

Kirov Saga

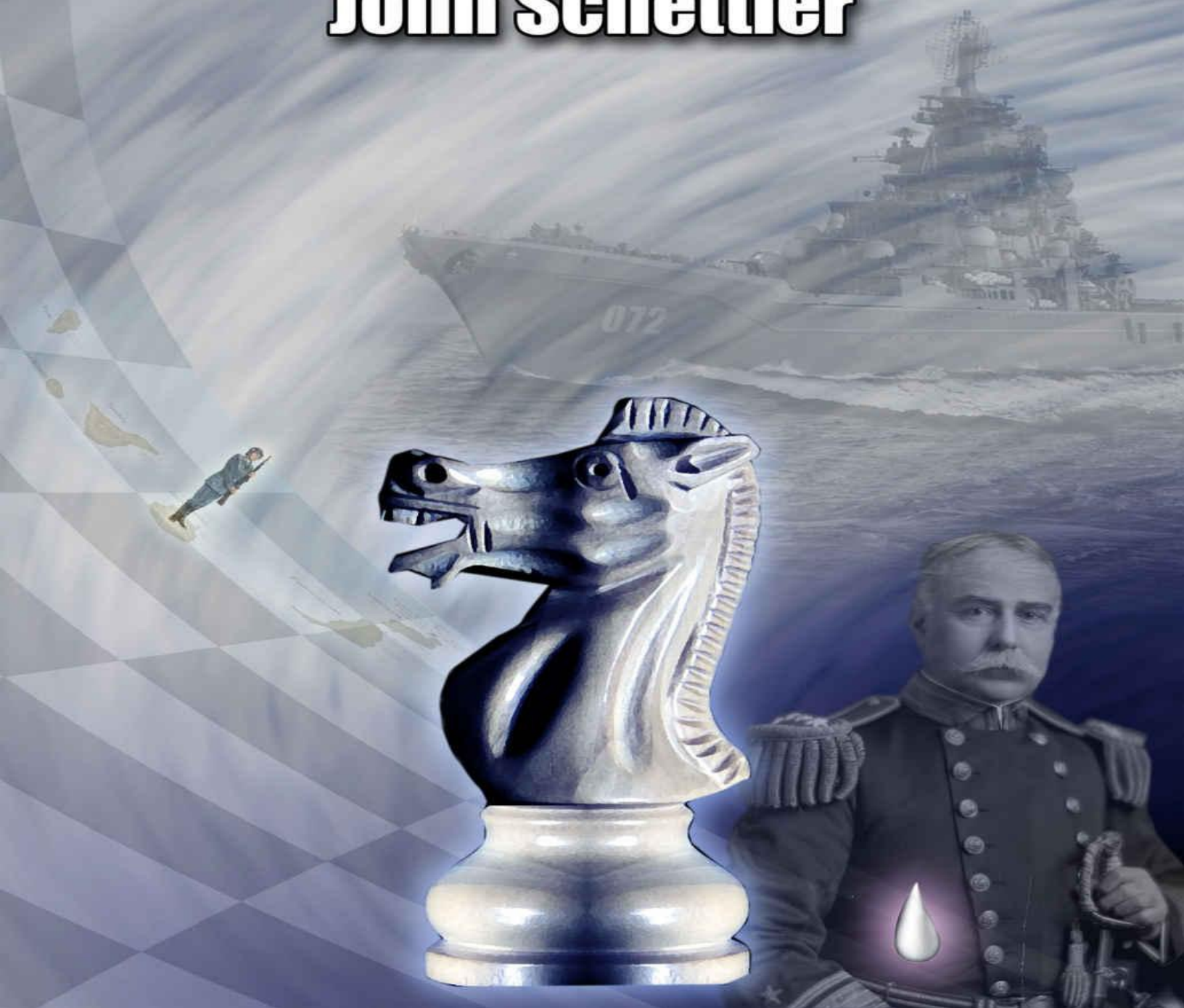


Season 3, Vol 5 in the Kirov Series

Knight's Move

An Alternate History of WWII by:

John Schettler



Kirov Saga:
Knight's Move

By

John Schettler

A publication of: *The Writing Shop Press*
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Kirov Saga:
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Author's Note:

Dear Readers,

This story gets into your head in some very interesting ways, particularly when you are imagining it and laboring to bring it to life as the author, day by day, hour by hour. About half the time I spend on each book is devoted to research and war gaming the outcomes I present for all the battles in the series. The Canary Islands action, for example, was designed down to a scale of 1km per hex and extensively simulated before the results were eventually written up into the story. I don't just decide who will win or lose on a whim, but try to thoroughly test that to give the outcomes as much authenticity as possible.

Sometimes I get so absorbed in the research, weaving it into the story, that it lingers in my mind as I sleep, and emerges in dreams. One morning I awoke at 5AM with the lingering remnants of a dream in my mind, a steel warship was anchored off a major port, and the words "USS *Washington*" and "Knight" were stuck in my mind. I could not recall any research I had done to create this image, or those words, but I lay there in the dark with my tablet device and Googled them up. To my great surprise, I soon found a historical breadcrumb trail of references that become the subject matter for Part IX of this novel, aptly entitled "Knight's Move." It seemed a little spooky, but that's what happened, and how my mind sometimes works to build story connections that become seeds of subplots to relate some of the mystery that underlies the entire series.

As to the title of this volume, it first came to me as I researched the German Operation *Rösselsprung* in 1942, the operation of the *Tirpitz* against Convoy PQ-17. I will have work for *Tirpitz* later in the story, but for now, I took that operational name and used it for the mission Admiral Raeder gives to *Kaiser Wilhelm* and *Goeben* as they break away from that costly naval engagement off Fuerteventura, the only two German ships to escape unscathed. They pose a grave threat to British convoys, the Winston Specials desperately trying to get reinforcements to two embattled islands, Gran Canaria and Singapore. But Kapitan Heinrich will also have a strange encounter in this volume, and one more significant than he realizes.

There's a lot going on in this volume. First I will have to give you some closure on the loss of our dear friend, Admiral Volsky. I won't give you a reason for his unexpected demise, other than to say it was his time, his hour,

and I think he acquitted himself as any of us might expect. There were future story / plot reasons for this, but I cannot speak of them here. It wasn't an easy thing to do, but it was necessary. May he rest in peace.

Then, I have three major battles to present here in this volume. First I will take you back to the Pacific to follow General Yamashita's campaign in Malaya, one of the most remarkable exploits of the war. Then we return to Phase II of the German Operation Condor against the Canary Islands. Finally, I turn Karpov and Kirov loose on the Japanese as he makes yet another unexpected "Knight's Move" in the North Pacific, the opening operations of his "Plan 7."

Through all these battles I will weave in the saga of *Kaiser Wilhelm* and the *Goeben*, and take you to some very interesting places with that. Some of this came to me in that odd dream, the rest emerged in my research, and it's going to matter a great deal as the story goes forward.

As always, many thanks for your continued support and interest in this saga, and for all your emails, which I always love to receive. Many times I will take the questions some of you raise in your letters, and then hand them to Fedorov for answers, so stay tuned.

One last note.... At the end of this volume you will find information on a project derived from this saga—the *Kirov Series Battle Books*. Sometimes the WWII battle action in any given campaign is spread over five or more novels, as with Rommel's exploits in North Africa. So I thought I would extract all those chapters and then re-edit them into one continuous, uninterrupted narrative of that campaign. For anyone interested, the first of these "Battle Books" will be available soon. For now... It's Knight to King Bishop Three, and let the game begin! - *John Schettler*

Part I

A Different Game

"I have seen too many men go down, and I never permit myself to forget

*that one day, through accident or under the charge of a younger,
stronger knight, I too will go down.”*

— **John Steinbeck**

Acts of King Arthur and his Noble Knights

Chapter 1

Admiral Tovey sat at the desk in the wardroom aboard HMS *Invincible*, still feeling the twinge of pain on his left shoulder where it was swathed in bandages, his arm in a sling. The scent of smoke and fire still hung over the ship like a funeral shroud, the last remnant of the damage it had sustained off Fuerteventura. Yet the physical discomfort he felt was nothing compared to the sorrow that lay on him now. Yes, it had been a hard day for the Royal Navy, a terrible hour, and so much was lost. He sat there, staring at the wrapped bundle before him, all that was left of Admiral Volsky's effects, all they could find. He knew from the young Ensign that served as his translator, that he was sitting there alive at that moment solely because of the bravery and determination of Admiral Volsky, a man who did not even know how many ways he had stood up to answer the call of arms.

Once they had been foes, set against one another on the stream of time, or so he had been told. He could not remember any of that, though on occasion, a vague reminiscence would come to him, of an island on the boundary between two seas, where two men once met, and shook hands in faith, instead of flinging monstrous shells at one another, like the one that had finally taken Volsky's life.

What was that last hour like, that last moment, he wondered? The words of Tennyson echoed through his mind, as love turned its head and spoke to death one day... *"This hour is thine: Thou art the shadow of life, and as the tree stands in the sun and shadows all beneath, So in the light of great eternity, Life eminent creates the shade of death; The shadow passeth when the tree shall fall, But I shall reign for ever over all."*

I shall reign forever... The willful boast of love, but nothing ever did, not Emperors, not Kings or Queens, let alone poor lowly Admirals like me, and all the men who stand below me on the ranks. Every Knight has a chink in his armor somewhere, and nothing is invincible, not even my proud ship. One day, a younger and faster sea knight will be her undoing, and that was nearly the case as we jousting this time around. Everything has its hour, and its fated doom. That may as well be my own personal effects there, all nicely wrapped up, the last remains of a lifetime, and everything I've ever seen, heard, felt or thought. But it wasn't me this time, thanks to the man who once wore that coat. The things we leave behind are the smallest part of that life,

and measureless are the things no man can touch—mind, heart, soul.

He reached slowly, opening the wrapping paper to find there the bundled fold of Admiral Volsky's Navy blue jacket, its tattered remnant stained with the char of smoke, and the man's own blood. A segment of one sleeve cuff was still intact, where the broad stripes of his rank insignia were inlaid with gold thread.

"Good bye, my friend," he whispered, laying his hand on the jacket, and at that same moment, also laying his hand on the jackets of so many more who had died that day, men of every rank and stripe who had fallen under the shadow in that last terrible hour at sea. *Valiant* had been lost, and *Renown*, with *Repulse* barely escaping to eventually reach the Azores, badly wounded. Then the heart of his formation had come up, *King George V*, *Prince of Wales*, and *Duke Of York*.

The long, deadly battle had been fought while he lay unconscious in the Plot Room behind the shattered bridge of HMS *Invincible*. The ship was headless, but yet ran on, the rudder loose, eventually seeing it turn to port. Perhaps the ship was driven away by the force of the wind and sea, or perhaps by the hand of fate. All the while her engines were thrumming away at full speed, her guns still training, firing, heedless of all that had happened.

Eventually the ship's course described a wide turn, until other heads and hands finally took her under control from the auxiliary helm station, and she was steered south, away from the hour where death was stalking that wild sea. Tovey was fallen, Volsky dead, but the fleet fought on, the battleships raging against the dying of the light, for a fighting ship does not go gentle into that good night. *King George V* had verse to speak in that hour, and her words forked lightning. She put good hits on the *Bismarck*, answering that ship shell for shell, and the virtues of her better Mark IX fire control table were quite apparent. Captain Patterson was the man of the hour. He was always a gunnery specialist, and fought his ship well.

Time for him to take his oath and join the Honorable Order of the Bath, thought Tovey, our newest Knight in that hallowed Order. The man had a sterling silver record, as long as that prominent nose of his. He had my back in that engagement, and may have even saved the fleet with good old *King George V* standing to with *Duke Of York*. Promotion to Vice Admiral would be a good recommendation for that man, and we'll need his sort in the days ahead. We built those ships well, but alas, *Prince of Wales* was the wild one who caught the sun in flight that day. A massive 16-inch shell from

Hindenburg exploded in her heart, and now I must grieve her loss as well. Some ships were simply fated to die, though *Repulse* had escaped her appointed hour for the third time now. *Prince of Wales* would sail no more...

On they fought, the strong arms of the *Duke of York* holding the line. *Bismarck* was burned and bloodied, taking 13 hits of various calibers. The rockets came first off *Argos Fire*, blazing a trail in the morning sky and bringing fiery wrath. Three GB-7s, struck each of the two German battleships, but *Bismarck* had the worst damage, many fires amidships, three secondary batteries destroyed, and one hit that penetrated so deeply into the ship that the internal fires compromised a boiler room three decks below. Yes, it was those five hits from the bigger 14-inch guns of the British battleships that really caused the trouble. One cut right through that beautiful clipper bow, and the flooding there was quite serious. Down at the bow, with speed cut nearly in half, *Bismarck* was still afloat and underway when the battle ended, limping off behind *Hindenburg*.

That ship had also been chastened, also damaged by three hits from those rockets fired by the *Argos Fire*, and another 14-inch shell from *King George V*. Yet the Germans must have built that one better. The rocket damage did not seem to compromise operations. She was wounded, but unbowed, turning north into the coming storm and vanishing into the grey rolling clouds with *Bismarck* following as best it could, a darksome shadow in her wake.

The cruiser *Prinz Eugen* had also been battered, no real match for the bigger guns on the British ships. It was *Invincible* that sealed the fate of the German cruiser. Retiring from the field as engineers struggled to regain control, the gunners were still firing, and they laid a nice six round straddle across *Prinz Eugen*. Two rounds struck home, and one blew right on through to the magazine on her forward turret. The second pierced her belt armor, only 80mm thick at its widest point, and unable to stop those gruesome 16-inch shells. That added uncontrollable flooding to the ship's fires, which then became so bad that the Germans were forced to abandon ship. British destroyers *Jackal* and *Jaguar* would find her and finish the heavy cruiser with four torpedoes.

Eventually the looming shadow of land ahead had forced each side to turn, the Germans north, the British south, and the French following after, their big gun ordnance expended, and no more fire in the belly of the Dragon that had fought the Bengal Tiger that day. They would leave *Richelieu*

behind, the victim of another shell that found a hidden magazine and opened a great yawning gash in her side that could not be filled. The cruiser *Dupleix* was dead and gone, as was *Gloire*, along with destroyers *Le Fortune* and *La Palme*. The British had traded *Renown* and the heavy damage on *Repulse* for *Richelieu*, and the others had all been lost in the duel with the cruisers of Force C, which had the better of the action that day, and by a good measure.

Coming late to the action, the Toulon group with *Jean Bart* and *Dunkerque* exchanged parting fire with *King George V* and *Duke of York*, but the threat from the British carrier born aircraft convinced Admiral Gensoul to turn and follow *Normandie* home. The British retired south, around the narrow tail of Fuerteventura, through the channel between that island and the Gran Canaria, and then up the western side as they reversed course, heading for the Azores. *King George V* had only eight 14-inch rounds left, and with one last defiant salvo, she put four of them onto the airfield at Tarfia, a last parting shot to end the day.

In the aftermath of it all, the brave pilots came off the decks of *Glorious* and *Furious*, and they fought on through to harry the German fleet as it retired, the stogy Swordfish and Albacore torpedo bombers having just enough pluck and skill to get a torpedo into *Bismarck's* side. The only German ship that escaped real harm was the speedy battlecruiser *Kaiser Wilhelm*. It had dashed away, opening the range with her tremendous eight knot speed advantage over the remaining British battleships.

As for Tovey, he made it back to the Azores with only three battleships in any semblance of fighting order. *King George V* and *Duke Of York* were still sound, but both ships would need repairs. HMS *Invincible* would live to fight again one day, the hit to her conning tower being the only significant damage sustained, though Tovey wondered if he would ever command that ship again.

So very many good men were lost in that hour, so many proud crews, fine old ships of the line, names now stricken from the roster that had been there for long decades. All told the Royal Navy had lost six ships: *Prince of Wales*, *Valiant*, *Renown*, and destroyers *Kingston*, *Griffin* and *Kelly*. The damage to *Repulse* would effectively put her off the active duty rolls for at least six months, and probably a long year. Cruiser *Cumberland*, fighting alongside the battleships, had also been roughed up enough to send her to the dry docks for three to six months of repair work.

It was a very hard day, thought Tovey. Now by god, what do we have

left? We still have *Hood*, and it's good that she's thickened her skin a bit in that last refit, he thought grimly. *Anson* and *Howe* will eventually stand in soon for *Valiant* and *Prince of Wales*, but reports on those quad 14-inch gun turrets have been less than satisfactory. I shall advocate we upgrade those ships to the new triple 16-inch turrets being designed for the *Lion* class. *Renown* is gone, and we may never see *Repulse* at sea again. She just can't stand in a fight like this with her armor as it is... as it was... As for *Invincible*, she proved vulnerable after all, though that hit might have been one in a thousand. That said, they'll have to completely rebuild her bridge and segments of the conning tower. She'll be laid up for months.

Standing a watch up to keep an eye on *Tirpitz* and *Scharnhorst* up north will be quite daunting now. *Tirpitz* has moved from Wilhelmshaven to Trondheim, putting it in a good position to get out after our PQ convoys to Murmansk. We shall have to rely on the American Navy to lend a hand, and turn the Denmark Strait and defense of Iceland over to them. I'll have little to assign to convoy escort duty now, old *Ramillies* and *Resolution* being all that's left at Scapa Flow. *Nelson*, *Warspite* and *Revenge* will have to stay with Cunningham at Alexandria, because we still have the Italians to worry about. Something had to go to the Indian Ocean, so it was *Royal Sovereign*, now at Freetown waiting to pick up that Winston Special convoy heading for the Pacific.

It was a difficult situation, but yet not all gloom and doom. We hurt them as well, hurt *Bismarck* badly enough to see that ship off my list of nightmares for a good long while. Who knows how bad the damage was to *Hindenburg*, but I mustn't lower my guard on that account. The trouble now is those raiders that slipped away while our back was turned. Our men in Gibraltar and Casablanca say every German ship was accounted for except two, the *Kaiser Wilhelm* and the light hybrid carrier *Goeben*.

That's the immediate problem for me, because by all accounts, both those ships can run like the wind. *Argos Fire* might help us keep an eye on them... Yes, that would be quite a little game of cat and mouse, only which side is the cat? Those ships can fight well. That German battlecruiser can stand with a pair of our heavy cruisers easily enough, and outrun most every ship we have. By god, it's nearly twice as fast as our older battleships. We shall have to address the issue of speed in every new ship we commission. And here we sit with 40,000 men at sea in convoy WS-15, all heading south to Freetown and beyond, and just where this raider might be prowling.

It's a new game now. The heavy pieces have sallied forth and fought it out in the center of the board. The exchanges were many and hard, strong Rooks falling, and the Queen in jeopardy right from the outset. Lord knows they almost toppled our King, and perhaps they did. Losing Admiral Volsky was the hardest blow of all. The knowledge of future days in his head was invaluable, but at least we still have the *Argos Fire*, Miss Fairchild and all her lot, so all is not lost. It isn't as dark as I feel it to be. I must seize the day and carry on.

Yet what about that key that was entrusted to me. Here I've gone and lost it, and Volsky would be alive in Murmansk now if he hadn't fulfilled his charge to bring it to me. The men have searched everywhere, but god only knows. It might have been blown into the sea, lost just like the key on old *Rodney*. A fine game I'm playing here. Damn sloppy.

A fine game, and yes, a very different game now with so many battleships licking their wounds on either side. It's time for the lighter pieces to dominate the board, slashing bishops in my fast cruisers and carriers, squadrons of destroyers, the intrepid pawns on the board, always loyal, always ready to sacrifice themselves, and with the hidden power to be much more than they might seem at first glance. Yes... Now it is time for the Knights to sally forth. Thank god for the cruisers. We've still got most of those in good order, and they'll have to really shoulder up now with so many of the battleships needing repairs. The new *Knight* class ships are just about to graduate to sea trials, and they could not have come at a better time.

From the day he first conceived the concept of the battlecruiser, Lord Jackie Fisher had thought they should replace every cruiser of the line then in service. Yet the Washington Naval Treaty would classify them as heavy capital ships, and so very few had been built when that vital category could see a battleship designed instead. Limits for cruisers were set at 10,000 tons and 8-inch guns, though there was much wrangling over those numbers, and even more cheating.

The Americans slipped ten 8-inch guns onto their *Pensacola* class cruiser, and British designers had also seen the sleek ten gunned heavy cruisers of the Japanese Navy. *Myoko*, *Takao* and *Mogami* class ships all ended up with ten 8-inch guns. The Germans had also fudged the treaty limits with their *Hipper* class, which weighed in at 14,000 tons. Then came the cruiser killers, Germany's pocket battleships with 11-inch guns, Japan's *Amagi* class super cruisers with 12.2 inch guns, the American *Alaska* class

with nine 12-inch guns. When Germany brazenly produced a ship like the *Kaiser Wilhelm*, with six 15-inch guns, a new arms race was again underway.

While pretending to still adhere to treaty limits, the British had also quietly pursued their own designs for such ships. So after the *King George V* class battleship was conceived, the naval architects had carried the same design concept on down to the cruiser class. What they wanted was a ship that could stand with these new designs from Germany and Japan, and what they got was *Sir Lancelot*, a dashing new Knight in shining armor. It would mount ten 250mm, 10-inch guns, which outpunched the ten gun 8-inchers on the Japanese designs, and also significantly outgunned the German pocket battleships, which had only six main guns. They were mounted in the same design as *King George V*, with a four gun turret fore and aft, and the kicker being that superimposed twin gun turret forward.

Might they have the same problems as the quad gun turrets on the *King George V* class, Tovey wondered? From initial testing, the lighter guns seem to be performing much better, with reliable hoists and hydraulics this time around, and a much smoother loading mechanism that will give these new ships a formidable rate of fire.

Yes, they are just what we'll need now, thought Tovey. They will be fast at 34 knots, well gunned, and with decent protection for their class. *Sir Lancelot* and *Sir Galahad* will get the sword over head and shoulders next month, the first two commissioned into the fleet. Behind them comes *Percival*, *Baudwin*, and *Pelleas*, then *Gawain*, *Ector* and *Bors* if we can ever get them built. It was always said the Knights of the Round Table would return in time of greatest need. To hell with sea trials. I'll need those first two ships here immediately, and they can joust while on active duty.

So the order of the day will be to screen the most likely sortie routes for the enemy, with heavy cruisers backed by a single carrier. What battleships I can float will only be deployed once we can find and shadow our enemy, and plot a good intercept course. Again, *Argos Fire* would be most helpful with that wonderful radar set. She'll be the eyes and ears of the fleet, basing from the Azores. I would dearly love to have our own naval rockets, but I'm afraid that day is too far off to matter in the heat of this moment. So it will have to be up the big guns.

He rubbed his forehead with his good hand, feeling the throb of pain again from his left shoulder. Then his hand rested on the bundled coat, feeling the loss, his eyes heavily on the stain of blood there. So many good

men, all gone into the shadow, that long final valley of death.

What is this, he thought suddenly? His finger had struck upon something hard within the tattered bundle of Admiral Volsky's jacket. Probably a faded gold coat button, or perhaps a medal, he thought, but it was something else. When he probed deeper, finding a hidden seam that had been opened, his finger touched the thin cold metal of the key, and when he pulled it out, his eyes were alight to see it again. He knew it had gone missing, and practically turned the entire bridge upside down when he ordered repair crews to search the rubble there, but it was never found.

Yet here it was again! Volsky must have taken it from my pocket when he came upon me, probably thinking to keep it safe, bless the man. So there it was, unblemished, without any sign of trauma or damage, and he resolved, then and there, that he would get to the bottom of the mystery that had taken the Admiral's life to bring it here, the fate that had seen him standing there on the bridge of *Invincible*, when the ship would suffer the worst harm any enemy had ever flung upon her.

"My good man," he said aloud to the bundled coat. "How can I thank you again? And how can we ever replace you?" Yes, they would build new ships, fill out the ranks on the roster, and they would fight on. But this man was unique in all the world, never to stand on one of those ships again.

Or would he? Tovey wondered. He narrowed his eyes, looking out the port side window of the stateroom where he still sat aboard *Invincible*, staring at the wide empty sea. What had happened to that other ship, *Geronimo*, the ship that bore the man he had come to know so very well? Was that Admiral Volsky out there somewhere, still standing a silent watch at the edge of some infinite sea?

I wonder...

Chapter 2

When the fight was finally over, the big ships all withdrawing to find safe waters, Admiral Raeder had flashed a defiant order to the *Kaiser Wilhelm*, a code word that cut her leash and sent her out into the Atlantic: *Rösselsprung*, Knight's Move. It was time to make a daring leap, and the chaos after the battle was the perfect moment for the fleet footed German ship to slip away.

Goeben was sent right alongside, both ships still capable of making 36 knots, a fast raiding group with very long sea legs that could see them operating for months if they could manage a secret rendezvous with German oilers. They hugged the African coast, speeding south under cover of German land based bombers out of Agadair. Once clear of land based aircraft the British might still have on the islands, the little raiding group waved goodbye to a low flying Kondor, and saw its wings wag in return. Then Captain Heinrich turned to starboard, heading out to sea.

The other German carrier, *Prinz Heinrich*, had all her planes up from the airfield at Tefia on Fuerteventura, but they had been well to the east when *King George V* said goodbye to that field, providing a last umbrella of defense over the remaining Axis fleet, which steamed off to Casablanca. Some of the better pilots flew off to make a secret rendezvous on the *Goeben* as it fled south, bringing that little 12 plane squadron to full strength. Marco Ritter and Hans Rudel were there, and the group was now composed of six fighters and six *Stukas*, with one reserve plane of each type.

Admiral Raeder now took stock of his situation, soon finding himself alone on the sea in the flagship of the German fleet. *Bismarck* was too badly hurt to move any further, and Admiral Raeder decided to leave the ship at Casablanca to see if repairs could be made before moving it to Gibraltar. That was where he took *Hindenburg*, leaving the carrier and destroyer *Thor* behind to serve in the aviation fuel transport role he had devised for *Prinz Heinrich*.

Prinz Eugen was gone, yet he realized things might have been much worse. They had hurt the Royal Navy badly, and could not expect to do that without taking losses of their own. All in all, he had fought them to a standstill, and sent them limping off to the Azores. That had been his mission, and his plan, for without those heavy battleships present near the Canary Islands, Phase II of the plan could now proceed.

The French still had a good strong group that had come late from Toulon. The battleship *Jean Bart*, and battlecruiser *Dunkerque*, still had a good provision of ammunition, and they would now take over the role of covering force for the next step in the plan. The British still had those carriers nearby, and a good number of cruisers and destroyers. Yet they would be matched by the French battlegroup, and it could outgun any line of cruisers that would dare to stand on their horizon.

So Raeder had every hope that his daring plan here might succeed. Now he set his mind to the matter of logistics again, for he needed to round up supplies, get them shipped down from Casablanca, and secretly move those Siebel Ferries along the coast under the watchful eyes of the Luftwaffe. It would be another 48 hours before Phase II could begin, enough time to work on those damaged airfields, rest the airborne troops, and get the JU-52s out to Fuerteventura and Lanzarote for the next jump. He rubbed his gloved hands together, confident that he could make a good account of this action to Hitler, in spite of the loss of *Prinz Eugen*.

I still have authorization to build out the destroyer program, he thought. I must be certain to impress the need for those ships upon Hitler now. If the French destroyers had stayed close, they might have been the ones to take that rocket fire. As it was, they raced about like unleashed dogs, and to no avail. Destroyers.... Yes, we need them in droves, good speedy destroyers, with decent torpedoes and engines that can give me 36 knots or better. That is what I must set my mind to in the dockyards—that and the remaining conversion projects for carriers.

He smiled. Now our forces are widely scattered, but there is a virtue in that. I'll have *Kaiser Wilhelm* and *Goeben* raising hell in the South Atlantic soon. *Hindenburg* will make repairs and pose a good threat from Gibraltar. That hydraulic armor plating came in very handy when those naval rockets came in. I must congratulate Kremel on that idea. They absorbed most of the damage in two of those three rocket hits we took, but without them, *Bismarck's* superstructure was hit much harder. It will be a good long while before I can even risk moving that ship to Gibraltar, but I think it will eventually have to go to Toulon for extensive repairs. As for *Hindenburg*, thirty days should see us back in fighting trim, and woe betide the waters from here to the Azores!

He was already dreaming up operations for the mighty battleship, coordinating with Doenitz and his U-boats, which would hopefully find new

bases in the Canary Islands soon. The strategic windfall of success there was incalculable at that moment, but Raeder believed it would pay good dividends.

If we win through here, he thought, then we set the template for a further move south. We'll take back Dakar, and then it will be on to the Cape Verde Islands.

Even as he thought that, a shadow fell on him. What about the Americans? How long would they take to get into the war? Would they confine naval operations to areas near their own homeland, or venture out? What will the British do if we take these islands? Whatever they may have planned, they will surely need the Americans in on the effort. So soon it may be time to speak with Halder again concerning Plan Isabella. That will need more ground troops in Spain, and he will not want to hear about it, but eventually the allies will force his hand, and that of the Führer as well.

Yes, he thought. Even if I do drive them off now, they will be back. The British will have another pair of new battleships soon to replace the two we just sunk. I will have nothing but the cards I presently hold... The Americans have two battleship divisions in their Atlantic fleet, unless they send ships to replace their losses at Pearl Harbor. Yes, we will still be badly outnumbered, but we can control the coast of Northwest Africa for some time now. Yet for how long? How will they attack when they come? Will it be here, in these islands again, or further north, perhaps in a bolder attack through Portugal? All that lies ahead, but for the moment, I will use what I have as best I can.

Tirpitz and *Scharnhorst* are still up north, and I also have the two new *Panzerschiff* there, *Rhineland* and *Westfalen*, not to mention the two older pocket battleships, *Deutschland* and *Admiral Scheer*. Then we'll have two new carriers there soon, *Peter Strasser*, and the big surprise for the Führer, my *Brandenburg* conversion project. The last two projects at Brest and Saint Nazaire might also help out. *Weser* and *Hannover* will rise on the old hulls of *Seydlitz* and the captured French cruiser *De Grasse*—a pair of medium carriers, just like *Prinz Heinrich*.

Then come the destroyers. That was the missing element of the fleet. How things have changed! I was always a battleship man at heart. All I could think of was building them bigger and bigger, to please the Führer with his dream of an invulnerable battleship that could destroy the Royal Navy single handedly. 100,000 tons! What good would it do me now if such a ship existed? As we have seen, no ship is invulnerable. Every ship dies one day,

either by fire and brimstone, or storm and sea. What I should have built were more fast ships like *Kaiser Wilhelm*, more little battle carriers like the *Goeben*, and many more destroyers. I once thought aircraft carriers were good for nothing more than gasoline tankers.

He smiled, for he had decided to employ *Prinz Heinrich* as exactly that, but for very different reasons. It was an old concept he had embraced long ago when he argued that the fleet must have long legs. He built endurance into his heavy ships, and then went further with the *Dithmarschen* class fleet replenishment ship, seeing it as a way to extend the capability of the raiders he would use to overtax the resources of the Royal Navy all over the world. *Altmark* was lost, but he still had *Nordmark*, *Franken*, *Ermland*, and *Havelland*. Another was planned, the *Westerwald*, a replacement ship for *Altmark*. Now they glowed in his mind's eye, for he appreciated their use and capability even more.

Now I finally see what is necessary for the real projection of sea power—ships that can create and defend a sound logistical chain. Now I see what aircraft over the sea can do. Now I finally understand what the Japanese, and the British, and the Americans seem to have known all along. No navy can control the sea unless it can also dominate the sky above it. I am a different man now, and the navy I must build will also be different.

So we will get more carriers, and yes, I will build those destroyers. The battleships I still have can pose just enough of a threat to keep the British spread thin, and then I will sail right through the holes in their defense, and ravage their convoys. But I will need destroyers. Those smaller ships are very useful. They can lay minefields, stand guard on ports and coastlines, hunt enemy submarines with depth charges. They can serve as escorts for all our logistical support auxiliaries, and for the heavy ships too. Their lighter guns are also perfect to compliment fleet air defense, and with good torpedoes they can even pose a threat to a battleship. Look what those two impudent British destroyers did to *Prinz Eugen* in that last hour.

The list goes on and on. They can serve as fast troop transports, or provide close in fire support for troops ashore in operations like Condor. With better equipment, they can serve as scouts and radar pickets. They can be used in so many roles, reconnaissance, replenishment, fleet defense, *Seejagers*, hunters and trusty sheepdogs.

Yes, the British have them in droves now, thanks to the Americans. We are woefully short on good ocean going destroyer classes. Only three of the

five ships in the *Beowulf* class remain, but the last three in that group will be ready with *Peter Strasser*. Next come all the refit projects. My little troop of dwarves will soon be ready to run with the fleet: *Durin* and *Dain*, *Regin* and *Rhandir*, *Fafnir* and *Frey*, *Galar*, *Glitnir* and all the rest. Those eight are nearing completion, conversions from our older existing destroyers that were deemed obsolete.

Yet there will be more, all new ships, fast, strong, with good endurance and sea keeping to let them range out into the Atlantic. Wait until they see what I am building! They will be real ocean going destroyers, just like these large fast French destroyers that fluttered off in the heat of battle. They will be forged from the steel I salvage from *Oldenburg*, my *Valkyries*, my Shield Maidens. They will have raised forecastles, clipper bows, funnel caps to keep out the sea. The guns will be dual purpose, suitable for surface actions or air defense. They will get the new Wagner boilers, but also utilize diesel propulsion, like *Kaiser Wilhelm*. The next time I take a ship like the *Hindenburg* to sea, they will be most essential, steaming right on either side with our new missile defense strategy.

So we still have prospects, and very good capability. The Royal Navy has lost a lot of ships in this war, mostly old, obsolete battleships, but they must be feeling the strain. Now is the time to put maximum pressure on them. Much will be riding with the *Kaiser Wilhelm*. I must demonstrate that we can keep the navy useful, a vital part of the war effort. As long as it remains a potent battle force, the prospect of a successful Allied counterattack is in doubt. They will have seen what we did to them here, and take pause.

All the better, for as long as I can hold Northwest Africa and Gibraltar, then the chances for Plan Orient still remain possible. If Hitler had finished the job with the British before Barbarossa, everything would look quite different now. Yet Rommel was stopped, unaccountably, and by tanks the Abwehr knew nothing whatsoever about.

I have always had my suspicions about Canaris. His reports of hidden defenses on the beaches at England, a standing British Army there of 1.6 million men—well, they were quite exaggerated, to say the least. It was Canaris who tried to put us off in the attack on Gibraltar. He droned on and on about Franco, and his network in Spain has not been helpful for our assessment study Group sizing up Operation Isabella.

Yes... Canaris... It is clear he has no love for Hitler, but could he be a double agent, as this man Volkov has whispered to the Führer? Could he

really be in the employ of the British? It is bad enough that we have bumlbers like Goring to reckon with in high places, but a traitor, and at the very heart of our intelligence network? This is too much to conceive, and certainly too much to bear. I must be very wary of that man, particularly concerning my own building projects. To think that I nominated him to his present post, as he was at least a Navy man. Better Canaris than that pest of a man, Reinhard Heydrich. He was nothing more than a beady eyed SD man, a Gestapo man, and a real spider. Hitler called him 'the man with the iron heart,' and I called him the man with no morals. I was correct to dismiss him from the navy years ago, and he has always tried to get even for that. So it was Canaris...

But I may have made a mistake.

The Admiral shook his head, brooding, distracted by these old memories and suspicions. First we must finish the job in the Canaries, he thought. and starve the British in Egypt. Then we will see if they can keep these new heavy tanks of theirs supplied for battle against Rommel. I'm told we still have no idea where they were manufactured, and how the British got them to North Africa, but that doesn't matter. They are there, but they will need gasoline to be anything more than pill boxes, and I am going to do everything in my power to take that away from them.

The Canary Islands are just the first step. So now I set my mind on seeing to the supply runs out to Fuerteventura, and organizing the covering force for those two big troop ships, *Bretagne* and *Rex*. Halder has finally found me that third division, the 327th Infantry. With that force in hand, I will certainly take these islands. But to use it, I must find a way to get it safely into a position to attack. That is a job for the Navy, and here I sit, alone on this single battleship, the apple of my eye ten years ago. Here I sit, but would I trade *Hindenburg* tomorrow for a pair of fast cruisers, an oil tanker and a good destroyer flotilla? I wonder...

With an endurance of 20,000 sea miles, *Hindenburg* can be my oil tanker if I need one now, and one that I will not have to protect. *Prinz Heinrich* can carry all the aviation fuel our airfields on those islands will ever need, and also ferry planes. The British have been using their aircraft carriers like this for years, but I was blind to it all. Look what the Japanese have just done at Pearl Harbor! The reports were most enlightening. The only real damage they sustained came from other aircraft carriers.

Yes, things have changed. Everything is different now. The navy I was building with the *Bismarck* and *Hindenburg* classes may have been

necessary. After all, the British had so many battleships, though they have lost six of them so far, and a battlecruiser as well. The odds are better for us, assuming I ever get *Bismarck* back in time to matter. Yet I could not have planned this without the French Navy at my side. The British were so worried about those ships that they tried to sink them at Mers-el Kebir. But what really put those two French battleships under the sea when Admiral Gensoul ran for Toulon? An aircraft carrier!

So I have become the greatest fool in the world. I wanted to build battleships the like of which the world had never seen, but now I am taking the massive hull of the *Brandenburg* and building the most powerful aircraft carrier ever to sail the seas. Yes, how things have changed, and I have changed with them. If I have any further doubts about that, one look at *Bismarck* now should tell the story clear enough.

Things are finally heating up in this war, but the battle for the Atlantic is far from over.

Chapter 3

The ship made its way up the narrow channel, with floes of ice on either side, some drifting near the hull as *Kirov* passed. They were in home waters now, familiar, and yet so far from the world the officers and crew once knew. The Sea of Okhotsk had always been a barren and forbidding place, a desolation of ice in the winter, and a brief fleeting summer before it would all come again. Magadan would be iced over now, were it not for the daily sorties by two icebreakers Karpov had found for the port. They cleared the channel to the harbor, breaking up the frosted grey-white sea.

Yet the smell of that ice was familiar, a tinge of home on the air, for *Kirov* was a denizen of the icy waters of the north, long based at Severomorsk near Murmansk. Ahead the narrow quay would just be long enough to let the ship ease up and tie off. And high above the harbor, the looming shape of a massive airship hovered in the grey sky, the long shadow of *Tunguska* darkening the wharf. Only Karpov would go ashore, where he planned to meet with himself that day, a very private engagement that no other man on earth could ever arrange.

The news of the third, and hopefully final victory at Ilanskiy was most heartening. The little weapons cache Sergeant Troyak had provided was put to the best possible use, and with deadly results.

“Six airships! And all at once?” The Siberian beamed, wishing he could be close enough to his other self to embrace him, but that could never happen. The searing pain would build rapidly inside a six foot radius. That was as close as the two men could ever come to one another, a polite conversational distance that could never be spanned, at least without one or both being annihilated. Time grudgingly permitted the existence of two beings here, but she was very particular about the space they occupied. The closer they came to one another, the more persistent her protest would be.

“I knew you could handle things,” said the Siberian. “I had every faith in you, even as I would in my own self, for that is who and what you are, as I am the reflection of your own self, like a shadow stretching out before you, only a shadow fully become this man you see here. Now... We have so much to discuss and plan together. Were there any difficulties we should speak of?”

“None worth mentioning,” said the younger Karpov. “I realize things might have been different were it not for those Koronets. We were

outnumbered by a good measure.”

“As I was on the Pacific, but it is the Japanese that went limping home, wondering what in hell had happened to them, just as you sent Volkov’s fleet packing. And speaking of the Japanese, that is our next operation. I assume the situation on the ground at Ilanskiy is secure?”

“Certainly. As soon as they lost air cover, their attack was doomed to fail. I moved up six airships, and we sat over them for an hour, pounding them with those recoilless rifles. They had some light flak guns, but we took those out first. After that, they couldn’t make a move on the ground without my seeing it, and delivering a nasty little sting. Fresh troops arrived from the east, and that was that.”

“A good lesson for Volkov again,” said the Siberian. “That will probably be the last attack he can mount. I doubt if he’ll ever persuade Hitler to lend him those transport planes again.”

“Agreed.”

“Good then... The Japanese. Plan 7 is scheduled to begin immediately. I’ve jousting with their fleet carriers on the way here, but now is the time to make our move for Kamchatka and Sakhalin Island. It is the last thing they would expect, and if we can get a substantial force moved, we’ll catch them before they have time to build up strength. Tyrenkov says the garrisons are quite slim, particularly on Kamchatka.”

“How will we proceed?” asked the younger man.

“We’ll move the Air Mobile Brigade first, and we’ll need most of the fleet for that. The terrain we’ll be facing is rather formidable, and there are very few ports or other landing sites favorable for a seaborne attack. That said, most of the heavy equipment for the troops must move by sea, which means control of the few ports available is a necessity. I plan on setting up a forward depot at Nikolaevsk at the mouth of the Amur River. We’ll need to secure Vanino-Gavan soon after that. I have already deployed the 40th Division to Chumikan and Torum near the mouth of the Maya River before the winter months set in. Airships did most of the work, and though it took some time, that division now has forward supplies for a move south. 3rd Air Guard Brigade has been added to lead this movement by air. It’s objective is to get down through Tyr to the mouth of the Amur, and get control of Lazarev on the Tatar Strait. That port is our land bridge to Northern Sakhalin Island, and that is where all the key oil fields are.”

“Oil? In 1942?”

“Well, it hasn’t been developed here yet, but we know where the oil is, and it will become an important resource in the future. The Japanese have set off to Borneo to secure oil, not knowing it was right under their feet.”

“How many feet?” asked Karpov, wanting to know what they were up against.

“They have an engineer regiment in that area snooping around with heavy equipment and drilling rigs, so I believe Volkov must have put them on the scent. But they haven’t found anything yet, as most of the really good fields are just off shore. They have a battalion at Lazarev, another at Alexandrovsk. The rest of their forces will be south of the treaty demarcation line, in Karafuto, as they call it now. Yes, they’re fond of renaming things. That is all of southern Sakhalin Island, and now it’s time we restored its original name.”

“What about Kamchatka?”

“Again, they deployed no more than a single brigade, five battalions, all still south of the treaty line. I will land the 92nd Division on the west coast, all well trained ski troops. They’ll be supported by a Naval Marine Brigade, and my air mobile troops with a division of airships. It is only about 100 miles east from my chosen landing site to Petropavlovsk. That’s where the main airfield is, and the best protected bay and harbor on the peninsula.”

“And what good does all this empty territory do us, aside from assuaging our damaged pride?”

“It is more than that, brother. Those two airfields on Kamchatka will be quite tantalizing for the Americans.”

“The Americans?”

“Of course. No one else can supply us with the necessary aircraft. I’m trying to demonstrate that this whole plan can be developed into a viable axis of attack against Japan. The idea is to offer the Americans basing rights to prosecute their bombing campaign against Japan. They’ll fight for years, hopping from one island to the next before they can get bases close enough for strategic bombing. I can give them that this year, within months.”

“But they aren’t ready. They haven’t got the planes yet.”

“It is under a thousand miles from Petropavlovsk to Hokkaido. Fedorov tells me that is well within the range of their B-17 bomber, and soon they will have the B-24, with even better range. The airfields on Sakhalin are the real prize. They are much closer, and if I can secure those, and then offer them to the Americans, I will have a real lever on the Japanese. I’ll have troops that

could advance along the frozen Amur river towards Khabarovsk, bases, airfields, new ports, all slowly closing in on the plum—Vladivostok.”

“A very enterprising plan...” The younger Karpov considered for a moment. “What does our resident historian think of all this?”

“Fedorov? He has his reservations, as always. He thinks a campaign of this nature will mandate a strong Japanese counterattack.”

“That does not sound too farfetched. If we know these airfields and ports are important, the Japanese must know this as well. I’m surprised they haven’t got stronger forces there.”

“Tyrenkov is running down their order of battle.” The Siberian folded his arms, a satisfied look on his face. “As for their counterattack, that is where *Kirov* comes in handy, wouldn’t you say?”

Both Karpovs smiled. “Precisely,” said the younger man.

“Precisely,” said the Siberian. “Let them try shipping anything over from Japan by sea and see what happens.”

It all sounded so plausible when the two men discussed it, but that evening, the Siberian would have one last meeting with Fedorov to hear his opinion on the matter.

* * *

“**They** don’t all have to come by sea,” said Fedorov. “Though I’m willing to bet they could get something from Hokkaido onto southern Sakhalin without much trouble, and very quickly. But don’t forget the Trans-Siberian Rail. They can move forces up from Vladivostok to Khabarovsk, and from there it isn’t far overland to Vanino-Gavan. They’ll certainly do this if you try to come down from the mouth of the Amur River.”

“That rail line can be interdicted very easily,” said Karpov. “I have partisan cadres all over Primorskiy Province when this operation starts. We’re even planning major uprisings in the big cities, including Vladivostok.”

“That’s what is so troubling,” said Fedorov. “The scope of your plan makes it into a substantial threat to Japanese security. Why, it would put enemy bombers in range of their homeland, and cut off the entire Kwantung Army if you actually took Vladivostok. That is their primary supply port.”

Karpov raised a finger. “If I am to ever win back the territory they seized in 1908, then I must certainly pose a significant threat. They received

my ultimatum, and yet took no action. In fact, they did not even give me the courtesy of a reply. So I must show them I mean business.”

Fedorov nodded. “This is why I believe your operation will provoke the Japanese into a major reaction. The security of their entire war effort in China would also be at stake, so I would not be at all surprised to see big troop redeployments to stop what you are planning. You may believe they have ignored you, but I expect your man Tyrenkov will soon learn that they have, in fact, begun to make preparations for renewed hostilities all along your border. That front has been stagnant for years now. You’ve maintained an army at Irkutsk, and they’ve sat on the other side of Lake Baikal on their border outposts, quietly facing you down. You can bet those troops will soon be on alert, and supplies also moving on their side of the board. Make no mistake—if they do take you seriously, you should expect to be attacked.”

“Let them try,” said Karpov.

“Just a moment,” Fedorov countered. “You say that with such confidence, but how many divisions are you committing to this operation?”

“I’ll have two veteran units, the 32nd and 92nd, and then a good line unit in the 40th Division, with one reserve division. Considering that I’ve sent so many troops to Sergei Kirov, that was all I could spare from the Far East Sector. All the rest is with the Irkutsk Army Group. I will also add three Air Guard Brigades that have been raised to operate with my airship fleet, and the Magadan Marine Brigade. So the force I have available amounts to five divisions.”

“And did this Tyrenkov fill you in on what you’ll be facing? The Kwantung Army Group has five *armies*, and over 20 divisions.”

“Most will have to stay on their frontier positions,” Karpov waved his hand. “They are scattered from Outer Mongolia all the way to the Amur River sector near Chita.”

“And what about their armies in Manchuria? They could easily re-deploy two or three divisions from those forces to augment anything the Kwantung Army Group sends. How much force will it take to stop you? I’m guessing not much. You have good troops, well acclimated to winter warfare, and hardy men, but could one of your divisions push easily through a decent Japanese division? Could they push through two? Three? Considering the terrain, I find that unlikely. Just keeping your forward units supplied overland from the mouth of the Amur will be a very difficult task. There is no question of your ability to contest or control the sea, but on land, you may find out it’s

a different game entirely. There is very little *Kirov* can do to help you there.”

“Don’t forget my airships. They can move supplies for a full brigade to virtually any point I desire.”

“That may be so, but if you push forward with an offensive of this scale, you will get a very strong reaction from the Japanese. Of this I have no doubt. You could find yourself in another bloody Russo-Japanese war if you aren’t careful.”

“That is the general idea here, Mister Fedorov. Why are you so squeamish?”

“Don’t misunderstand me,” said Fedorov. “My reservations are based on a good knowledge of the Japanese military. You forget that their troops have been fighting in Manchuria for years now. They are all veteran divisions.”

“Yet you said yourself that most of the really good units were combed off to strike south.”

“True, but that does not mean the forces remaining there are without capability. The Japanese Army was practically unbeatable at this stage of the war. If you want my real opinion, I believe this operation will fail. You’ll have the best chance at Kamchatka, as that will be their least defended frontier, with second line garrison troops, and it will be difficult for them to support or reinforce. Sakhalin Island may also be feasible, at least the northern sector, but they’ll fight hard for the south, and I don’t think you can push all the way up the Amur River from the coast as you have planned either.”

“We shall have to see, Mister Fedorov. War is not a certain enterprise. I realize there are risks in this operation, or any other. Ivan Volkov certainly thought he had everything planned on the last attempt to take Ilanskiy. My brother showed him otherwise. In like manner, the Japanese may believe they can easily stop me, but I may show them otherwise. It is all a question of will, Fedorov, fortitude, perseverance, and determination.”

“You may soon find your enemy has all of those qualities as well. And if they do stop you, Admiral, what then? Are you going to reach for a hammer?”

There was a moment of silence, for both men knew that Fedorov was referring to the one weapon Karpov possessed that could trump any army deployed against him.

“Well Mister Fedorov, I will tell you that I have no intention of being the nail in this endeavor. They may be asking themselves just what exactly

happened to that aircraft carrier I sunk. Well yes, I can make them wonder about so very much more if I so desire. I am not saying I have this in mind, but do not think I will hesitate to deliver a decisive stroke where one is needed. Now, in the beginning, I have exercised great restraint. It will be small moves, a pawn here, a knight there. Yet there is always an endgame in anything I do, and I intend to obtain one thing, and that without fail—checkmate.”

At that moment a *mishman* came running from the radio room, a message in hand, and the look on his face was one akin to a man at the edge of tears. He saluted, handing off the message to Fedorov, who read it quietly. Then he took a long, deep breath, and whispered something to the man, who nodded with another salute before he was off. Karpov turned his head, curious, but Fedorov walked slowly out through the port side hatch to the weather deck, where he stood alone a very long time. His curiosity getting the better of him, Karpov finally went out through the hatch.

Fedorov heard him coming, but said nothing, turning to hand him the message. As Karpov read it, some inner sense told him this was not a time for words. He met Fedorov’s eye, a silent acknowledgement passing between them, and then he slowly folded the message and slipped it into the pocket of his service jacket. They stood there, side by side, each man thinking, remembering, and watching the steady rise and fall of the sea.

Part II

Banzai!

“Speed is the essence of war. Take advantage of the enemy’s unpreparedness; travel by unexpected routes and strike him where he has taken no precautions.”

— **Sun Tsu:** *The Art of War*

Chapter 4

General Yamashita was on the move, his single minded obsession—the British bastion at Singapore. The Jewel of the East was the symbol of British power in the Pacific, just as Gibraltar had been in the Mediterranean. Like the Rock, it also had a reputation as being unassailable, at least from the sea, and no commander alive had ever seriously considered it would fall to an army that would first have to seize the entire Malay Peninsula before it could deliver the coup de grace. There on the edge of the great trans-Pacific trade routes, a thriving, exotic yet modern metropolis had grown up out of the jungle, and it was now a waystation and trade center for nations all through the resource rich Southeast Asia.

This enormously valuable bastion of British power had enough sea room in its harbor to hold most of the British fleet, with a pair of 50,000 ton dry docks for repairs. The island alone had four airfields, a naval base, stores and munitions to support 100,000 men. It simply had to be taken, and then made into Japan's principle supply base for this segment of the new Co-Prosperity Sphere. But how?

There were imposing fortifications on the southern shore, five 15-inch guns, two in the Buona Vista Battery and three in the Johore Battery. One of the latter three had started its life as a 14-inch gun, but was re-bored to a 15-incher. The other two were the last remnants of guns taken from British battleships during refits, like teeth pulled from a steel shark. One was taken from *Barham* and another from the ship that had only just met her fate in the Atlantic, the battleship *Valiant*. The battleships were dead, but their old guns would still fire in anger, a last hollow roar from the bygone era in which they were forged and rifled. Alas they had only armor piercing shells, which would be of little use if they could be turned around.

To these the British also added six 9.2-inch guns, and eighteen more 6-inch naval guns, not to mention the five additional twin 6 pounder batteries around the harbor. To service those guns, there were hundreds of gunlayers, spotters, magazine crews, and an enormous stockpile of 10,700 shells of all calibers. Yet in Fedorov's history, no more than 10% of that ammo stockpile would ever be fired in defense of this highly prized and invaluable outpost.

The question to be asked now was why weren't they turned around by this time in the war, and why were the fortifications there so unprepared for

an attack from the landward side? Fedorov had warned Churchill how Singapore would fall many long months ago in their desert meeting, but nothing had been done. Churchill did, in fact, send communications that the batteries should be prepared to turn about and be used in defense of the city. Many had the ability to traverse 360 degrees, and even those that could not manage that could still range on many targets to the north. Yet no one took the matter seriously. Defense against what, they thought? They had all of III Indian Corps watching their back, and 700 miles of impregnable jungle, or so they believed.

Before they entered the war, Japan sent agents posing as visiting businessmen to wander through the city, and then take small boats into the harbor to study it all from the sea. They quickly concluded the same thing the British believed, that it was simply unassailable from the sea. So the only way to take Singapore was from the landward side, by first doing another thing the British deemed impossible, seizing all of the Malay Peninsula.

When the Japanese proved how porous Percival's defense really was, the shock was lasting and profound. No matter how 'unsporting' their tactics were, they worked, and that was all that mattered in war. A good General had to know that, and there had to be in him a measure of ruthlessness that real warfare demands of its true practitioners. Unfortunately, the man commanding Fortress Singapore was not ruthless, nor was he up to the task that was now before him.

On the other hand, General Yamashita had something to prove in this campaign. He had fallen out of the Emperor's favor during the unfortunate "February 26th Incident," where a group of Army rebels planned high level assassinations in a self-styled coup. At first Yamashita was sympathetic, but later he ended up as an intermediary attempting to resolve the crisis. In any case, the Emperor, and Tojo, had turned a cold shoulder to him ever since. So he had set his mind on capturing Singapore and handing it to Hirohito like a gift on February 11th, the anniversary of the founding of Japan by the Emperor Jimmu in 660 BC.

The first phase of his landing in the north had gone off without a hitch. He had stormed ashore, seized the vital British airfields at Alor Star and Kota Bharu. To do so, he had taken his 25th Army right through neutral Thailand, some parts coming overland, and most others landing by sea. Speed was of the essence, so much so that one of the chief planners in this campaign, Masanobu Tsuji, personally went forward with a small detachment

of 300 men and a few light tanks to keep the spearheads of the Japanese columns moving.

A man with a brilliant tactical mind, Tsuji had been nicknamed “the God of Operations” for his skill in planning. He had a unique ability of cutting through red tape, and was also a strong believer of taking matters into his own hands when necessary, the peculiar brand of Japanese initiative that was called *gekokuujō*, “leading from below,” a kind of loyal insubordination that had led to numerous incidents of rebellious behavior in the past. It was the mentality that had triggered the war in China at more than one place, where enterprising young officers deliberately sabotaged a Japanese controlled railway as a pretext to blame the act on the Chinese and begin reprisals.

Tsuji had also instigated several “incidents” along the Siberian border, one provoking a combined Soviet-Siberian force that had been deployed along the Khalkhyn Gol River. That sparked a major battle, which backfired on Tsuji when another master strategist took charge of the fight, a man named Georgie Zhukov. The Japanese were taught a valuable lesson in that battle, and learned a healthy respect for the fighting ability of their northern neighbors.

Now, however, Tsuji’s fortunes would be found here on the so called “Southern Road,” and the segment he was walking now would lead through Malaya to Singapore. Nor would he be facing a brilliant mind like Zhukov. Instead, the chief opponent for Yamashita and Tsuji would be Lieutenant General Arthur Ernest Percival. No stranger to war, Percival had fought at the dreadful Battle of the Somme where he earned a Military Cross, and later, a Distinguished Service Order that specifically noted his “power of command and knowledge of tactics.”

No matter how well schooled he was, the Lieutenant General was about to meet his match, and then some, when Yamashita and Tsuji brewed up their own styled brand of Banzai Blitzkrieg. Percival had studied his situation and came to conclude that the enemy might do exactly what Tsuji had planned one day—land in Thailand and “burgle Malaya by the backdoor.” He noted that the fortress of Singapore might be impregnable from the south seaward approach, but that vulnerabilities presented an enemy with opportunities to attack from the north, through Malaya. He had laid out the plan his enemies might follow, almost chapter and verse, yet when it finally came at him, he seemed entirely powerless to stop it.

A kind of lassitude born of overconfidence had settled on him, a

complacency born of misapprehension. If the enemy came, he thought he would simply meet and defeat them in Northern Malaya, and his faith in the invincibility of Western arms and military forces would be rudely abused.

At one point the British sent up a small mechanized column, with armored cars and Bren carriers. Tsuji was at the point of contact, quickly ordering the British defensive line to be enfiladed through an abandoned rubber plantation, where he personally captured a valuable map of the peninsula, detailing all the key British positions. He went to Yamashita, jubilant with his find, and the two men decided the strategy they hoped that would bring them victory.

“They will defend here, along the Jitra River,” said Tsuji, his balding head and round eyeglasses catching the light. “The British were kind enough to build us those airfields, and also that lovely coastal road. Now we will use both against them. They hope to block our advance down that one good road along the west coast, but we will foil them. Our tanks will punch through, but the main attack will be a flanking maneuver by our infantry through the plantations to the east.”

“Can they move fast enough through the jungle?”

“They will with these...” Tsuji had shown Yamashita the special bicycles that the troops would take to battle, assembled in the field and used to literally ride right through the jungle, over terrain no one thought any force could easily penetrate. Forsaking trucks in his plan, he would bring 6000 bicycles for each division instead, and use man portable mortars instead of heavier artillery.

“The British have plenty of trucks there for us to use,” he boasted. “Why bring our own when we can simply capture theirs?”

“What about the rivers?” Yamashita had asked. “What if they blow all the bridges?”

“The infantry will not need bridges to cross those rivers. And there are plenty of saw mills along that road, with good lumber to rebuild anything the British destroy.”

It was a masterful economy of thinking—why burden the army with things the enemy would provide? The bicycles would allow his men to stay right on the heels of the British as they withdrew, giving them no rest or means of consolidating in a new defensive position. And since Japan had exported this same model to other Asian nations for years, Tsuji said there would be no problem finding spare parts for the bikes. Everything they

needed for their advance was already there. All they had to do was make use of it.

When the Japanese landed in the north, the Governor of Singapore, Sir Shenton Thomas, simply shrugged his shoulders and remarked to Percival: “Well, I suppose you’ll shove the little men off.”

It was typical of the attitude the British held towards the Japanese, a grave underestimation of their war fighting prowess. The little men would soon show the British Army what they were made of, moving with such speed, ferocity, and determination that plodding Percival, who stated the enemy has “rather less than a division ashore,” was soon seeing his Indian Brigades breaking and being swept south before the rapid tsunami of the Japanese advance.

In truth, the Japanese had rather more than two divisions, the elite 5th, which had led the Siberian Intervention years ago, and 18th Division, one of the units that had been part of the murderous rampage through Nanking. Behind these the Imperial Guards would come, though their name belied their real inexperience when it came to battle. The real fighting troops were in those first two divisions, and they would get the job done easily enough against the 9th and 11th Indian Divisions. Only the tough Australian 8th Division would give them a fight, but without the Indians to hold on their flanks, they became a rock in the stream.

The tactic the Japanese would use was called *Kirimoni Sakusen*, a driving charge with the armor leading in the vanguard, and the light footed infantry on either flank to infiltrate and encircle points of resistance. It was the charging bull that Percival thought his men would parry in his Operation Matador, but in this case it was the matador that was skewered and gored, his cape trampled and lances broken and scattered.

