *Orenburg* when the ship was engaged. He had coolly directed the gunnery during the earlier engagement that had dispatched the Siberian battleship *Yakutsk*, but that ship had been heavily outnumbered, and had no chance of survival. The enemy they were facing now was an order of magnitude bigger. How in god's name could we fail to detect that airship? Were the radar crews and watchmen blind? It was massive, bigger than anything he had ever seen. By comparison, the big battle underway ahead of them with Old Krasny would be a side show to the action that would now be fought here. That ship dwarfs Big Red, he knew. What could it be, a new ship we knew nothing about?

That was simply not possible. Kymchek knew his intelligence network

was simply too good to miss the deployment of a ship like that. He peered through his field glasses, struggling to find insignia, and there, at the heart of the prominent double headed eagle of the Siberian State, was the Serial number: T1. The T Class airships were small heavy cruisers at 100,000 cubic meter volume. The Siberians had two in that class, *Tomsk* and *Talmenka*, and the Orenburg Federation deployed three with *Tashkent*, *Talgar* and *Taraz*. That serial number belonged to *Talmenka*, but that ship was deployed far to the south, well away from this action, and this was not the old T Class he knew. While the shape and design of the airship was similar to the heavy cruisers, this ship was more than twice their size! It was bigger than the *Narva* class airships deployed by the Soviets, and by god, it was even bigger than the *Orenburg*!

T1! The new T class the Siberians had built this year... This was *Tunguska*! It could be nothing else. Yet that ship was reported lost over the English Channel just last week. How could it be here? Were all his network reports in error? Impossible!

“All guns to bear on that ship!” he pointed, and the rifle crews began to return fire in the chaos of the command bridge. The sharp report of the guns was deafening, the shell casings ejecting and falling from the ship as they fired, and smoke from their fire wafting up to the bridge level above.

Kymchek was on the voice tube to Volkov with the bad news. He knew he would have to answer for what was happening here now, and did not know how he could explain the presence of this ship, other than to say the obvious.

“Sir! That ship out there—it’s the T1—*Tunguska*!”

* * *

Volkov heard the clamor on the bridge, and the firing of the guns on the main gondola. Then Kymchek’s voice was loud in the tube again, and his eyes widened with surprise.

“Tunguska? Karpov? How is that possible? What in hell are you saying, Kymchek?”

“Sir... *The reports we had ... Well that must have been a deception, false information. There is no other explanation.*”

The heat rose on Volkov’s neck, his eyes bulging with anger. “Damn your soul, man! False information? Are we that stupid?” Yet even as he shouted this his mind began to piece together the truth of what must have

happened. *Tunguska* had been over Germany, rashly bombing Berlin before it made for the English Channel, apparently bound for London. Then the news was on the BBC of the airship lost in that storm, but they had never found evidence of the wreckage.

Yes, that was it. Karpov! That bastard must have been in league with the allies all along. He had just come from that meeting with Sergei Kirov, and there must have been some secret arrangement made with London at the same time. Perhaps he never sailed west at all, but turned about to come here. Could Karpov have learned of my plans? We were pulling airships off the front lines and assembling the fleet for this operation just a day after we got the news that his airship had gone down. The news was still fresh. Probably too fresh to really blame Kymchek for this lapse, though I'll give him hell in any case.

But what to do now? The roar of the battle was growing and he felt the ship shudder with a direct hit. He craned his neck, seeing the forward gondola had taken the blow, with smoke and fire there.

Karpov! That son of a bitch! Look what he did to the Caspian Division. The skies were black with the smoke of *Salsk* and *Sochi* as they fell to their doom. *Armavir* was burning badly from her tail, unable to maneuver, and descending as rapidly as she could. *Anapa* had fallen off and dropped elevation as well, intent on fulfilling its mission and putting her valuable troops on the ground. *Armavir* was trying to get down, but now he saw the skies dotted with the tiny dark shapes of men leaping from that ship. The flutter of parachutes followed, and Volkov took some solace to think that battalion might also get men on the ground. He would need everything he had to press a credible attack on Ilanskiy.

That is the key, he thought. I must get the ship to Ilanskiy. Once I control that place on the ground, I'll have the one thing Karpov prizes most.

"Kymchek! Break off this attack. Make for Ilanskiy, all engines ahead full."

"But sir... That will take us directly into that storm front!"

"Damn the weather. All ships to Ilanskiy! Signal the Southern Division ahead to do the same. The fleet will regroup there. Understood?"

"Aye sir, signaling fleet regroup orders now."

* * *

Aboard *Tunguska*, Karpov smiled when they scored the first hits on the *Orenburg*. The enemy flagship had been trying to climb, and maneuvering to bring all its gondola mounted guns to bear. *Tunguska* took a direct hit from the lighter 76mm rifles on the ship's forward gondola. Then she returned a well aimed 105mm round there, and took her revenge.

Yes, revenge, vengeance, vendetta. That was what Karpov had in hand now. Was Volkov on the *Orenburg*? Was he looking at what I just did to those little airships of his below? Look at those fires!

Bogrov turned, a warning in his tone. "They're breaking off, sir. It looks like they're going to run for that squall line."

Karpov saw the unwieldy bulk of the *Orenburg* veering off, the ship's great nose coming around, and heard the fitful thrumming of engines.

"Shall we come round and pursue?"

Karpov thought quickly, his eyes moving from the silver-grey mass of *Orenburg* to the more distant battle where he could vaguely see Big Red in action at lower elevations ahead. Another ship was burning there, and reports indicated that they were going to lose the heavy cruiser *Tomsk*. He looked at the storm front ahead, thinking that the weather had its own dark pact with the tempest that had sent him here from 1909. If he pursued, what might happen to *Tunguska*? Was that front energetic enough to affect the ship's position in time? Might he vanish from the scene right in the midst of the fight here, even as he had appeared to the great surprise and bewilderment of his enemy?

"No!" he ordered. "Do not follow *Orenburg*. Avoid that storm front. Make for Big Red, and all ahead full!"

Chapter 9

"**Old** Krasny" was hanging in the skies above the small hamlet of Karapsel, half way between Kansk on the River Kan and Ilanskiy to the east. The day was late and the setting sun finally fell low enough to send its amber gleam beneath the cloud deck. The light painted the dull red canvass in a tawny shade of port as the airship battled on.

The skies about Big Red were ripped by explosions. The ship's aft gondola had been hit, the number four engine burning there. And above, on

the broad flanks of the ship, three holes had been torn in the outer skin of the airship, one a large gash where singed canvas still fluttered fitfully in the wind.

The ship seemed to gasp, and then a rain of water fell from the bulbous nose as more ballast was vented. Big Red was struggling for elevation now, with at least two interior gas bags pierced by enemy shells and leaking helium, one on the verge of collapse.

Three enemy airships hung in the violent airs about her, two ‘S Class’ airships at 120,000 cubic meter volume, the *Samarkand* and *Sarkand*. Above, and slightly behind was the *Angren*, a ship of equal size in the same ‘A Class’ as Karpov’s old flagship *Abakan*. The last ship in this division, heavy cruiser *Tashkent*, had taken a full broadside from *Krasnoyarsk*, and was damaged so badly that it was forced to break off and run north for the open taiga. And *Angren* had taken hits as well, a deep gash gouged in the brow of the ship where crews had struggled to put out a fire that threatened to burn away the outer skin.

Big Red was well named at 180,000 cubic meter volume, with six 105mm recoilless rifles and another ten smaller 76mm guns. Yet it was still outgunned by the combined weight of enemy firepower. Now the odds were about to take a dramatic shift as *Tunguska* loomed on the scene, bringing another twenty four main guns to the battle, with half of those being the bigger 105mm caliber. To make matters worse for the enemy, Karpov had a thousand meter elevation advantage as he approached, so all his gondola mounted rifles were going to have perfect fields of fire, while the enemy could only bring its topside mounted guns to bear on him, and these totaled only six lighter 76mm guns between all these enemy ships.

Tunguska came in with a roaring broadside against the *Angren*, the skies about the enemy ship blooming with dark, fiery explosions. The gunners had the range, and the next salvos were beginning to tear into the hull of the ship, the big 105s ripping holes through the outer shell, piercing the gas bags within, and blasting away fragments of the duralumin frame. Already fighting fires, the engineers climbing the interior ladders to damage control platforms, found themselves shaken and riddled with shrapnel. Some fell from their perches on the upper interior superstructure and plummeted down into the voids between the massive gas bags.

The forward nose bag had now taken so many hits that it collapsed, and the greater buoyancy of *Angren*’s tail set it drifting skyward, as if the airship

was going into a nosedive, even though it still hung suspended in the tumult of the raging battle. Shocked by the sudden appearance of *Tunguska*, a ship nearly twice its size, the frantic topside gunners on *Angren* were turning every weapon they had on the enemy, sending thin streams of machinegun fire up in futile defiance.

“Main gondola gunners,” Karpov shouted through the voice tube to the men below. “Hold fire until all tubes are reloaded. Hit that damn ship amidships with one salvo on my command.... Ready... Fire!”

The resulting fire from all the rifles on the main gondola blasted into the heart of the enemy ship, tearing a massive hole in her side to expose the interior frame. There Karpov could see that the number three gas bag had been rent asunder, and was collapsing like a wet rag, the linings burning and soon engulfing the ship in choking black smoke. It was a fatal blow, and then there came two secondary explosions when the fires found reserve oxygen tanks. The resulting infusion of oxygen fed the flames, and the bridge crews watched the one nightmare they all secretly feared, the rapid, burning death of the airship, as fires engulfed it from bow to stern, and men fell, or leapt, from gondolas, preferring the headlong fall to the terror of a fiery death.

Angren hung in the sky, seeming to roll to one side for one brief moment, and then began to fall, the weight of the duralumin frame and gondolas overcoming all remaining buoyancy. It was now a fair fight, at least where ship numbers were counted. Yet with the loss of *Angren*, the captains of the two S Class ships could now clearly see that they were overmatched. *Tunguska* might have easily beaten them both, and though bruised and bleeding, Big Red was still throwing hard punches with its 105s.

Samarkand was the first to turn north, thinking to follow in the wake of the now distant heavy cruiser *Tashkent*. The Captain of *Sarkand* saw his sister ship turn, and knew that speed and maneuverability was now his only salvation. Both ships ran for the nearest cloud they could find, the skies about them pocked with explosions as they fled. The gunners began to cheer as the enemy turned, and Karpov smiled.

Big Red would live to fight another day. He was already re-writing the book Tyrenkov had found in that excursion up the stairs of the railway inn.

“Tyrenkov!” Karpov ordered. “Signal all ships to make for Ilanskiy. Tell them Vladimir Karpov is back, and ready for a fight!”

* * *

Kymchek stood in the open hatch to the armored command capsule where Volkov huddled. He saw the broken bottle of brandy on the deck, the sharp shards of glass a cruel microcosm of what had befallen the fleet. Volkov had thought to sip his brandy as he watched the battle in sedate isolation here, but the appearance of *Tunguska* had shaken the fleet to its core.

Two ships, *Pavlodar* and *Talgar*, had already been dispatched home after the initial battle that downed the enemy battleship *Yakutsk*. *Salsk* had been immolated by that dreadful fire bomb Karpov had deployed, and *Sochi* was smashed by those rockets. Now news came that *Angren* was down, *Tashkent* battered and fleeing north with the two S Class ships of that division.

“*Samarkand* and *Sarkand* are still battle worthy,” said Kymchek, trying to soften the blow as he reported. “They are steering for Ilanskiy as ordered, and will join our division there. If *Tashkent* can control her fires and stay in the fight, that will still give us six airships there when we reform. *Anapa* was the only ship to escape that surprise attack on the Caspian Division and got her troops down safely. She’ll join us directly.”

“Half the fleet is out of action!” Volkov blustered. “Where did Karpov come from? How did he manage to get a ship of that size in here without a single sighting from anyone in the fleet?” He shook his head, deeply bothered, his eyes moving about the confined space of the capsule as if he were a caged tiger, glowering to break free and get at his enemy. Then he clenched his jaw, a smoldering fire in his eyes beneath the thick gray hair, and reached for his map.

“What is happening on the ground?” he asked tersely.

“Most every ship was able to deploy troops,” said Kymchek. “We got 1500 men down, some northeast of Kansk, and the main body north of Ilanskiy.”

The “battalions” that the airships carried were really no more than large company sized units, though they were well armed, and among the best troops in the army. *Orenburg* could deploy about 200 men, with most of the other ships capable of lifting between 100 and 150. Volkov’s air mobile “division” would therefore not be much more than a single brigade in actual size, until fresh troops could be air lifted from the western front. Kymchek had warned him they would be outnumbered on the ground, with a full

Siberian division occupying the area from Kansk to Ilanskiy. Yet Volkov had assumed he would quickly overpower the smaller Siberian airship fleet, and therefore have complete air superiority over the battlefield to pound the enemy from above.

The sudden appearance of *Tunguska* had changed all that. Now the fleet might have a hard fight when it reached Ilanskiy. They expected at least two other Siberian airships were lurking there on overwatch, the *Abakan* and *Angara*, the two ships that had successfully defended the place during the first raid mounted by Volkov, albeit with a little help from Kandemir Troyak and the heavy weapons fielded by the Russian Marines. With *Krasnoyarsk* and *Tunguska* now maneuvering to Ilanskiy, the odds were not as wide as Volkov had hoped.

“We’ll have six airships to their four,” he said darkly. “What about their ships out east?” He was asking about the Siberian eastern flotilla, where two more battleships, *Irkutsk* and *Novosibirsk* were supporting Kolchak in his uneasy watch along the frontier with the Japanese empire.

“The last word we had, as of 6:00 this morning, still had both those airships near Lake Baikal. That’s about 700 kilometers to the southeast. They might be here by dusk if they were summoned.”

“Not a very satisfactory situation,” Volkov steamed. “This will simply not do. Send to fleet command in Orenburg. I want every airship they can get their hands on mustered to a new division and heading east within the hour. Any ship that broke off and ran from the enemy here will answer to me personally, from the Captain on down through every crew station. I came here to command this damn operation, not to involve the fleet flagship in the fighting, yet now that is inevitable. We were hit back there, is the damage controlled?”

“A minor breach on the number six gas bag,” said Kymchek. “Gas volume was off fifteen percent there, but the engineers have patched it and re-inflated. Aside from some minor welding on the airframe, the ship is in good fighting trim.”

“Very well...” Volkov had a harried look on his face now. “What’s your assessment, Kymchek? Is this the place to have this fight?”

“It will be a risky operation, sir, but with all our troops landed, we’re committed here. *Pavlodar* and *Talgar* may get back west soon. If their damage is not great they could return with reinforcements. *Krasnodar* and *Stavropol* have already completed loading operations and should be

underway soon. They will have troops as well.”

“You sound worried, Kymchek.”

“Well sir, the 11th Siberian Rifles are still down there. Karpov planted that division here last month, and they’ll have artillery. We hoped this unit would be rushed to the Ob River line after our attack started there, but at least a full infantry regiment remains here. The rail lines must be interdicted, in both directions, or we will likely see even more enemy forces arriving.”

“And the operation on the Ob River?”

“We’re still heavily engaged there. Three divisions are on the line, the last two are maneuvering north, but the Siberians have brought up the damn Tartar cavalry there. They won’t stop a regular division, but they’ll damn well slow us down. The woodlands are thick on that flank, with nothing in the area you could call a road. Our faster armored cars and lorried infantry will have a rough time there. I would not think we could count on any rapid movement east from the Ob River line, but we knew this from the outset.”

“Yes, you were quick to point that out the moment I proposed this operation. Something tells me you have been a reluctant warrior in this from the very first.”

“Sir, I will do all in my power to serve your interests and see that we prevail here... but—”

“But what, Kymchek?”

“But I’m a realist, sir. We can cut the rail lines here, tear up the tracks, but with our forces divided between Kansk and Ilanskiy, the prospect of taking the latter is not good, particularly if they do have the artillery I expect here, or even armor.”

“Armor? You said nothing of that before.”

“The 11th Siberian has a mobile element, with a full company of light tanks and two motorized rifle companies. It was in my report, and could be on the scene now. In any case, it will not be far away.”

“What kind of armor?”

“Armored cars, lighter T-60 and T-70 tanks.”

“We can stop those tanks, yes?”

“With what, sir? We brought no AT guns with us here. The men have AT rifles, grenades, and a couple 76mm recoilless rifles for direct fire support, but little else to stop an enemy tank.”

“Then we’ll hit them with our 105s from above. That was the plan from the beginning. I’m going to pound that Siberian Division all night if I have

to.”

“Assuming we win the airship battle here.” Kymchek needed to say that, risky as it was. What good was his advice if he didn’t have the backbone to speak his mind?

Volkov shook his head, staring at the map, then decided something. “The plan to take the bridges at Kansk is to be scrapped. Instead that force is to simply tear up the rail lines east of Kansk and then fall back on Ilanskiy. I’ll want our entire ground contingent focused on that objective—and get that message off to fleet command. I want every airship we can find. I don’t care if we strip the entire front, by god! That bastard pulled a fast one here, and he’s not going to get away with it. I want the rest of the 22nd Airmobile division out here immediately!”

“There’s one other thing, sir—the objective.”

“The railway inn in the center of town. I want that under my thumb as soon as possible.”

“But why, sir? What is so important about that inn?” Kymchek knew it was dangerous to ask this again, but his need to understand the objective was paramount.”

“Just *take* it, Kymchek. I don’t care if we sacrifice every god damned squad in the brigade, but you take that railway inn! Understand? No more questions about it. Just get the job done!”

“Aye sir.”

Kymchek saluted and re-sealed the capsule hatch, leaving Volkov with his broken brandy flask and map. This wasn’t how things were supposed to pan out. I should be high above that storm, receiving reports on the ground fighting while I dined in my stateroom. Now look at me, huddled in this damn escape pod! *Orenburg* was never supposed to enter actual combat. I had eleven other airships with me to do that, but things have changed with the wind. Now this whole plan seems cursed. Karpov appears here out of thin air, coming right out of the heart of that storm. When this is over I’m going to find out how he managed that. In fact, that interrogation will be the only consolation I have in this affair.

Yet that ship of his... *Tunguska* is a match for *Orenburg*, and Karpov is too damn good at the helm. This could get very dangerous, and very soon, but I’m going to get to that railway inn if it’s the last thing I do.

Even as he thought that, another part of his mind realized how desperate and stubborn he was being here, and how rash and foolish. Suppose you do

take the inn, it chided him, then what? Are you going to just sit there surrounded by your ground troops while Karpov summons every unit he can find within 300 kilometers of this place? And the inn itself is of no use to you now, correct? It was demolished in that earlier raid mounted by Sergie Kirov, and has not yet been rebuilt. What are you doing here? You're making this a personal little vendetta, when you should be thinking in broader strategic terms. The Germans are about to launch their big operation against the Soviets. You should be back in Orenburg, planning how best to support that attack. Instead...

Vendetta!

Part IV

Return of the Fox

“Destiny always rings three times...”

— Muriel Barbery

Chapter 10

While Troyak and Fedorov were watching the advance of the German 7th Machinegun Battalion at Raqqah, and Karpov and Volkov were vectoring in their forces at Ilanskiy, another warrior was about to rise from the ashes of his own making. Erwin Rommel had been a chastened and brooding general at Mersa Brega, sullen as he watched his mobile troops from the 5th Light Division digging in to hard defensive positions. Memories of the last war haunted him when he saw the men stringing wire and sewing fields of mines. It was a war of trenches, and great thundering artillery, dreadful moments in the space between barbed lines of death, and then came the gas, choking, asphyxiating, maddening.

Rommel had fought with the Württemberg Mountain Battalion of the elite *Alpenkorps*, where he quickly showed the genius for tactics and quick thinking on the battlefield that was to be his hallmark. His audacious infiltration tactics behind enemy lines had produced astounding results at times, where in one instance he had captured 1500 Italians with a single squad of five men. Then, leading a company of just 100 men, he had unhinged the defense of an Italian strong point garrisoned by 7000 troops! The Iron Cross and the coveted Blue Max that he so cherished were just some of the fruits of that labor. But the war was not all dash and medals. It was dreadful.

It was the tank that had broken the awful, grinding stalemate of the Western Front. The first cumbersome charge of the unwieldy metal land forts was a dismal failure for the British, as shocking as it was to the German soldiers who initially faced those growling behemoths. The tanks were unreliable, slow, ponderous in the mud of the rain sodden fields. They broke down, slipped tracks, found their guns jamming in the heat of battle, and too often caught fire. But the devious minds that had conceived them persisted, and eventually they tried again, and broke through.

Within months the sledgehammer charge of armor was used to batter the deeply entrenched lines of the enemy, breaking through for the infantry to cross that deadly space that came to be called no man's land, and win the hour. In the years between the wars, the Germans had mastered the art of armored warfare, developing tactics and methods that would prove equally shocking to the British and French when their blitzkrieg was let loose in

1940. Rommel had been one of the grand masters of the panzer divisions, the leader of the fabled 7th Panzers, the Ghost Division. It had advanced farther and faster than any other division in the campaign against France, and Rommel's exploits, and the favor they gained with Hitler, had led him to this privileged position as commander of the newly formed German Afrika Korps.

He remembered his promises to the Fuhrer all too well, yet now, as he stared at his motorized infantry digging in, his shoulders slumped with unwanted resignation. Before him lay a vast desert which was the perfect open field for his fast moving shock columns of tanks, armored cars and infantry. Yet the very same weapon that had led him to fame and the heights of command here, had also been his undoing—the tank.

This time it was an enemy tank, one so awesome in its power and capabilities that it rendered his entire armored force obsolete in a single stroke. He had advanced with breakneck speed and characteristic dash in the first Libyan offensive, sending the British reeling and then driving right past their last strongpoint of Tobruk and across the Egyptian frontier. Then, at an insignificant hamlet named Bir el Khamsa, and just as he was to deliver the final blow that might lead to a breakthrough to the Nile, something came out of the deep deserts to the south that stunned his veteran troops and sent them staggering back in a headlong retreat.

Tanks, massive new heavy tanks fielded by the British that were truly awesome to behold. They were twice the size of the older Matildas, a tank that had a tough skin and was already difficult to kill with the light guns on his armor, ranging from 20mm to 50mm. Rommel had adapted by taking the superb 88mm flak gun and deploying it as an anti-tank weapon, and with remarkable results—until now. This new British tank was so heavily armored that it shrugged off hits from a 50mm gun as if they were pebbles, and was even impervious to the dread flak 88!

Look at me now, he said to himself. I told the Führer I would deliver him Libya in two weeks time, and that I did, but I could not hold it long enough to have any sense of the victory. He asked me to stop O'Connor, and that I did, but the reversal and shame of defeat has dogged me ever thereafter. These new enemy tanks are so powerful that our only recourse is to stand on defense, dig in behind wire and mines, and register every gun we have to saturate the field with artillery. It is the first great war all over again, and it is maddening to sit here like this, simply waiting for the enemy to choose the

moment he will strike.

At first it seemed he would not have long to wait. The British had followed his retreat west, sending their veteran 6th and 9th Australian Divisions in the wake of the Italians, and it looked as though they planned to fight a battle to take Benghazi. The Führer demanded the place be defended, but Rommel was not going to commit his precious German infantry there. So he ordered six Italian Infantry Divisions to dig in around the port city, where they also waited for the enemy to attack, but it never came.

The British have a head on their shoulders after all, he thought. They realize that without Malta, Benghazi is of little use to them. We can pound it day and night from the air, and besides, they have a port of equal capacity right behind them in Tobruk. So Rommel was not surprised when he saw the two Australian infantry divisions withdrawing, and posted near Tobruk instead of coming down to Mersa Brega to face off against his own troops.

They aren't stupid, he thought. They know that they can hold the line much easier near Tobruk. Now any move I make will be seen ten days to two weeks before I can get anywhere near them, giving them ample time to prepare. And if I do move again, I must cross 500 kilometers of desert before I can even begin to contemplate battle. There is no way I can do that until I am reinforced here, and well supplied. Paulus was correct.

So he waited there, chastened and brooding at Mersa Brega, though his spirits began to rise when the first reinforcements promised him actually began to arrive. The 15th Panzer Division had joined him earlier, and now the 90th Light Motorized Division was in hand. Behind it came two more elite formations. One was the vaunted Grossdeutschland Regiment, veterans of France, the Low Countries and the men who had delivered the great prize of Gibraltar in conjunction with Kubler's 1st Mountain Division. Rommel had been promised that entire force, but the Mountain division had not arrived, being sent to Italy for possible deployment in Syria.

Instead he received another elite formation, the Hermann Goering Brigade, handpicked men chosen by the Reichsführer and head of the Luftwaffe. They had not seen much combat yet, but they were good troops, and spoiling for a fight. The Italians had also promised to send more troops, though Rommel had little use for them, thinking they were simply more mouths to feed, a drain on his limited supply network.

Over the weeks and months since his retreat, Paulus had worked some magic for him on that account—supplies. He made sure that Rommel was

getting all the food, water, fuel and munitions that could be moved to North Africa. The main German port was still Tripoli in western Libya, but they had also opened up Tunis and Bizerte, using the rail lines down to Gabes to stockpile supplies there, and then moving them by road and the new Siebel ferries along the coast to Mersa Brega. Benghazi was used exclusively by the Italians to supply their troops there.

In time, as the weeks went by, Rommel built up a considerable depot behind his entrenched infantry, and by late April of 1941, he was ready to renew operations. Only one thing harried him, those new British tanks, so he thought long and hard as to how he could operate offensively again.

Forewarned is forearmed, he thought. We were caught by surprise at Bir el Khamsa. The shock of this new tank was simply too much for my men to bear. God knows I had been pushing them hard, and there was barely enough petrol left to get us back here. So this time things will be different.

One question burned in the center of his mind: how can I kill these enemy tanks? I cannot pit my own armor against them. No. Wherever they appear I must drill my infantry with new defensive tactics. We will immediately adopt a hedgehog formation, digging in and holding in place on the best defensive ground we can find. They will be drilled in rapid minefield deployment, and the artillery will practice the mustering of quick saturation fires to be called in by the infantry positions. Then I must have a word with Goering. He's sent me his best men, and for that I am thankful, but I would much sooner have him send me his *Stukas*! I want to have the closest possible coordination with my infantry strong points to launch immediate air strikes against this armor. In fact, these new enemy tanks will be the priority targets for the Luftwaffe. They may be able to survive our 88s, but by god, see how they like a 500 pound bomb! If need be we can double down on that, and the *Stukas* can carry even heavier ordnance.

As for my own armor, it will not support the infantry. Wherever the British heavy armor appears, my own lighter tanks will maneuver elsewhere. These tanks cannot be everywhere, and the desert is a very big place. So we will use maneuver against this implacable enemy rock. From all accounts, they do not have many of these fearsome new tanks, so perhaps we can flow around them like water... As long as I can still keep my forward elements supplied. I will need to secure a good place for a forward depot, and this time I will also need to take Tobruk. I bypassed it before, but I cannot allow the British to sit there as a thorn in my backside if I plan to push into Egypt

again.

In the meantime, this campaign in Syria has already drained resources that were supposed to come to me. I have already lost the 1st Mountain Division. In fact Kubler's entire mountain Korps was sent to Syria, along with some very good mobile divisions. Now it is their turn to face these enemy tanks. Yes, the British must have used the rail lines through Alexandria to move reinforcements to their Syrian operation. They have committed their heavy tanks there, and by god, they stopped 9th Panzer Division in its tracks. Even the 5th SS Wiking Division was forced to do exactly what I have done here—deploy on defense. Yet this may have weakened the enemy strength on my front. Perhaps now is the time to make my move. While the cat is away...

The orders he soon had in hand put the wind in his spirits for the first time since Bir el Khamsa. *'Given the imminent opening of our final campaign in Russia, it is imperative that we now do all things possible to unhinge the British defense in the Middle East. In light of the determined British attack into Syria, you will now plan and execute an immediate offensive operation aimed at again threatening the British position in Egypt, with the initial aim of capturing Tobruk.'*

Good enough, thought Rommel, but capturing Tobruk may not be as easy to do in the field as it might be to order on paper. Those two Australian divisions will fall back on Tobruk when I renew my advance, so I must assemble a shock force capable of punching through to take the place. But what if the British deploy those monster tanks there? They know the value of Tobruk, and will fight like demons to hold it. If my attack there is to have any chance of success, then I must also mount a compelling threat to Alexandria, aimed at diluting the defense of Tobruk and compelling the enemy to deploy his best armor to stop my panzers. They will want to use those tanks to smash my own armor again, so I must be very cagey. My panzers will be the cape of the matador, flashing and luring with their speed and mobility.

Time to dance.

He stood up, the day fine and clear, with the heat still not too oppressive as May began. 5th Light, 15th Panzers, 90th Light, Grossdeutschland Regiment, the Hermann Goering Brigade... Now I finally have a force to be reckoned with, and the supplies to operate for an extended period. Now I get my *zweiten kommen*, my second coming. Now I rise from the defeat I suffered at Bir el Khamsa, and avenge my losses. It will not be for the medals

this time, but for the men I lost there. I owe them that much, and more. I owe them victory.

Dear Lu, he thought, his loving wife in mind again. It is said that destiny calls three times in a man's life. My first calling was in the Great War when I won this Blue Max and the other medals on my chest. My second call was in France with the 7th Panzers. Now I get my greatest chance. Destiny is calling me out again, and I must not fail to answer, or meet the challenge before me.

Who will I be up against this time? Will the British send O'Connor out to challenge me as before? He is good, perhaps the one man they have who knows how to use those new tanks of theirs. His offensive against Graziani was nothing short of masterful. In the end, I was able to come here and push him back only because of the very same reasons my own offensive failed—lack of supply. By the time he cut off Cyrenaica, and drove to Agheila, his armored divisions had practically melted away to nothing.

I must not allow that to happen to my boys this time around. I will not drive them with the whip as I did before. No. This time the advance will be well planned, methodical. Flank security will be paramount, adequate fuel, water and supplies essential. When we get within striking distance of Tobruk, I want my men fresh and ready for the fight. For something tells me the entire campaign here hinges on that battle. I must have Tobruk, but cannot allow that necessity to stop my advance east.

Even as he thought this, he knew the outcome of this new offensive was far from certain. The British will have taken the time to also reinforce their own armored formations. Abwehr spies in Cairo and Alexandria have been watching arrivals from the Suez very carefully. The British have been moving heavy equipment at night by rail, or so they tell me, but mainly east into Palestine to support their Syrian offensive. So what have they left for me here?

Something tells me they do not have the strength to conduct any meaningful offensive against me now. No. They have chosen to stand on defense here while they try to win through in Syria. So now they get another battle. I move tomorrow morning, and let us see what comes out to answer the challenge. Will O'Connor lead in those fearsome new tanks and dare me to advance?

We shall see...

Chapter 11

“**Not** there, damn your eyes man. That’s no place for a shore battery. Mount it there, on those headlands!” The wiry man, somewhat scrawny in appearance, was at it yet again, much to the chagrin of the officers and lorry men he was bothering. He seemed to be everywhere now, sticking that thin nose of his into every bunker and building on the home island. As much as the men rued his coming, they knew better than to say anything about it that might be overheard by the man. General Bernard Montgomery was no one to fool with.

The man had been shot clean through the right lung by a German sniper in the First Great War, but returned to fight at Arras and Passchendaele again. He caught Wavell’s eye in Palestine when he commanded the 8th Infantry Division, then went home to take over the 3rd Division in time to see action in France. Under his taught rein of command, Montgomery brought the Iron Division home from Dunkirk largely intact. Once he got home, however, his meddlesome ways and frank, biting criticism of the way the army was led in France, earned him few friends.

Rising to command the V Corps at home, his ascorbic temperament, and penchant for meticulous attention to every detail of his command, soon saw him locking horns with General Auchinlek. He pushed his men hard, with rigorous training and fitness drilling. No one knew just why he was summarily sent back to Palestine. Some said it may have been to simply rid the home islands of the man, but a few knew the real reason—Churchill.

The exploits and exhortations of Montgomery had come to the attention of the Prime Minister, though no one knew the real reason for Montgomery’s sudden new orders. It was, in fact, that quiet chat with the young Russian Captain in the desert oasis of Siwa that led to the call, destiny tapping the shoulder of another man as the war began to heat to the boiling point.

“Tell me,” Churchill had asked quietly, being careful not to step on the toes of General Wavell, who also attended that meeting and was acting as Churchill’s translator in the discussion with Fedorov. “You have let on that we end up winning this war, and for that light at the end of the tunnel I am most grateful. I know there are a thousand details, and perhaps a thousand battles to be fought before we prevail, and I have heeded your warning that the history isn’t quite cooperating this time around. A bit like coming home

to the wife and finding she's gained thirty pounds overnight!" Churchill smiled, sipping his brandy by the fire.

"Well," he continued. "Battles are fought by men, and led by good generals. I've one with me here, and I have every confidence in General Wavell as overall commander in the Middle East. O'Connor is also a good man at the head of 8th Army, and likely to be better now when Tiger Convoy gets round the cape with 500 new tanks for his 7th Armored Division. But we'll need every good man we can find to lend a hand. I was considering Auchinleck, or perhaps even General Alexander to come in and lend a hand and take some of the burden off Wavell's shoulders. It's clear that two fronts are forming up here, one in Syria and the second in Libya. If your warning proves true, the situation in Syria might grow to a point we never expected. Jumbo Wilson is a good man, but he could use a hand there as well. Any suggestions?"

The Prime Minister was fishing again, Fedorov knew. He had baited his line some time ago, and cast well out into the years ahead, hoping to land a big fish that would feed his hunger for knowledge of the days yet to come in this war. Fedorov knew he had to be very careful here. He might reveal things that would result in decisions that were never made in the history he knew, and could not foresee the outcome. Yet, even as he thought that, he realized that the mirror of history was so badly shattered here now that he could barely predict what might happen. And the thought that Ivan Volkov was whispering advice in Hitler's ear was most disturbing. Could that be the reason the Germans took Gibraltar and Malta, and now this intervention in Syria? Was Volkov behind it all?

So when it came to the question, he did not hesitate for very long. He knew how the war here played out, the pieces of the puzzle that would eventually lead to an Allied victory on both these fronts. But the Prime Minister was correct. It wasn't just a matter of strategy and tactics now. Someone had to lead the effort on every battlefield, and Churchill was fishing for the names of men who would give him the one thing he dearly needed now—victories.

"I agree that General O'Connor is a most capable man. He was captured, and out of the fight here in the history I know. When I heard his plane was down, I mounted that special rescue mission largely because I believed he could be a vital force for victory here—and that led to some rather unexpected dividends with the coming of Brigadier Kinlan and his troops."

“Yes,” said Churchill. “One day we must have a long talk about how it happened, but for now, having met the man and seen his troops first hand, I shall accept the testimony of my own eyes and warmly embrace him, no matter what rabbit trick sent him to us in this grave hour.”

“To answer your question, sir,” Fedorov continued, both Auchinlek and Alexander would serve you well, in any capacity you employ them, but there is one man that you would be likely to overlook now, and he was responsible for perhaps the single most important victory of the war in this theater.”

“Do go on, Captain. Who might this man be?”

“Sir Bernard Law Montgomery.”

“Sir Bernard? Well yes, I suppose he was admitted to the Order of the Bath last July, wasn’t he. But the man is in England now, fussing about with the shore batteries and ruffling the skirts of more officers than I would care to mention. A Tee totaling know it all, or so I have heard him called. And I might say that I’ve heard far worse.”

“Yet he wins, sir. Here you have a great General in O’Connor, fire. Well I must tell you that Monty is quite his opposite—ice.”

“Monty?”

“That is what history calls him. He wins here, and goes on to lead the entire Allied Army in the field for the eventual invasion of France. An American General has overall command, Eisenhower, but Monty leads on the ground. Yet he doesn’t do things as O’Connor might. He’s a careful planner, meticulous, tireless, and won’t really move until he knows he has what he needs to win—but he wins. Fire and ice, sir. O’Connor and Montgomery are as different as two men might be, but together they just might make a winning team for you here.”

“If they don’t end up killing one another first,” Wavell put in with a smile.

Some months later, Churchill met with Brooke and decided to send Montgomery back to Palestine. He knew it would eventually mean bringing yet another man into the small circle of British officers that knew the full truth about Kinlan and *Kirov*, but he wanted winners, and if Monty was the man who gave them victories, he would get him started at it as soon as possible.

So it was that Sir Bernard Law Montgomery was promoted to full general and sent on his way again, remarking that sadly, the war had been easy for a time, but now it was about to get very difficult. When a close

associate tried to cheer him up after hearing that, Monty clarified himself with a pointed remark: “Oh, I'm not talking about me, I'm talking about Rommel!” Three hours later Monty was on a plane bound for the Middle East to meet with Wavell and O'Connor.

Destiny had called, perhaps in arranging that meeting between Churchill and Fedorov, and soon the two men, Rommel and Montgomery, would face one another with the wide sands of Libya between them, and the fate of British interests in the Middle East in the balance.

* * *

“New tanks?” Montgomery raised a thin eyebrow beneath the Australian hat he wore. Standing no more than five feet and seven inches, Monty did not present the trim, statuesque deportment of men like Alexander or Auchinleck, or even Wavell's rugged aspect, worn as he was by so many years in Egypt. Instead he dressed in simple garb, a uniform he pieced together himself with baggy corduroy pants, a loose fitting field jacket, and any hat that suited him.

His features were lean and bird like, with penetrating smoky eyes over a prominent beak of a nose with the wisp of a mustache beneath it, and his personality could also be hawk-like, swooping in to prey upon the ills he perceived as detrimental to a proper fighting army. He was a stickler for drilling his men to keep them fit, with a hands on attitude to every detail of command. And he was never shy about voicing an opinion, be it positive or negative, and did so with an inner confidence that verged on arrogance in the eyes of many who came to dislike the man.

An outsider in every respect, Montgomery was not one of the genteel landed ‘British Gentlemen’ officers who populated the upper ranks. He was as black a sheep as they came in that flock, and in many ways prided himself on his disdain for the ‘good old boys’ attitude of so many British officers, and the posh life style they cultivated. But one thing was true of the man—he got things done, in an acerbic and feather ruffling way, never afraid to upset the reigning order of things and reset the pieces on any chess board when it suited him.

The news that Rommel was reinforced and moving east again had galvanized him. He was sent to augment the 8th Army command structure, which was presently being led by O'Connor, but the territory spanned by the army was vast at that time, and so a dual command was to be set up, with fire

and ice being in the mind of Wavell when he decided the matter. He would place the implacable Montgomery in the key anchoring position of Tobruk, and give him command of the ANZAC Corps, comprised of the three commonwealth infantry divisions, 6th and 9th Australian, and 2nd New Zealand. O'Connor had busied himself with the reorganization and refitting of the armored force, which now had a rejuvenated 7th Armored Division, and the 2nd Armored reinforced by the 22nd Guards Brigade, and would command the XIII Corps as he had in Operation Compass. Kinlan's force was in reserve, and designated 7th Heavy Tank Battalion, under O'Connor's command, and now it was time to brief Montgomery on the particulars surrounding this new unit, which was always a daunting moment.

"I've heard nothing of any new tanks, and I assure you, I would have been one to know about them back home. Don't tell me you've been field modifying the new equipment we been sending. Something in the way of making them more functional for desert fighting?"

"You might say as much," said Wavell. "There are no other tanks in the British Army anything like what I am about to show you. We'll soon have a look and you can see them yourself. Though what I am about to disclose to you now is to be considered a state secret, with the highest possible security rating. In the whole of the British Army, there are only two men who have full knowledge of what I will now reveal to you, and they are presently sitting with you in this room. No one else of note has been briefed, not Jumbo Wilson, nor any commander here in the theatre; not Auchinlek, nor Alexander, and not even Sir Alan Brooke, Chief of the Imperial General Staff. If any of those men ever do hear what I'm about to tell you, it will be at the sole discretion of the Prime Minister, who is the only other man in the civilian government privy to this matter. Understood?"

So it began, with the forcefulness of Wavell's authority, and the credibility of his rank and long experience in the service, to push open the gates of chaos that were now before Montgomery. Using the method Fedorov had pioneered so effectively with O'Connor, they were soon at the site of Kinlan's Royal Scott's Dragoons. There was the initial blank stare, the face of incredulity his first reaction, yet as the meeting progressed, and both O'Connor and Wavell kept on with absolute no-nonsense testimonials, his blue-grey eyes flashed with inner light.

"And so there it is," Wavell concluded. "King Arthur has come back from Avalon at the 11th hour to fight for King and Country. I realize what I

have just told you is as dumbfounding and preposterous as that, but it is hard reality, and now we will take this meeting to the field and you may meet Brigadier Kinlan and see his equipment first hand.”

Montgomery had all the same questions in his mind that O'Connor first had, yet seeing was believing, the most powerful advocate for the truth in the matter was the awesome sight of a modern British Challenger II tank. And there was also something at the heart of Monty's personality, an inner belief that he was called here by destiny, even as Kinlan's men were, and that he was meant to lead these men in battle, as if fate had prescribed it as a personal boon for him, delivering the tools he would need to win the victory he intended to deliver, even though he would not have direct command of Kinlan's force—yet.

O'Connor was still the armored force commander, and he was also Montgomery's nominal superior as overall commander of 8th Army. Monty had the hard defensive position, charged with holding Tobruk, with O'Connor on the southern desert flank of that bastion with all the mobile forces. Yet the moment he saw what had been delivered to Wavell's hand, by chance, magic, fate, or sheer destiny, Montgomery insisted that it be put to the fullest possible use.

“These troops fought in Syria? So now I have the riddle solved at last, and know how we were able to stop the German 9th Panzer Division.”

“The total force available amounts to no more than a brigade,” said Wavell. “Kinlan had a tank battalion, two mechanized infantry battalions, a recon battalion and one of light infantry, though those troops are all Gurkhas, and they were the lads who punched through the enemy defense at Damascus. We had no armor to speak of in Operation Scimitar, and so we sent half this brigade there to stiffen our attack and counter the ninety odd tanks the Vichy French had. They did the job well enough, and it was this force, in its entirety, that stopped Rommel earlier and sent him packing west to Mersa Brega. But he's had a good long while to lick his wounds, and is now heavily reinforced. Yesterday he moved two of his best new units up to Agheila from Mersa Brega. We think a new offensive is imminent.”

“As is his second defeat,” Montgomery said flatly, folding his arms, a fire in his eyes.

“He failed to take Tobruk last time out,” said Wavell. “We think he'll be wanting to correct that this time. You are well aware that we must hold that place, and I'm giving you the infantry corps because I know you'll be a

stubborn rock in the stream there. That said, Rommel has three fully motorized divisions now, and two more brigade sized units. With that he still has six Italian Infantry divisions, and the Ariete Armored Division. So you will most likely have a tough fight on your hands. Should it come to it, we've laid down plans on how we might withdraw from Tobruk if need presses us to do so."

"I won't hear of that," said Montgomery, his chin up and ready for a fight. "In fact if any such plans are handed to me, I'll tear them up the instant I receive them. I intend to fight the enemy where we now stand; there will be no withdrawal and no surrender. If we cannot stay at Tobruk alive, then let us stay there dead!"

Wavell raised an eyebrow at that, pursing his lips. "Strong talk, General, but if we can live up to it, all the better."

"That we can," said Montgomery, "but that road starts with walking your talk. I intend to impart this attitude through every rank and file of the units I command, from top to bottom."

"You've good men to start with," said O'Connor. "The Aussies are perhaps the toughest troops we have in theatre, and both their divisions are veterans now."

"Yet you've strung them out all over the Jebel country to the north," said Montgomery. "I'll want them back to Tobruk immediately."

O'Connor folded his arms, his eyes tight. "It was our thought that we could at least hold the airfields at Al Bayda, Marawah and Dernah."

Montgomery was quick to bat that aside.

"What for? We have fields that are more than adequate at Tobruk, El Adem and Sidi Barani. I realize you meant to keep a foot in the door in the event of some westward offensive, but under the circumstances, with Rommel coming to us, I'm bringing the Australians directly to Tobruk."

It wasn't a suggestion, but Montgomery's firm decision on the matter, notwithstanding the fact that both men he was speaking to were his superior officers. O'Connor had been promoted to make that obvious, but Monty was not one to fuss over rank, except when it came to his own.

"Well," said O'Connor, "we determined that Tobruk was the place to hold after all, and not further west with 500 kilometers of desert behind us and a long line of supply. Yet one day, if we do hold, we shall have to move west again. And, when I do move west, I shall be glad to know you will anchor our defense, General Montgomery, because I'm told you are a man

who is determined to win, as I am. That much is clearly evident.”

The two men locked eyes for a moment, the sandy haired dash and fire of O'Connor, and the lean, hawk-like aspect of Montgomery—fire and ice. But neither man had time to truly take the measure of the other in that brief encounter. News came in by motorcycle courier that Rommel's second offensive had finally begun.

Chapter 12

When Rommel moved, it was with well schooled precision. He had organized three columns, the southernmost to be led by the Grossdeutschland Regiment, followed by 15th Panzer Division. In the center he led with the 90th Light followed by the 5th Light Division, and to the north the Italian Ariete Armored Division pushed off, aiming for Mechile and followed by the Herman Goering Brigade. The columns were well fueled and supplied, and in seven days they had pushed across the desert and were approaching the British defensive positions anchored on Tobruk.

Monty's insistence on pulling the Australians quickly back to Tobruk was sound thinking. Otherwise his infantry brigades would have faced these shock columns, forced to fight in brigade groups out of close supporting distance from one another. It was a bit of a foot race that week, for the 6th Australian Division was not fully motorized, but the Aussies managed to foot it back to the outlying fortified line of Tobruk just as the first Armored cars of the Ariete Division finally reached the coastal road at Gazala, biting off the vast peninsula of Cyrenaica.

There had been no fighting during the advance, aside from scattered air strikes on both sides. The British were also evacuating all the airfields in Cyrenaica, and trying to cart off the aviation fuel before the enemy could claim it as a prize. For their part, the Germans and Italians were quickly flying squadrons to each new field as it was captured, and setting up ground crews and supplies to support Rommel's attack.

