Kirov Saga

Book XIII in the Kirov Series

Grand Alliance

Action rages on land and sea in this Alternate History of WWII by:

John Schettler

Kirov Saga:
Grand Alliance

By

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Author's Note:

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

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

To faithful crew members, my readers who have been with me from the first book, *Three Kings* was a "bridge novel" leading you to this one, and *Grand Alliance* begins the fourth trilogy in the series. It now takes us into the action that has been building on land and at sea as the British struggle for their survival in the Middle East and Mediterranean. As always, Fedorov, Volsky, Orlov and Karpov and others will be right in the thick of things, on land or at sea, for good or for ill. Enjoy!

-*J. Schettler*

Part I

A Thing of Shreds and Patches

"My pulse, as yours, doth temperately keep time,
And makes as healthful music.
it is not madness that I have uttered.
Bring me to the test,
and I the matter will re-word…"

— William Shakespeare: *Hamlet*, Act 3, Scene 4

Chapter 1

Brigadier General Kinlan arrived back at the tail of the column, his mind weighted with a thousand impossible thoughts. The evidence of his own eyes had betrayed his thin hold on sanity, forcing him to stand at the edge of oblivion and stare into the abyss. He felt completely untethered, his thoughts as dark as the dead satellite GPS links, a blind man groping about in a desert sandstorm in a desperate search to find something he could get hold of to save himself from being buried.

He stepped out of the FV432 command vehicle, thankful his sand goggles hid the uncertainty and fear in his eyes. His boast to his Chief of Staff, old reliable Sims, still echoed in his mind. What were they going to do? Could this all be really happening? Was his whole brigade now caught up in this whirlwind of impossibility, trapped in the deserts of 1941 and marooned in World War Two?

Where was that damn Russian Captain? “Sims,” he said, forcing as much normalcy on his tone of voice as he could. The men, the few that had heard and seen the same evidence as he had, would be as disoriented and clueless as he felt now, and it was his to be the heavy anchor and keep this ship from foundering on the rocks. They would look to him, first and foremost, to make sense of what was happening, and sort it all out. So he reached for the book. They would do things the Army way, step by step.

The Army way, thought Kinlan. The four pillars of operations were drilled into his head early on in officer’s training schools: integrity of purpose, application and threat of force, the nature and character of the conflict, enduring philosophy and principles… he smiled grimly at that, still hearing the command instructor’s words as if they were just spoken.

“These principles should be adhered to in every respect, but they are not immune from change. They are malleable, and can be altered so that they may be applied to as many situations as possible, but only after careful consideration. Doctrine is the map for all your operations. It turns the sum of subjective thinking into an objective guide for action, thus distilling a sometimes confusing array of ideas and opinions into a clear, simple essence.

Existing doctrine—based on common sense—should be consulted before new ideas are floated, but nothing should be taken too literally in translation. And remember that all principles of war fighting rest upon the cohesion of will, in ourselves, our allies, and our adversaries."

Doctrine, common sense and will power. Know the rules and use them, but be ready to break them if the situation warrants… But only after careful consideration. And by all means, don't be stupid. That was the menu now, right from the book of war. He had long known that no plan, however carefully it was devised, ever survived first contact with the enemy—but this? This was something else entirely. This was sheer bedlam.

Rommel… He had told Sims he was going to head for Mersa Matruh as planned, and if he found anyone named Rommel out there he would kick his ass half way to Berlin. Yet at the moment, with communications down, no satellite links, no sitrep, little intelligence as to what had actually happened, and this crazy Russian Captain and his troupe of World War Two impersonators, the doctrine called for caution. Rommel… It was he who had coined the phrase so often repeated by surly instructors in the officer's schools: "The British write some of the best doctrine in the world; it is fortunate that their officers do not read it!"

Doctrine… Observe, Orientate, Decide, Act… Yet at the moment he would go dark and still. There was no sense pushing his five miles of steel and thunder north until he knew damn well what he was heading for, and to a certainty. Now he wished he still had the 656th Squadron Apaches with him, but the air assault units were the first to depart. They left for Mersa Matruh three days before the missile came in. They were spared the madness, but he could damn well use their eyes and mobility right now. Then he remembered the Russians, and that nice fat KA-40 helicopter sitting out there somewhere.

"Tell Hampton to send out a Wingo to all units. The column is to stop and remain in NBC order, engines off, lights dark, except for flankers and air defense security. Then find me that Russian Captain and his interpreter, the fellow who calls himself Popski. We're going to get to the bottom of this right now."

"Sir!" Sims was off at the trot, soon disappearing into the heavy brown desert airs, still occluded heavily at ground level from the recent storm.

Send out a Wingo, which was Army slang for WngO, a Warning Order. Sense, warn, consider, decide, execute… And be ready to take risks. He

might be faulted for stopping now, leaving his column strung out, motionless, a massive sinuous heat signature on the desert. That wouldn't matter much to another ICBM, so he decided to take the risk. He knew that mobility was his first guarantor of survivability, but something told him it was not good just blundering ahead until he could understand his environment and make some sense of this situation.

He wanted to talk to that Russian Captain again, but even as he thought this, he heard the rebuke so often quoted in the Army Operations Manual about the last war in this goddamned desert. *'The British were plagued by feebleness, by lack of instant authority in the high command. Intentions were too often obscure. Orders at army, corps, or divisional level were too often treated as the basis for discussion, matters for visit, argument, expostulation even. The result was a system of command too conversational and chatty, rather than instant and incisive…'*

What if these two characters had been sent out here to serve as a grand distraction to delay his move north? That thought was silly. Could he imagine the Russians dreaming up something like this charade? How can we make sure the British will stay in the target zone? I know, send in a few men on helicopters to ID their position, and better yet, we can dress them up in old World War Two uniforms and tell the British they've been transported to that old romantic era of the past where the Desert Rats first made their mark on these sands.

He shook his head… Impossible. The Russians couldn't dream this up in a century. This business with the LRDG, Popski, O'Connor and the whole bit… well it all seemed so damnably authentic. The look in O'Connor's eye was riveting, and he was mad as a hornet now in the other FV432. To calm the man he had played along, almost comically.

"General," he had said. "We're glad you've been recovered, but I've a bit of a problem on my hands at the moment, and more than one. Would you be so kind as to wait here while I complete my reconnaissance? We're trying to get through to the liaison officer in Cairo."

That worked. It at least gave him the time he needed to slip away and sort this whole mess out. Yet the more he looked at the situation, the more wild and crazy it all became! The Russian had come to him bang away with the assertion that he should look over his shoulder and return to the Sultan Apache facilities. In the end, he had granted the man the small grace of

compliance, and sent a patrol back to check on the status of things at the massive oil drilling site. They reported nothing was there, and Kinlan immediately assumed they had wandered off somewhere in this damn desert sand storm and were probably lost in the desolation of the Qattara Depression. So he went to look for himself.

Nine months out here in the desert had given him an uncanny sense of how to navigate, even in conditions like this. He knew where his column was when the lights went out and they had lost all satellite links and GPS. So he got in his FV432, pulled out a compass, only to find the needle was spinning like a top! Something was certainly wrong, but he moved south, able to follow the fading remnant of the column's tracks. Sixty ton tanks leave a good footprint on the desert wherever they go, and he had sixty Challenger IIs in the brigade. It wasn't long before he saw the familiar shape of Hill 587, and realized he had come east to the edge of the Qattara Depression. Beyond this point the land would cascade down in a steep escarpment into the silted, wadi infested Sebka that was completely impassible to vehicles. But behind him he had the stony plateau where the Sultan Apache facilities should be… and they were gone.

Not destroyed… not blasted to hell by another damn Russian ICBM… The desert was a sublime, immaculate wasteland, with fresh drifts of windblown sand forming even here. This was something he had not counted on; something no man could factor into his operational planning, no matter how closely he read the manual and adhered to the principles of the Operational Art. This was something wholly unaccountable, a madness that had come upon him like the desert storm, obscuring all reason and sanity and presenting him with the bewildering prospect of having to lend credence to the impossible story spewed by this Russian Captain.

Popski, O'Connor, and a Russian Naval Captain… Now he had the distinct feeling that O'Connor had never once laid eyes on the Russian, and knew nothing whatsoever of the man. If this *was* an act, aimed at distracting him into immobility here, it was masterful.

Sims was back, with the Russian in tow, and he folded his arms, thinking. "Very well," he began, looking at the Russian. "I've done what you asked of me, and had a good long look at the facilities, at least the place where they once existed. That is no longer the case."

Popski translated, still with a completely befuddled look on his face as he

did so. When Fedorov realized they were again to meet with the commander of this force, he had quietly spoken with Popski to try and prepare him for what he might soon hear.

“Popski,” he said. “I must discuss our situation with this officer, and you will hear many things that will make absolutely no sense to you. I know it will be confusing, and I will do my best to explain it all to you later, but for now, can you simply serve as my voice and translate what I say? My English can get the essence across, but I’m afraid my vocabulary is somewhat limited still. Just translate, and I’ll sort this all out for you once we set things right with the British.”

“Good enough,” said Popski, but it was not long before he did begin to hear strange talk between these two men, some of it stupefying nonsense, other things complete mysteries to him, words and terms he had never heard or used before, though these two men clearly seemed to know what they meant.

“It is as I have told you,” said Fedorov. “The facilities remain where they were, but the timeframe has changed. There was a missile strike on your position, and a detonation, correct?”

“You ought to know about it,” said Kinlan, still nurturing the assumption that this man and his band of Russian Marines were out here to guide in those warheads.

“I assure you, I knew nothing, because I was not there, General. I was not in that timeframe at all. I was here all along. Understand? I have been here for the last six months, my ship and crew as well, and all of us trapped here in this time—in this war.”

“You’re telling me you had some kind of an accident aboard ship?”

“It had something to do with our reactors.” Fedorov did not want to get into all the details of Rod-25, Tunguska, the fragmented time that event had caused, the hidden places in the world where fissures in time had been created to allow men and objects to make impossible journeys through time. It was enough to try and give this man some footing here, some kind of solid ground to stand on, as shiftless and windblown as it all might seem now.

“General,” he said through Popski. “When this storm finally abates, your systems will settle down, but you will never establish satellite links again—ever. In fact, you will never again receive another message or word from the world you knew. The only communications you will ever pick up will be

things of this world, of this time, and the year is 1941—January of 1941 to be more precise. That is why the stars and moon seem to conspire against you. Believe me, I was a navigator by trade before being promoted to my present position. When this first happened to us, I used my skills as a navigator to determine the stars and moon were not what they should be, just as your men did.”

Popski could not help but cast a furtive glance at the night sky above as the evening settled over the scene and the first stars were again visible in the slowly clearing airs.

“Then you’re trying to tell me this man O’Connor is the real thing? This fellow Wavell that was bending my ear ten minutes ago is indeed General Archibald Wavell?”

“Correct. Impossible, but true. It took us a very long time to determine what had happened to us, and relate it to the strange effects of a nuclear detonation. Apparently the same thing has just happened to you. We determined that these effects have a radius—like the EMP effect can influence an area beyond the core blast zone. Well, even if this detonation missed its target, you must have remained inside the zone.”

Kinlan stood with that for some time, removing his sand goggles to get a better look at the man, noting the unfailing sincerity in his tone and expression. He allowed himself a question, even though it would admit to grudging acceptance of this whole wild scenario.

“Then how do we get back?”

Fedorov gave him a look of real sympathy and understanding, then spoke quietly. “That may no longer be possible.”

“What? You mean we’re marooned here, for good?”

“For good or for ill, but you are here, that much you will inevitably come to realize and believe, just as we did. And being here is a matter of grave concern, not simply for your own fate, or the lives of the men you command, but for the fate of this world. Do you understand what I am saying now, general? You are no ordinary man here—not in this time and place. This is the Western Desert of Egypt in 1941. You know what is happening here now, and why men with names like Wavell and O’Connor are before you. And you will soon hear of another familiar name—Rommel. He is here as well, and undoubtedly up to the same old tricks that confounded the British for years in this campaign. But you can change all that, General Kinlan.”

“Change it?” Now Kinlan remembered his own impulsive vow to Major Sims, that he would kick Rommel’s ass half way to Berlin if he found him.

“Yes,” said Fedorov. “That is the real dilemma now. We faced it, talked endlessly about it, debated it, and then we realized we could not remain here in the midst of this terrible war without choosing sides. And General, there was some contention among our ranks over that choice. There were those who were very embittered over the hostility and enmity that has grown between our nations in our day. It was a struggle, but my Admiral held firm and eventually opted for reason in the face of all this insanity.”

“Admiral?”

“Leonid Volsky. You have heard of this man?”

“Volsky. He’s the commander of the Red Banner Northern Fleet, or at least he was before your ship went missing.”

“Correct, and he was to transfer to the Pacific Fleet just as the incident at the Diaoyutai/Senkaku Islands ignited hostilities there. That little squabble was going to become something that would eventually devour the entire world. The missile attack you experienced was undoubtedly a part of all that, and your presence here may be the only safe ground you could have found for your men and vehicles. You know damn well that there would have been a second strike, and a third if your air defense prevented that.”

“Is that what you were here for, Battle Damage Assessment?”

“No General, you must understand that I was never there—never in that time. I was here all along, with my Marines and helicopter, and we were out here doing exactly as we have told you, looking for General O’Connor. You see, when we found ourselves here, in this time, we realized there was no way we could stand apart from this conflict. We had to take sides, one way or another, and knowing that Russia and Britain were allies once eventually guided our thinking to the right path. So it is as I have told you. My ship is out there right now, waiting for my return. *Kirov* is cruising with Cunningham’s Royal Navy fleet, and ready to do battle in support of the British here—and it is a grave hour indeed. Believe me, General, it’s all in shreds and patches now, but you will piece it together soon enough, just as we did, and the quilt of your understanding could save your country now—here—in 1941.”

Chapter 2

Shreds and patches… That was as good a way to put things as he could fathom. Here he was, a king of shreds and patches, just as Hamlet put it. Yet he wanted to shout at this man as Hamlet's mother had… 'No more! Your words are like daggers, please no more, sweet Hamlet. Angels in heaven protect me with your wings!...' A ragtag king he was, lost, completely out of his world, but a king indeed. That was what this man was saying to him now, that he was here and that meant something. He had a responsibility here, and it would begin with the same choice this Russian Captain had made, to be or not to be, here and now, in this war, taking up arms against a sea of trouble and by opposing…

"You're asking me to fight here… now?"

"Where else?" Fedorov gave him a thin smile. "We fought. We were misguided by a headstrong Captain at first—the very man I replaced. His was a hard line, and he had no love of the West, or the British. But my view was that if we could somehow prevent the enmity between our nations from ever taking root after this war, then we might prevent the one that comes after, the searing fire that you have only just escaped. Understand, General? You are here. This war is here as well. Your countrymen fight even as we speak. We have joined them. That decision should be much easier for you."

Popski was following the essence of this, but could not see why this Fedorov would have to try and convince a British serving officer as to which side he was on in this damn war, and he said as much.

"I'll admit I had my doubts about you when you gave us the rough treatment up front," he said to Kinlan, "but forgive and forget, General." This man here seems to think he needs to persuade you to take up sides here, as silly as that may seem."

Kinlan gave Popski a look, then realized that if any of this were true, then this man was not of his day and time. He was a man of this era, the very same man he had stared at in the data files on his library pad. He *was* 'Popski,' head of the PPA, a fringe element of the Long Range Desert Group, the Number One Demolition Group, to be more accurate. He wanted to dismiss all this with one boisterous 'bloody hell,' but that would not do. What he

needed now was more than the evidence he had before him. He needed information on what was happening here in the desert.

"So tell him to look at the uniform I'm wearing," he said to Popski. "That should answer his question."

"Clear enough, General," Popski returned. "Not that I can say as I've ever seen kit like that before. So I'm thinking you're a special unit, seeing as though General O'Connor doesn't even seem to know anything about you. But you had old Wavell on the blower a while back. What did he say?"

"Popski," said Fedorov urgently, picking up some of what he had been saying. "Don't converse. Please stay with me and translate. This is urgent now."

"Alright, alright. Don't get all hot and bothered. The man is obviously a British serving officer, and so there should be no question as to whether or not he will do any fighting, and which side he's on."

"He said that? He's willing to engage here? Ask him again. I need to be certain of this now."

"Very well… General, this man wants to know if you're prepared to engage here—take up the good fight, eh? I'm not sure what your orders are, but Wavell must have given you an earful."

"That he did," said Kinlan. "Tell him Wavell was just a tad upset, but he's grateful we've found O'Connor. Yet he doesn't seem to know much about my unit here… secret and all, even from the up and ups." He gave Popski a wink.