“They boasted they could hold their vaunted Jitra line for three months,” said Tsuji. “We went through it in 15 hours, and with no more than 500 men! And we are advancing so quickly that we capture the British forward supply dumps before they can even evacuate them. As I said earlier, the enemy will provide us with everything we need, trucks, fuel, food. We can even use their rail road and captured rolling stock. It is all there. We have merely to take it from them.”

And that they did. The Japanese advance outpaced the British withdrawal in places. At the Slim River defensive line, Yamashita executed a daring flanking maneuver using landing barges along the coast that Tsuji

thought would end with disaster. If caught by British planes, the troops would be sitting ducks, but only a few came and made one ineffective strafing run. The maneuver was a resounding success, and it was followed by an equally bold armored thrust.

The Japanese call their tanks *sensha*, or “battle wagon,” and it was their doctrine to assign small battalion sized units to operate with the infantry. A column of 20 Type 97 medium tanks, with 57mm main guns and two 7.2mm machineguns, was led by the intrepid Major Toyosaku Shimada. He decided to attack at night, which caught the British defenders completely by surprise.

The scattered defenders of 5/2nd Punjab Regiment managed to knock out four tanks, one from artillery fire, two others to a Boys AT rifle, and one to mines, but the remainder pushed around them and on through the Indian troops. A survivor ran with a breathless warning to perhaps the best unit on the position, the British 2nd Battalion, Argyll & Sutherland Highlanders. They had just arrived to put some backbone into the defense, but hardly had time to look over the ground when they saw four Bren carriers approaching along the main road.

“Look here,” said a Lieutenant. “Who’s that rushing about like this after dark?” He collared a Sergeant and sent him off. “Kindly get hold of that lot and tell them to quiet down. The enemy will hear that racket for miles.”

The Sergeant would soon learn the supposed Brens were actually Japanese tanks, which barreled right on through the British position, leaving astonished Majors and Lieutenants holding evening tea in unsteady hands and looking at one another as if someone had just committed an unpardonable breach of decorum.

That was the attitude that sunk the British in Malaya, from Percival’s initial underestimation of the enemy strength, and right on down through the ranks. Officers were too regimented in their thinking, and adhered too often to the rules of war where each side would line up and “have a go” at the other. One did not ride off around and behind his opponent’s lines on bicycles, and one did not attack up a road with armor after dark... except Yamashita.

The “Tiger of Malaya” was teaching his stodgy rivals that war was not a game of cricket. The unorthodox tactics Tsuji and Yamashita devised would unhinge one defensive position after another. Those four tanks would soon be backed up by the rest of the column, and the infantry of Colonel Ando’s regiment of the 5th Infantry Division. They would race ahead to the

vital railway bridge, and Major Shimada would have the satisfaction of personally leaping from his tank, drawing his samurai sword, and cutting the carefully laid demolition cables.

“Not very sporting,” would come the British reply from a captured officer in the 2nd Argylls. “I mean what do you mean by attacking us at night like this when we weren’t prepared to meet you? And what do you mean by using tanks on a narrow road and all? It’s really quite frustrating. When we hold the coast, you come at us out of the jungle. When we dig in on good ground, you come at us from the sea. If you take a position, you don’t consolidate it and wait to bring up reserves, but just rush about like madmen on those bicycles. One can’t sort out exactly what you seem to be doing here, which is most disconcerting. If you had made a proper attack after sunrise, I’m certain we’d have stopped you.”

The only thing certain for the man now was a long, arduous and often brutal stint as a P.O.W. The Japanese were already shooting and bayoneting any captured prisoners who could not walk. They were not about to nursemaid them along under the rules of the Geneva Convention. Theirs was not the cautious, plodding position game of chess that the British expected. Instead it was a daring leap by a knight, bypassing the carefully placed pawns and appearing right in the heart of the enemy camp. Yes, it was a Knight’s move....

As the last of the defenders to escape boarded trains in Kuala Lumpur, about 50 miles to the south, a railway manager looked sheepishly at a group of eight rail cars that had just been loaded with supplies.

“What will I do with them?” he asked an officer. “There’s too much traffic on the line south to Singapore. They won’t be able to move for hours.”

“Well what did you load on them?”

“Just the usual, sir, beef tins, biscuits and boxes.”

“Then just leave them here and don’t bother with them. We’ve plenty of beef and biscuits in Singapore as it stands.”

The Japanese would be very pleased when they arrived and found those eight abandoned rail cars loaded with supplies. One little windfall was in the “boxes,” a stack of detailed printed maps of the city of Singapore that were a dream come true for Yamashita and Tsuji. As late as October of 1941, Japanese “tourists” had been visiting Malaya trying to find decent maps, and Yamashita had nothing he ever deemed adequate, until that lucky find, just another of many oversights on the part of the British, who were too flustered

by these unorthodox moves, and found the whole Japanese attack simply too untidy for their liking.

Chapter 5

Percival had conceived his defensive plan, and gave it the flamboyant name of Operation Matador, as if the British defenders would swirl their capes at the boldly charging Japanese bulls, never giving an inch and sticking them with a lance as they rumbled by. Yet the troops he sent north to hold a territory as big as England itself were two under strength Indian divisions from III Corps, each missing one of its three brigades. They were not the toughened troops that had fought for Britain in North Africa, but illiterate cast offs, pressed into the service, shipped off to a foreign land with little training, and even less equipment. It was a British practice to stiffen these brigades by always including a battalion of British regulars, but of the six available in Malaya, only three were sent north to backstop this thin defense. It was no more substantial than the Matador's cape, and just as fleeting. So the bull leapt right over this hapless toreador, then turned and gored him in the back.

Yes, it wasn't very sporting, but it was a tactic of war that was quite effective. A defense that might have held for months if properly established was rolled up in a matter of a few weeks, and soon Yamashita's men would be approaching the next bridge they needed near the Muar River. This time it was the men of the 8th Australian Division on the line, 2/30th Battalion commanded by Colonel "Black Jack" Gelleghan.

"They've taken positions by storm so often that I think we can hoodwink them here," he said. "We'll set up south of the bridge, and then let them come trundling right over the bloody thing. Once they get here, have the engineers blow the bridge behind them."

Black Jack's battalion would hold up the Japanese for two days, inflicting a thousand casualties in the process, as they fell back from one stubbornly defended position to the next. They would prompt Yamashita to order a major attack by the air force to pave the way for his renewed advance. The Diggers showed what could be done by disciplined troops willing to roll up their sleeves and start thinking like their enemy. They anticipated many planned Japanese countermoves, and laid some very skillful ambushes, but there just were not enough of them to matter in the end. In spite of their valor, Yamashita would continue to drive relentlessly towards the last obstacle between his rampaging 25th Army and Singapore, the Strait of Johor.

In what seemed like desperation, Churchill had wanted to send *Prince of*

Wales and *Repulse* to the aid of this most valuable jewel in the crown. But those two ships would meet another doom off the coast of Northwest Africa. Dissuaded by Admiral Tovey, he instead sent two aircraft carriers, *Indomitable* and *Illustrious*, their decks laden with Hurricane fighters to be flown off for operations from airfields on Singapore.

Yet that was not all that Churchill sent. He hoped he could reverse the inexorable momentum of the war by sending a secret weapon—a single man in fact, one of his closest advisors, Brendon Bracken. A financier and businessman, and a long time supporter of Churchill, it was Bracken who advised Churchill not to say a word if Lord Halifax was named as a possible successor to Neville Chamberlain. In fact, he held Churchill to a promise that he would remain silent. As Bracken predicted, Halifax had his name put forward, and Churchill said nothing, a long two minute silence that was eventually broken by Halifax himself, stating he did not think he was in the best position to form a government. Lord Beaverbrook would later claim that was “the great silence that saved England.”

So Bracken was delighted when Churchill became Prime Minister, and was soon a member of the Privy Council, and Churchill’s Parliamentary Private Secretary. He would also serve as the Minister of Information, and it was this commodity that he was carrying with him to Percival on Churchill’s behalf that day—information.

In an effort to stiffen Percival’s resolve, Churchill dispatched his trusted associate and confidant to Singapore on the eve of the final battle, hoping to put into his mind that the attack that would soon come must certainly fail, if only he could maintain his resolve and stand fast.

* * *

“What do you mean by this?” said Percival. “You say the Japanese are bluffing? Then how did they manage to chase my entire army 700 miles in the last two months? That was no bluff, Mister Bracken, no matter what the Prime Minister might think. It was a shameful performance on our part, and I’m fully prepared to shoulder the responsibility for that. If I had it all to do over, I would have held the line much closer to Singapore, as General Heath of III Indian Corps suggested. We were trying to protect the airfields up north for the RAF. Without their air cover, how could we expect to receive reinforcements here by sea? That said, my Operation Matador was the wrong plan at the wrong time. I’ll admit that much.”

“General,” said Bracken, running a big hand through his wavy hair. “What I am now going to suggest is that you do indeed have a second chance here. As Minister of Information, I come by a few tidbits that may prove interesting from time to time. Mister Blair?”

He turned to an aide, a man who worked as a clerk which he brought along to manage the files and papers he would now present. He had fished him out of the imposing stone edifice of the Ministry building, a humdrum clerk doing a little war time work there. Unbeknownst to him, Clerk Blair was much more than he seemed, a prolific writer with a political edge, and an eye for things that would soon come to pass in the shadow of the war.

“Mister Blair here will present you with some rather detailed information as to the real force the enemy now has outside your keep. As you will soon see, it is hardly the invincible host you may think it to be. The Japanese 25th Army, if it could be called that, is actually a force of no more than 30,000 men—less than three divisions. That was what he started with, and his forces may be whittled down considerably by now. Why, you have 33,000 British troops at your disposal here, and another 17,000 Australians. Along with the Indian Units, your force totals at least 100,000 men. Am I correct?”

“30,000 men?” Percival could not agree. “My good man, the Japanese must have at least 150,000 out there by now. As to our own forces, I have more like 85,000 men, and of those I would deem 15,000 to be non-combatants. No offense to you or your ministry, but you have been out of the picture as I’ve seen it here, and your information is simply wrong.”

“But surely you have enough with that to throw the enemy back should they attempt to cross the strait.”

Percival was quick to reply. “Yet I have to cover 70 miles of coastline. The Japanese can pick and choose their points of crossing, and hit us there with everything they have.”

The big Irishman sighed, pursing his lips and extending an open hand to his clerk again. “The letter, Mister Blair. I probably should have presented it first. It is the Prime Minister’s own hand and mind, and I urge you to heed it in the strongest possible way.”

Blair fished out an envelope, and Bracken handed it to the General stiffly. “I must say, General, that I have spent more than a good amount of time burning the proverbial midnight oil with Mister Churchill. I am, you see, one of the few men in the government who sees him after that hour.”

Percival opened the envelope and read the note: *General Percival, I am sending you this letter to reveal the full scope of what British Intelligence has now come to know concerning the forces arrayed against you. You can take it on faith, in spite of your own setbacks in recent weeks, that the Japanese will not have 30,000 men to put against you in this fateful hour, and your own troops certainly number many times that. This is not conjecture or speculation. We have this information from a most reliable source, which for reasons of national security, cannot be revealed in this letter.*

Beyond that, the condition of the enemy is precarious. They are presently at the end of a very long rope, low on food, supplies and certainly ammunition. You simply must oppose them now with every sinew of war you can muster. The battle must be fought to the bitter end at all costs... Commanders and senior officers should die with their troops. The honor of the British Empire and the British Army is at stake.'

Percival raised an eyebrow at that, slowly folding the letter. Later he would write back to the Prime Minister: *'In some units the troops have not shown the fighting spirit expected of men of the British Empire. ... It will be a lasting disgrace if we are defeated by an army of clever gangsters many times inferior in numbers to our men.'*

"I trust you will accept what I say now, sir," said Bracken, his hand again in the thick hair that seemed plastered on his wide round head. "You must do as the Prime Minister urges. Do you realize that if Singapore falls, it will be the most disastrous military setback in all British history? We thought losing Gibraltar was bad enough, then Hong Kong, but this is the Gibraltar of the East, and we simply must hold on here. I do not also have to tell you that capitulation will be forever associated with your name if you don't stand up now, something I am sure you might prefer to avoid. Why, it would be the most ignominious surrender of British forces since Cornwallis. Now then, in light of that letter, what is this business I hear about your not wanting fortifications built on your northern borders of the city?"

"Bad for morale," said Percival, a tall, thin man, beady eyed and with a tiny wisp of a mustache above prominent rabbit like teeth that protruded whenever he spoke. He looked more the office clerk than the man Bracken had with him. "Fixed fortifications send the wrong message—bad for both the troops and civilians alike."

Bracken shrugged his heavy shoulders. "Well what in god's name do you call all those heavy naval batteries facing south, if not fixed

fortifications! That is what makes this island impossible to assault from the sea. You must build an equally tough defensive line to the north, facing the Strait of Johor.”

“And you must mind your manners, sir, notwithstanding your close association with the Prime Minister, you are certainly not a military man, or in any position to understand what we’re facing here.”

“General, I understand you quite plainly. The Prime Minister might have sent General Wavell, but he’s tied down with some big decisions in North Africa. So I’ve been sent in his place, and I’ve just told you what you are facing—less than 30,000 hungry, tired Japanese troops, who have little ammunition to prosecute a long siege. If you hold out, stand firm, then your name will forever be associated with something much more palatable—the defense and salvation of Singapore. The Japanese will propose your surrender, but you must not listen to them, or even treat with them seriously. This is an order, not from me of course, but from your government. No consideration must be given to surrender here.”

Percival was quiet, a manner he had lately come to adopt at strategy sessions with his subordinate division and corps commanders. A shroud of gloom seemed to hang over his thin shoulders, and if anything could be said to be in his eyes now, it was not the light of determination to stand and fight. Rather, a look approaching desperation seemed to haunt him, an indecisiveness that Churchill’s messenger could clearly perceive.

“Remember,” said Bracken, “You are the Rock of the East.”

“The Germans took the other one easily enough,” said Percival.

“Only after they threatened to pour gasoline into the tunnels from above and set the whole bloody place to an inferno,” Bracken shook his finger. “I hardly think the Japanese are capable of such depravity.”

That was to be an understatement, for at that very moment, the Japanese had come across a group of Aussies on the other side of the Strait, cut off, all wounded, and quietly waiting for their war to end, thinking the hardship of a prison camp might not be half as bad as the jungle. The Japanese officers who came across them decided to spare them that fate. Thinking it was time for their samurai swords to be blooded, they summarily beheaded each and every man. Atrocity and depravity lay dead ahead, and Percival stood there, completely unknowing, and oblivious to the fate that might soon overtake his island fortress.

The history books Fedorov read had pointed out the bayoneting of

patients and hospital staff in Hong Kong, and the ravaging of nurses on their bloodied bodies, but the real atrocity would be the slaughter of 50,000 to 70,000 Chinese civilians in Singapore, and up country in Malaya, all summarily executed for being ‘anti-Japanese.’

They would call it the *Shingapōru Daikenshō*, or “great inspection of Singapore,” but Western historians would name it the Sook Ching Massacre. Their troops would swarm into the steamy warrens of Chinatown, smashing the carts of the street vendors, overturning the fleets of rickshaws, breaking into the small family owned shops, putting the torch to lavish silks, exotic teas, ransacking the pearl and jade markets, looting, raping, and dragging out all the young men for “inspection.” Those from wealthy families thought to be financing resistance movements were of special interest, as were communists, civil servants, and any who might have been in a militia group. Those with tattoos were also selected out, for they may have been members of the Chinese “triad” gangs. Simple possession of any weapon could result in summary execution.

The old Amahs, grandmothers, and wizened old grandfathers would watch like shadows from the shrouded windows of the tenements. The mothers screamed and wailed as their young sons were dragged off, many never to be seen again. Those that managed to “pass” inspection had the word “Inspected” stamped onto their foreheads or clothing.

Out on the water, the sampans clustered there like birds on a pond would be put to the fire, and on Nankin Street, hundreds of squalid families would be rousted out of their tiny stalls, herded like animals as the troops gave them a liberal treatment of rifle butts, bayonets, and then simply began shooting them. But most “selectees” were herded out to designated sites, like Changi Beach, where the *Kempetai* would line them up and gun them down. It would be a death toll that would exceed the total number lost to US forces over 10 years of fighting in Vietnam, and it was all put to the sword and fire in a two to three week period after the fall of Singapore.

But none of that had happened yet... There was still the Strait of Johor, 100,000 men, and General Percival between Yamashita and his prize, and Brendon Bracken was there to see that they held the line.

“Mister Bracken,” said the General. “You can go back to London with every assurance that I will do my level best here to hold on. And while you’re there, you might ask around as to when we might expect relief.”

Bracken smiled, realizing now that Percival would have to say as much

in this situation, but still not seeing any real resolve in the other man. He realized he had to offer the General something to bolster his morale, and was authorized to do so by Churchill. So he lowered his voice, stepping closer, as if to confide something of a sensitive nature.

“My good general,” he began. “You didn’t think I’ve come all this way merely to give you a pep talk, did you? What I will tell you now is to be kept secret, a matter for discussion between you and your senior division commanders only.”

“Of course,” said Percival, waiting, with just the barest light of expectancy in his eyes.

“You should know that the Prime Minister was dead set on sending a strong naval force to your aid, but his battleships have been seeing to another problem with the French and German fleet in the Atlantic. In their place, however, I can tell you that a powerful naval squadron is presently in the Indian Ocean, and with every intention of intervening here at the eleventh hour. The aircraft carriers *Illustrious* and *Indomitable* have been dispatched, and with another 45 Hurricanes each to send to your immediate aid. Now, you said yourself that much of your thinking involved protection of those airfields to insure relief by sea would remain possible. This is the aim of this flotilla, and you can expect support directly.”

There, that was his bait, and now the artful Bracken had only to hope the General would take it, and allow him to reel this fish in and get a net on him.

Chapter 6

"I see," said Percival, looking a bit more hopeful. "The RAF boys will certainly be glad to hear that. As it stands, the only thing they can do in those unwieldy Buffaloes is out dive the Japanese fighters to escape from having to dog fight with them. They can't get up after the Japanese bombers. It takes them all of 30 minutes to climb to 30,000 feet, and by the time they get up there, it's usually too late. Needless to say, that is of little help to our cause."

"Well sir, the Hurricanes do a little better." Bracken needed to reinforce his point here.

"They do, if we can get them in action soon. Of the 51 in the first lot we received in January, only 21 remain available for operations."

"If you are to make good use of these planes," said Bracken, "then you'll certainly have to hold the airfields on this island, and rather tenaciously. Kallang is well in hand, but the fields at Tengan, Sembawang and Seletam are all in jeopardy should you fail to stop the enemy from obtaining a secure lodgment here."

Percival shook his head. "My good man, once the Japanese bring up their artillery, those fields will be under the gun and impossible to use. We'll only have the old civilian field at Kallang, and they've been bombing it daily. The damn place was built on reclaimed land, and the bombs kick up the mud from below. The planes have to dodge mud craters just to get into position to try and take off, which makes getting them up after the bombers a bit of a task."

Percival's subordinates always said he would see five difficulties for every opportunity he was presented, and Bracken was beginning to take the measure of the man.

"Frankly," the General concluded, "I'm not sure what good these 90 Hurricanes will do here now. I'm not even sure we'll be able to find a place to park them at Kallang, and if we do, they will most likely make good targets for the Japanese bombers."

"My, my," said Bracken. "Yes, I'm not a military man, but I believe I'm beginning to see the difficulty here, and it starts with you, sir, though I mean you no disrespect. You tell me you disposed your troops to fight for those airfields, and now, when I come with news of fresh fighter reserves, you make it seem as if they'll be more of a bother than any help!"

"What about additional troops and supplies?" said Percival. "I was only

sent one Brigade of the 18th Division, and I could use more along those lines if you have them handy.”

“They’ll be coming,” said Bracken. “The rest of the 18th Division is already at sea and should arrive shortly. But the first step is to get your existing troops ready to repel the attack that will inevitably come. I wish I could give you specifics on troop arrivals, but this was all I’ve been authorized to disclose at the moment. Yet I can tell you one thing...” he leaned in, lowering his voice again with a wink. “Something is in the works, old boy. Something big.”

“Indeed...” The light shone a little brighter in Percival’s eyes. “Well then, I appreciate everything you’ve said here. We won’t let the Prime Minister down, I can assure you.”

The two men shook hands, and hours later Bracken and his aide were on a plane, flying off to the nearest British base at Colombo. Blair felt privileged to have been in on the whole scene, even though he was no more than a mute attendant to the discussion.

“Good to hear there’s a big relief effort in the offing,” he ventured when they had settled in for the flight.

Bracken gave him a sideways glance. “Yes, good to hear it, yet it would be so much better if there actually was something big in the works, wouldn’t it?”

“I’m sorry? You mean to say there will be no relief operation?”

“Mister Blair,” said Bracken, “The Empire couldn’t find another division to stand up on the cliffs of Dover if the Germans were about to cross tomorrow, and they certainly can’t find one to send all the way around the cape and through the Indian Ocean to Singapore!”

“Oh... I was rather thinking it might be another Aussie unit.”

“Australian troops? Percival is damn lucky he’s got the two brigades of the 8th Division there. The rest have all been recalled home. So you see, my little disclosure there was meant entirely to give the man hope. If Percival thinks there’s a big push on to relieve him, he’ll act as if it was actually going to happen. That was the only reason I was sent here. You see, appearances make truth, irrespective of the reality in any situation. Truth is what we decide it to be, understand? Now then... You’re not to breathe a word of this to anyone, or you’ll find yourself sitting in a most uncomfortable room.”

“I understand, sir.”

Blair never liked his superior, and after that little incident his contempt

for the man deepened considerably. He would later come to call him B.B., using his initials instead of the man's name. The imposing edifice of the Ministry of Information in the Senate House of Bloomsbury would also come to seem a hopeless tomb to him, and all these experiences would figure prominently in his future writing. He never forgot what Bracken said to him about truth and appearances.

Blair adopted a pen name for his work, something he just made up one day. He changed his given name to George, the name of the monarch, or perhaps old St. George himself, the slayer of dragons. His sharp pen would be his lance ever thereafter, and he would joust with demons in many famous works, one day named as one of the most significant English writers of his era. For the surname he chose was Orwell, the name of a river in Suffolk, though some say it was a village in Cambridge that he fancied.

The book he would write one day after the war was, of course, *1984*, a dark vision of the future world he thought men like Brendon Bracken, would give rise to. For old B.B. was his analog for Big Brother, and the Ministry of Information in Bloomsbury his analog for the Ministry of Truth. Mister Bracken had told him just now, a simple maxim that he would put at the heart of that novel. "Reality exists in the human mind, and nowhere else." If Percival thought relief was imminent, he would perhaps become more of a man than he could by thinking otherwise.

"In wartime," Churchill would quip one day, "truth is so precious that she should always be attended by a bodyguard of lies."

* * *

Whether he was the image of Big Brother or not in Orwell's mind, Brenden Bracken had come to one inescapable conclusion during his talk with Percival—the man was not capable of properly defending Singapore, and under his watch it would certainly be lost. He reported this directly to General Wavell, who had flown from Alexandria to Colombo to take his report at Churchill's urging.

"Rotten from the top down," he said. "Any fight left in the division commanders will be leached right out of them under that man. Percival may be stolid and obey orders to hold on, but he won't conduct a spirited defense. I fear we're looking at the same disaster foretold to us earlier by the Russian Captain. We need someone else, and quickly."

Wavell nodded, his expression dark and grave. His unique position as one of the very few men ‘in the know’ concerning the Russians had kept him in his post as overall Theater Commander, and now he was feeling the weight of that command.

“I agree completely,” he said at last, “and I believe I have just the man for the job, our own General Montgomery. He’s a particular genius for a situation like this—cut his teeth organizing the defenses along the coast of Kent and Sussex when we thought the Germans might try to kick in the door. He held Tobruk, and to the point of taking up a rifle himself in that fight when we stopped Rommel. I’d say he’s the perfect man of the hour for Singapore.”

“Then get him there, and as quickly as you possibly can. And if you have anything at all you can spare by way of additional troops, even a single battalion, by all means, send it with him.”

That was Wavell’s order, and the troops he found to send along with Montgomery were the 6th Infantry Brigade of the 2nd New Zealand Division. Rommel had just lost his 98th Mountain Regiment, so Wavell thought he could spare one last Brigade, and hoped to rely on Brigadier Kinlan’s troops to fill in if needed. Along with those three battalions, he added the crack 28th Maori Battalion, a company from the 22nd Machinegun Battalion, and another from the Recon Battalion and Royal Engineers.

The troops would have to make a long sea journey, all of 7000 miles from Alexandria, but they were dispatched that day, the 15th of January, on the fastest transports available, and would get there inside two weeks time. RMS *Empress of Asia* was also dispatched from Cape Town, a steam liner that had once served as an auxiliary cruiser hunting WWI German raiders in the Indian Ocean. Her holds were packed with machineguns, rifles, mortars and other military supplies, and she was leading a little convoy comprised of *Félix Roussel* and *City of Canterbury*, escorted by HMAS *Yarra* and HMS *Danae*.

Along the way they would hear news of the great naval battle off Fuerteventura on the 23rd of January, and if nothing else, it imparted a sense of gravity in the situation they were now facing. The Empire was under assault from every quarter, and now they were being sent to the desperate defense of one of its most important outposts.

General Montgomery arrived by air on the 24th of January, stepping in with the rest of the fresh 18th British Infantry Division, which was there a

little earlier than it arrived in the old history. He wanted to make it seem that they were here at his behest, a proud new General leading in fresh troops to buck up morale. He met Percival in the “battlebox” beneath Fort Canning, a warren of narrow halls and rooms where the General held forth with his staff. There were offices and conference rooms, a gun operations room to control the shore batteries, a signals control room for communications back to Wavell. To Monty it all seemed a stench ridden, oppressive Ostrich hole, and he resolved to move his own headquarters much closer to the front lines he had in mind.

It was only then that Percival learned what was ‘in the works,’ as Bracken had put it to him. Monty handed Percival yet another letter, signed by Wavell, and formally relieving the lanky General of command. Percival would stay on in a secondary role as Chief of Staff, for Wavell believed his knowledge of the local scene would be of considerable use to Montgomery.

“Well then,” said Monty. “I can say I’m accustomed to the heat, but certainly not this humidity. It’s been a bit dry where I hail from. That aside, I shall want to review all your dispositions for the defense of this island immediately, and tomorrow morning, we will hold a meeting with all the senior division commanders. Am I to understand that you’re planning to pack all the fighters off our carriers into one small civilian airfield near the city?”

“We certainly can’t use the forward air fields,” said Percival. They’ll all be under the Japanese artillery soon.”

“Quite so, but this single airfield, what is it, Kallang? Well it simply won’t do. So I propose those fighters operate from Pakanbharu on Sumatra. It’s only 170 miles from Singapore, and our Hurricanes can manage that, with plenty of fuel left for combat air patrols over the city. The Fairey Fulmars on the carriers have even better range, but I’ll leave their disposition up to the Commanding Officer, Carrier Force. The Blenheims in theater can operate from Padang on the west coast of Sumatra, and Palembang.”

It was amazing how this single change suddenly imparted a whole new attitude. Unlike Percival, Monty was all business, quick minded, obstinate, decisive, and with a keen eye for defense. He soon looked over Percival’s plan, having discussed it all with Wavell earlier.

“It seems you wanted the Australians in the Western sector. Wavell believes that will be the most likely point of attack, and I tend to agree. Therefore, British regulars should be defending there.”

“But I’ve posted them in the Eastern sector, around the naval base,” said

Percival. "Surely the Japanese will make that one of their initial objectives. They've already put troops on the islands nearby. They'll want the oil fuel stocks."

"Then we'll give it to them, but not in any way they might like. As for the Australians, they only have two brigades, and you've split them in two, on either side of the Kranji river inlet. That' won't do at all. How will they communicate and support one another? Instead, I'll put them side by side, near the village of Kranji and the causeway sector. I'll move one of the Indian brigades to the Naval Base, and they can watch the northeast section. As for those oil stocks, I'm afraid they can't be defended—simply too vulnerable. So what I propose to do is spill the tanks into this slough and simply set it all on fire at an opportune moment. We've got to get positively medieval here. This is a castle, and the Strait of Johor is our moat. We've blown the causeway, but they'll try to rebuild it, as it is the only real road they can use to move in any heavy weapons or armor they may have. Think of it as the main gate, and this is why I want both Australian Brigades to stand the line there."

"And if they come over these islands east of the naval base?" said Percival. "They'll have the Aussies cut off."

"I very much doubt that. If they do put in an attack there, it would only be a feint. No, they must take that causeway. As for the British troops, I think I'll post the 18th Division here." He was pointing to a spot in the center of the island near Tengah airfield.

"Well they certainly can't cover the Northwest coast from that position," Percival protested.

"I have no intention of trying to man the entire coastline. If we try to hold everywhere, we'll be spread thin, like too little butter on bread. We need to mass our troops, and for two good reasons. Firstly, their numbers when massed are mutually supporting and good for morale. Secondly, they'll be much easier to control on the field, particularly in an attack. From this map, the northwest looks to be nothing more than a mangrove swamp. You've placed the entire Australian 22nd Brigade there, but the river near Kranji forms a natural barrier to the east, and any troops posted there will be cut off immediately if the Japanese land to their south. So I'll cede that ground to the enemy, if he wants it. In fact, I'll position my artillery so as to make it a nice killing field. They'll be tangled up in the mangrove swamps, and make good targets. We'll defend here, on a line from Kranji, along the river, and down to

the airfield at Tengah. Leave the 27th Australian Brigade where you've placed it at Kranji. We'll move the 22nd Brigade east and have them take over the positions you've assigned to the 11th Indian Division, and then send those troops to the Naval Base. That should do."

"Then nothing will defend the northwest sector?"

"We'll post forward detachments to watch the coast, and they'll all have radios."

"You'll break radio silence?"

"And why not? The Japanese will know exactly where we are. It's not like we have anything to hide here. Besides all they will hear is my order for our guns to fire. So the main job of these forward spotters will be to alert the 18th Division as to the enemy landings, and to call in our artillery."

"Then you plan to hold that far inland, behind the airfield at Tengah?"

"No, my good man, I plan to counterattack from that location. That is the whole point of massing the division there. We can't cover the entire coast in any real strength, so we'll hold in key positions to the rear, and when we've identified their main effort, that's when we hit them. It's what I recommended at Dover when the Germans were looking at us across the Channel. That's what we'll do here. The Indian Brigades are worn out, so I'll post them to the rear as a reserve, along with the Malay Brigade, Dalforce irregulars, and the Fortress Troops. Now then, I shall want to tour the entire sector today to look over the ground."

Montgomery had immediately seen the flaws in Percival's deployments and corrected them. Where Percival had his freshest unit, the 18th British Division, spread all along the northeast coast, Monty Moved it to Tengah Airfield in one concentrated force. Where Percival had split his next best force by separating the two Australian brigades, Monty combined them to reinforce the Causeway Sector. He then used the Indian troops to fill in here and there, and left the Malay Brigades and Fortress Troops to watch the south and stand as his reserve.

So Monty was off, baton in hand, visiting one unit after another and already issuing orders to get them moving where he wanted them. Some of the Australians muttered that they had only just settled in and now they were looking at yet another withdrawal.

"How big do they think this bloody island is?" they said. "How do we stop the Japs from crossing if we aren't in good positions on the shore?"

"Beats me," said a Corporal, "but this ain't a retreat, mate. He wants up

over on the other side of the island. This one seems to know what he's about. He's got that look about him—stiff upper lip and all.”

“Better him than Percy, I suppose, and better by the Causeway than in this bloody Mangrove swamp. But I've had enough of running from the Japs. When we get to Kranji, I'm staying put.”

“The general will certainly be glad to hear that Bob. Can't say the Japs will fancy it. They'll want that causeway, and to get at it, they'll have to cross one side or another, right in our laps.”

* * *

The Japanese continued to push, closing inexorably on the island, and forcing the defenders back over the long stone causeway to Johore, their last connection to the mainland that had been taken from them in just fifty days. The last of Brigadier Bennett's Australians tramped in, moving into positions near the causeway where Monty wanted them. The engineers were soon busy tending to the demolition charges, and they blew a 70 foot gap in the causeway, sending the steel of the rail line and water pipe into the murky waters of the Strait of Johor.

“That ought to stop the little bastards,” said a big Scotsman as he watched the smoke and dust rise from the explosion.

“Right,” said a Sergeant of Engineers. “And that's also stopped all the water coming in from the mainland. Now we're just down to what we have in the reservoirs here, and the city has swollen with refugees from up-country.”

It was an observation worthy of Percival himself, yet water would definitely be a factor in any protracted siege. The weary, disheartened troops filed back to their newly assigned positions on the island, the draw bridge was blown, and there they sat behind their moat—only this castle had no walls. Very little in the way of fortifications had been built in the north... bad for morale....

Montgomery would soon get busy recruiting volunteers from the city's swollen population to dig new defensive positions and trench lines. In this, the Chinese provided stalwart and eager workers. He was already picking out his secondary defensive lines, pouring over the maps day and night. The time he would spend in his temple with all this planning would serve him very well.

Part III

Rösselsprung

“The Knight... Inexperienced players have a fear of this piece, which seems to them enigmatic, mysterious, and astonishing in its power. We must admit that it has remarkable characteristics which compel respect and occasionally surprise even the most wary players.”

— **Eugene Znosko-Borowski**, Chess Master

Chapter 7

On the 12th of January, 1942, a “Winston Special” convoy was teed up to rush troops south. Some would reinforce the British Canary Islands, others were bound for the Indian Ocean and eventually the embattled stronghold of Singapore. It was a large convoy, with 27 ships, including the *Britannic*, and several escorts. It was carrying over 41,000 troops, artillery stores, AFVs, armored cars, and supporting ammunition, a most valuable asset of the Crown, which soon found itself very near the dangerous action fought in the Canary Islands.

The convoy sailed from Liverpool and the Clyde, forming up off Oversay and starting south. It wasn't long before an errant German U-boat, U-402, would make the first attack. That boat, under Lieutenant Commander Fieiherr von Forstner, had been part of the last undersea chess game Döenitz would play in 1941, the Wolfpack *Letzteritter*, or “Last Knight.” The boat lingered north of the Azores, with information that a possible fat convoy was heading its way. Forstner was not disappointed. On the night of January 16th, he was soon stalking and hitting the troopship *Llangibby Castle* right astern. The hit blew off the rudder, though the propellers remained undamaged. It was enough to send the ship limping into Horta on the Azores, where it disgorged its troops.

Forstner found the escorts too heavy for his liking, and slipped away, but he had nudged that ship out of the fold, along with the 1157 troops it carried. They were a very special unit led by Colonel John Frost, 2nd Para Battalion, and they had been planning to raid a German Wurzburg Radar site on the coast of France at Bruneval. The raid was planned for February, but the sudden onset of the German Operation Condor had changed all that. Now the men were bound for the Azores, and *Llangibby Castle* barely got them there after her close shave with U-402. They would soon be pulled into the desperate defense of the Grand Canary Island.

The rest of the convoy was re-directed away from the battle zone, well out into the Atlantic before turning to run for the protection of the Cape Verde Islands, and then on another 800 nautical miles to Freetown. It would soon be stalked by a most unwelcome guest, for Raeder's Operation *Rösselsprung* was now posing a grave threat.

Considering the value of those 40,000 troops at sea, and knowing the

German raiders were out there somewhere, the Admiralty had pressed Tovey to insure the convoy's safety. He got that news while still in the sick bay aboard *Invincible*, just one of the many matters that weighed upon him at that moment. The fleet was bound for the Azores, but now he would be forced to detach ships to bolster the thin escort. *Duke of York* or *King George V* would have been much better choices, but though they still had enough fuel to participate, they were both toothless tigers after the lengthy engagement off Fuerteventura. *King George V* did not have a single 14-inch shell remaining in her gun magazines to threaten the enemy.

Tovey briefly considered sending the two ships anyway, thinking their mere presence might deter an enemy attack. Yet he would need them back in some semblance of fighting trim as soon as possible. The battle for Grand Canaria would soon be the major focus of fleet operations again. After consulting with the Admiralty, Admiral Pound agreed that the longer legged cruisers would have to do the job. *Norfolk* and *Suffolk* still had good stocks of both fuel and ammunition, and had come out of the battle with only minor damage, so both were detached.

These were the same two intrepid ships that had stalked the *Bismarck* in one telling of these events, but that had never happened. A year earlier, *Norfolk* had been out after another German raider, the *Admiral Scheer*, but this mission would be far more hazardous. Where *Admiral Scheer* had 11-inch guns, *Kaiser Wilhelm* had the bigger 15-inch guns, the same weapons mounted on *Bismarck*, though only six barrels. A year ago, the cruisers enjoyed almost a four knot speed advantage over the German raider, but now *Kaiser Wilhelm* had that edge, a full four knots faster than the British ships. While the cruisers would rely on a few Walrus search planes, and radar sets of relatively short range, the *Goeben* had twelve aircraft to thwart that effort, not to mention another six 11-inch guns should the British actually make contact.

Admiral Tovey had been scraping about looking for other assets he could put in the chase. Yet, in the aftermath of the battle off Fuerteventura, he was very troubled. What could *Norfolk* and *Suffolk* do if it came to a fight, he wondered? They might get their hits... they might. But I could lose one or both in an engagement like that, and those are ships I desperately need.

Even now they were out there racing to catch up with the convoy. Tovey knew that was his only safe play. If the Germans were hunting, that was the best prey they could find. So all he had to do was get his ships out to WS-15

and the Germans would find him soon enough—but what ships? There was only one other battleship he could call to the action, the old *Royal Sovereign*. That ship was at Freetown now, where it was supposed to accompany the convoy down around the cape to Durban. There WS-15 would split, with some elements bound for Bombay, and others for Singapore, where Montgomery had been sent to relieve Percival and make a last desperate stand to try and save the fabled “Rock of the East.”

Tovey would have no choice now. *Royal Sovereign* would have to put to sea immediately. The ship would not be much good in a chase, but once it reached the convoy, it would at least give him a credible defense. But could the old battleship get there in time? He also found a pair of destroyers in the Cape Verde Islands, and another two at Dakar. They were given orders to move out at once to lend a hand.

Damn, he thought. Speed! That’s what I need at sea more than anything. Holland wasn’t happy when I ordered those two cruisers south to the Azores. He was counting on running them alongside *Hood*. For that matter, *Hood* is a ship that I could use now, and I might even trade him *Duke of York* for her.

He put that thought aside, knowing that prying Holland out of *Hood* would be no small matter. The man had been with the ship, and the battlecruiser squadron, for many years. No doubt he was very upset when he learned the fate of *Renown* and *Repulse*. So Tovey would make do with what he had, and *Norfolk* and *Suffolk* were the only heavy cruisers at hand... Unless... Tovey thought about something, realizing that it may be time for an unexpected move here. Yes, it just might fill the bill.

* * *

Kapitan Heinrich had taken his little task force out to sea, using speed to get safely away from the battle zone at Fuerteventura. Moving south along the African coast, he turned to starboard and was well out to sea on the 25th of January, and right astride the path of that convoy, now northwest of the Cape Verde Islands.

He was operating with the benefit of a recent windfall provided by the intelligence arm, for the Germans had broken the British Naval Cypher 3 in December of 1941, and now had the benefit of reading their signals intercepts. His B-Dienst radio intercept unit had learned of the orders sent to re-route Convoy WS-15, and now he was sitting in a very good position to

make contact.

“Any word from the *Goeben*?” said Kapitan Heinrich to his Executive Officer, Korvettenkapitan Dieter Jung, a young, eager man who had come aboard during their refit in Gibraltar. He had come over from one of the older cruisers, excited to be aboard a ship like *Kaiser Wilhelm* now, and particularly out on a mission like this. The battle off Fuerteventura had been a thrilling baptism of fire for him, though he had been below in the alternate control room during most of that action. A tall, well built man, his dark hair spoke of his youth, and he always seemed ready to break into a run, often rocking back and forth, shifting his weight from heel to toe on the bridge.

“Nothing yet, sir, but we should hear something soon.”

“They are sending a pair of cruisers, Jung,” said the Kapitan. “I would think they might have learned a lesson the last time we faced off against such ships.”

When acting as the vanguard and scout for Lütjens’ Schweregruppe, *Kaiser Wilhelm* had engaged the British cruisers *Sheffield* and *Gloucester*, badly damaging the latter and then putting that ship under the sea with torpedoes.

“Those were light cruisers,” said Jung, for he had moved through the ranks below decks and heard all the stories from the men about that battle. “B-Dienst signal intercepts indicate they are sending *Norfolk* and *Suffolk*, a pair of heavy cruisers.”

“Yes,” said Heinrich, “and a nice fat battleship coming up behind us from Freetown. “Looks like Schirmer will have plenty of work. All we found off those islands were British destroyers.”

The Kapitan was racking up quite a record for himself. In his first deployment he had taken part in the feasting frenzy when the Schweregruppe broke out near the Faeroes. There they had savaged Convoy HX-69, and he sunk the destroyer *Winchelsea*, a tanker and two other merchantmen. In their second deployment, they stalked the carrier *Glorious*, dueling with destroyers desperately trying to keep him at bay. There he had his second warship kill when Schirmer scored that amazing hit at very long range, and nearly broke the destroyer *Impulsive* in two. The cruiser *Gloucester* was next, before those troublesome planes off the British carrier got a lucky hit of their own and forced him to retire to Gibraltar for repairs. Then, in the action off Fuerteventura, he had put the destroyer *Loyal* out of action, and sunk the *Zulu* for good measure. No other German surface raider could claim so many

warship kills, though the commerce raider *Atlantis* still held the record for tonnage sunk in merchant shipping.

Kaiser Wilhelm had also taken a hit from one of those damnable British naval rockets during that action. A single GB-7 missile fired by the *Argos Fire* struck just forward of the main conning tower on the port side of the ship. It took out a 150mm secondary battery there, and a twin 20mm AA gun, but did little other damage. He still had ten more of those 5.9-inch guns on five twin gun turrets, and there was nothing wrong with his main 15-inch guns.

That incident had also had the odd side effect of bucking up the fighting spirit of the ship. The navy had heard the whispered rumors of these deadly rocket weapons, and then saw what they could do to *Gneisenau*, *Scharnhorst*, and even the bigger battleships. The fate of *Graf Zeppelin* was still talked about in hushed conversations below decks, but this time, they had faced the missiles and come off relatively unscathed. It had made Heinrich just a little more confident, and when he received that signal to begin Operation *Rösselsprung*, he was elated. Now he would not be operating like a dog on a leash. Now he had the open sea, and good hunting ahead. Every man aboard could feel it, the sense of excitement, and the eagerness for battle. Heinrich was going to see that they would have plenty more to talk about soon.

Later that day, Kapitan Falkenrath on the *Goeben* signaled that one of his Messerschmitts out on forward patrol had finally sighted the British convoy. Heinrich rubbed his hands together with the news.

“Increase to 30 knots,” he said. “Signal *Goeben* to take position astern and prepare to launch her falcons.”

The deadly combination of both air and sea power would now make this raiding group more dangerous than any other the British had faced to date in the war. At 18:00 hours the Convoy Master was notified by his lead escort ship, RMS *Ascania*, that a sighting had been made due south. Her Captain, Alastair Gordon Davidson, had a keen eye at sea, and considering the estimated range of the sighting, he thought it unusual that he would see anything at all—unless it was a ship with a considerable height to its superstructure and conning tower. That thought gave him no comfort, but he nonetheless notified the convoy that he was advancing to investigate the sighting, and sounded general quarters as the ship increased to its maximum speed of 15 knots.

Ascania was not a warship by birth, but rather a converted Cunard liner,

the sixth of the A-Class, displacing a little over 14,000 tons. Now an Armed Merchant Cruiser, she had eight 6-inch guns with four to either side on her main deck, and another two 76mm 3-inch guns, one each on the bow and stern. She had once provided cabin accommodations for 500 passengers, and another 1200 in 3rd class, but now it was mostly her crew of 270 men aboard, and all beat to quarters.

The sound of the ship's bell hung on the still evening airs as *Ascania* slowly edged away from the wide forward line of troopships, arrayed in a long row. *Pardo* stood off on the starboard side, and they were all lined up at intervals of about 100 yards, *Autolycus*, *Staffordshire*, *Strathmore*, where the Commodore held forth, then *Empire Woodlark* and *Port Chalmers*. HMS *Resolution* should have been there on that line, but as WS-15 was heading into waters where Tovey once had five battleships and two battlecruisers, that ship had been assigned to other duty.

Unfortunately, the ferocious battle off Fuerteventura had seen all those heavy ships well engaged, and it was now RMS *Ascania* on that front row, a brave sheepdog, but a vessel that might stand as a deterrent to little more than a U-Boat if encountered on the surface. On that first line alone, there were 7718 troops, and behind it were three more lines of ships, in silent rows, their evening quiet soon to be broken by the distant boom of large caliber naval guns.

Kaiser Wilhelm opened the attack at 16,000 yards, with Schirmer finding the range quickly. It would be the third occasion in the war where a brave Armored Merchant Cruiser would confront a dangerous foe. The *Rawalpindi* had faced off against the Twins, *Scharnhorst* and *Gneisenau*, and was sunk on the 23rd of November in 1939. Then *Jervis Bay* had fought a duel with the *Admiral Scheer*, her Captain going down with his ship as he defended Convoy HX-84.

Ascania would fare little better, and Captain Davidson knew as much when he saw those first shells fall off his port side. "Better signal the Commodore," he said darkly. "Tell him we'll hold on as long as we can, but it would be best if the convoy was somewhere else."

That was a gentle suggestion that WS-15 scatter to try and save as many ships as possible, and that would be the order minutes later, in spite of the difficulties it would cause. Every other escort with the convoy would try and hold the line, and now the old Type B Destroyer *Boreas*, even more lightly armed than *Ascania*, also charged bravely to the scene. It would bring another

four 4.7-inch guns to the battle, but *Kaiser Wilhelm*'s secondary gun battery still outnumbered both ships combined. That would be the least of their worries. Schirmer was at his work again, and it was those 15-inch guns that would rule the day. *Ascania* was hit below the water line, with no belt armor at all to stop that heavy shell, and soon there were fires below decks, and flooding.

Captain Davidson was taking stock of the damage report when the lookouts called out another warning—enemy planes above. It was Hans Rudel, up to get his pound of flesh that day, and it would be hard to miss anything he came swooping down on, the wail of the Jericho trumpets screaming out as he dove to attack. He put his bomb right through the centerline of *Autolycus*, and there was a tremendous explosion. That ship had been carrying mostly artillery stores, motor transport and five armored cars. It would all be a total loss in under ten minutes, only the first of the bison to fall.

The wolves were on the prowl.

Chapter 8

Meanwhile the situation at the Grand Canary Island was also precarious. Preparations for the onset of Phase II of the battle had taken much longer than expected. It was, of course, mainly a problem of logistics. The Germans had taken Malta by storm, though that was largely an airborne operation. They had not yet invaded Crete, and so that experience was not behind them. Some lessons were learned in the occupation of Cyprus, Rhodes and the transfer of troops by sea to Syria, but those island moves relied on the Italian Navy for cover and transport. Here, in Operation Condor, Raeder was relying mostly on the French.

The battle fought off Fuerteventura had been a severe shock to both sides, with damage and loss of capital ships that would profoundly affect the balance of sea power in the coming months. With *Hindenburg* needing at least a month in repairs, and *Bismarck* at least six months, Raeder was effectively out of business in the Atlantic. His only active battlegroup was the raiding force composed of *Kaiser Wilhelm* and *Goeben*. The French still had good operational capability, and so he would have to rely on them now, something that galled him, as he would not have direct control.

Seeing war for what it really was now, with *Richelieu* lost, *Normandie* damaged enough to need 30 days in repairs, the French were just a little more cautious in sending out their battleships. Raeder was able to persuade them to at least provide a covering force, and as they had already agreed to contribute so many transports, including the newly arrived troop liner *Bretagne*, they had little choice.

It had taken another day to fully secure Fuerteventura, and then a day to reorganize and airlift supplies to the islands. Three Siebel ferries were finally escorted down the coast to Tarfaya, though their presence was going to require a constant naval watch. Raeder was anxious to proceed, thinking the British would have time to intervene again if they did not move quickly, but Goring had been stung by the losses in aircraft, with over 50 *Stukas* destroyed, and a good number of Ju-88s and his older Do-17s. Repairs to the cratered airfields also took time, but when an entire battalion of the 22nd Luftland Division pitched in with their field shovels, they got the job done in 24 hours. So it was over three days before Phase II of Condor could be

contemplated.

Admiral Laborde agreed to use the Toulon Group for cover, which was still at sea, and ordered Admiral Gensoul to form two task force groups. One was centered on the Battleship *Jean Bart*, with five fast destroyers, and two more lighter DD escorts. The second was built around battlecruiser *Dunkerque*, with the cruiser *Algerie* and four more destroyers. The French had learned the hard way that no matter how good their ships were, their cruisers were still outmaneuvered by the Royal Navy cruiser Captains. They therefore reasoned that the larger capital ships could hold their own against the British cruisers, and fast destroyer escorts would provide the screening, scouting and close support.

As darkness fell on the 25th of January, the final preparations were being made for the renewed attack, which would begin in the pre-dawn hours of the 26th.

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The Royal Navy battleships had all returned to the Azores escorted by *Glorious* and *Furious*, while the longer legged carriers of Force H stood the watch. With 11000 mile sea endurance, *Formidable* and *Victorious* hovered off the island of La Palma waiting for the inevitable call to arms, well out of range of German land based attack. As signals intercepts revealed Axis operations again gearing up, they began to keep aircraft on ready alert. Santa Cruz La Palma had just enough fuel in stock to keep the light cruisers of Force C operating, *Kenya*, *Trinidad* and *Nigeria*, along with a bevy of destroyers.

Two other British cruisers, *Norfolk* and *Suffolk*, had been detached from Home Fleet and ordered to rush to the aid of Convoy WS-15. Light cruiser *Sheffield* had been trying to shadow the German raiders when they broke to the south, but the ship was harried by German land based air cover, and eventually forced to break off and make for Freetown to effect minor repairs after several near misses by 500 pound bombs. Every convoy in the Atlantic was put on alert, but it was WS-15 that would draw the short stick this time.

One of her ships, *Llangibby Castle*, had safely delivered her troops to land, in spite of that U-Boat attack. Another string of three transports had peeled off and steered for the outer Canaries with more reinforcements. The *Britannic* would deliver 2887 men, along with another 1745 on the *Stirling*

Castle and 1509 on the *Arawa*. These were the men of the British 7th Brigade, 3rd Infantry Division, three full battalions and the 3rd Battalion of the Reconnaissance Corps, composed of motorcycle troops. It would have been too risky to try and get those ships into the Grand Harbor, and so they landed by night at Santa Cruz La Palma, and at Tenerife. The plan would later involve lighter craft to move them to the Grand Island as needed.

The British had prepared several small landing sites on the west and south coasts of the island. These were mostly isolated coves, small fishing towns, or simply sheltered bays that could receive lighter boats. In the northwest, Puerto Sardinia and Puerto Nieves offered two landing points with decent roads then leading east to La Palma and the Grand Harbor. Puerto de Aldea was in the center of the western coast near San Nicholas, and this site was chosen for supply drops, as roads led north and south, and into the mountainous interior to the east. The south coast had many sites, chiefly the smaller ports at Maspalomas, Puerto Rico and Puerto Blanco, and here the main coastal road led north, passing Gando Bay and the main aerodrome.

The plan was to make these reinforcement landings by night, where the possibility of German air attack was minimized. The thin forces remaining with Force C would be sufficient to cover such landings, as it was not anticipated that the enemy would attempt to deploy naval forces west of the Grand Island. Some discussion was held concerning the ability of *Argos Fire* to stop the inevitable German parachute landings, but Captain MacRae laid out the grim reality.

“They’ll likely put three or four hundred planes in the air. And I’m sorry to say that we’ve no more than 21 of our longer range Aster-30 missiles. I could stand off about 120 kilometers and use those, but it would only be a pin prick. And anyone’s guess what kind of planes we hit. I’ve better stock on the short range Aster-15s, but that would mean we’d need to be in close to use them, and you know they’ll have warships out there as well. If you want me to risk it, it will be up to her ladyship, and I’m willing.”

“That will not be necessary,” said Tovey. “I was thinking your ship might be better for another assignment.”

“Aye? And what might that be?”

“We have a problem—40,000 troops at sea and those German raiders undoubtedly out there looking for them. If you could move south to support the defense, even if it only meant you were serving as a radar picket, it would be most helpful.”

“Aye... Those lads bound for these islands?”

“Some, but the ports outside of the Grand Harbor can only accommodate a modest reinforcement here. We’ll move in a full brigade, but the rest of that convoy is bound for the Indian Ocean and eventually Singapore and Batavia. There’s a good deal of artillery for the British 18th Division, and a number of AA regiments—ground troops as well.”

“Miss Fairchild having no objection, I can move tonight, but we’ll need fuel as well.”

“The funnies were moved to Madeira for just that reason. You can top off there and be on your way.”

The ‘funnies’ were the collection of fleet replenishment and Roll On - Roll Off ships that had slipped through during the engagement that saw Gromyko’s hidden submarine vanish from the scene. They had the fuel necessary to replenish the *Argos Fire*, which used a combination of gas turbines and diesel engines to provide power to electric motors that actually drove her screws. Fairchild approved the plan, and the ship was replenished the night of the 25th, just as the German attack on the Grand Island began.

* * *

While smaller in overall scale than the German operation that was once planned for Crete, the advantage of the plan here was the fact that most of the forces involved could be concentrated in one key area chosen for the attack. The British had already identified the most likely landing sites, and they positioned their AA batteries in those areas. They were mostly near the aerodrome at Gando, and that was also the best site for beach landings. In fact, they had landed there when they first took the islands from Spain.

That sector had to be contested, and so the 29th Brigade was posted there, with three battalions around Gando Bay, and three flak batteries concentrated near the airfield. They heard the planes coming, endured some light bombing from the JU-88s, and then the alarm was sounded as the night sky began to fill up with parachutes. Gliders were also reported landing a little inland near the small hamlet of Gordo, and further north near the larger settlement of Telde.

Only two battalions of the 1st Regiment in the 7th Flieger Division would make this initial jump, but the division’s entire 2nd Regiment had arrived after making the long journey by rail to Marrakech, and then by road

to the airfields in the south. That would add another four battalions to the attack, and two more would come by assault gliders carrying men of the 22nd Luftland Division. From the sea, the 98th Mountain Regiment would be the second wave, timed to hit the beaches just before dawn.

That night was a chaotic flurry of action along an eight mile segment of the eastern coast of the island. Field phones were ringing every other minute with news of newly spotted parachute landings, sirens wailed, and soon the chatter of machineguns and flak batteries began to punctuate the night.

2nd East Lancashire was the first British ground unit in action at the southernmost end of the attack. They spotted parachute units landing, and caught the gleam of wan light out on the sea where the first units of the mountain regiment were mustering off shore. Further north, the men of 2nd Royal Welsh were manning their positions near the small isthmus that jutted out from the airfield to form the northern shore of Gando Bay. Planes on the airfield were sputtering to life, the pilots having orders to try and harass any seaborne landings as best they could. There were only 9 Spitfires and 24 Hurricanes left there, but they would have to do their best. Even as they rushed to take off, there was already fighting behind them and to the north up the main road, where 1st Royal Scots Fusiliers was engaging enemy airborne troops.

2nd East Lancashire was able to push two disorganized companies of German parachute troops south away from the airfield, but the Scots Fusiliers found themselves facing enemy on three sides, and decided to concentrate their attack into the small village of Ojos de Garza, just west of the airfield. At the northern end of the assault zone, A-Squadron, Special Services, came down the road from La Palma with ten Marmon Herrington and five Humber armored cars. Their main intention was to see if any German troops were on the main road, and they found it clear until they reached Playa del Hombre, a little bay northwest of Telde on the coast. There they ran into three companies of Fallschirmjaegers deployed astride the road, and heard fighting coming from Telde itself, where the 2nd South Lancs were now fighting from the cover of the buildings.

Dawn saw the French destroyers hovering closer to the shore, and beginning to pick out targets for bombardment. They deliberately avoided any direct shelling of the airfield, knowing that their aim was to have that base intact for use that very day if the enemy could be cleared. Then came the boom of much larger guns, and the battleship *Jean Bart* began to drop heavy

rounds on the outskirts of La Palma, where German aerial reconnaissance had identified British positions the previous day. It had the British troops of the 29th Brigade wondering where the Royal Navy was, which was just what Tovey himself was wondering that day.

Churchill had taken the news very hard when he learned of the sinking of *Prince of Wales* and *Valiant*, not to mention the loss of *Renown* and the damage put on so many other ships. It was, he would later say, one of the greatest shocks he had in the entire war, and might only be eclipsed by the loss of Singapore, which Montgomery was now struggling to prevent. The Prime Minister said he was glad that no one else had been in the room with him when the telephone call came in with that grim news. With *Rodney* already gone, *Barham*, *Malaya*, *Queen Elizabeth* all lost, the Former Naval Person was seeing his navy being slowly deconstructed, and he had a mind to send Admiral Tovey a very strongly worded message as to his dissatisfaction.

Tovey had reinforced Force C with two more light cruisers, *Dido* and *Naiad*, but he had no intention of sending this force to oppose the battleship *Jean Bart*. Instead, that force was used to provide cover and AA support for the movement of the newly arrived 7th Brigade from Tenerife. It was decided that the many small ports and coves around Maspalomas in the south would be the best site.

General Alexander suggested it might land on the northwest coast, but that would basically cede the entire southern coast of the island to the Germans, which was now only lightly held by a few Royal Navy Marine battalions. The two small landing sites to the northwest were also deemed insufficient, particularly if the Germans did take the main harbor, forcing the British to retreat west along that northern coast. They would not be able to get off the island easily, and so the decision was made to land the 7th Brigade in the south, accepting the fact that this divided the forces available.

“But it will also force the enemy to deploy on two fronts,” said Brigadier Thomas, and that was the end of the discussion. There was no time for dickerings, and the troops would have to be moved under cover of darkness.

Sunrise saw the Germans consolidating their parachute landings, and the arrival of the mountain regiment, landing heavily on the spit of land near Gando airfield. Two battalions focused on one part of the coastal defenses there, pushing through, and by 10:00 they had overrun the airfield. Everything had been concentrated in this one area of the west coast, from

Telde in the north, to the tiny fishing port of Aringa in the south. It was simply too much for the single defending brigade there to contain, and now the wisdom of even fighting for that sector was called into question. The battalions of the 29th Brigade were simply overmatched, and only the artillery battery, further inland at El Siguero, remained unengaged. It fired off a few salvoes in protest, then was ordered to withdraw south to join the troops arriving at Maspalomas.

The British were now pinning their hopes on establishing what they would call the 'Santa Brigida' defense line in the north, a ridge extending from that inland town to the coast just south of La Palma. There they moved in the troops of Number 1, 6 and 9 Commandos, and the single battalion of 36th Brigade that had escaped intact from Fuerteventura, the 8th Argyll & Sutherland Highlanders. These forces moved up like a row of steady pawns, digging into the rugged terrain and setting up mortar and machinegun positions.

The problem the British faced was the fact that the enemy could always use their parachute forces to leap over that defensive line, like a bold Knight's move invading the enemy camp. There was ample open ground to the west of the main harbor that would afford the Germans good landing zones. Thus far, no forces had been spotted there, but the British did not know exactly how many troops the enemy had at their disposal. As soon as this became more clear, they had one more piece to develop, a White Knight of their own to leap into the fray from Madeira Island. There was the British 2nd Parachute Battalion under Colonel John Frost, now reinforced by the arrival of the rest of Parachute Regiment. As yet it had no transport planes to move it by air, but the RAF promised they would have then at Madeira that night.