The Axis columns flowed east, until lead units began to encounter British positions in a line stretching from Tobruk, forward of the big airfield at El Adem, then just east of Bir Hacheim. The night of May 7th, the German columns had begun to fan out along the line of expected enemy resistance, and Rommel was moving forward in the gloaming dusk to meet with the man who would anchor his southern flank, Walter "Papa" Hörnlein, who replaced Stockhausen a few months earlier than the history Fedorov might have known. The medals on his chest were as thick as those on Rommel's own when he found the lean faced man at his HQ billet that night. Hörnlein was a holder of the Iron Cross for valor, with wound badge in black, and the Honor Cross for his service in the First war, and before this one was over he would add many more. A man of 48 years, he had sharp, aquiline eyes above sallow

cheeks, and his face could seem drawn and tired at times, those eyes seeming to see things that he and his men might yet endure, as if he was endowed with some second sight.

He was a staunch National Socialist, though he left that behind him when he was in the field with his men, with whom he cultivated a kind of father-son relationship. His first meeting with the subordinate officers was taken over dinner and drinks, in a relaxed atmosphere of comradeship. Thinking his troops would be in the front lines of the imminent attack on Soviet Russia, Hörnlein was quite surprised to learn his unit was being sent to reinforce Rommel's Afrika Korps.

"Stockhausen has set the bar high," he told his men. "Taking Gibraltar was no small feat under his command. Now we get our chance in the desert."

Volunteers to a man, his men and officers were ready. They had been selected from all over Germany to form an exemplary regiment, tall, physically fit, and with perfect eyesight as a requirement for service. There were no shirkers here, and this unit would continue to toughen in the cauldron of combat until it would one day earn the title of "The Führer's Fireman," a unit that could be rushed into broken positions on the crumbling east front to restore order and save the day, time and time again.

The word "elite" was not enough to describe these troops. From its early roots as the *Wacheregiment* Berlin and the *Kommando der Wachtruppe*, Grossdeutschland, or "Greater Germany" was an exemplary force on the battlefield, reliable, unyielding, and persevering in circumstances that would have broken any lesser unit. Hörnlein and the men he commanded would be asked to do the impossible many times before the war ended, and they would seldom fail in that charge. Yet now Rommel knew that they were going to face a challenge unlike any other, and he wanted to take the measure of Hörnlein and his men, and prepare them if he could.

The two men met in Hörnlein's HQ tent, seated on simple folding canvass chairs before a shipping case that had been pressed into service as a makeshift table. It was not to be dinner and drinks that night, but serious talk about what they might be facing.

"The Korps is in fine spirits, as are my men," said Hörnlein as they began.

"I am glad for that," said Rommel. "But the fighting hasn't started yet. I am more concerned with their morale after that happens than any bravado that might be displayed before a battle. Make no mistake here, Hörnlein. This

will not be as easy as your service under Kleist in Fall Gelb. The desert is a hard place—no trees or rivers to cross, but dry stony wadis, salt pans, bare scrub that can hardly give a man any cover. It is an open field for battle, and one might think it perfect for maneuver with our fast moving formations, but here we must learn a different game. Every day in this desert, there will be just a little less of you and your men than the day before. You will see it in their faces in time, a lean, haggard look. My men have already fought here, and tasted both victory and defeat. Frankly I am still trying to decide which was worse.”

Hörnlein knew Rommel was trying to steel him for the combat ahead, but remained confident. “Your earlier setback was unavoidable,” he said. “I read the reports, particularly those from the Quartermasters, and the Korps was simply not adequately supplied. Frankly I am surprised you chose to attack at all given the situation you faced, and with only the 5th Light Division in hand. Yet now you have a Korps worthy of the name. There are fine troops here, well supplied this time, and I am not simply trumpeting the virtue of my own boys now.”

“Fair enough, General, but did you also note the comments concerning this new British armor?”

“Most surprising,” said Hörnlein. “A new heavy tank... How was it this tiger did not show us a whisker in France? We heard nothing of it. I am told the French had a few monster tanks, but they were more show pieces than any real asset in combat.”

“These tanks are different. The French Char 2C was a lumbering showpiece, just as you say, but not these new British tanks. They are dreadful, massive beasts, yet with a low profile and speed that would rival any tank we have. This is not a slow elephant, Hörnlein, but a dashing heavyweight. It can move like lightning, firing on the run, and from very long range. When we first encountered it, our tanks simply began to blow up before we ever knew what was hitting us. And when I saw them, even from a distance, I could simply not believe my eyes. Give me twenty of those tanks and I would be on the Suez Canal in two weeks. As it stands, however, they are fighting for the other side.”

Hörnlein nodded, accepting the warning evident in Rommel’s tone. “Yet from all accounts, there were not many,” he said. “And the few they have may still be in Syria and Lebanon.”

“Yes,” said Rommel, “the 9th Panzer Division made their acquaintance

near the big aerodrome at Rayak there. The Recon battalion was out in front, and a formation of these tanks ripped it to pieces. When we faced them the armor fought as a discrete unit, but in Syria the British seem to have created combined arms *kampfgruppen*. They also have a new medium tank that doubles as an infantry carrier. It is equally fast, and with a gun in the range of our own 50cm gun on the Panzer IIIs. They have learned fast, Hörnlein. Believe me, this is not the British army we fought in France. At Bir el Khamsa they coordinated every element of their force to perfection, reconnaissance, artillery, armor, and fast moving infantry in this new carrier tank. It was extraordinary. They fight on the move, as I have said, stopping for nothing. It is blitzkrieg the like of which you have never seen, and we were taken completely by surprise.”

“But we have had a good long while to think about that, yes?”

“Night after night,” said Rommel. “Paulus told me I had to start thinking like a commander from the last war, and fight my infantry units as hard as my panzers, and he may be correct.”

“This is why you have had us drilling in rapid field fortification and minefield deployment?”

“Exactly. Be advised—nothing stopped these tanks,” Rommel warned. “We hit them with 88s and yet could not hurt even one. As for the lighter AT guns, do not even bother with them. They may harm this new medium tank, but not the new main battle tank they have. It is impervious to any weapon we now possess, save perhaps heavy caliber artillery, which we may soon see. This is why I requested, and thank god, received, all those 150mm and 170mm guns! As I see it now, our only chance when these tanks appear is to deploy in a hedgehog formation, use fixed positions and mines, and then saturate the point of enemy attack with artillery fire—the first damn war all over again.”

“But not with the gas,” said Hörnlein. “No, not yet. If we were to use such a tactic the British would have no choice but to use it as well, and then we get that nightmare back again. This one looks to be bad enough as it stands.”

There was a moment of silence, and the two men seemed to dwell on memories of their time in the first war, before Rommel spoke again.

“General, I have placed your unit here on the southern flank for two reasons. The British will stand on the coast, as always. They are already digging in behind their bunkers at Tobruk, with three good divisions in the

immediate vicinity of that fortress. It will have to be taken if we are to have any chance to move further east. So I will throw the Italians at them first, to make some use of their infantry divisions. If nothing else, they will force the enemy to expend ammunition and supplies in the defense. Eventually, however, it will take good German troops to punch through there. I've selected Goering's troops for that attack, and will support them with armor."

"And what if the British have these new heavy tanks there?"

"I do not think they will deploy them at Tobruk. No. That is their hammer, not their shield. They will use their armor to the south, perhaps in an enveloping maneuver, as I might. The open desert is endless there. You will never lack for room to maneuver in a wide sweeping envelopment. That is what they will probably expect from me, but I will not give them that fight this time. I'm leading the assault with the 90th Light, here..." Rommel unfolded a field map and pointed to a place south of Tobruk.

"El Adem," he said. "That is their principle aerodrome here in the western desert. I'm going to lead with an infantry assault, infiltration tactics like those I used in the first war. Then we will see what they do with their armor."

"You expect they will counterattack there?"

"No, I believe they will try to swing round my southern flank—around your flank, general Hörnlein, which is why I have placed you and your men here in this vital position. You are the flank, and you must not collapse, under any circumstances. But I plan on committing my tanks behind the 90th Light, so do not expect armor support here. I will try to keep something in reserve, but if they come with their heavy tanks, my armor will not be effective. You must fight them as I have described."

"And if they simply swing around my infantry positions? What then?"

"That is exactly what I expect, and so we are planning a few little surprises for them."

"Surprises? Do enlighten me, Herr General."

"First off, the pioneer battalions from each formation are being grouped into a full regiment. I am going to select the ground carefully, and then set the men to digging out a good anti-tank ditch, mined and barbed. Behind it we will position a pakfront of 88s, all dug in well, as the enemy used artillery against us when we deployed them from the march at Bir el Khamsa. The 88s will screen our heavy artillery, including some new 150cm nebelwerfers. If they come around your flank I will wait for them to come up on that AT ditch

and then saturate the ground there with heavy artillery fire. Scissors, paper, rock, Hörnlein. They have scissors too big and sharp for our own panzers to cope with now, so we must use a rock—your regiment holding firm, and then comes the artillery. I come to you here this evening because I believe you will be the men to face this enemy armor this time...” He did not need to say anything more on that account.

Hörnlein knew he was being warned, prepared for a shock that was soon to be upon him, and Rommel was sizing him up, wanting to know how he would endure, or if he could endure at all.

“Let me be frank,” he said at last. “I’m told your men are the best we have. Make me believe that to a certainty. If you can hold this flank, then I have a chance to throw three divisions right through the center of the enemy defense, here just south of el Adem.”

“This feature here,” said Hörnlein. “Is it passable?”

“That is a deep wadi. We’ve been working on ways to get over them. You’ve seen me drilling the men. Once we do, I want to punch through with my tanks, and then turn north for the coast. But to succeed, I need the enemy to send these new tanks of theirs somewhere else...”

“Against me,” said Hörnlein, knowing what Rommel was saying now. “So we are to be your sacrificial lamb.”

“Correct. But do not think I am sending you to the slaughter, Hörnlein. If I know you are the best, then the enemy will know it as well. So I’ll want you to feed that fire, and demonstrate on this flank as if we were planning a wide southern envelopment. I’ll send you a battalion of tanks to make a good show. But yes, I want the enemy armor here, against Grossdeutschland, squaring off with the best we have. I realize I’m asking a great deal of you; of your men.”

“Have no worry, General Rommel, you can rely on us. We’ll dig into any ground you choose, and by god, we’ll hold it, even if there is nothing we can do against these new enemy tanks but curse at them.”

“That is what I will need from you. Be tough, General. Be stubborn. I know you have a particular fondness for your men, and that asking them to stand there and thump their chests at the enemy is a hard thing, but this is where the British will send their best units, and so I have chosen you and your men to face them. There is one other little surprise we have for the enemy—the *Stukas*.”

“Good air support is always welcome.”

“Yes, well I have been promised liberal support by Goering, and three squadrons will be assigned to direct support for your regiment. If the enemy does attempt to turn your flank, then the crows will darken their skies. Just use the code word Valkyrie. This is all we can do, General, fixed positions with good men holding them, mined, Anti-tank guns, for all they are worth, liberal artillery with every gun we can spare, and then a good pounding from the air.”

“And the timing of these operations?”

“We’ve just come 500 kilometers from Agedabia, so rest now, dig in here where I have indicated on this map. In a few days time there will be some real fireworks, but you have that interval to prepare. I will keep you informed.”

Rommel stood, returning Hörnlein’s salute, and then turned to catch a glimpse of the setting sun. It was always a rising sun that I loved most, he thought, yet now we must learn to love the dusk as well, and the darkness of night. I have risen from my long sleep at Mersa Brega. The enemy knows I’m here, and is probably out there tonight in their own tents, thinking how to stop the flanking maneuver they believe I am planning here. I will hate to disappoint them, but a good commander must never be predictable. Destiny may have forgiven me for my lapse at Bir el Khamsa. This time I will be ready.

Part V

Day Of Reckoning

“The Lord Almighty will come with thunder and earthquake and great noise, with windstorm and tempest and flames of a devouring fire.”

— Isaiah 29:6

Chapter 13

Admiral Raeder was beside himself. The news of the cancelation of the third *Hindenburg* Class battleship, the *Brandenburg*, had been a hard enough blow. Now this! He stared at the order he had in hand, signed by the Führer himself, and realized that his naval Plan Z was now doomed.

“In light of the fact that our capital ships have made no significant contribution to the war effort, and with the necessity of utilizing every resource possible, all further construction on new ships under Plan Z is to be halted, effective immediately. Ships presently in yards that are less than 80% complete, and not scheduled for sea trials before January 1942 are to be summarily scrapped. U-Boat construction is exempt from this order and shall proceed as planned, as is any conversion of captured enemy vessels deemed to be seaworthy within the allotted time period. Steel recovered from the shipyard cancellations is to be redirected to the Reichsminister for employment in construction of our new heavy tank programs, and to support continued production for the Luftwaffe.”

Brandenburg was a mere hull, but now they are taking *Oldenburg* from me, he thought grimly. The last status report clearly designated its status as being 75% complete. We are only waiting for the gun turrets to arrive, but given this order I have a strong suspicion they will be a long time coming. We will never get the ship ready before January. I need at least nine months. The repairs to *Scharnhorst*, and now *Bismarck* and *Hindenburg*, have slowed everything down. Who was behind this? Doenitz? Goering? Halder?

Doenitz has always been a strong advocate of his U-Boat arm, and frankly, not without good reason. He can claim the lion's share of enemy tonnage sunk thus far in the war, and for *Oldenburg* we could easily build twenty more good U-Boats. But he would never advocate such a thing behind my back, not without coming to me with it first and hearing me out. No. This was not the doing of Doenitz.

Goering? That fat spider has his hand in everything these days, including the oil production plans for the entire war effort. My fleet allocations have been leaner and leaner with this big Russian operation imminent, and that line concerning increased production for the Luftwaffe is suspicious.

But again, he thought, where did I get my hits in all these early fleet

actions? It was *Graf Zeppelin* that really made the difference in the engagements we fought. Those *Stukas* off the carrier delivered more damage to the enemy than all my capital ships combined! So I must do everything possible to protect *Peter Strasser*. Adding another carrier to the fleet may be the strongest possible thing we could do. For that matter, we must put every resource possible now into the conversion of that captured French carrier, and any other Flugdeck Cruiser close to completion. This means I will lose all the other keels for the remaining O-Class battlecruisers, and there will be no more *Panzerschiff* raiders commissioned. The five new ocean going destroyers I have ready for trials will be the last of that brood...

Raeder was running down the list of ships in his mind like a mother hen counting her eggs. Halder, he thought. It had to be Halder. He has been opposed to my Mediterranean strategy all along, and now that his brainchild in Barbarossa is ready to launch, he wants to secure all the supplies, steel, and oil he can for the Wehrmacht. And why not? The real barb in Hitler's order is the sad truth that all my ships have accomplished to date is the bombardment of the Faeroes Islands and that one big convoy we feasted on. Doenitz delivers that same tonnage every week! Since *Hindenburg* broke out, and even with Gibraltar in our hands now, our battleships have been little more than targets for those damnable new British naval rockets.

The squall that blew in with that thought added a deeper shade of grey to Raeder's mood, and he realized that these new weapons were the overture to the death knell of his battlefleet. What has *Hindenburg* done in the Mediterranean? It sailed with the French, the most powerful fleet the world has ever seen, and could still do nothing more than catch fire when these rockets were used. That is the real story behind this order—missiles are rendering all our existing naval thinking obsolete. The day of the big battleship is over, though old stubborn sea dogs like me will not wish to admit that. As for the carriers, that is another matter. Marco Ritter and his pilots have proven themselves, but again, that makes the *Graf Zeppelin* the real pride of the fleet, not *Hindenburg*. The battleship has been sitting in Toulon getting new armor welded and repairing her superstructure. In the meantime, the British have tried to bomb the place three times.

I would give my right arm if I could get my hands on one of these new enemy rockets. Word is that they now have two ships in the Med armed with these weapons, and together they were responsible for stopping Goering's planes, and putting all that damage on the battlefleet. Then, when their work

is done, along comes Admiral Tovey in HMS *Invincible* to pick up the table scraps. Look what they did to the Italian fleet! They have pulled most of their battleships back to La Spezia, and getting them out to sea again will be like pulling teeth. As for the French, the *Normandie* is a wonderful ship, but it has done nothing this year but shuttle from Casablanca to Toulon to Taranto. The British took a beating the first time they tangled with the French, but my ships have not been so fortunate.

He shook his head, clearly disturbed, and realized that he was now as useless as the *Hindenburg* had been. What have I done to prosecute this war, he thought? Here I have let this business in the Mediterranean run away with my best capital ships. I have divided my fleet, when I might have achieved a decisive engagement here in the north, particularly with Tovey away from Home Fleet. The war in the Med looked to be most promising. Then Rommel takes a pounding, and now the stalemate in Syria will make it impossible for us to achieve our aims before Hitler attacks the Soviets.

So what to do?

The British had detached two more battleships to reinforce their fleet at Alexandria. They were taken from Force H and sent round the cape with that big convoy of new supplies and material. Rommel is finally ready to move again, but he may find the British have more waiting for him than he believes. And what about this new British tank everyone has been talking about... yes! That is the real reason behind this order... *'Steel recovered from the shipyard cancellations is to be redirected to the Reichsminister for employment in construction of our new heavy tank programs...'*

It seems the British have more tricks up their sleeve than these new naval rockets. While we were busy building these ponderous new battleships, they were working on tanks and rockets, and they have trumped my ace, damn them all. Rockets, advanced radars, a tank that is now impervious to our best AT guns... And now the Führer wants me to scrap the *Oldenburg*, collect all the steel, and send it to Goebbels and Todt for new heavy tank production. This was inevitable. I knew it from the first moment I laid out Plan Z for Hitler all those years ago. Back then he wanted the biggest ships in the world, and I had to plead with him to allow me to use 16-inch guns instead of the 18 or 20-inch guns he was demanding. Now look what has happened. The enemy has a weapon that can smash my battleships and set off raging fires on them from well over the horizon. Lütjens and Lindemann tell me they never even set eyes on the ship that inflicted all this damage.

So now the war comes down to tanks and rockets, but that has not been set in stone yet. I might still accomplish something if I set my mind to it, and stop bemoaning a fate that I could see coming long ago. What to do, Raeder, he asked himself? First off, collect your fleet. It is not big enough to rule the Mediterranean while also planning operations here in the North Atlantic. There is only one thing that matters to the Führer, victories. Unless I deliver one, and a victory that really makes a difference, then the navy is good for little more than coastal defense.

He shrugged, realizing the futility of all he had been working towards these many long years. Time to get *Hindenburg* and *Bismarck* home, he thought. I will order them to Gibraltar tonight, and then we will see about a little sleight of hand up north so they can break out into the Atlantic. These new rocket ships are at Alexandria. They will not be able to intervene without first sailing all the way around the Cape of Good Hope. That will take them three weeks, or even a month, considering they must stop along the way to refuel. Yet, at this moment, *Hindenburg* is a mere 36 hours from Gibraltar at 20 knots. If I plan this carefully, the British will not be able to react. Their Force H has been operating from the Ascension and Canary Islands.

He looked for a map now, mentally plotting out ship's courses and headings in his mind. Somerville had most of his force at the Grand Canary harbor when those other battleships moved south with that convoy some weeks ago. From our latest reports, his capital ships still remain there, a single aircraft carrier and a few cruisers! He's been mounting cruiser patrols north to cover the approaches to Gibraltar, but as we have nothing of consequence there, he has had no reason to sortie with anything else.

He took up a pair of calipers and walked them across the map. *Hindenburg* is 36 hours from Gibraltar, at 20 knots. Force H is 26 hours to the south at that same speed. That would give Somerville ten hours to react if I move to Gibraltar now. But at 25 knots I can trim a good bit off that. Yes, at 25 knots I can have *Hindenburg* to the straits in just 29 hours, and if I order all ahead full, and make a mad dash at 30 knots, I can get them to Gibraltar in just 24 hours, too fast for Somerville to react! Even if he got up steam and set out immediately, he would still be 2 hours late. Yes... It could be done. *Hindenburg* can run for the Atlantic this very moment. With any luck the British will be some hours, or even a day realizing what I am doing. By that time it will be too late.

He smiled, feeling like a fresh breeze of good ocean air had cleared the

trouble from his mind. We built this fleet to fight in the Atlantic. We built it to be strong enough to bull our way past the Royal Navy and then find and sink those nice fat convoys. Sending *Hindenburg* to the Mediterranean was a good operation, but the enemy has reacted well enough. With the combined might of the Italian, French and German ships, we should have crushed the Royal Navy, but they were able to engage our flotillas piecemeal, beating the Italians before we could get east to coordinate operations with them. In the meantime, the British have had nice quiet days in the North Atlantic. Doenitz has been carrying the fight to the convoys, and now we see the results of my lassitude in these new orders from the Führer. I must correct that, and soon, or I can see the death of the entire surface fleet in the years ahead. The old maxim is true—use it or lose it. The Führer’s words still burned in his mind, ...*our capital ships have made no significant contribution to the war effort...* Well, all that is about to change!

Now it is time to steal a march on the enemy, and get my big ships into the Atlantic where I at least have a chance to win some victories. Only then can I have any chance of saving what remains in the shipyards. Yes, I need a victory, and a substantial one.

He smiled, feeling like a naval commander again, and not a logistician calculating oil tonnage deliveries and steel allocations. Doenitz has been fighting his war all along, while I have been sitting on my thumbs, ignoring the convoys. He turned, his resolve mustering, and called for a staffer.

“Send Enigma encoded orders to Admiral Lütjens at Toulon.”

* * *

Lütjens was in his stateroom when those orders came. There was a soft knock on the door, and Kapitan Karl Adler came in, removing his cap and saluting.

“New orders sir. We are to get up steam for immediate departure.”

Lütjens gave him a surprised look. “What’s this? Immediate departure? The work crews are still welding those new deck plates. What is happening, Adler? Are the British up to something?”

“No sir, from all reports their fleet is still off Alexandria.”

“Ah,” said Lütjens, with the tone of realization in his voice. “It’s Rommel again, yes? He’s finally got his tanks and fuel oil and now he wants to move east again. I was expecting this. Usually it is the Royal Navy

bombarding the coast road along that desert, but now they have work for our 16 inch guns. Yes?”

“I’m afraid not sir. We’ve been ordered back to Gibraltar.”

“Gibraltar? Whatever for?”

At this point Adler thought it best to simply step over and hand off the decrypt he was holding. He watched as Lütjens scanned it, the lines of his brow deepening as he did so.

“Your entire force is ordered to Gibraltar at the best possible speed... What do you make of this, Adler?”

“Something for us in the Atlantic?”

“Most likely. These orders come directly from Admiral Raeder, and reading between the lines, I see more here than may appear at first glance. We are to make our best speed? That can only mean that he is trying to get us out into the Atlantic before Somerville can do anything about it. Very well, I will take it on faith that the Grand Admiral has some earnest business in mind. How soon before we can get up steam for operations?”

“I had us on four hour steam, sir. But I think I can speed that along. Let me get down to the boiler room and see what Schultz can do about it. Shall I signal the other ships in the task force?”

“Of course. I assume *Bismarck* is also on four hour steam?”

“Repairs are well in hand there, sir. And the new crews arrived some weeks ago. The ship will be ready.”

“Very well. Then get all the geese lined up and ready to fly, Kapitan. *Bismarck*, *Kaiser*, *Goeben*, we pull anchors and head east in four hours, midnight. What is the moon doing?”

“An evening crescent will be an hour above the horizon at midnight, but the weather calls for low clouds. We should be able to slip away unnoticed.”

“Just the same, the British may have eyes in this port, and our departure may be reported. In that case, I want you to leak an order that we will be moving east to support this business Rommel is stirring up again. The British will likely come to that same conclusion anyway. It could buy us just a little more time. We’ll make our course due south at the outset. Get a signal off to Malta. Tell them they are to clear a berthing in the Grand Harbor there. If the British think we are dusting off a chair there for *Hindenburg*, all the better.”

“What do you make of these orders, sir?”

“What else, Adler? The convoys! That is why this ship was built, was it not? Something tells me Admiral Raeder has had a revelation. The British

have just reinforced their fleet at Alexandria with two more battleships. I hate to slip away without paying the tab here, but I think Raeder has seen a good opportunity for us to do some hunting.”

He smiled. “And those rocket ships will be here, Adler. If we follow these orders to the letter and make for Gibraltar at our best speed, they will be three thousand kilometers behind us at Alexandria, and at least a month before they could get round the cape of Good Hope. In the meantime, we will range in the Atlantic, and rule the sea. What could be better?”

Yes, thought Adler, what could be better? We tried to run with the wolves, and took a nasty bite for our trouble. So now we go off looking for sheep. He gave Lütjens a half hearted salute and started for the bridge.

Chapter 14

Admiral Tovey was pleased to meet with Volsky again, the two men having an afternoon tea together, this time aboard the Russian battlecruiser, on station in the Med just north of the Nile Delta. The battle they had fought together was a near run thing, he thought. That combined Franco-German fleet was more than Cunningham could have handled here. If not for the godsend in this Russian ship, and now the strange arrival of the *Argos Fire*, things might be very different here.

“I must tell you again how grateful I am for all you have done for us, Admiral Volsky.”

Nikolin was enjoying his role as translator immensely. Every time the British Admirals needed to meet with Volsky, he was relieved of his duty at communications, and was able to sit in the staterooms, sipping teas, and getting treated to all the niceties the senior officers lived with. He translated what Tovey had said, and Volsky returned.

“I only wish we could have done more. As it stands, we had some success in fending off that big enemy fleet, and we were able to interdict the Bosphorus, if only temporarily. The enemy is already busily repairing the damage we put on the rail yards there. Frankly, our Mister Fedorov may do more for your war effort in Syria than anything this ship could do. He’s been running about tearing up rail lines from Aleppo, and this has reportedly slowed down the arrival of new German units on that front considerably.”

“Ah yes,” said Tovey. “Those helicopters of yours have proved most useful from all reports I have read. Where are they now?”

“My last update had them in a town on the upper Euphrates, but I cannot pronounce it. Yet even his operations must be no more than a pin prick in this war. I am afraid the real fighting is only now about to begin. Everything we have seen thus far is merely a preliminary. The war in Russia now darkens my thoughts. It is about to begin, and I have sat awake many a night, realizing what is now soon to befall my homeland, and feeling powerless to prevent it.”

Tovey nodded, setting his teacup down as he considered the situation. “It must be very difficult for you, knowing what is to come, the losses, the suffering.”

“Yes,” said Volsky. “I have taken the liberty of sticking my nose into

our Captain Fedorov's library books, a bit like watching your own house burn down for all the good it has done me. Do you realize what is about to happen? Over eight million men will soon face one another on the eastern front. The Germans will commit well over a hundred divisions to the initial operations! They will fling over 4000 tanks and 7000 aircraft at us, and we have numbers exceeding that on defense, though our troops fared very poorly in the opening battles, and casualties and losses were very high. Compare that to all your operations presently in the field, Admiral Tovey. You have all of five divisions in your Western Desert facing Rommel, and no more than another five in Syria. The Germans will be throwing ten times that at Mother Russia, and the hell they inflict there will scar the psyche of our nation for generations to come."

"Somewhat humbling to think of it in those terms," said Tovey. "It's a wonder we have managed to hold out here in Egypt. Frankly, with that kind of power, it has only been logistics that has prevented the Germans from crushing Wavell and rolling us out of Egypt. The Germans simply can't supply any more units beyond those they have been able to commit here, and so we have been fairly matched. But yes, to think of the battle you describe, with all those German divisions facing your forces, is somewhat ghastly. Yet you prevailed, in spite of the long struggle and hardship, did you not?"

"Oh, we prevailed. The Germans destroyed most every city between Poland and the Volga but that is where we made our stand—at Moscow, and at a city called Stalingrad, and the tide eventually turned."

"Stalingrad? I am not aware of the place."

"Volgograd in this world, the world we have shaped with our own meddling in this war. You see, Sergei Kirov was not leading the Soviet Union in the history we know. There was another man, Josef Stalin, a man as hard as the steel that he forged his name from. He was ruthless, determined, and may I say as evil as the demon you now wrestle with in Hitler. Before the war he launched a purge that killed over 50,000 key officers in our army, all to assure his own power base. Thankfully, from what I have been able to learn, that has not happened in this world. So perhaps our boys will do a little better this time out against the Germans, though I have great fears on the matter."

"I understand," said Tovey. "Your dreams must be much darker than my own, Admiral Volsky. "You have done great things thus far, but as you have so chillingly described, the war has been a small thing compared to what it may soon become."

“Sadly true,” said Volsky. “Soon the fighting begins in earnest, and don’t forget the Japanese Empire is still out there in the Pacific. Fedorov tells me that all that history is as broken as our homeland. As I knew it, Japan entered the war in December of 1941, but who knows what will happen now. They already have Vladivostok, the result of another foolish Captain, and the actions he took with this very ship in the Pacific. Who knows what the Japanese will do this time out? This war is a darkness that is only just beginning to fall. Millions will die in the next few years... millions...”

There was nothing in Tovey’s teacup that could offer any solace for the look on Volsky’s face now. He could see the Admiral was deeply tormented, and could only imagine what he must be feeling, shouldering the responsibility for all these things, believing it was his own doing that was now bringing the world to the edge of chaos. He tried his best, but his words seemed a thin balm.

“You must not try to take all the blame on yourself,” said Tovey. “This war was going to be fought, with or without you. It wasn’t your doing, but the darkness in the hearts of this generation of warriors. You have told me that there are wars enough in your own time, but this one is ours, Admiral. We bear the responsibility for what we are weaving here, even if you can see your own handiwork in the loom. Yet I know how you must feel, wishing you could prevent what is about to happen, and feeling powerless to do so.”

“Not entirely powerless,” said Volsky, a distant, haunted look in his eye. “Yes, with every missile we fire this ship becomes less and less a factor in the war, but Admiral Tovey, I have weapons you have yet to see delivered on the enemy, weapons as terrible as this war that first spawned them. I ask myself whether I could, or should have used them, to stop what we are seeing the enemy do now. I could have prevented the fall of Gibraltar with a single missile—do you understand what I am now saying? Yes, I have a missile so powerful that I could have obliterated the entire German force assembled to attack that place. Yet I stayed my hand, thinking it too terrible a reprisal at this stage of the war.”

Even before Nikolin had finished his translation, Tovey felt a strange feeling come over him, something emerging from deep within, an old, dark memory rising in the back of his mind and soul, though he could not quite grasp it, or see it clearly.

“War is deceptive,” Volsky continued. “It starts with a sniffle and a cough, but given time it becomes much worse. On the eve of the attack on

Gibraltar, there was really very little else going on. The war had quieted down to a little headache. To use such a weapon at that time, I believed, would remove anything that now distinguishes me from men like Adolf Hitler, or the man I mentioned a moment ago, Josef Stalin. And yet... Now the real war begins. The fever rises, and our throats are sore with the planning of one battle after another. Now it shows us its real venom. In our time there once came a terrible illness that emerged from a backward village in Africa—Ebola. It began in the same deceptive way, with symptoms that seemed innocuous enough—a simple cold, or possibly the flu. Then it flared up to the horror it really was all along, and killed millions. So now I feel like my good friend Doctor Zolkin at times. I sit here with the power to do something about it if I so choose, do something before the illness of war becomes a pandemic that will infect this entire world. It is a torment that is worse than anything I have ever suffered. I might engage the enemy and save millions of lives, yet to do so I must certainly kill men in the tens of thousands, possibly even more. That is a ghastly calculation, and a very bitter choice.”

Tovey could not quite see what was in the back of his mind, but he could feel it. It was as if that moment, when he first saw the awful grey-white mushroom cloud over the North Atlantic, was blooming in his mind again—not the image of the event, but all the feelings of shock, and terror, and bewilderment. On some deep inner level he knew what Admiral Volsky was trying to tell him. The weapon... The ship... the barest glimpse of the capsized hull of a battleship... the haunting wink of ship’s lanterns, distant cruisers warning him, and then two words finally emerging from the fluttering signal... *advise dispersal*...

“The North Atlantic,” he said aloud, and Volsky waited while Nikolin translated. “It was in the North Atlantic. It was used there, was it not? This weapon you speak of was first used there. These are the same weapons Director Kamenski spoke of at Alexandria when he told us about those testing programs?”

Volsky was stopped cold by Tovey’s words. Did he and Fedorov reveal this to Tovey earlier? He could not remember, but he knew Kamenski had alluded to them at that meeting. That was perhaps the only explanation that made sense to him. Yet now it was Tovey who seemed clouded over with the gloom of his inner muse.

“Are you alright, Admiral?”

“Not quite,” said Tovey, still feeling like a sleeper who had awakened

with a nightmare in mind, the dream fading, shredding to fragments and slipping from his thoughts, like spirits fleeing to find the darkness that spawned them.

“You will forgive me, Admiral, but I have not been quite myself since we first met. Well that’s just the point, isn’t it? We met in the North Atlantic during that row we had with the German navy. Yet when I first set eyes on your ship, I had this very same feeling, a little dread on top of a memory so old that I could no longer see it in my mind. I had the distinct feeling that I had seen your ship before, and when we met, that was redoubled, like a bit of *déjà vu*, if you will. Then came your revelation that we had met before, yet in 1942! Well, that was enough of a shock for this old head, until we discovered those photographs and reports concerning your ship—an archive that seemed to document all the events you were referring to. We never really came to an understanding of how that could be possible, but things you can hold in your hand have a stubbornness about them, and they simply cannot be dismissed. These odd memories that come to me, recollections of seeing your ship, meeting with you in another time, and yes, seeing this terrible new weapon you mention now. Well, it remains a profound mystery, and most disturbing.”

Admiral Volsky nodded, his heart heavy, seeing that Tovey was as much bound up in all of this soul searching as he was. “One day we may get to the bottom of all this,” he said. “And I think that day may come sooner than we think. Our time here grows short.”

Tovey offered a wan smile. “You say that like a spirit from a Dickens novel.

“Ah yes,” said Volsky, “your Christmas Story. Well, my only problem is this—I cannot determine whether I play the role of the Ghost from Christmas past, or the ghost from days yet to come. In either case, I have the feeling that I have brought all of this unwanted torment to your own life and soul, Admiral, and for that I am truly sorry.”

Again it was Tovey’s impulse to offer Volsky some comfort. “No Admiral, we are bound up in this together, you and I. Fate seems to have billeted us together in this business, and by degrees, I have every faith that we shall work it through to some understanding in time.”

“In time,” said Volsky, the irony of his statement obvious.

There came a knock on the door, an officer rushing in and whispering something to Admiral Volsky, which did little to cheer his mood. He seemed surprised by the news. “You are certain?” he asked, then turned to Tovey, the

light of discovery in his eyes.

“Well, Admiral,” he said with a sigh. “Here we get another little tempest in our teacups. We have just received word that the German fleet has left Toulon some eight hours ago.”

“They most likely got up steam to support this new offensive by Rommel,” said Tovey with a nod. “I was afraid we’d have to lock horns with them again soon.”

Volsky continued. “I am told that Malta was signaled to be ready to have a berthing ready for the *Hindenburg* in 24 hours. But here is a little mystery. Do you recall that device our Captain Fedorov mentioned, the one capable of decoding German Enigma Naval traffic? Well we have been doing that, and I am now told that we have another order that purports to send the German flotilla off in quite another direction. They are ordered to steam west!”

“West? For Gibraltar? Most surprising. I worry enough to think they might be heading east again, though now that *Valiant* and *Nelson* finally made it round the cape to reinforce Cunningham’s fleet here, I’ve been sleeping a bit more easily. I wanted both the *Nelson* class vessels, but *Rodney* had other business, or so the Admiralty informed me. I had to strip most of Somerville’s firepower from Force H, but we’ll get him some help soon enough from Home Fleet. Now this news is most disturbing. The Germans can only be making for Gibraltar, and anything they do after they get there will be my next little nightmare. I’m afraid I can’t allow myself to become possessed by the burden of trying to sort out this entire war, Admiral. I understand what you must feel, but you may wish to take that as friendly advice. One thing at a time. In this news comes one small piece of this war that will soon be within my charge. If the *Hindenburg* moves west for Gibraltar, then I must go west as well. Somerville’s Force H is in no shape to handle a ship like that, and let us not forget the *Bismarck* either. This bit of lemon has certainly soured my tea.”

“Go west? Through the Mediterranean? Surely you mean you must go South around the cape.”

“That will be a three week affair. By the time I get into the Atlantic, *Hindenburg* will have raised hell and will be long gone. I must signal Home Fleet at once. Holland is about to have his hands full, but Somerville with his Force H will be the man of the hour. Yet his main body is well south off the Canary Islands. He’ll need to move at once.”

“And your ship?”

Tovey bit his lip. “I know I may be an old fool, but I’m looking at making a run west.”

“Through the straits of Gibraltar?”

“I know it sounds like madness, but this ship has damn good armor, and the speed to run like the wind. Yes, the enemy will have air power at Gibraltar. That, I suppose, is my worst problem if I attempt this.”

“But it is over 3000 kilometers east to Gibraltar from here, and that takes you under enemy air power for most of that distance. They’ll have planes on Sicily, Malta, possibly all along the French African coast.”

“Yes. It is just over 2400 nautical miles to our new refueling base in the Azores. That’s roughly 4400 kilometers. At 20 knots I can be there in five days—three days if I go all out.”

“You are more likely to find yourself at the bottom of the sea, Admiral. That is a perilous course.”

“Possibly, the safe play would be to go round the cape, but that stretches those three days to at least three weeks.”

Volsky nodded. “Mister Nikolin, thank you for your able service here. I hope you don’t mind having these cold cuts for lunch, because it seems Admiral Tovey and I have a lot more to discuss. But first, please get that *mishman* back here and tell him to get a message off to Captain Fedorov. He is to return to the ship immediately, and the Marines are ordered back as well. Something tells me our port of call here has now run its course.”

“Admiral,” said Tovey. “I don’t mean to drag you and your ship into this. *Invincible* can make way alone if need be.”

“Yes, and then you will have to rename your ship, Admiral. I do not think you will survive. Yet I have been thinking we must get back to the Atlantic for some time now, and so I hope you will not mind the company.”

“You mean to come along? Well I won’t insist otherwise.”

“I think we had best throw all our key assets into this little venture,” said Volsky. “With my ship along, and possibly the *Argos Fire*, we will have good air defense for you.”

“Then all we must concern ourselves with is enemy U-boats in the straits,” said Tovey.

“Ah,” said Volsky, raising a finger. “I have one of those too! Don’t forget my submarine, *Kazan*. I do not think we will have any trouble from the enemy U-boats if Captain Gromyko is with us.”

“It will be dangerous,” Tovey warned.

“Yes,” said Volsky. “It will be a run of the gauntlet, but we will be dangerous too. Let the enemy beware! Together I think we can do this, Admiral. So let the race begin!”

Chapter 15

Admiral Somerville was a very busy man that morning. The news that the German *Hindenburg* battlegroup had left Toulon heading west was a shock, and the fact that it was already six hours old when he received it made that even worse. The threat the Germans posed from Gibraltar had been minimal since Britain lost her Rock. The airfield there was small, and was mainly being used for naval search planes, and the harbor itself had become a way station for U-boats. But otherwise, *Hindenburg* had made only a brief stop there before moving east into the Med. Now it seemed he would finally get his day of reckoning.

Weeks ago, when he got the news that Admiral Tovey was ordering both *Rodney* and *Nelson* round the cape to the Med, he had raised an eyebrow, somewhat perplexed. They're taking things from me that I don't even own! Yes, I was told I would have the services of *Rodney* and *Nelson* here for some time, but then *Rodney* was recalled home. Admiralty says they want her to sail for Boston, and get fitted out with all new boiler tubes! Can't that wait? I know the old girl has been limping, but we need every ship that can fire a gun now. I suppose Tovey hasn't got the word yet, but when he does, it will most likely mean I'm to send both *Nelson* and *Valiant* to Alexandria.

That was exactly what had happened, and now Force H had been reduced to the status of another cruiser command. The biggest ship at my disposal will be HMS *Glorious*, thought Somerville. That's fine and dandy with things as they were, but not with this news about *Hindenburg* coming for tea!

Somerville had been living hand to mouth ever since Force H had been evicted from its home at Gibraltar. His dwindling battlefleet had to make do with any port in a storm. They had posted three destroyers at Funchal Island, more in the Azores group, which was being built up to a naval refueling station with daily tanker calls.

Sitting astride the Mid-Atlantic Ridge, the Azores Island Group was comprised of nine volcanic islands, possessions of neutral Portugal. Churchill had wrangled for them diplomatically, producing an old "Treaty of Eternal Friendship" between Great Britain and Portugal, signed in 1373. With that foot in the door, he summarily kicked it open with Royal Marines after Germany took Gibraltar. It was one of three operations that saw the newly

formed Marine Commandos also land on the Cape Verde and Canary Islands, securing those vital outposts as wergild for the loss of the Rock.

From April to August, the 'Azores High' produced clear balmy weather over the islands, which made them ideal for the establishment of naval air bases for search operations until the weather turned foul in the autumn. It was these planes, and later airships to be sent by the Americans, that filled the "Black Hole" in the Atlantic, a place where the Allies once had no air cover, and U-boats ruled the sea. Now the odds in those waters were at least even. There were already a bases at Lajes and Achada on Terceira Island, and naval facilities at Horta and Ponta Delgada.

In the beginning the air bases were just bare grassy fields, where the locals called the planes "aerovacas," or "air cows," seeing them right alongside their own livestock grazing in the area. Ports were not good, but the British had concluded that the narrow channel, no more than three miles between two of the islands, Pico and Faial, would serve as a good anchorage for larger ships. It would only have to be patrolled on the north and south to keep a watchful eye out for enemy U-boats.

The Portuguese Prime Minister Salazar put in a vigorous protest, and refused to allow use of the best air base in the islands, all as a cover to try and persuade the Germans that he had not been complicit in allowing British forces to operate in the Azores. Hitler had been too busy with preparations for operation Barbarossa to bother with Portugal's islands, though plans had been drawn up to use troop carrying U-boats setting out from French Ports in a secret attack. After the successes at Malta and Cyprus, Student's vaunted 7th Flieger Division was also considered as an option, but it was still mostly on Cyprus, and the 22nd Luftland was in Syria.

Raeder had hoped all these islands, and the Cape Verde and Canary Island groups, would now be in German hands, but never proposed a viable plan to deliver them. Instead he had committed the only force he had outside of northern waters to the Mediterranean in a bid to defeat the Royal Navy in the Med, but the stunning setback posed by these new British naval rockets had prevented that. As for Hitler, he never saw the real virtue of the islands, thinking they might only be a good base for his fanciful plans for a long range "Amerika Bomber," the Me-264, though only one was ever built.

So the British had their refueling and patrol bases in the Azores, and in Las Palmas on the Grand Canary Island, they had another good port to stand a watch on the French forces remaining in Casablanca. While it was 480

nautical miles to the south, that was only a long day at sea cruising at 20 knots if battleships had to get to Casablanca. Airbases on Funchal Island further north would provide early warning of any renewed French activity, but, for the moment, all their big ships had been recalled to Toulon.

The news of *Hindenburg* heading west was the first real alarm since the *Normandie* had been recalled to the Med, and now Somerville was keen to respond—but with what? *Rodney* had been sent home, and *Nelson* and *Valiant* were off to the Eastern Med. So all he could do for the moment was get the carrier *Glorious* out to sea under Captain Wells. A good man, Wells, but he's nothing to face down the *Hindenburg*.

Home Fleet is sending me a pair of battlecruisers, he thought. Good fast scout ships in *Renown* and *Repulse*, the former with all new boilers after those bomb hits she took last June. Yet they are not much good in a fight with the *Hindenburg* either. I think the Germans have pulled a fast one on us here. Tovey doesn't think we can stop the Germans from transiting the Straits and getting out into the Atlantic, so he's sending me ships with good legs in the hope that we can at least find the enemy and shadow them. Holland has kept *Hood*, and the two *King George V* class ships under his hat, and I've no word on what the rest of the German fleet might be up to. So I go with what I have. I'll get *Glorious* out to sea and heading north towards Funchal Island. That will be a little over twelve hours sailing time at 20 knots, and from there they would be in a good position to maneuver against anything transiting the straits of Gibraltar.

It was an obvious reaction, the only thing Somerville could do, but he was running late. *Hindenburg* left Toulon at midnight, slipping away in the first minutes of the new month of May. With every ship in the task force capable of 30 knots or better, the Germans would reach Gibraltar by noon on the 2nd of May. Somerville got his warning two hours before sunrise on May 1st, and had Wells out to sea at dawn, a little after 08:00. That sun would not set until 21:30, so Wells and his pilots aboard the carrier *Glorious* would have good light and weather for air search operations.

But they were late.

Admiral Raeder had not been idle after issuing his orders to Lütjens. He immediately coordinated with Doenitz to get any U-boats available in the area into his operation. The U-boat commander was eager to cooperate. In recent months he had been enjoying a spate of good luck against the allied convoys. Otto Kretschmer on U-99 had logged five kills against Convoy HX-

112 for 34,505 tons on March 16. Faithful to his motto—one torpedo, one ship—he had used only five shots to get his kills. Unfortunately, his boat was lost the following day when the British destroyer HMS *Walker* caught it east of the Faeroes, and a depth charge attack put enough damage on the boat that it had to be scuttled. The British had Kretschmer now, one of 40 survivors in his 43 man crew that day. His capture had removed a real thorn in their side, for Otto was the most successful U-boat commander of them all, logging a total of 274,333 tons before the *Walker* got him.

As if in answer to his capture, George Schewe in U-105 got another five ships in Convoy SL-68 for 27,890 tons the following week. And most recently, Heinrich Willenbrock in U-96 sunk three fat ships in Convoy HX-121 for 27,606 tons on the 28th of April. So Doenitz was not in a selfish mood when Raeder came calling. He agreed to provide scouting reports on the movement of British ships from the Canaries, and Lütjens soon knew what he might expect.

* * *

“**Good** news, Admiral,” said Kapitan Adler when Lütjens appeared on the bridge. “The ship is running smoothly, in fine fighting trim, and Schultz tells me the engines are thrumming like tigers. We are as good as new.”

“Glad to hear that, though our speed seems slightly off.”

“It’s that new deck plating,” Adler explained. Between the armor and the hydraulics, we are a thousand tons heavier. Yet we can still run a whisker shy of 30 knots, and the best news is this. We are well ahead of the British. We reached Gibraltar in good time, just 24 hours.”

“And the British?”

“We received word from Kapitan Gunter Hessler on U-107. He was operating south of the Canary Islands, and was sent north to have a closer look at the British base there. A squadron got up steam and sailed north at dawn—three cruisers, a carrier and five destroyers.”

