

Kirov Saga



Book 25 in the Kirov Series

Tigers East

An Alternate History of WWII by:

John Schettler



Kirov Saga:
Tigers East!

By

John Schettler

A publication of: *The Writing Shop Press*
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KIROV SERIES:

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

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Nemesis - Kirov Series - Volume 18
Winter Storm - Kirov Series - Volume 19
Tide of Fortune - Kirov Series - Volume 20
Knight's Move - Kirov Series - Volume 21
Turning Point - Kirov Series - Volume 22
Steel Reign - Kirov Series - Volume 23
Second Front - Kirov Series - Volume 24

Season 4 Premier: Tigers East

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Part I – *Turncoat*

Part II – *Fall Blau*

Part III – *The Ghost Division*

Part IV – *The Long Goodbye*

Part V – *Fish in a Barrel*

Part VI – *Tigers East!*

Part VII – *Falling Star*

Part VIII – *Ozymandias*

Part IX – *The Kirov Gap*

Part X – *Echoes of Fire*

Part XI – *Awakening*

Part XII – *Downfall*

Author's Note:

Dear Readers,

Here we are, opening Season Four of the series where I last left you, with Gromyko, and with Fedorov's bold decision to persist with his mission, in spite of Karpov's order to return to the ship. You and I know just how determined, and how resourceful Anton Fedorov can be, but even he will be surprised by what happens next. We will get to that again before this novel ends, but first, there is a good amount of wartime action to relate.

I have two theaters heating up now in late 1942. In the west we will return to Patton's battle in Algeria, and the naval action off Algiers as Tovey attempts to command the seas between that port and the vital Allied supply port of Oran. And we will also revisit an old warrior, apparently beaten and brooding on his defensive lines at Mersa Brega—Erwin Rommel. The Desert Fox has a sudden awakening here, bent on recapturing his old glory again. Whether he can ever do so in the shadow of Kinlan's Heavy Brigade remains to be seen, but there will be surprises ahead, and unexpected wrinkles in the fate line on Rommel's palm.

Then we must also take our Tigers East, and relate what has been happening with Operation Blue. There the Germans fight to secure two key objectives. The first will recount von Rundstedt's drive to take Voronezh, sending Model and Hoth in a big pincer operation. The second follows Manstein and General Steiner's SS Korps as they push into the lower Don bend towards Volgograd. Now Sergei Kirov and General Zhukov will have two new crisis points to handle, and desperate decisions must be made to try and prevent a general collapse, and survive until the winter of 1942.

After these battles are fought, we return to Fedorov's dire mission, where unforeseen visitors, and the strange hand of fate, lead him to a moment of real destiny.

A word on the Battle Books...

Many readers have written to tell me how much they enjoy the new Battle Books, which extract chapters forming a major subplot from the series and present them in one continuous narrative. So far we've had two released,

Foxbane and *Vendetta*. The next book was going to involve all the East Front action, but I have decided to postpone that volume so it can include material presented here in *Tigers East* and also from the book following this one, which will be heavy on the great battle for Volgograd, *Thor's Anvil*.

Readers have also asked me what happened to other subplots that have not been given much ink in Seasons 2 and 3, notably the Keyholders Saga, the mystery involving Duke Elvington's trip to 1815 on the eve of Waterloo, Paul Dorland and the Meridian Team in 2021, and many other related events, such as the planned raid on Gibraltar to discover what may be hidden beneath St Michael's Cave.

So there *will* be a new Battle Book coming August 1, (assuming I can get it edited!), and in it I will include a good deal of new material involving these other plot lines. In effect, it is going to present one major subplot story line, which will then be extended to include material that I haven't had room to fit into the regular Kirov Series, all concerning the mystery of the seven keys. I've been focusing mostly on the alternate history of the war in recent main series volumes, but if you like those other subplots, the next Battle Book will present material that may not appear anywhere else in the main series. A more detailed announcement on the next Battle Book appears at the end of this volume.

Enjoy!

- *John Schettler*

Part I

Turncoat

*“Well, whiles I am a beggar, I will rail
And say there is no sin but to be rich;
And being rich, my virtue then shall be
To say there is no vice but beggary.”*

— **William Shakespeare:** (King John, act 2, sc. 2)

Chapter 1

Gromyko did not have much time, and there were still so many questions unanswered in his mind. He had struggled to understand all the things Director Kamenski was telling him, but he was a submarine Captain, not a master of the arcane science of time travel. It was all still a great mystery to him, something he could not fathom, but yet something he could also not deny. He had lived it all thru, seeing that strange control rod shift his boat to the past, and at a most opportune moment in the heat of a fight with a combined Japanese and American ASW task force. After that, things only got more and more complex.

Admiral Volsky had been his one contact point with reality, a sane and sensible man if ever there was one. Kamenski agreed that if he could get to Volsky again, or to his able confederate, Fedorov, that they could help him sort through this mess. But Karpov was another matter, and Kamenski told him that it was very likely that Karpov would eventually achieve his aim of getting control of the ship... *Kirov*.

I was in this position once before, he thought. In fact, this mission was on my back when I first shifted to WWII with Volsky and Fedorov. They were dead set on trying to accomplish the same thing Kamenski wants me to do—get control of that ship and send it home, and that failing....

Kill the ship.

That would be a very hard decision, and perhaps even harder to accomplish. I can set my own scruples aside, but I would be asking a great deal of my men. *Kirov* was the flagship of the fleet, and it was all ready to lead us to war, the sad reality of the situation in 2021. It was going to be a most difficult fight. The navy had been given quite a few new ships in the days leading up to that war, but we were still a shadow on the sea compared to the American Navy. My boat was counted on heavily to address that balance. The same for *Kirov*. If that ship has to die, then it should do so fighting for Russia—an honorable death—and not this dastardly assassination Kamenski has pushed upon me. I fought side by side with *Kirov*. Now Kamenski puts this bloody knife in my hands and asks me to stab my comrades in the back. It isn't right, and yet, the consequences of failure here

are difficult to contemplate.

He shook his head, as if trying to clear the errant thoughts that troubled him, the endless nagging questions. Gromyko liked answers, not questions, but now they sat around him like fresh young crewmen that had been mixed up in a fight, and he had to lay down the law, sort things out, restore order.

I'm to go back, he thought, but where will I end up? Kamenski says I'll get where Time needs me, but that's as much a guess on his part as anything else. Alright, let's assume I get right back to the time I left after that scrap with that British sub. I still have no idea how it got there, or how it found my boat to launch that ambush attack. A good name for that sub, *Ambush*. But I'm to leave that one alone if I ever find it again, or so Kamenski tells me.

Supposing I do find Volsky or Fedorov still in command of *Kirov*. That would make things so much easier. I just tell them all these things Kamenski told me, and they will certainly cooperate. I just deliver this nice shiny new control rod, and that Engineer of theirs will know what to do next. What was the man's name? Dobrynin. Yes, I remember him now. We had tapes he sent over controlling our reactors, keying our men as to when the power had to be ramped up. It's all Greek to me.

Alright... I get that far, Volsky uses that damn control rod—then what? Where does *Kirov* go? To which world does it return? Does it go forward, or farther back, as it did once before? Does it get back to the world it came from—the world I came from when we first sortied with the Red Banner Pacific Fleet at the edge of that war? Does it get back to this world where my boat sits here getting a nice new set of very sharp teeth? Something tells me that won't happen. We built *Kirov* from the bones of the Four Brothers, as Kamenski calls them: *Ushakov*, *Lazarev*, *Nakhimov*, and *Pyotr Velikiy*. They are still here, so I don't think Volsky will suddenly appear here with the ship. In fact, the Admiral is probably here as well, clueless as to all of this. Strange how Kamenski knows of all these events, but he does, and that's a fact.

He tells me not to ponder these things, and to leave that part of the mission up to Mother Time. She will get me where I need to be, and she will then put *Kirov* where it needs to be. Sounds very tidy, but I'm old enough to know things will almost always go wrong if they can. The universe wants chaos.

The missile launch was completed under the grey skies of Severomorsk. That was good. That would keep the prying satellite eyes from looking down

and seeing what was going on here. *Kazan* was out in the long channel soon after, past the last buoy, rounding the rocky headlands as they turned east, and out into the cold of the Barents Sea. It was going to get much colder. There was a lot of ice out there now, and winter was coming again.

Where would he go? A lot may have happened since he fired that last torpedo. *Kirov* was in the Atlantic then, and would most likely be found there, but he could not know that for certain. Then he realized that all he had to do was run the procedure with that damn control rod, right there, in the Barents Sea. First things first. He would find out whether Kamenski was full of shit or not. He'd run the procedure with Rod-25, and see where he ended up. Then it would be a simple matter to just get on the encrypted HF radio and find out where *Kirov* was, and who was in command. That would be risky, but it was certainly one way he could quickly locate the ship—he'd just phone home.

His boat was soon under that dark water and taking a route that was well off the beaten path used by most Russian subs. The Americans always had boats of their own out here snooping about, lurking in the grey sea, looking to sniff out the trail of any Russian sub that tried to deploy. He couldn't allow that to happen this time, and he would rely on the inherent stealth of his boat, and his own considerable skills, to see that he slipped away undetected. Besides, he thought, we aren't sticking around here long. Even if an American boat did pick up our trail, we'd vanish soon after.

He smiled at that, wishing he could see the look on the US Sonarman's face when *Kazan* just flat out vanished, slipped into a hole in the sea and disappeared—back to a time before that young rascal was even born, before any of them were ever born. Even thinking of it now gave him the shivers. And so he would flee now, from the edge of this war to the heart and fire of the last one.

Then he had one of those thoughts that always lurks in the back of every submarine Captain's mind when he first puts to sea. If Time had issues with *Kirov* for meddling in the history, might she not also have issues with *Kazan*? Kamenski seemed to think that Time would cozy up to his boat, welcoming it with open arms. Things were all knotted up, he said, and I'm to be the scissors—and *Kazan*. He supposed that Time had no problem at all in using him like that—using him like a thief in the night, an assassin, a stealthy Ninja of death. Then that thought arose, like an untucked shirt, a loose shoestring.

What will Time do with us after we do her dirty work for her?

Yes, he thought. Suppose I do get *Kirov* home safely, wherever that might be, and failing that, suppose I kill the damn ship, and everyone aboard her. Then what? I'll be the last loose end in the loom, the last dangling thread. What will Time do about that? What will that bitch do with *Kazan*?

* * *

Hauptmann Karl Linz was a daring man. He had seen what was in front of him on the rudimentary radar set aboard *Fraenir*. There were two big enemy airships circling about Ilanskiy like a pair of great white sharks. If I can see them, he thought, then it is likely they can see me. Did the Siberians have radar? He would find out soon enough.

Those two sharks had names, *Riga* and *Narva*, and they had radar sets as well, though they were only the Topaz equipment Karpov had developed. The really good Oko Panel sets were few in number, and so they were only installed on the T-Class Airships, *Tunguska* and *Baikal*. They would see *Fraenir* in five minutes, and then a pair of fighters would be scrambled from the airfield at Kansk to get out and eyeball the contact. The garrison at Ilanskiy would go to full alert, and crews would soon be manning the heavy flak guns Karpov had set up there.

The two fighters were actually IL-2 Sturmovik ground attack aircraft, a gift to Karpov from Sergei Kirov's relocated factories in Siberia. The name literally meant "Storm Birds," and this plane was produced in the tens of thousands during the war, exceeding the production of any other aircraft in history. Karpov liked them because they were relatively fast, compared to an airship, very hardy, with an armored box protecting the pilot spaces, and they could take MG fire from typical 7.62mm guns and still keep flying. It would take several 20mm rounds to really damage the plane, or a solid hit from a 37mm round, and while the enemy was trying to shoot them down, the Storm Birds would fire back with two 23mm cannons and a pair of wing mounted 7.62 MGs. There was also a bigger 12.7 MG manned by the rear cockpit gunner, and the plane could carry eight RS-82 rockets, or four of the larger RS-132s.

"Enemy aircraft," came the alert. "Bearing 195 degrees south."

The ship was already at action stations, all guns manned and ready, and

Fraenir was a very well defended beast. The airship had three gondolas beneath the main body where its secondary batteries mounted sixteen Rheinmetall 7.5cm LG 40 recoilless rifles, with an effective firing range of 6,800 meters. There were also another eight Krupp 10.5cm LG 40s, with a range of 7,950 meters, and the 88mm guns were the main battery for long range engagement, four guns in all. There was one each in the nose and tail with 300 degree arcs of fire, and two on the main central gondola, one firing to port, the other to starboard.

Against aircraft, there were three top mounted gun platforms, each with a twin 20mm AA gun. Similar mounts in the nose, tail and lower gondolas raised the count to 18 twin 20mm guns, and there were also twelve twin MG-42s mounted on small portals along the main canvas body on either side of the ship. The Sturmoviks would be too fast to be bothered by the 88s, but all those 20mm cannon were a severe threat.

Both planes came streaking in from above, guns firing until the streams of red hot counter fire began to zero in on their line of approach, whereupon they split apart to divide the enemy fire. One got off without a hitch, but the plane that angled off the bow of the airship saw its wing riddled by a rake of 20mm gunfire, enough to cause serious damage and a fire. The two storm birds had sunk their claws into the behemoth, their own cannon perforating the big flanks of the ship, but the double lined Vulcan sealed airbags survived unscathed. The number six bag on the port side took the brunt of the enemy attack, where two crewmen were killed and a small leak started, but the engineers had it repaired in good time. Only one of the two Sturmoviks made it back to Kansk, the other pilot was forced to bail out and let his plane fall.

Had there been a typical attack group of eight planes flying in their characteristic 'circle of death' formation, the Storm Birds might have put some credible damage on *Fraenir*. And if they had all come with RS-82 rockets, willing to brave those guns to get close enough to fire them, they might have done much more than harm. As it was, the Siberians had too few of these planes, being a backwaters front, with all the production needed so desperately on the real battle front to the west. But they had eyeballed the target, picked at it with their talons, and now the word went to the Captains of the *Riga* and *Narva*.

They were big ships, both in the same class at 200,000 cubic meter lift capacity, all of 840 feet in length. They had ten 76mm recoilless rifles, and

six 105mm rifles each, allowing them to combine their fire to outgun *Fraenir* 20 to 16 in the 76mm category, and 12 to 8 in the 105s. The edge for the Germans would be those deadly 88s.

Captain Selikov was still on the *Narva*, the very same man that had taken Orlov and Troyak on a similar mission, appearing right in the middle of one of Volkov's ill-fated raids. He was in command here, coordinating the defense over Ilanskiy with his comrade, Captain Ivanov on the *Riga*.

"A big fellow from the looks of it," he said to his wheelman on the forward bridge gondola. He put his field glasses aside. "This has to be the same ship the Germans came in with earlier. Took the *Andarva* down, did they? Well now let's see them try on a pair of hefty boys like the *Riga* and *Narva*. Up ten degrees and take us to 5000 meters. Signal *Riga* to follow."

The game had begun with the mandatory struggle to achieve altitude on the enemy. But there had been survivors off the *Andarva*, and Selikov had taken the time to speak with them. "We climbed," they had told him. "We had good altitude, well over 7000 meters, but they still hit us. There was a nasty top mounted cannon on that thing, and it's a real bag buster."

Maybe I'm going about this all wrong, thought Selikov. I heard three accounts of that battle, and they all said the Germans had a gun that could hit them well outside the range of their 105s. So if I want altitude, I want it with just enough of an edge to take their lower gondola mounted guns out of the fight. And I want it inside the range of my 105s. Normally we'd stay at least six or seven clicks out, but now it might be better to rush this beast, with all guns blazing. We'll take hits. A ship like that has firepower, and by god we might even get blown out of the sky, one or both of us. But we'll take that monster with us. Karpov won't like that—trading a pair of battleships for one of the enemy. He's enough on his hands holding off Volkov's fleet, and every ship we have counts.

He could feel the tension on the bridge, with his new young navigator, Yuri Babkin, craning his neck as he looked over his shoulder to try and get a look at the enemy ship.

"Eyes on your charts, Babushka," said Selikov, using the handle he had given the young man. "Is that weather front still prevailing from the north?"

"Aye sir. I make it four hours or so before we see a squall line forming up, but the sun will be down by then."

"That'll make for a cold night on the upper gun platforms," said Selikov,

“and likely a wet one too, unless we finish this business and find a nice tower to dock.”

He reached for his field glasses again, his eye catching a gleam as the other ship sided them, the sun to the west playing over the taut silvery painted canvass. They’re turning, he knew immediately.

“By god, he’s showing us his backside! Range to target?”

“Sir, I estimate 15 kilometers,” said Babkin. Then the Captain saw the other ship’s tail wink at him, and he knew they had fired. The round exploded much closer than he expected, and Selikov raised his eyebrows.

“That was inside two klicks,” he said aloud. “That’s the goddamn long range gun that took down *Andarva*, and it’s a real game changer. Why, he could stand off and pick us apart with a gun like that.”

“Helm, ahead full and signal same to *Riga*.”

Here we go, he swallowed. How fast can we close that range? He’s already nose away from us, and probably has plenty of speed up. There, he’s fired again....

“Range to target,” he said again, his face stern, voice steady.

“No change, sir. I’m still reading 15 K on the Topaz.”

“Crafty bastard,” said Selikov. “All engines to one third and *Riga* the same. He can match our speed and I’ll be damned if I’ll sit up here and let him take pot shots at my chin while he leads us off into that squall line up north. That’s what he’s planning. He’s waiting for darkness and the storm. It’ll foul up the radars, and he’d like nothing more than for us to go gallivanting off after him like this. No sir. We stay on objective. Signal *Riga* to take up her normal station two klicks off the towers at Ilanskiy. Babushka, take us back there. We’ll not chase him. The bastard will have to come to us.”

Selikov was a very smart man, for that was exactly what Hauptmann Linz was planning. He would come alright, but in a dark and cold hour of his own choosing, at the edge of a storm.

Chapter 2

“So what is this really all about?” asked Symenko, eased into his chair in the desk of his stateroom. “You come off that thing back there, the strangest looking flying beast I’ve ever laid eyes on, and you and your Marines pull a nice little trick getting all the way in here like this. Take me to Ilanskiy you demand, and no matter how politely you say it, all I hear is my death order.”

“Don’t worry, Captain,” said Fedorov. “We have no intention of harming you or anyone else aboard this airship. This is just as it seems. I need a ride, and your ship is the only thing that can provide it at the moment.”

“Well, you can all be choir boys here and it won’t make any difference for my fate,” said Symenko. “I’m a dead man as soon as Karpov gets wind of what happened here. He already knows I was a turncoat once before. Now he’ll see this as colluding with the enemy, or incompetence at best. Either way, I’m a dead man. So before I get the bullet to the head, suppose you tell me what I’m dying for.”

“It’s too much to explain, Captain. Suffice it to say that I have business at Ilanskiy, and it’s imperative I get there as soon as possible.”

“What business? Certainly not any business Karpov has sanctioned. I may look stupid, but I’m not as slow witted as you might think. I was to pick you all up and ferry you to Ilanskiy. Then, right out of the blue, his lordship changes his mind. Instead I’m to take you into custody and haul your asses to Irkutsk. Then you pull this hat trick on my men. If it would make any difference I should have them all shot, since I’m to take a bullet soon myself. Misery loves company. But listen here, Captain Fedorov, I can do exactly as you wish and run you up to Ilanskiy, but what happens next won’t be so pleasant.”

“I said that once you get us there you’re free to do what you wish,” said Fedorov.

“Oh really? Do you have any idea what your compass heading has in store for you? Volkov has tried to get his hands on that place three times. He sent me to scout the place out last year, and that was when I made the acquaintance of his lordship for the first time. He’s not your sort at all—not nice and polite and reasonable sounding. He welcomed me aboard with a nice

little honor guard, but had a gun to my head a few minutes after. Hell, I knew Volkov was throwing me to the wolves when he ordered me to make that delivery.”

“Delivery?”

“Too long of a story to tell, just like yours. Needless to say, I was nearly a dead man then and there, until Karpov changed his spots and offered me a position in his airship fleet—in exchange for information, of course. What was I to do, die like a hero? For Volkov? To hell with that. So now you know how I come to be sitting here, but it’s you that I can’t figure yet. You say you come off a ship—battlecruiser Kirov. I’ve heard it fights for Karpov now, which means *you* fight for Karpov, eh Captain? Then wonder of wonders, you hijack my ship. As I said earlier, if you start your own private war with Karpov out here, good luck. He’s already none too happy with whatever you were planning—otherwise why would I get this order to apprehend you and your comrades? So what is it? You a turncoat as well? You jumping ship, Captain Fedorov?”

There was a sting of truth to what Symenko was saying, but Fedorov didn’t quite see things that way. “Karpov and I came to an agreement. I can’t say why he’s decided to renege on that, but there isn’t time to argue the matter. I need to get to Ilanskiy, and that is that.”

“I see....” Symenko folded his arms. “Then you’re a dead man too, just like me. You know that, don’t you? Karpov will be right there waiting for you... Then again, maybe he won’t. I got orders to take you to Irkutsk. Yes... his lordship was at Novosibirsk pounding Volkov’s line on the Ob with *Riga* and *Narva*. Come to think of it, he’ll probably be on his way to meet me at Irkutsk if he was so damn worked up about getting his hands on you again. You say you had an agreement with the man? Doesn’t sound that way to me. But let me think out loud for a moment, if you please. This agreement of yours has to do with this mysterious business at Ilanskiy. Karpov gets very sensitive about that place. Like I said, Volkov has been after it for the last year, so he’s beefed up the defenses there three times over. He’s always got an airship on patrol there, and after what happened to the *Angara*, he doubled that watch as well. I was posted there with this ship and the *Abakan*. But something tells me you’ve hit a nerve with this little caper, and knowing his lordship as I do so well now, he’ll double that watch yet again. I’d guess he’s already ordered *Riga* and *Narva* to Ilanskiy while he swings down to Irkutsk

to fetch you. That's a pair of nice fat battleships added to the watch, and Karpov won't bat an eyelash in ordering them to blast this ship to hell if I don't cooperate. Right now he thinks I have you all tied up in a sack, and bound for Irkutsk. Surprise, surprise when he finds out I'm not there! Then he'll turn the whole fleet out after us. So you see, you can't get through to Ilanskiy, not on this airship, and not on the ground if I drop you all off and wave goodbye."

"We can try," said Fedorov, his voice betraying just a little doubt. "We did it once before—my Sergeant Troyak got through. He's a very able man."

"Oh, I don't doubt it. He strong armed my security detachment easily enough, and didn't even have to use those fancy rifles there." Symenko pointed to Troyak's assault rifle, as he had never seen its like. "But that one and four others with your Marines won't get you through the defensive perimeter at Ilanskiy. If you think that's likely, you're just deluding yourself. And supposing by some miracle you do get through. The guard in the city is now composed of the Black Watch—Tyrenkov's men. He's Karpov's Chief of Security, and his men are very efficient. No. You won't get through. You may cause a ruckus and kill quite a few men with those fancy rifles, but you'll never live to conduct this business you're so keen on, and that's that."

Now Fedorov looked at Symenko with a harrowed expression on his face. The man was probably correct. Everything had happened so quickly, and he had acted on impulse, driven by the urgency of his quest. Karpov radioed to call off the mission, and he had been too bull headed to listen, too driven, so completely convinced that the fate of the world was in a sand glass of time that was quickly running out. Now, after the seamless way they took this airship, he had come to think he would stroll into Ilanskiy just as easily. Yet Symenko's words galled him with the hard spike of reality. What he said was true. Getting to Ilanskiy they could probably do, and he had simply put his faith in Troyak working his tactical magic to get him inside the city. Now that Symenko put the challenge before him in this cold light, he was finally realizing that his mission was most likely doomed.

But I *must* get through, he thought. Time is running out. I've got to get to that railway inn by September 30th. Doesn't Karpov understand that? I thought I had convinced him how imperative this was, but he always had reservations. Doesn't he realize what's at stake?

Behind that desperate thought, came the shadow of doubt. If he was

honest with himself, Fedorov didn't really know what would happen if he failed to get through, and now Symenko was making it fairly obvious that getting to the railway inn would not be as easy as he thought. Troyak and his men slipped through in the middle of one of Volkov's raids, while most of the garrison there was distracted. It was just good luck that it happened that way, but this time that would not be the case.

There would be airships on patrol overhead, just like Symenko was telling it. They would have to go to ground well before they came into contact range of those patrols, and then hump it to Ilanskiy on foot. That would take time, and all the while Karpov would very likely be tightening the cordon of steel he undoubtedly has around Ilanskiy. Now that he actually had time to think it through, the folly of his decision to try and proceed was becoming apparent. He had acted impulsively, with the edge of desperation and the urgency of his own dark fears over the consequences of failure. Yet he had been stupid to think he could succeed in all of this—in any of it, even if he did get through to the railway inn.

Suppose I did get there, he thought. I just assume I'll get right back to Mironov if I go down those stairs, and then, instead of having breakfast with him, I'll have to kill him—timely cruelty. That was how I put it to Karpov when I argued all this. He wondered then whether I had that in me, the capacity for that cruelty, and believe me, I wonder now if I could ever go through with this and actually gun down Sergei Kirov. It isn't the thunder and chaos that would likely follow that gunshot that feeds that doubt, it's just that moment itself, me, alone, standing there with that pistol in my hands and with Mironov in front of me. There he would be, young Mironov, innocent, like a seedling just taking root in the history, and there I would be, reaching down in the garden to pluck him out before he could root and grow and bloom to become the man I have already met here—the man I so admire.

He lowered his head, deeply troubled. Symenko had just made all his own inner doubts and fears real and palpable again. He had fled from them in the urgency of the moment, with the pulse of adrenaline still hot in his blood after that missile nearly took down the KA-40. Karpov had fired that missile in desperation as well, and with an urgency that Fedorov did not yet understand. Something had caused him to change his mind, and now he was dead set on seeing that decision through. Symenko wasn't simply taunting him, he was correct. Karpov was going to do everything in his power to stop

him now. He was on alert, most likely already tightening everything down at Ilanskiy; most likely sending those other two airships there to bolster the defense—the *Riga* and *Narva*.

Was there any play there? The *Narva* was Captained by Selikov. Was he still in charge of that airship? Could he be persuaded to cooperate with me?

That was just another desperate thought, he knew. Even if Selikov welcomed him with open arms, he would then have to get the Captain of the *Riga* to stand down and allow this airship to get in close—even to dock at a tower right over the city. Then what? Then Tyrenkov's men are waiting right there at the bottom of that tower, just as Symenko tells it here. I have Troyak and the Marines, but I would be asking them to fight against very steep odds. If we do try to fight our way off that tower, then we still have to fight our way from there to the railway inn—unless I can get Symenko to put us down right on top of the place. All these thoughts and realizations passed through his mind in an instant. Then Symenko spoke again, his voice the cold argument of reality.

“Got through once before, did you? That was then. This is now. Karpov's all riled up about this, which is why my life isn't worth a nickel now that you've come this way with your plans, whatever they may be. Oh, I'll get you as close as I can, but it will have to be well outside the range of all those flak guns Karpov moved into Ilanskiy after that last attack Volkov pulled.”

“Flak guns?”

“Of course! He ringed the place with 85mm AA guns—nasty little fellows when pointed at an airship. There isn't much the Vulcan lining in my gas bags can do about a round that big, and now Karpov has flak batteries set up at every landing site—all the airfields Volkov used in that stupid attack he made recently, and double batteries at Ilanskiy. So if his lordship is really pissed, and I think he is, then he'll blow this ship out of the sky if I get inside that circle of fire, and the range on those gun sis ten to fifteen klicks. Just to be safe, the closest I can get you is 20 klicks. I can just drop you off and turn my 105's on you for all the trouble you've brought me. Like I say, I'm a dead man after this. Might as well take you with me, and I'd likely be doing you a favor by killing you that way. His lordship would make it hurt if he got his hands on you—and he will, mark my words.”

Flak guns, twenty kilometers on the ground, Symenko above them with all those recoilless rifles the whole time, not to mention the other airships....

Selikov was a good man, but would he buck Karpov as well and disobey the orders he most likely has now to defend Ilanskiy against all comers? Karpov will soon realize that this ship wasn't going to Irkutsk, and that they were also not enroute to *Kirov* on the helo. These were things that had never entered Fedorov's mind in the heat and haste of his decision to proceed against Karpov's direct order to the contrary. It was all forming up like a phalanx of steel. Symenko was correct, they would never get through to the railway inn, so what in god's name was he doing here? He should have obeyed Karpov's order to return to the ship, and then tried to convince Karpov to proceed as they first agreed. He needed Karpov's compliance to get through to Ilanskiy. It was just that stark and simple.

Three days... That was all the time they had before the 30th of September. Three days, and all time and eternity waiting on what would happen between now and then. Now, with a darkness and feeling of utter frustration that was heavy on him, Fedorov knew his mission was folly. He was going to fail. Symenko's life was already blood on his hands, and he would likely get Troyak and the others killed if he tried to proceed; he would likely be killed himself.

Zykov had been listening to all of this across the room while he was fiddling with the radio set he carried in a backpack. He wasn't sure what any of it was about, but he could see that this Captain Symenko was stacking up a fairly convincing argument. What was going on between Fedorov and Karpov? They ought to just get on the secure channel and hash it out. He was going to suggest that, but then something unexpected happened, the radio set lit up with the incoming signal light, a clear amber light on the encrypted line. There came an audible tone, three solid beeps, and the light continued winking, waiting.

"Captain," he said. "I've an incoming signal on the encrypted channel."

Fedorov turned, his mind still in the anguish of all his inner doubt and guilt. "You mean the command link to *Kirov*?"

"No sir, it's the long range channel for HF encrypted communications. Someone's trying to contact us, but I'd have to know the code to open that channel." He showed Fedorov the winking amber light, and as he stared at it, the realization of what it was struck Fedorov like a hammer.

My god, he thought. Could it be so? His pulse quickened, for here was a joker on the table, something dealt out by the hand of Fate that he never

expected. Could it be so? His mind was a whirl—the code, the goddamned code! What was it? He had devised it himself, so long ago it seemed now. What was it? Something he knew he would never forget...

“Zykov,” he said quickly. “Key in 07-Alpha-03-Zeta-2018.”

Zykov just blinked at him. “The code sir?”

“Quick now,” said Fedorov. “Yes, that is the code, but use the letter o for every instance of zero—the first one upper case, the next two lower case. Quick now!”

Zykov flipped open the key panel and entered the code: O7Ao3Z2o18. It was a cypher that Fedorov was sure to remember, the day he first set foot on battlecruiser *Kirov* as its newly assigned Navigator, March 7th, in the year 2018. If it were confirmed on the other side, he knew exactly who was calling, and his heart rose with the thought of the voice he might soon hear on that radio.

Chapter 3

The code was in, the yellow light now a steady amber, waiting for confirmation from the other end of that transmission. Fedorov was literally holding his breath, and then he saw the light go solid green, the handshake made, the voice on the other end beginning to come through.

Miles and miles away, in the Sea of Okhotsk, Lieutenant Isaac Nikolin also got the yellow link light, and on a channel that was never used except for the most serious message transmissions, high level HF signals that would carry orders from Severomorsk, emergency action messages. He was very surprised to see it, the yellow light pulsing on and off, waiting. Normal protocols would see him immediately report the signal to command authority on the bridge, and then they would respond by fetching the link code from a secure safe. Then, as he stared at the light, and at the ID number for that channel, he saw that it was two cyphers off the normal EAM command link channel, a special frequency variation, which struck him, as that was most unusual.

Yet the longer he stared at that number, the more a feeling arose in him like some deep memory rising from the depth of the dark sea of his mind. It was a behemoth, a monster rising with sharp teeth, then in a shaking moment of realization, it broke the surface, careening up into the clear light of his understanding, and came thundering down like a great whale splashing back into the ocean. *The code!* He suddenly knew what he was supposed to enter. It wasn't to come from the secure Comm-box, but it was beaten into his head by Fedorov, somewhere, somewhere... long ago....

He could not find the where and when of that memory, only the alphanumeric truth that now glistened in the light of his awareness. *He knew the code!* His hand shook, and almost seemed to move as if commanded by another mind, another self within him, another Nikolin. He reached for the keyboard, clicked the line for code entry, and entered the cypher, unerringly: O7Ao3Z2o18. His heart was pounding, though he did not know why. He saw the light go to solid amber, waiting, and then the steady green of affirmation. His numbers were good. Seconds later he heard the voice speaking on his headset, and with it came the rush of a thousand memories.

He saw Karpov on the bridge, and Troyak standing before him like a stony Golem, snatching away the missile launch key in a sudden violent motion. Then again came the image of Karpov, this time with a pistol in his hand, Rodenko down on the deck near Doctor Zolkin, who clutched his bleeding arm. The cascade rolled over him, memories, realization, awareness of a life he had lived, experiences careening into his brain in a torrent of recollection. He closed his eyes, putting his hands on each side of his headset as he often did when listening to a difficult signal. It was too much, too fast, too intense.

Sweat dotted his brow as he listened to that voice speaking, and the memories piled in. He saw himself standing next to Admiral Volsky, translating for Admiral Tovey. He remembered all the secret things they were talking about, all the plans and strategies he was supposed to forget the moment he heard them. He saw ships burning, heard the dull drone of old aircraft overhead, saw missiles roaring off the forward deck, and then he remembered hearing that voice, the last time it called, and on this very channel, the channel reserved for this secret com-link.

Fedorov had told him such a call might arrive one day, and what he was to do when it came. Fedorov had given him the code, and yet, even though he could see the other man's face, the impossibility of that memory, and all the others, left him dizzy headed and very confused. When could any of these things have happened? Yet there they were, the memories clarifying with each passing second. He kept his eyes closed, listening, taking it all in, as if a whole other life was being poured into his head.

And it was.

* * *

Fedorov heard the voice as well when it came over the receiver, his pulse quickening. *"We read you, Kirov, on secure Alpha-Zeta Channel, and your numbers are good. This is Captain Ivan Gromyko aboard the submarine Kazan. Come back. Over."*

Zykov stared dumbly at Fedorov now. What was an Alpha-Zeta channel, and how could they be talking to the submarine *Kazan*? Who was this Ivan Gromyko? Yet he saw the light of welcome realization in Fedorov's eyes clearly enough. The *Starpom* strode over, his hand extended, reaching for the

handset.

“Captain Gromyko?” There was just the hint of doubt lingering in the tone of his voice. “This is Captain Anton Fedorov. Come Back.”

“Kazan to Kirov. Glad to hear your voice, Fedorov. I assume all is well aboard the ship. Frankly, we haven’t determined the date here yet. Phoning home was our first order of business. Over.”

This conversation had been pre-arranged by Fedorov long ago. They knew there was always risk, that Time was fickle, that things could slip. Fedorov could see what was already happening to the ship, and so well before *Kazan* vanished at the edge of the hole opened by its own nuclear tipped torpedo, Fedorov had huddled with Gromyko. “Should you vanish for any reason, slip in time, then it is also possible that you might be returned to this timeframe. This happened to us several times. *Kirov* moved in and out of different times. We shifted to the future once, and found it very bleak, and then we slipped back again. Well, should this ever happen, I have arranged a secure encrypted channel, just above the EAM comm link that sends us orders from Severomorsk. If you ever re-appear, call us on that link. Here is the code you must receive for the link to be valid...”

“Fedorov here. It is late September, the 28th to be exact, in the year 1942. Over.”

“Understood. No doubt you are wondering what happened to us,” said Gromyko. *“Where are you? Is the ship still in the Atlantic? Over.”*

“The Pacific,” said Fedorov. “But Captain, circumstances have changed. There is a very great deal I will have to explain to you. At the moment, I am not even aboard the ship. We have a secured radio set that can dial in to the HF command channels. Over.”

“You are not on the ship? Explain. Over.”

“Too complicated for transmission over this channel. I doubt anyone else could be listening, but just to be safe, we should meet face to face.”

Fedorov’s doubt and fear had now been driven out with this sudden arrival on the scene. Now he had a choice to make. He was *Starpom* aboard *Kirov*, but already out here in direct defiance of Karpov’s orders to the contrary. There was still enough of the fear Symenko had stoked for him to realize this little act of mutiny would have consequences. He doubted that he could repair the damage. Karpov’s truce with him had always been uneasy. Look how quick he was to fire that S-400. It wasn’t as he said, trying to

explain it away as theater to try and underscore the urgency of his order to return. No. That was direct violence, and it had been aimed to kill. If they hadn't been so far out when the missile came, he shuddered to think what might have happened.

Karpov had no conscience, he thought. He had no scruples, and did not hesitate a single moment before he fired that missile. I did the same when we thought Orlov was jumping ship, and explained away that violence with excuses about contaminating the time line. Look at all I have done since then. So I have to face the fact that Karpov was, and still remains, a deadly nemesis. And I also have to realize that everything Symenko laid out was true as well. I won't get through to Ilanskiy. I'll never reach that back stairway like this, not with Karpov raising the alarm from here to Novosibirsk. And even if I did get down those stairs, I doubt I would have the backbone, and that timely cruelty I spoke of with Karpov. I cannot kill Sergei Kirov. I just can't do it.

I'm sorry, he said inwardly. Sorry for everything. The torture of this world is on my shoulders, and I deserve all the chaos I have courted since the day we first shifted back to the 1940s. I was such a child then, enamored of the fact that I could see an old museum piece sweep over the ship as it did. Karpov wanted to kill that plane. Volsky stayed his hand. Then I opened my mouth, delighted as much as I was shocked to realize what I was seeing, for there I was, right in the middle of the history I have studied all my life. It was my own private heaven, and look what I have made of it—my own private hell.

"Kazan, Kazan," he said through the handset. "Transmit your coordinates. I am on an airship and we can come to you. Then we can talk, Captain Gromyko. I can explain everything, and believe me, it's a very long story. Over."

There was a long pause, and Fedorov knew Gromyko was considering something. Then he came back. "*Kazan to Fedorov. You say Kirov is in the Pacific? Please confirm. Over.*"

Fedorov did not know why Gromyko wanted that, but he confirmed it. Then the submarine Captain came on again. "*Kazan to Fedorov, we're in the Barents Sea,*" he said. "*We'll transmit exact coordinates. Can you get up here, and if so, how soon? Over.*"

"Standby, Kazan."

Now Fedorov looked at Symenko. “Captain,” he said. “I’m afraid we have yet another change of plans. Do you have sufficient fuel to get to the Barents Sea?”

Symenko raised an eyebrow. “It was 2000 kilometers to Ilanskiy from the rendezvous point where I found you. Let me think...” He reached for a chart he had on the desk, and walked a nav compass across it. “We’re skirting the northern tip of lake Baikal from the last report. The Barents Sea is a big place, but if he were up off the Nose of the Dolphin, it would be another 3300 klicks. Yes, I’ve got the fuel to get there, but not much more.”

The Dolphin Head was a long peninsula that jutted up where the White Sea flowed into the Barents. It looked just like the head of a dolphin, with a long nose at the end. Fedorov nodded, thumbing the handset to send.

“Fedorov to *Kazan*. We can make that rendezvous. Can you meet us off the Dolphin’s Head? Over.”

“Affirmative, Fedorov. Can do. Will transmit exact coordinates on approach. Anything more? Over.”

There was nothing else to be said, at least not now, even on a secure channel. Fedorov walked over to have a look at Symenko’s chart, his studied eye immediately knowing the heading change they had to make.

“Captain Symenko,” he said. “It seems that you and I are now quite literally in the same boat—in a manner of speaking. If you want to know the truth, Karpov will likely see my actions here as out and out mutiny. I’ve disobeyed his direct order to return to my ship to get this far, but given all you have just said, I don’t think it wise if we stay on this heading for Ilanskiy.”

“And this important business of yours?” said Symenko. “Not so important now with his lordship turning out the hounds on you. I was one of them, and I suppose I could still spit in your eye and let my men here have a go at your little contingent of Marines. Sure, those tough louts of yours would kill a good many, but we could also vent helium and simply bring this airship down. You could try to stop us, but I have a crew of 30 men on this ship. You want to try and kill them all?” He smiled.

“Then again,” Symenko continued, “I hear what you are saying about us being two peas in the same soup. Like the color on the other side of that jacket you’re wearing? You’re a turncoat, just like I was when Karpov flipped me from allegiance to Volkov and signed me on to his fleet. Like it or

not, that's what you are, and you'll never set foot safely on your ship again, or anywhere else in all of Siberia. Since I'm not sure that even my heroic resistance here would spare me Karpov's wrath, as one turncoat to another, welcome aboard. Yes, I can get you up to the Barents Sea, unless Karpov's hounds get to us first."

"Very well," said Fedorov. "Then may I suggest we come twenty points to starboard?"

"Aye, that looks right. You've a good eye."

"Came to the service as a Navigator," said Fedorov. "Captain Symenko, I know my presence here has complicated things a good deal for you. Yet if you can get us up there, I can promise you safe haven in Sergei Kirov's Soviet Union. Karpov can rant and rave, but he won't get to you there."

"How nice and generous of you." Symenko reached for his telephone to the bridge. "Helm," he said. "Come 20 points to starboard at once. I'll send a man down to the chart room with the new course plotted. This is Symenko. Do it now."

Symenko put the receiver in its cradle, smiling. "Well Captain, a Navigator you say? Have a seat and ply your old craft. Given our fuel situation, we'll have to take a very direct route, and when you get busy with that compass and pencil, have a close look at some of the ground we're going to have to overfly." He pushed the chart across the desk, and Fedorov took a long look.

"Interesting," he said. "We'll fly north of the big bend in the Angara, deep into the Siberian wilderness."

"Aye, and let's hope we get good weather and smooth sailing, because there won't be a friendly docking tower, nor food or fuel, anywhere along that route. Then again, if Karpov gets ships out looking for us, they won't get up there either. No sir, we'll be safe enough up there. Nobody overflies that ground. That's the Devil's Country."

He was tapping a place on the map about 200 kilometers due north of the big bend in the Angara River, up past the outlying Siberian town of Vanavara, at the edge of a devastated wasteland that was only whispered about if it was ever mentioned. It was the great blight in the land that had come on the 30th of June, in 1908—the Tunguska Event.

Part II

Fall Blau

“Although our intellect always longs for clarity and certainty, our nature often finds uncertainty fascinating.”

— **Carl von Clausewitz**

Chapter 4

OKW Headquarters, Wolfsschanze, Rastenburg, Poland

Hitler had been in a jubilant mood for some time as he watched the progress of the German summer offensive in Russia. Fall Blau, Operation Blue, was well underway before the Allies launched their bold attack at Lisbon and Casablanca. Manstein's powerful SS Panzer Korps was the tip of the spear, massing at Kantimirovka and then driving southwest between the Donets and Don Rivers, just as he had explained it to Hitler long ago. The rivers shielded both his northern and southern flanks as he pushed forward, finding little resistance after the initial breakthrough.

"It was only the sodden ground in the spring and the lack of good roads along our axis of attack that forced us to delay this long," Manstein explained to the Führer. "But we should have good ground for at least eight weeks now, and in that time I can get over the Don to begin the attack on Volgograd—of this I am certain."

"How long will it take to secure the city?"

"That will depend on the forces the enemy puts against us, but in that phase of the operation, we will need good infantry divisions. It would not be wise to commit our mobile units to an urban battle of attrition. No. I intend to break through, force a crossing of the Don, and then move in a fresh infantry Korps. Halder has his eye on just the troops I will need."

"Here, my Führer," said Halder, leaning forward over the map and pointing out the formation with his pencil. "General Hansen's 54th Infantry Korps is following the SS Korps, and it will soon move north to take up positions here, along the Don. There is some indication that the enemy is establishing bridgeheads there, and we will have to watch them closely. Schwedler's 4th Korps will be on the left, east of Boguchar. Hansen will be in the center, covering the area near Veshenskaya, and on his right, approaching the big river bend south of Frolovo, we will bring in the 42nd Infantry Korps under General Kuntze. It is already boarding the trains at Belgorod."

“Excellent. But what infantry for the city fighting?”

“We have von Seydlitz and his 51st Korps in reserve, and Kempf has two more infantry divisions presently attached to the 48th Panzer Korps. That will give us seven divisions.”

“Then what will you do with the SS once they cross the river?”

“They will secure the crossing point,” said Manstein, “then push for the city. When the infantry arrives they will reposition here.” He pointed to a rail junction at the town of Morozovsk. “From there they can force a crossing of the Donets at one point or another, and then we link up with Volkov’s troops. After that, it is only a matter of opening a secure rail corridor to the oil fields. He has already retaken the fields at Maykop. And the Soviets never got close to Grozny, let alone Baku. Yet to move those resources by rail, we will first have to take Rostov, and then most likely take a month or more to rebuild the rail lines to the proper gauge.”

“How soon can we take Rostov?”

“If all goes as planned, I will be closing on that city in a month—mid-August at the latest.”

“Then we can expect deliveries in late September,” said Hitler. “This is wonderful, just what I had hoped, and well before the winter sets in. Do you foresee any problems?”

“Nothing is ever certain in war, as we must all know,” Manstein cautioned. “That is what makes it all so interesting. One thing I do know is that we can expect they will fight hard to prevent us from doing all of this, and they will definitely plan a counterattack.”

“Where?” Hitler’s eyes played over the map.

“The most likely spot would be here, along the line of the Don. That is undoubtedly why they are trying to establish bridgeheads there, and so our infantry must operate to reduce those positions and push the enemy north of the river at the earliest opportunity.”

“48th Panzer Korps is in reserve,” said Halder. “It can be used to break any stubborn resistance south of the river, and then stand as a fire brigade for the winter, for yes, they will certainly attack there when the snows come again.”

“But we will stop them,” Hitler smiled. “We will stop them just as we stopped their last offensive. Gentlemen, carry out this plan to the letter. Once we take Volgograd and Rostov, then Sergei Kirov is finished. Now then—

when can we expect to destroy what remains of his forces in the Kirov Pocket?”

“That should still be considered a secondary objective,” said Halder. “Resistance is collapsing there, but it will take some weeks to mop everything up. It’s work for the infantry, as we are repositioning our mobile forces for further operations to the east. We already have Orel back, and we will shortly begin the offensive to retake Tula in the north, then Kursk in the center, with our final objectives being Lipetsk and Voronezh. After that, they will have very little left—no major industrial centers worth mentioning—except Leningrad.”

Halder glanced at Manstein, for the two men had clashed the previous year when Manstein was elevated to overall commander of Army Group South, and so many troops were taken from Group Nord. Leningrad still sat well behind the front lines in the north, the one major Russian city that had been spared the ravages of war.”

“That will be work for next year,” said Hitler, “assuming they survive our summer offensives. Admiral Raeder just smashed a big convoy bound for Murmansk, and with our strong base at Nordstern operational, he promises me he will stop them all. So the Soviets will soon feel us choking the breath out of them, and I would be most surprised if they do not collapse before year’s end. You see? All that doom and gloom last winter is forgotten now. Even Guderian is in better spirits, and I have him supervising all the upgrades for the Panzer Divisions. Given that the situation is favorable, he has asked me to withdraw certain divisions to France for refitting. Do you object?”

“How many divisions?” asked Halder warily.

“Three, perhaps four at the most. The British and Americans show no sign of bothering us in France any time soon, but they will get around to it one day. In that instance, we should have a mobile reserve in the West.”

“Agreed,” said Halder. “With your permission, I will meet with Guderian to discuss this further, and we will select the most suitable divisions.”

“Well enough.” Hitler was in such a good mood that he did not stick his thumb in the pie, much to Halder’s relief. It was Manstein, he knew, though he hated to admit that. Manstein’s cool presence, his unshakable morale, his keen eye for strategy, had an equally calming effect on Hitler. At the height of the crisis the previous December, it had been Manstein, arriving on a cold windy night, who had intervened in a badly deteriorating OKW staff meeting

with the Führer, and within an hour, he had settled everyone down, established a plan for holding operations, and laid out how the spring counterattack would unhinge all the Soviet gains in due course.

Yes, while I juggle numbers, pour over casualty lists, manage the logistics, Manstein pushes divisions around the map and gets the Führer clucking like a fat hen. Yet one day we will have to address the matter of Leningrad, for that will surely be the last refuge of the enemy if they continue to resist into 1943. This war is far from over. Let us hope our miracle worker delivers on the promises he makes here today. Oil deliveries by late September? I will personally drink a cup from the first arrivals if Manstein manages that.

Of course, Halder would never say that aloud, not to Manstein, and certainly not to Hitler. No, he would simply do what was necessary now, provide the infantry requested if possible, and keep a firm hand on the 48th Panzer Korps.

What about Army Group Center, thought Halder? Manstein promises to deliver Volgograd and all of Volkov's oil, and he wants the infantry to fight in the cellars and sewers of the city. I will send him 48th Panzer Korps, and the divisions needed to hold the line of the Don, but as for von Seydlitz and the 51st Korps, I will need that for Armeegruppe Center, so that is where it will go. If Manstein actually gets to the city, I will find the infantry for him somewhere else. Hitler will never have to know about it, and will likely forget the names and numbers discussed here in any case.

Something tells me that the one thing we can be sure of in all these plans was Manstein's statement about the uncertainties of war. Surely the enemy has plans of their own. Might they have recovered enough to act before winter?

We shall see....

* * *

The Germans seemed to be advancing into thin air, meeting only scattered resistance at Millerovo from a Soviet engineer battalion, but otherwise simply sweeping over the steppe country in the vast open spaces between the two great rivers flowing east. The weather was clear and warm, and the troops were in high spirits, with memories of the bitter winter of 1941 behind them.

Long columns of vehicles followed the thin tracks of the roads, and many simply rolled off over the open country, as the ground was flat and firm. Elsewhere, Hansen's 54th Infantry Korps was trudging over the grassy steppes, and slowly advancing on the long winding course of the Don as it flowed east. As they approached, enemy planes were spotted, and some made brief strafing runs to register their protest, though these attacks inflicted few casualties.

Kempf's 48th Panzer Korps began to flow into Kantirmirovka with two infantry divisions, artillery, flak, engineers and other service troops. The first two Panzer Divisions assigned to this Korps had also arrived, the 11th and 23rd. Halder proposed that the two infantry divisions follow the SS for ready infantry support, but that the panzers should be retained behind the line of infantry that was now screening the Don. There the Soviets continued to move troops into several bridgeheads, the nails that these panzers would soon have to begin hammering down to clear the enemy from the southern bank of the river.

Kempf moved forward to observe the enemy positions, and seeing signs of earthworks and entrenchment, he immediately ordered both his heavy divisions forward to begin the attack. He soon found that he was up against far more than a simple bridgehead operation. The Soviets already had most of Cherevichanko's 9th Army south of the river in a vast bridgehead served by roads and bridges from Verkhne Mamontov and Boguchar. He quickly got on the radio to Steiner with the SS Korps.

"Look over your shoulder," he said. "There is a substantial bridgehead south of the Don at Boguchar, and now Hansen is reposting he's come up against similar forces further east approaching Veshenskaya and Serafimovich."

"Well, what do you want me to do about it?" said Steiner. "Our main body has already reached Morozovsk."

"Just be wary. This could be the makings of a planned counterattack. These are army level formations, not merely a few divisions."

That was an understatement, for just east of Kempf's operation, General Lukin had his 58th Army in position south of the Don to cover the crossings at Kasanskaya. Further east, the bulk of the 2nd Siberian Shock Army under Vlasov, the Heroes of Moscow, had also crossed between Veshenskaya and Zomovskiy, and there was a similar operation underway at the big bend in the

Don near Serafimovich involving Yeremenko's 4th Shock Army. If any of these formations had been correctly identified, the Germans would have certainly realized that something big was in the offing. As it was, it was high summer in the Don Basin, and General Felix Martin Julius Steiner was already far off to the south, his mind fixed on the approach up the shallow river valley of the Chir.

A veteran of the first war, Steiner had gained the favor of Himmler and helped build the SS Panzer Korps to the formidable force it had become. After a command with the 5th Wiking Division, he was selected to lead the entire Korps. Born in Prussia, Steiner had a broad face with deep set eyes under heavy brows, and a visible scar on his forehead where a bayonet had wounded him in the first war. He already had his Knight's Cross of the Iron Cross in Gold, and now he wanted those Oak Leaves and Swords.

His lead division, the SS Wiking, had already encountered a pair of small rifle divisions forming the 20th Rifle Corps at the hamlet of Oblivskaya on the Chir. These troops appeared to have been posted only as a delaying force, for they withdrew when pressed, and fell back toward Surovinko on the main road and rail line to Kalach. That was the town he really wanted, the only suitable crossing point on the Don west of Volgograd. He expected it to be hotly contested, but he was fully prepared to mass his entire Korps here, and bull his way through, one way or another.

It was a strange echo of the battle that was fought in Fedorov's history, only most of the units involved were different. The strategic situation, however, would not change. Both Halder and Manstein had clearly seen the vulnerability of that long left flank along the Don. A successful offensive there could effectively drive south to Morozovsk, cutting the lines of communication to any forces that had gone on to fight for Volgograd. This time, Freidrich Paulus was nowhere to be found here, and the 6th Army was instead replaced by all these arriving infantry formations sent to screen that dangerous flank. They would be a tougher defense against any Soviet counterattack—much tougher than the Rumanian and Hungarian troops that had been placed there in the old history. That said, they would not now have the strength to reduce these strong Russian bridgeheads as Manstein had wanted—not with only the two Panzer Divisions in Kempf's 48th Panzer Korps.

Steiner had other business, and while the Wiking Division pushed out the

last of the 20th Rifle Corps at Oblivskaya, he sent his 2nd SS Reich Division on a wide sweeping maneuver south of the main road. That took them through State Farm 79, and on the high ground due east, they found the 180th Rifle Division dug in deep. The first battle on the River Chir was now well underway, for Steiner ordered all of the Das Reich Division to take those heights and clear the way forward. Division commander Paul Hausser notified him he would attack at once, but that he had reconnoitered the ground east of the hill and found it unsuitable for armor.

“There’s no decent ground for a crossing operation there. The river banks are too soft and marshy. I will kill this division, but you had better look north of the road for a better route to Kalach.”

Steiner wasted little time in doing that. In addition to the four SS divisions under his command, he also had a pair of aces in hand, the elite Brandenburg and Grossdeutschland divisions. The Brandenburgers moved north of the rail line to Surovinko, intending to go for Kalach. To their great surprise, the enemy had not covered the ground there with any appreciable defense. Steiner was soon notified that they had opened the route, and decided to send up Grossdeutschland.

“Be quick about it and we can get over that damn river in two days,” he said to General Hornlein, but the General did him one better. He raced on up the road, eventually swinging north and around the Brandenburgers where they deployed to clear another two Rifle Divisions screening Kalach. At a little after 15:00 on the 8th of July, his fast moving recon battalion reached the river, finding no defense. With boats in hand, and equipment available to build small pontoon rafts for their armored cars, they decided to cross.

And that they did.

It was the opening act in a very old and well known play, only this time it would have a cast of all new actors, and a very different finale.

Chapter 5

Georgie Zhukov had worked a miracle the previous winter, but now he was trying to pull the army together again, and build up reserves to face the onslaught that was now underway.

“They will drive on the Volga this summer,” he declared in a meeting with Sergei Kirov and Intelligence Chief Berzin. Kirov had finally re-established his government in Leningrad, old Saint Petersburg, the city he had been warned to avoid by Fedorov. As the old national Capitol under the Czars, it seemed a suitable place, the last real major city with resources, population and industrial capacity, still safe from war and well behind the front.

“That is no mystery,” said Kirov. “They want Volgograd, where they hope to shake hands with Ivan Volkov’s troops all along the lower Don. It’s a pity we could not hold our lines there.”

“That could not be helped,” said Zhukov. “Given your refusal to abandon the Caucasus and Kuban line, I had no choice but to evacuate the region south of the Don. There are only a few places an army can cross that river there, and so I can hold that line with just a few divisions. It would have taken three armies to hold it further south.”

“Well enough,” said Kirov, “but what will become of our troops in the Caucasus.”

“You tell me,” said Zhukov flippantly. “If I had my way, they would be on the line far to the north. As it stands, they will soon be encircled and cut off permanently, another nice fat Kirov pocket for the Germans to chew on.

Sergei Kirov flashed him a dark and angry glance. “We held off the Germans there for six months!” he said sharply. “We hold them still.”

“But not for very much longer,” said Zhukov. “Thankfully, I got the 24th Siberian out and sent it back through Orel. All the rest will be lost. It is only a matter of time now.”

“Yet we still have all the Donets Basin,” said Kirov. “We still have Rostov, the Kuban, all the Taman Peninsula. Hell, we still hold out at Sevastopol, and we will keep that city for months.”

“Only because the Germans pulled their 11th Army out and replaced the

investing troops with Rumanians.” Zhukov folded his arms on his broad chest, a man with a reputation for speaking his mind, and one who was never cowed by political higher ups throughout the war. In his mind, *he* was the man who had saved Russia the previous year. He had planned and executed the counterattack, stopped the Germans, even if he could not keep them out of Moscow. Now he was patching the shattered fronts back together again, and trying to rebuild the army to a point where further offensives might be possible.

“That doesn’t matter,” said Kirov. “What matters is that we hold Sevastopol—we have heroes to speak of there, as we had heroes in Moscow.”

“Ah,” said Zhukov, “Yes, the Siberians. I put them to good use there, but now they must go elsewhere. The Germans seem to have no interest in trying to clear the northern segment of the city we still hold, and frankly, I have no interest in trying to take what they hold—all we would get back is a burned and blackened ruin.”

“We have that traitor Beria to thank for that,” said Kirov bitterly.

“Just the same,” said Zhukov. “We don’t want Moscow any more than they do. What they want now is Volgograd, a linkup with Volkov, and then they will most likely push into the central heartland—Kursk, Lipetsk, Voronezh. If they take all those cities, then they will likely consolidate to receive our winter offensive—assuming I have the troops to launch another such attack, and next year, they come for us here—Leningrad.”

“Then we must foil their plans.” Kirov was adamant. “We will hold our ground wherever they face us.”

“So this is your strategy? Simply hold in place? We have the Kirov Pocket, and then soon we will have the Volga Pocket, Donetsk Pocket, Kuban Pocket and so on.”

“You may see no purpose in my insistence that we hold ground. Yes, we will lose the Kirov Pocket this year, but the struggle there gave us something that was in very short supply last year—hope. Moscow was burning, but the defenders of my city held out. In just the same way, we will fight them tooth and nail in Volgograd if they get there, and we will do the same in Rostov.”

“That may come sooner than you think,” said Zhukov. “They have broken through with a single Panzer Division on the northern segment of our defensive front screening the Donetsk Basin. We still hold Voroshilovgrad, but frankly, that whole northern front is mainly guarded by the Don itself. I have

virtually nothing to send there. A few divisions got through by rail before the SS reached Oblivskaya and Morozovsk. The rest will become another of your heroic pockets, the largest ever seen in the world—all the Donets Basin, along with the Kuban and Taman regions are now completely cut off. I sent Rokossovsky there after his defense in front of Moscow, and there he shall likely remain for the duration of his war. Watch what happens at the Kirov Pocket over the next week or two. That is a preview of what will happen to all the rest.”

“Yes, Kirov may fall, but it will take the Germans half a year to take the other terrain we still hold on the Donets Basin and Caucasus. Its size alone is daunting, and so I will hold it as long as humanly possible. I spoke to Rokossovsky this morning. He is in Voroshilovgrad, fighting to stop the Germans from crossing the Don there.”

“Good for him. The 1st SS Division has already crossed further east at Donetysk.”

Kirov looked at Berzin, and the bristly haired Chief simply nodded, confirming the report.

“The SS have turned south?”

“Not entirely,” said Zhukov. “I think they merely want a bridgehead there. That single division was detached to secure that crossing point. All the rest are after Volgograd.”

“They crossed the Don north of Kalach this morning,” said Berzin.

“Only a single battalion,” said Zhukov. “Unfortunately, they will have a very brief stay. I moved the 8th and 19th Tank Corps down to Martinovka yesterday. They are now in a perfect position to counterattack.”

“Good,” said Kirov. “Drive those bastards into the river. Let them know we mean business here. They will not get Volgograd without a fight. Are we still on track with our planned counteroffensive?”

“I have moved five armies, including three Shock Armies, into a large series of bridgeheads south of the Don. They have reached their assigned positions, and now we are trucking in the supplies and fuel necessary to sustain an offensive. The Germans are trying to screen that flank with infantry.”