By day's end, the strong enemy opening was played out, and the Germans were consolidating their landing in good order. Now it was time for the middle game.

Chapter 9

As dusk fell, Convoy WS-15 dispersed in three directions, grateful that heavy cloud cover was now to be their friend in that effort. The time bought by *Ascania* was invaluable, and the destroyer *Boreas* added a thick smoke screen to the already murky picture the gunners were facing. Unfortunately, the Captain on *Pardo* made a steering error, when he made a wide turn to get away from the burning *Autolycus* off his port side. It took him into the smoke screen, where he became disoriented as to where the enemy was. Ordering another 30 point turn, he thought he would get his ship safely away, but emerged from the screen dangerously close to *Kaiser Wilhelm*.

“Look there,” said Jung, pointing off their starboard side.

“The secondary batteries will have a good time with it,” said Heinrich. He had ordered Schirmer to cease fire with the ships main batteries to conserve ammunition on what promised to be a very long cruise. Something in him felt the pursuit of merchant shipping was a pedestrian task, but there was *Pardo*, and in another ten minutes, his gunners had the ship on fire, her sides pierced by numerous 5.9 inch gun hits, and listing badly.

Strathmore, where the convoy Commodore kept his flag, made a quick turn, leading *Staffordshire* and the *Empire Woodlark* off at their best speed. While *Pardo* carried mostly artillery stores, there were nearly 8000 men on those three ships. The Commodore’s ship was the prize, at 23,428 tons, and *Staffordshire* at 10,683 tons was right behind her. Those two ships vanished into the heavy roll of low sea fog, but the string of bad luck that had plagued the *Empire Woodlark* remained unbroken.

The ship was already living out its fourth life. It had been christened as the cargo liner *Congress* in 1913, operating off the US Pacific coast until it caught fire off Crescent City and was burned to a blackened hulk. The salvagers towed it to Seattle, spent years piecing it back together, and then sold it off to the China Mail Steamship Company, where it became the *Nanking* on runs between the US West coast and Shanghai. The company went bankrupt in 1922, and the ship was seized and sold off to the Pacific Steamship Company in Seattle to start its third life as *Emma Alexander*. Eventually the Ministry of Works and Transport in the UK picked up the ship for conversion to a troopship, and the *Empire Woodlark* was born.

Schirmer’s gunners would now put an end to the ship’s miserable life,

and put 1300 men in the water with her. As the death of ships go, it was perhaps a more gallant ending than the one ordained for her in Fedorov's history, leaking like a sieve and scuttled while carrying old chemical rounds to the bottom of the sea in 1946.

Every ship had a life line, and a story to tell of the seas it traveled, the men and cargo that rode it's metal back in all those years. *Empire Woodlark* was like so many others that would die in this war, gutted by U-Boats, bombed like *Autolycus*, or caught as these ships had been by a raider at sea. Heinrich credited *Autolycus* to the *Goeben* and Hans Rudel, putting only three more rounds in the ship to finish it off. He then added *Pardo*, *Ascania* and the *Empire Woodlark* to extend his own list of kills. He had now sunk seven vessels totaling just over 46,000 tons, and was thinking to loiter here to continue the hunt, coming about and heading south for another sweep.

The visibility closed to under 2000 meters, and *Goeben* had all her planes back, somewhere off to the south. It was then that Kapitan Falkenrath signaled trouble ahead. He had found an open patch of sea, and was scanning the low rolling clouds to the south when the shadow of a very large warship suddenly broke through into the clear zone. It was HMS *Royal Sovereign*, two days out of Freetown and out looking for WS-15 to render assistance. The *Goeben* made a quick 30 point turn and then put on full speed, slipping into the grey mist and fog before half the crewmen on *Royal Sovereign* even got to their battle stations. A coded signal was flashed to Kapitan Heinrich, which he received with some consternation.

"Trouble sir?" His young Executive Officer was curious when he saw Heinrich take the message, a squall of concern evident on his handsome face.

"A British battleship dead ahead," said Heinrich. "It almost caught the *Goeben*, but they have slipped away, as we must now."

"You will not fight it, Kapitan?"

"A battleship? They out gun us eight to six, and have the armor to stand in a close range fight, while we do not. If I was out at 20,000 yards with good visibility, I might put Schirmer's guns to the test, but not here, not in these conditions, and not with orders from the Grand Admiral of the Fleet to avoid combat with any heavy British ships above our class. Come fifteen points to starboard and ahead two thirds. We've taken a good bite out of this convoy, and sent the rest packing. Now we make our rendezvous with one of Stiller's supply ships, the *Ermland*."

Korvettenkapitan Stiller was heading up the Naval Supply Ship Unit,

Western Section, operating a group of ships out of bases on the west coast of France. *Ermland* had been sent down from Marine Tanker Gruppen Kommando Nord to join Group West. It had received a number of different hover points within the area in which it was to operate, each rendezvous being denoted by a code name. Kapitän Heinrich consulted his code book, and sent the appropriate message by W/T. For a tanker operation, the hours of 08:00 and 16:00 were the designated rendezvous times, and Heinrich had his young Executive Officer work out the details of this replenishment.

These supply operations were to be carried out with all possible secrecy. Ships crossing near any known enemy convoy route had to do so at night. Any enemy vessel sighted required an immediate change of course to mask the direction of the supply ships intended rendezvous. The ships often carried colors from other nations to disguise their identity, and even used different panels with hull names to complete the masquerade. And if ever actually found and attacked by an enemy warship, the German supply ship was ordered never to fight, but to immediately destroy all code equipment, and scuttle the ship.

Knowing that to be caught by the enemy at sea was an automatic death sentence, the men on the German oilers and ammunition ships were a clever and cautious group. They would listen for coded signals, but never send their own, maintaining strict W/T silence during all operations. Ship to ship communications would be made at range by the use of colored star rockets fired from a double barreled pistol. Closer in, they mounted recognition lights on the masts, which could be flashed on and off in a specified sequence to identify themselves. Finally, the ships would stand men on the forecastle, a certain number at a given hour, and that head count was also a code in the event other signals had been compromised. A correct flare signal, followed by the correct recognition lights had to meet that last test. For *Ermland*, there would be four men on the forecastle at the appointed rendezvous hour.

Kaiser Wilhelm and *Goeben* would slip away and make their rendezvous well west of the Canary Islands, out of range of British planes. The replenishment operation had been drilled many times in the Baltic during sea trials. The tanker assumed a speed of 8 knots, upwind of its charge, and sent out a grass line with an air filled float. The oil hose could therefore be floated back to the other ship, snared by a grapnel, and then secured to the refueling aperture on the bow of *Kaiser Wilhelm*.

In all these operations, security was provided by Marco Ritter and two

other Me-109 pilots up on overwatch and patrol duty. Both ships would top off their fuel and wink goodbye. Late on the 29th of January, Kapitan Heinrich made his final rendezvous with an ammunition ship to replenish rounds fired at Fuerteventura. The Rösselsprung task force was now ready to begin a long odyssey that would take both ships to some very unexpected places. They turned south, heading for the wide empty spaces of the South Atlantic, where they would soon find the seas were far more crowded than they ever expected.

* * *

That night the Germans consolidated their position at Gando Bay, secured the airfield, and began flying in the 65th Regiment of the 22nd Luftland Division. Kübler's 98th Mountain Regiment moved inland, through the small towns of Valle Nueva and Lomo Magullo, which they found empty of both enemy soldiers and civilians. The residents had long since taken all that they could carry on carts and wagons, and labored up the twisting road into the high country. The road would take them to a foothills village of San Mateo, and from there on up to the higher elevations, dominated by the volcanic massifs that formed this island.

In the pre-dawn hours of January 26th, the RAF delivered on its promise and planes were on the airfields at Madeira. Colonel John Frost led his men aboard for the pre-dawn drop, which would be a much needed reinforcement in the northern sector. They would land near Santa Brigida, and anchor that line of the defense. This would then free up Number 2 Commando to watch the mountain roads from San Mateo that wound north along the flanks of the hills to the town of Teror. If the Germans got that they would effectively flank the Santa Brigida line, forcing the British to fall back on La Palma and the Grand Harbor for a last ditch defense.

There, Lieutenant-General the Hon. Harold Alexander, poured over the map to try and size up his situation. He had already lost most of the two regular army brigades that had been part of his Canary Islands garrison. The 29th had 3 battalions left, and the 36th was mostly gone, but now in their place he had received the 7th Brigade, holding the south above Maspalomas, and the Para Regiment to bolster his defense in the north. The General was no stranger to desperate situations. He had received command of the British 1st Corps from Lord Gort at Dunkirk, and supervised their successful evacuation,

leaving on the last destroyer. Now here he was facing the Germans yet again on another embattled shore.

Like all men in his position, he had come up through the ranks in the First World War, mostly with the Irish Guards. He was a hard task master, yet popular with the men. Rudyard Kipling had noted that: "It is undeniable that Colonel Alexander had the gift of handling the men on the lines to which they most readily responded... His subordinates loved him, even when he fell upon them blisteringly for their shortcomings; and his men were all his own." In India he was right in the vanguard when he operated his Brigade, often climbing heights ahead of the oncoming troops to scout the way ahead personally.

Montgomery had been one of his instructors in the Imperial Defense College, but he said he found the man "unimpressive." Yet when Alexander made Major General, he was the youngest officer of that rank in the British Army. He would one day reach the lofty heights as Supreme Allied Commander of all Mediterranean Forces, but that day might never come if he could not hold his keep in this hour. Now he was relieved to learn the Para Regiment would be out there on his flank.

"They'll need artillery," he said to a staffer. "Send them the 465th. It's all we can spare, and it will have to do."

Colonel Frost was on the ground and sorting out his battalions just before sunrise when he came across a battery of six 3.7-inch light howitzers sent to him by General Alexander. He gave it a wry grin, then raised his small hand trumpet, which he used to rally his paratroopers. It would resound from the hills, and be heard by Kübler's mountain troops moving into position on that sector of the line.

"So the British have Falschirmjaegers too," said Kübler. "They can ride the planes and jump at night well enough. Now let us see how they fight." He would rest his men that morning, while the 65th Luftland Regiment came up on the main road to his right. That morning the Germans achieved near complete control of the skies over the island. The British had 8 Spitfires and 16 Hurricanes operating on Tenerife. 11 Seafires were left on the carriers, but *Glorious* and *Furious* would return, along with *Duke of York* and several destroyers. Their planes would bring the total British fighter strength to 32 Seafires, 17 Martlets, 17 Fulmar, those 8 Spits and 16 Hurricanes, some 80 planes. The Germans easily had twice as many Messerschmitts, and all with veteran pilots. To these they could add several squadrons of He-111s and

then fill the skies with Ju-88s, Do-17s, and screaming *Stukas*.

That afternoon the British 7th Brigade put in a strong, well coordinated attack from the south. They were able to shake up the German defense there, still forming as the troops of the 16th Luftland Regiment now came south after being relieved by the 65th Regiment. Kübler sent his recon Battalion down to counterattack, while the 65th Regiment moved into position on his right for a big attack near dusk.

Jean Bart had returned, and was put to good use pounding the heights of Bandama where 4 Commando was dug in overlooking the main road. The position was astride two successive volcanic calderas, each with steeply rising flanks above knotted ridge lines and rocky cliffs. That night they would face a prepared attack by three battalions on those heights, while two battalions of the 2nd Flieger Regiment and the engineers tried to push on up the main road into the outskirts of La Palma. This route was no better, with wrinkled ridge lines fingering down from the higher ground west to reach for the sea. The Germans were paying lip service in the south, holding their and pushing their freshest troops in the north.

By dusk the British 7th Brigade had reached and taken the town of Cruces de Arinaga, but the Germans still held the ground between that place and the coast where they had a Siebel ferry setting up a small supply depot. The British had fought hard, but they were played out and low on ammunition by sunset, stopping to rest and consolidate their modest gains that night. They had pushed a mile and a half, fighting all the way, but were still five miles from the real German supply hub at Gando Bay and the airfield.

Having rested most of the day in the north, the big attack started at dusk, with furious action to take the stony heights of Bandama Hill. Number 4 Commando fought tenaciously, its men mounting several charges with sub-machineguns blazing away to drive back the Germans. At times it was hand to hand, and the Commandos acquitted themselves well in that, their knives flashing in the wan moonlight all along the trench line. Casualties were heavy, nearly a third, but they held that hill, and Tafira heights behind it, giving the enemy worse than they got. III/65th Luftland Battalion was down to just 7 squads when it was over, and out of 81 squads that went up that hill after dark, no more than 35 were left at dawn the next morning. Medals for valor would go out on either side to men who had fought that desperate action. Then the letters would go out to the families of the dead back home.

The German Colonel Meindel would later say it was some of the hardest fighting his men had ever seen, and on the worst ground imaginable. The men were tough professionals on either side, the British outnumbered but dug in deep and with good fields of fire. Their unyielding defense would later be spoken of with hushed reverence in the service, and any man who could say “I was at Bandama Hill,” would be looked at with renewed respect.

To their left, the three battalions of Germans that tried to surge up the main road were also stopped by the men of Number 6 Commando. There, losses were much lighter on both sides, and the Germans called off the attack when the heights to their left could not be taken and they began getting fire from the resolute defenders on that hill.

In the south, the Germans counterattacked Cruces de Arinaga that night, taking the small hamlet back to restore their line, but could do no more. All things considered, if the force ratio held as it was that night, the British had good prospects on Gran Canaria. But that would not be the case. The Germans would fly in the fresh 47th Luftland Regiment, and then begin landing the first regiment of that last division Halder had found, the 327th Infantry.

Meanwhile, half a world away, General Alexander’s ex-school master was teaching class on another embattled island. General Montgomery was well occupied setting up his defense on Singapore, and the final act that would determine the fate of that bastion was about to play out.

Part IV

Rock of the East

*“Invincibility lies in the defense;
the possibility of victory in the attack.”*

— **Sun Tsu:** *The Art of War*

Chapter 10

The wild, exotic, prosperous city of Singapore was a much different place now under the impending shadow of war. While the fighting was still up country, far off and beyond the range of the gunfire, people could still go about their lives with some sense of normalcy. The street vendors were still out, the shops still open, the smell of scrumptious foods, cigarettes and fresh roasted coffee wafting on the city airs, with people eating late in the restaurants, coming and going in the night, until the bombers came that first dark hour.

The city was never the same after that. The whining fall of the bombs, the shock of the explosions, the muffled mutter of the 40mm Bofors lighting up the night sky in a vain effort to fend off the attack—these were things that are seared on the memories of anyone who ever endures them. War had come to city after city like this, to France, the Low Countries, Denmark, England, and all across Russia. It wasn't half as bad as the things that had already happened in places like Moscow, but to those experiencing that slow, steady transition from a normal life for the first time, seeing and feeling it sliding into the inexorable decline of order that builds with a restrained sense of terror towards chaos, it was always a heartrending and tragic affair.

Moscow was burned and ravaged, like the dead nurses in Hong Kong, but just knowing about the fate that befell that city on Christmas Day when the Japanese finally burst in, was enough to build that palpable sense of fear and dread in the swelling population of the city. People saw the streets slowly filling up with strange, haggard faces, the riff raff and vagrant wave of refugees from up country, sweeping into the streets like muddy rain water, running down the alleyways where they huddled in the night beneath old boxes and tattered blankets. The refugees brought the infection of terror with them, and the fear redoubled. Then the troops began to arrive in the harbor, the 45th Indian Brigade the first reinforcements since the beginning of the war, and the bombs came after them.

The Buffaloes lumbered up to try and find the bombers, and found the dreadful artistry of the A6-M2 *Reisen* Zero instead. It was only their heavy, unwieldy design that kept many of them flying, with wings and tails scraped and riddled with patched over bullet holes. They couldn't stop the bombers, and day by day, the rubble mounted up, and the civilian death toll with it.

Roads were blocked by abandoned vehicles, many set on fire when the bombs fell, and lighting up the long, empty streets at night with their eerie glow of terror until the weary fire brigades could get to them.

Fresh water was at a premium now, and so they were hauling seawater in barrels and rigging up makeshift water pumps to fight the fires that never seemed to be under control. The posh restaurants soon closed, the city dark each night, and a heavy, thick shadow of smoke and burning oil obscured every dawn. Looters and some deserters picked about the edges of the main town, breaking into houses and stores that seemed unguarded; taking what they couldn't buy or find by any other means. After dark, the mournful wail of air raid sirens would come, the distant rumble of the planes, and then the whistle of the bombs. The airfields were hit every day, the city every night, a campaign that became more and more indiscriminate, as war had a way of removing every vestige of civility and restraint, and killing compassion first and foremost with its cruel bayonet.

It would not be the worst fate a great city would suffer in the war. London had it worse, Hamburg, Dresden, and so many others. It was just the early autumn of war here, as its dreadful seasons turn. It wasn't the stark opposition of fire and frost that had blighted Moscow, but it was still death coming, and everyone in the city could feel it, sense it, fear it.

Soon the crews could not get to all the fallen after the night raids, and the morning would see the streets stained with the fresh blood of those who were killed, their corpses lying on the pavement, some headless from the awful concussion of the high explosive bombs. The heavy tropic airs carried the scent of their death, and dismembered arms and feet that washed into the sewers would fester and rot quickly in the muggy humidity.

Streetlamps tilted at odd angles, store windows were shattered, with the shards of glass gleaming with any sunlight that could penetrate the gloom. Dogs wandered through the streets at night, feeding on the dead. By day, the only energy in the city was clustered in a mad impulsive rush about the harbor and docks. There the quays were overrun with panicked citizens, those well off enough to think they could gain easy passage on a steamer out to points unknown, the white and wealthy first, the rabble after, or so they saw things. Many that took to those boats would die on the sea, the ships strafed by Japanese aircraft, which growled and wheeled with impudence over the city, for they had been masters of the sky for the last three weeks.

And then the Hurricanes came.

The last had fled the civilian field at Kellang three days ago, which did little to still the slowly rising panic in the city, but then they returned. The Japanese had been so emboldened that they came with fewer fighters that day, and well after dawn. On the 26th of January, the drone and thrum of engines craned necks upwards again, sending people running for any shelter they could find, until they saw what was happening through the wind rifted clouds of smoke. Dark blue fighters came wheeling in, their wings bright with fire, and people suddenly realized they were not the enemy.

“By God, those are our boys up there!” a man shouted. He pointed, seeing the bright fire at the tail of an enemy bomber, watching it fall.

Miles away, on the other side of the vast steamy bulwark island of Sumatra, the carriers *Illustrious* and *Indomitable* had flown off their Hurricanes to airfields designated by Montgomery. They landed just after dark, refueled, and were up at the break of dawn to make a sweeping show of strength over the embattled city. They brought the wrath of vengeance in the machineguns as they wheeled and dueled with the Zeroes, some losing that fight, others getting hits and even downing two enemy fighters. Yet more than that, they brought hope, a commodity that had been in very short supply, rationed in the hearts of only the most stalwart souls. And they were there for yet another reason that morning. *Empress of Asia* and a convoy of relief ships were bringing in the New Zealanders. It was a ship that had been fated to die there, bombed by the Japanese, run aground, and ravaged by merciless fire, but that would not happen today with all that air cover swarming over the city and harbor. The ship would get through to safely deliver her charge, and the considerable stores of weapons and ammunition within her holds.

Soon the crowds parted on the quays as the tall, suntanned men marched briskly off the boats, easily carrying their heavy kit and packs, rifles slung over broad shoulders, “good-day” on the morning air instead of the whine of enemy bombs. Monty knew they would be in that morning, for he had arranged the whole affair, and when they came he was there to greet them, standing proudly with their newly promoted Brigadier, William Gentry, grinning broadly as the troops marched by.

The last battalion off the boat, following the Maori troops, turned quite a few heads, the men were shorter, yet well built and stocky in stature. They moved with a precision that spoke of thorough military training and ironclad discipline. Their kit, backpacks and rifles seemed unfamiliar, and each man carried what looked like a machete at the back of his belt, a long curved

knife. In fact, they were the last gift Wavell had sent, Kinlan's elite Gurkha Battalion, armed to the teeth with modern assault rifles, ATGMs and even Swingfire anti-air missile teams.

Someone got hold of a bagpipe, and the squeal of the pipes welcomed the boys ashore. For the first time in many weeks, people smiled. They shook their fists and shouted to the lads to go and give it to the Japs—stick it to them, give them the boot and brawn. And that was exactly what Bernard Law Montgomery had set his mind to do—and then some.

* * *

To prepare for his attack, Yamashita and his God of Operations, Tsuji, would occupy the opulent palace of the Sultan of Johor, Ibrahim II. When the British were there, he coddled to them with gifts and favors. Now that the Japanese had come, he wisely had a Japanese flag raised from his high palace tower, overlooking the straits and presenting a splendid view of the city of Singapore beyond. The 25th Army had come over 700 miles in just 54 days, through forbidding jungle, and over countless rivers which they crossed by storm or the sweat of their troops and engineers, building well over 200 new bridges.

It had all been done exactly as Tsuji said it would, by using the materials and supplies, and the physical assets the British already had in place there, and with a little dash, fervor and abundant imagination and courage. When news came to Churchill that his Malaya defenders were now bottled up in Singapore, he seemed listless and worried. He had been told, long ago by Fedorov, that this would happen. It seemed that in spite of his constant urging, nothing could be done to stem the flood of the Japanese offensive. The British Generals thought they would hold Malaya for a year to eighteen months. They lost it in six weeks.

The night of February 1st, a week earlier than in Fedorov's history, Colonel Ikatani, Yamashita's Quartermaster, reported that the shortages of petrol and ammunition were very serious.

"We have come a long way, fighting the whole distance, and stores are very low. If we have to fight a long siege here, I believe we will fail. It may be better to wait until we have time to bring up more fuel and ammunition."

"Impossible," said Yamashita. "We must be in the city by the 11th of February. This is imperative."

“Very well, then shall I order the artillery officers to ration their fires?”

Yamashita thought for a moment. “No. Have them make a powerful opening barrage. I want the enemy to think we are stronger than we truly are. We must make them believe what they already fear—that we are invincible.”

Yamashita left the opulent palace and moved to an abandoned bungalow near the village of Kulang, summoning his officers for a final briefing. “We have lost nearly 1800 men since we landed, but here we stand, victorious, inflicting many times our losses on the enemy. Now the spirits and ghosts of those men who sacrificed themselves are watching us. The final victory lies ahead, on that island, where we will humble our enemy once and for all, and deliver a prize of great value to the Empire. But this must be done before the anniversary of the 11th of February. Never forget that. The division who reaches Singapore first will gain lasting glory.”

The men assembled all cheered at that, pledging they would be the first to enter the city. “And so we strike the northwest shoreline tonight, but we will also bombard in the north, where the Guards division will demonstrate to confuse the enemy as to our real intentions. The 5th and 18th Divisions will begin their crossing to assault the island a few hours after sunset, and be well ashore on the other side of the strait by dawn. Our first task is to secure the airfield at Tengah. After that we will drive up the road to this village, Bukit Panjang. Then Phase two of the assault begins, with the Imperial Guards Division crossing to seize the causeway and push south to the village of Mandai. They will then drive east, and cut off any forces defending the British Naval Base. After that, we move south to Bukit Tamah, and the water reservoirs. When we capture those, their surrender must surely follow soon after.”

Lieutenant General Takuma Nishimura, commander of the Imperial Guards Division, had been most unhappy to hear these orders. He had already been asked to make a demonstration against the eastern defenses of the island, sending a battalion to occupy a small islet there, and to threaten the naval base. Yet such an assignment seemed demeaning to him, while the two regular army divisions were both massing to attack the other side of the island.

“This is an insult to my division, and to me personally,” He steamed, saying his men were not shadow puppets, but the elite guards of the Konoye Regiments, and he was eager to bloody his samurai sword.

In truth, the “elite” troops were in both those regular army divisions, the

5th and 18th. In spite of its impressive name, the Imperial Guards here had little military experience, though they fought well against the 45th Indian Brigade on the Muar River earlier. Nishimura was eager to win more laurels for his men, and was bitterly disappointed that his troops would be used as a feint in the initial attack, and as a follow up force in subsequent operations.

He had been so eager to bloody his sword, that he ordered the massacre of 155 prisoners after that first battle on the Muar River, and would later be tried and executed for war crimes, which included his participation in the massacre of Chinese civilians.

Yamashita heard his complaint, but said nothing more, offering the officers a toast of sake. When he offered a cup to Nishimura, the Lieutenant General turned his back and strode away. He would hold a grudge against Yamashita ever thereafter for the slight he thought he had received here, fuming that he would get his men into the battle one way or another. It would be his wounded pride that would have an unexpected effect on the battle, just one of the many instances where the will of a single man could strongly influence the course of events.

That night, the Japanese sent three swimmers across the strait to reconnoiter the position. They reported back that most of the north coast west of Kanji was simply undefended, though they found signs of positions that had been abandoned there in recent days. The morning of the 4th of February, observation balloons were seen floating over Johore Bahru, with a single observer in each to spy on what the British were up to. Later that day, Nishimura penned a formal demand to General Yamashita. "My troops must be given the chance to demonstrate their bravery," he wrote.

Though he was inclined to ignore the letter, Yamashita began to have second thoughts when the balloon observers reported a buildup near the causeway. So he went to Nishimura and gave him permission to attack directly against this position, thinking it would still be a good diversion from his main landings to the west. Only he ordered him to begin the assault at noon the following day.

Having other ideas, Nishimura planned an immediate seizure of the causeway bridge, ordering his engineers to make ready for repair work as soon as his men gained the far shore.

Colonel Iwaguro's 5th Konoye Imperial Guards Regiment was chosen for the attack, a formation of three battalions supported by the engineers. "Attack at noon?" he said to the Colonel. "Ridiculous! We will begin the

operation immediately, taking every advantage of the cover of night.” He also disobeyed his orders to concentrate his artillery fire on inland targets, redirecting it to fire right on the Australian battalions of Taylor’s 22nd Brigade. At dawn, his initial attack would fall on II/20 Battalion and C Company, Royal Engineers, just east of the causeway.

That night, the crossings were made in wood and canvass boats, 100 for each of the two primary assault divisions, and a few heavier rafts that could support the weight of light artillery pieces. They formed up in the estuaries of rivers flowing into the strait, and slowly edged out into the open waters, the first wave being 4000 strong. They were expecting a tough defense on the opposite shore, but would find it completely abandoned, the darkness and quiet heavy on the water, with the moon the barest morning crescent, casting thin pale light on the water.

Yamashita had returned to the high tower of the Sultan’s palace, watching and waiting with his staff. There would be no radio communications established to his two assault divisions, but as midnight passed, he saw the first sign of success rise in a red star shell over the beaches closest to his position. 5th Division had made a safe crossing, securing a beachhead and pushing inland unopposed. They heard the boom of a distant gun, the shore battery at Pasir Laba to the south, which scored a lucky hit on one of the engineering barges. Then, minutes later, a white star shell rose, brighter than the thin moon, and Yamashita knew 18th Division was ashore. What he did not know is that Nishimura’s Imperial Guards were also nosing their rafts into the black waters of the strait, paddling towards the far edge of the causeway, and hoping to take it by surprise and storm. It wasn’t until he heard the small arms fire coming from that direction that he realized something was happening at the causeway.

“What is going on there?” he said sternly to a staff officer. “Nishimura was not to attack there until noon!”

Unfortunately, it was already high noon in Nishimura’s mind, and he was going to do everything possible to show Yamashita what he and his men could accomplish.

Chapter 11

Major General Gordon Bennett finally got his troops redeployed, and he was down in the ranks with the men at Kanji village, a small town just west of the Causeway. He was feeling a good deal better about his situation, glad to have his two brigades under Taylor and Maxwell, side by side.

“Much better ground here sir,” said a Sergeant. “I’ve got decent fields of fire for my machineguns. Out west we couldn’t see anything but the bloody Mangroves and rubber trees.”

“Glad to hear it,” said Bennett, removing his hat. “Good to feel the sun on this old bald head of mine, but stay alert, because the Japs will want that causeway bridge, and this village with it.”

Bennett had fought in the ill fated landings at Gallipoli, a battalion commander then, where he was wounded when his troops were cut off by the Turks, and literally wiped out. That experience, and the long retreat he had just made down the Malay Peninsula, left him in a state of mind to always keep a wary eye over his shoulder. Later he would move up to command 3rd Infantry Brigade, fighting at Passchendaele and the Hindenburg Line with distinction. He had already been admitted to the Order of the Bath, and had his DSO by 1919. An opinionated man, some believed he did not think much of British commanders, particularly Percival, but he had been willing to give Montgomery the benefit of the doubt.

“What do you make of him?” asked the Sergeant.

“Haven’t heard or seen much,” said Bennett. “He’s a teetotaler, and any man who can’t stomach a good whiskey is questionable, but there’s nothing wrong with his orders. I agree, we’re in a much better position here. That said, have your men write any letters they may want to send home.”

Bennett had become a controversial figure in this battle when he refused to become a prisoner and commandeered a sampan to escape the island. Some said he should not have abandoned his troops, others that he had done the right and expedient thing, though he had not yet been tested in this 11th hour.

* * *

The action started a little after midnight, when the restless sentries

thought they heard movement near the water by the causeway. A sentry team of two men slipped out of their slit trench, and scrambled down towards the embankment, and minutes later the sound of sporadic rifle fire alerted the whole battalion that the enemy was here. It could have been a probing attack, a feint as had been initially ordered, but something told Bennett otherwise. He had seen those flares to the west, and knew the enemy was signaling something of importance. As those first shots were fired, the battle of Singapore would begin on the island itself, and his battalions would have a front row seat.

It was hot action all that night, with the Australians holding their ground in the face of Iwaguro's initial attack. Machineguns chattered and fired at anything that moved in the shadows hovering near the dark waters, then, on Bennett's command, the Aussies switched on three search lights that had been rigged up with portable generators. As the glare of the beams illuminated the scene, they could see about twenty assault boats still in the water, and the shoreline dotted with enemy infantry.

Now mortar shells fell down the short metal tubes and hissed up with a pop, exploding around the causeway seconds later. The Japanese had a heavy machinegun team deployed, and it began to growl at the heights above, the bright tracers scoring the night. Deep throated shouts from officers were urging the guardsmen forward, and several platoon sized rushes were made, one led by a lieutenant brandishing his samurai sword. The Australians opened up with everything they had, and the casualties were heavy for the Japanese in those first hours.

The action was bitter all night as Iwaguro's three battalions built up on the shoreline. They soon perceived that the weak link in the Australian defense was the company of Royal Engineers, and 1st Battalion of the 5th Imperial Guards led the attack there. Unfortunately, the engineers had sewn mines and laid wire, and they had three Vickers machineguns with them. A scene that might have occurred in the last war resulted, with the Japanese infantry flinging themselves onto the wire to depress it for following troops, the mines detonating, sending bodies flying into the air, and then the Vickers guns rumbling away at the onrushing infantry. All that was missing was the artillery, but it wasn't missing long.

Taylor's 2nd Field Artillery was on the high ground near Bennett's headquarters, and they had fifteen 25-pounders. Soon the crack of those guns entered the rising swell of the battle noise, and their heavy shells began to fall

with pre-registered fire.

By dawn, with the position still holding, the Japanese were clinging to a narrow strip of land on the shoreline. Bennett ordered up the one reserve battalion in his sector, and directed his artillery to begin shelling the causeway itself. Unaware that enemy engineers had been working all night to rig up a section of bridge reinforced by steel rails they had discovered in Johore, he nonetheless suspected the Japanese had been using the bridge to get half way over the strait before lowering light rafts and rubber boats to complete their crossing. To his great surprise, after working all night and through the entire morning, the dogged engineers had been able to set the rails in closely spaced bundles, covering them with cross planks of timber.

They were already placing heavier wood beams to reinforce the structure from below when the first light broke and the Australian artillery began to fall. This soon prompted a vigorous round of counter battery fire on and around Bennett's HQ, which was so disruptive that he decided to move his staff elsewhere. He got to a car and was moving to the Mandai road when a Sergeant flagged him down with some alarming news.

"It's tanks, sir. Japanese got three over the causeway bridge late today, and Brigadier Taylor says there'll be more."

"Damn!" Bennett swore. "How in bloody hell did they manage that? Alright, the Indian division has a couple companies of 2-pounders at Nee Soon. Find a radio and get them moving on this road to Mandai. If the Japs get there with tanks, they can run right down the main road and rail line to the center of the island!"

Get to a radio... Why in god's name didn't he have one with him? There simply weren't enough to go around, and the two sets he had been allocated were somewhere on the road behind him. He saw a man on a small motorbike and collared him immediately.

"Get to General Montgomery. Tell him the Japanese have managed to rig out a bridge over the causeway gap. They're moving in armor—tanks!" Then he was off to Mandai, for that was where he most feared the enemy might come, a small village just down the road south of Kranji. The man started to say something, but Bennett was off, tapping his driver's shoulder. As the car sped away, the man made a half-hearted salute, then scratched his head. He had no idea where Montgomery was, and no intention of looking for him. Instead he started down the road towards Singapore, his mind set on getting to the harbor.

Further west, the landing of the Japanese 5th Infantry Division had gone off without a hitch, but as the troops pushed inland, they were suddenly ambushed by a company of Chinese volunteers from Dalforce. The Chinese had been ready to go into these positions as a forward screen, even though only half of them had rifles, and only 24 rounds each. They didn't even have proper uniforms, and the men had tied red bandanas on their foreheads and white armbands to identify them as friendly troops to the British.

That was how they would have fought, but the *Empress of China* had been saved by those Hurricanes, and so all the arms and stores had made it safely ashore. This time, all the men without rifles were issued combat shotguns, because the British doubted their marksmanship. They put them to good use, catching the Japanese unawares and popping up to blast them with shotgun fire at very close range. Their gallant stand was so effective, that two other Japanese battalions had to be deployed to make a prepared assault on their cleverly hidden positions. These men would fight so well that they would come to be known as "Dalley's Desperados," but 1st Company would soon be enfiladed, overrun and killed to the last man. The death they had there in the Mangroves was infinitely better than the one they might have otherwise suffered. Yet in all this early action, word filtered back to Yamashita, and left him with one salient question. Where were the British?

* * *

The miracle performed by those intrepid engineers was going to have a major impact on the battle Montgomery had planned to fight. He still had all of the British 18th Division concentrated in and around the village of Bulim, just east of the Tengah airfield. There he had set up a line of good defensive positions. Brigadier Blackhouse had 54th Brigade on his right, and Brigadier Massy-Beresford had the 55th Brigade on his left.

Both were dug in, and with good fields of fire across the open ground of Tengah airfield. Behind them Monty had positioned his tactical reserve, the newly arrived 6th New Zealand Brigade under Brigadier Clifton, with four good battalions, including the 28th Maori. The 53rd British Brigade had arrived first, thrown into the battle north of the causeway, and their numbers were reduced by casualties from that action. So he placed those troops astride the road north through Mandai to Kranji and the causeway.

It was to these forces that Bennett came, looking for some way to get a

blocking force in position on the main road. There he found Brigadier Duke, and asked him to move a battalion to the village of Mandai as quickly as possible.

“But our orders are to stand here on reserve,” said Duke. “And I have the feeling this new General Montgomery won’t like his dispositions fooled with.”

“Well let me put it to you this way,” said Bennett. “You can either sit here and wait for a column of Japanese tanks to come barreling down that road, or you can get some men up into the village in good positions where they might stop them. That should be clear enough.”

Duke relented, and sent an order to the 2nd Cambridgeshire Battalion, which was still at about 80% of nominal strength. He was only a couple miles south of Mandai, so the men started off, marching up the road, with Bennett right behind them. When they got to the village, they found a company of Indian 2-pounders already there, for Bennett’s other messenger had been a man on his own HQ staff, and completely reliable.

It was at this point that they heard the distinctive rumble of field artillery to the south and west. Bennett looked over his shoulder, wondering what was going on. It sounded like the British 18th division was finally being engaged, and now he began to wonder what would happen if the Japanese got through.

If they overrun the airfield, then they can push right along King’s Road to Bukit Panjang. That’s five miles behind me, and my boys are all up there in the causeway sector. There won’t be any way for them to get south. They’d be cut off, pawns on the front row, and with a knight leaping right into the center of the board behind them.

That had been Monty’s plan. If the island had been a chess board, he was a strong rook, developed after a deft castling move, and that main road was an open file right back to Singapore—checkmate.... That rook had to stand, and by god, this file had to be closed and well guarded. Otherwise this whole bloody plan could come unraveled in a matter of hours.

* * *

The guns that had turned Bennett’s head were indeed the three regiments of field artillery with the 18th Division. They were more like battalions, for there was simply not enough transport available to send their whole allotment of guns. All the rest were out in convoy WS-15, still en route. 155th

Regiment had 21 guns, the 88th Regiment had 18, the 118th had 14 guns and there were 13 more in the 148th Regiment. All together, he had 66 guns, mostly 25-pounders, enough to tear up some turf when fired together, and that was what they were doing now.

Montgomery's screening units in the Recon Battalion, engineers rigging minefields, and another company from Dalforce had been slowly falling back towards the airfield. The enemy was massing in front of them, and Monty decided to try and break them up a bit with his artillery. At this point, he still had no idea what was happening at the causeway. Bennett might have motored over to find him, but he was too set on minding the defense of that open file.

Reports Monty had received were mostly from those screening units to the west, where he learned the Japanese had landed their main force right where he expected them. Thus far, his outlying units had fallen back in good order, for it took the enemy some time to get sorted out, ferry their artillery across the strait, and work their battalions through the mangroves and rubber plantations to approach Tengah airfield. That was where Montgomery thought to fight his decisive battle here, but reports of enemy forces taking the shore battery at Pasil Laba to his southwest made him nervous.

"I can't very well fight my battle here if the enemy is going to creep down along that coastline," he said to General Smith of the 18th Division. "I believe this warrants some investigation."

"How about that Gurkha unit?" Smith suggested. "They're down at that end of the line. A damn fine looking bunch, that battalion."

"Indeed," said Monty. "I had them at Tobruk, and I put them to very good use there. I should like to keep them in hand, but under the circumstances, your suggestion makes sense. See to it, will you?"

So the Gurkhas were off, and Colonel Rana Gandar briefed his Company Subedars and Halvidars that this was to be a search and destroy mission. Many of these men had served overseas in their own day, and in every terrain imaginable. So they had no difficulty managing the heat and mangroves, and soon the lead teams of scouts and snipers were moving forward.

They were going to find the 3rd Battalion, 56th Regiment of Lieutenant General Renya Mutaguchi's 18th Division. He was a veteran of the Siberian Intervention, and had fought for years in China before his division had been handpicked to join the 25th Army. Earlier that day, it had landed to take out

that shore battery, finding it already destroyed by the crews when they got there. In spite, they herded the entire gun crew into the enclosed concrete housing, and then set the bunker on fire, laughing with one another at the screams of the tortured men. Then they were off, intending a wide envelopment to the south of the airfield.

But they were about to have a very bad day.

Chapter 12

3/56 Battalion came out of a thicket of mangroves when the lead Sergeant suddenly stumbled and fell. A private ran up to help him, thinking he had stumbled on a hidden tree root in the undergrowth, but then he, too, keeled over and fell. The third man in the column knew enough to realize they were under attack, and he shouted, turning to look back down the line, when a bullet came whizzing in to cut him down as well.

Gurkha Sniper Rana Sunil was well concealed in his camouflaged gillie suit, peering through the powerful optical sight on his L1115A3 Long Range Rifle. He reached up to his collar, pinching a button there three times. A quarter mile away, his Company Sergeant, Halvidar Druna Rai, got the message on his helmet microphone—contact! He, in turn, passed the message back to Battalion CO, and soon the other two companies were stealthily moving to the south, around the reported point of contact.

The Japanese reaction to the sniper was not to go to ground. They immediately organized a full platoon with fixed bayonets, and then set up two light machineguns, with another squad of riflemen scanning the trees. The platoon was going to make an attack in the presumed direction of the enemy, intending and hoping to draw their fire. They would head directly for Sniper Sunil's hidden squad, a blocking force, yet with more equivalent firepower than ten machineguns.

The Japanese made a brave charge, until the tree line opened up on them with that withering assault rifle fire. Colonel Yoshio Nasu would soon realized that he must be up against a strong enemy bunker. He blew his whistle, intending to order up a section of demolition engineers, when the low tree sewn ridge to his right erupted with fire. The crump of mortar rounds was heard, and their whistling fall soon began to explode all around his battalion CP.

The Gurkhas were attacking, and before it was over, 3/56 battalion would lose half its squads, driven relentlessly back on the supporting 2/56 Battalion to the north. The Gurkhas had found the enemy's southernmost flank, and they were slowly rolling it up.

Farther north, the line of screening forces finally gave way, and began to rush to the rear across the Tengah airfield while Monty's 25-pounders provided that covering fire. Here the bulk of the Japanese 18th division

thought it was about to seize its first objective, the leading battalions hotly pursuing the retreating engineers and scout teams, and some pushing out onto the airfield itself. It was a single wide central strip, with two other strips making an X right in the middle. The administration buildings and hangers were to the east, all occupied by outliers of Montgomery's main line. Those positions concentrated in and around the village of Bulim, and on a line to the south and north, right astride King's Road.

Monty's plan was to receive the enemy attack as it came over that airfield, a perfect killing field as he called it. He had every Vickers the division possessed in small dugouts, backed by his infantry, with the New Zealanders right behind. In effect, he had built a stone wall with the best two brigades of the British Division, and he intended to hold it, break the enemy charge across that airfield, and then send in his 6th New Zealand Brigade for his counterattack.

By the time the Japanese reached the airfield they had already been fighting for nearly 36 consecutive hours. In spite of that, both Brigades of the division sent battalions across, each vying with the other to be the first to storm the enemy position. On they came, the lead companies running right into those Vickers MGs and taking fearful losses. To the north, the first units of Lieutenant General Takuro Matsui's 5th Division were arriving on the scene, having cleared the entire northwest corner of the island around Sarimbun. They had engineers setting up a small bridge over a deep tributary to the Kranji river, but their main force was concentrated to attack that airfield.

Now Monty would face not one, but two enemy divisions, the real strength of the Japanese forces ashore. Only a portion of each division was forward to make the attack. In fact, Yamashita had retained one full regiment from his 5th Division as a reserve, and it was still in Johore Bahru near the Sultan's Palace. Yet between both units, there would still be at least 12,000 men to make this assault.

The initial casualties were so sharp that the regimental commanders were wise enough to stop the mad rush, get hold of their men and consolidate. The sun was already low, and the new plan would be to make this attack that night, with darkness providing cover for the movement over that airfield.

Both these units were "Square" divisions. They therefore had a unique structure, being composed of two brigades, which each had two regiments of

three battalions. By comparison, they were facing a triangular British division, composed of three brigades containing three battalions each. The New Zealanders would make this force “Square,” standing in for Monty’s fourth Brigade element. That said, he would have only 54th and 55th brigades on the line to receive the attack. The 53rd had already sent one battalion north to Mandai, and then a second, the 5th Battalion, Royal Norfolk, had been sent to defend the Kranji River line and stop the work of those Japanese engineers.

As darkness fell, Montgomery finally learned what had happened up north. The Japanese had managed to get enough Type 95 light tanks over the makeshift causeway bridge, that they had stormed the village of Kranji, and were already pushing south down the main road to Mandai. They had cleared the southern end of the causeway, still improving their bridge, and now controlled the area known as Woodlands. In these actions, Taylor’s Brigade had taken the worst of the harm. Maxwell’s was still holding firm to the right, but this was largely because General Nishimura was concentrating his attack down that main road.

Realizing that he now would no longer have the services of 53rd British Brigade to oppose the attack that was surely coming soon, Monty remained stalwart. He would receive the enemy as planned, and counterattack as planned. His intention here was to hurt them so badly that they would not have sufficient strength and ammunition to carry on. To do so, he was prepared to sacrifice the entire British Division, for behind him he still had the Malay Brigade, and fortress troops, though they were not as reliable as his regulars. His strategy was well informed, for Brigadier Kinlan had sent over two staff officers to brief him before he set off to his new post. They had told him where the Japanese would land, in what strength, and what their initial objective would be. Being forewarned, he was also forearmed. This was his battle, and he was determined the night would remain his as well.

* * *

When Yamashita learned what the disgruntled Nishimura had done he was initially very angry, resolving to go and find the man at once and berate him for disobeying his orders. Yet as reports came in, he realized that he now had this strong force to the north, controlling the causeway, Woodlands, and Kranji. Yet this force had been meant to make that crossing only after he had

the enemy well engaged, and possibly retreating further south. In effect, his reserve had been prematurely committed by the steamy Nishimura, and this was going to weigh heavily on his mind.

I was wise to hold back the 11th Regiment of my 5th Division, he thought. And Nishimura still has one regiment uncommitted. That may be enough. I must break the enemy in the center, and the Imperial Guards are now in a good position to provide a strong flanking attack. But can Nishimura break through?

“What you have achieved is laudable,” he said to the Guard’s commander, “yet you clearly disobeyed my orders. Do so again, and I will relieve you of command.”

The two men locked eyes, a contest of wills, but Nishimura knew he could not blatantly oppose his commanding officer again, and slowly nodded, saying nothing.

“Now that you have the causeway, get all your remaining tanks across. Form them into one strong group and be ready to attack tonight down the main road. The British do not like to fight after dark. Lead with Kita’s light tanks, and Colonel Komoto should follow with the medium tanks. Your objective is here—Bukit Panjang. Once we have it, fire off a red flare signal. That will mean the main route for the British to withdraw is in our hands. At that moment, I will seek to send the whole of my strength against them, and annihilate them.”

“They will turn and run, just as they have for the last two months,” said Nishimura. “And once we force them to surrender, then I will personally see that they suffer for their cowardice.”

“First things first,” said Yamashita. “Our men are tired. It is difficult to get what little supplies we have left over the strait. Your division is isolated from the others, and our artillery is running low. My plan is to make a strong attack, and if the enemy does not rout as you say, then I will send them an ultimatum, demanding their surrender. The 11th of February is drawing nigh. We have very little time, and very little ammunition. So collect your last three reserve battalions, and get them into position to cross at the causeway and follow your tanks. Because of the favorable position your men have given us, I have decided to commit Colonel Watanabe’s 11th Regiment to support your attack.”

At this, Nishimura stood taller, taking a deep breath, his jaw set. This was the way it should have been all along, he thought. The Imperial Guards

will lead, the others follow. He had disobeyed orders to force Yamashita to see this, and his men had fought well. Now, with these last two regiments to support them, their attack must certainly bring him the glory in battle that he so coveted. He would lead the assault, trapping the main enemy force by so doing.

“This is wise,” he said. “We will not fail.”

So just after sunset, Watanabe’s 11th Regiment started marching through the streets of the squalid neighborhoods of Johore Bahru, intending to be in position on the other side of the straits by dawn. They were Yamashita’s last reserve, and Nishimura’s attack must not fail.

Am I a fool to entrust such an important mission to that man, he thought. He will certainly cluck and strut if he wins through, but I cannot consider such things now. I must break the enemy tomorrow to have any chance of forcing their surrender by the 11th. Yet when I send them my ultimatum, it will be a complete bluff. I will not really have the strength and ammunition to prosecute the battle here very much longer. So we win or lose tomorrow. After that, it is all theater.

* * *

When the attack came on the Mandai road, Taylor’s 2/19th Battalion had only ten of 36 rifle squads left. The shattered companies fell back down the road, stumbling in the near pitch black darkness, and there was a tense moment when the men of the Cambridgeshire Battalion almost gunned them down. They reached the village, reporting a strong column of Japanese tanks and infantry was right behind them.

The Indian 80th AT Regiment had brought up eighteen 2-pounders, and they had worked the light guns into houses and behind low stone walls, and any other covering terrain they could find. The rifle squads of the Cambridgeshire Battalion, and those 18 guns, were now all that stood to guard that vital road. Major General Gordon Bennett was right behind them, the four squads of his HQ section, a few light AA guns and one 75mm howitzer now standing as tactical reserve.

The Japanese tanks rattled up, as it was impossible to achieve surprise on that road, and soon the firefight was joined. The Type 95 light tank had a 37mm main gun, and two 7.2mm machineguns. The medium tanks behind them had a bigger 57mm gun, and they were coming in good numbers in

spite of losses sustained in the storming of Kranji against that dogged Australian battalion. The 2-pounder was, by comparison, a 40mm gun, largely obsolete by this time in the war—but so were those Japanese tanks.

“Steady boys,” said Lt. Colonel Gordon Thorne. Hold your fire now until they come up. The closer they get, the more holes we can drill into them.”

In that he was completely correct, a maxim that would hold true for any similar confrontation between AT positions and armor. The QF 2-pounder could penetrate only 17mm of armor at 1500 yards, 27mm at a thousand yards, 37mm at 500 and a very respectable 49mm inside 100 yards. That was where the British opened their fire, what would be considered near point blank range. They easily ‘brewed up’ the lead light tanks, for even the heavier Type 97s behind them had no more than 26mm of turret armor, and 33mm frontal armor. But tanks fire back, and three 2-pounders were also hit in that wild duel, with hot tracer A.P. rounds zipping back and forth, and the hard clink of hits and exploding ordnance breaking the hush of the dark night.

Machine guns chattered, tanks burned, and then the British riflemen began to fire as the enemy brought up supporting infantry. The Japanese pressed a determined assault, but the Cambridgeshire Battalion stood firm for two violent hours of hard fighting. Nishimura realized he would not easily get through that village, so he ordered up everything he had assembling on the road behind his tanks.

“The honor of our division goes with you!” he shouted. “Take that village! Get up that road!”

Further east, a macabre scene was taking place at Tengah airfield. The Japanese mounted a well coordinated attack, with all their artillery firing to soften the enemy line before the harsh throaty calls of the Sergeants and officers sent their infantry forward. At that moment, Monty had all the searchlights they could salvage from the airfield turned on, and the 25-pounders fired a salvo of star shells. There, swarming over the airfield in full battalion formations, came rank after rank of veteran Japanese infantry. It was a banzai charge of enormous proportions, with fully twelve Japanese battalions involved over a three mile front that stretched from the Kranji river to a mile south of Bulim.

The officers had drawn their swords and led the assault in with the cry, “*Tenno Heika Banzai!* — Long Live the Emperor!” They swept over the airfield towards the British lines, in a dreadful rush. Sergeant Dillmore saw

one of his lads in the 1st Cambridgeshire start to turn and run, but he collared the man. The unit had been positioned at an angle in Monty's defense, and now faced charges on three sides.

"None of that," said the Sergeant. "Look to your mates and look to your front. If we go, the whole line goes with us, so here we stand."

The 25-pounders got in on the action, their hot barrels depressing to fire H.E. rounds as the enemy came on with a terrible din. Someone sounded a bugle, and then behind it came the pipes played by a big Scot from 1/5th Foresters further down the line. A whistle sounded, and the British infantry actually volley fired, then it was independent action, with every man firing for all he was worth.

The Japanese attack was strong and mercilessly brave, but also reckless. It was an attempt to storm the British lines by sheer will, determination and ferocious numbers. Up country, their enemy had broken in the face of such attacks many times, but here Montgomery had his men in good defensive positions, weary from digging them, but glad the trenches and sand bags were there now that the bullets were flying. And they held. Both of the two Cambridgeshire battalions stood their ground, at Mandai and on the angle at Tengah, which would now go down as a decisive moment in the annals of British infantry battles. They held, for two hours, then three, as the skies began to lighten over the terrible scene, where it was hand to hand at the sandbagged wall, bayonets on either side flashing with the early light.

A couple miles back, Monty was on the highest ground he could find, Hill 477 overlooking Koat Hong, King's Road, and the village of Bulim. He looked at his watch, then turned to Brigadier Clifton of the 6th New Zealanders. "Gurkhas should be back on the line by now. They'll watch things here. General, have at them, if you please. Take your men in, all four battalions, and give them bloody hell."

Montgomery's defense had stood like that strong Rook in the center of the board, and now he was sending in his Knights. It was a line that might have rolled off Wellington's tongue at Waterloo. It was a "Maitland, now's your time" moment. It was the very best that New Zealand could have sent to the defense of the Commonwealth, tall, strong young soldiers that had been hardened like twisted rope in the desert fighting against the Germans.

The Rock of the East was crawling with enemy infantry, but Montgomery was determined that it would not fall.

Part V

Bitter Dregs

*“Masters, I have to tell a tale of woe,
A tale of folly and wasted life,
Hope against hope, the bitter dregs of strife,
Ending, where all things end, in death at last.”*

— **William Morris**

Chapter 13

Thus far the twisting cords of history had seen the British holding the line. The last minute arrival of Montgomery, and his complete re-disposition of the forces on the ground, had dramatically changed the complexion of the battle. With foreknowledge of the likely enemy landing zones, Monty had concentrated his best units in the key area for defense. Instead of being spread out all along the northeast coast, from the Naval Base to Chanji, he had the British 18th Division well in hand, a strong bulwark astride King's road and the village of Bulim.

The timely arrival of those carriers transferring 90 Hurricane fighters, and the salvation of the *Empress of China* had all conspired to bolster the British defense. The planes were double shifting from their new airfields in Sumatra, with 36 to 40 going out for a combat air patrol sweep in the morning, dueling in the skies with the formations of Japanese bombers escorted by Zeroes. As their fuel ran out, the survivors would head home, tipping their wings to see the relief squadrons coming in the next wave to stand their watch. Losses had been heavy, with fully a third of the planes shot down in the ceaseless duels with the enemy fighters, but their dogged presence was both a bolster to the British morale, as well as a brake on the Japanese bombing effort.

The presence of the 6th New Zealanders, and the Gurkha Battalion also weighed heavily on the scales of this battle. They were troops that never should have been there, Monty's sword behind the shield of the British Division, which he had used to good effect.

Yet on the other side of the equation, the disgruntled disposition and wounded pride of General Nishimura had also changed the complexion of the battle considerably. He was facing the Australians at Kranji, as he had historically, but in Fedorov's history he had tried to slip up the estuary of the Kranji river to get behind that position, and his attack had become a disaster. His troops had become lost in the many sloughs and minor tributaries, bogged down in the mud flats and mangroves, and then caught in a sudden conflagration when the Aussies emptied the fuel bunker at Kanji into the river and set it on fire. This time, his daring attack had come right on the causeway, and the open ground to the east. While his casualties were heavy,

the herculean effort of his engineers had saved the day when they bridged that 70 foot gap and got those first few light tanks across onto the main road.

Seeing the opportunity this now presented him, and learning of the heavy fighting then underway near Bulim, Yamashita decided to risk everything by sending his last two fresh regiments into that battle. It was a gamble that looked like it might pay off, for on the morning of February 10th, Nishimura's tanks and infantry finally stormed the position at Mandai. Only six of the eighteen 2-pounders were left as the defenders fell back to the hamlet of Yew Tee, and a company of Japanese tanks was already pushing past the retreating defenders on the main road.

To make matters worse, the Japanese engineers had bridged one segment of the Kanji river, allowing a battalion of Sugiura's 42nd Regiment to cross. Supported by the engineer battalion behind them, they slowly overcame the resistance of the 5th Royal Norfolk Battalion, which was now retreating south, along with a battery of artillery that had been positioned in that sector. Monty had counted on the natural defense of that river estuary, but now it had been compromised. In effect, while his strong defense east of Tengah was holding as planned, the Japanese attack precipitated by General Nishimura was turning his right flank.

General Bennett's own HQ staff and support squads had been caught up in the fighting at Mandai, but seeing the desperate situation collapsing, he got to a radio and made a frantic call to Montgomery. With his battle at Tengah still underway, Monty received this news with some consternation. He had already committed the New Zealanders to counterattack, and they had just driven the Japanese off his forward lines, restoring many positions where they had made inroads. Yet now the only reserve he had in hand was the Gurkha battalion, and that suited him perfectly. He sent a signal to Colonel Rana Gandar, telling him he was to take his entire battalion up the main road, establish a blocking force, and delay the Japanese advance as long as possible.

"The loss of the causeway has buggered me," he said to Percival where they were huddled in a small farmhouse at Koat Hong right on King's Road. "The Australians are still holding up there to the east, are they not?"

"Maxwell's Brigade is standing firm. Taylor took the worst of it."

"Well then Maxwell must attack. We've got to cut off that bridge. They'll rely on it for all their supplies now. Order all the Indian troops in the Naval Base to move west along the north shore and support Maxwell."

At that moment, a low flying formation of Japanese bombers came roaring in, dropping sticks of 250 pound bombs that fell right on Koat Hong. The concussion and explosions raised havoc, overturning carts, blasting the farm houses, and smashing three staff cars parked outside Monty's position. Percival dove right under the table as part of the roof collapsed, looking up to see Monty staring down at him, still standing, hands on his hips, his red beret askew, but otherwise unharmed.

"General Percival," he said. "I don't think you'll have a very good view of the map from under that table."

Those orders were relayed by radio, and late on the afternoon of the 10th, Maxwell threw 2/29th and 2/30th Battalions right down the coastal road towards the causeway. Behind them came 5/14 Punjab of the 11th Indian Division, which had been holding in the fortified positions at the Naval Base dubbed "HMS Terror." While none of the three battalions were up to strength, they had enough in hand to make a strong attack down that road, driving back 1/5 Imperial Guards battalion, to Nishimura's outrage. The fiery General pulled one company of tanks off the tail of his assault column, and then personally led a counterattack with all the troops in his headquarters section, and those in Colonel Komoto's HQ. Seeing the dire threat to the bridge, many batteries of artillery across the strait on the shoreline of Johore Bahru depressed their barrels and began pouring fire onto that road.

The Japanese counterattack was furious, for their soldiers knew they were fighting directly under the eyes of their senior officers. They threw themselves at the Australians with complete ferocious rage, and the timely arrival of 16 Type 97 tanks made all the difference. With little more than a handful of Boys AT rifles, the Aussies could not stop them, and they were inexorably pushed back. At one point, Nishimura drew his samurai sword and personally beheaded two men of the Punjabs who were cowering on the ground, when the tanks overran their position. After Maxwell's men made it back to their original positions, there were no more than two companies left of the two battalions that he had sent on that desperate foray.

* * *

The sun was falling, and as dusk settled on the battlefield, both sides tried to pull themselves together. The night would see no end to the bitter struggle on the road to Mandai. With Yamashita's 11th Regiment now

deploying through that blighted village, the Japanese paused briefly to bring those fresh troops up and plan a pre-dawn push down the road. In the battle for Tengah airfield and Bulim, both sides fell back to regroup. Monty was forced to pull his New Zealanders off the line to re-establish a reserve, but the other two British Brigades were still in good shape, and still manning their trenches and fox holes after that long day's fight.

Yamashita received word from his 5th Division commander, Lieutenant General Takuro Matsui, that casualties were very heavy. In like manner, the 18th Division had suffered serious losses, and supplies and artillery were very low. He had gambled on breaking the enemy there with that massive attack, but it had come close to becoming *gyokusai*, a 'shattered jewel' attack that was near suicidal. It was not the first time a battlefield would see a desperate and determined charge like that, and be left with a carpet of the dead lying in clustered heaps all along the line.

At this point, Yamashita decided to play one last card, realizing his enemy must have also suffered grievous harm. He had his staff draft twenty copies of a letter to Percival, not yet realizing that he had been relieved by another man. They were placed into communications tubes and fired off with light mortars at presumed enemy HQ positions, and also delivered under cover of a white flag to the bunkers near Bulim. Montgomery got the message at 10:00PM that night, reading it with a wry grin.

"I call upon you to cease this meaningless fighting and instead discuss the issue of surrender," he said aloud. "It seems we've knocked the wind out of them."