“What? No battleships?”

“None sighted. *Seekriegsleitung* Schniewind indicates they were sent south around the cape to reinforce the British at Alexandria.”

“Good news,” said Lütjens. “But that aircraft carrier will be a nuisance. Where is this squadron now?”

“A Condor out of Casablanca spotted it off Funchal Island two hours

ago. They are presently steaming northeast of Porto Santo.”

“Show me,” said Lütjens, walking to the plot table as Adler came quickly to his side.

“Here sir, Madiera Island. The British have a small base at Funchal which they use to keep an eye on Casablanca. Yet from that position they are at least 20 hours sailing time to the Western Approaches. That leaves us time to top off fuel here tonight and still get into the Atlantic without interference.”

“Refuel? This ship can sail all the way to Germany with the fuel we presently have.”

“Yes sir, and both *Kaiser* and *Goeben* have long legs as well. But *Bismarck*’s endurance is no more than 8800 nautical miles, and it will be 5400 if we take our normal return route west of Iceland. And that range is for a speed of 20 knots. We’ve been all ahead full for 24 hours, and so that will mean *Bismarck* has burned a good deal more. Yes, the ship could probably still reach Kiel, but at 20 knots, and with very little time for operations in the Atlantic.”

Lütjens thought. “How long for this refueling operation?”

“Four hours, six at the most.”

“And where could the British Force H be in six hours?”

Adler drew an arc with his compass anchored at the present position plotted for Force H. “That is their farthest on, twelve hours from now. If we complete our refueling in six hours, then run at 30 knots on this heading to the northwest, we would be here, south of Sageres Point, Portugal. From there we can run up past Lisbon before turning on a more westerly course into the Atlantic. They cannot catch us.”

“That assumes they move northeast from their present position. What if they sail due north?”

“They would be closer to a possible intercept plot, at least with their faster ships. Yet they would pose no threat to us.”

“What about that aircraft carrier?”

“What? Those old *Swordfish*? Don’t forget Marco Ritter is over there on the *Goeben*. Our Messerschmitts will make mincemeat of them. As for their faster cruisers, they would not dare attack us.”

“That will never be their intention, Adler. They will shadow us.”

“Yet we can prevent even that, Admiral. Between the *Goeben* and the speed we have with the *Kaiser Wilhelm*, we can chase those cruisers off

without much trouble.”

The *Kaiser* was one of Germany’s new Plan Z ships, a fast, well armed *Panzerschiffe* that could run at 36 knots and fight with six fifteen inch guns. It was a match for a British battlecruiser, and would pose a dire threat to British heavy cruisers, as many had a top speed of just 32 knots. In effect, *Kaiser* could not only catch them, it could also kill them, and the normal British plan of shadowing a fast capital ship with cruisers could be easily frustrated, or prevented altogether.

Lütjens listened to his Kapitan, thinking Adler had given the matter a good deal of thought. He is clever, this one, he thought. He is considering logistics, speed, and all our assets in hand, not just his own ship. Yes, this is a different kind of operation, not just a pair of fast raiders, as in the early runs by *Scharnhorst* and *Gneisenau*. Now we have a real task force here, with each ship contributing some unique asset to the overall mission. I have the *Goeben*, a fast light carrier with a little sting, some air defense, and enhanced air search capability for my battlegroup. *Kaiser* is a marvelous scout ship in the van, or a perfect sheep dog if posted as a rear guard against nosy British cruisers. And *Hindenburg* can face any ship the British have with every prospect for victory... unless we run into another ship armed with those naval rockets.

How pervasive are they? We took hits in the Norwegian Sea, and now in the Med. In both cases the only ship that was involved in each action was their fleet flagship, HMS *Invincible*. Hoffman was trying to persuade us that there was another ship up north, a fast battlecruiser, but we have not heard anything of it since that big engagement last June, and in every case where Raeder probed British defenses in the Iceland gaps, we encountered no naval rockets. Yet *Invincible* comes to the Med, and lo and behold, these naval rockets blacken my ships before I could even close with my enemy. So it is my belief that *Invincible* carries these rockets, and no other ship. And the British Flagship is far behind me now, and of no concern.

One day there may be a day of reckoning with that ship, and what a battle it might be. But not today... Today we have the wide Atlantic before us, fat with convoys, and the British now feel the real sting in the loss of both Gibraltar and Malta. They may still hold out in the Eastern Mediterranean, but the west is ours, and *Invincible* will be three weeks around the cape now.”

He smiled. “Adler, you will make a good fleet Admiral one day. Very well, begin your refueling operation, but see if you can accomplish it in four

hours. I want to leave Gibraltar well before dawn.”

“A wise precaution,” Adler agreed. “I will see that the orders are transmitted at once.”

“Do so, and then we must discuss how we coordinate our movements with other elements of the navy, as well as our undersea boats. Don’t forget, the British still have good ships up north in their Home Fleet. We may have left their flagship in our wake, but now that they know we are heading into the Atlantic, they will make every effort to stop us once we get there.”

“I have news on that, sir. We have intercepted their fleet communications ordering the battlecruisers *Renown* and *Repulse* south to reinforce Force H.”

“Battlecruisers? No fast battleships?”

“Not in the signals we were able to decode.”

“Most interesting. See what they have done with this, Adler? The Royal Navy is a fleet, perhaps the most experienced and professional naval force in the world. No, I am not ashamed to say that, nor do I take anything away from our own fleet in doing so, yet you must give these men, and the ships they command at sea, the respect they are due. Those two battlecruisers make a little difference in our thinking, do they not? They run at 32 knots and have six 15-inch guns each. One might be a match for our *Kaiser Wilhelm*, and two would certainly rule the day in such an engagement. Yes, we can chase off their cruiser shadow, but they are pushing more chips onto the table, and upping the ante. Now we may be facing a shadowing force composed of these two battlecruisers.”

“Perhaps,” said Adler. “I remind you that the man who put a bomb into the HMS *Renown*, and laid up that ship in dry dock for the last ten months, is right here with us aboard the *Goeben*—One of Marco Ritter’s protégés, Hans Rudel. Perhaps he can repeat his performance, and there we have an ace to trump this battlecruiser shadow.”

“Touché,” said Lütjens. “Perhaps you are correct, Kapitan, but I have studied the Royal Navy for quite some time, and I have a gut feeling that they will find some way to engage us before we find their convoys. A day of reckoning is at hand.”

“And I welcome it, sir.” Adler had a gleam in his eye now. “Because I won’t leave all the fighting to this young *Stuka* pilot. No, I plan on seeing what the British battlecruisers think they might do when *Hindenburg* darkens their horizon, then we will see what this day of reckoning holds. Because

when this ship engages the enemy, the Lord Almighty will come with thunder and earthquake and great noise, with windstorm and tempest and flames of a devouring fire.”

Lütjens smiled. “So you are a poet as well, Kapitan Adler?”

“No sir, just a good Christian soul. That is Isaiah, Chapter 29, Verse 6.”

Part VI

The Gathering Storm

“They sicken of the calm who know the storm.”

— D. Parker

Chapter 16

Far to the east, Popski came in with a message that was a matter of some concern. Fedorov had been huddling with Troyak, trying to determine if they could hold on at Raqqah until the British got there, or if he was simply risking the lives of his men, and the Argonauts as well. It was clear to him that, in spite of the edge they had with their modern weaponry, they would soon be badly outnumbered.

The German 7th Machinegun Battalion had already appeared from the west, coming down the long road back to Aleppo. Another formation had landed by air, in spite of the mauling given them by the X-3 helicopters. Then the first elements of the retreating German 65th Luftland Air Landing Regiment began to appear on the road leading south to Dier ez Zour.

The fighting was hot near the bridge over the Euphrates. There elements of the German 7th Machinegun Battalion had been trying to suppress the defense on the northern bank by putting down a withering fire from their MG-32s. But the Argonauts had good positions, and whenever the enemy mounted a rush at the far end of the bridge, they were met by equal fire from their assault rifles. At one point, the Germans moved up a truck, trying to advance behind it for cover, but the hand held AT weapons made an end of that enterprise.

Earlier that day, Troyak had ten marines in the town itself, where they encountered German paratroopers from Ramcke's battalion trying to infiltrate. They joined with fire teams from the Argonauts, and a brisk firefight ensued. The German troopers were good. They knew how to lay down covering fire, slowly advancing to secure a building, and then using it as a base of fire to support further movement. They were testing the defense, trying to gauge just what they were up against, and concluded this had to be an elite force, all armed with SMGs, and with some amazing hand held weapons that were very powerful.

Troyak's Marines held, then counterattacked, and methodically drove the Germans from the strongpoint they had seized. Zykov would again have reason to boast how good his weapon was when he had to clear a room.

Fedorov was nonetheless worried about the situation. There were only ten men in the town now, and Troyak had told him they could not cover that

zone with the forces they had.

“What do you think, Sergeant? Can we hold here?”

“We’ve beaten them off for now,” said Troyak. “Our firepower is just too good when well concentrated, but we’re no more than 50 men. Just putting five men on each of those two hills there overlooking the airfield takes half my Marines, and that is not an adequate defense, even with the firepower we have. As for the town itself, it’s too porous. We stopped them today, but they’ll be able to infiltrate there tonight. Our night vision goggles will surprise them, but they have at least a battalion on that flank now. It will be hard to stop. We just don’t have enough men to cover that town, hold those bridges, and this airfield as well. Pick one place to hold, and I’d give us better odds, but I don’t see what good it will do the British for us to be holding this airfield when they get here.”

“What about the bridges? Can we hold those if we concentrate our entire force?”

“Possibly, but the ground on the northern end is quite exposed. The enemy will have mortars, and once they get into that town they can fire from concealed positions that won’t be easy to hit with the helicopters. If they know what they are doing, they could hurt us here.”

“Oh, they know what they’re doing alright,” said Popski. He had just come in from the KA-40, overhearing the end of Fedorov’s conference as he arrived. “But I’m afraid all this talk is academic now.”

“What do you mean?” Fedorov could see he had something more to say.

“We’ve just got word from your ship. It comes right from that fleet Admiral of yours. We’re to pull out and return at once.”

“Pull out? Did Volsky say anything more?”

“All I got was the order to return. You can get on the radio and confirm if you wish. Argonauts say they got the same treatment. They’re to get back to their own ship as soon as possible.”

“Something must be up at sea,” said Fedorov, thinking.

“You’ve heard Rommel’s on the move again?” There was a glint in Popski’s eye. “That might have something to do with it.”

“Well. That settles it then,” said Fedorov. In one sense he felt relieved. The burden of being responsible for the lives of the men here was no longer on his shoulders. All he had to do was get them safely back to *Kirov*.

“Sergeant, get the men to the airfield, and be certain nothing is left behind this time. I want an accounting of every shoelace. We’re going home.

If we have the fuel, I just may make one more landing along the way. The rail line south from Aleppo could use another demolition. That might keep it closed a couple more weeks.”

The men moved out, and he found himself wondering what this summary recall was all about. Rommel was moving again, and Kinlan’s force had mostly been in Syria. That could mean there’s trouble in Libya, and that the fleet has to take action to intervene. I’m Captain of the battlecruiser *Kirov*. Volsky was gracious in letting me run amok out here for so long.

He looked about him, noting the hills he would not see his men fight for, the forsaken airstrip, the gleam of the Euphrates to the south. This desert terrain beguiles a man in time, he thought. It’s a sea of sand, and I’ve been maneuvering out here like a sea Captain, but now it’s time I got back to my real duties on the ship. Something tells me there’s more to worry about than holding these bridges.

He was correct.

* * *

On the first of May, even as Rommel kicked off his drive east from Mersa Brega, Fedorov had arrived back aboard *Kirov*, and was welcomed onto the bridge.

“Good to see you again,” said Admiral Volsky. “Now that our Captain Navigator is back, the ship can actually do something more than steam in circles off Alexandria.”

“I didn’t expect to find you so far east,” said Fedorov.

“That is because we have business that we must now discuss.” Volsky briefed Fedorov on what they were going to attempt, which was a matter of some concern.

“Run the Straits of Gibraltar? That is going to be very dangerous, sir. We could be facing a great deal of enemy air power.”

“We understand that, but the German battlefleet has left Toulon and is already heading for Gibraltar. Admiral Tovey believes he has no choice but to attempt this. I have been trying to dig out information from your library, Fedorov, but perhaps you can make my task a little easier. What will we be facing?”

“Well sir, the enemy will certainly have planes here in their bases along the Libyan coast, and at Malta. That will be the first test. After that, we must

run the Sicilian narrows, with a lot of Italian air power on Sicily, and the German bases around Tripoli. Getting around that will be difficult enough, and if we do attempt it, the enemy will certainly have an opportunity to sortie against us from their bases in Italy and Toulon. Once we get past the southern cape of Sardinia, I don't think the Vichy French will bother us, but as we approach Gibraltar, the Germans could have both air strikes and U-Boat screens there"

"Just as I assumed. It's the air power that worries me, which is why *Argos Fire* is coming along with us. Together we have a combined total of 232 surface to air missiles, counting the 50 missiles we still have on the short range Kashtan systems. I am hoping that will be enough."

Fedorov nodded, feeling a little better about their prospects. "We may also have an advantage of surprise, if we move quickly. They won't expect us to move west like this. But the submarines are a matter of some concern to me."

"Don't worry about them, Gromyko will be right out in front of us in *Kazan*."

"I see... Well then, I think we have a good chance, sir. It will all depend on how many planes the enemy has to throw at us, and how determined they are to stop us."

"With any luck they will find our SAM defense a formidable deterrent," said Volsky. "They gave up trying to mount air strikes against Alexandria and Suez weeks ago. But tell me—what did you accomplish in your maneuvers?"

"Not much, sir. We served as an advance scouting and holding unit for the British, but they could not take Palmyra. Our move to Raqqa interfered with the German withdrawal there, but little else. Frankly, our raids on the rail lines around Aleppo were probably the most significant thing we did. It slowed down the movement of German troops and supplies into Syria."

"Yes," said Volsky. "I am told that situation has reached a stalemate around Rayak. The British used Brigadier Kinlan's troops there, but now they are moving them back to face Rommel. That force has been truly decisive, has it not?"

"At least here in this theatre. It can trump anything the Germans are likely to commit here, and tip the scales just enough that the British will likely gain the upper hand in time."

"It looks like Rommel is going for Tobruk this time."

“Of course, sir. He needs that port to secure his lines of supply, and to deny the same to the British. It is the key to all these operations.”

“It is still amazing to me that unit is even here. How did it get here, Fedorov? You tried to work this out with Director Kamenski before.”

“It’s still quite a mystery. Kinlan tells me they were on station at the Sultan Apache oil facilities, and they were targeted by an ICBM.”

“Most likely one of ours,” said Volsky sullenly. “Luckily their SAM defense was enough to save them.”

“Yes, but a warhead did detonate, and we know that can create conditions where time displacement is possible.”

“But we determined it was Rod-25 that was responsible for our own movement,” said Volsky, “not just that accident aboard *Orel*, god rest the souls of every man on that boat.”

“It may have been that the exotic effects of the nuclear detonation was catalyzing Rod-25,” said Fedorov.

“Awakening the dragon?”

“Possibly, sir. Then, once activated, the control rod was sufficient to move the ship on its own.”

“But this General Kinlan had no such control rod at his disposal, so this is what leads you to suspect that object Orlov found. Yes?”

“True sir.”

Fedorov remembered those first, harried moments when he had tried to comprehend what had happened, and the one odd thing in the mix he had eventually focused his thinking on—that strange object Orlov had found in the Tunguska River Valley—the Devil’s Teardrop. *A nuclear detonation... a Tunguska fragment... a hole in time.* It was the only possible explanation. That’s how Rod 25 must be working, he concluded. It contained exotic residual material from the Tunguska event... Was this Teardrop another such fragment?

He recalled Orlov’s haunting words, describing the moment and the place where he had found the object. “*The Sergeant calls it the Devil’s Teardrop. Good name for it. There was something very strange about that place—very bad.*” I’ve read stories like that about Siberia all my life, thought Fedorov, as every young boy in Russia eventually did. It was our “Devil’s Triangle,” one of those unexplained mysteries, wrapped up in all the myth and lore from the taiga and tundra. *Tunguska...* I was right there, on the very morning that object struck in Siberia.

He still shuddered to think of that, realizing that he had seen that second sunrise, the evil glow in the sky, with his own eyes. And he had heard the dull rumble that had haunted all those stories of his youth, echoing in the confined space of that stairwell at Ilanskiy.

“We gave that thing to Chief Dobrynin,” he said. “Has he discovered anything more?”

“Go and see him about it. Frankly, the whole matter slipped my mind. I’ve been in one conference after another with Admiral Tovey and Wavell. Then we came to this decision to head west.”

“I understand, sir....”

“But you are not quite comfortable with that, yes Fedorov? Something tells me it is not only the threat of enemy planes and submarines that is bothering you now.”

“Well I was just thinking that the war is about to take a very serious evolution soon sir—Operation Barbarossa.”

“Yes, the invasion of Kirov’s Soviet Russia. Yet how can we prevent that?”

“Impossible sir. Oh, we do have means at our disposal, but I don’t think you would wish to use our special warheads.”

“Believe me,” said Volsky, “I have given that a good deal of thought. In fact I was just discussing it with Admiral Tovey.”

“You told him about our nuclear weapons?”

“Not quite, but I hinted that I had more in my arsenal than he has seen. Then a very odd thing happened. It was as if he knew what I was talking about. He had a strange look on his face, almost as if he was seeing things that were not there, ghosts.”

“Admiral Tovey has been another little mystery in these encounters,” said Fedorov. “That file box he produced was quite a shock, and he seems to be haunted by memories from those earlier encounters we had with him, though I cannot see how that is possible.”

“Those photographs and reports he handed us were the real shock,” said Volsky. “They were hard evidence of our appearance in that other timeframe. But how could they be here, Fedorov, in this time?”

“We never did reason that out. Perhaps Director Kamenski could help us, but the only conclusion I came to is that they were brought here.”

“Brought here? By who?”

“That is the mystery, sir.”

“Well it is one that needs solving, Fedorov. And there is another wrinkle in all of this that I still do not quite understand—the *Argos Fire*! How did that ship get here. It has no Rod 25, and I do not think that Devil’s Teardrop was aboard the ship either. Yet it is there, right off our starboard quarter. For that I am grateful now, but the presence of that ship remains a stubborn mystery.”

“Miss Fairchild never really explained that during the meeting at Alexandria. I assumed it was a result of a nuclear detonation—mere happenstance.”

“Yes, but why only that one ship, Fedorov? If this is true, and *Argos Fire* was sent here by the shock of a detonation, why no other ships? There must have been missiles flying everywhere.”

“We need to discover that, sir. Perhaps we should convene a meeting here, and discuss this, as we plan the route ahead.”

“I will arrange it,” said Volsky. “In the meantime, kindly go and see if Dobrynin knows anything more about that Devil’s Teardrop.”

Fedorov saluted, eager to get to the bottom of things.

“And Fedorov,” said Volsky.

“Sir?”

“Welcome back!”

Chapter 17

Chief Dobrynin had been a very busy man of late, but he had given the mystery of the Devil's Teardrop as much time as he could.

"I've determined one thing right off," he said. "That object must be kept well away from the ship's reactors. Every time I got near the main engineering plant with it, we started to go into a flux event. I had the thing in my pocket when one started, and when I rushed to the engineering supply to fetch my system reports, things settled down, until I got back there, when they started all over again. On a hunch I just backed away—slipped right out through the hatch, and the moment I got well outside the armored shell, things settled down again. So I put two and two together, remembering the other times that had happened. Orlov was here on the first incident, and he tells me he had that thing in his pocket."

"And I had it the next time it happened!" Fedorov said excitedly.

"Correct. So I took the thing down to an engineering lab and gave it a good inspection. I was looking to determine its makeup, but found a little something more."

"You told Volsky about this?"

"Not yet. The ship has been in combat, running at high speed, and now we have this mission west to Gibraltar and the engines need to be in top condition. So I've been too busy with things, but now that you are here—listen to this! I used a phase-measuring acoustic microscope, and also an electron microscope. This thing is not a natural element, not simply a chunk of rock that has been melted by heat. It was engineered."

"Engineered? You are certain of this?"

"I could go in to technical details, but you'd have a hard time following me. But yes, I'm certain. It was once an almost perfect sphere, at least this is what I believe now. I thought it might be some kind of bearing, which is why I used that equipment to have a closer look. We often inspect bearings to check for surface wear, hardness measurements, cracks and depressions, but the metal is almost flawless."

"Well, what is it, Chief? Have you determined that?"

"I'm not quite sure, but I suspect it is loaded with exotic materials beneath that smooth exterior. I don't have the equipment aboard ship to really

do the job right, but everything about that object tells me that it was engineered. It's an alloy. I'm convinced of that. We use similar superalloys in our own high performance engines, and even here in the ship's reactors. They have an austenitic face-centered cubic crystal structure, and so does this thing, but its unlike any I have scanned before—very advanced metallurgy. I'd say it was engineered using equipment designed for nano-metrology."

"I see..." Fedorov was quite surprised to hear this, but it only deepened the mystery surrounding this object. There it was, just gleaming in that open clearing of the taiga, very near that other oddity, the thing Troyak described as a cauldron. They had been shrouded in mystery on the taiga, spoken of in ancient lore, where they were thought to be the haunts of demons. Anyone who found one was befallen by strange ailments, vision problems, dizziness, fainting, loss of balance, unaccountable chills... and fear. Orlov had tried to describe it to him, how unnerved he had become...

"In fact, it scared the crap out of me, and I'm not ashamed to admit that. It was as if... well I could feel something was terrible there, a real feeling of doom. Your senses were keened up like a grizzly bear was on your trail, but it was deathly quiet. I never felt anything quite like it. All I could think of was getting the hell away from that place."

"Would this be anything we might have made, in our time?"

"I suppose the technology is within our grasp," said Dobrynin, "but it would take some very sophisticated work to create an alloy like this. The surface of that thing was remarkably smooth. Yet I can't imagine what it would be doing here, in this time."

"Thank you, Chief. Where is the object?"

"Locked away in a rad-safe container, and as far from the reactors as I could get it."

Fedorov thought about this, though he could not come to any sure conclusions. Yet he kept that object locked away in the back of his own mind, wondering what it might do if allowed to really interact with the function of the ship's reactors for any length of time.

A manufactured object, he thought. So my initial theory that this was a part of the comet or meteor that struck at Tunguska is somewhat shaky now.... Unless it *wasn't* a comet... He did not know where that line of thinking could lead him, but the presence of this object here in 1941 was most disturbing. If it was machined, an alloy as Dobrynin believes, then how did it get here? Who brought it here? What was its real purpose?

He had heard all the other stories about Tunguska as well, that it wasn't a comet, but something much more. The UFO crowd had speculated about it, filling the empty space at the heart of that mystery with their own colorful ideas. In 1946, Soviet Engineer Alexander Kazantsev wrote a story called "A Visitor From Outer Space," where he theorized that the Tunguska event was actually the explosion of a spaceship from Mars. Many more serious expeditions had been also mounted in the wake of Kulik's early explorations. In 2009, a Russian scientist named Yuri Lavbin claimed he had found unusual quartz crystals at the site of the event, crystals with strange markings on them. He also claimed to have found "ferrum silicate," something he said could only be produced in space, though no evidence was forthcoming.

It was all speculation, fantasy, storytelling, just like those old legends reputed the strange metal cauldrons to be the homes of demons on the taiga. We've only just substituted UFOs for the demons, thought Fedorov, but this object came from somewhere, did it not?

I may not know what the damn thing is, but I know what it might be able to do—what it may have already done in bringing Kinlan's Brigade here. That thing affects the stable flow of time, particularly if catalyzed by a nuclear environment. It may be dangerous to have it anywhere near the ship, but they had experienced no ill effects as long as it was safely away from the reactors.

A thought occurred to him now, emerging from a worry he had nursed for some time. It was May 1941. In less than 90 days they would have to face a most uncomfortable moment, the instant *Kirov* first breached time and appeared on July 28, 1941—Paradox Hour. That was what he called it in his inner thoughts now. It was that impossible moment when the ship, and everyone on it, might face utter annihilation if they still remained here.

What was going to happen? Was this the world *Kirov* first shifted to, or was it some other universe? There were no altered states when they first shifted back. The Soviet union was intact, as was the history itself, before we started changing everything. I was able to call events, chapter and verse, but I could not presume to do that now.

But what if this is the world we first appeared in, only one we have warped and changed with all our meddling? We would have to be somewhere else when that moment arrives, and it must arrive, yes? *Kirov* must shift back for us to even be where we are at this moment. But can there be two Fedorov's in the same moment—one on this ship and another arriving here

on the 28th of July? We have always thought that would be impossible.

We must face this soon. That meeting with Elena Fairchild and Director Kamenski is a step in the right direction. If nothing else it may at least answer a few questions. Let's see what we can determine.

* * *

To cover their movement west with a plausible operation, Tovey had a signal leaked in an old code that had been compromised some time ago. It conveyed his intention to conduct bombardment raids on both Benghazi and Tripoli in an effort to interdict enemy supplies. The risk was that the Germans would know they were coming, and might further reinforce their airfields on Malta and at Tripoli. That was the first line of enemy air defense they would have to penetrate, but as it happened, they found enemy air operations scattered.

At noon on the 2nd of May, they set their course west at 25 knots, thankful for some air cover off Crete for a time, until they had reached a point due north of Benghazi. At this time Rommel's offensive was only in its second day, and the Germans had not seized airfields in the Jebel country from Al Bayda to Derna. Planes on both sides were skirmishing, and many of the *Stuka* Squadrons Goering had promised Rommel were still in Italy and Sicily, feverishly making preparations to transfer to airfields Rommel expected he would control in two or three days time. The Germans only real reaction to the move was to issue a warning to a convoy bound for Tripoli, place a single *Stuka* Squadron there on alert, and move two U-boats .

As for Malta, it was presently being garrisoned by the Italian Folgore Parachute Brigade, and its air squadrons were mostly Italian fighters, there to serve as a defense against British bombers. After a thirty hour run west, the flotilla was between Tripoli and Malta, and when *Kirov* and *Argos Fire* detected an incoming contact, an enemy recon plane.

"We could easily shoot that down," Rodenko suggested, and poke out their eyes before they see us." In Fedorov's absence he had been serving as acting Captain, and was now back in his role as *Starpom*.

"Perhaps a little ruse might serve us better," said Fedorov. Let us allow them to approach within sighting distance, adjusting our heading to a course aimed right at Tripoli just before they get into visual range. That should be very near dusk."

“Ah,” said Volsky. “You want to reinforce Admiral Tovey’s cover story.”

“Of course, sir. It will be a new moon tonight, very dark, with a bare sliver of a crescent just rising about 50 minutes after midnight. If they see us making for Tripoli just after sunset, they will assume we have plans to make a run at them under cover of darkness. That plane will not have much time to shadow us, particularly after dark. Then we turn for the Sicilian narrows and make our run there. If we increase to 30 knots, we could be between Tunis and Trapani on Sicily just before sunrise on May 3rd.”

“A very good plan, Fedorov,” said Volsky. “I will have Mister Nikolin signal our intentions to Admiral Tovey.”

The ruse worked. The Germans had a Dornier-17 take a look at them, discouraged from getting too close by some sharp anti-aircraft fire by HMS *Invincible*. As the light faded, it turned southwest for Tripoli, and when Rodenko reported it safely out of visual range, the flotilla changed heading and slipped away at high speed.

The following morning the Germans would have two squadrons of JU-87s at Tripoli, both preparing for transfer to bases around Benghazi. The planes had just arrived from Italy the previous week, and the ground crews had been busy repainting them. They shed the normal European of dark green *Schwartzgrün*, and a lighter underbelly of *Hellblau* blue, for a new paint scheme that was more suited to the desert climes. Now they were dressed out in *Sandgelb*, a sand-yellow paint that was developed just for this theater. One pilot, Leutnant Hubert Pölz, was seeing his own plane adorned with an elaborate snake from tail to engine.

“Aren’t we going to get up after those British ships?” a service mechanic asked Pölz.

“What ships? They sent out patrols this morning looking for them, and nothing was found.”

“But I heard an Italian plane off Pantelleria spotted them again.”

“Pantelleria? That is 400 kilometers north of us. If they spotted them there than they must have turned last night after that sighting we made.”

“We can still get them. I can mount extra fuel pods for you.”

“What? And ruin my beautiful snake? The paint hasn’t even dried. No, that is too far for us to try and mount a hasty search and strike mission. We’ll stick to our orders and fly to Benghazi this afternoon.”

It was a fateful decision, for if Pölz and his squadron had gone north

after the British ships, it was very likely that he would not come back. As it was, he had a rendezvous with destiny at some other place, and he and his plane, with its elaborate decoration, were going to have a most interesting encounter in the deserts south of Tobruk.

* * *

So it was that *Kirov* sailed northwest, passing Pantelleria in the early hours of May 3rd as Fedorov had planned, and getting into a good position to run the Sicilian Narrows. In 1942, and in the history they had once lived through, the place had been a choke point for British convoys attempting to reach Malta. Operation Pedestal, the ill fated effort to resupply Malta, was one of many that would be pushed through those dangerous waters. At that time the Germans and Italians had expected the British coming east from Gibraltar, but this time the surprise achieved by Fedorov's maneuver after dusk left them flat footed.

They were spotted by a fighter patrol off Pantelleria, and word was sent to Tunis and Bizerte, as well as Toulon. There the French took the information in hand, and seemed in no great hurry to act on it. They had been none too happy with the German decision to withdraw *Hindenburg* from the Mediterranean. When the news finally reached the desk of Admiral Gensoul, he gave the message a well deserved sneer.

"British ships were spotted northwest of Pantelleria... What could they be doing there? Chasing the Germans?"

"Shall I order the fleet to get up steam for action, sir?"

Gensoul looked over the starchy Captain, a new adjutant to his staff that week. "How many ships were spotted?"

"Three, sir—a battleship, battlecruiser and a heavy cruiser. We can have *Normandie* and *Dunkerque* ready for operations in a few hours."

"Very odd," said Gensoul. "The British have only just moved two battleships around the cape to Alexandria. Now they send these ships west?"

"They must be chasing the Germans, sir."

"Well have we received any request from the Germans to initiate operations?"

"None sir."

"Correct. That is because they were thinking to slip out the back door and leave this business in the Med to us now. Well good riddance! They

weren't much help here in the first place, and their troops in Syria haven't been able to stop the British there either. So let them go. Our ships are still making repairs, and I have no intention of going into action with the fleet flagship on a moment's notice like this. Besides, the weather is bad. There's a storm building. Get word to Algiers and Casablanca as a precaution, but we will not go running off after these ships today. Let the Germans at Gibraltar worry about them."

Chapter 18

It was called Baba Gurgur, the "Father of Fires," the place where a low smoldering fire had been burning in a small crater for centuries. Local lore had it that the shepherds and farmers near Kirkuk would often come there to warm themselves on the cold desert nights, and pregnant women would make offerings there in the hopes of giving birth to a boy. Yet in 1927, when a gaggle of geologists were summoned from all over the world, it became one of the first major gushers in the region when drilled, emitting a tall geyser of black oil over 140 feet high that drenched the derrick and surrounding area in an evil black rain. And it was also the scene of one of many environmental scares that the oil industry would cause, when the ceaseless flow threatened to inundate a nearby wadi that was a major watercourse in the wet season, and blacken the fields of farmers for miles.

While one of the first disastrous side effects of the emerging petroleum industry, it would surely not be the last. From the Exxon-Valdez tanker spill in 1985, to the massive deliberate disaster in Kuwait when the retreating Iraqi Army spilled 240 million gallons of crude into the Persian Gulf, oil had been a primary requirement for world powers, the essential resource of modern civilization, and both an object and a weapon of war. In 2010, British Petroleum would struggle for weeks to cap the raging Deepwater Horizon well beneath the Gulf of Mexico, and later the massive offshore platform *Thunderhorse* would be smitten by the rage of a hurricane and then deliberately destroyed, sent to its demise by a Russian torpedo. In WWII, the oil wars were only just beginning...

In 1927, Baba Gurgur was the scene of a desperate ten day effort to cap that first gushing well. The local Jubur tribesmen came to the site from miles away, joining the work crews in the effort to get close enough to the gusher to try and cap it. Their near naked bodies were blackened with the oil, and many succumbed to low lying pockets of blue mist that was actually lethal gas. In the end a large aircraft engine was deployed to try and clear the black rain from one segment of the wellhead to allow the crews to shut it down. Dikes were constructed in the wadi to trap the flowing oil and prevent it from moving farther down to contaminate the nearby rivers. The well was capped after gushing over 95,000 barrels per day, disaster was averted, and the geologists had tamed the demon that would both feed and haunt an energy

hungry world for the next hundred years, the “Age of Oil.”

By 1941, Baba Gurgur was considered the single largest reserve of oil on the planet, as the mighty Ghawar fields of Saudi Arabia would not be discovered until 1948. Ivan Volkov would claim he sat on vast resources in the Kashagan fields of the north Caspian Sea, but none of that had been developed as yet. The British, however, were quick to the tap, and soon pipelines extended from oil fields northwest of Kirkuk, through Iraq to Haditha, where the lines split, one transiting northern Syria to Tripoli, and a second flowing through the Trans Jordan to Haifa in Palestine. They were already considered trophies of war for whoever could secure and control them in the campaign underway, but Hitler would soon come to turn his greedy eye on the source itself, the Father of Fires, Baba Gurgur.

The German need for oil was most apparent to the planners at OKW, where Keitel, Halder and Jodl all met to discuss what might soon become a very grave situation.

“We had 15 million barrels of oil stockpiled before the outbreak of the war,” said Halder, looking at the carefully drawn numbers on his charts. “Now, with the consumption needed to launch Operation Barbarossa, we are likely to run out by late August, and that would be a most inopportune time. This operation is unprecedented in all of human history. Look at these numbers! We must move 91,000 tons of ammunition, 600,000 trucks, 750,000 horses, and half a million tons of fuel. That is 40% of all the oil stocks we presently have, and all for the opening two months of Barbarossa! Hitler had it right. When this attack commences, the world will hold its breath. On top of all this, we have this nonsense going on in Syria.”

“What about all those pipelines through that region,” said Jodl, who had been the able Chief of Staff at OKW throughout the campaigns in Denmark and Norway. “You want more oil, well there it is.”

“They run to Tripoli in Lebanon,” Halder said quickly, “which does us no good if we hope to get the oil anywhere by sea. Don’t forget the Royal Navy remains unbroken, and Raeder’s incompetence is to blame.”

“You are too hard on the man,” said Keitel. “These new naval rockets the British have developed are quite formidable. They have unhinged all his operations, and the damage to the ships is plain to see.”

“Thank god for the Führer’s order to stop his senseless Plan Z program and concentrate on U-boats,” said Halder acidly. “Doenitz is the man to rely on, not Raeder.”

“Something tells me we will need them both,” said Jodl. “The only reason the British don’t have even more power in the Mediterranean is because of the threat posed by our own naval forces.”

“Our battleships did little good there,” said Halder. “Not even the *Hindenburg*, the biggest oil hog in the fleet.”

“Don’t let the Führer hear you say such things,” Keitel admonished, stepping in to the light overhanging the map table.

“He has already said that himself! Why else are we planning everything around the need to secure more resources, more oil?”

“In that you are correct, Halder. But we will have a quick victory against Russia, just as we defeated the British and French last year. You will see.”

“Go on hoping, Keitel, it’s the doing that matters. So what do we have here with this latest wrinkle in the Führer’s mind?” Halder was referring to the letter he had received that morning, directing him to see to the possibility of securing Mosul and Kirkuk in Northern Iraq as part of the Syrian campaign.

“The Führer has not been fully briefed,” he continued. “Doesn’t he know that things did not go as planned in Syria? These figures on losses to 9th Panzer Division were quite alarming. We were barely able to get the division there over that antiquated Turkish rail system, and committing a unit like the SS Motorized Division behind it was a waste. Kleist was not happy about it.”

“Manstein settled him down. Remember, the Führer has ordered the entire 56th Panzer Korps to Army Group South, and all the SS units.”

“Remember? Only too well,” Halder steamed. “So what did this little foray into Syria get us? 9th Panzer Division is practically wrecked! It got the same medicine the British spoon fed Rommel. Now he’s on the offensive again, and let us see how things go in Libya. This time he should have no excuses. Paulus has been pampering him like a first born son! He has all the fuel he could possibly need.”

Keitel shook his head. “It may not be a question of supplies this time. I read the reports Paulus submitted. Yes, Rommel is well provisioned. But what about that new enemy armor? That is what caused all the trouble in Syria. This new heavy armor has rendered our blitzkrieg tactics obsolete overnight. It trumps every tank we have.”

“Yes? Well if Rommel cannot best a few British divisions in North Africa, then what happens when the Russians get such tanks?”

“That is simple,” said Keitel quickly. “We must get them as well. I have seen the new designs—the big cats—that is what they are calling them now. We have several on the drawing boards, the Panther, Tiger and Lion.”

“They will not do us much good on the drawing boards,” said Halder. “And from all accounts this new British tank would beat them all.”

“Just like the deployment of those naval rockets that have been crippling Raeder’s ships,” said Jodl. “Something is fishy about it. The Abwehr knew nothing whatsoever about these British weapons programs, and to this day, Canaris claims he can produce no evidence that any such programs are in active development in England. His men have tried to sniff out the production site, but to no avail.”

Keitel laughed at this. “Canaris couldn’t tell you what day of the week Christmas will fall on this year! The man is a bumbling fool. I will say one thing about these weapons, they have channeled a lot of personnel and resources into our own technology projects. The Army Research Center at Penemunde already has a working prototype for a missile.” His lowered voice carried the note of warning, as this was highly classified material. “The code name is ‘Cherry Stone.’ Have you heard about it?”

“Good for them,” said Halder, deftly avoiding that last question. “Talk to me about it when I can actually use the damn thing. Until then, it is nothing more than another research project and, as we have seen, they come and go, Keitel. Hitler just cancelled the *Oldenburg*! Yes, that was a smart decision this time, but that man can change his mind on a moment’s notice, and undo thousands of man hours work with a single sentence. Look what happened to Operation Merkur!”

“Yet the attack on Cyprus was entirely successful,” said Keitel.

“Ah,” Halder was unrelenting, holding up a finger in protest. “Yes, now we have Student’s 7th Flieger Division on Cyprus, where the British had no significant air bases, and while they still sit on Crete. Mark my words, one day they will get bombers on Crete, and the Führer won’t like it. In the meantime, the entire 22nd Air Landing Division is scattered all over Syria, and we still have troops strung out on that antiquated railroad system in Turkey. This agreement allowing us right of transit has given us nothing, really—nothing more than a means of diverting much needed military resources to a fruitless campaign in Syria. And now we are to take Mosul and Kirkuk?” He shook his head, clearly unhappy. “I have come to the opinion that all these deployments to North Africa and Syria are reckless and unwise.

We could make much better use of those troops when Barbarossa begins—if we have the oil to sustain operations there.”

Halder pushed the sheaf of documents across the table now, as the numbers would argue as eloquently as he could. “Look at these figures! The Army will need 7.25 million barrels of oil per month for the operations we have planned. Between all our domestic production, and including imports from all sources, we are adding only 5.35 million barrels per month to our stocks. That is a shortfall of nearly two million barrels per month. Well, we won’t get that trying to suck it from the pipelines in Syria.”

“I see,” said Jodl, who had been listening to the discussion intently, somewhat amused. “So this explains that letter from the Führer. A pity we can’t get our hands on the oil our allies already control.”

“Quite true,” said Halder. “Soviet troops are already pushing for Maykop. Production has shut down there, and the equipment is all being trucked south to Baku. All Volkov has been sending us is one request for military support after another.”

“All the more reason to get on with Barbarossa,” said Keitel. “Once we get over the Don and into the Caucasus, then we’ll have all the oil we need.”

“That may take longer than you think,” Halder folded his arms. “I do not mean to sound like a defeatist, but these adventures in Syria and Libya have certainly proved to be very uncomfortable setbacks. This will be a most costly operation, and I am not just speaking of the oil now.”

“Sergei Kirov is as hungry for oil as we are,” said Jodl. “If Army Group South breaks through as planned, then that will decide the issue. You must have faith in our troops. Don’t let these sideshows in the Middle East bother you, Halder. In the meantime, what about this business with Mosul and Kirkuk? Is the Führer serious?”

“The only way we can get anything there in the short run would be to use von Sponek’s troops,” said Halder.

“The 22nd again?”

“He had a regiment at Raqqah, another at Palmyra and one at Homs. They could be consolidated in one attack on Kirkuk.”

“While the British push five brigades up the Euphrates and go for Aleppo? The 22nd had no luck stopping them at Dier ez Zou, or even Raqqah. What makes you think they will do any better 600 miles to the east on the Tigris?”

“I’ll admit, that force was rushed in without adequate support.” Keitel

was twiddling with a pencil now. “But we still have 1st Mountain Division in theater reserve at Italy. Suppose we move it to Istanbul, then by rail through Turkey?”

“That could take a month, given the state of those rail lines.” Halder was not enthusiastic.

“But this is just an infantry division,” said Keitel. It won’t need much rolling stock. It should take no more than two weeks.”

“Then we would have another two divisions stranded in the middle of nowhere, and give the British another nice fat target for their new heavy tanks. If you want my opinion, we should pull out of that whole region. Yes, Hitler wants us to look at the matter, but he offers no resources. Nothing presently scheduled for Barbarossa is to be touched. So here we are moving the few pawns left on the board around, all while the British maneuver for checkmate! Ramcke took over the retreat up the Euphrates, and now he believes he must fall back on Aleppo. The rail lines south from there are already in a shambles with these commando raids—and that is another thing. I am told they have a new aircraft that can hover in place.”

“Helicopters,” said Keitel with a knowing nod of his head. “Yes, another thing that Canaris knew nothing about.”

“Well,” Halder pressed on, “supplies are not getting through to Steiner’s 5th Wiking Division, which is the only unit worth mentioning that we still have in Syria. The Vichy French have already lost Damascus, and they are barely holding on to Beirut. Now we are to go gallivanting off to Mosul and Kirkuk? No! I intend to inform Hitler that the resources for such an operation are simply not available—that is unless he wishes to lend me an infantry Korps from Army Group South. We both know what the answer will be, Keitel, so forget the oil wells at Baba Gurgur. Instead we must set our minds on linking up with Ivan Volkov.”

Keitel shook his head. “Here we have the world’s biggest oil field sitting there, just five or six hundred kilometers from our airfields in Syria, and perhaps only guarded by a few British Indian battalions, with the rest of those forces all on the upper Euphrates. Instead we choose to plow through half the Soviet Army over two or three times that distance, through the Don Basin to Rostov, and then into the Caucasus—either that or we take the Crimea first. It’s madness! No wonder the Führer has sent you this message. We should take Mosul and Kirkuk first. What about Student’s 7th Flieger Division?”

“It is standing in reserve on Cyprus.”

“Oh? In reserve?” Keitel smiled. “Something tells me you want to pull those plans for Operation Merkur out of the file cabinet, Halder. Yes?”

“The thought did cross my mind...” Halder returned Keitel’s grin. “But let’s face it, the war is moving east. It’s been decided. So now it is only a question of time, and the clock is ticking. Ivan Volkov will soon get his relief, and with any luck, we will soon get our oil. There’s no sense planning another operation into Iraq.”

“We have word Volkov got himself into another adventure in Siberia. Some kind of major zeppelin raid is underway, and there’s a big push on the Ob River line.”

Halder had to laugh at that. “And all that while he comes begging for more air support in the Caucasus. Why does he bother with the Siberians?”

“That remains to be seen...” Keitel had the look of one who might know more than he was disclosing, but he said nothing else about it, and the two men leaned heavily over the map table. “Not long now,” he said at last. “We launch Barbarossa on May 15, just as the Führer ordered.”

“Yes,” said Halder. “The storm has been gathering for quite some time, and soon it rolls east. Now Hitler will get what he wants, that much is certain.”

“The oil?” Keitel tapped the great fields of Baku again, the obvious aim of all these plans. Hitler had said: “To fight, we must have oil for our machine.” Churchill had echoed that when he said: “Above all, petrol governed every movement.” And had Josef Stalin been alive in this war, he would have repeated the phrase that summed things up from his perspective: “The war was decided by engines and octane.”

But that was not what was in Halder’s mind at that moment. “No,” he corrected. “Now he gets his war... The real fighting starts in three days, and god only knows how and when it will end.”

Part VII

Clash of Arms

“Remorse has no place in a warrior's mind... A war is like a game of chess... Every battle is like a well-thought-out move on the board. Once it begins, there shouldn't be any emotion involved whatsoever.”

— J. Garwood

Chapter 19

Brigadier Kinlan received the call from General O'Connor with some trepidation. Ever since the stunning arrival of his force, and their bludgeoning victory at Bir el Khamsa, his 7th Brigade had been an apple in the eyes of the British commanders. When Churchill saw the tanks he was thrilled, and urged both Wavell and O'Connor to make the best possible use of them.

But Kinlan knew he had a candle force here. Each time it was used, it consumed a small portion of its life and strength. He had agreed to support Operation Scimitar, sending light tanks, and then both his two heavy infantry battalions in the Warrior AFVs, and half his Challenger IIs to Syria. There they had led the attack on the vital airfield at Rayak, stopped the German counterattack with their 9th Panzer Division, and then his men were pulled off the line, replaced by a brigade from the 6th Infantry Division.

His Gurkha battalion had also been instrumental in the fighting around Damascus, though they paid for their victories in casualties. His men were only human, no matter how well armed they were, and they had already started dying. Thus far, his equipment had held up very well. Not a single Challenger II had been seriously damaged, though they did lose several Scimitar tanks and two Warrior AFVs, all more lightly armored and vulnerable to enemy AT rounds of this period. The German 88s had bruised a couple of his main battle tanks, but it could not mission kill them. The engineers looked over the composite armor, and laid on exterior armor modules to reinforce those areas weakened by the 88 rounds.

Now, with more than half Kinlan's force still in Syria, O'Connor was calling to ask if he could make anything more available for the Operation looming to the west. Rommel was on the move again, and the British had a long week to watch his careful advance, digging in to their fortress at Tobruk and bringing up their newly reconstituted Armored forces.