"That will be the case at the outset," said Fedorov through Popski. "You are a great unknown. There will be questions, a good many questions, and it would be wise if you allowed me to assist you in answering them. You see, only a very few men alive here know the real truth concerning our presence here, and the operations we are presently undertaking."

"You were ordered here by the Russian government?"

"No. We are acting independently. Our present intention is to try and reverse what is looking to be a very desperate situation in the Mediterranean at the moment."

"Well, we know how it all turns out," said Kinlan, still inwardly shaking his head to hear himself admit the insanity of the thought that this man was telling him the truth, and this was, indeed, 1941.

"We know how it once turned out," said Fedorov quickly, in halting

English, wanting to make certain Popski got it right. “This time things are different,” he said again to Popski in Russian. “Tell him that the Germans have taken Gibraltar.”

“What’s that you say? Gibraltar?”

“Yes,” said Fedorov. “And if you know this history at all, then you know that was never supposed to happen.”

“Know what history?” said Popski.

“Just translate what I said! We’ll have time to talk later.”

Kinlan could see that Popski was in the dark. He did not really know who this Russian was—at least who he claimed to be. So he decided to explore this ground briefly.

“These men don’t seem to know the whole story, Captain,” he said. “Have you told them the same tale you’ve spun out for me?”

“Only one man here knows the whole truth—two actually.”

“Wavell?”

“No sir, General Wavell has not yet been briefed.”

“Is this man here in the know?” He nodded to Popski.

“No,” said Fedorov directly, his eyes carrying a note of caution that he did not wish to try and put into words.

Popski knew what they were saying, but if this was something that Wavell was not even privy too, then he was in good company, and he did not let any of this bother him. Yes, this was some secret unit assembling out here. Perhaps that’s why the LRDG has units down at Siwa, and why Jock Campbell is there now.

“Look General, this is the situation as far as I understand it. I was in Alexandria yesterday, and with Wavell himself, along with Admiral John Tovey, who has been fully briefed in this matter.”

“Tovey?” Kinlan knew the name, and knew Tovey had been the man in charge of Home Fleet during these years. “Who else knows?” he asked.

“That isn’t important now,” said Fedorov. “But what is important is that your unit here is going to eventually be discovered. You had orders to withdraw to Mersa Matruh? Thankfully that was still in British hands when we left yesterday, though it may not be theirs for very much longer. Now it’s time I gave you a good briefing. Gibraltar was attacked last September, and the Germans have closed the entire Western Mediterranean. All traffic to Egypt now has to go by way of Capetown, and that’s the least of it. To take

Gibraltar the Germans persuaded Spain to join the Axis, and the Vichy French have followed suit. That means all of North Africa, from Casablanca all the way to Tobruk, is now Axis controlled territory. The British still have Tobruk itself, or they did yesterday, but Rommel is here early, and he's doing what he did so well before—raising hell. We've saved O'Connor, which may be a real plus, but for now the British are overmatched. The Germans have already sent the 15th Panzer Division to reinforce Rommel's 5th Light Division and, after recent operations, the British have nothing in the way of mobile armor left."

"You say they still have Tobruk?"

"Correct, and I spoke to Wavell about that personally. The 6th Australian Division is there, but the rest of the army has fallen back on Bardia and Sollum. That's a strong position, a natural castle in the desert. The escarpment there means Rommel will have to go some 80 kilometers further east if he wants to outflank that position."

"How is it you have Wavell's ear, Captain, if you don't mind my asking?"

"Because we matter, General. That's the simplest way to put it. You know what my ship is capable of, and we're about to take off the gloves here and get serious."

"You're an active combatant?"

Fedorov did not want to go into any of the events that preceded their arrival to 1940—or to hint in any way that they once were actively combating the British! He had to get to the heart of the matter here, and get Kinlan to see that he mattered as well—that his force could be decisive here.

"Yes, we fight for the British. We have helped them secure the Iceland gap against German raiders, and intervened on more than one occasion to support their operations. Up until now, my Admiral has been reluctant to fully engage, but events have taken a real turn for the worse in this war, and so now we fight. We are prepared to use the full power of our ship and crew to try and reverse the setbacks lately suffered by the British. If we do not, and Egypt falls to Rommel, then it will be more difficult than ever to prevent a German victory in this war."

"I seem to recall that you Russians had a good deal to do with stopping Hitler."

"True, but my homeland is no longer whole. The Soviet Union, as it was once known, exists only in part now. The country has fragmented into three

warring states. We think we know how this has happened, but the implications are staggering. It took all these states, strongly unified under Stalin, to stave off the German invasion that may happen later this year. Without a unified Soviet state, I fear that the West has little prospect for victory. Remember, it is January of 1941, and the Americans are not in this yet."

"He says the Yanks aren't in it yet," said Popski. "So it's a nice private little fight for us now, just like my PPA—that's Popski's Private Army. Got that right from Hackett, if you know the man."

"So you see, General," said Fedorov, "What we can do at sea in the Mediterranean, you can do here in the desert. How was it Lawrence put it when he was trying to enlist Arab support with Feisal? The desert is a sea in which no oar is dipped, and on this sea you can go where you please, and strike where you please, and this is what you must do now."

Kinlan's eyes narrowed. In the face of this whole impossible day, he at last had his hand on something solid. Here I was, he thought, about to preside over a withdrawal on the brink of World War III, and worried about how I could save these men here. Now I've gone and landed in the last war instead if this crazy talk holds. But if that is so… If I am here, with the 7th Brigade at my command, well then it is exactly as this man puts it—I matter here, we matter a very great deal. I can do exactly what I told Sims, and I can kick Rommel's behind any time I choose.

Wavell had been hopping mad. He had no idea who he was talking to, and wanted to speak with O'Connor straight away. I had to feign a communications lapse to get out of that one, and I still have this O'Connor fellow on ice in the other FV432. I know it sounds crazy, but something tells me I haven't heard the last from this Wavell, and that O'Connor is going to want to get right back in the saddle as soon as he can. That thought brought a question.

"O'Connor… Does he know all this?"

"No sir," said Fedorov, "he has not been briefed either. The only other man in theater that is fully briefed is Admiral John Tovey."

"Tovey knows. He's heard everything you've told me here?"

"Yes."

"And he believed it?"

"He's seen my ship in action. That can be very persuasive."

“I suppose that is so.” Kinlan rubbed a cramp from the back of his neck, the least of his worries. “So what will I find if I do proceed to Mersa Matruh now?”

“That will depend on how far east Rommel has moved. The last I knew he was operating near Bardia.”

“That’s 200 kilometers west of Matruh.”

“About that,” said Fedorov. “If you get there soon you will likely appear well behind British lines—assuming there is still a line. If I can get through to Wavell I can determine what the situation is. Then again… If you go north for Bardia, you might appear behind German lines, which would be a very unpleasant surprise. May I ask how big your force is?”

“He wants to know just how many lad’s you’ve got here,” said Popski.

Kinlan passed a brief moment thinking he was about to divulge information to an enemy, but then he realized that the Russians of 2021 knew full well the composition of his force when they took their pot shot. Telling this man what cards he had in hand would not affect the game one way or another.

“Tell him I’ve a full brigade, 7th Armored Brigade, to be precise.”

“He says he has a full brigade here.”

“Can he be more specific?” Fedorov gave Popski a nudge.

“I have the 12th Royal Lancers for starters, with one company in Dragons and the rest with the old Scimitars.”

“Just an armored cavalry unit?”

“I said for starters,” Kinlan corrected. “Right behind them are the Royal Scotts Dragoon Guards, and not the 2020 light cavalry configuration. They sent the big boys here to settle this business at Sultan Apache. See those two tanks over there?” Kinlan pointed to the two Challenger II tanks that were part of his headquarters troop. “Well, I have four Sabres—a full battalion of 60 tanks, and a few more tucked away in HQ troops. Then two mechanized infantry battalions are in support, the Highlanders and 3rd Mercian, both Armored Infantry in Warrior IFVs. That’s a real fist full of war fighting for you. Throw in a battalion of Gurkha light role infantry and supporting engineers, supply, and logistics troops to round it all off. It’s a lot to keep on my mind, and none of those boys have heard this wild tale were spinning out here.”

That brought another whole can of worms to the discussion. If this were

true, how in the world would he tell his men about it? How could he tell them there would be no sealift units waiting for them at Mersa Matruh. They were scheduled to rendezvous there to meet several RoRo units, the 'Roll on—Roll off' ships that could accommodate his heavy vehicles. *Hurst, Hartland, Anvil Point* and *Eddystone* were to be in attendance to move the 7th Brigade to Toulon in several trips, for deployment in Europe. But that would never happen now. That was all gone. Even if we were still where we should be, it might still all be gone, he thought. If the Russkies lobbed warheads our way, they would have hit those units at Mersa Matruh as well.

"So that's what I've got out here," said Kinlan. "If this had happened a few days ago I'd have a squadron of Apache attack helicopters too, but they left early and missed the party."

Fedorov nodded. "It may not feel that way now, General, but you were the lucky ones. Speaking of helicopters… can we sort this out and get my men back aboard our KA-40? We were to get General O'Connor back to Alexandria, but your presence here has changed everything. That said, my helicopter can give you some very good airborne reconnaissance. Care to take a ride with me? I'll give you a good sitrep on the whole situation up north."

"The Captain here invites you to accompany him on that helicontraption of his, and believe me, General, that's a royal ride if ever there was one."

Kinlan thought about that. "Well," he said at last. "I've a good deal on my plate just now, the least of which is advising my men on this situation."

"For the moment, sir, I would recommend considerable discretion concerning that. We can discuss it later, but it would be best to keep things quiet."

"Well they'll have to know, Captain. This isn't exactly news that will be in any way easy to explain or deliver."

"I understand… Come with me on the helicopter. I can leave my men here if you suspect any foul play, though I assure you, I am your friend and ally, perhaps the best friend you will have here. I can help you, General, and you can help us all—immensely. Come with me. You'll get good situational awareness, and I can discuss all this further."

Kinlan waited, thinking, then decided.

Chapter 3

While Fedorov's team had been waiting out the storm at Bir Basure and making these encounters, events in the north became more precarious for the British with each passing day. O'Connor's disappearance left the ragtag 2nd Armored to fall back on Tobruk, and when he had been reported missing Wavell gave a quiet order that the tough 6th Australian would go no further. They would dig in along the strong fortified lines outside Tobruk and make a stand there. Two light motorized brigades of Indian troops covered their southern flank, and all the remaining armor drifted back towards Bardia, along with the 9th Australian Division.

Rommel took one look at Tobruk's fortifications on a map given to him by the Italians and made a fateful decision. He would not stop and commit his German troops to a static battle of attrition here, though he had no confidence that the Italians could take the place on their own. Even so, he invested the port with four Italian infantry divisions, Pavia, Pistoia, Bologna and Savona. The Sbratha division was held in reserve, and the remaining two Italian divisions, being more mobile, would continue east. These were the Trento Motorized Division, and the Ariete Armored Division, which alone possessed more operational tanks than the British had in all of Egypt at that time. In fact, the British 2nd Armored had taken to fleshing out its thinned ranks with captured Italian tanks taken during O'Connor's whirlwind drive in Operation Compass.

Now, however, the compass needle was pointing the other direction, and Wavell was trying to throw together the semblance of a defense along the Egyptian border. His first thought was to position the Australian 9th Infantry Division in a wide arc covering Bardia and Sollum, and place the armor on the southern desert flank, but the German buildup on the border seemed more than a single division could hope to contain. Like a poker player stolidly throwing chips onto the table with a bad hand, he first thought to yield Bardia, shortening the 9th Division's lines at Sollum, then finally realized his best play was to fold and hold the narrow defile near Halfaya Pass instead. The ground was so constricted there that he might post a single brigade on defense and have the other two available for other duty.

From Sollum and Halfaya Pass the rugged escarpment stretched south and east for nearly 80 kilometers, ending about 25 kilometers south of the coastal town of Sidi Barani. The escarpment was a godsend, like a stony castle wall that could not be outflanked by the fast moving German columns. So into this castle Wavell moved the bulk of the 9th Australian Division, and all the service and support troops that had been clustered around the ports. He knew he was yielding the small advantage of using Bardia and Sollum to supply his troops, but knew that if he had left them there, they would have been invested along with their brothers in Tobruk.

Even as he made these dispositions, Wavell was hastening the remainder of his ANZAC Corps west in the 2nd New Zealand Division. Instead of making the dangerous sea transit to Greece, he now had this division to stand on a defensive line well south of Sidi Barani, but it was his last full division reserve of any strength in Egypt. He might cobble together one more division sized force with the Carpathian Infantry Brigade, and the British 22nd Guards that were now mustering to the defense. Added to the 2nd Armored, no more than a brigade, this was all that he had left, and that unit would be lucky if it could muster thirty operational tanks.

Rommel invested Tobruk on January 25th, and then showed every intention of crossing the border soon after he was satisfied the Italians were in position. He now had two strong German units at hand, the 5th Light being reinforced by the early arrival of the 15th Panzer Division. Keitel had made good on his promises to Rommel in more than one way. He had sent him that second division, and was even now gathering elements of what would become the 90th Light Division, and sending them to Tripoli.

At the same time, the Fallschirmjagers on Malta had been slowly building up strength, enough to clear most of the northwest quadrant of the island, occupy a defensive position known as the Victoria Lines there, and seize the vital airfield at Ta’qali. This allowed the Germans to land much needed supplies there, and move troops onto the island more rapidly. The Italian Folgore Paras had also landed on the smaller island of Gozo to the north, and were preparing to take the main town of Victoria. The remainder of the defenders had fallen back on the vital port of Valetta to make their final stand. The meager air defenses had been pounded to dust by the intense combined German Italian air campaign, and what remained of that force was now grounded or evacuated.

To speed the battle there along, the Germans decided to send a single regiment of the 1st Mountain Division, which landed at the small fishing ports in the north between Gozo and Malta. From there they quickly moved south to join the Fallschirmjagers, which were building up to near division strength on the island by nightfall on January 28th when Rommel made the decision to cross into Egypt. That was the day Fedorov had organized his rescue mission for General O'Connor with Popski, and the fleet put to sea on the 29th.

The following day, while Fedorov's group hunkered down in the desert sandstorm, Rommel was pushing his two divisions east with the two Italian motorized units. 1st Battalion, 61st Motorized of the Trento division were the first troops to reach Bardia, jubilantly reclaiming that coastal fortress for El Duce. The Armored cars of the 7th Bersaglieri Battalion pushed on ahead and swept into Sollum by mid day on the 29th of January. They still had 23 operational Autoblinda 41 armored cars out of the 30 they had started with way back at Agheila on the Gulf of Sirte, a maintenance feat that was seldom equaled in this harsh terrain.

On their right, the tanks of the Ariete Division pushed quickly through the undefended fort at Capuzzo, and reached Halfaya Pass. There they stopped to refuel and repair while they waited for the divisional artillery to come up. A reconnaissance had shown them the Australian Brigade digging in just beyond the pass, and they knew that they would need those guns before any attempt could be made to storm the narrow defile.

And so, positions that might have proved very difficult to take if adequately defended were all in hand by the morning of the 30th when Fedorov made his fateful encounter with Lieutenant Reeves of the 12th Royal Lancers. They would take that whole day to sort the situation through, but Brigadier Kinlan finally decided to take Fedorov up on his offer to use the KA-40 to have a look around. If nothing else, he would either prove or disprove the impossible premise he had been led to believe. Fedorov had one final trump card to play in that game. He thought they could have a quick look at Giarabub Oasis. If it was held by the Italians, that would run the table. The evidence of a hostile force there with old WWII equipment would be incontrovertible, but what they saw there was far more than Fedorov expected.

* * *

O'Connor had been steaming like dry ice where he waited with one of the command vehicles. The men posted with him were respectful, and followed full military protocols as per Brigadier Kinlan's instructions. He did not want the man any more ruffled than he already was, and knew one question would quickly become three then five, then seven. So he assigned a staff adjutant to see to the General's needs, serving tea and other refreshment, which O'Connor found most welcome. The Earl Grey went a long way towards soothing his temper, and he felt like a civilized man again for the first time in what seemed like many long weeks.

Then the weariness of the hour, the long desert trek and fatigue overcame him, and he drifted off to some much needed sleep on a cot set beside a large tracked vehicle. Some hours later he awoke, finding a Sergeant Major in attendance and ready with boiled eggs, muffins and jam, and more tea. It was very near dawn, or so he came to feel, his instincts well honed after months in the desert. He was grateful for the warm woolen blanket he found draped over him, as the mornings were quite cold before the sun was up to heat the day.