He got hold of a staffer and told him to draft a reply to send back across the lines. "We are not prepared to discuss the terms of your surrender while your troops remain on this island. Should you lay down your arms and withdraw as you came, we will then consider suitable terms, and will promise you and your men fair treatment."

When Yamashita received that reply he was dumbfounded, staring at the signature there of a man named B.L. Montgomery. His surprise soon turned to anger, and then utter frustration. Who was this man? Could it be that General Percival had been killed in action, and this was a relief officer?

It was now the eve of the 11th of February, Japan's "National Day," the equivalent of the American 4th of July. It was the day he had hoped to deliver his prize to the Emperor, and the temerity of the British reply to his demands, presuming he would be the one to surrender, now enraged him. He left the

high tower of the Sultan's Palace, drove through the hovels of Johore Bahru, and right over the causeway bridge, intending to personally direct the attack down that road with Colonel Watanabe's 11th Regiment.

"You are the last regiment not yet engaged," he told the Colonel. Nishimura's Guards have fought hard to get this far, but now the honor falls to you. It is the eve of *Kigensetsu*, the day our Empire was founded. Tomorrow the spirit of the Emperor Jimmu will be watching each and every one of you. You must prevail! Everyone in Japan is waiting to hear of your victory here. Let every man do his utmost to see that it is delivered!" The men would advance that night, pushing the weary troops of the 2nd Cambridgeshire Battalion out of the village of Yew Tee in preparation for their morning assault.

That night, the men of Kinlan's Gurhka Battalion took up positions astride the road to Mandai. Two companies of the 6/14 Punjabs came up on their right, and half a mile behind them, Montgomery was busy reorganizing the men of Brigadier Clifton's 6th New Zealand Brigade. Each of those four battalions had lost a third of their strength, and the entire brigade now amounted to eight companies.

As the sun rode on the 11th, the Japanese tanks led the way, backed up by the fresh troops of the 11th Regiment of 5th Division. They came right down the road, where 2nd Company of the Gurkhas had set up a blocking position. Such an attack had always pushed unsupported infantry aside in the past, and their scouts had identified no enemy AT gun positions, yet the Gurkhas had just a little more than Boys AT rifles with them.

The hiss of Javelin ATGM missiles came as a complete shock, smashing into the lead tanks and blasting them to pieces. Colonel Komoto's tankers had never seen such utter destruction of their vehicles, and the Japanese were momentarily stunned by the sudden, unexpected blow. Yet this was February 11th, and if the tanks could not bull their way through, the infantry would now have to do the job. They advanced, utterly fearless, moving in determined rushes past the smoldering remains of the leading tanks—and then the Gurkhas opened fire with everything they had.

Every man in every squad had the equivalent firepower of a machinegun in his assault rifle, and these were also backed up by teams with heavier machineguns and a pair of German made L123A1 Grenade Machineguns. The hail of those 40mm grenades popping off at a high rate of fire that could reach 320 rounds per minute was devastating. The Japanese would lose the

equivalent of a full company, yet the close terrain and sheer momentum of their charge would carry them into the defensive line, where it was soon hand to hand combat. Now the bright flash of the Kukri knives met the Japanese bayonets, and the Gurkhas fought like demons.

Then, coming up in support, the Maori battalion surged up the road, their brave companies charging in counterattack. They fell on the scene, and the fate of Singapore was riding in the whirlwind of their attack. Neither side broke, and the fighting was fierce until the weight of those Gurkha assault rifles at close quarters literally cut the Japanese squads to pieces. They staggered back, driven on by the Maoris, and the enemy attack was finally broken. Over a third lay dead on the field, but undaunted, the remaining men of the 11th Regiment were already reorganizing for another charge.

Further west near Bulim, the 5th Division troops had fought to the point of utter exhaustion, yet were unable to take that strongpoint. The village was a burned and blackened wreck after that battle, but Yamashita's great morning attack had failed. When he got the news he buried his forehead in his clenched fists, realizing that he would not have the resources to continue the fight for very much longer. His tanks lay blasted, broken on the main road. His assault battalions were shattered. In spite of that, the Japanese morale had not broken, and his hardened veterans would still fight if he ordered them to persevere.

Yet Yamashita realized he could destroy the fighting effectiveness of his entire force if he continued to press the attack under these circumstances. The ferocity of the enemy defense on that road had been completely unexpected. They had beaten back the very best troops he could throw at them, and all supported by armor that was good for nothing against a terrible new enemy anti-tank weapon. Who were these men? Surely they were demons from hell, sent to mock and berate him for his failure to break the enemy's will to resist.

By mid-day he could see the futility of pressing on, and ordered his men to consolidate and rest for a night attack. General Nishimura came to the headquarters, his face blackened, a haggard, harried look in his eyes. The two men said nothing, but shared the same cup of tea. Theirs was the bitter dregs of fortune's cup to drain that day, and the ghost of the Emperor Jimmu sat there with them.

Chapter 14

The line held, and on the road north to Mandai, the Gurkhas advanced with the Maori Battalion, pushing the Japanese back, and leaving wrecked tanks in their wake. It was only the artillery fire that forced them to halt, then slowly fall back to British lines. Both sides were exhausted by the three days fighting, and ammunition was low, especially for the Japanese. Now Yamashita's opening bravado, firing that powerful barrage to cow the British, came back to haunt him. He was shocked when his Quartermaster, Colonel Ikatani, reported the guns had perhaps an hour or two left, and would then go silent.

The question now was what to do? He knew he could not simply withdraw, and yet his position on the island was precarious, with the bulk of his force to the west, and the British occupying the only roads that linked the causeway sector to those troops. Thus the Imperial Guards Division would remain unsupported, and Montgomery's position standing firm at Bulim was now a major problem. He considered one more attack, the 'Broken Jewel' massed charge as before, but the casualties were already too high. If he preserved these troops, replacements would eventually bring his divisions back up to full strength. But how to explain this to Tojo and the Army General Staff? How to bear the shame of having to ask for additional support here?

An idea occurred to him, and he looked at Nishimura with dark eyes. "This is what happens when orders are not obeyed," he said accusingly.

"What do you imply by such a remark?" Nishimura set down the teacup on the small wooden lap tray, the wan light a dull gleam on the sheen of perspiration on his balding head, his dark rimmed eyeglasses almost fogged over.

"What I mean should be obvious enough," said Yamashita. "Your premature attack expended not only your division, but also forced me to commit my last reserves before the situation in the west was clarified. I had to drop everything, leave my headquarters, and drive through that pig pen of a city on the north bank just to see what a shambles you have made of this operation!"

Nishimura stood up abruptly, his knee spilling the tea tray and sending the cup falling, shattered on the cobbled stone pavement of Kranji where they

were meeting. The broken glass was the end of their tryst, and the long moments of sulking and mutual consolation that the silence provided each of them. Now it was back to the old enmity, the resentment and annoyance with one another, the suspicion that each man was trying to secretly undermine the other, wishing him nothing more than ruin.

“Do not attempt to blame me for the failure of your own troops.” Nishimura’s statement carried the unspoken rift between them, a wedge as wide and deep as the Kranji River inlet that now prevented those divisions from establishing communications.

“My own troops?” Yamashita almost laughed, then darkened with anger. “They are *all* my own troops! Do not presume to think your precious Imperial Guards are sent here from the heavenly realms at your bidding. I command here!”

“Then you must also shoulder the blame for this failure as a man. Only a coward would try to blame another. Where is your honor?”

Yamashita’s hand went to the haft of his sword, and Nishimura’s to the butt of his service pistol on his hip holster, but both men froze in that moment of terrible hostility, simply glaring at one another.

“Go!” said Yamashita. “Back to the front lines! Let us see how well you lead the next attack down that road. And do not come back if you should fail this time. Die on that road, Nishimura. Die there and go to smirk with your ancestors.”

Nishimura spat to one side, but did not utter the curse that came to his mind. Then he turned his back and stormed out, his footfalls hard and sharp on the stone courtyard. That night he would send a secret message to Tojo and the General Staff, blaming Yamashita for interfering with his attack, and saying it was now impossible for his division to fight under Yamashita’s command. He now contemplated pulling the Guards Division back over the causeway, and all the supporting tanks, but knew he could not do this without losing face with his own men. They had fought hard to make that crossing. It was only the failure of Yamashita’s suicidal banzai charge across Tengah airfield that had so depleted his divisions that they could not support his victorious guards. This was how his message read.

Back in Tokyo, Tojo received the message with mixed feelings. On the one hand, if Yamashita failed to take Singapore, the timetable for operations against the Dutch colonies, Sumatra, and Java, would now be in jeopardy. On the other hand, he had little love for Yamashita, and was secretly pleased on

one level to see him fail. It would give him just the excuse he needed to get rid of the man, for he had watched his whirlwind advance down the Malay Peninsula with some consternation. What to do?

Soon he was handed yet another communication, this time from Yamashita himself. It noted that as the navy failed to prevent the arrival of carrier borne aircraft, the 3rd Air Group had also failed to prevent timely British reinforcements. Given the condition of his divisions at the end of a long six weeks of fighting, and the present depleted state of his munitions and supplies, a siege of Singapore was not practical, nor advisable, and any further attack would have to be delayed.

The Tiger of Malaya, thought Tojo, smiling. Listen to him growl now! It was the Navy's fault, and then the fault of the Air Force. Next he will tell me it was Nishimura's fault for disobeying his orders. Yes, Tojo already knew everything that had happened. He had many eyes and ears among the staff officers in every command of the Army.

Yet given Homma's difficulties in the Philippines, he thought, Yamashita's position is not anywhere near as grave. Manila is a port we simply must have, and the enemy has retreated to the Bataan Peninsula, stubbornly refusing to surrender.

Yet Singapore is but a bauble for the Emperor to faun over. We do not need it. We already have the airfields in Malaya, and all I need to do is transfer sufficient force to crush the remaining enemy air power. Without air support, the British will find out that trying to hold on to their 'Jewel of the East' may burn their own hand. They will have to find a way to keep that entire garrison supplied, not to mention nearly half a million civilians who will need food and fresh water. What to do?

For now, I think it best to suggest Yamashita pause his attack, in honor of the 11th of February, and make one last effort to secure the enemy's surrender. If they remain adamant, then I might recall the toothless tiger and send him up to the Siberian front. In fact, I could simply turn over command of the 25th Army to Tsuji and Nishimura. That would gall the tiger, would it not?

He considered that, realizing this news now arriving from the far north would be the perfect cover for such a move. My, who would have expected the Siberians to attempt what they were now doing—and on this day, of all days, the founding of our Empire? Their ultimatum was an insult, and their attack upon our ships at sea gives me every pretext to renew operations in

that sector. Now they have the temerity to actually cross the treaty line in Kamchatka, and land troops on North Karafuto Island. They think they will soon be changing its name again, to Sakhalin Island. Well, something must be done about them. The Emperor will surely ask me about all of this at our next meeting. But what to do?

Should I recall Yamashita and tell him that because of his outstanding performance, he is now given the honor of punishing the Siberians. Yes, that is how I will shine that apple before I hand it to him, but when he takes the first bite, he will know the rotten truth. He will know how I am shaming him, sending him off to the land of ice and snow in the dead of winter, and with Nishimura given command of his old army.

Yes, he thought, that is exactly what I will do.

* * *

Karpov's "Plan 7" was as audacious and daring as it was impudent. Japan had sat in the "occupied territories for 30 years, with a strong military presence on the roads leading north, as far away as Outer Mongolia. They had stopped at the narrow mountain pass that edged around lake Baikal to the major Siberian city of the east, Irkutsk. There the line was held for decades, with troops on both sides patrolling the passes, and the cold rugged shoreline of Lake Baikal.

Yet on the 11th of February, as Yamashita drank his bitter cup of tea on the Island of Singapore, the night sky was lit up with the brazen fire of artillery firing over Lake Baikal. The guns rumbled through the pre-dawn hours, falling on Japanese border stations, guard posts and lakeside patrol boat ramps built over the years. With war declared weeks ago, Karpov had taken his battlecruiser up to the icy waters of Magadan, and then seemed to vanish into silence. The Japanese paid him no mind, being busy with their great 'Southern Offensive,' until those guns opened a new front in their war, as surprising as it was unexpected.

All along that front, Siberian troops were now on the move. Swarthy Tartar and Cossack Cavalry had crossed the Amur river in many places, emerging from hidden assembly areas in the thick, impenetrable forest of the taiga. Their first mission was to reinforce the work of Partisan cadres, who had placed explosives and obstacles all along the thin steel lifeline of the Trans-Siberian rail, effectively denying its use to the enemy as a means of moving troops and supplies. Then they moved out in small battalion sized formations, sweeping like a shadowy tide into Japanese controlled Primorskiy-Amur Province. They would be scouts and marauders, using lightning quick hit and run tactics to strike at border stations, garrisons, rail depots, key bridges.

Elsewhere, two of Karpov's three divisions were on the move. The 92nd had made the long, hazardous journey from Magadan through ice floes and heavy fogs to land on the western shores of Kamchatka. The 32nd would soon make the same journey by airship to land on the northern tip of Sakhalin Island. Their intention was to establish a Siberian military presence in both places, and then move inexorably south to reclaim the territory that had been lost to them decades ago.

The scale and scope of the attack was completely unanticipated by the Japanese. On the massive Kamchatka Peninsula, a "Treaty Line" had been

drawn at the 54th parallel, but Japanese occupation stayed well south of that on the 53rd, with their main operations base at the largest town, Petropavlovsk. They had renamed the place *Joyaku Kazantochi*, the land of volcanoes. There the tall brooding cones dominated the mountainous landscape to the north of Avacha Bay, which was the best sheltered anchorage and port in the region.

The previous month, the 4th Independent Mixed Brigade had been moved from duty in the southern Kuriles to beef up the garrison there. It consisted of five battalions of infantry, with an engineer battalion that was working on improving roads in the area, and establishing a secondary airstrip well inland at Nachiki, about 130 kilometers to the west of the port. There was only one good road that wound its way through the mountains and valleys to the west, eventually reaching the tundra and marshland near Apache and Lenino, and then continuing on to Bolsheretsk near the western coast.

Here the land was flat and open, and the coast offered several good landing sites that were now frozen solid. Trying to make the journey by sea all the way to Petropavlovsk on the east coast would not be possible. To do so, the convoy would have to pass through the real bastion of Japanese power in the region the fortified islands of Shumushu and Paramushir just off the southern tip of the peninsula. The risk of detection was almost certain, and the risk of attack from enemy aircraft, surface ships or submarines was deemed too high to contemplate such a move.

So instead the plan was to land just north of what is now called Ust-Bolsheretsk, and then move along that one good road east, a little over 100 miles to secure the port of Petropavlovsk. All the airfields north of the southern tip would be along that road, and once secured, Karpov would also have a port directly on the Pacific.

Karpov planned to move the entire 92nd division, but his initial assault would be made by the Special Marine Landing Group. He had also assigned three airships carrying troops of his 22nd Airmobile force, and recruited three battalions of mountain cavalry from the local Koryak natives in Kamchatka's wild north.

All that artillery near lake Baikal was meant primarily as a feint and a distraction so Karpov could get his Marines ashore, and move the transports north again to Magadan, where the 92nd infantry waited. With surprise complete, those initial landings went off without opposition. The defensive

eyes of *Kirov*'s radar saw no threats on the horizon, and above, a division of three airships hovered over the landing zone for additional cover.

The planners knew they would easily get those Marines ashore, and now they began to move out, soon to be followed by the 92nd Division, which was comprised of three Ski Brigades. Local partisan groups, the Koryak Cavalry and Karpov's Airmobile units would be the advance scouting forces, preparing the way for the overland troop movement. Initially, they would make good time on the flat western reaches, but at Apacha, the ground would begin to rise into the rugged mountains that ran down the spine of Kamchatka, and the going would be slower.

While Karpov could lay claim to all the turf his men now occupied, it mattered very little to the Japanese as long as they held the key eastern port at *Kazantochi*, and the big islands off that southern tip that anchored the Kuriles to the peninsula. They stood like Singapore had in Yamashita's campaign, fortified islands at the end of that long peninsula. It was there that their real power base was established.

Known as the *Kita Chishima* Fortress Region, Shumshu Island had a seaplane base, and three other airfields defended by nine fortified areas and the 73rd Brigade of the 91st Infantry Division, including three tank companies of the 11th Regiment. There were numerous bunkers at all likely invasion sites, and underground facilities well protected from bombardment or attack.

The much bigger island of Paramushir had two more airfields in the north close to Shumushu, where the channel between the two islands provided all the good naval anchorages. There was also Suribachi Airfield along the southeast coast, and the Musashi Naval Base and airfield at Karabu Zaki on the southern tip of the island. Here was the 74th Brigade of the 91st Division, with numerous fortified positions and AA installations.

The campaign had many objectives. Karpov wanted to make good on the threats he had leveled earlier, re-occupy lost ground, secure that port and anchorage at Petropavlovsk, and all those vital airfields on the peninsula. If further developed, he hoped they would be a strong lure for the Americans, outflanking any Japanese move in to the Aleutians, threatening the Kuriles, and providing bases from which US Bombers could even strike Japan.

The first convoy loomed out of the ice fog like frozen grey shadows. *Anadyr* Class icebreakers *Saratov* and *Krasin* led the way, with 500 Marines on each ship to make the first landings. Behind them came the small convoy

of Siberian “Timber Ships,” *Komoles*, *Sevzaples*, *Klara Cetkin*, and *Maxim Gorky*. Next came the old refrigerator ships, *Rion*, *Mironych*, *Krasny Partisan*, and *Krestyanin*. Above them hovered three airships, *Novosibirsk*, *Abakan* and *Andarva*, and *Kirov* watched over the whole flock, with a pair of destroyers riding shotgun on either side of the convoy.

Of course, none of these grandiose scenarios ever entered the minds of the Japanese. The north had been theirs for so long that it seemed an endemic part of their empire, never to be lost again. Even as this first bold move was made in the game, with Karpov’s Knights leaping from Magadan to the distant forgotten reaches of Kamchatka, the Japanese still never clearly saw or believed the attack was anything more than a nuisance. They would soon learn otherwise, or as Karpov would put things, they would soon learn who they were now dealing with.

Chapter 15

When word came of the landings the Japanese did not quite know what to make of it. A small security detachment at the Lenino airfield, about 80 kilometers east of the landing operation on the coast, radioed to report it was under attack. The Lieutenant who took the report thought it was just another instance of partisan activity. The vast up country region of Kamchatka was never securely held outside of Petropavlovsk. Disgruntled partisans would occasionally raid hamlets around the new Japanese airfields under development in the west. All the Japanese usually had to do was send up a *shotai* of planes from the southern or eastern fields, and a few strafing runs would be enough to settle the matter. Then, one plane would land at the air strip to refuel, while the other two waited above for their turn.

If the outpost garrison was lucky, the pilots would bring them rice wine or saké, and sometimes a call might come in just because the garrison wanted a visit like this. But Lenino, now called Suyako by the Japanese, would never call back. Then a second message came in that raised an eyebrow. A large airship had been spotted just east of Apache, another 45 kilometers east of Suyako, the gateway to the road east through the mountain valleys.

“Airship?” said the Lieutenant. “What kind of plane is it?”

“Not a plane, sir. A giant airship. And there is something else in the sky—a very strange aircraft. It has no wings! It is low over the road about two kilometers east.”

“Then go and see what it is doing.” The Lieutenant shook his head, thinking the outpost security company had more than enough saké as things stood.

Karpov’s opening moves were Knight’s Moves, the daring attack of his 22nd Air Mobile Battalion aboard Airship Division 3. He was posting two companies to guard the road as it wound inland, following the winding course of the Platnikova River. With those lead elements, was a most unusual aircraft spotted by the Japanese at Apache, a KA-40 off the deck of *Kirov* carrying Sergeant Kandemir Troyak and a pathfinder squad of Marines. The outpost at Apache would never call back again either.

The weather was heavy, with a thick overcast and frigid temperatures in the mountains. This precluded any aerial reconnaissance that day, which would allow the little invasion to get a secure footing on the coast, and begin moving inland on the only road available. The odd reports eventually found

their way to the desk of Brigadier Kenji Ozawa of the 4th Independent Mixed Brigade at Petropavlovsk, and he pursed his lips, thinking.

He looked at his map, his finger tracing along the main road, which ran northwest from the harbor following the Avacha River through Yelzevo to the village of Koryaki. From there, it turned slightly southwest, winding around the massif of Mount Ostraya, and finding a tree-sewn river valley that led to the site of the new airfield at Nachiki. Then it jogged northwest again until it reached the Platnikova River, where it split. One branch went north through the tiny settlement of Malki, the other went south, down through the hunting settlement of Kostogor, following the river southwest to Apacha, and then Lenino Airfield.

A third report had just come in from the guard outpost at Malki. That incident involved the troublesome local native Koryak tribesmen, and the report indicated a large group of horsemen was coming down that northern branch of the road. Was that what all this fuss was this morning? The Koryak out raiding for food and supplies when the hunting went bad? Yet when he learned none of the other outposts had reported in, he grew more concerned. He turned to an adjutant on his staff, still wondering what was happening.

“What unit is stationed on the main road northwest of Nachiki?”

“Sir, we have posted the 67th Machine Canon Company at Dal’niy.”

“There are trucks there?”

“Six halftracks, and three motorcycle squads.”

“Send them to investigate this report at Malni.”

The order was radioed, the unit unhappy to have to take to their vehicles that grey morning, the cold intense in the mountain valley, and a light snow on the ground. They tramped out, and the halftracks rattled down the road. Fifteen kilometers later, they came to a clearing where it bent towards the river, and Sergeant Kimmoura knew the fork was just ahead.

* * *

Zykov heard them first, for he always had good ears in the mountains. Cold as it was, the Russians were in their element now, and moved about with lighthearted energy, glad to be on home turf again. For Sergeant Troyak, the region was very near his birthplace, which was farther north on the coast of the Chukchi Peninsula.

“What is it?” said Troyak.

“Vehicles—on the road to the north. Four.... Maybe more. It sounds like tracks.”

“Tanks?”

“Possibly, but the engines sound more like trucks. Maybe halftracks.”

Troyak listened, looking over his shoulder. Most of the platoon was scattered down the road, looking for positions near the bridge. He looked at Zykov. “Bring them up.”

The corporal nodded, and was off at a run. Thirty yards down the road he caught the eye of Private Gomel, and spun his finger in the air three times before pointing north. That was enough to get the message flashed from one man to another, all the way back to the bridge.

The men took little time getting up to the edge of the open ground, where Troyak now stood watching the road north, hands on his hips, eyes narrowed, a stony silence about him. The noise of vehicles was very evident now, and the Sergeant slowly turned to his men, a light platoon of five squads.

“Sniper team, pick your own ground. Koronet team, left to that notch. Mortar team a hundred yards back on the fallen log. Bullpups on either side of the road with a rifle section. Leave the Autogrenade MG stowed. Move!”

The men were all wearing their arctic whites, and now they moved like ghostly shadows, rushing to positions and swinging their assault rifles off shoulders as they went. Troyak had picked out a good position himself near a stump and boulder, and now he pinched off his collar microphone. His flak jacket was also a short range radio, and he sent a brief message on a secure channel.

“Grey Wolf One to KA-40. We have contact. Standby.”

“Affirmative Grey Wolf. Contact reported. We’re ready if needed. Standing by.”

They saw the first vehicle on the road ahead, and Zykov had been right. It was actually a Type 98 Ho-Hi flack gun chassis, designed to mount a 20mm AA gun. They were few in number, but the Japanese found the tracks gave them good traction on the mountain roads, and this particular vehicle was eventually going to be posted at the new Nachiki Airfield. A second vehicle, just a standard infantry truck, came round the bend about thirty feet behind.

Troyak pinched off his collar mike again, and spoke one word. “Koronet.”

* * *

Back at Brigade Headquarters the reports were now as thick as the heavy sky. Another village in the north reported enemy horsemen, and the cavalry unit at Kostogor south on the road from Troyak's position indicated they were also under attack. Yet it was the silence that weighed most heavily on General Ozawa, the silence from Lenino Airfield, from Apacha and Malki. No one at those outposts could be raised on the radio, which led him to conclude something more substantial than a tribal raid was now underway. He took the liberty of sending a message to Lt. General Fuzai Tsutsumi at 91st Division HQ, informing him of the difficulties. He was told to do what he had already decided, wait for the weather to clear and send up planes to reconnoiter the entire road.

Then the radio hut reported the security mountain cavalry detachment at Kostogor was reporting strange aircraft, and what looked like large artillery observation balloons, as was Dal'niy a further 50 kilometers up the road. An alarming picture was developing, but one the General was having real difficulty comprehending. Those were isolated and difficult mountain roads. How could there be so many attacks reported in that terrain, and all at once? The notion that airships and helicopters were leap frogging assault groups forward along the road to clear it for the main body never entered his mind.

Weather or no weather, he could see a threat on the map now, and took stronger action. "Colonel Azaki!" he shouted at a staff officer. The 14th battalion at Koryaki is to move immediately to Nachiki Airfield. The regimental group at Mitsunami will then move to Koryachi and await further orders."

Halfway down the long valley road to Nachiki, the 14th Battalion would run into Troyak and his Marines. They had halted the advance of Sergeant Kimmoura's 67th Machine Canon Company, blasting his lead vehicles to oblivion and then opening up with the Bullpup MGs and two 82mm Mortars. The sergeant thought he had run into a full battalion, and ordered the vehicles at the back of his column to turn about and head back to Dal'niy. Troyak was soon joined by the local Koryak cavalry militias, and so he took to the helicopters, leaping ahead over a high mountain ridge beyond Nachiki Airfield to take up a new blocking position on the road leading northwest.

When that report came in by radio, Brigadier Ozawa stopped for a

moment. “Yet there are no attacks reported at Nachiki?”

“No sir, all is quiet there.”

“Then the enemy must be using these observation balloons to float over the mountain passes and put troops on the ground behind our advancing units.”

He had suddenly stumbled into the realization of what was actually happening. All his initial responses had been deftly bypassed in this manner, and now his troops were out on the long road to Nachiki like a string of pearls. But what to do? He had already moved one regiment northwest to Koryaki. Should he leave it there, or order it to press on to Nachiki? If there were attacks all along that road, as far as Lenino, then something more substantial was coming at him. Of course? How else could this port be attacked? The enemy certainly could not come here by sea, and so they were coming on the one road that would take them to Petropavlovsk, to *Kazantochi*, the land of volcanoes.

He briefly considered moving that regiment down the valley road to Nachiki. I am here to protect the ports and airfields, he thought. It appears that the enemy has already taken the landing strips at Lenino. Nachiki may be indefensible. They are already behind it with these balloons! So I will defend my primary assets here.

Now he looked to find Colonel Azaki again, but the man had already run off to convey his earlier orders. Cursing, he grabbed a Sergeant. “Go find the Colonel and tell him those last orders are hereby cancelled. The regimental group will wait at Koryaki as ordered, but the 14th Independent Battalion must return there at once.”

So when Troyak and his Marines opened up on that battalion, realizing they were going to have a good fight on their hands, they were surprised when the enemy quietly fell back, then started withdrawing back up the road.

“I don’t think they like us,” said Zykov.

“What have you been eating?” said Komilov. “They can probably smell you way up here!”

Troyak said nothing, watching the Japanese infantry pull back with good discipline and then listening as the sound of their vehicles rumbled on the road below his position. He could see immediately what was happening.

“They’re pulling out,” he said in a low voice. “Notify home base. Enemy consolidating at Point Bravo. Proceeding to Sorka as planned.”

Point Bravo was Koryaki up ahead, where the road winding around the

mountainous bulk of Gora Ostraya finally reached the river that ran through that town and down to Petropavlovsk. That was where they were going to try and make a stand, and Mount Sorka to the northwest of that position was his next objective. They were going to flank the Japanese defense before they could even get it established.

At Troyak's signal, the noisome dark shape of the KA-40 soon appeared overhead, landing in a small clearing. His squads boarded and the helo climbed into the grey sky, heading northwest towards the looming stone shadow of Mount Sorka.

Part VI

Shadows of Things To Come

“Shadow is ever besieged, for that is its nature. Whilst darkness devours, and light steals. And so one sees shadow ever retreat to hidden places, only to return in the wake of the war between dark and light.”

— **Stephen Erikson**, *House of Chains*

Chapter 16

Armed and well fueled, Kapitan Heinrich turned south, following in the shadow of Germany's most successful commerce raiders, and thinking he had every chance of taking that honor and title for his own ship. He had now sunk eleven ships and 68,413 tons, but he had a very long way to go. The wolf in sheep's clothing, raider *Pinguin*, still held the record, sinking, capturing, or mining 28 ships totaling 154,710 gross registered tons. *Atlantis* had come close to taking the crown away, killing or capturing 22 ships totaling 144,384 tons, a most impressive feat in her amazing 602 day odyssey.

All told, in Fedorov's history, the German commerce raiders would sink 800,611 tons in WWII, far more than all German and Japanese warships combined, which managed only 324,932 tons. Both *Atlantis* and *Pinguin* died under the guns of British cruisers, but that would not be the case for *Kaiser Wilhelm*, thought Heinrich.

I've got my Iron Cross for sinking *Gloucester*, but now I want my Oak Leaves, and more tonnage. *Rösselsprung* has only just begun. My orders are to head for the Indian Ocean and interdict the sea lanes. But before I go there I will make a few unexpected ports of call. The British have several isolated island outposts on our present course, one at Ascension Island, and another at Saint Helena....

Ascension Island Base was administered by the British Cable and Wireless Company, part of the infrastructure for the trans-Atlantic cables. Now it was also the location of a "Huff Duff" station established in 1939. That was slang for HF/DF, or High Frequency Direction Finding. It was a means of snooping on the high frequency radio signals between Germany and her far flung U-Boats, particularly when they transmitted signals home. Admiral Raeder wanted the base put out of action, in spite of the risks that mission entailed.

The Americans would come and build a useful airstrip there, dubbed Wideawake Field, and some Aviation Engineers were already there. Nobody got much sleep on the island, for it was a favorite roosting place for the Sooty Tern, a bird that was infamous for its incessant, noisome calls. The Hawaiians even named the birds "ewa ewa," which meant cacophony, so the airfield was well named, as its service crews were too often wide awake at

night with all that noise. The project was still in the planning stage, but it would soon see squadrons of Aircobra fighters and B-24 bombers arriving to transform the island into a vital airfield.

Now, in early 1942, the birds were there, but not the planes. The island was the remnant of an extinct volcano, its surface pot marked by small peaks and calderas, one in the shape of a horseshoe that had been called the Devil's Riding School. The 35 square miles of rock had but a single lonesome tree, called "the forest," and it was home to little more than a colony of hawksbill turtles, the terns, 170 hardy residents, and a modest collection of Navy and RAF personnel at the small settlement of Georgetown on the northwest coast. They manned the small Huff Duff station, and a weather post up on a 600 meter hill near a place known as "Devil's Cauldron" on the east coast of the island. It seemed like it would be an easy kill for *Kaiser Wilhelm*, except for one thing—HMS *Hood* was there—at least a couple of her teeth, if not the ship itself.

In 1935, the venerable battlecruiser underwent a refit to downsize her secondary armament from 5.5-inch guns to the dual purpose 4-inch guns that could also serve to bolster her AA defense. Two of her old 5.5 inchers, serial numbers 56 and 78, were freighted down to Ascension Island, where they were installed at Fort Bedford, Cross Hill, overlooking Georgetown. There they stood like stolid square blocks of stone, along with a pair of old Victorian era cannon that had once kept that same watch in earlier times.

Just a few weeks ago, the German U-124 was out on her seventh patrol and was caught on the surface by the British light cruiser *Dunedin*. That might have been a death sentence for the German boat, but they fired a pair of torpedoes at very long range that got lucky that day. Both torpedoes struck home, and *Dunedin* went down in just 17 minutes. Emboldened by this success, U-124 approached Ascension Island, whereupon those 5.5-inch guns from HMS *Hood* gave the Germans a very cold welcome. Raeder wanted the shore batteries put out of action, and now he had the means of settling the matter in *Kaiser Wilhelm*.

The winds were howling that day, as they often were, sounding like the disembodied wails of lost souls that had been shipwrecked there over the decades, their bones still buried in the stony sand and gravel of "Deadman's Beach." In spite of the wind, it was "Summer" on Ascension, for the island's warmest months were December and January.

Kaiser Wilhelm had come south like a grey shadow, with the *Goeben*

skillfully flying off recon patrols to spot enemy shipping and allow the task force to avoid detection. They would feast later, but now they had business with the British outpost on Ascension. Heinrich had planned to stand off out of range of those 5.5-inch guns and let his 15-inchers do the work, but the visibility from the ship at the required ranges was not good enough to allow Schirmer to spot his target.

Marco Ritter had been up to have a look, and landed on the *Goeben* after a brief patrol. “The island itself is in the clear,” he said “but there is a circle of clouds all around the damn thing.” He looked for his protégé, Hans Rudel, now become somewhat of a living legend aboard the ship for his dive bombing skills.

“Look, Hans, I think you can get up there and do the job easily enough. Take two 500 pounders, one under each wing.”

Ritter sold Kapitan Falkenrath on the idea, and the *Goeben* closed up to flash lamp signals to the task force CO, as they were observing strict radio silence as they crept up on the island. Some minutes later, the lamps on the high mainmast of *Kaiser Wilhelm* signaled back—*proceed as planned*. The *Goeben* winked farewell, and then slipped off to find some open sea. Half an hour later Hans Rudel was in the air.

“I could hit a tank on the ground nine times out of ten,” Rudel had once boasted, and it was really no brag. “Those gun batteries will be much bigger. I’ll get them both.”

Marco Ritter wanted to come along, so the two of them went up, climbing up through the low clouds to find the island. He was soon looking down on the dirty black peaks of the volcanic cones, with flows of grey ash and red soil staining the flanks of the highlands. Only in the center was there any spot of green, the well named Green Mountain, with its thick vegetation growing from the rich volcanic soil and watered by ceaseless rainfall. Aside from that one spot, Ritter and Rudel could have been flying over a base on Mars from the look of the place. Its austere, barren landscape seemed almost otherworldly.

As they came in, Rudel spotted signs of human habitation and life, the tall white spire of St. Mary’s Church in Georgetown, built in 1843. Above it was the dull reddish brown height of Cross Point, and he had little trouble spotting those guns. He looked over his shoulder, seeing Marco Ritter waggle his wings to wish him good luck, but just smiled. I won’t need it, he thought. Luck is for those too short on skill to get the job done. I’ll hit those guns with

no trouble at all.

When his *Stuka* came screaming down from above, it was a severe shock to everyone who saw or heard it. The sound of the *Jericho* trumpet sent hundreds of Scooby Terns skyward in a chaotic swarm, and then the first bomb came whistling down, right on target. The second dive would get the other gun, just as Rudel promised.

Not wanting to remain idle, Ritter took his fighter down, swooping around the horseshoe caldera of the Devil's Riding School, past the Dark Crater and then strafing a group of trucks and personnel that were out beginning survey work for the airfield. The sudden attack, signaling the presence of German ships nearby, was quite a shock. Soon the airwaves were alive with signals, and Kapitan Heinrich smiled as his B-Dienst Operators picked up the frantic traffic.

"It seems we've shaken up more than a few birds," he said to Jung with a grin. "Very well, now it's time we were gone. There's nothing more to be done here. Play out your ruse."

As their presence was already known to the enemy, he instructed his signals team to send a message home indicating the assigned target was destroyed and the ship was heading home to Gibraltar. If the enemy decryption teams were as good as his own men, he would see what the British did with that little tidbit.

As Alan Turing would soon explain to Tovey, anything with the word encryption attached to it eventually came to his attention, and he soon learned of the unexpected attack on Ascension Island... and a good deal more.

* * *

Something else was in the signal, he was sure of it. The longer he worked with it, the more he became convinced that the intercept teams had picked up two overlapping messages, and they must have been copied into one traffic report. Yet one was quite different from the other. While parts of the signal contained recognizable phrases, they were not normal German radio nomenclature.

He ran his theory by Peter Twinn, and the two men eventually agreed that something had been bundled up in the wrong package. Yet being a very patient and persistent man, Alan Turing would not let the other snippets of the message go. He wanted to know what it was, and curiosity was a most

motivating state of mind. He put his labyrinthine brain, and his machines on the problem, and in a week he had a breakthrough, which he shared with Twinn.

"I'm certain of these three characters now—K, D and T. But this other word I've sorted out, Charger, I wonder what it could mean."

"Most likely a code word," said Twinn, "But there's no mention of it in the material we already have—nothing in the *Kurzsignalheft* code book. I've checked them all, rendezvous code names, weather states, harbor names, ships, dates and times. Nothing."

"That's what's so disturbing," said Turing. "The Germans might be switching to a new code."

"Then why do we still get so much traffic using *Funkschlüssel* code. I've seen three or four *M3* coded messages just this morning."

"Who can say," said Turing. "But this hybrid signal isn't *Funkschlüssel* or *M3*. It's something new. And this isn't the only oddity to come across my desk this week. Have a look in that tray... The Manila envelope."

Twinn took the envelope in hand, noting the label. "My, this has been a long time in transit. All the way from Saint Helena?"

"Apparently so."

Twinn opened the envelope, sliding out a photograph and pursing his lips as he took a close look. "A destroyer," he said. "But not one of ours... Flush deck construction from the look of it... rather large."

He flipped the photo over to note the location of the sighting as well south of Saint Helena. "Strange," he said. "but it looks like an American ship."

"That it is," said Turing.

"The focus is way off. Damn thing looks like it's a ghost ship. Look here, you can see the wave sets right through the image of the ship. Are you sure this wasn't another dodgy mistake in a darkroom somewhere?"

"That thought occurred to me," said Turing, "but there's something else amiss with that photo. You see, I've identified the ship, or at least I know its class. That's an American destroyer alright—*Fletcher* Class."

"*Fletcher*? But those ships are still under construction."

"Correct. This one seems complete, except for that ghostly image you speak of. Yet from all I can determine, the first of this class won't be commissioned until June of this year in Boston Naval Yard—Hull Number 445."

"I suppose a little bird told you that," said Twinn.

"Something like that. Now here's the rub... I've had a good long look at that photo under magnification. The technicians are fairly certain the hull number on this one is 654."

"Did you mean 4 – 5 – 6?" Twinn asked, thinking Turing had passed a dyslexic moment. "That would make it ship number two in the class."

"Yes it would, but the number was 6 – 5 – 4."

"Rather odd," said Twinn with characteristic understatement. "I suppose you've asked the Americans about that hull number."

"That I have," said Turing. "It's on the schedule, to be laid down in July of this year."

That brought Peter Twinn up short. He inclined his head to one side, giving Turing a long look. "In July of this year? Well, that certainly doesn't make any sense. How could we have a photograph of the bloody ship if it isn't even laid down yet?"

"Precisely," said Turing, and he smiled. "There's one other odd thing about this photograph. See the mark in the top right corner? It reads 'T1,' and that means this was a test shot for the camera. Usually there's nothing on them. They just run the shutter and all to make sure things are in working order. These photos are normally just shots of the empty sea. All I usually get from them is sea conditions at the time the others in the set were taken... But not this one."

* * *

It would begin like that, with a mangled message, an unaccountable photo, little oddities that began to accumulate, growing more substantial, like slowly deepening shadow creeping on the scene of the war in early 1942. It was a shadow of something impending, a harbinger, promising grave consequences. It was a shadow of things to come.

The photograph Turing shared with Peter Twinn would not be the last. There were others, arriving week by week, all in the routine hustle and bustle of normal deliveries to Bletchley Park for analysis. Normally Turing wouldn't take an interest in such things, being much absorbed with his cryptography, but this time he did. He was in and out of Hut 8, quite often, hobnobbing with the same chaps that had sent him that double signal with the discordant code stuck in the middle. Then he found it...

It was another of those inexplicable discoveries, all strangely gathered into one place—a very special and highly secret place—the same place where he had dragged a similar old box out of those dark recesses of the archive room in Bletchley Park.

With the war heating up, and being much absorbed with the creation and employment of his fabled “Turing Machines,” the noted Cryptologist had been completely preoccupied in recent months. Turing had friends in very high places within the Royal Navy, and it was high time that he took his discovery to one of them instead of bantering it about with associates like Peter Twinn.

In all that time Admiral Tovey had not seen much of the man, being much preoccupied himself, though he always kept Turing in mind. Then, after the wound he suffered in the Battle of Fuerteventura, and as much to call the man on the carpet for the losses taken by the Royal Navy in that engagement, Tovey was ordered back to London. When Turing learned he was in country, he rang the Admiral up and asked for a meeting. It was there that Tovey would learn just what Turing had found, and what it all might mean.

Chapter 17

The Admiral was first summoned to a private meeting with Churchill, where the two men discussed the entire situation at some length. It was perhaps that meeting alone that saved Tovey's head, for Admiral Pound had been inclined to relieve him after Fuerteventura, sending Admiral Bruce Fraser in his place while Tovey was recalled to London. It was Churchill who finally restrained Pound, for Tovey was "in the know" concerning matters of the deepest possible secrecy, while Pound remained "out of the loop" and increasingly bothered by failing health that would soon take his life.

Perhaps more than anything, it was the key that Tovey now carried to that meeting in his jacket pocket, and the disclosure of all that had happened during the "*Rodney* incident," that saved the Admiral's neck. Churchill emerged from that meeting with renewed confidence in Tovey, saying that he had discussed the recent setbacks and losses at sea with the Admiral at length, and had become convinced that every prudent and seaworthy maneuver had been made by the Admiral to ensure the best possible outcome.

"Without him," said Churchill, "I can only imagine that our losses might have been far greater, and with him, we have sunk the *Graf Zeppelin*, *Gneisenau*, *Richelieu*, *Strasbourg*, *Bretagne*, *Provence*, *Caio Duilio*, *Andrea Doria* and *Littorio*, great ships the enemy can no longer put against us at sea. Beyond that, while our own forces have sustained damage, we have put more of the same on the enemy, pounding *Normandie*, *Bismarck* and Germany's mightiest ship, the *Hindenburg*, and sending all three to the dry docks in this latest engagement, where we have every hope the RAF will keep them good company."

So Tovey was able to retain his position as Admiral of Home Fleet, though several changes were now to be made in the way that fleet would be handled. Admiral Holland would be designated "Commander in Chief, The Nore." A command that was principally involved with the operations and safe passage of eastern convoys, its responsibility was widened to include all operations north of the GIUK line, as it was thought that one man could simply not effectively managed that region along with the Med and Atlantic. Holland still remained "in the dark" as to the real nature of *Kirov* and *Kinlan*, or "the two Ks" as Churchill called them. This change allowed Tovey to focus his energy on the Atlantic, and the Azores was now being rapidly

developed as Britain's major anchorage south of the Home Islands. Convoys called on the ports daily, bringing fuel, munitions, equipment, engineers and other supplies. While he was in London checking on the disposition of a few of those convoys, Tovey received a call from the enigmatic Turing, his eyes brightening when he heard the other man's voice.

"Ah, Mister Turing," he said warmly. "I was meaning to have a chat with you myself. Good of you to call."

"Admiral," said Turing. "I'm afraid I have yet another little mystery on my hands here. I wonder if you might be able to stop over at Station X for a little talk."

That was what Tovey did, where he soon learned that yet another unaccountable file box had turned up in the Bletchley Park Archives. "It was right under the first one," said Turing. "Completely unmarked. When I made that first discovery, I was so riveted by the contents of that box that I never thought to look further. God only knows how long it's been there, but it looks as though it has been sitting there undisturbed for years. Unfortunately, given the contents of this second box, that would be impossible."

"How so?"

"Impossible in the same way the contents of the first box could not exist when I found them in 1940. We were both quite perplexed to see our names there on those files, and information dating to 1942."

"You mean to say this has happened again?" said Tovey. "There's more of the same?"

"Not exactly," said Turing. "Oh, there's certainly more, but the information is quite different than anything we uncovered in that first box. In fact, it has nothing to do with the Russian battlecruiser, and I'm happy to say that neither of us can be called to blame for generating any of this new data. Our names appear nowhere in the material. Here..." He handed Tovey a photograph, which he eyed with some interest.

"An aircraft carrier," he said, for the photo depicted a frontal view of a large warship, its prominent bow coming right at the photographer, and the high flat edge of the flight deck crowning the top.

"Note that fellow standing there on the flight deck. He'll give you a good sense of the scale of this ship—and then have a look at these."

More photos followed, and Turing explained that several had come in through regular delivery channels, posing quiet little mysteries when Turing got hold of one or another part of the elephant. Then he found the mother

lode in that box, as if it had been collected by someone for a very long time, though no one at Bletchley Park would confess to the crime. One showed the carrier steaming off the unmistakable silhouette of the Rock of Gibraltar, and then another a close-up, as if taken from the flight deck itself. That third image showed the workings of the carrier's island superstructure, the weather decks crowded with crewmen. There, on the mainmast and fluttering behind some well developed radar antennae, they had their first clue as to the origins and identity of this ship—the flag.

“An American aircraft carrier?” said Tovey. “Off Gibraltar?”

“Well I can't make out any colors in that second image off Gibraltar,” said Turing, “but yes, that third photo makes it quite obvious. I've compared the island superstructures in both images, and I'm convinced it's the same ship. Those other flags will be of interest to you.”

“Yes,” said Tovey, studying the photo carefully. “Naval pendants for signaling.”

“American, of course,” said Turing. “They've run up three letters at the end, if I am not mistaken, and I'm seldom mistaken Admiral. The letters are K – D – T. The Americans would say it this way: Kilo, Delta, Tango. Individually those letters have assigned meanings. Kilo means: ‘I wish to communicate with you.’ Delta indicates: ‘I am maneuvering with difficulty.’ And Tango means: ‘Do not pass ahead of me—keep clear.’”

“They might mean that when hoisted on the halyards,” said Tovey. “then again, they might simply be a call sign.”

Turing raised an eyebrow. “You mean like a radio call sign?”

“Certainly. Whispers from the fleet, my man. Ships at sea often hoist flags simply to identify themselves, and also to send little messages such as those you just related.”

“Indeed,” said Turing. “A simple identification... And here I was trying to piece together the meaning of those longer messages. Might they serve a dual purpose, to both identify and communicate at the same time?”

“I suppose so,” said Tovey. “But it would be rather clever. I can't imagine an American aircraft carrier off Gibraltar, and I'd certainly know about it. Nothing comes to mind in recent years. Could that photo have been taken well before the war?”

“Admiral, I'm afraid the opposite might be true....”

That struck Tovey, and he gave Turing a frown. As if to answer his objection, Turing simply handed the Admiral another document.

“Now have a look at this...”

It was a line drawing of a map that showed the movement of what appeared to be several vessels of the United States Navy. The course tracks were clearly marked and labeled: “USS *Albemerle*, Task Force 88, USS *Norton Sound*.” Beneath this there was a single line of typewritten text which read: “Task Force 88 track chart, 1 August to 6 September, 1958, ARGUS.”

“Task Force 88,” said Tovey. “1958? What do you make of this?”

“The dates could be fabricated as a thin security measure, but I doubt it. As to that Task Force designation, again, discrete inquiries with my American contacts lead nowhere. There is a USS *Albemerle* presently in service, a seaplane tender. It was commissioned December 20, 1940, and when the war started for the Americans it was at Norfolk. They sent it to Argentina, and then on to Iceland where it ran into that nasty storm on January 15—hurricane force winds. It’s back in Norfolk now, fit as a fiddle. As for the other ship, there is no USS *Norton Sound* in the United States Navy... At least not today.”

“Not today? You mean to say—”

“Yes, I do,” Turing cut in. “There is no such vessel as we speak, but apparently there will be. My sources tell me the Americans have such a ship on the drawing boards, another seaplane tender, *Currituck*-class, it’s currently scheduled in the US maritime naval buildup program, only here’s the rub. That ship won’t even be laid down until September of this year, at least according to my sources. They tell me commissioning would be expected sometime in 1945.”

“Very curious,” said Tovey.

Now Turing handed the Admiral the image of that destroyer he had shared with Peter Twinn. “A *Fletcher* Class destroyer. That photo also images a ship that will not be laid down until July of this year. In fact, the lead ship in that class was laid down in June of 1941, and won’t be commissioned until June of this year. That the photo even exists is one little mystery, just like the others; that it was sent to me by our own RAF reconnaissance fellows out of Saint Helena is quite another little mystery. It came in a few weeks ago, before I found this other lot.”

Tovey was flabbergasted. “Our own forces took a photograph of a ship that has yet to be commissioned?”

“That looks to be the case,” said Turing.

“Well,” Tovey folded his arms. “If I hadn’t walked about on such a ship

myself, and made the confidence of its lately departed Admiral, I would call all this balderdash. But having the lessons taught to us by that Russian Admiral in mind, this cuts rather near the bone. After all, we still have *Argos Fire* and that little flotilla of service vessels I've been hiding in the Azores, and not one will be commissioned within our lifetimes. What about that aircraft carrier? I'm certain there has been no contemporary American vessel anywhere near Gibraltar, as far as I know, and that goes a good long ways."

"Correct," said Turing, "especially since the Germans have the place. Unfortunately, that photograph had no date or time stamp, so we can't determine when that happened. That said, I'm inclined to think this image is a shadow of things to come. It hasn't happened yet, but it might, because this is another ship that does not exist, just like that destroyer. Those photographs depict a new class of American aircraft carrier, the *Essex* class. They've a dozen on order as things stand, with the first due for commissioning soon."

"This ship?"

"I'm afraid not. Note the hull number there, CVS-40. None of the scheduled ships would get that designation. In fact, my American chaps shook their heads at it. What's a CVS they asked me? No such animal." Turing handed Tovey yet another photograph. "Birds of the same feather," he said flatly. "Ever seen aircraft like that?"

The image showed a pair of twin engine planes, each clearly bearing US Navy markings. Tovey squinted. "I'm not familiar with this aircraft type. Have you looked it up?"

"Oh, I tried that bang away when I saw this photo. Have a look there, right beneath the word Navy. That's the Squadron number, VS-32, yet after making discrete inquiries, the Yanks say they have no such squadron designated. I investigated further and can now confidently say that no such aircraft presently exists in the American inventory." He let that hang there, then slowly turned the photo over, his finger pointing to the time stamped date label. "You'll see that reads August, in the year 1958."

"1958 again. The same year indicated on that map."

"Quite so."

"Well," said Tovey, "ships and planes that haven't been built yet, with course tracks marked on a map for an operation sixteen years hence. And here you're telling me the RAF is photographing them in the South Atlantic. They've been *here*, in our time?"

"Seeing is believing," said Turing.

“Something many of us here have learned in the most alarming ways,” Tovey agreed.

“Only in this case, Admiral, there was nothing to see when a number of these photographs were taken. They were test shots, usually snapped on the empty sea, just to test the calibration of the camera. Then, when developed, these images were found. One interesting thing about this... Every shot was taken very near, or on, the course tracks marked on that map.”

“I see....” Tovey had a look of deep concern on his face now. “What about this other word, typed in all capital letters on that map diagram you showed me—ARGUS. That wouldn’t be our own HMS *Argus*, would it?”

“I hardly think so,” said Turing. “Strange... *Argus* was the first Aircraft carrier ever built, back in 1918, and here we have a look at one that hasn’t even been born—still in the womb.”

“What could all this mean?” asked Tovey, expecting that Turing would have everything sorted out by now, yet he was disappointed.

“Nobody seems to know,” said Turing. “But why not ask our Russian friend, Mister Fedorov? He’s a man who can see all the shadows of things to come. If this is something that *may* happen, he might already know about it.”

“He’s in the Pacific,” said Tovey. “And that is another matter we shall have to discuss.”

“What about that special radio they sent over to *Invincible*?”

“How did you know about that?” Tovey gave him an odd look.

“Well I’ve learned that it uses a kind of encryption for set-to-set signals transfer. My dear Admiral, anything with the word encryption attached to it is likely to come to my attention at one time or another. Now I’ve heard *Invincible* is scheduled for a refit. Perhaps you could take a stroll to the radio room?”

“I’ll see to it,” said Tovey.

That statement was the beginning of yet another round of mystery that would soon complicate the already fragile state of affairs in WWII. Tovey would make his call, and come to learn more than he expected from Fedorov, who used his access to the history files in his library to solve the riddles found in Turing’s second file box. It was a strange tale, one that involved hundreds of personnel in the US Army, Navy and Air Force, with forces scattered to distant outposts over vast reaches of the globe, and all to conduct an arcane scientific experiment, conceived and hastily launched in just five months.

It was top secret, a clandestine operation that saw a group of nine ships slip quietly out to sea from ports on two shores of the continental US. From Newport, Rhode Island, the aircraft carrier *Tarawa* went out in the company of two *Dealey* class destroyer escorts, the *Courtney* and *Hammerberg*, two more destroyers, the *Warrington* and *Bearss*, and two oilers, the *Neosho* and *Salamonie* for fleet replenishment.

Neosho was not the ship that had been destroyed in the recent Pearl Harbor disaster, but another by the same name, commissioned in 1954. Another ship, a seaplane tender named the USS *Albemarle* would slip away from Norfolk, Virginia, and take up a position near the Azores. The ninth ship was the USS *Norton Sound*, a seaplane tender converted to a missile test ship operating out of Port Hueneme, California. It would sail south into the Pacific, around Cape Horn and into the deep South Atlantic. There it would make a secret rendezvous on August 22, 1958, with *Tarawa*, the lead ship in Task Force 88, on a very special mission. For *Norton Sound* had a most unusual cargo aboard that day, three X-17A missiles, with each one holding a small 1.5 kiloton nuclear warhead.

Chapter 18

All these government agencies and armed services were now conspiring to conduct a great experiment. As Fedorov explained it to Tovey, the idea that would set it all in motion came from a most unexpected time and place. There was something about Lawrence Livermore Labs in Berkeley California that would stand as a thorn in the side of Mother Time. It would be the place where an intrepid band of scientists and researchers would one day find a way beneath her skirts, when they opened the continuum for the first time in May of 2020.

That first violation had been launched out of a sense of exploration and discovery, but was mounted at the edge of an impending disaster—born in the Canary Islands. The unstable slope of El Hierro, the volcano that makes up the mass of the Island of La Palma, had tumbled into the sea, and the resulting displacement of seawater would send a massive tsunami west towards the coast of the US Eastern Seaboard... Or would it? The project team led by Professor Dorland had every hope of reversing that catastrophe, and that was what they set their minds to do.

Yet decades before that, there were men working at that same lab who would unknowingly flirt with Mother Time, and one of them was an Electrical and Mechanical Engineer, a former elevator company owner, with a long time interest in accelerator physics and high-energy particles. Nicholas Constantine Christofilos had dabbled in these arcane arts, eventually creating an idea for a machine he called the “synchrotron,” a particular type of cyclic particle accelerator.

Christofilos would later go on to become a member of a group known as JASON, independent scientists advising the United States government on matters of science and technology. One of his major projects would be a top secret operation under the code name “Argus,” which was carried out in one of the most isolated regions of the world in August of 1958, deep in the South Atlantic. Argus was just one of many harebrained ideas conceived by the military as it tinkered at the edge of infinity, experimenting with military applications for the exotic aftereffects of nuclear detonations. It was one part fear, one part curiosity, and one part chaos, no matter how well it was all planned and calibrated by the methodical scientists that conceived it.

The fear was born of the new nuclear foe on the block, the Soviet Union.

It was thought that a radiation shield might be created with sufficient strength to interfere with the electronics aboard incoming ICBMs. This “shield” would itself come from the detonation of a small nuclear warhead at the edge of space, where the decaying electrons would become “trapped” in the earth’s magnetic field and create a shell of white noise around the globe as they bounced back and forth between two poles in that field. Known as the Argus Effect, the scientists wanted to see if it could actually be created, and then determine if it had any practical military application.

Very little was known about that operation, even in Fedorov’s history, where it passed quietly into obscurity after its completion. But in the distorted reality now underway in the alternate timeline where Fedorov now found himself marooned, Operation Argus would become the seed of major changes, a point of departure born of chaos, and one that would soon skew the lines of fate, another insult to time that contributed to the “Great Calamity” professor Dorland had so darkly warned Tovey and the others about at their Azores meeting in 1941. The curiosity of science, and the eagerness of the military to find some new defensive measure against the weapons they themselves brought to war, would now come face to face with the uncontrollable force of chaos, and the result would be something quite unexpected.

* * *

“A sailor lives for three things, chow call, pay call, and liberty call.” James R. Giles was a flight crewman in VS-32 assigned to the USS *Tarawa* that day, and he had just written that line into his journal of these events, which were finally coming to the boiling point insofar as the operation was concerned—but not the weather, which had grown progressively colder as the Task force moved south. The ship had been transformed from CVA-40, an attack carrier carrying squadrons of F9F Panthers, Cougars, and Sky Raiders, to a less dashing role as CVS-40, now entirely rigged out to be an ASW carrier facing a completely different threat.

In place of the sleek fighters and attack planes, the carrier now carried a group of stogy twin engine Grumman S2F Trackers. They were ideal for maritime patrol, the forerunners of the more modern S3 ASW planes on modern carriers, and they could carry the Mark 43 torpedo, designed specifically as an anti-submarine lance, before the Russians began to build

subs that could simply outrun the weapon. There were also several Sikorsky H-34 helos aboard, designated HSS-1 by the US Navy, mostly useful for search & rescue, and ship to ship transportation within the task force itself.

Giles had been out many times on routine patrol, flying with his buddy from Newton, Texas, Allyn Howard. These patrols were so uneventful that most of his journal had been filled with the innocent banter concerning the inevitable “Crossing of the Line” ceremony, where the uninitiated “Pollywogs” would face the terror and torture dreamt up by the old Shellbacks who had made the crossing before. King Neptune would be piped aboard as the ship reached the line of the equator, and he would rally his Shellback sons to the duty now before them, to humble, harass, harry, and humiliate the Pollywogs. One favorite ritual was the smearing of anything vile that could be found on the bare belly of the most portly Shellback aboard, dubbed “The Royal Baby.” The Pollywogs would then be forced to crawl to kiss the Royal Baby’s belly, paddled the whole way. The impending events of “Wog Day” seemed to dominate Giles mind, for he really knew nothing of the ship’s true mission.

The men had been told they would sail north when they set out, and it was not until they were aboard that they learned they would be heading south. Long days of humid and sweltering temperatures first saw the crew sleeping on deck, preferring the hard metal surface to the smothering oppression of the compartments below, but that soon changed. As the ships moved south, the weather worsened, temperatures dropped, and Giles wrote on August 19: “Weather growing colder by the day!” August 20: “Rough weather and fairly heavy seas. Deck pitching. Weather getting even colder.” August 21: “Flying as usual and weather steadily getting colder. And finally the arrival of an unexpected ship on August 22: “Rendezvous with the *Norton Sound*, a guided missile ship. Rough seas and heavy flying. We hope to be away from here by the end of next week.”

Giles and crew would see his hopes realized soon enough, but not before they saw something else, the first harbinger of the chaos inherent in the experiment these men were now about to conduct. In the early morning hours of August 27, at about 2:30AM, the ship had finally reached “Point Lima,” a carefully selected map coordinate that would correspond with a meridian of fate that arced up through the earth’s magnetic field, descending above the equator at a point as far north of that line as the ship was now south. That corresponding point was the Azores, which was where the seaplane tender

USS *Albemarle* was quietly waiting with radar sets, along with other land based monitors and planes flown from airfields on those islands. The first of the X-17A missiles were finally launched. If the experiment worked, and decaying electrons were indeed injected into the magnetic field, that was where they would migrate, to the so called “mirror point” which would then see them reverse course and head back to Lima Point.