"We've got 2nd Armored back on its feet, and the 7th as well—that's your grandfather unit, yes? Well, if you would care to throw in with us, it would stiffen my division considerably."

"You do realize that two thirds of my force is in Syria."

"Of course, I sent them there, but we think we have a lever on Syria further east on the Euphrates. The Germans have only been able to move brigade sized airborne units out there, and we have the whole of the 10th

Indian Division, a brigade from the 8th Indian, and all of Brigadier Kingstone's force on that flank. The Germans set up a blocking force at Dier ez Zour, but we moved them out of that easily enough. Now they are trying to consolidate at Raqqah, further up the Euphrates."

"Yes, I know the place," said Kinlan. "There was a lot of fighting there in our time. A group known as ISIS made it their headquarters in an attempt to control all of northern Syria and Iraq. War just seems to flower in the same old places, like a bad weed, I suppose."

"Indeed, well our Russian friends swept out to Raqqah on those marvelous helicopters of theirs, and that got our foot in the saddle there. We've already got a brigade up from the lower Euphrates, and Kingstone and our Glubb Pasha pulled off a nice desert crossing to keep the Germans off balance again. The thing is this. I don't think we'll need your boys in Syria any longer. You've done just what we hoped, and cleared that log jam south of Rayak. Stopped the panzers right in their tracks! Well then, this situation shaping up out west in Libya looks to be a tad more to worry about. Rommel has three good divisions now, and two more Brigade sized units. Throw in five or six Italian divisions, including the Ariete Armored Division, and he can pose a real threat."

"So you want another Bir el Khamsa?"

"Well, we won't ask you to do all the heavy lifting. Tiger Convoy finally got round the cape with 500 new tanks. Lord knows, if they were Challenger IIs like those you have, this war would end soon enough. But no, I'm afraid we'll have to make do with our Matildas, and some new cruiser tanks we're calling Crusaders. My thinking was this—to place your force in reserve. You are presently billeted here south of the old rail head near Mersa Matruh, but I propose to move your force to Sidi Omar on the Egyptian border."

"I see... And then what?"

"Stand as 8th Army reserve. We're arranging to get your two battalions back from Syria by rail, just as we sent them there. You should have them in hand in seven to ten days time. In the meantime, might you be so kind as to move your current force to Sidi Omar?"

Kinlan smiled. "General, you give the sweetest orders I've ever heard. You know damn well that I'll move my troops anywhere you need them. But I appreciate the light hand here. As you know, we have considerations beyond the military to think of."

“Ah, yes, the secrecy bit. We’ve certainly done our best, but it’s fair to say the Germans know about you, don’t they. What they may be planning to do about it is anyone’s guess. Rommel took one hell of a beating at Bir el Khamsa, but yet here he comes again.”

So it was decided, and Kinlan was getting his troops into a march column ready to send them west. He would move up the road through Bir Sheferzan to Sidi Omar, and await the arrival of his heavy infantry battalions from Syria. O’Connor had hoped Rommel would take some time sorting out his units once they made contact with the British defensive line, but he rested no more than 24 hours before beginning his attack.

The Italians opened the action at Tobruk, along the coastal road leading back to Derna. There they threw three infantry divisions at the British positions along Wadi Sehel. The new British commander, General Montgomery, had posted the 20th Brigade of the 9th Australian Division, in a line of 18 defensive strong points between the ragged coast and the main road to Tobruk. South of the road, the 24th Brigade extended the defense to a high point known as hill 209. It had once been outside the perimeter defense plan, but when Monty took over he immediately ordered the defensive works moved forward so that hill could be occupied by British troops.

“I’ll be damned if I’ll let them get up there and machine gun the hell out of us,” said Montgomery. “No. Get your engineers to work at once. That hill will anchor the southern line of our perimeter.”

South and east of hill 209, the line dog legged to run parallel to the coast. There Monty placed the last brigade in the 9th Australian Division, and then posted its sister division, the 6th, south between the Tobruk perimeter and covering the big aerodrome at El Adem. He then had one last division in his corps, the 2nd New Zealanders, and it was his inclination to hold it as a reserve behind the Australians. But O’Connor had argued that the line should extend further south of El Adem, where a substantial wadi ran in a wide arc.

“I’ll want to position my armor south of the bend of that wadi,” said O’Connor. “It’s a good anti-tank obstacle, and a perfect defensive position for infantry. My guess is that Rommel will have to send his own armor either north or south of that feature. If he comes north, I’ll leave you a brigade of Matildas and the Carpathian Brigade as your reserve. If he comes south, I’ll have 2nd and 7th Armor there to handle things.”

“Very well, general, but I must give you my opinion that it will need three divisions to adequately hold Tobruk and El Adem.”

“Don’t worry,” said O’Connor. “If the Carpathians aren’t enough for you, I’ve made arrangements to move a reserve to Sidi Omar.”

“Sidi Omar? That’s too far south and too far east. You should post it at Gambut if I’m to make any use of it.”

“Well it is my hope that you will not need to do so, General.” O’Connor gave him a thin smile.

“If wishes were horses,” said Montgomery, folding his arms.

“Yes,” said O’Connor, “beggars would ride. I’m not trying to unhinge your defensive plan, General Montgomery, but do post the 2nd New Zealand as I advise here. I’ll need them as a shield if I’m to be able to use my armor effectively as a sword. It’s my assessment that Rommel will attempt a wide envelopment south of El Adem. I plan to meet him there with my own 7th Armored, but I’ll need you to hold all the ground to my north. You’re an infantry commander, and new to fighting in this desert. Things have a way of getting rather dicey out here on short notice. But rest assured, we’ll have adequate reserves.”

So it was that the 2nd New Zealand Division was placed south of El Adem, over Montgomery’s objections, and the wiry General steamed about it for some time after. Their plans had considered Rommel’s most likely choices for an attack south of Tobruk. What O’Connor did not expect, however, is that Rommel’s main effort would not be a deep southern envelopment around that wadi, but a concerted effort to punch through the defensive fortress to get to his main objective.

Tobruk had foiled Rommel’s drive into Egypt during his first offensive, and his plan now was to reduce it while fending off the British reserves with his own mobile divisions. Rightfully called ‘the Verdun of the desert,’ Tobruk could prove to be a difficult task, or so he believed. The British had some time to prepare the perimeter defenses, though the infantry occupying them had only just arrived after being withdrawn from defensive positions in the Jebel country. Rommel’s plan was to soften the outer shell by first using the Italian infantry divisions. He did not expect they would be able to actually break through, but they would force enemy defensive artillery fires, and possibly pull in reserve units within the fortress to the more threatened sector on the coast.

Behind this screen of four Italian infantry divisions, Rommel’s real shock troops were assembling for the main attack. He had quietly boasted that ‘Tobruk will be no problem this time—I will take it with the Luftwaffe,’

but in this he meant he would use the considerable hammer he had in the Herman Goering Brigade. This unit was a lavish formation, much more developed at this time than it was in the history Fedorov could read about. Then it had been a regiment, with heavy emphasis on flak units that led it to be posted near the oil fields of Ploesti in Rumania. This time around it had already been built up to a full brigade.

There were three well equipped "Schutzen Battalions" in the formation, which were heavy motorized battalions with four companies of infantry each, the third being heavier on support weapons and engineers. Together they comprised the mobile Schutzen Regiment within the Brigade. Next came the two Flak Battalions, each equipped with three heavy batteries of 88s and three light batteries of 20mm guns. The third battalion here was all artillery, and then came the vaunted "Führer Flak Battalion," which had the best mobile flak batteries, including quad 20mm guns, a 37mm battery, and yet more 88s. If that were not enough, there was also a *Wachbataillon* in the Brigade, with three more companies, and a big *Ersatzabteilung* for replacements that had four more infantry companies and three flak batteries.

All together, the Brigade could field twenty infantry companies, an equal number of flak batteries and three artillery batteries. By comparison. Rommel's 5th light Division had only two heavy machine gun battalions, the 300th Afrika Infantry Battalion attached, and his two tank battalions as the real combat elements of the division, so the Reichsminister had seen that the Brigade formed in his name would have the strength to do it justice in combat. But that was not all the Luftwaffe had to offer Rommel's Afrika Korps.

After the stunning success in capturing Malta, and then the easy victory they enjoyed on Cyprus, Kurt Student had been given a free hand to further enlarge his Fliegerkorps. There had not been time to create a full division, but he had been putting together several new "Sturm Regiments" that would be suitable for smaller operations when a full division would not be required. The concept had been proven in the attack on the Dutch fortress positions, when three *Sturmgruppen*, Beton, Eisen, and Stahl, had proved very effective. This had given rise to the formation of the Luftland Sturm Regiment for the Crete Operation, which was now involved in the Syrian campaign. But Student had selected another good man to lead his second Sturm Regiment, Oberst Eugen Meindel, who had fought well at Narvik earlier in the war.

This was also a new wrinkle in the history, as both Ramcke and Meindel

had been commanders of the same Sturm Regiment in Fedorov's books, but this time they each would be given a chance to make their fortune with unique formations. When Hitler summarily pulled the 1st Mountain Division off the reinforcement schedule for Rommel, Paulus came looking for fresh troops in compensation. He asked Student if anything could be spared from the 7th Flieger Division, then acting as theater reserve on Cyprus, but Student had Meindel's troops available instead.

So behind Goering's fat brigade, Meindel had another three battalions of *Fallschirmjagers* available in support. Together the two units had as much infantry fighting power as the 90th Light Division, which had also been considerably reinforced to a full nine battalions. To round out Rommel's hopes for a good attack, the Luftwaffe was also providing six squadrons of the deadly *Stuka* dive bombers.

Just after the Italian infantry hurled themselves at the coastal defenses south of the main road, the Italian Ariete sprung into action, coming down the track from a place the British had named "Knightsbridge," and aimed at the northernmost end of the 6th Australian Division lines, just outside Tobruk's southern defensive perimeter. It was clear they meant to drive straight up the road that bypassed the fortress, hoping for a quick breakthrough.

The Italian tanks were not unstoppable, but they had also been reinforced in the long interval, and came in good numbers, backed up by their 8th Bersaglieri Battalion. Behind this division, the whole of the Trento Motorized Infantry Division was strung out along that road, all the way to Knightsbridge. It would feed itself into that battle, like a log to a buzz saw, but over time, the preponderance of strength in that vital junction fell to the Axis forces.

The fighting was hot and furious for some time, but the Italians had made a few good inroads as Rommel monitored reports on their battle closely. He had already ordered his 90th Light "Afrika" Division to make a full assault against the 2nd New Zealand Division, south along the obstacle of Wadi Nullah, so there were no reinforcements that division could send north towards the fighting near El Adem.

The Aussies of the 6th Division were as tough as they came, but they still had nothing bigger than a 2 Pounder AT gun, and all too few. They held off the first tank charge, then rallied and sent in their reserve elements to counterattack, using the recon battalion armored cars and their motorized

machinegun battalion. This pushed the Bersaglieri Battalion back, and by nightfall it looked as though the line would hold.

No one expected the Italians to continue the fight after dark, but that is exactly what they decided to do. A battle was shaping up much like one that became known as “The Battle of the Salient,” also fought in May of 1941 in Fedorov’s history. There the Ariete Division and 6th Australians fought for a row of strongpoints labeled R3 through R7, all taken and held by the Italians. But here the attack was not directed at the strong points, but on the entrenched lines of the Australian infantry. And the Italians had a bone to pick. They had been pushed around by the Aussies long enough, and now General Raffaele Cadorna was going to get his pound of flesh one way or another.

“We attack all night,” he said sternly. “Regroup! Form your tank companies. Lead with the M11s and follow with the M13s. Then bring up the armored cars!”

There would be no sleep on that ground for either side that night, and when dawn came the situation was ripe for a development that no one expected.

Chapter 20

The night attack by the Ariete Armored Division was running parallel to the line of defenses where the main road from Tobruk led five miles south to El Adem. There the 2/1 Field Company of Engineers was the only unit of the 6th actually inside the fortifications, manning bunkers R35 through R39. They could see the action developing, watching the hot tracer fire and listening to the rattle of tanks, but none turned for their positions.

Tom Walls gave the elbow to a Vickers MG gunner as he watched. "Looks like the Eye-Ties are giving us a pass," he said, using the familiar slang word the Aussies used for the Italians.

"Good for us," said Corporal Peters, "but there's practically nobody on the line to the east. Strongpoints astride the road are well manned, but after that it gets fairly thin."

"Well where's the bloody 9th Division?" Walls protested. "I thought old Ming had that lot locked down tight in here." He was referring to Major General Leslie Morsehead, the no-nonsense commander of the 9th Division. Tough as nails, and with a deep reserve of calm in the most trying circumstances, he was a hard taskmaster, and strict disciplinarian, to the point where the men had come to call him "Ming the Merciless."

"Eye-Ties are hitting the coast road too," said Peters. "What you think we've been listening to all day until this lot showed up? They hit the ninth with three divisions, and most everyone's gone off to that little hornet's nest. This one here is ours."

"Fancy that." Walls shook his head. "Well, if they push over those trench lines to the south of us, they'll be able to swing right around and into the Fortress from the south."

"Don't worry about it, that new limey General will have something in the cupboard back there. Just keep your eyes on that view slit and watch for enemy infantry."

The action heated up, with four battalions of Italian tanks making a determined attack, until they had pushed through to approach the artillery of the 1st Field Artillery Regiment. There the Aussie commander had ordered his gunners to level the barrels and blast away point blank at the Italian tanks, and though he had some success, darkness and the speed of the enemy advance made it obvious that his position would soon be overrun.

Elsewhere, the Morris and Marmon Herrington armored cars that had rushed in to stop the attack earlier, now found themselves in a hot gun duel with the M11 Medium Italian Tanks. The M11 suffered from two prominent design flaws in that its main 37mm gun was hull mounted with a limited traverse, with only machineguns on the turret. Its armor was also too thin, and even the light 2 pounders could penetrate it at most ranges. These tanks suffered badly, but the improved M13s behind them had a bigger 47mm turret mounted gun that allowed it to hit harder, and respond quicker in a firefight than the M11 could. When these came up, they were able to beat back the Australian armored cars, and by 2am, in a confusing night action, it seemed as though the Ariete Division was finally breaking through.

Yet the new Limey General did have reserves at hand, and when word reached Montgomery that Italian armor had been seen on the bypass road east of bunker R43, he immediately was on the radio to summon up reinforcements.

In exchange for compelling the southern deployment of the 2nd New Zealand Division, O'Connor had placed two units behind the 6th Australian Division holding the line at El Adem. One was the Polish Carpathian Brigade at Gambut, and the second was the 32nd Army Tank Brigade at Sidi Rezegh. This unit was formed some months earlier than its historical appearance, and had a good number of heavier Matilda tanks. It rattled down the secondary road towards El Adem, skirting a craggy escarpment that opened onto the main bypass road below. Near El Adem they could turn north and move to shore up the northern flank of the division, but events developing near the airfield itself were going to complicate that plan.

There the Bologna Infantry Division and Trento Motorized Division had been pushing hard on the center and southern positions of the 6th Australians. By the time the Matildas arrived, they would be pulled into the desperate fight near El Adem and would never get north. The Carpathians were coming, though they were not going to reach the scene until after dawn, but Monty had one more card to play. The Indian 3rd Motor Brigade was stationed near El Duda shrine where the road from Tobruk paralleled the coast east to Gambut. He called on this reserve, sending two of its three battalions rushing to the scene of the Italian breakthrough, and he was not happy about the development.

"I told O'Connor that it would need three divisions to adequately hold the fortress and airfield," he steamed. "Now look at the situation."

“Well sir,” said a staff officer. “We’ve still got the whole of 1st Army Tank Brigade right here inside the perimeter.”

“Yes, and that is my last reserve. This is only beginning. I’ll need to have some mobile force that can counterattack when we need it. Don’t forget that Rommel is out there somewhere. These are just the Italians!”

Monty was correct, for in the pre-dawn hours of May 8th, the three battalions of Meindel’s newly formed Sturm Regiment II moved silently through the ranks of the Hermann Goering Brigade, intending to make a surprise attack on the strongpoints guarding the main road to Tobruk. They moved like shadows, the squads making a stealthy advance in the dark, until Tom Walls in Bunker R36 saw more than he liked through his view slit.

“Pssst... Corporal! Infantry! Get on that Vickers gun, and be quick about it!”

Corporal Peters slapped the butt of the gun to bring it round and began to fire. Then, the moment of surprise lost, they saw the whole line light up with returning fire, and knew they were being hit by a major attack. 2/1 Field Engineers were in a fight for their lives. These were not Italians. The units of the Italian RECAM Regiment, a recon unit with an engineer battalion, Machinegun company and some Autoblinda 41 armored cars, had been sent to reinforce the Ariete Division tanks a little after 04:00. The unit had fluttered about the southern edge of the block houses, trading occasional fire with the defenders, but making no real threat. The coming of the *Fallschirmjagers* was like a dark tide of war, and they were not planning to stop.

When Rommel got news of what appeared to be a possible breakthrough by the Italians on the bypass road, he wasted no time, immediately ordering 5th Light to move north from its central position behind the 90th Light.

So the Italians are worth the petrol it took to get them here after all, he thought. That Ariete Division is putting in one hell of a scrappy fight tonight. I did not expect them to push this hard, and whoever ordered Mindel’s boys to move in before dawn was also using his head. He later learned that the order had been given by Oberst Paul Conrath of the Goering Brigade, the nominal leader of all Luftwaffe troops in the Korps.

So it was that the men who once formed *Sturmgruppen* Beton for Concrete, Eisen for Iron, Granit for Granite, and Stahl for Steel, were now directed at the stone and earthen bunkers of the Tobruk defenses, an area that was thought to be relatively secure, some three kilometers behind the lines of

the Australian 9th Division. Those code names had been used to identify the *Sturmgruppe* targets in Holland, assigned for the steel and iron and granite in the bridges and forts they were to assault, and they hit the line like a hammer just before sunrise on the 8th of May. Rommel left his headquarters at the old Turkish fort of Bir Hacheim an hour before dawn, intending to find his 5th Light Division and see what was developing up north.

“Let me know the instant you hear of any turning movement to the south,” he said to his headquarters staff. “Is Grossdeutschland in position?”

“They say the ground could be better, but yes, Herr General, they are digging in to prepared defensive positions as ordered tonight.”

“And the artillery?”

“We have sent them three more battalions, mostly heavier guns.”

“Good. Send the rest north to coordinate with 5th Light. I’m off to see what the Italians have been up to all night. Here the British thought we were trying to kick in the back door along the coast all day, while we just might slip right through the front door today!” He smiled.

I came here for Tobruk, he thought. And by god, I’ll have the place, one way or another. All reports place O’Connor’s armor to the south, which is most likely where those monster tanks of theirs will be. So if all goes as planned, my 15th Panzer Division launches a demonstration attack there at dawn. I must make sure the British armor stays well to the south, and out of the fight for Tobruk. But god help the 15th Panzer Division today. God will probably have nothing to do with it, he thought. Instead it may come down to Papa Hörnlein’s boys in the Grossdeutschland Regiment on their right flank. As he was so many times in these long years of the desert, Rommel was a bit of a prophet that night.

* * *

The Italian Ariete Division had uncovered the main road into the fortress of Tobruk with their gallant night attack, but now allied forces were reacting like antibodies to deal with the threat. 78th and 154th Field Artillery found their positions could range on the point of the enemy attack, and they began putting in probing barrages, the fire corrected by the frantic calls from the engineers on the bunker line.

Walls and Peters position was overrun, with bunkers R28 through R35 all stormed by the German paratroopers. They got out alive, retreating

towards the main road to eventually make contact with the men of the Indian 18th King Edwards Own Cavalry, one of the two Indian battalions Montgomery had rushed to the scene that night. These troops were the only Indian units still in the west, with all their remaining troops in Syria, and now they were the only organized infantry available to hold the main entrance to the fortress, but more help was on the way.

One of the three tank battalions in 32nd Armored Brigade had veered off the track to El Adem, answering the call and heading north. It had 45 Matildas, and they were going to meet and stop the Italian M13 tanks in a sharp engagement just before sunrise. The remaining two battalions got pulled into the growing crisis near El Adem itself, and were soon battling with the dogged Trento Division just west of the airfields.

Meanwhile, far to the south, beyond the wide curve of wadi Nullah where the 2nd New Zealanders watched the grey dawn, O'Connor had all of 2nd and 7th Armored divisions formed up and ready to attack. They were going to run right into the demonstration attack mounted by 15th Panzer Division in a titanic meeting engagement.

At dawn the two panzer battalions of the 8th Regiment led the attack, the fast armored cars of the 33rd Recon Battalion on their right. They rolled forward over good ground, the rumble of the tanks shaking the dawn as they charged. Inside their steel chariots, the gunners and drivers kissed their lucky charms, and some silently crossed themselves as the attack went forward. They had faced the sudden shock of the new British tanks before, and knew what might be waiting for them. Many had also heard what had happened to 9th Panzer Division in Syria, and most secretly hoped the enemy heavy armor was still there, far away, and not to be their nightmare that morning.

Just as the rising sun was changing the color of the ground from sallow grey to wan ocher and amber, they saw the low profiles of distant enemy tanks in a long line ahead. A surge of adrenaline twisted their innards as the charge went forward to its uncertain fate. One of the gunners called out that he had not seen this enemy silhouette before, which quickened the pulse of the crew in that tank. He was correct, for they had not met these tanks in any previous engagement, all new arrivals to the desert war, though they were not the nemesis that had bedeviled the panzers at Bir el Khamsa.

Up ahead, their engines turning over, crews buttoning up, turrets training, were the new Crusader tanks of the 22nd Armored Brigade, fresh off the boat from the reinforcement convoys that had come round the cape. The

3rd and 4th County of London Yeomanry had 45 of the new tanks each, and there were another 45 in the 2nd Hussars, a formidable looking force of 135 fast cruiser tanks.

They looked every bit the name, with a low profile, and a sleek polygonal turret with a 2 pounder gun. The armor was modest at 40mm, and the tanks were exhibiting teething trouble in the early going, as was the unit itself. The 22nd had been sent from England to bring the 7th Armored Division up to a full three brigade strength level, and it had arrived earlier than Fedorov might have expected it, as all these events were accelerated on a scale of three to five months ahead of the tempo of his old history. The crews, in a new tank, in a new and unfamiliar place, had not yet had the time they needed to train and get properly acclimated to desert warfare, and the shock of this first engagement was severe.

The Germans opened fire at the run, and the British returned, the morning ripped open by the gunfire of over 250 tanks on both sides. 17 Crusaders died in those first awful minutes, but the rest recovered and began fighting, particularly when they got up infantry from the 7th Armored Support Group. This, in turn, prompted the Germans to commit the grenadiers of the 104th and 115th Schutzen Regiments, deployed on the left flank of the attack. As they came forward, they were going to run directly into the 22nd Guards Brigade infantry, and soon the sharp regiment/brigade level tank duel, had expanded to a massive division scale battle that extended for many kilometers to the north.

* * *

With the Italian attack faltering after fighting all night, and then being confronted by the stolid, well armored Matildas, Rommel decided to go all or nothing and moved his 5th Light Division into the attack. Conrath had already followed up the successful attack against the perimeter by the Sturm Regiment, and now he was sending in his elite battalions from the Hermann Goering Brigade. But the attack on the Italians had to be stopped, and 5th Light soon found itself in the perfect position to counter.

15th Panzer Division was now heavily engaged but, as it move south, its left flank was extended, near a place where the long wadi wrinkled eastward, called Qubur al Janda. It was just where O'Connor had placed the 2nd Armored Division, which soon saw that the gap provided an interesting

opportunity.

Yet Rommel was not called “The Desert Fox” without good reason. He had ordered that all reserve flak elements were to screen that flank in a long Pakfront, with many of the positions studded by batteries of the deadly 88s. Also, the night before, Rommel had gone to Papa Hörnlein and his crack Grossdeutschland Regiment, showing him just where he thought the British turning movement would fall. So when O’Connor’s 7th began to wheel its reserve tank brigades to the west, they found Grossdeutschland waiting for them in a well prepared defense, backed by six battalions of artillery, and with another AT Pakfront screening its extreme right flank. It was a defense designed by Rommel to have the hope of fending off, or at least delaying, those monstrous new British tanks.

But O’Connor was not bringing Kinlan’s Challenger IIs to the fight. He had his Matildas and many new Cruiser tanks in good numbers, but did not expect the prepared defense that was waiting for him that morning.

Chapter 21

That day saw the crisis at Tobruk redoubled. The *Fallschirmjagers* of the Sturm Regiment had pushed into the fortified line, opening the way for the heavy battalions of the Herman Goering Brigade. Now they advanced, in wave after wave, the onrushing tide of German infantry seeming unstoppable. Montgomery had struggled to hold on to one last mobile reserve in the 1st Army Tank Brigade, which also had a battalion of Engineers, and now he threw them forward into the fray, the Matildas posing a strong armored challenge as the troops of the Goering Brigade began to move north towards the vital road junction of King's Cross.

The morning of May 8th saw the British tanks launch a fierce counterattack, driving back two German battalions towards the outer fortified line. But the Goering Brigade soon wheeled in heavy flak batteries in the scissors, paper rock of warfare, and the dual purpose 88s soon began to stem the tide and drive back the lumbering Matildas, leaving 27 tanks as smoldering wrecks on the battlefield.

The Germans reorganized at noon, then resumed their tireless advance that afternoon, with fresh battalions moving through the gap in the outer defenses to strengthen the push north. To make matters worse, the Panzer Regiment of 5th Light had now moved in to support this attack, and soon Monty was reaching for every spare unit he could get his hands on. All his remaining artillery began to pound the German advance, and flak units positioned near the airfields, to either side of the road leading to King's Cross, were sent forward in a last ditch defense. To these he added two battalions of Royal Marines, the Layforce Group that had come in by sea on the previous night.

By now, the Carpathian Brigade had finally footed it up from Gambut, and was taking up positions on the eastern flank of the German advance, and far to the east, the trains had been laboring all through the previous night to deliver the last reserves that the British could count on. Only the onset of darkness carried the hope that the embattled garrison of Tobruk might hold on.

As the sun set on the 8th, the battle in the south had also ground to a halt. The infantry clash on the left of the German advance had resulted in a stalemate, hot and furious at times, with squads of German grenadiers making

concerted attacks, only to be countered by waves of British infantry, charging over the desert with fixed bayonets. In places the fighting was hand to hand until, under orders from Rommel, the 15th Panzer Division pulled back to form a defensive night laager.

“Any sign of those heavy British Tanks?” Rommel had been keen to learn where and when the enemy might play their last Ace. Yet thus far, there had been no reports of these unstoppable goliaths anywhere along the front. The first British attempt to envelop 15th Panzer Division fell right astride the prepared defenses of the Grossdeutschland Regiment, and the enemy was stopped cold, with heavy casualties, and forced to withdraw into a defensive laager of their own. So the battle in the south had resulted in a stalemate that day, which is exactly what Rommel had planned. Thus far everything seemed to be going as he wished.

I’ve stopped O’Connor with my 15th Panzers, he thought, and Grossdeutschland is standing like a rock on that southern flank. We’ve pushed into the fortress with my shock troops, and tomorrow should decide that issue. Conrath must drive right over those airfields and take the port, and that will bag the whole of the 9th Australian Division. But where are those big enemy tanks? We’ve seen scores of Matildas, and a new small cruiser tank, but no sign of the demons that fell on us at Bir el Khamsa. One more day, that is all I need. If I can take that port tomorrow, the British will have no recourse but to withdraw.

* * *

That night, O’Connor was on the radio to Kinlan at Sidi Omar. Was his force ready for operations? Could he move quickly west to Bir el Gobi? Was there anything he could send to Tobruk? Kinlan mounted a fast vehicle with Lieutenant Sims and sped up the road after dusk, intent on meeting with O’Connor at Bir el Gobi to plan their next move. It was close to midnight by the time he got there, saluting as he arrived at XIII Corps headquarters.

“Good to see you, General,” said O’Connor. “I hope you’re coming with more than those three trucks out there.”

“Stand easy,” said Kinlan. “The Highlanders and Mercians have arrived by rail, so I’ve got my whole brigade together again. They’ve been assembling at Sidi Omar since 04:00, and I’ll be making a night march here, if this is where you want my men.”

“Excellent. We’ve been in a bit of a boxing match with the German 15th Panzer Division all day.” O’Connor leaned over the map on the briefing table, his face weary with the hour, but the light of battle still in his eyes.

“Now then, my envelopment maneuver ran right into Rommel’s men this morning, about here, and it’s been tooth and nail ever since. I jogged left with a brigade, but found another German unit in well prepared positions there.”

“Sounds like Rommel planned it that way,” said Kinlan. “He knew you would try that end around.”

“Quite so. In the meantime, he’s punched right through the Tobruk perimeter near the main road, and the fighting reached King’s Cross by dusk.”

“I’ve sent my light infantry battalion on to Tobruk by rail as you requested,” said Kinlan. “It’s just one battalion, but these men will fight, and then some.”

“Good enough, because no matter what happens tomorrow, I plan to hold on here. We simply cannot lose Tobruk. Rommel thinks he can compel me to withdraw if he gets a firm hold there, but I’ll hear none of that. Montgomery is manning the line with artillery, flak units and rail workers, so that battalion will be more than welcome. In the meantime, you and I must decide how to handle things in the south, and we’ll need to move quickly.”

“My brigade will be here by dawn,” said Kinlan. “I assume you have a plan?”

“Well, we’ve two options as I see things. You might swing down here...” O’Connor fingered the line of a long wadi that ran southwest from the vicinity of Bir el Gobi. “There’s a road along that wadi, and it will take you here, down past my 7th Division headquarters and in a good position to swing round Rommel’s flank.”

“Isn’t that exactly what he expects us to do?”

“More than likely. It’s what I tried to do late this afternoon, but my 7th Brigade wasn’t able to carry it off. Your brigade, however, is something more. Now, we’ve had a good while to scout that flank. Jerry had a brigade sized defensive laager there, and further east, there’s a line of fixed gun positions—most likely his heavy flak batteries.”

“Sounds like he’s expecting visitors.”

“Indeed, and I’m also told the Germans have been busy laying minefields on that flank. They clearly expect us to try them again, and are

digging in.”

“Any other options?”

O’Connor pursed his lips. “This segment here, just north along the wadi from where my 7th Division is posted... I’ve got 2nd Armored there, just two brigades, but they put in a spoiling attack on the German flank in that area. Ran into another line of flak units and mixed it up all afternoon, but those damn 88s are just good enough to stop even our Matildas. As for our cruiser tanks, they go through them like paper. Yet, as I see it now, that defense was hastily mounted, and not anywhere as well prepared as the German southern flank. That move by 2nd Armored was the one thing Rommel didn’t expect today, otherwise I’d say he’s read my damned operational orders to the letter. The road running northwest from here could put your brigade right behind my current positions with 2nd Armored.”

Kinlan nodded. “An attack there would cut off everything the Germans have to the south.”

“Precisely. Rommel expects me to swing left again around that flank, and by God, sending in your boys along with my 7th Division would see all the Desert Rats taking it to the enemy in one glorious rush. But if there is one thing I’ve learned out here, it is not to do what the enemy expects. My 7th Hussars has had a good long look at that German position on the southern flank. I don’t like it. They’ve had two days to harden that defense, while this segment here opposite 2nd Armored Division is much weaker. I say we hit them there.”

“Agreed,” said Kinlan. “I can have my column up by dawn, shake them out, and be ready to attack in little time.”

O’Connor smiled. “And I’ll put on a good show tomorrow morning on that southern flank, to keep Jerry guessing as to what we’re up to. The only rub is this—can Montgomery hold out at Tobruk? ”

Kinlan smiled. “General, if I had to give odds on that, I’d bankrupt anyone who bets against me. Monty will hold.”

* * *

King’s Cross was being held by 16th Light AA Battalion, the 1st Carpathian Battalion and a company from the Ulhans Recon Battalion. To the west the other two battalions of the Carpathian Brigade stretched out in a line reaching towards Gabr Casm. Beyond this, the rail line that the British had

labored all spring to complete wound its way through the crumbling edge of an escarpment and down past a line of three inner forts, Pilistrino, Solaro and Ariente, the old fortifications built by the Italians. Montgomery had stripped away their scant garrisons, including any flak batteries he could round up, and put them on the makeshift defense line he was forming south of the port.

“Our back is against the wall, gentlemen, so I expect we shall have to leave off civility and become something more. Here we stand. There is to be no further retreat from this line. We fight here, or we die. Sergeant Major!”

“Sir!”

“I see no rifles here for my headquarters staff. Fetch anything you can find. I’m partial to the old Martini & Henry myself, but under the circumstances, one can’t be picky.”

“I think we can fill that order sir,” said the Sergeant Major. “Would a Martini-Enfield do?” The crisp salute and click of the heels set the tone of the hour. In all the annals of military history, through countless wars over the centuries, there had been a thousand other moments like this, where men banded together in some crucial fort or redoubt, or on a hill forsaken by time and the whims of man until that hour. They huddled in trenches, hunched in the cellars of forgotten hamlets, shivered in a cold, nameless forest, and held a line. One side or another would prevail, and history changed with their sweat and toil, wrenched by their bones and muscle, washed with the shedding of their blood.

This was one such moment, where the fall of Tobruk might cascade to unforeseen consequences that no man could see, or read about, as this was all new history being written that day. It may have echoed and mocked the battles fought in this place, all well chronicled in Fedorov’s history books, but here was a chapter where the outcome hung in the balance, and could not be found all neatly resolved at the end of a typeset paragraph.

Yet there was something strangely macabre about the whole scene. Here were men that had all left homes, wives, children, family and friends, and then traveled half way around the world to this place, a bleak and barren desert, all to form lines in the heartless sands, and to kill one another.

Across the deadly interval between the lines, other men crouched with their squad mates, hands tight on the hard steel and wood of their rifles, helmets pulled low on their foreheads. It was Major Kluge’s *Wachbataillon*, three companies under Zillmann, Krohn and Trukenmüller opposite King’s Cross that day. On their right was Burchardt’s battalion from the Sturm

Regiment, on their left were Heydt's troops from that same unit. Between them a salient was holding out with a company of Engineers from the 1st Army Tank Brigade, and 1/74th Flak, with four 3.7 inch AA guns.

Kluge was getting up some fire support from the 5th Light, as 605th Panzer Jaegers had sent up a number of tracked 47mm guns. By noon he was ready to make his attack, and the men that had been handpicked by Goering himself, to first stand a watch over his lavish Karinhall estate, would now be thrown at Montgomery's last dogged defense. They were just one small link in the chain of battle that stretched for miles in all directions, but this attack would carry weight far in excess of the numbers actually involved.

Yet something was happening just east of this crucial crossroads in history, when a train arrived at the edge of the Tobruk perimeter and the "Little Men" of Kinlan's tough Royal Gurkha Rifle Battalion leapt from the rolling stock, ready for action. The very presence of that rail line itself was yet another anomaly in the history, for the connection between the railhead at Mersa Matruh and Tobruk had not been finished by the British until 1942. This time, however, they had used the interval from February to May to feverishly extend that line, and it was a most timely decision.

There were fewer men in the Light Battalion now, with 17 dead and another 20 wounded in Syria. Colonel Gandar had the men formed by companies in ten minutes, and now he looked to get some sense of what was happening on the battlefield ahead. The sun was well past mid day when he led his men forward, feeling the battle ahead of him with senses keened by many years of military service. He was listening to it, smelling it, and coming to some sense of what he was now leading his men into.

His companies possessed a great deal of firepower, but here, in these open spaces, with little more than bare scrub for cover, the men would be vulnerable to all the many banes of infantry, chief among them being enemy artillery. He looked south with his field glasses, spying the distant squat shapes of the block houses that marked the outer perimeter. In his mind he now saw them as an archipelago of stony islands, perhaps the only cover he could find within miles. There his battalion might be able to work its way from one strongpoint to another, and he elected to move in that direction. In so doing he was going to launch his companies at the southernmost anchor of the British Commonwealth defense, like a man arriving at a beleaguered fortress, and then shouldering his way against the breach in a desperate effort to shut the gate.

* * *

It took a good part of the night for Kinlan's force to motor up from Sidi Omar, moving slowly along the desert roads to Bir el Gobi, and then turning northwest on the road running a few kilometers east of Wadi Nullah. They moved over the wadi, the obstacle bridged by the engineers, and began to assemble behind the lines of the 2nd Armored Division. The action had slackened off on all sides, troops exhausted and needing rest. Even the position inside Tobruk quieted down, as assault squads re-assembled, and the weary troops tried to get some food and rest before the day that would surely decide the battle.

Early evening came with Kinlan's two heavy mechanized infantry battalions largely assembled and ready, the Scots Dragoons behind them. Any troops of the 2nd Division that saw them gawked at the sight of the Challenger IIs. They had heard rumors that the army had a new tank, but wondered where it was. Now they knew. It had their back in the fight that was coming, and O'Connor and Kinlan met with Division Commander, Michael Denman Gambier-Parry, or simply GP to the men. He was another fish that had slipped through history's net, for he was supposed to have been captured by the Germans the previous month, along with Norrie and O'Connor himself. Yet all these men were free and at large, a good windfall for the British at this crucial juncture of the desert war.

"Look GP," said O'Connor. "Keep a tight leash on your boys tonight, and in the morning we'll be moving a new brigade through your lines. They'll move fast, hit hard, and when the dust clears, you're to move your men after them, if you can manage to keep up. They'll punch through and turn north, but you are to take your division south. Understand?"

"Yes sir, but the Germans have had all night to thicken up their lines out there. Those 88s gave us a nasty bite yesterday, and there will likely be more. What if we don't get through?"

O'Connor smiled. "Oh, they'll get through, GP. You can count on that. Tomorrow you're going to see the damndest armored charge you'll ever witness in this war, and be glad you're to be a part of it."

Part VIII

Behemoth

“Behold now behemoth ... Lo now, his strength is in his loins, and his force is in the navel of his belly... the sinews of his stones are wrapped together. His bones are as strong pieces of brass; his bones are like bars of iron.”

— Job 40:15-18

Chapter 22

Hans Ludek was trying to sleep when he heard a fitful buzzing sound. Then something came falling from above, thumping right on his boot toe with a dull thud. He sat up with a start, his heart fast with the scare, but saw an odd looking thing in the trench by his foot. He squinted, leaning forward to pick up what looked like a small white device with a little propeller on top, and a thin tail with another smaller rotor. The whole thing sat in the palm of his hand, no more than four inches long and an inch high. What was this? Was one of the other men fooling around, like a man whittling to pass the hours? What had he made here?

He shook his head, putting the thing in his pocket and laying down again to try and get some sleep. A little toy, he thought. Someone was playing around with a little model helicopter, which is exactly what the thing looked like. He probably just threw it up into the night to see how far it might fly.

Other men were playing around that night, but the game was in deadly earnest. O'Connor was expecting to wait until dawn on the 10th of May for the British counterattack, but Kinlan explained that he preferred to go well before sunrise. He had men out now doing preliminary scouting and range finding, and the attack would commence soon.

"At night the threat of enemy air strikes is much reduced. That's the one thing I worry about, as we have limited air defense missiles."

"But how will you manage to coordinate your movements?"

"General, I know where every vehicle I own is at any given moment. As for the enemy, we have optics on our vehicles that are adapted to see at night," he said. "It's an advantage that will allow us to close with the enemy very quickly, and we can hit him as we come, at very long range, before they can even see us."

It was, indeed, an unanswerable edge possessed by the modern British 7th Brigade. Command and control enabled by the fact that all Kinlan's units were networked was only one of his assets. Night vision equipment used by the brigade combined active illumination, image intensification, thermal vision, lens magnification as well as infrared or thermographic cameras with digital image enhancement. It all came down to the same advantage that *Kirov* possessed over its enemies at sea, what you could see first, you could kill first, and the aim of modern combat was to find and kill the enemy before

they could do the same to you.

In this case, the scales tilted yet further, skewing the balance in favor of the attackers, because even if the Germans did see what was coming, killing it was not going to be easy. Kinlan was going to use his Challenger IIs in their ideal role as a leading edge breakthrough weapon, and he was operating his tanks in tandem with his armored engineers. Expecting a more prepared defense, the British were going to use specialized equipment intending to clear pathways through minefields, and closely coordinate the advance with fire from the AS-90 Braveheart 155mm artillery.

The Germans could not see what was about to fall upon them, three full battalions of raging modern armor and mechanized infantry, but they could hear it. Hans Ludek was in a flak company attached to the German 15th Panzer Division, and could hear the dull rumble of ground thunder through the cold earth where he huddled, trying to get a few hours of fitful sleep. He was up, blinking, with a growing sense of alarm as he realized that distant rumble was the sound of an impending attack.

Rousing his mates on their dual purpose 88mm gun, he ran to the nearest field phone, intent on getting through to the artillery battery assigned to coordinate with his unit. The Germans had done everything that Rommel advised, laying mines and wire, digging in and sand bagging their heavy guns, entrenching light supporting infantry and pre-registering artillery in the zone of any expected attack. The preparations here were not as extensive as those of the Grossdeutschland Regiment further south, but the Germans had worked through the evening until well after midnight to mount a credible defense here. They were light on infantry, with only one battalion that had been moved down by the 90th Light, and the recon battalion of the 15th Panzer Division. But there were a good number of flak guns in all calibers here, and sixteen 88s.

All this was in readiness for the dawning of the third day of the battle, but the fire of that dawn started well before sunrise. There came that distant rumble, growing ever closer, more pervasive, until the men could feel the vibration of heavy vehicles beneath their boots. Guns were trained and loaded, crews ready, and then came the muffled crack of artillery and the whine of incoming shells.

They expected the normal scattered barrages of the British 25 pounders, a good weapon, but what they got instead was somewhat more. The AS-90s were lobbing well sited 155s, and advanced spotter teams had also been busy

that night, infiltrating forward with laser range finders and snipers to find prominent gun positions. Before the attack even began, Kinlan's men had painted a fairly accurate digital picture of the outer crust of the German defensive line. The DP 88s had very high profiles, and proved easy to spot, even when well dug in and camouflaged. The artillery that rained in was not a random or scattered barrage, but well sighted fire missions that were coming down on the German gun positions with fearful accuracy.

Corporal Hans Ludek was soon in a dugout trench, as the artillery fire found his battery, four heavy rounds, and one finding the number four gun, which was blasted to hell. The screams of the dying gun crews there would haunt him. Then he heard a hissing sound, looking to see the evil trails of rockets lancing in at the line, and he now knew that all the rumors of these new British wonder weapons were true.

The little toy Ludek had in his pocket was not something that had been cobbled together by one of the other men on his line. It was a Black Hornet Nano, a micro scale military drone developed for scouting by Prox Dynamics. The dream of a Norwegian developer who cut his design teeth making millions of helicopters for a toy company, the new PS-100 Black Hornet had full motion video cameras, and could fly like a small helicopter for up to twenty minutes to send back imagery to its operator. The British had used them successfully in Afghanistan, ideal for looking over walls, around corners or scouting over urban areas to look for hidden threats. In this case, they were being deployed by men observing for the AS-90 artillery.

They were also flying the Lockheed Martin Desert Hawk that night, and the Honeywell Tarantula Hawk. Developed to detect improvised explosive devices from the air, both were ideal for finding the German gun positions. In this case, Ludek's little find was the result of a weak battery, causing the tiny drone to falter and fail as it was returning to its operators after scouting and filming this segment of the German line.

Find them, kill them. This was the simple mathematics employed by Kinlan's 7th Brigade, and they had tools to solve that equation unlike anything ever seen by the armies of this day. The protective cover of darkness was swept aside, and the German gun positions were now being subjected to punishing artillery from the big 155mm rounds. Ludek's battery lost another gun before it was over, then came the missiles.

The British were now sending in rockets from the FV438 Swingfire ATGM vehicle, and also a section of FV102 Strikers. To the Germans such a

vehicle would eventually come to be known as the *Raketenjagdpanzer*, or 'rocket tank hunter.' In this case they were hunting big enemy 88 batteries. With a range of four kilometers, they were a good direct fire weapon against known target sites, and the ranks of 88s and 37mm flak batteries were thinned again. By the time the Challenger IIs rumbled forward they were taking very little fire at the two kilometer range mark.

Lieutenant Jake Martin was the number five tank in his section of Light Sabre One, designated light because it had only ten tanks that day. The other five had been sent to one of the companies of the Highland infantry to bulk up that unit and give it heavy armor support. Kinlan had distributed half of his 60 Challengers in that manner, sending five to each of his six infantry companies, retaining the remaining 30 tanks in three light Sabres of ten tanks each. Behind Sabre One was a company of Royal Engineers with a Titan, a Trojan and other armored combat engineering equipment. They had laid down an assault corridor through the minefields discovered by Lieutenant Reeves and his 12th Royal Lancer scout teams. Now the Challengers were going through, to be followed immediately by 1st Company, Highland Infantry in their 15 Warrior AFVs.

It was again to become an unstoppable assault. The Challengers blasted away at anything missed by the artillery and ATGMs, and then began to put on speed.

"Tally Ho!" shouted Martin as his Sabre moved out in front, firing as it went. They were just a kilometer short of the line when the first real enemy response came in the form of a heavy artillery barrage. The plaintive and frantic call of Hans Ludek had begged the German gunners to simply fire anything they had, and the pre-registered barrage was the only reprisal that was in any way threatening as Kinlan's attack came in. Yet it was not aimed fire, or corrected by observers who were all grounded by the fire from the British attack. It was just a random saturation barrage, intending to sodden the approached to the line with a rain of steel and high explosives.

There were several close misses, before Jake Martin's number five tank became the first unlucky Challenger to sustain damage, right off the left front quadrant of the tank, which then careened very near the exploding round as it hit the ground. The concussion was not anywhere as severe as it might have been had that round hit the tank but, as it was, it was enough to blow off the front left track, jarring the tank to one side as it slid into a low depression.

Martin was glad for his assault helmet that day, as he was jolted up and

hit the upper hatch. The gunner was thrown right and bruised his shoulder, but the driver was unharmed. He saw the red warning light flashing and immediately knew they had lost that track, kicking the vehicle to all stop. A rain of falling stones and earth kicked up by the round fell over the Challenger, and it sat in stunned stillness a moment, like a bruised behemoth, until the gunner rotated his turret left and right to test the traverse, glad to find it was still functional.