“Rumanians?”

“No, German troops, but they have not been able to cover that entire front yet. In fact, I could attack tomorrow and raise a good bit of hell there.”

“No,” said Kirov. “We wait as you suggested earlier. Wait until we have the supplies to do more than raise a little hell. When we go, it will be with all of Satan’s wrath. In fact, if the Germans do cross the Don west of Volgograd, then everything they send there could be easily pocketed if our counterattack is strong enough to reach the river behind them. So we wait. When you can tell me you are strong enough, then I will turn those armies loose, but not before. How long will that take?”

“That will depend,” said Zhukov, hedging his bets. “This is not the only battle we will fight before this year ends. Their Army Group Center is going to push east soon. The plan was to send our reserve tank corps south into those bridgeheads over the Don, but I may have to send many west to stop von Rundstedt, Hoth and Model. The Germans spent a good deal of time to refit their mobile divisions, and they have new tanks. One is a real monster—the Tiger, and something tells me they will soon be on the prowl. The Tigers are coming east, Mister General Secretary, and soon.”

* * *

While Manstein drove deep into the Don Basin, the offensive launched by Armeegruppe Center began to gather real momentum. It had taken many months to extricate all the panzers from the front lines, moving them into rear areas to refuel and repair damaged equipment. Supplies finally arrived from Germany, with replacements, and most importantly of all, with fresh tanks. The divisions were getting more of the series I Lions, the 55-L, and in a very few units, a faster medium tank, the Panther V, was being introduced. With it came a fearsome looking heavy tank, the Tiger, and it mounted the dread 88mm main gun. Germany’s answer to the increasing numbers of Soviet T-34s was bigger tanks, with heavier armor and good long range hitting power.

Generalfeldmarshall Gerd von Rundstedt commanded Armeegruppe Center, an aristocratic Prussian with a long family history in military service. He was to have commanded Armeegruppe South, but when that went to Manstein, he moved north. Hitler had a mind to relieve him after the disastrous Soviet Winter counterattack, but Manstein prevailed upon him to keep the stolid von Rundstedt in command. He would have two very able subordinates, General Walther Model leading 2nd Panzerarmee, and General Hoth leading the smaller 3rd Panzerarmee.

The divisions sorted themselves out, becoming a leaner force when four divisions were withdrawn by Guderian and Halder for deployment to the West. All were hard fighting divisions, the 2nd, 6th, 7th and 16th Panzer Divisions, and their absence would be keenly felt. All their equipment was left in the field, and that allowed the remaining units to refit more quickly. When the troops arrived in Germany, they would get all new equipment, and then take up positions in France.

Now Rundstedt looked east. The Soviet line ran from Moscow to just east of Serpukhov, then down to Tula, which they had taken at great cost the previous winter. 5th Army held there, and then 43rd Army under Sobbenikiov ran along the main road and rail line south towards Mtensk and Orel. That was the same road Guderian had clawed his way up the previous November, and the Russians had fought hard to maintain control of that vital communications corridor. 7th Army under Meretskov now held the line from Plavsk down past Gorbachevko and Orel, and then they moved in the 17th Siberians under Paturov. He was tasked with securing the tentative Soviet hold on Orel, but it was not to be, at least not that summer.

Von Rundstedt was planning a major offensive, and to prepare the way he sent 18th, 22nd, and 24th Panzer Divisions storming into Orel before the Soviets could consolidate there. This forced the 7th Army back, which prompted Zhukov to send in his war heroes, the Siberians. One of Karpov's armies was already south of Orel, the fighting 24th. They had held out in the Kirov Pocket for many long months, then moved to Bryansk to hold that city against all comers until Zhukov ordered them to break out of the pocket and fight their way east to Orel. This they did, and now they were to be reinforced by the 17th Siberians, for this segment of the line screened the vital rail line east to Lipetsk. The 24th took the line about 30 kilometers east of Mtsensk, where it began licking its wounds and looking for supplies and equipment. The 17th came in on its left and southern flank, opposite the newly German occupied Orel.

"This is where they are strongest," said von Rundstedt, "and so this is exactly where we will hit them. "We will break through with 2nd Panzerarmee, open a hole between those two Siberian armies, and then send Hoth right on through with 3rd Panzerarmee. He will drive due east to Lipetsk."

That was the plan, and it was executed with traditional German ferocity in

the attack. The 17th Siberians had barely had time to catch their breath after arriving on the trains, when suddenly they were faced with the mobile wrath of five massed German Panzer Divisions. Concentrated against the 17th Siberians, they punched through in a grueling two-day fight, whereupon Hoth ran through the hole in the line like a madman, his 57th Panzer Korps leading the *Schwerpunkt* through with 12th Panzer Division. On July 8th, the tip of Hoth's spear was already 40 kilometers east of the breakthrough point where the battle was still raging. The Siberians had tried to plug the gap by sending in their one reserve unit, the 57th Motor Rifle Division, but it bought them only a brief stay.

Hoth would drive that penetration 100 kilometers before the Soviets could react and bring in two reserve armies to try and staunch the deep wound in the front. His lead elements were nearing Yelets, covering half the distance to Lipetsk in three days before growing pressure on both the north and southern flanks of the penetration prompted him to stop. It was here that the wisdom of Sergei Kirov was most keenly seen. What Hoth needed now, more than anything, was good infantry to hold the flanks of his drive so he could keep the Panzer Divisions moving instead of having to fend off enemy counterattacks. But all that infantry was far to the west, fighting to reduce the Kirov Pocket and claim the city named for the Soviet head of state.

Events would continue to develop rapidly over the next week. The Grossdeutschland Division Recon Battalion fought like demons to hold the narrow grip they had over the Don north of Kalach. They held off the entire Soviet 8th Armored Corps, a formation that perhaps had less striking power than its name suggested. Further south, 1st SS Division reached the lower Don, then turned the area over to German security regiments and moved northeast to rejoin the main attack on Volgograd.

Then, on July 15, 1942, the SS 5th Panzergrenadier Regiment of the Totenkopf Division met a strange looking band of cavalry. The SS had been sent to see if a crossing point could be forced south of Tormosin that would allow an approach to Volgograd from the southwest. There, Ivan Volkov had mustered units at Kotelnikovo and sent them up to that very place. It was defended by a pair of Soviet Rifle Divisions that had been dug in there for nearly a month. Volkov's troops merely watched them from their positions on the southern bank of the river... Until the Totenkopf Division arrived. Volkov's men fished, swatted mosquitoes, lolled about on the banks of the

river occasionally firing a mortar or artillery piece at the Soviets, and basically watching the German troops methodically reduce the defense to nothing over a three-day battle.

Then the Argir Cavalry Regiment of Volkov's Kuban Command swam their horses across the river to meet their new found 'Allies' for the first time in the war. The rag tag horsemen stared in awe when they saw the tough German Panzergrenadiers in their dark camo uniforms, MG-42s slung over their broad shoulders, and belts of ammunition dangling below their waist. The Germans did not quite know what to make of them. They looked much like all the other cavalymen they had chewed up in their long year of war in Russia.

It was an awkward and near silent meeting, until one of the Lieutenants in the Argir Cav simply clicked his heels together and stiffened his arm in the traditional Nazi salute. "Heil Hitler!" he shouted, "Heil Volkov!"

This brought smiles and laughter from the Germans, and a burly SS Sergeant stepped forward, extending his hand. With that single handshake, the Germans had finally linked up with their ally deep within the heartland of Asia, the Orenburg Federation, and the war would never be the same after that.

Chapter 6

The strategic situation facing the Soviets at Volgograd was radically different from that in Fedorov's history. The entire eastern bank of the Volga was a hostile shore, where despondent troops under the black flag of Orenburg huddled in heavy concrete bunkers studded with the cold steel of artillery and machineguns. The daily ritual was for both sides to exchange desultory artillery fire, but Volkov's men had never been able to press a direct cross river assault against the city itself. In fact, Kirov's troops had crossed years ago, occupying areas where the river swept in a wide bend near Beketova, and now they also sat in heavy fortified bunkers, waiting.

Yet nothing could get down that river from the north in the way of barges for supply. The guns on the east bank were plentiful enough to close that waterway completely. Instead, the city relied on the rail lines coming in from the north, west, and south. Two of the three had already been cut, leaving only the north rail line open to feed in the vital stores of food, fuel, ammunition and replacement troops, if they could be found. If that rail line were to be cut, then the city would have to rely on its own internal production.

The politically important city of Kirov had done this for over six months, the stony heart beating at the center of the Kirov Pocket. On July 19, that city finally fell, as the thick encircling bands of German infantry slowly closed on it like a steel vise. Sergei Kirov wept that night, not for the dint to his personal pride, but for the thousands of men who had fought there, enduring the whole winter, the rains and mud of spring, undaunted, until they were simply overcome by superior numbers and lack of supplies.

The city itself was a gaunt, broken ruin, its buildings decapitated by artillery and bombing, the cold stone walls of the ruins scored black with the char of fire. Virtually anything that could be burned for heat and cooking had already been consumed. There wasn't a dog left alive in the entire city, as all had been killed for food long ago, and not even the ubiquitous rats survived the hunger that sought them out in the last extreme. In many ways it was harder to take the news of the city's demise than the burning of Moscow, and it was compounded when on that same day, the German 51st Infantry Korps

stormed into Kursk.

Further north, the Russians had taken hold of Hoth's 3rd Panzer Army like a man wrestling with a mighty serpent. The 1st Shock Army under Konev had moved into reserve long ago, and it struck from the north, while Yeremenko's 1st Red Banner Army came up from the south. He had not yet fully supplied his army, and felt he had been forced into combat before he was ready, but war was war. Now his army was strung out along the deep southern shoulder of Hoth's advance, and the two armies had brought enough to the fight to slow and then stop the German drive.

"We've stopped them," said Zhukov, "but we haven't the strength to do anything more. Pushing them back is out of the question. And now, with this news of the end of resistance in the Kirov Pocket, I fear the Germans will soon be bringing all the infantry they had there onto the line. I give us another month, but after that, something will break."

"What about all the troops we have on the Don?" asked Kirov. "Might we launch that offensive early?"

"We might, but it would likely stall half way to our planned objective. Give me time and let me build those divisions up a bit more. I'm sending them everything I can get my hands on. Under the circumstances, I will have no troops left for the planned attack towards Kharkov this summer... They are all in the Kuban."

"Enough of that!" Kirov turned on him. "If they weren't there, all the Germans facing them would be elsewhere."

"You mean the two divisions at Kerch in the Crimea? Those are the only German forces presently in contact with our armies in the Caucasus. Even Volkov has been content to simply sit on his line south of the Kuban and wait. They are completely ignoring that front, as I knew they would. There is plenty of time for that later. The Germans just linked up with Volkov south of Tormosin. That route isn't practical for any real communications between the two sides, but it was a nice little symbolic victory for the folks back home."

"Yes," said Kirov sullenly. "I'm sure the Führer was delighted, particularly since his Generals also handed him Kursk and Kirov today. Damn! It wasn't supposed to happen this way. We should be stronger! Where are all our tank armies?"

Berzin stepped forward, nudging Kirov's elbow, for Kirov's remarks were opening a door that Zhukov had never walked through. The knowledge

of what had happened in this war once before was still a closely guarded secret. Even though the old “Red Archives” had been deliberately burned by Berzin in those last hectic moments in Moscow, he had managed to save one book. Over many long nights since that time, both he and Sergei Kirov had poured over it like two high priests over a bible, until the pages were worn at the edges with their heavy use. And they could recite passages from that book as if they were scripture: Stalingrad, Chapter 7, verses 10 through 15. But it wasn’t happening that way this time, and they both seemed powerless to force the lines of battle into the shape they once assumed.

The Soviet Union was not producing anywhere near what it did in the old history. Oil was found in Siberia, but drilling was a slow and awkward process, delivery even slower. Factories had been relocated, but their output was sluggish. Now, to make matters even worse, the convoys had stopped coming to Murmansk and Archangelsk. PQ-17 had been slaughtered by the wolves of the Kriegsmarine and Luftwaffe. The damage was so heavy that Britain cancelled the convoys for the foreseeable future. Kirov was promised that they would resume, and also promised that a Second Front would open soon, but not where he had hoped. It would come in North Africa, and not France—not this year or possibly even next year.

Those were verses Kirov and Berzin could also read of in their bible. They knew of Operation Torch, but wondered if it could succeed this time around. And yet, that history, the foreknowledge of what might come, was as much a mockery as a balm to them in these hours. There they could read of victories that could not yet be grasped, of massive tank armies sweeping over the steppes, but they were nowhere to be found.

At times Berzin marveled that Zhukov would conceive of the very same strategies and planned attacks that he had devised in the history. He was even calling them by the same names, operations named for the planets circling in their dark, cold orbits above—Mars, Uranus, Saturn. The plan that had been the undoing of the German attack on Stalingrad, Operation Uranus, was slowly taking shape now on the line of the northern Don. Yet there would be no southern pincer this time. All the ground that had been used to stage and build the armies in the south was now occupied by Volkov’s troops.

Now Zhukov was calling his new version of the plan Operation Mars. His war gods were lining up on the Don, gathering their strength each day in the slow process of rebuilding and delivery, and he hoped to unleash them in one

mighty blow that would reach all the way to the lower Don, destroying anything in his path.

It was an agony of one kind for Kirov and Berzin to listen to him expound his plans. They could see what was done in the history, and see how it could not be done now, and that difference scalded their souls.

“He’s calling it Mars this time,” said Berzin when Zhukov had left them. “That was the big operation he planned around Rzhev where our losses were so heavy they would not be officially acknowledged for years.”

“Yes,” said Kirov, “the Rzhev Meat Grinder. It never happened, and thank god for that. Strange that he chose that name instead of Uranus as he did in the material. If we do launch the attack soon, let us hope it does not bear the curse of Zhukov’s old Operation Mars.”

* * *

On the 22nd of July, Zukov decided to act. The Germans already had a reinforced division over the Don at Kalach, but the local commander, Chiukov, had reacted by moving in some of his toughest infantry, the Volga Guards Rifle Corps. These hardened troops dug in and refused to move, in spite of every attack the Germans put against them.

In truth, Steiner’s divisions were now at the end of a very long logistics chain. They had come over 200 miles from their first assembly point at Kantirmirovka, and over terrain that had very poor roads along the line of their advance. The only rail line that directly served their present position ran southwest along the Chir River, through Morozovsk to reach the Donets at Belaya Kalivta before continuing west into the big industrial mining hub of the Donets Basin. This line was torn to shreds, and could not be used. The Germans were still fighting to seize its vital hubs and connection points, all on the south bank of the Donets.

Another line ran north to south, coming down from the German rail hub at Kantirmirovka through Millerovo where it split, with one line running southwest to Voroshilovgorad, and the second due south to Kamensk Shaktilinskiy on the Donets, and then into the basin again. So that meant Millerovo was now the closest rail hub the Germans would have in their effort to take Volgograd, and that was all of 150 miles behind the fighting.

Fuel stocks were running low in Steiner’s Korps, and ammunition was at

a premium, with some units down below 30% of standard issue. The one good thing that had happened was the arrival of fresh infantry, which did much to aid the SS in eliminating the two stubborn Soviet Mountain Divisions that had been defending the western bank of the crossing at Kalach. Those divisions were broken, and the Germans pushed across, only to run into Chiukov's Volga Rifles. Then, with his front line units in the Don bridgeheads reporting they were now at 100% supply status, Zhukov decided to spring a surprise attack. It was a long time until the first snows of Winter, and he knew he could not simply sit there, particularly with all that was happening in the center of the line as the Germans drove on Lipetsk.

At 04:00 he sent in the first waves of riflemen from 61st and 66th Rifle Corps. They had scouted out a weak point in the German line where the 530th Regiment of the German 299th Infantry Division had only just arrived, with no supporting units on either side for over five kilometers. 4th Mech and 7th Tank Corps were right behind them, ready to surge against the line at a point some 30 kilometers west of the Don.

Zhukov's plan was to launch a series of attacks against that flank, like successive hammer blows all along the line. This first attack was Gerasimenko's 21st Army, now heavily reinforced with the addition of two more mobile corps, the 1st Guard Tank, and 25th Tank Corps. Next up the line on their right were the 3rd and 4th Shock Armies in the Serafimovich bridgehead, with the 2nd Shock Army further west near Veshenskaya. This was the main attack, where Zhukov hoped the combined mass of all three armies would overwhelm the German infantry screen and punch through for rapid movement to the south.

Next came Lukin's 58th Army, which was to put in a pinning attack near Kazanskaya. Then, at Boguchar, Cherivichenko would throw his 9th Army against the line, hoping to reach Kantirmirovka and cut the rail line south into Millerovo. Even as far away as Rossosh, over 200 miles from that opening attack near the Don, all the units were to at least begin a masking barrage of artillery, hoping to convince the Germans that a big push was imminent there as well.

The last force of note in his larders was the powerful 2nd Guards Army on the line at Chernvanka, about 60 kilometers north of Valuki. That was another key rail hub for the Germans, and though he did not think this single army could go that distance alone, he told it to try. The threat itself would be

likely to pull in German reserves that might otherwise move east. Then, for good measure, he ordered a counterattack at Kursk to contest the Germans there. If nothing else, it would put a new headline in the papers, both east and west.

All along the line the Soviet artillery roared. Tanks surged forward followed by the motorized infantry regiments. The cavalry divisions thundered after them, sabers drawn and gleaming in the summer sun. Ponderous rifle divisions followed, wave after wave of Soviet infantry swarming around the German regiments of the line, which were now in a fight for their lives.

A frantic radio call came in from General Kempf to Steiner at his headquarters near Oblivskaya. He was with the last of his Korps units, minus the two Panzer Divisions, and he was moving southwest, ordered to follow the SS with its supporting infantry divisions.

“Steiner! Do you realize what’s happening? My column is 60 kilometers south of the Don front, and a Soviet motorcycle regiment just came up on our rear. They are behind us!”

Steiner was shocked. The infantry shield screening all those Soviet bridgeheads had been pierced south of Veshenskaya, and the Russians had sent the 17th Tank Corps and 5th Cavalry Corps right on through.

“Where are your panzers?”

“11th and 23rd are still south of Boguchar, but Balck radioed and told me a goddamned tank brigade just came up on his position 35 kilometers south of the city. There’s a big attack there as well.”

“Damn!” Steiner swore, his forehead red with anger. Then he realized the danger that thrust represented.

“They want Kantirmirovka. If they take that, it cuts the rail line into Millerovo, and there goes the last of my supplies. You must stop them there. Turn your entire column around and get back up there. I don’t need your infantry here now. The 42nd Korps arrived two days ago. Just hold that rail hub. Understand?”

“Alright, but you had better look to your north flank. Hansen called to report the 54th Korps is under attack there—all along the line. This is a big offensive.”

“It can’t be that big,” said Steiner dismissively. “It’s probably nothing more than a spoiling attack to take the pressure off our push for the Volga.

You'll see."

"Well what about those troops behind my column?"

"Go around them! Just protect that railhead."

Kempf heard the line go dead, and threw down the radio handset in disgust. He reached for his gloves, pulling them on slowly. "Go around them, he tells me. I've got bridging equipment, Nebelwerfers and artillery regiments, a mortar battalion, and my lead division is already well to the east. I've only the 57th Infantry Division here, but go around them we will."

He quickly found a staff Leutnant. "Get everything turned around. We move back to Kantirmirovka at once."

The tank unit that had the misfortune of running right up on the 11th Panzer Division as it did was the Soviet 10th Brigade. There, another man was pulling on his leather gloves, one Hermann Balck, one of Germany's most able panzer leaders. Wounded seven times in the first war, Balck had survived to join the Inspectorate of Motorized Troops before the war. He rode with Guderian in France, spearheading the crossing of the Meuse, then fought well in Russia with his fighting 11th. He would later be noted for his incredible defense against the Soviet 5th Tank Army along the River Chir during the winter counterattack that encircled Paulus and his 6th Army, killing over 1000 Soviet tanks in the defense, and basically stopping the entire Army. In fact, no other German division ever matched the 11th panzer when it came to confirmed enemy tank kills. Now here was a summer counterattack, most unexpected, and it aimed to do the very same thing to Steiner's SS Korps that the winter attack had done to Paulus.

"What in God's name is that?" Balck squinted through his field glasses, pointing at the oncoming Russian tanks. Then his mind raced to the only possible conclusion. His division was laagered 40 kilometers south of Boguchar, and if those were Soviet tanks, it meant they had broken through the 4th Infantry Korps line there, at least in one place. Yet knowing the German infantry well, he realized that they would have pulled in their flanks if hit with a really big attack, and adopted a defensive formation known as the hedgehog.

"Hauptmann," he ordered. "Kill those tanks!"

With that order Balck would begin an odyssey of brilliant defensive maneuvers that would live up to the division moniker of *Gespensterdivision*—the Ghost Division, one of the most effective Panzer Divisions of the war.

The division insignia often bore the image of a ghost, and now that spirit would begin haunting the Soviets like a demon from hell.

Part III

The Ghost Division

“Out of every one hundred men, ten shouldn't even be there, eighty are just targets, nine are the real fighters, and we are lucky to have them, for they make the battle. Ah, but the one, one is a warrior, and he will bring the others back.”

— Heraclitus

Chapter 7

It had come from nowhere, appearing behind British infantry in France, shocking them with the speed of its movement, and the determination of its troops. It was there that the division first was given the nom du guerre of the 'Ghost Division,' renowned for its valor, skill in battle, and yet also for the honorable way in which it fought. Prisoners were always treated fairly, enemy officers respected, cease fires honored to allow removal of wounded men on the field. Patton would later exclaim that the 11th Panzer was "the fairest and bravest" of all the German divisions he had encountered in the war.

Its commander had a quicksilver mind for maneuver in battle, that one man in every hundred with the warrior's soul, and complete mastery of the art of violence that became the energy of war. He was a dynamic and active defender, yet also fierce in the attack. In Fedorov's history, Hermann Balck had been one of the very few men to receive the Knight's Cross with Oak Leaves, Swords and Diamonds, joining Erwin Rommel in that honor. Born to a military family in Prussia, his father was highly decorated, and a master of strategy and tactics, rising to the Imperial General Staff.

Like father, like son. Now he was about to step out from behind his father's shadow and fight what would later be noted as one of the most brilliant tactical defenses ever conducted. It was Balck who first suggested to Guderian that tanks should always fight in mixed battlegroups with supporting infantry and other weapons. In effect, he was the originator of the concept of the German *Kampfgruppe*, and he put that doctrine to use immediately. He organized a counterattack with his 15th Panzer Regiment, a unit that had just been fitted out with a good number of the newest Panther V tanks in one battalion. The remainder were Pz IV-F2s, but they were bolstered by 18 of the heavier Lions that had already gained a fearsome reputation wherever they appeared on the front.

Balck took companies of Panzergrenadiers, mated them with platoons of armor, added in mobile flak guns and SPGs, and sent them off to battle. He

held one regiment of his infantry in hand, forming a defensive front, and then studded it with his AT guns. Then he sent the *Kampfgruppen* sweeping out on his flanks. One built on the fast moving recon battalion would seek out the line of enemy advance, relay the information by radio, and then the KGs would swoop in like vultures. Just as the Russians stopped to engage one such attack, another fast moving KG would suddenly appear on its flank or rear. The Ghosts were out in force that day, steel grey specters haunting the steppes.

Learning that a Soviet Cavalry division was following these enemy tanks south, he shifted his Panzergrenadier regiment west, assigned it several SPG batteries, and told it to drive the remaining horsemen back. Then, knowing he was now the center of the defensive line, and his right flank was hanging on thin air, he quickly organized several *Kampfgruppen*. One was formed from his pioneer battalion reinforced with several companies of AA guns. He would use it as a quick holding force on one flank.

In that hour, the highly trained men of Balck's division moved like a well-oiled machine. It was going to be very bad luck for the Soviet attack emerging from the Boguchar Bridgehead, and to make matters worse, the 23rd Panzer Division was close by, as was a new brigade of heavier tanks, the 102nd, which was at Martovka, about 30 kilometers southwest of Kantirmirovka. That unit had 28 Lions, two dozen Panthers and another 50 lighter tanks, the IV-F2s and the fast new Leopard medium recon tanks. Between the three formations, Balck would have command of well over 250 tanks. In fact, in this one small segment of the vast battle line that stretched for hundreds of miles in either direction, Balck commanded a force with greater striking power than Feldmarshall Erwin Rommel had in his Afrika Korps at that moment.

That was a clear lesson on just how impoverished Rommel's forces had been in North Africa, and at the same time how massive the Russian front was by comparison. The Soviets were going to throw a force twice the size of the British 8th Army in Africa at Balck, and it would be all in a day's work for him to dismantle those divisions, one by one. Yet, as strong and capable as it was, Balck's division could not be everywhere. To his immediate left and right, the Armies attacking on either side of his defense also created battles that doubled and even tripled the size of a typical engagement fought by Rommel.

The most serious penetration was 120 miles east of Balck's position, the main attack staged by Zhukov that had achieved a spectacular breakthrough. Kempf's column had barely slipped by its leading elements as it hastened west again at Steiner's urging, and not really knowing just how bad the breakthrough was, Steiner ordered the Wiking SS Division north immediately, sending them towards a small hamlet called Perelazovsky. The division had been re-supplying on the Chir, and now it trucked north with its three motorized infantry regiments, arriving to fill a 15-kilometer-wide hole in the line between the 46th Infantry on the left, and the 50th Division on the right—and that was not even the main breakthrough zone.

Steiner's appraisal of this action as nothing more than a spoiling attack was gravely wrong. The nearest German division to the west of the 46th was over 30 kilometers away, defending just southwest of Veshenskaya. It was therefore a combination of insufficient reconnaissance and pure hubris that led Steiner to continue with his battle in the Kalach Bridgehead, where both Grossdeutschland Division and the Brandenburgers were still locked in a death grip with Chiukov's Volga Guard Rifle Corps. He was also busy supervising the opening of a new pontoon bridge south of the main bridge at Kalach, where he sent the 102nd Infantry Division across to pressure that flank. They would cross and storm directly into the teeth of the newly arriving 18th Tank Corps, another surprise delivered by Georgie Zhukov.

General Felix Steiner had once commanded the 5th SS, and when he moved up to Korps level, his shoes were filled by the very capable Otto Gille, a man who was destined to become the most highly decorated SS officer of the war. Gille was a hard fighting realist leading hard fighting men, yet when he arrived at the position Steiner had ordered him to take, he was shocked to see that the line there was already outflanked to the west.

The Soviet 5th Cavalry and 17th Tank Corps went right through that gap in the front, and raced south, completely unopposed. By the morning of the 24th, a disgruntled supply clerk was awakened by the sound of rumbling vehicles. It was most likely a column coming in for fuel or parts or some other bothersome request, and well before breakfast. He got up from his cot, stuck his head out of his field tent, and was amazed to find the column pulling into his small forward depot in a village north of Morozovsk was composed of Russian tanks.

Gille could see what was happening all around him. Fast moving enemy

cavalry were already 30 kilometers to his southwest, and the 46th Infantry Division was now entirely swamped by the pressing mass of Russian infantry. To make matters worse, he found his troops arriving in the middle of a big attack through the gap in the line his division was filling. No less than four Rifle Divisions, two of them Guards units, were joined by a cavalry division for this push, and The Wikings were all that barred the way.

Those odds were not really as steep as they sounded, for each of Gille's three Motorized Regiments, Nordland, Germania and Westland, had the fighting power of a full Russian Rifle Division. So it was really more like five to three in that face off, but the units already behind him were of some concern. He got on the radio to Steiner at once.

"Herr General," he said. "We have plugged the dike, but the water has already spilled through. We've spotted enemy cavalry well south and west of our position. I'm sending the recon battalion to slow them down."

"That's the least of my problems now," said Steiner, the frustration evident in his hard voice. "The Russians are already approaching Morozovsk!"

"My God! You can't allow them to take that. If they cut that road, then your entire force is cut off."

"Not entirely," said Steiner with just an edge of sarcasm in his voice. "We have a bridge at Tormosin where we can always move in with Volkov's boys south of the Don. Very well, I pulled the Totenkopf Division from Tormosin last night. They need rest and have very little in the way of supplies and ammunition, but I will send them to Morozovsk."

"Do you still want me to stand my ground here? There's another big attack coming in right now."

"Hold as long as practical. Can you make contact with 46th Infantry?"

"They are well to our west."

"Well try to fold back your flank there, and yes, stand your ground. This is much bigger than I realized. If we can't stop it soon, we'll lose the bridgehead at Kalach, and I will not want to be the man who reports that to OKW and the Führer."

The next call went all the way to Eric Manstein at Armeegruppe South HQ in Kharkov. It was Steiner, laying out the situation in no uncertain terms, a massive Soviet attack all along his northern flank, the infantry buckling, but holding, enemy penetration and fast moving columns sweeping to interdict

any road or rail they could find. When Manstein learned that his reserve 48th Panzer Korps was already heavily engaged, he knew things were quite serious. He needed another strong mobile force to plan a counter move, but the only existing formation in the entire army was von Wietersheim's 14th Panzer Korps, well west of Kharkov. It was on good rail lines, and rolling stock was at hand. The only complication was that he would now need OKW approval to use that Korps, which meant he had to confer with Hitler and Halder.

Manstein knew that there was also a big offensive underway in the center. That force was held where it was to be a central reserve, and von Rundstedt would want it to further his drive east. If he merely sent a telegram requesting the panzers, he knew Halder would likely refuse. He had to go in person, and so he rushed to the nearest airport and got aboard a fast He-111.

Hitler had wanted to get closer to the front, and had taken his personal train, *Führersonderzug Brandenburg*, to move from the Wolfsschanze in Rastenburg to HQ Werewolf in Vinnytsia, Ukraine. That HQ was well named, for he had been in high spirits, until the news of what was happening fell upon him like cold moonlight, and a terrible transformation ensued. Suddenly, all the progress made over the last few weeks counted for naught. The fact that von Rundstedt's thrust had been stopped, and now hearing that Manstein's attack was faltering and under heavy counterattack, enraged him. Steiner had been his unfailing sword. He had pierced the last river barrier before Volgograd, but now that sword was stuck in the hard steel wall of the Volga Guard Rifles.

Then in walked Manstein, his cheeks red with the cold night air. He found Hitler leaning sullenly over the map table, a noticeable twitch in his right arm. Without even looking at him, Hitler spoke: "Why are you not at the front? What are you doing here?"

It was the first time he had snapped at Manstein that way, and Halder, who had come along when the Führer moved, tried very hard to restrain a smile. Yet Manstein remained cool, ignoring Halder, and focusing his attention on Hitler. He simply walked slowly up to the map table, removed his gloves and set them down, and then leaned in beside Hitler, who was eyeing him with sidelong glances as he did so.

"Ah," he said with a definitive tone. "Just as I expected. Von Rundstedt piled on. He sent Hoth in right behind Model—good for quick yardage, but

now he has no southern pincer to bag all these troops he leaves in his wake. It is clear what must be done.”

Hitler had been squinting through the fog of his anger trying to ascertain what to do himself for some hours, tapping the map, muttering under his breath, casting about for staffers and shouting them down whenever they would speak. Yet now, strangely, when Manstein spoke, he quieted, looking at the general for the first time.

“I see you have correctly positioned the one tool I will need now,” said Manstein. “And look, you have cleaned up that mess at Kirov. There is your answer for von Rundstedt’s dilemma. Well done, my Führer. It is obvious that my plane ride here was for naught. Seeing these dispositions, obviously carried out on your personal orders, is most encouraging. With your permission then, I will move Wietersheim’s 14th Panzer Korps immediately, and we will put a complete stop to this Russian Summer offensive over the upper Don. I have already sent in Kempf’s 48th. Excellent divisions, but frankly, he is too slow. May I suggest von Knobelsdorff as a replacement?” Now he clucked, shaking his head as he stood upright. Hitler stood with him.

“Did they think they could fool you with this nonsense?” he said to Hitler with a wry smile. “Not at all. We’ll cut them to ribbons. I will restore the situation immediately, and then Steiner can get back to business as usual.”

Halder’s jaw fell open, his eyes widening, but he waited to see if the werewolf would throw himself upon Manstein as he had every other officer that had approached him in this mood.

“You came here to consult with me on this?”

“Of course. I would have ordered Wietersheim’s troops to move this morning when Steiner informed me of what was happening, but one does not pick up a knight and move it without a good appraisal of the overall situation. The infantry you have ready at Kirov will be exactly what von Rundstedt needs. He can feed it onto the positions he has had to hold with his Panzergrenadiers, and relieving them, he regains his mobility and striking power. Infantry, my Führer. One must always have a balanced force in the attack.”

“I have already sent him two divisions,” said Hitler matter of factly.

“Of course. Now send the rest. It looks to me like you have readied Forster’s 6th Korps, and Heitz with the 8th Infantry Korps. They can take the trains through Orel immediately. Don’t worry about them after that. Model

will know exactly what to do when he receives your gift—a good sturdy shield so he can get moving again. As for me, I need a hammer, and von Wietersheim is the only force for the job just now. 14th Panzer Korps will do nicely.”

“But my Führer...” Halder’s voice appealed from across the room, though he did not approach the map table.

“What now Halder? More protests? Can’t you see we are busy here? Where are those adjutants and staff officers? I’ll need runners for these orders at once!” An hour earlier, Hitler had threatened to have the next man that brought him bad news shot, and since that time, the junior officers had kept their distance.

“You realize that is the last Army reserve we have?” said Halder.

“Of course I realize that. And what good is a reserve if it simply sits about when the enemy attacks like this?” He looked at Manstein now. “You may call von Wietersheim directly. Get him moving east at once.”

“I have already taken the liberty of seeing that the necessary rolling stock is available,” said Manstein. “Thank you, my Führer. Just give me a week and I will send you good news.”

That was that. Manstein’s personal intervention had worked its magic yet again, much to Halder’s chagrin. He had it in his mind to take those panzers and move them up to a point just south of Kursk, intending to strike northwest towards Voronezh. Instead, von Manstein had wheedled them away in just five minutes!

So it was that the last of the Valkyries would take wing that night, four good divisions in the hands of an able commander. Wietersheim had fought with Hoepner on the drive to Moscow, getting there when Guderian failed in his wide envelopment strategy. Now Hitler envisioned him as a kind of unfailing remedy, particularly when this notion was seconded by Manstein. The Führer had been hesitating about those divisions, not knowing exactly where he should send them.

Now he knew.

Chapter 8

Kurt Ruschel stopped in his Panther, opening the hatch to get a better look at the ground ahead. He had come up on the slopping banks of a narrow stream, one of the few terrain features he might use in this otherwise flat ground. The infantry assigned to his Kampfgruppe was just now arriving behind him, and he signaled that they should take up positions along the stream. He had a mind to then move his Panthers back, a platoon of 12 tanks, and wait for the enemy to try and force their way over the stream. Then up came a Kubelwagon, and he turned to see an officer stepping out, striding quickly towards his tank.

“Hauptmann,” the officer called. “What are you doing here?”

Ruschel suddenly saw this was no mere officer, it was Hermann Balck, and he was well forward, right at the point where the enemy attack was expected. He saluted immediately. “Sir, I want to spring an ambush here. My men can take cover in the depression of the stream, and I will move my armor about 300 meters back.”

Balck looked the ground over. “Wrong,” he said simply. “Their optics may not be worth much, but they will still see your tanks at that distance. You don’t hold the line of a water obstacle from only one side like that. Send two platoons of infantry 200 meters forward and have them dig in on the other side of the stream. Then put your tanks down there in the depression—they’ll be hull down. Hold the last platoon of Panzergrenadiers in reserve on this side of the stream. If they hit your forward infantry with tanks, they reveal their intention to cross here, and then you pop up with your Panthers and give them a nasty surprise.”

That advice worked for Ruschel’s KG, but Balck would tailor his commands to the unique composition of each KG he encountered, and he always led from the front. A good commander up front at the critical spot with a reliable radio was worth three Generals in the rear areas at their desks with field phones. This is why Balck, like Rommel, was constantly on the move, motoring from one point to the next. He would make an assessment of the situation, then radio back to his Chief of Staff behind the lines to tell him what orders to issue to various elements of his division.

He wanted his troops lean, fast and light, thinning out excess vehicles in the division, which he said would only clog up the few available roads. These he sent to a vehicle pool at the rear, and then used them to replace damaged vehicles in his maneuver elements. In the same fashion, Balck would never use his Feldersatz Battalion as a standalone unit if he had one. Instead he would use those troops as direct replacements for his line infantry battalions, which was the correct employment of that battalion as he saw things. In this way his line battalions would have what he called resilience in combat, and be kept up to strength.

In like manner, he swept his division and culled out specialized units for what he called his “Commander’s Reserve.” These might be experienced artillerymen, reserve tank crewmen, an infantry platoon, mortar men, AT gunners. This group would amount to two or three companies in overall size, and he would never allow it to be employed as a standalone unit in combat. It was there for him to send the necessary replacements to existing units, and as a kind of toolkit for him to man up a specialized Kampfgruppe he might need to build.

If he came across three orphaned AT Guns, he might call for reserve gunners, round up two or three trucks, assign a single tank in support, and a squad of infantry with good MGs. So at the drop of a hat, he had the experienced men he needed in his Commander’s Reserve to build such units, and nobody touched that unit but Balck.

“Alright then,” he said. “Ruschel, you are left of center on my line here. I’ll have a Pakfront set up to your right and rear. If you get too much attention here, then jog even further left, and don’t get too attached to that watercourse. Be ready to maneuver at all times.”

“Are you sending me the new Nashorns?” asked Ruschel.

“Those monstrosities?” Balck shook his head. They had been assigned to his Pz Jaeger Battalion 61, a small unit equipped with a dozen of the latest Marders, and an equal number of Pak 75s. When the ten new mobile 88mm guns arrived, the Nashorns, he just smiled. “Somebody has a wild imagination back in the factories. Nashorn? That’s a good name for it.”

The name meant ‘Rhino’ in German, an apt handle with that long deadly 88mm horn, it was also called the *Hornisse*, or Hornet, and with a very dangerous sting. Balck would make good use of them, but he never liked them.

The reliable towed AT gun was essential in Balck's thinking, an integral part of all his panzer operations. One might think such guns were unnecessary in a division heavy on tanks, but that was not the case. As he saw it, attrition in tanks would always far exceed that of his PzJaeger battalion. A Panzer battalion might start the day with 50 tanks, and after a hard day's fight have only 20 left running, but such attrition was rare for the PzJaegers. The guns he most preferred were the 7.5cm AT guns, and towed when he could get them as opposed to guns mounted on a mobile specialized chassis. The 88s would usually be assigned to flak units, and unlike Rommel, Balck found them too large, slow and unwieldy for panzer warfare in Russia.

The Pak 37s were now useless, and the Pak 50's growing less effective each month, so he loved the 75s. A good towed AT battalion was every bit as mobile as self-propelled guns, and their vehicles could be put to many other uses as prime movers. He felt the same way about his artillery and mortars, wanting everything towed when he could get it. The vehicles could remove damaged guns, fetch ammunition, go back and bring up additional infantry, all while the Pakfront stayed in action. The guns they towed were far easier to conceal from air strikes than a self-propelled gun. If a prime mover broke down, its AT gun could always be moved by another vehicle.

He would allow Ruschel to stage his defensive action where he was that morning, but would much prefer to keep his Panzers in small, fast moving groups to envelop, enfilade, and surprise enemy advances by slashing at their flanks and rear. The Pakfront was his line of defense, supported by infantry and artillery. The Panzers were to fight like wolves against a flock of sheep, which was a fitting metaphor for how the Russians sometimes advanced. They had a herd mentality, as he saw things, with poor radio communications, equally poor radio security when they did have that equipment, and were often too ponderous and inflexible. They would go for their objectives, heedless and brave to be sure, but failed to make adequate appraisals of the overall situation, and react appropriately.

"Look here," Balck produced a threadbare map and pointed out the line of the stream where he now determined they were standing. "This stream runs north to south, so they will probably come on your left. There is a small state farm here, and I am posting a battery of 75mm AT guns there. If they do not turn as you expect, and attack your position, then I will need you here." Balck stuck his finger on the map where he wanted Ruschel to go. Then he squinted

at the terrain around them. “There,” he said. See that little group of trees? Swing south of that and you’ll be on the right course.”

This was another aspect of Balck’s command style. He never issued written orders, even well before a well-planned battle, and certainly not in a situation like this. Instead he preferred to conduct map briefings and terrain walks with his officers, and this was a perfect example. And that map he had in hand was also stored in his head. The General had an uncanny sense of where he was at any given moment. “Getting anywhere that matters,” he said, “must begin with knowing where you are when you first decide to go.” It was a maxim that he demonstrated time and again, appearing where things mattered most, and in the heat of battle, heedless of his own personal safety. All the really great commanders of mobile warfare would act this way, O’Connor for the British, Patton for the Americans, and men like Erwin Rommel and Hermann Balck for the Germans.

“Hauptmann Ruschel,” he said. “I will call you when I need you, and you must be ready to move in the blink of an eye.”

Ruschel saluted, then smiled as he watched Balck run to his Kubelwagon, slapping the hood as he mounted, and then the driver gunned the engine and he was gone in a swirl of dust. He was off to find the commander of his 61st Motorcycle Recon Battalion, Lt. Colonel Paul Freiherr von Hauser. (*Not to be confused with the SS officer with a similar name Paul Hausser*). Balck had great confidence in the man, for Hauser was a master of the fine art of reconnaissance, even with his noisome motorcycles. He knew how to scout a position like few others, was audacious in the advance, and tenacious if asked to defend. Balck would come to call him simply, “the incomparable Hauser.”

Knowing Hauser was from a noble Austrian family, he took to addressing him as Herr von Hauser in their personal discussions, according him a measure of respect he believed was his due. One of the very best, Hauser would eventually rise to command the elite Panzer Lehr Division in the West, but for now, he was one of Balck’s chief military spirits in the Ghost Division, and he often relied on him in situations where no other man might prevail.

He found Hauser about ten kilometers east, his lead company feeling its way toward the expected line of the Russian advance. “Herr von Hauser,” he said with a smile, greeting the man with a warm handshake. Balck always felt he was at the root and stem of the division when he was with the motorcycle

troops. In fact, the division itself had been converted from the older 11th Schutzen Brigade after the campaign in France, a fast moving formation on motorcycles.

“What does it look like out there?” he asked. “Any sign of our Infantry?”

“Not yet,” said Hauser. “I had 1st Company well north a while back. They made radio contact, with a Leutnant in the 73rd, and I’m told everything has gone to hell up there. The troops were all at the morning mess pits when the attack came in. The divisional commander got drunk last night and was still asleep. The poor Leutnant was trying to pull the defense together himself.”

“God bless the Leutnants of this army,” said Balck. “They are a special breed and without them how could our Generals drink and sleep?” Balck flashed him his characteristic broad smile, eyes alight. He never lost his sense of humor, even at the height of a crisis like this.

“Very well, Hauptmann, I want you to find that infantry for me. Note their position on a map when you do, and then send a fast biker back here to look for me. Can you get up there?”

“Certainly,” said Hauser. “This advance here has a lot of heavy armor—many KV type tanks in small battalion formations. That’s going to be a lot of work for the Panzer Jaegers. The really big breakthrough is to our east from all I can gather. We picked up a lot of Russian radio traffic. They moved several corps through a big hole last night, and I even heard Steiner on the radio talking about Morozovsk. The situation is very scattered. They have cavalry milling about over there, then charging off in every direction and getting nowhere fast. There are also tanks, however. I heard clear radio traffic that identified the 17th Tank Corps, and some units from the 6th—T-34s for the most part.”

“Yes, we’ve already killed all their older tanks,” said Balck. I’m afraid all we did was encourage them to build more of these new ones. Well, we have a few new tanks as well. I have Hauptmann Ruschel not far from here with a Kampfgruppe. He’s watching the stream bed on your right for the moment, but his cats will come when I whistle. Let me know if you need them. I think we had better finish up here quickly, and then move east at mid-day. Pass the word. We’ll regroup at Roshok on this secondary road to Morozovsk. That will put the division on the flank of that breakthrough, and that’s when we do what we do best.”

That became the order of the day. The 23rd Panzer had blunted the attack

pushing out of the Boguchar Bridgehead, and then shifted to its right where Balck had been engaging those heavy tank battalions Hauser had scouted out for him. In that he had the support of the 102nd Heavy Panzer Brigade, and with that unit, one Kurt Knispel was having a field day, racking up an astonishing 13 kills in the space of an hour.

“My,” said Balck, watching through his binoculars as the Lions roared. “Look at that lead tank there, number 507. I want that man in my division!” He had unknowingly pointed to Knispel’s tank, seeing it turn and engage, the crack of its heavy gun sharp on the afternoon air. Balck first thought he had fired much too soon, until he saw the enemy tanks burning, well over 1500 meters away. Knispel’s penchant for long range kills was in rare form that day, and he got seven of his baker’s dozen at ranges where the Panzer IVs could never consider engaging.

By late afternoon it wasn’t a runner who came looking for Balck, but Hauser himself. “I heard this is where the action is tonight,” he said. “But I have good news. The 9th Panzer Division has arrived by rail at Millerovo.”

“That’s Walter Scheller’s outfit now,” said Balck. “Good for him. He can smell where the fighting is.” Balck had taken command of the 11th Panzer from Scheller, who then went to the 9th.

“His division has been assigned to Kempf’s Korps,” said Hauser, “only Kemp is going somewhere else. It’s Knobelsdorff commanding the 48th now.”

“Knobelsdorff? I thought he was in the hospital. In any case, that’s a step in the right direction. He did excellent work with the 19th Panzer Division. Kempf is good with the infantry, but not with tanks. This is very good news.”

“It gets better. Scheller has an infantry division with him.”

“Just what we need. Good! Then we attack until sunset—keep them off balance. After dark we pause, and we’ll let them think we’re sleepy. Instead we move to see if we can coordinate with Scheller’s division. This is going to get very interesting. Stay sharp, Herr von Hauser. I will want your eyes and ears on my right flank now. That’s where we hit them tonight.”

Hermann Balck wasn’t the only one with good eyes and ears. The Soviets had enjoyed a rare local air superiority in the last two weeks, as Manstein’s advance outpaced the ability of the Luftwaffe to reposition and supply squadrons to airfields close enough to support it. Therefore, General Zhukov had a good bird’s eye view of what was happening on the ground. When he

saw the dramatic breakthrough in his main attack, he clenched his fist with elation.

He had pushed a tank corps and supporting cavalry divisions through that hole and seen them race over 120 kilometers to the south, all the way to threaten Morozovsk. He had killed the German 46th and 50th Infantry Divisions, cut the line of communications for the SS Panzer Korps, stopped the flow of supporting infantry, worsened its supply status, disrupted its attack at Kalach, forced Steiner to pull units out of that hard won bridgehead to cover his north and even western flanks. The Wiking Division had gone north, Totenkopf west to Morozovsk, Das Reich was pulled into reserve, its troops too exhausted and supplies too low to be used in the bridgehead battle any longer. There his two Aces still fought with the Volga Rifles, now heavily reinforced with the arrival of several independent tank brigades. The Germans would eventually restore their supply corridor, but not this week. He smiled.

Now, however, he could also see the slashing counterattacks that began to bite into the western end of his offensive. A pair of fast moving German Panzer Divisions had punched, moved, punched again, until they had restored order and stabilized the entire German line from Boguchar to Veshenskaya. A third division was seen arriving on the trains at Millerovo, and he knew what was coming next. "Signal Yeremenko—Summer Fox," he ordered.

It was the prearranged code for consolidation and pullback. He wasn't going to sit there and watch the Germans tear up his scattered divisions. So on the night when Balck was planning to strike, the Russians pulled back. Only the formations that had broken through near Morozovsk were to be sacrificed. They were too far south, so Zhukov ordered them to turn for the big bend of the Donets, tear up rail lines, blow bridges, and attempt to join Rokossovsky.

His brief summer offensive was over, but he had gained nearly a month of valuable time for the citizens of Volgograd. As far as he was concerned, Operation Mars was a success.

Chapter 9

The German assessment of what had happened in that attack was quite different. The Russians had definitely caught them by surprise, and for eight long days their shock armies had rampaged across the steppes. Yet from the German perspective, they had seen the enemy throw the mass of all the forces they had available along the line of the Don against a string of German infantry divisions that had only recently taken up positions. The line had buckled, was pierced in at least two locations, with one very serious breach that led to the startling enemy drive on Morozovsk.

Yet the presence of two panzer divisions, the 11th and 23rd, had stopped the wound at Boguchar, then swung east to smash into the flank of the enemy's most serious penetration. The timely arrival of the 14th Panzer Korps had finally put an end to Zhukov's offensive, but at some considerable cost.

When Steiner sent the Wiking Division north into the breach at the height of the crisis, casualties had been high. When finally pulled off the line, the Germania Regiment was down to the strength of a reinforced company. There were only 18 rifle squads left of the 120 that had started the offensive a month earlier. Nordland had only 24 squads, battalion level strength. Only Westland survived reasonably intact, with 69 squads still on the line reinforcing a battered infantry regiment that had been whittled down to battalion strength. The rest of the Wiking Division had to be pulled back to the Chir for extensive rest and reorganization to a traditional Panzer Division structure. Nordland and Germania would combine their resources, and tanks and other assault guns were on the way to form a panzer regiment.

Morozovsk was cleared of enemy infestation by the tired 3rd SS Division. 1st SS relieved the Wikings to fill the hole in the north, and the supply corridor would reopen by August 3rd. Manstein considered the affair nothing more than a spoiling attack, as massive as it was. His troops had even counterattacked to retake Kursk and change the headlines there once again, and all this news reaching Hitler restored his hopes and calmed his mood considerably. Manstein had done what he said he would do, and the outcome

only increased the Führer's confidence in his strategy, much to Halder's displeasure. What might have happened if Manstein had not wrangled away the 14th Panzer Korps as he did, was not discussed, nor was there any mention of the fact that now there was no mobile reserve anywhere else on the front.

In the meantime, Ivan Volkov was elated that his troops had finally made contact with the Germans at Tormosin. He ordered his bridging engineers to improve that crossing, expecting visitors soon, though none came. Then, knowing the Germans were in a fight to cross the Don at the Kalach Bridgehead, he gathered the disparate elements of two Army Korps and committed them in a drive north along the south bank of the Don towards Nizhny Chirskaya, a small town about 45 kilometers south of Kalach in a very marshy region of the Don bend. That was where the rail line from Morozovsk crossed the river before running up to Volgograd.

A regiment of the Brandenburgers had taken that bridge, and now his troops cleared the southern and eastern banks of the Don to enable German bridging engineers to get to work on repairing the span. So the Germans had two bridges over the Don, and it was now only a matter of resting their shock troops, resupplying, cleaning up Zhukov's mess, and bringing up the rest of Wietersheim's 14th Panzer Korps. The 13th Panzer Division arrived on August 6th, moving up to finally seal off the massive breach those Shock Armies had torn in the German line. Balck moved his division, and other elements of the 48th Panzer Korps into reserve, and went off to look for von Knobelsdorff.

Back at OKW, Halder was determined to get his hands on fresh troops for Armeegruppe Center. The collapse of the Kirov Pocket provided a massive pool of infantry that had been tied up there for over six months. He immediately began sorting through the available divisions, and sending them east towards the big operation by Model and Hoth. They had been the missing element there, as Manstein had correctly pointed out. There had been nothing to hold the shoulders of the German breakthrough, and so as it advanced, the Panzer Divisions had been roped into that duty, stopping their advance. It was only the commitment of Hoth's 3rd Panzer Armee that allowed the drive to get as far as it did. Now the job was to get infantry east, move them into the shoulders of the breakthrough, free up those Panzers and get moving again.

Both the 6th, 8th and 9th Infantry Korps would be sent, slowly arriving by rail and feeding into the line to relieve positions held by 2nd Panzer Armee. Hoth was already consolidating his divisions and front loading the tip of the spear, the most advanced positions attained after the initial breakthrough. If seen on a map, the German penetration was like a vast arm, reaching for Lipetsk, but there was no southern pincer moving on Voronezh. Halder had to settle for half an offensive, counting on the sheer mass and mobility of his Panzers. As long as he got up additional infantry support, he was ready to strike southeast yet again. It was going to produce another dramatic blow to the front.

With the infantry relieving 2nd Panzer Armee, Model shifted the bulk of his divisions south, right at the junction of the Soviet 49th Army and the 1st Red Banner that had been sent up to form the southern shoulder of the initial penetration. Five Rifle Divisions were smashed, the headquarters of the 49th Army overrun, artillery positions decimated and the Germans were suddenly through, and pushing for Livny. At the same time, Hoth's 3rd Panzer Armee broke through at the *Schwerpunkt* of the drive where he had been forced to stop weeks earlier, and his divisions came barreling into Yelets. By the 13th of August he had advanced elements 25 kilometers beyond the city. Halder finally had something to crow about at OKW.

From the Russian Perspective This was yet another disaster, but one which Zhukov had anticipated. Where were all the Tank Armies? There was only one formed officially, composed of 22nd, 23rd and 24th Tank Corps. All the other Tank Corps were operating independently, but these three combined as one under General Kusnetsov. They had been positioned behind Lipetsk, the apparent objective of Hoth's drive weeks ago. And now, with the Germans on the move again, they crossed the upper Don River there and moved northwest of the city, preparing to strike at the German flank should the enemy attempt to take the city itself. Only one Motor Rifle Regiment of the as yet unformed 21st Tank Corps was posted in the city.

In the meantime, the last surviving units of 17th Siberian, and all of Yeremenko's 1st Red Banner Army, were being swarmed over by Model's 2nd Panzer Armee. Any unit that was not pinned down in combat began a massed stampede south away from the onrushing tide of German steel. The axis of this new German breakthrough was going to take it behind Berzarin's 27th Army, and the 40th Army under Podlas defending near Kursk. Behind

the great bulge in the line created by those two armies, about 100 miles east northeast of Kursk at a small town on the rail line, sat Zhukov's Central Front Reserve, the 11th Army under Morozov. It was a small force composed of four Rifle Divisions, an independent Rifle Brigade, a security regiment and supporting artillery. The first desperate refugees from the front were already straggling down from the north, and the 1st Heavy Artillery Division was in full retreat.

It was a tense hour when Zhukov got the news. He had to decide quickly whether to commit his reserves to try and blunt this attack, or to attempt to extricate the 27th and 40th armies. His instinct warned him of the terrible danger he was facing. He could lose both armies, or see them trapped in a pocket, while the Germans pushed down towards Voronezh, and Morozov's infantry was all he could put in their way. If Voronezh fell, then the whole line from Kursk to Boguchar on the middle Don was essentially cut off. It was either block the breakthrough in the north and hope the front could hold, or attempt to withdraw all six armies between the breakthrough zone and Boguchar, and fall back to the line of the Don running through Voronezh. Without consulting Sergei Kirov, he ordered the retreat.

At least I'll save something from this wreck, he thought. If I can get the bulk of the rifle divisions back to the Don, and hold in front of Voronezh, then we've got that city as a good supply center, and we can stop them from using this offensive to unhinge my entire front on the lower Don. 2nd Guards Army was trying to get to Valuki during my offensive. Of course it could not get there, but now it remains intact, reasonably well equipped, and still mobile. I will relieve it with the 11th Rifle Corps, and get it back to the nearest rail line. It can hold Voronezh for me. It *must* hold that city. This is all or nothing. If I don't stop them and stabilize the front by September, then God only knows what might happen. I have nothing else in reserve—nothing!

A day after he ordered that retreat, in walked a heavy set man, balding, round faced, and with a prominent mole near his nose under his left eye. He claimed that he had been sent directly to Zhukov's HQ at Voronezh to determine what was happening and report to Sergei Kirov.

"And you are?" asked Zhukov curtly.

"Commissar Nikita Sergeyevich Khrushchev."

"Ah," said Zhukov. "Then you are here to check up on me as well, eh Commissar?"

“You might see things that way. We are abandoning Kursk, and losing a good deal of terrain with those orders you issued yesterday. Care to explain yourself, or should I simply tour the front and come to my own conclusions before I return to Leningrad with my report?”

Khrushchev had become known as a troublemaker, a henchman, a watchdog all in one. And he always seemed to appear at the point of crisis. He had been at Kiev when that city was surrounded and so many were lost, and again at Kirov, where he had stayed in the pocket for several months before being flown out when Moscow burned. Wherever there was disaster, chaos, or calamity, Khrushchev would be sure to put in an appearance. Some whispered that he was one of Beria’s old men, though any who had sought to denounce him came to a swift and deadly end. And now, here he was again.

“You may draw whatever conclusions you wish,” said Zhukov, not intimidated in the least. You were at Kiev, were you not? You were in the Kirov Pocket? Well, I do not have to tell you what happened to all those troops, when one timely backward step might have saved many armies to continue this struggle on other ground. The Rodina is a very big place, at least on my maps.”

Khrushchev smiled. “May I see your map? I wish to review the dispositions of your forces given this sudden change in the front lines.”

“They are there on the table, and as you will soon see, I am trying to save six armies from becoming the Kursk Pocket. I think we have had quite enough of that sort of heroic stand. Would you agree?”

“Your offensive on the lower Don,” said Khrushchev, ignoring the question. “Has it been terminated?”

“It has served its purpose, and I have consolidated on the ground we won with that attack.”

“Then you have no further intention of pressuring the enemy line there?”

“The mere presence of those troops is pressure enough—assuming I can keep them there and reform them. This new situation is the real crisis.”

“Not Volgograd? Sergei Kirov is very determined to hold that city. We have held it for decades against Volkov’s troops, and he will not see it given away as you so lightly hand the Germans Kursk.”

That remark irritated Zhukov, and he made no effort to conceal his displeasure. “Commissar, I can have you flown to Kursk if you like, and you may organize the defense there—you and your NKVD.”

Khrushchev looked at him, again with a smile. “General, nobody likes me. Yes, I am well aware of this. Yet someone must look over a shoulder or two in this mess, and sort things out. Where do you mean to make your next stand?”

“On the line of the Don.”

“Then you will cede the enemy half of Voronezh?”

“Commissar, one always holds both sides of a major water obstacle at a critical point like that. Rest assured, we will hold that city. I am sending the entire 2nd Guards Army there, and Kusnetsov’s 1st Tank Army is poised to deliver a strong spoiling attack if they persist towards Lipetsk. As for the armies I have ordered east, I would prefer to still be in command of them this winter. If I left them in the Kursk bulge, they would either be dead, in a German concentration camp, or perhaps huddling with you around a few last camp fires, making another heroic stand as at Kirov. Only they will have no plane ticket out.”

“My,” said Khrushchev, “insult on top of injury. Very well, General Zhukov. I believe I have seen quite enough here, and yes, I do have another plane to catch—to Leningrad.”

Zhukov cast a derisive glance over his shoulder as the man left him, shaking his head. Commissars, he thought. The world would be a much better place if we rounded them all up and shot them. Because if we don’t, that is what they will do to the rest of us one day—the high and the low.

Khrushchev made one brief stop before he went to the airfield, taking a personal car to an isolated village east of Voronezh. He got out, the driver waiting, and made his way to a small insignificant farm house, ostensibly to visit a distant cousin, and deliver a bottle of good vodka, which he had in hand.

No one was there, and once inside and alone, he sat himself down at the plain wood table and took out a small booklet. Leaning over, he grunted as he moved one of the floor boards, finding there a small box that hid a radio telegraph set. It would operate using the traditional key to tap out code, but send the signal wirelessly, like a radio might. His message was brief.

‘ZHUKOV ADAMANT. WITHDRAWING TO UPPER DON TO HOLD VORONEZH. 2ND GUARDS ARMY EN ROUTE. 1ST TANK ARMY TO MOUNT SPOILING ATTACK AT LIPETSK. NO FURTHER OFFENSIVE PLANNED FOR LOWER DON.’

That was that, a very brief message in a special cyphered Morse, and it would be picked up by the nearest friendly listening station. There was just one catch—the nearest friendly listening post was not under Soviet command, because the rumors were all true. Nikita Khrushchev was a Volkov man, through and through. His operatives would repeat the message, until the signal hopped east, over the Volga, and right into the eager ears of the security forces of Ivan Volkov. Khrushchev had been promised the entire province of the Ukraine after this was all over, and he intended to speed things along, any way he could.