45 minutes before “the event,” men were out on the frigid, snow covered flight deck struggling to launch large weather balloons, with sensors to spy on the doings then underway. General quarters was sounded, and the ship’s crew were all huddled below decks while a team of special men were posted on the flight deck in dark heavy rubber suits, with thick round goggles and special binoculars. They huddled around the squarish form of an Air Force truck mounting an MSQ-1A radar set on top, parked just forward of the island. They looked like dark, shadowy ghouls about a mastodon, waiting for some obscene ritual. Then the countdown would be sounded on the ship’s P.A. system, and the strange words were heard: “Buzzard away! Six minutes to Flash Light.”

The missile climbed up through the cold skies, and finally detonated, creating a horizon wide and piercingly bright flash in the sky that rippled along the cloud layer, and then shot off streamers of milky green auroras to the north and south. The experiment was working. The Argus Effect would become a proven reality, but it would do something no man there could have possibly anticipated.

* * *

Kaiser Wilhelm had finished up at Ascension Island and then sped away to the south, hoping the message they sent off home would put the British off their real intended course. Kapitan Heinrich would now plan his route around the Cape of Good Hope, but he intended to go very deep into the southern seas before he turned, too deep. He bypassed St. Helena to the west, thinking the British would be likely to have warships there as a precaution. That island marked the outer boundary of the southern convoy zone, and the enemy would likely be very vigilant.

Kaiser Wilhelm and *Goeben* would travel another 1750 nautical miles south, disappearing into the vast, empty sea. Kapitan Heinrich thought he might have a discrete look at the world’s most isolated inhabited island,

Tristan de Cunha. There were also a couple other little specks in the sea there, Inaccessible Island, and Nightingale. One of those, he thought, might offer a source of fresh water, but he found both quite barren and uninviting.

So he continued south towards the next volcanic rock in the sea, Gough Island. The ship was between that rock, and a very hard place, though no one knew it at that moment. The quiet empty sea and sky belied the chaos ahead, but that night they would sail through its portal. The first sign that anything was amiss would come was that bright flash of light in the sky, and then the strange auroras would waver and flow like silken phosphors in the moonless night, for its silver waxing gibbous sphere had set an hour earlier.

The night watchmen saw the light, and woke others. Soon many men were on deck, their necks craned upwards to see the ghostly aural display. The Eskimo peoples of the north believed these mysterious lights were bridges between one world and another, and in this case, the legend was very close to the truth. Sixteen years in the future, in that very same spot, Operation Argus had just launched the first of its three X-17A missiles off the snowy decks of the *USS Norton Sound*.

Aboard *Kaiser Wilhelm*, the watchmen on the high mainmast was taking in the show, when he saw the same eerie lights seem to hover low on the horizon. He looked, smiling with delight, and then his jaw slackened, his hand reaching quickly for his field glasses. Seconds later his hand was on the bell, his voice loud and strident.

“Ship off the starboard bow! Alarm! Alarm!”

* * *

James R. Giles was as restless as the men on Wideawake airfield that night. He had been hustled below decks, but he knew this was the moment the mission had brought them here to experience. When the ship’s alarm sounded again, he thought he might be hearing an all clear signal, but that was not the case.

“All hands, all hands. Stand to general quarters. This is no drill. Repeat, this is not a drill.”

Giles looked over at his friend Allyn Howard. “We already are at general quarters. What do they mean?”

“They mean get to general quarters again—the real general quarters. They just herded us down here for the damn missile launch. Now they want

us back at our regular action stations.”

“At 02:45 in the morning?”

They heard a distant boom, loud and threatening, and instinctively knew it could not be thunder. Seconds passed, and then came the long drone of something heavy falling from the sky, the hard jolt of something striking the wild seas, very near the ship from the sound of things.

“Holy mother of God,” said Allyn. “Someone’s shooting at us!”

* * *

Kapitan Heinrich could not believe his luck. When he first heard the alarm he was annoyed when coming on deck, thinking someone had thought to let every man aboard in on the spectacle in the sky. Then, out on the weather deck off the bridge, he saw what the lookouts were pointing at. There was an chill in the air which made him shirk, and then he saw the dark silhouette of a large ship off his starboard bow, and the profile of an aircraft carrier was unmistakable. For one fleeting moment he thought the *Goeben* had inadvertently moved out of steaming order, until he realized this ship was much bigger, a full scale fleet aircraft carrier. How could they have run up on it like this, without either side seeing anything in that approach?

That was a mystery he would not solve in that moment. Instead three things clicked like tumblers of a lock in his mind. This was a British ship, for who else could have an aircraft carrier here. It was looking for him, as he could imagine no other duty that would bring such a ship to these waters. Lastly, it was right before his guns, no more than 3000 meters off, and easy prey.

His crews were racing to their action stations, and a minute later, without the slightest hesitation, he gave the order to fire. Schirmer’s opening salvo was an immediate straddle, in spite of the darkness. It was only then that Heinrich looked around him, seeing the strange lights above, and the glow that seemed to surround his own ship. On some unconscious level he noted the moon was gone. It had been a waxing gibbous moon. Low on the horizon, but all was dark and quiet there. Then the second salvo fired, and chaos held court.

Having the range, Schirmer put both forward turrets into action, and one of those 15-inch shells blasted into the side of CVS-40, easily penetrating the relatively thin 100mm belt armor. The carrier that once held over 90

warplanes now had only 19 Grumman S2-F twin engine trackers and four Sikorsky HSS-1 Seabat helos. Captain Howard Leyland Young was on the bridge with the Task Force Commander, Vice Admiral Lloyd Mustin.

“What in god’s name just happened?” said the Admiral, after the first near miss salvo.

Young had his field glasses up, and having seen the ominous flash of naval gunfire, he knew in his gut what had happened, but who in the world could be out there. They had seen nothing on radar. The position of every ship in the task force was well known. It could not be a mad hatter Captain on one of the destroyer escorts, for all four were over 460 kilometers to the west on a long line weather picket. The two oilers had moved well off to the east away from the launch site, and *Norton Sound* had no armament to speak of in her role as a test ship. It was out there, well off the port quarter of *Tarawa*. My God, could this be a goddamned Russian ship? Where in hell did it come from?

Then that second salvo from the dark raider blasted into the ship, and all hell broke loose. Captain Young lost his footing, falling to the deck. The urgent call would soon go out: “*Mayday! Mayday! This is Kilo-Delta-Tango, and we are under attack!*”

Far to the north, the seaplane tender USS *Albemarle* was on the comm-link, ready to report observation from her post near the Azores. They saw the bright flash, high up, and the low wavering propagation of the eerie green auroras. It was just what they expected and hoped to see, but it came as quite a surprise to the British forces there in 1942.

They saw it too....

Part VII

Gift of the Magi

“Be careful what you set your heart upon—it will surely be yours.

— James A. Baldwin

Chapter 19

Like a shadow retreating from the light and returning to the darkness from whence it came, *Kaiser Wilhelm* vanished. It was there in that one wild moment, the sharp edge of war cutting into the night with the anger of its guns, and then it was gone. The strange lights in the heavens seemed to descend and surround the ship, finally collapsing inward to a scintillation of jade green phosphor, and then fleeing into the night.

For Kapitan Heinrich, the sudden disappearance of the ship he had been firing upon was a shock. He lowered his field glasses, a stupefied look on his face. Dieter Jung stood beside him, gawking with disbelief. The booming sound of Schirmer's last salvo seemed to quaver on the tension of that moment, oddly distended, as if far away, at the end of an impossibly long tunnel, a roar that became a rumble, then nothing more than a quiet murmur. It was then that he saw another light, strangely out of focus, a white smear on the horizon that soon solidified to the solid shape and silver glow of the waxing gibbous moon. It was back again, right where it should have been all along, but the enemy carrier they had been firing at was completely gone.

Schirmer's second salvo with both forward gun turrets had been right on target. He had seen a shell strike the carrier, heard the roar of the explosion. Could a ship of that size have simply blown up? No, his mind protested, eyes wide, seeing the stillness in the sea, feeling again the warmer temperatures, when there had once been an icy chill in the air. Now the scene off his starboard bow was eerily still and empty. He looked around, seeing the shadow of the *Goeben* over his shoulder where the hybrid carrier steamed in his wake. It was as if nothing had happened, until the watchman on the high mainmast shouted out another contact.

"Ship sighted! Port side contact!"

Heinrich looked, already seeing the ship's main turrets slowly rotating to confront this new interloper. There, he saw what looked to be a cruiser class vessel, yet he could discern no visible gun turrets, and it seemed strangely dark and silent.

"All guns, cease fire!" He shouted back through the hatch to the bridge. His big turrets had just retrained, the barrels elevating ever so slightly to adjust for the range, chaos held in a tense moment of suspense. For the next

minute, everything waited in that hushed silence, the world seeming to be a frozen thing. Heinrich peered through his field glasses, seeing no sign of life on the distant ship. It hovered like a shadow on the sea, aimlessly underway at a sedate speed of less than ten knots from what his well educated eye could tell.

“Signal that ship to identify itself by lantern.”

It was too dark for flag hoisting, and soon the watch crews were flashing signals at the silent ship, but nothing was returned. Heinrich looked at Jung, quite perplexed, seeing the younger man simply watching him, as if hoping to find an answer to the riddle. When the lantern signals were not returned, Heinrich ordered one 5.9-inch battery to fire a warning shot across the bow of the ship, watching closely for any sign of movement of life on deck, but there was nothing.

“Could they be playing possum?” Jung looked at him. “They had to see what happened to that aircraft carrier.”

“What aircraft carrier?” Heinrich’s voice was near a whisper, and Jung was silent, a bemused look on his face. Both men could feel something was very wrong here. It was almost a tangible sensation of presentiment, the kind of shiver that shakes you in the face of unknown danger. For the next minute, all was held in that breathless interval, the body driven by adrenalin within, restrained by the mind as they struggled to understand what was happening.

“Send to the boat deck,” said Heinrich. “An armed detachment will launch at once. Signal that ship. Heave to, and prepare to be boarded.”

Heinrich had no idea what he had on his hands here. The chaos and surprise had barely subsided. His guns were still smoking from the two salvos Schirmer had fired. Crews stood tensely at their action stations, but all was silent. It was as if they were now pacing a derelict ship, cruising aimlessly, abandoned by Captain and crew.

That might be the case, his inner mind argued. This looks to be an auxiliary ship, not a warship. After ordering a ten point turn and slowing to ten knots, he came around to run parallel to the other vessel, still seeing no life or any sign of movement. He knew full well there was danger here, for this could be a commerce raider, just like *Atlantis* and *Penguin*, masquerading in silence, waiting for the range to slowly close before dropping its disguise and showing its fangs. It was that silence that seemed to hold unspeakable danger, the dark unknown poised in the tension of that moment like a knife.

If that is so, he thought, then it would likely have no more than five or

six inch guns. If they so much as show me a machinegun barrel, I'll blast that ship to hell... just like the other one... yet what did I just see a moment ago? What was Schirmer firing at? Where could that ship be? Even if we did get a lucky hit, possibly striking a magazine or aviation fuel bunker, there should still be wreckage and fire all over the sea. The smoke should be blotting out those cold stars, yet it is as if someone simply reached down and snatched that ship away. This is impossible! And now what do I have here off the port quarter?

He was keeping *Kaiser Wilhelm* slightly behind the other ship, where it would not be easy for any hidden guns to bear on him. And he trusted to the ship's armor, 190mm at the belt, to give him protection from any lighter caliber guns.

Slowly, the boat launch was made, and a crew of fifteen men approached the ship, which was still underway at about 8 knots. Heinrich could hear them calling out in English on the bull horns, yet there was no reply. Soon he would have his answer. He saw his launch come along side, riding the gentle swell from the ship's forward motion.

It was a very odd looking ship, with a long fantail deck that extended over 40% of the vessel. A prominent crane amidships was angled forward, telling him this must be some kind of seaplane tender. There was something jutting from the open fantail deck, though it clearly was not a gun turret. The fat superstructure merged seamlessly with the hull and showed no sign of any secondary batteries, and no guns were mounted forward. Above the conning section, which was relatively low and flat, an angled structure seemed to hold squarish flat panels, with rounded edges, crowned by what looked to be a small radar set. Other antennae were visible behind the mainmast and just forward of the single stack. The moonlight played over the water and grey hull, and he squinted through his field glasses, seeing the hull lettering VM and then a long letter "I," which he took to be the Roman numeral one.

He saw his men using grapples to come alongside, and then they began making their way cautiously up the side stair and gangways, weapons at the ready. The next minutes passed, and Heinrich finally saw men on the ship—his own men. Soon a lantern flashed in the night, and Jung was mouthing out the message as it winked: "*Ship abandoned. No crew...*"

The furrow on Kapitan Heinrich's brow deepened, and he found himself looking about, scanning the horizon for any sign of smaller boats, or any other ships. Nothing was there. Then the next message came. "*Ship secure.*"

All stop. Request Kapitan's presence aboard prize."

That was what he obviously had on his hands there, his first prize ship taken at sea, but under the strangest possible circumstances. Could this ship have been a derelict, taken in tow by that carrier? The disturbing lack of any sign of the carrier still galled him, refusing to be understood, and lending this whole scene an air of incredulity. Soon, however, he would learn just what a prize he actually had, one that now threatened to radically alter the future meridians of time.

The ship his men had just boarded was AVM-I, the USS *Norton Sound*, and the history written in the secret reports that would now be filed away concerning Project Argus would be much different than the information Fedorov could fetch from his files.

CVS-40 would come home under a veil of secrecy, escorted by the four destroyers that were hastily ordered back to the scene. The two oilers were still on hand, though many miles away. They arrived first, aghast to see the big carrier on fire, explaining the thick, heavy smoke they had seen earlier on the horizon. Damage control teams would eventually suppress the flames, and the crews were able to seal off segments of the hull that had been blasted open, causing some flooding amidships. The one ship that was not accounted for in the Task Force was the *Norton Sound*.

As flight operations on *Tarawa* were not yet possible, planes were alerted on Wideawake Airfield, both for security and search operations. Yet no sign of the converted seaplane tender was ever found, nor was there any wreckage of flotsam on the sea, no oil slick, no life boats, not a single man adrift. Above the entire scene, the eerie luminescent glow of the sky seemed to haunt the Americans. What had happened? What had they done? What ship had appeared so suddenly to fire on them like a lurking sea demon? Where had it gone, and where was *Norton Sound*?

The ill fated Project Argus was immediately cancelled, having fired only one of the three X-17A missiles that had come so far south. In the long hours after the Germans boarded their prize ship, they would be delighted to find much advanced radar and communications equipment, and there, sitting on wheeled cradles in the hanger bay amidships, were two long and dangerous looking missiles, over 40 feet long, with needle point noses, and broad stubby fins at the wider base. The Americans had taken to calling the X-17A the "Nail Driver," and what the Germans did not know at that moment was that the missiles were carrying very dangerous warheads.

“Naval rockets!” said Heinrich when he first set eyes on them. “At last we see them first hand. So this is the terror weapon that has been giving us nightmares.”

It was all that and more. The small W25 nuclear warhead had been developed in 1954, a fission bomb with a small yield of 1.5 kilotons, just a tenth of the size of the bomb that might one day destroy Hiroshima. It had been designed to be fired by unguided rockets from US aircraft, and used as a area detonating weapon against Russian bomber formations. While a small tactical weapon, an air burst would nonetheless cause complete destruction on the ground below, out to a radius of 1000 feet, or over three football fields, with anything combustible likely to catch fire out to a radius of about a mile. Weapons like the W25 had been developed to make the massed bomber formations of WWII as obsolete as cavalry charges.

There, sitting on those long threatening weapons, were the two warheads the Argus team planned to use in subsequent launches to take place on August 30 and September 6. The missiles they were mounted on could climb to an altitude of 300 miles, tip over, and then re-enter the atmosphere at a blistering Mach 14.5. In effect, it was a weapon that was virtually unstoppable after it was launched.

The American scientists had already proven the Argus Effect was real, but they had the bad luck to fire their first shot along the fragile crack of a lost meridian in time. It wasn't the size of the detonation that did the damage, but the precise location where it struck. Nuclear testing had seen massive warheads smash against the fabric of spacetime without undo consequence. In this case, all it took was a single tap. That weakened meridian had been further stressed by the inexorable tide of change migrating forward from the war. It was casting a shadow before it as it went, a Heisenberg Shadow, a zone of chaos where the solidity of the history it was about to overtake and re-write was highly vulnerable.

The strange events of August 27, 1958 had been at the edge of a kind of sink hole in time, and the detonation of that rocket had been just enough to open a breach. *Kaiser Wilhelm* sailed right on through, there for the briefest moment, but just long enough to blast away at *Tarawa* before being pulled back to its own time in 1942. As for the *USS Norton Sound*, it moved at that same moment, slipping sixteen years back in time to 1942, as if dragged there by the sheer gravity of *Kaiser Wilhelm*. That posed a grave problem for the ship's crew, for every man aboard would have been alive in that day, and

Paradox had its way with them all.

The ship, however, and all its contents and equipment, had not been built yet in January 1942. It would not even be laid down until September, and so all of that artifice passed the stern review given by the court of chaos, and remained intact. Something would happen between that day in late January of 1942, and the 7th of September of that same year, and the plans for the laying down of AV-11, *Norton Sound*, would be cancelled.

The Kapitan ordered a small skeleton crew aboard, elated with his find. Still harried by the strange engagement with that carrier, he hastened away, pleased that this captured American ship could at least work up to 18 knots. He had not yet taken the full measure of the prize he now held, but his first thought was to get the ship to a place where it could be safely hidden and inspected in more detail, and he knew exactly where he could go. Initial finds made him jubilant. He had captured a pair of the dread naval rockets, and many advanced radars. And though he did not know this at the time, he had one other thing in his holds, and if he could get it safely home, Germany would have it as well... the bomb.

Chapter 20

Kaiser Wilhelm and *Goeben* turned, angling southeast on a course that would take them round the Cape of Good Hope. The weather worsened, with rain and storms more prevalent. Often they found themselves sailing amid the dark grey columns of thunderstorms, which towered up into the slate sky, their flanks riven by streaks of lightning. The roll of thunder seemed grim and hollow in the distance, inherently carrying that sense of warning, a feeling that there was something impending, something waiting out there for them, something that now hungered for their lives.

Kapitan Heinrich had consulted his charts and set his thumb on another hidden island in these lonesome, empty seas, and it was well named. A French held territory, Kerguelen Island also came to be known as ‘Desolation Island’ when Cook called it that after visiting in 1776. There was one large island there, Grand Terre, nearly 2600 square miles, and it was surrounded by a broken scattering of some 300 smaller islets, many no more than barren rocks jutting ominously from the sea like stony icebergs. It had been named for the French navigator that discovered it in 1772, and he immediately laid claim to the place for France, leaving a message there to notify any others to that fact. For years it was a favored hunting ground for whalers.

Heinrich knew of the place because it had been visited by the German raider *Atlantis* the previous year. With numerous bays and fiord like inlets, it provided many places to lurk unseen, and the island itself had good sources of fresh water, and even food. Getting there was no easy task, for the seas were swept by vicious cold winds in a region known as the Roaring Forties. Gale force winds were the norm, the ships rising and falling as they cut through the frothy white crests of the troubled sea. The sound of that wind was ever present, a vagrant moaning at times, rising to a demonic welter at others. Under such conditions, flight operations were impossible, but Heinrich had no fear that they might encounter enemy shipping here.

In heavy swells that often towered over the ship, anything that wasn’t tied down would be flung across the decks, or sent clattering through the interior compartments, including the men. There were plenty of bruised elbows, knees, and bumped heads in that journey, which always stood out in the minds of the crew as some passage through a twilight zone between two great oceans of the world. There, in that desolation of sea, wind and sky, they

passed like grey spirits riding in phantom ships.

The sea remained ice free in this region, and January was one of the warmer months, where the mean temperature would be about 46 degrees. When they finally spotted the islands, the crew was much relieved, for it seemed they might be lost on forsaken seas forever, denizens of that twilight zone, never to walk on solid ground again. They made their cautious approach, and Heinrich consulted notes and charts he had obtained from a former crewman of the *Atlantis*. So he knew enough to be cautious of the bays, for even those marked 'safe' might have hidden rocks like the one that had grounded *Atlantis*, threatening to maroon the ship and crew there indefinitely.

They skirted the ragged coastline, the work of a thousand centuries of icy wind and rain scouring the volcanic rock, grateful that the weather had subsided somewhat to allow safe passage of the flotilla through Passe Royal, the inlet to Morbihan Gulf where the only settlement worth the name squatted on the shore as a collection of small cheerless huts. It was there that they saw another ship, and for a moment it seemed as if *Atlantis* was still stranded on the rocks, but Kapitan Heinrich knew otherwise.

He smiled when he saw the low grey lines of the ship. "Right on schedule," he said to Jung. "Detmers is a very punctual man."

They were looking at what appeared to be a tramp steamer, with a single coal pipe stack and a mast fore and aft. The prominent bow gave the ship away for Heinrich, and he immediately knew this was Schiff 41, the *Kormoran*, another auxiliary merchant cruiser that had been operating in these waters for some time. The Allies called her "Raider G." It was supposed to have been sunk by now, going down in a fabled duel at sea with the Australian Cruiser *Sydney*, where both ships were sunk in a brief, violent battle when *Kormoran* had played her role so well that she lured the cruiser in close enough to gore the other ship with her hidden guns. But that chance meeting had not happened in this history, and so Kapitan Detmers was alive and well, as was his ship and crew, there to make a secret rendezvous with *Kaiser Wilhelm* and *Goeben*, and brief them on what they might expect ahead in the waters of the Indian Ocean.

"Come to pay your respects to Hermann's Grave?" said Heinrich as he welcomed the other Kapitan into his wardroom. He was referring to the grave of German sailor Bernhard Herrmann, the first man to die aboard *Atlantis*, when he fell while painting the ship's funnel a year ago. His grave was

known as the most southerly German grave of the war, and both Kapitan's had every wish to leave Hermann with that title undisputed.

Theodore Detmers had been on two battleships in the first war, then on cruisers *Emden* and *Köln* before taking a post as a destroyer Kapitan on the *Hermann Schoemann*. He already had 11 ships to his credit, sinking or capturing 69,211 tons. A clean cut, careful looking man, Detmers smiled. "It is still here, mostly visited by the birds these days. I see you have had a bit of luck. What's that other ship?"

"An American vessel," said Heinrich, stirring his tea and pushing the pot across the table to Detmers. "We had a most unusual encounter south of Ascension Island. There was a British carrier, and this ship. So I put a nice big hole in the carrier, and then took this one by the nose."

"A carrier? Then you sunk it?"

"We do not really know. I would certainly like to think so, but the situation was very confused. We came up on it very suddenly, in the middle of a strange aural storm at night. Even the moon was playing tricks on us. One minute it was there, the next it was gone—just like this carrier we hit."

"Probably lost behind a bank of low clouds."

Heinrich nodded, but did not say anything more. In fact, the less said about that incident the better, or so he had now come to feel. "They must have slipped away like that," he said. "Visibility could not have been much more than 3000 meters, at least on the sea. But overhead, we were treated to the most marvelous display of auroras. The next thing I know, we came up on this ship, still underway, but completely abandoned by her crew. It was very strange."

"An American ship," said Detmers. "Yes, it is somewhat surprising they are out here already."

Now Heinrich leaned in, lowering his voice, a light in his eye. "I think we caught the bastards making a little delivery. When we boarded that ship, we found a pair of magnificent naval rockets aboard, and a good deal of other advanced equipment, radars, radio sets, a strange aircraft, and other gear we have yet to identify."

"Naval rockets?"

"Precisely," Heinrich smiled. "And they had visible markings indicating they were designed by the Americans. I now believe they must be the ones behind these rocket attacks on our ships. They were probably here to meet up with that British carrier and deliver these goods, when I caught them flat

footed. Two were left in this ship's hold, but who knows how many they may have transferred before we got there."

"Very strange," said Detmers. "The ship was abandoned?"

"Not a living soul aboard."

"But why would they do such a thing? Why wouldn't they scuttle the ship to prevent these weapons from being captured?"

"I have asked myself that very same question, but the fact remains they did not. The oddest thing was this, we looked about for any sign of boats or men adrift on the sea, but there was nothing. So I can only conclude the ship must have been abandoned even before we came on the scene, possibly transferring to the carrier, which sped away."

"Be careful here," said Detmers. "What if there was disease aboard, plague?"

"I hardly think that would be possible. No. Detmers, it was the most chilling feeling in the world when I first set foot on that ship. I walked the entire upper deck. There were still cups of warm coffee on a table in their ward room. Equipment was running, magazines and newspapers were sitting by chairs. The vessel was underway, but with no one at the helm."

"Perhaps they were going to use it as a target ship?"

"With those rockets still aboard? I hardly think so." Now Heinrich became very serious, a troubled look on his face, and an inexplicable hint of anxiety in his eyes. "Detmers, listen carefully now... Those magazines—I took one. I can read and speak English well enough. Have a look at this!"

He reached for a document folder on the table, opening it slowly and showing Detmers a magazine, with a full color cover, where an old General sat in full military dress, a map of Europe behind him on the wall. He ran his finger over the titles and read aloud: "Monty's outspoken Story, Triumphs, Blunders of World War II, Bittersweet world of growing up."

"Monty?"

"Look, here is his name." He pointed to the white text lettering that read: "Field Marshal, The Viscount Montgomery of Alamein, K.G." The man's decorations were prominent and thick on his uniform jacket breast. Heinrich had his hand over the lower segment of the magazine, hiding something there. He opened it and flipped to an article, plain in two typeset columns below a bold headline that read "DESERT DARING."

"Listen to this," said Heinrich, reading. "Starting his memoirs, the great general tells how he disobeyed orders, took over a whipped army, changed

strategy—and smashed the Germans.”

“Smashed the Germans?” Detmers gave him an incredulous look. “What is this drivel about? That man is not in North Africa any longer, and Rommel almost had him by his mustache when he was. They’ve sent him to Singapore now. I learned this just last week when we intercepted some British radio traffic on the way here.”

“There is very much more,” said Heinrich. “I have read it all, locked away in my cabin for hours after I found it. Then I immediately ordered the men I sent aboard to collect every other magazine and document they could find on that ship and bring it here in a box. No one was to look at anything, and nothing, not the slightest bit of paper, was to be left behind. I have everything, these magazines, a few newspapers, ships records, log books. Look here...”

He thumbed his way to a new page, where a large color photo showed Montgomery, sitting in civilian dress now, in what looked to be a quiet study. On the wall, hanging like a hunter might display the heads of fallen prey, were framed portraits, and Detmers immediately recognized them—Erwin Rommel, Model, and Kesselring. Below it was another photo showing Monty in a mobile caravan, its walls plastered with maps, his hand touching a spot on one as he studied it. Heinrich read the caption, translating it for Detmers.

“Montgomery, wearing Paratrooper’s smock, studies map of West Germany which shows troop dispositions on V-E day.”

“He’s got hold of our maps?” asked Detmers.

“It’s his map,” said Heinrich. “V-E Day means “Victory in Europe Day. The troop dispositions he was checking on were his own—in Western Germany...” He gave Detmers a penetrating look. “Everything in this article speaks as though this war were already over and done—and we lose it, Detmers.”

“Complete nonsense!”

“Of course,” Heinrich conceded, but persisted, showing the other man a map and reading aloud again: “Victory Route of Eighth Army under Montgomery started at El Alamein 160 miles from Cairo, finished six months and nearly 2000 miles later at Tunis. Dates show duration of battles or day British captured key points.” He gave Detmers a riveting stare. “There is a detailed account of all these battles—even photographs—Montgomery’s opening artillery barrage, a battle in the field and an aerial photo supposedly

showing the German retreat. Look here, this one shows Churchill in Tunisia giving the Victory sign to what the article labels as ‘victorious British troops.’ It is absolutely chilling.”

“It is absolute nonsense, I tell you, something the Americans must have printed up to entertain their sailors and buck up morale.”

“But look at the photographs,” Heinrich protested. “They are so authentic in appearance.”

“That shot of Churchill could have been taken anywhere.”

“Possibly... But everything in this magazine is consistent. If it is a work of fiction, then it was masterfully done, right down to the advertisements. I tell you, Detmers, if you spend an hour with this magazine you will be quite a different man and mind when you finish. And this is why.... There is one other thing you should see.”

Now he flipped back to the front cover, the place at the bottom that he had hidden with his hand. There, in prominent letters, was the publication date: “October 13, 1958,” and the price, “25 Cents.”

Detmers gave him a smirking grin. “See what I tell you? The whole thing is a fantasy, a fairy tale made up by the Americans. They fabricated this to show their troops the world they could live in if they do win this damn war, which is highly unlikely.”

“Maybe so,” said Heinrich, “but as you are staying for dinner, I invite you to study this little fabrication, and then tell me what you think over brandy.”

The two men discussed further ship’s business, but Heinrich left the magazine with Detmers to take to his cabin, as he would be sleeping aboard *Kaiser Wilhelm* that night. When that brandy finally came, and Heinrich was pouring, Detmers reached out and kept his hand steady, seeing his glass filled to the brim.

“I will need that after what you have given me here.” He seemed just a shade paler at dinner, where the two men had discussed nothing more than future plans on the trade routes. Heinrich could see there was something eating at Detmers, and he knew exactly what it was. That magazine was like a window on a world that had not yet been born, a shadow of things to come, and a find that seemed like the most valuable gift any man in his position could ever have—a vision of the future, with knowledge of how these days would resolve themselves, and how this war might end. It was so completely consistent in its presentation of these facts, that it was, indeed, chilling. It had

left Detmers deeply disturbed, in spite of every effort to simply dismiss it as he had before. The photographs, the narrative, all worked to create a perfect harmony that seemed completely believable. Yes, it was absolute nonsense, masquerading as absolute truth, and a masterful guise it wore.

“So you have read it?” Heinrich smiled. “Your English is better than you knew. Well, let me tell you there are six more just like it—different months of that same magazine in the year 1958. Most have nothing to do with this war, but they depict the world they pose as coming from with uncanny reality. One had an article concerning warfare at sea. It clearly showed naval rockets being launched from under the sea by submarines, and by American destroyers. I will give it to you to read this evening, but hear this first...”

He leaned in again, his voice hushed. “There was an aircraft in the hanger of that ship out there, a very strange one—a kind of helicopter. You will see a photograph of several in flight over an American naval task force in this magazine. Look very closely. Those aircraft are identical to the one in the hanger out there on that ship.... Study it all. They refer to something called an Atomic Sub, a vessel called the *Skate*. They call it a nuclear submarine. There are photographs, and another long article about a submarine called the *Nautilus*, making an historic voyage to the north pole. They hold up a flag emblazoned with their accomplishment, and it reads: ‘Submerged Polar Transit, *Nautilus*, 1958.’”

There was a hardness in Detmer’s eyes as he listened, edged with uncertainty.

“Now listen to this...” Heinrich finished. “I have that ship’s logs. Every date logged agrees. As crazy as it sounds, whoever made those entries thought it was 1958.”

Detmers took a very long swig of his brandy. “More,” he said darkly.

Chapter 21

“What do you intend to do about this?” asked Detmers.

“What else?” said Heinrich. “I will inform Group West, and deliver what we have found.”

“You actually expect them to believe the information printed in those magazines is real? Those ship’s logs? It could all be a ruse.”

“A very elaborate ruse indeed,” said Heinrich. “Why would the British or Americans do such a thing? Why would they abandon such a valuable ship, considering its contents. Do you think they would assume we would just come along and find it, even if that is what actually happened?”

“I don’t know what to think.” Detmers was feeling his brandy now, the heat on his neck and cheeks, and yet clearly disturbed by the implications of what they were now discussing.”

“I’ll tell you what they will think when I show them what we have in those naval rockets,” said Heinrich. “They have bedeviled us for months, put damage on this very ship, and now we finally have some clue as to how they so suddenly appeared, and why they are in such limited use. They are getting them from the Americans! Admiral Raeder has been pulling out his hair over this, and when he sees what I have found, I will surely get my oak leaves for this.” He flicked his Knight’s Cross, a smug grin on his face.

“You expect Raeder to believe the Americans are sending the British these weapons on ships like this—from the year 1958?”

“Who can say? Those magazines could be a wild fiction, just as you say, but rockets are certainly real enough. Raeder will believe his eyes, as I must. I have the rockets, and now I must get them safely home.”

“Home? Then you are not proceeding to the Indian Ocean as planned?”

“That will be up to the Admiral.”

“You have sent him a signal about this?”

“About the greatest prize of the war to date?” Heinrich beamed. “Of course! I could sink a hundred thousand tons of merchant shipping, but it wouldn’t matter at all compared to what I have over there in that ship. Think, Detmers! We have two fully functioning naval rockets in our possession. They are absolutely invaluable. They could advance our own research into missile development in one gigantic leap. I simply *must* get them to a safe port.”

“What port?”

“It will have to be in Europe. Gibraltar might do, or the coast of France. They will have to be shipped by rail to Germany for further study and analysis, but how best to do this? I could load them aboard one of my ships, reverse course, and deliver them myself. My ships are fast, well gunned, and we have our own air cover.”

“Yet you have already tangled with the British. What about that aircraft carrier? They know you are out here somewhere, and they will be hunting for you.”

“Let them try,” said Heinrich. “Here is what I propose to do. I am putting my engineers onto that ship tonight. They will begin inspecting some of that radar equipment to dismantle it and bring it aboard our ships.”

“Our ships? You mean *Kormoran* as well?”

“Certainly. I cannot take the risk of leaving everything on that captured ship out there. You have a good ship, well disguised, and with some real teeth if you get caught. So we will distribute the goods, and then all four of us will head north.”

“I have orders to the contrary,” said Detmers.

“I expect you will find they will soon be changed,” said Heinrich. “I will then load one of those two rockets onto *Kaiser Wilhelm*, and move the other to the *Goeben*. I cannot risk losing them both with one chance hit if we are found and engaged. As to the radars and other equipment, some will go to you, and some to my ships. I will even leave some on the prize ship, and we will put a good reliable crew aboard. This is where you come in. You’re a commerce raider, and you know how to play that game. Perhaps there is a good man in your crew who could take the prize ship north. We’ll all set out together, but on any sign of trouble, we can scatter and go our separate ways. One or another ship must make it safely to a friendly port.”

“What about the U-Boats,” Detmers suggested. “We could deliver some components to one or more boats, and they can help out too. We can all be seen by aircraft, but cannot dive and hide like a good U-boat.”

“Good idea,” said Heinrich enthusiastically. “The more chances we have to get this equipment home, the better. I will send another message to Raeder tonight to suggest this.”

“Well,” said Detmers. “I could certainly use some good radar. The junk they gave me doesn’t even work.”

“More than that, Detmers. You’re a Korvettenkapitan, and the youngest man to be given a command that would normally go to a full Kapitan, or at

least a man who had already made Fregattenkapitan. Here is your chance to prove your worth. As I said, those ships and tonnage you have already logged on your kill list won't mean anything compared to this. When you deliver your charge to Berlin, expect a big promotion, and another medal to go with it. Now... Who can you recommend for that prize ship out there?"

"Oberleutnant Meyer is my number one Prize and Boarding Officer. I have six others, Leutnant Kube is a promising young officer. I could send them both."

"Excellent! Get that prize safely home, and you can take credit for it. There will be plenty of laurels to go around."

Detmers thought for a moment. "Very well," he said. "Assuming Group West permits it, I am willing to join this expedition home. Once we deliver this prize, we can always get back out here and continue the war. But we must also plan what we will do should anything go wrong. Your ship is going to cause quite a stir. The British will already be scrambling to protect their convoys at sea."

"Yes," said Heinrich, "we already ran into a battleship. No matter how many we sink, they always seem to pull one out of their hat."

"Well you must now operate differently. Our mission would be to avoid enemy contact as much as possible."

"*Goeben* helps out a good deal. We have fighters to blind enemy eyes in the sky, *Stukas* to get after their ships and airfields if necessary."

"That is good, but if you do make contact, and battle is inevitable, then what?"

"My good man, *Kaiser Wilhelm* can run at 36 knots. I can choose to fight what I wish, and outrun anything else."

"Choose to fight only if there is no alternative," Detmers cautioned. "I know this will be difficult. You are a fighting officer, I can see that, and you will want to use those nice big guns, but this is a battle we win by avoiding engagement. Suppose even a little destroyer were to get lucky and put a 5-inch shell right on your precious naval rocket? Then what will you bring to the Führer for your Gift of the Magi?"

"I understand what you are saying," said Heinrich.

"Another thing," said Detmers. "Your war diary and ship's logs. You must be very careful what you say there. If, for any reason, they come into the enemy's hands, they will know what we have done. So word things cleverly. Use code known only to you, or one or two other reliable men. And

if worse should ever come to worse, you must be prepared to scuttle everything, get rid of it all, the diaries, your Enigma equipment, ship's logs, even those magazines you've been flaunting, not to mention all the equipment we take from that American ship. We have special weighted bags for that. You should have some similar means of disposing of everything."

"We'll never let that happen," said Heinrich confidently.

"That's the spirit, but things do happen at sea that a man might never expect," said Detmers. "Think about that. There you were, out in the middle of nowhere, and then you suddenly bump right into a British carrier making this secret rendezvous with that American ship. Expect the unexpected. That is the hard lesson there that has thankfully delivered this prize to our hands. Then think again about this. If that interpretation of your engagement is correct, then the British know what they lost, and what we have taken from them. Believe me, they will move heaven and earth to stop us from doing the very thing we are planning now."

"Well considered, Detmers. Yes, you know your business well."

"Let's just say I am a quick learner," Detmers smiled. "We should therefore assume the waters to the north will be quite dangerous, but, by not putting all our eggs in one basket, one of us will get through. I'm sure of it."

"I have every intention of getting through," said Heinrich. "Here we sit, a couple wise men bearing gifts. This could mean everything, Detmers. It could change the entire course of the war, ensure our victory, and rewrite all those magazine articles."

Detmers chuckled at that. "I wonder if you really believe those magazines are what they appear to be. 1958? That is sixteen long years away!"

"Yes, but if it is true, however impossible it may seem, then we have technology in our hands that is sixteen years ahead of anything we can build today. That is all that matters."

"Unless..." Detmers smiled.

"Unless what?" Heinrich waited, wondering what this last objection might be.

"Unless those are simply dummy rockets, fabrications, just as those magazines must surely be."

"Dummies?"

"Of course. We have never answered the question as to why the British or Americans would leave such a ship adrift like that, and with the most

advanced weapons to come along in decades. I have heard all the talk about these naval rockets. They represent an evolutionary leap in naval warfare. We thought we were on to something with the development of aircraft carriers like the British, Americans and Japanese. You yourself see how useful even a small ship like the *Goeben* is. The Japanese certainly know how to use them, and they will make battleships and even fast battlecruisers like yours obsolete. But here we have a new weapon that can trump the carrier. You heard what that naval rocket did to *Graf Zeppelin*. This changes everything.”

“And we will be the men responsible for that change,” said Heinrich, reaching again for the brandy. “Another drink, Detmers. To the Gift of the Magi! If need be I will sacrifice everything to get at least one of those naval rockets home intact. And if it is a ruse, then I’ll be the biggest fool in the world, and they can lock me away with that box of newspapers and magazines as my only solace.”

“Yes,” said Detmers. “And let us also be careful what we wish for here. The one thing I have heard about these rockets is that they cannot be stopped. Give them to the Führer, and he won’t be stopped either...”

Heinrich thought about that, but said nothing more.

That night, all four ships were in the bay, and the engineers worked all night to move the rockets. There was plenty of room on the *Goeben*’s lower deck, and Kapitan Falkenrath, knowing how important his new guest was, had the rocket moved to a section that was closer to the armored segment of the ship, and then heavily sand bagged. Nothing was said to him about the magazine articles, and he himself said nothing to Heinrich about the strange reports that had noted his ship missing for some time off his bow. His own ship’s log would later belie his secret.

02:30 -37° 94’S; -11° 82’E: *Odd auroras and brilliant white flash extending over entire horizon. Smokey cloud at 182° true, with strange phosphorescence. Watchman reports he has lost position of Kaiser Wilhelm ahead.*

02:45 ESE 4; sea 3-4: *Swell from WNW and NE, overcast, with clearing segments and better visibility. No sign of Kaiser Wilhelm, no word on W/T. Strange auroras persist. Engines set for ‘ahead one third,’ and Kapitan orders watch doubled on all masts.*

03:48 - *Still no sighting of Kaiser Wilhelm after a long hour's search. Kapitan orders word sent to flight deck to prepare a seaplane for night search operation. Plotted approximate expected course for Kaiser Wilhelm at 'full speed' to determine farthest on.*

04:10 - *Mainmast watch calls 'ship ahead' [visible] against a strangely lit horizon. Intercept course set, with engines set ahead two thirds. Goeben approaches from darkness, possibly unseen. Use of wireless not permitted, but a recognition flare is fired off.*

04:18 - *Watchman positively identifies Kaiser Wilhelm, but in the company of another ship. Fast approaching in the darkness, the Kapitan orders ahead one third to slow the ship and prevent any possible collision. No sign of hostilities or engagement underway. Lamp signals flashed to Kaiser Wilhelm, and proper return received.*

Kapitan Falkenrath would ask Heinrich how he had come by his prize in the final briefing before the ships left the bay. "It was just sitting there," said Heinrich. "So I took it. What else?"

The following morning, the ships slipped out of the bay, with the men Detmers had recommended, Leutnants Meyer and Kube boarding the American ship to lead the prize crew. It was decided that the two warships, having much greater speed, would go on ahead. Even if they reduced to cruise at half speed, it would mean *Kormoran* and the prize ship would have to be running full out at 18 knots. The warships each took one rocket, as Heinrich had planned, and the radar sets and other equipment were distributed evenly, leaving whatever was left over on the prize ship for Detmers to rendezvous with a U-boat and hand off what he deemed suitable.

So instead of a journey into the Indian Ocean to harry the British convoys, *Kaiser Wilhelm* turned north, with *Goeben* in her wake, about 3000 meters behind, as always.

Let us hope the Kapitan doesn't pull another disappearing act on us, thought Falkenrath. And let us hope the British are so worried we are down here, that they will not think to look for us again up north. We've come nearly 8000 nautical miles south after attacking that British convoy, and now we go back again, that is after we find a tanker and take on more fuel. If everything goes well, we will be back in Gibraltar in about two weeks.

If wishes were horses....

Part VIII

Plan 7

“The general who wins the battle makes many calculations in his temple before the battle is fought. The general who loses makes but few calculations beforehand, and rushes blindly into combat seeking a victory that may never be his.”

— **Sun Tzu:** *The Art of War*

Chapter 22

Hajime Sujiyama was a stolid, bullish man, Chief of the Army General Staff. The samurai sword of his ancestors hung always at his side, and those ancient warriors were often on his mind, which wandered in the ancient castle of Kokura, where the old Daimyos of the Ogasawara and Hosokawa held sway. His mind was as sharp as the blades of Miyamoto Musashi, the famous *ronin* swordsman who always fought with two weapons at one time. He had been Minister of War when the fighting first broke out in Manchuko, and Campaigned with the North China Army. So now this alarming news coming from Kamchatka and Sakhalin was most disturbing. Today he would meet with Prime Minister Hideki Tojo to discuss the formal declaration of war with Siberia, and plan Japan's response.

"The announcement will be made formally this afternoon and broadcast from Tokyo," said Tojo.

"I was afraid our business in the north was not yet concluded," said Sujiyama.

"Yes," Tojo remarked with the slight edge of sarcasm in his tone. "Your prediction in 1937 that our invasion of China would be completed in three months was quite bold, and we are still there."

"Do not taunt me," said Sujiyama. "I can still feel the sting of the Emperor's rebuke. The question now is what we must do about this situation. That attack on the *Kido Butai* was insult enough, and it is you who must explain the loss of an aircraft carrier to a third rate power without so much as five destroyers in its navy. As for me, it is time I returned to the Kwantung Army, and settled affairs in the north."

"Do not bother yourself with that personally," said Tojo. "I have someone else in mind. What is the latest report?"

"The Siberians have landed what appears to be two divisions on the west coast of southern Kamchatka. There is only one road to speak of from that region to the Pacific port at Kazantochi, and they have moved very rapidly along it, seizing all the landing strips. Now they are at Nachiki, the new airfield we were building there in the inland valley."

"How could they move so quickly? How could these sea landings have been carried out unnoticed?"

"Quite simple—no one was looking. The navy has settled at

Karamushiro Island, just off the tip of Kamchatka, and now that the ice makes operations to the north troublesome, they discontinued regular destroyer patrols.”

“That was why the Siberians waited to make this attack. They are moving with ski troops, and by airship.”

“Airship? What is the air force doing about it?”

“When the weather permits, they fly, which isn’t often. But those old airships are more durable than we realized. We suffer now because we have simply underestimated the cunning and resolve of our enemy.”

“Outrageous,” said Tojo. “What will you do about it?”

“Whatever the Emperor commands. At present, the 4th Independent Mixed Brigade is holding the area around Kazantochi. Colonel Ozawa has asked for reinforcements, but says he will hold that ground to the last man, even if we send him nothing. But now that these new landings have taken place on Sakhalin Island, we simply must respond. Those airfields are valuable. They cannot be taken by the enemy, as he will certainly invite the Americans to use them in time. That is the real threat here—American troops and aircraft on Siberian soil. To prevent that possibility, and re-secure our northern holdings, we must now contemplate much stronger measures. The garrisons in place on Kamchatka and Sakhalin will not suffice.”

“Then what do you suggest?”

“I was planning to go there myself and assemble a corps to deal with the situation. Who is this other man you speak of?”

“Our little Tiger in Malaya, General Yamashita.”

“Yamashita? He has not yet completed his work at Singapore.”

“Exactly. He will if I leave him there, and then he will want to come home to take his laurels. Remember, he’s a troublemaker. I want him isolated from any contact with the Emperor. I had planned on re-assigning him to the northern command in any case. So now let him take this position and deal with the Siberian Front. The orders have already been given.”

“Without consulting me?”

“That is what this meeting is about. Do you object?”

Sujiyama stewed for a moment, then relented. “Very well, send Yamashita.”

“And what troops can we give him?”

“They will have to come from the Kwantung Army. I will speak with General Umezu. There has been some Siberian movement along the Baikal

front, but we believe it is nothing more than a feint. What they seem to be most interested in are the ports and airfields in Kamchatka and Sakhalin. They must never get them, and if they do, then we must certainly take them back. In the short run, we can send elements of the 73rd Brigade in the northern Kuriles. Two or three battalions can go by sea to reinforce Kazantochi, and the navy is putting together a task force to accompany them. One good battleship in the bay should be able to provide heavy artillery support. The Siberians will soon see that landing there is one thing, fighting there another."

"Be careful, General, this is territory where they have lived and fought for centuries. We can expect no help from the indigenous population, such as it is. It is amazing that they have the temerity to strike us like this, but this rebellion must be put down this week."

"A moment ago you criticized me for my own predictions concerning Northern China. Now you want all of Kamchatka secured in a week? It will take two weeks just to bring in reinforcements."

"Just see that it is done. But bear in mind that the Strike South camp will not permit any troops to be taken from those already assigned to offensive operations there. Any forces you give to Yamashita must come from the Kwantung Army."

"Three divisions should be able to do the job," said Sujiyama. "I will see the orders reach the appropriate commanders." He settled into his chair, thinking.

"And when we are done with the bravado here," said Tojo, "tell me what you really think."

Sujiyama looked at him, his hand on the haft of his sword. "I think that now we must fight like Miyamoto Musashi, with two blades, and win our victories on both fronts... Or lose them. Only time and the valor of our soldiers will tell the end of that tale."

"Which front gets the long sword?"

"The south, of course, even though all our victories will come from the south in the next few months. After that, the troops will sit on their islands and wait for the Americans. But we will be fighting in the north for a very long time."

"Then we must do so as Musashi advises," said Tojo. "Does he not say that to wield the sword well, you must do so calmly, purposefully?"

"We will do so," said Sujiyama, "respecting both Buddha and the gods

as we fight.”

“Of course,” said Tojo. “But we must not count on their help. This war will take a good deal longer than any of us first thought or realized. Now we win, then we struggle not to lose what we have taken. Considering that an enemy as weak as Siberia would dare raise its hand against us, I can only imagine what the Americans will do when they draw their swords in anger. The attack on Pearl Harbor must have enraged them. Considering the losses we took in the carrier divisions, Yamamoto will be the one to apologize to the emperor, not me. It was he who insisted on that operation.”

“That sword may be dented, but it is not yet broken. Just be certain Yamamoto uses it effectively. We will need the navy to cover and support the movement of reinforcements to Sakhalin and Kamchatka.”

“You may make that request directly to Yamamoto.” Tojo rubbed his hairless head. “For now, find General Yamashita his divisions.”

* * *

Karpov had carefully chosen his initial objectives. On Kamchatka, his troops had made amazing progress along the single mountain road, finally meeting Colonel Ozawa’s defense as the road reached the open lowlands rolling down to the harbor. A bitter fight ensued, with three Japanese battalions in line, standing like a stone wall holding back the mounting pressure of the Siberian advance. One by one, more Siberian units arrived, as the men of the 92nd division finally came up.

The defense had been foiled in the long run because the Siberians had been able to meet it piecemeal. The battalions of the 4th Mixed Brigade had been strung out along the road and defeated trying to secure Nachiki air field. What remained of them fell back to Koryaki, to join the rest of the brigade, which was then set upon by the full weight of all Karpov’s forces, nearly two divisions strong.

Eventually, the pressure on that wall was simply too great, and the Japanese were forced back to the southeast, taking heavy casualties. The Siberians overran Mitsunami Airfield, then used it to stage further air mobile operations with their Zeppelins. These troops were air lifted east of the port to open another front there, and stretch the available defense even thinner.

By this time, the navy had been alerted to the situation, and was finally assembling forces to intervene. Elements of the 73rd Brigade were planning

to move from the island of Shumushu, ready to board transports for the journey up the long, ragged coast by sea to Kazantochi. One of Japan's old heavy battleships would be selected to lead the operation, the venerable *Mutsu*.

She was the second and final ship in the *Nagato* Class, laid down in June of 1918, and commissioned two years later in May of 1920. Displacing 46,690 metric tons at deep load, she was a big ship, 100 feet longer and 10 feet wider abeam than *King George V* after her most recent refit in 1936. Old and slow, the ship could push 25 knots on a good day, but she carried a good punch, eight 16-inch guns that had been on reserve for the *Tosa* Class Battleships that became the carriers *Tosa* and *Kaga* instead.

Only the massive *Yamato* class carried anything bigger, and only the new battleships *Satsuma* and *Hiraga* had anything equivalent with their nine 16-inch guns. During negotiations for the Washington Naval Treaty in 1922, the Americans tried to have the ship scrapped as a newborn, but the Japanese managed to save her from the administrative chopping block.

Mutsu once had the distinction of serving as the Emperor's flagship during the naval maneuvers of 1927, but aside from that, the most notable event in her early career was a bump on the nose with her sister ship *Nagato* in a minor collision. With fighting already underway in China, and plans brewing in Japan for more conflict, *Mutsu* got a major overhaul between 1934 and 1936, all new boilers, a better torpedo bulge, more armor, a taller pagoda style mast, more secondary guns.

In August of 1941, Captain Kogure Gunji came over from the heavy cruiser *Chikuma* to take command of the battleship, and he was about to become part of a most interesting entry into Time's new ledger of events for this history. Word of the Siberian invasion of Kamchatka had rattled the Japanese, eventually reaching Yamamoto himself in Tokyo, where he was conferring with Admiral Nagumo after the Pearl Harbor operation. The two men had been planning their next moves into the South Pacific, eyeing Rabaul as the beginning of a land bridge to their vital, yet isolated stronghold at Noumea on New Caledonia. The Siberian attack was completely unanticipated, but of course the Navy was immediately expected to intervene and put a stop to it.

Initial accounts were scattered and incomplete, with the heavy weather impeding reconnaissance operations, but it was eventually learned that the Siberians had actually pulled off an amphibious landing on the southwestern

coast of the peninsula, just beyond the limit of the ice pack. It had come out of the only port that still remained ice free in that region, Magadan, and soon reports were also coming in of air lifted troops landing all along the single road that led through the mountain valleys to Kazantochi, the port on the Pacific the Russians called Petropavlovsk.

With most of the fleet already tasked with operations to the south, only units in home waters were available, and among them were the battleships *Nagato* and *Mutsu*. It was determined that *Mutsu* would form the heart of a small task force and investigate the Siberian landing, putting a quick stop to it all with those big 16-inch guns. Her new Captain's old ship, the Cruiser *Chikuma*, would also join the task force, along with the destroyers *Yugumo*, *Kazaguno*, and *Makinami*.

Mutsu's last assignment had been the inglorious duty of towing the old Italian built armored cruiser *Nisshin*, so that *Yamato* could enjoy some target practice with her massive 18-inch guns. That ship had already been sunk once in such trials, but like a man beaten to the floor in a bar fight, it was raised and floated again only to be pounded to oblivion by *Yamato*. After that, *Mutsu* was on standby alert status at Hashirajima in the Inland Sea, and was now called to join what was known as the "Kita Joyaku Naval Group."

Captain Kogure rubbed his hands at the opportunity, finally getting a respectable wartime operation under his belt. He led *Mutsu* out to sea on the night of February 11th, while all Japan celebrated the founding of the Empire, and General Yamashita gnashed his teeth on Singapore. It was a long 1200 nautical miles to the lower Kuriles where he met the remainder of the task force coming out of Sapporo on Hokkaido at mid-day on the 14th. They would then sail together to the Musashi Naval base on the southern tip of Paramushir, escorting transports necessary for the movement of troops north to Kazantochi.

While that operation was being prepared, the task force would depart and sail north to see what was happening on the western coast of Kamchatka. They set out on the foggy night of February 17th, expecting to reach the scene of the Siberian landings sometime after dawn on the 18th. It was there that they would meet the whispered legendary beast that had reportedly hunted Admiral Nagumo's carriers after Pearl Harbor—*Mizuchi*.

Chapter 23

Kirov had left Magadan to cover the landings, and was standing off the coast in the ice free zone when Rodenko picked up the contact. Fedorov was on the bridge that morning, starting his shift very early.

“Five ships, sir,” said Rodenko, “bearing almost 180 true, and about 120 kilometers out. *Tunguska* is still up over the landing zone, and they just relayed the data from their *Oko* panel. They want to know whether they should investigate.”

“Investigate? No, tell them to move well inland. We’ll handle the matter, and inform the Captain.”

Karpov arrived minutes later, somewhat bedraggled, the circles dark under his eyes. “Five ships? Any further data.”

“Sir, *Tunguska* wanted to investigate, but I advised them to stand off and move inland. I’ve taken the liberty of sending the KA-226 out to have a look, It should be close enough to feed us imagery in about five minutes.”

“Good,” said Karpov. “Yes, there is never any need for *Tunguska* to confront enemy surface ships, which is what I assume this contact to be. What else? They certainly aren’t transports, or fishing boats. What is the speed of this contact?”

“Sir,” said Rodenko, “18-knots steady, and presently at 112 kilometers.”

“Already inside our missile range for the Moskit IIs. The ship will come to battle stations. Mister Samsonov, ready on 100mm forward deck gun, and heat up the Moskit II system.”

“Aye sir,” as always, Samsonov was all business.

Nikolin soon advised that they now had a telemetry feed from the KA-226, and put it up on the overhead HD panel. “What are we looking at, Mister Fedorov?” Karpov folded his arms.

“That large ship is certainly a battleship... two twin gun turrets forward, two more aft... tall pagoda mainmast, single stack, clipper bow... That rules out *Ise* or *Fuso* class, as they had more turrets, and the aft turret configuration means it cannot be *Kongo* class—the guns are too closely spaced. Captain, I believe this is *Nagato* class, either that ship or its sister ship *Mutsu*. Those are 16-inch guns, and they’ll have an effective firing range of about 30,000 meters.”

“Very precise, Fedorov. See what a good team we will make? You

identify the targets, and I'll kill them. But I'll be diplomatic about it. Mister Nikolin, send out a warning—in the clear please—and tell those ships they are violating Siberian controlled waters, and they are to withdraw immediately or be fired upon. Use that kana code you've been fiddling with. That should impress them.”

“They won't respond to that,” said Fedorov.

“I'm aware of that, but the history will record that they were duly warned off.”

“You're concerned about how this gets recorded in the history?”

“Why not?” Karpov smiled. “Since I am now personally re-writing the history of the Pacific War, these appearances matter. The history will record that we did not attack them without warning—not that it matters all that much. They had no qualms with the Americans, and should not expect any different treatment, but I'll give them this one chance to turn away.”

* * *

Captain Kogure would certainly not take that chance, or even perceive his present danger. He had no idea that his task force had even been detected, the low rolling fog and mist reducing visibility as they approached the coast. He was back on a battleship, one he had been assigned two twice before as a younger officer, but *Mutsu* felt and looked quite different to him now. In recent years he had moved from target ship *Settsu*, to cruiser *Chikuma*, to his present command, and now he was finally getting into the war.

“Warned off?” he smiled. “By the Siberians?” His deep laugh was shared by all the officers on deck. “Do not even answer that ridiculous message. We will answer it with our guns. The ship will increase to 24 knots. Signal Captain Komura on *Chikuma* to take station ahead. The destroyers will follow our wake. There will likely be no more than transport ships ahead, and they will make for good target practice. *Mutsu's* guns could use a little work. They have been silent for too long.”

It was then that the first whine of an incoming shell was heard, Karpov's warning shot across the bow with two rounds from the 100mm bow gun on *Kirov*. He had allowed the range to close to 50,000 meters, the maximum range of that weapon with extended rocket assisted shells. For the sake of decorum, he put two such rounds out, and they fell well short of *Chikuma* as the cruiser took the vanguard of the task force.

The Japanese Captain was surprised, yet he still had a wide grin on his face. He had no idea how they had been spotted, but their gunnery was certainly nothing to be concerned about. He sent lamp signals to *Chikuma* ahead—return fire—and though Captain Komura had no sighting in the heavy overcast, he nonetheless complied, firing a single salvo from a forward 8-inch gun turret. A most unusual ship, *Chikuma* was the only sister of the *Tone* class, a seaplane tender aft, and a heavy cruiser forward where she had all four of her twin 8-inch gun turrets ready for action. A sleek looking ship, with twin funnels the kissed one another in a backwards swoon, the cruiser had a prominent swept bow, and could run easily at up to 35 knots. She had been a scout ship for the Pearl Harbor attack, and was therefore available with those seaplanes to investigate the situation at Kamchatka—a situation that was now about to spin wildly out of control.

Minutes passed with no sign ahead. The watchmen strained at their posts, eyes puckered against the low clouds, waiting. Then a bell rang from the high pagoda, and the watch shouted down—aircraft ahead!

“Aircraft?” the Captain did not expect anything of the kind. He rushed out onto the weather deck, seeing what looked like a plane on fire, climbing slowly up, and visible as a dull red-yellow glow in the sky. The movement was deceptive, for the missile coming at him was just in its boost phase, now about to tip over and come roaring down, so fast that it would outrun the sound of its own engines three times over, and seem a silent arrow of death, flung at them from some wrathful God of fire above. It was a sleek 10,000 pound lance of inertial radar guided chaos, and firing at this short range it was carrying a heavy load of highly flammable fuel.

Up it went, the silent fire in the sky. Down it came, cutting the stillness, piercing the low clouds and then spearing down onto the forward deck of *Chikuma* in a massive explosion. Karpov had reprogrammed the missile to make this top down attack, and were it not for the fact that it struck one of those four 8-inch gun turrets, it might have plunged right through the thin 36mm deck armor at that point. Instead it plunged through the roof of that gun turret, only 25mm thick, and the explosion obliterated everything within, detonating ready ammo, and sending its raging solid rocket fuel fire deep into the inner shell of the barbette.

The heat was terrible, and the ammunition already on the hoists to be raised up to the guns exploded, along with all the charge bags, and then the violence of that chaos ignited the magazine itself, blowing what was left of

the turret completely off the ship.