He seemed a bit groggy for a time, yet soon remembered where he was, blinking, bleary eyed. In spite of that, his mind was taking in everything he saw around him, with a mixed feeling of suspicion and wonderment. He had never seen a vehicle like this one behind him, let alone the Scimitar tanks he had encountered earlier. Kinlan had discretely ordered the two HQ Challengers to be moved during the night so, when O'Connor got up to stretch his legs, they were no longer there to be seen.

Now he was in a circle of odd looking new vehicles, two FV432s, and a pair of Sultan Armored Command Vehicles, which looked much like oversized light Mark VI tankettes. One had a large vertically displayed map next to a retractable side desk, where three men sat on a bench making notations on the map board, their heads and ears covered with headsets that were obviously for local area radio communications. There was other odd looking equipment about, which was actually a battery of the 16th Regiment, Royal Artillery, a Rapier air defense system protecting the headquarters.

"See here," he said to the Sergeant Major standing by for security. "You chaps seem to have things well wired here. Has there been any word from Alexandria?"

“I haven’t been informed of anything sir, but I would be happy to check with the comm-shack.” Sergeant Dilling had been told to see to the General’s comfort, and by all means to keep him safely where he was, and out of trouble. He had no idea who this visitor was, or why he would be decked out in such an archaic uniform, but he did his best nonetheless—for the third time—returning a few minutes later to report that they had no recent communications of any note.

At this O’Connor exhaled, frustrated and eager to be up and about his business again. He needed to get to Alexandria, but this unit was quite a mystery to him.

“Just who do you say you are out here, Sergeant?”

“Sir?”

“What unit are you, man? Are you out from Siwa?”

“No sir,” said Dilling politely, answering the second question while ignoring the first. He had been told to say as little as possible about the business of the brigade, but he could see that this man was getting up a good head of steam and seemed restless to be up and about, which would be his problem. Thankfully he was reinforced by a Major from Brigadier Kinlan’s staff and was able to recede, off the hook for the moment.

“Ah, there you are General,” said Major Isaac. “I have been asked to inquire on your wellbeing, sir. I trust you managed to get a few hours sleep.”

“Quite so,” said O’Connor, “and a better breakfast than I’ve had for a good long while.”

“Splendid. Well, sir, if you would be so good as to accompany me, we’ve arranged for a local area reconnaissance. Brigadier Kinlan would be very pleased if you would come along.”

That sounded better. Reconnaissance was an art O’Connor strongly believed in, but he wondered what this was about, and asked as much.

“Well sir,” said Major Isaac, “that storm could have masked a host of unpleasantries out here, and it’s standard procedure to have a good look around before we move the column out. General Kinlan was most eager to have you along. Then we can see about getting you to Alexandria. Right this way, sir.”

At last, thought O’Connor. Things were starting to feel just a bit more normal now. For a moment there he had the distinct feeling that he was being treated like an outsider here, an interloper, and even came to feel he was

being considered a prisoner! The questions that had succumbed to the weariness of the night were all with him again now. Who were these men? Why were they dressed so strangely, and by god, where did they get all these odd new vehicles? He had seen two tanks the other night, but they were gone now, and for a moment he doubted what he had seen. It must have been the bloody sand storm, a trick of light and shadow in the wind.

Yet what he saw next did little to still his mind. He was politely ushered aboard a vehicle, where two curious looking soldiers sat with unusual looking rifles, and the hatch was closed, obscuring everything from view. Yet O'Connor had a good pair of ears, and he knew the sounds of a military unit waking up in the desert, shaking off the cold, warming up and getting ready to move soon.

"You've obviously just come off the boat," he said to the Major. "Yet I can't imagine why, or even how you managed to get the ten or twenty odd vehicles you have here this far south, and it sounds like there's a good deal more here. Just what are you up to out here, Major? A reinforcement sent to Fergusson at Siwa?"

Like Dillings, the Major had been told to divulge as little as possible and simply get the General into a secure vehicle, with no windows, and get him out to the Russian helicopter. So he fell back on the one thing that he knew might allow him a brief holding action here, and punted.

"Well sir, I haven't been fully briefed on the situation. Brigadier Kinlan has simply asked me to convey his invitation, and stated he preferred to brief you in person."

"Good enough, Major." That made sense to O'Connor, and so he let the matter go, but one question after another was waking up in his head again and, when the vehicle finally stopped and he stepped out into the pre-dawn darkness, he got yet another surprise to be standing in the shadow of a massive mechanical beast, a huge metal locust, with long bladed wings.

* * *

Fedorov was there to greet him, along with Brigadier Kinlan, who saluted. The two men had conferred over how they would handle the matter with O'Connor. The only question now was whether they could pull it off.

"You can't just come out with this cockamamie tale about time travel,"

said Kinlan. “Yes, you’ve managed to drag my horse’s ass to the water, but it’s rather brackish and unpalatable. I at least had some understanding of what you tried to convey. I know what nuclear weapons are, and the strange effects they give rise to, but this man hasn’t even heard of something like radiation, let alone EMP or this fracturing of time you’re arguing. He has no framework whatsoever to understand any of this.”

There it was again, thought Popski. What in bloody hell was EMP? What was this talk of nuclear weapons? The two seemed right chummy on the subject, but I’ve no idea what they’re talking about.

“Tell him in the short run we’ll have to take things easy,” said Fedorov. It was a real dilemma, and he had to think what to do here. They could just spirit O’Connor away to Alexandria and get him out of the picture. That would be the safest bet, but it would only postpone the inevitable. One day he would have to see what was down there, massed on the desert floor in the fighting steel and Dorchester Chobham armor of the 7th Brigade, and one day he would have to know the truth. But yet he still felt that secrecy was best for the moment. The bear would wake up and get out of his den in due course.

His mind went round and round about it. Could they say this unit had been sent from England, a highly classified war secret, with new weapons and vehicles being deployed for the very first time? This was a lie that would soon become the thin veil it was, for one look at a Challenger II up close, or a good look inside the command compartment of any of these vehicles, would reveal more than he could explain away with that line. There were touch screen digital panels, technology and equipment that would amaze and dazzle any man of this era. He remembered the look on Tovey’s face when they brought him aboard *Kirov* and showed him the missiles and radar stations up close. And Tovey had a whole other life to prepare him for what he saw there. In fact, he had come to the truth about the ship they had once called *Geronimo* all on his own, albeit with the able assistance of Alan Turing.

Telling O’Connor the truth would be like throwing the man in ice water just now, but he would have to know, just as Kinlan had to know. The future would have to meet the past here, shake hands to reach a mutual understanding somehow, and it was up to him to make that so. But how? How could he wade in gently, and slowly lead this man to the truth?

Part II

Awakening

"And so it is, that both the devil and the angelic spirit present us with objects of desire to awaken our power of choice."

— Rumi

Chapter 4

“Russians? This is a Russian aircraft?” O’Connor gave the KA-40 a good long look, amazed. “I had no idea they were working on helicopters.”

The idea had been around for centuries, and several British thinkers had experimented with designs for such aircraft. Even Jules Verne had brought one to life in his book *The Clipper of the Clouds*, and Thomas Edison had modeled helicopters in the United States long ago. So it was something O’Connor could grasp without undue difficulty, yet there had never been an engine powerful enough to make the dream a reality—until now.

“We’ve been working on these for quite some time,” Fedorov had Popski explain. “Ever since Igor Ivanovitch Sikorsky and Boris Yur'ev experimented with designs in the early 1900s. Your own Westland Corporation is also interested in this kind of aircraft.”

“When they see the likes of this one their eyes will bug out,” said O’Connor.

“It’s a very good platform for search and rescue,” said Fedorov. “And it is excellent in reconnaissance. Let’s get up there and have a look around.”

Small steps, thought Fedorov. Get the man airborne and see what develops. Every bird learns to fly in due course. He would have to take things one step at a time, and see if O’Connor would eventually come to the same conclusion Tovey did—that there were things in front of him that no man could build in this world. That would be the moment to ease him over the final line to the real truth. For the time being they would tell O’Connor that Kinlan commanded a detachment sent here to reinforce Siwa, and leave off the details, which would become apparent over time.

“Fergusson has been begging for reinforcements,” said O’Connor. “It’s a wonder Wavell had anything left in the cupboard to send out here. How many are you? It was night and the bloody sandstorm made it impossible to see much, but it certainly sounded like there were a good number of vehicles in your detachment.”

“Yes sir,” said Kinlan. “They got the 7th pulled back together, though you are correct, we’re just off the boat, in a manner of speaking.”

“Well it’s about time we got support from England. I realize its all of 40

days to get here round the cape. Where were you serving back home? Were you with 1st Armored Division?”

“What else?” said Kinlan, as he knew that most of the armored reserves in early 1941 had been cannibalized from that division back home in the UK, and his own 7th Brigade was, in fact, still a part of the British 1st Armored Division in modern times.

They were out over the desert, and heading southwest. Fedorov was worried Kinlan would get talked into a corner by O’Connor, so he tried to keep the man distracted with the reconnaissance, and it was not long before O’Connor spotted something, his eyes keen enough to recognize movement on the desert, as he had spent many hours airborne over a battle zone himself.

“There,” he pointed.

The thin streams of dust were telltale evidence on the desert floor below. Something was moving there, the first probing outriders of an advance heading east.

“That has to be out from the Italian Garrison at Giarabub,” said O’Connor. “Just one little fish I couldn’t net when I moved west earlier.”

When he made his sweeping attack to smash the Italian position in Cyrenaica, a small garrison under Major Salvatore Castagna had been marooned at Giarabub, well over 200 miles south at the edge of the Great Sand Sea. It was one of the most isolated outposts the Italians had established, and was largely held to keep watch on the British controlled oasis at Siwa, some miles to the southeast. It was also a holy place, where a mosque and tomb of the founder of the Senussi sect attracted small groups of pilgrims from time to time, but now they were all gone. The Italian Army had come in their place.

“Look there, General,” Fedorov pointed as he handed Kinlan a pair of field glasses. “What does that look like to your eye, Berbers?”

Kinlan had a look and could see more than he wanted there. Those were obviously small patrols of armored cars, though he had never seen anything like them out here before. O’Connor seemed to know what they were, however, and shook his head.

“Damn little Autoblinda 41s. They’ve a nasty 20mm autocannon and a pair of good Breda 8mm machineguns. But those scout vehicles that rounded us up looked to be enough to handle them. What were they, something new?”

“Just out of the oven,” Kinlan smiled.

“The Captain says he can get you photography of those buggers to look over later,” said Popski. “But I’m more concerned with what’s behind those patrols. See that dust column there?” He had a keen eye for movement on the desert as well, having spent many days with his small patrols in this desolation.

“That has to be a larger force.” Popski did not know it at the time, but he was pointing at an unusual new arrival, the 136th Giovanni Fascisti Regiment, the fanatical Blackshirts that had been sent by Mussolini to try and put some backbone into the Italian infantry. They were here early, not having arrived in Libya until July of 1941 in the old history, and now they were out to begin writing the stubborn chapters they had etched into that history, by holding out in the face of overwhelming odds at places like Bir el Gobi. The British would come to call them “Mussolini’s Boys,” and they would soon reach Major Castagna’s garrison, adding three more battalions of tough infantry to the two already there.

“If that is what I think it is, then that Colonel Fergusson down there at Siwa is going to have more on his hands than he realizes soon.”

“Fergusson?” O’Connor remembered now. “Yes, 6th Australian Cavalry was out here keeping watch on Giarabub, but this looks like a strong reinforcement. I hope your boys are ready for a good fight,” said O’Connor. “If they get up some real strength here they just might get a notion to pay a visit to Siwa. It’s got much better water sources, and a couple decent airfields.”

Kinlan smiled inwardly, realizing that Fergusson was the name the Russian Captain told him to ask for at Siwa. Dobie’s section of the 12th Lancers had scouted down and found the man there, along with a company of Australian motorized cavalry and a battery of 25 pounders freshly arrived, and commanded by Jock Campbell, the man who had given his name to the famous ad hoc “Jock Columns” the British had used so successfully in these early desert forays. He gave Fedorov a knowing look, realizing the Russian had been straight with him all along, though it was still hard for him to believe what was happening to him, and to all the men of his brigade.

“That’s a large force,” Kinlan agreed. “At least a regiment. Can we swing over for a better look?”

They maneuvered discretely, and Kinlan was treated to a good look at the troops on the march, shaking his head in disbelief.

“Looks to be an infantry unit,” said Kinlan. “Not much transport, but that’s a good support column behind them.”

“Agreed,” said O’Connor. “Most likely supplies to relieve the garrison at Giarabub.”

When Popski translated Fedorov passed another moment of anxiety. This was not supposed to happen, but the facts on the ground were now making the strongest possible argument to the contrary. The history had changed again, another small eddy in the stream here.

When he was cut off by O’Connor’s attack, Major Castagna knew he was isolated and could only receive meager supplies by air at the small airfield serving the oasis, but he stubbornly determined to hold out, encouraged when he received a personal message from Rommel promising reinforcements and supplies. With six machinegun companies and a number of light guns, Castagna set about fortifying Giarabub, digging trench lines, laying barbed wire and mines, and building small gun positions to resist any attempt to take the place by storm. In the heart of the oasis, there was also an old fort, which he strongly reinforced, determined to hold out indefinitely. He put his troops on rations, knowing lack of food would be his greatest liability in time, but he did not have long to wait.

Rommel would keep his promise.

This had never happened in the history, and Fedorov now knew that the small battle that was fought here by the Australian Divisional Cavalry and other units might soon take a frightening new form.

“They will take Siwa if they come in strength,” he said through Popski.

“That’s no bloody good,” said O’Connor. “We need the place as a staging zone for our long range desert patrols. But Fergusson won’t be able to hold on here. He’s only a single battalion, and he’ll soon be bottled up or simply sent packing east, and it’s a long way to the Nile.”

“We’ll see about that,” said Kinlan with a grim smile.

“That’s the stiff upper lip,” said O’Connor, “but unless you’ve at least a full brigade with you, you may find the going rough, General. We’ll have to warn Fergusson, and then inform Wavell.”

Fedorov thought on this for a moment when he got the essence of O’Connor’s reaction from Popski. Then he ventured something. “You managed to capture or destroy an entire Italian Army with a much smaller force. Perhaps we can do more here with what we have in hand than you may

realize at the moment."

"I'm all for it," said O'Connor. "At the very least we must give them a good punch in the nose if they come east for Siwa. Discourage them."

"Why General," said Kinlan. "That was exactly what I was thinking. I've a battalion of good Gurkha light infantry that can strengthen that garrison."

"Gurkhas? Bloody good troops. I wasn't aware they were here."

They moved off, not wanting to draw anti-aircraft fire, and scouted the way north as well. Fedorov knew the real battle was there, and that much would hinge on the fate of Tobruk at this stage in the fighting. If the Germans could take the place, then their lines of communication back to Benghazi and Tripoli would be cleared, and they could move east. But he did not know that Rommel had already made that decision, and was even now about to engage the thin defensive line Wavell had established south of Sidi Barani with the 2nd New Zealand Infantry Division and what was left of his armor. News of that battle would come to them soon after they landed, and it would pose another thorny question for both O'Connor and Kinlan.

O'Connor had a good look at what was on the ground now, amazed at the size of the force Kinlan had at his disposal.

"You've a good deal more than a battalion of Gurkhas! A full brigade? Here? Whatever for? Siwa is useful, I'll grant you that, but the real fighting is north on the coast. That's where this force should be, and as soon as possible. Whatever possessed Wavell to send you here? I must speak with him directly."

He had not yet seen the tanks close up yet, as the helo deliberately landed several miles from the main column where Major Isaac was waiting with a Sultan Command Vehicle and two Dragon 8-wheeled scout cars. Fedorov knew that each passing hour was going to raise more and more questions in O'Connor's quick mind, and he wondered what to do about it. He pulled Popski aside to confer with Kinlan one last time.

"General," he said. "I think it is fair to say you are now convinced of what I have told you?"

"As loony as that sounds, the evidence is hard to deny. Yet my men know nothing of this, and I've a long road to walk with them."

"You mean to go north?"

"Where else? We can't sit out here indefinitely."

"You'll be needed there. My guess is that Wavell has his hands full. One

good battle there could smash Rommel's Afrika Korps, and buy the British the one thing they desperately need now—time."

Kinlan nodded. "Ironic," he said. "Time…"

Fedorov gave him a knowing look. "Then am I to assume I can collect my Marines and operate as I please?"