Unbeknownst to him, Berzin had men on the front lines as well, and with all the key headquarters. One had taken a particular interest in Nikita Sergeyevich Khrushchev, and he, too, would send a coded signal that night, right to Berzin himself. The Intelligence Chief would read it with some interest in his evening conference with Sergei Kirov.

“What is it?” asked Kirov. “You look like you’ve eaten some bad borscht.”

“Khrushchev,” said Berzin. “He visited Zhukov tonight as we ordered, but afterwards he did not go directly to the airfield, but to a farmhouse ten kilometers east of Voronezh.”

“What would he be doing there?”

“Who knows, but we picked up an enciphered signal about that same time. It might have originated with him....”

Kirov took that in. “I know what you think of him, Grishin,” said Kirov, calling Berzin by the nickname he always used. “And I also know you expect me to protect him, but we can take no further chances after that little theater Beria pulled in Moscow. I know you did everything possible to root out his network. Red Rain was quite extreme. Yet we must accept the fact that Volkov still has men embedded within our own security system, and what better place than the ranks of the Commissars. Watch him,” he finished. “Watch him very closely....”

Part IV

The Long Goodbye

*“My center is giving way, my right is in retreat, situation excellent.
I will attack.”*

—General Ferdinand Foch

Chapter 10

Mersa Brega, 15 SEP, 1942 ~ 06:00

Rommel was exhausted. It had been another sleepless night, and the news from the front was frustrating. The Italians were finally finished at Benghazi. The deployment of a third enemy infantry division to that sector had finally put an end to the garrison there.

“Our Italian friends, and would be masters, are not happy about their situation,” said Rommel. “Yet Hitler demanded that Benghazi be held, and most of those units had little in the way of transport. Losing the port hardly matters. Most everything we need comes through Tripoli—and then takes weeks to get here. We use a third of the gasoline just transporting the rest to this position. If I had my way, I would move back to Tripoli at once.”

He was speaking to one of his new Corps Commanders, Generalleutnant Wilhelm Ritter von Thoma. Rommel had finally requested a replacement for General Crüwell, finding him too abrasive and disobedient to work with any longer. Crüwell was then shipped off to Russia, which is where von Thoma had just come from after commanding first the 17th Panzer Division, and then the 20th. He was a tall, aristocratic looking man who had a dubious reputation in Fedorov’s history. Some believed he had deliberately surrendered to the British to get out of the war after El Alamein, and then, while in captivity with General Crüwell, he let slip vital details of the German rocket program, giving the R.A.F. a choice new target.

Crüwell would escape his fate as a captive this time around, and now it remained to be seen whether or not von Thoma would become a reliable replacement.

“Useless mouths to feed,” he said to Rommel. “The Italians are good hard workers, but they do not like to fight. It’s simply too noisy on the battlefield to suit them.”

“Well it has been entirely too quiet of late,” said Rommel. “Finally they start with the morning artillery barrages again, which could be a sign that something is in the offing. I got a most unusual message the other day,

delivered to me in that secure diplomatic pouch you brought me. Did you know about it?"

"Me? No, I do not read the mail I deliver, Herr General. What was it, if you don't mind my asking—a message from the Führer? It must be nice to have such a cozy relationship like that."

"Don't think it is easy," said Rommel. "Yes, I am fortunate to have the trust and confidence of the Führer, but the man can be... trying. As to this message, it was not from Hitler. It was a note from Himmler."

"Himmler? What would the SS Chief want to convey to you? Is he sending one of his precious divisions?"

"Not exactly," said Rommel. "Yet he mentioned a brigade he has formed, and stated he was holding it in readiness for deployment to Spain."

"Spain? Why there?"

"He believes an invasion is imminent."

"The British?"

"And their new friends, the Americans."

"Invade Spain? That will not be as easy as it might sound. Cadiz is the only place they could look at, and even that is so close to Gibraltar that our *Stukas* would pound them to dust."

"Oh?" Rommel smiled. "General, you are new here, but you will soon learn that our *Stukas* pound very little these days. Unless we can give them air superiority with our fighters, they are useless. That wasn't so difficult last year, but now, the Americans are delivering scores of new aircraft to this theater, and the balance has tipped in favor of the enemy. If the Allies do launch such an attack, you can believe that they will be sure to bring along a few hundred fighters. Things look different on a battlefield when you are under constant attack from above. Goering clucks and boasts a good deal, and he has deigned to deliver his personal armored brigade into my hands, but if he would deliver a few more Bf-109s, I would be happier."

"An invasion of Spain..." Von Thoma had a thoughtful look on his face. "You know I fought with the Condor Legion there—hard fighting. That's where we first got our hands on those Bf-109s, and worked out all the problems until they were the finest fighter in the world. And we had the 88s there as well. I suggested several improvements."

"I am glad for that," said Rommel. "I was putting them to very good use, until the British rolled up a tank that even that gun cannot handle."

“I have heard the rumors. Haven’t you captured one by now?”

Rommel flashed him a dark look. “Almost... In this instance, it was indeed a *Stuka* that got our first kill on one of them. It was disabled on the battlefield, and one of our recon platoons was approaching it when a monster appeared that froze their blood—some kind of massive engineering tank that looked like a demon from hell. It hauled off the enemy tank before we could get our hands on it.”

“But surely there were other kills.”

“No General, only one. This tank is completely invulnerable to any weapon we have—yes, even the new upgraded 88s. In fact, it is the reason I am sitting here instead of Alexandria. From what we have seen, there are not many of them, perhaps only a single brigade, but they move with incredible speed, and have a main gun that can outrange any weapon we have except the 88. Our tanks are hit before we can even see the enemy coming. I’ve tried everything, and all it resulted in was one wrecked panzer division after another. Crüwell was largely responsible. He would rush in, thinking he was up against those old British cruiser tanks. Then these monsters appeared.”

“Only a brigade you say? Where is it now? Surely you have intelligence.”

“We believe it is at Jalo, well south. If we dare make a move east, then it will be right on our flank as before.”

Why not simply block it with infantry, then swarm it with anti-tank teams carrying the new Panzerfausts?”

“A good idea, if I could get enough Panzerfausts to matter. The only vulnerable spot on that tank might be the tracks or wheels, but they move so damn fast that hitting one on the run is very difficult. And these tanks do not fight without infantry support—armored troops in a very fast vehicle with a 20 or 30mm gun, or so we believe. This brigade is a perfect combined arms *kampfgruppe*—infantry, armor, excellent heavy artillery support. I’ve tried everything, and when you get out to the front you will see the only solution I have come to—WWI.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Wire, trenches, mines, saturation kill zones for our artillery, and every 88 we have is dug in deep at hard points along the line. The infantry dug in as well, just like the first war. If we attempt to fight with our new tactics using the panzers, that brigade will trump any maneuver we make, and smash our *Schwerpunkt*. Then the rest of the British armored force comes in and it

becomes a matter of simple attrition. We start a battle with 350 tanks, and end up with 70 or 80 when it is over. I got as far east as Mersa Matruh last year, but no farther. That was when we first encountered this new enemy formation. It came out of the south, and hit us on the flank at Bir el Khamsa. Believe me, that was quite a shock. Looking back on it now, I can see it was the beginning of the end for us here.”

“I see....” Von Thoma seemed concerned now, hearing a vacant, empty tone in Rommel’s voice. “If the British have such tanks, then why do they not attack?”

“Oh, they did attack. That’s what pushed us off our Gazala line. It was the same old story, Montgomery with the infantry pushing up the coast; O’Connor with the armor trying to swing south around our flank. I had all three of my panzer divisions lined up to smash him at his turning point. Then Crüwell ran off halfcocked and started a premature engagement. He got into trouble, called for Bayerlein, and by the time I got there it was a complete mess. I sent in my last division to try and win the day—then these monster tanks appeared again, and that was that. Well, Herr General, rest assured, the British are not done with us yet. That was what Himmler was whispering in that message you delivered—another big offensive. He believes the Allies are planning to open a second front.”

“In Spain?”

“There, and possibly in French North Africa. If it happens, then you can bet that it will put an end to my supplies and replacements. Himmler even suggested that I stand ready to detach units west if the need arises. Perhaps I will join them. The flies here are very bad in the summer. I’ve had my fill of Mersa Brega and El Agheila.”

Rommel’s Afrika Korps had reached the Mersa Brega line months ago, settling in behind well-established positions protected by wire, anti-tank ditches and minefields. The defeat at Gazala and the long retreat across Cyrenaica had taken some toll, but the enemy seemed in no better shape, and the pursuit was not pressed with any fervor. He had come over 250 miles in short order, but his major supply port at Tripoli was still another 450 miles to the west. Something was in the air, as Himmler’s message warned, and he would soon learn that the intelligence was very sound—the Allied landings at Lisbon and Casablanca were already underway as he spoke with von Thoma.

In the months while he waited on defense, eager to receive new tanks,

infantry, vehicles and guns, he felt the buildup was far too slow, and chafed that he could never hope to entertain offensive operations again if OKW did not get serious about reinforcing and rearming his troops. That was a fantasy now, he knew, as there could be no advance while that heavy British armor stood watch. Yet why didn't the enemy attack? That was von Thoma's question, and now Rommel came to believe that they were building up for something very big.

In that he was quite correct, for the British had been completely rebuilding their own forces in the 8th Army over the last several months. O'Connor was waiting for fresh armor, particularly the new infantry tank dubbed the Churchill that had been promised, along with an influx of American Grants and Shermans. He had two Armored divisions to flesh out, the 7th and 1st, and was told he would get two more. This was later paired down to one, the 8th, as the 10th Armored was held in the UK pending the decision on the timing of Operation Torch.

The 4th Indian would return to relieve the 5th Indian, and the two South African Divisions were sent to invest Benghazi. The veteran Australian 9th Infantry was being called home, and Churchill continued to wrangle for at least the 2nd New Zealand Division to remain in theater. O'Connor was told he could use it to secure Benghazi, but after that, the division would embark from that port and head home. This left only the 50th Northumbrian in hand for offensive operations, and so O'Connor waited to receive additional forces from Britain. These eventually came in the 51st Highland Division, and the 44th Home Counties Division, giving him a solid British Infantry Corps to back his three armored divisions.

All these changes took 60 days, and in the meantime, supplies and fuel were trucked up from Alexandria, new forward depots established, airfields occupied in Cyrenaica, and squadrons built up with an influx of American planes. The plan was to build up sufficient strength to allow the 8th Army to resume full scale offensive operations without having to rely on Kinlan's Brigade.

It was late July until hostilities resumed with artillery duels at Agedabia, Rommel's easternmost line of defense. Then, in recent days, the Italians reported the movement of the 4th Indian Division and 2nd New Zealand to reinforce the South Africans around Benghazi. O'Connor wanted to take that port as a secure base and leave no "Tobruk" behind him if he advanced west.

The first two weeks of August were therefore devoted to doing exactly that, while Rommel brooded to the south on his Mersa Brega line, unable or simply unwilling to do anything to aid the Italians at Benghazi.

With that port finally cleared on August 18th, O'Connor brought up the last of his armored reserves, the 8th Division. It was his initial intention to combine all three mobile divisions into one Corps, but he then came to think this formation would be too unwieldy. Seeing that the new 8th Division was heavy on the infantry tanks, he decided to parcel out its heavy brigades to bolster his other divisions. He therefore restructured his army with 1st and 7th Armored in X Corps, the three British divisions and 23rd Armored Brigade in XXX Corps, and then 2 New Zealand, 4th Indian and 1st South African forming XIII Corps. 2nd South African was to be held in reserve at Benghazi. He had many of the same cards as Montgomery had at El Alamein, but he had shuffled them about to produce these three balanced corps formations.

While 8th Army grew stronger week by week, Rommel would soon find his own Afrika Korps picked apart to help build an entire new army to defend in the west, the fallout from that unexpected message from Himmler. As a pinning attack, meant to hold German forces in place after the Torch landings, O'Connor moved his XXX Corps infantry up against the Mersa Brega Line while he maneuvered his X corps Armor into position on the southern flank. It was a natural move, not in any way unexpected by Rommel, as that was the formula for most any attack in this long campaign, fix and press the defense on the coastal road, while enveloping the line by a wide envelopment from the south.

"This O'Connor thinks he is fooling me here," said Rommel to von Thoma. "I know damn well what he is planning."

It was then that a courier came in, saluting, his uniform covered in dust. He had just come in from the makeshift landing strip, arriving on a Storch, and then riding to Rommel's HQ on a motorcycle.

"Message from General Kesselring," he said, handing off the envelope. "There is a map enclosed."

"Thank you, Leutnant, even though I am certain you bring me nothing but more bad news. Go and see the adjutant in the next building. He'll see that you get some refreshment."

"Thank you, sir. The general has requested a response, and I'm to fly off

with it at your earliest convenience.”

“Must be trouble,” said Rommel, opening the envelope and moving to the table where an oil lamp illuminated the room with a dull glow in the grey dawn. He found the map, opening it and spreading it out on the table.

“My, my,” he said under his breath. “Come have a look at this, von Thoma. It seems that message you delivered was right on the money.”

Von Thoma stepped over, hands behind his back, head inclined to look at the map. An eyebrow raised, the surprise evident. “Lisbon? The British violated Portuguese neutrality?”

“Oh, I have no doubt they rang the bell with flowers in hand and asked politely before they kicked in the door. And look here.... The Americans have landed at Casablanca.” Rommel raised an eyeglass, looking at the typed message now, then shook his head, a grim expression on his face. “Just as I feared,” he said, the weight of the moment heavy in his tone. “I am requested to immediately release the whole of 10th Panzer Division, and all of Goering’s troops as well. We sit here for three months rebuilding this army, and with this letter, everything I have struggled to secure goes out the door.”

The first shells of the morning artillery bombardment came rumbling ominously in the distance as he finished. Rommel looked at his watch. “Very punctual, these British. It usually lasts for twenty minutes, only this time, I think we will be lucky if it ends before noon. Welcome to Afrika, von Thoma. We are about to get very busy.”

Chapter 11

There was one more force at O'Connor's disposal, the brigade that had been Rommel's bane ever since he first encountered it at Bir el Khamsa. The British had used "Kinlan's Heavies" as they were now called, to spearhead their flanking attack against Rommel's Gazala line, but this time, with the strengthening of 8th Army, O'Connor suggested they have a go at the enemy without resorting to the use of Kinlan's Brigade.

"You will always be available should things go wrong," he explained. "Yet I think we can hold our own. I'll have six infantry and two strong armor divisions, even after 2nd New Zealand leaves for home. So I propose to keep you in deep reserve. You can move up to the coast after we jump off here. Everything is set to go the first of October."

"My man Reeves is already at Marada on a forward recon operation," said Kinlan.

"Our 7th Armored will relieve him, and I'll return him to you forthwith. We've cleared out Tobruk now that I have Benghazi. So I've had a good amount of fuel moved south of Tobruk and stored there for your brigade. Sorry to hog it all for my boys, but a tanker came in two days ago at Alexandria, and we're finally supplied. Replenish those marvelous tanker trucks you use in your train vehicles. Top off your tanks. I'm afraid I can't offer you more of those charmed rounds your big tanks use, but at least we've got the fuel. Once we push Rommel out of Mersa Brega. You can move your brigade there."

"Good," said Kinlan. "We can use that fuel. We only had enough to refuel one Sabre of my heavies. The rest are thirsty, but I suppose we can make it to the Tobruk area easily enough."

"Right then," said O'Connor. "I'm off to the front. Wish me luck."

"General, make your own luck," said Kinlan with a wink. "And give them hell."

* * *

The Mersa Brega line was perhaps the strongest in Libya from a

standpoint of natural defense. The ground all along the coastal plain was marshy in places, and a morass of salt pans, wadis, and rocky terrain that impeded any real speed in maneuver on attack. The terrain formed a natural bottleneck, and sandy ground known as sebka, dune fields, and rocky escarpments clotted the southern flank as well. O'Connor had positioned 50th Division right on the coast road, with the 51st Highland Division on its left. A long rugged wadi separated the two divisions, running almost parallel to the coast itself, which would make communication between the two units difficult if one had to support the other. Further south, there was a narrow pass between the rocky ground near Matan Al Jafar and an east west escarpment. This was where O'Connor had posted his 1st Armored Division, which was heavy on Infantry tanks.

The Army was flush with armor now, their steel ranks swollen with new deliveries from both the Americans and the UK. In this single division he had nearly 100 of the American Grants, an odd medium tank that looked like a throwback from the first war.

It had a high profile, mounting a 37mm gun in the top turret, and then adding a bigger 75mm gun on the right forward hull in a boxy enclosure. The sloped armor plates were all assembled with rows of thick rivets along the edges, and it was a hot, noisy vehicle in the desert, an ungainly looking mechanical monster. The sponson box for the main gun put it so low that the tank could not assume a hull down position, and its high profile made it a very easy target. Compared to the newer tank designs being produced by the Germans, it was a complete anachronism. In spite of that, it had good 51mm frontal armor, and that 75mm gun packed a decent punch.

While they were not happy with the design, the British had such a need for armor that they spent every last schilling they had in US banks to order 1,250, and then insisted on a few modifications, including better frontal armor. Added to these, they also had another 86 Crusader IIIs, and nearly 100 of the new Churchills, and an equal number of Valentines in that division, commanded by General Briggs.

7th Armored was built more for speed and envelopment, and it had only 50 Grants, with all its remaining tanks being Crusader IIIs and the American M5 Stuarts, fresh from the factories. It was a scouting and reconnaissance tank, fast, agile, and with a turret mounted 37mm main gun. General Harding commanded this division, which found itself approaching the German flank

with impassible dune fields on its right, preventing any contact with 1st Armored, and rugged terrain, ridges and hills to its left. It was simply terrible ground for the attacker, but O'Connor had over 750 tanks, and was counting on sheer mass to overwhelm the enemy once contact was finally made.

O'Connor was supposed to attack soon after the landings at Lisbon and Casablanca, but this difficult terrain caused him considerable delay in getting his divisions positioned "in the wine bottle," as he called it.

"It only gets worse from here on out," he briefed his men. "But once we push through this bottleneck, the ground is much better. My intention is to reach the Marble Arch near Merduma in three or four days. That may be a tough order if the enemy puts up a good defense here, but once we get there, then we're the cork in the bottle, and Rommel has no way to threaten another move into Cyrenaica. In effect, gentlemen, it will remain in British hands permanently, this I can guarantee you. There will be no more falling back on Tobruk. After that, we fight for Tripolitania."

"Sir," an officer of the 50th Division raised his hand. "Who are we up against on that coast road?"

"Well Ben, you've got all the Italians in front of you. One look at you, however, and they'll all turn tail and make a run for Tripoli. As for the 51st Division, your lot has drawn a dance with Rommel's 164th Light."

"What sir?" said Wimberly, commander of the 51st. "Not the Mighty Ninety Lighty?" This got another laugh, as it was the nickname the British had given to the 90th Light, the division these new troops had heard so much about from the veterans in the other divisions. "Tenacious little Bastards," they were told. "Never underestimate them."

"Now Jerry has been in a mad dash to get east of the Americans at Casablanca," said O'Connor. "Kesselring wants nothing to do with Morocco, and now they've pulled back from Oran near the Algerian border—too close to the RAF for their liking I suppose. Everything is Willy Nilly in Spain, and Montgomery is closing in on Gibraltar. Now it's our turn. Let's show Rommel the door here, and move him out of the picture, baggage and all. I want to get to Tripoli before the Americans horn in on the show, They're making a big push for Algiers as it stands. Very good then, off to your divisions!"

To say that things were 'Willy Nilly' in Spain was an understatement. Eisenhower and Clark had quietly put out peace feelers to Franco. In truth,

his membership in the Axis Club had been marginal. He was certainly complicit in allowing the Germans to traverse Spanish territory to get at Gibraltar, and there were many who wanted to see him hanged. Considering British animosity over the loss of Gibraltar, allowing him to stay seated in power was out of the question, but allowing him to retain his head on his shoulders, and accept early retirement in a comfortable villa was much more than he might have received otherwise, and that was the offer.

Eisenhower sent the message, delivered by submarine to the Spanish coast as before, and then into the British spy network that still had men in Spain. Franco looked at his situation, with half his army unreliable, the other half wavering, insurgents in the north, Germans in country and a growing British force that had already fought its way through Seville and was now closing on Gibraltar. News of the destruction in Seville gave him a preview of what would likely happen to other cities in Spain if he allowed the fighting to continue. Yet if he declared his support for the Allies, as Eisenhower urged, what would the Germans do to him?

The answer was that he would take a train to the front lines, ostensibly to buck up the morale of his army near the Portuguese border. In reality, however, he would secretly cross into Portugal, turning himself over to the British Army there, where he would be guaranteed immunity in exchange for making a national broadcast from Lisbon declaring Spain had abandoned the Axis, and exhorting his army to strike the Germans wherever they found them.

This he did, and most of his army was only too willing to join the Allied cause. While the majority simply ceased operations and refused to budge, some went home, while others took up operations against the Germans. Few dared to openly engage German military units, but rail lines, bridges, and roads could make easy, and relatively safe targets. Hube was soon informed that there was considerable unrest in Spain, and demolition attacks from these insurgents were multiplying daily.

The chaos caused by Hitler's decision to disarm the Vichy French and occupy their territory was pronounced. After lengthy discussion with Kluge, Kietel, Jodl and Halder, Hitler threw up his hands in anger and cursed Franco.

"That man has been a headache from the very first. I knew he would be unreliable, and now he's gone running to the British. I've half a mind to send

fifty divisions into Spain and crush every city to bare road dust! Yet, considering the situation on the Volga, we have far bigger fish to fry.”

Of course, Hitler could not have found fifty divisions to carry out his threat, and soon Halder and Jodl convinced him that Spain was nothing more than a massive liability.

“We have only the one rail line from Marseilles to Barcelona open now,” he said. “The Spanish Army opened the frontier they were holding north of Hube’s positions and the British already pushed an armored Brigade into Madrid.”

“Why wasn’t it garrisoned?”

“It was garrisoned, my Führer, but with Spanish troops. All our divisions, and there were only three, were south near Seville and Gibraltar where the main British drive was happening. Given that the rail line back along the southwest coast of Spain is now subject to interdiction, I believe the best solution we have is to pull out of Spain entirely. The Pyrenees Mountains will prove a formidable obstacle to any Allied incursion into Southern France, but if we attempt to hold Spain, it will need far more troops than we have there now—and we both know we do not have those fifty divisions you spoke of.”

“Yet Gibraltar must be held,” said Hitler adamantly. “I designate it Festung Gibraltar, and our garrison there will fight to the last man—delay as long as possible.”

“We can give that order, and our troops there will certainly comply and stand fast, but need I remind you that we took Gibraltar with the threat of gasoline to be poured into the cave openings from above and ignited. I fear the British will not have forgotten that.”

Hitler’s hand was unsteady, yet his jaw was set and firm, his eyes smoldering with anger and resentment. “I will find out where Franco is hiding,” he said darkly, “and then I will send *Obersturmbannführer* Scorzeny in with his commandos and have his throat slit!”

No one said anything more, watching and waiting in the strained silence of OKW headquarters. The Werewolf was still in the throes of his tantrum, and a very dangerous beast when so transformed. Then Hitler composed himself, reached for his eyeglasses with an unsteady hand, and stared at the map.

“All of Morocco gone, and now Kesselring tells me he wishes to establish

his defensive front at Algiers. What of Oran? Too far west, he says. The Allied air units in Spain will make any defense there impractical. Admiral Raeder has already taken it upon himself to move the *Hindenburg* and our other ships to Algiers. Why are my Generals and Admirals so eager to give the enemy ground, give them airfields, ports, and without a single shot being fired? Why?”

No one spoke.

“Very well. Spain is a nuisance. I will order Hube to withdraw his divisions through Barcelona at once, and they are to crush any impediment placed before them by the Spanish Army, swiftly and ruthlessly. For every German soldier harmed in this redeployment, I will have ten Spanish citizens rounded up in the nearest town or village and summarily executed! See that those orders go out to Himmler at once. Make provisions to watch the Spanish Frontier. As for Kesselring, he is to stand where he is at Algiers—not one backward step more! That port, and all of Algeria and Tunisia will be held. Further territorial losses in North Africa are unacceptable—no, they are forbidden. Thank God Rommel still holds the line in Libya. The British have been unable to move him for months! My other generals should take a lesson from him!”

No one present thought it wise to raise the point that Rommel had not been attacked for months either. But that was all about to change. Down on that front, a Lieutenant and Sergeant were studying the no man’s land between their position and the enemy lines. It looked to be the first war all over again, as they could clearly see the wire, and knew that the ground must be heavily mined. Then they heard an awful falling whoosh in the sky, seeing it scored by white contrails. Something came plummeting down on the ground ahead, seeming to explode into a hundred fragments. Then the ground erupted with an equal number of explosions, as if strings of fireworks, or more like sticks of dynamite were popping off one after another.

There was a thunderous roar, until the din and the explosions finally subsided, and the Sergeant looked at his officer, slack jawed. “Lord almighty,” he said. “What in bloody hell was that?” It was a peculiar mix of the divine and profane, but the Lieutenant had no answer for him.

What they had witnessed was a little gift from Kinlan’s MLRS artillery batteries, missiles that distributed hundreds of small bomblets all over the mined ground ahead of the British lines. They were the firecrackers. The

dynamite were the German mines exploding that they had been sent to clear.

The men watched as the smoke and dust slowly cleared, blown off by a dry wind. Then the more familiar crack of the division 25 pounders behind them started, and both men settled in, knowing that would go on for at least thirty minutes. Yet as the heavy rounds fell, beginning in the no man's land and then slowly walking forward towards the Italian positions, the adrenaline in their chests rose with each passing minute. It was time for the 50th Northumbrian to get back in the war, and they knew the whistles would soon be at the Captain's mouths, and the mad rush would soon be on.

Chapter 12

Rommel had been correct. Around noon on the 1st of October, the opening barrage of the battle for Mersa Brega finally lifted, and 1st and 2nd Infantry Battalions of the 50th Northumbrian started through that blighted no man's land. The last rounds had laid down smoke, but a cool breeze off the Gulf of Sirte was slowly blowing it inland. It still gave the infantry time to make that rush across the broken ground, the rifle teams surging forward, Bren teams behind them leaping into craters from the artillery barrage, and others setting up covering MG positions with the Vickers guns. A company of Royal Engineers would move up with each battalion, ready to get at the wire or any mines that might still bar the way.

The first enemy unit they encountered was the Recon Battalion of the Italian Littorio Division. Those troops had drawn the lot to defend the main coastal road, and on their left, beyond the parched salt pans, was the Ariete Armored Division. That unit would be assaulted by the 8th Durham Light Infantry, and the Queen Mary's Rifles, each battalion again supported by Royal Engineers. The Littorio Division had no more than 36 M14/41 tanks in fortified positions astride the road, and when their forward screen of Fiat M13 Tanks was driven back by the Northumbrians infantry, they waited until the retreating screen had reached their lines, then the M14s began firing with their 47mm main guns.

Further south, the 2nd and 5th Seaforth Battalions of the 51st Highland Division were astride the Wadi that ran parallel to the coast. They would run up against fortified positions defended by the 8th Bersaglieri Regiment and the division AT guns. The dogged British infantry kept coming on, and after an hour, the 3rd Bersaglieri Battalion broke and began to withdraw. 3rd Nizza Armored Cars on their flank also withdrew, leaving five AB41s burning behind them, but this was the entire 8th Regiment, and the other two battalions held the line for the Blackshirts. Behind them, lined up abreast in several groups, was the full armored regiment of the newly supplied Ariete Division, 90 M14 Tanks. They were going to wait to see if the Blackshirts could hold and break this initial attack. If not, they were set to make a massive charge.

It was the opening act of Rommel's stand at Mersa Brega. He found his army weakened by the loss of the 10th Panzer Division, and all Goring's troops, but having had some time to resupply, receive new vehicles, and tanks, and most of all fuel, he was in much better shape than he was in Fedorov's history after retreating there from El Alamein. His mood was sullen, but not the black despair that had prompted him to quickly abandon that defensive position in the old history. While he loved the defensive nature of the ground, it was still a very long way from his major supply base at Tripoli, and he knew how quickly a battle like this could eat up supplies, vehicles, and fuel.

If the British have enough in hand here to fight a battle of attrition, then I think I must find better ground, he thought. I won't beat them that way, which is why I put the Italians on the coast road in the shop window, and hold my two Panzer Divisions back. My infantry will hold, but this O'Connor will come round the flank to the south in time. Then I decide whether or not to hit him in a counterattack.

And yet, isn't that exactly what happened at Gazala? If he comes with those heavy tanks again, then all I'll accomplish here is to wreck the last too Panzer Divisions I have, and now, with these landings behind me in Morocco and Spain, something tells me I will get fewer and fewer replacements. I am told von Arnim will take over the operational defense there from Kesselring, so Smiling Al can become the overall Theater Commander. I never liked von Arnim. He's a stiff backed academy General, and with little imagination, and now he has my 10th Panzer Division. I had better discuss things with him soon, and tell Kesselring to get these bothersome Italian Generals off my back.

Cavallero was here again yesterday, complaining as he always does. He doesn't like my placement of the two Italian Armored Divisions up front as I did. The fate of those infantry divisions at Benghazi still stings. The Italians think I am needlessly sacrificing their troops to save my own. He smiled as he thought that, because that was absolutely correct. Without my Afrika Korps, he mused, all those Italian Divisions would be in British prison camps in the desert by now, so Cavallero can moan and groan all he wishes. Yet he has the ear of Mussolini, who in turn will whine to Hitler, and on it goes.

Politically, I can see why the Italians are getting more and more nervous here. The loss of their colonies in Africa could break their morale altogether,

and knock them right out of this war. Look what just happened with the French. In many ways, I thought the French to be more reliable than the Italians, but they folded like a badly set up tent when Hitler ordered our troops to take Oran and Algiers. Frankly, I do not think we have seen the last of them. They must have cut a deal with the Allies. They have not interfered with Von Arnim or Nehring, but they still sit in their colonies, and we haven't the men or time to round up all their troops and put them under guard, let alone their equipment.

Yes, something tells me that many of those troops will join Leclerc or De Gaulle, and we will fight them sooner or later. This whole affair in Africa has been a great waste. I was never adequately supported, particularly by the Luftwaffe. And yet... I had three Panzer Divisions here, regiments from Goring and Grossdeutschland at the high tide mark. I should have boxed the ears of the British with that force and chased them all the way to Alexandria. It was only that damnable Heavy Brigade... And where is it this time around? Is it waiting to pounce the minute I give orders to 15th and 21st Panzers to stop this British attack?

* * *

Late in the day, the British Northumbrian Division stormed into Mersa Brega, but the Italians had a bone to pick with them after Benghazi, and Littorio Division decided to commit everything it had in a major counterattack. Their tanks rattled into the town again, with hot fighting from one broken building to the next. This forced back the infantry of the British 2nd Battalion, but the heavy infantry tanks if the 1st Tank Brigade were right behind them and quickly moved up to challenge the Italian armor.

There were 33 of the American Sherman tanks, a new model that had just been delivered a few weeks ago, much superior to the older Grants. They also brought up the Matilda Dozer tanks of the Royal engineers, which advanced on the Italian hard points outside the town, the enemy machinegun fire snapping off the big metal shovels up front, and the British infantry huddled behind this steel vanguard, their rifles fixed with bayonets. Behind them they suddenly heard the thunder of the Division artillery again. Fire from 48 guns was directed over the front at the road beyond the town, where it pounded columns of Italian vehicles. Meanwhile, 6th and 7th Green Howards and the

6th Yorkshire Infantry formed up to the rear of those guns, waiting to push forward when needed.

On the long wadi well south of the town, the Ariete Division was in a similar fight to the death with the 51st Highland Division. The northernmost segment of the British line was right on the wadi, the seam between the Italians and the German 164th Light Division to the south, which was well dug in to stony ground near Matan al Jafr. General Wemberly decided to make that seam his main effort, sending one reinforced regiment to lap up against the lines of the 164th in a masking attack simply intended to keep them in their positions. Then he committed the muscle of his other two regiments to fall upon the Ariete Division, which had already sent up lines of its medium tanks to hold the line.

The British armored cars of the 8th Hussars, particularly the heavy hitting AEC III with a QF 6 Pounder main gun, and armor up to 65mm thick, outclassed the Italian M14/41 tanks, which had only 30mm frontal armor and a 47mm main gun. The armored cars were also faster and more agile on the field, and better coordinated, as each had a radio, a liability the Italians had yet to correct in their armored formations. Yet coordination in this terrain simply meant filing your armored cars up the narrow passways, and along the single coast road, and it would become a grueling battle of attrition. It would take those two British divisions on the coast all of three days to push through Mersa Brega, clearing the mines, sending in the infantry, moving up the tanks of 1st Brigade in support.

No one would say the Italians did not acquit themselves well. Ariete and Littorio would fight tenaciously to hold that narrow coastal defile, while Rommel sat with his two Panzer Divisions in reserve, trying to decide whether to engage O'Connor's armor as it attempted to wheel around his main defense over that horrid ground.

It would not be the tenacity of the front line troops that decided this battle, but news that came with the arrival of Kesselring that same morning. It was both good and bad. Hitler had issued another of his stand fast orders. Kesselring was not to yield Algiers, and Rommel was not to withdraw from his Mersa Brega line.

The good news was that Rommel was going to receive a nice new gift for his upcoming birthday, his old division from those halcyon days in France, the 7th Panzers.

“We know it was a lot to ask of you when we called for 10th Panzer and all Goring’s troops,” said Kesselring. “So you will get this division to compensate you. Perhaps it will take some of the sting out of that order from the Fuhrer.”

“The 7th Panzers?” Rommel was delighted, his mood elevated, eyes alight. This was the other phantom of those early days of the blitzkrieg, also called the “Ghost Division” when Rommel had it.

“The service troops are already busy repainting the camo schemes on the tanks with desert colors,” said Kesselring with a smile. And I met that aide you favor at the airfield when I landed, Lieutenant Berndt. He has just returned from Germany with a briefcase full of letters from your wife Lucy, and a box of those cookies you always talk about. Save a few for me!”

“This is excellent news!” said Rommel. “Yet you come with both fire and ice here, Kesselring.” Rommel paused, his mind working furiously, his thoughts congealing to a sudden new point of certainty. Now he knew what he had to do.

“I was resigned to hold this position when I lost those troops earlier,” he began. “It is the only ground suitable for good defense when badly outnumbered. But don’t you see? Now that I will get another Panzer Division, I can fight again. I can maneuver. That damnable heavy brigade the British have been using as a hammer is not here. The Luftwaffe reports it has moved towards Tobruk. Without that to check my panzers, I can maneuver—fight the second war instead of the first, and adopt a much more mobile defense—or better yet, I can go on the offense! But not here, Kesselring. Not here. The terrain is suitable only for static defense. All I can do here is fight a battle of attrition, and you know that we are outnumbered. O’Connor has eight divisions.”

“Then what are you proposing?”

“That should be obvious—move west! Listen Kesselring, it is all of 400 kilometers to the Buerat Line where I have stockpiled fuel.”

“Why there? Why did you not bring it forward to El Agheila?”

“You know damn well why I left it there. Because I expected to find myself retreating to that place in due course. Now, however, the situation here has changed dramatically. I would have used 30% of that fuel just to move it here, but there was no way I had any need for it, except to fuel my retreat. I cannot attack here, not on this ground. On the other hand, I have

enough fuel now to get where I need to go—not forward, back into that wasteland of Cyrenaica, but back to Buerat. The plan now is to give all that useless ground between here and Buerat to O'Connor. Let *him* be the one who must haul his fuel forward from Benghazi.”

“You want to withdraw? Again? In spite of the fact that you are promised this new division? In spite of the Führer’s order?”

“Of course! The Führer’s order aside for the moment, the reinforcement is the precise reason why withdrawal is called for now. I assume 7th Panzer Division will land in Tripoli. Perfect! Then I fall back to Buerat—fall back on strength as 7th Panzer comes down from Tripoli to meet me. O'Connor will think he’s won another battle, and he will huff and puff after me like a bad desert storm. I’ll throw him a few bones as I leave, and when I get to Buerat, 300 tons of gasoline will be waiting for me to top off my tanks. Not only that. A move to that line brings me 60% closer to my main supply source at Tripoli, while O'Connor burns fuel chasing me, and extends his supply lines by the same amount.”

Now Kesselring saw what Rommel was saying. The genius of his mind could see the opportunity he had with such a move. His enemy would be tired, flushed with his perceived victory, but advancing farther and farther from Benghazi. “So there you will be at Buerat,” he said, “with three Panzer Divisions and the fuel to use them.”

“Precisely! I will counterattack—but surely not here. They have enough infantry to plug that defile at Mersa Brega indefinitely, and I would simply be advancing away from my supply source again, even if I could get around that flank. What I need now is to lure O'Connor into Tripolitania. That’s where he wants to go, yes? So I’ll open the door and invite him in, but not to dinner. When he gets to Buerat and thinks to sit down at my table, he will get some very bad news.”

“What about that heavy brigade?”

“What about it? It is at Tobruk—too far away to intervene. Don’t you see? The ground means *nothing*. Beating the British 8th Army in the field means everything. Once I do that, I can take all this useless sand back again if I want, and make more pictures for the news reels. But that isn’t how we win here, not by holding at Mersa Brega and watching the British slowly wear down this army. No. We win by out-thinking the British, and out maneuvering them. I can do that at Buerat, but not here. You must persuade

Hitler to allow me to withdraw.”

“You know that will not be easy,” said Kesselring. “He is still steaming over the fact that I gave up Morocco.”

“Of course he is, but you knew damn well that you could not hold there, or in the Canary Islands, with what little you had. You would have lost both those air mobile divisions, as well as Morocco. Every minute counted, and you knew what you had to do. You simply had to fall back on Algeria, and so now you can see the wisdom in what I now propose.”

“I do see it, but I do not think I am the man to persuade Hitler in this.”

“Then I will go myself! I’ll leave tonight.”

“What? In the middle of a battle?”

“General, my troops will know what to do when I order the withdrawal. In fact, that is what I am inclined to do—order it this moment, and present Hitler with a *Fate Accompli*. Then I will go to OKW and tell him why it had to be done. He will get angry, fail to understand, but if I promise him a new offensive, perhaps he will settle down again. This is strategic withdrawal, not retreat. I will find a way to get through to him.”

Kesselring shrugged. Every military bone in his body told him Rommel was correct here. This is what had to be done, just as it had been necessary for him to withdraw from Morocco. But somewhere, a line had to be held, and a battle had to be won. Could Rommel deliver on his promises? Nine months ago he was crowing about going to Alexandria. He thought, and thought again. Then smiled.

“General Rommel,” he said slipping the Führer’s order into his coat pocket. “My plane was delayed. I was never here, and you never saw the order I have just put into my pocket. But by God, Rommel. If you do this, you simply must beat O’Connor. Fail again, and things will go very bad here.”

Part V

Fish in a Barrel

*“Alive without breath,
As cold as death;
Never thirsty, ever drinking,
All in mail never clinking.”*

—J.R.R. Tolkien: *The Hobbit*

Chapter 13

It was a strange echo of the real history, for in the waning days of September, 1942, Rommel would return to Germany to meet with Hitler after the Battle of Alma Halfa Ridge at El Alamein. There he had forced his way through unexpected enemy mine fields in his attempt to swing around Montgomery's defenses, only to abandon his plan for a wide envelopment around the ridge that ran west to east. Instead he had turned early, right for the ridge itself, and found that Monty had sprung a deadly trap on him. AT guns, mortars, artillery and enemy bombs rained down on his tanks and vehicles when they got stalled in soft sand. He lost his nerve and ordered a withdrawal, back through the hard won corridors through the minefields.

Kesselring remarked that the old Rommel would have never done such a thing, and as he left Rommel in the alternate history we are exploring, a warning voice told him that Rommel seemed all too ready to give the British this gateway into Tripolitania. The Italians would scream in protest, seeing another big bite taken out of their last colonial holding in Africa. Mussolini would go to Hitler and demand that Rommel stop his withdrawal and stand his ground. Neither man would grasp the concept of strategic withdrawal, consolidation, the laws of overstretch that would soon constrain the British advance.

In the old history, Rommel had been warmly greeted by Hitler, and given his Field Marshal's baton. The cameras had been running, news reels proclaiming his achievements, taking the Afrika Korps right to the doorstep of Egypt. On this day in the old history, the cameras would film his hand on the doorknob of the international press room where Goebbels had arranged a press conference. He had used the moment to proclaim that: "we have the door to all Egypt in our hands."

Then he had gone to tell Hitler he would not give back an inch of the hard won ground he had claimed, now, he would go to tell him he wanted to hand the British half of Tripolitania, and not because he lacked adequate reinforcements, fuel, weapons and supplies, but instead because he had those things in abundance, and now he simply wanted to look for a bigger hunting ground.

Hitler's reaction at OKW should have been predictable. The Führer had been fussing over the maps again, impatient with the progress being made over the Don in Russia. But something would happen to change his mood, and at precisely the right time.

* * *

Far to the west, the American Army had felt its way east in the wake of Kesselring's slow fighting withdrawal to Algiers. Hitler was noticeably upset with the loss of Morocco, which uncovered the southern approach to Gibraltar when Tangier fell. On September 25th. That mad dash by Patton to take Tangier and its small harbor figured strongly in the calculus that led OKW to suggest Spain was now a liability. The Allied plan was now to quickly secure the Rock in the north, while pursuing the Germans east into Algeria in the south.

"They won't even try to hold Oran if they're smart," said Eisenhower.

"The *Hindenburg* group left that port two days ago," said Clark. They know it will be under our air power soon enough, but Algiers is another matter."

Oran was about 275 air miles from Gibraltar, 225 from Malaga on the coast further east, only 125 from Almeria, and 135 from Cartagena. The British were going to get their Spitfires and Hurricanes, and anything else that could pose a threat, to airfields in and around those cities in order to interdict that port. Algiers, however, was over 260 miles from Valencia, and 230 from Cartagena, and those would be the nearest airfields the Allies could use in Spain. It was then over 475 miles to fields at either Gibraltar or Fez, so the Allies would have to count on getting airfields running at Oran, still some 215 miles east of Algiers.

"Trying to support this whole operation from Oran will be tough," said Clark. "The British still haven't taken Gibraltar, and we have yet to force the straits. Old methodical Montgomery will probably take weeks sorting out that mess in Spain, even if the Germans are withdrawing through Valencia to France. So in the short run, we could lose air superiority if we go for Algiers too soon."

"You try reining Patton in now," said Ike. "He's got the bit between his teeth—says he can throw the 34th Infantry at Algiers and then swing around

the high country and threaten to cut the city off.”

“Right,” said Clark. “Hold ‘em by the nose and kick ‘em in the ass. I’ve heard that speech.”

“He did a good job in Morocco.”

“The Germans were giving us Morocco.” Clark would give credit where it was due, but he thought they had been given a pass by the Germans after the Casablanca landings. “If you want my opinion, they just wanted those troops they had out there in the Canaries. Those are their only air mobile divisions, and they were smart to yank them out of there. The moment we landed, those islands were cut off and heavy fruit for the picking. Have the British moved back in?”

“Not yet. We’ve tied up most of the available shipping, but their 110 Force on Tenerife is planning an operation against Gran Canaria.”

Clark nodded. “Say Ike, did we ever find that missing page from the War Diary Harry Butcher was keeping?”

“Not a trace,” said Eisenhower, “though I don’t suppose it matters much now. It might have had something to do with the fact the Germans had all those mechanized forces ready to move into Spain at the drop of a hat.”

“What was this damn SS unit Montgomery bumped up against there?”

“Some Franco/German outfit. Looks like the SS rounded up all the bad ass Vichy boys and recruited them. Hell, we didn’t even know the unit existed. It even got by the boys at ULTRA. But that doesn’t matter now either. The Germans have pulled it back into France. Intel thinks it was a widely dispersed internal security unit, and they pulled it together on a moment’s notice. But it sure sounds like they had a heads up on what we were planning. We’ve got to tighten down security even more now.”

“Tit for tat,” said Clarke. “If Rommel knew we were reading all his gripes to OKW, he’d have a fit. This ULTRA outfit is top notch. They can tell us what Kesselring had for breakfast this morning.”

“He gets a full breakfast?” Ike smiled. “We must be doing something wrong. All I ever get is a boiled egg and something they’re calling a biscuit. The coffee here is nothing more than sludge.”

“General,” said Clark. “I’m told they make some fine coffee in Africa. All the more reason for us to finish the job down there. Then we can go after that fine Italian and French wine.”

General Situation – Oct 1, 1942

With the withdrawal order given, the Allies finally forced their way south to the doorstep of Gibraltar. Hube had pulled out two days earlier, and his troops were now mostly on the roads and rail lines heading east and then north to Valencia and Barcelona. There were several incidents of rail sabotage, roadblocks and sniping at the Germans, but when Himmler ordered his SS Charlemagne troops to make an example of one town, the resistance waned. Soon his fanatical Frenchmen were back in their own country, dispersing again to aid in controlling the local population during what was now the final “Occupation” of what was once Vichy France.

It would take ten days before Hube had all his troops out of Spain, then the 337th and 334th Infantry took up new posts along the Spanish border, their regiments dispatched to all the key potential crossing points. 15th Infantry moved to Toulon to relieve the German Panzer Divisions there, and Hube took his 16th Division to Marseilles. The Germans then began collecting shipping from all the French ports on the Mediterranean, and additional ships from Italy. They had every intention of making a fight for North Africa, and there were now three Panzer Divisions in Southern France, one of them newly equipped after returning from the Russian Front.

It was therefore decided that von Arnim would take Command of the newly formed 5th Panzer Army, keeping the 10th Panzer Division and Goering’s troops sent by Rommel. The 6th Panzer would remain in France until the security situation was deemed adequate. There it would also continue its refit, and its disposition would be determined by the facts on the ground in North Africa. Rommel was getting the 7th Panzer, with all new equipment.

Patton had moved aggressively to flank the German defense of Algiers, but he was about to run into a much tougher defense than he had encountered in Morocco. There the Germans had delayed his effort south of Casablanca with the timely arrival of the 327th Infantry Division from Fez. After that, Student’s 1st Flieger Division had fought a delaying action, eventually yielding the ground when Kesselring opted to fall back on Algeria. So the Americans were about to be tested as never before as they closed in on Algiers.

The 34th Division had been the last to land, and they had moved up to

Tangier, occupying that city and then taking Ceuta opposite Gibraltar itself. German demolitions in the harbors and shore battery installations had been very thorough, but a battalion of artillery was left at Ceuta as the 34th then moved along the coast road. The remainder of the Allied force then followed Kesselring's retreat from Fez, though they had to do so by truck. When the Germans left, it would be the last train ride from Fez east for some time. They dedicated a special team to tear up the tracks behind them.

So it would be early October before Patton was approaching Algiers, and he ordered 34th Infantry to demonstrate against the town on the open ground to the southwest. Then he moved a strong force, all of 9th Infantry and 2nd Armored, below the rugged Tellien Atlas Mountains, intending to have them take the town of M'sila and then push north to cut the rail line east to Constantine. His intention was to try and compel the Germans to yield Algiers by threatening to envelop and isolate it.

Yet now Kesselring was strongly reinforced, appointing von Arnim as his field commander. He could clearly see what the Americans were attempting to do, and with the veteran 10th Panzer Division in hand, he sent them by rail to a point north of M'sila and then moved south on the narrow mountain roads south to confront the Americans. It was to be the first meeting engagement of German and American armored forces in the war.

Further north, the British had moved their 3rd Infantry Division to Cartagena, where it was refitting and preparing for a planned embarkation to North Africa. The two Brigades of 78th Division would also embark from smaller ports. Air squadrons were moving quickly into bases on the east coast of Spain, mostly at Almería and Cartagena, with plans to move on Valencia as soon as it was clear of German presence. Gibraltar was under siege, with a stubborn German garrison holding out, the airfield and harbor approaches heavily mined, and tough troops in the tunnels and warrens of the Rock.

The only question was whether the Germans would contest the Western Med approached to Algiers. So in many ways, before the battle for Algiers could be fully engaged and settled on land, it was an argument between the ships and planes that would weigh heavily in the outcome. That battle was shaping up on the night of October 2nd, when Admiral Tovey gave the order to the newly reconstituted Force H to pass through the Straits of Gibraltar, pounding the German shore batteries on the Rock as they did so, and then move aggressively into the Western Med, with their objective being to cover

the port of Oran and threaten a further eastern movement towards Algiers.

This move would effectively call Admiral Raeder's bluff. He would either have to commit his combined battlegroup, or cede the sea-lanes to the British. He decided to fight.

Chapter 14

Captain Gordon MacRae was on the bridge when the contact was first made. *Argos Fire* was out on point, its radars and towed sonar array alert for any sign of the enemy. A Sunderland out of Cartagena had been looking over the waters some 150 miles east of his position, spotting what looked to be a large surface warship a little after mid-day on the 3rd day of October, 1942. Low on fuel, the seaplane had to turn for home, but MacRae knew he had a big fish on the line, and notified Admiral Tovey.

Now in overall command of the joint US-British Naval Forces, Tovey was making a bold bid to seize control of the waters between Oran and Algiers. The former port was needed as the primary supply conduit supporting Patton's move east towards Algiers, and it was also slated to receive British Divisions that Montgomery was designating for transfer to North Africa from Spain. Hube had withdrawn through Valencia and Barcelona, and was now entering France by rail with the three divisions he had under his command. Spain was a chaotic place, with Franco out of country in Lisbon, no real power center, and the Spanish Army melting away into the countryside for fear of Allied reprisals.

Gibraltar had been sealed off, but not taken, and the Straits had been cleared of mines, the shore batteries on the Rock pounded by the Allied Air force. The German garrison was a lost battalion that was now designated "Festung Gibraltar" By Hitler. They were a fanatical bunch, all SS men, and determined to make the Rock their final resting place, preferring death to surrender. For that reason, after a battalion of the Black Watch tested the defense and found it very potent, Churchill gave an order that no major assault was to be made. The fear was that the Germans would use heavy explosives to collapse the tunnels and caves, ruining years of engineering work. The truth was, the SS did not have such munitions at hand, and what little they did have was used in the town and harbor area to demolish the quays, sub pens, and other dockyard facilities.

"Let them stew," said Churchill. "We'll send them a message about gasoline and fire soon enough, and repay the courtesy they extended to our troops by giving them one last chance to surrender before they go up in

smoke.”

Another hidden truth to the delay was the mystery that lay beneath Saint Michael’s Cave. It was not known whether or not the Germans had discovered anything there, and Churchill did not want an attack driving the enemy troops deeper and deeper into the dark recesses of those tunnels and caves. Instead, a plan was being devised for a raid by commandos. The British had detailed maps of every passage, gate, door, stair, ladder and tunnel under the Rock. They also knew of special hidden entrances that the Germans may not have discovered. It was thought that if a team of elite soldiers could penetrate the fortress, something might be found and guarded before the Germans ever had the chance to do the same. In this effort, Elena Fairchild was only too happy to offer the services of the highly trained group of Marines she had aboard *Argos Fire*—the Argonauts.

When she learned of the planned raid, she also requested a private meeting with Tovey to relate some information she had shared with only one other man, Captain MacRae. It concerned the fate of a British Sergeant, discovered in the Port of Ceuta, and not in the time he was born to.... The Raid, as it was now being called, was scheduled for October 15th, and so now the ship and crew had other business, the eyes and ears of Tovey’s fleet, well out in the vanguard.

The U-boat threat was the first worrisome problem. Nothing had been found as *Argos Fire* passed about 70 nautical miles north of Oran. All was quiet, but that was because the German U-Boat Kapitan Gerhard Feller on U-653 was also quiet. He had been laying low, still and unmoving, waiting for the vanguard of the British force to pass. Once *Argos Fire* was well to the east, he risked coming to periscope depth to have a look around.

MacRae’s crew had picked up some movement in the sound field, but there were a lot of ships churning up the sea. He nonetheless posted an indefinite undersea contact warning, but it would arrive too late for a doughty British Knight. *Sir Galahad* was 2nd in a line of three ships, with *Sir Lancelot* in the van and *Sir Percival* following. Tovey had grouped these three fast battlecruisers together as his forward scouting force, and their combined thirty 305mm main guns were thought capable of taking on all comers.

They were operating about ten nautical miles behind the *Argos Fire*, yet the one threat they were ill suited to defend against was a stealthy U-Boat.

Feller saw them late in the day, their silhouettes dark on the sea ahead, and he was very close. He put one torpedo in the water to see if he could take the lead ship from behind, but then decided the number two target was better. He could fire from just under 5 miles, a fairly long shot, but within the range of his G7 Torpedoes.

And that is what he did. Three went out. One hit, and *Sir Galahad* was knocked from the saddle before it had a chance to join the fight. It was not a fatal hit. The fires it caused would put two 76mm guns out of action, temporarily sooting over the Type 275 Radar antenna, and also putting light damage on one of the 152mm secondary batteries. There was flooding, and resulting loss of speed, and so the ship was ordered to make for the Spanish coast, the nearest Allied occupied port being Almeria.

The British had a pair of fast destroyers off the port side of *Argos Fire*, and they moved out ahead to feel their way towards the contact reported by that Sunderland. At a little after 01:00, Executive Officer on *Argos Fire*, Commander Dean, took a radar report that confirmed the contact at about 23 nautical miles, due east. Word was passed forward to the British destroyers, *Beagle* and *Brilliant*, but there was grave trouble ahead. By the time they got the warning, their own lookouts were sounding the alarm, "Ship ahead!"

The crack of small naval guns soon followed, and the sea began to plume up with small water splashes. Hot fire erupted on the forward deck of *Beagle*, and then a second hit amidships struck her 21-inch torpedo tubes. The ship wallowed as it turned, still receiving very accurate fire from small secondary guns. Then that fire shifted to *Brilliant*, and Lieutenant Commander Arthus Poe knew he was in trouble. Whatever was out there, it was more than a match for his four 4.7-inch deck guns, and he immediately turned, sending off a warning message: "Contact with large enemy ship, visibility limited. Under fire."

Neither destroyer would survive, both going down before 01:30 that dark morning. The signal they got off would then awaken Captain Thomas 'Sandy' Sanford on board *Sir Lancelot*. He was already resting uneasily in his room off the main bridge where he kept a small cot for cat naps. The incident earlier that had sent *Sir Galahad* off to the Spanish coast annoyed him—now this.

"Somebody picking a fight out there? Quite the bully. Helm, bring us about. Fifteen points to port please. I think we'll see if they want to pick on

someone their own size, eh Mister Laurence?”

Executive officer Laurence was quite stoic, and usually reserved, but this time he asked a question that was veiled with just the hint of a warning. “A night engagement sir? Have we any idea what we might be up against? There was no detail in that message.”

“If it’s shooting at our destroyers, that will be enough reason to intervene,” said Sanford. “Day or night.”

“Very good sir,” said Laurence. “Shall I signal *Sir Percival* to follow? Misery loves company.”

Sanford thought for a moment. “No, I think we’ll have a look about on our own. *Sir Percival* is to carry on to the rendezvous point. We’ll rejoin later.”

Laurence didn’t like this at all, a night action against an unknown contact that had just dispatched a pair of destroyers, and the Captain splitting his force, heedless of the risks involved in what he was now ordering. Sanford could perceive his discomfiture, and spoke up.

“Reservations, Mister Laurence?”

“Well sir, it’s just that I’d feel a good bit better if we had *Sir Percival* behind us. This is obviously a capital ship.”

“And we are standing on the same,” said Sanford. “Percy has other business. We’ll verify this contact, make our challenge, and give the fleet a better look at what’s out there.”

The Captain would get a very good look indeed. Twenty minutes later the first rounds came in off his port bow, small caliber, and when one struck a 76mm AA gun, he was quite perturbed. “Mister Kingston!” he shouted. “No one pushes my shoulder with such impudence. Answer that, and use the main battery.”

Kingston answered with the forward A-Turret, a pair of 303mm guns booming out, the fire and noise shaking the night. They waited, the watchmen barely able to make out signs of the distant shell fall, as the range was over 17,000 yards. Then they clearly saw the horizon light up with orange fire. Was it a hit? It would be rare indeed if that were the case on the first probing salvo. Sanford had been lucky in his engagements thus far, but not that fortunate. Instead his watchmen had seen the enemy ship replying, and that was evident when two heavy rounds came thundering in, quite close, and the sea erupted with white, moonlit water.

The size of the water splashes revealed a great deal, two large caliber rounds, easily 14-inch guns or bigger to Sanford's eye. "A tap on the shoulder, and now a swing at my chin!" he exclaimed. "That's no cruiser—not with shellfall that big. Mister Laurence?"

"If it was a single salvo, sir, then it wasn't a French ship. Their main guns set up four abreast. And it wasn't an Italian ship, at least not a newer one. They set up three guns per turret."

"Well then," said Sanford. "That will narrow it down to the Germans. We know they have ships operating here. Could this be that raider we were chasing in the Atlantic?"

"Possibly," said Laurence. "*Kaiser Wilhelm* would throw rounds that big. The only other ship would be the *Hindenburg*. The *Bismarck* is still laid up at Toulon."

Sanford chewed on that a while, his eyes shifting about before he spoke. "The *Hindenburg*..." The name had the ring of dread about it, and the guns were firing again. "I can see why you proposed we keep *Sir Percival* at our backside," he said. "Notify Admiral Tovey. Tell him we're in an argument here with a large capital ship, twin gun turrets, heavy rounds, possibly *Hindenburg*."

He was, indeed, in an argument he should have never started, and ten minutes later, the fires on the starboard quarter convinced him of that. He had taken a direct hit from a 15-inch round, and lost a pair of flack guns to that one. At the same time, he was certain he had scored two hits, possibly three, but the enemy seemed completely unphased. When a message returned at 01:40, he had his marching orders. He was to come about on a heading of 260 and retire at once. Tovey did not want one of his new fast heavy cruisers in a fight with a German battleship. So *Sir Lancelot* reluctantly turned as ordered, and Mister Laurence was quite relieved.

That course would move the ship towards Tovey with his battleship squadron, where there was enough throw weight to settle any argument, with no quarter given, and none to be asked.

The assumptions made by Captain Sanford and his XO were spot on. The ship that had been pounding the British was indeed the *Hindenburg*. It was planning to rendezvous with three other battleships in the Central Med, but the British had come much faster than Kapitan Adler suspected. *Fredric de Gross* was still well south, coming up from Algiers after being seized in that

daring raid by the Brandenburg Commandos. It now had a Chief Gunnery Officer from his own ship aboard, and half the crew of *Bismarck* had joined with other German naval personnel sent over with the reinforcements arriving at Tunis. They were now attempting to man that unfamiliar ship, and Adler had his doubts about its ability to measure up to the task at hand.

Behind him, the Italians had also sent three cruisers and two battleships, the *Roma* and *Impero*. How many ships did the Allies sortie with this time? They had three British battleships covering the Lisbon operation, and three more American heavy ships at Casablanca. They also had cruisers and destroyers in good numbers.

We will need the advantage of our land based air power, he thought. *Prinz Heinrich* has good pilots, but the British never undertake an operation like this without carriers. They will send at least two, and the Americans have more. So I must take this fight into friendly waters. I must either go south to Algiers, or withdraw towards Sicily or Sardinia. If I do the latter, the enemy might decline to engage there, but they most certainly want Algiers. That is where the fighting is now. So south it is, and I must signal all units to rendezvous with *Fredric de Gross* off Algiers.

I gave them a little taste of what they might have in store. Those two British Destroyer Captains are not going to enjoy their time in the sea. What was that ship we just drove off? The shell fall looked big, and the salvo patterns were very much like a *King George V* class battleship. They fired a two round spotting salvo, then threw a second salvo of six rounds at me, and by god, they got a hit or two in that little scrap. Yet it was nothing more than a scratch on my chin. This is a sturdy ship, good in any fight where I choose to stand. But for the moment, I will use the night, and speed. I must get down south and meet up with the Italians. Then we get a battle that might decide the fate of naval operations in the Mediterranean for some time to come.

So *Hindenburg* turned and ran southeast, buying time, and intending to rally much closer to Algiers with the Italians and *Fredric de Gross*. By dawn the following morning, October 4th, the action would be well underway.