The Captain stared in utter disbelief. There had not been a sound before that hammer struck, for the missile was too far ahead of its own engine noise, and when it exploded, it drowned all that out. Yet now the Captain thought he heard a low, residual growl, as if the dragon that had belched this awful fire at them was out there somewhere in the rolling mist. For the briefest moment he thought he saw the smoky shoulders of some great beast, but it was only the heavy black smoke from the fire that was now devouring the innards of that heavy cruiser.

A secondary explosion raged out again from the stricken ship, for the close positioning of all four turrets on that forward deck meant there were four gun magazines beneath that long bow. The same thing might have happened to *Kirov* had the Japanese flung one of their massive shells up into the sky to strike her forward deck. All those tightly packed missiles, their heavy warheads and nearly 200,000 pounds of missile fuel in the weapons would have literally ripped the battlecruiser to pieces.

Gunji Kogure raised his arm as if to fend off the destruction he was witnessing, then instinct prevailed and he spun about, wide eyed, and shouted an order to turn the ship hart to port. The officer of the watch relayed the order, and the helmsman was hard on the wheel. Slowly, the heavy bow of *Mutsu* turned, and then, to the despair of his soul, the Captain saw two more glowing coals in the darkened sky. They rose up, side by side, like a pair of smoldering eyes, the withering regard of *Mizuchi*, the terror of the seas, come to burn and break and kill.

Mutsu would now feel the demon's wrath, a pair of the heavy Moskit II missiles, again plunging down from above like angels of death. Fiery the angels fell, bringing deep thunder in the deafening roar of their own demise. One would strike the conning section and end all thought and fear in Kogure's terrified mind, the second fell very close to the tall pagoda mainmast, the explosion shearing away the supporting legs, the fires raging , smoke broiling up and up.

Then the massive metal structure began to fall, guy wires, cables and halyards snapping, the ship's ensigns immolated, the seething wreck collapsing down. Chaos without, the rage of fire within, this was the vengeance Karpov delivered that day, and now old *Mutsu*, bereft of command, her conning section blasted and burned, continued round in that wide 30 point turn, reeling like a headless knight that had been pierced by the

fiery lance of its unseen foe. Much of the conning tower structure remained completely intact, protected by heavy 365mm armor, but it was all engulfed in that fire, killing every man there, devouring the oxygen in the air like a rabid jinn.

Neither ship would sink that day, though both were so badly damaged that they were definitely mission killed insofar as this operation was concerned. The fires would rage for an hour before exhausting themselves, leaving a charred and blacken hulk of most of *Mutsu*'s main superstructure, and the ship had to be steered from the emergency engineering section. The forward deck on *Chikuma* was so badly damaged that she barely made it south to Musashi Naval base on Paramushiro Island, and they were forced to ground her there to prevent the ship from going down. Both were also effectively out of the war for a good long while.

The Captains of the three destroyers trailing in the wake of the bigger ships saw what happened, but could simply not believe it, and that day, the name *Mizuchi* was branded on their souls.

* * *

Aboard Kirov, Karpov was literally watching the effect of those missile strikes by using the telemetry camera feeds from his KA-226. It was hovering beneath the cloud deck, an unseen speck, running dark as it watched the scene from a distance.

"Well Fedorov, what do you think of your battleships now? That top down attack profile has certainly proven to be most effective. Look at those fires!"

"Yes sir, most effective." There was no enthusiasm in Fedorov's voice, and little excitement. It was clear to Karpov that the fire of battle was not burning in his *Starpom*'s heart, and he thought he was most likely still grieving the loss of Volsky.

"I realize you may take no pleasure in all of this, particularly after what happened to the Admiral."

"There are men out there burning to death in those fires," said Fedorov."

"Correct," said Karpov. "And there are men facing death and freezing cold in Soviet Russia, millions of them. There is fighting in the streets of Moscow even as we speak, and the casualties will dwarf what is happening here. There are men dying in the Atlantic, their merchant ship torpedoed,

sides ripped open and sunk a thousand miles from any friendly shore. The Germans have taken half the Canary Islands, while here, the Japanese run rampant in the Pacific. Who's going to stop them? The Americans are still trying to extinguish the oil fires at Pearl Harbor. Those fuel tanks have been smoldering for weeks now, and they are in no position to mount any offensive operation yet. But we are. We are ready, and with clear and important objectives here. This is war, Fedorov, and so you had better get used to this, and the sooner you harden your soul to the necessity of taking the lives of our enemies, the better. You, of all people, know what the Japanese will do in this war, and the merciless ferocity with which they will prosecute it. Their naval officers may still slip on white uniforms and gloves, but beneath them, their hands will be stained with the blood they have already shed. Understand?"

Fedorov gave him a grim nod, though he still felt burdened with the war, with the inevitable destruction and chaos it would unharness, with the loss of every life it would consume, just like those raging fires on *Mutsu*.

"I may be a reluctant warrior in your eyes, Captain, but that is only because my conscience has not yet died here. Yes, I see the necessity of what we now do, but I don't have to like it, or embrace it. This war will be terrible, and in many ways it is only just beginning now, but one day it will be over, and I want there to be a man left alive in side me when we finish. Understand?" He handed Karpov back the same word, and the Captain gave him a thin lipped grin.

"You may think I relish all this violence, or even take pleasure in it. I assure you, I do not. I see it only as a means to an end, and that end must be achieved. It will be victory, Fedorov, victory. Only then will we restore our lost homelands, and perhaps even see the re-unification of the Soviet Union. I plan on having a great deal of influence in that. You know, they tried to kill Sergei Kirov, which does not surprise me. Tyrenkov tells me he survived, and he's out there somewhere right now, planning the defense of what remains of Russia, and the counterattack against our enemies. That is all I do here, and its end will be victory. Keep that in mind, and those fires out there will be easier to stomach. That ship was coming here to do the very same thing to us if it could. You know that as well as I do."

"You realize this isn't over yet," said Fedorov. "You have shocked them here. They will not have expected this setback any more than they expected your attack in Kamchatka. You caught them off guard, and while most of

their navy was operating in the south, but now they will have to respond. We must anticipate that their next move will be equally bold, and much stronger, both by land and sea.”

“Then help me get ready to face it,” said Karpov. “Help us win.”

Fedorov gave him another nod of his weary head. “What else can I do, Captain? The prospect of defeat is too bitter a cup to contemplate now. Yet that does not mean the taste of victory here is sweet to me just yet. It may come some day, but for now, it is a sour cup alongside the one we force our enemy to drink here, and for me, the dregs of victory are still bitter.”

“Well enough,” said Karpov, “but when you are done with that, you might consider offering more pertinent advice.”

Fedorov thought for a moment, then turned, folding his arms. “Time to move,” he said quietly. “Our amphibious landing operations are over. We have very little open sea left in the Sea of Okhotsk. When they come north, we’ll be bottled up here if we don’t find more sea room. Get the ship to the Pacific—now—before they have time to organize.”

Karpov nodded slowly. It was sound advice, but the tone in Fedorov’s voice made it more than that. His Navigator was giving him a warning.

Chapter 24

Shaken by this heavy blow, the Japanese navy was at a loss as to how to proceed, like a boxer stunned in the opening round with a heavy punch. No one really knew what had happened, but by the time the reports filtered up to command level, they began to realize that this must have been yet another rocket attack, by the same ship, and with the same dreadful weapons that had struck at the *Kido Butai*. It was only now that the true measure of the threat the Siberians represented was beginning to register in Tokyo, at General Headquarters of the Combined fleet, now aboard the battleship *Yamato* as it was heading out to sea.

Yamamoto got the news, his brow furrowed, eyes dark, and with a strange light of presentiment in them. It was as if he were seeing something in that report that was not written there in the boldly typed script. For the briefest moment, the image of a wild thing at sea came to him, a shadow of a memory, or a nightmare. He had been in the heart of a massive castle of steel—like this very ship around him—and yet he kept hearing the thunder and roar of heavy blows against those walls and towers. Then fire... awful fire and choking black smoke... the dreadful glow of the flames on the sea... and then it was gone.

It was an old memory, and something new. It was a distant recollection of a battle he had fought in his youth, near Tushima Straits, against a sea demon that had vanish without the slightest trace. And at the same time it was something impending, something very close, another great battle, and though he knew the notion was ludicrous, he could not shake the feeling that it had been fought with this very ship. Could he be merely anticipating the inevitable result of these events, the inexorable sucking gravity of this war that would pull his ship into that nightmare like a maelstrom?

He cleared his thoughts, shaking the memory from his mind. There was a strange echo in these events, for that battle, fought with *Yamato*, had then been followed by that dogged pursuit by *Chikuma*'s sister ship *Tone*, and the incredible event that saw that ship nearly plunge right into the heart of *Kirov*. That day and hour, later in 1942, had not yet come in this meridian, might never come now as *Kirov*'s persistent presence continued to rewrite the history.

Yet that hour was close at hand, and it was almost as if Yamamoto could

feel it, sense it, perceive it on some inner level, though he could not clarify any of this in his mind. The report of the fate of *Mutsu* and *Chikuma* seemed a foreshock to events that had not yet happened, darkening his mind like a threatening shadow. There was a warning in this report, something that sent his pulse rising. He had heard the legends that Nagumo shared with him, heard the name *Mizuchi* whispered by the men in the lower ranks. He could believe nothing of that, but he could feel some grim reality in this report. It was a harbinger, an omen, a herald of unseen danger ahead, not for himself, but for the navy he commanded, and for his nation.

A battleship, and a heavy cruiser.... Such a loss, and so suddenly, so unexpectedly. That it had come at the hands of the Siberians was an outrage, and now he would be forced to answer it. Now the fleet would be forced to turn about and confront this new foe, and all while the Southern Offensive was still under way, still expanding outward into the South Pacific like the shock wave from a great explosion.

He considered what to do, noting what ships would now be available. Clearly the Siberians had a powerful warship at their disposal. Such a ship had been found by the Germans at Nikolayev when they captured that great naval port in southern Ukraine, the *Sovietskaya Ukrania*, nearly complete. Could they have built another similar warship, and then sent it into the Pacific by the northern route? It was from that direction that Nagumo's carriers were first attacked....

What to do? The immediate situation for the Army on Kamchatka is now regrettable. I cannot send a convoy of the 73rd Infantry north to Kazantochi as planned, not with this enemy warship at large. It must be found and destroyed, but by the time we do so it is likely the garrison on the main peninsula will be defeated. The Army will blame the Navy, of course, for failing to prevent the landing of the enemy troops that defeated them. But that doesn't matter. All that matters now is that this enemy exists as a proven threat. The Siberians can no longer be laughed off, and ignored. They must be crushed.

His mind now turned to the ships, the long steel hulls of the battleships and cruisers, the sweeping flat decks of the carriers, the mad frothing rush of the destroyers—the fleet. A task force will not do now. I must send a much stronger battlegroup. Yet here I am, sailing south to take up command at Truk. Who can I send?

His mind ran down the list of names. Who was available? Rear Admiral

Kurita... Yes, Takeo Kurita has the 7th Cruiser Division now, and he was poised to operate in the Indian Ocean. I have canceled Nagumo's carrier raid there, which will mean that Kurita will be available, a most capable man. Yet a cruiser division will certainly not suffice. We will need a real show of force this time, with strong carrier based air support, and the Army will have to transfer aircraft in as well. We will have to darken the skies over the Sea of Okhotsk, fog or no fog. The ice free zone there is very restricted in winter. If this ship retreats to Magadan, then we will have the genie in a bottle. But I will have to send a wall of steel to drive it there, just as Admiral Togo deployed the full might of our navy at Tushima, and at Oki Island...

Nagumo has already gone on ahead with 5th Carrier Division for Operation R against Rabaul. *Kaga* and *Akagi* are both in the docks for their planned refit. That leaves only *Soryu* in home waters, and *Tosa* now joins her to reconstitute Carrier Division 2. Those ships will have to provide the carrier support.

There was still a good deal of strength left in the Inland Sea. *Nagato* is there, and would most likely be eager to avenge the insult to her sister ship. *Musashi* is there, sitting like a steel fortress at Hashirajima, more a symbol of our power than anything else now. I would have to obtain the permission of the Emperor to use it, as that ship has been formally designated the Emperor's Flagship now that I have taken *Yamato* to sea. Making such a request would be awkward, to say the least, and it would have to be done in person, so *Musashi* stays where it is for now.

There are plenty of cruisers and destroyers available. I could also recall *Satsuma* and *Hiraga*, our newest fast battleships, though I hesitate to do so. Those ships were built to run with our carriers. I'll want them in the Solomons.... *Ise* and *Fuso* could be recalled, as their work in supporting landing operations has been concluded. So that will be the order. I will build a new Northern Fleet, with the nucleus being those three battleships and Carrier Division 2. Kurita can plant his flag on *Nagato* or one of the carriers if he so chooses, and he can have the pick of the litter when it comes to the cruisers and destroyers.

So... What are the strategic consequences of this opening move by the Siberians? They will likely take Kazantochi, and by so doing gain a port on the Pacific. At the moment, Magadan is their principal naval operating base and it is deep within the Sea of Okhotsk. Any line of communications by sea to Kazantochi must run right through the Kuriles, where we could easily

interdict and destroy it. So the only way the enemy will be able to supply Kazantochi is with that airship fleet they possess. I must admit, those old Zeppelins have proven much more useful than they ever were in the first war. That said, they create a very limited supply line to that port. So I do not anticipate a major threat from there any time soon, unless...

What about the Americans? They might be very interested in that port as a base, particularly for its airfields. They could attempt to supply that place by sea, and would have the means to do so. Look what they are already doing to support the Soviets through Murmansk. Yet they do not control the lower Aleutians, and if we move quickly to establish a strong base there, the air power could serve us well. So this means the first counter move against the Siberians will be to launch an offensive into the Aleutians. I can support that with one of the light carrier divisions, and use the newly formed Marine Amphibious Brigades.

Next we have Karafuto, Sakhalin Island. The entire northern half is presently locked in the cold embrace of sea ice. So I do not expect anything more than a token intervention by the enemy there, as nothing can come by sea. Again, his airships prove useful, but they can only lift so much—enough to disrupt the oil exploration operations underway there in the north, and that could be a problem. So we will send troops available in Hokkaido to southern Karafuto. The new rail lines we have built there will be most effective in moving them north. What happens along the Amur River further inland will be up to the Army.

Very well, resolution of the Siberian issue will be up to Kurita. I will then continue with Operation R into the Bismarck Archipelago and Solomons, and we will continue to support the next phase of the planned offensive into the Dutch holdings on Sumatra and Java. Thankfully, the navy we have built is strong enough to respond to this new challenge. Pearl Harbor has bought us time, nothing more. Soon my main worry will not be the great bear to our north, but the eagle in the east, America. That is where our war will either be won or lost....

* * *

The Siberians continued to press their relentless attack at Kazantochi, struggling now to overcome the old fortifications they themselves had built to protect that place. At one point, an entire regiment was thrown at Fort

Avacha at the north end of the city, and took nearly 30% casualties under Japanese artillery, supported by some timely naval gunfire from a few destroyers that had been in the bay. The old stone ramparts were also manned by unmovable Japanese troops. Trench lines were dug in the hard cold ground, and the action took on the flavor of the battle for Port Arthur, when the Japanese infantry took that at great price in blood from the Russians. The Siberians rushed these old fortified positions, but they would simply not yield, even after successive attacks by much superior numbers.

The airships tried to stand off and use their 105mm recoilless rifles against that small naval flotilla in the bay, but the dual purpose batteries on the destroyers simply outranged those rifles, and made any approach close enough to hit the enemy a very dangerous proposition. *Abakan* was damaged and forced to withdraw, and so the presence of these few steel warships in the bay had effectively neutralized the Russian airship division's presence over the harbor.

Two battalions of artillery in the Russian 92nd Division tried to reduce the fort, but without success, so the Siberians decided to simply bypass that strongpoint, taking to the high slopes of the imposing Mount Sorka volcano, and edging east to attack the city from that direction. Unable to be everywhere in sufficient strength, the Japanese could not stop the Siberians from eventually breaking through. The tough ski troops assembled, then made massive infantry attacks that swept down the slopes of Mt. Sorka like an avalanche, pushing into the town. There they were met by stubborn groups of Japanese infantry, fighting house to house.

Had the Japanese simply held in the buildings and cellars, they could have made a mini-Stalingrad out of the battle. Yet as the defense wore thinner and thinner, the increasingly desperate situation led the Japanese Sergeants to muster what little troops they had left and launch suicidal banzai charges. With the enemy already behind them in the city, the defenders of Fort Avacha fixed bayonets and came charging into the Siberian machineguns.

In all this action, Troyak and his Marines acted as a kind of storm group. They methodically advanced on the coastal fortifications at Dolinovka, east of the port, and the Black Death combined the suppressive firepower of their assault rifles and the precision targeting and penetrating power of the Koronet ATGM to reduce key enemy strongpoints. Then the stolid Siberian infantry would mount a battalion strength assault and carry the position.

Colonel Ozawa reported the situation to 91st Division commander, and

though he was prepared to die there, he was ordered to embark as many troops as possible and return to Shumushu Island to the south. Six battalions had been under his command, but no more than two battalions made it safely south. All the rest died where they stood in those last hours, leaving much of the city a blazing wreck.

When Karpov learned of the casualties his divisions had taken to secure Petropavlovsk, he grimaced, then took a long breath. "What you have said about the fighting character of the Japanese is now made clear to me," he said to Fedorov.

"Yes sir, they will be tenacious and fierce opponents. Consider what just happened. We had the element of surprise, air mobility, overland speed with our ski troops, and yet when it came down to it, it was hand to hand in the streets of Petropavlovsk."

"And that is what the place will be called again," said Karpov. "I ordered every sign of Japanese occupation eradicated. Mitsunami Airfield is now Mokhovaya again, and Uji Airfield is now Zavoko. That is the way it will remain."

"What if they counterattack?" said Fedorov. "What if they persist and move troops there by sea? Those waters won't ice over, and *Kirov* cannot be everywhere. We can't sit there watching that sea route indefinitely."

"They will have to bring at least a full division by sea to retake that harbor from us now," said Karpov. "I will have the entrance to the bay mined in 24 hours, "Yes, they could try a landing, but I do not think the Japanese will send the force required to retake this place here any time soon. We paid a high price in blood for it, but Petropavlovsk is ours, and with it, we now have de facto control of Kamchatka, whether the Japanese know it or not. Now I will have a port on the Pacific in the spring, and with *Kirov*, the means to defend it."

Fedorov nodded, seeing the strategy Karpov was slowly working to bring about. He struck in the dead of winter, yes, the Siberians were always better then. He took the one place that had to be held to lay claim to that vast peninsula, and that was all that mattered. It was his now, and in spite of fears concerning what might lay ahead, Fedorov had an inner hunch that this first small victory was going to matter a very great deal.

Kamchatka had fallen, but now the battle for Sakhalin would begin, and there the Japanese would soon come to see that desolate northern land as more vital to their security than any of the distant islands they were now

seizing with their Naval Marines. Yamashita would arrive, flying directly to Khabarovsk to assess the situation and gather intelligence on what the Siberians were doing. And then the Tiger of Malaya would soon become the white, striped death of a Siberian Tiger, for Karpov's war had only just begun.

Part IX

Knight's Move

“Mankind accepts good fortune as his due, but when bad occurs, he thinks it was aimed at him, done to him, a hex, a curse, a punishment by his deity for some transgression, as though his god were a petty storekeeper, counting up the day's receipts.”

— **Sheri S. Tepper**, *The Visitor*

Chapter 25

Boston Navy Yard was a busy place just before the war broke out in the Pacific. A number of new ships were scheduled to launch, and among them was a new *Gleaves* Class destroyer. She was lined up on the slipway about four months earlier than in Fedorov's history, ready to taste the champagne and sea for the first time. The usual crowd of onlookers were present, friends and family of all the men and women who had a hand in building the ship, and the few dignitaries standing up on the high platform rising to kiss her bow.

The *Gleaves* Class would be the successor to the older *Benson* class, looking almost identical to those ships. At 1,630 tons, the ships were fast at 37 knots, and hardy at sea, with a range of 6500 nautical miles that was good enough to send them to the vast Pacific. They mounted four single 5-inch guns, two forward and two aft, and ten 21-inch torpedo tubes amidships between a pair of stovepipe stacks that were just slightly inclined from the vertical. They also had a pair of depth charge racks aft, making them a good all purpose sheep dog and escort ship for fleets and convoys. Many things learned by the *Gleaves* class at sea would help make its successor, the *Fletcher* Class, the most successful destroyer class ever built.

This particular ship was late in the series, the 54th of a total of 66 that would be built in the class, designated DD-633. Only 11 ships of that total would be sunk in the war, and in Fedorov's history, this particular ship would be lucky enough to survive unscathed, finally being sunk as a target ship off San Diego in 1967. For now, that ignominious moment before a firing squad from the nation the ship so ably served was decades away. The ship was fresh and new, untried, untested, the rivets in her hull plating barely gleaming with fresh paint.

Up on the high platform, the ship's sponsors were gathered for the launching ceremonies, Rear Admiral W. T. Tarrant, the Commandant of the Boston Navy Yard, and a young fresh faced woman, Miss Elizabeth Harwood Royal, the granddaughter of the Admiral this ship would be named for. Young and pretty beneath her light lace veil, Miss Harwood stood with her bouquet of flowers beside the Admiral, her smile lighting up the moment. They posed for photos, and then when it came time to swing that bottle of champagne, she gave it a solid knock, right at the 6 fathom line, and sent the

effervescent white foam awash across that bow. From that moment on, it would be the white foam of the sea there, for this ship was to have a most unusual twist in its life line, and all because of the man she was named for.

At that moment, it was all smiles and ceremony, the shipwrights looking on from a perch above that platform. Then, the bottle broken, the ship rolled down the long wood slipway, and into the sea, rocking this way and that, before settling down in the water, ready to be moved to a new dock to be fitted out. She would be finished those four months early, commissioned in February of 1942 instead of June. Lieutenant Commander Richard B. Levin would get the ship, which would have gone right out into the Atlantic for Operation Torch if this timeline had not been altered. Yet now, born to the sea those four months early, the need was in the Pacific, and Levin would take his ship there, completely re-writing the tabular record of movement for this vessel.

Before the destroyer sailed for Panama, a dark car pulled up at the docks and a man appeared in a long grey coat, the collar pulled high against the chilly wind. In his hand he had a bundled package for delivery to the ship's CO, and in it was a small wooden box and a brief letter. *"Please accept this gift as a token of good luck. It was a family heirloom, a favorite keepsake of my grandfather, for which your ship is proudly named. May it gift your ship with a long and interesting life. – Elizabeth Harwood Royal."*

Levin scratched his head as he looked at it, not knowing quite what to make of it. Such things were often the chicken's feet and rabbits feet of history, he thought, but this one was rather unusual. The fact that it was a personal possession of the ship's namesake made it quite special—Admiral Austin M. Knight. The gift his granddaughter had delivered to the ship's keeping had come from a forsaken and faraway place, lost in the foggy veils of the history the Admiral's life had once helped to write....

* * *

It started a very long time ago, in a place that was strangely woven into the fabric of plane now spinning through the mind of Vladimir Karpov. After the "incident" off Oki island in the Sea of Japan in 1908, Japanese retribution was swift. With Russia's navy already defeated at the Battle of Tushima Straits, the sudden aggression of yet another Russian ship in the Sea of Japan

led to a violent reaction. Thinking the ship had been lurking at Vladivostok, the Japanese moved quickly to seize that port and all of Sakhalin Island, which Japan had long coveted. The treaty ceding the northern segment of that island to the Siberians was nullified, and Japanese troops pushed as far as Okha on the northern tip. Landing in Vladivostok and renaming the place Urajio, they set up a military governorship there, and then used the rail lines to push inland to Khabarovsk.

Yet their conquest of the Primorskiy and Amur Oblast regions was not immediate or ever really complete. The dearth of roads meant that large military formations relied almost entirely on the Trans-Siberian Rail, and the Japanese made gradual progress north, then west around the wide bend of the Amur River, but over a period of many years. The nature of the situation in Siberia quickly saw any semblance of a central government there swept away by the winds of the Russian Revolution. Throughout that long struggle, Siberia remained a wild, lawless land, ruled by Cossack and Tartar Atamans, and other petty warlords.

Hosts from the Urals, Orenburg, the Bakshirs, Yesenis, Siberian Cossacks, Ussuri and Amur tribes, and natives of the Trans-Baikal all began a systematic looting of anything valuable. The grandsons of all these men were now riding with Karpov in his cavalry regiments, under the firm rein of his discipline, but back then, no town or village was ever safe. Passage on any road or the rail lines would often see travelers kidnapped, robbed, beaten, tortured and killed.

There was a sense of heedless depravity in the ranks of the Cossacks, largely instilled by ruthless leaders like Semenoff and Kalmykov, who commandeered train cars and engines, building armored trains that rolled along the long steel lines bringing terror to any town where they paused. So stern were the hands that led these units, that their own soldiers were driven to their tasks with leather whips. Needless to say, life was merciless and cruel, where hardship and deprivation was the norm.

The slowly encroaching Japanese presence centered on the major towns along the Trans-Siberian Rail, with Chita being the largest outpost as that line approached the Trans-Baikal region. Soon they had all of 70,000 troops in Siberia, and no intention of leaving. Yet in the early years, they had made an uneasy truce with the Cossack hordes. On the one hand, they saw the disorder these warlords created as a means of preventing any unified central government from arising in Siberia to oppose them. On the other hand, the

terror caused by the Atamans had other ramifications. There was wanton raping, looting, beating, and torture. Villages were razed and young men were killed, strung up from trees, with hot iron rods driven through their ears. They were bound hand and foot with a necklace of heavy stones tied to the their necks before being thrown from railway bridges into icy lakes. All this disorder and depravity eventually came to the attention of President Truman, a distasteful shadow looming over another ‘issue’ concerning Siberia.

Vladivostok, now Urajio, offered a Pacific port for the shipment of goods bound for the Tsar, and at one time, considerable stocks of ammunition and other war supplies had been sent there, and to Murmansk, in the hope of securing Russian support in WWI against Germany. Many of the railroad cars now serving the line had come from the US, and the warlords were stealing them at will. When the revolution swept the Tsar from power, and the nation began to fragment into warring factions struggling to control Russia’s vast territories, the US saw their “investment’ in the Tsar as a bitter loss—or was it? Much of that ammunition still lay in massive stockpiles near Vladivostok, and the rolling stock they had delivered was all still there, even if it had been commandeered. The Japanese kept a careful eye on the ammunition depots, though the American Ambassador in Tokyo made it known that the United States considered those stocks as American property, and soon dispatched several armored cruisers, and two regiments of infantry, to look after US interests in Siberia.

The Japanese were not happy to see these warships appear, and less happy at the prospect of foreign troops landing. By this time, however, Admiral Kolchak had emerged from the chaos of the revolution, setting up a fledgling government in Omsk and declaring himself the Supreme Leader of all Russia. The Bolsheviks continued to war with him, until another figure named Ivan Volkov emerged in Orenburg, rallying dissenting elements of the White movement there by overthrowing Denikin. With so many Whites going over to his banners, Kolchack’s position was seriously weakened, eventually forcing him to retreat from Omsk and re-center his nascent government at Irkutsk. Meanwhile, Ivan Volkov extended his influence down into Kazakhstan and the Caucasus, where The Terek and Kuban Hosts joined his movement. They tried to recruit the “Kolchakaya,” those tribes loyal to Kolchak in the west, but this effort only solidified the lines of control near Omsk, where a temporary no man’s land of a border zone was established.

Seeing Kolchak as the only means of diplomatically gaining access to

the region, the US courted him to allow US troops on Siberian soil. While Japan, with the loose allegiance of the Cossack Atamans, actually controlled the Trans-Siberian Rail as far as Chita, the Americans still appeared one day, intent on landing at Vladivostok. They had timed their arrival to coincide with a major demonstration by a faction in the city posing as a Red Cadre, which began to go on a rampage in the Chinese quarter near the port. Small arms fire was deliberately directed at the US warships anchored out in the Golden Horn Bay, and the pretext for an American landing was soon well in hand, no matter what the Japanese thought about it.

Admiral Austin M. Knight was Commander of the US Asiatic Fleet at that time, his flag planted on the armored cruiser *Washington*. Along with the USS *South Dakota*, and USS *Brooklyn*, the Americans had a good deal of muscle on hand for the landing operation. The first two ships each had four 10-inch guns and another sixteen 6-inchers. The *Brooklyn* had eight 8-inch guns with a secondary battery of twelve 5-inch guns. Considering that the Japanese had only one cruiser and two lighter destroyers at the harbor that day, the American flotilla possessed a considerable edge in firepower.

A careful and sensible man, Knight had been anticipating turning over command of the Asiatic Fleet to Admiral Gleaves soon so he could retire, but that had not yet happened in these altered events. The stream of causality was slowly deviating from the path where it once flowed, with minor variations gradually beginning to appear. Yet, in the face of this dangerous tripwire situation, Knight knew he had to be very cautious.

A short man, he barely stood but five and a half feet tall, round faced, squarish chin, and fair of complexion, with thinning grey hair parted in the middle, and a thick charcoal mustache. He was a well experienced man, prim and proper, with no button ever out of place on his uniform jacket. His book, *Modern Seamanship*, would demonstrate the methodical focus he brought to sea, and become a bible among seamen in both commercial and naval fleets for decades.

In drafting a speech on preparedness for war the previous year, he wrote: "It has been well said that the world stands aside for the man who knows where he is going." His was a habit and instinct for command that had hardened like frozen seawater from many tributaries: thoroughness, proper systems, logical reasoning, and timely decisions. In this case, however, he did not really know where this journey to Siberia would take him. As the sound of distant gunfire rumbled through the night, he could feel that events were

on the edge of a knife. Then, when bullets snapped off the hull of the USS *South Dakota*, he decided to act. Knight made his first daring move.

Signals flags were raised on the halyards, and lamps flickered out his orders. While the main body of the first regiment of US troops was still in the Sea of Japan, Admiral Knight decided to send in the four companies of US Marines now riding at anchor on his ships. Captains Barry, Reynolds, Wheeler and Johnson would take to the long boats and form their companies near the harbor quays. Already the sound of fighting and gunfire was drawing near, and then a column of trucks pulled up, crowded with Japanese infantry who brandished their rifles threateningly at the US Marines.

Captain Barry of 1st Company looked to his first Lieutenant, a man with a famous name and ancestor, Edgar Allen Poe. ‘Lieutenant Poe,’ he said sternly. “See what those men want.”

Poe saluted, walking briskly forward, fearless, and looking for any man among the Japanese who looked to be decorated as an officer. He spied a squat man with shoulder pauldrons, and took him to be the commander of this contingent, and the two men exchanged some hard words, first at odds with the language barrier, until an interpreter intervened on the Japanese side.

“You have no business here,” said the Japanese Colonel. “Leave immediately.”

“I’m afraid that is impossible,” said Poe. “The interests of the United States are involved, and I have orders to answer this threat and secure the peace here to preserve and protect the property of the United States Government.”

“I tell you your country has no interest here. None! You must leave immediately!”

Poe took a look over his shoulder, seeing the Marines standing in tense lines on the quay, and then he caught the gleam of moonlight off one of the long 10-inch guns on the *South Dakota*. “See that,” he pointed. “The United States presently has over 40,000 tons of war fighting steel at anchor in that bay, and you are now looking at four companies of United States Marines. The Commander in Chief of the United States Asiatic Fleet is standing right there, on the bridge of that ship, and he had given me specific orders, which I fully intend to carry out. Now then... If you attempt to impede me in any way, you will thereby set your government and nation in opposition to the United States, and this, sir, will become the first battlefield of the war you so thoughtlessly chose to begin.”

Chapter 26

A tense moment ensued, broken by the sudden resonant clang of a bell on the USS *Washington*. It seemed to underscore the warning implicit in the Lieutenant's words, and slowly, the forward main gun turret on that ship rotated shoreward with ominous intent. Poe's blood was up, one hand tensely on the haft of a sabre, the other on the butt of his sidearm. In his mind the verse of his distant second cousin rambled with an urgent beat... *'Brazen Bells, What tale of terror, now, their turbulency tells! In the startled ear of night, How they scream out their affright!'*

Saying nothing more, Lieutenant Poe turned and strode boldly back to the ranks of the Marines. He saluted crisply to Captain Barry. "Sir," he said forcefully. "I have given fair warning, and believe I have made our intentions perfectly clear. With your permission, I will lead the company forward."

Captain Barry raised his chin, a gleam in his eye, the bells on the *Washington* now being answer by those of the *South Dakota*. "Lieutenant," he said firmly. "You may proceed."

Poe, nodded, a half smile on his lips, and then sharply drew his sabre. "Company—Atten-*hut!*"

The Marines snapped to attention, their voices loud in response as they did so.

"First Company.... Fix *Bayonets!*"

The night glittered with steel, a coiled, sinuous movement in the ranks, as though a long, scaled dragon was rousing itself from troubled sleep and seething with a terrible anger. "Sergeants forward. At the quick step, and follow me!" The Lieutenant turned, the blade of his sabre on his shoulder, his pistol drawn in his other hand. He started off at a trot, and the Marines moved as one thing, chests, shoulders, thick armed men, their legs tramping out a steady rhythm as they went, the gleam of light rippling over the cold steel of those bayonets, the deep voices of the sergeants urging them on. All the while those bells were singing in the bay... *"Oh, the bells, bells, bells! What a tale their terror tells. How they clang, and clash, and roar! What a horror they outpour..."*

For one brief moment a canvas tarp was thrown back on one of the trucks, revealing two men squatting behind a machinegun. Then the Japanese Colonel waved a hand, beckoning the truck to move forward from the

position where it was blocking the way. The engine sputtered to life, and the clutch jerked as the truck lurched forward, just as Lieutenant Poe and the leading edge of that long column of iron faced Marines came tramping up. As if to acknowledge the wise decision of his adversary, Poe shouted out an order.

“Marines! Eyes... *right!*”

Thick necks turned, chins high, and the company pounded on by, the sound of their heavy footfalls hard on the stone and concrete as they moved into the city. They were going in to restore order, and now the whistles of the other Marine companies behind them animated those troops, and no one in the city ever forgot that moment. They had suffered the chaos of disorder, the lawless rampage of brigands and bullies, the hard hand of the Japanese, and the terror of the Atamans. Now, that one night, the hard steady tramp of those leather soled boots on the pavement timed out the uncompromising beat of a new order.

Out on the weather deck off the bridge on the USS *Washington*, Admiral Knight had witnessed the entire scene through his binoculars. It always started this way, he thought. The old men get a notion in their thick, grey heads, the young men get an order, and events are written into the history that can never be undone. Another poet, Omar Khayyam, would capture the sentiment perfectly when he wrote: “*The Moving Finger writes; and, having writ, Moves on: nor all thy Piety nor Wit Shall lure it back to cancel half a Line, Nor all thy Tears wash out a Word of it.*”

Speaking again as an ambassador from the US Naval War College, Admiral Knight would say: “The wonderful thing about youth is that it has, to some slight extent, the power to shape the future. The melancholy thing about age is that it cannot change a single feature of the past.” Yet in war, the old were too often tasked with the spending of youth, and the shedding of young blood in that effort to shape the uncertain future. As to the fixed and unalterable nature of the past, Admiral Knight would soon go ashore in the sinuous wake of those columns of Marines, and would learn that was not entirely the case.

The Marines would quickly put down the demonstration of the Red Cadre, which soon melted into the night. They would stand as a kind of local constabulary in the city for months, with more tense moments as they sought to ascertain the location and size of the ammunition stockpiles the US had delivered. They would ride the rails to Khabarovsk, and up around the Amur

River, dueling with the Atamans. Two full Regiments of the Army and volunteers from several other units would form the A.E.F., or the American Expeditionary Force, and they would stay for two long years. Yet like so many other American interventions, this temporary incursion would have no real long lasting effect on the political situation in Siberia. Japan moved three battleships to Urajio, bolstered her garrison troops there, quietly tolerated the Americans while secretly bribing the Atamans to cause them difficulties. In time, the US troops were pulled out, and went home.

Admiral Knight's opening move in Siberia would not carry the board in favor of the Americans, which soon forgot the affair, being possessed with a much more important intervention in Europe's terrible First World War. Yet something had happened in that incident that would matter a good deal, that very night when the Admiral came ashore to join those Marines. He was welcomed by a local Mayor, seeking allies and eager to befriend anyone who might bolster his sagging authority in the face of Japanese occupation. Exchanging gifts in greeting, Knight proffered a box of cigars, and received in turn a basket of fresh baked bread, goat cheese and mushrooms.

"May it bring you good luck," said the Mayor through an interpreter, a British reporter who had been in the city for some months. "And may it gift you with a long and interesting life."

It was not until he had returned to the *Washington*, handing the basket off to the ship's cook, that the Admiral was disturbed in his stateroom by a quiet knock.

"Come," he said, wondering if there was trouble ashore, but instead surprised to see the cook.

"Excuse me sir, the officers will certainly enjoy that bread for breakfast, and mushroom soup for lunch, but I also found this at the bottom of that basket, and thought I'd best bring it here at once." He handed the Admiral a small wooden box, just a few inches square, and strangely carved. "I haven't opened it, sir, seeing that it was meant for you."

"Thank you, Mister Hawes. Good evening."

The man nodded and was gone, and Admiral Knight, a bit near sighted, leaned in to study the small box more closely. Perhaps it held a ring, he thought, slowly working off the lid, which was fitted snugly in place. There, nestled in fine velvet, was a small silver object that seemed to capture and reflect all the light in that room. He looked at it closely, thinking how very odd it appeared, much like a teardrop of silver, he thought. Yes... A

teardrop...

* * *

Lieutenant Commander Levin did not quite know what to make of it when he saw it, gleaming in a velvet lined cradle within that box. It was a most unusual thing indeed, but what would he do with it? His first thought was to have it welded to the ship's wheel, an easy handle for the helmsman, but when the engineers tried, they could not succeed. No other metal would adhere to it, and the workman was astounded to find it was still completely cold when he dropped it into a bucket of water afterwards, as if his blow torch had been no more than a breath of icy air.

It was a most unusual thing, and now it would make this destroyer a most unusual ship, for DD-633, USS *Knight*, was indeed named for the Admiral who had first received that gift, long ago. She made her way through the Caribbean to the Panama Canal, passing through in early February, and then sailing on to Pearl Harbor. As if the ship was some kind of harbinger, that same week the great mountain that the island was made of began to rumble and glow. It was a little known episode of geologic history that was about to repeat itself, though it was happening just a few months earlier than it did in Fedorov's history.

There had been elevated seismic activity on Hawaii for some months before, and it was clear to the listening scientists that Pele was awakening. Fissures began to open along the western rim of the volcano, which soon produced a strong flow of hot orange fire and lava. The fissure migrated towards the summit caldera, soon opening to new vent systems and cracking open a new fissure there that was a kilometer in length. Fountains of lava leapt up nearly a 100 meters, then grew to 150 meters at the height of the eruption. As it flowed down the long flanks of the mountain, it was soon apparent that it would threaten fresh water supplies and vital roads on the island.

So the Army Air Force decided to declare a quiet little war on Pele, the Mountain Goddess of Fire. The ribbons of fiery lava she expelled would soon cool and dry to become the thick black curls of her flowing hair. Her brother Gods of thunder, explosion and fire falls gathered around her there, and the Air Force began to literally bomb the advancing lava flows to attempt to divert them. All news of the eruption was also rigidly suppressed, because it

was thought that if the Japanese knew about it, they might use the glowing summit of Mauna Loa as a kind of homing beacon to guide in attacking planes. The bombing effort was fruitless, for Pele's powers were measureless compared to the might of those few old bombers that had risen to challenge her.

USS *Knight* made a brief port-of-call visit to Hilo on the Big Island that week, and the crew would look up by day to see the threatening pall of smoke veiling over the highland, about 24 miles to the southwest. They could see the ominous glow from the summit by night, and it left a disquieting feeling in them. At one point, at what would be the height of the eruptive sequence, Lieutenant Commander Levin was sitting at his desk with a cup of rapidly cooling coffee, looking over crew manifests and lists of supplies laid in. His cup was sitting on the desk, right next to the box he had received from Admiral Knight's granddaughter. There came an uneasy tremor, a quavering in the stillness that rattled his favorite pen in its inkwell.

He looked up, hearing a distant rumble, a barely perceptible growl in the night. Pele was stirring again, he thought, thinking little more of it. This volcano had never been known to make large explosive eruptions. It had slowly built this entire chain of islands over many thousands of years, oozing out these steady flows of lava year after year. This one was no different, or so he thought, reaching for his coffee cup to take a last sip before it lost all warmth. To his great surprise, he started when he took that sip, for it was so hot that it nearly burned his lips. He could feel the steady heat emanating into the mug itself, which was now so warm that he had to set it down, this time well away from the box and its hidden talisman.

Commander Levin never made any connection in his mind between that unaccountably hot coffee, over forty minutes old in his cup, and the box sitting there on the desk next to his mug. If he had, he might have opened that box, and seen the strange green glow emanating from that family heirloom.

The next day the ship left Hilo, bound for Pearl to take on the last of her scheduled ordnance allotment. As they rounded the northern tip of Hawaii, entering the Maui Channel, they came across a cargo ship, which winked at them requesting a recognition signal. Ships were understandably still very cautious in these waters, for one never knew if the Japanese might try to sneak in again and raise havoc.

"Mister Kent," said Levin. "Haven't we run up our recognition flags this morning?"

“The Watch Officer craned his neck to have a look, then gave the Lieutenant Commander a sheepish look. “No sir, the halyard is bare. Sorry sir. I’ll see to it immediately.”

The flags were run up, but they had a most unexpected effect on the other ship, which turned and steamed off at high speed, as though they had seen a ghost. Levin shook his head, never making the odd connection between the ship’s recognition flags and the messages they might spell out if interpreted separately.

The radio call sign for the USS *Knight* would speak ominously to her future fate. The letters were N.X.U.T, Nan, X-Ray, Uncle, Tare in WWII, and if run up together on a signal halyard they could spell out a fairly dark warning. “*Your movements not understood... Not keeping visual watch... Stop carrying out your intentions, and watch for my signal... Keep clear of me....*”

Even the ship’s hull number DD-633, would spell out a warning if run up on flags, which is what the flagmen sent up beneath those call letters. A young seaman on that cargo vessel, wet behind the ears and still learning his flags, called out the message he thought he was seeing to his section Chief.

“Sir,” he said. “Now it says: *Keep clear, I am maneuvering with difficulty... Act at your discretion... steer away... steer away!*”

And that was what the cargo ship did.

It would not be the first time the USS *Knight* would be thought of as a ghost ship. Three days later, outward bound from Pearl Harbor, she was first in a line of three destroyers. Another ship in her same class was second in the line, USS *Gwin*, and behind her came the older *Somers* Class destroyer USS *Warrington*. Seas were rough, and the riggings were alight with the eerie glow of Saint Elmo’s fire. A heavy squall blew in and then, for a moment, the watchman on *Gwin* saw a bolt of lightning strike well ahead, suffusing the entire scene with a phosphorescent glow. He raised his hand to shield his eyes from the rain, and could see no sign of the *Knight*.

Word was sent to the bridge, and orders came to set the ship’s lamps to work to see if they would get back a response, but none came. Tense minutes passed, with no sign of the lead destroyer. Lieutenant Commander Higgins aboard *Gwin* was about to notify the *Warrington* of the trouble, when lo and behold, there was the other ship, so close in front of him that he had to issue a fast order for a speedy turn to avoid collision.

Every man of the watch got a grilling that day, and the incident was

logged as nothing more than unsteady sea keeping in a storm. That night, Midshipman James Morgan on the *Gwin* would sulk after that rebuke, but swear to his mates that there had been absolutely no sign of the ship before it was seen so suddenly close off the bow.

“Damn storm wasn’t that heavy,” he said to his mates. “Damn ship wasn’t there, I tell you. I would have seen it clear as day if it was. It wasn’t there...”

Chapter 27

With Kamchatka's principle port and city secured, Karpov's Plan 7 now shifted to Sakhalin Island. Initial objectives would be in the North, where there were considerable settlements along the coast of the Tartar Strait. The only problem was that the pack ice in February would prevent any landings there by sea, and the operation would have to be entirely entrusted to the Air Corps. The entire might of the Siberian Air Corps was amassed for this operation. Three of the five airships in Kamchatka were recalled, leaving only the cruisers *Abakan* and *Angara* there to patrol the sea approached to Petropavlovsk. The three bigger airships joined six others, three from Irkutsk and three more coming down with Karpov from Magadan.

These nine airships could combine to lift a five battalion brigade, Karpov's veteran Air Guard units, and this force was deemed sufficient to seize the initial objectives. They wanted Okha, which offered a modest port in warmer months. Further south on the east coast, particularly between the towns of Paromay and Val, the Japanese had been surveying for oil, which led Karpov to believe Ivan Volkov had given them information on where they could find it.

Karpov and Fedorov also knew exactly where the most productive wells would be found and developed, and so this region was a big part of the strategic plan for North Sakhalin, yet it, too, could not be reached by sea in February.

"I have given some thought to using ice breakers," said Karpov.

"Far too slow," said Fedorov. "The sea ice can extend out 200 miles from Sakhalin. If they are spotted trying to plow their way towards that northern coast, the Japanese could bring down enough air power to destroy the invasion flotilla."

"I can stop them with *Kirov's* SAM umbrella."

"Possibly, but that won't prevent them from trying, and they won't give up easily. They'll take their losses, endure the shock of facing our SAMs, then simply shift more planes from Japan and try again. Do not underestimate them. Your sea transport assets are few in number, and very valuable. You caught them napping with that surprise landing on Kamchatka, and you could only do this because the waters remain ice free year round in the landing zone

you choose. But now they will be on alert. You moved almost two divisions to take Kamchatka, but you don't have that kind of muscle now for Sakhalin. As you have said, everything has to go by air. Attempt to get through that ice, and you are courting disaster. Should even a few planes get through, could you afford to lose a transport, or even two or three such ships?"

"Your point is well made," said Karpov. "Given the situation as it is, we will simply have to rely on our airlift capability. So this will be an operation lifting one brigade at a time, and *Kirov* will stand off in the ice free zone in the Sea of Okhotsk, and serve for A.E.W. picket duty, and air defense. Once we establish a lodgment in the north, we can move down the coastal roads and seize the oil development region, and then Lazarev at the narrowest segment of the Tartary Strait on the west coast. My plan will then be to build up forces and supplies in the Amur region, for a planned drive down that river to Komsomolsk, Amursk and eventually Khabarovsk."

"That's a long way to go in winter."

"375 miles," said Karpov. "The Japanese are not well established in Khabarovskiy Province. There is nothing there, and the river is the only way to move in the warmer months. So this buildup will not be opposed on the ground. Once established, we'll move as we did in Kamchatka, along the frozen rivers with ski troops and sleds, and by air. Once we do take Khabarovsk, we will have cut the Trans-Siberian rail there, effectively isolating all the Japanese garrisons in Amurskaya Province along that rail line."

"They'll still have the line running from Vladivostok, through Harbin to Chita."

"True, but we will have at least isolated the entire Amur River bend with that move."

"Yes," said Fedorov. "It is a bold move, but also very risky, a little like posting a knight in the center of the board in the opening game."

"Exactly," said Karpov. "And from Khabarovsk it is then only another 400 miles to Vladivostok. So what do you think of my plan?"

"I think its virtues could also spell its downfall," said Fedorov. "You will carry off the seizure of Northern Sakhalin easily enough, and possibly secure Lazarev as an access point to the mainland. But then we will have to wait until the ice breaks to use that as a logistical port receiving supplies by sea from Magadan, and it will certainly come under regular Japanese air attack. As for the drive along the Amur River, if it can be done swiftly, while

the ground and river remains frozen, then you may get your division to Khabarovsk. When the thaw comes, anything you have in the open will get bogged down. I hope you have plenty of small boats. That's miserable terrain out there, just ask Troyak."

"We'll get down river before the thaw," said Karpov confidently.

"Yes? Then what will your troops find waiting for them at Khabarovsk? That's what concerns me. The Japanese will use the rail infrastructure from Vladivostok and Harbin to move forces there. In fact, I believe Harbin will be the key to their defensive operations. It will be the center of the wheel, and from there, road and rail connections branch out to all the major towns along the Amur River. This will be a much more difficult campaign than you may realize. You could be facing several divisions when you arrive, outnumbered two or three to one. Unless you have well established river transport, your forces will have to be supplied by air. And remember, Japanese airpower will go after any river traffic, and certainly challenge your Zeppelin fleet as well. Khabarovsk is well inland. *Kirov* would have to hover right off the coast in the Tartary Strait to project any SAM defense, and even then, only S-300 missiles have the range to matter, and we have only 61 aboard."

"I have considered all that, but remember, my men lived in this region for generations. They can live off the land if need be. I have no illusions about what we will be facing, but this is the only strategic move worth the name. We will make small moves first. This winter offensive attack only aims to secure one primary sector—north Sakhalin. That's where we play out Knight to King Bishop three. Come spring, we will see how the board looks, and plan our moves accordingly. But we must eventually take Khabarovsk. Only then can we open that file and strike south to Vladivostok. I know it will take time. I do not expect this all to happen in just a few months. In the meantime, I have already seized a port and airfields in Kamchatka, and I plan on using these to make an offer to the Americans."

"I agree that those airfields could be useful," said Fedorov, "but to a limited extent. Weather conditions in Kamchatka will prohibit large scale air operations there. The waters off Petropavlovsk are the foggiest in the world. Furthermore, the real bastion of Japanese power remains on Shumushu and Paramushir Islands. They'll move fighters there, and right astride the routes any American bombers will have to take to reach Hokkaido. So, while you have Petropavlovsk, your campaign in Kamchatka must now transition to an attack on those islands. The northern Kuriles will become some of the most

strategic islands in the war. And also consider Attu Island in the Western Aleutians. The Japanese took that in June of 1942, and I have no doubt they will try to do so again.”

“A lot of gloom and doom, Fedorov.”

“You wanted my best assessment of the situation, and I am giving it to you. Remember, in chess we are not the only one who gets to make a move. The Japanese will have counter operations to everything we do. And now, with this campaign in the north already under way, the Pacific war looks to be an entirely different game. But this is a war, Captain, as you have pressed upon me on more than one occasion, not a chess game. Everything we do must be carefully planned, because as you have seen on Kamchatka, we pay for it in blood.”

“Yes,” said Karpov, smiling. “It is war, to be certain. I gave them an ultimatum, and they ignored me. So now I will give them a war on two fronts. They will now have to expend resources, men, ships, planes supplies, that they never had to use in the history we know. The Americans will not fail to notice that. Mark my words, they will soon come to appreciate what we do here a great deal.”

* * *

The Japanese would also come to appreciate it, only not in the way Karpov hoped. It would soon be clear that they intended to contest his opening war moves with the same ferocity and tenacity that they applied elsewhere. In some ways, Karpov’s war was premature. His opening was playing out to an optimistic beginning, but only because his enemy had been caught off guard. Fedorov’s cautious warnings would soon become apparent to the Siberians, as the Japanese now met to plan their countermoves.

The grim faced Chief of the General Staff, Hajime Sujiyama, flew to Harbin to meet and brief the man Tojo had selected to lead operations in the north, General Tomoyuki Yamashita. Unhappy with his reassignment, Yamashita stewed in Harbin for some time, thinking he had been shamed and cast off to a do nothing outpost for his failure to take Singapore. The fact that the recalcitrant General Nishimura had been given command in his place galled him, as Tojo intended.

“Do not look so glum,” said Sujiyama. “Forget Singapore, it was nothing. We do not even need it to continue operations as planned in the

south. It will be isolated and become nothing more than a millstone around the necks of the British. The city is swarming with refugees. They will have a million hungry mouths to feed, and our air power will eventually win the day. Yet now, these new developments in the north are most troubling. Your campaign in Malaya was a masterful affair. Believe me, it was noticed, even by the emperor.”

“Yet I will never live down the shame of failing to deliver the city.”

“Nonsense. The Emperor has the same mind in this matter as I have just related. In fact, he has ordered Nishimura to consolidate his position, and the air force will pound the place while supplies are moved south. Nishimura was forbidden to attack it again directly, so now he is the one sitting in the humid jungle down there with nothing to do.”

“No further attack on Singapore?”

“It will fall now by the indirect approach. Our next move there is Sumatra and Java, where the enemy is hoping to retain valuable airfields to defend Singapore. Once we have taken those, the place will fall like rotten fruit. So be glad you are here! This is where the real action is now. The Siberian attack has opened a second front, and one we did not expect to have to consider in our war plans. All our resources have been thrown into the Southern Offensive, but now we must fight with two swords. So you will take command of the newly reconstituted Northern Army.”

“What army? There is only one division here in Harbin, and it does nothing more here than watch the rail lines.”

“And for good reason,” said Sujiyama. “Those rail lines are now the life lines of the Empire. Three more divisions will be assigned to your command. First, the 8th Cedar Division will be pulled from pacification duties in Manchukuo, then the 14th Shining Division will be recalled from Qiqihar in Mongolia. I cannot think of a more distant and useless place, and so those troops will come to you. Finally, the 28th Abundant Division, is presently stationed north of Harbin for internal Manchukuo security. It is yours, along with the 10th Iron Division, which has its headquarters right here in the city.”

“Four divisions?”

“Precisely. So you will have an army to command after all, General, and one almost twice the size of the force you so ably led in Malaya. The enemy has just made his next move. Those obsolete Siberian airships are now landing troops in Kita Karafuto, the far northern tip of the place they called Sakhalin Island. Do not concern yourself with that. The Navy has troops on

Hokkaido that will be moved to reinforce Karafuto. But we have learned that the Siberians also plan a move up the Amur River. They plan to take Bo Li!”

That was the old Chinese name for Khabarovsk, and Yamashita raised his eyebrows as he studied the map between them. “You will, of course, stop them from doing this, and then plan their complete destruction.”

“But Bo Li is nearly 400 miles from these landings in Kita Karafuto.”

“Yes, but that is what they are planning. We have this from the network of spies and informants established by our friends in Orenburg. They are going to move along the Amur River. See how it runs up from the south, parallel to the coast? In Kamchatka they moved great distances by using ski troops, and those infernal balloons of theirs. We believe they plan a similar move, while the river remains frozen. But it will take them a good deal of time to build up forces to do this. Their airlift capability is known to us, and it can move no more than a single brigade. So that gives you time to plan your own moves, and we have the roads and rail lines. When your divisions arrive, begin moving troops to Bo Li. Some could move overland by road, but it would be faster to use the main rail line through Urajio, and then go north from there. We expect they will attempt to sabotage that line, but it is well guarded, so you should not incur any major delays.”

“And once I am there?”

“That is up to you, General. You may wish to push a division up the Amur river to see what they are up to. Follow that river and it will eventually lead you to Kita Karafuto. Our counterattack will come from the south on that island, and then your forces can join from the Amur River axis.”

“This terrain looks very difficult.”

“No more difficult than the jungles of Malaya,” said Sujiyama. “I am sending you the God of Operations. Masanobu Tsuji served you well in Malaya, so put his mind to good use here as well.”

“How soon should I begin?”

“As soon as you are ready. I have every confidence in you, and I will relate the same to the Emperor when i meet with him in Tokyo next week.”

“Tojo won’t like that.”

“Tojo doesn’t like his own shadow. Forget about him as well. Focus your mind and energy here. You are Tomoyuki Yamashita, the Tiger of Malaya, and now you are the flashing sword of the north. I will see that the Army provides you with everything you need, transport, supplies, air support. You have only one thing you need to concern yourself with now—the

destruction of our enemies.”

Part X

Cover of Darkness

“So the darkness shall be the light, and the stillness the dancing.”

— **T.S. Eliot**

Chapter 28

The fighting on Gran Canaria continued, with the Germans tantalizingly close to their main objective. II Battalion of the 7th Flieger Regiment had been joined by a small company of armored cars and the newly arrived 327th Pioneer Battalion. They were just south of San Jose, a small hamlet below La Palma, and soon they began to receive artillery fire from the British guns located some miles to the north, on San Lorenzo Ridge. Their attempt to push on up that road did little more that morning than to burn out those pioneers. The British defense was simply too stubborn.

General Kübler was pouring over his map, seeing that the British had more strength here than he initially believed. “They have good troops on the line now,” he said to General Leutnant Hubert Lanz. The two men had been with the 1st Mountain Division for some time, and Lanz was supposed to be leading it on the East Front now, but that had never happened. The mountain troops had gained so many laurels after the successful storming and capture of Gibraltar, that they were now seen as a kind of elite force by Hitler, and kept in the Mediterranean where they participated in the Syrian intervention, and fought with Rommel’s Afrika Korps.

“That position near Tafira will be very difficult,” said Lanz.

“So I think it is time we move the regiment west into the high country,” said Kübler. “Send the Engineer Battalion up this road and take this place—San Mateo. The remainder of the regiment will attempt a flanking movement between that town and Santa Brigida to the east near the foothills.”

“The troops are rested now after the initial fighting,” said Lanz. “I can be ready to attack at mid-day.”

That attack would find another good British unit on the line, 1st Battalion, 1st Para, under Colonel John Frost. He had his troopers dug in well, and an intense firefight was soon underway. The mountain troops advanced in small groups, making rushes, but the ground was very difficult. The Germans followed furrowed ravines due west, climbing along the flanks of the high country, but when they turned north they found the British deployed on the far side of a wandering barranco, one of many cutting their way down to the lowlands.

The Pioneer Battalion had followed the winding road up to San Mateo, and infiltrated into the town unopposed, but they soon found themselves

facing a strong British counterattack. 3rd Para Battalion emerged from the woodland to the north, and from the west, on the road leading up the mountain, No. 2 Commando put in an attack to try and flank the town. Kübler had thought Santa Brigida was the end of the British line. Now he realized it extended much further inland.

“This envelopment cannot proceed under these circumstances,” he told Lanz when they met again that afternoon. “With at least three British battalions on this flank, the regiment will not be able to make the turning move I had anticipated. I’m afraid the main effort will have to remain on the coast road. If we had the rest of our division here, things would be different.”

“Yes,” said Lanz with a wry smile, “different for Herr Rommel. At least it is good to be out of that god forsaken desert and with some decent high country under our feet. You should consider sending our men higher.”

“We will have to see what develops. At present, we must hold this ground until relieved.”

“But you are in overall command here. Why not have the Luftland 65th Regiment extend their lines to hold here against these Red Berets. Our business is in those mountains.” He pointed with a stiff finger, taking a deep breath and appreciating the cooler temperatures at elevation.”

“I will consider it,” said Kübler. “Another regiment of the 327th Infantry is landing tonight. That should improve the situation. Until then, hold San Mateo. We’ll need that if we take to the highlands.”

Unfortunately for Kübler, No. 2 Commando had other ideas, and they put in such a persistent and ferocious attack, that the Pioneers were forced to pull out of San Mateo that night under cover of darkness. This prompted Kübler to pull back two of his three battalions, and reposition them to try again the following morning.

In the meantime, the Germans were building up strength and sending more units up the main road towards La Palma. Further down the line, in the rugged country near Bandama Hill and Tafira, No. 4 Commando’s brave defense had been reinforced by 8th Battalion, Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders, the last of the forces that had been safely extracted from Fuerteventura. The 2nd Lancaster Fusiliers of 110 Force were on the coast at Vegueta, blocking the main road into the city, and two miles inland, the village of San Jose was defended by the 5th Northumbrian Battalion. Between them, General Alexander had taken a company of 2nd East Surrey, which was mainly guarding the city and harbor, and ordered it to fill in the

gap to prevent any German infiltration.