Kinlan hesitated, wondering whether he should let this fish off the hook just yet. Something still rankled at him about this whole situation, and the presence of this Russian team at the very moment his force was attacked by that ICBM. In spite of the man's apparent sincerity, there had been long years of growing enmity with the Russians, ever since Putin started trying to patch the old Soviet Union back together again when he annexed the Crimea and meddled in Ukraine back in 2014… Back in 2014? If any of this were true, that time was now decades away, in the future. He still struggled with it, in spite of the obvious evidence.

"What do you propose to do?" he asked Fedorov.

There it was… The question Fedorov had been struggling to answer himself. He was in a real quandary over how to handle the issue of O'Connor. The evidence he had presented to Kinlan had been enough to establish that all important factor of great doubt in the man. He knew from his experience aboard *Kirov* that he had to find some key evidence that was wholly inexplicable by any other means, and this would leave time displacement as the only possible solution that could resolve that issue, and also account for all the other evidence.

The presence of Popski, the men from the LRDG, and O'Connor with his downed Blenheim were strong local evidence as to their position in time, but they could be easily dismissed, just as Karpov had tried to dismiss the Fulmar fighter that first overflew the ship, and even the radio intercepts of local era news broadcasts, thinking it was all an elaborate hoax staged by NATO as a deception. He knew Brigadier Kinlan was likely to come to the same conclusion, unless he could present the man with incontrovertible evidence that could not be easily dismissed or explained away. When they had first displaced in time, so long ago it seemed now, that evidence had been obtained by reconnoitering Jan Mayen Island for the weather station that was located there. When that facility was not found, along with the modern airstrip that should have been there, it strongly argued that they were not where they belonged.

Sultan Apache had been that same inexplicable dilemma for Kinlan. The only possible solution had been the impossible notion of time displacement. It was the only thing that explained what could have happened, and also account for Popski, O'Connor and all the local era evidence.

Yet now he had another challenge—how to bring General O'Connor to the same place in his understanding? Kinlan had been correct in pointing out that the man would have no foundation to admit the possibility of time displacement as an odd aftereffect of nuclear detonation. He would have no knowledge of nuclear weapons at all, as the physics involved was still theoretical and would not be tested for another five years. Convincing O'Connor of what had happened would present a whole new set of problems.

With each disclosure of the secret of their identity, Fedorov knew the risk of damage to the chain of causality that extended forward from this point would grow more and more severe. Only a very few men had eventually managed to discern the true nature and origins of the ship, Turing, Admiral Tovey, and the select few he admitted to that grey priesthood he had come to call the Watch. A ship like *Kirov* could be easily hidden in the world, out to sea on the vast oceans, and out of sight. That was not the case now for General Kinlan and his brigade of modern British troops! They were here, and their presence could not be hidden indefinitely.

At the moment, the isolation of this place, and the desolation of the endless desert around them, served as a thin buffer between Kinlan's world and this one in 1941. But the General could not sit here for very long. He had neither the supplies or fuel to operate independently for any extended period. His men would need food, fuel, water, and when they ran through their own organic supplies, perhaps enough for a week or two, they would be forced to move to a place where they could survive.

And then it would begin…

Chapter 5

What could they do, Fedorov wondered? The oasis site of Siwa presented one option. Could the brigade move there? Perhaps, but that would only become a brief outpost against the inevitable. They might be able to sequester Colonel Fergusson and his Australian cavalry units, and keep the lid on things for a while, but one day someone would get through to Alexandria on a radio, or the simple silence and lack of contact from the outpost would prompt the British to determine what was going on there. Another a relief column would come and they would be facing this same moment again, standing at the precipice just as they were now.

No. Fedorov knew that trying to conceal the fact of Kinlan's presence here would only delay the inevitable. His other choice was equally difficult. It meant he would have to subject the locals here to the sudden shock and realization of what had happened, and by so doing, the chances that knowledge of this would spread became astronomical. He could hear the rumors now, of invincible warriors from another time, or another world, come to rescue Britain in her hour of gravest need. The shock would be profound, but he wondered how the Axis powers would react to such knowledge?

Certainly Volkov knew the truth by now, particularly if he met and spoke with Karpov. He was, himself, a denizen of that future world, and this was most likely something he had held secret since he first disappeared—over 30 years now since he manifested in 1908, if that was really what happened to him. Images he had retrieved of the man belied his age. Volkov was easily in his 60s as far as Fedorov could tell.

Then what to do? He had difficult choices on every side. Should he simply spirit O'Connor off to Alexandria and leave things as they were? There would be a brief interval of calm, until Kinlan decided he would move north, and then all hell would break loose. He needed to sort this through.

"General," he began. "We must face the problem of your presence here, and the shock it will cause. If you go north I can tell you what you will find, just as I told you about Sultan Apache. One division is still besieged in

Tobruk, and the British are making a last stand below Sidi Barani. From intelligence we gathered, Rommel is stronger than he was at this time, and he's moving east well ahead of schedule. Do you know this battle?" He was going to say 'this history,' but he was choosing his words carefully with Popski translating the bulk of what he said.

"Somewhat," said Kinlan. "I can educate myself quickly enough."

"Well I can brief you. Rommel has two German divisions in hand now, the 5th Light and the 15th Panzers. He should have only one, but that second division arrived sooner than expected. Between the two he'll have four battalions of armor, four more motorized infantry and a pioneer and recon battalion in each division. These are veteran troops, even at this stage in the war, and he also has two more Italian motorized units at hand, the Ariete and Trento divisions. they will be opposed by a single division, the 2nd New Zealand, and if Rommel is true to form he'll execute a flanking maneuver. The problem is that the British have insufficient mobile reserves to counter that. The remnant of the 2nd Armored is no more than a weak brigade now, and just retreated all the way from Mersa Brega on the Gulf of Sirte. Their vehicles and men will be worn out, and their 7th Armored division is in equally bad shape, refitting at Alexandria."

"Well…" Kinlan offered a grim smile. "The 7th is about to get some reinforcements, Captain."

"Then you mean to engage here?"

"I mean to go north as planned, and if these divisions are in my way…" Kinlan did not have to say anything more.

"Yet you realize that Mersa Matruh will be no haven for you," Fedorov explained. "If you do this, then you will be joining the British Army up north. There's no other way to look at it, and we have the issue of how they will react to your arrival."

"True enough. Well, I'll have to coordinate my effort with the men here, that much is certain. It would seem we'd best start with this O'Connor."

"Yet how do we… bring him along the garden path?" Fedorov said carefully, glancing at Popski. "How do we brief O'Connor?"

"I can think of only one option," said Kinlan. "I'll have to take him over to the Scotts Dragoons and show him. It's the only way."

Yes, thought Fedorov. Talk is one thing, but seeing was believing. Would seeing those monstrous Challenger II tanks be enough for O'Connor to

believe what they would have to eventually tell him? Would Wavell have to fly out here as well and learn the truth? He suggested this to Kinlan, and the two men agreed that if they could get these senior officers into their camp, that would be the essential first step.

"I can speak to Wavell directly," said Fedorov. "He speaks fluent Russian. Shall I do this?"

"Convincing Wavell might be one more log on the fire for me as well. I must tell you, Captain, that I'm still having some trouble with this in spite of the evidence."

"I understand. It took us a good long while to believe what had happened to us as well. After that the real questions get asked, and you have to decide what to do. We had the option to find a remote island and hide while we tried to get home. Unfortunately, this war spans the entire world, and it was impossible to stay clear of it. The desert is a fine and private place here at the moment, nicely isolated from the reality of what is happening out there. But this is a temporary grace. Any move north and we reap the whirlwind."

"Someone does," said Kinlan. "And I think his name is Erwin Rommel."

"You realize the Germans will fight."

"Of course they will, until they have nothing left to fight with. Do you have any idea what a Challenger II can do in battle?"

Fedorov knew the power Kinlan could wield here all too well. "Yes, but that said, you will be facing two full divisions. The Challengers aside, how thick is your armor on the other vehicles?"

"The Warrior IFV has a welded aluminum armor hull and laminated steel armor turret. We've got the upgraded version, with the new stabilized 40mm main gun, but I take your point. Their armor can protect against armor-piercing rounds up to 14.5mm, and the frontal arc is likely to withstand 25mm rounds. Many have the modular appliqué armor system for the turret and hull, and the anti-mine barrier below, so we can toughen those vehicles up considerably. We usually lay on the modular protection depending on the mission. You say this Rommel has four tank battalions?"

"5th Light Division started with 44 light Panzer IIs and another 40 medium Panzer IIIs between the two battalions. The 15th Panzer Division will have at least that. They likely sustained some attrition coming all the way from Agheila, but they'll probably have eighty percent of those tanks still operational. Then there will be the Panzerjager battalions, and the flak units

to think about. Rommel was the man who adapted the 88mm gun to good use as an AT weapon, and I'm sorry to say that an 88 will put a round clean through one of your Warrior IFVs, and then some."

"You know a good deal for a navy Captain," said Kinlan. "Yet what you say is true. So how many of these 88s will they have out there?"

"I'd say he might have three batteries with four guns each—possibly four batteries. Many more come later. Then there will be the self-propelled Panzerjagers. They'll have a 47mm AT gun that might penetrate your Warriors, as will all the guns on their medium tanks if they have the 50mm version. Even their light Panzer IIs will have a 20mm main gun that could pose a threat to one of your IFVs. Beyond this there will be artillery, and a lot of it. Each German division would have several battalions, from 75mm guns up to 150s. Attack a prepared German defense and you can expect it will be well supported, and they'll have air support as well, *Stukas*, Heinkel-111s, Bf-109s. Yes, these are old planes, but very capable, and those *Stukas* will be dropping 500 to 1000 pound bombs. This won't be like a deployment in Afghanistan. You'll be up against tough, disciplined troops. Another thing, sir, your force is mostly mechanized infantry. Well, once they exit their vehicles…"

"I'm beginning to get the picture," said Kinlan. "They've got good infantry body armor, but beneath that its good old flesh and blood. We were sent here to face down the renegade Egyptian Army, and that we did, and without a single casualty. They wanted no part of us."

"That won't be the case here. You'll shock the Germans in the first encounter, undoubtedly, but they will adapt, and they will fight. Something tells me they'll put a good deal more effort into this campaign, now that Gibraltar has fallen. Malta may be lost soon as well. That has dramatically increased their logistics potential, but it will be my job to work on that end for you. My Admiral is already at sea with the British to see about it. But I've given this a good deal of thought, General. Yes, I think you can win this battle up north, but the Germans have plenty more they could commit here if they choose to do so. Understand? The British have not yet seen the full might of the Wehrmacht, and with Russia and the United States still neutral, their prospects are very bleak. They'll need all the help they can possibly get. This may be a very long war."

"Understood, but at least we can make a real difference here if it comes to

a fight."

"You certainly can, as long as the ammunition holds out." Fedorov thought he should voice this concern early on. "We found our capabilities more than equal to the adversaries we faced, but that said, we've taken hits, and there have been some alarming near misses. We've had to be very stingy with our ammunition once we realized we were…" He looked at Popski now. "…going to be in theater for a good long while." He also wanted that to register on Kinlan—a good long while.

"That's another issue I'll have to visit with the men in time. For now, I've got my whole brigade strung out in road column. If we go north, how soon before we can expect trouble?"

"I can give you a detailed scouting report with my helicopter, if you'll permit me."

"You're a long way from the coast out here. What is your fuel situation?"

"We were expecting to spend some time in our search and rescue operation, so we laid on extra fuel. Eventually I will have to rendezvous with my ship to replenish, but we should be able to operate here for a while yet. We can set up a secure comm-link to you on HF bands not used here. I can keep you informed as to the situation you will be facing, and also see what I can do to help brief Wavell and O'Connor."

"That sounds acceptable," said Kinlan. "Do you think you can get Wavell out here?"

"Possibly, though he may be in the thick of things up north."

"Then perhaps we should start with the bird in hand and give this General O'Connor a little tour of the brigade. Let's take this thing slowly. If we can brief O'Connor and get him over the fence, that may help us with Wavell when it comes to that. You know I studied that man's tactics in the academy —O'Connor as well—we all did. To think of them being right here at my side … Well, all this is a bit overwhelming."

"You'll need time, though I'm afraid we have all too little to spare. Rommel may decide things before we can intervene, but I'll keep you informed of anything I hear on that." Fedorov extended his hand now, smiling.

"General, thank you for giving me that small benefit of the doubt and having that look at Sultan Apache, and welcome to this nice private little fight here. I'll do anything I can to help you. You have my word on this.

Understand I've been through all this with my own crew."

"I appreciate that," said Kinlan, and they shook hands warmly.

Then to Popski, Fedorov said: "Can you go inform General O'Connor that we would like him to tour the brigade?"

"Well enough," said Popski, hoping he could come along too.

"And tell him not to worry about Siwa," said Kinlan. "I'll handle the matter, then together we'll see about this General Rommel."

"He'll be happy to hear that, sir." Popski was glad to hear it as well, but he was no fool. He had been listening very carefully to everything that was being said, involved in all the discourse between Kinlan and this Russian Captain. He had seen things on that ship, and on the ground here that he knew were quite extraordinary, fantastic, as Fedorov had put it to him earlier. Slowly, like a hunch that was gathering strength by degrees, he was starting to feel something was not quite what it seemed to be here, and that all these men, the Russians, Kinlan, and his soldiers in those odd new uniforms and equipment, were a bit of a mystery that he set his mind to solve.

How was it that these two men could share a common understanding on all that gibberish they were talking over? They just mentioned that Indian Sultan again, and what was all that talk about ICBMs and nuclear bombs? And these damn tanks… That was sixty tons I saw there last night if it was an ounce. Where in bloody hell did the British Army get that monster I saw? Was it true that this was all new equipment? If so, Rommel is going to get the surprise of his life.

The General is right cozy with the Russian Captain now, but things didn't start that way. These men assumed we were hostile right from the get go. The one thing I don't understand yet is why this Russian seemed to have to convince General Kinlan that they were on the same side. It was as if the General had been sleeping under a tree somewhere and knew nothing of what was going on, yet he had to have been briefed if he was sent here with this new unit. And why did he presume to think I was an enemy combatant at first encounter, or the Russians, for that matter? In fact, that cheeky Lieutenant who first found us went so far as to state we were to be his prisoners! Kinlan said the same. Was the man blind or merely stupid? He did not seem that way.

It just didn't make any sense, and it fed that growing feeling of uncertainty in his gut. Something wasn't quite on the up and up here. These

men are not what they seem, he said to himself. They seem like fish out of water here. Maybe it was the harsh environment of the desert, but he had the feeling it was something more. I'll play along, even play dumb if I have to, but I'm going to find out what's up, one way or another.

Chapter 6

Kinlan thought long and hard about everything Fedorov had told him. Yes, the Germans had another 200 divisions out there if they needed them. Yes, he had every confidence he could make a difference here, but for how long? His tanks had ready ammo of 50 rounds, and he had another 100 rounds per tank stored with the supply train. The Warriors had 180 rounds with twice that in reserve, and the Scimitars 160 with two reload ammo sets in train. The missile inventories were lighter. They would have to make every round count, so the first thing he did was brief his senior officers and tell them to pass the word. There was trouble up north, and the brigade may soon be going into action. There was no telling if they would ever see friendly ammo stocks again, so he put out a standing order to make every round count and be stubborn about it.

O'Connor was the next problem, arriving in twenty minutes for his tour. Kinlan had one last moment with the Russian Captain, about how the command structure would be worked out here.

"I know you will think to be independent," said Fedorov in English when Popski left them, "but in the end we must realize we are here to advise and support British war efforts." He left out some articles, but he got his message across. "Their senior officers are well known… much respected. We cannot replace them."

"Yet we know every twist and turn this war will take," said Kinlan slowly, realizing tanks and ammunition were not the only assets he had in hand.

"We know what happens once," said Fedorov, knowing he got the verb tense wrong. "Yet things are different. Things have changed this time, and we will cause even more to change. Yet we will not plan everything—control this whole war. They must do that. We can only help them."

"I understand," said Kinlan. "I will do my best to support these men here, and their officers. I swore to serve the British Army, the men under me, and the crown and government that put them here. I guess that still holds true, no matter where I find myself. Now, I'll want to make a brief announcement on the brigade comm-system."

He put out an all units message to expect a tour from a Lieutenant General. “And in case any of you limeys haven’t heard,” he finished, “a Lieutenant General ranks a Brigadier, so stand smart and step lively! Kinlan out.”