Chapter 15

Vice Admiral Hellmuth Heye Had been languishing on the coast of Rumania, ostensibly the Commander of all German naval forces in the Black Sea, which amounted to very little. Yet after the seizure of the French Fleet, Raeder was looking everywhere for competent officers and trained crews to man as many ships as he could. He had always liked Heye, who had commanded the heavy cruiser *Hipper* in the Norwegian Campaign, and sunk the destroyer *Glowworm* there. So Heye got the call, and to a posting he never imagined. They were giving him the captured French flagship *Normandie*, now flying the German naval ensign under the new name *Fredric de Gross*.

He had very little time to familiarize himself with the ship, which now had half the crew from the *Bismarck* aboard, and many men sent over from the *Hindenburg*. But Heye was a quick study, and he soon realized that if the crew could figure out the equipment, all he had to do was command, sail the ship as he might any other, and that he could do easily enough.

Now he was out as the southern wing of the naval screen covering Algiers. *Hindenburg* was calling the tune, having made contact with the enemy that night, pounding a pair of destroyers and dueling briefly with a ship Adler called a battlecruiser before breaking off east to rendezvous with the Italian battleships. Heye was now heading 080 to make that same appointment, and off his port side were three captured French Destroyers, all running with reduced crews, a mix of Germans, Italians, and even a few Frenchmen that had sworn continued allegiance to the Axis.

The Vice Admiral thought about the situation as he looked out over that long beautiful bow of the ship. There sat those two quad turrets, each really a pair of twin turrets sharing the same armored castle. He had eight 15-inch guns up front, and four more aft, more sheer throw weight than any other ship in the world. He glanced at the ship's chronometer, noting the time at a little after four in the morning. In a few hours the sun would be up, and he did not like the idea that all the Axis fleet would be silhouetted. The British, cagey at sea as always, had chosen the time for the main engagement to occur at dawn, when they would sit out west and see the enemy ships starkly

silhouetted by that rising sun. There we will be, battleships on either side, like fish in this barrel we call the Mediterranean Sea. Only the fish will be shooting at each other this time.

* * *

Well behind the main battle force, a little pre-dawn drama played itself out when the Italian Submarine *Emo* emerged inside the patrol station of the British carrier *Formidable*. She had been cruising with destroyers *Sikh* and *Tartar*, but when an undersea contact was reported, additional help was summoned, and DDs *Gurkha*, *Matchless* and *Lightning* came on the scene from the north.

After spending months as a training boat at the Italian Submarine school near Pula, *Emo* had been reassigned to wartime patrols when the Allied landings occurred. Now she was in for a little real time training by the Royal Navy, and these experienced destroyer Captains would be very hard schoolmasters. Destroyer *Gurkha*, under Lieutenant Commander Charles Lentaigne, was the first to pick up the scent. His ship was living an extended life, having avoided being sunk off Egypt by U-133. Now *Emo* was trying to get at this Zombie ship, but her first two torpedoes missed, running too deep, right beneath the British destroyer.

Gurkha had been an unlucky name, the third British destroyer to be so designated, with the first two *Tribal* class ships sunk earlier in the war. This one was an L-Class ship, again renamed *Gurkha*, and she was quick to lay down her depth charges, her commander elated when he saw obvious signs of damage come to the surface after his run. Just to be sure, he came round for another run, pressing his luck when he shouldn't have. This resulted in a malfunctioning depth charge, which exploded much too soon and too shallow, putting damage on his own ship! Now he was forced to break off and head for a friendly port in Spain, but he had the consolation of knowing he had taught *Emo* a lesson when he was informed that submarine had been confirmed as sunk.

Meanwhile, off to the east, Admiral Tovey had given the order for his battle group to slow to 15 knots. He was waiting for the slower American battleships, trailing his formation by 16 nautical miles, and he was also waiting for the sun, which would not rise until 7:45 that morning. He

reasoned that in another two hours, his force would be roughly 50 nautical miles due north of Algiers, and very likely in contact with the enemy just before dawn.

But Adler had other ideas, and after effecting his rendezvous with the Italians, he lined up like a steel squall line and headed west at high speed, intending to engage well before sunrise to neutralize the British advantage.

It was not long before *Argos Fire* reported a group of four contacts due east of Tovey's position, no more than 18 nautical miles out. That was over 36,000 yards, and well beyond engagement range, but that would close very quickly as the two sides approached one another.

"Send word to HMS *Formidable*," said Tovey. "We might want to give those new Barracudas a little night action."

The two sides were now lining up against one another like two formations of heavy cavalry. On the Axis side, *Hindenburg* and *Fredric de Gross* were side by side, separated by a little over two miles. *Roma* and *Impero* were two to three miles further south. Tovey allowed the range to close, receiving regular reports from his own Type 274 radar now. At 05:00 he was about 12 nautical miles, or some 24,000 yards northeast of *Hindenburg*, still holding his fire at that range considering the darkness, but the tension was mounting as both sides came on.

"Mister Connors," said Tovey. "You may begin finding the range. Target that closest ship."

"Aye sir," said Connors. "Type 274 is sending us good numbers. I have the range and bearing dialed in. Rangekeepers should have it in a second or two. The boom of those 16-inch guns was heard soon after. *Hindenburg* had fired at almost the exact same time, and the big shells passed one another in flight, steel demons of the night, off on their missions of mayhem. The British opening salvo would miss by 500 yards, but Bruno turret on the *Hindenburg* put its rounds very close, one a little over 100 feet off the starboard bow of the *Invincible*, which prompted Tovey to raise an eyebrow.

"Come left rudder, and five points to port," he ordered. "Ahead thirty knots." He had *Duke of York* and *King George V* in line behind him, and now he was turning not only to throw off the enemy fire and complicate their range finding for the next salvo, but also to give those ships a line of sight on the enemy ahead. "We'll want to do a little better Mister Connors," he said.

Connors did not disappoint. He was working his table men intensely,

ordering them to drop 500 yards, account for the speed and course change. The boom of the guns rattled the window as his second salvo fired. A long minute later they saw the results down range, a hit, which sent the men on the bridge to cheering. That was most unusual this early in an engagement.

Hindenburg's lighter guns began filling the gaps between main battery salvos, and the sea was erupting with those smaller caliber rounds, one well inside a hundred feet. The range fell to eight nautical miles, about 16,000 yards, and the main guns fired again. In that interval, *Hindenburg* landed a few jabs with her secondary guns, but damage to *Invincible* was light, her heavy armor taking most of the hits and simply shrugging them off.

Soon the thunder of *Duke of York* was heard aft, as she now had a good fix on the target with her weapons directors, and began to engage. Off to the south, the cruiser *Bermuda* joined the action, her guns good for harassment if nothing else. Captain Sanford on *Sir Lancelot* was also there, about a mile and a half behind *Sir Percival*, and he began weighing in on *Hindenburg* with his new 10-inch main batteries.

The roar of gunfire rolled over the dark sea, and white smoke billowed in the moonlight. Tovey could feel the speed of his ship, engines making 30 knots now as he angled to port to enable C-turret to get into the action as well. The chink of *Hindenburg's* small caliber rounds was sharp on the side armor of the ship as they turned, but the damage was minimal.

"A rain of steel," said Tovey, exhilarated. The last time he had met this adversary, it had cost the ship, and the Allied cause, dearly. Tovey had that in his mind now, Admiral Volsky's sacrifice still heavy on him.

So many good men had died that hour, Captain Bennett, the ship's Helmsman, Executive Officer, Senior Watch Officer, all struck dead. He might have joined them in that silent death, but for the brave actions of Admiral Volsky, who gave his life to save the ship, and Tovey's along with it. Here was his time to avenge that loss.

He had four ships directing murderous fire at the German warship, while off to the south, the American battleship *Massachusetts* had come on the scene and was now dueling with *Fredric de Gross*. That ship had been in a running gun battle with *Sir Percival*, which had then turned hard to starboard to run south. 'Percy' was holding firm, but she had taken one bad hit from those French 15-inch quad turrets up front, and her Captain was suddenly grateful when the enemy ship shifted fire to the Americans.

With the range now closing towards 12,000 meters, *Hindenburg* took yet another main gun hit, this time from Sanford's ship, *Sir Lancelot*. The bold Knight had stuck her with an arrow, and Sanford's cheeks reddened with the excitement of that hit. Mister Laurence stood stoically by his side, hands clasped behind his back, watching the battle closely. He could see their present course, steering about 100 degrees southeast, would eventually run them right across the bow of the American battleship *Massachusetts*. He was about to mention this, but then he saw the American ship execute a turn to starboard, and now the two ships were running parallel to one another.

The fire put in by *Duke of York* was soon augmented by that of *King George V*, and now the thinking behind the deployment made prior to the battle was beginning to decide its outcome. Tovey had kept his three battleships in a line, advancing like a javelin towards the enemy, and north of the *Hindenburg*. He then strung out his cruisers, including *Sir Lancelot* and *Sir Percival*, south in a front opposing the enemy charge. *Massachusetts* had come up to bolster that line as well.

This saw all three of Tovey's battleships engaging *Hindenburg*, one after another, while *Fredric de Gross*, *Impero* and *Roma* were all locked in gun duels with the Allied cruisers and the US battleship. The German battleship was getting pounded. Both the *King George V* class ships began to get hits, and soon fires were raging on Adler's ship, though none of his main guns had been compromised, and he was still running at 29 knots. Yet those fires were serious, and they were going to get worse before they got better.

Seeing what was happening, Adler ordered *Hindenburg* to come hard to port, wanting to turn south, away from the northerly turn he saw the British battle line making. His thought was to add the mass of his own ship to pile on and get that American battleship, and also escape that terrible fire put on his ship by the British. Then HMS *Invincible* scored a most damaging hit, penetrating the forward deck, and plunging deeply into the ship to reach the magazine for Anton turret, exploding heavily. It would have been a very bad day for Axel Faust had he been there, but he was now seven miles to the south, aboard *Fredric de Gross*.

The explosion was so fierce that it literally ripped open the starboard side hull of the *Hindenburg*, with one round after another going off in a cacophony of raging hot metal, fire and smoke. That one telling blow had achieved the vengeance Tovey had come to bring, and it was going to end the

career of Germany's largest warship then and there. *Hindenburg* was shipping tons of water, the incoming flood so heavy that the crews could not get the watertight doors shut. The sea surged in, flooding the magazine and stopping the chaos of fire there, but now the great warship was rolling heavily to starboard, down at the bow and swinging into a heavy list. Behind that forward flooding, the superstructure of the ship had been ravaged by fire, though the two rear turrets continued to fire until the heavy list saw their guns unable to elevate.

Aboard HMS *Invincible*, there was an audible gasp throughout the bridge crew when they saw the great grey mass of the enemy ship roll over. *Hindenburg* capsized at 05:20, the guns forever silent, and now she lay heavily upon the dark swelling sea, undersides exposed like the belly of a massive whale stricken by some fatal malady and floating on the surface, a lifeless hulk. The hiss of white steam rose above the ship, as the fires amidships were swamped by the sea. Tovey raised his binoculars, taking a deep breath.

At last, he said inwardly. That was for Bennett and Slocum, Harvey and Jones, and more than anything, that was for Admiral Volsky, the man who preserved my life, and the life of this ship to bring me here again to lay heavy hands upon you in the dark. That was for *Prince of Wales* off Fuerteventura, and for brave *Rodney*, harboring that bloody key and never knowing it. That was for *Renown*, broken and sunk in that same battle, and for *Repulse* on crutches, and likely never to walk again. It was for every ship that went down in that last convoy to Murmansk, and by God, we'll get to the *Tirpitz* in time. And if *Bismarck* ever shows me her bow wash, that bastard will get the same.

Out there in that wrecked hulk of a battleship, he imagined Captain Adler and his men scrambling for survival, and in spite of the hardness on his heart now, he ordered all ships in his task force to cease fire. We'll not hit a man when he's down, he thought. For those that can get into the sea and get hold of something to stay afloat, God be with you. As for me, my place was to be the Devil incarnate, demon on the sea, the hot steel hand of retribution.

As for Kapitän Adler, given the command of Germany's most formidable battleship, his yearning for battle had finally been quenched. He had seen his mentor, Admiral Lütjens die in combat, and now he would join him, shaken by the sudden hammer blow his ship had been struck, and the massive damage that was caused by that magazine explosion. Once he had felt his

ship to be invulnerable, and after he had smashed HMS *Invincible* in the jaw when they last met, and sent the pride of the Royal Navy wallowing to the corner on unsteady legs, he had every confidence that he would prevail. Yet the body punch delivered by Tovey's ship was so heavy, that Adler's ship would die that hour, and he would die with it....

There came a lull in the action as Tovey's three battleships continued their turn to the north. Then they heard the thunder rolling up from the south, where the American Battleship *Massachusetts* was in much a similar situation as the *Hindenburg*. *Impero* and *Roma* had come on the scene, and now they joined *Fredric de Gross*, putting in enough fire to force that ship to turn and attempt to disengage. The American ship took five main gun hits, three on her side armor, which held up well, but two on the superstructure, seeing damage to secondary batteries, her seaplane bay and launchers, and lifeboats wrecked and on fire amidships.

Yet the awareness of what had just happened to *Hindenburg* finally sunk in all down the line, and it prompted Admiral Heye to make a sharp turn to the south. He did not want his ship to be next in the line to receive the attention of those three British battleships. Seeing the American battleship turning to break off, he ordered the same. *Roma* and *Impero* saw his ship turn, and they began to come around to keep formation.

Off to their south, the American cruisers *Tuscaloosa*, *Wichita* and *Philadelphia* had come upon three French destroyers, sinking two of them, and sending the last one running for Algiers. Now they turned to come round with the *Massachusetts*, damaged but still running soundly at 21 knots.

That was the battle. The bang became a whimper, and all that remained on the scene were a flight of six Barracudas, finally making their way in the dark and swooping over the stricken carcass of the *Hindenburg* like vultures. They could see that ship was doomed, and so broke off to try their luck on *Fredric de Gross*, but the AA defense on the ex-*Normandie* was fierce and unrelenting. Four of the six planes would be shot down, the last two breaking off and running for HMS *Formidable*.

The result of this action would send all the heavy metal on the Axis side back to home ports. Heye would sail for Toulon, the Italians back to La Spezia, and by so doing, the Axis fleet would concede the Western Med to the Allies for the near run, and possibly forever. The convoy then at sea carrying British troops to Oran would arrive in good order, and days later, the

US 34th Division near Algiers would get some much needed help.

The battler for Algeria was on.

Raeder took the news very hard. The damnable Royal Navy had triple teamed the pride of the fleet, he thought, and this was a very heavy blow. Hitler would likely go through the roof, and rail on and on about the useless battleships he ordered me to build. If we could have built six of them as originally planned, then the Royal Navy would be weeping tonight. This time the tears are mine, and the bitter dregs. My only consolation was the fact that both our carriers, and *Kaiser Wilhelm*, were far from the scene of this action.

What was Adler thinking fighting a pre-dawn battle like that? He was worried that the sun would silhouette him, but with that same sun the *Stukas* and He-111s would have launched in droves from Algiers. He could have fought his battle under good air cover, but now all is lost. Without *Hindenburg*, holding the Med will be most difficult. And as usual, the Italians were of little help. They reportedly drove off that American battleship, and those new British heavy cruisers, but sunk nothing. *Fredric de Gross* survived, but now the loss of *Hindenburg* sends my spirits to their lowest ebb in this war. The Canaries are gone, all my plans there shattered. We've lost Casablanca, and the French are gone, leaving us a few good ships we can struggle to man.

Damn, he thought. I will be lucky to retain command of the fleet, and luckier if Hitler doesn't order all my building programs to halt. *Hindenburg* is lost, and there will never be another like it, but its brother *Brandenburg* will soon be ready, only as the finest aircraft carrier the world has ever seen. Will it suffer a similar fate?

We shall see....

Part VI

Tigers East!

*“When the stars threw down their spears,
And water'd heaven with their tears,
Did He smile His work to see?
Did He who made the lamb make thee?*

*Tiger, tiger, burning bright
In the forests of the night,
What immortal hand or eye
Dare frame thy fearful symmetry?*

—William Blake

Chapter 16

After his successful defensive action on the line of the Don, Balck's 11th Panzer Division, and 23rd Panzer had been in reserve at Millerovo, but he was soon handed a new mission. Von Knobelsdorff came in and told him he was heading south.

"We need to secure the bridgeheads in the Donets Bend, Kamensk and Belaya Kalivta. The enemy has been stubborn at Voroshilovgrad, and we haven't the infantry to conduct a street fight with them there. They have been relying on the fact that the Donets Bend is not threatened at the moment, and so they only have light screening forces there. We are about to change that."

"You realize our Korps is the only mobile reserve behind the entire line of the lower Don?"

"Of course I realize that, but your intervention earlier, and the arrival of 14th Panzer Korps, has stabilized this front. Von Wietersheim will hold the line now. We must be off to other business."

"Very well," said Balck. "Where do you want my division?"

"Totenkopf has pushed over the river at Belaya Kalivta. They were supposed to be refitting back there, so you will relieve them, cross at Kamensk and push on to Sukovo. That will clear the rail line, which dips below the river before it heads west for Volgograd. Steiner's supply situation there is not good, so we must open that rail line. No less than nine railway engineer regiments have been sent to get that line up and running before the weather turns bad. We will need it this winter."

It was still high summer, the early September heat heavy on the steppe, but Balck understood. General Winter had been very hard on the Army in 1941, and he would be campaigning again, and all too soon.

"We still have six to eight weeks," said von Knobelsdorff. "In that time I want to secure the east end of the Donetz Basin, and move on Rostov from that direction."

"Will Totenkopf operate with us?"

"I'm afraid not. They are being recalled to the Kalach bridgehead, along with the Wiking Division for the push on Volgograd. Steiner needs everything he can get his hands on. But 16th Motorized has been operating

independently there, and it will now be added to our Korps. I intend to take Rostov.”

Balck saluted, and was on his way. He knew who he wanted to see first, his incomparable Hauser. He would have him get his fast moving motorcycle battalion down south and scout out the situation while he got the rest of the division ready to move.

* * *

The fighting in the Kalach Bridgehead had been a grinding battle of attrition. Steiner had kept both the Brandenburg and Grossdeutschland divisions in the fight, eventually reinforcing their effort with Das Reich and all his Korps assets. They pushed relentlessly along the main road that led through Martinovka, a vital rail station and airfield and the site of Chiukov's Volga Front headquarters. As Balck was moving into the lower Donets, Steiner continued to push up that road until they came up against a stolid wall of old steel.

It was a Soviet Armored Division, one of the last of the old formations that had once been their massive mobile arm. The 1st Division had been moved to Volgograd long ago by rail, but now had little transport and almost no fuel. Chiukov had simply placed it astride the road to block the way to Martinovka. Like water seeing the path of least resistance, Steiner's troops simply washed up against it, then turned to attack the airfield to the southwest of that town. By the 30th of August, they were attacking the field, their tanks shooting up the hangers, what remained of them after the artillery preparation.

The 502nd Schwerepanzer Brigade, had been a part of the fighting in the bridgehead. It had arrived on the front with 45 of the new Tiger tanks, and an equal number of Lions. Now it was down to 67 tanks, an acceptable level of attrition given the normal rates on this front. Yet it had less than 10% of its normal supply issue, low on both ammunition and fuel, and had to be pulled off the line. So that unit sat in reserve 15 kilometers west of the river, and its brother unit the 503rd Brigade had also been pulled off the line to await supply at the rail depot of Surovinko on the Chir.

It was this lack of supply, as much as anything else, that was holding Steiner up. Once a unit got provisioned, he quickly moved it over the Don

and back into the fight to relieve troops that had fought so hard for that bridgehead. Now some of the rifle companies in the Brandenburg Division had no small arms ammo at all. In spite of the massive effort, Steiner was told that it would be at least another two weeks before the rail line from Belaya Kalivta on the Donets could be repaired as far as Surovinko on the Chir.

Meanwhile Chiukov had retreated from the line of the Askay River and fell back on the Myshkova defense line to better consolidate his forces. The nose of Steiner's attack was still about 50 kilometers west of the city, but many of his positions on the Myshkova were only 30 kilometers southwest of Beketova, the southernmost outlier to the main city of Volgograd. There Volkov had his 1st Khazak Field Army reinforced by the Kazakh Mobile Corps, and to its left, his Mountain Corps had joined with 9th Infantry Corps to fight their way up from Nizhny Chirskaya. They were now shoulder to shoulder with the Germans after linking up the previous week.

East of the Volga, the 4th Orenburg Army still sat in its fortified bunkers, with 5th Orenburg Army occupying the line of the Volga as it reached north from the city. All of Chiukov's supplies still depended on that single rail line coming down from the north, and a second spur that ran northwest near Golubinskaya, the only rail crossing on the Don still retained by Soviet troops. That was a new line, never built in Fedorov's history. It ran from Golubinskaya on the Don, through Kalmykov, Perelazovsky and then on to Veshenskaya on the upper Don, where it crossed the river again.

All these forces surrounded the defenders of the city on three sides, the battle becoming a slow WWI style grind, with progress of one to three kilometers achieved per day. Further west, in the hard fought battle for Voronezh, the German 2nd and 3rd Panzer Armies continued to apply relentless pressure on the defense. Hoth's push for Lipetsk was called off. Instead his Army was directed southeast to close on Voronezh from the north. Model was pulling in units from the north near Tula, as they were slowly relieved by infantry still coming up from the Kirov Pocket. More than anything, it was this steady flow of one new infantry corps after another that would keep the panzers free to maneuver to weaker sectors of the Soviet defense without trying to hold ground they had already taken.

September 3 was a big day in the field there, when 2nd Panzer Armee punched through southeast of Voronezh and drove a deep wedge all the way to the Donets. Seeing his opportunity, Rundstedt gathered all the bridging

equipment he could find and sent it to Model. If a crossing could be forced there, the entire Soviet position could come unhinged. Three Soviet armies that had fallen back from Kursk were still holding in a bulge south of that breakthrough. Their position was fed by one rail line running through Georgu Deza on the Donets, and Model had elements of 4th and 5th Panzer Divisions some 20 kilometers from that vital crossing point.

At his wits end, Sergei Kirov summoned Zhukov and demanded to know what he would do about the situation. "We cannot let them cross the Donets there," he said. "It would cut off all those troops! Last month you argued that a timely withdrawal was needed when you pulled out of the Kursk Bulge, yet now all those same troops are at risk again."

There was good ground where I posted them, but look at the map," Zhukov pointed. There must be 15 or more Panzer Divisions, all massed in this drive to take or isolate Voronezh. I have thrown everything at them, 2nd Guards Army, and yes even the first of the new Tank Armies we were building. We have delayed them, but we simply cannot stop such force. I need another army."

Kirov ran a hand over his forehead. "You say that like you are asking for a new pair of shoes, but I can read a map as well. Everything we have is tied up on the line."

"Then we must pull something off that line," said Zhukov. "I propose we take the 17th Siberian, and what little is left of the 24th. They were on the line well south of Tula at the point of the initial German breakthrough. Then they folded back to hold the northern shoulder. Now that the panzers have all pushed south, that sector is quiet again. There is nothing but German infantry there, and I could relieve those troops with reserves from the armies to either side. They can assemble at Yeremov and then move by rail to Voronezh."

"What about the Shock Armies you used in Operation Mars?"

"I would rather leave them right where they sit. Those troops are still reasonably well equipped and supplied. If we are to mount any kind of a winter offensive, they will be the armies I must use again."

"General Zhukov, you assume we will survive until winter. One more disaster and the entire front could collapse."

"That danger is very real," said Zhukov, "but given the circumstances, this is all I can do. There is not a single army remaining in reserve now. Anything we use must come off the line from somewhere else."

“What about the line west of Moscow? That sector has been quiet for months.”

“Yes, and our men there have fattened up, as have the German Infantry they oppose. We could launch a spoiling attack, but as it is so far from Voronezh, it would do little to affect that battle. Better to leave those troops for a possible attack in the winter.”

“What about Karpov and the Siberians?”

“He is obsessed with his effort to take Sakhalin Island from the Japanese. We can expect no further help from him now.”

“That is useless,” Kirov ran a hand through his thick hair, his frustration evident. “I must arrange a meeting with that man, and get him to understand the gravity of our situation. What good will it do if he takes Sakhalin while we lose Voronezh and Volgograd?” His eyes played over the map. “What about Rostov? What about the Donets Basin?”

“They moved the reserve panzer corps they used to blunt my Summer counterattack. It crossed the Don at Belaya Kalivta and so I have had to pull in everything I could in that sector to reform a front there. I have even pulled the Marines out of Novorossiysk and sent them through the Kerch Strait to Taganrog. We will hold Rostov, perhaps for another month. After that, I cannot guarantee you anything, unless we give ground somewhere else to get the troops. Take a good look at the map now. The Kuban and Donets Basin are the largest pocket ever formed in the annals of military history. They must now fight with what they have, and supplies they can produce in Rostov and the other cities there.”

“Those troops you pulled back from Kursk,” said Kirov, pointing at the map. “Are you going to leave them there? The Germans are breaking through behind them.”

“I will attempt to get as many out as I can, but withdrawal from a prepared line in heavy contact with the Germans will not be easy. I expect casualties of 30% or higher. Yet if I do leave them in place, we get yet another pocket, and they have the infantry to digest this one after Kirov fell.”

Kirov was silent for a time, thinking, the lines around his eyes deep with worry. “And the morale of the troops?” He asked. “Will they fight?”

Zhukov could see his distress, and passed a moment of pity for him, wanting to be able to say something, anything that might bring him some comfort or relief. “Yes,” he said, “they will fight. They haven’t given up yet,

not anywhere I have been on the front.”

“Then get them out of that trap. Save them. Pull them back to the Donets as you planned earlier, and god help us if we can’t stop those panzers after that. I approve your plan to extract those two Siberian Armies from the line south of Tula. Let us hope they still have some fight in them.”

The order for that withdrawal was given, and Zhukov was pleased that the casualty rate was much lower than he expected, perhaps no more than 5%. On the high ground southwest of Voronezh, troops in the 8th Panzer Division could see masses of brown infantry moving like a great herd of animals towards the river. More than 25 divisions had pulled back, all trying to get to any bridge the engineers could erect, or make it over the one bridge at Georgu Dezu.

North of that town, a small flotilla of Soviet river gunboats bravely patrolled the muddy waters, and they saw hordes of mechanical animals heading their way, in utter awe. Model had decided to cross north of their position, his engineers quickly building a pontoon bridge over which he pushed the massed armor of 1st, 4th and 18th Panzer Divisions, along with both the 101st and 103rd Schwerepanzer Brigades. There were over 400 tanks in the operation, a mailed fist that was driving right over the river bridge and then fanning out in all directions, pushing up to the rail line about 15 kilometers east of the crossing point.

It was there that a wild melee ensued, for the panzers arrived just as the troops of the 17th and 24th Siberian armies were leaping from the trains to deploy. The German tanks were advancing in rows, blasting at the long line of train cars that seemed to stretch over 20 kilometers. Soviet troops were throwing equipment from the flat cars, seized by the infantry, which then turned and began to set up makeshift positions for their AT guns, mortars, and machineguns. The armored assault was coming up against seven or eight Siberian Rifle Divisions, all deploying from the boxcars, clutching little more than a rifle and a few grenades. If they failed to stop Model’s thrust, those fast moving tanks could roll up behind Voronezh from the south, and that was the plan.

North of the city, Hoth’s 3rd Panzer Army was massing to form another pincer, and the Germans hoped to clamp down on the entire defense of the city with those two massive jaws of steel. There was no good news for either Zhukov or Kirov that day. Even in the south, Balck’s intrepid Ghost Division

had punched through the thin Soviet line, and Hauser went dashing into the breach, soon finding his battalion alone on the road south to Rostov. On the 6th of September, Balck received a radio call from him.

“Where are you? I haven’t heard from you for two days.”

“I am five kilometers from Rostov. I sent a squad up to have a look an hour ago. The city is virtually undefended. There are heavy flak units, a few Marines and lots of service troops, but no line army here. Come on down! Bring the division and we can take it for the asking in three days!”

Hauptman Paul Hauser and General Hermann Balck were out to make a mockery of Zhukov’s prediction that he could hold Rostov for another month. It seemed that everywhere, Soviet hopes were failing, and the German summer offensive was reaching for its final objectives with the violence of its sweeping advance. If Rostov fell, Balck would literally cut the massive pocket Zhukov had spoken of right in two. The Donets Basin pocket would be separated from the Kuban Pocket, and he would be occupying the primary base of supply for both.

It was then that Zhukov decided on another desperate gamble. When the Germans had taken the Crimea the previous year, they extracted 17th and 11th Armies and replaced them with Rumanian troops, which simply invested Sevastopol, making no effort to take it. There were six Soviet infantry and two tank divisions in a small enclave around that port, and if he could get them out by sea, they might be enough to save Rostov. Sergei Kirov now had to choose which city to hold, and of the two, Rostov was by far the most important. His Black Sea Fleet would sortie to cover the operation, and then simply move south to base at Novorossiysk.

For Kirov it was the gravest moment of the war, even surpassing the holocaust in Moscow the previous winter. At one throw, four major Russian cities were all under threat of imminent capture. Sevastopol would surely fall once those divisions were moved out, Rostov’s fate was as yet in doubt. Voronezh was slowly being surrounded by two massive arms of German steel, and the citizens of Volgograd could hear the German guns at night, the sound growing louder day by day.

Chapter 17

Kirov sat in his office at the Smolny Institute in Leningrad, the one city that had been spared the fire of war. The news seemed so far off in the quiet of the night, but he knew it was only a brief respite. If we lose the south, he thought, then next year they will come for us here. If we lose Rostov.... Then the Kuban is next, and Hitler finally gets the one city and rail line he needs to move the oil home to Germany. Damn him and damn that traitor Ivan Volkov to hell. I have fought that man tooth and nail since the revolution, and all the while I knew there was one sure way I might eliminate him. Yet I let him live because the consequences of taking his life were too uncertain—potentially catastrophic. Yet that is what I see unfolding now—catastrophe.

Yes... One sure way....

“Grishin!” he shouted over his shoulder, wanting his Intelligence Chief Berzin.

“Sir?” The bristly haired Chief came in from the study.”

“Round up a team of the best men we have—the very best—company strength. Then get me an airship big enough to lift them.”

Berzin stood there with a puzzled look on his face. “May I ask what for? Are we going to move the headquarters?”

“You might say that, my friend. Yes, we are moving it to the one city that matters now, more than any other we fight for this day.”

Berzin could take his pick. “You want to go to Volgograd?” He chose that city because he knew Kirov prized it above all the others, even Moscow.

“Not yet,” said Kirov, a far off look in his eye. “We are going to Ilanskiy.” He stood up, opening his desk drawer, and taking out a pistol he had kept for decades. It was the weapon he had used as a young man to kill Josef Stalin.

“Ilanskiy?” said Berzin. “What are we to do there with a hundred men and a pistol?”

Kirov looked at him, a cold light in his eyes. “I am going to kill Ivan Volkov.”

“What? Kill Volkov? At Ilanskiy? What are you talking about?”

“Don’t be a fool,” said Kirov. “You know what I have told you about that

place, and you also know what I have told you about Volkov. He doesn't belong here. He came from another time, and his presence here is a blight on all these events. How many divisions do we have facing Volkov's troops? Do you know what I could do with those men if I had them now? I could defend Volgograd, stop the German offensive, save Rostov! All the oil Volkov is sitting on would be mine, and I would not have to scrimp and dig for it in Siberia under Karpov's guard, and then transport it a thousand miles before I can use it. What if the Siberian Rail goes down? Our armies would be frozen like ice this winter!"

"But sir.... Think about this. To begin with, Karpov is sitting on Ilanskiy with three divisions. After Volkov's raids, he won't let anyone come within a hundred miles of the place. He's got airships on constant patrol, particularly after the German airship incursion. We would never get through."

"Oh, yes we would. I'll simply send him a message requesting an emergency meeting there, a wartime summit to plan the defense of the motherland. I can waltz right in. He'll even provide me an honor guard, and all proper diplomatic niceties. We'll get through. All I need to do is get to that railway inn with a handful of our best men. From there it's just a short walk to victory."

"Victory? What in God's name do you plan to do?"

"I've said that—kill Volkov."

"But where? How?"

"At Ilanskiy. With my pistol—the same one I used to kill Stalin. I'll put an end to this madness once and for all. Let's see what the front looks like after I eliminate Volkov in 1908."

"In 1908? You think you can get back there again—by using that stairway?"

"I got here from there once, didn't I? Where do you think the material all came from? I went up that stairway and brought it back. This time I'll start at the top."

"You think you can get to the past—to 1908—simply by walking down that back stairway?"

"Why not? Volkov did it. That's how he got here in the first place. So I can do it as well."

"Madness..." Berzin did not know what else to say. "Madness! Suppose you did do this. Then what? You expect to find Ivan Volkov sitting there

having tea and waiting for you to put a bullet in him? Think, Sergei. Think! You say Volkov came here that way, but how do you know it will work for you?”

“I’ll test that proposition with my feet.”

“Alright. Suppose it does work. You have told me you were there yourself, as a young man—back when you called yourself Mironov. How can you go there now? Can there be two of you—two versions of the same man, one young, one old? This is madness!”

That caught Kirov off guard. He had never considered that possibility. Could he go there and really find his younger self? He would be right there, having breakfast on the day it all first happened, the day the sky shuddered with the fire of a second dawn—Tunguska.

“Finally you make a good point,” he said slowly, but a solution to the problem immediately dawned on him. “Ah...” He turned with new light in his eyes. “Suppose I write a letter—about all of this—Volkov, the war, the goddamned Orenburg Federation. Yes! That is all I would really have to do. Grishin, you are correct. Perhaps I can’t go there myself if I already exist there as a young man. Nor can I take this pistol, because it will already exist there as well.”

“At last,” said Berzin. “You finally begin to see reason in all of this nonsense.”

“Oh, do not be so hasty,” said Kirov. “You are correct in what you suggest, but I don’t have to go there personally to do what I am planning. I’m already there! All I have to do is get a message back to myself—to the young Mironov. I will tell him what to do, what he *must* do after he finishes off Stalin. I will tell him he must put one more bullet in his pistol, and go find a man named Volkov.” He looked at Berzin now, smiling.

Outside the thunder of a storm rolling in off the Baltic Sea rattled the windows. Lightning flashed in the sky, and Kirov’s eye was drawn to it. He found himself looking out on the city, the last stronghold of the Soviet Union he had struggled all his life to build. The darkness in the clouds over the brown stone buildings seemed ominous. The Germans had leveled one great city after another, Kiev, Minsk, Kharkov, Moscow, and now they were about to devour all that remained. He had to stop them—stop Volkov from skewing the history of this war so badly that the material he had found as a young man now seemed like nothing more than a fairy tale.

He could do this thing. He knew he could get there safely, get close, get inside that railway inn. Then all it would take is a message in a bottle. He could stand at the top of that stairway, and simply roll it down.

Mironov will know what to do. I will know what to do, he told himself. He will read it and believe, because I know exactly what to say to him—things that only I will know.

Yet Berzin could still hardly believe that he was hearing all of this. He had to find some way of convincing Kirov that this plan was absolute lunacy.

“You want to send a letter? Down those stairs? Who will deliver it? Can’t you see how crazy this sounds now?”

“I can send a nice young man down, someone who was not yet born to that time. He could get back.”

“You assume he will arrive at the precise moment you were there having breakfast as you told me? Why? Why make such an assumption?”

“Fedorov got there that way, and yes, at precisely that moment.”

“But not Volkov,” said Berzin quickly. “You see? Not Volkov. He was nowhere to be found while you had your chat with Fedorov. Correct? So what makes you think this man you send will arrive that same morning. Suppose he arrives months earlier, or later—even years. Then what? Does this man scour the countryside looking for Mironov? How would he find you—even recognize you?”

“I have a photograph of myself at that age. I can give it to him, and if he is good, one of our very best, then he will find me.”

“But not easily. Yes? Weren’t you hounded and pursued by the Okhrana all that time? I know you, Sergei Kirov. You are a very clever man, very cagey. You would spot this man in an instant, and try to evade him. You would think he was an agent of the Okhrana and avoid him like the plague. Even if your man did find you in the past, do you honestly think you would believe what he tells you—believe anything you might write in that letter you hope to send yourself?”

“Yes! Of that I am certain. You don’t understand, Grishin. Couldn’t you write such a letter to yourself right now? Don’t you know things that you alone are privy to—things that no one else could ever possibly know about you? That is how I will convince my younger self. Understand? He will believe that letter, because he will know the truth hidden in that back stairway as well. Remember, I went up those stairs many times as a young man.”

“That is another thing that has always bothered me,” said Berzin. “How could you have done that, come to this time, when you were already alive here?”

“Because I *wasn't* alive here. I was assassinated in 1934. It was Fedorov who first put me on to that—warned me. Then, when I first went up those stairs, I found material that explained it all to me. That was just one more reason for me to kill Stalin, because it was Stalin who arranged that little scenario. He found someone—Leonid Nikolaev. That’s the man who did his dirty work for him.”

“Alright... Even if all this could happen, then what? You say you know Volkov came here that way, but you have no idea when he arrived, where he went, what he did after that. The history is largely mute on all that, until he emerges in the White movement as an aide to Denikin. So it could take our man months to find out where he went—even years. Will we just stand there like a pair of idiots and wait for our man to come tramping back up those stairs with the good news?”

“You don’t understand. He could go there and spend ten years, then come back and return before we had time to finish a cigar. He would be ten years older, but for us only a few minutes might pass. Start thinking about who we can send. We will need one of our very best.”

“But you assume he could return here at all. You are making one outrageous assumption after another, but it is all mere speculation. Anything could happen if you try such a thing, anything. It’s a very dangerous world back there. The revolution was just beginning to seed itself, and the Tsar was still a dangerous opponent. The Okhrana was very powerful, and very efficient.”

“Our man will get the job done. We must believe that.”

“And what if he does succeed? Suppose it all works as you believe. He finds you—delivers your letter. Your younger self believes it, and knows he must now find a man named Ivan Volkov and kill him, which is all another rack of balls on the billiard table. You really have no idea whether he could pull such a thing off, and if he did, then do we expect to wake up one morning for the intelligence briefing and find the Orenburg Federation no longer exists? All Volkov’s troops simply vanish? Madness! I cannot believe such a thing could ever happen.”

“I have come to believe in the impossible many times in the last year,”

said Kirov. “You forget; I was acquainted with the impossible as that young man Mironov. Then, imagine that impossible day when this young Russian Captain sends me a message inviting me to a meeting in Murmansk. Lo and behold, there he is, the very same man I met in that railway inn. But he had not aged a day. Lo and behold, there is a massive battlecruiser sitting out in the bay, a ship so powerful that it can single handedly challenge entire fleets! Yes, I have seen the impossible many times, Grishin. This will only be one more impossible thing that comes true. You will see.”

Berzin rubbed his forehead, confused, and still shocked to hear all of this from Kirov. He’s desperate, he thought. He knows we are losing this war, and the pressure on him has been mounting and mounting with each passing month. We have no more divisions to send Zhukov, no more armies, so now he dreams up this crazy scheme to try and sweep half the black pawns right off the chess board. It is all utter lunacy, but what if it did happen as he says? He asked that question next.

“I have granted you the benefit of every doubt thus far,” said Berzin. “We go there, get the welcome you expect, get our men close enough to that railway inn to reach the top of those stairs. Our man goes down and arrives at just the correct year to take action. He finds Mironov, convinces him that he must kill Volkov too.”

“That may not even be necessary,” said Kirov. “We could just send our man to do the job. He does not need to find me at all with that letter.”

“Again I grant you the impossible benefit of the doubt,” said Berzin. “Our man seeks out a man named Ivan Volkov—of all the hundreds of men who might bear that name. He has no idea what he looks like, but he knows he will be thick as thieves with Denikin, so he eventually narrows down who this man must be, gets to him, and does the job. He puts a bullet into Volkov.... Then this entire world collapses before our very eyes. Yet only you and I know about it? We wake up one day as I said earlier, and the Orenburg Federation is gone. All of Volkov’s troops are now ours to command. Alright, mister General Secretary. I have stacked up all the plates, forgetting that if even one thing in this impossible stack slips, it all comes tumbling down. Here we sit on that fine morning when everything becomes more agreeable for us and Volkov’s armies disappear. This is how you think to win your victory? Magic and mayhem?”

Kirov shrugged. The rain was beginning now, a cold rain that promised

the long weeks of the Rasputista were coming. Soon the country would see every road become a quagmire, and the land would be a sea of mud. The German Summer Offensive was in its last throes. They were so very close to achieving all their objectives, but soon the mud would slow them down, and then the cold. The temperatures would fall, and for a brief time the ground would freeze hard enough for armies to move and fight again. Then the real winter would begin, the snows coming so deep that nothing could move again.

Then it will be our time, he thought, our time to move and fight as we always have in the winter. But will we have anything left to fight with? Zhukov tells me he still has the Shock Armies on the line of the Don, rested, fat with supplies and equipment, and ready to try again. They failed in Operation Mars. What will he call the next one, Uranus? Saturn? Will it work? Can we survive the winter of 1942 if we do not make a Stalingrad out of Volgograd? The damn German 6th Army isn't even fighting there. It's all of Steiner's SS Korps there this time—Hitler's mad dogs, braying at the gates of the city, and Ivan Volkov on the other side of the Volga, salivating as he thinks to finally get his hands on Volgograd....

Chapter 18

“Sergei...” came the voice of Berzin again. He was watching Kirov as he gazed out the window, looking at the storm blowing in, hearing the rain on the windows, the thunder. “I know it looks black as hell for us now, but you must have hope. You must believe we can still win through. If not you, then how can we expect our soldiers to fight on? Look here at the map. The SS have been fighting tooth and nail in the Kalach bridgehead for over a month. That never happened. The Germans just waltzed right through in the material. We’ve done better this time. We avoided the pocket that formed northeast of Kharkov when Zhukov pulled out of Kursk, and we pulled everything back to the Don instead of trying to form a line west of the river. The Millerovo pocket never happened either. Don’t you see? It looks grim now, but it is not as dark as you believe.”

“You think we can win?” asked Kirov. “Tell me, Grishin. You know everything going on out there, my faithful Chief of Intelligence. You honestly think we can prevail?”

“I know we have avoided those errors I just spoke of. And in the material, the Germans captured Voronezh on the 5th of July! We are still fighting for it! They were approaching Stalingrad by late August, and here it is mid-September, and our troops still hold the line in the Kalach Bridgehead—against the very best they have. In the Material, they already had Rostov, and all the Kuban was overrun, but we still hold Rostov and the Kuban as well. That maneuver Zhukov pulled by moving the rifle Divisions out of Sevastopol was brilliant! They arrived just as the damn Germans were pushing tanks into the suburb of the city. We stopped them. Don’t you see? We are doing better than Stalin ever did. It may not seem that way, but it’s the truth.”

Kirov inclined his head, looking at the map, thinking.

“We can win, Sergei,” said Berzin with a hand on Kirov’s broad shoulder. “It won’t take miracles and magic, or all this cloak and dagger you spoke of just now. It will just take backbone, and the men who still fight so bravely for us out there in that storm. They aren’t going to sit down to a nice meal with wine tonight as we might here. For them it is live or die, and even a crust of

bread is something to be grateful for. Give them that bread, Sergei. Give them the chance to win here. The Germans took most of Moscow last winter, but what did that get them but the burned out city they still huddle in? We can stop them. We can still win, not at Ilanskiy with a single man, or a mysterious letter and a string of impossible events that must all line up and salute us as we wish in order to come true. No! But we can win right here, right now. We can win at Volgograd, at Rostov, at Voronezh!”

The radio had been playing quietly in the background, the sonorous strains of Tchaikovsky, his movements slowly rising, rising to the inevitable crescendo that once shook the world. The 1812 Overture commemorated that day, the day Russia stopped that other mad dog, Napoleon. Then, the music suddenly cut off, the signal tones of Radio Leningrad sounded, and a voice began speaking. There came at that same moment the sound of footsteps in the outer hall, men rushing, an urgency beat out with every footfall, and a hard knock at the door.

Berzin instinctively reached for the pistol in his side holster, but Kirov raised a hand, his head inclined, listening. The news on the radio began to make the announcement. *“This morning in the predawn hours, a combined British and American armada landed troops in Lisbon and Casablanca...”*

Berzin was at the door. “Who is it?” he said sternly.

“Sir,” came the voice of a trusted Lieutenant, giving him relief. “Important news. I bear a message that just came over the teletype.”

Berzin opened the door, seeing the man salute, then he handed off a plain white paper. “Is it true sir?” asked the Lieutenant. “Is this the Second Front we’ve been hoping for?” He was not supposed to read the messages he delivered. They were supposed to be placed in a secure pouch, meant only for Berzin’s eyes, and the eyes of Sergei Kirov. Under the circumstances, Berzin did not correct him.

“Thank you Lieutenant. That will be all.”

The man saluted stiffly, and withdrew. Berzin took the paper, scanning the lines of bold type there: 15 SEP, 1942. INTELLIGENCE CONFIRMS ALLIED LANDING AT BOTH LISBON AND CASABLANCA. GENERAL EISENHOWER DECLARES SECOND FRONT AGAINST GERMANY HAS NOW BEEN OPENED. MORE TO FOLLOW....

Berzin turned, seeing that Kirov had moved to the radio, turning up the volume, hanging on every word of the announcement. “At last,” he said,

turning to Berzin.

“Our network confirms,” said Berzin, waving the paper he held. “The Second Front! You see, Sergei. They haven’t quit the fight. The convoys may have stopped after the disaster of PQ-17, but they haven’t abandoned us. Here they come! All we have to do now is hold on. We have to keep fighting.”

“Get me more information,” said Kirov quickly, all business now. “I want to know how big this operation is, how many divisions, how many troops and tanks, how many planes. Get it all for me.”

“You can rely on me, sir,” said Berzin. “And I hope to god the nation can now still rely on you.”

Kirov looked at him, and he smiled. “How many divisions did Zhukov pull out of Sevastopol?”

“Six, and they all made it safely to Azov and Taganrog. They are in Rostov, fighting as we speak.”

“Good,” said Kirov. “Good....”

* * *

Berzin’s arguments were closer to the mark than even he realized. Steiner’s SS, the very best the Germans had, were still in a death grip with the defenders of the Volga Front, but the line had held. All of 2nd and Third Panzer Armies had delivered terrible blows to the Central Front, but Voronezh was still in Soviet hands, and Zhukov’s second withdrawal of the three armies he had extricated from the Kursk Pocket was now providing a pool of fresh manpower to hold the line of the upper Donets. The German infantry opposite those Armies had not pushed aggressively to pin them in place. All the supplies and most of the available fuel had gone to the panzer divisions, and they had broken through, but now the river, and all the men Zhukov could find, stood between them and further advances.

The General had thrown 2nd Guards Army in to slow the advance, then struck with the three tank corps of his 1st Tank Army, the first and last that he had. They could not stop the Germans, but they surely slowed them down. Model had sent a massed armored attack over the Donets, but the 17th and 24th Siberian Armies had arrived in the nick of time. For now, at least, on that morning of much needed good news, the line had held.

The Soviet Armies had not broken. Ragged, burned out units fought on, with bravery and tenacity that defied description. The Motor Rifle Division in 19th Tank Corps had started the war with 300 rifle squads and 80 AFVs and tanks. Now there were ten squads, with a single engineer squad and a few companies of military police, with 28 AFVs, including three armored cars. But they still fought. Some divisions had to be fought to the very last man. Divisions were shattered, but the stragglers were rounded up, formed into a new regiment, and sent back to the front. They were holding. It was as if the Soviets were simply piling up sand before the seemingly unstoppable bulldozer of the Wehrmacht. Sooner or later, with enough sand, it would grind to a halt, its heavy tracks unable to gain traction, the sand all around it, smothering deep sand.

That was what the Red Army had become in late 1942. Their potential for counterattack was severely limited, but the recruitment effort had put hundreds and hundreds of divisions in the field. Each one was perhaps the equivalent of a British regiment in actual combat power, with a single Allied division being the equal of a Russian Corps at this stage. But there were hundreds and hundreds of those grains of sand on the line, and the bull dozer was slowing to a crawl.

It was early autumn, the rains thickening in the grey skies, the mud beginning. The Germans had been fighting for two months, over 60 days of ceaseless offensive operations. Manstein's southern front had come some 350 kilometers, occupying the whole of the Don Bend and pushing over the river at Kalach. Rundstedt, Model and Hoth had gobbled up another 275 Kilometers, and more ground had been lost in the Donets Basin. Yet the Russians fought on. They had seen the enemy formations slow for lack of fuel and supply, and the casualties had mounted on the German side as well.

Steiner's SS Korps was easily half the size it once was in raw manpower, though its equipment had suffered perhaps only 25% attrition. The Germans now had much more infantry available after the demise of the Kirov Pocket, and it had helped to get Model and Hoth moving again, but none of that infantry had reached Steiner. He got one division that had been attached to the 48th Panzer Korps. The other went on the line of the Don. His plan to force open a corridor to the city and then feed in hordes of infantry for the street fighting was well behind schedule, and now the Germans were running out of time. The Rasputista was coming again, the thick endless sea of mud

and grime. The high summer of the German offensive was fading, waning, and though they continued to push, it was clear to the Generals that the offensive was beginning to stall.

But it was not clear to Hitler.

All he could see was the ground gained by each new breakthrough, the latest being the startling and unexpected dash of Hermann Balck's 11th Panzer Division and the rest of 48th Panzer Korps to the very doorstep of Rostov. This news had come on the very day that Rommel arrived at Werewolf HQ to seek permission for his withdrawal to Buerat, and he would find Hitler a happy man instead of the snarling beast that he had been in Fedorov's history. The Führer had been brooding over the loss of the *Hindenburg*, ready to sack Admiral Raeder and order all building programs to convert to U-Boats. He was eyeing Doenitz for the new Fleet Commander, but then he was pulled into the drama unfolding on the east front, and his mood brightened considerably.

"Rommel? What a surprise to find you here. Are you getting bored in the desert? I hear the British are pushing again."

"That is what I have come to discuss," said Rommel. "Yes, they are pushing, and it will be a slow grind."

"That is all I hear from Manstein these days," said Hitler. "He pushed over the Don three weeks ago, but he still hasn't taken Volgograd. Yet have you heard the good news? Knobelsdorff has pushed all the way to Rostov. 11th Panzer has tanks in the city even now. This will cut off the entire Donets Basin, and isolate all the remaining resistance there from any support they might get from the Kuban. What, have you returned to celebrate your Birthday early? What is it you need?"

"As always, tanks, fuel, weapons."

"7th Panzer Division wasn't enough?"

"Ah, that was a most welcome gift. I am assuming it will be sent to Tripoli, which is perfect for what I have planned. With that division, I can resume the offensive in a matter of a week or two."

"Offensive? I have not heard that word from you for a very long time. Frankly, after Gazala I was beginning to think you had lost your edge. What offensive?"

Rommel cleared his voice, knowing this would be the moment of truth. Hearing the word "plan," Halder and Keitel drifted over, standing by the map

table.

“My Führer,” said Rommel. “The point of all these operations in North Africa has always been one thing—to beat the British 8th Army. We have been at it like a pair of bulldogs for well over a year, and though the new tanks we are beginning to receive have helped a great deal, that British heavy tank is still unbeatable. But the British have grown overbold this time. Even though most of their veteran Commonwealth divisions have gone home to fight the Japanese, they have replaced them with three new divisions sent from England. O’Connor now has six infantry divisions and two armored, with an additional supporting armored brigade.”

“That heavy brigade you fear so much?”

“No my Führer, that is the good news. The Luftwaffe spotted that unit moving towards Tobruk. It is deep in reserve, and it appears O’Connor has a mind to attack without it. After losing 10th Panzer to von Arnim, and all of Goring’s troops, I still had no option other than to sit stubbornly on defense. I cannot fight eight British Divisions with four of my own, and we both know the four Italian divisions I still have would be useful on defense, but not in the attack. Their equipment is simply obsolete now. The British are fielding armored cars with better armor and guns than the Italian medium tanks!”

“Yes, yes,” Hitler waved his hand. “No one ever expected to see the Italians leading the way to Alexandria. I had hope in your promise, Rommel, but instead you gave the British all of Cyrenaica.”

“Useless sand,” said Rommel. “If you want it, I can give it back to you after 7th Panzer arrives, but as I said at the beginning, that is not the point of these operations. If I ever have a chance to win through to Egypt again, I must first beat the British 8th Army, and decisively.”

“Yes, but the opposite has been true,” said Keitel.

“None of those so called British victories was ever decisive,” said Rommel quickly. “But I did not come here to fight those battles again with OKW staff. When I got the news of 7th Panzer Division, I knew everything had changed. I don’t have to sit behind my minefields and wire any longer, taking a pounding day after day from the British artillery and the RAF.”

“You plan to attack?” said Halder, crossing his arms.

“Of course, but certainly not from where I sit now. I need room to fight a mobile battle, not a grinding battle of attrition. So this is what I plan to do. The British have all that useless sand in Cyrenaica, and they are flushed with

what they perceive as a victory. That was nothing. I gave them that to preserve the Afrika Korps. That was the only important thing that happened at Gazala. I preserved the bulk of the Army entrusted to my command—so we could fight again another day. And now I believe that day has come. Look here,” he pointed to the map. “That is some of the worst ground for mobile operations in all of North Africa. Now look here—Tripolitania has good terrain for such a battle. There I can put the maxims of *Truppenführung* to good use—combined arms, maneuver, speed in the attack. On such ground I can dance around the British Army and chop it to pieces. When I have done that, then they will give all the useless sand in that desert behind them back to me, and my Führer, I will pass it on to you.”

“Exactly where do you propose to fight this battle?” asked Halder.

“In Tripolitania. The exact place does not matter, and the time will be the right moment of opportunity as I see it. A battle of maneuver needs room, and good footing for the panzers. That is the only place I will find it now, because I will certainly not waste my forces trying to push through the narrow defile where I presently sit. So this is what I plan.”

He leaned over the map, pointing as he spoke, indicating where he had positioned his reserve fuel at Buerat, telling them how he would lure O'Connor forward, thinking he had won yet another victory at Mersa Brega, stressing how the British might feed only one or two infantry divisions through that bottleneck at a time, making them vulnerable to defeat in detail. Nowhere in his discourse did he ever use the word ‘withdrawal,’ and certainly not its surly brother, ‘retreat.’ Instead he said I will redeploy here, maneuver there, command the ground on the enemy flank, envelop, enfilade, engage, crush. They were just the sort of words the Führer liked to hear, and to finish it all off, he seized upon the startling progress made by Knobelsdorff's 48th Panzer Korps in the last few days.

“Look what Knobelsdorff has done in just 48 hours when he can fight a battle of maneuver—*Blitzkrieg! Angreifen!* He has gained more ground than all of Steiner's SS has in the last three weeks. Let me do this, my Führer, and I promise you I will smash the 8th Army, and eliminate the threat of further advance from the east. Then we can turn and smash the Americans in the west, and when we have finished with them, Kesselring and I will turn and chase O'Connor all the way to the Nile.”

Hitler stood in silence for a moment, his eyes looking over the map.

Neither Halder nor Keitel said anything, as they expected the plan to be immediately rejected, because it required the abandonment of the Mersa Brega Line. To their great surprise, Hitler straightened, clasped his arms behind his back, looked his favorite General in the eye, and smiled.

“Herr Rommel,” he said. “I have heard such boastful talk from you before, and the Nile River is still very far away. That said, you have my permission to fight your battle. The Italians will squeal a bit, but I will settle them down. I will tell Mussolini that we are reinforcing the Afrika Korps and planning this big new offensive, because that is what we will do. In addition to the 7th Panzer Division, you will receive the best weapons; the best new tanks we have, and adequate air support. Did you get a close look at the new Tigers? You can have the pick of the litter as they come out of the factories. Take all the 88s you need. But if I give you this latitude, all this new equipment, you must not let me down. Take these new tanks and kick the British back into Egypt. Earn that Field Marshall’s baton I have just given you. General Rommel, take your Tigers east!”

Part VII

Falling Star

*“Unseen in the background, Fate was quietly
slipping lead into the boxing-glove.”*

— P.G. Woodhouse

Chapter 19

The fighting in North Africa was beginning to heat up. In the west, the British had begun to move more naval forces through the Straits of Gibraltar to cover the port of Oran. The 43rd Wessex Division would move there, and move by road to support the American attack on Algiers. Patton had no intention of making a direct attack on the city. His part was to cover the approaches from the west, which he did with the 34th Division. They had tried to take the town and airfield of Blida from the Germans, but 327th Infantry would not budge, and 34th division commander General Ryder suspended his attack to wait for the British.

When they arrived, General Thomas looked the situation over and then quickly sent in his 5th Duke of Cornwall Battalion supported by the 43rd Royal Armored Cars and a battalion of tanks, Wilson's 153rd RAC from the 34th Armored Brigade. This was enough to push the Germans out of the coastal town of Fouka, and that was what prompted them to abandon their positions at Blida, for fear of being cut off. The inexperienced US 34th were only too happy to finally enter that town, but they had not really earned the privilege, and it was dawning on them that the enemy they were facing was tougher than they realized.

Further south, Patton sent the 3rd Infantry Division, and one RCT from the 9th into the mountain country to cover that long flank as he sent the remainder of his forces east towards M'sila. They were to probe for an access route to the coast, but found every pass and road through the mountains blocked and manned by German Falschirmjaegers and Kubler's Mountain troops.

Meanwhile, the battle for M'sila became a see-saw affair. Blade Force and 1st Armored tried a wide envelopment, but the arrival of 10th Panzer Division stopped them cold. The more experienced German tankers were pushing back the US forces, which were struggling to understand just how to really fight as a combined arms unit. The arrival of 2nd Armored changed the situation dramatically, and Patton now had sheer mass to throw at the Germans. He began to rage about the battlefield, directing artillery fires, staring down Lieutenants and getting them moving where he wanted. One

RCT from 3rd Infantry Division supported the advance of the US armor, and the combined weight of two reinforced divisions was enough to convince Fischer that his attack could not proceed.

At one point, II Battalion of the 69th Panzergrenadier Regiment was hit by 1st and 3rd Battalions of the 30th RCT, supported by 3/67th Armored Battalion of the 2nd Armored Division. The US also had tank destroyers and a fist full of scout tanks in that attack, and the Germans were running low on ammunition. The Panzergrenadiers bravely held their ground, their MG teams chopping out suppressive fire supported by three mobile flak guns, but when they finally stopped that attack there were only seven of eighteen squads left in the battalion. The Recce sections had died to a man. Late in the day, two motorcycle squads from division reserve arrived to offer support, and brought good news. They were to be relieved by I Battalion, 104th Regiment, and to their right, where the Americans had been attempting to climb the hill country to get behind them, the Luftland 47th Regiment was coming up from the rail line further north.

Fischer's problem was that his division had been low on equipment and supplies before it was even detached. It had been the strongest of Rommel's three Panzer Divisions, with three battalions of tanks, but when he learned it was going west, he cherry picked some flak guns, and even a few tanks to strengthen his remaining two Panzer Divisions. So 10th Panzer was operating at about 60% of its normal strength, but it still had nearly 100 tanks left and had been able to stop and hold the reinforced 1st US Armored Division. Now, however, the combined weight of Patton's growing force at M'sila was becoming too much. Fischer got on the radio to von Arnim, advising him of the situation.

"I have the tanks, but not the fuel and ammunition," he said. "And I'm up against two Armored Divisions supported by a lot of infantry. I've pulled in the 47th Luftland Regiment from its position on the rail line at Ain Defra, but I can't counterattack to seal off this flank under these circumstances. If they get through to Barika, they will have your whole position at Algiers well flanked."

"Look over your shoulder," said von Arnim. "KG Hauer and Huder's tanks from the 190th just arrived at Barika rail head. You can use them to plug that flank. In the meantime, I'll see what Conrath can do. His division is down on the coast near Algiers, but he is fully supplied."

“Send him out here and we can counterattack,” said Fischer, and that was what von Arnim would do. Yet this was the mobile reserve for the fight at Algiers itself, so he decided to send only the 2nd Panzergrenadier Regiment, supported by II Battalion from his Panzer Regiment, and the Führer Flak Battalion, which was heavy on 88s. The US 9th Infantry Division had been flanking M’sila on the left in the foothills of the high country, and they were about to get some most unwelcome guests when Conrath arrived.