“Well, that’s done it. We’ve just lost anything we had in the battalion pool.” The men had taken up bets on whether or not they would lose any of their superb fighting tanks that day. “I was ten to one dead set that we’d come through without a scratch, but look at us now. Slipped a goddamned track, and that’s going to set us back about a hundred quid, lads.”

It was to be the least of their worries that day. Number five tank was stopped, but when Cooper punched in to raise the engineers he found his link was down.

“We’ve been knocked off the network,” he said. “I can’t get through to the engineers.”

“Then use the radio. They’ll know we’ve fallen off the matrix alright, but a call home to battalion HQ won’t hurt. We’ll need to be pulled out of here. Everyone fit?”

Bill Happer was still rubbing his shoulder. An amiable man the others called “Happy Happer,” he was on the business end of the tank as main gunner.

“Took a knock but all is well,” said Happer. “Gun traverse is clear, but we’re a bit off kilter in this depression.”

“Probably good we ended up here,” said Martin. “I’m opening up to have a look.” He had the upper turret hatch open and was up with night vision binoculars to see what was around them. The other four Challengers had thundered on, and the last of the Warriors of 1st Highlanders were passing them now. He saw one man taking note of his tank from an open hatch, and gave him the thumbs up to indicate all was well. Then he was down through the hatch and sealing it shut, enfolded in the armored shell of the tank again.

“Well then, we wait for the engineers. Sorry Happy. Looks like you won’t get much to shoot at today.” He looked at his watch, noting the time as 04:20, just a little over an hour before sunrise. He expected they would have engineering support within that hour, and settled in, looking to brew up some

tea on the built in BV, or boiling vessel, a nice feature of the Challenger tank.

“Who’s up for some Earl Grey,” he said lightly, not knowing how many cups away the engineers actually were.

* * *

The attack rolled on, merciless, and broke clean through the German Pakfront with thundering rage. Once through, the vehicles picked up speed, fanning out and shooting up rear area trucks, ammo stores, fuel canisters and anything else made by the hands of men. In time the 3rd Sabre on the right encountered the German artillery positions, and raised havoc there. The penetration had forced a wide bulge in the German line, right at the seam between the positions of 90th Light along Wadi Nullah to the north, and the salient made by 15th Panzer Division to the south.

Oberst Maximilian von Herff was leading the 15th Division now, newly appointed by Rommel during their rebuilding phase at Mersa Brega. Now Herff realized that a strong enemy penetration was above and well behind his *Schwerpunkt*, and he knew his demonstration attack towards Bir el Gobi had run its course.

“Get the men ready for immediate withdrawal,” he said, “and notify Grossdeutschland. Ask them to hold their positions until we can get back.”

Herff did not have to plead his case. For Hörnlein had been forewarned by Rommel that trouble was coming, and his men were dug in deep. Yet now the enemy was behind him as well, and not south where the distant rumble of vehicles on the move was now suspected to be the deception it truly was.

Rommel’s plan had met its first great snag, an attack at a time and place that he had not anticipated, and just as the first elements of the Recon Battalion of the Hermann Goering Brigade had clawed their way towards the outskirts of Tobruk.

The men on that front were weary, having fought at Rommel’s bidding all through the night in an effort to break through the last stubborn British resistance. The land fell in three tiers, each broken by an escarpment, and the main German attack was still on the road that led down to the cemetery on the middle tier, just south of the port. Just as a gap was pushed through, and a few sections of German armored cars raced on towards the port, Rommel got word that a strong attack was being mounted along the fortified line near the original point of the breakthrough into the fortress. The Germans had cleared

the pill boxes and block houses as far as R56, but now that strongpoint had fallen to a stealthy night attack by a fierce, yet elusive enemy.

“There’s some damn good infantry down there,” an officer reported. “They are pushing right along that fortified outer line. They move like shadows, but hit hard. They must have a good Schwere company attached, and a lot of machineguns.”

He was describing the assault of Colonel Gandar’s Royal Gurkhas, with each man a machine gunner in the eyes of the enemy, and hard hitting hand held AT rockets that could blast away any concerted German resistance in a targeted objective. The light infantry would move in rushes, deploy withering automatic weapons fire, smash enemy MG or gun positions, and then storm in, the long kukri knives flashing to cut down anything their guns and grenades had failed to kill. Some even took a souvenir or two, slicing off the ear of a fallen enemy. They were pushing towards point R53, and with only ten more strongpoints east of the main road, they were slowly shouldering the gate to the fortress shut.

Chapter 23

“Happer, track left! Target at 600 yards!”

The big turret of tank five from 1st Sable pivoted quickly, and Happy had the vehicle in his optics. The crack of the 120mm gun jolted the tank as it fired, and Lt. Martin saw the enemy armored car blown to fragments with a direct hit.

They had been at it now for three hours. German doctrine when faced with an enemy breakthrough was to mount an immediate counterattack at the base of the *Schwerpunkt*, and the Recon Battalion of the 15th Panzers had come up to do exactly that. There they found that the speed of the enemy advance had left the area strangely quiet. The fighting was already rolling off to the north and west, and here was only one solitary enemy tank, apparently disabled during the advance—but what a tank it was!

Oberst Hans Karl von Esebeck had come on the scene while withdrawing with the rest of the division. The sight of the massive, solitary tank out in a low depression some 500 meters from the German lines was enough to make him stop and take notice. He soon had his field glasses up and was studying the tank closely, seeing that the division recon battalion was mustering here, and ready to destroy the behemoth. But that was a thing easier said than done.

He watched as the first troop of armored cars rolled up to engage with their short barreled guns. The SdKfz 222s had 2cm autocannons, and they opened up with a blistering volley of fire, but Esebeck saw that it had no effect whatsoever. It was as if the gunners were simply throwing sand at the enemy tank, which was not one of the new cruiser tanks they had encountered the day before, and certainly not a Matilda, as it was easily twice the size of that older British tank, and its hide was even thicker. This had to be one of those big new enemy tanks, and through his field glasses, he could clearly see that it had thrown a track.

Then he saw the huge flat turret rotate, the long barreled gun traversing to fire, and was aghast at the results. The first armored car was literally lifted off the ground, a shattered, smoldering wreck. The other four in that troop beat a hasty retreat, and he heard an officer bawling for AT gun support.

There wasn't an 88 left standing on this segment of the field, but the infantry had a good 50mm gun, the best that they had available, and they

managed to get it into position to fire. It got off three rounds, two glancing harmlessly off the heavy armor on the beast, and then the tank fired that evil main gun again and obliterated the position. Esebeck was very near, and was hit with shrapnel from that explosion, wounded and pulled back by a medic team. He looked at a gritty Sergeant who had come to check on him.

“My God! What a monster,” he said. “It’s no good using our AT guns on the damn thing. Try mortars, or artillery, or get it with infantry. Get in close and use grenades, or anything else you can get your hands on. Find a demolition team!”

And so it began, one of those little duels that history seldom records, yet one that would have a dramatic impact on how those events would play out in the future days, months, and years of the war.

The Germans deployed three squads from the Recon Battalion and the first tried to make an advance, but the ground was simply too open. The behemoth rotated that turret, and this time a machinegun fired, the EX-34 Coaxial 7.62mm chain gun, a deadly and reliable weapon against infantry attack. The advancing squad was quickly pinned down, three men dead and two wounded.

“Smoke!” called a Sergeant, and the Germans got a 50cm mortar into action, lobbing a series of smoke rounds to try and give the infantry some cover for another advance, yet it made no difference. The enemy tank fired again, with uncanny accuracy, sending withering bursts of MG fire at one squad, then rapidly rotating the turret to engage a second squad trying to flank it. Another MG, on top of the tank, was also moving as if guided by unseen hands, its barrel spitting out well aimed rounds, though they could see no gun operator. It was a remotely operated system, that could be fired by Jake Martin from his post inside the Challenger, safe within that heavy armored shell. In just ten minutes, the tank had eaten through the first platoon, sitting there, implacable, and undaunted.

Two more platoons came up, and the Germans thought to try again. This time the attack was bigger, with upwards of 50 men advancing, but they got a nasty surprise. Jake Martin’s number five tank had the remotely controlled 40mm autogrenade launcher mounted on the turret top as well, and it showered the advance with grenades, breaking the attack and leaving little more than a few brave squad sections for the coaxial MG.

Esebeck was shocked to learn that within half an hour, they had wasted a full company of infantry trying to get at the tank, and all to no avail. He

ordered the battalion commander to stop his attack, and told him that, unless they could find a heavy caliber gun, there was no chance of storming the behemoth they had found at bay.

Inside tank five the crew had endured several 5cm round hits, the constant spray of MG fire and the crash of mortar fire falling close by, though the Germans had been unable to get a round directly on the tank. It would not matter if they did, as the small 50mm mortars they were using would do no more harm than any other weapon they had employed. Esebeck's assessment had been correct. It was going to take a heavy round, of considerable caliber, to make any impression on the tank. He had men out looking for a 150mm infantry gun, or a stray artillery piece they might get into firing position, but there was always the threat from that massive main gun on the tank, as big as any heavy artillery Esebeck could find, and deadly accurate, even through the thick smoke the Germans had deployed.

This thing can see in the dark, he thought. It can find our men right through smoke. Nothing we use on it has even put a nick on the damn thing, and it has cut through this first recon company in half an hour. I could throw the whole goddamned battalion at the thing and it would be like water flowing over a rock, assuming we got men anywhere close to that beast alive. It's a living, breathing fortress, and even with a broken leg, it just sits out there impervious to any weapon we possess.

He looked up at the smoky sky, taking a deep breath. Perhaps not every weapon, he thought. "Hauptmann Werner!"

"Sir!"

"Get on the radio. Where is that *Stuka* support we were promised? Tell them we have a nice fat target for them! It will take at least a 500 pound bomb to have any chance of killing that monster. Pull your men out, the division is withdrawing, and we go too." He winced with the bite of that shrapnel wound, though it was not life threatening. Half an hour later they were moving northwest when they heard the drone of aircraft overhead.

A section of planes were up answering Esebeck's call, and looking to find a target that had been marked by a single purple smoke round. Leutnant Hubert Pölz was in one of those planes, and he was feeling lucky that day.

Lieutenant Jake Martin had had enough tea for one morning, and there were entirely too many uninvited guests about. Where were the bloody Engineers? They had put in a call an hour ago, but the company assigned to the Highlanders had apparently moved on with the attack. They had been on

the other side of the action, moving fast with the Warriors on that flank. By the time they realized a tank from 1st Sabre was no longer on the network, they were already ten kilometers to the northwest. So they put in a call to Brigade HQ to see if there was anything in the stables there. Kinlan had a small engineering detachment with his HQ park, and it was soon dispatched to look for tank five.

By the time it was drawing near, a squadron of six *Stukas* were overhead, led by Pölz, who had an elaborate hand-painted snake along the fuselage of his plane, stretching from the tail to the engine, where its mouth opened right near the nose mounted cannon, the white forked tongue licking up towards the prop. The *Stukas* saw the purple smoke marking their target, and the first subflight of three came in a steep dive. Three bombs fell, one wide, but two others in a straddle that rocked the tank, spilling what was left of Jake Martin's last cup of tea.

"Bloody hell! That was damn close! We're a nice fat sitting duck here. Better tell Brigade we'll need air defense support, and that quickly."

He thumbed the radio to call in for more support, but found the system dead. Shrapnel, shell and small arms fire, had worked the tank over hard that morning. They had been hit by 20mm rounds, a Pak 50 AT gun, MG fire, and fragments from near miss mortar fire, one round eventually coming right down on the tank's turret, which sent a cheer through the ranks of the watching German infantry. It was quashed when the tank simply pivoted that massive turret and blasted a light flak battery to oblivion, completely unscathed.

But all that enemy fire had sheared away sensors, antennae, and the shock of those 500 pound bombs, even though they fell some 20 meters off the target, had damaged some of the internal electronics. Yet Martin and his beleaguered crew could be thankful that the Air Defense Company at Brigade HQ had seen the planes and, knowing they had a few vehicles out there stopped for recovery, they deployed forward with a tracked Alvis Stormer system. It mounted eight ready Starstreak missiles in the launcher, with another twelve stowed. It saw the incoming planes, but by the time they came within firing range, the first three had made an attack. The last three faced a gauntlet of well named high velocity missiles, the fastest short range system in the world. They accelerated quickly to Mach 3.5, scoring the sky with their contrails as they leapt up to get at the enemy planes.

Two of the three *Stukas* were hit in the middle of their attack dive by the

three sub-munitions carried in each rocket. It was a lucky day for Pölz, and his aim was also very good that morning. He got his 500 pound bomb off, and then veered away in his screaming dive, with one missile streaking by, narrowly missing his plane. In fact, it was not after him. The system was not a fire and forget weapon that traced targets by radar or infrared. It relied on the aiming vehicle to use lasers for guidance, and could track only two simultaneous targets at one time. The wing mates in that subflight had been its prey. Pölz had not been painted by the aiming lasers that were guiding the missiles in, and he escaped in a low evasive maneuver, screaming over the last remnants of the German recon battalion, and sending the men cheering again when they saw the results of his attack. He had not scored a straddle or a near miss. It was a direct hit!

No matter how well protected the tank was, even a hit within a few meters by a 500 pound bomb was enough to cause serious damage. The modern US GBU-12 Paveway II bomb also had a 500 pound warhead and, during Operation Desert Storm, it was the tank busting weapon of choice, often used by F-111F bombers to savage Iraqi armor. Though the British Challenger II was better protected than the Soviet tanks faced in that battle, the fact remained that the explosive power, kinetic shock, and sheer concussive force of a 500 pound bomb striking a modern tank was going to read “kill” on the record of any pilot who had the skill to put it there.

Leutnant Hubert Pölz had done exactly that, and it was the last cup of tea that Jake Martin would savor that morning, the 10th of May, 1941, the day the first Challenger II died at the hands of enemy fire. The troops of I/33 Light Flak that were still in the area held their breath, halfway expecting the enemy behemoth to rotate that turret and belch fire and wrath at them again. For the last three hours it had held off the entire Recon Battalion, inflicting heavy casualties in the process. If just one of these new enemy tanks could do this, and this one with a slipped track and unable to maneuver, then what was happening to the northwest where the main enemy attack was still underway. They shuddered to think of that, wary as they crept just a little closer to the stricken enemy.

When the smoke and debris cleared, the squat shape of the tank was still there in the depression, scarred and blackened by the blast of the bomb, still as death, and with a fire burning there that slowly sent a thick clot of black smoke up over the scene.

They watched for some minutes, waiting, until they finally came to

believe the monster was dead. Slowly, a few sections of infantry began to pick their way towards the scene, until they heard a dull growl, and the rumble of something coming over a slight elevation rise some meters off. There, cresting the low hillock, was the most threatening looking armored beast they had ever seen. It looked like a great metal crab, with three arms and a huge spiked, V shaped shovel that glowered like the teeth of a shark.

The men turned and fled for their lives, as the Trojan AVRE came on the scene, its 7.62 MG spitting out fire in warning that sent any other man in the vicinity to a rapid retrograde movement. Riding on a Challenger chassis, and with the same heavy Chobam armor, the Trojan was even more threatening looking than the enemy the *Stukas* had finally managed to kill. With the retreat of 15th Panzers now gaining momentum, no one left on the scene wanted anything to do with that tank. The last of the infantry leapt atop a German flak carrier and sped away, preferring to be alive with a whopper of a story to tell, than to be dead and ground beneath the tracks and shovel of that evil looking engineering tank.

So it was that Kinlan's Royal Engineers found their fallen comrade, and soon had the Challenger hitched up for recovery, with a troop of infantry standing by on overwatch in a pair of AFVs. They dragged the fallen behemoth away, back over the ground of that breakthrough zone, until they reached the engineering park near Wadi Nullah. They were under strict orders that no modern vehicle was ever to be left on the field to be found by the enemy, and now they would pick over the bones of this carcass, to recover anything of any value it still might hold, including the remains of Jake Martin, Cooper, and "Happy Happer, all dead from the shock of that hit.

By this time Kinlan had surmised that his attack had gone off as expected. All the German formations cut off to the south were now hot footing it back towards Bir Hacheim, and the 90th light, after putting in a futile counterattack near the northern rim of the breakthrough zone, was now also disengaging and falling back to the northwest. O'Connor's 2nd and 7th Armored were nipping at the heels of the retreating enemy, but the German formations were still in good order, moving in hastily formed columns and leaving behind small rear guards that imposed caution on the WWII era tankers.

As for Kinlan's 7th Brigade, he gave orders for the unit to stop and reform on a road that led north towards a small settlement called Acroma. If they followed that road to reach that place, they would be behind all the

forces Rommel was hastily extracting from the Tobruk fortified zone, cutting off the Trento and Ariete Armored divisions in the process.

“General,” said Kinlan. “I can have my brigade reassembled within the hour. Do you want me to continue north towards the coast?”

“Well,” said O’Connor, “we haven’t any idea what’s out there, aside from three or four enemy divisions. Frankly, given the situation concerning your use of ammunition, it might be best for you to wait until we can collect the rest of the army. My own brigades are well scattered to the south, and I’ve little in the way of infantry prepared to move west at the moment. Hold until we get news of what’s happening at Tobruk.”

Chapter 24

Rommel took the news of the enemy counterattacks with a quiet, restrained frustration. He had stopped O'Connor, baiting him with that feint against Bir el Gobi by Herff's 15th Panzers. He had rejoiced when the Italian Ariete Division had bravely fought all night on that first day to lay bare the entrance to Tobruk's fortified outer ring. Then he had sent in his shock troops, the handpicked men of the Hermann Goering Brigade, and they had made remarkable gains in the last 18 hours, pushing all the way to King's Cross and Fort Solano. In all this fighting, there had been no sign of the enemy heavy armor, and he was hopeful it still remained in Syria. Now this.

Herff was reporting a strong enemy attack had pushed right through the defensive line to his north. That was our one weak spot, thought Rommel. Herff must have moved a little too far south with his feint, and it extended his flank there where the German line ran north along Wadi Nullah to reach the positions held by the 90th Light.

Flak guns and just two battalions of infantry held that zone, and now it was Rommel's turn to bite his lip when his enemy declined to fall on that hardened southern flank where he had posted Hörnlein's elite troops in waiting.

They aren't stupid, he thought. This O'Connor is a cagey one. He danced around that flank all day yesterday, but he was merely probing, waiting, and now I see why. They were staging for this attack!

The reports coming in from the front set off that pulse of fear and alarm in him. Tanks—massive, fast, hard hitting enemy tanks, and this time in good numbers. They were breaking through that exposed segment of the line, and would cut off both 15th Panzers and Grossdeutschland in little time. He could not leave them there, and Herff, knowing he could not sit in place, had already begun to disengage, always a dangerous and often costly operation of war.

Now this damn infantry attack on the outer line of the fortifications presented another problem. He had all of the Hermann Goering Brigade, and most of the fighting elements of his own 5th Light Division, deep inside the perimeter. If the enemy was able to re-occupy those damn block houses

astride the main road... This place could become a cauldron of doom, he thought.

We've got round the flank of the Australian 9th, and the enemy was throwing every scratch unit they could find onto the line. His crack battalions were pushing on through, but the rest of the Australian 9th Division had stayed in its defensive positions, and Rommel knew the Italians on the other side of that wall would not be enough to force them out.

We had to fight all night to penetrate this far. The harbor is just another four or five kilometers, and by all accounts I already have a few armored cars out there. One of my staffers jubilantly sent out a message that Tobruk had fallen, and I'll have that man stewed! The Goering Brigade fought hard, but the men are exhausted. How far will that penetration to the south go? Which direction will it turn? North, of course, they will turn north and then they'll have 90th Light in a cauldron as well. Where were those *Stukas* I was promised?

Even as he said that, he knew where they were—back on the air strips waiting to take off. The attack had come in well before dawn. I'm told the British put in artillery fire that was so accurate it obliterated most of our 88s before they ever had a chance to fire. It was Bir el Khamsa all over again. Now these tanks come through, and we simply cannot stop them. Come sunrise, let's hope the *Stukas* have some good hunting, otherwise.... It is a long way back to Mersa Brega again.

This attack had completely reversed the situation that had looked so promising over the last three days. Now his plan had failed. He knew it in his bones, in spite of a stubborn streak that wanted to refuse to admit that. He was to be the German General beaten not only once, but twice, and that thought scalded him, reddening his neck and cheeks.

Yes, Tobruk was falling, but it would not be taken that day. He could not stay here. Herff knew what was necessary now, and when the Headquarters of the 90th Light reported enemy movement well behind his front line and coming north, Rommel's worst fears were realized. He had to withdraw.

"Get a message to Herff and Hörnlein. They are to fall back on our depot at Bir Hacheim at once. As for our troops inside the fortress, get them out—now!"

"But Herr General, we have broken through. Our men can see the port!"

"Yes? Well I hope they enjoy the view, because if we are still here by

noon, they'll most likely be shipping out through that port—to a British prison camp! Now get them out I tell you!”

* * *

General Montgomery also had a good view of the harbor that morning, aghast to see the arrival of German armored cars! They had not come in strength, and could only put out harassing fire across the bay where he had his headquarters, but he knew that situation could change quickly.

If this lot is here, then they pushed through our blocking position at King's Cross. I threw every man I could find on the line, flak units, air field service personnel, rail crews, medics and supply troops. I've trained every battery of artillery we had at them, but damn if they just keep coming.

He put down his binoculars, annoyed by the rattle of an enemy machinegun raking the quay. Then he spied that Martini-Enfield rifle the Sergeant Major had fetched for him, common with the Australian and New Zealand troops at this stage of the war, and decided enough was enough.

“Sir, best take cover. We're under fire!”

“I can see that you blithering fool! And do you suppose I'm going to just sit here and take it?” Monty had that rifle up and was taking aim, his beady eye sighting down the long barrel, and his thin finger hard on the trigger. He fired three shots, more to quell his own frustration than to do any real harm to the enemy. Later he would lord over the moment, saying he had to take a rifle in hand himself to stop Rommel at Tobruk. At that time he knew nothing of Brigadier Kinlan's attack, or that his own situation would soon find relief with Rommel's order to pull his men out of the fortress.

As if those three rounds had marked the high water line of Rommel's fortunes, and the low ebb of his own, word soon came that there were signs the Germans were pulling back. They had assault squads poised to make an attack on Fort Solano, and Montgomery fully expected his rifle might soon have to be put to use in earnest, but that moment never came. Rommel was pulling out. One report after another came in, as the *Fallschirmjagers* and troops of the Goering Brigade made a skillful withdrawal, much to the relief of the weary defenders on the last thin line of resistance.

By all rights, that staffer Rommel had promised to stew had been correct. He had, indeed, taken Tobruk, but he could not stay there long enough for that to become a fact of war, or to savor any sense of the victory.

Instead he was now planning how he might get his army to some ground he could hold, and save what was left of his vaunted new Afrika Korps.

For his part, Montgomery would make the most of the heroic stand his reserve units had made, though most of the 1st Army Tank Brigade had been shredded and the Carpathians badly mauled as well. Yet he held, Montgomery of Tobruk, and that played well at home. But another name was soon in the papers as well, that of General O'Connor, and the story of his 7th Armored Brigade was also making the press.

The only rub was that the men of the real 7th Armored Brigade had nothing whatsoever to do with that attack, and when they heard the news later that they were being trumpeted back home, they simply scratched their heads. The bloody reporters got at least one thing correct—they had stopped Rommel again, and that was enough.

* * *

The Germans and Italians fell back on Gazala, and the area near Mechili where an airfield and forward supply depot had been established. Rommel spent all the next day coordinating the withdrawal, taking stock of what he still had in hand, and trying to determine whether he could hold on. He screened the approach to Derna through the airfield at Timimi with the Italian formations, and consolidated his Afrika Korps further south, below Mechili, guarding the desert track that would cut across Cyrenaica to Agedabia, and eventually reach his starting point at Mersa Brega.

Back home in Germany, Hitler had been busy with the final preparations for Barbarossa, but had taken some interest when he learned Rommel had begun to advance again. The reports that he had swept over Cyrenaica, running the British and Australians out of the Jebel country, and capturing many airfields in the process had been encouraging. Then came the news that Tobruk had been invested, and an assault there was in the works. He was dining in Berlin when an aide came in with the report Rommel's staffer had sent, that Tobruk had fallen.

"Good news," he said over his wine. "Though it hardly matters now. It's a little too late to have much of an effect on the real war. That comes in just a few days time, when Sergei Kirov gets more than a little surprise for picking the wrong side of this business. That said, send General Rommel my congratulations, and ask him how soon he plans to be at the Suez Canal this

time.”

When Rommel got that message he was sitting in his tent at Mechili airfield, reviewing reports on the action that had thankfully concluded with nightfall on the 11th of May. He was taking stock of his forces, chastened again and forced on the defensive, with all thoughts of offensive operations long gone.

15th Panzers suffered 30% casualties, and lost a good deal of its flak elements, and some artillery as well. I/8th Panzer Battalion had 15 Pz IIs, 16 Pz IIIs and only 5 Pz IVs, a total of 36 tanks, losing another 40 during the three day battle. II/8th Battalion fared a little better, and still had 58 of its initial allotment of 80 tanks. The grenadier battalions had suffered equal losses in infantry and trucks. 90th Light division would again make that name more suitable. It had been built up to a full three regiments before the offensive commenced, but now could muster manpower only equivalent to two regiments. The vaunted Herman Goering Brigade had taken severe casualties as well. Only Hörnlein’s Regiment seems to have come off unscathed. Grossdeutschland is largely intact, he thought.

“It took us three months to build up forces and supplies for this attack,” he muttered to his Chief of Staff, “then just three days of fighting to wreck the entire Korps again. Where were all those *Stukas* I was promised? Where was the navy? They should have been off the coast pounding Tobruk the whole time!”

Colonel Klaus von dem Borne listened, his eyes on his report from the quartermaster. “It won’t be a question of supplies this time,” he said. “We still have plenty of fuel for our tanks and trucks.”

“Yes? Well it’s a pity we no longer have the tanks to use it.”

“It has been worse. That attack came in darkness. That is why you did not get your *Stuka* support. Once dawn came the planes were up, but by then the enemy had already achieved a breakthrough—and those rockets! They took a terrible toll on the air squadrons. We lost 18 planes before noon. As for the navy, the *Hindenburg* has been recalled to Gibraltar. We only just got the news. By now they will be in the Atlantic.”

Rommel shook his head. “They are pulling out, Borne. The navy took a beating in that last big engagement, and they want nothing more to do with the Royal Navy here. We finally take Malta, and now control both the western and central Mediterranean, but we do not use this advantage to really move the forces here that will make a difference. One more division... If they

had sent me the 1st Mountain Division as promised, then I would not have had to commit 5th Light to the action at Tobruk. Goering's troops fought hard. In another six hours we would have taken that harbor. If I had Kübler's troops assaulting behind them, then 5th Light would have been available in reserve when this enemy counterattack started. For that matter, 10th Panzer is just sitting in France doing nothing, and that division could have made all the difference here."

"It's the Russian operation, sir. Everything is being nailed down in readiness for Barbarossa. We were lucky to get the supplies and troops assigned in these last three months, particularly Grossdeutschland."

"Well as it was, I had no reserve," Rommel complained. "Once they broke through we had no recourse. It was either withdraw or be cut off."

"Even 5th Light may not have been enough..." Von Borne was a realist. He had collected the reports from the officers of 15th Panzers, and the flak units that faced the enemy counterattack. "It was those god awful heavy tanks again, same as before. That defense was hastily mounted. We did not expect them to hit us in the center. Down south Hörnlein stood his ground as ordered, but the center was weak, and I think that, even if you had 5th Light in hand to throw in, it would have been much the same."

"This isn't over," said Rommel, stubbornly resisting the notion of defeat again. "We have withdrawn to better defensive positions here, that is all. We will get more tanks up from Tripoli and then consider what to do. Thank god the enemy doesn't have the sense to get after us now. How do we stop these tanks!" The frustration in Rommel's voice was apparent.

"One was damaged by our artillery fire."

"One?"

"That night attack was difficult to cope with. The artillery fires were not as heavy as we planned, but yes, we stopped one, and after dawn the *Stukas* got it."

"So they can be killed, if we get the air support. For now, we must assume a defensive posture again."

"We're safe for the moment," said von Borne. "The British have not pursued us west. They seem content to consolidate around Tobruk, and that is another mystery. They used this new armor in Syria to stop 9th Panzer Division, then just pulled it off the line. And they have done the very same thing here. You would think they would exploit these breakthroughs, but each time the hammer falls they set it aside."

“They don’t really have the strength to go on the offensive yet,” said Rommel. “Their infantry divisions can’t push us—only this new armored force. They aborted their offensive in Syria against 9th Panzer Division to send those tanks back here. So this tells me that they do not have them in any great numbers, possibly only this one brigade sized unit from what we’ve been able to piece together. They counterattack to hold the line, and thus far that has been enough, yes? Operations have ground to a halt in Syria, and now we have been stopped again here. This big strategy of squeezing the British in a pincer operation was doomed to fail from the very first. I needed Kübler’s troops here, and another good panzer division. And forces committed to Syria were also inadequate.”

“I’m afraid there will be no serious reinforcement here now for some time,” said von Borne. “Everything is going to Russia. I have even heard they are going to recall Steiner’s troops from Syria. In fact, I would not be surprised to find that Grossdeutschland is taken from us soon. You must prepare yourself for the worst.”

Rommel was pouring over those terrible loss reports von Borne had handed him, his mind searching the days ahead as he might peer out into this forsaken desert, seeing nothing there but endless, lifeless stretches of barren land. It was then that a staffer came in with the Führer’s congratulations on his capture of Tobruk. The man saluted as he handed off the note, his eyes bearing the weight of what had just happened to the Afrika Korps. Rommel gave him a wan look, returning his salute.

When Borne had left, and he was again alone, he quietly read the message, a grim smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. Then he slowly crumbled it in his clenched fist.

Part IX

Big Red

“And having once chosen, never seek to return to the crossroads of that decision, for even if one chooses wrongly, the choice cannot be unmade.”

— *Jacqueline Carey*

Chapter 25

Karpov watched as the *Orenburg* climbed for the safety of the advancing storm, risking the tempestuous wind there rather than face battle after having been caught by surprise.

The *Orenburg*, he thought. Volkov's flagship! That would not have been committed here unless this was a major operation, just as Rudkin had it in that book. He thinks he is going to destroy my entire fleet, but so far my little surprise here has worked as I hoped. I was meant to be here, he thought. The line of my fate is simply too strong for time to disregard me, nor will I be marooned in the past as we were just now, even if that left me in a very interesting position to destroy Volkov in 1909. No, this is the way it should be, ship to ship, face to face, man to man, only it looks as though Volkov wants no part of this fight, if he's aboard that ship. I have chosen, and there is no going back now.

"Radio room says there are three enemy airships at low elevation north of Ilanskiy," said Tyrenkov, rushing in with the latest report.

"Low elevation? That can only mean they are landing troops. Any word as to what is happening on the ground?"

"There was some scattered fighting east of Kansk, sir. It looks like some of Volkov's troops landed there, but they have withdrawn."

"For Ilanskiy," said Karpov quickly. "He thought he was going to catch us all napping here, and he must have brought troops on every airship, but it still won't be enough. We have the entire 11th Siberian Division there. Kolchak wanted to know why it wasn't sent to the Ob river line? Now he knows. Speaking of Kolchak, what about *Irkutsk* and *Novosibirsk*?" Karpov was hoping his last two airships might be heading west.

"Last report still had both airships over Lake Baikal. Kolchak is wary of giving up his only heavy air support on the Japanese frontier."

"Damn the Japanese, they haven't even entered the war yet! The fight is here. Signal Kolchak again. Tell him *I* am here now, and I need those damn ships! What about *Talmenka*?" That was his last ship, another T-Class heavy cruiser like the stricken *Tomsk*.

"At least six hours away, sir. She was the only ship patrolling the Ob River line, and is re-provisioning at Chemororsk."

"Tell them to get here as soon as possible, and any troops at Kansk as

well.”

“Nothing there but light garrison troops and three squadrons of Tartar Cavalry.”

“Send the cavalry after those troops Volkov landed east of that city. If they cannot make contact, then they are to follow the main rail line and come to Ilanskiy.”

Karpov was pacing, his footfalls hard on the metal plated deck of the main gondola. He had this ship designed with a wide central walkway there just so he could do this, an old habit when things got hot on the bridge of any ship he commanded, and his field glasses hung from a clip on a nearby bulkhead beam, just as they did aboard *Kirov*.

So I can't count on help from Kolchak, he thought. I'll only have *Abakan* and *Angara*, already hovering over Ilanskiy, and if Volkov can pull his surviving ships together we could still be in for a tough fight. No matter, that was what I was sent here for. Yes?

“Signal Big Red,” he said confidently. “Tell Captain Alenin that Admiral Karpov sends his regards. Well done! Have him forward a report on his ship as soon as they can control their fires. Now let us steer directly to the fight at Ilanskiy! All ahead full!”

“All engines ahead full sir,” said Bogrov.

It was then that a runner handed Tyrenkov the report he had been waiting for, and he read it with some misgivings. “Sir,” he began. “We may not have the full 11th Siberian Division after all.”

Karpov spun on his heels, a flash of anger in his eyes. “What do you mean?”

“I've just received word from Colonel Ivanov on the ground. He tells me that two rifle regiments were sent west by rail three days ago when the enemy opened that offensive on the Ob River line. He has only his regiment at Ilanskiy, and the Motor Rifle battalion was recalled to Irkutsk yesterday.”

“On who's order?”

“Kolchak, sir. He was the only one who could have cut those orders.”

“Damn that man! I gave specific orders that the 11th was to stand here at Ilanskiy.”

“It seems the confusion caused by our recent absence resulted in some alarm here sir. When that big offensive started, Kolchak tried to assume command from Irkutsk.”

“That *idiot!*” Karpov did not mince words, not even in front of Bogrov

and the other men on the bridge. “Doesn’t he realize what’s happening here? Volkov started that offensive three days ago to try and compel us to do exactly what Kolchak ordered—weaken the garrison at Ilanskiy. He knows damn well that his troops out west will never break through and get 700 kilometers east to have anything to do with this battle. Kolchak is a fool! He played right into Volkov’s hands. I should have dealt with him long ago—before I left for that conference with the Soviets.”

He steamed with the news, his eyes searching this way and that, driven by the fever of his mind. “Very well,” he said at last. “Then we get our troops on the ground as soon as possible. Were there any men aboard our other airships?”

“No sir, they were all rigged for air operations.”

“Then get your men into their parachutes on the double.”

“Sir... Your personal guard?”

“That’s at least one more heavy company we can get into the defense,” said Karpov. “But we must move quickly. We’ll maneuver the ship south of the town and you’ll have safe ground for an air drop. But I can’t sacrifice any elevation. The men will have to deploy by parachute. You will have to lead them, Tyrenkov.”

“Understood, sir.”

“Very good. First contact that Motor Rifle Battalion and get it turned around and headed back here immediately. Then get your men to Ilanskiy. Get to that railway inn, Tyrenkov. You know what’s at stake.”

I certainly do, thought Tyrenkov. Yes, I do indeed. He saluted crisply, turning to leave.

* * *

The *Orenburg* emerged from the edge of a darkening cloud, and hovered in the sky, glowering at the two distant airships over the town. Far below, Kymchek could see the bright flashes of heavy weapons fire, and the smoke and fire of battle west of the town. The troops landed by the Southern Division, four heavy companies, had already arrived. Three more had been safely put on the ground by the 1st Division, but of the four ships in the Caspian Division, only *Anapa* and *Armavir* had safely landed their troops, just east of Kansk.

That’s just nine heavy companies, he thought. Volkov calls them

battalions, but they'll be matched by a full regiment of the 11th Siberian Division. Lucky for us that the enemy took the bait and moved most of this division to the Ob River line three days ago. We'll have no more than a Brigade sized force here, and it will still be some time forming up. As for the air battle, we'll need *Pavlodar* and *Talgar* back as soon as possible. It was foolish to detach those ships so early in the action. Then again, we thought we outnumbered the enemy twelve to five at that time, and so I can see why Volkov made that decision. It does put them in position to get back here with at least two more companies, but we may need more than that if Karpov gets any help from the East.

Down on the ground, the battle Kymchek was musing on was slowly beginning. The Tartar cavalry at Kansk had the word to move east along the main rail line, and to look for enemy troops along the way. Two rifle companies from *Armavir* and *Anapa* had landed there safely, lucky to be alive after the thermobaric bomb that had immolated *Salsk* with all hands aboard, and the hot action that had blasted *Sochi* from the sky. This force was hastening east along the rail line, a small platoon of infantry on light motorcycles standing as a rearguard.

A battalion of Tartar cavalry came upon them, the report of a machinegun firing from a concealed position north of the rail, and gunning down three horsemen. Hailing from the Upper Volga region and the Ural Mountains, these were big, hardy men, with swarthy beards, broad shoulders and dark eyes. Most had rifles, but in close combat they would seldom dismount to fight on foot, preferring the speed and mobility of fighting from horseback. Their mounts enabled them to move swiftly through the wooded terrain of the taiga, going places where no motorized formation could follow, and easily eluding most infantry forces that might try. And when they charged, their bright curved sabers were enough to unnerve all but the most stalwart of infantry.

The days of massed cavalry charges were long over, ended by the carnage a few good machineguns could inflict. But here, in the thick terrain and woods, broken only by occasional clearings, they could emerge unseen, and fall upon their enemies in a storm of violence. The men of that small motorcycle platoon were wary now, wondering if these were merely scouts at the far side of the clearing where they had set up their blocking position. They had two light 7.62mm MGs, the Degtyaryov DP-28, with a small circular cartridge on the top that had prompted the troops using it to call it the

“record player,” as the magazine resembled a gramophone record, slowly revolving as the weapon fired. First in service in the year 1928, it was so reliable that many were still being used as late as 2011, where militants used DP-28s in the uprisings of the “Arab Spring.”

The gunners lay prone, seeing more movement at the far side of the clearing, and then sporadic rifle fire zipped into the ground nearby. They returned fire, spitting out rounds from their record players, a song of death that was the first mournful tune of the battle that was now beginning. Then, to their surprise, a thunder of hooves and deep throated voices came from the right. Their enemies had only teased them with rifle fire, while stealthily moving around their flank, covered by the heavy woods the MG platoon thought were impassible. The horsemen charged along the open ground at the eastern edge of the clearing, coming from the north instead of the west, rifles firing on the run, and cruel sabres flashing. Most of the platoon ran for their motorcycles, hoping to escape, and were ridden down.

Farther east, two recon companies of the 11th Siberian, motorized in light trucks, had formed up astride the main rail line about four kilometers west of Ilanskiy. The remainder of the regiment, all infantry, was deployed in a wide horseshoe defensive position around the town, which had marshy wetland to the northeast that made that flank impractical for any infantry attack. The three battalions, nine rifle companies in all, were enough to set up a good defensive perimeter on the exposed sides of the town. The rail line from the east bent around that marshy ground and ran north into the town itself, and it was also guarded by the regimental engineer company. For heavy weapons support, there were two batteries of artillery, positioned in the open ground around the main rail station.

Volkov’s forces had finally assembled east of the town, north and south of the rail line leading to Kansk. Colonel Levkin gathered his men, a tall officer in black uniform and grey overcoat. He had taken stock of his forces, four companies from the 1st Division, three from the Southern Division, and two more behind him, landing near Kansk and the last to arrive on the scene, as they had been harried by the Tartars that were skillfully dogging their march east. A man of forty years, Levkin was under no illusions that this would be the easy fight Volkov had hoped to find here. He had only seven companies in hand at the moment, and one look at the map told him what he needed to do.

“Lieutenant!” He shouted at an officer from the rifle company off

Sarkand. “Take your entire battalion and occupy that hamlet southwest of the town—all four companies.”

There were two outlying features he wanted to control at once, one a small farm beyond a low rise just west of the town, and further south, a large hamlet called Sverdlova. Once he occupied that, his men would be just south of the main rail station, and also in a good position to strike due east and cut the Trans-Siberian rail line. Any help the enemy received would most likely come from the east.

His men moved out, swinging south in short rushes, while an MG platoon, supported by engineers and a 76mm recoilless rifle team, moved on the farm. Volkov’s men had little in the way of heavy weapons. There was no artillery, its weight precluding easy air transport. Instead they would rely on small sections of 82mm mortars, their machineguns, and three 76mm recoilless rifle sections. All the rest of their fire support would have to come from the six airships that were slowly emerging from the clouds, some still smoking from their earlier duels with the Siberian fleet. Colonel Levkin hoped the enemy would not have too much in the way of heavy firepower here, and that Volkov’s airships would tip the balance when they got down to a ground support elevation, but he was wrong.

Even as his men were gathering themselves, a small train was chugging along the rail line to the east. It was led by an armored engine, its top and sides bristling with machineguns and flak guns, Rail Security Engine #4. Behind it would come the first unexpected surprise, a pair of large railroad artillery pieces that had been dubbed “Siberia” and “Baikal.” They had once been machined for the 12-inch gun turrets of a *Kronshtadt* Class battlecruiser that had never been completed. The guns, 305mm monsters, had been captured from a factory in Omsk, and then rigged out as big rail guns by the Siberians three years ago. Both had been at Irkutsk, where Kolchak kept his watchful eye on the Japanese, as they could fire all the way across the wide sweeping curve of the great Lake Baikal. Karpov had wrangled them away, and was planning to move them to the Ob River line defenses near Novosibirsk. As it happened, they were only twenty kilometers east when this action started.

Now they were in the rail yards of Ilanskiy, their long barrels pointed west at the unsuspecting troopers of the gathering Grey Legion. There came a loud roar, and a resounding boom as the first gun fired, the whine of the shell coming quickly before the first big explosion fell just beyond the lines of the

legionnaires. Colonel Levkin craned his neck over his shoulder, eyes wide with surprise.

“What in god’s name was that?”

‘Siberia’ had announced itself with that booming challenge, and the battle for control of this insignificant backwaters settlement, the crossroads of fate and time itself, was soon underway.

Chapter 26

High above Ilanskiy, above the slate grey sleet of the rain, hovering over the gathering storm, the big airships climbed for the crucial advantage of elevation. The troops on the ground below would have to wait until the battle in the skies was resolved before either side would gain the support, or endure the wrath of fire from above.

Abakan and *Andarva* had received the order to climb to their best elevation, and now they saw the enemy riding the rolling grey storm clouds ahead. Three S-Class Zeppelins, *Sarkand*, *Samarkand*, and *Saran* were formed in a great triangle, their silver noses pointed upwards as they climbed. Behind them, some distance off and much higher, was the fleet flagship *Orenburg*, bigger than any other airship over the town at that moment. Only *Tunguska* could outmatch her, but Karpov was still some ten to twelve kilometers to the south, completing the airdrop operation for Tyrenkov's "Siberian Rangers."

The three S-Class Zeppelins all carried eight 76mm recoilless rifles. Both the Siberian A-Class airships were similarly armed, except the gun on their forward command gondola had been replaced with a heavier caliber 105 when Karpov took command. They were fast at 130kph, but could only climb to a ceiling of about 9000 meters, which would not be an issue until a larger airship appeared on the scene. Unless *Orenburg* descended to join the action, the S and A class Zeppelins were of largely the same class, and the battle would be decided by skill and maneuver.

Already the Siberian captains were seeing their best chance was to take the fight as high as possible, without drawing *Orenburg's* attention, and keeping both their ships in a tight formation to maximize firepower. *Abakan* led the way, followed closely by *Angara*, and they were maneuvering to try and catch one of the three S-Class ships in a position where its own bulk would shield them from the other two ships in the enemy formation.

The 76mm guns were effective out three to five thousand meters, but as in most ship to ship combat at sea, closing the range increased the probability of good hits. The duel that resulted saw *Saran* taking the brunt of the Siberian firepower, raked by ten of their combined 76mm guns, the others being top mounted and unable to bear on the target, given the fact that the Siberians had

just a slight elevation edge. *Sarkand* and *Samarkand* reacted quickly, blowing ballast to pop up and avoid the intervening mass of *Saran*, and getting even elevation with the two Siberian ships. They blasted away, both ships concentrating on the *Angara*, and the result was that both *Saran* and *Angara* were soon smoking with heavy fire damage, and losing altitude with many punctured gas bags.

The new Captain of the *Abakan*, Melnikov, knew he could not hang in the fight long against both the other S-Class airships, but climbing presented him no easy escape with the massive *Orenburg* lowering over the scene. To make matters worse, the enemy had two other A-Class ships of their own, *Armavir* and *Anapa*, and they were only now arriving after dropping off those troops closer to Kansk. Melnikov would soon be boxed in by four enemy airships, but help was on the way.

From the south a great air horn sounded, the lowing roar of Big Red charging to the scene. Old *Krasny* had lost some buoyancy, but her massive 180,000 cubic meter volume and greater firepower was going to go a long way towards evening the odds. All the enemy airships mounted eight 76mm guns each, a total of 24 guns. Now Big Red brought her ten 76mm and six 105mm guns to the scene, and the odds were even at 24 guns each, with the Siberians having an edge in raw firepower with all those 105s.

Kymchek was on the bridge of the *Orenburg*, seeing the looming shape of Big Red emerge from a bank of clouds, smoke still trailing from her right side from the previous battle.

“That battleship will even the odds down there,” he told Volkov. “We should descend and attack at once.”

“What?” Volkov said immediately. “Without knowing where Karpov is? We’ll lose the elevation we’ve been fighting to gain for the last half hour.”

“True sir, but that’s the *Krasnoyarsk*, Big Red. It’s carrying heavy guns like our own, and one good broadside will rip one of those battlecruisers apart in no time. We’ve got to kill that ship, sir, then we can mass everything we have left against *Tunguska*.”

“Damn you, Kymchek! This is the fleet flagship!” Volkov was not happy to think that a big 105mm round might come crashing into his escape pod. It was well armored, but would not withstand a direct hit like that.

“Don’t worry, sir. We’ll be descending on that ship, in a good position to bring most of our guns to bear. And we’ll climb easily enough if *Tunguska* shows up. The emergency helium tanks will move us quickly.”

“Very well. Get on with it then.”