* * *

“Good of you to show me the brigade,” said O’Connor. “I like to get acquainted with the men I send into this desert. The job’s not easy but they do their best. You say you’re 7th Armored? I drove that division fairly hard a while back, but with good results. We kicked the Italians right out of Egypt when they had the cheek to cross the border, and then chased them half way across Libya for good measure. The only problem is it seems we’ve hit another rough patch with the Germans showing up uninvited like this. I’m afraid I’ve taken a bit of an early bath.”

“We’ll see what we can do about that, sir,” said Kinlan, a head taller than O’Connor, and dark haired in contrast to the other man’s grey-white hair.”

“All the men are dressed out in this new kit. It looks to be very efficient. When was it issued?”

“Just before we deployed, sir. Yes… It’s new, as are many other things in the brigade. We’ve new equipment and vehicles to show you today.”

“Then Tiger Convoy made it through?”

Kinlan did not know what O’Connor was referring to, but Fedorov did. He was walking just behind the two generals, with Popski, who was quietly translating what was said at Fedorov’s request. It was the Winston Special convoy Churchill had insisted on to reinforce Wavell with new tanks, but it was not supposed to happen until May of that year. It would transport Matildas and the A15 Crusader tanks to Egypt, taking the short but dangerous route through the Mediterranean, but that would not be possible now that the Germans controlled Gibraltar. For O’Connor to mention it meant the British must be planning to sent the convoy early, as it would have to travel all the way around the Cape of Good Hope.

“I’m sorry, but I haven’t heard anything about that,” said Kinlan.

“Not in the loop yet,” said O’Connor. “Don’t worry, Mister Kinlan, you’ll wish you were out of it once they do drag you in. Tiger Convoy was supposed to be delivering fresh tanks so we can get 7th Armored back on its

feet. Yet here you are, as far from the main front as one is likely to get out here. Why were you sent here, General? We hardly need a brigade of armor here for Siwa. And you certainly weren't sent here to look for me."

"No sir, I only learned of your disappearance when Captain Fedorov informed me of his mission. It seems I've a good deal to learn here, but I just follow orders. In fact, I had orders to move to Mersa Matruh."

"Better there than here. You say you have armor with you? Well I'd give my right arm for a good tank battalion or two these days."

"Well sir… I think I can fill the bill for you. The unit is just ahead; just over that rise."

He gestured as they began to climb the low hill that screened the terrain ahead and, as they crested the rise, he stood in silence, one eye on O'Connor, the other on the Royal Scotts Dragoons. There sat four Sabres of heavy Challenger II tanks, sixty in all, in a square of steel dressed out in khaki on the desert below. O'Connor stared at them, his face registering complete surprise.

"My god," he said quietly, the sheer quantity and mass of the formation striking him. Then he leaned forward, taking a closer look. "What in the world? Those aren't Matildas, nor any cruiser tank I've ever seen. Why… they're enormous!"

"A new design, sir," said Kinlan. "Our very latest model. 7th Brigade received them for this mission to Libya. Shall we have a closer look."

O'Connor had already started down the hill, as if drawn by some powerful magnetism, and Kinlan looked over his shoulder at Fedorov, giving him a wink as they followed. The General walked right up to the nearest tank, his eyes wide with amazement as the scale of the beast became more evident as he approached. The crew there were standing to attention, saluting crisply as he came up, which he returned, his eyes transfixed by the awesome machine in front of him.

"God in his heaven," he whispered. "That's twice the size of a Matilda, and that gun would make a 25 pounder blush. What is it?"

"Lieutenant?" Kinlan looked at the commander of his First Sabre, Lieutenant Matt Gibson.

"Sir! This is the new smoothbore BAE-120 conversion, based on the Rheinmetall 120mm L55. First Sabre was the leading unit selected for this upgrade."

The gun weighed over 7000 pounds and exceeded 17 feet in length, enough to drop the jaw of any old tank warrior of the 1940s. Popski was now seeing the tank up close for the first time as well, and he was just shaking his head in complete awe.

“Did you say 120 millimeters?” O’Connor gave the man a look. The Matilda only mounted a 40mm gun.

“Yes sir.”

“Artillery? Mounted on a tank hull? My god, the damn thing is enormous! Then this is a mobile artillery gun?”

“Not quite,” said Kinlan. “It’s primary ordinance is anti-tank and AP rounds. Tell the General what we have in the cupboard, Lieutenant. What are our performance metrics?” Kinlan prompted his Sabre commander again.

“Yes sir. This gun will fire armor piercing fin stabilized discarding sabot rounds, HESH-2 high explosive rounds, and the new CHARM-4 depleted uranium rounds developed specifically for the smoothbore. CHARM-3 was the rifled barrel variant for the old L30 gun system. Effective firing range is 4000 meters, but one of our boys hit a T-60 a good while back, and knocked it out at 5200 meters.”

O’Connor heard the range, unbelieving. “Did you mean 520 meters?”

“No sir, 5200. And the new smoothbore also allows us to deploy the new LAHAT system. That would be the **La**ser **H**oming **A**nti-**T**ank missile, effective out to 8000 meters.”

“Missile? It fires a rocket?”

“Yes sir, and it’s quite effective—a semi-active laser guided tandem HEAT round, rated to penetrate 800mm of standard steel or reactive armor.”

O’Connor heard the words, but not their meaning. The man had just told him this rocket projectile could penetrate 800 millimeters! “Why, that would go in one side of a Matilda, and clean out the other,” he said, “and blow through four in a row! This can’t be so.”

“Our Lieutenant Gibson here is very well informed, General,” said Kinlan. “I’ll vouch for his claim, as I’ve seen these tanks in action. They’ll do everything he says, and more. This big fellow is also fairly agile for its size. You wouldn’t think that to look at the beast, but what is a fair battle speed, Lieutenant?”

“40KPH off road on decent ground, sir. Just under 60KPH on a good road.”

“And we can fire at that speed if we choose to do so,” Kinlan was enjoying this very much.

“Unbelievable…” There was no other work for what O’Connor was now seeing and hearing.

“Shall we have a look inside?” Kinlan smiled.

“By all means!” O’Connor was up onto the tank and, when his hand touched the heavy turret armor, he was stunned by its sheer mass. “Heavy as a block house!” he exclaimed.

“Third Generation Dorchester Chobham Armor, sir. The best protected tank in the world.” The Lieutenant was not making an idle boast.

O’Connor had put his hand firmly on the elephant’s mighty flanks, and seen its awesome trunk, yet when he finally lowered himself through the entry hatch his amazement was complete. He was shown the commander’s position, the periscope view and thermal imaging system, and then, to his utter astonishment, the digital electronics, and all within a cool, air conditioned and relatively spacious compartment. Tankers in the desert might endure temperatures north of 130 degrees in the hot sun, but not the men in these tanks, and this simple physical comfort improved their efficiency by 100%. They could think faster, react quicker, and fight longer in the controlled interior environment of the tank.

The General stared in utter amazement when the driver and gunner spoke of their respective duties.

“We’ve 25 of these at the ready,” the gunner explained, pointing the ammunition. “Another 25 stowed within easy reach.”

It was as if O’Connor had been swallowed by a behemoth, and when he emerged, he had a dazed, bedraggled expression on his face, Jonah expelled from the whale, senseless at what he had experienced. He got down from the tank, then stood there in complete silence, just looking at it.

“Start the engine,” he said at last. “Let me hear it.”

The driver inside accommodated him, and the deep low rumble of the big engine filled the air, thrumming with an expression of sheer power. O’Connor closed his eyes, listening to it, an almost frightening sound with overtones of doom in the lower registers. If Troyak had been there, he would have known it at once, a sound not unlike that deep, bone penetrating vibration they had heard in Siberia, only clearly audible this time. It had the same effect, and spoke of one word that it would put into the soul of any

enemy it faced—fear.

O'Connor turned to the other men, and smiled. "It's the bloody Hammer of God," he said, and that was not too far from the mark. "This is… well its quite extraordinary! I had no idea a tank like this was even in development."

Now he realized why this unit might be here, far from spying eyes, a new secret weapon, perhaps sent here to a remote proving ground for training. But Lord, he could only imagine these tanks in action now, thundering in at 40 kilometers per hour and firing as they went. There was no way they would ever hit anything, he thought, until they showed him how the tank could rotate its main body while the turret maintained a rigid and stable position aimed at a potential distant target.

"That's what a stabilized gun system can do," said Kinlan. "We can hit like lightning, move like a wildcat, and we've very sharp teeth. General," he put his hand on O'Connor's shoulder now. "This tank is all but invulnerable to anti-tank weaponry of this day. You could roll up one of your Matildas, park it right there and fire, and you might do nothing more than disturb the paint job on that armor. I have sixty of them sitting here, and woe betide anyone who gets in my way when I turn them loose. Now… What were you saying earlier about us having trouble holding off that Italian Infantry heading for Siwa?"

"Gentlemen," said O'Connor. "I'm not much of a drinking man, but I'll have a nip of anything you've got, just so I can stay on my feet." He turned to them now, his astonishment becoming a broad smile. "Bloody marvelous!"

It *was* marvelous, and yet incomprehensible. O'Connor just kept staring at the tank, not one, but sixty of them! Behind the dazzle, a strange feeling came over him. The tank was extraordinary, its size and design astounding but, more than anything, he was flabbergasted at the things he had seen in the interior compartment. The whole space was immaculate, and looked like the dash board of an aircraft in places. Yet there were no typical needle gauges and dials. In their place the interior of the tank glowed softly with a strange light. Colored panels were lit up with numbers and symbols, and in one place he saw what looked to be a map glowing softly on a glass pane! The driver merely touched it with a finger and the whole image expanded and changed! He was so taken with it that he was almost mesmerized. He was seeing things here that boggled the mind. Look at that armor! The Lieutenant had said something about it that stuck in his mind.

“What did you call this armor, Lieutenant?”

“Third generation Dorchester Chobham, sir.”

“Dorchester?”

O’Connor knew the place. It was a small market town on the southern coast, just above Weymouth, with a population of about 10,000 people who chiefly traded local produce three or four days a week. The ladies there had taken to organizing for the coming war early on, setting up the local “Women’s Voluntary Service” or WVS, which was soon called the Widows, Virgins and Spinsters. The town, like many others after Dunkirk, had also set up the LDV troops, or “Local Defense Volunteers,” many armed with little more than broomsticks. After the people took to calling them the “Look, Duck and Vanish” squads, they changed the name to the “Home Guard” last July. He had a relative there, and she had written some time ago to say they were all busy making concrete anti-invasion blocks to drag off to the beaches, “Dragon’s Teeth” as they were called. Yet here this man was telling him they had also been hard at work on Dragon’s scales for this monstrous tank!

“Dorchester Chobham…” O’Connor repeated the words, an unaccountable feeling rising in him now. We could barely equip the troops that struggled home after Dunkirk. There weren’t even enough simple rifles in the country to re-arm the men! How in the world did we go from broomstick militias and concrete blocks to this?

“Third generation?”

“Yes sir, the process is hush, hush, but I understand that they’re using more exotic materials now in the composites—carbon nanotubes and all.”

O’Connor heard the words, but was oblivious to their meaning. He suddenly felt daft as a brush. Third generation? That implied two earlier models or versions of this armor. He suddenly felt something was very odd here. Secrecy was one thing, but hiding the design, development and testing of a weapon this sophisticated was quite another. There was simply no way these new vehicles could have been built and deployed in a fully combat ready status without thousands of men knowing about it, people in the factories, testing sites, dockyards, merchant marine, and anyone at Alexandria when they arrived. And he simply could not imagine that Wavell, with his back to the wall at Sidi Barani, would have blithely ordered a unit of this size and obvious value south into the heart of nowhere like this. It simply made no military sense. He turned to General Kinlan with a strange look in

his eye.

“Just who in bloody hell are you people?”

Fedorov saw it now, behind the awe and surprise, a look of profound doubt, and he knew the time was ripe to move O’Connor to a new understanding. The awakening had begun.

“Excuse me, sir,” said Popski on Fedorov’s behalf. “The Captain suggests it may be time to take the General aside for a more detailed briefing.”

Part III

Seeing the Elephant

"It was six wise men of Indostan
To learning much inclined,
Who went to see the Elephant
(Though all of them were blind),
That each by observation
Might satisfy his mind.

— John Godfrey Saxe

Chapter 7

HMS *Queen Elizabeth* was in the vanguard of the fleet that day, her bow awash with rising seas as the grand old lady led the way at 16 knots. Laid down in 1912 and commissioned two years later, the ship had seen extensive service in WWI, with most of her combat hours logged near the Dardanelles until a troublesome turbine sent her home for repairs. She missed Jutland, eventually returning to Scapa Flow, but was nonetheless honored to present the terms of surrender to the German Admiral von Reuter after the armistice in 1918. After the war she went through two major refits, and first saw duty in the warm waters of the Mediterranean in 1925. Her latest refit was completed in the shadow of impending war at Portsmouth, where the ship had her guts torn out when 25 old boilers were removed to be replaced with 8 of the new high pressure boilers. New AA armament was installed, and her guns were modified to elevate just past 30 degrees, improving their range to 32,000 yards. Even the bridge structure got a facelift, and her distinctive tripod mainmast was finally crowned with the oddments of radar fittings, technology that had not existed when she first went to sea.

All this work kept the ship in the dockyards through most of 1940, and she had been scheduled to visit the powder room at Rosyth one last time before doddering out to sea for duty. There the Queen would have received her new Type 279 and Type 284 radars, but it was not to be. In this altered reality, the pressing need to reinforce Admiral Cunningham sent her off to Alexandria instead. Old but proud, she remained a stout hearted warrior, out now on her first real sortie of the war with the intent to find and hurt the enemy. Behind her two other old warriors sailed in stately review, *Malaya* and *Warspite*, both ships in this same class, and veterans of Jutland.

Captain Claud Barrington Barry was on the bridge that hour, a bit restless, as the fleet had been ordered to circle in place while the Admirals detached for an unusual rendezvous to the northeast off Crete aboard HMS *Invincible*. Cunningham had been aboard when the fleet left Alexandria, more to tour the ship and hearten up the crew than anything else. He had set his flag on *Warspite*, where his staff still waited, and would return there after the conference.

So Captain Barry was enjoying the last moments of calm he might know for some time. The fleet knew what they were in for, knew the odds were steep. The arrival of HMS *Invincible* and the strange Russian super destroyer, as the men called it, had been a welcome reinforcement, but that aside, the enemy outnumbered them two to one in capital ships. None of them really knew just what the Russian ship could do at sea, though they had heard rumors that it had played a vital role in turning back the Kriegsmarine north of Iceland. The aerial rocketry it displayed on arriving at Suez had given everyone quite a surprise, most of all the Italians, but you couldn't sink a battleship with fireworks like that, or so the men thought.

The fleet had sailed west along the coast, all the way to Tobruk where the big guns cleared their throats lending fire support for the besieged garrison. They lingered there for a day until Admiral Tovey signaled that he would detach for an urgent meeting at sea, with no further details. Cunningham left in a hurry, boarding a destroyer and slipping off into the night, leaving Barry and the other fleet Captains in the dark as to what was causing the delay.

That night, on the 30th of January, they sailed north to a position well screened by British submarines. Since that time they had been sailing in a wide circle, attended by cruisers and destroyers just in case an Italian sub might get curious. They had been overflown by recon planes from Greece on the 31st, even while Fedorov was having his most unexpected first meeting with Brigadier Kinlan.

It was hard to keep up morale in these circumstances. Gibraltar had fallen, Malta was battling for its life, and the British army had just been chased halfway across Libya into Egypt again, wiping out all the gains O'Connor had delivered with his remarkable campaign. Captain Barry had a restless, worried feeling now, and the long slow circles he was sailing did little to calm his mind. Anything would be better than this, he thought. The men are as worried as I am, and it's plain enough on their faces. We should be charging off to Malta now, guns at the ready, but instead here I am idling north of Derna, twiddling my thumbs and reading reports from the Chief of Engineers.

There had been an odd clicking sound in one of the turbines when they left Tobruk and started north. The engineers noted it, and were rousting about to see what it might be, but it did not seem serious. Probably just needs a little grease, he thought. The ship had been too long abed, and she was bound

to have some creaks and squeaks now that she was up in her slippers and shuffling about again. That was all…

* * *

Cunningham had been welcomed aboard HMS *Invincible*, curious as to what this meeting was all about. It seemed very odd to be detaching like this, and politics were now uppermost in his mind as he sat down with Admiral Tovey for a briefing. He had assumed this meeting might have something to do with organizing fleet operations aimed at covering an evacuation of Greek forces, possibly to Crete, as they were sailing for Chania Bay. Andrew Browne Cunningham, old "A.B.C." as he was called from his initials, had been disappointed when the planned attack on Taranto could not be teed up. He finally got hold of a pair of aircraft carriers, and now they were relegated to fleet air defense and anti-submarine patrols. His bid to even the odds and catch the Italians napping in port had been tabled with the news of the attack on Malta.