At the town itself, 1/6th Armored Infantry had pushed into M’sila, with 13 M3 Lee tanks and a single Sherman SPG. Strengthened by these arriving reinforcements, Fischer sent in II Battalion of 104th Panzergrenadier Regiment to retake the town. With Conrath and the 22nd Luftland Regiment relieving his units on the right, he was able to shift considerable force south to this engagement, including the Pioneer Battalion and I Battalion of 7th Panzer Regiment. The ensuing fight was sharp, cruel and decisive, with the German grenadiers storming the American positions, sending shattered squads of US infantry retreating south.

Patton was at Bir el Caid, some 60 Kilometers west of M’sila where he was consulting with Generals Harmon and Truscott. When he got the news he exploded with anger.

“Goddammit! Where the hell is Terry Allen and the 1st Infantry Division? You don’t send an armored division into battle like that without adequate infantry support.”

“Sir, said Truscott. “The last I heard his 18th RCT had just pulled in to Bel Aroug. They’re still 90 Kilometers west of M’sila. The rest of the division is de-training at the railheads, Hassi Bahbah and Ain Ossera.”

“Well they better damn well pull into M’sila, and fast! Get someone on the radio and tell the colonel in charge that I will personally see his ass kicked if he doesn’t get his outfit up to the front, and I mean now! As for you, we need to get up there and pull 2nd Armored together again. I won’t have it said that the American Army came off second best against the Germans the first time we went nose to nose with their panzers. We need to start breathing some fire!”

“Well the good news,” said Harmon, “is that the British 43rd came up and opened that coast road at Fouka. They’re just 15 kilometers from Algiers.”

“The British? I’m not going to let them steal the headlines here. I want to punch through these Heinies, cut that goddamned rail line at Ain Defra, and

then push all the way to the coast. We'll bag the whole lot of them if we do that."

Truscott gave Harmon a look, but said nothing. What Patton wanted, Patton would get, and after telling his armored warriors what he wanted, he was off in a jeep to look for Terry Allen. When he found him, he gave the man an earful.

Allen was a respected general who had the 90th Regiment in the First War. He had always spoken with a stutter before that. Then the Germans put a bullet through his jaw and when it finally healed, his speech had healed with it.

"Hell General," he said. "You don't have to rattle my cage. Just open the door and give me my orders. My boys will tear those lousy Germans to pieces."

"That's what I want to hear, but the Germans are 90 kilometers east of here." Patton pointed with his riding crop. He didn't have to say another word. Allen was a roughhewn fighter, tough on his men, but not one to parade about with the niceties of formal command. He slept on the bare ground, was often unshaven, never wore a tie if he could avoid it, yet he demanded his men toe the line when it came to uniform regulations, and more importantly, training and fitness for battle. He was no slacker, had a warrior's soul, and it was no surprise that he wound up at the top of the best infantry division in the Army at that time, the Big Red 1. He had heard all he needed from Patton, and now he was out to get his men fired up for battle.

His division was now badly needed. With the equivalent of a fresh strong brigade arriving from Conrath, Fischer attacked. He had taken M'sila back, repulsed an American counterattack, and then went right back on the offensive, sending KG Huder and the tanks of the 190th Panzer against the ad hoc scout group dubbed Blade Force. That blade was about to be severely dented, and now it was the Germans who were turning the flank, attacking just north of an impassible terrain labeled Chott el Hodna on the maps. It was covering their left as they came on, scattering Blade Force as it drove through the dry desert landscape.

The retreat was finally halted when Blade Force was backstopped by CCB of the 1st Armored Division. And now the largest tank battle of the engagement ensued, with two battalions of the 10th Panzer Division, augmented by the 190th Panzer Battalion plowing into CCB and the remnants

of Blade Force.

There were about 30 tanks and mobile AT guns in each battalion, some the new Marder III and even three of the 88mm Nashorns. The Americans had over 100 M5 Stuarts, a pair of Shermans, and 33 M3 Lees, but what they lacked in armored hitting power with all those light tanks, they made up in Armored infantry. That and the timely arrival of Terry Allan with the 26th RCT was enough to stop the German attack.

Allen massed both his 16th and 18th RCTs for another try at taking M'sila back from the Germans. He was determined to show Patton what his men could do, and the division did not disappoint. They were aided by heavy artillery fires, two battalions from 3rd Infantry, and the Armored infantry of CCA, 1st Armored. That force was enough to eject II Battalion of the 104th Panzergrenadier Regiment, which also had support from the division pioneers.

The pattern here was finally reaching a decision point. The Germans, with more experienced troops, better tanks and AT weapons, were punching hard, driving the Americans back, and holding the line. They were more agile, with a sharp jab and good right hand when they counterattacked. But Patton just kept leaning in and body punching with everything he had. It was the weight of four US divisions against 10th Panzer and two supporting brigade sized kampfgруппes, and that would eventually retake M'sila for the Americans. They took back the town with hard fighting, and flanked it to the north.

Fischer got on the radio to Von Arnim, advising him of the situation. "The pressure is too great here at M'sila. I'm still holding, but I'm not sure how much longer that would be wise. What's happening at Algiers?"

"The British are pushing very hard. Conrath stopped them, but I'm afraid it's the same situation for him. You have half his troops where you stand now."

"Yes, and our line is strung out all along the mountains from M'sila to Algiers. Beyond that, we have the equivalent of another full division just posted to positions on the coast between Algiers and Bougie. If we moved to a line south of that latter port, we could put everything on one good front."

"Agreed," said Von Arnim. "But I don't think I can get permission from OKW for a withdrawal. Not while the Corporal is in charge there."

"Well, you will have to decide. I'm still covering the southern rail line east, but if they get through, then you will only have the line through Ben

Mansour to Bougie if you have to move later. If you want to move. This is the time to do it, while we are still fairly strong and able to conduct a good fighting withdrawal.”

“Make that the order,” said von Arnim. We’ll give ground stubbornly, so Hitler can see we are still fighting. But I’m going to start pulling men back from those mountain passes and getting them to the rail lines. As for Algiers, we’ll hold it as long as possible with the 327th Infantry, and then wreck the place before we hand it to the British. I’m pulling Conrath’s troops out tonight. I need you to cover that flank for another day or two.”

“Good enough,” said Fischer. “We’ll hold.”

It was a wise decision, made by men who both knew what they were doing on the battlefield. At the moment, their forces were deployed in a large oval, with the west end being Algiers, and the right end M’sila. The north edge was the coast, the south the Atlas mountain passes where the 22nd Luftland and Kubler’s 98th Regiment were holding two other American infantry divisions at bay. The front line opposite the Americans stretched over 110 kilometers. If they pulled back to a front covering Constantine, they could cut that in half, putting many more troops on the line per kilometer, and having the rail line behind them.

So it wasn’t a battle of dash and maneuver that would give Patton his victory here, but one of sheer attrition, where he had been able to lean on his opponent and take him into the later rounds where he hoped to win on points. There were no knockdowns. The scorecards were very close, and most judges would see the fight as a draw. But when the final bell would sound, Patton would have the ground, his divisions battered and bruised, but still on their feet in the center of the ring. He could crow that he had beaten 10th Panzer, but Fischer, Conrath, Student and Kubler would all lead their forces east in good order.

“How about that,” said Patton when he made his report to Eisenhower. “We stopped 10th Panzer at M’sila! That was one of Rommel’s old divisions. Now, what I want to do next is get to that railhead at Batna, move east to Tebessa and take the whole Army into Tunisia from there. By God, Ike, I can cut right through to the coast and kick Rommel right in the ass!”

“Hold on, Georgie,” said Eisenhower. “We don’t even have Algiers yet, and it will be weeks before we can clear the ground from there to Batna. You did right by us at M’sila, but now I want you to regroup and bring up supplies

before you go gallivanting off to Batna and Tebessa. The British have another division at sea from Spain, and Montgomery is transferring his headquarters to Algiers the moment we have the place.”

“Montgomery? Why he’ll take a month at Algiers before he decides to move east. Hell, I’m half way to Tunisia where I stand.”

“That may be so, but unless you want to walk there, with all your men, hold up until we can get fuel, supplies, and replacement tanks out there for you. What’s the score on that tank fight you had south of M’sila?”

“Our boys fought hard, but they were out gunned. The German tanks make ours look like toys. There aren’t many, but what they have outweighs our armor pound for pound in every way.”

“There’s another reason to hold your horses,” said Eisenhower. “I’ve got a big new shipment of the new M1A Shermans, enough to refit your armored divisions so you can put some teeth in them before you really have to push east again.”

“Good enough, Ike. I’ll reconnoiter to see what the Huns are up to out there, but you get me those tanks and I’ll go all the way to the coast, just like I said.”

Chapter 20

O'Connor's 8th Army was not the force that Montgomery had commanded after his victory at El Alamein in the old history. Monty had seven infantry and three armored divisions at his disposal, but O'Connor would take only four infantry and two armored divisions into Tripolitania. He maintained the 1st South African in reserve at Benghazi.

Yet Montgomery's advance had never been conducted with the whole mass of his substantial army. More often than not, he was operating with two to four divisions, and then rotating in fresh units to relieve forces used after a successful operation. And Monty's advance was methodically planned. He would never move unless he had a precise amount of supply to support operations in his forward depots. Often, he would pause to reorganize and supply units, and to permit the necessary "dumping" as he called it.

The battle O'Connor had just fought to push Rommel out of his positions at Agheila and Mersa Brega was also an action Montgomery conducted, launched on December 11th in the old history. Then, Rommel had been extremely low on supply, his tanks thinned out to fewer than 100 operational vehicles, his own morale at an all-time low, to the point where he despaired and advised Hitler that North Africa could not be held. He had chafed against the Italians trying to keep him fighting in Tripolitania, and continually argued for withdrawals, first to the line at Buerat, then to the Tarhouna-Homs line, and finally to Mareth.

Monty had pursued him at his leisure, "dumping" supplies at a convenient site about half way between El Agheila and Sirte, dubbed Nofilia by the British, and An Nafaliyah to the locals. After Rommel retreated on December 13th, Monty waited just over one month, until January 15th, before testing Rommel's defense at Buerat. In all that time, he was seizing forward airfields for the RAF, seeing to the expansion of port handling facilities at Benghazi, dumping supplies and fuel for a presumed ten-day advance to Tripoli, and cleaning up the mess at El Agheila by removing mines and wire, and improving the roads. He dedicated an entire infantry division to this task alone. It was this meticulous attention to logistics that was the hallmark of his command style.

O'Connor's situation was now quite different. To begin with, the Afrika Korps he was facing here was much better supplied. Rommel had been sitting at Mersa Brega for months, while the 8th Army took Benghazi, occupied Cyrenaica, received new divisions and tanks, and moved supplies up from Tobruk. He was well prepared when he launched his attack, but so was Rommel, and the mental condition of his opponent was also much stronger.

Rommel seemed to exhibit the mood swings of a manic depressive. He would be in the depths of despair, complaining about the Italians, the lack of tanks and fuel, the slow dismemberment of his once powerful force as units were sent west into Tunisia and Algeria. Then, when he learned he was to be given back his old 7th Panzer Division, his mood suddenly elevated into the "old Rommel," as Kesselring put it. This was the Rommel that had first arrived at El Agheila over a year earlier, and the Rommel that had chased O'Connor all the way back to Tobruk, then drove him relentlessly towards Mersa Matruh—until Kinlan appeared on the scene like King Arthur's lost knights returning in Britain's hour of gravest need.

The British stopped Rommel at Tobruk, just barely, then launched Operation Crusader to push him back to Gazala. It was their final offensive, the Supercharge operation led by Kinlan's Heavy Brigade, that had finally unhinged Rommel's Gazala line and sent him back to where he had started. Now O'Connor believed his operation to take that bottleneck at Mersa Brega and El Agheila had been a great success, but he was wrong.

He wasn't facing a defeated and demoralized Rommel, and a badly depleted Afrika Korps this time. After losing 10th Panzer and Goring's troops, it was much weaker than it was at Gazala, but it had more than adequate supply when it pulled back at Rommel's order, and more than adequate fuel to get it to the Buerat line. Rommel wasn't pushed out of the bottleneck as O'Connor believed, he yielded the position deliberately to go seek better ground of his own choosing for a mobile battle. O'Connor was not facing an adversary that was beaten and demoralized as had Monty. He was now facing the Desert Fox, and was unaware of the peril that might lie ahead.

With the mentality of a hard driving cavalry officer, O'Connor came charging through the bottleneck into Tripolitania, thinking to harry and pursue his enemy as Rommel withdrew. Yet the Germans moved with speed and deliberation, a well-coordinated withdrawal. The two Italian Armored

divisions had paid the price for that. Ariete and Littorio were both largely destroyed at El Agheila, with only scattered remnants being extricated to fall back on Sirte. Yet they covered the retreat long enough for Rommel to pull out all his good German divisions, and the “bad going” in the terrain to the south also slowed O’Connor’s enveloping move considerably. By the time the British pushed through, Rommel and his Afrika Korps were gone.

Major Popski was with a detachment of the LRDG, well out in front to look for the Germans. The tracks of their withdrawal were easy to follow but the enemy was never found. Their dust had long settled as they passed northwest, and Popski could feel trouble in his bones now. He had scouted up to Wadi Rakhiriyah, a perfect defensive site where he thought the Germans might have posted a delaying force. The low ground in the wadi was backed by higher stony hills to the west, perfect for defense.

“Well that’s a situation,” he said aloud to a Lt. Colonel John Richards. “This doesn’t sit well with me. They should be sitting on that position, but there’s not a whisper, not a man or a single rifle.”

“Rommel’s been beaten harder than we thought,” said Richards, but Popski shook his head.

“Not the way I see it. You don’t give up a position like this—unless you don’t need it. You see? These tracks lead northwest, and Jerry is well gone by now. He isn’t limping off to lick his wounds. This was a well-planned move, and they had the fuel to motor out of here with no trouble at all. I’ve a bad feeling about this. My guess is that we won’t find a German for another fifty kilometers. He’s headed for Buerat.”

“All the better,” said Richards. “Then we won’t have to fight our way up to Sirte. The ground is empty for the taking.”

“Right,” said Popski. “It’s as if Rommel has tied it off with a bow and gifted us with the whole lot. Welcome to Tripolitania. Well, we’d better be careful.”

“Yet the road is open,” said Roberts. “Surely we can tell Harding to bring up the 7th.”

“I suppose so,” said Popski. “But we better check it for mines first. If it’s really clear, they can swing up to Nofilia this way, only I think we’d better have a look farther north and west. Something smells fishy here. I’ll get on the radio to Reeves.”

That was the one bone Kinlan had left on the table when he took the

Heavy Brigade to replenish at Tobruk. Reeves had already topped off, and he had asked the Brigadier if he might hang on with O'Connor and help scout the way around Marada for the planned envelopment of El Agheila.

"I'll just take a single squadron," he said. "That was all we had fuel for, and there's no point burning it all up by driving back to Tobruk. Why not let me move forward with O'Connor?"

Reeves, and most of the other men in the Brigade, had finally settled into their role here, accepting the impossible fate that had befallen them. He was a soldier, and what better place to ply his craft, and live his soldier's life, than right here, in the middle of the greatest war ever fought on earth. So gone was the shock and disbelief of those early weeks. Now he was all business.

For the most part, Popski's unit was among the few British regulars of this era to operate directly with Kinlan's men. The rest of the Brigade always operated as an independent unit, always in the deep southern wing of the Army, where Rommel would feel their shadow on his right shoulder every time he contemplated a move. In fact, few men had ever seen the interior of any of Kinlan's vehicles, on Churchill's specific order after he had glimpsed the digital wonders there in Siwa.

Permission was granted, and so Reeves took a small detachment from his 12th Royal Lancers, nine Scimitars, three Warrior AFVs with an assault squad in each. A pair of FVS 81mm Self-Propelled Mortars, and the icing on the cake was his wrangling away three of the five Challenger IIs that were assigned to his Lancers. "We'll just make off with them," he said. There wasn't fuel enough for the other two, and they were scheduled for a maintenance check. Two of the Brigades few tank moving trucks were going to haul them back to Tobruk. So Reeves, with 1/12th Royal Lancers, was just two kilometers behind Popski, waiting for him to give the word to move his column up.

That was all that there would be of Kinlan's shadow in this engagement. The rest of the Brigade was far away, and headed for a rendezvous south of Tobruk. If things went bad for O'Connor, they were over 500 kilometers away, and for the first time in many months, Rommel finally had a fair fight in front of him—a chance to make good on his promise to Hitler that he could beat the British 8th Army.

O'Connor was moving into Tripolitania, and feeling the same wind at his back that he had after soundly thrashing the Italians in 1940 and then racing

all the way across Cyrenaica to Beda Fomm. This combination of circumstances, a strengthened Afrika Korps, a weakened 8th Army, a beaten German General looking to redeem himself, a victorious British General giving his horses the reins—it was all going to add up to the danger Popski could sense all around him now. The Major's eyes were hard on the desert as he scanned the terrain ahead with his field glasses. This was too easy.

44th Home Counties Division was in the lead, having passed through both 50th Northumbrian and the 4th Indian Division after the successful breakthrough along the coast. By mid-day on the 3rd of October it moved through the coastal town of Bin Jawad, and was approaching the wadi that ran through Nofilia, some 8 miles inland, winding and twisting its way to the coast.

The division was a patchwork force, as its 131 Brigade had been detached to 7th Armored, and its 133 Brigade had gone to Spain with the 10th Armored. This left only Whistler's 132 Brigade, and to beef up the division, O'Connor had attached the two Free French Brigades in theater, and then added the independent 1st Tank Brigade. Their mission was to get to Nofilia and prepare the area to receive supplies for his new forward depot. The area was perfect for a support site, protected by a wadi to the west, well-watered, and with a small airstrip.

The division was advancing up the one main road that governed all movement in North Africa, the coastal Via Balbia. Montgomery once remarked that fighting and supplying the troops in North Africa was like advancing from London to Moscow on a single road. That was the same distance by land between Tunis and Alexandria, and the Via Balbia was the only good road. The inland roads were nothing more than well-worn tracks where vehicles had pushed their way through the imposing terrain, the paths of least resistance.

4th Indian was next in line on the Via Balbia, followed by the two divisions that had broken the Italian resistance along the coast, the 51st Highlanders and 50th Northumbrian. Both would need a little rest before moving up through the Marble Arch and making their entry on the new chess board that was now being set. As for the armored Divisions, O'Connor had his lighter 7th Armored on the leftmost inland flank. And the 1st Tank Division between their position and the Via Balbia, about 12 kilometers inland. 23rd Tank Brigade was in reserve following O'Connor's

headquarters.

* * *

For his part, Rommel had completed his final briefing the previous day. “Wadi Hiran,” he said, running his finger along the map. “It runs almost perpendicular to the coast, about 30 kilometers east of Sirte. That’s where we’ll stop their advance. General Lungerhausen, I’ll want you on the coast with your 160th Division, right astride the Via Balbia. General Marcks, your 90th Light will be inland at his shoulder, with your right flank a few kilometers beyond this feature, Bir Khalfiyah. The wadi meets another there, and covers your right. This road just beyond that point runs east to west, as you can see. That is where I will place General Bismarck with the 21st Panzer Division. That road is ideal. It allows Bismarck to keep his division in march column, but at the same time, that column covers the infantry defensive front perfectly.”

“And where do you want my fighting 15th,” said General Randow, another new stand-in after Crüwell left the scene.

“Hold on this road south of Bismarck’s position. Wait for Funck to bring up 7th Panzer. That will give us a situation much like our defense at Gazala. I will have all three Panzer Divisions in hand on a tight leash until I deem it time to begin the counterattack. Before that happens, I will want the British testing our blocking position on the coast. It will hold, they will reinforce, and at that point, this O’Connor will look to take his armor in a typical flanking movement.”

“You intend to meet him with all three Panzer Divisions?”

“That would be a good attack, but an even better one would be to swing well outside his own envelopment, then come north and take him in the flank. So I may use 21st Panzer as the shield, and the remaining two divisions as my sword. Hauptmann László Almásy is already well to the south scouting out the ground. This terrain here labeled Abu As Shawk is open and flat, with good traction. The same for Alam Qarinah here, further east. But the objective of our envelopment will be these crossroads—Alam Hunjah. Look how all these tracks run parallel to the east and northeast, and note this difficult ground on the right. That protects your flank as you make your turning maneuver. See this hill? It was scouted yesterday, and gives a perfect

view of all surrounding ground. We make this maneuver at night, and I want to be standing on that hill by noon the next day.”

“And the Italians?”

“What of them? I have sent them to the Buerat line to prepare those defenses. If anything goes amiss, then our two infantry divisions fall back through Sirte to that position. Ah... Herr Ramcke. I forgot your brigade. I will want your men here, right along this wadi screening the location of the Korps Headquarters at Gasr bu Hadi, about ten kilometers due south of Sirte. Any more questions?”

“Suppose they don’t attack us,” said Bismarck. “It’s over 100 kilometers from El Agheila to this wadi where we make our stand. What if they dally about?”

“I am planning a ruse. I have sent a signal saying that fuel stocks are running dry, and we must wait for deliveries. We have long suspected that the British are reading our signals traffic—decoding it at will. I want this O’Connor to think he has me at a disadvantage, that we are desperate to retreat. I have even planned a little theater of a more personal nature. You know I am in the habit of corresponding with my wife back home. Well, I have prepared a phony letter, and I intend to see that it gets found by the British. O’Connor must believe we are a wounded animal, limping off to seek shelter. If I know this man, he will attack, and with the envelopment maneuver I expect.”

Von Thoma had been listening to all of this, and now he spoke up, remembering Rommel’s admonition to him upon his arrival. “And these heavy British tanks you spoke of earlier,” he said. “What if they appear in the midst of all of this?”

“The Luftwaffe has spotted them far to the east. It seems the British already believe we are beaten here. Now gentlemen, it’s time we showed them how very wrong they are.”

Chapter 21

A whisker over 370 miles due south of Tobruk, the wreckage of an American B-24D Liberator bomber still rests in its dusty grave, like a forsaken shipwreck on the seabed of an ocean that had dried up and vanished long ago. The nose and cockpit, and much of the fuselage still remain intact—even the window glass remained sound for the most part. A machinegun juts from a circular aperture just above the plane number 64, which vanished into the sand at the base of the crumpled fuselage. The broken tail was bent forward towards the nose, jutting into the stark sky above, and twisted propellers still hung from the remnants of the wrecked engines.

Her name was Lady Be Good, serial number 41-24301, out on April 4, 1943 for its maiden flight with the 376th Bombardment Group from Soluch field north of Benghazi, and with a fresh new crew. They were going to bomb Naples that day, but on the return leg, the plane's direction finder failed, and it overflowed the base and continued on, south into the endless wasteland called the Calanshio Sand Sea. None of the nine men aboard were ever seen alive again, though evidence of their plight and struggle for survival would be found in the desert decades later.

It was a bombing raid that had not yet been launched in the history writing itself anew in that desert. Whether it ever would be launched remained uncertain, one of those many unwoven strands of fate in the tapestry of Time. All around that wreckage, the sun beat down on leagues of high sand dunes rising like great waves in a tempestuous sea, some well over 100 feet high. Yet hidden beneath all that sand, beneath the bones of lost soldiers, animals, and the wreckage of a war that once was, new life was found at the edge of that sea in the year 1961.

A man named Nelson Bunker Hunt, an eccentric billionaire and oil man from Texas, had a nose for shady deals in the silver markets, fast horses, and light sweet crude. He had learned he might find oil in Libya, and picked up a concession plot designated C-65 in 1957 to do some survey work and exploratory drilling. Prospects did not immediately pan out, but four years later, high gas readings were detected, and additional work discovered oil stained sand in the samples extracted from the site. Five wells were soon

drilled, about 150 miles south of the bottleneck O'Connor's troops had just pushed through, and in time it was discovered that old Bunker Hunt had found what would end up being the Sarir Oil Field, the largest in all of Libya, with reserves estimated at around 12 gigabarrels. A 34-inch pipeline was constructed to move the oil to Tobruk, where a large terminal exists today, on the southern rim of the bay that forms the harbor.

Up to 4 million barrels of crude could be stored there, where the bones of soldiers from so many armies lay buried in the sand. Tankers called from all over the world, hauling the valuable crude of China, Europe and the United States. That was what put Tobruk on the map in 2021, not the history of a war fought 80 years past. Yet all that oil would drag the storied port into the next war, painting a nice fat target on the dry desert sand around Tobruk. In the year 2021, a missile would be launched to strike that target, and blight the land with its terrible power.

The battlements and bunkers where the Rats of Tobruk once fought and fell, where Rommel's troops huddled outside the wire, straining to push through, where artillery and machine gun fire once rattled and shook the dark desert night, would now be completely devastated. In 2021, all it would take is a single missile, but the blow struck that day was so powerful that it would have dramatic effects that no one ever anticipated. The Russian 15A18 Missile, dubbed the SS-18 "Satan" by the west, had a very heavy throw weight. It could lift and deploy up to ten 500 kiloton warheads, and one would target a place in the sky above that harbor, where a ship lay berthed that carried a most unusual gift.

The USS Destroyer *Knight* had been slated to support the Torch landings, but in this history it was put on convoy duty and sent round the cape to Alexandria to help keep an eye on all the tanks bound to fill O'Connor's ranks. Its commander, Lieutenant Commander Levin, had been eager to see the famous port, and even more pleased when he learned that he was to be sent out to Tobruk on a milk run to deliver mail and other effects.

So it was, by chance or design, that the *Knight* was in port that day, while nearly 80 years on, Satan came calling in the skies above. The little gift that had been delivered to the ship by the daughter of the Admiral it was named for, had sat in a box on the Commander's wardroom shelf, a useless bit of trivia, forgotten, unnoticed, overlooked—until that day. No one aboard saw it begin to glimmer and glow, the sheen of phosphorescent green surrounding

it, the temperature rising as the light burned hotter. Then the skies above Tobruk opened with raging fire of another kind, for the hand of Satan had reached all the way back to that embattled year, guided there by that strange talisman, and perhaps the vengeful, jealous and hungry arm of Time itself.

It wasn't reaching for the ship, which had every good reason for being exactly where it was that day. But there were things in the desert close by, men and machines, with no license to move on those sands. They were intruders, trespassers, an aberration in the careful scheme Time sought to play out, and now they would pay the price.

* * *

Reeves' Squadron was the first to approach Nofilia as his unit probed north. He came in from the south, Scimitars leading, and Sergeant Williams had the lead section up front, his eyes scanning the infrared detection screens to look for residual heat of other vehicles. He had just reported what he thought was a small contact, three vehicles ahead on a low hill overlooking the wadi. Reese was in the Squadron command vehicle, a Dragon AFV with special communications and data-link equipment.

"Looks like a couple of light flak guns to my eye," came the voice of Sergeant Williams. "I could pop them from here with the APSE rounds."

"Save your breath," said Reeves back again. "That British division up front is right there on the coast. They'll have troops up to sweep that area soon enough. If they move, let me know, but otherwise just lay low and save the ammunition."

At that moment there came a brief flutter in the electronics, and the engine stopped. Reeves saw his screens wink off, the vehicle's internal emergency lighting kicking in from the battery. He looked over at Cobb, his driver, his eyes scanning his panel. Those screens were dark as well.

"What's up, Cobber? I thought you said you went over the vehicle from top to bottom."

"I did sir, didn't find anything to fuss about."

"You topped us off with the fuel?"

"Full tank. Checked it a moment ago sir. We've got plenty of range."

"Well then, turn the engine over again, and it bloody well better start."

Cobb hit the ignition, and got the reassuring sound of the engine

restarting. He was all business now, his eyes playing over the readings on his panels. “Hello...?” He leaned in, and tapped one screen. “Here’s a wild one,” he said over his shoulder. “Got a reading on the NBC module. It says we just had a mild EMP pulse.”

“What? EMP? Not bloody likely. Nobody throws around the Hammer of God out here, except the Russians on that bloody ship, and it’s in the Pacific.”

“Just reading the screen sir. Says right here that—”

“Well enough,” Reeves cut him off. “Let me check the main data link to Brigade.”

Every unit was normally wirelessly linked into the FVS command vehicles in Kinlan’s Brigade HQ troop. When they had GPS, they could use that network to see the real-time position of each vehicle and tank on a digital map. Now, with GPS long gone, they had rigged the system out to home off the direction and range of a radio signal, almost like the Huff Duff receivers that would triangulate. Every vehicle had a broadcast code, and when it was picked up, multiple vehicles in the receiving unit would be able to triangulate and determine its approximate position. At the very least, Kinlan would be able to know that Reeves and his Squadron were X miles away on a given heading, and then that position could be represented on a digital map display. It wasn’t as accurate as the GPS finding, but it was still an order of magnitude better than the paper maps and reckoning that the locals worked with.

Reeves checked his link when their systems rebooted with the engine start, but he got a “NO SIGNAL” error message. He tapped the diagnostic button, watching his screen roll through some test displays until it finished with the reassuring message “PASS: NO FAULT DETECTED.”

“That’s odd,” he said. “No link into Brigade. Hey Gunny,” he called up to Corporal Holmes, who manned the 90mm main gun in the turret. “Everything squared away up there?”

“Locked and loaded, sir,” said Holmes. No problems here.”

Reeves normally took out one of the standard Dragon 300s with the Bushmaster 25mm gun, but this one was the up-gunned 90mm variant, and he decided to make it his ACV for this mission. The Corporal had aspiration of making Gunnery Sergeant when they shipped over, and so after a few months in the saddle here, Reeves waved his right hand in the sign of the

cross over the man and pronounced him the new Gunnery Sergeant, saying no one would care a lick about his unsanctioned field promotion.

“Put the main turret on strike mode,” he said.

That would send a signal pulse back to Brigade indicating that his vehicle was armed and ready to fire. They would receive back one of three lights: green to authorize the action with a weapons free signal, yellow to hold fire and stand by, red for weapons tight. Reeves wanted to see if that signal link was operating.

“What’s the verdict?” he asked.

“The jury is still out, sir. I get no signal return, not even an indication the message was received.”

Reeves didn’t like that. What was going on with Brigade? His next option would be to break radio silence and send a direct call back to the HQ troop on the HF system. It would annoy one of the Colonels, but it was all encrypted and secure nonetheless. He reached for his communications handset, adjusting the fit of his earphones.

“1/12 Lancer to Brigade HQ. Lieutenant Reeves here. Please respond, over.”

There was no answer back, and after repeating his hail three times he began to get a bad feeling about the situation. What was going on here? Could there have been an incident he was not aware of, involving special weapons? Was Cobb right with that reading off the NBC module advising on the threat of EMP? Electromagnetic pulse was always a danger in the modern day warfighting environment. Their vehicles were hardened, but that was not entirely foolproof. He had seen his own vehicle flutter and die. Maybe they had the same trouble and were booting everything back up again. The weather wasn’t a factor, even though Tobruk was 375 miles east. Might they have a sand storm or some other complication affecting reception?

Reeves could think of no other reason why they should fail to get through, and the real reason was far from his awareness or comprehension—the presence of the USS *Knight* in Tobruk Bay.

The Lord giveth, and the Lord taketh away. Time was balancing her books. It was not able to simply pull the collective mass of Kinlan’s Brigade forward and put it back where it belonged. That was beyond her means. Things often fell backwards in time when a hole opened, almost as if a strange kind of Time Gravity was pulling at them—but they did not move

forward easily in the same manner.

What Mother Time could do, however, was push open the door between the time of that detonation in 2021, and the place where that strange teardrop object sat shuddering and glowing in the wardroom of the USS *Knight*. Time could not pull Kinlan and his machines out, but it could let Satan through the hole that opened, made bigger and more yawning by the awesome explosive power of that 500 kiloton warhead.

If Reeves had been looking out the hatch and over his shoulder, he might have seen that strange flash on the horizon, almost too far off to be noticed. But there at Tobruk the effects were more than noticed—they were catastrophic. A warhead that size was 25 times bigger than Little Boy and Fat Man, the weapons that had flattened Hiroshima and leveled Nagasaki. It was the size of the US Ivy King bomb test, which was the most powerful pure fission bomb ever detonated, though even that was dwarfed by the Russian Tsar Bomba detonation, a different kind of bomb that was a hundred times more powerful.

The entire force of Satan's wrath did not come through that gaping hole in time, but the penetration was enough to wreak havoc. Tobruk, as it was known to all those who had fought and passed through that port town, no longer existed. Kinlan's Brigade, all cuddled up to the southern shore of Tobruk Bay to receive the fuel O'Connor had promised, no longer existed either. The lower jaw of the harbor was broken, smashed, and a massive crater formed from the very low altitude detonation. A sea of earth and sand was first blown in all directions, then the raging cascading waters of the sea swept into the crater, and beyond into the desert. When those waters receded, they clawed back thousands of tons of sand, shattered earth and debris, eventually covering all that remained.

The Brigade was now scattered about the floor of that undersea crater, the heavy armor of those blasted Challenger IIs buried under tons of collapsing earth, silt, and soot. In places, the twisted barrel of an artillery piece jutted through the debris deep beneath the sea, its broken remains a testament to the folly of those who think to wield power. It was as if a star had fallen here, and no man survived its searing wrath.

Lieutenant Reeves would never again make contact with the HQ Troop. His single Dragon 300-L90 was now the sole remaining nerve center of the mighty 7th. It was ironic that the Brigade had made its storied entry into this

war at the edge of the Sultan Apache oil production center in the deep desert to the south, and now it would make its unhappy departure because it was waiting right at the location of the main oil terminal at Tobruk in 2021.

They were all gone, the Mercians, the Highlanders, the Scots Dragoons. Reeves did not know it then, but he and his men were now the last of the Mohicans, he and the single battalion of Gurkhas that had shipped out to the Pacific long ago. He had that Dragon 300-L90, nine more Scimitars, three Warriors, a pair of FVS Tracked mortar carriers, three Challenger IIs, two fuel trucks, and one ammo truck.

Churchill's magic wand was suddenly gone.

Part VIII

Ozymandias

*“Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
Stand in the desert. Near them, on the sand,
Half sunk, a shattered visage lies...
And on the pedestal these words appear:
'My name is Ozymandias, king of kings:
Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!'
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare
The lone and level sands stretch far away.”*

— Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Ozymandias*

Chapter 22

O'Connor continued his advance, with the 44th Home Counties Division turning off the main coastal road and heading inland to Nofilia. He had intended that a stronger British Division would then move on up the Via Balbia, but he first sent the independent 1st Tank Brigade along the road, with the 44th Recon Battalion detached as a scouting unit. The 4th Indian Division was next in line, but it also turned off the main road, intending to eventually deploy south of the 44th near Nofilia. This meant the main advance would be little more than a road clearing operation by that 1st Tank Brigade until the 51st Highlanders came up.

Over the next several days, the 8th Army slowly flowed west into the land abandoned by the Germans. The advance up the Via Balbia saw 51st Highland Division reached As Sultan, just nine kilometers from the positions of the 164th Light in their blocking position along Wadi Hiran. O'Connor had finally found his enemy again and began formulating his plan of attack. The Highlanders would lead the assault on the coast, and right behind them, like a great steel battering ram, would come the infantry tanks of 1st Tank Brigade, with 46 Shermans and over 40 Matildas rigged out as special armored engineering tanks to breach wire and mines.

To their immediate left, General Leese posted the 50th Northumbrian on a twisted feature called Wadi Rakwah. This was XIII Corps, occupying the coastal strip extending about 12 kilometers inland in an area that was mostly desert, with scattered hummocks of low scrub. Then came the powerful 1st Armored Division. Fisher's 2nd Armored Brigade was forward at Alam al Matan, where a road track ran due west along their intended line of advance. That was the inner circle of O'Connor's planned envelopment, for if that division broke through, it would be just south of the 90th Light, which was dug in on the right shoulder of the 164th Light.

Behind 1st Armored, the 44th Home Counties Division was spread out in a wide arc along Wadi Harawah, and O'Connor put those two divisions under General Leese in XXX Corps. Further South, he had lined up the 7th Armored Division, with its nose at Sidi Azzab on the long Wadi Harawah, and the column extending east some 15 kilometers. Right behind it was the

motorized 4th Indian Division, which had just come up after resupplying at the depot established at Nofilia. This was Horrocks and X Corps, the wide envelopment force. O'Connor planned to push it west into the open country of Alam Qarinah, then swing north in to the Al Hamrayah flats where they could find a road that ran north east of Wadi as Zaud towards Sirte.

It was exactly what Rommel expected him to do.

* * *

Hauptmann László Almásy was a very busy man that morning. He had been scouting on the extreme southern right flank of Rommel's advance, with a Sonderkommando unit comprised of scout cars and a few squads of light infantry, all handpicked men from the Brandenburgers. They were Germany's answer to men like Popski and the L.R.D.G., all specially trained veterans of desert fighting, and excellent scouts.

Yet his force was but the leading edge of a much larger formation called the Sondervverband 288, or 'Special Formation 288.' It consisted of 7 companies pulled from various units and initially disposed to screen and defend Benghazi before the Italians retreated there to meet their eventual fate. There were Brandenburg Commandos, a mountain rifle company, regular rifle company, machinegun company, AA units, a pioneer detachment and a Panzerjager unit that had Pak 50s and a few *Sturmgeschuetz III* self-propelled assault guns. Rommel had sent them well out ahead, or rather left them there when his forces withdrew towards the Buerat line. They were now assembling at the southern end of the long feature known as Wadi Faras, which extended north to meet Wadi Tilal reaching all the way to the coast.

Midway along that long dry riverbed, Rommel had assembled his two knights, the 15th and 7th Panzer Divisions. Two tracks ran southeast from the wadi, into the plain of Abu As Shawk, bending east to meet the long run of Wadi Harawah. This was where Rommel was sending his two knights, wanting them to cross that wadi, and drive for Alam Al Hunjah another 18 kilometers beyond. If they got there, all the roads and tracks favored a turn to the northeast, which would eventually be aimed at Nofilia, the British forward depot. It was a long way to go, about 85 to 100 kilometers depending on the route, but Rommel had stockpiled the fuel to get his panzers there, and true to his old habits, he believed he would then find plenty of fuel in the

depot once he got there.

Hauptmann László Almásy had scouted the way forward across Abu As Shawk, finding it empty as far as Wadi Harawah. All Rommel was waiting for was O'Connor's attack. It began on the 9th of October, right on the coast with 2nd and 5th Seaforth Highlanders supported by two companies of Royal Engineers and the 42nd RTR from 1st Tank Brigade. The initial attack was not coordinated well, and it was taking longer than expected to get through the wire. Slowly the sappers cleared lanes, and then Matilda dozers plowed through the wire, but the German line would not be pressed hard that morning due to these delays. At mid-day, an artillery duel developed, with the German 105s and 150cm guns answered by the British 25 Pounders.

At noon Rommel ordered 21st Panzer to stop the advance of the British 1st Armored, and both sides met where the road hit a feeder wadi before it continued west. The British had the 9th and 12th Lancers on point, mostly armored cars. The collision of the two sides brought all movement to a halt, with the Damliars and AEC IIIs firing away at the oncoming German tanks and Panzergrenadiers. The British fed in the infantry from 7th Motor Brigade, and the division artillery began to rain fire on the Germans, which had pushed into the wadi to use it as a blocking position.

Further south 7th Armored was attempting its wider envelopment, its recon elements running into German AT guns along that same wadi as it wound into the open country. 2nd Derbyshire Armored cars found a way around the guns to the left, and led the way for 4/8th Hussars and the Greys Armored Battalion, with 14 Grants, 18 M5 Stuarts and five AEC III Armored Cars with that good 75mm main gun. This was Robert's 4th Light Brigade, and it now believed it had found the enemy flank. 22nd Armored Brigade began to swing in behind it, but then a call came in from Popski on the flank, warning of trouble.

"I'm up on hill 482," he said. "That's the one southeast of your jumping off point at Sidi Azzab. There's a big column of dust to my southwest, and I can make out tanks in the lead with my field glasses—maybe seven or eight clicks off. Look, there's what passes for a road out there, and it leads all the way back to the main north south road to Sirte. I think Rommel's on it, and he's up to his old tricks again."

"Good enough, Major," said the Colonel back at HQ in response. "But we've already locked horns with Jerry's 21st Panzer. We're turning his flank

right now.”

“That may be so, but what about the rest of the German armor? They’re about to turn *your* bloody flank, and that’s a fact. Now you get this to O’Connor, and fast, if you please Colonel.”

Popski would have a balcony seat to the drama that was now playing out on the plain below. He watched as his every fear began to materialize before his eyes, with long columns of tanks and vehicles emerging from that desert dust storm they were making as they came. With each passing moment his mood darkened. This wasn’t a single division—not simply the 15th Panzer which they knew Rommel had in hand. It was two divisions, and he watched as they split like the horns of an onrushing bull, one moving south of his position, the other turning northeast. He knew Lieutenant Reeves was a little to his southeast on the road back to Wadi Harawah.

“Lieutenant,” he called on the radio. “You’re about to have some nasty company.”

“We’ve seen them,” said Reeves. “Looks like a tank company up front. My boys can stop them.”

“No lad, it’s a good deal more than that. There’s a whole bloody Panzer Division coming your way, and you’d best get back to the Wadi. I’ll notify HQ, if I can get the damn Colonel there to understand what’s happening.” Then the sound of artillery fire could be clearly heard by Reeves over Popski’s radio link, and it added depth to that warning.

“Looks like they’ve seen us up here,” said Popski. “I’m heading east, and you do the same! Popski out.”

When the Colonel went to O’Connor, he found him already on the radio. It was Wavell, all the way from Alexandria on the special HF Radio set that Kinlan had given each high level HQ for better communications. He had just heard news that he found hard to believe. “Tobruk?” he said. “The whole bloody harbor?”

“Blasted to hell,” came Wavell’s voice in reply. “The bay is twice the size it was, and all the fuel bunkered on the south shore was completely destroyed. Every ship in the harbor was sunk, including two tankers, several gunboats, the monitor, and an American destroyer.”

“Destroyed? But we sent Kinlan’s Brigade there to top off. Can you reach him?”

“We’ve tried, but get no reply. This report came in from troops at Mersa

Matruh that were moving to Tobruk this morning. If he was there, then Kinlan went the way of everything else. I'm told the whole area is completely devastated, for miles in all directions. They saw it light up the sky like a second sun when it hit. Planes were blown off the tarmac at El Adem, and the hangers caught fire there. That's all of 13 miles south of the bay. It had to be one of those special warheads the Russians told us about."

"Well who in God's name fired the damn thing? Surely not the Germans—they can't have such weapons."

"We don't know, but I've a message out to the *Argos Fire*, and to the Russians. Richie, you had better rethink this offensive. If Kinlan is gone, you're on your own out there." O'Connor looked over his shoulder, seeing the Colonel trying to get his attention.

"Damn it man, what is it?" he said, still shocked by Wavell's news.

"Rommel sir," said the Colonel. "That scout down on the southern flank says he seen a lot of movement. He's reporting division sized forces on the deep left flank—two divisions, sir."

O'Connor nodded. "General," he said into his handset to Wavell. "I've got my hands full out here. Keep me advised if you learn anything more."

He stormed over to the nearest map on a small field table set up outside his HQ tent. He had been all set to leave for the front to go and listen to the battle, but this news from Wavell was deeply shocking.

"Colonel," he said, collaring the messenger. "Where was Popski when he reported that movement you spoke of?"

"He says he was on Hill 482, sir, southeast of Sidi Azzab."

"Sir," came another Lieutenant. "General Tucker with the 4th Indian reports the enemy is attacking Sidi Azzab. He's had to turn his whole column 90 points to face what looks to be a full panzer division."

"That was where Harding was with 7th Armored this morning when we jumped off," said O'Connor. "Rommel's got round my left flank!"

"This Popski fellow seems rather insistent about exactly that, sir," said the Colonel.

"Well, why didn't I hear about it sooner? Alright, where is Brigadier Richards with the 23rd Armored Brigade? Has he moved yet?"

"No sir," said the Lieutenant. "He's still laagered on the road leading up to Bir Qarinah, waiting for orders."

"Good for him. Now he'll get them. Tell the General I want his Brigade

here. He's to swing southeast of Sidi Azzab. General Horrocks?" O'Connor looked over his shoulder for his X Corps Commander. "You had better get forward and sort things out. We may have to stop 7th Armored and get it turned around. I'm taking the AA park south and setting up a screen at Ulyam Ar Rimith. Both roads meet there if Rommel is doing what I think he pulled off here. Now... What's this unit?"

"Those are the French Brigades attached to 44th Home Counties."

"Good. Tell General Hughes I'll be taking them into Army Reserve. And where is the 21st Indian Brigade?"

"They were at Nofilia, sir, but nobody's heard from them for hours. Probably on the road somewhere."

"Well someone bloody well find out where they are, and tell them they are to go here..." He leaned over his map, squinting. "Alam al Hunja," he said. "Yes, that's what the cheeky bastard wants. From there all the roads lead him right to the coast, and 50 kilometers behind our backsides! My God, that man does war justice. Who's attacking who here? Rommel looks like he's trying to bag the entire 8th Army!"

Chapter 23

All was not lost on the front simply because Rommel had out flanked O'Connor's position. The wily General O'Connor had reacted quickly, reaching for any reserve he had at hand and sending them to precisely the right positions to stop what he believed his enemy was now doing. Meanwhile, further west, his own planned envelopment was still pushing hard. Horrocks did not get out there quickly enough to stop 7th Armored.

Now the planned two division thrust looked like a great arm swinging into an uppercut at Rommel's defensive front. The long muscular forearm was the sturdy 4th Indian Division, most of which was now facing south against the threat of Rommel's envelopment. The clenched fist was 7th Armored, and it was punching through Rommel's screen of AT guns and light mobile Panzerjagers. And on the Via Balbia, the 51st Highland Division had forced two penetrations in the line against the German 164th Light Division. All was not lost. There was still a great deal of fight in the British 8th Army.

Moving swiftly through the night, with sandy fragments in their wake catching the moonlight, Sonderverband 288 raced towards their objective at Alam Hunjah. That was the place Rommel said he hoped to be standing by noon on the second day of the battle, and his troops were nearly there. 7th Panzer had crossed all the plain of Abu as Shawk that night, turning north. There, to its chagrin, it ran right into Brigadier Richards 23rd Armored Brigade.

This was O'Connor's haymaker, the heaviest brigade he possessed in terms of sheer armored fighting power. 50th RTR had 36 Churchill IIIs, 36 Valentines and another 36 Crusader IIIs. The 46th and 8th RTRs were configured the same way. A fourth battalion, the 40th RTR had another 48 Valentines in reserve, placing over 350 tanks in this single brigade. 7th Panzer's lead elements had just crossed Wadi Harawah when that wave of armor fell upon it like a hammer. O'Connor then ordered both the two Free French Brigades due south to Sidi Azzab, and they were to attack immediately. To the 4th Indian Division, he gave orders to push south with all its strength. His intention was to take hold of the German Tiger as it

prowled east in the night, wrestle it to the ground and attempt to stop it, then and there. It remained to be seen whether he was taking a tiger by the tail or not, but this battle would decide the war on this front for months to come.

50th RTR drove on, pushing back the armored cars of the 7th Panzer Recon, and then trundling down into the wadi. Popski's scout detachment was right there with them, and his AEC III was shot right out from under him. He only just barely managed to escape through the upper hatch before the vehicle 'brewed up.' There was a shrapnel wound on his left forearm, though the adrenaline of the moment was too great for him to notice. All he could think of was getting to the nearest cover, which in this case was a scout jeep. When he dragged himself under it, there were two other members of his team, Lance and Nelson.

"Whoa Nelly," he breathed. "We've no business in the middle of this mess. Does that jeep above us still run?"

"Shot clean through the engine," said Nelson. "Richards has all the rest of the group, back about 300 yards. Can't see a thing in all this smoke and dust."

"Then it's belly work for us," said Popski. "Stay low and we'll head that way. We belong out on the flank, not here in the middle of the stew."

"You'd best bandage that arm," Corporal Lance pointed, and Popski noticed he was bleeding for the first time. He took the scarf from around his neck, and wrapped it as tightly as he could. Then they began to crawl, like three fat snakes in the sand, making their way from one hummock of low growth to the next. Off to the south, Popski could see the tanks of 46th and 8th RTRs grinding towards the German Position, and the whole scene was masked with grey smoke, where the lightning of gunfire cracked out sharply as the tanks fired, the yellow orange fire marking their positions.

46th RTR ran straight into two companies of the II Battalion of Funck's 25th Panzer Regiment. 8th RTR was dueling with the 3rd Company on the left of the British advance. The Germans would field about 120 tanks there, against 220 British, and it was a fearsome collision of armor. 46th RTR got the worst of things, taken in the flank as it charged by one of the two German companies. There were four Tigers there, and four Lions, their big turrets rotating, guns cracking out their fire. The 88mm gun on the Tigers took a heavy toll, and the 46th lost 16 Churchills, 15 Valentines and 20 Crusader IIIs, knocked out in twenty minutes of hard fighting. It began to back away,

treads grinding in the sandy ground, guns still firing.

Popski and his comrades made it to Richards, where they found three jeeps and motored away to the northeast. When they came up on the height of Ulayam ar Rimith, they saw O'Connor's HQ vehicles below, and to their great surprise, a German recon unit was already flanking that hill to the east.

"Bloody hell," said Popski. "The forward depot is just five clicks down this road. I hope the General down there knows what's happened. Who's got a radio?"

Up the far side of the hill they soon saw movement, crouching low, their fists tight on their weapons. Nelson pulled back the bolt on the machinegun mounted on the jeep, and took aim, but then he saw the red berets ahead, squinting through the blowing smoke.

"Hold your fire," he shouted. "It's the S.A.S!" O'Connor had sent the single company of commandos attached to his HQ up to that hill to have a look.

"You boys are a sight for sore eyes," said Popski. "Hell of a fight back there. Rommel's going all out to turn this flank! Is the General down there?"

"We Just came up from the HQ," said a Lieutenant. "He's there, alright. Threw in the Pretorian Guard half an hour ago when he unleashed the 23rd. There's nothing else left but the AA Park units. He's got them all dug in in front of the depot. We're to hold this hill."

Seven Kilometers south, Reese had been caught up in the sweeping battle with his 1/12th Royal Lancers. He was on the road east to Al Hunjah, and ran into the Panzer Fusilier Company from Sonderverband 288, which was quickly reinforced by a platoon of pioneers, and then, in the middle of the fight, up came II Battalion, 6th Panzergrenadiers. The three Challenger IIs formed a triangle, their 120mm guns blasting away and blowing up one halftrack after another. The Scimitars pumped out a lot of fire with their autocannons, yet Reeves saw two of his vehicles hit in rapid succession by a heavy caliber round, and their thinner aluminum armor was easily penetrated. There was too much enemy infantry. He could see them dismounting, moving forward in small groups, setting up mortars and machineguns, and their AT teams had the Panzerfaust that had ambushed one of his vehicles after Gazala. He knew he had to maneuver, and open the range.

"All units," he ordered through his headset mike. "We move north to Ulayam ar Rimith. Challengers provide covering fire. Scimitars move now!"

Reese would lose one more Scimitar as they fell back. His other vehicles made it safely away, and the three Challengers remained invulnerable to any hits they took. Popski spotted them withdrawing toward his position, and raised Reeves on the radio. "Come on up and join the party," he shouted over the din. "Our whole lot is up here with the S.A.S. company, and the General is right behind us."

"This is going to get ugly," said Reeves. "We spotted what looks like an entire battalion of armor swinging round your left and heading north. And there's fighting at Alam al Hunjah. Hold on. I'm moving my unit to your position now."

All over the field, the fortunes of battle were shifting, the balance teetering. The 4th Indian had swamped the German line, and was now heavily engaged with 15th Panzer Division, which acted like a good blocking linesman to allow the fallback, 7th Panzer, to race around the flank. The British 7th Armored pushed out onto the plain of Al Hamarayah, but then ran into a strong German blocking position at Wadi Daf'an. Ramcke had been listening to the battle back at Rommel's old HQ at the airfield complex south of Sirte. The General was long gone, off to join his panzers, and Ramcke had no orders. Hearing the battle chatter on the radio, he knew there was trouble on the flank, and so he stepped out of the HQ tent, whistling for his Adjutant.

"Get the men up and ready to move," he said. "The British are trying to come round the flank of 21st Panzer. We're going to stop them!" He had five battalions of tough Falschirmjaegers, and they leapt aboard the reserve trucks pooled there, motoring off into the haze. When they reached the scene of 7th Armored's turning maneuver, they could see that 21st Panzer was hard pressed, with the British 1st Armored to the east, and now the 7th Armored coming up from the south. The German Division had adopted a horseshoe defensive front, with the rugged ground of Wadi Daf'an in the center.

Ramcke knew that it would take tanks to stop that envelopment, so the thing to do was to get his battalions east to relieve the Panzer units on that line. Then they could swing south and engage the enemy armor. That battle was still raging, when another most unexpected arrival would shift the winds of fate in Rommel's favor.

The 501st Heavy Panzer Battalion had landed at Tunis, and von Arnim had thought to put it on the trains to move west into Algeria, but Kesselring intervened.

“Those tanks are to go to Rommel,” he said. “Führer’s orders—direct from OKW this morning.”

So three companies of tanks were arriving, 27 Tigers with the lighter Lynx Recon tanks among them. Hitler had kept his promise, and now it was up to Rommel to keep his. The arrival of Ramcke’s five battalions had stabilized the situation. With this fresh force of heavy armor, the Germans would counterattack.

Harding’s attack was already slowing when he got a message from General Horrocks on the radio. “Look,” he said. “Rommel’s got 7th Panzer round our flank, and he’s already well east of Wadi Harawah. We’ve had to turn the whole of 4th Indian Division south to hold the flank, and so we’ve nothing to support you out there. O’Connor wants you to pull out, and now. Get back on the road to Bir Qarinah, and head due east. Jerry has turned north and he’s after the depot at Rimith!”

Those orders were easily given, but they would be very difficult to carry out. About half the division was able to disengage and get back to the road. The other half was still locked in close range firefights with the German 21st Panzer Division. As Harding’s column headed east in the gloom, they could hear the sounds of battle off their right shoulders, the line of the 4th Indian still fighting with 15th Panzer Division. At Sidi Azzab, a patchwork of machine gun units, engineer field companies, and the Free French troops were battling to hold that crossing point over Wadi Harawah.

O’Connor could see that he had been outmaneuvered. His attack toward the wadi to try and stop 7th Panzer in that massive tank battle involving 23rd Armored Brigade was a gamble, but the Germans had held with most of their division while sending that battalion of tanks right on around the flank. He needed armor, and quickly, reluctantly giving the order to Brigadier Richards to pull his brigade out and return to Ulyam ar Rimith, the site of the HQ AA park and forward depot. It was all the fuel the British had brought forward to sustain their planned envelopment, and it had to be saved.

8th RTR was able to disengage and move northeast, but it would not get there in time. 46th RTR took a route south of the hill where Popski and the others watched, and ran into a recon company from Sonderverband 288. But Reeves had been listening to all this radio traffic and knew now what he could do. He gave the order to move to full battle speed, and his fast AFVs moved like the desert wind, racing north around Popski’s position and then

swinging up to Ar Rimith to arrive there just as the first of three companies of German panzers began their attack. The light flak batteries with their 40mm Bofors were trying to hold the line, but now they would get some most welcome relief.

Reeves hit the 1st Company of I 25th Panzer, which had 12 VK-55 Lions, three of the new bigger versions, the VK-76, 21 Leopards medium tanks and 9 of the speedy Lynx Pz II recon tanks. The Challengers opened fire, knocking out two Lions and three Leopards, which forced the Germans to fall back and regroup. There were two more companies, equally configured, and they were continuing to flank the position to the right. Then the Germans organized another tank rush with 1st and 2nd Companies, and Reeves was all that stood in their way. Behind them the Germans, II Battalion of 6th Panzergrenadier was coming up in support.

Rommel had been on the scene, racing in his staff car from one unit of the 7th Panzer to another. He pulled together any scattered unit he found, a few flack guns on halftracks, two towed AT guns, a company of motorcycle troops. Building small kampfgруппes like this, he sent them east and north, and battalion by battalion, he had directed the masterful sweep of the 7th Panzer Division in that envelopment. He had reached Al Hunjah just a few hours after he said he would, a testament to the amazing skill he possessed, the ability to see ahead in a battle like a good chess player, judge the terrain, and know what his units could do, where they could go, and how fast. Now he wanted that fuel depot.

46th RTR brushed the recon company it encountered aside and was now assembling just northeast of Popski's hill. 8th RTR was 2 kilometers to the northwest, moving towards the depot, and 50th RTR was still on the road, another 5 kilometers west near Sidi Azzab. The 4th Indian had been slowly extricating itself from the lines of 15th Panzer Division, falling back north again. Reeves had stopped one company of German tanks, and was hotly engaged by the reinforcing battalion arriving.

The tanks we can handle, he thought. Our Challengers can pick them off one by one if they persist, though I'm down to four scimitars now, and the three Warriors. His own Dragon-90 had taken a glancing blow from a lighter gun, most likely from one of the German Leopards, which still had the 50mm gun. It failed to penetrate at the angle it hit, and Cobb saw the enemy tank, pivoting and blasting it with that 90mm gun. The arrival of 8th RTR was a

welcome sight, and when it engaged, he decided to pull his Squadron out, shifting northeast to an ancient cemetery site where the road crossed a wadi bed. When he arrived he could see the Army transport pool truck reserve heading north.

O'Connor now had a most difficult decision to make. The Germans had reached the depot, overrunning the stores and barrels of fuel stockpiled there with two companies of tanks. They now had the bulk of the entire 25th Panzer Regiment on the scene, reinforced by two Panzergrenadier battalions and two battalions from the recon force, which were already bypassing the site, speeding east past hill 430 towards Nofilia some 26 kilometers on. The only thing that could try and stop them was the RAF. The 21st Indian Brigade was still dueling with elements of Sonderverband 288 near Alam al Hunjah, very near the place where Rommel was at that moment. O'Connor ordered the Brigade to withdraw towards Nofilia the way it had come.

As for the rest of his 8th Army, it was clear to O'Connor that he was not going to beat Rommel that day, nor was he going to break the defensive front his nemesis had established here. On the coast, the 51st had broken through the line of the wadi, but then up came the Italian Giovanti Fascisti Brigade, just in time to stop them. Called "Mussolini's Boys" by the Germans, the Young Fascist unit was fanatical and very stubborn when it went into combat. It was an odd moment, with an Italian unit coming to the rescue of the German 164th Division, and they were enough to hold the Via Balbia closed to further British advance. 50th Northumberland could not break the well-fortified lines of the 90th Light, and so everywhere, the British were on defense.

O'Connor turned to a staffer. "We've lost the forward dump, and now the stocks at Nofilia are exposed. Send word to the 1st South African Division at Agedabia. I want them to move west into the bottleneck at once. All units west of Wadi Harawah will disengage and return to their starting positions. This battle is over—unless Rommel persists on this flank. I can't imagine he can push much farther east, but I've been wrong before. I want all of Tenth Corps to retire through Bir Qarinah. We'll just have to pull ourselves together and try again another time."

Tobruk gone, and now this, he thought heavily. The whole army is out here, and deflating like a great balloon. If I have to fall back, that's exactly what it would be like, getting all the air out of that bloody balloon. I've a

single good road passing through the bottleneck, and the whole area is just four kilometers wide. On the other side, we can't be bothered. Rommel simply cannot push through the mass of this army as long as I still hold that defile. But something tells me he has no intention of ever trying. No. He's forsaken Cyrenaica for good now, and while it looked like he was giving us half of Tripolitania with his withdrawal, he snookered me good. He was just luring me out into good ground for a fight. Yes, he can't fight on the ropes, so he wanted to dance in the middle of the ring again, a weary old champion looking for one last victory. Well, he's got one now. But we aren't beaten yet. We'll fall back, consolidate, hold the bottleneck in tight if we have to. Then it's simply a matter of replacing our losses before we try again.

That evening he would learn that 2 battalions of 22nd Armored Brigade had been cut off and destroyed, almost to a man. War was hell.

Chapter 24

As night fell, O'Connor realized that any further retreat by the Army as a whole would likely end up in a complete mess. Units would get lost, intermingled, equipment would be abandoned, and worse, morale would ooze out of the Army like air from that balloon. So he issued a stand fast order to all the infantry divisions. They were to consolidate behind a defensive front, begin moving their artillery and local stores, but would make no retreat that night. He did not think the German infantry divisions could threaten or move them in any case. The infantry when well deployed on defense was a sturdy shield.