The sight of Old *Krasny* had already prompted Volkov’s smaller ships to break off their gun battle with *Abakan* and begin climbing. In any duel with a bigger ship, they relied on their ability to change their internal buoyancy quicker, enabling them to rise or descend faster. Getting an elevation advantage on a larger ship was really their only chance, and they had to do so early in the engagement, because the greater lifting capacity of battleships allowed them to eventually reach much higher service ceilings. *Tunguska* had shocked the Germans by topping even their highest flying bombers, skirting 15,000 meters over Berlin.

Aboard the Krasnoyarsk, Captain Alenin stood near the elevator man, urging him on. His right arm was bandaged with a bloodied shirt, as he had been nicked by shrapnel in the earlier battle when a round came right through the main gondola, killing two other men. *Krasny* had taken at least five hits, two in the nose of the ship, where the forward gas bags there had been penetrated. They would have completely deflated, had it not been for the rapid intervention of the “baggers,” a special team of engineers poised in the rigging, and on ladders between the big gas bags. With rolls of vulcanized rubber patches that could be deployed and sealed with a heated tar-like epoxy, they could seal off a bag breach in minutes in a long rehearsed emergency patch drill. The network of ladders around the shell of the airship allowed engineers to get to almost any position on the interior lifting bags, and for a breach that could not be reached, there was one last resort—the squealers.

There was a maintenance flap which could be opened on the top of each gas bag, and a man could go within if adequately rigged out in a protective diving suit with oxygen. It was extremely dangerous, for breathing in the helium could lead to a giddy delirium and asphyxiation so easily, that there would later be a method of suicide using a helium bag called “the suicide bag.” On the airships, any man brave enough, or skilled enough, to enter a bag and swing on a long cable from above was called a “squealer,” for a badly seated face mask might see them breathe in some helium, and their high voices on exiting the bag had led to the name.

Alexi Larionov was a squealer set for entry on the forward gas bag of Big Red. They had done what they could to patch two holes, but there was a shrapnel tear just big enough to defeat the self-sealing inner lining, and it simply could not be reached by any other ladder.

“Now don’t get heroic, Alexi,” said the Sergeant of Engineers. “And don’t get silly. Otherwise another round is likely to come blasting through the ship’s nose and knock you right off that cable! Get in the access pouch and be sure the outer seal is fully secured before you open that inner flap. And hook up well! That tear is about 50 feet below, and you’ll have to swing a bit before you can get hold of an inner seam hook, but don’t play around in there. And remember, turn on your red lantern when you want us to haul you up.”

Alexi had been known, on more than one training drill, to slide his oxygen mask aside and take a little breath of helium, yelling in a high voice as he swooped about in the interior of the gas bag on the long maintenance cable. The drill was to enter the upper access pouch, and do exactly what the Sergeant had advised. It was a canvas airlock of sorts, with an inner and outer access flap, the whole thing sealed with *Vulcan* linings.

Alexi was through, sitting on the suspended swing seat, and opening the lower flap in no time. Once he did so the helium from the main gas bag rushed in, and he always got a thrill when that happened. Then he yelled for the cable men to begin lowering, and down he went, through the inner flap and into the vast interior of the helium filled gas bag. It was a strange experience, seeing the silhouettes of other engineers outside the bag, moving like animated shadows. There he knew the men were rigging up a replacement tarp where a fire had burned away a segment of the nose canvass.

After lowering some 50 feet, Alexi could see the inaccessible tear in the side of the bag, and, in spite of the Sergeant’s stern warning, he slipped aside his mask and took one gulp of helium, singing in a high pitched timbre as he leaned his body weight to swing over to the damaged area.

Outside the gas bag, the Sergeant rolled his eyes, shaking his head when he heard the man squealing away. Alexi did not huff too deeply, and had his oxygen mask on again when he finally reached the side of the bag, and caught one of the inner securing hooks to hold him in place. Now all he had to do was get the patch from the satchel strapped over his shoulder, and use the glue gun to seal off the breach. But young Alexi was soon going to have more work than he needed just then. *Orenburg* was falling rapidly from above, her gondolas bristling with recoilless rifles.

* * *

“Steady...” said Kymchek, watching tensely as the ship bore down on the lumbering shape of Big Red. There it was, the nemesis that had first dropped that terrible fire bomb in the last breakthrough attempt on the Ob. He could see that *Krasny* was struggling to climb, the skin on one side of the nose still torn and flapping in the wind, exposing the inner duralumin framework. Up on top, the gunners on the upper platform deck were already firing at *Orenburg*. There were two 76mm guns there, and he could see the bright muzzle flashes, and white sideward’s directed exhaust when they fired. Two near misses puffed in red-black explosions very near the main gondola, and shrapnel rattled against the thin armor plating.

Yet now *Orenburg* was going to get the advantage of the first big salvo. With most of her lower gondola guns trained on Big Red. Soon the two ships would be at roughly equal elevation, and *Orenburg* was already trying to stop her descent to keep the elevation edge as long as possible while Big Red continued to climb.

It was the 105mm guns on the main gondola that struck the hardest blow, and they ruined Alexi Larionov’s song that day, just as the Sergeant had warned. Two shells blasted right through the nose of Big Red, one striking a duralumin girder and sending hot fragments that shredded the gas bag in a hundred places, as if a shotgun had blasted the ship at close range. The *Vulcan* inner linings hissed as they slowly resealed the smaller wounds, but some were too big to close—and the second round plunged right into the bag itself, exploding inside and putting an end to Alexi’s patching operation. His song was stilled, and he was dangling from his cable, a still form, blood falling from his limp body in his pendulum descent to the final cold clutch of death.

Being a completely inert gas, helium would not explode, but an explosion of that much power within the pressurized gas bag was more than enough to burst it completely open, the gas rushing out into the interior of Big Red, where there was soon more than one “squealer” on the rigging ladders. The outer canvas was permeable to the gas, but a lot got into the ship before it vented, leaving crewmen dizzy and disoriented. Yet that was the end of the ship’s attempt to get on an even keel with *Orenburg*. Only the other ship’s great momentum prevented it from stopping its descent, but it was slowing rapidly, as more helium was pumped from reserve tanks to increase buoyancy.

There was a moment, with the two ships no more than 300 meters apart, where it looked like *Orenburg* would slip down right into the waiting fire of all those big lower gondola guns on Big Red. Kymchek's eyes widened, and he could see the enemy gunners training the barrels of their rifles as high as they could to try and fire.

"Vent emergency water ballast!" he yelled at the top of his voice, and Captain Grankin echoed the order. The ship seemed to drool water, but the sudden loss of weight was enough to lift the nose and get it climbing again. The two dogged top gunners on Big Red had scored a hit, damaging the gun pods on the aft gondola. Better there than the gas bags, thought Kymchek. Look how our own bag busters tore open the nose of that airship!

* * *

"Big Red has taken a bad hit," said Air Commandant Bogrov. "She's going nose down with that one, it's unavoidable. Looks like they lost the entire forward bag."

"Damn," Karpov swore. "Can't we get more speed? We need to get in this fight. I've got elevation on the *Orenburg* now, damn Volkov's soul. Get us over there, Bogrov!"

"We're running full out now!" Bogrov exclaimed.

"Are there any thermobarics still on Big Red?"

"Sir?" What was Karpov thinking.

"Yes," said Karpov, we had three canisters in those sealed barrels stowed on the bombing rack near the tail." Karpov's eyes narrowed. He watched the two ships battling ahead, seeing the top gunners on Big Red firing bravely, until the platform took a direct hit from a 76mm round that silenced those guns, sending a man falling wildly down along the dull red flanks of the airship, and to a sure death some 3000 meters below.

"She can't climb, and can't run with that broken nose forward," said Bogrov, shaking his head."

"Signal Captain Alenin. Tell him all hands are to abandon ship. Rocketeers!" Now Karpov was on the voice tube to the forward RS82 rocket racks in the nose gondola. "Stand Ready!"

"But Admiral," Bogrov warned. "They can't hit the *Orenburg* now. Big Red is right in the way! We'll have to come hard to port."

"No! Steady as she goes! Rocketeers, on my command, fire all RS82

missiles! Steady... Steady..." *Tunguska* was nosing down, aimed right at Big Red's tail, with the *Orenburg* executing an emergency turn that brought it very near Old *Krasny*.

"Down elevator, five degrees!" Karpov tipped the nose of *Tunguska* toward his target.

"You'll never hit *Orenburg*!" Bogrov warned again.

"Fire!"

There was just a moment's hesitation from the crews below. They could see emergency hatches open on the side of Big Red's gondolas, and men were already leaping from the airship, the first parachutes opening a thousand feet below the torrid gunfight. Karpov's voice was harsh on the voice tube. "*Fire everything you have! Now!*"

The rockets hissed away, streaking right ahead, and it was clear they were going to miss the *Orenburg* by a wide margin, just as Bogrov had warned...

But they were not going to miss Big Red.

Chapter 27

The ground battle at Ilanskiy was heating up. Tyrenkov's men had leapt from *Tunguska* at an elevation of 4000 meters, about 13,000 feet, at the high end of typical parachute jump altitudes. He had told his men to hold in free fall for no more than 30 seconds, which might limit their drift and scatter, given the wind conditions at the time. As the men leapt from the airship, their experience of forward throw imparted by *Tunguska's* motion was not as strong as that from a flying aircraft, so they were soon "over the hill," as the men described it, when their motion changed from horizontal to vertical.

These were the Siberian Rangers, Tyrenkov's handpicked men from the very best squads of the airborne corps. They were always assigned to the flagship of the fleet, standing as Karpov's personal guard, and *Tunguska* was big enough to carry fifteen squads, a full heavy company, all armed with sub-machineguns. They fell into the wind, their white chutes soon deploying for the ride to the ground. It would take him the better part of an hour to collect his men, but soon they were moving north, about three kilometers south of Ilanskiy.

Tyrenkov's HQ squads were approaching the bend of the rail line just as the armored train was arriving ahead of the big rail guns. He fished into his pack for Karpov's command insignia pennant, and flagged the train down. The engine slid to a noisome halt when the engineers saw the men gathered by the rail line in their dark uniforms, recognizing the Rangers at once. Tyrenkov motioned for his HQ sections to leap aboard the armored train, wanting to get to the rail yard as soon as possible. His officers had orders to bring up the Ranger Company to the railway inn as soon as possible.

When he reached the station, Tyrenkov could see the artillery batteries there, and he quickly gave them orders to move their guns further west to make room for the two big rail guns. He smiled when he saw them roll in, Siberia and Baikal, the two hammers of the east. Volkov won't like it when I start pounding his men with those, he thought.

He took a deep breath, turning to spy the railway inn, just a few blocks east of the tracks. The debris and damage from the raid that had demolished the stairway had been cleared, and he could see that there was already a rudimentary wood frame in place, with fresh lumber cut for the project, and the first beams for the staircase itself already elevated. The old hearth had

been reinforced with new brick, and remained a good reference point for determining where the alcove and stairs were to be rebuilt. The dining room was gone, but the rest of the inn was still intact, as the demolition had been very precise.

“Sergeant!” he said sharply. “We’ll set up our command post on the second floor of that inn. Signal the Rangers to form the company there. And find out what is happening on the west edge of town.”

He hastened away, waving his squads after him. When he reached the inn, he had his men clear out the small guard posted there and sent them to watch over the arriving rail guns. Then the first thing he did was unfurl the double headed eagle trimmed in gold, Karpov’s standard, indicating that he was now in personal command of all military operations here. The men in the rail yard saw it, along with the long barrels of ‘Siberia’ when the first rail gun arrived, and a cheer went up. Soon word spread along the perimeter defense of the town—Karpov was back! He was here, and the fighting resolve of the men was bolstered by the news.

Word soon came that a heavy attack had been put in on that outlying farm to the west, so Tyrenkov resolved to send reinforcements there.

“Lieutenant! That cavalry unit regrouping there—send them up to cover the causeway near the marshes, and pull the infantry battalion there out. Move them to the west edge of the town, opposite the track to that farm. And I saw a company of armored cars to the south. Have them move up the road north of Sverdlova and flank that position.”

That unit had been the recon company attached to the Motor Rifle Battalion that had left the previous day. It had 15 armored cars, nine BA-20, three BA-10, and three older BA-6. The most numerous model had been developed in 1934 from an old modified Ford motorcar chassis, a four wheeled vehicle with bullet resistant tires and light armor suitable for stopping small arms fire and shell fragments. It had poor off road performance, but mounted the same DP-28 Record Player machinegun that had been used by the motorcycle platoon in its encounter with the Tartar cavalry. In effect, it was little more than a mobile machinegun, and the nine cars had little shock value when they ran into Volkov’s well trained troops, now positioned on either side of the road.

* * *

Colonel Levkin had ordered the three companies off Admiral Gomer's Southern Division airships to move into the attack for the farm. He then shifted the four companies from the 1st Airship Division into a wide movement aimed at slipping into the hamlet of Sverdlova. There they ran into those armored cars, and a wild scene ensued, with bullets snapping against the light armor, some penetrating, and the BA-20s chattering back with their turret mounted MGs. Neither side was doing much real damage to the other, as Volkov's troops had little in the way of AT weaponry. Then the three BA-10s came up behind the scout cars, and the situation changed.

The BA-10 had been developed in 1938, and it had better sloped armor at 15mm on the front and turret, and a much bigger gun there firing 45mm rounds. It also had a pair of DT machineguns, so it put out considerably more firepower. The Legionnaires had not expected to face any armor here, and the three BA-10s were blasting away at houses on the northern edge of Sverdlova, forcing Volkov's men to extend that flank around the town in a wider envelopment.

Resistance from the enemy was very strong. The tough Siberian troops had a long time to sand-bag into prepared positions in the town and, even after two strong assaults, the hardened building at the farm had not been taken. Levkin was counting on speed now. He wanted to get four companies around and through Sverdlova, and into position to make an assault on that rail yard as soon as possible. The loud boom of the railway guns had been another unwelcome surprise, and now he had a report that an armored train had come in along the rail line from the east.

Damn! He cursed his bad luck. I was supposed to have twelve heavy companies on the ground, and heavy air support overhead. Where is the fleet? They're up there in that gathering storm, still dueling with the Siberian airships. How long before I get air support here? The Siberians are dug in deep, and my companies are reporting heavy casualties. Now we're facing armored cars on that southern road, and even a troop of Betushkas!

That was the nickname they gave to the small light cavalry tank, the BT-7. Apparently there had been a troop of these at Kansk, and now they were also arriving on the road leading south from Sverdlova.

Six Betushkas, fifteen armored cars and a goddamned armored train in the rail yard! That will have 20mm guns, maybe even 37s. And we've nothing in the way of a good AT gun here at all. This attack was badly planned. The ground element was not equipped to do the job alone without

support from fleet airships. I should have spoken my mind in the briefing, but it's too late to have regrets about that now. The decision was made, and there's no going back.

He considered what to do, his eyes narrowing as he studied his map. The only way to deal with that armored train will be to get even farther east, and fight our way to the railway inn from that side of the marshalling yards.... That is, if we even get anywhere near that rail yard. As it stands, my men are having a tough time making any real headway here.

He summoned a Sergeant, and sent him to call in his last two rifle companies off *Armavir* and *Anapa*. They had been watching the road to the west, but he thinned out that defense, leaving only the MG Platoon, and the men of the motorcycle platoon that had managed to make it to their bikes and speed away when the Tartars came charging at them. Then he heard the roar of a loud explosion, and the skies lit up with evil red fire. Something was dying in the throes of that explosion, and up beyond the rising thunderheads there was fire in the east.

* * *

The RS 82s did not miss, at least not the target Karpov had been aiming at, not the fleet flagship of his enemy, but the tail section of his own beleaguered battleship, Big Red. The cold calculation of his mind had seen what happened to *Krasny* when that forward gas bag was blasted open, and her nose slumped downwards, losing too much buoyancy there. They would never be able to match *Orenburg* in a climb now, and maneuvering with that bloodied nose was going to be very difficult. He could see the *Orenburg*, just 300 meters above Big Red, and executing a turn to bring all her gondola mounted guns to bear. In his mind, hardened by so many difficult hours of combat at sea, Big Red was doomed.

He allowed himself one grace, sending the order to Captain Alenin to abandon ship, and waited breathlessly until he saw men leaping from the side hatches in the gondolas. Most of the command level crew, and perhaps the gunners might get to safety, he thought. As for the riggers, bag men and engineers...

This was war.

He waited that one tense moment, nosing *Tunguska* down as Bogrov flapped his jaws at him, too stupid to realize what the Admiral was doing.

Then he gave the order to fire his RS82s, knowing they would just have the range to hit what he was aiming at, the tail of Big Red where those three sealed canisters of highly explosive coal dust and kerosene were stored. It would not be a wide area explosion. The weapon had been designed to have its greatest effect by dispersing the dust and fuel as an aerosol first, but that was not possible. Yet the sheer power in those three canisters were going to raise hell, right beneath the huge silver mass of the *Orenburg*.

The resulting explosion was massive, a huge broiling flame that expanded in a hot yellow fire, deepening to crimson red and jet black smoke. The entire tail section of Big Red was obliterated, the duralumin frames there blasted to pieces, which shotgunned out in all directions as a deadly rain of metal shrapnel. They flailed against the siding of the *Orenburg*, tearing through the outer canvass, clanking against her metal bones and lacerating the *Vulcan* lined flesh of her gas bags. Some wounds would quickly re-seal, others were gashed too deep, and helium hissed out in fitful jets as the airship rolled with the shock of the explosion.

Big Red shuddered with the blast, men shaken from exposed inner girders and ladders, their lifeless bodies falling into the grey clouds below. The fireball bloomed with anger, flames eventually reaching the *Orenburg*, just as Karpov had hoped. He clenched his fist, his jaw tight as he watched Big Red die its agonizing death, the fires rippling from that shattered tail section, rolling forward, consuming all as they went. The men on the bridge of *Tunguska* stood stunned, eyes wide, jaws slack with disbelief. Bogrov was pallid with shock, and then his cheeks reddened with hot anger.

“By god! You’ve killed Big Red! You murdering bastard!”

Karpov turned to face him. “The ship was lost! You knew that as well as I did. But look now, Bogrov. Have a good look at the *Orenburg*!”

The enemy flagship rolled with the shock of the explosion, fire now leaping from the torn canvass siding, and losing elevation fast from a hundred cuts to her gas bags. The broiling flames from the fire had licked one engine, and it still burned, even after the thermobaric blast had expended itself. Karpov knew that he had dealt his enemy a fatal blow. They were losing elevation, fighting fires everywhere along the ship, and now they had lost that engine as well. He could swing up over the *Orenburg* and blast it to hell with his gondola guns, and that was exactly what he was going to do.

They watched for one last agonizing moment, as Big Red lost all remaining buoyancy, and began to fall, her twisted metal frame still glowing

red near that shattered tail. Karpov saw one of the *Mishman* cross himself, and gave the man a disgusted grin. Did he think god had anything to do with the fate of that ship out there, or the good men he had just sent to their miserable end? No! That had been decided by me, he thought, Vladimir Karpov. It was my order, and my hand on the tiller of fate in this hour, and god has nothing to say about it.

“Up elevator—ten degrees!” he shouted. “Ready on all main guns. Target the *Orenburg* and give them hell!”

The stunned crew reacted, jerking to life again, moving on reflex, driven by the hard lash of Karpov’s voice. Then the guns were firing, the black explosions puffing in the sky around *Orenburg*, with other shells ripping into the massive side of the ship. *Tunguska* had a 500 meter elevation advantage, and the battle would be short and violent.

Karpov took up his field glasses, his leather gloved hand steady as he peered at the savage fate of his adversary. Are you there, Volkov? Did you have the guts to come out here with the rest of your fleet? Then, as if in answer, he saw what looked like a round metal egg fall from the underside of the enemy ship. He followed it down, seeing a parachute deploy from its top, fluttering in the storm. Volkov! That bastard had an escape pod! It could only be him. He was fleeing his burning ship like a rat, probably hoping to get to his ground troops before my men find him. I’ve got to get down there!

He turned, seeing Bogrov still standing there like a blithering fool, staring at him with those big eyes, a look of shock and disgust on his face. Then he remembered what the Air Commandant had said to him, shouting at him when he had struck his fate shattering blow against the tail of Big Red. He lowered his field glasses, looking for the peg on the bulkhead beam where he hung them, then strode over to Bogrov his eyes hard. In one swift motion he raked the back of his leather gloved hand across the other man’s face.

“Get hold of yourself, Bogrov! See to the ship! And If you ever speak to me again like that, it will be the last words you ever say. Understand?”

Bogrov understood.

Part X

Fire In The East

“The war against Russia will be such that it cannot be conducted in a knightly fashion. This struggle is one of ideologies and racial differences and will have to be conducted with unprecedented, unmerciful, and unrelenting harshness. All officers will have to rid themselves of obsolete ideologies. I know that the necessity for such means of waging war is beyond the comprehension of you generals but . . . I insist absolutely that my orders be executed without contradiction.”

— Adolph Hitler ~ March 30, 1941

Chapter 28

Vladimir Karpov was not the only one acquainted with the harshness and cold reality of war. And the fires that burned Big Red and cast the fate of Ivan Volkov to an uncertain future were not the only flames being kindled in the east.

In a speech he delivered to officers of OKW, just months before this day, Adolf Hitler had set the prelude for what was now about to happen. It was to be the largest military operation ever mounted in human history, the practice of the dreadful art of war as it would seldom ever be seen again. By comparison, the American “Operation Desert Storm,” that defeated the Iraqi Army in just 100 hours of fast paced mechanized fighting, was only a small corps level affair. Barbarossa would be ten times bigger, a titanic clash along a line of fire and steel that would extend from the Baltic to the Black Sea.

As Hitler so darkly predicted, it would also see the practice of warfare become that unprecedented, unrelenting, and merciless fire that threatened to consume an entire continent. To say that it would be conducted with harshness was an understatement. Here men and machines would clash in a struggle where pain, misery, death and destruction were the order of the day—but this time the war in the east would be quite different.

In 1908, young Sergei Kirov had put an end to Joseph Stalin, long before he ever rooted himself in power. And with his death, much of the bitter, unrelenting harshness he visited upon his own people never happened. Yes, there were power struggles in the beginning, old rivalries. Molotov and Trotsky had to be cowed, Lenin embraced, and power centered on the one man who had been able to hold it in those tumultuous years, Sergei Kirov.

The long civil war that followed had been costly in lives, and seemed interminable. The fighting would flare up for two or three years, then quiet down, but it always left a contested boundary in the east of the Motherland, where Ivan Volkov schemed and maneuvered for power, and Kolchak and his Lieutenants held sway in Siberia.

There was misery, deprivation, and hunger that often became famine, fighting that became murderous at times, but Kirov held the Soviet state together, and kept the outlying provinces of Orenburg and Siberia at bay. He ruled, however, not with the steel hand that Stalin wielded, but by getting other men to believe in him, and to follow him out of a sense of loyalty and

admiration. At times incipient conspiracies cropped up, and they were dealt with, but the vast archipelago of gulags, the prison camps in the cold hinterland of Russia that had been built under Stalin, never appeared in the Soviet state that Sergei Kirov forged.

In like manner, there was no “Great Purge” in 1934, initiated by Stalin after Kirov’s own assassination that year had been avoided. The repression and terror of the purges never stalked the land, and the Soviet Army itself was not decapitated with the arrest and execution of nearly 50,000 officers. Instead these men were still in their posts, and the long years of on again, off again fighting with the Orenburg Federation, had put a much sharper edge on Soviet steel. The military was well tried, hardened by this combat, and much more ready for the storm that was now about to be unleashed.

Divided as Russia was, Kirov’s Soviet state would not have the vast resources the combined Soviet Union had in Fedorov’s history, and particularly the oil it needed to fight a long war on the scale of the one that was now beginning. Soviet Russia had the manpower, with most of the big population centers, and a well established industrial base. Orenburg had the fuel but lacked strong industry to produce heavy weapons. Siberia had enormous untapped resources, tough, hardy soldiers, but little industry. It was also facing a three front war until Karpov reached an accommodation with Kirov. Yet the fighting with Orenburg continued, and the Japanese occupying Vladivostok were a growing threat in the far east.

When Germany began its wars of conquest, the long years of infighting in Russia suddenly changed when Ivan Volkov joined the Axis powers. The flow of oil to Russia, grudging trade that had been exchanged in periods when the civil war was dormant, now came to a halt. The Siberians had never presented much of a threat to the other two states, until Karpov arrived, pulled together the aging Siberian air fleet, began raising new divisions, and rapidly built up strength on the Orenburg frontier.

Volkov had thought to trade Omsk for peace, knowing the storm that was coming, but something in the personal rivalry that grew from his suspicions concerning Karpov and Ilanskiy led him to seek the destruction of the Siberian state. Yet Volkov was now also contending with a strong offensive in the Caucasus, launched by the Soviets in 1940 after Orenburg joined the Axis. Hitler and Germany were not then in a position to render assistance, and this forced Volkov to initially trade ground for time, and begin mustering new divisions from his own hinterland provinces in

Kazakhstan.

By May of 1941, on the eve of Operation Barbarossa, the fighting in the Caucasus had reached Maykop, the one oil center closest to the Soviet borders. Volkov had already lost the vital Black Sea port of Novorossiysk, and the big supply center at Krasnodar on the Kuban River. The front then followed the line of the Kuban, through Kropotkin to Salsk. Orenburg held a fortified region around Elista, but from there the front was nebulous all the way to the Volga. The great industrial center of Volgograd had long been in Kirov's hands, and it was never to be called "Stalingrad."

Yet the lower Volga was occupied by the Orenburg Federation, and an equally vital center for supplies and industry had grown up in Astrakhan. Volkov had built two important railroads from there, one to Elista and then down to Stavropol, and a second running south along the Caspian coast through Kyzlyar, Makhachkala and on to Baku. These vital rail lines, and the sea connection from Astrakhan to other ports on the Caspian, were the primary means of getting supplies into the Caucasus, and oil out.

So Kirov's offensive, if successful, would not only seize much needed oil reserves for his own war effort, but also cut off the flow of those resources north to the industrial center of Volkov's state in the capital city of Orenburg. To achieve this, he would have to eventually take Astrakhan, but at the outset, with so many troops facing down the growing German threat, he did not have the divisions available to mount that offensive. The expedient course had been to try and seize Volkov's Black Sea ports as a fall back for his Black Sea Fleet in the event the Crimea ever fell into German hands, and the oil center at Maykop as a ready source of new petroleum. The question now was whether he would have time to extract that oil, and the clock was ticking ever neared to the launch of Operation Barbarossa.

* * *

The German plan for Barbarossa was also much revised given the situation in Russia. Instead of aiming for Moscow and Leningrad, the political and industrial heart of Kirov's State, it would place a much stronger force in Army Group South. The intent was to drive to Rostov, the major supply center sustaining Kirov's offensive against Volkov. From there the combined Axis forces would cut off the Crimea, and all Soviet troops that had crossed the Taman Straits into the Caucasus to threaten Maykop. Once

these armies were defeated, and a link was forged with Volkov's troops, the Axis powers would then turn north and begin a combined offensive aimed at Moscow.

As strong as the German Army now looked on paper, just over 140 divisions, Halder had his misgivings about the coming storm, and not just because of the oil figures he had been fretting over. He had heard the whispered warnings of Ivan Volkov, trying to convince the Germans that their vaunted Panzer Divisions would soon be matched by the might of the Soviet Army. There will soon be strong new tanks, he had warned, and he had gone so far as to send diagrams and design plans he claimed to have obtained showing a new Russian tank to be called the T-34. Yet his intelligence indicated that the Soviets were still using tank models developed in the late 1930s, the BT-5 and BT-7, and older tanks like the T-26, T-28 and T-35. What was this T-34? It had not been seen in any Soviet units penetrated by German intelligence thus far.

Yet the sudden appearance of a new British heavy tank in North Africa had done much to awaken German military planners. Very few of these tanks had been seen, perhaps no more than 50 or 60 according to reports, but they had been able to stop Rommel twice, and halt the German counterattack in Syria. If the Soviets had anything similar... Halder did not wish to think about this, yet given the fact that the Soviet Union was allied with Great Britain, how long would it be before the Russians benefited from these new British designs?

Keitel and Jodl are correct, he thought. We must build new tanks, and quickly. Keitel tells me we have three on the drawing board, the 'Big Cats' as he likes to call them. For now we will have to make do with what we have, mostly Panzer IIIs, though we are getting more with the 50mm gun into the front line units now. That gun is already inadequate in my view. We will need at least a 75mm gun, and our new tank designs may soon need something bigger. Yet Rommel claims that he could not kill these British tanks with anything, even his 88s! That is most alarming.

Guderian has read the reports, yet not having seen any of this first hand, he takes them with a grain of salt. He claims Rommel is reckless, which may be so, but numbers are difficult to argue with, and now we have the battle at Rayak with 9th Panzer to consider as well. This cannot be written off as a defeat suffered by a headstrong and overly confident general, out to seek yet another medal on his chest. No. The forces we committed to Syria should

have stopped the British advance on Rayak, but they could not do so. It was only when Steiner's Wiking Division was able to concentrate, that the front was stabilized there.

In that Halder was telling himself what he wanted to believe, that the presence of at least one good German division had saved the day, but in doing this he overlooked the quality of the units that had heretofore been beaten by the British. 5th Light was undermanned, but 15th Panzer Division was at nominal strength, as was the 9th Panzer. The truth of the matter is that the British were forced to pull this new heavy mechanized unit of theirs out of the Syrian front and return it to Libya, so Rommel's offensive was good for something after all.

But all of this is really irrelevant, he thought. I do not think Sergei Kirov has these tanks, nor will he get such weapons any time soon. So before he does, we must raise hell, strike hard, and run like the wind. Our Blitzkrieg tactics may have met an able challenger in North Africa, but Guderian remains convinced that we can still beat the Russians.

Halder looked at his watch, the ticking of the second hand seeming loud. His pulse quickened as the time swept inexorably on, counting down the last seconds that formed the wafer thin boundary between the old war, and the new war that was now about to begin. In his mind, he could already see the massed squadrons of *Stukas* gathering like dark crows over the borderlands, hear the shouts of the artillery officers as over 7000 guns were being elevated, perceive the low growl of the tank engines turning over in the Panzer regiments.

Tick, Tock.

It was all planned, with just that clock like precision. 3.4 million men, 148 divisions, 7100 guns, nearly 3400 tanks, and close to 2800 planes...

And when it began, the world did indeed hold its breath. It was as if a line of well muscled men had taken sledge hammers to the stalwart wall of the Soviet defensive line that stretched from Riga in the north to Odessa on the Black Sea. Before that first awful day was over, tens of thousands would die. The Germans would use the battering ram of their Panzer Divisions to smash a hole in the enemy front, and then rush through. Nearly 1500 Soviet planes were caught on the ground and destroyed, another 400 died in the skies over the battlefield, but even these staggering losses represented only 20% of the Soviet air strength, which was counted at 10,775 planes on May 15th. The *Stukas* pounded rail yards, trains, enemy gun positions, and any

massed formation of armor they could find, and they did not have far to search.

The German onslaught would drive into a massive Soviet military force, comprised of 4.5 million personnel in 300 divisions, with 50 of those being tank divisions, and 25 more being mechanized divisions. They would field an astounding number of tanks, mostly pre-war models, but over 20,000 strong, more than five times as many as the Germans had, supported by 48,000 artillery pieces! Kirov's armies outnumbered the Germans in almost every category, but one—the Russians had only 270,000 trucks, less than half as many as their adversaries, and their forces suffered from this general lack of mobility, especially when facing an enemy that placed a premium on rapid deployment and lightning swift movement. That said, most German infantry divisions were still relying on horsepower of the four legged kind to drag their guns forward through the mud, with over 700,000 horses employed.

The German operational art, the balance of tanks, AFVs and supporting weapons in their units, the training and skill of their troops, all weighed in their favor. At one point in the line, along the Bug River at Pratulin, the Germans would employ a devious tactic that surprised their own troops as well as the enemy—the *tauchpanzers*.

The old canceled plans for Operation Seelöwe had envisioned the offloading of tanks in water up to 25 feet deep on the English coast, and an ingenious method was devised to permit that, and allow the tanks to advance on the sea floor itself to reach the shore. Special adhesives were used to seal off the tanks to water penetration, inner tubes surrounded the wide seam between the turret and tank body, and a long snorkel was attached to the tank to feed air to the crews. The gun barrels were plugged with a rubber cap. Blind under water, the tanks were to be steered by using a compass. To prevent water in the exhaust, a one way valve was attached there.

To test the principle, tanks were rigged out and ferried out to sea near the Island of Sylt, then sent down long ramps into the water to the sea floor below, where they would attempt to drive to the nearby shore. When the invasion of England was cancelled, the units trained were sent off to form a regular panzer regiment, but the special conditions at Pratulin reminded a staff officer that they might just wade their tanks right beneath the river, and catch the enemy by surprise. It worked as planned. Manfred Graf Strachwitz led the attack of the 18th Panzer Regiment, with the German infantry gawking at the tanks as they lumbered down the muddied river bank, and

disappeared beneath the water.

In later years the idea of amphibious tanks would become more common, but this was a first, and it achieved the desired surprise when the Germans literally drove 80 tanks under the river, instead of trying to get bridging units in place under heavy enemy fire.

In most places, the tried and true methods would be used, and the art of rapid cross river assault had been perfected in France during the rapid advance of the Panzer forces there. In the south, these defended river lines were arrayed one after another, a series of natural water barriers formed by the Southern Bug, Prut, Nistru, Danube, Dniester and Dnieper all forming major obstacles to rapid forward movement.

But here the Germans had reorganized their plans to put those “good German divisions” on the line, pulling the *Liebstandarte*, *Das Reich* and *Totenkopf* units together into one korps, and adding a new unit that was not in any order of battle Fedorov could read about. Hitler had been so pleased with the performance of Grossdeutschland at Gibraltar, that he order the formation of another “Sturm” division, with its units built around cadres of the elite Brandenburgers. So it was that the “Brandenburg Motorized Division” came into being, and would lead the attack of the SS Korps as a specialized infiltration and breakthrough unit. Instead of snorkeling tanks, the highly trained and daring officers of the old Brandenburg commandos would lead the way, with the best troops in Germany behind them.

And this also worked as planned...

Chapter 29

Volkov's hands tightened on the hand rails of his armored capsule when the explosion rocked his ship. The RS82 rockets struck the tail of Big Red, and the resulting explosion was so violent that *Orenburg* had been dealt a fatal blow. The fireball had expanded to sear the side of the great airship, where it had been hanging in the skies no more than 200 meters above *Krasny*, in a perfect position to blast that ship to pieces. The fleet flagship had turned smartly, its rapid descent corrected, and was just beginning to climb again when the explosion occurred. Within minutes, the gashes torn in *Orenburg's* side by a hundred fragments of Big Red's shattered duralumin frame, had fatally compromised the ship's buoyancy.

Through the chaos of that moment, as the airship rolled in the sky, fires spreading rapidly to engulf its tail and rudders, Volkov heard his Security Chief shouting frantically over the voice tube to his capsule.

"Sir! Are you all right down there?"

"What's happening?" Volkov had shouted back, though he knew very well what was happening. He could feel the ship shuddering in the sky, hear the hiss of helium escaping from the lacerated gas bags, feel the queasy roll of *Orenburg* as the flight crew struggled for control. The sight of *Krasny* falling from the sky was a chilling prelude to what was now about to happen to his own ship. They were going down, and Volkov gritted his teeth, his eyes searching frantically for the overhead lever that would eject his capsule into free fall so that he could escape.

"Kymchek! I'm using the escape pod! Save yourself! Get off the ship, and by god, if you make it out alive round up every man you can find and get a security detail to my landing site."

He reached for the lever, never thinking a moment like this would come. He had always been above the heat of combat, immune to the violence he set in motion with his iron will. Now his pulse was rising with the thought that this emergency system had never been used before. What if it failed to operate? What if the parachute would not deploy? He could be plunging to his death at that very moment, but there was nothing else to be done.

He found the lever, pulled hard, and was relieved when the securing clamps released, and the weight of the capsule allowed it to fall freely away from his burning ship. Agonizing seconds passed, then the sharp tug of the

chute deployment stilled his fear, and he eased back, collapsing against the bulkhead and gaping out the observation window, seeing burning fragments of the chaos above falling like molten rain. A man fell screaming, then another. Some were saved as their parachutes also deployed, though he saw one chute suddenly engulfed in flames from the falling burning cinders. Crew members from both the stricken airships were leaping for their lives, each with the same hope and fear that wrenched his own chest.

Seconds passed, and he finally realized, with great relief, that his parachutes were going to hold. The capsule was descending through a grey-white cloud, and then it broke through, allowing him to see the green rolling taiga below. All he had to do now was survive the landing.

“Damn you, Karpov!” he swore, venting his emotion. “I’ll see that you burn in hell!” He realized now what must have happened. Big Red was the same ship that dropped that terrible fire bomb on his troops some months ago. And he had seen Karpov use the weapon again, savaging the ships of the Caspian Division and sending *Salsk* and *Sochi* to a fiery end. There must have been another bomb aboard *Krasny*, mounted in the tail cargo holds. My God! He fired those rockets at his own ship this time, just so he could detonate that weapon. I will never underestimate that man’s black heart and soul again!

Down he went, falling until the capsule plunged into a stand of trees, in a wild moment of snapping branches. But the woodland actually helped to cushion his fall, which might have been much rougher had he struck some rocky clearing, or worse, fallen into a marshy tundra bog. In one last chaotic moment, he tumbled down through the stand of trees until his chute, tangled on the upper branches, brought his descent to a sudden halt. He was thrown to one side, his shoulder bruised, but then it was over.

There, in that relative silence, he cursed his enemy a hundred times, and bewailed his own fate as he did so. How could he have allowed this to happen to him? He was Ivan Volkov, Secretary General of the Orenburg Federation! He should still be up there, high above the storm, sipping his brandy and receiving reports of the destruction of the Siberian Fleet, but Karpov, damn his soul, had literally come from nowhere to ambush his ships just as victory was within his grasp. How could this happen?

A hundred other questions were in his mind now. What was happening on the ground? Has Colonel Levkin taken that railway inn? What about the rest of his fleet? Would they know what to do now that *Orenburg* had fallen.

Orenburg, the fleet flagship, a 16 gun leviathan with 200,000 cubic meter lift... The sound he heard next was the final horrendous chaos of the falling airships. It was somewhere behind him, a terrible roar and crash of twisted steel. Then his adrenaline rushed, and instinct took over. He had to get the hatch open, get out of this damn capsule, and get to his men on the ground. Where had he fallen? Thankfully the drift of his capsule on the rising winds of the storm had allowed him to escape the pandemonium in the sky above. He looked for the emergency supply satchel—food, ammunition, water—and then he wrenched the hatch open, seeing he was perched about six feet from the forest floor, suspended by the tough straps of the parachute harness.

He was out through the hatch, grunting as he fell to the ground. A man in his sixties now, he was never expecting a moment like this, yet here it was. He felt his old instincts for survival kick in. You're alive! You're on the ground now, but it is imperative you get to your men. Where in god's name am I? First things first. I must get away from this capsule. If Karpov saw me escape this way, then it is only a matter of time before he orders every man at his command here to look for me. But what is happening at Ilanskiy?

He listened for a moment, after the terrible sound of the falling airships had finally subsided, eyes closed. He could hear the crump of mortar fire over his right shoulder, and he turned in that direction, knowing that must be the fighting at Ilanskiy. Then he heard a much louder boom, the sound of a great cannon firing, and the thunder of its round hitting home. Good lord, he thought. Where did they get that heavy artillery? He started away, his legs stiff, but moving with the urgency of his need.

This was far from over.

* * *

“What’s happened to the 2nd Battalion?” Colonel Levkin was huddled in a barn at the far edge of the farm his men had been battling for.

“Melnik was just on the radio. They’ve run into more armor—five or six light tanks, but we weren’t expecting them.”

“Nor those damn armored cars! Has he gotten around that hamlet?” Levkin pointed to Sverdlova, where a wide flanking movement was underway with four companies involved.

“Not yet. Sir. They reached the road leading up to Ilanskiy, but that is

where they ran into those tanks. He says there's another column coming in from the east. They could be getting up reinforcements, sir."

"Which is what we're going to need in short order. This attack looks like it will become a defense within the hour. We're already three companies light, and even the full twelve companies were not enough to take on a full regiment. What was Volkov thinking? He promised me heavy air support, but we're not getting it. What in God's name is going on up there?"

"Somebody caught hell just now sir. A big airship fell about ten kilometers to the south of the town. Maybe that's the last of the Siberian fleet, sir. We got news that *Pavlodar* and *Krasnodar* should be here soon with two more companies. They landed by parachute half an hour ago on the road to Kansk."

"Good! The minute they're assembled, have them come here. Damn! Those bastards are putting up one hell of a fight for that farm house. We need heavy weapons. We're getting pounded by those big railway guns—another thing I warned Volkov about. Kymchek said they were still out east near lake Baikal! This is going to get much worse before it gets better. Get another message off to the Ob River attack and see if there's any progress there. Otherwise, we need everything they can airlift, and as quickly as possible!"

* * *

When Karpov saw that escape pod fall from *Orenburg*, he knew it was Volkov. Now all he could think of was getting on the ground to capture him before he slipped away. The chaos in the sky around them slowly subsided, and he peered through his field glasses, seeing that the other two enemy airships Big Red had been dueling with had fled to the north. He smiled.

Watching those two big monsters die like that had just the right effect, yes? We'll see how quick they are to tangle with us now. One look at *Tunguska* will freeze their blood!

He took a quick mental count of the fighting thus far. He had killed two enemy ships in that first ambush, appearing right in the thick of their formation, and at perfect altitude. I could not have planned it better, he thought—then again, I *did* plan it! I knew I would get here. I willed all of this to be, and Mother Time had no choice but to obey, because I've got her by the throat again.

Then I got that third ship, and now the fleet flagship! That's four enemy

ships destroyed, and a fifth had a bad tail fire. Tyrenkov tells me at least two others were detached earlier, or so he has learned. There still may be another four enemy ships nearby. As for my fleet, *Angren* took a beating in that last fight, but *Abakan* is still in good shape. But we've lost *Tomsk*, *Yakutsk*, and now *Krasnoyarsk*, god rest their souls. I had to do what was necessary, but Big Red did not die in vain. They took *Orenburg* down with them, and that may make all the difference here. *Tunguska* can handle any other ship they have. We're twice the size of their battlecruisers.

Soon he had a much better picture of their situation, his signal intercept team had been listening to enemy ship-to-ship radio traffic. Another enemy ship, *Saran*, had been damaged so badly that it crashed north of the town. The rest of Volkov's fleet had been ordered to withdraw to the north.

Good, he thought. That will give us time to pull things together. *Angara* was badly hit, and had to be grounded southeast of Ilanskiy, But I make the count four to two at the moment. We may get *Talmenka* up from the front soon to better those odds, and with *Tunguska*, I could probably beat those other four ships single handedly! This is looking very good.

Then he thought of Volkov down there somewhere, possibly alive. He wanted to get on the ground, but knew that he had to remain on overwatch. The enemy could get further reinforcements as well. We've only faced half their full battlefleet so far. They've another twelve airships on their side of the line, but many may be too far away to intervene here. The thing to do now is to drive off those last four enemy airships. Only then can I contemplate getting on the ground to find Volkov.

Tyrenkov is already down there. I must signal him at once. He can alert the Tartar Cavalry and watch the roads east through Kansk, He must do everything possible to find Volkov. But think! What would I do if I were Volkov now? First off, he'll get to his men on the ground, but he'll realize he's marooned here, sharing the same fate as the men he ordered into this stupid attack. So he'll try to get airborne again, as soon as he can. That could be why those last four enemy ships have broken off. They're consolidating all their remaining air power into one division. Volkov might be trying to rendezvous with one of those ships.

Yes, that's what he has to be planning now. He'll hover with one ship, lower a sub-cloud car to the ground level, and leave the other three on overwatch. So that means I should be able to find that bastard just by finding those last four ships of his.

“Bogrov!” he turned to his Air Commandant now. “Deploy our Forward Topaz Radar equipment and tell *Abakan* to do the same. They are to form up and take the van. We’re steering north to find those last enemy airships!”

Karpov rubbed his hands together, eager to get in the hunt.

* * *

Far below, Volkov had picked his way to the edge of the woodland, moving warily to the northeast towards the sound of the ground battle. He hunched behind a fallen tree, staring across a small clearing, and could see men moving there. From their uniforms he knew they were his own troops, and he started across the clearing, running as fast as he could, winded and tired when he reached the far side. Then he heard men shouting, the sound of a motorcycle revving its engine. A rider wheeled up on a motorbike, halting some fifty yards off and firing a machinegun at him!

“Cease Fire! Damn you! This is Ivan Volkov! Now get over here with that motor bike at once!”

The stunned rider knew one thing when he heard it—that voice, deep and threatening. He had heard it a hundred times in radio addresses, but what was Volkov doing here? He edged close, then saw a man in a plain grey uniform with red piping, and his heart skipped a beat when he recognized the General Secretary. He scooted over to the man’s side, saluting and blathering out an apology, saying he had been ordered to watch this clearing.

“Never mind, never mind, you idiot. Where is Colonel Levkin?”

“At the farm, sir, coordinating the attack. Just over there.”

“Get off that bike!” Volkov would ride the rest of the way, motoring to find Colonel Levkin in a few minutes time. Every man in the headquarters was surprised when Volkov motored up to the back side of an old barn in a cloud of dust, growling like the motorbike. He would hear Levkin’s report, then get all the remaining men of the motorcycle platoon together here to form an escort and security detail.

“What’s happening, Levkin? Have you taken that railway inn?”

“Sir... resistance is much heavier than we expected, and we’re three companies light. Reinforcements are only now arriving on *Pavlodar* and *Krasnodar*.”

“Those ships have returned? Good! What about *Talgar*?”

“No word on that ship yet.”

“Very well, circumstances have forced me to ground here, Colonel, but I must get airborne again as quickly as possible.”

“We’ve lost the *Orenburg*?”

“*Forget that!*” Volkov shouted now. “Where is *Pavlodar*?”

“Sir? That ship is to the east, along the road to Kansk. They were bringing in a reserve company.”

“Good. Tell them to hold where they are, and descend to ground level. *Krasnodar* will stand on overwatch. I’ll get there as quickly as possible. Signal all our other ships to move to the north and form a strong battlegroup.”