Now it was down to the real brass tacks, he thought. If we lose Malta the whole central Med goes with it. It was our unsinkable aircraft carrier, battered and beaten up daily by the Italian air strikes, but defiant. He knew the airfields at Ta'qali and Luqa would not hold for long. The Luftwaffe had come in droves, adding its considerable weight to Regio Aeronautica, and there was simply no way the threadbare squadrons on Malta could survive. They did their best, he thought, but we would have needed to get another thirty *Hurricanes* out there to make a fight of it. The carriers were here, and now I've a mind to see what we can do. Cunningham had a great deal on his mind that day, but he would soon learn things that would send him spinning like a top. The knowledge he was about to be handed, like an apple picked from the tree in paradise, was forbidden fruit. He would not be the same man when he returned to the fleet.

For his part, Admiral Tovey had anguished over what to do in this situation. He was the only man who really knew the whole terrible truth about the Russian ship and crew, or so he thought. At that moment, another man was learning that truth, as Fedorov struggled to convince Brigadier Kinlan of his impossible fate. Yet Tovey knew nothing of this when he stood to greet Admiral Tovey as he arrived for the meeting. He had been

considering the situation for some time, and had determined that, given the circumstances calling for this meeting, there would be no way he could keep Admiral Cunningham in the dark. The man was simply too essential to the operation of the fleet here, a steady and reliable hand on the tiller that would be difficult to replace.

Volsky entered with two other men, one the young Lieutenant who would serve as his translator, and the other an older man in civilian dress, bespectacled, wizen with age, yet obviously carrying the wisdom those years had brought to him. He seemed like an amiable old grandfather, but Tovey could see there was something more to the man, a layer beneath that outer shell that spoke of something much deeper. The men all exchanged hearty handshakes, and Nikolin was pleased that Tovey remembered his name as well, taking his seat next to Admiral Volsky. There were still two more place settings at the table, and Nikolin wondered who was missing. He found out soon after when, to his surprise, a woman entered the stateroom, accompanied by a man in a dress white naval uniform, clearly a Captain by rank and bearing.

Cunningham looked up, also raising an eyebrow when he saw Elena Fairchild enter the room. Then he assumed this must be part of the diplomatic mission from Greece, though it seemed somewhat unusual. His reflex for propriety and decorum soon asserted itself, and he stood, as did the other men, politely greeting the woman as she was introduced.

“Miss Elena Fairchild,” said Tovey. “Allow me to welcome you aboard HMS *Invincible*. Please meet Admiral Andrew Cunningham, Commander of our Mediterranean Fleet and Admiral Leonid Volsky, a special representative of the Russian Navy.”

Fairchild gave Volsky a searching look, then quickly introduced Captain Gordon MacRae as they all took their seats. She had seen the long, dangerous lines of the battlecruiser *Kirov*, cruising on the far side of the British battleship, and it raised her hackles. There it was, *Geronimo*, the phantom ship that had bedeviled the British Empire, and led to the foundation of the Watch. When she first received the emergency message from the Russians, she had been shocked to learn the ship was here. From all she knew in her induction as a member of the Watch, *Kirov* had first appeared in the Norwegian Sea, in late July of 1941. Yet they had determined it to be January of 1941, six months before *Kirov* supposedly appeared!

The request for parley had been odd enough, but given that the two ships were both on a razor's edge, it was a welcome reprieve, and much better than a scenario where their missiles would speak to one another in a battle at sea. The news that Admiral Tovey was on the line had been the next shock: *"All is well, Argos Fire. All friends here. We request a rendezvous in the Gulf of Chania. Over."* So here she was, and that meeting was now about to convene.

As she seated herself, she gave both Tovey and Volsky a lingering look. There he was, the legend in the flesh, Admiral John Tovey, founding father of the Watch. And there he was, the terror of all their nightmares, the Captain Nemo that had been the object of all their early operations. This man and his ship had been tearing through the history like a sharp knife, and yet, as she looked at Volsky, he did not seem a man who could carry any of the sinister thoughts she had associated with him in her mind. This was obviously a part of the story she knew nothing about. The calm presence of these two men here together, the obvious demeanor of friendship and warmth between them… well it seemed most irregular to her, most unexpected, and she was now wondering how all this had come about.

"Well then," Tovey began, thinking this to be a most challenging meeting. He had sat through sessions in the Admiralty and War Cabinet, and knew how turbulent the waters could be, but this was something else. Here was a woman, who seemed to know him, or at least know of him, and he had the feeling that she was looking on him with a certain awe and reverence, which he did not quite fathom. And here was Admiral Volsky, who had never met this woman before, though he seemed to know of her ship. They were two birds of a feather in one respect, both impossibly here from that far distant future, but yet, his observant eye perceived some tension between them, and uncertainty. And finally there was Admiral Cunningham, completely in the dark about all of this, and blind to everything before him. He looked as bemused as a boy freshly assigned to his first mission at sea. How would all these loose ends be tied into the same knot here?

"No doubt this meeting was a surprise to all of us, yet here we are, and we'll make the best of it as we go." He looked first to Admiral Cunningham, a sympathetic expression on his face. "Admiral, I'm afraid you are about to hear some things that will be most unsettling. In fact, you may conclude that we are all quite daft, but bear with us. Everything will be made clear to you in time. That said, I must tell you that what you will now learn is the most

highly classified secret of this war—a secret so dark and inaccessible, that only one other man within the British Government has any knowledge of it, and you will be surprised to learn that our Mister Churchill is not that other man. Bear with me, Andy," Tovey used the familiar handle that only two friends might share, hoping to ease the shock for Cunningham if he could.

Then he looked at Admiral Volsky, addressing Elena Fairchild as he gestured to the man. "I can see that the presence of Admiral Volsky here and his ship is somewhat unexpected. Let me say that I was once as unknowing about all of this as you both seem to be. Yet it begins with the Admiral here, and with his ship. So perhaps it might be best if I yield the floor to you, Admiral Volsky. If there is any man among us who might sort this whole matter out, I would start with your chair."

"Thank you, Admiral," said Volsky, "and may I introduce our Director Kamenski, Russian Intelligence. He has been with us aboard *Kirov* for some time, and I thought he might be able to help us sort through all of this. In fact, he will likely do a much better job than I could. Director?"

"Admiral," said Kamenski, "this is one odd kettle of fish we have. Here are two adversaries, and unfortunately so, from a time neither you or Admiral Cunningham here could ever see or imagine. And here you both sit with us, two new friends from a past long removed from us, yet one we have been shaping with our very hands, unknowing at first, and now with more deliberate endeavor. It is a strange enterprise, and a mighty challenge we all face now. Yet I fear that if we are to measure it, and prevail with any sense of sanity, we must all now reach across this table and join our hands in a common understanding. Here we sit, like a group of blind men around the elephant, each holding onto a piece of the truth as they grope that mighty beast. We all know something of this truth, some more than others, but we must all hear each other now as we describe it to one another, so that we can see the whole as one together, and determine what we must do." He looked at each one around the table now, the knowing and the unknowing, and smiled. Nikolin completed his translation, and now he continued.

"Opening your eyes and actually seeing the elephant is quite another experience, ladies and gentlemen. To do so we will have to drink of the same cup of poison, I fear, for only then can we die together, and be reborn with some new understanding that can unite all present in one accord. Forgive me if I sound more like a bad poet than a diplomat at times, mixing my

metaphors like this, but we have a fine and arcane business before us now, a mystery as deep and unfathomable as time itself, and we are its minions. Admiral Volsky here has asked me to begin this discussion, and yet where to start the tale? I think the only way is to just come right out with it, crazy as it will sound at first blush. My name is Pavel Kamenski, all seventy five years worth, and I was born on the twelfth night of June, in the year 1946…" He let that hang there, waiting to see the reaction of Admiral Cunningham as Nikolin translated.

"Excuse me, Mister Kamenski, I'm afraid your Lieutenant here has his number wrong. 1946? Surely you meant 1865, as I cypher it."

Nikolin translated that back, and Kamenski smiled.

"No Admiral Cunningham, the Lieutenant had it right, but to hear it right you will have to extend your hand now and take hold of the elephant's tail." And then he began to speak of the war, the long struggle ahead, and how the nations of the earth were now engaged in the making of weapons to prosecute it. He told them one weapon that would be forged in the crucible of this conflict would be so terrible that it would cast a deep shadow of doom on the world for generations, and one day make an end of the human endeavor on this planet. He told them how this weapon was made, and that he knew, for a fact, that many nations were now engaged in the effort to bring this terror to life. And then he slowly began to describe the arms race they would engage in, and the nuclear testing that would be a part of that, until Soviet Russia would build a bomb unlike any other, and set it off in the frozen north on October 30, 1961.

"Yes, and you have heard that date correctly as well," he said looking directly at Admiral Cunningham. "Yes, I am speaking of all of this as though it had already happened, and from my perspective, that is true. You see, I am a man from tomorrow—your tomorrow at least—and all of this *has* happened, and more than once I'm afraid. The only question before us now is whether or not it will happen again—whether or not we can do something about this war without planting the seed in this Devil's Garden that will make the next war a certainty. So I will tell you now, Miss Fairchild, how it is that our ship came to be here, and you can then tell us the same thing about your ship. Hold tightly to the tail of that elephant, Admiral Cunningham. We're all about to climb on the damn thing and give it a good stiff spur in the gut, and hopefully you will be dragged along with us."

Then he went through everything, the odd effects they discovered in their weapons testing program, *temporal* effects that were affecting the flow of time itself, and he laid out the whole impossible story, chapter and verse.

Chapter 8

Brigadier Kinlan sat with Lieutenant Colonel Sims and Major Isaac at Brigade HQ, a thousand dilemmas on his mind. The evidence he had seen, or not seen, at the old Sultan Apache site was damning enough. Now he had Italian infantry at Giarabub, and showing every intention of marching on Siwa, the small British held oasis manned by ghosts from the past. He shook his head. When I was with this Russian Captain and his confederates they were so damn convincing. Yet now, the more I think on this the more insane it all seems, particularly when I try to talk about it with the other officers.

"I'll have to reinforce Siwa," he said. "Not much there beyond this Australian motorized cavalry and a couple squads of the Long Range Desert Group."

Major Isaac shifted uncomfortably. "Excuse me, sir. You're going to reinforce Siwa? What for?" The Major was just about to be eased over the line with information on what had happened to them, and he did not take it well. His initial reaction was to take the whole matter for a bad joke, or an idle wish that they might find themselves anywhere but the sands of the empty Libyan Desert, at any time other than the days they would now be facing. The brigade was to have made a night march to Mersa Matruh to meet roll on/roll off ships there for transfer to Toulon, and start a new deployment in Europe, until this! Was the General mad? Had he finally broken under the long strain of this endless deployment?

He soon learned that General Kinlan was stone cold sober, and in deadly earnest. He was actually telling him that he had come to the conclusion that they were no longer in their own time. They had moved, vanished, and reappeared, and it was now 1941 by every account they could surmise. They had moved in time—all of them—the entire brigade! Kinlan shared the evidence, the testimony of the Russian Naval Captain, the photographs from the library pad on both Popski and O'Connor, but Isaac remained unconvinced.

"Ludicrous!" he objected. "I'll admit that the resemblance of these two men to those historical figures is uncanny, but you can't really believe this. It's rather convenient that these Russians show up Johnny on the spot when

that damn ICBM comes wheezing in on us. They were obviously here for reconnaissance and battle damage assessment. Can't you see that? And look here… You could have told me Reeves had stumbled on Shangri-La out here and I'd believe that before this preposterous story. You mean to say that Russian Captain actually told you this? And you just send him off on his helicopter with the prisoners as if it were all true?"

"Major," said Kinlan. "Now you know as much about all this as I do. Suppose you go on over to Sultan Apache yourself and explain what happened there. Sims and I went over the place with a Geiger counter and magnifying glass. It was completely undisturbed. There was no sign of any blast damage, no wreckage of any kind, no radiation. Now you tell me how twenty square miles of British Petroleum disappear in a heartbeat like that? Tell me! I'll gladly listen to any explanation you might have, because I haven't got any answer aside from the one this Russian Captain gave me."

Major Isaac folded his arms, frowning. He knew Kinlan to be a competent, no-nonsense man. For this to be coming from him was the hardest blow. There was no way in hell that the man he had known and served under for the last three years would concoct such a story. Not now, not here, with the whole damn brigade strung out in column of march and the missiles lighting up the sky. No. Kinlan wasn't mad, nor drunk, nor groggy with sleep. He was standing there, plain as day, and telling him this was 1941! Bloody World War Two!

"Add it up for me, Major. Sims and I have gone round and round with it for the last two hours. I spent four hours with this O'Connor and by god if he isn't the real thing I'm a goat. Then Lieutenant Horton says the stars are all wrong. The moon was wrong last night, or did you happen to notice that? You explain it! Then, when you have it all figured out, you tell me how I'm going to explain it to the men…"

There was a long silence, and in that stillness Isaac realized this was Kinlan's real burden now. Could he have this conversation with every man in the brigade? They had been out here for months, away from home, knowing now that the lives of all their loved ones were in dire jeopardy. If the missiles were flying here, they were damn well lighting up the skies over London as well.

Major Isaac sat down, a distant, vacant look in his eyes, his expression blank, and almost lifeless. The pallor of his cheeks betrayed the awful strain

they had all been under, battle ready, the whole brigade wound tight like a watch spring, under ballistic missile attack, and buttoned up in their vehicles these last 48 hours, knowing the war to end all wars had finally begun in earnest. Every man among them had the image of someone back home in his head, wondering now whether any of them were still alive, wondering what lay ahead for them, or whether they would even make it to Mersa Matruh alive before another missile came at them and the Aster 3 system was not good enough to save them this time.

"No answers?" Kinlan left the question out there, but he could see the defeated look on the Major's face, and relented. "I didn't have any either, Bob, so don't feel bad. You think I bought this story hook, line and sinker without smelling the fish first? There was only one explanation that accounts for all these anomalies and makes any sense—Sultan Apache, the stars all wrong, this fellow calling himself General O'Connor, not to mention Wavell on the bloody radio chewing my ear. We've no satellite links, nothing on any command level channel, but plenty on the AM and FM bands. And guess what, it's all news of the war, the last big war, news of Rommel in the desert, and Wavell's last stand at Sidi Barani. And then there's that Italian infantry unit down south at Giarabub. I scouted the damn thing myself. There's a stack of photos right there on the desk, and Sims and I spent the last hour with them. So call me crazy, and yes, this whole thing sounds completely insane, but there it is. You think I'd make a fool of myself like this? Here? Now? Not bloody likely."

Sims scratched his head. "Look, General, there's only one thing to do here. Reality has a way of rearing up like a stone fence, no matter what we think of it. I say we head north as planned. There will either be RoRo ships waiting for us at Mersa Matruh… Or we'll run into Rommel and his Afrika Korps."

"And the men? Am I going to have to go through this with the whole rank and file one by one? I thought the very same thing the Major did here—that the Russians were up to no good. But that didn't explain away any of the hard evidence we uncovered."

"You could say nothing of this," said Sims. "If it's all a fairy tale then the road north will hopefully be uneventful. But I'd suggest we keep the air defense units on full alert."

"And if it's not a fairy tale? What if the Russians were telling us the truth

and it *is* 1941?”

“Then woe betide General Rommel,” Sims smiled. “That’s the wall I was talking about, sir. He’s either out there as we speak, or not. Time will tell. It’s as plain as that. As to the men… We do an all points signal and notify all units. You get on and lay it all out. Tell them there’s been an anomaly, some odd effect of that ICBM attack, and we’re looking at some unanswerable questions. Tell them what the Russians said about it, preposterous as that sounds. Yes, they’ll have a good laugh, and you can laugh right along with them. But then tell them we’re going north, and if, by any chance, we do run into the German Army… Well tell them they’ll know what to do about it. Yes sir. Let them find out as we do, by heading north and walking right up to that wall if it’s there. Things will sort themselves out after that, I can assure you.”

Kinlan nodded gravely, his eyes tormented, yet knowing that was the only course they could take. “Major?”