For his shattered sword, the armored force, he knew that he needed to keep moving. Behind Ulyam ar Rimith, there was a track that ran due east for a little over 20 kilometers. It would parallel the road the German recon units had taken to Nofilia, and so that was where he wanted his armor. He sent Popski on ahead that night, telling him to report in hourly as to the condition of the track, and any enemy movement that might be attempting to cut that route. Then he assembled his Brigadiers and got them all on the same page, telling them what he wanted them to do.

"Nofilia," he said. "We've lost the fuel at Rimith, but there's a good deal more at Nofilia. Rommel's headed that way, but he has a long flank to watch, and it gets longer with each mile he moves east. We've got the inside track, and so we move east with him, right along this road. It passes the hill at Ras at Tarqui, then crosses the highland here at Ras Kubar. At that point, the Via Balbia is just seven or eight klicks north, and Nofilia no more than fifteen klicks east. We need that ground. We've got to block any move by the Germans to the north and secure the depot at Nofilia. Gentlemen, how are your brigades looking after this fight?"

Roberts of 22nd Armored spoke up, a dejected look on his face. "I'm afraid our lot took quite a beating. Jerry got up the paras to hold the line we were fighting with 21st Panzer. Then the mobile units shifted south and caught my brigade in the flank. I've lost the whole of 1st and 5th RTRs, nearly a 100 tanks gone there. I managed to save the Yeomanry, and the infantry battalion and artillery."

“Bad throw there,” said O’Connor. “Let it be a lesson to us. Even the mighty shall fall. These sands cover the heads of kings and warlords who thought they would rule here forever. We’re just the latest to come along.”

4th Light Brigade was in better shape, except for the Household Cavalry. 23rd Armored Brigade still had plenty of tanks on hand, some still fighting down near the lost depot. Ironically, they were low on fuel. O’Connor continued to count his eggs, then gave orders to each Brigade commander, suiting the condition of the forces he had. While 51st still held on the north coast, he withdrew the 1st Tank Brigade, and started it east on the fast road surface of the Via Balbia

“Gentlemen,” he said. “We thought we’d give the Germans a surprise with our Churchills and the new American tanks. But I’m told they did the same to us. He’s taking his Tigers east, but we’ve got a lot of fight left in us yet.”

“Yes sir, those new heavy tanks really *are* Tigers—well named. But our heavies can stop them, wherever they are.”

The men looked at O’Connor with expectant eyes. They had seen, time and time again, the swift moving mass of Kinlan’s 7th Heavy Brigade riding to the rescue, and O’Connor could see that they were wondering where it was.

“Brigadier Kinlan was at Tobruk,” he said. “And I’m afraid I have some bad news about the place....”

* * *

Lieutenant Reeves had a problem. That night one of his three Challenger IIs hit a mine as he was withdrawing up the road from the cemetery. It completely blew off a segment of the left track and damaged two wheels, though the interior of the tank was not compromised and no one was injured. Under normal circumstances in operating with the Brigade, an incident like this would not have been a problem. They would have just called for engineers to come and tow the tank, or even effect a field repair, and it would have been back in operation within hours. That was not possible now, not with two battalions of German tanks and infantry three kilometers behind him, and nothing but a thin screen of light flak holding them—that and the darkness. He huddled with Sergeant Williams.

“Willie,” he said, “that’s a huge chunk of our firepower sitting there, and I hate to leave it, but I don’t see there’s anything we can do. We either leave it there as a pill box and have it fight to the last round, or we cut our losses and save the ammo. Let’s get every round out and distribute them to the other two tanks. The crew can ride in the Warriors.”

“We’re going to just leave it sitting there for the Germans?”

“Hell no! Rig up a demolition charge and place it inside the tank. Another goes down the barrel. That’s the best we can do. It will blow the interior equipment and electronics to bloody hell. Before we do that, strip off any external equipment we can use for the other two, and scour the damn thing for anything that shouldn’t be left behind. Let’s be quick. The Germans could move this way any minute, and we’ll find ourselves in another firefight.”

So there it went, one of the last three Challengers on the field of battle. An hour later Reeves was following in the footsteps of Popski, heading east on the road to Ras at Tarqui, and leading the long column of 23rd Armored Brigade in a slow procession of steel. Along the way they passed a Muslim shrine, and then the broken column of an old Roman ruin. When he saw them, Reeves could not help but think of the empires that had swept over these sands, each thinking it was the epitome of power, there to bend the hand of fate to its will. The thought of that Challenger II he was leaving behind nagged at him—all glory was fleeting. Now it would be just another derelict ruin in the desert, and a monument to the folly of man’s pride, and of war.

Come dawn on the 3rd day, October 12th, O’Connor gave the order for the infantry to withdraw, with 51st Highland on the coastal road, and 50th Northumbrian taking a parallel track through the desert. 4th Indian and the two French brigades continued to screen the withdrawal of the armor. A single battalion of the Indian 21st Independent Brigade reached Nofilia as ordered. One was still hung up near Alam al Hunjah, surrounded by German troops of the 7th Panzer Division. The other was strung out on the roads, dogged by elements of Sonderverband 288.

Rommel was standing exactly where he had planned to be, but the chaos of war saw his panzer divisions scattered all over the desert, on ground spanning over 40 kilometers. What he needed now was infantry, a force to screen his flank if he continued to push the panzers east. The heavy Tigers in the 501st arrived, and he immediately sent them east in a shock column build

around two Panzergrenadier battalions of the 15th Panzer Division, and a battalion of armor that had been operating with those Tigers.

“Are the Italians coming up as I ordered?” he asked his new Chief of staff Fritz Bayerlein. He was now working with von Thoma to help coordinate the movement.

“Mussolini’s Boys have already reached the 164th, and the Trieste Motorized Division is right behind them, along with what’s left of the Ariete Division, which isn’t much.”

“Good, that will free up the 164th. And the 90th?”

“Trento Division should relieve them on the line, but not until very late today. They might reach the front by nightfall.”

“The British have pulled their infantry out,” said Rommel. “Tell Marcks to begin moving the 90th this way immediately, and 15th Panzer should continue east to join us here.”

“You mean to continue the attack?” asked von Thoma.

“You object?” Rommel looked at him.

“Well sir, the troops are scattered all over the desert; the divisions all intermingled with one another.”

“Then it is up to us to sort things out. We’ve sent the British packing, but they’ve left a lot of luggage behind as well. Don’t be fooled. They aren’t beaten yet. But if we can get to Nofilia in strength, they will be in a bad way. That is only 35 kilometers from where we stand now.”

“I can have the bulk of my division at Sidi Azzab by sunset,” said von Bismarck of the 21st Panzer.

“Then we will move with 15th Panzer taking the lead. The 7th will reorganize here and be ready to follow in the morning, with your division right behind it, Herr von Bismarck.”

“Do you really think you can cut off the entire 8th Army?” said von Thoma.

“I will certainly try,” said Rommel, somewhat irritated. “If we sit on our thumbs now, so will O’Connor. He’ll secure Nofilia, bring up reserves, and we’ll be back at it again in no time. If, however, I press him hard now, threaten to cut his route back through Mersa Brega, then I may compel him to withdraw through the defile. Then we put the cork back in the bottle again.”

“But we were just sitting there two weeks ago,” said von Thoma. “It was you that popped that cork with this withdrawal to Buerat.”

“That was then, this is now,” said Rommel, his cheeks flushed red with the cold desert air. “If the British do withdraw through the bottleneck, then we look for other options.”

“Another flanking attack—through the badlands near Marada?”

“O’Connor came that way when he thought he was pushing us out a few weeks ago.”

“You want Cyrenaica again?”

Now Rommel turned on him. “What I want is the choice to do what I wish,” he said sharply. “Appearances matter in war. Whether I want Cyrenaica is not the point. I must demonstrate that I can go there nonetheless. The fact that I *might* be able to take it if I choose is the entirety of it. O’Connor will look at my dispositions and then he will be forced to plan accordingly. We’ve gained at least a month with this battle. Now I want to make that two months. Tonight the Führer will have some more good news, just as I promised him. He will hear O’Connor was beaten, that the British are retreating, that the Afrika Korps is on the move east. For the next few days, let him enjoy the headlines.”

Now an officer came in with three messages, saluting and handing them off to Bayerlein. “Well,” he said, “scanning the pages, and looking over a photograph, which he now handed to Rommel. “This is most unusual. Something has happened at Tobruk.”

That surprised Rommel, for the port was just a backwaters outpost now, with most British supplies being routed into Benghazi. He glanced at the aerial recon photo, and the surprise deepened to real mystery. “That isn’t Tobruk,” he said. “The shape of the bay is all wrong. The pilot must have made an error.”

“It says here Tobruk was overflowed at noon today and found to be completely destroyed.” Bayerlein handed Rommel the message.

“I tell you it’s wrong. If that’s Tobruk, I’ll eat my hat.”

“Then what about this?” The second message was handed over, and Rommel saw that it was coming direct from OKW. “Confirm massive detonation at the port of Tobruk. Forward latest aerial recon imaging at earliest opportunity.” Rommel looked up at the others.

“Someone at OKW wants me to have this dusty old cap for breakfast,” he said with a smile. “Very well, confirm it. Yet if that photograph is accurate, it must have been a truly massive explosion. What could cause such damage?”

Look at the southern edge of the bay, the sea is well inland there now, all the way to the escarpment near the airfield at Fort Marcucci. And look where the town should be. You can't even make out the roads in this photo!" The more he looked at the image, the more he began to feel an uneasy sensation of fear.

Rommel had studied maps of that area for hours on end. He knew every landform and feature of the terrain, and how all the roads connected. He had given it a cursory glance earlier, but now he looked closer, seeing it was indeed Tobruk. There was the hill at Ras Belgamel, the Solaro Escarpment, Fort Pilastrino, some 10 kilometers from the bay. But the harbor, the town, even Fort Marcucci, were completely gone. What could have caused such tremendous devastation? Could they have had ships there, packed to the gills with ammunition and gasoline? Even that could not cause this destruction. He was deeply troubled. It didn't seem like OKW had any clue as to what had happened. They were looking for more information from his Luftwaffe assets here. Very strange indeed.

"And here's the last message," said Bayerlein. "It seems we've finally got our hands on one of those monster tanks the British have been beating us with. They found one abandoned just beyond the cemetery at Ar Rimith."

"Where is that?" Rommel was reaching for a map. "Here, about ten kilometers north. Let's get moving, gentlemen. Off to your duties. As for me, I'm off to see this tank!"

He would jump into the nearest vehicle, and was off in a column of dust, with von Thoma staring stupidly after him. The British rearguards were still fighting near the cemetery when Rommel arrived a half hour later. His appearance energized the local commanders, where a mixed regimental sized force from 7th Panzer was cleaning up the remnants of light flak guns, some still firing with their 40mm Bofors. Rommel was impatient, and he looked at his watch.

"I want this area cleared in fifteen minutes!" he ordered, and that was done.

When he reached the cemetery, he passed among the dry graves, the buried bones of generations past. There were few headstones, and those that remained were now scored by bullet wounds and the flash and powder burns of shells and grenades. There, north of the cemetery on a thin desert track, he saw the tilted mass of the largest tank he had ever laid eyes on.

The German Tiger I weighed in at 54 tons, with a body length of 20 feet

plus 8 inches. Gun forward it measured out to 27 feet, 9 inches. And it was just under 12 feet wide. The Challenger II was ten tons heavier, its body seven feet longer, and when gun forward it measured 44 feet with that long 120mm barrel. Only the width was about the same as the German tank. Even the later model King Tiger would not be as big as the Challenger II. Rommel could see the damaged track and wheels, the crater in the earth where the mine had gone off to hobble this vehicle. The long gun was bent and broken by an internal explosive, obviously deliberate. This spoke volumes to him.

The unit that fielded this tank was just a detachment, he thought. They had no engineering support, because our intelligence was correct. This heavy brigade was not here today, only a few vehicles. The ground around me still holds the imprint of their tank tracks, and I can read it very well. They couldn't save it, so they stripped it and then tried to demolish it with charges.

He climbed up onto it, his hand flat against the heavy turret armor. The solidity and power that feeling gave him was something he never forgot. This was the monster that had stopped him from taking Egypt, the beast that had brought him to the shame of defeat. He had tried to explain that shame away with all his talk of strategic withdrawal and saving the army to fight another day, but the bile of defeat was still bitter taste, no matter how much honey he stirred into that tea. Peering down through the top hatch, he was struck by the roomy turret, impressed by its flat design, nearly the width of the vehicle body itself. Everything there was wrecked and blackened by fire, but he gave orders that the Division tractors be brought forward and the tank was to be hauled off; transported to Sirte at once.

"I want it on a ship bound for Toulon within two weeks," he said. "Someone back home will be very pleased to have a look at that beast. How the British could have built it remains a mystery to me. And if they *could* build it, then why do they persist with that." He pointed to the wreck of a Crusader III, which seemed a feeble excuse for a tank beside the great mass of the Challenger II.

It was a most unexpected dividend from his little victory, like the errant RPG round that had been left behind at Palmyra, and the windfall delivered by Kapitan Heinrich when he captured the *Norton Sound*. There had been so little time to rig the demolition, and though the electronics were totally destroyed, someone was going to get a very good look at the composition of that Chobham armor, the powerful Perkins CV-12 engine, the David Brown

TN-54 transmission, the Hydropneumatic suspension. This little gift of the Magi would have a dramatic effect on the future course of the war.

Part IX

The Kirov Gap

“Satan never wasted a fiery dart on an area covered by armor.”

— Beth Moore

Chapter 25

While O'Connor was advancing into Tripolitania, the Germans achieved a dramatic breakthrough north and south of Voronezh in late September. 2nd Panzer Army had clamped the city in an enormous vise, then the infantry freed up by the Soviet withdrawals came up to relieve those troops, allowing them to continue east. A small pocket formed around Voronezh, trapping 16 Soviet divisions, including most of the 2nd Guards Army and supporting troops. The drive east saw Hoth in the north, his 3rd Panzer Armee holding the northern shoulder, and Model's larger 2nd Panzer Armee for the main offensive. German recon elements raced ahead through the breach. Cutting rail lines to prevent the enemy from using them to bring in speedy reserves.

South of the city, 24th Siberian held the shoulder, and Zhukov was forced to pull back everything he still had west of the upper Don. With strong infantry support available, the Germans shifted 12th and 55th Infantry Korps to that shoulder, again freeing up Model's Panzers to move further east. There was a sharp battle around the railhead town of Panino, 80 kilometers east of Voronezh on 1 October, but the sheer mass of the German advance overwhelmed the defense. To the north and south, the ground was now a sea of mud, but Model cleverly found the hardened rail bed a perfect avenue for his drive. It ran southeast to the city of Anna, which is exactly where he wanted to go.

By October 8th, The Germans were 100 kilometers east of Voronezh and the Don, advancing into territory that they never occupied during Operation Blue in the old history. In fact, this was the original intention of Operation Blue as it was first conceived. The Germans wanted to pierce the enemy line east of Voronezh, and with that breakthrough, turn to attack the Soviet position south of the Don from the rear. It was their inability to make this breakthrough in Fedorov's history, that forced them to instead move along the southern bank of the Don, which remained a bulwark of the Soviet defensive front. Now, the stunning pincer operation Halder had planned would deliver Voronezh, and write all new history with that speedy drive east.

At his wits end, Zhukov pulled units back over the Don, then pushed them

north, including the entire 50th Army under Petrov, which extended the southern shoulder of the German penetration as it pushed east. He then set about grabbing any rear area unit he could find, border security regiments, NKVD guards, railroad battalions, flack units, and service troops, and threw them in a haphazard line to extend the northern shoulder. His problem was that he had no substantial force available in this area to stage a counterattack to try and blunt the German drive.

To make matters worse, the German 17th Army took Rossosh as the Soviets pulled out, then launched a surprise night river crossing operation just north of Pavlovsk on the Don. That attack was driving up the rail line past Voronskova towards Burnurlinkova. It was acting as a small southern pincer and, if Model shifted his drive south, he would bag 36 divisions, all the troops of 3rd and 11th Armies, along with 24th Siberian. It was another disaster in the making.

“They persist,” Zhukov said to Sergei Kirov. “The mud is slowing them down in the open country, but they are advancing up the hardened rail lines. This attack to the south of Burnurlinkova must be contained by counterattack, so I have moved Yeremenko’s 4th Shock Army to the rail lines, and pulled the 1st Special Rifle Corps under Katukov out of the Boguchar Bridgehead as well.”

“4th Shock Army?” said Kirov. “Those were troops you were holding for the Winter Offensive.”

“Yes, but that is all I can use. There is nothing else in reserve, and I’ve raided every nest I could find, from cities as far away as Tambov and Saratov, just to find scattered remnants that were reforming in the rear and throw something in front of those panzer divisions. The line won’t hold. It will have to be the mud that eventually stops them.”

“What can Katukov do?”

“He has good troops: 1st and 7th Guards Rifle Divisions, 4th and 11th Tank Brigades, and with all new T-34s, and then the 12th and 27th Cavalry Divisions along with a few smaller supporting regiments. These were the troops that fought at Mtsensk and saved Tula last Winter. They will be enough to challenge this southern pincer that crossed the Don at Pavlovsk. As for the German 2nd Panzer Army, it will take a strong fresh army to stop them. 4th Shock Army was in the Serafomovich Bridgehead. It was slated to be the exploitation Army for Operation Uranus. It is either that, or nothing.”

“Why not pull back all those armies and form a new line running from Anna, through Burnurlinkova, and then to Voronsovka?”

“We could do that as well,” said Zhukov, “but then all the German infantry presently opposite those armies will be free to redeploy again. They can thin out their line, shift troops north into the penetration, and that could allow the panzers even more freedom of movement.”

Kirov stared at the map, his brow deeply furrowed. They were in uncharted territory here, fighting for cities that Stalin had never lost. On the Volgograd Front, Steiner was pushing up the road from Martinovka towards Volgograd, and this also forced the Soviets to abandon the Beketova bulge, terrain they had held south of the city opposite Volkov’s troops. That fortified line had held for years, but now it was simply abandoned as the defense there focused more and more on the immediate approaches to the city. Yet this crisis east of Voronezh was the most serious event on the table. A decision had to be made.

“If you send 4th Shock Army, can it stop those panzers?”

“Possibly. At the very least we will take hold of the tiger’s jaws and keep them from closing for a time. Katukov will stop the southern pincer, and 4th Shock attacks the main drive in the north. But do not expect them to do anything more. We can probably halt the German advance, but taking ground back is out of the question.”

“What if we allowed a pocket to form? The Kirov pocket held up the German advance on Moscow a year ago, and it held out for over six months.”

“That was because we had a major city at its heart. Burnurlinkova cannot supply all the armies that would be in that pocket here, over 36 divisions.”

“What about Volgograd?”

“I have a train arriving from Saratov. It isn’t much, a single rifle division and three or four regiments of engineers, flack units, AT battalions. I’ve also shifted three divisions from the line of the Volga north of the city. I do not think Volkov will try another attack there after what happened to him last time.”

“What if he does? He got over the river there before.”

“Then, Mister General Secretary, we have the Volgograd pocket, and if that happens, I will attack with everything we have left in the Serafimovich Bridgehead and try to reach the Chir again. They have the rail line open there now. The supply it has been delivering is the reason Steiner was able to break

the stalemate. I had 18 divisions against those SS troops. It took that much to hold them in check for so long. The Volga Rifles practically died to a man. Only one division in the corps remains.”

“We have nothing else in reserve? No more tank corps?”

“I have three rifle divisions and a few tank brigades at Ryazan, and four or five airborne regiments guarding key airfields. Aside from units in the Serafimovich Bridgehead, the only free tank corps are well west of Moscow, in the North Front sector. I was holding them for a spoiling attack.”

“They would be better used where it matters, but we must step up tank production dramatically.”

“That would be wise, but unfortunately, everything is in Siberia or up at Perm, and both production and delivery is very slow. The factories in Volgograd have enough to do just repairing damaged tanks we send them. The Germans have most every other major production center. Aircraft deliveries are better, as the Americans have sent us a good deal through Siberia. Tanks take longer, and we need them desperately. I massed damn near every heavy tank I could scrape from the lines into a division for Operation Uranus.”

At that moment, a messenger arrived with a stiff salute and trouble in his eyes. Model had again broken through the thin screen of units that Zhukov had thrown at his advance. The Germans had tanks in Arkangelskoye 40 kilometers east of Anna, and other units were flowing through a 20 kilometer breach in the front and turning south. This was also compounded by a big push north to Martinovka by Steiner’s SS that broke the stalemate in the Kalach Bridgehead. The Germans had cleared the terrain north of the road to the city to a depth of eight to ten kilometers, and Volgograd was now under direct threat of attack. Three Divisions were now reorganizing prior to commencing offensive operations.

“Choose your poison,” said Zhukov. “On the Voronezh Front, they are trying to pocket those armies we spoke of earlier. I suggest we attempt to extricate them, withdrawing through Burnurlinkova while we still can. The rail line south from there is already cut in at least one place. If not, then our entire line south of the Don in those bridgeheads will soon be under threat.”

“Do it. Save those troops. Cover your bridgeheads. They are the only force we have that can stage a creditable attack, the only eggs we still have in the nest.”

“And Volgograd?”

“Could you move some units from your bridgeheads to help defend the city?”

“It would take time,” said Zhukov. “We still hold the Don crossing at Golubinskaya. That road allows us to feed units into the defense north of Martinovka, easing the pressure on the city. I could send 4th Shock Army there instead of sending it to the Voronezh Front. Choose your poison, Mister General Secretary. I can do one or the other, but not both.”

Kirov rubbed his chin. “Berzin? Do you have an opinion on any of this?”

Berzin cleared his throat. “I know you have a strong psychological bond to Volgograd, and not just because half the city in the south has been renamed Novo Kirovka. But in my mind, the Voronezh Front is the more serious situation. If the German advance is not halted there, it will unhinge the entire line south of the Don, and foil the General’s plan for Operation Uranus as well. Send Yeremenko north.”

“Agreed,” said Zhukov. “Voronezh is the real crisis at the moment.”

Kirov shook his head. “And without 4th Shock Army, what chance does your Operation Uranus have?”

“A good offensive needs three things,” said Zhukov. “It needs mass, like water behind a dam. It needs shock to break that dam, and then it need speed to exploit the breach and penetrate as deeply into enemy territory as possible before he can react. With 4th Shock Army, Operation Uranus gets all three of those things. Without it, the battle becomes nothing more than a spoiling attack, just like Operation Mars.”

“Yet even that saw us get tanks as far south as Morozovsk.”

“For a day. Without support, they had to withdraw, and without 4th Shock Army, nothing would get that far in any case.”

Kirov had to decide. “Two balloons,” he said, prompting Berzin to look at Zhukov quizzically. But Kirov explained. “The first is this big group here, the armies south of Voronezh that we just pulled back over the Don. Now this German drive to the north threatens to pocket them. The second balloon is the big buildup you have labored to create in our Serafimovich Bridgehead. You say it is ready to strike, but now we stand here contemplating how best to minimize its chances by stripping Yeremenko’s troops away to send them north, or east to Volgograd. Well, we will do neither.”

“I don’t understand,” said Berzin. “We must do something, and quickly.”

“We will. Time to let the air out of both balloons. General Zhukov, those armies under threat south of Voronezh—pull them back as you have suggested. Form your line anew running from Voronsovka in the south, where Katukov is dealing with this infantry pincer. Then anchor it on Burnurlinkova, and run it up to Arkangelskoye. This will cover your Don bridgeheads and buy us time. It is mid-October. Winter must come soon, and god help us if it is late.”

“General Winter?” said Zhukov. “Oh, he is never late. In fact, he may arrive early this year. That volcano that erupted in the Pacific has had some rather dramatic effects on the weather. Very well, Mister General Secretary, I will do as you order. But the second balloon? Do I send 4th Shock Army north to stop Model, or to Golubinskaya to support the defense north of Volgograd?”

Kirov kept staring at the map. “General,” he said. “This operation you have planned for winter. Could it be launched early?”

Zhukov raised an eyebrow. “The ground in the south is still firm,” he said, thinking. “Mother Rasputista was not so generous there. So yes, the armies are ready, and I suppose I could attack at any time.”

“Haven’t the Germans strengthened their line after your abortive Mars offensive?”

“They have. The 14th Panzer Korps is in the Bouguchar sector, and one of their SS divisions has moved to the line south of Perelazovski opposite the Serafimovich Bridgehead.”

“Will it prevent this attack from succeeding?”

“It will be a rock in the stream, but the infantry on either side will be the target of our breakthroughs.”

“And the aim of this operation?”

“To get to the main road and rail lines along the River Chir. All their supplies are in depots there—Morozovsk, Oblivskaya, Surovinko. If we take those, or even any one of the three, we cut Steiner’s offensive off at the root.”

“Can’t he get supplies from Volkov’s territory south of Volgograd?”

“He might get some gasoline, but Volkov does not manufacture the ammunition and equipment he needs to sustain his operations.”

“Very well, then attack. Use 4th Shock Army as you have already planned. The best defense is a good offense. I see no merit in dissipating the power you have labored so hard to build up there, so attack, General, and

may God go with you.”

* * *

Katukov's defense on the southern pincer against the German 17th Army was masterful. He contained the breakthrough, and was counterattacking when the retreat order was given to pull those five armies out of that imminent pocket. The men fell back under a protective artillery barrage, dragging any guns and equipment they could move through the mud.

To their north, the breakthrough by Model's 2nd Panzer Army looked far more serious than it was. The German offensive was played out. They were advancing still because they had virtually nothing in front of them, though supplies and fuel shortages were already stopping units in the field, where they would sit for hours, sometimes days, waiting for the trucks to catch up and bring the gasoline.

The panzer divisions were all intermingled with one another, and losses had been very heavy with the constant fighting. 33rd Motorized Regiment of 4th Panzer Division, for example, was one of the better supplied in the Schwerpunkt. Out of 150 rifle squads in various sub units, it now had about 75 remaining, a staggering 50% casualty rate. Other regiments were much worse off. 26th Motorized Regiment in the 24th Panzer Division had 45 squads left. Those in the 17th Panzer and 36th Motorized Divisions fared little better. Most of the panzer regiments were still at about 60% strength, but it was lack of fuel, munitions, and the endless mud that was slowing their operations to a crawl. The men that remained were tired, and as worn out as their equipment.

In spite of this, Model was not yet finished. He had a plan.

Chapter 26

The stunning German drive east of Voronezh had been possible only because of the infantry coming up to hold the shoulders of the breakthrough. It mostly deployed along the southern shoulder, giving 2nd Panzer Armee the freedom to continue to attack. Hoth had to deploy on the northern shoulder, as infantry in his sector was now forced to encircle the city of Voronezh itself, where 16 Soviet divisions sat in a small pocket.

Even though his divisions were worn out, Model worked to keep his advance rolling, taking fuel from one division and giving it to another. 4th Panzer had been in the lead, under Heinrich Eberbach, “Willy Rubber Nose” as he was called. Model wanted to keep his spearhead sharp, and he gave Eberbach the gasoline to keep moving his division through the expanding gap in the front. He swung south, ironically toward another town called Kalach, about 70 miles north of Boguchar on the Don.

Willy could smell victory with that rubber nose of his, and he knew what the Russians were attempting to do. His lead regiment, the 33rd Motorized, stopped at the end of the day on October 15th, only 75 miles north of the Don. Just south of that were the bridgeheads that Zhukov had fought so stubbornly for, from which he had also launched his abortive Operation Mars. The armies massed there now included 2nd, 3rd and 4th Shock Armies, portions of the 24th Army, Volga Front Reserve units, and numerous independent rifle and tank corps that were now formed into the Don Army Group under Rokossovsky, a formation that had never been so named in the old history. The Rock had moved north at Zhukov’s order, turning over his command in the Donets Basin to another man.

The pieces on the board were different, but the game was still the same. This was the one strategic front that allowed the Soviets to attack. The divisions there, over 80 strong, had been resting, resupplying, and were waiting for the snow to herald Zhukov’s planned Operation Uranus.

Eberbach was through that gap, heading south toward those 80 plus divisions, while over his right shoulder, 36 more divisions were trying to withdraw to avoid encirclement that he alone was now striving to complete. No thought was given to what all those enemy units might do in response to

his incursion. Willy Rubber Nose had the wind at his back, gasoline siphoned from his brother divisions, and he was heading south, a typical example of the audacity with which the Germans would conduct their mobile operations.

Hitler was delighted. All he could see were the arrows being drawn on the map to indicate the farthest on point of that advance. No one told him that, even at that moment, Katukov was dancing like an expert swordsman, executing a maneuver that would have made Hermann Balck proud to witness. He extricated his 1st Special Rifle Corps from its bridgehead containment operation, turning those positions over to the retreating rifle divisions. Then he made a night march on the road east through Kalach, a full 60 kilometers to Manino, where he ran head on into Eberbach's 33rd Motorized Regiment. These two adversaries had fought the previous year on the road to Tula, and now they met again.

By dawn on the 16th the Germans found themselves surround by the entire Corps, and the infantry adopted a defensive stance, its advance completely halted. Its fate would be sealed, for the mass of all those divisions withdrawing from Kirov's first balloon was now forming a new line, and some were pushing up the rail line from the south. Hitler was reading his map, but it was lying to him. Things were not entirely as they seemed.

The German envelopment was quickly running out of steam, and grinding to a halt. Eberbach's impudence had been answered by Katukov's Special Rifle Corps, where Dimitri Lavrienko was still with Katukov's force, and they had the very latest tanks Kirov's factories could deliver. The two Guards Divisions took the 33rd Motorized Regiment in a vise, and then 4th and 11th Guards tank brigades went through them like knives. The Cavalry division finished off any that remained alive on the battlefield, the hardy Cossacks galloping through the sodden ground, sabers flashing. The regiment ceased to exist, Manino was retaken, and Eberbach, his HQ some 30 kilometers north, decided to call a halt to his premature encirclement. He was smart enough to know trouble on a battlefield when he found it, and radioed back to Model that it would be inadvisable for him to continue.

"But you told me you had already taken Manino," said Model. "Push on to Kalach."

"We did take Manino, but we just lost it, along with the entire 33rd Motorized Regiment! They're gone." There was a moment of silence on the line. Then Eberbach composed himself and continued. "We need to

consolidate and reconnoiter. Something is going on. They brought up reinforcements from the south.”

“Alright, perhaps you are correct,” said Model. “The Infantry is finally moving up to relieve Hoth on the north shoulder of the breakthrough zone. That will put some fresh life in the offensive. He’ll take the lead while we reorganize and resupply. These rains are going to become sleet and snow soon, and I don’t have to tell you what the winter was like last year.”

“Lucky for me that the frostbite couldn’t do anything to this rubber nose of mine,” said Eberbach. “Tell Hoth to move quickly. They’re planning a counterattack. I can smell it.”

Eberbach’s nose, what was left of it after taking a bullet years ago, did not betray him. By dawn the Russians sent his men up in the wake of Eberbach’s cautious withdrawal, a cold storm blowing in on the point of the German breakthrough. They were aiming to seal the breach, and buy that time Zhukov desperately needed so he could unleash another storm to the south in Operation Uranus.

Like a fullback seeing trouble ahead, Model would now throw the ball laterally to Hoth, who was already forming up the first of two shock columns of his own, centered on his fresh 12th Panzer Division. Everything was in motion again, the long months of stalemate broken by the mass, shock, and speed of the German attack at Voronezh. Now it would be answered by another attack, born before its time, and hoping to redeem the laurels Operation Mars had first delivered, until Hermann Balck appeared on the scene to work his military magic and halt the advance. This time, Balck’s 11th Panzer Division was far away, down near Rostov where he had consolidated his position to wait for infantry support. It was no good sending his panzers into the urban mass of Rostov. That was work for infantry, and he had been promised the fresh 336th Division, but it was slow in coming.

* * *

Near Volgograd, Steiner’s troops had finally reorganized for the next phase of the operation. The road they were on ran directly east into the new quarter of the city renamed Novo Kirovka, and then up to Mamayev Kurgan. That height dominated the center of the city, serving as an artillery observation point. Shelled almost daily by Volkov’s guns across the river,

that was most hazardous duty, and observation details would trudge grimly up each night, waiting for dawn to peer through the morning haze and smoke. Their job was to observe the cross-river town of Krasnolobodsk, where elements of Volkov's Guard Corps manned fortified bunkers all along the river. The morning artillery duel went off like clockwork, and Mamayev Kurgan would invariably receive a five-minute barrage.

Known as the Hill of Blood, the battles fought there in the old history left fragments of metal and human bone embedded in the ground for decades after. There, in modern times, two huge statues stand on that hallowed ground, one bearing the clarion call to battle: "Rodina Mat' Zovyet! The Motherland Calls!" The woman, representing Mother Russia herself, stands all of 53 meters, wielding a sword that extends another 33 meters, reaching high overhead. The tip of that blade extended up to a height that doubled that of the statue of Liberty bearing her torch in New York Harbor and the history it commemorated was yet to be written in these altered states—the misery and madness that the world once called the Battle of Stalingrad.

That morning, General Eric Manstein had left his rear area headquarters at Morozovsk to come visit Steiner's forward HQ at Surovinko, a town on the River Chir, about 50 Kilometers west of Kalach Bridge. The spearheads of Steiner's attack, the Brandenburgers and Grossdeutschland, were already 40 kilometers east of that bridge, and now a conference would be held to determine the plan of attack on the city.

"At this stage of the operation," said Manstein, "we were to have pulled out your entire Korps and the city fight should be turned over to the infantry."

"What infantry?" said Steiner sarcastically.

"My point exactly," said Manstein. "We got Freisner's 102nd over just north of Kalach, but everything else in Hansen's 54th Korps was pulled onto the line against the Serafimovich bridgehead. We are promised two fresh divisions soon, but who knows when they will ever get here. In the meantime, even though your troops are weary, we cannot just sit on our thumbs here, not while Halder is clucking over that big push east of Voronezh."

"That's where all the infantry is," said Steiner. "What they sent us here was barely sufficient to hold that northern shoulder as we came east. We should have had enough in hand to push the Russians north of the Don, but their buildup there was steady and unrelenting, and as we have seen they

have already demonstrated the threat those bridgeheads pose to our operations against Volgograd.”

“Balck gave them a good lesson or two,” said Manstein with a grin. “And that attack allowed me to wrangle away the 14th Panzer Korps.”

“Yes, but where is it now?” Steiner tapped the map. “It’s right on the line in the Boguchar sector, along with all the infantry they gave us. I even had to put the 3rd SS on the line, which is one reason these last 40 kilometers were such a slog. If we had the infantry, I’d be in the city by now.”

“That is the last place I would prefer to see your divisions,” said Manstein. “This is the best mobile shock force in the army. It should be used in the breakthrough role, and then pulled out. Under the circumstances, as we have nothing in hand to relieve your troops, they will simply have to push on to the city. If we ever do get those two infantry divisions, they will relieve you. Now then, what is the plan?”

“Drive east on the road,” said Steiner. “They moved in a Guards Rifle division in front of the Brandenburgers. That will be my first order of business.”

Manstein looked at the map. “Steiner, that is the real problem. As long as they still have the rail lines leading north, and that crossing at Golubinskaya, they will be able to constantly feed in reinforcements. I would recommend that we strike north first and eliminate those supply corridors to isolate the city. You have 1st and 2nd SS holding the shoulder north of the road back to Kalach. Take Das Reich and attack north, then a little hook west to the river near Golubinskaya. At the same time, the 75th Infantry Division should begin an attack along the west bank of the Don, aiming at those crossing points from that side.”

“It won’t get through,” said Steiner stoically.

“Then reinforce it. What about the Wiking Division? It’s been sitting at Oblivskaya for nearly two weeks.”

“They were worn out,” Steiner explained. “That division forced the crossing and took the bridge at Kalach. I’ve been resting and rebuilding those regiments.”

“Can they still fight? If so, move them right behind the 75th. Hansen can also throw in Army assets—artillery, engineers, a couple Stug battalions. There’s only one enemy rifle division on the line there now. They should get through.”

“Very well, and what about Leibstandarte?”

“It will move north, on the right shoulder of Das Reich at the outset. When that division swings left, Leibstandarte swings right. It’s objective is to cut that damn rail line.”

“That is all of 30 kilometers from their jumping off point!”

“The Brandenburg Division will join in on the right,” said Manstein. “It will attack with Grossdeutschland, and get through that Guards Rifle division you spoke of easily enough. Then the Brandenburgers will move northeast to support Leibstandarte. Grossdeutschland can continue along the road east. So you see? The main attack is against the enemy’s lines of communication, not directly into the city. Once we have cut those lines, then we reorganize for the city fighting. Hopefully, we will have that promised infantry by then.”

“A good plan,” said Steiner. “But let us hope it doesn’t take us another two weeks. Winter is coming.”

“All the more reason to isolate the city before the snows set in.”

Steiner shook his head in agreement. “Herr General,” he said. “I suppose the enemy is thinking the exact same thing. Suppose they stage another offensive from those bridgeheads? You know that is what they are planning for their big winter offensive.”

It did not take any great imagination to reason that, but Steiner was going to see his prediction come true much sooner than he expected.

Chapter 27

With new orders, the 4th Shock Army was leaping off the trains, fat, fresh, and ready to attack. The battle hardened Siberian troops deployed quickly and moved back to their assembly point for Operation Uranus. By nightfall on the 16th Yeremenko had established his headquarters in Perelazovskiy. The Army had four rifle divisions, a cavalry division, four tank brigades and numerous ski troops. They would not yet wax their boards, but 4th Shock Army would put the mass, shock and speed into Zhukov's planned attack.

The main breakthrough force would be the few tank and mech corps that Zhukov had husbanded for this operation. He had 1st Tank Corps, 4th Mech Corps, and the newly reorganized 24th and 25th Tank Corps. 4th Shock Army was the follow on force, intending to exploit any breakthrough obtained.

Even as this force was preparing to attack, word came that the Germans had opened a new attack on both sides of the Don as it flowed down towards Kalach. Manstein's plan was underway, not knowing that a much bigger Soviet offensive was gearing up to the west of that attack. The 167th Rifle Division was closest to the river on the western side, its lines anchored on the riverside hamlet of Mostrovskiy. 690 Assault Pioneer Battalion supported 3rd Battalion of the Germania regiment there, and just west of that attack, 2 battalions of that regiment pushed forward with the support of the 190th Stug Battalion from 11th Army reserve. The main effort would be made along that road, the most direct route to Golubinskaya where the Russians had built a new road bridge over the Don to communicate across the river to forces of the 64th Army defending there.

In order to use that road, it was first necessary to take a high hill that overlooked the scene, number 584 on the maps, its flanks wrinkled by balka runoff channels clotted with scrub and low undergrowth. That job was given to the 75th Recon Battalion and 741 Pioneers, which moved up the hill in the pre-dawn hours, launching a quick attack that stormed the position as the sun began to come up. Once in command of the hill, two battalions of the Nordland SS Regiment moved up to the left, where the remainder of the

167th Rifle Division had been positioned on the ground leading up to that hill. Behind this attack, the entire Westland Regiment waited with the long column of assault boats and bridging units. The Germans wanted to be able to quickly establish communications across the river with Das Reich if their plan succeeded.

The Russians knew that road had to be defended, and the call went out to Rokossovsky at his headquarters with the 24th Don Army. "We need your help," said General Rodin. "If they get to Golubinskaya, we will have no choice but to blow those bridges. That means everything south of that town on the other side of the river will be cut off and forced to withdraw.

A veteran of the fighting the previous winter at Moscow, Rokossovsky, gritted his steel teeth and looked at his list of reserves. "I have several units that came in by rail two days ago from Saratov," he said. "They aren't much, all understrength, but I can send you a few light tank brigades, and engineers."

"Anything would help, but it needs to be quick!"

What General Rodin received that day were the light tanks of the 9th, 10th and 12th Brigades. To call them brigades was a misnomer, as each unit was little more than a battalion in actual strength. They had been sent to Rokossovsky to form the nucleus of a new tank corps as more reserve units arrived, but were just waiting in his Don Security Group to receive tanks. At the moment, they still had 35 T-70s, and 18 T-34s between the three units, about the same number that might be in a single tank brigade. Yet tanks were tanks, and Gille's Vikings had none to oppose them. Instead they sent the two Stug Battalions that had been attached to his assault, and a close range duel ensued, with the German Stug-IIIs being more than a match for the Soviet light tanks. The T-34s were tougher to knock out, but there were not enough of them to pose a serious threat.

Mostrovskiy fell a little after noon, and a company of Wiking motorcycle infantry started up the road, pursuing scattered elements of the 167th Rifle Division, which was now retreating north. The Russians were then bolstered by the engineer units Rokossovsky had sent, desperately trying to block the road about 2 kilometers south of the bridge. By late afternoon, the Westland Regiment was ready to move forward, and all the heavy guns of 11th Army reserve thundered out the renewed attack.

By evening the attack by the Wiking Division would coalesce and

become unstoppable. They took on anything Rokossovsky sent, grinding them up one unit at a time with a methodical efficiency. Had this division been at full strength, it would have cut through the enemy lines in a matter of hours. As it was, with unit ranks down to 50% or less in many instances, it took time to burn through, but the outcome was not in doubt. A little after midnight, they had recon companies probing just outside Golubinskaya.

As General Rodin had warned, this breakthrough was now compromising the position of the 2nd Volga Rifle Division on the other side of the Don. Engaged by the German 102nd Infantry, it had held the line like a rock, but now it would be forced to fight a withdrawal. The unit fell back towards Ryumino, having to move around a marshy inroad from the Don as they did so. They arrived south of that town just as a company of armored cars from Das Reich was approaching. That company was not going any further, and the Volga Rifles took up blocking positions, ready for anything else the Germans sent against them.

East of the Don, the Soviet 64th Army had been under attack by both 1st and 2nd SS Divisions, just as Manstein had planned it. The Germans had but one infantry division on the east side of the river, the 102nd, and it was facing off against the last division of the Volga Rifles. General Friesner's troops had only intended to lean on the Soviets there, knowing he did not have the strength to break through. It would be enough to engage and pin down the 2nd Volga Rifles, perhaps the best division the Soviets still had on the line in that sector. His men did that job—until the Russians decided they had to leave. Then the hardened veterans of so many years fighting against Volkov's troops simply executed a perfect tactical withdrawal under fire, and Friesner was powerless to stop them.

Das Reich threw itself against the Soviet 49th Rifle Division and the 12th division to its right. Taking on two divisions, the early going was slow, though one regiment of the 12th Rifles had been overrun and surrounded by mid-morning. The Russians responded by sending in the 53rd Rifle Brigade, which they had in reserve, but the real crisis was further east in the 1st SS sector. The 247th Rifle Division took the full brunt of the Leibstandarte attack, which was pushing up a good road. 112th Tank Brigade was posted there, and as it moved south in response to the attack, a sharp engagement ensued, with the German Pz-IV F2s and new Panthers slugging it out with T-34s. Where the Pz-IIIs had been outgunned, these two newer German tanks

were both more than capable of taking on the Soviet tanks.

In the midst of that firefight, 2nd Panzergrenadier Regiment veered right as planned, where they soon ran into the local 75th NKVD Brigade that had been watching the front just behind the outer crust of 64th Army's lines. Stubborn on defense, and with a good number of machineguns in the NKVD unit, the advance was held up for several hours, then eventually bypassed as the Leibstandarte turned further east, only to run into the 132nd NKVD MG Brigade.

The fighting often pulls a unit in a direction it had not intended to go. As 1st SS made that move east, the entanglements with those two NKVD brigades and the Soviet 25th Engineer Battalion forced it to turn north to deal with that resistance. On its right, the Brandenburgers had broken through, and so now the Germans executed a tactical decision in the field that would change Manstein's plan.

"We'll be another two or three hours dealing with these damn NKVD troops," said Sepp Dietrich when he reported to Steiner. "Then we can move northeast again."

"Don't bother," said Steiner. "Beckermann's Brandenburg Division has already broken through. Grossdeutschland has the enemy line fully engaged, and Beckermann's troops are spilling over the top of that line like water over a dam. He already has troops approaching Spadnovka, which is just twelve kilometers from the rail line we want to cut. So do this—build two Kampfgruppen and send one up the road to Hill 259. That will put you on the outside edge of the envelopment Das Reich is fighting to achieve."

"And the second Kampfgruppe?" asked Dietrich.

"Send it up the secondary road to Peskovatka. The two shock columns will be moving parallel to one another as you move north. Once you get Pestkovatka, reconnoiter towards Vertyachi. I'll scrounge up some bridge battalions and send them up that road. Look over the river for a suitable crossing point."

"You want me on the west bank of the Don?"

"Not just yet, but I want the option to send you there if the situation warrants."

"Very well. I still have two regiments of the 247th Rifle Division blocking that main road. They'll have to be dealt with tonight."

Dietrich was a practical man, and a daring one when dash and nerve was

needed. He would take this assignment in hand like any other, and see what fruit he could shake from the tree.

The Brandenburg Division, he thought as he stepped into his staff car outside Steiner's HQ. They get the glory and the open field running. I get this turning movement to a place I had never intended to go. Well, let me see if we can get to Vertyachi first. That may yield some opportunities. But now our two divisions will be moving in different directions. Who will fill the gap that develops? That will be Steiner's problem. I had better get back to division and form those *kampfgruppen*.

As he made his way back over the bridge at Kalach, the radio man. Lieutenant Fuchs in the back seat, began to seem edgy. He was listening to traffic on his headset, a linguist who could speak Russian so he could sample the random traffic from the airwaves in a fight like this. It often gave a good sense of what the enemy was up to, and now he leaned forward with a warning in his eyes.

"Herr General," he said. "A lot of traffic on the radio, it's suddenly very heavy."

"Hunting foxes again?" said Dietrich. "Hopefully they are orders to retreat."

"No sir," said Fuchs. "I get tone of voice as much as anything else. This is an attack. Something big is up tonight."

"Steiner said there was unusual movement in the forward lines west of the Don," said Dietrich. "The rifle divisions have been probing more aggressively."

"Well sir, I've listened in on Rifle Corps traffic for a good long while. Not many radios in those units. This is something more. I think they have armor."

"Can you pick out any unit names?" asked Dietrich.

"They never use direct division names," said Fuchs. "It's always Red Star One or Red Banner Three—that sort of thing. Herr General, there's a lot of red banners in the wind tonight."

Dietrich gave him a dark eyed look. "Keep listening," he said, and then he told the driver to go a little faster.

*Armored Car Battalion 1, Brandenburg Division,
28 Kilometers NE of Oblivskaya ~ 02:40 AM, October 16, 1942*

It was the only unit of the Brandenburg Division that was not operating with its parent formation, one bird that had flown the nest when it was caught refueling at Surovinko during the Soviet Mars offensive. It participated in the successful defense of that key supply center, and helped drive the Russians north again when the offensive was called off. After that, it had been in a gap just north of the hamlet of Kirov, between the 3rd SS and the 299th Infantry Division on its right. The battalion was never relieved, and so it continued to stand its watch until it received orders to the contrary, which never came.

It had three companies, mostly armored cars, with a few Marders, mobile flak and 75mm guns mounted on halftracks, and a platoon of engineers. It heard that movement Fuchs was picking up on his radio, and the alert recon troops were quick out of the trenches and into their armored vehicles when the first sign of enemy attack started.

3rd Company had five SdKfz 233s, the squat eight wheeled *Schwere Panzerspähwagen* with a short barreled 7.5cm main gun on top. It also had eight SdKfz 234/2 vehicles, eight wheeled, but with a modified light tank turret on top, the same one used for the new light tank Germany was calling the Leopard. It mounted a 50mm main gun, good enough to penetrate the armor of most lighter tanks and other vehicles, but rapidly losing its punch against the newer Soviet T-34s and KV-series tanks. Three older Austrian made ADGZ armored cars were also in the unit, with a 20mm cannon and a pair of 7.62 MG-34s. Two light scout cars, a single SP mortar and one 7.5cm gun mounted on a 251/9 halftrack rounded out this company.

The company was just west of hill 636, some of the highest ground around, where the 299th infantry had two battalions posted. A stream ran down from that height, marshy at the outset, but there was a secondary road there that the company was watching, and something was moving on it. The 299th was the unlucky division that night, for all along its front the Russians were sending up their crack 2nd Guards Rifle Corps, composed of three divisions, the 3rd, 5th and 7th Guards. On either side of that three division front, roads led south towards Steiner's forward HQ at Surovinko, and along those roads the Soviet heavy mechanized units were now rumbling forward in the darkness.

The guardsmen were up front, marking the road to lead the mech units on. There was no artillery barrage to soften the enemy line. Instead it would be

the shock of those three experienced rifle divisions hitting the line like a big wave, and then the double envelopment by the heavy armored formations. On the right would come the newly reformed 24th Tank Corps, with Kolypov's tank brigade in the lead. On the left would come the 1st Guard Tank Corps, right into the gap between the 299th Infantry and the 3rd SS Division. It was beefed up with the addition of two independent heavy tank brigades, each with two dozen of the very newest tanks the Soviets had produced. These were the all new SK-Is, the initials standing for 'Sergie Kirov.' They would be the equivalent in power to the JS-I Stalin tank that would now never be built, and every single tank that had been squeezed out of the factories in the last six months was here, a total of 120 in all, spread over five heavy tank brigades.

The Kirovs had heavy armor at 110mm, and a powerful new 85mm main gun that was being field tested for the first time. Work was already underway to upgrade the design with an even more powerful 122mm main gun, but none of those had entered production yet. There was also a new SU series assault gun on the field that did have a 122mm gun, but it was the M-30S howitzer and not the anti-tank variant that would be built into the Kirov tanks soon. The 33 ton SU-122s were mated with a few SU-152s in the heavy assault gun brigade with 1st Guard Tank Corps. Unfortunately for Hauptmann Beck, the armored cars of the Brandenburgers were in their way.

At the outset, the companies of armored cars held their own against the infantry. Their cannon and MG weapons put out good suppressive fire, and the armor on their vehicles was just good enough to stop small arms fire and shrapnel. But a fresh Guards Rifle Division is well equipped, and soon the Russians were getting 45mm AT guns and a few of the newer 57mm guns into action. The lone 88 in Beck's 1st Company on a mobile halftrack was hit and knocked out, and with that, the recon unit realized they would not be able to hold their positions any longer when all that heavy enemy armor began to grind its way forward through the ranks of the Soviet guardsmen. Hauptmann Beck got on the radio and immediately notified Steiner that they were under heavy attack.

"We got hit with a full division, and there are a lot of tanks right behind it. They're coming right through the gap east of Totenkopf—right towards the village of Kirov on the stream behind us. We'll have to fall back and try to hold there, but the best we can do is buy you a little time. You'll need a full

panzer division here!”

Steiner didn't have a panzer division in reserve. He had sent 5th SS into the Golubinskaya operation early the previous morning, and it was now heavily engaged. What he did have is a single Stug Battalion with 12 STG IIIs and six Marders. He ordered it up the road through Osinovka and past Hill 495 to approach that river line position at Kirov. Now he could hear the distant rumble of artillery, a roll of thunder from the north, and he knew that the Russians had probably mounted another spoiling attack. He had worried about this, expressing his concerns to Manstein.

“Balck is turning over his positions outside Rostov to infantry,” the General told him. “Would you feel better if his division were back in theater reserve?”

Damn, thought Steiner. I wish I had that division at hand now. The Russians found the one weak point on our line, the Kirov Gap. But what to do here? Reports were coming in rapidly. Totenkopf was also under heavy attack. And more enemy tank units were on the main road to Oblivskaya. The division had also been hit on its left flank, prompting Eicke to send most of the panzer regiment there to counterattack. Now it seemed that was nothing more than a flanking maneuver intended as a diversion. The main attack was coming right down that road.

Now Steiner looked for any reserve he could find. There was a pioneer battalion at Kalach, and he sent for it immediately, ordering it west on the road to Surovinko. Yet that single battalion and the Stugs he had just sent to Hauptmann Beck would not be anywhere near enough. Beck was correct. He would need a full division, and the only way to get one would be to call off his offensive towards Golubinskaya. He notified General Gille in the 5th SS and told him to suspend operations immediately and get back to the main road.

“But were just outside the town now. They are blowing the bridges as we speak!”

“Good enough. Turn that operation over to the 75th Infantry. I need your division back here as soon as possible, and bring the heavy guns with you from 11th Army. This is serious. Now move!”

“Alright, we're coming. I'll have my division on the road south to Kalach by first light.”

Part X

Echos of Fire

*“No earthly act escapes its eternal echoes,
echoes more substantial than the acts themselves.”*

— Geoffrey Wood

Chapter 28

Eicke's 3rd SS Division had been holding a wide segment of the line extending just over 20 kilometers when the main weight of the Russian offensive finally struck the division like a great wave. As Zhukov had predicted, Totenkopf stood like a rock resisting the initial surge until the front curved and bent around it. On the left flank, three rifle divisions and supporting light tanks and cavalry pushed down the road past Aleksandrov. It finally reached a tributary stream some ten kilometers south of the top arc of the division front. On the right flank, the 1st Guard Tank Corps reinforced by three heavy tank brigades was attempting to bypass the division in the gap that had been screened by Hauptmann Beck and his armored cars.

Now, on the morning of the second day, the Soviets threw two more javelins at the stalwart SS shield. The first was General Volsky's 4th Mech Corps. (No relation to the Admiral we have all come to know so well.) This powerful formation was also reinforced by three heavy tank brigades, and it was trying to pierce the defensive arc at its apex, which was centered right on the main road to Oblivskaya. Two more rifle divisions and supporting units also pressured the line between that point and the Kirov Gap to the east, so Totenkopf was now facing the weight of over six enemy divisions, an entire army by Soviet standards, or a force that would be the equivalent of a typical German Panzer Korps.

It could not hold, nor did Eicke think it wise to even try to hold in the face of that attack. He knew he had to be stubborn, buy as much time as he could, but he also knew that his only defense would be to trade space for that time, and slowly fight a withdrawal back towards the River Chir. The next possible defensive line was seven kilometers south at the village of Alekseyevskiy, where another stream ran east to west. It had two hills anchoring either flank, and the main road ran right through that town. He gave the order to fall back to that line at 10 AM, his Panzergrenadiers withdrawing behind a light screen of AT guns. Everything got back safely, except the pioneers, which were too heavily engaged.

Eicke was on the radio to that unit, listening to the sound of heavy fighting. He could hear the armor, the sound of the metal treads grinding, the

harsh crack of their main guns. The shouts of his men fighting clawed at him. He heard a Panzerfaust fire, an explosion, the growl of some massive unseen engine, then the sharp report of a submachinegun before the line went dead, the command post overrun and radio ground to pulp beneath the tracks of a 45-ton tank. No one in that company of the Pioneer Battalion would return. He handed the headset to the radio man, and pulled on his gloves. They had a hard morning's work ahead of them, and there would be no breakfast.

By noon he had one regiment on Hill 469 about 8 kilometers east of the road, a second regiment at Alekseyevskiy, and only on the left did he have a concern, for his Panzer Regiment had taken too long to extricate itself from the three rifle division assault being mounted by 3rd Shock Army. That offensive stretched much further west, all along the front of the 46th Infantry Division, but the Soviets were only masking the line there, and not pressing hard.

The drama of the morning again saw Hauptmann Beck on the stage. He had reached the hamlet of Kirov late the previous night, but he did not get much sleep. The Soviets continued to press a night attack, which is to say they kept the tanks and vehicles of 1st Guard Tank Corps moving on that road in spite of the darkness. They reached the village, and Beck was pushed out easily enough by 24 T-34s and numerous lighter T-70s in the lead brigade of the corps. He fell back two kilometers, in the shadow of Hill 495 that overlooked the road, and there he heard the growl of armor, but it was already behind him.

"Zuber!" he called to a Lieutenant. "Take your platoon back to see what's going on. If they've already got round our flank, then we move to Osinovka."

But the noise was not from Russian tanks. Beck was most gratified when Zuber reported he had come up on a small column of Stug-III assault guns. "And they have three Marders!" he called on the radio.

"Alright then," said Beck. "We'll try to delay here for a few hours more. Get those Marders up to block the road!"

Beck had blown the bridge over the shallow river at the village, but the tanks were able to ford easily enough, though with some delay. One of his 234s knocked out the lead T-34 with a good side shot, but then his troops began to take heavy fire as that brigade deployed. Behind it he could see a long column of heavy tanks, 18 KV-IIs and six more T-34s on their right, with a few SU-76 assault guns. There were still two more brigades behind

that, and one by one they thundered up that road, forcing him to fall back east of a balka that fed the river. His men fought a losing duel for ninety minutes, but by 2PM the Russians had pushed right on through, and were half way down the road to Osinovka, which was only another seven kilometers to Steiner's HQ at Surovinko.

The General could hear the fighting, and he knew that single Sturm Battalion he had sent up would not hold long. The entire headquarters staff was already packing everything up, the trucks being hastily loaded to move east. He had already decided that if the Russians got through, he was going east to join the main body of his Panzer Korps. Then a Kubelwagon came racing up the street, halting quickly. A man stepped out that Steiner immediately recognized, General Hansen of the 11th Army. There was another main road about five kilometers east of the one running through Osinovka, and Hansen had his headquarters up that road in a bunker the Army engineers had built for him near a small makeshift airstrip at Lobakin.

"Steiner!" he called. "I've been all morning on the road. The Russians overran our HQ site last night and I only just escaped in time. They have tanks south of Lobakin by now. They are pushing right through the 299th. 87th and 129th Divisions are still holding their original positions, but I've ordered them to get ready to move. This is going to get very messy."

Steiner kept looking at his watch. Where was Gille with his Wiking Division? The lead elements were still 20 kilometers to the east, with the division column strung out on the road all the way back to Kalach. They would get there soon, but would the Russians reach Surovinko first?

Like bad news, good news can also arrive when least expected. That day it came on the whistle of a train, which prompted both men to turn their heads west. They could see the white smoke of the locomotive puffing up into the grey sky, and soon the squeal of the wheels cut through the mid-morning cold in greeting. It was a nice little gift from Eric Manstein. The moment he learned of the enemy counterattack, he gave orders that the Army reserve should sent up anything they had and get it on the rail line east to Steiner.

What they had was the 501st Schwerepanzer Brigade, with 24 of the new Lions equipped with an 88mm gun. Eight more of the new heavy assault AT guns, known as the Elephant, and making an early debut in this history. Those plus six light Leopards, three Brumbars and three more Grille SPGs made for a very powerful right hand punch. These were special armored

vehicles, all new designs that had been reserved for the heavy brigades. This one had been regrouping to the rear with the arrival of these new tanks, and was returning in the nick of time, the transport engineers already working at the mounting chains and getting the steel rails placed to disembark the heavy tanks.

“Thank God for small favors,” Steiner breathed to Hansen. “Those tanks will hold until the Wiking Division gets here.”

General Gille arrived within the hour, at the head of his long column, a motorcycle infantry company rattling in right behind him. General Koch of the 299th Division straggled in a few minutes later.

“Well,” said Steiner with a wry grin. “When the Generals all come for lunch, you know things are either very good, or very bad. Koch?”

“My entire division is disintegrating,” said the sallow faced General. He had been hit hard by the three divisions of the 2nd Guard Rifle Corps, and had both 24th and 25th Tank Corps enveloping his right, with the big push through the Kirov gap enveloping his left. Now his division sagged like a deflating Zeppelin, and it was coming crashing down on the road between Surovinko and Kalach. The General himself was the first burning remnant. Behind him the division artillery and one battalion of the 527th Grenadier Regiment had reached Osinovka just seven clicks north.

Koch pointed to the heavy Lions being unloaded. “If we had a few of those growlers there, we might have held,” he said, obviously shamed in the company of the Armee Commander and the other SS men. Steiner could see it, and gave him some face.

“It can’t be helped,” he said. “Totenkopf is fighting for its life to the northeast. This was a much bigger offensive than the last one. How they managed it with all the chaos up near Voronezh eludes me, but now we must deal with it.”

“What do you propose to do with those Schwerepanzers?” asked Hansen. He was a highly decorated officer that had come over from 16th Armee when Manstein became overall commander of Armeegruppe South. His health was poor, and the fight his men were in now did not help his morale.

Steiner was looking at his map now, his dark brows heavy over flashing eyes. His old favorite division was finally arriving. He had been instrumental in forming the SS divisions, and Wiking in particular. Now he was finally getting some cards in hand that he could begin playing, but the situation was

far from secure.