“But sir—we need air cover here! They out gun us badly, but even with the additional troops off *Pavlodar* and *Krasnodar*, it’s going to be difficult, if not impossible, to get to the objective. We need heavy weapons! They’ve been pounding us all morning with those heavy railway guns. My companies are down to four and five squads each.”

“Don’t worry, Levkin. I’ll get you support in due course. For now, do as I have ordered! I’ll want any man on a motor bike to meet me on that road to Kansk in ten minutes. See to it!”

Volkov was desperately planning his escape. As for the fate of the men he had led here, that was as far from his mind now as his stateroom in the capital back at Orenburg.

Chapter 30

The reports were coming in to the Main Intelligence Directorate in the Kremlin, known as the GRU. First founded in 1918 by Trotsky, it had gone through many evolutions over the years, a vast intelligence network with operatives all over the world. Internally, it also competed with the KGB, NKVD, and other military intel units, but in Kirov's Russia, the GRU was the real head of the snake when it came to military intelligence.

It was presently led by Ian Karlovich Berzin, also known simply as "Janis," a hard man with short cropped hair, penetrating eyes and a ruthless disposition. A former member of the Cheka, Lenin had used him to head up his "Red Terror" in the early years of the Russian Civil War before Kirov fully consolidated power and moderated those policies. He served in the diplomatic corps before the war, until he was recalled and transferred to Moscow to become head of the "Red Archives." Stalin would have had him arrested in the purge of 1938, but that never happened, and so Berzin soon was moved from his post at the Archives to head of the GRU, and he was soon to be called "the spy of spies."

There in "Berzin's Kitchen," as the GRU was called, plots and secret operations were cooked up that often aimed at shaping the political structure of any nation designated an enemy of the Soviet Union. Spain had been so designated once, where Berzin personally intervened in the Spanish Civil War, advising the Republican forces under his code name "Grishin." To this day, Sergie Kirov still called him that in their private meetings, for Berzin had the ear of the General Secretary from the moment he consolidated power. He was thought to be a most gifted man, with vast knowledge and instincts that often seemed prescient to his rivals and foes. How he came by the information he so ably used to unhinge enemies of the state, no one knew—except perhaps Sergei Kirov himself, who often met with Berzin in a highly secure room within the Red Archives.

A central records depot for Soviet intelligence, the Red Archives also had a secret room open only to Sergei Kirov, and a very few handpicked confederates in the Central Authority. Berzin was one of them, and there he was amazed to see the strange documents Kirov had secreted away, newspapers, books, photographs depicting a world, and a history, that Berzin could scarcely imagine. He learned that all these things had been collected by

the General Secretary himself, though he was never told how Kirov had come by them. At first he believed them to be fabrications, preposterous documents dreamt up by some story teller—until Kirov took him into his confidence one day, and told him a story that changed his life forever.

“The material,” as it was called by the two men in their secret conferences, was fantastic and unbelievable to Berzin in the beginning. Yet, he was soon convinced of its veracity when events depicted on the pages of those secret books began to take place with almost clock-like accuracy. He learned of the rise of Adolf Hitler, long before that demon ever emerged on the world scene, and he had been directed by Kirov to eliminate him.

On three occasions, Berzin had mounted special operations attempting to find and kill Hitler, but in each case, something had happened to frustrate the attempt. They were small things, one a careless slip of the tongue that exposed an agent and blew his cover, the second a simple street accident that killed his assassin just an hour before the planned attack. The third time it had been a mere loose boot lace, which saw a man stumble, rattle a half open door, and be exposed as the saboteur he was.

Finally, Sergei Kirov came to the conclusion that some men, through the sheer magnetism of their will, were destined to come into the world, like weeds invading a garden. Once they got rooted, and matured beyond some unknown nexus point in their darkened life histories, they became impossible to eliminate. He had managed to get to one despicable weed before it bloomed and seeded the Devil’s Garden of the emerging Bolshevik Revolution, Josef Stalin—but he could not pluck out the life of Adolf Hitler before he became the mortal threat he now was. The energy driving that man’s forward momentum along the meridians of history was simply too great.

An early 21st Century physicist and theorist would one day describe such a man as a Prime Mover, an entity so powerful in terms of the exercise of human willpower, that he was destined to exert dramatic influence over the course of events. Berzin’s GRU had tried to eliminate others, sometime with success, and other times found their operations only aided the rise of even more threatening men. A prime example had been the successful plot to undermine the head of the White movement after the Revolution, Anton Denikin. In his place, a shadow rose within that movement that was so deep and impenetrable that not even the full weight of the GRU could pierce it. That shadow was a man named Ivan Volkov, wholly unexpected, an

interloper that Sergei Kirov had dubbed “the profound anomaly” at one point in his briefings with Berzin.

Volkov was mentioned nowhere in the secret documents and books hidden away in the Red Archives. He was a rogue, completely incongruous, an intruder on the history like a thief that had broken into a great mansion. At first his presence was silent and stealthy, stalking the hallways of time, and probing into rooms and chambers in the history. One by one, other rivals within the White movement were quietly eliminated, and when Denikin fell, it was as if a door had been opened. Within months, the name Ivan Volkov was being spoken in fearful tones, and Kirov came to believe that this man must have some secret archive of his own.

Dubbed “the Prophet,” Volkov had an uncanny ability to find the key moments along a given meridian of causality, and there he would seed the garden with his own nefarious plots. Berzin had been directed to eliminate him, but he became another of those “slippery fish,” as Director Kamenski might describe it, and Kirov soon came to believe that Volkov, like Adolf Hitler, was another Prime Mover, with a destiny too powerful to be easily unhinged. He was deeply bothered about this, and very suspicious of Volkov.

“Perhaps I drove that man in to Hitler’s camp,” he once confided to Berzin in a briefing. “But I must tell you, Grishin, there is something very strange about this man. Yes, he has a history, like all other men. We were able to find out a good deal about him once we determined he was a potential threat within the White movement, but why does he not then appear in the material?”

Kirov soon began to believe that Volkov was not the man his simple life history depicted. They had found no record of his birth, and his parents had never been identified. This was not unusual, as the revolution had seen many men adopt new identities. Kirov’s own name had evolved from Sergei Mironovich Kostrikov, to the code name Mironov, and then to his present name of Sergei Kirov. Who was Ivan Volkov before he had assumed that identity? This was something that not even the full resources of the GRU had ever been able to uncover.

What they did know, is that Volkov was now a mortal enemy of the Soviet State, and a highly dangerous threat. His own intelligence service was so good that it often frustrated the plans of the GRU, and Kirov soon came to understand that Volkov was also secretly in league with Hitler’s Germany. When war broke out, that suspicion was proved true when the Orenburg

Federation formally joined the Axis. Many thought this was simply a way for Volkov to curry favor with Hitler, and gain much needed support and assistance from the German arms manufacturing industry, but Kirov told Berzin he believed it was something much more.

“This man sees and understands things about the unfolding of events that is as accurate as the information in our Archives. The very fact that the material contains nothing whatsoever about this Orenburg Federation, or Volkov’s rise to power there, means that he is a profound anomaly, a free radical, some wholly unaccountable force that is exerting influence on the history. And the lever in all this is Volkov himself. He asserts knowledge that no man of our own time could be privy to, unless he were right here with us, Grishin, and had access to the material. Are you certain that there have been no leaks?”

“Of course, sir. The fact that Volkov is so free with his boastful predictions should make that clear. Could someone be leaking all that information to him? Impossible. No sir, I agree with you. He is an anomaly. His emergence is a mystery, and his presence has obviously re-written things. Our material was once very reliable, but since Volkov has come on the scene, things can no longer be predicted with any complete confidence.

“Yes, he is another Prime Mover,” said Kirov, “just as I became one when I eliminated Stalin.” As to all he really knew about Ivan Volkov, information he had been given by Fedorov and Volsky, Kirov said nothing. He only spoke of the one thing that weighed on his mind.

“We have been unable to eliminate Volkov personally, or to crush him militarily, and that will become even more difficult now that we have the Germans snarling at our throats. What are the latest reports from the front?”

“At the outset, things were very difficult, as we knew they would be, sir. This attack was not unexpected. We could see the buildup of troops for many months, but the material indicated we still had some weeks before the guns actually fired.”

“Yes,” said Kirov, “the German offensive was supposed to begin on June 22nd. That date was well documented.”

“They hit us five weeks early, sir. We had good men on the front lines, but we needed those last five weeks to complete our final mobilization. Many units were not fully ready, the new arms and munitions not distributed, particularly to the armored units. Oil shortages have hindered production. We have plenty of tanks, but they are still largely our older models. So we have

been implementing our plan, *Bronirovanny Kulak*, Armored Fist.” Berzin emphasized his words by clenching his own fist, the glint of battle in his eye.

“All the armor and motorized infantry is pulling back as ordered. In fact, though our losses have been heavy on the forward lines, the withdrawal is proceeding as planned. There have been no major encirclements yet, and our troops are now consolidating on the Minsk and Kiev defensive lines as planned.”

“And the south? That is where they will make their main effort.”

“We were hit very hard, and they are already over the Dniester. Their best troops are leading this attack, as we predicted. One armored force has turned south for Odessa, but their main effort is still aimed at the Dnieper bend. They have already reached Kirovgrad.”

“Kirovgrad! That is well beyond the Dniester.”

“We have managed to assemble a good armored force, sir, and we are planning to counterattack soon. The trouble is that we get little air cover, so movement is difficult, particularly by rail. In spite of our alert The early days of the attack still managed to catch our air force flat footed. We lost many planes on the ground, even though we posted those alert warnings ten days ago!”

“Don’t worry, Grishin,” said Kirov, placating his spy master. “No matter how good we are, we cannot predict everything. We have already seen the discrepancies and deviations getting bigger and bigger. Soon we may not be able to rely on the archive material at all. Look what has happened! Ever since the ship arrived here, and I got that message from Fedorov, things have begun to take dramatic turns. The history is being radically altered, and I may have had a great deal to do with that myself, as you well know.”

‘The ship’ was the battlecruiser named after Kirov himself, and it was another thing that was mentioned nowhere in the material, a fact that had eventually led Sergei Kirov to determine the world he had been reading about in his secret archive was no longer the same one in which he lived.

“The air force will recover. I have faith in Khudyakov and Novikov. What about the new T-34s?” Kirov knew they would need those tanks to eventually turn the tide, that is if the victory described in the material could be relied upon. It had taken the entire united Soviet Union to achieve that, and the world was quite different now. The existing Soviet tank force was already much greater than the inventory of German Panzers, but the lighter BT-6 and BT-7s would not hold the line forever, and the T-28s were too slow

and antiquated to fight the mobile warfare Kirov knew the Soviets must soon adopt if they were to match the German art of war fighting.

“We have no more than 500 T-34s ready,” said Berzin. “Production is switching to that model in all our weapons plants, but it will take time to build up numbers, and they have stolen a march on us.”

“We should have seen this coming,” Kirov shook his head. “We were well warned, Grishin. The material told us we needed new tanks, and this Fedorov also warned me when I met with him.”

“The British also have a new heavy tank, sir.”

“So I am told by your men in that theatre. When will you have more information?”

“Very soon. I have a very good man on the job there, but it is a long way to Libya where these tanks made their latest appearance. What we do know is that the Germans cannot stop them, which is why we must do everything possible to build heavy tanks like these ourselves.”

“When will you have the plans?”

“That will not be easy. In fact, we have learned very little about them thus far. We have scoured England, but this is also an anomaly of sorts, sir.”

“What do you mean?”

“We can find no production facilities in England associated with this new tank. At first I assumed they were well hidden, perhaps even underground, but my people there are very good. This may sound surprising, sir, but we’ve turned up nothing—no factories, no materials requisitions, no evidence of a design or planning committee—nothing! I must conclude these tanks may have been built in a secret overseas facility, perhaps in the British colonies. Our man in North Africa says they first appeared out of the deep desert of southern Libya.”

“Nonsense. If they had factories there, we would know about them. You simply cannot hide facilities big enough to produce heavy tanks.”

“I thought as much, sir. So we are now looking into India. They could have been shipped in from there, and we’ll find out soon enough. That said, this is all another deviation from the material. No mention was ever made of these heavy tanks, and the fighting in both North Africa and Syria has been radically altered. The Germans have been stopped on both those fronts!”

Kirov thought about this, nodding his head. “No evidence... Just as the British found no evidence that we ever built the ship. That must have been a great surprise to them when it appeared in the middle of their battle with the

German Navy last year—yes, another anomaly.”

“There is one more we must discuss, sir.”

“Karpov?” Kirov knew what was on the other man’s mind. “Any further information?”

“Only that those reports of his demise were proven wrong. His airship did not crash in the English Channel. We believe this may have been deliberate misinformation. *Tunguska* was spotted by our agent at Ilanskiy. And sir, there is a big battle underway there now.”

“At Ilanskiy? Why wasn’t I informed in the morning papers?”

Kirov was not referring to the Moscow news. The ‘morning papers’ were his daily briefing reports from the GRU, which he read over hot tea, blini, and good bread at his breakfast.

“We only got the information an hour ago,” said Berzin. There is an airship battle underway, and Volkov has landed a large troop contingent.”

“I see...” Kirov’s eyes darkened. “Then this offensive opening on the Ob River line three days ago was a ruse. It was meant to pull in Siberian reserves to that front, all so this attack at Ilanskiy might succeed.”

“Why would Volkov want that place, sir?”

“That is usually something I might be asking you, Grishin. Are you not head of the GRU?” Kirov smiled, indicating he was not serious. He knew full well why Berzin was in the dark about Ilanskiy. There were some things Kirov told to no other man, and his experience on the back stairway of Ilanskiy was one of them.

“For that matter,” said Berzin, “why does this Karpov fret over the place? I can only conclude it must be a new weapons facility, sir. There is construction going on there. The Siberians have also been bringing in materials from mining concerns deep in the taiga. We are getting more hard information on this, and I will have a report for you very soon, sir.”

“Where are these mining concerns you speak of?”

“Up near Vanavara, sir, which is very surprising. Those old mines there are a thousand kilometers away from this new operational base Karpov seems to be setting up at Ilanskiy, and we all know the Siberians have very few trucks to waste in hauling mineral ore half way across Siberia.”

“Indeed,” said Kirov, a light of understanding in his eyes now, though he said nothing more.

Part XI

The Gordian Knot

“Prometheus is action. Hamlet is hesitation... In Hamlet the will is more tied down yet; it is bound by previous meditation--the endless chain of the undecided. Try to get out of yourself if you can! What a Gordian knot is our reverie.”

— Victor Hugo

Chapter 31

Elena Fairchild was not satisfied. The conversation she had with Admiral Tovey had done nothing but deepen the mystery, and the dilemma she now found herself in. It was not simply the shock and amazement over what had happened to the ship, or even the deep, residual guilt she felt when she left those oil tankers adrift in that uncertain future.

The moment she received that fleet order on the Red Phone, the thrum of anxiety had redoubled. Her nerves had been jangled by the imminent outbreak of war, and their hurried mission to close a deal with Salase and complete that oil shipment would have been enough for anyone to cope with. When that order came, however, directing her to Delphi, she had been very perplexed. It was blunt and simple: *Keyholder Alpha to designated mission point. Godspeed.*

It was one of those things that had always been lurking in the background, and something she never quite grasped in its entirety. The duty had been handed to her, officially, just six months before she met Salase, when she was in home port, anchored off her corporate headquarters facility at Port Erin on the Isle of Man. She had gone ashore that day, thinking to have a bite of fish and chips at a favorite little restaurant near the old railway station and museum. The Port Erin Diner was a simple place, in an eggshell yellow building with the familiar green sign. Right next door was “The Station,” serving pure brewed traditional ales, and she would have a pint herself after lunch.

But the dark, official looking car that pulled up outside, and the man in a naval uniform with that briefcase, spelled trouble from the moment she saw them. Instead she was sought out by the young officer, a special courier, and told that she was to take delivery of the briefcase and its contents, and that he was not to leave her presence until he was satisfied that a security team was present to escort her safely back to the ship.

Once aboard *Argos Fire* she sat in her secure office, staring at that briefcase for some time before she mustered the determination to get on with it and open the damn thing. Inside she found a small manila envelope, and equally terse instructions.

Now designated Keyholder Alpha. Contents to be worn on person at all times. Mission point briefing to follow. The briefing had designated Delphi,

and specifically the shrine itself, as her mission point, and gave instructions on how she was to excavate the site should she ever be called to carry out this mission. No further explanation was given, and for some time nothing more came of the matter.

It was just another of the many riddles and mysteries surrounding her induction into the Watch. The things she had learned had been deeply shocking, and her life was never quite the same afterwards. Once she had tried to unburden herself to Captain MacRae, Gordon, the man who had become much more than her able ship's commander in recent weeks. She had always admired him, and knew that behind that admiration, another feeling lurked in the background, an attraction that she found impossible to dismiss. She had kept it hidden behind the protocols of running the ship, and conducting company business, but she could feel, with that intuition women are famous for, that there was something in his gaze at times, something in the tone of his voice, that was more than simple ship's business.

At first she hesitated to say anything at all about her role—the secret office, the Red Phone, the Watch, the mission that she had been sent on as they were harried from the Black Sea on the eve of war. Then she knew that Gordon would inevitably be at the center of anything that happened, and to be effective, he would need to know more. But how to reveal the truth, the life changing truth that the world they were living in was something quite different than any of them ever imagined? How to explain it, that this moment was never lost on its endless movement forward in time? It was connected, always, to every other moment of the past, and every moment yet to unfold from an unknown future.

But why here, she thought. Clearly that device I retrieved from Delphi had but one purpose, and that was to somehow move this ship to this point in time. She had long known that such displacement in time was possible. She was one of the very few that knew this, a burden that seemed almost impossible to carry at times. Information had come to them long ago—information from the future. It had first served to persuade them as to its authenticity, quoting events that were yet to happen, chapter and verse. And then it had become a warning, of a ship, the very ship the Watch itself had been determined to wait for, and find—*Geronimo*.

Now it was here, steaming a thousand meters off their port quarter. But why was *she* here? What was she supposed to accomplish in this time? Was *Argos Fire* merely called to arms in this hour of need. Was she sent here to

try and somehow save this strangely altered world she now found herself in? To find that they had moved, slipping from one of those cross-stitched moments in time to another, was amazing enough. But why this moment? And what about that note she had found, signed by Admiral Tovey himself?

I've gone from Keyholder Alpha to Watchstander G1, she thought. Yet I haven't really any idea of what my responsibilities are for either role. It was clear now that the Keyholders were meant to be moved in time. How many were there? Were they all out there on similar missions? Where were they going with the keys that had hung about their neck? What would they open? Were there other places, hidden vaults, mysterious boxes and devices seeded in the world by people from our own future? What was the intent of all of this? Why this time, right in the middle of WWII?

I thought I would finally get my answer when I took this to Admiral Tovey, but he seemed completely in the dark. He had no recollection of ever writing the note I found in that device, and how could he? This John Tovey was living a full year before he had ever even founded his secret group, the Watch.

It became even stranger for her when Tovey had confided that information about the reports, documents, and photographs in the archive at Bletchley Park. An anomaly... She had been told such things might happen. They had told us it was possible, those unseen voices from the future. Things sometimes slip, they become unhinged, they pass through cracks and holes, and turn up in most unexpected places. That was all she had learned about it, and all she knew. Yet her curiosity would not let it go.

For years she had taken in all this incredible information, never seeing the entire picture, but always being asked to hold a brush. Now she was doing much more than simply standing her watch. Yes, now she had that brush in hand, and she was being asked to paint on the canvass of this history. She knew that her very presence here was an offense. The *Argos Fire* did not belong here, nor did *Geronimo*, *Kirov*, the ship... Yet here they were, actively intervening in the events that were unfolding, as if they were at war with destiny. Were they sent here to merely hold the line? What was their real purpose? The Russians tell me that this was all an accident, but clearly my presence here was very well planned...

We've turned back the tide for a while, she thought. Yet now we sail west for Gibraltar. I wonder how long this has been planned? Is this my mission now, to simply serve here in the midst of this war? How long will we

have to stand *this* watch?

She remembered telling Gordon all this, and expressing her curiosity about Delphi... *"That box we found at Delphi... It's been nagging at me,"* she had told him.... *"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," MacRae told her. *"Delphi isn't very far away."*

Yes, she could get up there with the X-3s again and have a look. What would she find? Was that hidden chamber there, buried beneath the shrine? Something told her now that she would be disappointed if she tried that. What would she possibly find there, the box that she already had in her possession at that very moment? No, that would be impossible. Then she remembered the question Gordon had asked her that day.

"What about the other key? What was it to be used for?"

Yes! The other key! She could hear her own voice to Gordon in reply. *"The key that was found in the Elgin Marbles? We never discovered that, because it was lost, in May of 1941, the 27th of May, to be precise."*

It was aboard HMS *Rodney*, bound for Boston to have those dodgy boiler tubes replaced. It was there when the ship sailed, but missing when it finally reached Boston. Somewhere on that journey, and through the fire of that engagement with *Bismarck*, that key was lost.

That thought struck her like a hammer. *27 May, 1941*. Why, here she was in that very same month! Yes! I told Gordon we knew the exact day that other key was lost, because it was aboard HMS *Rodney*, meant to be shipped secretly to Boston, along with all that gold bullion hidden in the battleship's belly. That was right in the middle of the hunt for the *Bismarck*. The Admiralty was pulling every ship they could get their hands on into that action, but things are very different now. In that history the *Bismarck* was

trying to run the Denmark Strait off Iceland, yet now it is right here... in the Med... running west for Gibraltar with a very big friend in the *Hindenburg*, and by god, yes, that's where *Argos Fire* is too!

Could this be the reason we were sent here? Does it have something to do with that last remaining key? It suddenly occurred to her that the key could be out there at this very moment. It was in the Selene Horse! The custodians at the British Museum always knew that the key existed. It had been a mystery for some time, though it was known only to a very few. Yet it was thought to be an oddity, and never explained, until we started receiving those messages from the future, years later.... The keys were very important, they were essential, *critical*, and they must all be found and accounted for...

One thought tumbled on another in her mind now. This is my mission! This is what I'm here for. HMS *Rodney* is out there somewhere, and if anything in this topsy-turvy world holds true to the history I know, then her hold is bloated with gold bullion, and the Elgin Marbles are there. The key is right there with them, in the base of the Selene Horse.

She suddenly realized she needed to know everything possible about the whereabouts of *Rodney*, and who better to ask but Mack Morgan. In a heartbeat she pressed her intercom, buzzing Morgan's office two decks above.

"Mack? I want some information. Contact Admiral Tovey on the *Invincible* if you need to do so, but be discrete. I want to know where the battleship *Rodney* is at this moment, as quickly as possible, but get it right."

"Aye, Mum. I can't say as I'm privy to Admiralty ship schedules, but I'll see what Tovey knows."

"Good. Find out what we're looking at in a few days, will you?"

"Right now we're looking at a significant airborne contact off Sicily. I was just about to beat the crew to quarters."

"We're under attack?"

"Not just yet. The Sampson radar has a good long range, but I've about fifty contacts out there that don't look like a welcoming committee."

"Very well. Inform the bridge. Then get me that information on the *Rodney*—as soon as you can."

Where was *Rodney*? Tovey had been wondering that himself,

particularly when Somerville had informed him the ship was recalled to Home Fleet. So he had taken *Nelson* and *Valiant*, promising two ships to Somerville in return, and he thought little more about it until Mack Morgan's request came in, edged with just a note or two of urgency.

He went down to the W/T Room to catch up on signals traffic from Admiralty, and it wasn't long before he found what he was looking for. There was an old message there that he had taken no notice of. It was orders for *Rodney*: '*On arrival in the Clyde refuel with all dispatch and prepare to leave harbor again*'.

That was interesting. Admiralty seemed to have some urgent business for the old lady, so he dug a little deeper. *Rodney* had been rushed home, then managed to blunder into a small ASW trawler, *Topaze*, off the mouth of the Clyde. She had sustained little damage, but the *Topaze* was a total loss, along with her entire crew of eighteen men. That will be weighing on the big Scot, thought Tovey.

He was referring to Captain Frederick Dalrymple-Hamilton, assigned to that ship at the moment, and a big Scot he was indeed. He had been nursing *Rodney* along, as all capital ships had been pulling extended duty given these trying circumstances. But *Rodney* was having a number of problems with her turbines, and her boilers were also badly in need of an overhaul. He had assumed that the Admiralty pulled the ship from duty with Force H precisely for those reasons, but now he learned there was something more.

Rodney is to proceed to Scapa Flow with dispatch and prepare to take shipment as per private order. Take shipment? Most likely the boiler tubes for this overhaul, thought Tovey. They'll probably have the damn things stacked all over the deck. But he soon learned that that private order was officially "King's business," and that made it very much more than a maintenance issue. Tovey also knew enough to realize the mission, whatever it was, would be given a very high priority. Only the urgency imposed by unexpected enemy action might alter the ship's intended course now, so there was no hope wrangling *Rodney* away for use by Somerville. He would just have to stick to his previous plan, and send Force H the two battlecruisers, *Renown* and *Repulse*. In the meantime, he had more than enough to worry about getting *Invincible* safely out west, and into the Atlantic.

As he was thinking this, the alarm sounded and he immediately knew they would soon be under threat of air attack. It was to be expected, he realized. We're heading for the Sicilian Narrows now, and it is about time the

Eye-Ties did something about it. Let us hope they aren't to ardent today.

Chapter 32

Rodenko was the bringer of bad news that day, as *Kirov* approached the Island of Pantelleria near dusk on May 3. He had been hovering near his familiar post when the radar operator saw the contacts emerging. One was a small group up from airfields on the island itself, the second much larger, a storm of crows gathering off the coast of Sicily.

“Con, radar contacts, bearing 085, range 200 kilometers. I’m reading fifty aircraft inbound at about 300kph.”

Admiral Volsky was on the bridge, but he turned to his Captain now, a glint in his eye. “What do you expect, Mister Fedorov?”

“Most likely Italian medium bombers, sir. I would guess these are SM-79s out of fields near Catania. If I’m correct, this will become a low altitude torpedo attack.”

“We have faced these planes twice before.”

“Yes sir, and with good results. I suppose that goes for any aircraft of this era. It is only a question of how many missiles we wish to trade for enemy planes.”

“Fedorov, you will fight this engagement. You have been trying to be a Marine Captain of late. It is time you take your proper role as Captain of the battlecruiser *Kirov*.”

“Very well sir. Mister Samsonov, sound air alert one. State current SAM inventory, if you please.”

“Sir, air alert one. My board reads fourteen S-400 long range SAMs, sixty-two Klinok medium range, and fifty missiles remaining on the close in Kashtan system.”

“Mister Nikolin, please signal *Argos Fire*. Tell them we are going to fire a barrage of 12 medium range missiles at the 80 kilometer mark to see if we can discourage this strike wave. Ask if they plan to engage.”

Nikolin soon had a message back that they were standing ready on their Aster-15 system to take up fleet defense at the 30 kilometer range mark.

“Very well,” said Fedorov. “Mark your targets and you may engage at the appropriate range, Samsonov. Let’s see how much stomach they have for a fight here. I’m assuming they now see our sortie as an attempt to interdict shipping in the Sicilian narrows. At this point, I cannot imagine they expect us to run the straits. Rodenko, what about those planes over Pantelleria?”

“A small formation, sir. Five contacts.”

“Most likely fighters on a reconnaissance sweep. They may want a better look at what they are facing.” Fedorov then realized that he had failed to inform Admiral Tovey on the *Invincible*. They were steaming in *Kirov*’s wake, about a thousand meters off the stern quarter.

“Tovey will not be aware that we are presently under attack. Mister Nikolin, please inform HMS *Invincible* of this impending action.” He then turned to Admiral Volsky and asked if he had any further recommendations.

“No Captain, I believe you have the situation well in hand. Please proceed as planned.”

Fedorov’s guess as to what they were facing was fairly accurate. There was a formation of thirty SM-79 Sparrowhawks up that day, the old tri-engine “hunchbacks” they had faced so long ago in the Tyrrhenian Sea. With them was another tri-engine plane, a flight of twenty CANT-Z 1007 *Alcione* “Kingfisher” medium bombers, each carrying two 1800 pound torpedoes, as were the SM-79s. This meant that a hundred enemy torpedoes were now inbound. Some traveled at 40 knots, and would have a range of about 3000 meters, which was going to mean an attack would require the pilots to come within Gatling gun range to have any chance of a hit—those that survived the missile gauntlet.

The Kingfishers were carrying something different, a new Italian slow speed torpedo that had a very long range of about 15,000 meters. It was also deployed in a novel way, dropped by parachute into the sea near the target, whereupon it would begin circling like a shark, hoping to blunder into an enemy ship. This unaimed weapon was developed for use against enemy convoys, and was about to get its first wartime test. As the attack came in, the Kingfishers planned to break off, and fly to a position well ahead of the British ships to deploy their school of fish. At the same time, the Sparrowhawks would make a high speed, low level attack from the east, where they could see the targets silhouetted by the setting sun, and remain difficult to spot in the gloaming shadows of dusk.

But all this assumed that their defenders needed human eyes to see and target the incoming threat, which was also wrong. And the Kingfishers assumed they would be safely out of flak range when they deployed their weapons, which was also not the case. The Italian pilots were not expecting any flak threat for some time. Many were new, sent down from the mainland in recent weeks to flesh out the squadrons. They had been warned by their

mates about the guided rockets that had so devastated earlier attacks against the British fleet, but most had not seen this happen, and would therefore have to endure the initial shock and horror of the SAM attack.

Volsky was watching Fedorov closely. The young man seemed to be well in charge of the situation, and he had become a very good officer in his brief, yet trying, time as Captain. Yet he had come to know Fedorov very well in these many long months, and he could also see that something was troubling him. He was covering it well, but it was there, just beneath the surface of his self-imposed calm. He eased over to his Captain, leaning his way and speaking in a quiet tone of voice, so the other members of the crew would not hear them.

“Something troubling you, Mister Fedorov?”

“Sir?” Fedorov did not quite know what was eating at him, but now he realized that it must be obvious if Volsky had seen it so plainly. He said the obvious thing, telling Volsky that he never really felt at ease in a combat situation.

“Ah,” said Volsky. “This is nothing unusual, Fedorov. I have over 30 years at sea, and I still get that twinge of anxiety when the missiles fly. It is not only the risk to the ship and crew. Lord knows we have seen some most unexpected things happen in battle of late. Half the time we end up somewhere else when things settle down.”

Fedorov gave him a thin smile. “I think we’ll be staying put this time, sir. But in some ways, that is what is bothering me.”

“Oh? Tell me.”

“Staying put. Dobrynin has removed those new control rods and put them in rad-safe containers. Rod-25 is still aboard *Kazan*, and I do not think we will be setting off a special warhead in this scenario. So I think we’ll stay put. Yet it is already May, Admiral. Now we have less than 60 days to spend here before we face that big, unanswered question.”

“I see... So you are worried about this paradox business again, and thinking we must be somewhere else come July 28.”

Fedorov nodded, glancing at Rodenko, who seemed absorbed with his radarman at the moment. Samsonov was receiving his targeting data, and keying his missiles to specific planes in the formation to make sure each missile found a unique target. In doing so, he was the unseen hand of death, passing casual and thoughtless judgment on the men now flying those planes, not knowing their fate was being decided by a tap of his finger on the digital

display. He tapped away, consigning one soul after another to oblivion, until all twelve missiles were targeted.

“Well,” said Volsky. “Dobrynin can always re-install those control rods. For that matter, we could also try to move again the same way we got here. *Kazan* could hover right beneath us and use Rod-25.”

“I’ve considered that,” said Fedorov.

“But yet you take no comfort from those alternatives. You remain uncertain. Yes?”

“I do, sir. We already know that one of those two new rods moved us in space. It was able to take us slightly out of phase, but did not really open a breach in time. Yes, we vanished, but then re-appeared in this same time period. I think it was only the earth’s rotation during that interval that saw us manifest in a different location. And as for Rod-25, I’m worried about what Dobrynin tells me. He says that it is showing signs of wear and soon may reach a point where he would normally remove it from service for disposal.”

“Just like all the rest of us,” said Volsky. “Captains and Kings, Admirals and Emperors, we all get old one day, and then the world will find a way to dispose of us as well.”

That remark hit a deeper vein in Fedorov than Volsky may have intended. He had hoped to lighten the mood a bit, with the self-deprecating humor he often used, bemoaning the extra weight he carried in later years, the labor of getting up ship’s ladders and stairs, the inevitable loss of vitality that came with age. But Fedorov heard something more there, and it finally hit the real nub of the worry within him.

“There is one more alternative,” he said quietly.

Volsky gave him a long look, almost as if he was trying to read the other man’s thoughts. “What now, Fedorov, another of your mysterious plans? What alternative?”

“No sir... It won’t be my doing. The third alternative would be the hand of fate, and I guess that is why I feel somewhat anxious now. Yes, we have the missiles to defend ourselves here, but there is one other way we could leave this time period before July 28th, and it is not very pleasant to consider.”

“The hand of fate? I see what you are getting at now. You are thinking our luck may run out one day. Well, I am the first to admit that I worry about that as well. Yes, every time we go into battle like this. There have been numerous close calls, and the sight of those big shells hitting the water near

us is enough to give any man at sea the cold chill of death. The British were good, were they not? They were good enough to force Karpov to use a special warhead. And as for the Japanese, every time I walk past the battle bridge aft, I realize how close we came to that moment you fear. Every time I see that fresh paint over the scars of battle on this ship, I wonder about it. Yes, we have been very lucky. We have been at large here for a good long while, with the power to have our way, to go where we please and do what we like. Those men out there on the planes heading our way do not know what is about to befall them, and the odds are heavily in our favor that we will prevail here easily enough. Still... that gives me no solace, and this is what is really bothering you. Yes? You are thinking our lease is running out here, and that if we cannot reach into our bag of tricks and find a way to move the ship safely somewhere else, that Mother Time will have no recourse but to take the matter into her own hands.”

Fedorov nodded, for this was truly the heart of his worry. “Yes sir, you have scored a direct hit. That is what I’m concerned about, because that may be all it would take to finish us, and make certain we are not in the way to create this insoluble paradox come late July. So yes, when we go into battle like this, I feel that nerve pulse somewhere inside—a little fear and anxiety is normal, but this is something more. The thought that our doom may be inevitable is most unsettling.”

“So you are thinking one of these planes may get through our defenses here? While that may be possible, I do not think it is likely. If need be we could destroy each and every contact well before they get into firing range. You said yourself that this will most likely be a low level torpedo attack, and the weapons of this day do not have a very long range.”

“They will have to get inside 3000 meters,” said Fedorov, the reflexive retrieval of that fact a small comfort to them both.

“Well then,” said Volsky with an air of finality. “This is really nothing special at all. The day you stop feeling that twist in your chest when you go into combat, is the day you should really be worried. Fight your battle, Mister Fedorov. We do what we must, and leave the rest to time and fate.”

Samsonov was ready for action, and this time *Kirov* would not be sorely tested, though the killing gave Fedorov little comfort. When the missiles came, the more experienced squadron leaders called out for their sub-flights to dive to attack elevation, hoping to evade the high flying rockets, but to no avail. The fiery lances swooped and dived, falling on the formation of SM-

79s and lighting up the horizon with bright red-yellow explosions, each one the death of one plane and its unlucky crew, the souls tapped by Samsonov as he heedlessly made his target selections. Shocked by the attack, the Italian pilots craned their necks, thinking they may have miscalculated the range and flown right over an enemy ship. Others knew better, having seen the missile contrails that led back over the horizon. Yet knowing where the attackers were imparted no advantage to them. The fact remained that they would be seen, targeted, and killed long before they ever would get the chance to do the same to their enemy.

All twelve Klinok missiles scored hits, thinning the ranks to 22 Sparrowhawks and 16 Kingfishers. There came a brief interval of calm. Then, ten minutes later, the sky was scored by the vapor trails of more missiles, this time the Aster-15s rising to challenge the enemy as they reached the 30 kilometer range line. *Argos Fire* had eighty of these left, and had fired an initial barrage of ten. By the time ten more planes and crews had died, the incoming attack had sustained nearly 50% casualties, and it was going to take some very brave men to press on against targets they had not even spotted.

The squadron leader had had enough. Citing darkness and poor visibility, and facing an enemy that had such lethal accuracy, he broke off his attack and turned back. The first trip wire of enemy air defenses would therefore be passed for the expense of 22 missiles. The last twelve pilots in the Kingfishers dropped their torpedoes, if only to say they had at least delivered some potential reprisal to the unseen enemy. None of the 60 torpedoes carried by the Sparrowhawks ever tasted water, except those that fell in those fiery wrecks.

Back at their bases, disheartened and defeated, the Air Commander had no harsh words for them. "Let the Navy handle this," he said. "I will send no more of my men to their death against ships that can kill us before we even see them! Let the submarines deal with these ships!"

It was as if he had announced act two of the play that was now unfolding, for far beneath the sea, well out in the van of the British formation, Chernov was listening intently on his sonar headphones, and suddenly smiled.

"Con, Sonar. Contacts ahead, enemy submarines, confidence high."

On the bridge of *Kazan*, Gromyko reached up, ever so slowly, and did what every man there expected him to do—he scratched the back of his head. The Matador was about to unfurl his cape.

Chapter 33

Mack Morgan had his answer from Tovey, that *Rodney* had been recalled for maintenance problems, and would be bound for Boston soon. It seemed simple enough, but just to be thorough, he decided to check ship's records to see what he could find on the incident. Now he was in Elena Fairchild's stateroom, making his intelligence report.

"A bit of a mixed bag here, Mum. On the one hand, Tovey's information jives with our own historical records on movements for this ship, on the other, I don't think he's given us the whole story."

"Oh? Please explain."

"Well, I decided to dig a little deeper, and went over the log of that ship's movements in some detail. It seems it was given a special mission, very secret, transporting bullion and other valuables to the United States for safe keeping."

Elena did not tell Mack that she already knew that. It was in the historical record, and she knew all the details given her position in the Watch.

"Thing is this, Mum. That's *our* history, from the world we were sailing in before that trip we took to Delphi, and before we pulled this duty. As we've seen, this world is more than a wee bit different. That British ship out there never existed in our world, nor the ship we're out after now, the *Hindenburg*. So I find it odd that these little details still seem to hold some coherent shape. I mean, *Rodney* was detailed to Force H just before this assignment, not on convoy duty out of Halifax, as in our history. But when it comes to this little secret mission, it's as if the event has a kind of magnetism. I've had my people listening in on Admiralty message traffic—got to keep the black line boys busy. And we went over those message logs as well. *Rodney* was ordered back to the Clyde, and was to refuel for immediate duty thereafter. Needless to say, that's very strange for a ship with dodgy boilers and a bad turbine."

"King's business, at least in this world," said Elena. "Any movement of bullion and other valuables would have that designation."

"Fair enough, no argument there. But I read a little further, and it seems *Rodney* had a collision a few weeks ago. The ship ran into a trawler in a night passage as she was returning to the Clyde. Oh, it's right there in our own historical logs, but why should it also be the case here in this world? We've

got Russia broken into three pieces, strange ships at sea, Gibraltar taken by the Germans, not to mention Malta! With all these major changes, why would something of such insignificance hold true in both worlds like that? But that's the case. I just read the Admiralty message on that collision. Found it in the signals archive we've been building since we got here. There it was—same ship, and same bloody day. It happened on the 20th of April."

"Same day? That is strange," said Elena. "And where is *Rodney* at this moment?"

"Scapa Flow," said Morgan. "She was escorted there by three destroyers, and arrived the 23rd of April. She's been there ever since. The cover story is maintenance on those turbines, but then we have this King's business you mention. According to our history, she'll soon be sent to the Clyde again to load boiler tubes and a few other little niceties."

"The Elgin Marbles," said Elena.

"Aye, pilfered by our very own Lord Elgin."

"*Rescued* by Lord Elgin," said Elena, and Mack gave her a wink.

"You have an interest in this, Mum?"

"Somewhat," said Elena, thinking. "Thanks Mack. Stay on top of this, will you? I want to be informed the instant that ship puts to sea, and if you can give me heading, course and speed, all the better. Don't you just love tall orders like that?"

"Well," said Mack, "I'll have to earn my keep somehow. I'll have my ear to the ground on this one for you because, with this little foot race we're in here, I've a notion that things are going to heat up for us fairly soon. We expended ten Aster-15s to repel that incoming air strike, but that was the end of it. The Russians threw twelve missiles at it themselves, and there will be more than a few empty chairs in the squadron briefing room tomorrow. So I think we'll get through the Sicilian narrows tonight as planned. After that, things should settle down until we get closer to Gibraltar."

"Good enough, Mack. Keep me informed." She thought for a moment. "Oh Mack, one other thing. Get another message off to Admiral Tovey. Ask if we can come alongside tonight. I'd like to have a little chat with him."

* * *

That night the weather was fair, with calm seas, and it made the ride across to HMS *Invincible* a little easier for Elena. She had sea legs for the big

boats, but never felt comfortable on the small ones. She was piped aboard, glad to be up the ladder and on a firm and steady deck again, and enduring the curious glances from the young officers, unaccustomed as they were to ever seeing a woman aboard ship.

Some minutes later she was escorted into Admiral Tovey's stateroom, and there she was surprised to see that the young Russian Captain was also there with his interpreter.

"Good evening, Miss Fairchild," said Tovey. "I hope you don't mind that I've invited another guest for tea."

Elena gave Fedorov a quick glance, smiling and extending a hand, but thought better of saying that she had hoped this might be a private meeting. The Russian Captain was most likely here to discuss the route ahead, and coordinate plans, so she would get through ship's business first, as always, before turning to the questions she had been ruminating on of late.

"The Captain and I have just been informed that a pair of Italian submarines are waiting for us up ahead off the Skerki Banks. Good place for an ambush, I suppose. We call those narrows 'Bomb Alley,' at least we did before we lost Malta. Our convoys have no business there now, and the Italians are probably wondering just what business we have at the moment. But don't worry, Mister Fedorov here tells me his people are handling the matter."

"I'm sure they are." She gave Fedorov a quick glance, listening to Nikolin translate, but it was the tone of her voice that carried most of the message, with just enough of the edge of suspicion to be discernible.

"Well," said Tovey. "First things first. We should coordinate our plans for Gibraltar. We've been lucky thus far. If that is all the Italians have to throw at us, I'll be quite satisfied on our chances of slipping through at Gibraltar."

"What about the Germans," asked Elena. "Won't they have planes at Tunis?"

"Possibly, though from what we have been able to learn, most of those squadrons have forward deployed to support Rommel's move east. It seems we could not have picked a better time to try and slip out. The Germans will likely have something based at Gibraltar, and we should also expect threats from mines, shore batteries on both sides of that passage, and enemy U-Boats. As to the shore batteries, RAF has had a look at that for us. They say the Germans have what look to be a few artillery installations in the works

near Ceuta on the Peninsula de Santa Catalina. I could pound them with those nice big 16-inch guns out there, but that does get a bit untidy. Any thoughts?"

"We will not want to waste any missiles on them," said Fedorov after he had heard the translation. "Our own deck guns are a good deal more accurate than your main batteries, Admiral. They can engage that artillery long before we ever come inside their range, but again, that will be like ringing the doorbell, and serve to alert any other defenses the enemy may have in place. The preferred strategy would be to engage the batteries just as we make ready to run through the straits. It would mean waiting until we are very near their firing range, yet it will be dark, and we'll be running black. I think the risk is acceptable."

"We could also use my X-3s," said Elena, when Nikolin had finished. "They could hover on overwatch, and engage those guns spot on, and only if we are discovered and it appears they are making ready to engage us."

"A good plan," said Tovey.

"Yet I'm more worried about the U-boat threat," said Elena.

"That will not be a problem," said Tovey. "At least that is what I am told by Captain Fedorov." Tovey looked at Fedorov now, and received a confirming nod of the head.

"Miss Fairchild," said the Admiral. "At a meeting with Admiral Cunningham, myself, and the Russian Admiral Volsky, something else was confided to us. It was being held secret, as so much of this business is, but as you and your ship are in the thick of it here with us, you must know what I am now about to tell you. The Russian battlecruiser is not the only vessel from their time that is present here in 1941. There is another boat, a submarine, and it is out in front of our task force clearing the way insofar as the undersea threat is concerned."

"A submarine?" Elena was quite surprised, restraining a flash of anger at the same time. "Why wasn't I told this before?"

"My apologies," said Tovey. "You were not at that meeting, and the matter slipped my mind, though I had every intention of briefing you, for obvious reasons. I am told the radars and sonar systems on your ship are very good, and was worried you might discover this submarine on your own and deem it a threat. I put that aside, being told that this vessel was not near us at the time, but now, with this mission, you need to know."

"I see... So things are being handled on a need to know only basis here. I cannot say I am happy with this arrangement, Admiral."

“I apologize again, but please understand that we meant you no disrespect.”

“The submarine in question is our *Yasen* Class boat, *Kazan*.” Fedorov was forthcoming, seeing himself that Fairchild was not happy the information was withheld. “It is a very long story as to how it comes to be here with us, but I would be happy to brief you in full. It is not our wish to withhold information, and frankly, I do have many questions myself, chiefly concerning the matter of how your own ship arrived here.”

Elena folded her arms, looking the young Russian over and trying to size him up. She had a knack for getting a sense of someone, born from long hours negotiating business arrangements across boardroom tables, and with some very shady characters over the years. She could hear the obvious sincerity in the man’s voice, even with the language barrier. It was a struggle for her, at first, as she had only just come from a hot engagement with the Russian Black Sea fleet, losing a fleet tanker and a lot of her people there. Now here she was, wrapped up in this strange alliance with this Russian ship and crew, in another world, another time. It was still taking her some time to tamp down her old instincts and reflexes where the Russians were concerned, and now she had questions of her own.

“Alright,” she said finally. “I accept your apology, Admiral, and I’m not naive enough to think I will be privy to everything, but there are some things I should know, and yes, Captain Fedorov, the first is how this submarine came to be here.”

So Fedorov started to explain, trying to be brief, but fair and complete enough to satisfy this woman. Yet the moment he tried, he realized how tangled all of this was. *Kazan* was here because of Rod-25. That was the simple explanation as to how the sub had appeared. Revealing *why* it had been sent on this mission was another matter. It meant that he would have to explain a good deal about what had happened to them aboard *Kirov*, information concerning Captain Karpov, the mutiny, and his redemption. He told that story faithfully, and then spoke of the clues they had found in the Pacific as to how the war would begin in 2021. It was a little more difficult when it came to Karpov’s assignment in leading out the Red Banner Pacific Fleet, and his subsequent disappearance, wayward fall from grace, and mysterious re-appearance here in WWII. It was a lot to convey, and Nikolin was kept quite busy for a while, but Elena was spellbound.