That was where the Germans tried to push through that night, with an attack led by I/7th Flieger Battalion, and supported by some fairly accurate fire from the French destroyer *L'Audacieux* off shore. But it also failed to make any headway. The British were dug in deep, with good, well motivated infantry, and they were fighting hard. The only question was how long supplies would hold out. Artillery stores were already running extremely low, and 10th Field Battalion reported it had no more than a few rounds remaining per gun. Some of the lighter artillery batteries were better off, but the fact remained that the advantage in heavy weapons would soon shift dramatically to the Germans.

General Kübler knew this, a hard wiry man, with features chiseled as sharp as the stony mountains he had trained to conquer. He knew the Luftwaffe ruled the skies, the presence of *Jean Bart* and *Dunkerque* off shore had gone unchallenged, and he had already landed as much artillery as the enemy had from the sound of their gunfire.

Time may deliver what the force of arms cannot yet take, he thought. If I just keep up the pressure on their line, and see what Lanz can do in the highlands, they must eventually run out of supplies. This is a real turning of the tables. With Raeder's ships all out to sea or sitting at docks for repairs, I am still enjoying command of the sea here, thanks to the French. I can continue to land troops and supplies, but the enemy can only use the small ports to the south and west. If they are landing supplies there, then they will have to be using that coastal road to the west.

He tapped a weathered finger on the map, seeing that as the key to strangling his enemy. I must interdict that road, by one means or another. The French will not move their ships off that coast out of range of land based fighter support. Goering's boys are finally setting up at Gando. If Lanz cannot get through those mountain roads, then it is time for another daring leap, *Rösselsprung*. We could put Falschirmjaegers on those planes, fly over those mountains in a few minutes, and drop here, near Galdar on the northwest coast. Why am I wasting those troops trying to take these bloody ridge lines?

He had seized his bridgehead, established a strong lodgment ashore, built up troop strength and supplies, and now he believed he had determined the main line of the enemy defense. Now it was time for something lightning quick, a Knight's move.

“Leutnant Himmler!”

“Sir.”

“Get orders out to the Flieger Regiment. I want them back at Gando airfield as soon as possible. They will be relieved by 327th Infantry.”

* * *

The following afternoon saw the Germans mount yet another strong attack up the main road, this time led by armored cars. The road ran right through the village of Vegueta, where 2nd Lancs had been holding doggedly. But soon the boom of heavy naval guns rippled like thunder from the sea. *Jean Bart* had returned, with *Dunkerque* at her side this time, and now both ships were putting heavy rounds on the position, with several destroyers also lending support.

It was simply too much firepower. MG positions were blasted by direct hits, mortar teams cut down, and the infantry was hugging the ground behind shattered adobe houses and fragments of low stone walls. An hour under those guns was all it took, and when the German armored cars rattled up that road, the defensive fire was far less spirited. 2nd Lancs were pushed back, with II/47th Luftland taking the town in a strong, determined attack.

General Alexander had no choice but to recall the men he had sent to reinforce the commandos on Bandama Hill. “I think they’ve had more than enough from us there,” he said. “Recall the 8th Argyll & Sutherland Highlanders. It’s the only reserve I can move.”

“So it’s down to the Thin Red Line,” said a staffer, for that was the nickname that regiment went by, ever since Balaklava on 25 October 1854, when a single battalion had held the line against a determined enemy cavalry charge in the Crimean War. Some of the men in the unit today were the great grandsons of the soldiers that had fought at Balaklava, and they were determined to hold the line here as well. They moved into position on the outskirts of Vegueta, faces grim and set.

The General got on the radio to Madeira, asking if there was anything left in the cupboard there. He learned that there was one more battalion available, presently acting as a garrison for Madeira, the 1st Battalion 102nd Royal Marines.

“Get them on ships or planes for a move here tonight. I shouldn’t expect the Germans to attack Madeira anytime soon if at all. We need those men

here.”

As Generals often do, he would get his way, and so that night the Royal Marines were lining up on the planes, ready to make the flight south in under cover of darkness. From Tenerife, two more companies of Royal Engineers would move over by sea, and *Duke of York* would arrive to bolster Force C with some heavier guns. Her Captain, Cecil Harcourt, had orders to preserve the fighting ability of his ship, for it was one of the few battleships available now. *King George V* had gone home to Scapa flow. *Hood* was out on her regular patrol off the east coast of Iceland, and everything else was either on convoy duty, or laid up in splints and crutches.

General Alexander sent a message near dusk hoping to get the navy to finally intervene. “CONSIDER PRESENT SITUATION NOW REACHING CRITICAL PHASE. WHERE IS THE NAVY?”

Something had to be done to break the enemy power at sea, and so Captain Harcourt decided the stakes were now high enough to risk another operation. Yet with the German air power a grave threat, it would have to be a night sortie. He would take *Duke Of York*, with five light cruisers. *Nigeria* had been sent to Madeira for repairs, and *Fiji* had arrived to relieve her and join *Kenya*, *Trinidad*, *Naiad* and *Dido*. The Tribal class destroyers *Somali*, *Bedouin*, *Maori*, and *Cossack* would serve as the advanced screen. Some of these ships would not be present in Fedorov’s history, but the altered reality here saw them still afloat, notably the *Fiji*, which was sunk after the battle for Crete that never happened here, and *Cossack*, which was sunk escorting a convoy from Gibraltar that never sailed.

Opposing this fleet that night were mainly the ships of the Toulon Group under Admiral Gensoul aboard battleship *Jean Bart*, with battlecruiser *Dunkerque* under Captain Deramond. The French also had heavy cruiser *Algerie*, and destroyers, *Le Terrible*, *L’Audacieux*, *Le Triumphant*, *Le Malin*, and *Le Fantasque*. The British would have a slight edge in ship numbers, ten to eight, but the French had a good deal of firepower in those three capital ships leading the task force. They would bring eight 15-inch guns on *Jean Bart*, and eight more 13-inch guns on *Dunkerque*, with eight 8-inchers on the *Algerie*. All of that would face off against the ten 14-inch guns of *Duke of York*, but the British light cruisers combined for thirty-six 6-inch guns, and eight 5.25 inchers. The *Tribal* class destroyers were not as fast as the French, but they were well gunned, with four twin QF 4.7-inch turrets compared to the French five single 5.4-inch gun turrets on their destroyers.

Pound for pound, the two sides looked fairly well matched, but there would be other factors that would come into play during this night action. Experience at sea, fleet handling, the British edge in radar aboard *Duke of York*, all weighed in their favor. But the performance of the main 14-inch gun turrets on that ship were suspect, particularly the newly designed quad turrets fore and aft, which had been very unreliable. *Prince of Wales* had experienced difficulties in the first big engagement off Fuerteventura, and that ship was now at the bottom of the sea.

Captain Harcourt had some idea where his enemy was, as troops ashore had reported their positions at dusk off the main harbor. As night fell, visibility diminished, with occasional light squalls. The British decided to make a run for it, racing in at ahead two thirds, with most every ship capable of 30 knots or better, except *Duke Of York*. They rounded the north coast at 24 knots, unseen by the Germans, which had very few planes up after dark. The Type 279 radar was the first to spot the enemy, a screen of 3 destroyers operating with *Algerie*.

Now the cloak of night would be the key to bringing his fire and light to battle, and in that stillness his ships would dance on the roiling seas of war.

The British fleet would sail round the northern coast of Gran Canaria with the intention of engaging any enemy force operating in the waters off La Palma. The stakes would be high also for the Germans, as that same darkness was to mask their own move to unhinge the enemy defense. The last regiment, and all the heavy artillery of 327th Division, was scheduled to land at Gando Bay, and the Flieger Regiment would be on the airfield there ready to make its daring leap across the island—night moves on either side, about to collide in the chaos inherent in all battle.

“Let’s give them a hard knock on the door,” said Harcourt. “Nothing like unexpected guests after dinner.”

So it was that the boom of big gun turrets would open what came to be known as the “Action off Gran Canaria.” It would decide, once and for all, who controlled the seas around that island, and by extension, who could sustain troops fighting ashore in the bitter contest of arms still underway. That action opened at just 7,000 yards, and the fate of the battle quavered in the sound of those 14-inch guns.

Chapter 29

7,000 yards isn't much to speak of in a modern naval engagement. It was usually feasting time for the secondary batteries, and the lighter guns on cruisers and destroyers. Though main guns could do a good deal of damage, the flatter trajectories might often see those shells striking belt armor, with a limited plunging angle of fire that could make them so deadly.

Four of the five British destroyers were out in front, and they soon encountered that French screen centered on *Algerie*. Signals called out “*enemy sighted, cruiser and three destroyers—engaging,*” and the action was on. The French were surprised by the sudden appearance of enemy ships. For days they had sailed unchallenged, thinking the Royal Navy would no longer risk an action under German air power. Now here was a pack of hungry destroyers rushing in at near top speed, their sole aim to get their torpedoes in the water, with *Algerie* the primary target.

Following closely on their heels, the first of the British cruisers appeared five minutes into the action, with *Kenya* and *Fiji* leading the British main column. Even though *Algerie* threw heavier punches, the British ships had decent protection. The *Colony* class light cruisers had 83mm side armor compared to a 120mm belt on the heavy cruiser *Algerie*. The British had 51mm on their 6-inch gun turrets and decks, and 102mm on the conning tower, while the *Algerie* had only 80mm deck armor, with 70 to 90mm on her bigger turrets, and conning tower.

At this closer range, the twenty-four 6-inch guns on the British cruisers were still going to hurt the French cruiser. They could penetrate her turrets, decks and conning tower, and the QF 6-inch gun was going to be throwing a lot of lead with a typical rate of fire at 8 rounds per minute, and flight time to target under 10 seconds at that range. The British gunners worked like white headed ghouls, their anti-flash bonnets tight over heads and shoulders as they fed in the shells and cordite charges, and they were getting hits from the very beginning of that action.

But behind the fast cruiser battle, where the destroyers sped about in a chaos of white frothing wakes, there loomed the larger shadows of heavy warships. *Duke Of York* had a big contact on radar, and opened fire immediately, her 14-inch guns falling just short of the battleship *Jean Bart*.

The fire helped the French gauge her position, and *Jean Bart* answered with both of her forward turrets, all eight 15-inch guns. A battle of these two “treaty battleships” was soon underway, and could most likely decide the action should one or another of these behemoths score a telling blow.

Both ships carried the bulk of their firepower in those quad turrets, a design feature that was aiming to get the maximum firepower in the fewest possible turrets, and by so doing, reduce weight to meet the treaty restriction, and also work in the service of speed. Of the two ships, the French had achieved a near perfect balance of firepower, protection and speed, with a four knot edge over the *Duke Of York*, and a much longer sea range to go with it. The British ship could loiter at ten knots and coax 15,600 nautical miles out of their ship, but even increasing speed to only 18 knots burned fuel at an alarming rate, reducing that range to only 5,400 nautical miles. By contrast, *Jean Bart* had much better endurance, achieving over 9,000 nautical miles at that same speed of 18 knots.

Yet a night action like this was not going to rely on range and speed. The real determining factors would be sighting, targeting and of course, those guns and armor at the much closer range. While the British ship had better side armor, a main belt of 370mm to 330 on the French ship, the French had taken several steps to protect those novel quad gun turrets.

The risk in the design was that a single hit might knock out the entire turret, silencing half the ship’s main gun firepower in one blow. This was the reason the Germans had adopted a four twin gun turret design on their *Bismarck* class battleship, where no more than a quarter of the fighting power of the ship would be lost if a single turret was hit. First off, the French addressed this shortcoming by creating two gun pairs within that turret, and then building in a 25mm armored bulkhead between those two compartments. The thought was that a glancing blow to the turret might then only involve two of the four guns. More importantly, they gave these turrets solid, heavy armor, with 430mm face armor, and then further reduced risk by widely spacing the two turrets on that long forward deck. This was nearly 100mm thicker than the 324mm turret face and barbette armor on *Duke Of York*.

Those 100mm were going to matter. When the first hits were registered, the British learned their 14-inch gun had decent punch at close range, capable of penetrating all of 396mm at 10,000 yards. They would do even better at 7,000 yards, and *Jean Bart* suffered an early side armor penetration slightly aft, and an internal explosion that came very close to setting off a magazine

for one of the secondary batteries there. That said, the French guns had more penetrating power. They could pierce 393mm at 24,000 yards, while the British gun would only penetrate about 280mm at such ranges. Up close, the French 15-inch guns were going to hit much harder.

They easily breached the conning tower armor on *Duke Of York*, starting a serious fire there that was soon threatening the bridge. But as the action ensued, the British then found their 14-inch guns had more liabilities than their lighter throw weight, protection, and penetration power—they jammed. The forward A turret suddenly had difficulties, and only one gun fired as planned on the fifth salvo. It was a nagging problem on these new quad turrets, which were much more complex than the older twin turrets or even the triple gun mounts on ships like *Invincible* and *Nelson*. In the heat of that action, where that firepower and rate of fire was crucial, *Duke Of York* had now lost 30% of her throw weight.

To make matters worse, up came *Dunkerque*, following closely in the wake of *Jean Bart*, and adding another eight 13-inch guns to that duel. Shells were churning up the sea all around the battleship, and Captain Harcourt had no choice but to turn so he could bring his rear quad turret into play. As he did so, the French had a much wider target to aim at, and scored three hits in rapid succession. It was then that Harcourt realized his bold engagement was as good as over, and that he would be lucky even to save the ship. The 6-inch guns on his light cruisers were not going to seriously harm the heavy French ships. They hit those big turrets on *Jean Bart* several times, but to no effect. Everything depended on *Duke of York* getting her licks in early and often, but it would not happen that night.

With great reluctance, he had to admit the Royal Navy had been run off again by the French. They were simply out-gunned, and so he flashed the signal to all ships to effect a withdrawal. It was here that the seamanship of the British Captains paid them good service. The destroyers immediately broke off their swirling attack around *Algerie*. Many already had torpedoes in the water, and *Bedouin* would get the lucky hit that night, putting a 21-inch Mark IX torpedo right into her bow. It would be enough to cut her speed in half, with flooding forward that would not be controlled.

Then, with a well practiced precision, the four British destroyers formed up to lay a thick screen of heavy smoke. *Fiji*, *Kenya* and *Duke of York* turned into it, vanishing into the night. *Trinidad* and the two AA cruisers were bringing up the rear, and had not even engaged before the order to turn about

was received. Captain Leslie Saunders aboard *Trinidad* shrugged when he saw the signal. “We’re missing those battleships now,” he said. “Things must have gone ill aboard *Duke Of York*. Without her, Force C is just a paper tiger, unless the F.A.A. can weigh in.”

* * *

Saunders was a bit of a prophet that night, for that statement was going to play out in the next two hours. Hovering off the west coast of the island of Tenerife, carrier *Glorious* was ready for a fight. Captain Christopher Wells was watching the planes of 823 and 825 Squadron spotting up for takeoff. He had received the new Albacore torpedo bombers, faster, more durable than the older Swordfish, though the latter plane had turned in an outstanding war record in spite of its age. He was going to put all 36 planes up that night, along with 12 Seafires, leaving him only 12 more for CAP duties. *Furious* was with him, and she would throw in another 12 Albacores in 822 Squadron, and 12 more Seafires in escort. All told, he would throw 48 torpedo bombers and 24 fighters at the enemy, in a daring pre-dawn raid that would hopefully not meet strong enemy fighter strength.

From the experience of the last several days, the German fighters that had been moved to Gando Airfield on Gran Canaria were operating with limited capacity, most likely due to fuel shortages, for it all had to come by sea. They would mostly take to the skies about thirty minutes before sunrise, and Wells was going to get to his target an hour before that.

“They can do it,” he said to Lieutenant Commander Robert Woodfield, who was basking in the recent promotion that had put that word “Commander” behind his former rank. “Look Woody, we know exactly where the French fleet is now. I have it chapter and verse from Captain Harcourt on *Duke Of York*. If they come in low, approaching the western coast of the main island, then they can sweep right up through and over those mountains and come down on the Frogs like wailing banshees.”

“Risky flying,” said Woodfield.

“Maybe so, but the skies to the east will be nice and rosy soon, and that will silhouette that island. Our boys will be coming from the west, low on the shadows of the sea. They’ll come dancing in over the top of those peaks, and catch the French by surprise.”

So that was the plan, and it was going to work—for the most part. What

Captain Wells did not know was that the Germans had “Aunty Ju” out of bed early that morning, all dressed up and ready to lift troops of the 7th Flieger Regiment in an equally daring morning hop from Gando to the north coast of the island. The planes would barely have time to gain altitude before the jump would be made, and as it happened, the two formations ran right into one another. The morning stillness was soon a wild jig in the skies, for the Germans put 18 fighters up to escort that lift, and soon there was a battle underway over the high peaks of the main island.

Fighters swooped and dove, falling through the more stable formations of strike planes and transports, some engaging in brief flashes of anger, others turning and diving just to avoid a pursuing enemy fighter. At one point, a squadron of Albacores flew right over a line of JU-52s, the pilots giving the Germans their middle finger, and wishing they could drop those long torpedoes to get after them, but they had bigger fish to fry, out in the troubled waters off the Grand Harbor.

The 24 Seafires put up a very good fight, though the Bf-109 was still the superior fighter. They got three of the 109’s, losing five in the effort, but the swirling dogfight was enough to keep most of the German fighters off the Albacores, and vice versa—all but three of the Ju-52s would get up to their zones and the brave Falschirmjaegers jumped, in spite of the risk of being gunned down by enemy fighters.

Of the 48 Albacores, 42 got through and found the French ships just a little east from the location last reported by Captain Harcourt. Admiral Gensoul was running low on ammunition. His ground support fire, and then the brief, violent engagement with *Duke Of York*, had compelled him to seek a safe port for replenishment.

The Albacores saw the long line of ships, three destroyers in a wide fan forward of two large warships. Notably absent was *Algerie*, which had taken on so much water from *Bedouin*’s torpedo hit that she had to be abandoned and scuttled. Two destroyers were taking on survivors, and the British let them be, intent on getting after the bigger warships.

“Come on, boys!” said Flight Lieutenant Alvin Williamson. “Let’s get that one there from behind!”

They were running in on the *Dunkerque*, and finally alerted to the danger, the French gunners were sending up everything they had by way of AA gunfire. A curious ship, *Dunkerque* had all her main guns forward on two quad turrets, and all her secondary guns aft on three quad turrets mounting

dual purpose 5.1-inch guns. They could elevate to 90 degrees to oppose dive bombing attacks, but that was not necessary here. With a good rate of fire, those twelve guns were soon filling the lightening skies with dark thorny roses as the rounds went off. Their accuracy was not all that good, but the British planes were coming in formation, and so several hits were scored from shrapnel flung off by the exploding rounds.

Williams gave the sign, and the formation split, as much to confound those aft turret gunners as to get into position to hit the target from both sides. The torpedoes were soon in the water, a deadly fan on either side of the ship, running in at about a 30 degree angle to her course. It was a perfect attack, for if *Dunkerque* turned in either direction, she would be showing her broadside to those torpedoes. Her only chance was to put on speed and run dead on, hoping to outpace the deadly lances that were aimed at her.

This is what *Jean Bart* did, putting on full speed, racing forward to evade the deadly steel trap, but *Dunkerque* had taken one last parting hit from that quad X turret on *Duke Of York*, and the damage was aft, low on the water line, where minor flooding was already causing her engines difficulties. She could only work up to 24 knots, and that would be her undoing.

Jacobsen, McNamara, Falkson, Purdy and Bently would all score hits, the tall fountains of white water washing up on either side of the battlecruiser. Three others narrowly missed the frothing wake of *Jean Bart*, which now executed a 30 point turn to starboard, seeing open seas and no sign of torpedo wakes there. Five more torpedoes hit the water to get after her, but Admiral Gensoul was quick to resume his original heading, and his ship fast enough, and agile enough, to make the evasive turn in time.

Dunkerque was not so fortunate, rocked from one side to another as the blows were struck. With two of those hits aft, just outside the protective reach of her belt armor and anti-torpedo bulwark, the ship was doomed. Water cascaded in through the breached hull, adding to the flooding already underway. Captain Deramond could see that he was shipping heavy water astern, with fires below decks there from the explosions that were also threatening the magazines of the port side 5.1-inch turret. When the engineers called the bridge with the news, he knew *Dunkerque* would not survive. If he tried to flood the magazines, he would only make the situation worse.

It was as if a pack of jackals had just fallen on their prey, their sharp teeth on the flanks and calves, intending to hobble their victim and put it to ground. That was what was going to happen, for the last flight of Albacores

came in and saw the big ship wallowing, her stern awash, and starting to list to her starboard side. That was where they put the last of their torpedoes, three shuddering hits that would seal the fate of the sleek battlecruiser once and for all. Now she would join her sister ship, *Strasbourg*, put under the sea months ago by a similar torpedo attack, only that time by Ivan Gromyko on the stealthy modern Russian submarine *Kazan*.

The French had very little time to gloat that day, for the Royal Navy was much more than its battleships. The F.A.A. was out there, bold enough to rise to the challenge, and Captain Christopher Wells would continue his extraordinary war record of sinking French capital ships at sea by torpedo attack. And so, even though they were driven from the field, the British won the battle where tonnage was concerned, by a wide margin. They would not lose a single ship that day, while the French would see both *Algerie* and *Dunkerque* lost forever.

These sharp, costly battles had suddenly reduced the field to only one battle worthy heavy ship on either side. *Duke of York* rejoined the carriers, which recovered 38 of the 48 strike planes sent out that morning, and 18 of 24 Seafires. The entire flotilla then turned northeast, to get as far from German land based air power as possible. As for the Falschirmjaegers, they made it to ground and began to assemble. The move was like a Knight leaping inside the third rank on a chess board, posing a grave threat for the beleaguered defenders on that island. Their presence in the northwest was going to cut all the supply lines to the smaller ports on the west and southern coasts, and effectively trap the main body of British troops. That day the complexion of the battle would change dramatically.

Chapter 30

“See here,” said General Alexander, leaning heavily over the map. He had assembled his Brigadiers for a final strategy session. General Thomas was not in attendance, being with his troops in the south. Colonel Frost was there, along with 29th Brigade Commander, Hugh Stockwell.

“Jerry has what looks to be a full regiment on the ground near Galdar. Needless to say, that’s a problem. He’s gone and jumped right over the Santa Brigida line, and cut off our route to the west coast, and by extension, the south coast as well. We can’t very well lug supplies up over the high country. Now... A Royal Marine battalion from Madeira landed at Puerto Sardinia here, on the northwest tip of the island. We’ve also got Puerto Nieves four miles to the south, but there’s no more than a company of Royal Marines there. I’m afraid there’s no help further south. We’ve two more companies of engineers near San Nicholas minding the supply stores there, but they won’t be much help. Opinions, Gentlemen?”

“We’ve got San Mateo, but just barely,” said Colonel Frost. “Those mountain troops pulled back late in the afternoon yesterday.”

“Good show,” said Alexander, “but it’s all of 50 miles from that place to the southern coast over the mountain roads.”

“Yes, but if we hold San Mateo, we at least close the main road into the highlands if we decide to move west with the main force.”

“And give up La Palma? Give the Germans the Grand Harbor?”

“Well, begging the General’s pardon, isn’t that why you’ve called this meeting—to decide whether we hold here, or try to get the men off to Tenerife?”

Alexander gave him a stern look, but silently nodded. “I got a message off to London yesterday. In view of the fact that we’ve no air support any longer, the Navy is fighting with one hand tied behind its back. They can only sortie at night, and the Germans will be on to that soon enough. I asked the Prime Minister if he wanted us to stand our ground here, and by so doing expend this force, for I cannot see any way we can hold out without supply. So yes, Colonel Frost, that is why I called this meeting. That is the question. Do we hold, and make this our war, riding out the balance in a Jerry P.O.W. camp? Or do we fight our way west and try to hold Tenerife?” He folded his arms, looking the men over, waiting.

“The lads have fought hard,” said Stockwell. “We’ve held the line from here to San Mateo, and beaten off attacks at high odds. That said, when the bullets are gone, I don’t much fancy the thought of a P.O.W. Camp. I say we fight our way west,”

“Right,” said Frost. “We’ve still got two or three days supply in hand. If we move now, and fall back in good order, the line will strengthen as we withdraw west. See how the mountains run up towards Galdar? That town would be the tip of a cone, with the north coast one side, the mountains the other, and our present line the wide base. Our line will compress in length as we withdraw. I’m sure we could hold.”

“Getting the entire force off from the west coast won’t be easy.” Alexander raised an eyebrow, thinking.

“We did it at Dunkirk,” said Stockwell. “We can do the same here. Get everything that floats or swims to any port worth the name.”

“Those are just small fishing ports—bays and beaches. We’ll have to leave all the vehicles behind.”

“We won’t need them on Tenerife.” Stockwell stated the obvious.

“Yes... And when we get there we’ll have a ticket to the very same show we’ve just sat through here.”

“Well at least that gives the navy a chance to get supplies to Tenerife,” said Frost. “I say we fight, and if they kick us off there, then we fight them on Palma.”

General Alexander shrugged. “That was the decision I came to last night, but I’m glad to hear you both concur. As for General Thomas and his 7th Brigade, he’ll have to get back to Maspalomas. Johnny, you’ve got San Mateo. Hold it, then you get the exciting mountain trek west to San Nicholas.”

“My pleasure sir,” said Frost with a smile and a nod.

“We leave nothing of use to the enemy behind. I’ll want the quays demolished, and all harbor facilities, and I obtained permission to mine the city and harbor. The old escorts *Malcom* and *Broke* are still here, and if they can get the wounded off, so much the better. They’ll make a run for it tonight. The F.A.A. gave it to the French good this morning. They’ve lost *Dunkerque*, and will have their hands full pulling men out of the water. So I don’t think we’ll be under their naval guns today. Now’s the time to make our move. Make all the arrangements, gentlemen. We pull out as soon as possible.”

* * *

As often happened in war, the planned withdrawal would meet with unexpected difficulties. To begin with, stores of petrol were very low, which meant that most of the artillery could not be moved. General Alexander had no choice but to fire off all the remaining rounds they had, and then spike the guns. 2nd Lancaster Fusiliers was given the task of standing as rear guard, and there was fighting in La Palma all that morning.

German air strikes were also very heavy the next day, as the Luftwaffe seemed angry that the British carriers had slipped in an attack while their guard was down earlier that morning, and Goring no doubt got an earful from Admiral Laborde after the sinking of *Dunkerque*. German fighters were prowling over the island, diving and strafing anything that moved, which made the withdrawal a dangerous adventure. The regular army battalions had the most difficulty. The Commandos, being lighter afoot and trained for long open country marches, made better time.

As they moved west, they found that there was more German strength behind them than they anticipated. In addition to the three battalions of Falschirmjaegers that had parachuted in the pre-dawn hours, the Germans sent in two more machinegun battalions that had been in reserve on Fuerteventura. As British units arrived on the scene, sporadic fighting erupted in the northwest corner of the island. Battalions of British troops would encounter enemy company strength positions attempting to block the roads, and so the British were forced to deploy and attack. The five Commandos swept inland, with the regulars along the coast, and with the Germans threatening Puerto Nieves, some units near San Nicholas to the south humped it up the road to reinforce the engineers there.

Not a man from 2nd Lancs would get back, fighting stubbornly to hold the main strength of the Germans at bay near La Palma. They would make their last stand on San Lorenzo Ridge about five miles west of the harbor, fighting until the last round was expended, and by so doing, buying the valuable time the remainder of the force needed to make the withdrawal west.

Stockwell's 5th Northumbrians were also forced to deploy as a rear guard that afternoon, fending off the advance of a battalion from the German 327th Infantry Division. Colonel Frost held San Mateo until he realized the Germans were not interested in it, then began the long hard trek up into the

highlands to the west. By dusk, his men had trudged some 20 miles over very difficult terrain, and Frost himself had led the way, reaching a point only five miles east of San Nicholas.

To the south, Brigadier Thomas was also forced to leave most of his artillery behind, managing to get only one battery safely to Maspalomas where it boarded a small transport that night under cover of darkness. Fishing boats, dinghies, and transport shipping timed their arrival on the coast just after sunset when the risk of German air attack was lowest, and the 7th Brigade would get off intact, living to fight another day. The Germans were less energetic in pushing south after them, still focusing their main effort near the Grand Harbor to the north.

As the Germans were still quite scattered from that pre-dawn air drop, the Commandos were able to shoulder them north towards the coast. Ramcke was present, and he moved from company to company, organizing the defense. By dusk he was holding a segment of the northwest, about four to five miles deep and twelve miles wide from Puerto Sardinia in the west to San Felipe in the east. The British had no intention of tangling with them further. They merely wanted to open a path to Puerto Nieves, and the coastal road leading south to San Nicholas. That was the only way they could get anyone off the island, and they succeeded in securing that route by the following morning.

They would be two more days getting the men off, mostly at night. In this the destroyers of Force C were an invaluable aid, rushing in to arrive after dusk, and making several trips by night, their decks laden with the Commandos as they slowly embarked. Stockwell's troops were the last to leave, and they left many behind that had fallen in those hard fought rear guard actions. But the British would get all of 7th Brigade, five Commandos, three battalions of Royal Marines and Frost's entire Parachute Regiment safely to Tenerife. There, weary, disheartened and bedraggled, they would set about organizing the defense of that island, principally around the main harbor at Santa Cruz.

For their part, the Germans would take Gran Canaria after eight days hard fighting. They found the harbor docks and quays demolished, the port mined, and the old WWI destroyer escort *Broke* scuttled in the main channel to block large ships from docking. The nearby airfield had been mined and craters by demo charges, and it would be weeks before the Germans would get any use out of their new conquest. In the short run, they would focus

mainly on sweeping the island for stragglers, consolidating, repairing the damage done by the British engineers, and lifting as much war supply as possible by sea and air.

Three of the seven islands had now been secured, though only Tenerife and Palma offered the British any facilities that could pose a threat. But Halder's warning to Rader was now made a hard reality. The Germans were going to have to secure all these islands to make use of the principle ports and airfields they now controlled without constantly having to fight off possible enemy attacks from airfields on the others. Raeder had his prize, but it had come at great cost, and that night a beleaguered French Admiral would rue the day France ever cast its fate to the service of Adolf Hitler.

* * *

Admiral Laborde was incensed. Gensoul... this was the second time the man had seen his battleships torpedoed to oblivion, and now look at what was left of the French navy! Both *Strasburg* and *Dunkerque* gone, along with *Bretagne* and *Provence*. *Lorraine* and *Paris* interned by the British, though they were too old to matter much in this war. *Richelieu* was another matter, blasted to hell off Fuerteventura, along with three cruisers lost in this damn operation. *Jean Bart* was lucky to have slipped away unscathed, and *Normandie* is laid up at Casablanca, forced to anchor out in the bay because she's just too damn big to dock there. I'll have to send her to Gibraltar, where she can stew with the rest of the German ships beaten to near hulks there.

In the Pacific, we've lost *Bearn*, our only functioning aircraft carrier, and the Germans have cannibalized every other ship we had on the dry docks. We've spent ourselves in the service of that demon of a man in Berlin, and all because the damnable British thought they could simply order us about, seize our ships, demand we sink them to deny them to the Germans. Well, that was not to be.

In spite of these terrible losses, we've managed to hurt any force we were up against. We taught the British to respect us off Dakar, and they lost *Barham* there. We fought them hard off Casablanca, and then came that awful battle off Fuerteventura, all so the Germans could get their greedy hands on these islands. So here we sit, with no more than two good battleships we can put to sea in the foreseeable future. If I leave those ships in the Atlantic, what will their eventual fate be? Admiral Raeder will certainly

find good use for them, as he has for all the rest of our ships on the bottom of the sea. Can I refuse?

He considered that, thinking how he might extract his last two battleships from this fruitless campaign, and send them home to Toulon. From there they might at least weigh in with the Italian Navy to neutralize Cunningham's fleet in the Eastern Med, and for what? To keep Herr Rommel supplied.

That is all we are now, he thought, a covering force and fetch and carry service for German operations. Moving *Normandie* would be accomplished easily enough. I can simply say she needs work that can only be accomplished at Toulon. *Jean Bart* can hold on at Casablanca, but if I leave her there, Raeder will want that ship out to the Canary Islands any time he musters up a supply convoy. Yes, the Germans may eventually take those islands, but now they must keep all those troops supplied by sea. They certainly can't count on the *Bismarck* any longer, not for at least six months. And the *Hindenburg* will likely be nursing her wounds in Gibraltar for 90 days.

He shrugged. I suppose *Jean Bart* will have to stay, otherwise how do I support the colonies in West North Africa? The Germans have made themselves right at home there as well, but we may need them soon. The Americans are in this war now, and so it is only a matter of time before they begin to plan operations against us. I have little doubt that our colonies will become the first battlefields, along with Gibraltar. It is going to be a very long, hard year...

He sighed, the fatigue of these last days heavy on him, his thoughts a muzzy ache behind his forehead, seeing nothing but pain, loss, and further humiliation ahead for France.

Yes, the Yanks and Brits will lock arms now, and they'll come. What will we do when that happens? What will be left of France when this is over? Germany may still look invincible now, but something tells me we are on the wrong side in this war, and that is something we will have to pay heavily for, in both blood and honor.

Part XI

Encounters

“Ships that pass in the night, and speak to each other in passing, only a signal shown, and a distant voice in the darkness; So on the ocean of life, we pass and speak to one another, only a look and a voice, then darkness again and a silence.”

— **Henry Wadsworth Longfellow**

Chapter 31

Captain Gordon MacRae stood on the bridge of *Argos Fire*, thinking. They had gone south to look for that British Convoy as planned, and were now well off the Cape Verde Islands. But the replenishing operation had taken far longer than planned at Madeira, the engineers sorting out a few difficulties below decks. They laid in a stock of ten Harpoons, and were taking some time to see how they could adapt them to the underdeck silos. MacRae did not want to go to sea without them, for he would be little more than a radar picket with two deck guns.

That thought gave him more than a few troubled nights. Those ten Harpoons were now all the real punch he had, and soon, if the ship was committed to any further air defense scenarios, he would be looking at the same situation on his SAMs. They were just weeks into 1942, and the war might have three more long years to play out. At this point, it was not yet even certain that the Allies would prevail, and that thought gave him a chill. In spite of all the advanced technology aboard the ship, he felt as though they could not really do all that much to nudge the outcome in a favorable direction.

“Our Sampson radar is likely to be the most significant edge we can offer these people,” he had said to Mack Morgan, the ship's swarthy intelligence officer. Morgan gave him a look, clear eyed, his mind always thinking yet one more step ahead, like a good chess player, plotting out his moves.

“Aye,” said Morgan. “We can make a difference in a situation like this, where the Royal Navy has to get after a surface raider. A pity we were so long getting down here. It looks like the trail has gone cold.”

By the time the missiles were rigged out to be made operational in the silos, they were too late to stop that German raider from sinking its teeth into Convoy WS-15, and then too late to prevent them from slipping away when the old battleship *Royal Sovereign* came on the scene.

“Well this is our watch now,” said MacRae. “We’ve topped off our fuel, though that tanker might only fill us up a few more times.”

“It’s a damn miracle those ships fell through,” said Morgan. “They call them ‘The Funnies.’”

He was talking about the modern flotilla of auxiliary ships that had

suddenly appeared in the midst of that tense duel with the Germans at sea. Someone lit off a nuke, most likely the missing Russian submarine, which had never been seen since. To their great surprise, in exchange they found a small convoy that had been bound for Mersa Matruh, strangely linked to Kinlan's 7th Armored Brigade. They were supposed to be his ride safely back to the continent, but the war broke out, the missiles came, and so did Kinlan, blown 80 years into the past, just in time to give Erwin Rommel nightmares for months on end.

There were four Roll On – Roll Off ships to move his heavy armor, *Hurst, Hartland, Anvil Point* and *Eddystone*, and a civilian ferry sailing under an Irish registry was also along, the *Ulysses*, capable of lifting 2000 personnel and over 1300 vehicles. The RFA repair ship *Diligence* had proved to be most useful, with engineers and extensive shops to make repairs. When HMS *Invincible* showed up with that head wound, MacRae had suggested he give the lads on *Diligence* a crack at working on her shattered bridge, which is what they were doing even at that moment. *Invincible* would also get a very nice surprise when the job was done, for *Diligence* had the modular workings for one of Britain's new radar sets, the Type 997 Artisan 3D.

Artisan stood for **A**dvanced **R**adar **T**arget **I**ndication **S**ituational **A**wareness and **N**avigation, and if the engineers could figure a way to integrate it with *Invincible*'s antiquated power generation systems, they could literally built it right into the newly repaired upper conning tower superstructure. Intrigued by the idea, Tovey ordered the venerable battlecruiser to the Azores, where it now road at anchor right next to *Diligence*, with scores of modern day engineers working the problem, and the repair job, day and night. When they finished they would give *Invincible* her night eyes, an all seeing radar system, to be manned by trained personnel from the Funnies. It could range out 110 nautical miles, and track 900 simultaneous targets the size of a tennis ball traveling at Mach 3. Those were night eyes, to be sure.

The last ship in the Funnies was the versatile RFA *Fort Victoria*, with double duty as an ammunition stores ship and replenishment oiler. At 33,675 tons displacement, she exceeded the weight of the *Revenge* Class battleships of this era, was 50 feet longer, and also wider abeam. It had its own night eyes in a Type 993 3-D Surveillance radar, and the ship's ample aft helo deck could hold five aircraft. Better yet, three of those were already in the helo bay, AgustaWestland AW101 Merlins, capable of carrying up to 45 troops

each, as well as Sting Ray torpedoes. So the ship could function in an ASW role, a perfect convoy escort command ship if ever there was one for this era. This was what MacRae pressed upon Admiral Tovey once he took stock of what they had in those ships.

"I know that ship well," said Morgan. "Worry not, Gordie, old *Fort Victoria* can help keep us at sea for a good long while, god bless her. They were going to retire her in 2019, but the deteriorating political situation gave them other thoughts. So they laid in more room for stores and fuel, even fresh water generation—and one more thing. There was a company of Royal Marines aboard that lassie, all fit as fiddles. At the moment, they have them pulling security details on the Funnies, but for my money, they'd make a nice little hit and run outfit on those Merlins."

"Hit and run at what?" said MacRae. "That ship will most likely be used for convoy escort. Those helos will do a fine job on German U-Boats, at least while the torpedoes last."

"Aye, the same old problem," said Morgan. "We've a nasty bag of tricks here, but only for a while. Yet there's nothing stopping them from using weapons from this era. The only rub then will be the aviation fuel. You can't just pour anything into those engines."

"It'll be a job for the engineers," said MacRae. "Eventually we'll be needing the Ro-Ro ships as well, unless they fancy leaving Kinlan's Challengers in that desert for the duration of the war."

"Well, that will take a little more doing than we may realize," said Morgan. "We'll need control of the Western Med for that, and that means we'll have to finish the job here with the Germans and French."

"Things haven't exactly gone our way in that," MacRae shrugged.

"Not yet, but the Yanks will be on board soon. This was the year they planned Operation Torch, and now something like that same operation will have to be teed up again soon."

"Well, they'll have to run them off the Canary Islands first," said MacRae. "And then I suppose the main attack will fall on Casablanca."

"Don't forget Gibraltar," said Morgan. "That gets your hand in the honey pot fairly deep. You know damn well that Churchill will want the Rock back, and Franco won't like it one damn bit. Gordie, this is going to be one hell of a war from here on out. The gloves are starting to come off."

"Aye, and here we are pinching pennies and holding our punches, just when the bar fight gets interesting."

“Ah, don’t despair, we’ve an important role to play here. That radar up on the mainmast will make a real difference, just like you say. We’re the eyes and ears of the Royal Navy now. That’s our proper role. Yes, we’ll be holding their coat instead of rolling up our sleeves for the fight, but we’ll matter. Believe that. We’ll matter a very good deal.”

MacRae thought a long time about that. Here I am, back in the Royal Navy again, only not the one I signed on to all those years ago... all those years hence. It was still so very confusing. And here is *Argos Fire* back in the service of that fleet, for in truth, the Royal Navy built and commissioned this hull, until her Ladyship got her purse open and took charge of it for Fairchild & Company. Now she’s gone and rigged out that special red phone of her’s to answer to Tovey. Odd to think that was always where those calls were coming from—that secret group within the Admiralty started by Tovey himself—the Watch. Now I wonder whether he’s gone and done that again, and just what all this business with these bloody keys is about? Perhaps it’s a good time to wine and dine Miss Fairchild. She just might get loose enough to tell me another tale.

Gordon MacRae had a good idea with that one. She did.

* * *

“A heavy loss,” said MacRae. “I can’t say I knew the man, him being Russian and all, but he held himself well from what I did see of him. Saved that damn ship in the thick of things. Saved your Admiral Tovey as well.”

He had had his dinner, and yes, they had their wine. There in Miss Fairchild’s stateroom aboard *Argos Fire*, the night was thick, and the talk thicker. “I’m not sure how I feel about it,” said Elena. “So many years at sea were spent standing the Watch on that man’s coming and going. To be honest, when we first came into contact with that ship, I believed we might come to blows.”

“That would have gone ill, and for both of us,” said MacRae. He had donned his dress white naval jacket for the dinner, but now that was cast off and the two were settled on the couch, allowing themselves the grace of informality that this sliver of privacy permitted. The Captain could think of a few other ways he might better spend this time with her, but this business of the keys was gnawing at him, and he wanted to know everything she knew. He had broached the subject in bringing up Volsky, for they both knew what

Tovey had found in the Admiral's blood stained jacket, the key that the young Russian Captain had entrusted to him to deliver to Tovey.

"It seems to me that a lot of good men have gone down in service to those keys. What's it all about, Elena? What in God's name are we supposed to do with them? Where in bloody hell did they even come from?"

"I wish I had the answer to both of those questions," she said, and with a look that promised she was leveling with him now.

"Yet your organization—the Watch—you've had a so called Keyholder in the mix all along. You mean to say they had no idea what that was all about?"

"No, I mean to say *I* had no such idea, but I was next in line to know."

"What do you mean?"

"We only had one Keyholder, and that person was always designated Watchstander G1. Normally that title would be conferred in a quiet, secret ceremony, and the key transferred. In this case, circumstances did not permit that. So it was delivered to me, and the message I found was the first inkling that the torch had been passed. I'm Number One now. When the key comes to a new Watchstander, they are charged with holding it, keeping it secure, and continuing the search for any other key that might exist. One day they may be called upon to use it. In my case, I got both charges at the same time."

"When you were ordered to Delphi?"

"Correct—but Gordon, we've been over all of this."

"Aye, that we have. I was just hoping there might be something more to it. I mean... someone sends you a message—Tovey himself from all accounts. He sends you off to Delphi, and for what? That bloody box, that's what. It brings the ship here, and gives us a shot at getting our hands on the key that went missing from the Elgin Marbles. I won't ask how you knew about it, but there it is. Then, out of thin air, this Russian Captain produces yet another key. Some bloody fine rabbit he pulled out of his hat. And that was rather dramatic when he honed in on those engraved numbers being geographic coordinates. The key we lost on *Rodney* was supposed to open, or secure something in St. Michael's Cave. Only now the Germans have the place, and that's the way it will likely stand for some time. I wonder what's been hidden there, another of those thick metal doors and underground passages?"

"Those caves get very deep, and there are segments that have not yet

been fully excavated. But... there is one thing more I can tell you.”

“Ah! You’ve been holding out on me, have you? Out with it, wench!” There was enough of a jesting tone in his voice to get that familiar with her now. The two had cast off more than dress whites in their quiet sessions alone, and they were closer every day.

“It happened a year before we set out on this mission... A man stumbled into a bar in Ceuta harbor, right south of Gibraltar across the straits. He claimed the Germans had taken the Rock, but that he had found a way out. Said he was a British Sergeant fighting there when it happened, at least that was the story in the police report. They assumed he had one too many that night, and that he was just a vagrant sailor off a tramp steamer, but nobody claimed him when the authorities contacted the ships in port that day. He had no passport, but did carry some authentic looking documents—a ration book, right from the war—this war.”

“How did this come to your attention?”

“It was just one of those odd stories that bounced around the web for a day or two, but somebody in British intelligence got curious about this fellow’s tale. They got hold of that police report. The fellow had it chapter and verse. His name was in the register of troops assigned to garrison duty at Gibraltar in 1940.”

“Anybody could have gotten hold of that kind of information.”

“True, but his story included a few details that now strike a nerve or two. The man said he was up on Windmill Hill Flats, above Europa Road, when a British battleship ran the straits and shelled German positions in and around the harbor. After that, they got the order to withdraw to St. Michael’s Cave. Ring a bell?”

“The same bloody cave associated with that key we lost on the *Rodney*?”

“The same bloody cave. You know.... There always was a legend that there was a hidden tunnel beneath the straits that led all the way to Morocco. The Macaws were said to be using it to come and go. It’s only fifteen or sixteen miles across those straits.”

“Aye, and 80 years between 1940 and 2020. That’s quite a trek, even if such a hidden passage ever existed.”

“Well, you asked me if there was anything else I knew about it. Now you know.”

MacRae scratched his head. “When you figure out what all that is

supposed to mean, the two of us will have another drink on it. Until then...”
He leaned closer.

Chapter 32

After the near disaster when *Kaiser Wilhelm* had stalked Convoy WS-15, the British were taking no further chances. The next Winston Special in the series, WS-16, would be composed of 21 ships, though two would fall out in rough seas early on when cargo shifted and caused hull damage. The remaining 19 ships would have the comfort of knowing they would have a most distinguished visitor in escort. HMS *Formidable* had been under repair in the US, patching up damage suffered in the Med while sparring with the Italians. The new Type 281 radar was installed, and the ship was out to the Azores to join force H. There her planes had jousted with the Germans over the Canary Islands, and after *Glorious* and *Furious* returned to Force C, she was to be detached to accompany convoy WS-16 south to Freetown.

Admiral James Somerville had come aboard in the Azores, bound to take command of the Far Eastern Fleet, where two more carriers already awaited him, bolstering up the defense of Singapore with those timely deliveries of 90 Hurricanes. *Formidable* had taken on 20 more, crated below deck. She also carried 818 and 820 Squadrons with 12 Albacore torpedo bombers each, and 888 Squadron with 12 Grumman Martlets. Light carrier *Argus* was also along for the ride, with 15 more crated Spitfires bound for Madeira. The carriers would always be attended by cruisers and destroyers, and so light cruiser *Newcastle* would join the convoy on February 21st, along with destroyer *Paladin*, and *Lookout* and *Lightning* would join from Force H as they reached the Azores on the 22nd.

This being a vital convoy, with troops, supplies, crated aircraft and even armored fighting vehicles, Tovey asked the Fairchild group if they would lend a hand. The role that MacRae had presumed his ship might settle into was not to be his fate. *Argos Fire* would accompany WS-16 to Freetown, where she would then turn over that duty to destroyers *Boreas*, *Brilliant* and *Wild Swan*.

There was one other notable change, a transfer of personnel. Somerville had noted the outstanding performance of Captain Wells with *Glorious*, and so he decided he wanted the bright young officer at his side as he sailed to face the Japanese. He came aboard *Glorious* in a rendezvous off Madeira, personally commending the ship and crew, and then meeting privately with

Wells to deliver his new orders.

“Captain, you’ve done a bang up job here, perhaps the most outstanding record among any carrier commander in the navy. Churchill asked me to dispose of the French Fleet at Mers-el-Kebir, but in fact, you are the man who has done the heavy lifting in that. I want you with me as I establish the Far East Fleet, and I have orders to that effect here in hand.”

Wells was surprised. “*Glorious* is sailing to the Pacific?”

“Not exactly. She’s been invaluable here since you saved her in that close shave with the Twins, but you and I will both agree the ship is a bit long in the tooth. Besides that, she hasn’t the legs required for an assignment to the Pacific. Her range is simply inadequate. No Mister Wells, it isn’t *Glorious* I’m after here, but her Captain will do quite nicely. You’re being transferred to take command of HMS *Formidable*, effective today.”

“I see,” said Wells, not knowing whether he should be happy or sad over this unexpected development.

“Yes,” said Somerville. “*Formidable* is *Illustrious* Class, with twice the endurance at sea. Now I realize you’ve settled in well here, and I’m not giving you much time to take your leave of the men.” The Admiral looked at his watch. “*Formidable* will continue on with WS-16. Take the day if you wish, two days even. Then hop aboard an Albacore and hitch a ride out to find us at sea. Captain Bisset has already slipped off to Madeira. He’ll transfer in to take command here in your place.”

“Very well, sir. Is this to be a permanent reassignment?”

“Onwards and upwards, Mister Wells. There’s one more thing involved in all of this. I’ve discussed it with the Admiralty, and there’s full agreement. Those four Captain’s stripes on your cuff are going to be pinched together in to one nice fat stroke of gold. You’re to assume the rank of Commodore, 2nd Class, upon your arrival aboard *Formidable*.”

Wells took a deep breath. “I hadn’t expected any of this.”

“Yes, well you’ve earned it. Your actions at Mers el Kebir, off Dakar, and now here with Force C were commendable in every respect. Damn good work getting after the French like that. Put *Dunkerque* right on the bottom.”

“Thank you, sir.”

Somerville inclined his head, knowing the news, even of the promotion, would be unsettling, but that was war. Men would not sit in their chairs very long before the music would start again, and then it was up and into the mad dance. “Any questions?” he asked, feeling more sympathy for the young man

than he could express in this brief meeting.

“Will you be setting your flag aboard *Formidable* sir?”

“Ah... Will you be standing in my shadow? Only until we reach the Pacific. My personal effects have already been shipped out to *Illustrious* on station there, and that is where I’ll plant my flag. There’s also one more thing...” Somerville looked Wells in the eye now. “The German raiders that slipped away after Fuerteventura went south. There was an air attack on Ascension Island some days ago, so they’ve gone very deep into the South Atlantic. Once we deliver WS-16 to Freetown, we’re going down there to have a look. So a fighting Captain, or should I say Commodore, is just the ticket we need now.”

“Thank you, sir. I’ll do my best.”

“And I have every intention of finding that rascal,” said Somerville. “This is hush-hush, but we’ll have a little help. That new fast rocket cruiser will be accompanying us, the *Argos Fire*.”

Wells had heard of the ship, and the Russian battlecruiser with all that advance rocket weaponry. Yet he had no idea of the true origins of either ship, nor did Somerville, until the Admiral was finally taken into Tovey’s confidence in a meeting at the Azores, aboard *Invincible*. Tovey had decided it was high time to establish the group he supposedly founded as a result of these events, and the Watch had its newest member in Somerville.

“I heard of that ship, sir. Will we all get those rockets soon?”

“Perhaps... Though it may take a good long while. That ship is a prototype.” Somerville reached for the easiest cover story. “As such it is highly secret, and any discussion or mumble fest among the crew concerning its existence and operations should be roundly discouraged.”

“I understand, sir.”

“Good enough, Mister Wells. Take whatever time you need here, and I shall meet you on the flight deck when they pipe you aboard *Formidable*.”

Wells would spend most of that time with his good friend Woodfield, who rejoiced at the fact that he was getting a promotion, even though he was sad to see Wells leave *Glorious*.

“Can’t keep a good man on a drafty old bird like this one for long,” said Woodfield. “I’ll miss you, Welly, but by god, give the Japanese hell when you get out there. You’re likely to be tangling with them right from the get go. Commodore Wells! That has a nice ring to it. Good show!”

“Yes? Well don’t make a fuss with the men. I’ll make the announcement

tonight as I make my rounds. No bother or ceremony. They'll be getting a good officer in my place."

He looked about the ship a good long while that night, wandering into odd corners and passageways that he seldom traveled as Captain, and talking with the men, thanking them for their stalwart service. By the time he was finished he had a hollow, lonesome feeling, for any man who leaves his first command will not do so lightly. Then he retired, confiding to Woodfield that he would slip off quietly the following morning. He asked him to have an Albacore spotted on deck at 08:00, and then spent a few hours alone in his cabin, packing up a duffel bag and having it sent down to the hanger deck.

HMS *Glorious* was a good old lady, he thought. He was a Zombie Captain on a ship of ghosts, men that should have mostly all gone under the sea by now, though he never knew that. Come morning, he awoke with a thrum of mixed anxiety and excitement, shaved at the same old sink and mirror, had a light breakfast delivered to his stateroom, and then wandered out onto the bridge for one last moment there. The memory of that first desperate minute he had spent at the wheel returned like a bad dream, with a pair of steel demons out there gunning for his life, and the life of the ship that day. But he had saved her, and all these men, and he had stood his watch here with as much skill and dedication as he could muster.

He saw Woodfield eyeing him from his post near the binnacle, and then proffered a brief salute. "You have the bridge, Mister Woodfield."

"Thank you, sir. I have the bridge. Let the log record that it passed from the most able man I will have ever served with, and right into my bumbling grasp, until a real Captain shows up." He smiled, saluting crisply.

Wells gave him a smile and a nod, returning that last salute as he stepped through the aft hatch and started down. At that moment, Woodfield stepped lightly to the flag bridge and the men ran up a signal. It seemed there was a rustle of many feet aboard, and when the newly appointed Commodore Wells emerged from the hatch on the flight deck, he saw it filled with the ship's personnel, all standing to attention.

Damn it, Woody, he thought, immediately craning his neck to look up to the conning tower where he saw his old friend smiling down at him from the weather deck. Then all the men broke into a rousing chorus of "He's a Jolly Good Fellow," and they sang it until he had made his way to the waiting Albacore, its engine sputtering to life as the men finally cleared the flight deck. They sang him right into the skies that morning, and he could hear that

last loud chorus even as the plane rolled down the deck.... “For He’s a Jolly Good Fellow, which nobody can deny!”

* * *

Kapitan Otto Falkenrath was a very careful man. Joining the Luftwaffe in 1918 at the age of 18, he aspired to become a fighter pilot, and was even briefly befriended by the famous Manfred von Richthoven before the latter’s death in April of that same year. Falkenrath got a little experience in that war, making Lieutenant before it ended. Between the wars he became fascinated with the prospect of flying a plane from a ship, and keenly followed developments that eventually led to the design and building of the *Goeben*. He transferred to the air arm of the Kriegsmarine, just to get a shot at serving on that ship, and now he was its Kapitan.

Falkenrath did not quite know what to make of their recent find. A ship adrift like that was very strange, still underway, so eerily quiet and empty, and yet with such valuable cargo in her holds. It was a mystery he would never have time to solve, a ghost ship, an inexplicable derelict at sea. And what had happened to *Kaiser Wilhelm* during that brief, violent encounter? He had not seen the enemy ahead, but he heard those 15-inch guns well enough, until their resounding boom seemed to echo and quaver, strangely distended, as though coming from a faraway place.

It was then that the strange milky green tendrils in the sky seemed to lick the sea ahead, and a roll of heavy mist came between the *Goeben* and *Kaiser Wilhelm*. The watch called out that they had lost their fix on the other ship and, as a precaution, Falkenrath reduced speed to one third. It was more than an hour before he sighted the other ship, and in all that time there had not been the slightest inkling of any enemy in the vicinity that would have prompted *Kaiser Wilhelm* to fire those guns. It left Falkenrath with a creepy feeling, and there was a sinister edge on the cold air, a warning in the oddly luminescent skies above. Ghost ship... That was how it all felt, but that thing they had brought aboard was certainly real enough, a great white shark’s tooth secreted away on the hanger deck.

They had steamed out with *Kormoran*, before the faster German warships sped on ahead. Now the strange prize ship would be Detmers’ charge, and he wondered if he would ever get it safely back to a friendly port. They had a very long way to go, and much of it would simply be the open,

empty sea. This time they would skirt well away from the small British base at Saint Helena, and Georgetown on Ascension Island. There would be no spiteful bombing run as before. Instead, they sailed at least 150 miles west of Ascension, entering the narrowest part of the Atlantic, still a vast 1700 mile sea between Brazil and Sierra Leon. Over 6000 nautical miles and ten days later at 18 knots, they planned to link up with *Ermland* again to refuel.

That was when the difficulties began. It had been nearly a month since they last rendezvoused with the ship, though they had taken on fuel and fresh water at that distant French outpost of Kergulen. The round trip ticket would log nearly 14,000 nautical miles, and they could not have made it back this far without that fuel. Now the stocks were again running low, but at the designated coordinates, at 16:00 hours as required, there was no sign of the oiler. The weather had been too thick to fly off planes, but Falkenrath sent down a message to get two fighters ready for operations in any case.

Marco Ritter would normally be the first man up to go, but the Kapitan had scheduled a meeting with him, so Eulers was assigned in his place. They waited, seeing the lowering cloud deck lift enough to have a chance at spotting anything. Then Falkenrath ordered the planes up. Otto Klein was going to join Eulers, but when they tried to turn over his plane's engine, it would not start.

"I told that damn mechanic the engine sounded odd last time I was up," said Klein. "Wait for me. I'll have them bring up another plane."

"Why bother? Look at the weather. I won't see anything in this. Go have some coffee. I'll be back before you know it."

Kline made a quick call to Ritter, and permission was granted for Eulers to fly alone. He was off the deck at 16:40, with little more than an hour before the sun would set at about 18:00 at this latitude. Climbing above the cloud deck, he circled briefly, looking for any break in the weather. There he saw the moon was already well up, a full evening crescent that would sail above the grey clouds until it set near midnight. It was one of those soulful, empty moments, just Eulers, his plane and that moon, and it seemed nothing else was living in any direction for a thousand miles.

Until the missile came....

* * *

"Contact!" said the Radar Watch, "Single aircraft. Range 120

Kilometers, 3000 meters and climbing slowly. Bearing 185 Degrees, speed 380 KPH.”

Captain MacRae folded his arms, thinking. The British had an airfield at Sao Filipe on Fogo Island, and a seaplane base at Brava. Might this be a plane out of one of those bases?

“Contact range to nearest British base in the Cape Verde Islands?” He asked the most obvious question to solve this riddle.

“Sir, that would be Brava Island, at approximately 930 kilometers north by northwest.”

“Mack?”

“Aye sir.”

“Twitch your fingers and dial up someone in the Azores on the secure line. Ask them if they might have anything out that far.”

Morgan would soon learn that the seaplane base at Brava was only flying three Supermarine Walrus, flown off there by *Barham* before she went down at Dakar. A little research indicated that plane had a maximum range of 965 kilometers, so unless it planned on landing in the middle of the sea, it could not be out from Brava.

“But I’m told there’s a squadron of Bristol Beaufighters on Santiago Island at Praia Field. That would be a little more than 1000 klicks out, and the Beaufighter could be out that far. The plane has a range of 2800 kilometers.”

“Well? Is it out that far? Do they have one up?”

“No sir. This weather has them all socked in. That’s where the main front is now, right over the islands.”

“Then who’s our guest down south?” MacRae scratched his chin, felt the stubble there. It had been a long night after that story Elena had told him, and he had not shaved before coming to the bridge. “Any other convoys down there that might have a cruiser in escort with seaplanes?”

“No sir,” said Morgan. “I’ve had my people interfacing with the Royal Navy. We’ve got all their planned convoy moves charted. And there’s nothing up from *Formidable* either. We’d know about that.”

“Alright then... Contact presumed hostile until otherwise determined as friendly. Where’s it going Mister Hawes?”

“Just circling, sir.”

“That obviously came off a ship,” said Morgan.

“Aye, only what ship?” MacRae folded his arms. “You’re certain the British have nothing down there?”

“*Norfolk* and *Suffolk* just left Freetown two hours ago. They’re coming up to meet us at Point Bravo as planned.”

MacRae nodded. “Looks like trouble. Ships out that far will be looking to steer clear of British air search assets in the Cape Verde Islands.”

“All convoy traffic goes right through those islands now,” said Morgan. “My bet is that we’ve found that German raiding group. They’ve a small aircraft carrier, or so we were briefed.”