“Very well,” he said. “It is likely that one or both of their mechanized columns will get through to the road and rail lines we depend on. We know what they want, what they are driving for, so I will meet them head on. General Gille, deploy your division to shield our position here at Surovinko. With the addition of the 501st, your motorized division is now an SS Panzer Division. Congratulations, you hold Surovinko. As for Eicke and the Totenkopf Division, he is still well forward, but it would probably be better if he moved south to screen Oblivskaya. That will be my order this afternoon. General Koch, assemble anything that manages to get safely south and form a Kampfgruppe east of Surovinko on the road. I will call on you later. General Hansen, as the other two divisions up north have their flank exposed, they should fold back to form a new defensive front here. On the left, 46th Division will have to fall back and screen Chern.”

“What about the troops east of the Don?” asked Gille.

“That’s where they stay,” said Steiner. “The only good news I have this morning, aside from those heavy tanks out there, is the fact that Das Reich and Leibstandarte have nearly completed their objectives. The former is well north of Golubinskaya, and the latter has already reached Vertyachi and has now turned east as we originally planned. So we control the ground east of both their bridges over the Don, and the Fusilier MC Company of the Brandenburgers has just radioed to report they have reached the main rail line. Gentlemen, we are successfully isolating Volgograd, and I will not pull those units out.”

“Yes, but if we can’t hold this rail line open than they are isolating us,” said Hansen with a warning evident in his tone.

“That may be,” said Steiner. “So we will now fight to prevent that. Manstein tells me the 502nd Schwerepanzer Brigade is right behind this one. It should arrive on the late afternoon train, and I will leave it at Oblivskaya. Eicke has lost a good many panzers and he will need armor support. Alright, let’s get busy.”

The main road leading south to Surovinko ran right over the high ground at Hill 472, and that was where Gille posted his Westland Regiment. They had been the reserve element in the drive on Golubinskaya, and so they were the first to withdraw. Now they were on that hill, digging in with a company of AT guns. And like bad weather arriving right on schedule, Nesterov’s

Tank Brigade of the 24th Tank Corps was the first to come down that road. Polyakov's Brigade was right behind him, and as he saw the leading brigade deploying to engage, he decided to swing left, where a secondary road ran along a stream running south to the Chir. Kolypov's Brigade veered right, and it ran into the 1st Westland Battalion. The battle for Hill 472 had begun, late on the 17th of October.

That was also the first day in many weeks that supplies had not been delivered to the depot at Surovinko. They reached Oblivskaya, but the Russians had pushed recon units south of Hill 361, eight kilometers northeast of that town, and they cut the rail where it passed through the woodland near Kovalenski. A truck convoy was organized, with the service troops unloading the train that delivered 502nd Schwerepanzer, then moving supplies into trucks to move to Surovinko. This road left the town and dipped several kilometers south of the River Chir, and it had not yet been cut. Yet as soon as he learned the rail line had been cut, Steiner realized that 3rd SS must be very hard pressed. It simply did not have enough troops to stand firm in the center north of Oblivskaya and still cover both flanks. The Russians were flowing around it like water seeking the path of least resistance.

There was now a seven kilometer wide gap between Oblivskaya and Surovinko, and that was where 1st Guard tank was heading. The Russian Corps Commanders had exercised uncharacteristic initiative in this attack. Perhaps it was the lesson of Operation Mars that taught them better, but this time they were not trying to simply plow through the German front. Instead, they utilized their mobility to seek weak points in the line to exploit, and to ebb around those flanks in any division front they encountered. Eicke needed more help, and Steiner thought he knew where he could find it.

He got on the radio to one last lost sheep from his corps, the Reichsführer Sturm Brigade that was posted to the far left of this sector. This was a unit that would have been organized much later and served in Italy, but with the big buildup of the SS Panzer Korps for Barbarossa, it came to life much earlier.

"Obersturmbannführer Gesele," he said. "What's going on in your sector? You haven't reported."

"Because there is very little to report," said Gesele. "We've got only light pressure on this flank. The 46th Infantry has fallen back a little, but it is not under attack."

“Can it hold that flank if I move your brigade?”

“At the moment I see no threat here, and besides, we are 40 Kilometers north of the Chir. All they have in front of us is infantry and they would take days to threaten anything, even if the front was undefended.”

“Alright, I need your brigade at Oblivskaya. Totenkopf is hard pressed there and they are getting round the right flank. Go and see what you can do to clear the rail line.”

As the day progressed on the 17th, the situation was fast becoming desperate. The Wiking Division was now heavily engaged by the 2nd Guards Rifle Corps, and the tanks and infantry of the 24th Tank Corps had taken the apex of Hill 472, though the Grenadiers still fought stubbornly on the lower slopes to the south. The rail line was cut on their left, and the Russians were now at the Chir, which was not a major water obstacle, being no more than 30 to 60 yards wide at any given point. If they could cut the main road at Hill 417 some 8 kilometers southwest of Surovinko, then everything to the east would be effectively cut off, just as Hansen had warned.

The divisions fighting in the Volgograd sector had already noticed the supply trucks arriving that day were lightly loaded, taking things that were mainly still in reserve at their divisions headquarters. A typical German division in offensive mode could consume up to 300 tons of supplies per day, and that was fairly economical relative to their Western counterparts. Yet these were no ordinary German divisions. Had they been at full strength, a typical SS division might use 500 tons per day. That was a lot of truckloads.

Low on supply, the Brandenburgers halted late in the day, needing fuel and ammunition. 1st SS continued to push and broke through to their north to catch Soviet rail crews trying to repair the line that had been cut earlier by German recon units. Grossdeutschland put in one good attack on the center of the enemy line, but otherwise, events there were slowing. It had been raining again, and there was mud, increasing cold, and weariness to contend with in addition to the enemy. So it was that a Korps that should have cut through this Soviet defense like a knife when it was at full strength, now struggled to make small gains of three or four kilometers per day.

Then the situation changed.

Chapter 29

The train pulled into the station at Chern, which was short for the more tortuous name of Chernyshkovskiy. It was a town about 20 kilometers west on the rail line that ran from Steiner's position and Morozovsk. A man got off the forward train car and pulled up his collar against the cold October wind. Two others followed him, their tall black boots stained with the brown earth and mud.

As he stepped away from the steamy engine with his officers in tow, Hermann Balck could already hear the sound of the battle he had come to join. The low mutter of artillery fire rolled on the evening fog. Three days ago, he had received a message with orders from General Manstein. 11th Panzer was to find any rolling stock available and board trains to come to the River Chir. As he looked at the shallow, muddy flow passing through Chern, something stirred in him, as if a faint memory was trying to surface from beneath that brown water.

Just another river, he thought, shaking the feeling off. Just another battle, only this time my division will be on defense again. That is the second time in the last few months, and something tells me the situation has taken a decided turn for the worse here.

Balck had sent two Panzergrenadier Battalions of his 110th Regiment, and two companies of Panthers, on ahead to Oblivskaya. The rest of the division was still coming up on the rail from the south. They would have to pass through Morozovsk before turning east. Balck had stopped there as well to confer with Manstein before he moved his division up.

"This is more trouble than the last time," said Manstein. "I could smell it days ago, which is why I sent you those orders. Now you are here, and we can restore the situation. I sent two Schwerepanzer Brigades east earlier, but even they won't be enough. The rail line is already cut east of Oblivskaya, so that is as far as you can go. It may be wise to disembark at Chern instead. Things are hot further down the line, and we need this rolling stock intact."

"Very Well. I'll risk sending a small kampfguppe forward to Oblivskaya, but will do as you suggest with the rest of the division. What are we up against this time?"

“Their 4th Mech Corps is flanking the town to the left, and 1st Guard Tank Corps is doing the same on the right. Eicke’s 3rd SS is heavily engaged between those two envelopments.”

“They’re trying to pocket the division?” said Balck. “That would be like taking a tiger by the tail.”

“Perhaps so, but Eicke had a lot in front of him at the moment—the whole of the 4th Siberian Shock Army. Their 3rd Shock Army is leaning on the 46th Infantry Division just east of Eicke’s position, about 20 kilometers north of Chern. It’s water building up behind a dam, so you’ll have to keep an eye over your shoulder if you move east.”

“We need more infantry,” said Balck. “If that division should fail, then we’ll have a real mess here.”

Manstein nodded. “I’ve got two divisions heading our way as we speak. The 336th should arrive in a day or so, and the 305th a couple days later. It was all I could do to get those two. Halder has all the rest, the entire 17th Army tied up supporting the Voronezh operation. So we will have to make do with what we have.”

“Anything else I can expect?”

“Not at the moment. Wietersheim’s 14th Panzer Korps is fighting with their 2nd Shock Army. He’s given some ground, and if he can adjust his lines to cover the necessary frontage, I might be able to move the 9th Panzer this way.”

“What about 23rd Panzer—the rest of my little fire brigade from the Mars offensive. We danced fairly well together. Lengsfeld is back in command now after Mack was killed in August. He’s a sturdy right hand man.”

“I’ll see what I can do,” said Manstein, “but I cannot promise you anything more at the moment. It will again depend on how much infantry I can get south to the Rostov area to relieve Lengsfeld’s troops.”

“I understand,” said Balck. “Well Herr General, you can at least rely on me. The Ghost Division won’t let you down. So if you’ll excuse me,” he smiled, “I’d better go rescue Steiner and the rest of the SS Panzer Korps.”

* * *

Hauptmann Beck had fallen back to Surovinko, finally giving his weary battalion a little rest. The next morning, the 18th of October, 1st Guard Tank started its enveloping breakthrough west of Surovinko, and his men were

needed. He looked around, needing ammunition and any stray equipment he could get his hands on. There was a single 88 mounted on a halftrack, and he commandeered it from the Wikings, then led his battalion west. He led third company towards the sound of fighting, leaving the other two to move along the road and take up positions on his left. They would never get there. They ran straight into the 18th Heavy Tank Brigade, its big assault guns grinding up the roadbed as it moved east towards Surovinko. The flank defense was itself flanked before it could even get into position, and Beck's armored cars were not going to make any impression on those heavy tanks.

Beck got hold of a company commander with the 501st Brigade on the radio. He had been backing up the 2nd Company of the Wiking Recon Battalion defending on this flank, and they were now being fronted by a Guards Rifle Brigade. The infantry could be held for a time, but not those heavy tanks. It would take the long barrels of those VK-88 Lions to do the job, and they immediately pulled out and shifted four kilometers south.

By the time they arrived on the scene, the entire 1st Guards tank Corps had gone around that flank and was now pushing east up the road to Surovinko, just two kilometers outside the town. Beck was in a fight for his life again, and behind him he could hear all Steiner's artillery firing off a steady barrage to the north, where the pressure continued relentlessly. Seven Russian divisions were now in a death grip with the Wiking Division, and the 501st Schwerepanzer Brigade. The fighting was now no more than five clicks from the town where Steiner sat, and he was giving orders that any supplies and loose equipment that could be moved should be loaded onto the Korps transport pool trucks and sent east to Kalach. He wanted as much support as possible for the units that were now cut off, as he had not yet been informed of Balck's arrival, and did not know if the Soviets could be stopped. Then he heard the train pull in.

The arrival of those two battalions of Panzergrenadiers Balck had sent forward on the trains at some risk was very timely. The engineers were just finishing offloading the last of the two tank companies, when a brigade of Soviet cavalry came charging haphazardly into the eastern edge of the town. Actually, it was fleeing more than charging. It had been trying to cross the Chir near Kovalenski, six kilometers east, and was suddenly surprised by the Lions of 1st Schwerepanzer Company of the 502nd Brigade. The cavalry scattered, machineguns rattling after them, and most fled west along the rail

line and came rushing right into Balck's forward Kampfgruppe.

The carnage that followed was gruesome. Balck's seasoned Panzergrenadiers deployed quickly and went right into the attack. MG 32s and 42s gunned the horsemen down, their mounts rearing under fire, falling and dying. Then the tank companies came up, armored horses that the cavalry could not hope to withstand. Those that survived fled northeast towards a tributary that flowed down to the Chir through the hamlet of Kyzl-Aul. If Balck had not risked that deployment, those horsemen would have come right in the east end of town and found a major supply depot at the train station.

Audacity has its merits in time of crisis.

The rest of Balck's division was sorely needed. The Soviet attack continued through the night of the 18th, which was very uncharacteristic, and at dawn another big push was mounted by all flanking units. Steiner would have no breakfast that morning in Surovinko. The Guardsmen of the 1st Motor Rifle Brigade had moved south of his position and began infiltrating the town. By 11 AM on the 19th Steiner's HQ defense company was engaged with the Russian troops just three blocks away. He had no choice but to move east, hoping the road was still open there.

There was now no point in holding a town that was so badly compromised. Its remaining supplies had been trucked east the previous day, and now it remained to be seen whether the Wiking Division could withdraw from the ever compressing pocket of defense that it had thrown up in the last two days.

When Balck learned how bad the situation was, he spurred on. "Come on men! A night march is good for soul, and it saves blood! We move out immediately."

Manstein promised to keep him advised on any reports he received. Now he had some bad news for him. The 46th Infantry Division was having trouble west of Oblivskaya. When Steiner pulled out the Reichsführer Brigade, elements of the 3rd Shock Army had slipped through the gap in the line and compromised the 46th Division flank. Now Balck realized that, before he could do anything about Steiner's situation at Surovinko, he had to clean up the mess west of Oblivskaya.

Thankfully, the news that General Walther Lucht was bringing in the 336th Division that morning was very well received. That division could help stabilize the left flank, but it would be some time getting into position. Given

operational authority, he got on the radio to General Haccius with the 46th and asked him to fall back and try to form a hedgehog position with the remainder of his division. Then he went looking for his incomparable Hauser in the recon battalion.

“Hauptmann,” he said quickly. “I need you on the left. Get to this town, Popov, and hold it. 46th Infantry is falling back to the right of that town, and 336th Infantry should be coming up on the left soon. I’ll get them posted to cover Chern. Hold that position until I call code blue. Then come east on the road to Oblivskaya. If I give you code red, then you are to move to a position southwest of the town. That will be the assembly point for our division if we have to dance. In the meantime, I have to go kill a tank brigade or two. Good luck!”

Balck’s first order of business that day was to shore up and secure the left flank of the army. He reasoned that he could not hope to counterattack east unless the threat to the general line of communications running back through Chern to Morozovsk and Tatsinskaya was neutralized. At that moment, the chief threat to the left of Oblivskaya was Volsky’s 4th Mech Corps. It had taken some time to get south, getting hung up in a firefight with Beck and the SS recon units at Popov, the very place Hansen was now closing on with the division recon battalion.

Now Balck recalled the troops he had slipped into Oblivskaya by rail just in time to stop that haphazard cavalry incursion. He wanted both fists, a full division attack, in any engagement he undertook. Volsky’s 4th Mech was next on his dance card. Schwerepanzer 502 was already dueling with this formidable force, and they had identified a new Russian tank, very strong, with powerful long range fire and very good armor. This was the new Kirov tank that Beck had run across earlier, and it was going to be a dangerous opponent in this and any other engagement where the Soviets could deploy credible numbers of this new AFV.

Volsky’s recon battalion had been in the lead, pushing through Popov before it ran into a firestorm. Hansen’s battalion had just reached the town to stop that advance, and not long after, Balck’s troops came in from three sides. With him, he brought a company of heavy Elephants that was on the main road to Oblivskaya, grinding its way toward the enemy with that impenetrable 200mm frontal armor, nearly eight inches thick. Also called the ‘Ferdinand’ by the Germans, it was a true Panzerjager, with a new updated

88mm gun with higher muzzle velocity and better penetrating power than the original 88. It could tear right through the best armor the enemy had.

The Elephants went head to head with the new Kirov heavy tanks, and in a close range duel, the extra 90mm of frontal armor they possessed over their adversary mattered a great deal. Their one liability was the fact that the Ferdinand was a fixed mounted gun, with no turret, so it had to be facing the target directly to get good hits. In the narrow streets of Popov, that was not a factor. Seven of 24 Kirovs were knocked out, the brigade forced back to reorganize. Balck's Lions then engaged the 55th Tank Brigade, mostly T-34s, and killed eight of 36 tanks, and a heavy KV-II. Volsky's Corps was pushed back, but the Russians operated with newfound skill. The 86th Mech Brigade fell back, regrouping, and then came forward again with the tanks for another try. They joined the 11th Heavy Tank Brigade for a counterattack on 5th and 6th companies of Balck's Panzer Regiment.

At the same time, the throaty shouts of *Uraaaaaah* were heard to the west, and 61st Pioneer Battalion saw a thick wave of Russian infantry charging the left flank of the action. A battalion of 111th Panzergrenadiers was already in a hot firefight with the Russian 356th Rifle Division, and now three more regiments were rushing the flank. These were troops of the 3rd Siberian Shock Army, a formation that had been advancing to cover the right flank of the Soviet attack, occupying ground given up by the 46th Infantry as it withdrew. When The Germans halted their withdrawal, effecting a linkup with 336th Division on their left, the 3rd Shock Army massed four rifle divisions to surge against the line. Another column, the 2nd Shock Group, was strung out for miles on the road south to Morozovsk, where Eric Manstein stooped over the maps with increasing concern.

His Army HQ and supply center at Morozovsk was now under direct threat, and now he made a risky decision. This is what they want, he reasoned. This is the whole intent of this attack, Morozovsk, Oblivskaya, Surovinko. They could turn south and west towards the Donets, but I do not think they have the force to go that far. So I am ordering Wietersheim to disengage the 9th Panzer Division and send it here. In the meantime, how to defend this city?

I have three battalions of reserve infantry here, an engineer battalion and some machinegun troops with the Luftwaffe service ground troops and flak. That should be enough to form a screen that could delay the enemy advance.

It will have to do.

He looked at the map, seeing the similarity to the advances the enemy made in their Operation Mars. They have learned, he thought. They now operate their mechanized units in pairs, and instead of frontal attack, they use their mobility to enfilade the flanks. They have enough infantry to swarm and fix the line of defense, even against good divisions like Totenkopf and the Wikings. And the appearance of these fresh Guards Rifle Divisions is unsettling as well. Those are tough troops, undoubtedly culled from the cadres of veterans that survived our onslaught last year. They fight night actions now, and do so with increasing skill. Their artillery is being augmented by these fast moving rocket batteries running with their mech units.

Yes, they have learned, and they have been very stubborn here, holding Steiner off for six weeks in the approach to Volgograd. At this rate, I may not be able to keep my promise to Hitler to deliver that city by Christmas. Where is my infantry? The last thing I want to do is order Steiner to get into a street fight with his SS divisions. If given a moment to breathe I will begin swapping out what remains of Hansen's infantry, and replacing Steiner's troops east of the Don. But I will need that breath of air first, and at the moment, Sergie Kirov's boys have taken us by the throat.

Chapter 30

The Wikings had successfully pulled out of the arc defense they had north of Surovinko, and now they were heavily concentrated in and around the town itself. They destroyed the first Russian units to penetrate to the town center, the Motor Rifle Regiment of 1st Guard Tank, but now they were again facing strong armored attacks on both sides of the town. 24th Tank Corps, with the 81st Motorized Division, was trying to break through at Zirkovskiy, about 5 kilometers northeast of Surovinko. The main road east looped just south of that hamlet, and they were aiming to cut that vital artery by any means.

At the same time, the three tank Brigades of 1st Guard Tank, along with its heavy assault gun regiment, were now pushing into Surovinko from the west. It was like a steel vise, and the Wikings, with no tanks to speak of, would not have to rely solely on their infantry AT weapons and a few AT guns. The 501st Schwerepanzer Brigade Steiner had promised the division never reached Gille's position, and it was still fighting along with the Reichsführer Brigade, just east of Oblivskaya.

A decision had to be made as to whether the division should continue to fight for the town, and Gille wasted little time. "Here we make our stand," he said firmly. "The Chir runs southeast from this town, and the banks are very marshy. It will not be easy for an armored force to envelop us on that flank, and the infantry is better off fighting in the town here than in the open ground east. So dig in, and fight!"

The boom of the division artillery pool thundered out a second as he said that, firing at the heavy regiments of the 3rd Guards Division. Had it just been that, the infantry of the Wiking Division against Russian ground troops, Gille had every confidence that his men could hold. But it wasn't just that. The enemy had over a hundred tanks to his west, and now he learned that Zirkovskiy had been taken and the main road east to Kalach was already cut. He would have stayed and fought, but Steiner radioed to see what was going on, and immediately ordered him out.

"I need you to swing up and cover the left flank of the infantry, otherwise I will have visitors here in Kalach tonight for dinner, and it won't be you!

Now move!”

General Gille reluctantly countermanded his stand fast order, and now he called on his men to make a difficult withdrawal under heavy enemy pressure. That was not the only thing on Steiner’s mind. He still had the 75th, 87th and 129th Infantry Divisions, the 54th Korps in Hansen’s 11th Army. They were holding in a wide arc from the hard won Golubinskaya on the Don, and then west and south as far as Surovinko. That town was lost, and he could see no reason to hold all the ground between that place and Kalach. He rubbed his brow, thinking.

Infantry, he thought. That’s what I need here for street fighting. And my SS Divisions should be west of the Don smashing this Soviet offensive. They only have a few tank corps, but they have concentrated them between Surovinko and Oblivskaya, and that was enough. We fought hard for Golubinskaya, and yet, now that we control the east bank of the Don opposite those bridges, our purpose is still achieved in isolating Volgograd. If I pull Hansen’s men east of the Don, I have much more force here, and can probably then assign just one of those divisions to watch the river crossing points. The rest can mass for my attack on Volgograd.

Then again, that is more mouths to feed here, and no trains will get through if I yield that ground—they won’t get through even now, not unless Balck can master the situation, which could take weeks. Totenkopf is still screening Oblivskaya with Balck’s help, but now I am told the enemy is threatening Morozovsk. That rail line west we labored so hard to rebuild will soon be useless, and for months. So I must consider my situation carefully here.

He turned to an aide. “Get Goring on the phone at Luftwaffe Headquarters.” He was going to see what the Reichsmarschall could do in terms of supply deliveries to the airfields he now controlled east of the Don. Then he would contact Gorodin, the head of Volkov’s troops, which was something he never wished to do. The man was a Russian, and worse yet, a traitor to his own people. While Germany needed the windfall alliance with the Orenburg Federation, Steiner did not like dealing with Volkov’s men, and did not want to make this call either. But he had to do so now, the supply situation was the key thing on his mind.

Volkov could keep the trucks and vehicles running with gasoline, and he can even send us food. He controls that rail line from Krasnoarmeysk south

of Beketova all the way to Astrakhan. That is our life line now, at least for the next few months. So then if I can get Goring to deliver the ammunition we need, this situation can be resolved favorably. I will call it Festung Volgograd, and so now I give the order to pull in that outlying infantry behind the water walls of the Don. We will hold a strong bridgehead west of Kalach—the Castle gates, so I can sortie with my armored knights once Hansen relieves them here. This isn't a defeat. I will beat the damn Russians here one way or another. It is only a redeployment to make best use of the circumstances and terrain.

He could tell himself that, but even as he did so, another voice was whispering that he was now moving pieces on the board simply to save them from destruction by an enemy he should have defeated long ago.

* * *

The second division Manstein had counted on was now making a very timely arrival at Morozovsk. The shortage of rolling stock saw only one regiment pull into the train station the morning of October 20th, along with the division artillery. The rest was on the road to Tatsinskaya, and would likely arrive before noon that same day. This would allow him to secure a front from Morozovsk all the way to Oblivskaya. Better yet was the news that KG Herr from the 13th Panzer Division had tangled with the enemy 2nd Shock Group column, and forced a good portion of it to engage him. Then, as that fight began to thicken, General Scheller arrived with the 9th Panzer Division.

Good, he thought. This will force Ivan to look over his shoulder and realize that his right flank and rear must now be defended. He can't very well continue pressing 3rd Shock Army southeast with Scheller's division nipping at his heels.

The Russian 30th and 60th Light Tank Brigades had been probing the makeshift defensive arc north of Morozovsk, but they soon learned that the main road behind them had been cut, and that significant reinforcements were arriving in the town that had been their objective. Had they come here a day earlier, they might now be fighting inside that city, but 2nd Shock group was a day late due to the little ambush KG Herr had staged 30 kilometers to the northwest. That group was now on the defensive, and soon the Germans

would be pushing on the exposed right flank of the 3rd Shock Army.

Now the Russians passed a moment of indecision as to how to proceed. Three tank corps had stormed south, encircled Surovinko, driving Steiner and Hansen out with their HQs, and then forced the Wiking Division out as well, looting all the supplies that the Germans had failed to take with them. 1st Guard Tank was still west and now south of the town, its HQ in the 25 kilometer gap between Surovinko and Oblivskaya, but that latter town had not been taken. 24th and 25th Tank Corps were east of Surovinko, along with the bulk of the 2nd Guards Rifle Corps with three infantry and one motor rifle divisions.

It was now clear that the Germans were abandoning the ground west of the Don which was slowly being occupied by advancing Russian infantry from the 9th and 11th Rifle Corps, and Rokossovsky's 24th Army. Zhukov had three major objectives along the Chir, and considered that if even one were taken and held, his operation would be deemed a success. That he had done, but how to proceed?

"In another two or three days we will have them bottled up east of the Don, he said jubilantly to Sergie Kirov. And we have prevented any major breakthrough towards Volgograd there as well. Now we must decide what to do next. Supplies are tighter, but at acceptable levels. There is only one situation that could be troublesome—3rd Shock Army."

"What is wrong there?" asked Kirov. "Aren't they ready to strike at Morozovsk?"

"They were, until a fresh German Panzer Division came on the scene—the same outfit that broke up Operation Mars—11th Panzer, and it seems it has been everywhere. It stopped the push east of Oblivskaya, then vanished. The next morning it turned up here, at Popov, where it stopped Volsky's 4th Mech Corps right in its tracks—quite literally. Then, when 3rd Shock Army began to enfilade that position and approach Chernyshkovskiy, it suddenly appeared there and stabilize the German front. Now they have brought up a fresh Infantry Division, and another is reportedly coming into Morozovsk from the south as we speak."

"That panzer division was reported well south near Rostov."

"No longer. It is here again, and up to its old tricks. The only armor we have to really contest it is in Volsky's Mech Corps, and he can be somewhat... lethargic."

“What will the Germans do?”

“At the moment, they will fight to stabilize that front, and I do not think we have the strength there to prevent that. In fact, the flank of 3rd Shock Army is now exposed, and I would recommend we withdraw those units.”

“Withdraw? After fighting so hard to get where they are, you would ask them to retreat?”

“Mister General Secretary, you know full well the virtue of a timely strategic withdrawal. You have been ordering me to do this for the last 30 days. Yet another Panzer Division has been identified northwest of Morozovsk, the 9th. Together with the 11th Panzer, the Germans now have a formidable mobile force ready to counter-operate against that flank. They could roll it up if we do not take precautions immediately. I suggest we fold it back, while remaining anchored against the 3rd SS division at Oblivskaya. Let 4th Shock Army continue to fight there, but 3rd Shock should switch to defensive operations, its primary mission being to screen the flank of 4th Shock. Understand?”

“Then we will not take Morozovsk, or Chernyshkovskiy? We will not be able to enfilade Oblivskaya from the west?”

“That was Volsky’s job, and with this 11th Panzer Division backstopping the enemy lines there, I do not think it will be possible. We must therefore adopt our strategy to do things we *can* accomplish, and that is where our position around Surovinko still holds promise. Understand what we have just done—we have chased Steiner and three infantry divisions back to Kalach and trapped them east of the Don. We are pushing that other SS Division, the Vikings, south to the railway crossing north of Nizhne Chirskaya. This is a significant victory.”

“But you have not answered my question,” said Kirov. “If we do fold back 3rd Shock Army, what will the Germans do next?”

“They will undoubtedly wish to restore the line of communications to Kalach, but this I believe we can prevent.”

“What about this 5th SS Division, shouldn’t it be pursued, even destroyed? You could do that with all three of your mechanized divisions, and then try to force a crossing at that railway bridge.”

“That would be much more difficult to do than to say. No, we do not have the force to cross there just yet. It will take another reserve army to do this. Instead, I would now suggest we order all three tank Corps near Surovinko to

form a new army, call it what you will, perhaps the 5th Tank Army would be good. It will make the Germans think there are four others out there somewhere.” He smiled. “They should move west immediately, and threaten Oblivskaya. This will take the pressure off our extreme right flank, and allow 3rd Shock to move as we have discussed without undue harassment. We might even take Oblivskaya with that maneuver.”

“Agreed,” said Kirov. “It is premature to think of forcing the Don under these circumstances. Alright, General Zhukov, do all these things you have suggested, and congratulations. This was a much needed reprieve, considering the situation we still face east of Voronezh. Keep me informed of your progress.”

When Zhukov left the room, Kirov looked at Berzin with a knowing glance. “We have Surovinko,” he said, “and we’ve cut the damn rail line in taking that town. Now the General thinks he can face down the forces the Germans are mustering to the west. Did you hear what he decided to call this newly established army? 5th Tank Army! The history rings true, but with an eerie echo of that depicted in the Material, an echo born of fire and pain. Didn’t this 11th Panzer Division unhinge the attacks made by the 5th Tank Army, and very near Oblivskaya?”

“Yes,” said Berzin. “I read it over again last night. It came to be known as the ‘Battle on the River Chir.’ Very strange.”

“Should we caution him?” asked Kirov.

“I think he has an abundance of caution as things stand,” said Berzin. “He knows what force he has in hand, and what it is capable of. That is what made him great.”

So it was that both sides had achieved their short term strategic goal of isolating the other. As long as the Germans still held the east bank of the Don opposite Golubinskaya, and had a watch on that river as it wound north past Vertyachi, the Russians could not reinforce the Volga defenders by that route. Now the rail line from the north was also cut, with 1st SS division firmly astride that route. Steiner was also moving 75th Infantry Division quickly over the river and then north to the Vertyachi line to relieve Das Reich. That would give him one more powerful division to throw at the defense west of Volgograd. The rest of 54th Korps was flowing down towards Kalach, over that bridge and into the self-imposed cauldron Steiner was now creating.

He reasoned that as little as one good reinforced regiment could defend

that crossing point, abandoning his idea of maintaining a strong bridgehead west of Kalach, which would have required at least a full infantry division, reinforced. The river between Kalach and Golubinskaya was too wide and marshy to permit a sound military crossing, for his own engineers had scouted it thoroughly. This way he could husband as much infantry as possible to send against what he now called “the Volga Line.” He was determined to get to that city and redeem any dint in his shield that the Russian offensive may have created, particularly in Hitler’s eyes.

Come dawn on October 21st, the 16th Heavy Tank Brigade under General Alexey Rodin moved down the road that now ran south of the Chir behind Oblivskaya. Hermann Balck had shored up the 46th Division lines, and seen the successful linkup by the 336th and 305th Divisions. Now he was extricating his units from the line, regrouping his elite Ghost Division for renewed operations. His ‘Battle on the River Chir’ had only just begun. He signaled all units: Code Red.

Part XI

Awakening

*“Is all that we see or seem
But a dream within a dream?”*

— Edgar Allan Poe

Chapter 31

It took Nikolin some time to recover from what he had experienced. In the beginning, he thought he was simply hallucinating, dreaming while awake, but as those minutes passed, the feeling that all these memories flooding into his brain were real lived events began to solidify. It was as if he had been in a state of amnesia for years, or a kind of waking coma, going about his business unaware of all these things. Then, suddenly, that single trigger, the cypher code Fedorov had given him, set off this cascade of memories, and he was awakened from the dullness of unknowing in this sudden rush of awareness.

The same thing had happened to Orlov earlier, though Nikolin did not know that. The Chief at least had the guiding and reassuring presence of Anton Fedorov when his memory was restored, but for Nikolin, it was a shuddering and frightening experience. Everything he recalled was now so real in his mind, and yet he could also trace back the chronology of his life as lived from childhood, through the university, to Naval School, and then his career in the Navy itself, and all the time he had spent since he was first posted to *Kirov*. Nowhere, in any of those sequenced events, could any of these memories find a place to live. They were interlopers, imposters, and now intruders on the normal calm and sane progression of his days. They were impossible.

Until he found the message....

Sitting there, he saw himself staring at a message he had decoded in one of those phantom images flooding into his mind. Then, as if determined to test the reality of that recollection in defense of his own sanity, he reached for the special drawer where he put all non-official radio traffic signals transcripts. It was just a habit he had developed over the years, like a man who might sort his sales receipts, putting some into a box for safekeeping, others into a file to be officially registered in his expense log. Some might have been personal items, other things bought for work.

He did that with his message transcripts, and now, if the recollection he was holding in his mind were in any way real, then there should be a transcript of it, and right there in his special drawer. He opened it with some

trepidation, afraid of what he might find. On the surface, he was moving with the urgency of a detective, trying to find that scrap of evidence to prove his case in an otherwise overlooked pile of documents. On the other hand, he was chiding himself, berating himself as his unsteady finders flipped through the stacked papers. Then the internal argument stopped. He found what he was looking for, and his hand was literally shaking as he pulled it from the drawer, staring at the words, unbelieving: *Nikolin, Nikolin, Nikolin... you lose!*

He closed his eyes, thinking he might again open them and find the message gone, or simply saying something else, but when he looked again those five stubborn words were still there, taunting him, a transcript of a memory he could simply not fit anywhere in the chronology of his life. And yet, as the awareness increased, he began to see that this phantom message had its own place in another sequence of events, that there were memories before it, and others that came after, and that they all conspired to present an alternate chronology of lived events, one, by one, by one....

Now he looked at the date on the transcript, again seeing there the impossible. It was the message sent by Orlov, tapped out in Morse one night after he broke into a telegraph station while drunk in Cartagena. He had jumped ship on the KA-226, and was at large in Spain, and that errant signal had been a vital moving event, a Pushpoint, a trigger setting events in motion that ended up changing everything, the entire world, every lived event.

Yet the longer he stared at it, the more that other life in his head solidified. Now there were two Nikolins, two versions of himself, a schizophrenic duality in his mind that made him queasy at first. He put the message in his pocket, needing to hold onto it, in spite of the impulse to simply throw it away, run from it, deny it ever existed at all. That would be the easy course to steer, throw it away, destroy it, and with it the reality of all those other recollections. Denial was a reflexive defense mechanism, a guardian at the door of his mind, there to preserve the calm order and inner decorum that he could call his sanity. If he simply threw the message away, then he wouldn't have to face this dilemma any longer. He could return to his old self, send another riddle to Tasarov, plan how he might wheedle a second cinnamon roll from the ship's galley, return to the history novel he had been reading in his quarters. He could forget this ever happened.

No, he could *not* forget. The memories were too strong, their numbers too

great, like an army that had surrounded the keep of his mind. It had been out there all along, he realized now, digging trenches in a quiet siege, building its engines to break down the walls. Now the gate of the castle was beaten down, and the horde was storming in.

The message was dated August of 1942, another impossibility, but one he had to pardon. He had come to accept the impossible as everyday reality. The ship was here, in that very year, as astounding as that still seemed to him when he actually thought about it. Life aboard *Kirov* seemed the same here as it might have if the ship were on a standard deployment out of Severomorsk. He could look out at the ocean, and it looked like the same ocean they had been sailing in in 2021. There was nothing but the sea, in every direction, nothing but the sea and sky.

The date on that message was very recent, and try as he might, he could not remember ever recording it, or ever slipping it into that drawer—at least not in the mind he had been living in before those barbarian memories stormed his castle. It was all so very strange and disconcerting. As soon as his shift ended, he found himself hastening below decks, and his feet unerringly led him to the one place of refuge he had often sought when things went wrong. He knocked on the door of the sick bay, grateful that there was no line outside.

“Come,” came the familiar voice of Doctor Zolkin, and he took a deep breath, entering through the hatch.

“Ah, Mister Nikolin,” said Zolkin. “Come in. What is it today? Another headache?”

It was so much more than that, thought Nikolin, but how could he explain any of this to the Doctor? “No sir... I’m not quite sure. It’s very confusing.”

“What is confusing?”

“My... My mind, sir. I’m all mixed up.”

That got Zolkin’s attention, and he put down some instruments he had been ready to sterilize and turned, his studied eye on the young officer. “Suppose you sit down and tell me about it,” he said, his voice calm and reassuring. Zolkin had that way with the men. He was one part Physician, one part Psychologist, and a kind of grandfather figure to them all in one.”

“Thank you, sir,” said Nikolin. He did not know where to begin. Then he just came out with it. “Doctor, I was at my station just now, when I suddenly remembered something, not just one thing, but a torrent of things, as if I had

suddenly remembered a whole other life that I had completely forgotten!”

“A torrent of things? You mean memories?”

“Exactly, sir—memories of things that I just can’t understand... I mean, I remember things, but then I can’t fit them into my life here at all. Its very confusing.”

“What kind of things?”

“Events, sir, just memories that you might have of anything, only some of these memories are fairly intense. The only thing is, I don’t see where or when they could have happened.”

“I see,” said Zolkin, paying more attention now. “Can you give me an example?”

Nikolin reached right into his pocket and pulled out the message, explaining what it was to Zolkin, and how he had stowed it away in that special drawer. “But sir,” he concluded. “This is dated just last month, but I never got such a message. It’s from Chief Orlov, and he was right here on the ship at that time. So how could he be sending me something like this on the radio when he was right here? It makes no sense.”

“That is quite odd,” said Zolkin. “What does it mean, Mister Nikolin? Have you determined that?”

“Yes sir... Well... It was something the Chief said to me once. We were playing cards, not here, not recently, but I still remember it. We were playing cards and he won the final hand, and after that he gave me that big grin of his and said this, shaking his head the way he does, Nikolin, Nikolin, Nikolin... you lose. Well Doctor, I got that message—at least that’s what I remember now. It came over the radio in Morse, and when I decoded it, I realized it had to be from the Chief. I mean—who else could have said that, but... I’m all mixed up sir, I can’t remember receiving such a message recently, but look at the date. I should remember it. I do in one side of my head, but I don’t in the other.”

“I see,” said Zolkin. “You say you remember receiving that, but yet have no recollection of when it happened. It that it?”

“Something like that sir... It’s as if...”

“As if what?”

“As if I had two versions of events in my mind now, two lives. I have memories of two separate lives all jumbled up now, all together in the same head. I tried to explain one of them away—like you would shake off a bad

dream that seemed so real that you could swear you actually lived it, a kind of waking dream. I tried to just dismiss it that way, as a bad dream, but it's too real, too detailed. It isn't just one memory, but a whole sequence of events, day, to day, to day. And this is from one of them." He held out the paper, an anguished look on his face.

Now Zolkin was very quiet, thinking, nodding to Nikolin to give him some solace, but thinking, very deeply about something. "You say that came from one of these memories you have, but you cannot account for it."

"That's it, sir. But if this is real, then..."

"Then the memory is real." Zolkin voiced the impossible conclusion that had brought the young officer to him. It would be easy enough to simply summon Chief Orlov, but he wasn't on the ship. He had gone off with Fedorov on the KA-40, and they had not yet returned. Yet this incident affected him in a very odd way, for he had experienced something very much like this earlier, when he found that bloodied bandage in the special cabinet where he only put things that mattered, keepsakes, mementos, things of importance.

That bloodied bandage.... That was his message in a drawer, and it had picked at the edge of a memory that he could not quite recall, something dark and dangerous with in his mind, lurking, like a burglar that had broken into his home in the night, hidden, stalking, ready to do harm but as yet unseen in the dark.

"Mister Nikolin," he said. "Something very much like this, happened to me. In fact, it happened to Fedorov as well. He came to me with a story just like this. I suggested it was *Déjà vu* at first. You know, the feeling that you are living an event you have already experienced. But it was more than that. And just like that message there you pulled from your private drawer, I found something here in my domain that I could not quite account for. So I went searching through my own medical logs, to see if I had made an entry about it, and found a good deal more.... May I ask you something? These memories you say you have in your head now, does one of them have the ship heading south through the Denmark Strait after we first arrived here, and not east to the Pacific?"

"Yes!" Nikolin's eyes widened, a look of great relief on his face.

Fedorov had explained the anomaly to Zolkin, the list of names he had found, names of men that had all died in combat. It was a list, he told him,

that Zolkin himself had compiled and filed away. The Doctor could not remember that, but Fedorov asserted it to be true, and he could recite, chapter and verse, exactly how every man on that list had died, even Lenkov... yes, that ghastly incident written into the record about Lenkov, even though the man was alive and well in the ship's galley at that very moment. The list, said Fedorov, had been compiled by another version of himself, another Zolkin, from another ship, a phantom ship, yet one so real that it had changed all history.

Now Zolkin remembered that visit from Fedorov again, and the incredible revelations the *Starpom* had come out with. Fedorov claimed this exact same thing, that the ship had turned south, entering the Denmark Strait, and logged another history that was quite different from the journey they were on now. He could still hear Fedorov's words... *"I am the man who was at sea in the Atlantic, in May of 1941 when we made that final shift. I am not simply Fedorov, remembering things I once lived through. I'm the man who lived out each and every one of those moments, and up on the bridge, Karpov is the same."*

Then Fedorov came out with that word as he explained Karpov—*doppelganger*, double walker, another version of yourself at large in the world. Was Nikolin remembering things his own doppelganger had lived and experienced? Is that what had happened to Fedorov? He had believed Fedorov when he came to him with that impossible story, and largely because of the strange evidence he had uncovered, that bloodied bandage, that list of dead men's names buried in his files. Those things were not the assertions or testimony of a man, which could be colored as he wished. They were real and tangible things, almost as if they were remnants from the world Fedorov claimed he lived through.

Now, here was Nikolin, a folded paper in hand, yet another remnant, just like that bloodied bandage. And here he came with a story that sounded exactly like the one Fedorov had told him. He asked another question.

"Mister Nikolin... Do you see that bandage there in the cabinet—the one with the blood stain? I have been trying to determine where that blood came from, as we've had no serious incidents, even with all the shooting that's been going on here. But just when we were turning east, Mister Fedorov told me something about it—said that it was mine, with my blood on it. Might you remember anything about it?"

Nikolin swallowed. “Yes sir,” he began. “This will sound crazy to you, but I remember that you wore a bandage like that on your arm. You were wounded, sir.”

“Wounded?” Zolkin was fishing for more. He wanted Nikolin to come out with the same story Fedorov had shared with him. “How would that have happened?”

“Karpov...” Just one word from Nikolin sent Zolkin’s heart beating faster. “On the bridge, sir. It’s one of the things I remember. There was a battle on, and Rodenko was trying to get Karpov to stop. You were there, sir, and... well... I remember the Captain pulled out a pistol and shot you in the arm. It just grazed you, but your arm was bandaged up for a few weeks after. I know it sounds crazy sir, but I can remember it as clear as I remember shaving this morning. Only I can’t fit it into any of the days we’ve lived out here since we arrived. See what I mean now? Am I going crazy?”

Chapter 32

Zolkin just stared at him, eyes wide, a feeling of profound disquiet falling over him. Nikolin recounted the exact same incident that Fedorov had asserted. “Did Fedorov tell you this?” He asked the most obvious question.

“Sir? No. He has never spoken to me about that.”

“You’re certain?”

“He wouldn’t have to tell me that, sir. I was there when it happened. I saw what the Captain did—everyone saw it, Rodenko, all the other officers on the watch that day.”

“Only none of them have come in to tell me this,” said Zolkin. “None, except you and Fedorov.”

“Fedorov? He knew about it?”

“He told me this exact same thing, and I told him I believed him. But by god, if I was the man shot in the arm, why in God’s name can’t I remember it? I’ve got snatches of all this in my mind, fragments, but they won’t come out and face me.” He was talking to himself now more than Nikolin. Now he looked at the young officer. “How long have you known these things?”

“Since the message came in on the HF encrypted channel, just a few hours ago.” Now he told Zolkin the rest of his story, the message, the code, the torrent of memories that flooded in after.

“Interesting,” said Zolkin. “A kind of satori moment for you.”

“Sir?”

“Zen,” said Zolkin. “A moment of sudden realization that might be triggered by some small event, even a leaf falling. You say you entered that code, knew what it was, and that knowledge open the door to all these other memories.”

“Yes sir, that’s it exactly.”

“Then what was that message about, if I might ask?”

“Sir, it was a secure message protocol, something Fedorov arranged, and it’s a bit of a story. In these memories I have, we were not alone here. There was another ship, a boat, a submarine with us.”

“A submarine?”

“Yes sir—the *Kazan*—Captain Gromyko’s boat.”

“Ah, yes, I know the man—The Matador.”

“That’s him, sir. Well, his boat was with us, and there was a battle in the Atlantic, but then it vanished—*Kazan*—it disappeared and we never heard from it again. But Mister Fedorov had set up this protocol, seeing as though ships and subs were moving about in time like this. He thought that Gromyko might appear some time again, in the future, and if he did, he was supposed to send out a signal on this specific channel, and that code was the way it would be authenticated.

“And you remembered it—the code—and then you remembered everything else.”

“Exactly sir. I knew you would understand!”

“I’m not quite sure that I do, only that seems to be what has happened, to both you and Fedorov. Now let me get this right. If you got that message, then it came from Gromyko?”

“Yes sir. In fact, I keyed in the code and the channel opened, and I heard Mister Fedorov speaking directly with Captain Gromyko.”

“Indeed. Well, what did they say? What was this all about?”

“Fedorov is arranging a meeting with *Kazan*. That’s how I understand it. They’re going to meet in the Barents Sea.”

“Interesting. A very busy man, our Mister Fedorov. Did you report this message traffic?”

Nikolin lowered his eyes. “No sir... All these memories came flooding in, and I was trying to keep my head and all. Then I realized that things were getting dangerous.”

“Dangerous?”

“That last missile we fired—well, Karpov fired it at Fedorov on the KA-40.”

“What?”

“Yes sir, he said he was just trying to get his attention, but I think... well I think he meant to shoot that helo down. I think he was trying to kill him.”

“That passes for dangerous in any book I’ve ever read,” said Zolkin, and he put two and two together. He didn’t know what Fedorov was up to on that mission, but it was certainly something important.

“Why in the world did Karpov try to shoot down that helicopter?”

“He didn’t want Fedorov to proceed with his mission, whatever that was. Nobody tells us things, but Karpov ordered him back to the ship, and when

Fedorov asked to speak with him, he responded by firing that missile.”

“The little Admiral wanted his *Starpom* back very urgently—or he wanted him dead. I see....”

“What’s going on, Doctor?”

“You probably know more than I, Mister Nikolin. These memories you say you have, might they give you the reasons?”

Nikolin shrugged. “Mister Fedorov and Karpov have been adversaries for a good long while,” he said. “I wish Admiral Volsky was still here.”

Zolkin nodded solemnly. “I wish that as well,” he said quietly. “Very well, I do not think you should reveal any of this to the rest of the crew. They would not understand.”

“Not unless they remember it all too,” said Nikolin.

“Perhaps, perhaps. I can tell you that Fedorov himself remembered it all, just as you do. I’ve had flashes, bits and pieces, and when you tell me these things they seem to ring true to me, though I can’t pull out the clear memory of it all like you seem to do. And so, my young man, I can say that you are not crazy—not unless Fedorov is crazy with you, and Karpov as well.”

“Karpov?”

“Yes, Mister Fedorov told me that Karpov knows all of this—knows he pulled that pistol on me and fired, and all the other things you remember. He knows it all, and yet acts as if none of it ever happened. There is more I could tell you—things Fedorov revealed to me, but that would only complicate things at the moment. Needless to say, if Karpov thought you remembered all these things, that would be.... dangerous for you. So I’d keep this all under your hat, Mister Nikolin, even that message you just received from Gromyko. Understand?”

“Alright, sir. I won’t tell anyone.”

“Good. If it gets too difficult, I want you to come right here and see me about it, and the two of us will sort it through. But I don’t think it would be good if Karpov discovered you know these things.”

“Alright sir, but how did this happen to me—and to Fedorov? Why can I remember these things, but no one else on the ship remembers, except perhaps you, if only just a little.”

“There are others,” said Zolkin. “Men have come to me like this with odd feelings, uncomfortable feelings about things that were bothering them, like waking dreams, nightmares. Fedorov told me that one other man woke up to

it all, just like you apparently did—the Chief.”

“Orlov?”

“Yes, and perhaps that is why Mister Fedorov wanted the Chief to accompany him on this mission. Orlov can’t keep secrets. He simply talks too much. But you, Mister Nikolin, you must be very cautious now. Not a word. But I want you to come to me if it bothers you. I’m with you. You can always come to me.”

“Thank you,” said Nikolin, glad that he wasn’t crazy after all. The whole world around him was topsy-turvy, but at least the Doctor was telling him his memory of it all wasn’t a nightmare, not a waking dream. It was real, as real as the message he had in hand, as real as that missile Karpov had fired, as real as Gromyko’s voice in his headset, which meant that *Kazan* was out there somewhere, and Fedorov made it safely away to find that sub.

The story in his head had a good many chapters left to be written, he thought, but now he worried what they might hold. Fedorov had been on that submarine before, with Admiral Volsky, and they had come for Karpov. The things he remembered happening after that were not too pleasant, and he glanced at that bloodied bandage the Doctor had pointed out. Might it come to that again? Would it come down to Samsonov standing up like he did, stalwart, sturdy Samsonov, refusing to do Karpov’s bidding, come hell or high water. The memory of how the crew all stood with Samsonov, of how he stood with him, was clear in his mind now. Would the crew have to mutiny here again to sort this all out?

Then he remembered something else, someone else—Grilikov.

* * *

Karpov was not happy. In fact, he was deeply upset. Fedorov... his old nemesis was up to the same tricks again. He was always hatching these crazy missions, always thinking he could fix everything, make it all right again. First it was that wild hunt for Orlov, which built the world they were sailing in now. Then he thought he could just waltz into Ilanskiy, go down those steps and change everything again. Well not so fast.

The Admiral was well settled into his new reality here, and quite comfortable in fact. That suggestion he had shocked Fedorov with, that the time loop would effectively allow him to live forever, seemed strangely

inviting to him. Yet for that to happen, the ship would have to slip again, fall backwards in time, to a period before its first coming. That would set up Paradox Hour once more, and Time would have no choice other than to double back on itself for another replay, to see if she could sort things out. Otherwise, argued Fedorov, she could not proceed to draw the future they came from, or even fully certify this world as sound.

We certainly caused a great deal of trouble here, he thought, and most of it is on my shoulders. But what do I care as long as I am in charge? They thought to throw me out of my heaven, so now I reign in hell. So be it. Now that I have Grilikov and my security contingent aboard, there won't be any little rebellions aboard ship here to frustrate my plans. Even Troyak is gone with a chunk of the Marines. My men should be able to handle the rest. So there won't be any heroics from the crew this time, like Rodenko and Zolkin tried to pull before. It took a long history to move those men to do what they did. Even faithful Samsonov bucked my authority in the end. I must never forget that.

Yet without the cooperation of the crew, I cannot carry out my plans. So I must be cautious here. Rodenko objected to that missile firing, and for the very first time. And Samsonov hesitated when I gave the order to fire. That was also a first. It tells me that their instinct is none so ruthless as my own. In the end, they are Fedorov's men, and would weigh in on his side of the equation. There's one more good reason to continue with Grilikov's training at the CIC.

That was one hell of a fight we just had with this rogue destroyer. What was it doing there? Who really knows, but it remains a threat to my plans here as well. My research indicated those ships only carried eight anti-ship missiles, so unless they had something below decks in crates, they have an empty gun now, at least insofar as the ship-to-ship missiles go. Yet they probably still have SAMs left, and that could be a problem for me. They can't harm *Kirov* with their little Standard Missile 2. I can shoot those down as easily as I took down their SSMs. And now that I know they are here, they certainly won't be able to ambush me like that again.

No. The damage they can do lies in their ability to influence events in the war. As toothless as they are now, their remaining missiles can be a decisive factor in any air battle that occurs here. I wonder what they are up to now? They were obviously sent up here to deal with me and the ship, and the fact

that they were operating with other Japanese fleet units is most revealing. That means Yamamoto has to know about them. How very interesting. They didn't just appear here, shake hands with Admiral Kurita, and decide to come and kill me. No, that isn't likely at all. I can imagine they went through everything we did when they first appeared here—trying to decide who's side they were on. Who knows, maybe that big volcanic eruption off Java had something to do with their appearance, just as Fedorov speculated. If nothing else, it put a little spice into the stew.

Now what are they up to? Yes, Yamamoto must know about them, which means they conspired to get to him and arrange a little pact. The Japanese were down south with this big operation involving Fiji. Why didn't they send *Takami* there? Perhaps Yamamoto thought he had the power to handle the Americans himself. It's my ship that must give him nightmares these days, particularly given what I did to his precious *Kido Butai* after Pearl Harbor, just a little demonstration of what was to come if Japan continues to defy me.

I ruffled a few more feathers when I took Kamchatka, now my Sakhalin operation has finally got their full attention. That reaction they made off Kamchatka was knee jerk reflex. They thought they would just send a little task force up and settle things. Now they know better. After I made my successful landing on Sakhalin, I must have really rattled the teacups in Tokyo.

He smiled.

So now what is this *Takami* up to? They'll have to go back to Yamamoto, tail between their legs, and tell him they failed here, and more, that they have no real power to intervene in my operations again. Oh, I suppose they could form the nucleus of a carrier strike group, and protect those ships from my SSMs as long as their SAMs hold out. But they can't stop my torpedoes.

He smiled again. He would settle all this later. His most immediate problem now was the same old nemesis that had foiled him so many times—Fedorov. It was an uneasy alliance from the very first. Fedorov had little choice but to knuckle under. He took the position I offered him, and served well, until he got a big head on him again, and started cooking up this sour borscht. Thank god I had the good sense to think it through. We aren't going to win this war on the back stairway of that railway inn. What fun is that? I'd much rather prefer to slowly grind the Japanese under my boot, until they beg me to stop.

So that is my main concern now—Fedorov, not the damn Japanese. I need not worry what this *Takami* is up to, but Anton Fedorov is another matter. What is he up to with this insubordination? He tells me he'll comply with my order to return to the ship, but there's been no sign of the KA-40 yet, and no word from him at all. Beyond that, my younger self tells me that the *Irkutsk* has gone silent. They can't raise them on the radio. Fedorov had Troyak and a few marines with him. I was remiss in not checking to see what Troyak was packing away on that helo from his weapons lockers. He has things in there that can bring an airship down, which is why I warned my brother to keep a sharp eye.

Then again... What good would it do Fedorov to take down the *Irkutsk*? He'd be stranded there. Oh, they still have the KA-40, and it had fuel enough to get back to the ship from the drop off point at Tokko Lake. That draws a fairly wide circle around that lake, the farthest on for that KA-40, and Fedorov could be anywhere inside that circle. He could easily reach the Trans-Siberian Rail as it swings up north of the big bend in the Amur River. But that would be risky for him, as it is all Japanese occupied territory. He would not come east, towards my operations here, and he would not go south into Japanese held territory. If he continued west from Tokko Lake, he would not even make it to Lake Baikal, and that would do him no good. He'd just have to sit there in the wilderness, twiddling his thumbs.

That leaves north. Yes, he could get up to the populated region along the Lena River, or perhaps even the Aldan River. That's my territory, but they could go to ground, be discreet, and they would be very difficult to find. There would be food there, the means of survival, particularly around Yakutsk. That would buy him time to figure what to do, but what would that be?

Karpov thought and thought. He'd want to get to Sergei Kirov. Yes... He was all chummy with Kirov, and that would be the only ally he could run to now—unless he had ideas about trying to contact the Americans. I've invited US Air Force personnel to evaluate my offer of basing rights on Siberian territory. Could he be running to them? If so, how could they help him? It certainly won't change anything concerning Ilanskiy. I've got that place locked down tighter than a bank vault now. Nobody gets anywhere near that railway inn without my permission. Tyrenkov's men had a complete cordon around the place.

Another smile, with a dismissive shake of his head. Fedorov, he thought, you are becoming irrelevant now, no matter where you think to go. Run to the Americans, or try running to Sergei Kirov. Yakutsk is a very long way from Leningrad, and besides that, I have much more pull with Sergei Kirov than you may realize. It's my Shock Armies that saved Russia last winter, and my troops still fight for him even now. How do you think I got this ship back?

So if he runs home to Leningrad, Fedorov might get a rude awakening to find he can no longer pull strings there. But I can. Kirov's factories are relocating to Siberian territory, and Siberian troops, oil, resources, are all that is still keeping the Soviet Union in this fight. The Americans and British have finally opened their Second Front, for what it's worth. I sent more troops to Kirov than all the British and American divisions combined.

Yes, I may be worrying too much about Fedorov now. He's really quite powerless, isn't he? That said, he needs to be apprehended and brought to my very annoyed justice. If he did have Troyak and his Marines take down the *Irkutsk*, that's one more airship I'll need to build for the fleet. He'll pay for that. Yes, he'll pay for everything the next time we meet. No more parley talk with Fedorov. He's my enemy now. I should have realized that long ago.

Chapter 33

Fedorov felt right at home again as he settled into a chair in the navigation room, charts spread out before him. They had been just north of the tip of Lake Baikal, and were heading west towards Ilanskiy and Kansk by a little used route when the course change was put in. He double checked the distance to the rendezvous point, seeing it was just under 3500 kilometers. If the weather held clear, they might make 80KPH enroute, but the weather was very fickle in Siberia this time of year. He figured the earliest they might arrive would be 48 hours, possibly longer if they were delayed by any unforeseen circumstances. That was to be an understatement, and by a massive margin.

They had gone to high altitude for the initial leg of their journey, to avoid being observed over more populated areas near the Lena River. It was chilling cold up there, and now they had descended into warmer air, the crew very glad for that. Life on a Zeppelin was a hard existence. The rigging and gas bag crews would have to wear heavy parkas, head gear and gloves at altitude, just to keep from being frozen. Gunners assigned to the top mounted platforms got the worst of it, and they were grateful that they did not have to go to action stations and actually man their weapons, fully exposed to the frigid air. In such circumstances, and with the natural wind chill caused by the forward motion of the airship, gun crews could only remain exposed for ten minutes, and they would rotate that often with other men who were huddled on a small warmed deck space just below the platform.

But it wasn't the cold that seemed to bother them most as they turned north. There was an unaccountable feeling of discomfort settling on the crew, from Symenko, who was naturally surly, and right on down to the cable linemen, sail makers who mended the canvass tarps, and the bag boys. The gunners, bombers, and sub-cloud car men were thankfully not at their posts, and the naval infantry contingent was standing down at Symenko's order, but everyone seemed tense. It was a slowly rising sense of anxiety, and not just because most of the crew could not understand why they were navigating this territory instead of the familiar routes they would take on their many patrols. It was something more, an impalpable sense of doom, just below the skin. It

was that feeling of rising adrenaline prompting a man to fight or flight, but the crew could do neither. There was no apparent danger in the skies around them, save the ever present threat of a sudden storm, and the ubiquitous cold. There were no enemy ships to worry about out here, and in fact, the crew didn't really know much about what was going on. But they were edgy, and Symenko could feel it too.

Now Fedorov sat staring at his chart, seeing the plotted line of their course as they passed over the winding flow of the Lena River, doubling back on itself in a series of twists and turns near the small settlement of Makarovo. Beyond that, the wilderness grew more intense, allowing them to get lower. It was very green here, the terrain beneath them relatively flat, yet covered by endless stretches of dense forest. Most of the trees on earth must be gathered here, he thought, his mind wondering what was going on down in that silent world. There were places there, where even in modern times, no human footprint had ever touched the ground. He thought about that, realizing the world there was quietly present, trees, soil, water, wildlife. Most of it did not even know it was there, he thought. It's just a mindless existence, ancient, unknowing, yet marvelous nonetheless.

A little over three hours after the course change, they passed over the thin stream of the Gulmok River. After that they would cross the Nepa. These small rivers appearing at intervals in the otherwise undifferentiated terrain were their guideposts, yet his eye kept roving on ahead, following the thinly traced course line, and seeing that it was, indeed, taking them over what he now regarded as a most dangerous area.

The fuel situation was their main problem. He was getting regular reports on usage to factor into his thinking, and he now calculated that they would just have enough to make the rendezvous. As much as he felt compelled to avoid the area ahead of them, he knew they would simply have to stay on this plotted course, and it was going to take them right over the dead ground that had been haunted by so many legends and stories of strange events and evil doings.