“Amazing,” she said at last. “He ended up in 1908? Your ship was

actually engaging Admiral Togo's fleet there?"

"Our Captain Karpov was a very determined man," said Fedorov. "When he found himself in that time, by chance we believed at first, he saw it as an opportunity to reverse Russia's defeat at the hands of the Japanese Navy in 1905. In fact, it was always a struggle with Karpov, even while he served aboard our ship. He saw these events as presenting us with a definitive opportunity to change the history in a way that favors Russia."

"Then he was trying to deliberately change the history? This wasn't all an accident as I was told earlier?"

"Let me be clear," said Fedorov. "Our initial displacement in time was the accident. Decisions this man made after that were willful, and though we must take responsibility for what we have done, we did not agree with Karpov, and were trying to stop him. We found ourselves here, bewildered, and soon pulled into the fire of this war. Much of what we did was simply to defend ourselves, as Admiral Tovey and his Royal Navy proved to be quite a formidable opponent! But yes, Karpov took deliberate action, and it was aimed at bettering Russia's future, yet it failed. We later saw the terrible consequences of our meddling here. Ever since then, it had been our effort to try and prevent those consequences, one of which is that war we were starting in 2021."

"And this Karpov took the fight all the way to 1908?" Elena shook her head, astounded to learn all of this, and inwardly nagged by a great unanswered question about it all.

"I was not surprised to see what Karpov planned to do when he found himself in 1908," said Fedorov. "At one point, I thought we had seen him come to his senses, and take a more reasonable view. In fact, I came to like the man very much, and admire his skill at the helm. I learned a very great deal from him, and believe me, it was not easy for me to raise my hand against him. But it was absolutely necessary. *Kazan* was our only means of doing so, a threat so powerful that Karpov could not dismiss it. We removed the control Rod from *Kirov* before the ship sortied from Vladivostok in 2021, and the reason why is another long story I will confide to you later. Yet that allowed us to use this rod on *Kazan*, and to eventually stop Karpov in 1908."

"You went that far back? I wonder why? All your other displacements only brought you to the 1940s, or so you've explained."

"Very true, and that was somewhat of a mystery at first, but I have come to some understanding about it, which I will share with you if you care to

hear it. It gets at the heart of why all of this is happening, and might possibly help us untie this Gordian knot we've got on our hands now."

"I see," said Elena. "Do go on, Captain. I'm all ears."

Part XII

Coincidence

“Coincidence may be described as the chance encounter of two unrelated causal chains which—miraculously, it seems—merge into a significant event. It provides the neatest paradigm of the bisociation of previously separate contexts, engineered by fate. Coincidences are puns of destiny. In the pun, two strings of thought are tangled into one acoustic knot; in the coincidental happening, two strings of events are knitted together by invisible hands.”

— Arthur Koestler

Chapter 34

“1908,” Fedorov began. “That year, something very significant happened in Russia, in late June, at a place called Tunguska. No doubt you have heard of this?”

“Of course,” said Elena.

“I can’t say as it rings much of a bell for me,” said Tovey.

Good, thought Nikolin as he translated. Now I finally get to hear what this has all been about! He waited, eager to be Fedorov’s mouthpiece, and thanking his lucky stars that he was so accomplished as a speaker of English. I’ve been taking tea and lunch with Admirals and Generals, and privy to decisions and discussions that no other man aboard knows anything about, he thought. And all my life I’ve read those stories about Tunguska, and imagined what may have happened there. Now perhaps I will find out!

“Admiral,” he translated for Fedorov, “In June of 1908, something came out of deep space and impacted the earth, exploding in the atmosphere over the taiga of Siberia with such power that it leveled trees over an area exceeding 2000 square kilometers. No one but the locals knew of it, though this impact was seen by many, and detected as far away as your London on seismographs and other equipment. Its effects were also observed for days after, a strange lightening and discoloration of the evening sky. The region was so remote, that it was not investigated until nineteen years later, and it has been explored by curious minds ever since, with many explanations as to what may have happened there. I do not presume to know the answer to that, even though I am one of perhaps a very few people now alive who actually saw that event transpire.”

“Excuse me?” Elena Fairchild had been following closely, but that brought her to a stumble. “You saw the event? On this mission you described earlier to stop your renegade Captain?”

“No, not on that mission, but on another. If you recall, I told you we had removed that control rod from our ship’s reactors, but I did not explain why.”

Now Fedorov gave a brief account of the trouble caused by the other conspirator in that first fateful mutiny aboard *Kirov*, Gennadi Orlov. Elena listened intently, taking all this in and mating it with information she had been privy to in her position as a member of the Watch, information gained over long years of meticulous intelligence work, slowly tugging at the cords

of that Gordian knot.

“Amazing,” she said. “You used it in your test reactor to go back yourself after this Orlov. That explains a few things.”

Fedorov did not quite know what to make of that statement. What did this woman know about all of this? She seemed to be very interested here, almost as if she were inwardly testing what he was telling her now, assessing it all in light of something she knew herself. He resolved to find out what that might be.

“Yes,” he said. “It was a very risky thing to do, but back then I was very worried Orlov would eventually do something, and cause irreparable harm to the history. Seeing what has happened to the world here, I suppose my fears were well justified, though I cannot lay all this on Orlov’s shoulders. Much of it was my fault.”

“Your fault? I don’t understand.”

“Yes, My fault. Why I appeared on that day, in 1908, I have never truly understood.”

“Your engineering reactor sent you there?” asked Elena. “This Rod-25 was responsible for that displacement?”

“No. Rod-25 was not the cause. It delivered me to the 1940s, just as I hoped it would and, after a very difficult mission, I found our missing officer. But that was not the only thing I found during that mission, and this discovery has perhaps had more influence on events here than anything else. I left Vladivostok, traveling east along the Trans-Siberian Rail line to a location where I hoped I might find Orlov. Along the way I stopped at a small railway station.”

Now he briefly related that story, and the strange event that occurred on the stairs of Ilanskiy. This time both Admiral Tovey and Elena sat in utter stillness, hanging on every word that Nikolin was translating. As the story unfolded, Elena could feel her pulse rising.

Another rift, she thought! A location we knew nothing about! At least one that I never learned of. I’ll be the first to admit that I may not have been told everything. Yes, I’m Watchstander G1 now, so appointed by this man sitting right across from me here—Admiral John Tovey in the flesh—our founding father, though I never dreamed I would ever meet him like this. I’m Watchstander G1, by God and his degree, and I more than that. I’m a goddamned Keyholder, a Riftkeeper as well. But we haven’t found every location then, have we? This Russian Captain is telling me about one that we

never discovered. And it took him right back to the source of this entire affair—Tunguska! My god, he saw it with his own eyes!

And what she learned next was equally dumbfounding. There he met a young man in the dining hall having breakfast, Mironov, Sergei Mironovich Kostrikov, and that was the very same man who later took the name of Sergei Kirov. Fedorov went on and on, telling her of that awful moment of weakness when he had whispered that dire warning in Mironov's ear, the words that shook the world's foundation, and reset the meridians of the history from that day forward.

"So now you know why I have told you that I am responsible," said Fedorov with a deep shrug. "I killed Josef Stalin, just as surely as Sergei Kirov might make that claim. It was all my doing, in an effort to spare the life of a single man that I had always admired in the history. And here I am now, Captain of that ship out there, and consorting with other men who have glowed only in the light of my imagination as I studied these events. Yes, I have studied them all my life, a strange love affair with it all, and now, as we can all so plainly see, I have destroyed the thing I so loved. Now I foolishly sail about in this monstrosity of a battlecruiser, thinking I can put all the pieces back together again—thinking I can somehow redeem myself for the great sin I committed, and the misfortune I caused here in this world."

Nikolin finished his translation, but Elena's eyes were always on Fedorov as he spoke. So he has been standing a watch of his own in all of this, she suddenly thought, feeling in him a kindred spirit at long last. She had tried to explain it all to Gordon and Mack Morgan, but only ended up confusing them, and raising one question after another in their minds. Her heart opened as she looked at Fedorov, seeing the torment in his eyes, and hearing it in the tone of his voice. She said the one thing that she could, in all honesty, seeing this young man with new eyes now.

"I understand," she said softly. "Well I must tell you that I have spent a good part of my life studying these events as well, Captain Fedorov. Some of the things you have just revealed are most startling, things I never knew, and I knew a great deal. I knew about Tunguska, for one thing. Yes. The events related to us by your Director Kamenski were well known to me—the nuclear testing, the exotic effects of those detonations, and the odd connection all of this had to that event above the Stony Tunguska River."

"You knew of this?" said Fedorov. "How?"

"Because the good Admiral Tovey here got hold of this business long

ago, in 1942, and he and his associate, a Mister Alan Turing, came to some very interesting conclusions about your ship in time. Yes, in time, that is one of those little puns of destiny I suppose.”

Now it was Elena’s turn to confess her crimes, telling them of the foundation of the Watch, the discoveries they made, and how they eventually came to trace the threads of the mystery back to Tunguska.

“Well,” said Tovey. “Here I sit feeling as though another man has made off with my entire life! You all speak of things I have done, things I will do, as though they have already happened. And yet, even as you do so, I find myself strangely possessed by the clawing inner realization that it is all true. I remember it now, Mister Fedorov. Yes, and it was in 1908 that I first set eyes on that ship of yours. In fact, I believe I fought my first battle against it all those many years ago, a battle I thought we had won, though we never did come to any satisfactory conclusion about what had happened to that ship.”

He told them of Tushima, and the battle he had fought. “I was a very young man then, and young men go from one moment to the next, with scarcely any worry over what they leave behind. I left that battle behind me, I suppose. At least I tried. I moved on in the ranks, busy with one thing after another, and let it drift away, but I have been strangely haunted by it ever since, and particularly so when your ship returned here last June. I knew I had seen it before, but my mind was telling me it could not possibly have been the ship I fought back then, in 1908, the year this thing came from the sky. What does it all mean?”

“As you can see, Admiral,” said Elena, “We are as perplexed about it as you might be.”

“Yes? Well it seems we all have a piece of this puzzle in our pockets. I sit here knowing that I never laid eyes on you, Captain Fedorov, or Admiral Volsky. And yet, deep down, I feel I met you both before, in a year I have not yet even lived! It’s maddening, and I would certify it all as such if not for that unaccountable evidence presented to me by our Mister Turing. You sit there and lay out chapter and verse about my collusion with Turing, Miss Fairchild, and the foundation of this group you call the Watch. Yet I only just met the man some months ago, and damn if that wasn’t the subject of that very meeting—this Russian ship, *Geronimo*, and those file boxes Turing had discovered in the archive room at Bletchley Park. It is utterly confounding!”

“As is this whole story about that stairway at Ilanskiy,” said Elena. “Well, as you say, Admiral, I have something in my pocket as well. It’s time

I pulled my piece of the puzzle out and put it on the table here. Perhaps we can all find how it connects to everything else we've been discussing."

"I would be very eager to hear your story, Miss Fairchild," said Fedorov. "May I ask you to begin by first telling me how your ship came to be here?"

"Yes. You were not at that meeting in Alexandria when I met your Director Kamenski—a most interesting man. Well, it seems we have a little magic box ourselves, one full of unexpected tricks, just like that control rod of yours." She told Fedorov of the box, or the device she had aboard *Argos Fire*, which he found quite surprising.

"And you believe it was responsible for displacing your ship in time? How?"

"I *know* it was responsible. I was given specific orders to go and fetch the damn thing, from a very special site, right here in the Mediterranean, albeit in our time, the year 2021."

"Orders? From who?"

Now Elena had to smile. "Forgive me if this does nothing but confuse the issue, but in point of fact, from this gentleman right here, Admiral John Tovey."

"Yes," said Tovey. "I've been presented evidence of my complicity in that crime, but I must confess I recall nothing whatsoever about it, and plead innocence."

Now Elena told Fedorov of the note that had been found in the box from Delphi, and related it to the long history of her position as a Watchstander in the organization Tovey founded. Fedorov thought he had been the only one to make these revelations, and see the shocked expressions on the faces of those taken into his confidence, yet now he was learning something here that put him in that very same position.

"But how did it move your ship in time?"

"I can tell you what I think, though I have not taken a sledge hammer to the thing to find out. Alright, we both know that something very odd happened there at Tunguska in 1908. Whatever it was, left behind remnants, fragments, residue in the terrain of that area. Your Director Kamenski told us of this at Alexandria, and confirmed what we took long years of intelligence work to find out. This residue, whatever it is, was most likely in that control rod of yours. So it is my suspicion that it may also be within that device."

Yes, thought Fedorov. It was just what he had suspected. A Tunguska fragment. Something about that exotic material had the ability to open time.

This was what he suspected about the Devil's Teardrop, and now it may also be in this device. But Orlov's find was mere coincidence, something he just stumbled upon that ended up having an effect on time, and this history, in an alarming and significant way. It brought Brigadier Kinlan's brigade through to this year, and that was changing everything, at least insofar as the history of the campaign in North Africa was concerned. But the box—the device—this was something more. It was not a random fragment, but something deliberately engineered...

That thought brought back the words of Chief Dobrynin. He had asserted the very same thing concerning the Devil's Teardrop! He said he believed it was too perfect to be a random element. It was *engineered*." His eyes widened, and he spoke quickly to Nikolin, eager to get the words out.

"We have a man aboard our ship who might be able to answer your questions concerning that box," said Fedorov. "He is our Chief Engineer, and very familiar with the material we are now discussing. But one more question please. You believe this box was deliberately placed there, at Delphi, by this group you speak of—the Watch—the group that has been awaiting the return of our ship?"

"The note I found inside argues to that," said Elena.

"Then they made this box?" Fedorov blurted that out in English, as best he could, eager to get on with things.

"That is one possible interpretation," said Elena. "But there's more." Yes, there was always more, and now she told him her real suspicion. "Someone may have given the Watch that device, or simply placed it there themselves."

"Someone else? Who could do this?"

Elena shrugged, deciding that she could safely set her reservations aside with this man. His sincerity was palpable here. He wants nothing more than to mend the damage he believes he has done, she thought. So then I suppose he needs to know. There I was getting miffed about that submarine. I owe him the truth, as least as far as I can see it. So she told him the other incredible tale, of what the Watch had learned in monitoring that strange signal traffic their ships were receiving at sea.

Fedorov listened, the lines of his brow seeming to deepen as he did so. Signals? Warnings? What was all this about? "These signals," he said, "did you ever determine their source?"

"Not exactly, though we speculated long and hard about that. You see,

the information we were receiving was, in itself, plain evidence that told us *where* they were coming from, yet that said nothing of who may have sent them.”

“Then you know the location? You were able to triangulate the coordinates?” Fedorov was eager to get at the nub of this mystery.

“Not exactly... I am not speaking of a spatial location, not a place we might find by longitude and latitude. To find these coordinates we would have to navigate another way—through time. These signals came from the future—our future. They were originating from years beyond our own day; perhaps even beyond the 21st Century! They related information on events that had not even happened yet, but then, four days after each message, these events played out exactly as they were described to us.”

There came a soft knock on the door, though to Fedorov it was as though someone had pounded on the gates of his soul. His mind reeled with the realization of what this woman was telling him.

Tovey frowned when he heard the knock. He had given instructions that they were not to be disturbed unless... Now the interruption was more than a mere annoyance, it was another warning. He turned, eyeing the door, and then got up to open it. An officer was there with something in hand, and whispering softly to Tovey. When the man had finished, Tovey shut the door and turned to them again, holding out what looked to be a signals transcript.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” he said quietly. “It may be nothing more than a little coincidence, but we’ve just got a signal ourselves, though it originates from the here and now. The Admiralty informs me that Force H has a battle on its hands, with the Germans—no further details.”

Chapter 35

Details... The devil lived there, or so it has been said. They were going to be most inconvenient for the men standing a watch with Force H that day.

The German task force had moved rapidly west, and it was only another strange coincidence that caused them a brief delay at Gibraltar. That port had proved to be a godsend for German U-boat Captains, and there were now six boats stationed there. Being much farther from England, it was relatively safe from RAF bombing raids, which would either have a long overseas journey, or a more dangerous flight path over hostile territory in France and Spain. So many U-boats that had formerly been berthed at Saint Nazaire or Brest moved to Gibraltar, where they prowled the straits, and also sortied out into both the Med and Atlantic.

Another ship was berthed there the night Lütjens arrived, the UJ-2210. It was an old French trawler, the *Marcella*, captured and converted into an undersea boat hunting ship, or U-Jaeger, and it was now in the proud possession of the man who would become Germany's top hunter killer in that role, Captain Otto Pollmann. He had been out hunting that day, and had just completed refueling when the big flotilla came in. The sight of Germany's largest and most powerful warship was a thrill, and he also took great interest in the sleek lines of the light carrier *Goeben*. Unfortunately his crew took equal interest, and when they had to move their trawler during the refueling operation for *Bismarck*, the hose became strained when the helmsman was gawking at the *Hindenburg* and failed to mind his station properly.

The trawler ran afoul of the hose, causing a fuel spillage and other damage to the fittings. It was going to cause a two hour delay in getting fuel into *Bismarck*, and those hours were used well by the British ships in Somerville's Force H, as they now raced due north, intending to get into a good position to find *Hindenburg* if it sortied from Gibraltar. Those two hours were crucial, for if Lütjens had completed the refueling operation and left before dawn, as Adler promised, then the chances of intercepting the German fleet would have been very thin. As it stood now, things were quite different, but Force H was going to pay a price for its alacrity, as the German fleet was now a very dangerous enemy.

It was well after dawn before Lütjens was able to depart from Gibraltar, and at 14:00 he found himself off Cape Saint Vincent, Portugal, as planned, though they were well over the horizon to make certain curious eyes would

not spot them. But not all curious eyes were landward that day. The Germans were soon to be visited by a pair of Fulmars off HMS *Glorious*, and Marco Ritter on the *Goeben* was to have a very busy morning.

It would be the second time that pilots off two opposing aircraft carriers had met in battle. Ritter was up in his ME-109T, and saw the two fulmars in a tight formation, some distance below. It was a perfect scenario for an ambush, and he quickly tipped over his wings and dove to attack. The resulting fight saw him down one Fulmar, which put up just enough of a fight to allow the second to escape. Ritter saw the other plane speeding away, and thought he might open his throttle to see if he could catch it. But he had been up too long that day, and low fuel compelled him to return to the *Goeben*. Yet he took careful note of the direction the enemy plane was flying, and reported it to the ship's Captain as soon as he was aboard.

"Hans!" he said when he was again below decks to check on his plane. There was one small hole in the tail where the enemy had nicked him.

"Getting sloppy?" asked Hans Rudel.

"Oh that? It was nothing. Just a lucky shot. I was up and around on him in no time, and put him in the sea. The other fellow was smart enough to make a run for it. But now it's your turn, Hans. Let's get back up there and look for this enemy carrier!"

And they did.

Hafner, Brendel, and Rudel were in the only three *Stukas* aboard the *Flugdeckkreuzer*. Heilich, Ehrler and Ritter were flying escort in ME-109-T fighters. The remaining six planes were all ME-109s, and they would be retained for combat air patrol over Lütjens task force. Marco Ritter followed his nose, and it was not long before the six planes found what they were looking for. There was only one thing that gnawed at him when he finally spotted the enemy task force below—those damnable rockets. So far they had not seen their evil white tails in the sky, and now it was time to get those *Stukas* in for an attack run before they came.

"There they are, Hans! I'll keep those fighters off your backside. Good hunting!"

* * *

Aboard HMS *Glorious* the alarm sounded at 15:20 hours, not long after Lieutenant Charles Stewart came in with a badly nicked Fulmar. His mate,

Eddie Shackley, was not coming home that day, and the word was soon passed to the bridge where Captain Christopher Wells now commanded the only capital ship remaining in Force H. Admiral Somerville was ashore, still on the Canary Islands coordinating an operation being teed up by the Royal Marine Commandos. So instead of planting his flag on HMS *Glorious*, Somerville was content to command from his desk in the Grand Canary Harbor HQ facility.

“Mister Lovell,” said Wells to his XO after he got the report. “See that Admiral Somerville is informed of this incident, and make certain he knows that Stewart thinks these were 109-T Messerschmitts. He says he could clearly see the arrestor hooks.”

“That would mean that new German carrier is about.”

“Indeed, and we both know what that means. That ship was operating as a forward screen for *Hindenburg* and *Bismarck*.”

“That’s why we’re out here, sir,” said Lovell with his chin up. “Shall I get a word down to the flight deck as well and get 823 Squadron up?”

“That would be wise but, as it stands, we’ve no fix on the enemy location yet.”

“If that German plane that ambushed Stewart was up on top cover, it would be a good bet they’re very close, sir. We could send 823 to the northeast to have a look. They’ve good range and loiter time in those *Swordfish*.”

“Very well. See to it, Mister Lovell.”

“Aye sir.”

Lovell was off, but he would not get far before the alarm was sounded. The W/T room had a message from their own top cover—enemy planes inbound!

Wells was out on the weather deck in an instant, neck craned and eyes puckered to see what was coming in. He heard it before he saw it, swinging around to see three birds of prey dropping from the sky, pursued by one of their own Fulmars, which was in turn being tailed by another German fighter. His close escort, the AA cruiser HMS *Coventry*, was quick into action with her five 6-inch guns able to double as AA guns, augmented by two 3-inchers, and two 2 pounders. The new octuple 2-pounder pom-poms *Glorious* had received in her last refit were also chopping away, one on each side of the flying-off deck. The sky was soon pocked with exploding flak, but the swift descent and high vertical attack of the *Stukas* made them very difficult targets

to hit. My god, thought Wells. Where are our bloody fighters?

That was a most appropriate description at that moment. For Marco Ritter was a highly skilled ace, along with his two wing mates. Even though they found themselves outnumbered six to three, the German pilots had the better plane, and more experience flying in the heat of combat than their British counterparts that day. Two of the six men up above Wells task force were already bloody, Purdy and Moore, and Ritter was on the tail of the one plane that had managed to get near the diving *Stukas*.

It was soon clear to Wells that his luck, born on that hot moment when Hoffmann's *Scharnhorst* had caught the ship in the Norwegian sea nearly a year ago, was now about to run thin. He heard the whine of the *Stukas* as they came, the Jericho trumpets screeching, and the whistle of falling bombs. When they fell he was horrified to see the first two straddle his bow, and then, seconds later, a third bomb came thundering down on the forward deck.

He braced himself as the ship shuddered with the hit. *Glorious* had once had seven inches of armor in that spot, where the barbettes of her big 15-inch guns had been mounted in a previous life as a battlecruiser. But those guns had been removed long ago, and now the deck armor was no more than an inch thick at best. The bomb fell just forward of the flying-off deck, where it dipped in a rounded downward curve. There it struck one of the QF 4.7 inch dual purpose guns, putting it out of action and starting a fire below decks. Hans Rudel had stayed in his dive those few extra seconds, and made certain his bomb would not miss.

* * *

Aboard the *Hindenburg*, Kapitan Adler was watching the horizon with his field glasses when he noted the curling black finger of smoke in the distance.

"We must be very close, sir," he said to Admiral Lütjens.

"That could be thirty or forty miles off, Adler."

"True, sir, but we can be there in an hour with our speed."

"May I remind you that we steered this course to try and avoid the British fleet."

"True sir, but what about *Kaiser*? They are well out in front of us. Why not send them in to have a taste. They can outrun anything the British have, even their cruisers and destroyers."

Lütjens thought about that. He soon got word back from Marco Ritter as well—three enemy cruisers, five destroyers and one aircraft carrier—position, course and speed. One look at the plotting board told him that Adler was correct. He could send the *Kaiser Wilhelm* up to engage the enemy, and come right on their heels if he wished. If nothing else, that might drive off this enemy task force, and that smoke on the far horizon meant that their *Stuka* pilots off the *Goeben* had already drawn blood. He could see that Adler was like a shark smelling that blood now, his eyes alight, yearning for battle.

“No sign of those new enemy rockets, sir,” said Adler, waiting.

Finally the Admiral nodded his head. “Very well. Signal *Kaiser Wilhelm*. Tell them to approach and engage at long range. If the enemy attempts to close the range, he is to steer three-zero-zero at his best speed and break off.”

“Break off?” Adler quickly thought that the Admiral wanted to go in for the kill himself. “Shall we turn to intercept the enemy now?”

“No, Captain. We will hold steady on our present course, and come a further five points to starboard the minute *Kaiser* indicates they are breaking off as ordered.”

“But sir!” Adler thought for a second before he spoke, realizing they were on the bridge, in front of the other crewmen, and recalling the Admiral’s earlier warnings. That turn would take them away from the fight, and it galled to think the *Hindenburg* was running now, running from a fight it might easily win. He turned stiffly, arms folded behind his back.

“May I understand the Admiral’s intentions?” Adler waited, a restrained anger still noticeable when Lütjens regarded him.

“My intentions have been plainly stated, Kapitan. We are steering for the Atlantic convoy routes. I have no intention of dueling with British cruisers, which should be two hours to the south of us now. We were late leaving Gibraltar, and now we have other business to attend to. *Kaiser* will lead the British off on a course that will make it impossible for them to catch up with us if they follow that ship. As you so correctly point out, they will then have the speed to shake those cruisers off and rejoin us. As for our battleships, we steer northwest for the open sea.”

It was clear that Adler was not happy, but he said nothing more, silently steaming behind his raised field glasses again. Lütjens is too old for this, he thought. He is too cautious, especially after we took those hits in the Mediterranean. Alright then, at least we have *Kaiser* out looking for a fight.

If the British do have these rockets, we will soon find out. But one day the Admiral will have to realize that *Hindenburg* was built to fight the enemy, not run from them.

“Those *Stuka* pilots on the *Goeben* have certainly done their job,” said Lütjens with a smile. “Hopefully that hit will prevent the British from mounting further air operations.”

“Thankfully someone is doing their job,” said Adler, with just enough ice in his voice to make his feelings known. “Because the British certainly have no reason to fear anything from the *Hindenburg*.”

“I can see you disagree with this course, Adler.”

“I do sir, and I think it is not inappropriate for me to say as much.”

“Not inappropriate,” Lütjens rejoined, “but also not wise. Yes, I know you want to get those guns out there into action, and the thought of feasting on a wounded British aircraft carrier is very enticing. If the situation changes I will consider your objection, but for the moment, my orders stand.”

* * *

The situation, as they so often did, was soon about to change. *Kaiser Wilhelm* was a very fast ship, capable of 36 knots, and it was soon a shadow looming on the horizon of Captain Christopher Wells.

When the sighting was first made by HMS *Sheffield*, steaming some 3000 meters off the starboard quarter of the carrier, Wells knew he had to act quickly.

“Mister Lovell,” he said imposing calm on himself. “The ship will come to our best possible speed. I know that won’t help the fire crews up front, but it can’t be helped.”

“Very good sir. Flight crews say they can get the first squadron of *Swordfish* spotted in five minutes, but we’ll have to come round into the wind.”

“That will put us at three-three-zero, but I’m afraid we haven’t the time just now.” Wells was squinting through his field glasses, trying to pick out details in the distant silhouette. The details, the details. That’s where the devil lived. He could see the tall central superstructure, but he did not think this was one of the German battleships. He walked briskly to the plotting table, where he fetched a printed card with silhouettes of all the known enemy ships. Somerville had informed him of the composition of the enemy task

force, and he knew this was neither *Bismarck* nor *Hindenburg*.

So it has to be the *Kaiser Wilhelm*, he thought, quickly running his finger down the estimated specifications on that ship. A single note was printed where the speed would be indicated: *Observed running in excess of 34 knots during trials.*

“Mister Lovell,” he said again in a measured voice. “The ship will come hard about and steer two-one-two. Ahead full. Signal *Coventry*, *Sheffield* and *Gloucester* to follow. The destroyer screen will make smoke at once.”

Chapter 36

“I’ve sent instructions to the bridge,” said Tovey. “We’re all ready running at 28 knots, but we might kick that up a notch. I can have word sent to your ships to match speed, but there’s little else we can do for the moment. Let us conclude our meeting, and then we’ll slow to 10 knots for your departure. I think we’ve a good deal more to discuss.”

“Agreed,” said Fedorov, still struck by the realization of what he had learned. Signals from a future time! Someone else was trying to intervene in the course of these events! But who?

“These signals,” he said. “They were a warning of some kind?”

“Most certainly,” said Elena. “And now this gets to a part of the story that has been kept secret for decades. I suppose the easiest way would be to show you.”

She reached to her neck line, drawing out a simple gold chain with something dangling from one end. Fedorov could see that it was a key of some kind, looking very old.

“This key was necessary to activate the box we have been discussing. In fact, it was used to open the site where the device was found at Delphi. It was given to me, to be held secret until the day and hour I received instructions to use it. That was the day that sent my ship here.”

Fedorov looked from Fairchild to Tovey, but the Admiral merely shook his head. “Notwithstanding the fact that my name was in that box,” he said, “I can add nothing further. I know nothing whatsoever about that key.”

“But I do,” said Elena. “To begin with, this is one of several similar keys, and they all have a connection to a specific place, very special places, like that railway inn you described to me.”

“Ilanskiy?” said Fedorov. “Explain please.”

“That site appears to be a rift zone. That’s what we call these places—rifts in time. The signals we received were more than a warning. They contained... instructions, and something more, information concerning certain artifacts—each one embedded with one of these keys.”

“Artifacts?”

“Objects, some very old, and all prized in our day as works of art. Each one held a key, though I cannot name them all. Frankly, I was only told a part of this tale, the information I’m relating to you now. I knew there were other

keys, but not their number, or where they might lead; what they might open.”

“Who told you this?”

“Our organization, the Watch. How they came to know about all this I can only speculate. My assumption is that those signals from the future revealed this information.”

“Then these keys came from there—from the future?”

“We believe as much.”

Of course, thought Fedorov. Rifts in time! Perhaps they were the result of that first event at Tunguska. The first cracks in the mirror, were not caused by the ship, not by *Kirov* or anyone aboard, but by that thing that slammed into the earth and exploded above Tunguska.

“Then there is a key that is somehow connected to the railway in I described?” asked Fedorov. “Is this so?”

“That was unknown to us,” said Elena. “At least it was unknown to me. I was aware of only two other keys. One was assigned—to a Keyholder—that’s what we are called. Anyone given a key to hold in trust is a Keyholder, and it is a very exclusive club. As for that railway inn, we knew nothing about it.”

“I have considered this,” said Fedorov. “When I realized what was happening at Ilanskiy, I attributed those effects to damage caused by that event at Tunguska, and thought there may be other similar places, other rifts in time. Then you know of two others?”

“I know they exist, but not much more. In fact, I had no idea what to really expect at Delphi. I was merely sent there, and told that I would need to use this key at that time. Oh, I had my inklings and speculations as well. We knew that one key opened to another passage similar to the one you describe at that railway inn. So I thought there might be a similar passage beneath Delphi, but found nothing but that box. Believe me, after I tested the key a second time aboard my ship, I was quite surprised at the outcome. But once I realized what had happened, I assumed it was all planned. Yet I could not see what I was to do here, aside from throwing in with you and the Royal Navy, Admiral Tovey. Now I think otherwise.”

“What do you mean?” said Tovey.

“Well,” said Elena with a sigh. “I told you I was aware of at least two other keys, but there is more to that. One was assigned to a another Keyholder. The other, however, was lost.”

“Lost?”

“Yes, in spite of its importance, it went missing. I suddenly realized that when I was trying to sort all this through in my own mind. Why was I sent here, I wondered? Was it only because your ship was here, in this time? This was my first guess, as I had long been standing a watch waiting for your ship to return. I must confess, Captain Fedorov, that your vessel was always regarded as a dire threat in my mind. My first thought when I realized you were here, was that I was sent to try and destroy *Geronimo*, sink your ship, and it took some adjustment to think of you as an ally. Now I finally think I know why I was sent here.”

Fedorov simply waited, his eyes on Fairchild, and the silence was thick in the room. Even Nikolin hung on her next words, waiting to translate, amazed to be hearing all this.

“The other key I knew about was found in an artifact retrieved from ancient Greece, a particular piece of artwork that was a part of the Parthenon. It was embedded in the base of the Selene Horse, along with other artifacts that have since come to be known as the Elgin Marbles. We learned it was there, at least this is what I was told, but it was never assigned to a Keyholder. It went missing, strange as that may sound. It went missing this very year, on the 27th of May, 1941. And as remarkable as it may sound, it was actually in your charge at that time, Admiral Tovey—at least in the keeping of the Royal Navy.”

“My charge? But I know nothing of this matter. Perhaps some other John Tovey, in some other time might be the culprit—the man you claim to have met in 1942, Captain Fedorov, but this John Tovey remains in the dark.”

Elena smiled. “That may be so, but I know for a fact that this particular key was loaded aboard the battleship HMS *Rodney*, right there in the Selene Horse along with other segments of the Elgin Marbles, and a goodly amount of the King’s Gold.”

Tovey raised an eyebrow at that. “The King’s business,” he said aloud. “So now I know what this is all about, and why *Rodney* was pulled from duty with Force H by the Admiralty. Are you saying their Lordships were aware of this key? They knew of its existence and significance?”

“I don’t think so,” said Elena. “Perhaps the curator of the British Museum might have had knowledge of it, but as for the Admiralty, no I think they just thought they were shipping valuables to safekeeping in Boston. That’s where *Rodney* is bound, is it not?”

“My dear woman, have you been listening in on Admiralty fleet signals

traffic?”

“No Admiral, you forget that this is all history from my perspective. Strangely, in that history, *Rodney* was involved in a chase very similar to the one we now find ourselves on. It seems a coincidence, but I suspect it is something more. They say history does not repeat itself, but it rhymes. As we know the history, you and your Home Fleet were out after the *Bismarck* this month, and now here we are chasing that ship as well, and its bigger brother. That little twist could complicate things, particularly if this coincidence holds true. You see, *Rodney* was in the thick of the final action that sank the *Bismarck*. I’m sure you’ll be pleased to hear that, Admiral, but while the ruckus was going on, several pieces of the Elgin Marbles were knocked about, and one was slightly damaged—the Selene Horse—right at the base to reveal a place where the key was concealed. But the key itself was missing. It was never seen again after that engagement. When *Rodney* arrived in Boston, the artifacts were removed and stored. They were returned to England at a later time, and everything was accounted for—except that missing key.”

“Was it lost while those artifacts were still aboard the ship?”

“No one knows. All we know is that the damage to the artifact was discovered in Boston.”

“Then someone there was privy to the existence of that key?”

“Perhaps, but we aren’t certain who that was. Remember, there was no Watch at that time. It was not established until 1942. We only learned the significance of these keys later, and that this one had been aboard *Rodney* when it left for Boston. The ship was searched, of course, and the crew interviewed, very discretely. The Curators at the British Museum were behind that, probably by way of investigating the damage to the Selene Horse. They knew about the key, though whether they knew just what it was is not known. A suspicion remained that the key was still aboard *Rodney*, and when the ship was finally scrapped at Inverkeithing in 1946, the wreckage was gone over with a fine sieve. It was all handled by the Grey Friars, or so I was told, but nothing was found.”

“The Franciscans?” Tovey knew that order had been long known as the ‘Grey Friars’ because of the color of their robes.

“Yes,” said Elena. “Why they were charged with the task remains a bit of the mystery, but they were carting over bits and pieces of the ship, metal filings, nuts and rivets, and examining the whole lot in a quiet little room at Saint Peters Kirk, Inverkeithing.”

“Most irregular,” said Tovey. “The Grey Friars sifting through the bones of old *Rodney* to look for this key... Well, they certainly had to know something of what they were looking for. You say the Watch learned of these keys in those strange signals you received. If that is so, then how would anyone in 1941 know about that key, or attribute any significance to it, particularly the Franciscans!”

“Very good questions,” said Elena. “Yet this only remains perplexing when you assume that everyone alive in the here and now is native to this time. As you can see, you are presently sitting here with three people who were born long after your own death, Admiral.”

“Of course!” It was Fedorov speaking now, exclaiming his surprise in English. Then he spoke quickly, and Nikolin translated. “Other time travelers! We thought it was only our sad fate, the ship and crew of *Kirov*, but we all know that is not the case. Consider that stairway at the railway inn. I moved in time on that rift, as did Sergei Kirov, and another man, a name you will be familiar with Admiral—Ivan Volkov. But who knows who else may have used those stairs? If there are other sites, other rift zones as you call them, then it is not a stretch to imagine that others may have used those holes in time.”

“Well this is quite a fine mess,” said Tovey. “People coming and going, just as they please, and fiddling with history! I knew this world was something quite different after I learned the truth about you and your ship, Mister Fedorov, but now it seems we have others involved in this whole affair, in these rift zones you speak of, coming and going like servants in and out of the back door.”

“Correct,” said Elena. “The zones I knew about were all well hidden, and placed under lock and key.” She dangled the key on its chain again to make her point. “So they were open only to Keyholders. That took careful planning—planning that extended over long decades, because the sites I know of are both quite old, like Delphi. The sites had to be secured, protected, and then locked down to prevent anyone from using those passages through time. I wondered what I might find if I went there now to have a look at that site. Would I find the same passage and chamber I discovered in 2021? I was considering doing exactly that, flying in with my Argonauts to have another look, in case the Germans were about. Then this little foot race to Gibraltar started. As for that railway inn, that was a site we were entirely unaware of. That said, all this gets to my mission here, at least as I

understand it now.”

“Your mission?” Tovey cocked his head to one side, waiting.

“Well Admiral, whether you remember it or not, it was you that determined I should go to Delphi, and now I think I may know why—HMS *Rodney*—that missing key. The signals we received in our time were very pointed. We were told the keys, and the sites they opened, were crucial. They must all be accounted for, and here, at this very moment, that missing key may be finally within our grasp. Believe me, we searched long and hard for it in the years after 1941, but it was never found. Yet here, at this moment, it is quite possibly within our grasp.”

“Suppose it is,” said Tovey, “sitting right there in the hold of *Rodney*, along with all the rest of the King’s business. What do you propose?”

“Why, to get my hands on the damn thing, what else! It will tell us where its corresponding rift zone is.”

“How so?”

“Because the keys were very carefully machined. If examined closely, with the right instruments, they reveal a set of numbers along the shaft, and these translate into geographic coordinates. That was how we determined where the other two rift zones were.”

“Oh? And may I ask where they are?”

“You may, but I do not think I should answer, for purposes of security. I’m sure you understand that these zones are very dangerous. The Keyholder for each zone was privy to its existence, and I learned a little more after being designated Keyholder Alpha. I suppose that means I’m to be the keeper of the keys, or that I hold the master key in all this. Well, one of my keys is still missing, and I think it would be wise to find it as soon as we possibly can.”

“Yes,” said Fedorov. “These zones are dangerous. We went so far as to attempt a demolition of the rift site in Ilanskiy. We sent our Marines in, and they got the job done. There was only one thing we did not count on—our ex-Captain Karpov. His appearance on the scene has complicated our effort to seal off access to that breach. Activity in that region leads me to suspect that Ivan Volkov may have also learned the significance of that place. Otherwise, why are the two still battling over control of Ilanskiy? We had word that another big engagement is underway there.”

“That is very troubling,” said Elena. “Why we never knew about that site is equally vexing.”

“Perhaps it was unknown, even to those who made these keys,” said

Fedorov. “Or perhaps they suspected another rift was open, but never found it themselves. For that matter there may be others that no one has yet to discover.”

“A harrowing thought,” said Elena. “Just managing the two sites we knew about was more than enough. Yet now I see that it is imperative that we obtain the key, and locate this last site.”

“Well,” said Tovey, “I don’t see why you just weren’t told about it in these odd signals you received.”

“Perhaps for the same reason,” said Elena. “It is dangerous for anyone to know such a place exists, and even more dangerous to venture there. The condition we find the world in now results from one man’s inadvertent trip through a rift zone, and I do not mean to flay you with this, Captain Fedorov. I fully understand how you feel, but imagine if others knew of these rifts in time, and decided to use them...”

The darkness of that thought was a shroud over them all at that moment, deepening the silence, until Tovey spoke again. “Good enough. As to our HMS *Rodney*, I think I can be of some assistance. We find ourselves in a most interesting place, heading for Gibraltar and the Atlantic beyond. This little coincidence you speak of is presently underway. The players are on the stage and the first act is in the works even as we speak. If history does rhyme, then *Rodney* may have a part to play here as well. I can imagine Admiral Holland is looking at this situation with *Hindenburg* very seriously now, and sizing up what assets he can commit. I’ll be in touch with him soon enough.”

“Admiral,” said Elena. “As to HMS *Rodney*, I do hope that ship comes to no harm. If it were to be sunk...”

“I understand,” said Tovey. “I shall see about keeping old *Rodney* safe and sound. Don’t worry.”

“Oh, but I must, Admiral. That was drilled into my head when I was briefed for that little trip to Delphi. Do not think that the history can protect you once you intervene. This is what I was told. Everything is on the table now, gentlemen, and not just this ship and key. It is all riding the whirlwind, as we seem to be. And if we are not cautious, if anything slips here, then god only knows what could happen next. The reason the makers of these keys didn’t just send us a nice little message telling us how to find the missing key is a dark one. They’re gone.”

“Gone?” Tovey looked at Fedorov, and then back at Elena.

“Yes Admiral. The key makers are gone. The changes rippling forward

in time have been building and building, like a great tsunami. The messages they sent to us were their last attempt at saving the situation—saving the whole damn world I suppose. Because somewhere out there, in the years rolling on beyond the time where Captain Fedorov and I once lived, there is a darkness so all consuming that it devours everything. We were given a word for it from these people in the future, whoever they were. They called it a Grand Finality. A rose is a rose, gentlemen, and in that description I find yet another word that might express it just a little better—*calamity*.”

Silence. The only thing Fedorov could hear now was the sound of his own pulse, beating like a drum, and timing out the rising crescendo of doom.

The Saga Continues...

Kirov Saga: *Paradox Hour*

The hour and day that Fedorov and the crew of *Kirov* have long feared draws nigh, the moment of insoluble conflict, when their greatest enemy is not another hostile ship or plane, but their own selves—Paradox Hour.

Yet before that moment comes, the ship finds itself in one of the greatest naval chases of all time. It is May, 1941, and a powerful German battlefleet has broken out into the Atlantic. Admiral Tovey is fast on the heels of *Hindenburg*, but must first run the gauntlet of Gibraltar to get into the hunt. With him are three of the most powerful ships in the world, *Kazan*, *Argos Fire*, and the battlecruiser *Kirov*. Yet Admiral Lütjens will not fight alone. The Kriegsmarine now sorties with all its might as Raeder throws the dice in a desperate bid to prove his navy's worth and power.

As Admiral Holland musters the fighting ships of the Home Fleet to join in the chase, Admiral Raeder springs yet another surprise in the north, and soon the Royal Navy is reaching for every warship it can find to beat to quarters. One ship called to the action harbors a secret, the missing key Elena Fairchild is so keen to find—HMS *Rodney*. It is now at grave risk, and should it be lost, the secret it might unlock will be lost with it, and the doom Fairchild so darkly describes may then be unavoidable.

Join Anton Fedorov, Admirals Volsky and Tovey, Captain Gromyko and a host of historical characters as the chase unfolds, a race against time itself, and the shadow of doom that hangs over the world. Meanwhile, consumed by the fire of his own thirst for vengeance, one other man figures prominently in that fate—Vladimir Karpov—for he holds yet another key to the outcome of all these events, as he sets himself on another chase of his own, desperate to find and cow his arch rival and enemy, Ivan Volkov.

Don't miss the grand finale of "Season Two" of the amazing *Kirov Series*, coming soon from the Writing Shop Press.

Reading the Kirov Series

The *Kirov Series* is a long chain of linked novels by John Schettler in the Military Alternate History / Time Travel Genre. Like the popular movie “The Final Countdown” which saw the US Carrier *Nimitz* sent back in time to the eve of Pearl Harbor in 1941, in the opening volume, the powerful Russian battlecruiser *Kirov* is sent back to the 1940s in the Norwegian Sea where it subsequently becomes embroiled in the war.

Similar to episodes in the never ending Star Trek series, the saga continues through one episode after another as the ship’s position in time remains unstable. It culminates in Book 8 *Armageddon*, then continues the saga in *Altered States*, which begins the second saga in the series, which will extend to Volume 16.

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*. Each trilogy in the series is followed by a similar “bridge novel.”

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 in 2021 as Japan and China battle over disputed islands, and the action of the Red Banner Pacific Fleet against the modern US Fleet. It then takes a dramatic turn when the ship is again shifted in time to 1945. There they confront the powerful US Pacific Fleet under Admiral Halsey, and so this trilogy focuses much of the action as *Kirov* faces down the US in two eras. 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 concludes the opening 8 volume Kirov Saga, continuing the action as a sequel to Book 7, while also standing as a kind of prologue to the next eight volume saga that begins with 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, including O'Connor's whirlwind "Operation Compass" and Rommel's riposte with his arrival and first offensive. The main characters from *Kirov* and other plot lines from the opening 8 book saga figure prominently in all this action, with a decisive intervention that arises from a most unexpected plot twist 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 a surprise German airborne attack, and the British the campaigns in Syria, Lebanon and Iraq. It continues in *Crescendo of Doom*, the German response as Rommel begins his second offensive aimed at Tobruk on the eve of Operation Barbarossa. At the same time, the action in Siberia heats up in a growing conflict between Vladimir Karpov and Ivan Volkov.

You can enter any of these trilogies that may interest you by first reading the "bridge novel" that precedes the trilogy. For example, to read the 9 Days Falling Trilogy, begin by first reading book 4, *Men Of War*; and to

read the Grand Alliance Trilogy, begin by first reading book 12, *Three Kings*, though your understanding of the characters and plot will be fullest by simply beginning with book one and reading through them all!

More information on each book in the long series is available at
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Pacific Storm - Kirov Series - Volume III

Bridge Novel:

Men Of War - Kirov Series - Volume IV

Second Trilogy: *9 Days Falling*

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

SAGA TWO: *Altered States*

Third Trilogy: *Altered States*

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*

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