Isaac shrugged, shaking his head. “By all means,” he said half heartedly. “We go north as Sims says. At least that way we all become fools at the same time, and no one can point a finger at anyone else and call him a madman. We all just go stark raving mad together. Shall we?”

“Very well,” said Kinlan. “I’ll want to brief all battalion commanders here personally. Have they arrived yet?”

“They’re all here sir,” said his Chief of Staff, Sims, “waiting just up the line with the artillery.”

“We’ll bring them in on this shortly, and we’ll have to throw the same bucket of ice water in their faces that I just dumped on Major Isaac here. I’ll want them ready for anything when we move north. But first I’ll want senior staff briefed on this, and on our planned movement north in the next 24 hours.”

“We’re taking the whole brigade?” Sims had one last question.

“No, I’m sending the Gurkha Light Infantry Battalion to Siwa, just in case those really were Italian infantry in those photos. They certainly weren’t Egyptian Army, and they certainly weren’t Berbers. This Fergusson fellow at Siwa might be glad to have a little company. The rest of the mechanized elements move north. But I’ll want to know what we’re up against, one way or another. We have no idea what’s really going on—no reliable sit-rep.”

“What about that Russian Helicopter?”

“My thoughts exactly,” said Kinlan. “Gentlemen, I think it’s time you met

this Russian Captain that Reeves rounded up out here… and someone else.”

* * *

Fedorov had struggled for some time with everything that was happening, and Popski did not have to work too hard at finding out what was going on. Fedorov realized that if he were to communicate here in any way that could be convincing, he would have to rely on Popski for the moment. The man would simply have to know what was happening, who they were, yet he felt a deep reluctance to reveal the information. Something told him that they wanted to keep this secret for as long as possible, but here he was, in the midst of an entire armored brigade from the year 2021. They were going to be pulled into the maelstrom of this war, and there was nothing he could do about that. They were going to know—a few key officers at the outset, yet all the rest in due course. They were *all* going to know, but what chaos was he now about to unleash upon this world?

He had worried about contaminating the time line, cracking that pristine mirror of history. Look at the damage they had already done! Their homeland was shattered in civil war, a circumstance that now made the prospect of a German victory in WWII very likely. He had long since abandoned any hope that they might ever get the history back on track again. It was broken beyond repair. There were now simply too many men who must know why, and that knowledge would spread like a fatal illness and contaminate this whole world.

What should he do? He wished he had Admiral Volsky here, or Director Kamenski, and he remained haunted by the dreadful, aching feeling that he had been responsible for the hell they had unleashed upon this world. Every instinct in his body was screaming at him to be silent, to hold the secret within, but how could he do this with these men here? They were going north and in another 24 hours they were going to learn a very hard truth, one with or without his intervention. That fact alone decided his course. He could not stop what was about to happen. He could no longer hold back the flood—the dam of secrecy was breaking, but what he could do was try to open the sluice gates slowly. He could try to channel and guide what happened next, as best he could.

It was his doing, he thought. Admiral Volsky wasn’t here, and Director

Kamenski wasn't here, so this was all on his shoulders now. It was up to him.

"Alright, Popski," he said just as Sims was waving them to approach. "You are going to hear some things now that will sound unbelievable, but bear with me. I tried my best to speak with General O'Connor earlier, but I will need you to translate here now, and this is of critical importance. Stay with me, believe in me, and do your best."

"Alright, Captain. I've had my notions that something was amiss here, but you have your say."

"Popski…" Fedorov gave him a long look. "You might think I'm making a fool of myself, and you in the bargain here, but I assure you, everything you are about to hear is the truth."

The truth… a terrible truth. A secret about to be revealed that could shake this world to the core. That was how Fedorov began his briefing, feeling the awful weight grow heavier on him with each word he spoke.

"I will see the unbelief in your eyes," he said with Popski translating. "And yes, I know that you may look upon me as your enemy, though I offer my hand in friendship now, and I speak to you with absolute fidelity and sincerity. Yet the information I must now disclose is critical, the darkest secret the world has ever known. I do not use these words lightly. Secret. Yes, My ship and crew have lived with the burden that word implies since the accident I will soon reveal to you—a mishap that changed the course of history itself. Only one man among us is entirely convinced that he has his feet firmly planted in the here and now—General O'Connor. He will tell you to a certainty that this is the year 1941, and you must believe him, as I have had to believe this same terrible truth. Yet he now struggles to believe that we now stand here like dark angels from another world, with weapons and power at our disposal unlike anything this world has ever seen."

He looked from one officer to another now, seeing various reactions in the eyes of the men, and when his gaze fell on O'Connor he felt an upwelling of compassion for the man. The innocence of his life was now forever gone. He would never be the same man again after hearing all this.

"Yes," Fedorov continued, "that is how many might perceive us. This world may not be able to hear what you must now hear and know. The collective arms of every soul on this earth may not be able to hold what you must now grasp. Can you imagine it? This knowledge is, in itself, a force of chaos and terrible power. My crew learned all of this the hard way, in the fire

of combat. Your men, each and every one, will soon learn the same way. Yet though it was easy to contain this terrible knowledge on a single ship, hidden in the vast oceans of the world, that will not be the case here if this brigade goes north, as it certainly must in the hours ahead."

He looked at them, an almost pleading look on his face. "But anything we can do to limit the general knowledge of what you learn here is of the greatest importance. In war there are secrets—we all know this. Weapons will be built, forces moved and gathered in secrecy, plans devised and sprung into motion. Secrecy is no stranger to the war fighter. Lives depend on it. The hope of victory over a determined and dangerous enemy requires it. But in this we face the hard task of denying even those we fight for the full knowledge of who we are, and where we have come from—a future that was again wracked in the throes of an all consuming war. Well, I have seen the end of it, as I will soon relate. I have seen the place we were all condemned to, the purgatory, the hell of our own making, and I have been struggling here to prevent that enmity and war from ever taking shape—the war that will follow this one as surely as night follows day. And yet we must struggle on in the shadows, gentlemen, even though we few will be the sole carriers of this light of truth, and we will bear a very hard burden as we do so."

He could see that some of the officers were following him, others waiting for more clarity, still others with expressions of disbelief and suspicion, but he struggled on.

"Some men of this world must know what I will now reveal, a chosen few who find themselves entrusted with the fate of all those they now guide and command in this war. Up until this moment only two men in this world have come to learn this truth. General O'Connor here is the third, and soon we will have to welcome General Wavell to this dark circle. Yet, as I will now tell you, the force inherent in this knowledge can tear this world apart. It is fantastic, unbelievable, terrible, but nonetheless true. And we are now watchers on a crumbling wall of secrecy that hold the full fury of this knowledge from the innocence of this world. If it breaks, if we break, and this truth were to become generally known… I fear the fabric of history, perhaps even the fabric of human society itself, might be rent asunder and lost forever. And what world would it give rise to? This will be our responsibility, because Destiny now lies prostrate at our feet. Fate waits at our beck and call, and gentlemen, Time itself has lost her cold hard grip upon our souls. We are

men unlike any others who have ever walked this earth, and we must measure that, stand up now, and act accordingly.”

Then he told them… he told them the whole long and bewildering journey that had brought him to this place, beginning slowly with that last moment when he still sat in the innocence of unknowing.

“It was the 28th of July, in the year 2021, and I was at my station as acting Navigator on the bridge of the Russian battlecruiser *Kirov*…”

Chapter 9

The three men huddled together at the back of the FV432, and Popski stood respectfully off to one side, waiting. He had heard more than he expected in the briefing, and more than he could get comfortably under his belt for the moment. Yet here were two British Generals taking the whole matter in hand, and with the utmost seriousness. The Russian Captain was also there, waiting while Kinlan activated a digital map of the region.

"Captain Fedorov, that was one hell of a story," said Kinlan.

"My Captain says that is not too far off the mark," said Popski. "It has been his private hell for a good long time now, and while sharing it here might offer him some relief, he knows that he has laid a heavy burden on your shoulders, and those of all your men."

"That he has."

Fedorov spoke again and Popski interpreted. "I took a grave risk in telling you this, and I hope that all I have said concerning the importance of secrecy was taken to heart."

O'Connor had listened, dazed and confused at the outset, but then slowly embracing another mood, one driven by a burning inner energy. At one point he had quietly tapped his riding crop on his thigh as Fedorov spoke, his mind galloping ahead like a wild beast, seeing a thousand possibilities if this incredible story was true.

"You know what this means," he said, looking from Kinlan to Fedorov. "Why, if this is true then you know everything—the history, the war, the outcome of all this madness."

It was a question Fedorov had been waiting for, and he turned to O'Connor now, knowing that silence on this subject would only invite frustration. Yet his answer was much the same as the one he and Admiral Volsky had given Tovey.

"Yes," he began. "We know how these events once played through, but our presence here in the past, and the actions we have taken, have obviously altered the course of events, as I tried to describe in my briefing. The Germans never took Gibraltar in the history we know, nor did they ever put troops onto Malta. These developments will make for a dramatic change in

the course of the war here, but the most critical change is the civil war that continues within my homeland. It took a strong, united Soviet Union to defeat Germany, and that was with all the might of Great Britain and the United States thrown into the equation as well. General O'Connor, the Germans have committed no more than two divisions here at this point. Yet before this war ends, they will field over 300. Understand? Britain has not yet faced the real strength of the German war machine, and so the outcome of events now is completely in doubt. I know you look to me as a signpost with knowledge of all that is yet to come, but that is not so."

"But surely you can provide the most valuable intelligence we could ever possibly want," said O'Connor. "Why, you at least know what did happen once, and whether we stumbled here or prevailed. I'm no fool, and I know that mistakes are made in war by men who have every good reason for acting as they do. You know all of this, the victories, the blunders, the wrong turns and dead ends on the long road ahead."

"Yes, what you say is true, insofar as any of the history holds true. In some ways it does echo our own history. Your first offensive, for example, was known as "O'Connor's Raid," and from what I have been able to determine, it played out much as it did in our history—a bit early, but the outcome was the same. Yet listen now, General, in the counter offensive now underway our history records that you never made it safely back to Alexandria, and not because your Blenheim crashed here in the desert and you met up with us. No. Both you and General Neame stumbled right into a German column and you were captured. You spent the next several years as a prisoner in Italy, escaping in December of 1943."

"I see… 1943, you say? So we have a good long slog ahead of us, do we? The war drags on another two years?"

Fedorov was reluctant to get into a discourse on the future course of events, but he knew he had to give O'Connor something here, if only to impress upon him the true gravity of what they were all now facing.

"This war goes on a good while longer than that. It eventually ended in 1945."

"And we prevailed? General Kinlan is standing here with his brigade, so we won the damn thing, yes?"

"Yes," said Fedorov, knowing that answer would put at least one thing into O'Connor's soul—hope. "A grand alliance was formed between Great

Britain, Russia and the United States. Together we defeated the Axis powers, in a long and bitter struggle that consumed all of Europe and Asia, and lasted until late 1945."

O'Connor's eyes narrowed, an expression on his face akin to that of a hiker looking up at a mountain he must climb, knowing he could get to the top, but realizing the agony and hardship that climb might bring. Fedorov continued, needing to emphasize the key point he had been trying to make.

"What you must understand now, General, is that this history may not repeat itself. There is no united Russia. Even if Sergie Kirov is inclined to join with you now, Ivan Volkov is not, and the Siberians are a wild card that could figure heavily in the outcome."

"This Captain of yours, what was his name again?"

"Karpov."

"Yes, well could you talk some sense into the man?"

"Possibly, yet Karpov is a man of dark ambition. At the moment that appetite has led to his conflict with Ivan Volkov and Orenburg—a Federation that never existed in our history. Don't you see now how dangerous the knowledge we possess is? Volkov obviously used that knowledge to achieve the position he has. Our wayward Captain Karpov has done the same. And both men know full well how all this ended once. It may be that Volkov sees advantage now in his alliance with Hitler, but realize how dangerous that is. Orenburg controls 80% of the oil that Soviet Russia needed to prosecute its war—the very same oil Hitler coveted, which was one reason he invaded Russia in the first place."

"Yes, I don't have to be a mind reader or man from tomorrow to figure that much."

"So you see, the Soviet Russia today under Kirov is in a very serious and dangerous position. At the moment, there is still a cautious neutrality between Germany and the Soviets, even though Kirov has publically signed an accord with Great Britain. There is fighting on the Volga, and in the Caucasus, and none of that occurred in our history. Kirov's army is on the offensive, but you, yourself, know the bitter tides of war."

"I do indeed."

"Exactly, and if the Soviets are defeated…"

Fedorov did not need to say anything more. He could see that O'Connor now appreciated the gravity and the magnitude of all that lay before them. He

nodded grimly, but then looked up, another question in his eye.

“Indulge me one step further, if you would, Captain Fedorov. I have come to gather that this grand alliance you spoke of was short lived. This war you speak of in your time, the war you are trying to prevent… Your country was our enemy?”

“Sadly, this is the case. Soviet Russia and the West never found any true harmony after the war. There were decades of guarded watch, on both sides. We called it the Cold War, as no open conflict occurred, though both sides maintained armies at the ready.”

“Yes.” Kinlan had been listening to all this, and now he finally spoke. “This very brigade stood a long watch in Germany as part of an allied force facing down the Russians—and with German troops as our allies, if you can fancy that.”

“German troops?” O’Connor raised an eyebrow at that. “I see the future holds a good deal more than we might expect.”

“It does,” said Fedorov. “But the enmity that separated our two nations need not repeat, any more than the history governing your own personal fate has—though I might advise you to watch where you are driving in the days ahead, General O’Connor.”

O’Connor smiled at that. “Then you have come here to try and mend fences and set things right?”

“No, our presence here was a complete accident. We have been trying to get back to our own time ever since we arrived, but it seems time had business for us here, and so here we stay.”

“But you say you moved about from one year to the next?” Now it was Kinlan’s time to look for answers. “How did you manage that?”

Fedorov had not told them everything. He indicated that their position in time remained unstable, but said nothing of Rod-25, or the stairway at Ilanskiy. He anticipated this question as well, but knew that his best answer was to simply say they did not know.

“We’re as much in the dark as you are, General. In fact, we truly don’t know what really caused all this to happen. It’s a mystery I could guess at, and we are gathering clues as we go along, but I can’t say I have put all the pieces together.” That was true enough, he thought.

“But you say you saw the outcome of the war—our war—in 2021? How was that possible? How did you get back there?”

“As I have said, our position in time was unstable. We moved forward again, like a rock skipping off a pond I suppose, but then fell back again. On one of those skips, I think we arrived at a future time beyond the onset of that war, and we saw the utter devastation of the entire world—our world. Then we fell back again, and now that we are here we decided to try and do something about that. It started with the hand of friendship we extended to Great Britain. That grand alliance has to begin somewhere, does it not? Perhaps this time we can hold it together.”

“Good enough,” said O’Connor. “Any man who’ll sail and fight with Admiral John Tovey is a friend in my book. And as for you, General Kinlan, I don’t think there’s any question where you and your men will stand in this fight.”

“None sir. I signed on to fight for the Crown, no matter who’s wearing it at the moment.”

“Good enough, but may I ask… As to the chain of command.” O’Connor gathered his thoughts, then came out with it. “Are you and your men prepared to fall into line behind our current leadership?”

Kinlan had thought about this, and knew the question might soon arise. O’Connor was a Lieutenant General, and the ranking officer present in the British chain of command. “It seems you are a couple rungs up on the ladder, General O’Connor. Yet you must understand my position here is … rather unique. You saw the inside of that tank, and I daresay that the methods we use have changed somewhat when it comes to war fighting. I have the greatest respect for you, and for the chain of command, and intend to do all in my power to cooperate and achieve victory here. But we fight a new style of maneuver war, General. I think it is one you would take to easily enough. In fact, your tactics and maneuvers are well studied in our training schools.”

O’Connor seemed to glow at that, very pleased.

“That said,” Kinlan continued, “if the General would grant me the license of a free hand here, I think it would best serve the interests of all concerned.”

“The Captain has a point on that,” said Popski. “Aside from yours truly, General O’Connor is the only man here in theater that knows what we have been discussing. He says that General Wavell will most likely have to be briefed, but wonders where the line should be drawn.”

“Secrecy,” said Fedorov on his own in English. “Is very important.” Then Popski translated further.

“Some men must know the truth I have shared with you. Certainly all the men of your brigade will know in due course. As to the men of this time… I think the less they know the better. The true nature of this unit, and its origin, must be kept the most closely guarded secret. This may mean that it would be best, as General Kinlan suggests, if this unit remains a separate fighting entity.”

“Yet you’ve told us your own ship now flies the flag of our own Horatio Nelson,” said O’Connor. “You sail right alongside HMS *Invincible*.”