In modern times he knew there had been many hidden installations out here, secret mines, military depot sites, testing grounds for weapons, and even hidden silos where cold missiles waited in their stony silence. None of that was here now in 1942. The terrain was unblighted by modernity, and its many evils. Yet the course line was taking them right over the terror of the

taiga, the place where something came out of space in 1908, heralded by a strange magnetic flux that was picked up by many scientists and observers across the globe before it struck. They were going to fly directly over the site where it fell, the Tunguska Event, the epicenter of all his worst fears about what was happening to the world around him now.

He got some much needed sleep, awakening again six hours out, near the 450 kilometer mark as they overflowed the Chupakan River. Next came the Selkii, then they Ayava, and with each passing, the sense of anxiety seemed to grow. Night fell around them quickly when the sun set just before 18:00 hours, the darkness thickening quickly, the cold increasing. The fat gibbous moon would not rise for another hour and a half, so it was just their bad luck that they would pass over the epicenter of Tunguska in this interval of relative darkness, about an hour after that sun had set. In one sense, that was good, for they would skirt very near the inhabited settlement of Vanavara just 15 kilometers to their west. No one would see the slate grey beast in the skies above, passing like a shadow, nothing more than a smudge that moved over the stars.

A silence had fallen over the ship, a sullen dampening of spirits that now weighed heavily on the crew. Some were trying to get fitful sleep, and the bridge crew on the main gondola sat bleary eyed at their posts, the Wheelman, Elevatorman, Engineer, Trim and Ballast Man, Compass Man. Symenko stood nearby, grumbling about the dark and casting dour glances at Fedorov, Troyak and Orlov. The Chief was particularly edgy.

“*Sookin Sym*, Fedorov. Where have you taken us? It feels like hell on earth, only no fire, just endless black, and this numbing cold. I haven’t felt this bad since we went down with Troyak and I found that thing on the taiga. Remember that Troyak? I nearly shit my pants!”

The burly Sergeant looked at him, blinking. “Remember what?” he grumbled.

“Never mind that, Orlov,” said Fedorov quickly, and he gave the Chief a warning glance. Orlov had a way of blurting things out like that, which was one reason Fedorov wanted him on this mission, and not back on the ship. This Troyak had never been with them on that mission, nor had any of these Marines. That had happened with the old, original crew of *Kirov*, but this version of the stalwart Sergeant knew nothing about it. This Troyak had never accompanied Fedorov along the Trans-Siberian Rail, never set foot at

Ilanskiy, and he never fought in Syria and Iraq when the war took them there, nor did he have a place on that fateful mission with Popski to look for General O'Connor's downed aircraft.

Fedorov could feel the anxiety himself as he waited for the moon. Without any good ground reference, they could easily drift off their intended course, and the moonlight would be needed so they could mark out terrain features. Just to be safe in times like this, they would reduce speed to ahead one third. It would minimize the possibility of course drift until they had more light for ground observation. There they were, in this aluminum framed leviathan, defying gravity in the careful balance of lift and ballast, a beast of the wind and sky.

Another hour and they should be through the worst of it. The moon would rise, they could spy out the ground to find a telltale terrain feature, mark their position on the charts, and then make any necessary correction for inadvertent drift. Vanavara was right on the bend of the Stony Tunguska River, and the twisting course of the Vanavarka tributary entered it from the northeast. If they drifted, they would most likely move west with the prevailing wind, and so Fedorov was keeping a close eye that direction. If he saw the tortuous flow of the River Chamba, he would know they had gone slightly off course, but as the time passed, his anxiety became more than a welling inner feeling. Something was wrong.

"Captain," he said, his eyes narrowed as he scanned the horizon. Symenko had been dozing in his chair, and he grumbled as he woke, rubbing the sleep from his eyes. His dreams had been black, and now he remembered why. He was none too happy to be where he was, off the charts as he knew them, levered out of his position in Karpov's fleet, a renegade now, and with an uncertain future ahead of him at the end of this journey, and surely, a bounty on his head when his lordship learned what had happened.

"Captain Symenko?"

"What is it? Can't a man sleep?"

"We have a problem."

"What kind of problem? Is it weather? The ship feels sound; winds even. What's the matter?"

"The moon," said Fedorov, a disheartened and almost foreboding tone in his voice.

"What about it?" Symenko growled.

“It’s wrong.”

Symenko gave him a dismissive look. “Well give it time, Captain. It will sort itself out.”

“You don’t understand,” said Fedorov. “It hasn’t a mind on these things. In any given position on this earth, I can calculate the exact moment the moon will rise, and to the second, give or take a few due to terrain on the horizon. It’s never late, nor is it ever early, but this one is simply not there at all. Unless every man’s watch, and your own ship’s chronometer are all wacky, I make it 19:30. That’s already two minutes after moonrise for this location—the light I’ve been waiting on to give us a good look at the ground should have been apparent even before that, but it’s still dark out there. Well, have a look for yourself.”

He pointed off the starboard side. “The moon should be up right there, and right now. This is completely wrong. Something has happened.”

Symenko shook himself awake, took a good long look, and now the impact of what Fedorov was saying dawned on him. “No moon, eh? I say give it time. Maybe the ship’s chronometer is off—my damn compass clearly is.” He had fished his compass out of his pocket, and now he handed it to Fedorov, who saw the needle spinning wildly about.

Fedorov’s worst fears descended on him now, and he knew, after all the many shifts he had been through, that they were slipping, moving in time. Something was wrong, and the position on the map was ample testimony as to what might have happened. They were over it now, the very impact site of the Tunguska Event. There could be no other explanation.

“There’s your goddamned moon,” said Symenko, pointing.

Fedorov turned to a place in the sky where he had not expected to see anything, off the port side of the ship, and there was a thin evening crescent, barely there. His every instinct, and long years of experience told him that was wrong as well. That moon was setting. It was to their west!

Before he could say another word, there came a shudder, very pronounced. The equipment was shaking all over the bridge, the big guns rattling in the pods below them off the main gondola. Then the skies about them seemed to lighten, slowly at first, as if someone had the sun on a dimmer light, dialing it up. To his shock and surprise, that thin crescent faded away completely and then vanished. In its place, off the starboard side, and high up, what first looked like a full moon was now hanging in the sky,

veiled by clouds and smoke. The smell of burning woodland was very evident. Then, to their amazement, the ground itself started to glow red. Fedorov stared at it, eyes wide, and with each passing second the image became clearer—fire! The ground beneath them was engulfed with flames.

He looked around him, stunned, seeing many of the bridge crew doubled over, as though stricken by some stomach ailment. One man vomited. Only Troyak and his own people seemed unaffected, and he, himself, passed only a momentary sense of nausea, a queasy feeling that was quickly chased away by the utter shock of what he was now seeing. He rushed to the side port, looking down at the burning ground, and now he saw that it stretched away from a dark center, circular in shape, covering a vast segment of the ground below.

By God almighty, he said to himself inwardly. It's pulled us right on through to the source. I was a fool to steer this course and overfly this ground. I should have known better than to take a risk like this.

"What in hell is going on?" Symenko looked at him, unbelieving. "Look at it, hell itself down there. Those fires must stretch for a hundred kilometers!"

Now they were over the edge, and into that dark central area where there was no fire. Looking at the ground, Fedorov could clearly see the forest had been completely flattened, the trees pointing away from a central point that he could just make out, where it looked like blackened trees unaccountably remained standing in a small cluster.

There it is, he thought, the epicenter of doom itself. My reckoning was dead accurate, and if we keep on, we'll fly right over it, but I'll not risk that. God only knows what might be going on there. Time could be all knotted up, and again it might be swirling and twisting away into some black hole.

"Helmsman, come left thirty, and engines ahead two thirds," he said. But the helmsman was down on the deck, in no shape to answer that order.

"Captain," he pointed. "I don't want to overfly that. We need to turn." He could see a strange aura emanating from that stand of blighted trees, and what looked like greenish lightning striking it from above. A Time Storm, he thought, worse than any gale a ship at sea could ever encounter. It's already pulled us here to 1908, for that's where we have to be, hours or days after the Tunguska Event.

Symenko took the wheel, and now he shouted through a voice tube for his

Chief Medical officer. “Durgin! Get to the bridge, we have men down here. On the double!”

He wrestled with the wheel, and Troyak helped out. Orlov was holding on to a handrail for dear life, gaping at the scene around them. The airship’s rudder responded, the *Irkutsk* now beginning a wide turn to port. It would take them back over the edge of that darkened central zone, and over those raging fires. The sea of green forest Fedorov had been gazing at earlier was completely engulfed for miles. That dark center had come to be called the ‘Fire Eagle’s Nest’ by the local tribesmen down there, many which stood as witnesses to this event.

Now Fedorov realized that *he* had been a witness to this event as well. He realized, with a sudden awareness, that they must have been pulled to a point in time very close to the impact. It was not a matter of hours, he thought quickly, but perhaps a day after impact, perhaps two days at most. The raging fires might have burned for many days or weeks before they eventually died out, but those flames look hot and young. This had only recently started.

The impact of what had just happened to them hit him now. They were in 1908, and with an airship that could take them to the one place that was now uppermost in his mind! In bringing the ship around to port, he had already started to nose in that direction. He took a quick look at his charts, moved a ruler, then asked for another fifteen degrees. The compass was all awry, so a precise turn was impossible, but his long years of experience served him well.

“Give me a little more to port. Alright. Steady as she goes now. Hold this course and let’s see if we can pick up the Stony Tunguska soon.”

The hatch above the ladder opened, and Zykov stuck his head through. “What’s happening?” he shouted, then stared at the scene around them.

“What could have caused this madness?” said Symenko.

“Tunguska Event,” said Fedorov, but he realized Symenko would not know much about it in 1942. “This ground you called the Devil’s Country was devastated by the impact of a large object from space, a meteor or possibly an asteroid or comet. This is what such a strike might look like after impact. That black area behind us is closer to the center. Everything there was mostly blown to hell. These fires would be caused by the extreme heat generated by the detonation.”

“For god’s sake man,” said Symenko. “What are you talking about?”

“That!” Fedorov simply pointed to the darkness behind them. “This was no storm, Captain, not lightning, and there’s no volcano about, is there? Nothing man made could have caused that, not if every bomber in the world dropped its load all in one place. No. It was caused by something much bigger; something that struck the earth itself. That dark hole back there is over 2000 square kilometers.”

Even as he spoke a heavy rain began, and soon a crewman who had been tending to a rigging line on one of the upper decks appeared, his face and clothing streaked with black soot. Lightning scored the sky, and there was a continuous rumble of thunder.

The shock of what they were seeing still gripped them, and though Fedorov had moved to analyzing what had happened in his mind. They had been to hell and back again so many times that he was able to accept what had happened, and was already thinking about what this all meant. Yet the others were still dumbstruck.

The whole damn ship was pulled back, he thought, a crew a thirty men for me to worry about now, and here we are in 1908! From my reckoning we are now on course for the very place I was hoping to get to when I boarded that KA-40 on *Kirov*. My god, I hijack this airship, and then events conspire to bring me right where I wanted to go—to the year 1908, and to the place just off the nose of this airship now, no more than another 600 kilometers, just eight hours flying time away—Ilanskiy.

Part XII

Downfall

*“Life is a full circle, widening until it joins the circle motions
of the infinite.”*

— **Anais Nin**

Chapter 34

How do you explain what just happened to a man like Symenko? You don't. The scourge of fire, the blackness in the scorched earth behind it, were enough reason to make that turn and flee. At some point in the next hour, when they had put the devastated zone behind them, and the crew had time to recover, words were needed. Something had to be said, but Fedorov had decided it would be foolish to try and lay it all out and feed Symenko the whole truth.

"Then you mean to stay on this course?" asked Symenko. "We'll never make it to the Dolphin's Head this way."

"I'm aware of that."

"You think Karpov's ships will all just bow and curtsy when they see us darken the sky at Ilanskiy?"

"They won't be there."

"How can you be so sure?"

"Look behind you, Captain. See that glow on the horizon? Look at the sky. That will be seen for thousands of kilometers. Whatever this was, it was a massive event, and it fell right here in Karpov's Siberia. If he's here, he'll damn well be curious about it. Don't worry, this airship is the least of his problems now."

Fedorov knew Karpov wasn't out there anywhere, not yet. He might be soon, for he had first arrived in 1908 on the 10th day of July, on the old ship, the vessel he took out from Vladivostok. Was that the history he now found himself in again? It just might be. That had been the Prime Meridian before we started changing everything. When I first went down the stairs in Ilanskiy in 1942, I reached this very time and place—probably yesterday, the day of the event itself. I was there that morning when it happened, but did not stay long. I know that Mironov was there as well, so he just might be waiting for me off the bow of this ship. It's only a matter of time now before I know the answers to these things. But there's no way I can explain all this to Symenko.

"Captain," he said. "You might want to make up for lost sleep. In another six or seven hours you'll have your answers, at least in part."

"Sleep? After that?" he thumbed the red glow on the horizon behind

them. “No, I’d better walk the ship and see to the men. If we might have a fight ahead of us, then they’ll need to be ready. And they’ll have questions too—like how we go from the dark of night into that mess back there, and all in the blink of an eye. What do I tell them? And another thing—you were right about that moon. How do we go from no moon, to that sliver of a moon we spotted, and in the wrong place, all in the blink of an eye? Then it ups and disappears altogether. Its broad daylight. That’s the sun up there in all that smoke and haze, not another moon. This is insane.”

“Captain... Things are going to be ... somewhat strange for a time. I could tell you what I think has happened, but you won’t believe a word I said.”

“Try me.” Symenko wanted something, any explanation that could help him make sense of what he was experiencing now.

“Alright, let me put it to you this way. The sun and moon don’t lie, they mark the time each day, and when they change like that, it can mean only one thing—the time has changed right along with it. Look at the sun. See how high up it is? It wouldn’t be up like that in September, not in this latitude, and not at this hour. But there it is. That’s a summer sun, and you know it as well as I do. So if the moon was wrong, and that sun out there is up like that, we aren’t where we were when that gibbous moon last set. We’re somewhere else—not another place, but another time. That’s my explanation. If you have a better one, let me know.”

“Another time?” Symenko shook his head, starting for the ladder up. “God almighty, what a load of crap that is. Karpov will straighten you and your lot out soon enough. Just you wait.”

“Zykov,” said Fedorov. “Go with him and make sure all is well with the other men.”

Fedorov knew Symenko had a volatile temper, and he didn’t want the Captain stirring up anything with the rest of his crew. When they had gone up, and the hatch was closed, he looked at Troyak and Orlov. The other four Marines were stationed in pairs, two in the engineer’s compartment aft, two more watching the local contingent of Naval Marines that Symenko had with him.

When they had gone, Orlov came over, wanting more from Fedorov. “Was that a load of bull you just fed the Captain, or are you on the level?”

“I was quite serious, Chief.” He looked at Troyak as well, bringing him in

on what he had to say. “We’ve moved. We aren’t in the same time as before. That event out there is the Tunguska Event. That’s what we were overflying, only in 1942. Well... It isn’t 1942 any longer. I can tell the two of you that, because at least you’ve been through it once before, and you, Orlov, remember going through it a good many other times. They say lightning never strikes the same place twice. Well, I very much doubt that another asteroid fell right there again, right where the thing fell at Tunguska. I already know that events like this bend and break time. So if I’m right, then this is 1908, and just a day or so after that thing fell back there on the 30th of June.”

“1908?” Orlov gave him a blank look.

“So you see why I didn’t want to get into it with Symenko,” said Fedorov. “As for you two, you need to know the truth. It’s 1908, and probably the first of July, the day after Tunguska. I’ve changed our heading and we’re going to Ilanskiy, just east of Kansk. There’s someone there I have to.... Speak with.”

He couldn’t quite say the words that were lurking behind that conversation. There was someone there that he had to kill, an innocent young man that he had come here to murder. He just brought Orlov along to get him off the ship, and to keep an eye on him. Troyak and the Marines were just muscle, and they had already brought him this far—along with these incredible twists of fate. Yet even as he thought that, he was beginning to feel that Time herself had gotten him this far. Once he set his mind on what he had to do, she became a willing co-conspirator. Anything might have happened to them when they overflew the epicenter of that event. The anxiety, the feelings of doom and fear were all just harbingers. This had been the last thing he expected.

“You have to speak with someone?” said Orlov. “But you heard Symenko earlier—Karpov has the place locked down tight. We can’t get through.”

“Yes we can.”

“But what about those airships Symenko warned us about?”

“They were there in 1942, Orlov. I just told you that this is 1908!”

It took a while for things to get through Orlov’s thick skull. “Oh,” he said dumbly. “Yes, I suppose you’re right. There wouldn’t be any airships, and none of Karpov’s men either.”

“Exactly.”

“Who’s the man you need to see there?”

“Mironov. Alright, I’d better tell you both this, and it will be a lot to

swallow. It all started with you, Chief, and you remember it very well—when you decided to jump ship. Well I came after you to get you home again, and you, Sergeant, came right along with me.”

So he told them, the whole knotted tale of what had happened when he and Troyak got to Ilanskiy. Orlov grinned at times, nodding his head when a part of the story included him. He had all that inside his head now, clear memories of everything. He could still see those bulging eyes and purple lips as he choked the breath out of Commissar Molla.

“This young man,” Fedorov finished. “He was going by the name Mironov back then—right now, in 1908. Later he would change that name and take another—Kirov.” He folded his arms watching them both closely. He had told Troyak this once before, and when he said it again, something registered in the Sergeant’s eyes, a faded memory suddenly jogged to life. It was just as Fedorov was telling it, he knew, though he could not trace the memories with any clarity, as Orlov could.

“Sergei Kirov?” said Orlov. “The man we named our ship after?”

“That’s correct.”

“You came all this way to speak with him? He was right ahead of us on our old course. All we had to do was divert to Leningrad.”

“Yes, I could have gone to visit him in 1942 once we got our hands on this airship. But it’s here that matters. Now is the crucial time—1908. That’s why I was trying to get to Ilanskiy in the first place—to go down those stairs like I did before, and find him again.”

“Well what in God’s name do you want to speak with him about?”

“It was going to be more than that,” said Fedorov darkly, the feeling of guilt and shame already heavy on him again. “This was something that Karpov and I worked through for a very long time. This whole situation—back in 1942—well it’s my fault. You see, I told Mironov something, opened my big mouth, and I let something slip. That changed everything. It set up that whole crazy world, the war we were fighting, the Orenburg Federation, all of it.”

“Mironov set that up? I thought Volkov did all that.”

“Yes, he did, but he might not have ever succeeded if I had kept my mouth shut. When we’re this far back in time, any little slip can have major consequences to the events that follow. One little slip could end up becoming something very big. Well, I made a mistake, and now I have to correct it—at

least I'm going to try."

Orlov nodded. "But didn't you already make that mistake?" Orlov could work things out if given time. He had been following what Fedorov was telling him very closely. "You said you appeared here on the morning of the event—that shit back there we flew right over a while back. That's when you met this Mironov—Sergei Kirov. So you've already made your mistake—yesterday if this is July first like you think it is."

"No," said Fedorov, "I didn't make the mistake here, not in 1908 when I first met Mironov. Shocked as I was to see what was happening there, I had the presence of mind to reverse my path and go back up those stairs. The problem was, Mironov got curious, and he followed me."

"Ah," said Orlov.

"He came upstairs!" said Troyak, remembering that now, and not guessing about it. His eyes narrowed, for the rest had slipped away like a dream does when you awake in the morning.

Fedorov gave him a sudden look. "Yes, he came up the stairway after me, and I sent him back. But before I did that, I told him something, and that changed everything."

"What was it?" Orlov was really curious now.

"I told him how he would die—not exactly—but I gave him a warning about Leningrad, about the day he would be assassinated."

"*Sookin Sym!*" Orlov gave him a wide grin. "Good job, Fedorov. It looks like he took your advice, because he lived, and he's a damn sight better than Stalin."

Now Fedorov lowered his head, the shame heavy on him again. "Yes," he said quietly, "I suppose he is."

"So you want to make sure he gets the message," Orlov guessed. "You want to speak with him again and leave nothing to chance. I Understand now. But Fedorov, how do we get back after this? Have you worked that out yet?"

Fedorov gave him an anguished look. Orlov thought he just wanted to make sure his hero lived. It would never once enter his mind that I had come here to achieve just the opposite—to kill Sergei Kirov with the pistol on my hip. He would never think that of me....

"Get back?" said Fedorov slowly. "Well, the stairway will be right there, won't it? The last time I went up, it delivered me right back to the time I left—1942—the very same day, only a few hours later. The good Sergeant here

said he had been looking for me for some time, though for me, it was only a matter of minutes that passed. I think that stairway works like that. You get right back to where you started, as if you were walking a circle. It always takes you back to where you began.”

“Only this time we didn’t come by the stairs. We got here on this damn airship,” said Orlov. “Will it still work?”

“We can try,” said Fedorov glumly. “We all go together, right up those stairs.”

“What about Symenko and his crew? He’s got 30 men aboard. We gonna all file up those stairs, nuts to butts, like a string of blind men, and then what? Do we all come out in 1942 on the second floor of that inn? Excuse me, party of 35 checking in, but we don’t have a reservation.”

Now that Orlov put it to him that way, Fedorov scratched his head, thinking. Yes, what to do about Symenko and his men? It had been easy enough when he thought it would just be his own small group, but Orlov had painted a fairly difficult picture just now. He was silent for a moment, thinking. Timely cruelty... He had come here to wield that sword, and he could have no scruples if he was actually going to do this. They were knee deep in the borscht now, and he knew he could leave no loose ends here—no dangling threads that would spoil the loom of time in the days ahead.

“I’ll... think of something,” he said, but those thoughts were very dark and troublesome for him.

“Well now,” said Orlov glibly. “This will be like shuffling the deck right in the middle of the goddamn poker game! And guess who is sitting across the table—with a fist full of high cards? That bastard, Karpov, and that ham fisted brute of his, Grilikov, he’s the dealer. What will happen when he catches us in his precious railway inn?”

Fedorov knew more than he could say just then. He hadn’t told Orlov the whole story. The Chief thought he was wanting to make certain Kirov lived, not that he had come there to murder him. The Chief thought Karpov’s security men would be waiting for them at the top of those stairs if they all filed up, and had no inkling that none of that was likely to ever take form and shape if he killed Kirov. If he did what he had come here to do, then the whole world would be different when they climbed those steps. Stalin would be back, the Orenburg Federation likely gone, and Volkov dead or in a gulag if he tried to buck the man of steel. If there was one man who could handle

Volkov, it would be Josef Stalin.

So there wouldn't be any Free Siberian State either, and it would not be likely that Karpov ever seized power there. These airships would have gone the way of many other old inventions of history, and so airship Captains like Symenko, and the *Irkutsk* itself, would have no place in Stalin's world. The ship and its crew were here, and that thought caused him some trepidation. How would Time account for them if they did try to return to 1942? They might not have a place in the changed future they would be returning to, and now that he thought of it, the airship itself remained a huge unsolved problem. He certainly could not leave it here, with radio sets, rudimentary radar equipment, WWII era guns and engineering. It would simply have to be destroyed, and he made a mental note to have a talk with Troyak about how they might accomplish that.

There was so much on his list to now. Be careful what you wish for, he thought. I got my wish to get through to Ilanskiy and reach this very time. Well, here I am. Now what do I do?

Chapter 35

The black rain was behind them now, but the sky was still alight with that strange astral light. It would be seen as far away as Moscow, where the night was illuminated to near daytime brightness. In Europe and England, people saw the horizon lit by a luminescent red glow, and some reported they could read a book by that light in the dead of night. The next hours saw Fedorov's mind surrounded by so many questions.

He was reasonably sure of the time, believing this was late on the day after Tunguska, July 1, 1908. Now he struggled to remember the events that took place here earlier. Karpov told him they determined their arrival date when the met a clipper ship at sea. That was on July 10, so if he was correct, and they were back on the old Prime Meridian, then Karpov would appear here in a few days—in the Pacific. Then Fedorov appeared here a week later, shifting back with both Orlov, Troyak and others on the *Anatoly Alexandrov*. They determined that they arrived on 17 July, staying only briefly, and shifting forward again on 19 July to reach the year 2021.

That was when he hatched the plan to use Rod-25 on *Kazan* and try to return to 1908. It was a bumpy ride, taking them first to 1945, but they eventually shifted back, right on the eve of Karpov's big showdown with Admiral Togo. That was July 25-26, 1908. So whatever I decide to do here now must be accomplished before Karpov arrives on 17 July. I have a little over two weeks here, and then I must be gone. Otherwise I could never arrive here on the *Anatoly Alexandrov* as I did. He realized the incredible danger he was in by arriving in this narrow window between his two appearances in 1908. The threat of Paradox loomed like a cold shadow in his mind.

Now his thoughts moved to Mironov. It was likely that he might still be at the railway inn. He told me he was traveling somewhere, but where? Ah, I remember now. He was traveling to visit relatives at Irkutsk. It was just blind chance that he found himself at the railway inn at Ilanskiy on the 30th of June. I researched that time after that encounter. That was right in the middle of the Great Race, the teams of men from various countries trying to race around the globe in a custom auto. In fact, the German team had just arrived at Ilanskiy, behind the Americans by a couple hundred miles. They were

staying right there at the inn on the second floor. I bumped into them near the front desk before I retraced my steps up the back stairway. That was when I realized where I was. I saw the calendar at the front desk—1908!

He closed his eyes, summoning up the memory of that brief adventure. Mironov had two other men with him, a tall man with a Ushanka, and then that stranger—yes—the Englishman. After he got over his suspicion that I was working for the Okhrana, Mironov told me that second fellow was a reporter working for the Times of London, covering the Great Race, a man named Byrne. He might still be there as well.

I also know that Volkov used that stairway to get to 1908, but the details on that are fuzzy. I have no way of knowing how he did that. Or when he appeared—what day. He could be there this very day, or he might not appear for months. One thing I do know, Mironov followed me up those stairs on June 30th of his time, and like Orlov said, that was where I made my mistake and warned him of his fate. Kamenski didn't think I was fully responsible. He argued that anything Mironov did after that warning was of his own free will, but would he have done those things if not for my warning?

So there he was, approaching that same fateful moment in time again, and wondering if the same actors would be on the stage. Would Mironov still be at the inn? If not, then Fedorov would be in a most difficult position. Mironov should be close, but it might take time to find him.

If he boarded a train for Irkutsk, thought Fedorov, then I suppose I could use the airship to find it, but that would be a very awkward rendezvous. Lord, I hope he hasn't left the inn to travel by other means. It could take days to locate him, and I have so little time here. He tried to recall if there was a train there in 1908, but it was too fuzzy. The only thing to do was to get there, get on the ground, and then sort the situation out, but he had a lot of loose ends to deal with, and the thoughts in his mind about them weighed heavily on him.

What if I simply cannot locate him? Then what? I have one last play here—Karpov's arrival in the Pacific. We have just enough fuel, and just enough time to get there. He was in the Sea of Japan, and I could simply radio him. He'll certainly be surprised to hear from me, won't he? But what would I be doing? I have no Rod-25 with me, and there would be no way to get him back to 2021. So there I would be, counting out the hours and minutes before the *Anatoly Alexandrov* appeared in 1908, and I was on that platform.

There it was—Paradox.

He had a very limited life span here, and now he knew he had no play in the Sea of Japan looking for Karpov. All he could do would be to try and persuade him not to take the actions he was planning, and to wait for the *Alexandrov*—to wait for his own arrival, and most likely his own death by Paradox. No. His only solution had to be here, at Ilanskiy. It was Mironov, just as he had reasoned it out with Karpov. It was Mironov's death, or nothing. At least he had the stairway up to escape the Paradox, but that presented other problems.

How to resolve the issue of the *Irkutsk*?

I can't very well leave that airship here, he thought. Suppose I do what is necessary at Ilanskiy, then we re-embark on the *Irkutsk*. If I took it back to the epicenter, would we shift again? Would Time deliver us back to 1942? That sounded all too convenient. While he had good reason to assert his travel up and down the stairway would always deliver the walker back to the approximate time he last left, that same logic did not necessarily apply to his travel on that airship.

I can see how we might have been pulled here to this time by the sheer gravity of the Tunguska Event. I've thought that all along, when *Kirov* shifted here after Karpov set off that nuke in 1945 and killed the *Iowa*. Things seem to fall through to 1908 easily enough, perhaps pulled by that time gravity I'm speculating on. But would the inverse be true? I was able to get the *Anatoly Alexandrov* from 1908 back to 2021 again, but that was the work of Rod-25 and possibly Chief Dobrynin's magic as well. Something tells me that I would only be courting further disaster if I took *Irkutsk* back to that epicenter. It's just too risky. So what do I do?

The words that spoke now in his mind might have easily been uttered by Karpov. He would have the solution easily enough, but for Fedorov, getting there was an agony—the *Irkutsk* had to be destroyed, and not just the airship itself, but perhaps Symenko and the entire crew as well. Orlov had come out with his comical description of the whole damn crew, all packed into the downstairs dining room at the railway inn, and filing up that stairway, one after another. Would it work? He would have to try, because his only alternative would be Karpov's solution—take down the airship, crew and all.

To do this, we would have to anchor the airship at Ilanskiy, a nice eyeful for anyone there to see. I'd need Symenko's cooperation, and then the crew would have to disembark, probably using the same basket they hauled us up

on. What a scene, and what effect would it have on the locals here, particularly when I give Troyak the go ahead to take that airship down? Could he? I haven't even spoken with him on this.

"Sergeant Troyak?"

"Sir?"

"A word with you please. We have a situation here... I can't allow this airship to remain at large here, and I don't think we can navigate back with it the way we came. Understand?"

Troyak merely nodded, waiting.

"Can you destroy it? Is there any weapon you have that could do that?"

"Yes sir. We have a handheld ATGM, and three thermobaric rounds."

"Thermobaric? You're talking about fire now."

"Aye sir, and it would wreak havoc on this airship if we hit it from the ground. I could also rig up grenades at a few key places, the engineering section, engines. It would bust up the equipment."

"Yes," said Fedorov. "Nothing could be left for the locals to find or use. All the equipment, radars, radio sets, even the guns would have to be destroyed."

"Most of the ship would die in the fires," said Troyak, "but the bigger guns might have to be revisited on the ground and we could pop grenades down the barrels, or into the breech. That should do it."

"You brought all this with you?"

"Standard weapons loadout. We assembled these things in packs, then we can just grab them and deploy."

"I see. Well, that airship coming down would make quite a scene. Perhaps we should plan to do this at some distance from Ilanskiy, then we move to the town on foot. I have business at the inn, and I'll need to get there as soon as possible. I suppose you could lead the crew to the railway inn after the demolition. It would be very important that this gets done flawlessly. No useable equipment could be left behind, and each and every last crewman would have to be herded to the town, and right to the railway inn. We can't lose a single man. Otherwise they'd be stranded here."

Even as he said all this, he realized how insane it was going to sound to Symenko. There was no way he could get him to understand and accept what was involved here. He was still under the assumption that this was 1942, and his fate was sailing towards a safe haven in Soviet Russia. Trying to explain

that he needed his entire crew to assemble in that railway inn was going to be quite a challenge.

“Sergeant,” he said. “It’s occurred to me that Captain Symenko may not be cooperative in all of this. But neither he, nor any of his crew, can remain here, and that airship has to be destroyed. I may have to make a very tough decision here.”

“Aye sir,” said Troyak. He knew what Fedorov was saying now, hard as it sounded.

“This is 1908,” Fedorov went on, looking for the rhyme and reason. “If any of them fail to come with us... well, they can’t remain here. The impact that could have on future days would be impossible to calculate, and I cannot allow it to happen, not under any circumstances.”

“I understand, sir,” said Troyak stoically. “You give the order. My men and I will do whatever is necessary.”

Troyak could see that this was bothering Fedorov a good deal, but he was a soldier, signed on in the service of the Black Death. It was therefore no problem for him to know that he would become death in that service, and it would not be the first time he had taken lives, and for reasons, under orders, that would be trivial compared to what Fedorov was explaining here. He tapped his collar, where the comm-link microphone was embedded in all their service jackets. “Sir, pinch off that collar mike you have there, and give the order ‘Downfall.’ My men will handle the rest.”

Fedorov could say nothing more, simply nodding, but the look of guilt was plain on his face. In another hour they would make their approach to Ilanskiy. Now he had to see what he could do about Symenko.

* * *

“Look,” said Symenko, “I don’t have to know your business here. All I was to do was ferry your ass to Irkutsk! Now look at me. So now it’s back to plan A, and we’re coming up on Ilanskiy. Strange that we haven’t been spotted and challenged yet. I suppose that wreck off to the northeast has the radios all fouled up, but that doesn’t matter. *Riga* and *Narva* might be waiting there to blow us to hell.”

“They won’t be there,” said Fedorov, “I can assure you, but here’s my plan. There’s good clear ground just west of Ilanskiy. We can come in real

low. The sun set two hours ago at 21:40. It won't rise until a whisker after 03:00. We'll come in before that and go to ground to drop land anchors. Then I'll make my way to Ilanskiy on foot from there. All I ask is that you wait there."

"What for? You won't be coming back. Karpov's men will have you in no time at all."

"I'll take my chances."

Symenko just grinned at him. "Alright, assuming we get anywhere near the place, I'll hover shallow for you. Since you parlayed a safe harbor for me and my men with the Soviets, I owe you one. But if I catch even a glimpse of another airship, I'll be up and on my way. You'll be on your own down there. Understand? I've told you that I'm a dead man if Karpov gets me, and there it is."

"Deal," said Fedorov, realizing he was making one hell of a devil's bargain here, and he was the devil! But what else could he do? The mission before him was all important. Everything depended on him now—everything. The moods and whims of Symenko could not be allowed to interfere. That didn't make what he was doing here any easier. He still felt the weight of this man's life, the lives of his entire crew, all piled on his weary back. But they were nothing compared to the weight of the whole world. That's what he was carrying now, the weight of the whole goddamned world.

It was a world that was still strangely alight when they arrived, even in the dead of night. At this latitude, the sun would not be gone long, and even at its darkest, they could see easily, as if it were a grey, overcast day. Yet the horizon to the northeast still glowed eerily red, and the sky above it was strangely alight. The forest was still burning there, as now Fedorov reckoned these must be the pre-dawn hours of July 2nd.

Symenko was very surprised, but just as Fedorov had told him, there had been no sign at all of the *Riga* or *Narva*. So the *Irkutsk* was able to sneak in low, to an open field about four kilometers east of the town. They put down a light ground anchor, but Symenko remained edgy, and requested that Fedorov and his party use the basket. In his mind, that was the safest and quickest way to get these intruders off his ship, once and for all.

"Symenko," Fedorov told him before they lowered. "The radios are clear, and I will send you a signal if I have success. I'll ask you to do something more, you and your crew, and it will be a matter of life or death for you all."

Do as I say, will you? Your life, and the lives of your entire crew, will depend on it.”

“Fine,” said Symenko, wanting nothing more than to get this man and his Marines off his ship. I’d promise to kiss your ass if you asked nicely, he thought, but that doesn’t mean I’d really pucker up. Once you and those thugs of yours are on the ground, then I’ve got only one thing in mind. I’m taking this ship up into that red sky, and we’re running for Soviet territory. We don’t have to make it all the way to the Dolphin’s Head to rendezvous with that damn submarine. No, all I have to do is get my own ass to Soviet territory, then we can go to ground, hand over *Irkutsk*, or simply abandon her, and disappear.

That was what he was planning to do now, and so Fedorov would never make that plaintive call on the radio, asking Symenko to disembark his entire crew and foot it to Ilanskiy. Instead, it would be a call that came the other way as Fedorov, Orlov and Troyak approached the town, very near the inn. Zykov and the other four Marines were in the trees opposite the clearing where *Irkutsk* had been hovering. He called Fedorov over their service jacket comm-link, warning that the *Irkutsk* was pulling up its land anchors and making ready to depart, already drifting up and away. Fedorov knew what Symenko was doing, what he had obviously decided, and that he had no time to argue with him now. He took a deep breath and looked at Troyak heavily.

“Sergeant,” he said grimly. “Send Zykov the code: Downfall.”

Chapter 36

On the 30th of June, 1908, Train 92 was heading east on the Trans-Siberian Rail when it was jolted by the intense shock of the fiery blast above the Stony Tunguska. Even though the event was nearly 400 miles away, the train shook so violently that the Engineers brought it to a halt. Many on that train saw the terrible tail of fire in the sky as the object surged in from the southeast with a terrible roar. The air quavered with its massive sonic boom. The shock wave would circle the entire earth, vibrating instruments at meteorological stations as far away as London.

When the worst of the blast had subsided, they moved on, the train cars buzzing with frightened conversations about what had happened. It was decided to halt the train at Kansk to inspect it for damage, or even something as nefarious as a bomb, but nothing was found. The Engineers inquired as to what may have happened, and the locals reported that they had felt the earth shake and a heavy blast of wind. Many windows were broken, which prompted local magistrate Pytor Sukhodaeff to cable the Seismic Commission in Saint Petersburg to report the event. Rumors had begun circulating that a meteor had fallen nearby, and some residents were already out in the countryside looking for it. One reported he had found something near the hamlet of Filimonovo, but it turned out to be nothing more than a large rock.

Train 92 was delayed there all that day, as the Engineers were told the tracks were blocked by debris ahead. They decided to go out on horseback to inspect the line as far as Ilanskiy, but found no blockage. The next morning, they would move on to Ilanskiy for a brief stop to pick up any passengers wanting to head east. That was the train that Mironov had been waiting for. It would continue on to Irkutsk, where he had relatives he could visit while he was laying low after his recent discharge from prison.

Yet the events of that day had been most unusual, the violent sound of explosion and rattling shock wave, the terrible red sky to the northeast, then came the strange man dressed in military garb that had suddenly appeared on the scene. Mironov had been very curious about him, and very suspicious. He would see the shadow of the Okhrana everywhere, and so, when he saw the

man slip away up the back stairway, he decided to follow him, leaving the English reporter, Thomas Byrne, alone for a time in the dining room with his interpreter.

That man had been Fedorov himself, appearing there for the first time after he followed that curious rumbling sound during his hunt for Orlov. Following him up the stairs, Mironov had been apprehended by other soldiers, who took him to this Fedorov, as the man had called himself. While he was gone, to a place he only later came to know as the distant future of 1942, other things were happening at the railway inn.

Byrne, the reporter, had been sent there to cover the Great Race by the industrious owner of the Times of London, Alfred Harmsworth. A few days earlier he had interviewed the leading American team as it came through, and that day, the German team had been staying at that inn, making ready to move on west. Needless to say, the events of that day caused them to linger, but Byrne, hearing them near the front desk, believed they would soon depart. So he thanked his local interpreter with a hearty handshake, wanting to get up to his room on the second floor as soon as possible to gather his belongings.

He had seen Mironov go up the back stairs after that other strange man left them, the one who called himself Fedorov. Then Mironov appeared again, a troubled look of astonishment on his face. He said nothing, striding quickly across the dining hall and out the main entrance by the front desk.

Seeing the doorway still ajar in that nook near the hearth of the dining room, Byrne thought he would go that way to save time, but it was to be a most fateful decision. He started up the dark stairway, feeling very odd half way up, a prickly feeling sweeping over him, and with a sensation of slight nausea. He reckoned it was only the dark confined space, and sudden disorientation as he groped about in the shadows. When he finally reached the top, shuddering to feel the sticky brush of a cobweb on his brow, he heard voices. Trying the door, he found it locked, which was probably why Mironov had made such a hasty retreat, he thought. But rather than simply retreating back down those stairs as Mironov had, he decided to knock, and the sound of his knuckles on the door would reverberate through time like a great boom.

Mironov did not find the door locked on his journey up those stairs. Unbeknownst to him, it had taken him to 1942, where Fedorov and Troyak had collared him, questioning him briefly, before releasing him again. That

whispered warning that had haunted Fedorov ever since had been made right there on that upper landing near the door where Byrne heard those voices, but 79 years earlier! For some unaccountable reason, Thomas Byrne's journey up that stairway took him much farther forward in time, all the way to the year 2021. The voices he had heard were those of the modern day innkeeper and a very diligent Captain in the Russian Naval Intelligence Service, Ivan Volkov. He had been looking for Fedorov along the Trans-Siberian Rail in 2021, ordered to do so by Director Kamenski.

What happened next was a strange twist in the history, which never would have happened were it not for the presence of Thomas Byrne there that hour. Hearing that knock, and Byrne's voice on the other side of the door, Volkov had forced the very edgy proprietor to unlock the door, seizing upon Byrne as a suspicious character. The pulse of history itself quickened in those moments, for Volkov thought he had found a hidden passage in the inn, and he forced Byrne back down those steps and back into the dining room, where his suspicions were confirmed by the sudden appearance of three men with guns.

These were the NKVD Colonel and another henchman, with Lieutenant Surinov, the officer Fedorov had berated for the poor treatment of prisoners heading east to one of Stalin's gulags in 1942. Seeing Volkov and Byrne, they immediately apprehended them at gunpoint, and Surinov was asked if this was the man that had caused all his trouble. The uniform was similar, but Surinov was not certain. The violence that followed that interrogation stunned Byrne, with Volkov gunning down all three of his captors and then seizing Byrne again, determined that he was behind some nefarious plot here.

"You!" Volkov pointed his weapon at Byrne. "Come with me."

The Captain prodded him, goading him up the main stairway to the second floor this time, until they reached the upper landing.

"Where is the room you were staying in?"

"There, sir... The second door on the right, I think." Byrne was very confused, frightened, and could not imagine who this man was, though his garb looked much like the uniform worn by that other man they had encountered, the man named Fedorov.

His captor forced open the door to his room, easing in carefully before he pushed Byrne inside. "Russian Naval Intelligence!" he shouted, leaping in behind him, but the room was dark and silent. Byrne was very surprised to

see that none of his things were there, and he immediately thought that he had pointed out the wrong room in his haste and fear. The bed was facing the wrong direction, the bed clothing all different, the curtains on the window gone, the oil lamp on the night stand missing. He was, in fact, standing in the correct room, number 214, but it would never enter his head that it was the year 1942 at that moment.

His captor's eyes narrowed as he methodically scanned the nightstand, made up bed, and then he walked to inspect the closet and restroom to make certain no one was concealed there.

"Well it doesn't seem that anyone has stayed in this room for some time." The suspicion was obvious in his tone. "Very well, come with me. Let's find that old proprietor and see what he has to say about things. What was your name again?"

"Thomas Byrne, sir. I'm a Reporter for the London Times—just here to cover the great race, sir."

"Well, Mister Byrne, your name should be on the register of this inn, yes? You had better hope I find it there. Now move!"

They were out into the hall, very near the back stairwell, and the hard hand of the man on his shoulder steered Byrne towards the entrance.

"So you say you were meeting with friends in the dining hall, eh? Some associates? I trust you saw what happened to them when they presumed to trifle with me. Bear that in mind. Now get down those stairs!"

And so down they went, the first downward movement by Byrne, the second for Volkov. As Fedorov had theorized, Byrne would get unerringly right back to the year and time where he started, 1908, and all the while, Volkov's hand was tight on his shoulder, his pistol jabbed in the hollow of his back. And so he would take Volkov back, right along with him, each of those 17 steps down marking off the years, 34 in all. That was how Volkov got back to 1908, not because Fedorov had whispered anything to Mironov, but because an enterprising Newspaper man named Harmsworth had sent Thomas Byrne to far off Siberia, to look for news that might boost his circulation.

If Thomas Byrne had not been there at the railway inn that day to cover the arrival of the German race team, Volkov would have never reached that fateful year. But how far back did the line of causality go? Where was the real Pushpoint on that event? Was it Byrne's decision to hasten up those

stairs to fetch his belongings, or should the fault be laid on the desk of Harmsworth? Then again, the history of that man's life led even further back, into the lives of the parents that had given birth to Harmsworth. Was the Pushpoint there, hidden in the romance that had given birth to Harmsworth? Or was it the school master he encountered later in life, one J. V. Milne, where Harmsworth was educated at Henley House School in Kilburn, London? It was he who had encouraged the young Harmsworth to start the school newspaper, setting him on a career track that would later see him found the Times, and send Thomas Byrne off to Siberia.

Strangely, one of Harmsworth's teachers there at that very same school was someone who would later do a good deal of speculating and writing on the arcane possibility of traveling through time—a man named H. G. Wells....

One thing or another led Byrne to that railway inn, and it was he who led Volkov back to 1908. The dining room they found themselves in when they made that final descent was obviously the same room he had been in before. Byrne could tell by the shattered windows from that terrible blast, and the amber glow that was still illuminating the room. Yet his assailant seemed very confused and surprised. The bodies of the three men Volkov had murdered so violently were nowhere to be found.

Byrne could feel his captor's hand tighten painfully on his shoulder. They moved to the front desk, and the stranger looked over everything very carefully. No one was there, but he saw the guest register open on the desk, a pen there as if it had been dropped at a moment's notice, and squinted at the scrawled handwriting. Byrne knew his story would be vindicated, for he could see where he had signed his own name there, right along with the names of the German race team when they had arrived.

"Koeppen," said the stranger. "The thirtieth of June, oh eight? The year is obviously wrong. 2008?"

"One of the contestants," said Byrne, glomming on to the information as if to buttress his story with this strange and dangerous looking man with a gun.

"Contestants?"

"In the Great Auto Race, sir. The race I am here to report on."

"What are you talking about, you fool?"

The stranger gave him an odd look, then scanned the front desk area,

seeming more confused with each passing moment.

“Where is everyone?” he said, his eyes dark and dangerous.

“Probably out near the tracks, sir, where I should be. The *Protos* is leaving this morning. That’s the German team’s car. I was just running upstairs to fetch my notebook when I found the door locked on the upper landing and began knocking to see if I could gain access. Then you appeared with that other older man, and... well, I’m very confused, sir. Are you with Mironov?”

“What? Mironov? I am with the Russian Naval Intelligence, and I have had more than enough of this nonsense. Is this Mironov the associate you spoke of earlier?”

Byrne followed what the man said as best he could, in spite of the fact that his Russian was limited. Yet he heard enough to realize this man was an intelligence officer, and Mironov’s warning about the Tsar’s secret police, the Okhrana, rose as a caution in his mind now. “He was just another boarder,” he said, not knowing what else to tell this dangerous man. “I had breakfast with him. I thought perhaps that you were with his party.”

Now the man peered outside. “Through that door,” he said gruffly, nudging Byrne out. They emerged to find the northeastern sky still aglow with a strange light, for there had been some tremendous explosion there and the whole taiga forest was set aflame. There was still a distant rumble of thunder in the air, as though from a cannonade, or more explosions.

“My God,” the man said as he stared at the sky. “They’ve finally done it,” he breathed. “It’s begun.”

Byrne had no idea what the man was talking about. He seemed to be reading some meaning in that terrible glow on the horizon, but the Things he said next made no sense.

“Alright,” said Volkov. “Your story pans out. Get on with your business. But see that?” The man pointed. “The war has started, and if you have any sense in your head you will get away from here as fast as you can. There’s a big naval weapons arsenal south of here, and an airfield at Kansk to the west. They’ll certainly be targeted, so you had better head east. I must find my men. What could have happened to them?” The man seemed to say that more to himself than to Byrne, who nodded, grateful that he was set free, and thinking only of getting away from this man.

He turned heading towards the railway yard to see if the train had arrived.

At that moment it was still at Kansk to the west, and would not continue on to Ilanskiy until the next day. So Byrne wasn't going to get anywhere that day, war or no war. What did this strange man mean by that remark about the war—Naval Weapons Arsenal? Airfield? Orville and Wilbur Wright had only just made the first flight in a rickety flying machine a little over five years ago. Such craft existed, but they were mostly experimental, and the airships developed by Count Zeppelin never came here, so there was nothing that might pass for an airfield at Kansk that he knew of. He had stopped there briefly when the train last brought him here before getting off at Ilanskiy. He sighed, thinking he might as well try to find Mironov again, and warn him of what had happened to him. That strange man had to be Okhrana, which means the other fellow named Fedorov might be the same. First, he decided to go back to his room to look for his belongings, only this time he took the main stairway up, as he noticed that a very nervous looking innkeeper had closed the lower door to the back stairway off the dining room and latched it with a padlock.

“Sir,” he asked, “will the train be in this morning?”

“After that?” said the innkeeper, motioning to the red glow outside while sweeping up the broken glass by the windows. “Not likely,” he said gruffly.

“There was trouble here,” Byrne ventured. “A bit of murder and mayhem; strange characters everywhere. You found the bodies?” He could see no blood on the floor or carpet.

“Bodies? What are you talking about?”

“Never mind,” said Byrne, still very confused. The man acted as though his only concern was the broken window. “I’ll be in my room,” he said. “It looks as though the German team will be staying here another night as well. Good day sir, if it could possibly be redeemed after a morning like this.”

Byrne went up to room 214, as much to gather his wits as his belongings. There would be quite a bit of commotion about the inn that day, with several visitors getting off Train 92 and taking carriages on the muddy roads all the way to Ilanskiy seeking lodging. They had come to see the race, though they were late, and when they heard the German team was still at Ilanskiy, they came to make good their effort.

The following day there would be more than stray guests off that train. Something would loom low on the horizon from the northeast, where the dull glow of burning fire still lit on that distant edge of the wilderness. Byrne

would see it, just after dawn, rising up in the deep crimson light, a great silver-grey whale in the sky, soon backlit by the sun. A Zeppelin, he thought, amazed that such a craft would be here. Then came the wrenching sound of another explosion, and there was fire in the sky again where the airship had been, and the sound of something crashing down to the earth. Frightened guests came running from their rooms, thinking this was yet another terrible red dawn, as the day before, and hearing the sound of booming explosions yet again.

Byrne was one of them, rushing down the main stairway and reaching the doorway there just in time to bump right into a man he immediately recognized. There were two other hard looking men with him in soldier's uniforms, one brandishing a dangerous looking weapon.

It was Fedorov, with the implacable Sergeant Troyak, and Orlov in his wake. There was a look of despair on Fedorov's face, his eyes wet and glassy, and with a desperate, almost vacant look in them. Symenko, with all his crew on the *Irkutsk*, had just met the wired fate set off by Fedorov's order transmitted to Zykov—Downfall. The sound of those thermobaric rounds exploding, and the demolitions Zykov's men would carry out in the wreckage, would be reported again by the locals as that same strange artillery fire they had heard the previous days.

For Fedorov, each sharp report was scoring a mark on his soul, and the worst of it was still before him. Then, with a sudden awareness of recollection, he knew who he had just bumped into—the reporter! Now he had to find Mironov.

The Saga Continues...

*Kirov Series: **Thor's Anvil***

As Fedorov arrives at the moment of dread and destiny, he must now struggle to find Mironov, and steel himself for the mission he has taken upon himself. His decision, and the events that follow, will shape the course of all future days from that moment on.

Meanwhile, as the world awaits that decision, events proceed on the East

Front in the altered history of WWII. Steiner's decision to withdraw east of the Don has created a thorny problem for Manstein, and now he must gather the resources to try and defeat Zhukov's sudden counteroffensive, and restore the line of communications to Kalach. At the same time, Steiner presses his SS legions forward towards the embattled city of Volgograd, determined to deliver the prize to Hitler and redeem his apparent failure during the bloody month of Red October. The history has again conspired to give us the grueling trial and terror that became the greatest battle ever fought in human history, only this time it will be known as the Battle of Volgograd.

Coming Sept 1, 2016

Kirov Series Battle Book III: Argos Fire

The odyssey of the long running series subplot involving the *Argos Fire* is now concentrated into one interrupted story line, but with major new additions. Elena Fairchild, the keeper of the mysterious keys that seem to secure entrances to hidden fissures in time, is joined by Captain MacRae, Mack Morgan, and the crew of the *Argos Fire* as they skirt the edge of war in 2021, and find themselves delivered to the heart and fire of WWII by the workings of a strange device they recover from an ancient shrine.

This volume will also include a great deal of all new material never published in the main Kirov Series, including the continuation of the mystery involving the Keyholder's Saga featuring the story of the Duke of Elvington's surprising quest to the eve of the Battle of Waterloo that began on Lindisfarne Island. That narrative is extended to reveal true goal of the Duke's journey to 1815. It soon dovetails into Fairchild's desperate search to find the key that was lost on the Battleship *Rodney*, including the return of Professor Paul Dorland, and the secret that lies beneath St. Michael's Cave on Gibraltar will soon be revealed. Mystery and intrigue are interspersed with more all new scenes, making this volume a must have for all series fans.

Coming August 1, 2016

Reading the Kirov Series

The *Kirov Series* is a long chain of linked novels by John Schettler in the Military Alternate History / Time Travel Genre. Like the popular movie “The Final Countdown” which saw the US Carrier *Nimitz* sent back in time to the eve of Pearl Harbor in 1941, in the opening volume, the powerful Russian battlecruiser *Kirov* is sent back to the 1940s in the Norwegian Sea where it subsequently becomes embroiled in the war.

Similar to episodes in the never ending Star Trek series, the saga continues through one episode after another as the ship’s position in time remains unstable. It culminates in Book 8 *Armageddon*, then continues the saga in *Altered States*, which begins the second “Season” in the series, extending through Volume 16. The series is presently reaching the end of Season 3, as the Allies launch their first offensive in the West—*Second Front*.

How to Read the Kirov Series

The best entry point is obviously Book I, *Kirov*, where you will meet all the main characters in the series and learn their inner motivations. The series itself, however, is structured in “seasons” with 8 books in each season. In Season 1, the first three volumes form an exciting trilogy featuring much fast paced naval action as *Kirov* battles the Royal Navy, Regia Marina (Italians) and finally the Japanese after sailing to the Pacific in Book III. Book 4, *Men Of War* stands as a sequel to that trilogy and the bridge novel that links it to the second segment of Season 1, beginning with *9 Days Falling*.

The *9 Days Falling* trilogy focuses on the struggle to prevent a great war in 2021 from reaching a terrible nuclear climax that destroys the world. It spans books 5, 6, and 7, featuring the outbreak of the war in 2021 as Japan and China battle over disputed islands, and the action of the Red Banner Pacific Fleet against the modern US Fleet. It then takes a dramatic turn when the ship is again shifted in time to 1945. There they confront the powerful US Pacific Fleet under Admiral Halsey, and so this trilogy focuses much of the action as *Kirov* faces down the US in two eras. Several subplots are also launched that serve to relate other events in the great war of 2021, and deepen

the mystery of time travel as discovered in the series. The season ends at another crucial point in history where the ship's Captain, Vladimir Karpov, believes he is in a position to decisively change events, the season finale, *Armageddon*.

Season 2 begins with the *Altered States* trilogy, where *Kirov* becomes trapped in the world made by its many interventions in the history, an altered reality beginning in June of 1940. It is here that a sequential alternate history retelling of WWII begins that will extend to the war's conclusion in 1945. The opening volume sees the ship pitted against the one navy of WWII it has not yet fought, the Kriegsmarine of Germany, which now has powerful new ships from the German Plan Z naval building program as one consequence of *Kirov*'s earlier actions.

The *Altered States* saga spans books 9 through 16, initially covering the German attack on the carrier *Glorious*, the British raids on the Vichy French Fleets at Mers-el Kebir and Dakar, and the German Operation Felix against Gibraltar. Other events in Siberia involve the rise of Karpov to power, and his duel with Ivan Volkov of the Orenburg Federation, one of the three fragmented Russian states. (And these involve airship battles!)

The second half of Season 2 begins with *Three Kings*. It covers the action in North Africa, including O'Connor's whirlwind "Operation Compass" and Rommel's arrival and first offensive, Operation Sonnenblume. The main characters from *Kirov* and other plot lines from the opening 8 book saga figure prominently in all this action, with a decisive intervention that arises from a most unexpected plot twist. Book 13, *Grand Alliance* continues the war in the desert as Rommel is suddenly confronted with a powerful new adversary, and Hitler reacts by strongly reinforcing the Afrika Korps. It also presents the struggle for naval supremacy in the Mediterranean as the British face down a combined Axis fleet from three enemy nations.

Book 14, *Hammer of God*, covers a surprise German airborne attack, and the British campaigns in Syria, Lebanon and Iraq. It continues in *Crescendo of Doom*, the German response as Rommel begins his second offensive aimed at Tobruk on the eve of Operation Barbarossa. At the same time, the action in Siberia heats up in a growing conflict between Vladimir Karpov and Ivan Volkov.

Book 16 is the Season 2 finale, *Paradox Hour*, where the ship faces the

prospect of annihilation on the day it first arrived in the past, 28 July, 1941. This impending event overshadows all else as *Kirov* joins Tovey in a pursuit of *Hindenburg* and *Bismarck* as they break out into the Atlantic.

Season 3 then begins with Book 17, *Doppelganger*, where the aftereffects of the Paradox are finally sorted out. Fedorov is strangely displaced, and appears on the newly arrived ship, while Vladimir Karpov survives in Siberia, even as another version of himself defies paradox and appears on *Kirov*. Now Fedorov struggles to prevent the same dominoes from falling and keep the ship from engaging the Royal Navy as it did in Book 1. At the same time, the Siberian Karpov plots to seize control of the ship, and that action invariably involves Ivan Volkov, who has his own plans to strike at Ilanskiy in *Nemesis*.

The war then heats up on the East Front as the Germans launch Operation Typhoon, reaching a dramatic event on the outskirts of Moscow in Book 19, *Winter Storm*. These actions continue through *Tide of Fortune*, as Japan enters the war at Pearl Harbor, and the British again tangle with Rommel in Operation Crusader. The action then depicts the Japanese Malayan Campaign and the battle for Singapore, naval actions off Java and the invasion of the barrier islands, and then Operation FS, leading to battles in the Coral Sea and of the Fiji Island group.

In *Knights Move*, Montgomery is brought in to try and save Singapore, and coordinate the defense of Java. In the West, as the Germans battle for Gran Canaria in Operation Condor, Admiral Raeder turns his fast raiders loose in Operation Rosselsprung, but the Germans find something far more than they ever expected in the deep South Atlantic.

Turning Point resolves the fast naval actions in the Canaries as the German raiders attempt to return to Casablanca with their mysterious prize of war. Meanwhile, the Japanese invasion of Java is interrupted by an event that threatens to change the balance in the Pacific. A most unusual challenger to the ship they call *Mizuchi* appears on the scene. Meanwhile, in the Western Desert, the British launch Operation Supercharge to try and push Rommel off his Gazala line and liberate Cyrenaica.

In *Steel Reign*, the Japanese offensive reaches its high water mark as Yamamoto launches Operation FS in a bold attempt to storm the Islands of Fiji and Samoa and isolate Australia. He is opposed by a determined stand

made by Admirals Fletcher and Halsey in the desperate battles of the Coral Sea and Koro Sea to decide the fate of Empires. Meanwhile Vladimir Karpov continues his long planned invasion of Sakhalin Island, but Japan now has a powerful new champion as the Destroyer *Takami* is detached north to join Admiral Kurita's task force. The showdown is resolved in the season finale, Second Front, as the Allies storm ashore at Casablanca and Lisbon in September of 1942.

You can enter the series at any season by reading the novel that immediately precedes your desired entry point, as it also acts as a prelude to events beginning that season. The series continues in the premiere of Season Four: *Tigers East*. Information on the battles covered in each book is available at www.writingshop.ws.

KIROV SERIES - SEASON 1: *Kirov*

- 1) *Kirov*
- 2) *Cauldron of Fire*
- 3) *Pacific Storm*
- 4) *Men of War*
- 5) *Nine Days Falling*
- 6) *Fallen Angels*
- 7) *Devil's Garden*
- 8) *Armageddon – Season 1 Finale*

KIROV SERIES - SEASON 2: *Altered States* (1940 – 1941)

- 9) *Altered States*
- 10) *Darkest Hour*
- 11) *Hinge of Fate*
- 12) *Three Kings*
- 13) *Grand Alliance*
- 14) *Hammer of God*
- 15) *Crescendo of Doom*
- 16) *Paradox Hour – Season 2 Finale*

KIROV SERIES – SEASON 3: *Doppelganger* (1941 – 1942)

- 17) *Doppelganger*
- 18) *Nemesis*
- 19) *Winter Storm*
- 20) *Tide of Fortune*
- 21) *Knight's Move*
- 22) *Turning Point*
- 23) *Steel Reign*
- 24) *Second Front – Season 3 Finale*

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