“Mister Dean,” said MacRae with the hard edge of a decision in his voice.

“Sir?”

“Send to the helo deck. I want an X-3 up, air-to-air missile loadout. Have them get out to the location of this contact and have a look.”

“Aye sir.”

Chapter 33

Eulers never saw what fired at him. The cloud cover remained thick, and he was having difficulty locating the *Goeben* again until he dropped down very low, his eye cautiously on his altimeter as he did so. The X3 was behind him, tracking by both radar and infrared, and fast enough to stay on the fighter's tail as long as it did not go full throttle. In this case, Eulers was cruising at about 400Kph, which was well under the maximum speed of the X3 at 475Kph. Lieutenant Ryan was flying that mission, and he clearly saw what the plane was looking for, two large contacts on the sea. One quick image on his long range camera was sufficient, and then he rose up into the grey cloud deck.

Minutes later he had orders to fire, and that would end Eulers' low level flight home with a streak and roar. The X3 was carrying a slightly modified variant of the Mistral M2, manufactured by the European weapons company MBDA. It was a close in air-to-air killer, ranging no more than 6 kilometers, but enough to do the job. The French and Dutch both used them on their own helicopters, and they often saw service on the Eurocopter Tiger.

On the *Goeben*, the watchman had just spotted a grey speck below the clouds, and had seen enough of them to know it was the 109 heading home. Then there was a thin white streak emerging from the clouds above, zipping in so fast that it looked like a bolt of frozen lightning. The explosion dropped his jaw, and he immediately sounded the alarm.

Kapitan Falkenrath was on the bridge when they heard the dull crump of an explosion. The watchman's exclamation was pointed enough. "Rocket!" he shouted. "That was Eulers' plane!"

The Kapitan rushed out onto the weather deck, field glasses in hand, and was soon squinting at the remnant of what was once his fighter aircraft. The thin streak in the sky was still visible.

"Radar!" he shouted back to the bridge.

"Nothing sir. We have no contacts!"

Nor would they have any contacts as long as that X3 was up there. The helo had a wide spectrum jammer operating that was going to blind the rudimentary radar sets of that day. Marco Ritter had just finished his meeting with the Kapitan, and had been half way to the flight deck when it happened. He turned and ran back up to the bridge, catching Falkenrath as he entered

from the side hatch.

“Do you want me to take the rest of the squadron up?” he asked,

Falkenrath rubbed his chin, his brow furrowed, then shook his head. “No,” he said. “You saw what happened. It was a rocket attack. Something is out there...”

“A plane?”

“That looks to be the case. Eulers’ plane was killed from above. Look, you can still see the contrail of the missile.”

“Then all the more reason to get up after them,” said Ritter.

“What could you see in that cloud cover? The sun will be down in another twenty minutes. Besides, if I am correct, and that rocket was fired by a plane, then we have another problem. We are too far out to sea for it to have come from any British base, and that means they must have an aircraft carrier out here. Now I am new at this game, Ritter, but I know enough to realize we are in grave jeopardy here. They know where we are, but the inverse is not true. And if they can put those damn rockets on aircraft...”

Ritter nodded. “What do you suggest we do?”

“I will notify Kapitan Heinrich. My best advice would be to split the task force. If they do have a carrier out here, then we could face an air attack, but not tonight. That plane of theirs must have been out on search patrol. They just got lucky. Now they will have to return to their carrier, but there will be no light for a strike tonight. Not in this weather.”

“Right,” said Ritter. “Even Eulers was having trouble finding us, God rest his soul, and he knew exactly where we were. That was lucky how they stumbled upon us.”

“Or perhaps they found us with radar,” said Falkenrath. “Our own sets went down twenty minutes before this attack. I believe we were seen by an enemy plane on radar, and jammed. The ship will come to battle stations as a precaution. Get to the hanger deck and ready your planes for operations in the morning, and just hope we don’t see a naval rocket low on the sea any time soon. Don’t forget what happened to *Graf Zeppelin*. *Kaiser Wilhelm* has a decent armor belt, but we don’t have the metal to stop such an attack. I’m going to suggest we break off to an alternate heading immediately.”

* * *

“It seems we’ve found our bandits,” said MacRae.

“Those ten Harpoons are in the silos and configured for operations sir,” said Dean. The bright young XO was standing near the wide row of forward windows, watching the slate cloud deck stretching all the way to the horizon. It would be dark soon, making visibility even more difficult.

“What version did we get?” asked MacRae, looking at Mack Morgan at his side.

“RGM-84, the so called ‘Next Generation.’ It’ll range out 240 kilometers.”

“How big is the warhead?”

“140 kilograms, 300 pounds, and it’s an H.E. warhead, not a penetrator. Damn thing used to have a 221Kg warhead, but they slimmed it down for this latest version to improve the range.”

“That’s a problem,” said MacRae. “We don’t know how much armor those ships are packing out there. Our GB-7s had a 200Kg warhead, and they served for mixed results against these armored behemoths. This missile is a sea skimmer, is it not?”

“Correct. It’s likely going to slam right into the belt armor of the target, and that will end up looking like we just threw a bottle of champagne at them.”

“Well, the Russians didn’t seem to have any problems.” MacRae folded his arms.

“They were throwing around warheads three times the size of that Harpoon, on missiles weighing well over a thousand pounds, and traveling at Mach 3. Even then, that Russian Captain told me they had trouble with the armor on these battleships. So they re-programmed their missiles for a plunging angle of attack. That deck armor was a little easier to punch through when you throw something at it that heavy, moving that fast.”

“You spoke with this Captain?”

“Fedorov. Aye, I picked his brain a bit when we were at Alexandria. We discussed tactics before that donnybrook we fought in the Med. He was fairly blunt in giving his advice—said we’d have trouble hurting these old WWII ships, and that’s been the case.”

“Well, didn’t we slap the *Hindenburg* about the head and shoulders with our deck guns?”

“Aye, it was likely some annoyance, but you didn’t really hurt that ship, not with those deck guns, nor any of the missiles we hit the damn thing with. No sir, these missiles were designed to hit unarmored modern ships, and

cause their damage with blast fragmentation. This Fedorov told me that the real threat from those big Russian missiles of theirs was the fuel reserve when it hit. In effect, he said they were throwing Mach 3 fire bombs at the enemy, and the fire that fuel started was the real ship killer. You want to sink these ships, he tells me, then you'd better have good torpedoes."

"We've none we can fire from the ship," said MacRae with a shrug. "*Argos Fire* was designed as a air defense and general fleet security picket. We never really anticipated going head to head with other major surface warfare combatants. This ship was built to shoot down air threats, and take on lighter frigates and fast attack boats—not bloody battleships."

"We've got two Sting Rays for each of the X3s," said Morgan. "But then again, that's a light weight torpedo designed to attack subs. We can skewer a U-boat, but the damn thing has no more than a 45Kg warhead. It won't bother the anti-torpedo bulwarks on these old WWII ships. They were designed to resist torpedoes of this era, with warheads in the 300 to 400Kg range."

"We'll have to save the Sting Rays for the U-Boat threat," said MacRae.

Morgan scratched his heavy beard. "Gordie," he said, his voice lowered. "Remember what you told me earlier. This isn't really our fight. We've done our best for them in finding those brigands. There's an aircraft carrier behind us, and we can clear the skies for their torpedo planes with our SAM defense. That German scout carrier out there can't have but ten or twelve planes aboard. They've one less now, and we'll see anything else they launch easily enough. Beyond that, the British have a light cruiser and three destroyers in escort here, and then there's those two heavy cruisers coming out to meet us from Freetown."

MacRae shrugged. "I know what I said, Mack, but when it comes down to the thick of things, and the Germans start pushing on shoulders out here, I'm one to be up and pushing back. That said, I think we'll do as you say. I'll have Mister Dean transmit the coordinates of the enemy position to the British. They've an Admiral out there aboard *Formidable*, and it'll be his call. Let's see what they can do, and we'll play goalie this time. The least we can do, is keep watch on this convoy for them while they're out for the hunt. With our sonar, they've no U-boat threat, at least as long as we still have those Sting Rays."

"Aye," said Morgan with a wink. "The next six U-boats that bother us will rue the day. After that, it's anybody's game again. We'll hear them

coming, but we won't be able to do anything more than wave at them as they fire their torpedoes."

"It's not all that grim," said MacRae. "I got the inventory from that fleet replenishment ship. They had a dozen Sting Rays in crates for those Merlin helicopters. Perhaps we could sweet talk them out of a few."

* * *

Kapitan Heinrich thought about the situation for some time. A rocket from the sky. Yes, he clearly saw the contrail himself. The British had found a way to mount their new American weapons on aircraft, and look what happened to Eulers. Now we've lost a damn good pilot, and a plane along with him. Will the British also have planes that can strike our ships like that? Falkenrath wants to break off, but we've already taken their ship launched missiles, and shrugged them off easily enough. It was the shells off the British battleships that hurt *Bismarck* and *Hindenburg*. Their rockets were an annoyance this time—much lighter in impact than those we faced earlier in the Med. This tells me they must have several prototypes in development.

But what to do here? We've clearly been spotted. They've jammed our radar, and if they're using equipment like the things we found on that prize ship, then they might even be tracking us with their own radar sets. So I must assume they know where we are. The only question I have is where is *Ermland*? If they spotted us out here, perhaps they found *Ermland* as well—or even sunk her. That will put us in a very serious situation. We've come a long way north, largely undetected until now, and we need fuel. I could probably reach Casablanca, but not if I have to churn up the sea at high speed in a fight here.

How close are they? That plane was most likely off an aircraft carrier. Their Fulmars and Albacores have a maximum range of no more than 800 miles, which means they have a useful radius of perhaps 300 miles. Yet for all I know they could be right over my horizon. How can they fly in this weather? Clearly they did, and if I want to try and spot them with aircraft off the *Goeben*, then we will need the clearing skies to the west. But not tonight... There's no light left for air operations, so we must turn as Falkenrath advises to avoid a possible surface engagement. Yet that takes us deeper into the Atlantic, farther from Casablanca....

It was a difficult decision, yet he signaled *Goeben* that they would

change their heading to 320 degrees, coming well around to port. For the time being, the two ships would remain together. He would send a coded message to Group West, informing him of the missed replenishment window, and request tanker support at an alternate hover point. A few minutes on his charts would find the right location.

As for the British, he had learned in the latest intelligence communiqué, that there was yet another convoy proceeding southeast from the Cape Verde Islands, bound for Freetown. If that is the case, thought Heinrich, then they are worried we are a threat to those ships. Under other circumstances, I would be a wolf indeed, and go after those sheep, but not now, not with those missiles and radar sets we've got hold of, and not with our fuel so low. I have no other choice now. We'll break off to the west, keep looking for *Ermland*, and see what Group West advises.

* * *

Somerville had kept his promise that day when Captain Wells stepped off the Albacore that had flown him out to *Formidable*. A small company of the ship's senior officers was waiting on the flight deck, all in dress whites, and he was properly piped aboard, with salutes, introductions and handshakes all around.

"Well you've come at a most opportune moment," said the Admiral. "*Argos Fire* has sniffed out a wolf off to our southwest. We've just received information on their last course and speed."

"A threat to the convoy?" asked Wells.

"They're 150 miles out at the moment. No immediate concern. We've no light for air operations tonight, and the weather is rather thick, as you've likely seen. I've ordered the convoy to move east, closer to the African coast. *Newcastle* and one of the destroyers will stand a watch on our right flank as we go south."

"They'll likely be gone in the morning, unless they know we are here."

"It's rather push pull on that question," said Somerville. "The last place I want to see those raiders is within gun range of any of the ships in WS-16. That's our primary charge. After that, finding those ships and bringing them to heel is the next order of business. *Argos Fire* has good radar, and they can keep us well advised if the enemy turns this way. I've contacted Captain Bellars on *Norfolk*. He'll lead *Suffolk* up at the double quick, and I'll feel a

good bit better with a pair of heavy cruisers on the watch.”

“Right sir, with your permission, I suppose I should get to the bridge.”

“No need to rush off to work immediately,” said Somerville. “Get some dinner in the officer’s dining room, and a little sleep. Your Executive Officer has the watch tonight, Commander Liang. He’s come over from *Furious*.”

“Ah... yes sir, I know the man.”

“Very good then, the two of you can confer in the morning, but I think we’re likely to have a quiet night.”

“How soon before we can expect *Norfolk* and *Suffolk* to come up?” Wells was already thinking ahead. The opening pawn moves had been made, and soon the Knights would sally forth.

“Last word had them four hours to the south. I’ve informed Force C of this development, and Admiral Tovey. If we can assure the safety of WS-16, then we’ve a free hand to join the hunt.”

“I’ll have that dinner sir,” said Wells, “but I’ll want planes spotted for operations first thing in the morning.”

Somerville nodded, appreciating the man’s energy. He could see Wells was already contemplating the possible outcomes of this chance encounter. Good for him, he thought. The man who fights the battle in his head the night before may have the best chance of winning it come sunrise. But with WS-16 out there, I would be just as pleased to have this be a quiet episode of ships passing in the night. For the moment, darkness and silence is our friend.

Part XII

Flight of the Goeben

*“It is vain for the coward to flee; death follows close behind;
it is only by defying it that the brave escape.”*

— **Voltaire**

Chapter 34

Captain Thomas A. Sanford was standing on the deck of the newest ship in the fleet, fresh from its commissioning ceremony at Scapa Flow just three days ago, and now already out to sea. If anyone saw her go, along with her sister ship off the starboard side, they might have thought Britain was sending out the last two battleships in the *King George V* class, *Anson* and *Howe*, but that was not the case. It would be an easy mistake to make, he thought, and a nice little war mask we can wear when first encountering an enemy at sea, seeming to be more than we are.

He was standing aboard the heavy cruiser *Sir Lancelot*, the first of the *Knight* class, and *Sir Galahad* was keeping pace, her clipper bow cutting the sea, a white bone of water in her teeth as the two ships ran their engines at high speed for sea trials.

"Mister Laurence," he said with just an edge of warning in his voice. "Are you certain we're running full out? It looks like *Sir Galahad* is creeping up on us. Their bow is almost amidships now." The Captain was short and heavy set, full chested with sandy hair, and sea blue eyes that always seemed to be moving, always seemed alert, shifting out to sea, then up to rigging on the mainmast to watch the new Type 281 radar spinning there. They were the outward sign of the active mind behind them, always thinking, considering, evaluating.

"Full ahead sir," said Laurence, a capable Number One, the perfect foil to complement the Captain, even in appearance. He was lean and academy trim, with dark hair and just a flash of grey at his temples. Cool in demeanor, Laurence was the calm to balance the Captain's busy temperament, the ice to his fire, and the two men got on quite well together. "I'll ring up the engine room to see if they can coax another knot of two out of the turbines," said Laurence, knowing that a simple 'yes sir' would not suffice with Captain Sanford. It would only frustrate him, and leave him thinking that nothing more could be done to push or nudge the ship along, drive it just a little harder, because that was what they were doing out there on *Sir Galahad*, running for all they were worth.

"Thirty-four knots!" said Sanford with a smile, seeing his ship maintain the slight lead she had.

"I'll make it a whisker over that sir," said Laurence to put a little icing

on the cake. "We're breaking through thirty-five knots even now."

"Thirty-five bloody knots," Sanford beamed, "even in choppy seas and with a good stiff wind in our nose. By god, we've a real warhorse here, Mister Laurence."

"That we have, sir."

"*Galahad* is keeping pace, but just barely. I think they look a little worn out, wouldn't you say?"

"We've run them ragged, sir. Look at that halyard amidships, the flagman has the wrong ensign up. He's run up the red code flag sir."

The other ship had been flying the "A" flag, a blue chevron on white, indicating she was running full out. But now they ran up a red and white pendant beneath that, indicating they were taking on a signal.

"What is he talking about? Anything from the W/T Room?"

In came Ensign Willard, message in hand, and the Captain turned about, one hand still holding his field glasses, the other reaching into his pocket for the mints he was fond of. "What's this, Willard?"

"Just came in, sir."

"Just came in? Then why is that ship out there flying a code flag? They would have had it minutes ago to get that hoisted. By god man, I should have had it minutes ago as well! This is the flagship of this squadron."

"Sorry sir, I slipped on the ladder up and scuffed me knee."

Sanford gave him a look. "That knee looks to be in perfect order. Here, give me that, and off with you. Just be damn certain you get the latest signal up here quick as a cat next time."

"Aye sir. Sorry sir."

"Mister Laurence, answer that pendant."

"Already done, sir. They've hoisted again, and want to fall off to two thirds."

"Send the affirmative, but we hold our present speed until they reduce. I'll not fall for that old trick. Just the sort of thing Everett is likely to pull. He'll wait for us to fall off and then nose ahead."

"Not on your watch, sir," Laurence agreed.

Now the Captain was actually reading the message he should have had minutes ago, his eyes alight. "Well now, WS-16 had a contact to our south. We've been ordered to cancel scheduled sea trials and proceed directly to the Cape Verde Islands."

"Might it be that German raiding group sir?"

“We haven’t heard a peep out of them since they popped off at Ascension Island,” said Sanford. “Some thought they were heading for the Indian Ocean, but I’ve heard intelligence that they were just down there to harass Ascension and Saint Helena. They could be heading home. Somerville is out with that convoy, and that means the Admiralty was on to something.”

“Then it looks like our stint with Force C has also been cancelled?”

“Apparently so. Very well, Laurence. Run up ‘follow my wake,’ and then ahead two thirds. I see *Sir Galahad* has fallen off as they requested. Good to know there’s certainly nothing wrong with our engines. Note we’ve achieved 35.2 knots in trials, and see that it’s properly logged. On our way south, I intend to conduct live fire exercises to make certain the guns are sorted out as well—three salvoes, all main batteries. If we’re going to get lucky and find some action out here, we’d best clear our throats before we sing.”

“Aye sir. 35.2 knots it is, and properly logged. Now ahead two thirds.”

The Captain brought the ship around on 190 southwest, reassured by the responsive rudder and smooth turn. At 20,500 tons full load, she was quite a bit more than a heavy cruiser. The *County* Class she was designed to replace weighted in at about 14,150 tons average full load, so this was a super cruiser, to be sure, though not as large as a full battlecruiser like *Renown* had been, which displaced 32,740 tons full load. In spite of her size, she was a remarkably quick ship, and those 35 knots at trials would have left any *County* Class cruiser in her wake.

The extension of her forward segment, and clipper bow, had done wonders for her speed. *King George V* had always shipped a lot of water over her squarish bow, but that was corrected here, and the *Knight* class deftly parted the sea as it ran. While it would be rare for the ship to go full out at 34 knots for more than a few minutes, achieving that speed at trials meant she could easily give the Captain 32 knots when desired. Better yet, her sea keeping was steady as a rock, and like most large cruisers, she had good endurance, about 12,000 nautical miles at 18 knots.

When seen in profile the ship also looked a good deal more threatening than a typical heavy cruiser. The conning section looked almost identical to *King George V*, though smaller, and the ship also had two stacks right amidships, with their truncated angled tops being the only noticeable difference that would make her easy to spot. They had been adapted from a design penned for a future battleship, HMS *Vanguard*, and in many ways this

ship was a hybrid of old 'treaty era' ideas, and new wartime ideas free of that restraint and born of that experience.

The main battery that Sandy Sanford would test that afternoon was composed of ten 10-inch guns, configured exactly as in the *King George V* series. In one stroke, the Royal Navy had bettered the ten gun Japanese heavy cruisers, and made the German cruiser killing *Deutschland* class obsolete. They were also better gunned than the new German *Rhineland* series, which still had only six 11-inch guns. That 10-inch gun was entirely new, designed before the war, and had performed very well in terms of durability, range and reliability all through early testing.

Added to that, the ship would also get three twin QF 5.25-inch turrets per side, the same guns that were on the *King George V* class, though not as many. The 2 pounders were then switched out for eight 40mm Bofors, and another sixteen 20mm Oerlikon AA guns. Add in a quad 21 inch torpedo tube to either side, and it was a most formidable ship, one that might easily tangle with the likes of *Scharnhorst*, though it was not as heavily armored.

That was where the weight had been saved in the interest of speed. While the *Knight* class occupied that grey zone between heavy cruiser and battlecruiser, the designers had kept her cruiser attributes uppermost in mind. Yet they also wanted a design that could stand confidently with any cruiser then in existence. So where the likes of the existing *County* Class cruisers had no more than 110mm belt and turret protection at 25mm, the *Knight* class would live up to its name and put on some real armor. They would have 152mm at the belt, (5-inches), the same protection given to *Renown*. Her turrets and conning tower were lighter at 100mm, but well protected relative to any other British cruiser, and her deck armor was a half inch thicker than the *County* Class at 50mm. All of this was a third of what a battleship might have, but significant for any ship primarily designed to fulfill the role of a cruiser.

Some argued the effort made here was fruitless, even as the *Renown* Class, and to some extent HMS *Hood*, had been seen as having inadequate protection to face another strong battleship. That thin deck armor would make the ships vulnerable to plunging fire from bigger guns, but the *Knights* were never meant to stand in a fight with a true battleship. Instead, they were conceived as fast carrier escorts, fleet scout and patrol ships. Their job was to find, engage, and shadow the enemy, just as any cruiser might. With over 34 knots proven in Captain Sanford's little race with *Sir Galahad*, there were

few capital ships in the world that could outrun the *Knights*, and if pressed they had the firepower to blast away any cruiser they might encounter, and even threaten other ships large enough to hurt them.

All these ideas were soon to be put to the test, as the first two *Knights* of this new round table in the Royal Navy were now to be thrust into the middle of a desperate sea chase.

* * *

Kapitan Heinrich finally got a message back from Group West that night. He learned that *Ermland* had been delayed by an unexpected rendezvous with U-68, a lone wolf out from Lorient on the 11th of February, the boat was commanded by *Korvettenkapitan* Karl-Friedrich Merten. He had skirted west of Madeira, and then made a run in towards the Canary Islands to serve as a reconnaissance picket during the recent operations there. After the British evacuated Gran Canaria, things settled down, and both sides consolidated on the islands they held, needing supplies and reinforcements.

Merten took a few shots at merchantmen trying to make runs down to Tenerife, but had no success in that month. Receiving orders to proceed to his regular planned patrol, he then moved south, when an unexpected oil leak threatened to compromise his entire mission. The boat lost many tons of fuel before the Engineers could get that leak stopped, and for a time the visible oil slick on the sea was a liability that was most hazardous. After repairs were completed, Merten requested tanker support, and diverted to meet up with *Ermland* about 300 nautical miles west of the Cape Verde Islands. It was that replenishment operation that kept *Ermland* from being at its regularly scheduled hover point, and Group West had not informed Heinrich until they received his request for tanker support on the 24th of February.

Now *Kaiser Wilhelm* was heading northwest to find the tanker, making 18 knots in grey seas with low overcast on the morning of the 25th. Unbeknownst to Heinrich, *Argos Fire* was nipping at his heels when he turned, just far enough off for that Sampson radar to keep an eye on the ship and confirm his new heading. Captain MacRae reported this to the British, who then diverted *Norfolk* and *Suffolk* to take up that patrol while *Argos Fire* returned to its assigned picket duty with Convoy WS-16.

Another U-boat, number 505 under Axel Loewe, had taken a shot at the tail end of the convoy, narrowly missing *Cuba* in row four, which was

carrying personnel bound for Batavia. The British escorts, destroyers *Boreas*, *Brilliant* and *Wild Swan*, which had come up from Freetown, went into action, but they could not locate the enemy. So a message was sent to *Argos Fire* to lend a hand with its very capable sonar. With the German raiders apparently heading out to sea, MacRae left to go hunting for that submarine.

The weather was too low, and the hour too early to contemplate even launching a seaplane off the *Goeben*, which also carried a pair of crane launched Arado 196 float planes. At 08:20 hours they began to get enough clearing to permit air operations, but the question remained as to whether any planes should fly.

“Falkenrath wants to get eyes up to look for *Ermland*,” said Dieter Jung. “Shall I give him that authorization?”

Heinrich had been considering this for the last hour. The situation seemed quite calm. There had been no further sign of enemy activity the previous night, and their radar had cleared up as well. They had no contacts out to a range that would mark their horizon, so the only way to extend their situational awareness would require an air search.

“Very well,” he said. “Send an Arado. Have him spot a pair of fighters on deck as well in case we get any more visitors.”

That was the order, and the *Goeben* had that seaplane aloft, with Marco Ritter insisting he be right there on the flight deck on ready alert should there be any sign of trouble. The loss of Eulers galled him, and he was eager for revenge, rockets or no rockets. Jurgen Hafner would be his wing mate if they had to go up, but it would not prove necessary. The Arado found the *Ermland* just over the horizon, flying very low and seeing the distinctive lines of the ship. *Kaiser Wilhelm* turned to intercept, and soon Kapitan Heinrich was out on the weather deck with his field glasses, studying the light sequence flashing from the ship’s mast.

“The signal is correct,” he said, “and there are four men standing on the forecastle, as we should expect. We’ll nose up and get some breakfast while the *Goeben* recovers that plane. They should be ready to fuel right after us in about two hours. We’ll only take on enough to safely reach Gibraltar.”

First Officer Jung relayed the order, then went out to supervise the hookup and replenishment operations. It was only 90 minutes later that the hydrophone operators reported a contact to the south at a range of about 20 nautical miles. The FuMO 23 search radar operators confirmed it minutes later—two contacts.

“Already within my gun range,” said Schirmer. “Even though we won’t sight them for some time in this weather.”

“That is too close,” said the Kapitan. “Leutnant Jung, signal the *Goeben* to break off to the north. Cast off that fuel line at once! This is most likely that pair of British cruisers, and here we are with our pants down and our nose tethered to the *Ermland*. The ship will come to action stations!”

Chapter 35

Kapitan Heinrich now had a most difficult decision to make. A pair of heavy cruisers were on the scene, closing on his position with each minute. There was *Ermland*, a most valuable ship to the Reich, and if he simply broke off and used his speed here to outrun the British, he would be leaving *Ermland* vulnerable to capture or sinking. In fact, that outcome was almost certain, as the ship had orders to scuttle if caught at sea by enemy warships.

If he turned to confront the intruders, he would be risking damage to the precious cargo he now harbored, but he could see little else to do. "Schirmer," he said. "I hope you have had your coffee, because I have work for you."

"Ready Kapitan." Schirmer was already at his platform above the bridge, ready to coordinate the ship's main guns."

"We can't leave the scene without assuring those cruisers are no threat to *Ermland*." He gave his Chief Gunnery officer a hard look.

"I understand, sir."

Heinrich had decoupled, with *Ermland* speeding off as best it could. Then he brought the ship around and steered directly towards the oncoming British cruisers, like an armored knight beginning his gallop in a jousting contest. The sound of the heavy 15-inch gun turrets turning to train on the enemy's heading was an ominous note, the long cold barrels elevating, ready to fire. He was carrying a very heavy lance as *Kaiser Wilhelm* pushed through 24 knots, the sea white at her sharp bow, a mad steed galloping forward to battle.

The range decreased sharply, falling through 17,000 meters, where Heinrich got his first sighting visually with his field classes. He could see the two slim profiles, indicating the cruisers were coming at him dead on, but then they began to fatten out, and he realized they were turning.

"Take your shot, Schirmer. I'll be turning 30 points to starboard soon to give you the aft turret."

"Elevation, ten point four degrees," said Schirmer, all business now. "Shoot!" The roar of the two forward turrets came in answer, sending four heavy shells out with a striking velocity exceeding 2500 feet per second. They were going to come in at an angle of fall of about 17 degrees, and have tremendous penetrating power if they struck anything. Flight time to target

was about 32 seconds at this range, time enough for the quick action of the gun crews to reload.

The four rounds would both fall short, their white splashes forming clear strokes over the dark silhouettes of the cruisers. Those shadows soon lit up with their own fire, flinging 8-inch shells out at the onrushing charger that was riding out to challenge them. They could fire more of them, and faster than their enemy, but they weighed only 256 pounds, compared to the massive 1,800 pound shells the Germans were using. To make matters worse, German optics on the *Kaiser Wilhelm* were superb, and Schirmer was a master at using them. He was going to score the first hit, against *Suffolk*, on the third salvo fired. It struck low on the bow, penetrating the thin armor there so easily that it did not even explode.

Both sides had turned and were now running parallel at about 15,000 meters. At these ranges the relatively flat arc of the shells would not produce much plunging fire, and hits to deck armor would likely see the rounds skip or ricochet right off. The British 8-inch guns might only penetrate 1 to 1.2 inches of deck armor, which would not be enough to harm *Kaiser Wilhelm* even if they struck at a more favorable angle. As for the 190mm belt armor on the German ship, all of 7.4 inches, it was also going to stop even a direct hit from those shells, which might only achieve a partial penetration of about 5.5. inches. So the armor on *Kaiser Wilhelm* was simply too good for these cruisers to beat, but the inverse was not true.

Schirmer's fifth salvo found *Suffolk* again, this time right on her aft Y Turret, which was completely penetrated, having no more than 25mm armor. Even the German 5.9-inch secondary guns were going to punch through protection that light. The 3.5 inch side armor on the British cruisers would stop those shells, but barely. The resulting explosion was a prominent flash of yellow orange fire against the slate grey backdrop of sea and sky.

Kaiser Wilhelm took a glancing hit from *Norfolk*, low on her conning tower. There was partial penetration there, and considerable splinter damage, but not serious enough hurt any vital ship systems, aside from three crewmen who died there. Then, on the ninth salvo, Schirmer's Anton turret put a round right on target, forward of the tower, and low against the belt. It blew right through, the round exploding this time, and blasting through the barbette of B Turret, which had armor only capable of stopping shell splinters. The result was a magazine explosion that was terrible to behold. It blasted the side of the ship open to the sea, obliterated that turret, and sent up sheets of searing

flame and clotted smoke, which was so heavy that it obscured the scene for some minutes.

As it slowly cleared, Kapitan Heinrich allowed himself a tight lipped smile when he saw the British cruiser wallowing to starboard, obviously shipping enough water to pull it into a heavy list. He was going to get ship number 12 that day, yet another warship, and add 13,315 tons to his total, which would soon reach 95,728 tons.

Norfolk had seen what happened, and her Captain Bellers realized he had no business getting into a fight with this ship. He was already taking damage from accurate enemy secondary guns, and now, with *Suffolk* stricken, those six 15-inch guns were re-training to engage *Norfolk*. He ordered a hard turn, steering to put *Suffolk*, and all that heavy smoke, between his ship and the enemy, cursing the fate of his comrades, for he knew he could do nothing to help them in the short run. That was the only thing that saved him.

With sea, smoke, and weather all conspiring against them, Schirmer reported he had lost contact with the second British cruiser. "Shall I put another few rounds into that one?" he asked.

Standing in the protected bridge now, Heinrich had a satisfied look on his face. "Not necessary," he said. "It won't survive that hit—must have been a magazine explosion. Helmsman, come about to 340. We'll head back north to cover the *Ermland*."

They were standing in what would typically be called the wheelhouse, though that was a misnomer in this case, for there was no wheel. The battle helmsman was standing smartly at his post before a squarish box mounted on a circular pedestal. He punched the rightmost of three tall buttons there, for this is actually how the ship was steered, one button for left rudder, one for right rudder, and the center button for a more rapid response that would only be pushed if he needed to make a faster 'hard rudder' deployment.

Directly above this he could see dials indicating rudder position, a gyro compass, and there were also voice tubes to the chart house on the deck below, and the auxiliary command center. He actually had no direct view of the sea from this position, though there was a helmsman's periscope he could use if he needed to see what was in front of the ship. Two other men were peering through the oculars of their periscopes, the ship's Navigation Officer, and the Officer of the Watch.

"Is our radar clear?" Heinrich asked.

Kaiser Wilhelm had a FuMO 23 search radar on her rangefinder tower,

and a *Timor* antenna for the FuMO 4 *Samos*. “Yes sir,” said Jung. “We have the second cruiser heading south, now at 27,000 meters. They are slipping out of radar range.”

“They want no more of us,” he said, “but it is good to know we’ll see them if they come about and attempt to shadow us. Order both *Ermland* and the *Goeben* to assume this heading. We’ll continue for two hours then come due north on 360. If all is quiet, then *Goeben* can link up for replenishment. Do we have damage?”

“We took one hit, sir, low on the conning tower, and there was a minor fire and some splinter damage. Three casualties, all KIAs.”

“See that they get proper sea burial.”

“Aye sir.”

Out on the port side of the ship, huddled in a tall armored mushroom, Flak Director Gunter Ghorbandt opened the small metal hatch and peered cautiously out. He had heard a hard clink against that armor during the fight, and now his periscope wasn’t functioning properly. Craning his neck to inspect the periscope mount, he saw a small splinter wound there from the shrapnel thrown off by that 8-inch shell hit. He shook his head. The hatch was too small to allow a workman to get shoulders through to repair that scope. He would have to report it to the engineers and have someone climb up from the outside ladder....

* * *

Hours later, back on the *Goeben*, Kapitan Falkenrath was pacing nervously on the bridge as the ship maneuvered into position behind *Ermland*. His fuel stocks were running very low, though he thought he might have enough to reach Casablanca at no more than 18 knots. Marco Ritter had finally gone up to have a look around, finding the seas empty, except well behind them to the south, where the British had been mounting search operations for survivors from *Suffolk*. He landed in a flurry of sea spray as the clouds were building, with the threat of a another storm darkening the skies to the west. Ritter tramped up to the flight control tower where the Kapitan waited, pulling off his gloves, and grateful for a little warmth.

“It’s thickening up to the west,” he said. “Couldn’t see a thing. But that cruiser came about behind us. Don’t worry, they are merely trying to pull men out of the sea. *Kaiser Wilhelm* sunk the other one.”

“Good enough,” said Falkenrath.

“Seas are rising. That little flight deck was pitching hard when I came in. The undercarriage took a real thump when I landed, and I nearly missed the damn arrestor cable.”

“It’s obvious that we won’t be able to conduct flight operations until we ride this out,” said the Kapitan. “But this ship is also capable of acting as a surface raider. Yes, we get second billing here, as *Kaiser Wilhelm* has claimed most of the tonnage, but we still have those two triple 11-inch turrets up front, and one day we may get a chance to use them.”

Be careful what you wish for, thought Ritter, but he did not voice that warning. “Are you going to try to take on fuel in this mess?”

“Heinrich thinks we should wait for this front to move through, and I am inclined to agree. Sea keeping will be very difficult, and we could easily over-stress the fuel line. So we wait.”

That wait would be a long one, with the three ships clustered in formation, and moving at just 12 knots, which was a comfortable cruising speed for the *Ermland*. They had skirted west, then north, to bypass the Cape Verde Islands, and were now a little over 1,000 nautical miles southwest of Tarfaya, where the Germans had been busy repairing and expanding that vital airfield. They had moved a squadron of He-111 twin engine fighters into that field, intending to offer them some extended range air cover as they approached the African coast. Those planes had a maximum range of 1,200 nautical miles with drop tanks, which meant their longest safe combat radius would be no more than 500 nautical miles. So they would have to go another 500 miles at sea before they could expect that help.

In the meantime, Falkenrath hoped he would have clearing skies after this next front moved through, but there were things afoot that he could not see or know just then, and the danger ahead would come from a most unexpected direction.

* * *

Admiral Somerville had been more than a little angered by the loss of *Suffolk*. With the position of the German raiding group reasonably known, and WS-16 safely to the south and heading for Freetown, he decided to detach HMS *Formidable* with destroyers *Rapid*, *Redoubt* and *Relentless*. He moved to effect a rendezvous with *Norfolk*, which had spent all the next day

in rescue operations. A freighter had also come out from the Cape Verde Islands to take the survivors aboard, over 600 men saved from the crew of 720.

"I have every intention of getting after those brigands," said Somerville. "I'll get to the Pacific in due course, but for now, we're taking *Norfolk* and the three destroyers north to look for the Germans."

"Might I suggest we take a course to the northeast sir," said Wells, now settling in to his new command. "I don't think they'll run west of the Canary Islands. That still our beat, and Force C is there. I think they'll turn northeast and run for the African coast. Once they come up on Spanish Morocco, they'll be under land based air cover."

"Yes, that's a reasonable assumption, but won't they want to get into the convoy lanes on the outside track?"

"Well sir, they've acted strangely. After that engagement with *Norfolk* and *Suffolk*, they might have turned due east to threaten WS-16. In fact, I was expecting them to do so, but instead they moved out to sea."

"Probably wary of our aircraft operating out of the Cape Verde Islands," said Somerville.

"That would not have discouraged me," said wells. "Not with a nice fat convoy within easy reach of my guns. Yet it seems to me that they are now attempting to avoid contact."

"Perhaps *Norfolk* and *Suffolk* got a few licks in," Somerville suggested. "Captain Bellars reported he observed at least one hit."

"Could be, sir, but let's also remember that they were very far south if this is the same group that hit Ascension Island. That's a long way down and back. If you want my thinking on it, I would say they are low on fuel now, and possibly looking to avoid contact and rendezvous with a tanker. We know they have one out here. Intelligence picked up a request for emergency support from a U-Boat some days ago."

"Well considered," said Somerville. "Very well, you have the ship, Mister Wells. Plot your course, and be sure to get a signal out to Sanford on *Sir Lancelot*. He's leading a pair of cruisers down from Madeira, and they should be south of the Canary Islands now."

"That would put them in a very good position to head off any movement by the enemy as I have suggested. If we coordinate well, we might just catch these fellows somewhere west of Cape Blanco."

That was a long narrow peninsula that extended some 35 miles south

from the border of Spanish Morocco and French West Africa. Wells knew his intended course would be running him into that front, but it would pass over him, eventually leaving him with clearing skies and steady seas. If the Germans turned northeast now as he expected, he would be running parallel, on the landward side of their course, and hoping to get into a good position to get his Albacores up.

Another pair of cruisers, he thought. I've heard these new ships were getting ready to be commissioned next month. It looks as though the navy needs everything they can float now. Here we've just gone and lost another good ship. Well, with any luck, I'll have a crack at these bastards.

He looked at his watch, noting the time. Another 48 hours should do it, he thought, and it was a very good assessment.

Chapter 36

Captain Sanford was always busy, his energy endless, yet always seeming on the edge of anxiety and frustration as well. HMS *Sir Lancelot* had cruised south, with her fellow Knight *Sir Galahad* in her wake. The gunnery drill had been carried off unannounced, and the Captain was quite temperamental about it.

“Six minutes!” he said with a scowl. “Six minutes from alarm to gun training. Mister Laurence, we shall have to do better than that.”

“Indeed sir,” said Laurence, always cool and collected, standing tall, arms folded behind his back while the Captain fidgeted with his field glasses.

“*Sir Galahad* was trained and elevated on her B turret in under 5 minutes,” said the Captain. “I noted it on my stopwatch. Now I’ll want our guns ready in four minutes flat. But Mister Kingston will be thinking I’ll have him run it through again, here and now, but that would be too easy. Secure from battle stations. We’ll wait a good twenty minutes and then surprise them again.”

“Very good sir. Secure from battle stations. Signaling *Sir Galahad* to stand down from gunnery trial as well.”

“Right,” said Sanford. “Can’t have them popping off while we sit over here seeming to be at tea. Secure that drill flag. We’ll try again later.”

It was that way for the next two hours, with the alarms sounding, crews rushing to stations, but with no permission to actually load the guns until Sanford was satisfied they could reach battle stations and properly train and elevate the barrels to target a previously unknown coordinate. In this he conspired with Senior Lieutenant Arnold Kingston, his Gunnery Officer, telling him he would get a sighting alarm sent down from the watch, and he should be prepared to hit it in due course. They tried again at 14:00 hours, but the Captain was not satisfied. This time he delayed until 14:40, then deliberately waited through that for another three minutes before sounding the alarm, just in case Kingston’s men, and the crew, were anticipating something on the even numbered minute.

At that moment, the tramp of heavy feet were heard from the ladder and in came Ensign Willard again, a message in hand.

“Sir!” he said with a smart salute. “W/T signal—fresh off the wire.”

The Captain was eyeing his watch, giving Willard a sidelong glance as

he extended his hand to take the message. "Better, Mister Willard," he said. "I don't see any pendants on *Sir Galahad* this time, so I trust we've got this first."

He looked at the message, frowning. "Damn," he breathed. "*Suffolk's* gone down. The ship will come to action stations. This is not a drill. Run up number two, Mister Laurence, and ready all stations for surface action. This time they may load the guns."

"Aye sir," said Laurence. "Number two flag to halyard, and ready on all battle stations."

The bells clanged, and the tramp of feet was swift and heavy on the decks, for this was the third time in the last hour Sanford had sounded the alarm.

"Come to 160," said the Captain. "Ahead two thirds."

* * *

It was the high watch on the mainmast of *Kaiser Wilhelm* that made the first sighting, a little after 15:00 on the 26th of February. Kapitan Heinrich was on the bridge with his young first officer Deter Jung, and he was staring at the low grey clouds hovering just above his horizon to the north and east. They had the contact on radar twenty minutes earlier, and had turned fifteen points to starboard, intending to avoid any other enemy shipping. But this contact soon altered course to intercept, and the angle was such that they were going to do so if they knew where the Germans were.

"They must have us on radar as well," he said, curious. A pair of ships like this would usually be two British cruisers. They would certainly not be merchant ships, not at the speed the contact was making, at least 24 knots, and in rising seas. *Goeben* had been taking on fuel from *Ermland*, and wasn't flying anything with the winds up over 30 knots, and the fast running outliers of the storm front sending rain squalls at them every ten minutes. It had been a dangerous hookup, with perilous sea keeping, but the urgency of the moment compelled them to risk it. Then, in the middle of that operation, radar reported contacts at 27,000 meters.

"The British will not let us have dinner in peace," he said to Jung. "Now, who is this come knocking at the door?"

The sun would set at 17:40, and would add welcome darkness to the gloom already hanging over the scene. He had ordered the replenishment

operation aborted, then sent *Ermland* due west on a heading of 270, while he led *Goeben* on a course of 70 degrees northeast. That was the last they would see of *Ermland*, and they were still about 400 miles from German air cover on the mainland, if anything would be flying. Then the watchman called out the sighting, and the tension ratcheted up yet another notch.

Heinrich studied the distant silhouettes off his port quarter for some time at 18,000 meters as the ship came to battle stations. They were already well within the range of his guns, but were slipping in and out of squall lines, vanishing for minutes on end, before running into the clear. They could attempt to fire by radar, but he elected not to do so, thinking to let the silence and gathering darkness be his cloak. The *Goeben* was ordered to come abreast on his starboard side, just in case this was a ship deploying naval rockets. The better armor on *Kaiser Wilhelm* would serve to shield the light carrier, and also mask its presence, its silhouette screened off by the larger and more prominent lines of the battlecruiser.

Two more British cruisers, he thought sullenly. “Well, they have to know what we did to the others. Yet there they are, bold as bulls, and certainly maintaining a good angle to intercept. I would have to turn beyond 90 degrees now to break off, and that would put me on a heading for Dakar. Those are unfriendly waters. There are a lot of British planes operating from that base. It is obvious they’ve plotted our course, and they are definitely trying to head us off. Yet I wonder how pushy these two will get. Schirmer’s guns are already well trained. One peep out of them and I’ll give the order to fire.

Then he stopped, suddenly alarmed by what he was seeing now that the range closed inside 16,000 meters. He was lucky to have any sighting at all, but there they were, turning to present a prominent broadside silhouette—two identical ships. The intake of his breath came fast as he adjusted the focus on his field glasses. Those were not British cruisers. He had seen that silhouette before, the squat forecastle and conning section, with two stacks amidships, and three turrets. These were not cruisers....

The *County* class ships like *Kent* all had three stacks and four gun turrets. *London* class had two stacks, but also four turrets. This had to be something more, and with a sinking feeling he now thought he was looking at a pair of British battleships of the *King George V* class. Three were said to be operating in the Canary Islands, and were present at the battle of Fuerteventura. Two remained after that action.

“Battleships,” he breathed, cursing his bad luck. “A pair of *King George V* class battleships...” Heinrich took a deep breath. “Come to zero-eight-zero and increase to thirty knots. Signal *Goeben* to match course and speed. We will see if we can break off to the east.”

The thought that he was now facing twenty 14-inch guns to only six 15-inch on *Kaiser Wilhelm* and six 11-inch on the *Goeben* was cause for considerable discretion here. This time the British were out for their pound of flesh. The Kapitan was wrong in his assessment, though he did not know that. He was actually looking at Captain Sandy Sanford and his two new *Knight* class heavy cruisers, and that misapprehension would now color the decisions made by the Germans here with a heavy wash of grey.

There came a distant flash from the forward segment of both ships, and he held his breath. It was likely the B turret, being fired to judge the initial range plot before the larger quad turrets on those ships joined in. If he was correct, he should see shellfall in two separate pairs here soon, and seconds later, that was what happened. He was out on the weather deck off the main bridge, seeing the heavy gun barrels turning to re-train as the ship turned. *Kaiser Wilhelm* was looking over its shoulder, and now it was time he at least gave those distant foes a fair warning.

“Schirmer,” he yelled. “You may begin at your discretion.”

“Aye sir,” the Gunnery officer called from his post on the high primary gun director, sitting prominently on the forecastle. He elected to open with his aft turret, which had a good angle of fire on the enemy contacts, yet even Schirmer knew they had no business in this fight if these were indeed two British battleships. In fact, they had been given direct orders by Admiral Raeder to avoid such engagements, and now, with the precious cargo they carried, the situation was even more perilous.

Heinrich watched the *Goeben* accelerate to keep abreast, still screened by the bigger ship. He cast a wary glance at the sky, dreading to see the contrails of naval rockets there, but none came. Instead, he saw only the high shellfall splash of heavy rounds, more familiar but no less deadly.

It was going to come down to speed, he thought. We can both make 36 knots if we need to, though that will burn up all that extra fuel we managed to take on from *Ermland*, and we are still a thousand miles from Casablanca. These battleships are reported to top out at no more than 28 knots, so let us ease ahead here.

“Helm, 30 knots, and signal *Goeben* to match speed.”

“Aye sir, 30 knots.”

The thrum of the ships turbines was reassuring, the sharp bow easily parting the heavy seas in spite of the wind. Those seas erupted again, just off his port bow as a series of four shells fell in a long line. The British were finding the range, and Schirmer answered with both forward turrets.

“Range to targets?” the Kapitan asked.

“Range 17,200 meters.... 17,000....”

“Are you certain? The range is closing?”

“My optics are very good,” Schirmer called down.

The boom of the aft turret interrupted them, but Heinrich was suddenly concerned. They should be gradually easing away from the enemy, but they were closing. Something was wrong here. Those battleships should not be able to run like this, but if it was a foot race they wanted, he would show them what speed was.

“Helmsman, all ahead full.”

“Ahead full sir!”

Executive Officer Jung was handling signals from the Flag Bridge for *Goeben* to match speed. They were going to run all out, attempting to break away. As the ships accelerated, the range stabilized at around 16,600 meters, then slowly increased, opening slightly by 200 meters every few minutes.

Heinrich frowned when he slowly realized the enemy was hanging on, stubbornly keeping pace, and yet another series of four heavy shells whistled overhead, falling very near the bow. They nearly had a straddle, and they were firing very quickly. Those cannot be *King George V* class battleships. We should have broken off easily. The range should be opening much faster, but still they hang on off our port side, though they do not have the angle to nose ahead of us now. This is very odd. Could these just be a pair of heavy cruisers as before. I have seen that 8-inch shellfall many times, but this looks like something much larger.

It was only then that the possibility entered his mind that these could be another ship class. He had heard the British were building bigger cruisers. Could these ships be the result of that effort? He scanned the near horizon, grateful to see a low roll of cloud and mist ahead.

“Come right five degrees,”

“Aye sir, right five degrees.”

I do not have the time to find out what is chasing us now, thought Heinrich. Those low clouds will be our friends, and the night. But these ships

have radar.... That thought set a pall of grey on his own brow. It was going to be a very long night if this enemy kept on his heels. Our edge in speed is very small, so I am certain these are not enemy battleships, and both their battlecruisers were sunk or damaged at Fuerteventura.

Now a messenger ran in with a decoded lamp signal from the *Goeben*. Heinrich took it, removing his gloves as he read it. Kapitan Falkenrath was suggesting they separate....

He thought for a moment on that. The *Goeben* would be good in a chase with both her 11-inch turrets mounted on the bow. But in a situation like this, if the enemy is attempting to close on her stern, she had little more than a few secondary batteries to bother them. I can at least use my aft Caesar turret to keep them honest. But what if we do separate, and the enemy chooses to pursue the *Goeben*? That would be very bad for Falkenrath without our guns in the equation. Yet splitting up also forces the enemy to make a similar choice, while also increasing the odds that at least one of our two ships will reach a friendly port.

He decided.

“Leutnant Jung, signal *Goeben* to be ready to fall off to starboard on our signal. They should continue east for at least twenty minutes at their best practical speed before coming back on this course. Once acknowledged, *Kaiser Wilhelm* will execute a 30 point turn to port, and we will engage the enemy to cover the *Goeben*’s withdrawal. Our intention will be to try and engage and hold the British on our course track, giving the *Goeben* a clear shot at breaking away. Yet we will not do this until we have pulled ahead, beyond visual range. Then it will be up to the radar, and we will see how good their equipment is relative to ours. In time, we should be able to edge away.”

Yes, he thought, but how much fuel will we burn before that happens? We will both have to reduce speed considerably, and likely within the hour.

He looked nervously at the ship’s chronometer, seeing it was a little after 17:00. In another 40 minutes the sun will be down, but before that happens, it may fall through the low cloud deck and illuminate the entire scene for a few moments. They’ll be silhouetted to the north and west, we’ll be running into shadow and night. That is when we make our move, a Knight’s move, forking off in separate directions to run for the clear.

That moment was soon upon them, a blood red smear of fiery sky off their port side. The range had increased to 24,000 meters, and both sides no

longer had a good visual sighting, then *Kaiser Wilhelm* winked goodbye to the *Goeben*, wishing them good luck as they turned. It was Heinrich's intention to stand and fight a brief action here, as his fuel situation was just a little better than that of the *Goeben*. The order was given and the big ship turned, the sea a mad thing at the bow, foredeck awash with the froth of the rising storm.

They came round, the radar man calling off the diminishing range now, his voice the only human sound breaking the strained tension on the bridge. It was then that the Kapitan saw the enemy ships again, low and dark behind the brilliant fire of the setting sun. The ship shuddered with the concussion of those 15-inch guns, a warning and challenge fired in wrathful anger.

The flash of returning fire was barely discernible, but the sound of the rounds coming in was icy cold on the wind. They fell short, but with good bearing, and now *Kaiser Wilhelm* answered for the first time with a full broadside, a rage of fire and smoke broiling out from the ship. Looking over his shoulder, Heinrich could no longer see the *Goeben* in the thickening mist ahead.

God go with you, he breathed. I will try to thumb the British in the eye here, and keep them off your trail as best I can. To do so, I will have to fight, but that is what this ship was built for. Now let us see if they really want to joust with me.

"Mister Jung. Fifteen points to starboard. Get to work Schirmer. Get your hits while you can!"

It was going to work. The enemy was going to answer their challenge and step boldly after them into the ring. But they were still a very long way from safe waters, and the flight of the *Goeben* had only just begun.

The Saga Continues...

Kirov Saga: Turning Point

With diminishing fuel, the Germans go their separate ways into a harrowing sea chase that could change the entire course of the war and darken the entire world if the British Knights should fail. For deep in the underground concrete bunkers of Peenemünde, a brilliant young aerospace engineer is waiting breathlessly on the outcome—Wernher Magnus Maximilian, Freiherr von Braun....

Meanwhile, the belated Soviet counteroffensive is finally launched in a desperate attempt to save Sergei Kirov's Soviet Union from collapsing in the cold winter of early 1942. In the far east, Vladimir Karpov realizes the peril that he must now face as Admiral Kurita leads a strong battlegroup out to find and challenge the mythical sea demon that has been ravaging their fleet—*Mizuchi*.

With the threat to Singapore checked, the British now look to the defense of Java, and Commodore Christopher Wells aboard HMS *Formidable* will join the new Far East Fleet in an effort to challenge Japanese sea power and hold the enemy at bay.

In the Western Desert, the Allies now plan a final offensive aimed at defeating Rommel once and for all, but new shipments of the fearsome *Löwe* heavy tanks have reached Benghazi and Tripoli. Now the decision must finally be made—should they commit the overwhelming force of Kinlan's 7th Armored Brigade, or continue to hold it in reserve until the Allies can begin the long road to relieve the British in Egypt with a very different look at the battle that was once called Operation Torch?

Coming Soon...

Kirov Series: Battle Book I

War in the West

Gibraltar, Malta & the War in North Africa

Jun 1940 ~ Jun 1941

As fans of John Schettler's *Kirov Series* already know, the author is presenting a detailed alternate history of WWII, with the course of events strongly influenced by the presence of the battlecruiser *Kirov*, and other war fighting forces from the year 2021, which have been displaced to the cauldron of WWII.

Now, in response to reader requests, we are presenting a series of "Battle Books" for all the major campaigns featured in *Kirov Series*. Often times the action depicting these battles is spread over four, five or more volumes of the series. Here we will extract all that exciting battle action from the many volumes, gathering all the disparate story threads pertaining just to that campaign, and presenting it as one continuous file, reviewed and edited by the series author. In effect, it's just the battles please, nothing more.

This first volume will present the great action presented for the Western Theater, starting with the dramatic and unexpected German attack on Gibraltar in *Operation Felix*. The alternate history 'point of departure' is presented in a brief prelude. The story then moves to the Western Desert for *O'Connor's Raid* and the battle of *Beda Fomm*, followed immediately by the coming of Erwin Rommel and his stunning first counteroffensive launched from Mersa Brega, *Operation Sonnenblume*. The fall of Malta is covered and, as the arrival of Brigadier Kinlan's 7th Brigade is so vital to the understanding of the story that follows, segments of that are presented as a prelude to Rommel's fateful alternate history encounter at the *Battle of Bir El Khamsa*. Soon the Desert Fox begins to rethink his tactics while awaiting strong reserves promised by Hitler.

Yes, we loved *Kirov*, the characters, and all the intrigue surrounding Ilanskiy and time travel, but the battle books are presented for the hard core WWII aficionado who is primarily interested in the history, and how it is changed and altered over the course of the war. As such, they will focus mainly on the historical characters and the campaigns and battles they waged

in this ongoing alternate history of WWII.

Battle Book II will present the action in the Middle East, with the British *Operation Scimitar*, German *Operation Anvil*, and the intervention in Iraq that led Fedorov and his Marines to the famous ruins of Palmyra. Then it is back to the desert again, as Rommel faces down the British *Operation Crusader*. After that we will present this ongoing desert campaign through 1942 and beyond, (after John writes all that!), but for now, Battle Book I, *War in the West*, covers all the exciting battles from June of 1940 through June of 1941, the first year when Britain faced the might of Germany alone. It's all here, extracted from scenes presented over seven *Kirov Series* novels, and concentrated in one continuous, uninterrupted narrative.

The Battle Books Series will do the same thing for all the fighting on the Eastern Front, covering all the material for *Operation Barbarossa*, the *Battle at Mtsensk*, *Operation Typhoon*, the fighting at *Tula* and *Serpukhov*, the dramatic *Fall of Moscow* and the desperate *Russian Winter Counteroffensive*. Later, after the series takes us deeper into the Pacific, we'll create a battle book for all that action too. If you are a WWII history buff, you will find here the concentrated juice of all the great WWII action presented in the amazing *Kirov Series*.

Kirov Series: Battle Book I

War in the West

Gibraltar, Malta & the War in North Africa

Jun 1940 ~ Jun 1941

36 Chapters, 325 Pages, about 111,000 words

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 mid-way through Season 3 with the publication of *Knight’s Move*, Book 21 in the series.

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. Those eight books are further structured as an opening trilogy followed by what the author calls a “bridge novel” that leads to the next trilogy.

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 trilogy in that season, the three novels beginning with *9 Days Falling*. Each trilogy in the series is followed by a similar “bridge novel.”

The *9 Days Falling* trilogy focuses on the struggle to prevent a great war in 2021 from reaching a terrible nuclear climax that destroys the world. It spans 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. This second trilogy also launches several subplots that serve to relate other events in the great war of 2021 and also deepen the mystery of time travel as discovered in the series.

The trilogy ends at another crucial point in history where the ship's Captain, Vladimir Karpov, believes he is in a position to decisively change events. The next bridge novel, book 8, is also 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 sequel to the *Altered States* Trilogy and the bridge novel leading to the next set is book 12, *Three Kings*. It covers the action in North Africa, including O'Connor's whirlwind "Operation Compass" and Rommel's arrival and first offensive. The main characters from *Kirov* and other plot lines from the opening 8 book saga figure prominently in all this action, with a decisive intervention that arises from a most unexpected plot twist. Book 13, *Grand Alliance* continues the war in the desert as Rommel is suddenly confronted with a powerful new adversary, and Hitler reacts by strongly reinforcing the Afrika Korps. It also presents the struggle for naval supremacy in the Mediterranean as the British face down a combined Axis fleet from three enemy nations.

The *Grand Alliance* Trilogy continues with *Hammer of God*, covering a surprise German airborne attack, and the British 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 Book 18, *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, and the British again tangle with Rommel in Operation Crusader. The next page presents a list of all titles in the series and shows the trilogy-bridge novel structure. You can enter the series at any point of interest by reading the bridge novel that immediately precedes it, and also acts as its prelude.

KIROV SERIES - SEASON 1: *Kirov*

First Trilogy: *Kirov*

- 1) *Kirov*
- 2) *Cauldron Of Fire*
- 3) *Pacific Storm*

Bridge Novel:

- 4) *Men Of War*

Second Trilogy: 9 Days Falling

- 5) *Nine Days Falling*
- 6) *Fallen Angels*
- 7) *Devil's Garden*

Bridge Novel:

- 8) *Armageddon* – Season 1 Finale

KIROV SERIES - SEASON 2: *Altered States* (1940 – 1941)

Third Trilogy: *Altered States*

- 9) *Altered States*
 - 10) *Darkest Hour*
 - 11) *Hinge Of Fate*
- Bridge Novel:**
- 12) *Three Kings*

Fourth Trilogy: *Grand Alliance*

- 13) *Grand Alliance*
 - 14) *Hammer of God*
 - 15) *Crescendo of Doom*
- Bridge Novel:**
- 16) *Paradox Hour – Season 2 Finale*

KIROV SERIES – SEASON 3: *Doppelganger* (1941 – 1942)

Fifth Trilogy: *Doppelganger*

- 17) *Doppelganger*
 - 18) *Nemesis*
 - 19) *Winter Storm*
- Bridge Novel:**
- 20) *Tide of Fortune*

Sixth Trilogy: *Knight's Move*

- 21) *Knight's Move*
 - 22) *Turning Point*
 - 23) *TBA*
- Bridge Novel:**
- 24) *TBA – Season 3 Finale*

And yes, there will be a season 4 as the war moves into 1943-44

More information on each book in the long series is available at:
www.writingshop.ws

Discover other titles by John Schettler:

Award Winning Science Fiction:

Meridian - Meridian Series - Volume I

Nexus Point - Meridian Series - Volume II

Touchstone - Meridian Series - Volume III

Anvil of Fate - Meridian Series - Volume IV

Golem 7 - Meridian Series - Volume V

*The Meridian series merges with the Kirov Series,
beginning with Book 16, Paradox Hour*

Classic Science Fiction:

Wild Zone - Dharman Series - Volume I

Mother Heart - Dharman Series - Volume II

Historical Fiction:

Taklamakan - Silk Road Series - Volume I

Khan Tengri - Silk Road Series - Volume II

Dream Reaper – Mythic Horror Mystery