“Yes, but we remain the sole authority insofar as the operation of our ship is concerned, and there are no British seamen aboard *Kirov*. Only one man in the Royal Navy knows we are from your own distant future, Admiral Tovey himself. And he has even held this secret from the Admiralty, and from your own government.”

“I see… Somewhat cheeky, wouldn’t you say?”

Popski found a Russian equivalent for that, and Fedorov smiled. How could he impress upon this man the utter seriousness of this situation. “General,” he began. “Suppose knowledge of our presence here became generally known. I would say you have a thousand unanswered questions in your mind about what the future holds, and as I have told you, not all of that future is rosy. The war in Asia ignites into a new conflict just five years after this war concludes. It continues for over a decade, then the oil wars begin, the struggle for resources and energy that has its roots even in this conflict. Yes, there are marvelous things in the future, like that digital map there on General Kinlan’s television, but there is poverty, inequality, racism, disease, and yes, there is war. Any knowledge of these events can become a poison in this world. There are wonders ahead, but also darkness and terror, and like our Ivan Volkov, and Captain Karpov, there are men who would use the knowledge of the future for personal gain, and many others who would stop at nothing to obtain this knowledge. Understand?”

“I think I follow you. I understand the importance of secrecy, as you have urged.”

“Your own Mister Churchill said once that ‘In war-time, truth is so precious that she should always be attended by a bodyguard of lies.’ It is a well turned phrase, and carries the essence of what I am trying to tell you now. Yet Churchill may never utter those words. They were spoken to a man named Joseph Stalin—a man who no longer exists in this world of yours. So

you see, things have changed. Our knowledge of what is to come may seem a solid thing to us, but in reality, it is becoming more and more insubstantial with each passing day. I told you that you should be in an Italian prison now, but here you stand, and your freedom, and the knowledge you now have, makes you one of the most significant men alive. Here we stand, discussing all this, like three kings on a raft at sea. Yet those waters are turbulent, and the tides of war are flowing even now as we speak. Rommel is not waiting on our decision. One day soon he will factor our potential choices into his war planning, but for the moment, he is ignorant. That will soon change, because even now he is driving east against the last few reserves General Wavell has managed to scrape up."

"Then we'd best see about that," said O'Connor.

"Yes, we must. It is time for Generals to confer over maps, and we have much to plan and do here. The fate of your nation, and the outcome of the war is now in our hands. General Kinlan's brigade represents a powerful new addition to the British order of battle here, and a shocking new threat and rude surprise for General Rommel and his Afrika Korps. Yet know this… With every round your troops fire, your power diminishes. This brigade is a force that must devour itself every time it is used. Yes, some of the munitions you expend might be duplicated in this world, but most will remain beyond the capabilities of any industry here to replicate. Look there, general O'Connor. The map on that screen, and the equipment that displays it, could not be designed or duplicated by the combined knowhow and resources of your entire nation, even if we were to give you detailed blueprints of how it was made! There are materials and processes in this equipment that will not be understood or mastered for decades, just like the armor on those tanks you visited earlier. Understand? Well then you must also understand this… Take a hammer and put it through that screen, and that equipment is gone—permanently—and it is irreplaceable. So when you plan your war, realize that some of your vehicles will be lost, and worse, that men here will die, as they have already died aboard my ship. This is the nature of war, and we are but a torch in the wind here, bright, powerful, but doomed to expire one day, as all men must."

Part IV

Torch in the Wind

"In the beginning, a flame, very pretty, often hot and fierce, but still only flickering light… Later, coals, deep burning and unquenchable."

— Bruce Lee

Chapter 10

Admiral Cunningham had heard it all, and he had gone through the same shock and disbelief that O'Connor had, but in the end, had been treated with the same cure. After the initial briefing, if it could be called that, Admiral Tovey suggested that they all adjourn, and then take a launch over to the new ship come to meet with them here, *Argos Fire*. It would give Cunningham that same experience Tovey had when he first boarded *Kirov*, the hollow verse of T. S. Eliot rolling through his mind and the coffee-spoon normalcy of his life being stirred away forever that day. The evenings, mornings, and afternoons would never be the same for him now, nor would they ever be the same for Cunningham.

They crossed to board the sleek white destroyer, a most unusual ship, with odd angles and a superstructure that blended seamlessly into the hull. Its tall superstructure was crowned by a large white dome.

"This is a warship?"

Tovey had much the same reaction when first seeing *Kirov*. At least the lines of that ship had that sharp and menacing aspect, the long foredeck and the rising steel battlements behind it, that spoke of power and danger on the sea. Yet those lines had been deliberately smoothed and softened in the refit Fairchild had applied to *Argos Fire.* It was necessary to have Captain MacRae deploy all the guns, which were retracted below deck when not in use. Even so, Cunningham did not seem all that impressed.

"What do you people do when it comes to a fight?" he said, trying to add an edge of humor to soften his obvious deprecation. "Pardon my remark, but do you simply use harsh words? Those two deck guns of yours are good for a light destroyer, but we'll generally give them at least four or five. Your ship would match the displacement of most of our heavy cruisers to my eye. Take our own HMS *York* by way of an example. She has six good 8-inch guns on a little over 10,000 long tons full load, and here you sit with no more than a two guns that looks to be a 5-incher."

"This gun replaced your own 4.5 QF Mark V in the 1960s. It was actually a 55 caliber barrel at that time, the Mark VI version firing ordinance that had been used by a 105mm artillery gun. We call it a Third Generation

Maritime Fire Support Weapon. It can fire 25 rounds per minute, out to a range of 27,000 meters with our latest munitions."

"Yes? Well with all due respect, I'll put my money on our HMS *York* if the two of you tangle."

"Well sir, we aren't really designed to be a ship killer, though we do have other means than our deck guns. I was told you witnessed the rocket defense the Russian ship put up when it arrived at Suez."

"That I did, and it was quite impressive."

"We have a similar air defense system. In fact, that is the primary role and mission of this ship. In our day, two adversaries at sea will seldom ever lay eyes on one another. You never really darken the horizon of an enemy ship. We have other missiles, rockets, that have a good long range, well over that horizon, and that big dome on the mainmast up there masks a radar system that is able to see an enemy ship out well over the horizon. So if it came down to it, Admiral, I could put missiles into your HMS *York's* belly long before she ever knew I was there. You might think of us a bit like an aircraft carrier, only instead of planes we use these rockets to attack both incoming enemy aircraft and enemy surface combatants as well."

"Interesting," said Cunningham, cocking his head to one side. "And may I ask just how many of these rockets you carry?"

That hit on a nerve that MacRae was still soothing once he had realized what had happened to them. The power of his ship was awesome when used against the technology of this era, but it was also limited, a bright burning torch in the beginning, but deep burning coals in too short a time.

"We've enough to handle ourselves," MacRae said diplomatically. "Though I take your point, sir. What power we have will be temporal. I realize that. Each missile we fire is one less under that deck there at our disposal, and I'm afraid that your own industry will not have the means to replace them, even if we put our technicians and engineers at it right alongside your very best people. A great deal has happened in the last 80 years."

"I understand," said Cunningham. "Fleet air defense you say?"

"Yes sir, that is our primary role. The aircraft, or other missiles fired by opposing ships, are the main threats to any warship in our day. Those and the threat from a submarine are the things we worry about."

"I imagine you have some real demons under the sea in your day then?"

“That we do, bigger, faster, deeper diving, and much more deadly than anything from this era, as you might expect.”

“Well at least a submarine can hide when it needs to evade an enemy. That’s more than your ship could do, or even that big fellow there.” Cunningham thumbed at the distant silhouette of *Kirov* now. “Once you run out of those rocket weapons, things look a bit different. I hope you’ve decent armor.”

“Not much to speak of there, sir,” said MacRae.

“Then you’ll need the protection of the fleet, won’t you? Join us, and the Royal Navy is your armor, Captain. I hope you understand that.”

“Well sir… I did join you, in 1996, serving twelve years before I mustered out and was picked up by Miss Fairchild here. In fact, I served aboard this very ship, HMS *Dauntless* as it was called when active with the Royal Navy. We’ve given her a makeover, but she’s still the same ornery beast underneath the white paint.”

“No doubt,” said Cunningham, though he took the matter of the limited missile inventory within, and filed it away with all the other astounding things he would see and hear in the next few hours. After touring the ship, meeting the Argonauts and the crew, and seeing the fancy whirligig aircraft in the aft hanger deck, the officers all convened again in Fairchild’s stateroom, her executive suite.

“I thought seeing the ship would help you deal with all this,” said Tovey. “I went through the same thing when I first toured the Russian ship.”

“Quite amazing,” said Cunningham. “Truly astounding, particularly the bridge. We’ve a good hammer here, and it comes at a time of most pressing need. So now all the secrecy surrounding the Russian ship makes sense. But Admiral… How long do you think we can keep our light in a basket? Crewmen on your ship are gawking from the gunwales even as we speak, and you know how rumors make the rounds aboard ship, and then how they jump from there to every bar and brothel they can find. You tell me the Prime Minister doesn’t even know about this business as yet?”

“Not at all. And for the moment we must keep things that way. The less said, the better. There will be some who must know, and your name was uppermost in my mind when I first thought on this. I should also think Admiral Fraser would be a good man to bring in, and certainly Churchill will have to know in time, but can you imagine trying to get Admiral Pound in

this same bathtub?”

“I see what you mean,” said Cunningham. “Then Somerville doesn’t know any of this? And what about Holland with Home Fleet?”

“Both in the dark as you were some hours ago.”

“And as I still am, for the most part. This is…. Well it’s simply an unbelievable story, as you well know. If I wasn’t standing on this ship, and seeing the equipment and all here, I’d be a stubborn nut to crack myself. What is it they call those glassy colored screens on the bridge?”

“Computers,” said Tovey. “Don’t ask me to explain what they are and how they work.”

“Well I saw the young officers there simply poking their fingers at the glass and they could run the entire ship! Astounding.”

“I suppose so,” said Tovey. “But we haven’t time to gawk and ask questions now. Billy Wind is out there in the Italian Fleet, and he’s heading our way. We’re going out to meet him, and you will see the rockets fly soon enough, just as I did north of Iceland. Certainly you heard about that.”

“Hearing is one thing, but standing on this ship quite something else. The Russian Director put it right when he invited me to take hold of the elephant’s tale. This whole thing is double Dutch, yet here it is.”

“And here we all are,” said Tovey as Admiral Volsky came in with Kamenski and Nikolin. They had been touring the bridge with Mister Dean as host, and were now ready to rejoin the conference.

“Ladies and gentlemen.” Tovey played the role of chairman of the board again. “So we’ve all had a good stiff drink from that cup Director Kamenski referred to so artfully. Now it’s time we decide what we can do about the present military situation here in the Mediterranean. I sent the main body of the fleet south to lend a hand off Tobruk while we’re here, but we will soon rejoin them, and point our bows west for Malta. We must decide how to set our order of battle. I propose Admiral Cunningham lead the main body as planned, with his flag on *Warspite*. I will sail with you, Admiral Volsky, though we will remain in close supporting range in case ABC gets into more trouble than his three battleships can handle. Any thoughts on how things will play out?”

“I see this ship has helicopters,” said Volsky. “And we also have two aircraft carriers. I propose that you use any reconnaissance assets to quickly locate the enemy fleet, and then my ship, and perhaps that of Miss Fairchild

here, would be well disposed to engage at very long range. This attack might even be combined by a strike mission from your carriers. What our intention should be is to strike first, and narrow down the odds."

"From what we know," said Tovey, "the German fleet has reached Toulon from Gibraltar. *Hindenburg* and two of their newer ships were there, and we believe they will sortie with the French Fleet soon. The Italians are already at sea, so we do not yet know what the enemy intends. It may be that they plan to rendezvous into one grand fleet, which would be somewhat imposing, if I dare say. The French will have the *Normandie*, which proved to be a very formidable ship when engaged off Dakar, and they'll throw in two battlecruisers and plenty of supporting cruisers and destroyers."

"It will be my intention to target the capital ships," said Volsky. "Past experience has shown me that the shock of seeing a battleship on fire, with no clear enemy on the horizon, can be quite disconcerting to the enemy. May I ask if you know who commands the German Task Force?"

"Admiral Lütjens, a cautious, professional officer. It was he who led the attack on our Faeroe Island base very near the place we met, Admiral. He slipped away to Brest, and from there down to Gibraltar once that fell into German hands. Now the best ship in the German navy is here in the Mediterranean, a match for my own HMS *Invincible*, as I daresay the *Normandie* would be as well. As for the Italians, they have been somewhat timid at sea in the early going, but that seems to be changing. They have strong new ships that we would be wise to respect."

"Undoubtedly," said Cunningham. "But you say you suggest we use all our carrier borne aircraft in a strike role, Admiral Volsky. May I remind you that the enemy air presence will be thick as we approach Malta, and I'm given to understand that the Germans have a carrier with the *Hindenburg*. If so, how will we protect the fleet?"

"I'll lend a hand there," Captain MacRae spoke up, "with assistance from *Kirov*. We've a good magazine for air defense, nearly full, and I can extend a defensive umbrella out over thirty kilometers with our *Sea Viper* system."

"That will be a good second line of defense," said Volsky. "Our own S-400s have a considerably longer range, so we can provide the initial salvos against any incoming air strikes. Between the two of us, I believe we can adequately discourage an enemy air strike, depending on its size. But it will be necessary to coordinate on IFF codes. We should program each of our

systems to treat all missiles as friendly."

"A good point," said MacRae. "I suppose we can send some people aboard your ship, or vice versa, and take care of that."

"Good enough."

They worked out the details, and the Russians made ready to depart with Admiral Cunningham. It was decided that they should rejoin the main British fleet and move west at their earliest opportunity.

"Admiral Tovey," said Fairchild. "I wonder if I might have a word with you before you depart."

Tovey gave her a knowing look, for he knew there were still things unsaid between them that had not been covered in the briefing given by Director Kamenski. After seeing Admiral Volsky off, he found himself in the relative quiet of the Fairchild executive suite, politely removing his hat and taking the seat offered.

"Well," he began. "You have been looking at me like I was a long lost uncle ever since we met. What is it, Miss Fairchild?"

She looked at him again, eyes full of uncertainty, then took the same tack that Director Kamenski had used in his briefing and just came out with it."

"Admiral… There was no nuclear detonation anywhere near my ship, and yet here we are, displaced to this time as *Kirov* was. We stated that in general terms during the briefing, but the devil is in the details. I must tell you now that the agent of our displacement is a peculiar device aboard my ship—one that I was led to by a direct order from my superiors. In fact, I did not expect to find what I did. Director Kamenski has told you how large detonations had a secondary effect of fracturing the time continuum. What he has not told you is that the Russians are capable of initiating a similar effect by utilizing the nuclear reactors aboard their ship. Yet *Argos Fire* is not so equipped. We have a pair of two Rolls-Royce gas turbines and diesel driven generators providing what we call integrated electric propulsion—not nuclear propulsion. So you might wonder how my ship came to be here."

"You tell me this device you mention has something to do with it," said Tovey. "You say you were led to the discovery by your superiors?"

"Yes sir, by the G1 Watchstander at that time. His name isn't important, but I receive my orders on a secure communications link on the other side of that bulkhead." She pointed to her hidden office now. "I must tell you that when I heard your voice in that first communication with the Russians, I was

quite relieved and surprised. Things might have gone badly otherwise, but it was more than that. You see, I am a member of the group I believe you have just begun to form here sir—a group known as the Watch by its members. The odd thing about it, was that this dated from 1942 in the history I know. This business about all this being an alternate history is quite daunting. So what was familiar and well known to you, that Russia was fragmented into three states, was a great surprise to me, and I have only just learned about it."

"There was something in the tea for all of us, or so it seems," said Tovey by way of comforting her. "Admiral Cunningham got the bitter dregs , no sugar and double lemon."

"Yes sir, and he also became a member of the Watch in the history I knew, as did the other man you mentioned, Admiral Fraser. And you haven't mentioned him, but I know about Alan Turing. All Watchstanders are given the whole history when they are inducted."

"A fascinating fellow," said Tovey. "Yes, Turing and I have been thick as thieves."

"Well now…. There is something else I must tell you about this device I mention." She reached into her pocket now, and produced what looked like a typewritten page, handing it slowly to the Admiral. "I found this note in a compartment within the device itself."

Tovey took the note and scanned the page quietly: *"Should you read this your mission will have concluded as planned. Keep this device within a secure room aboard Argos Fire at all times and it will serve to hold you in a safe nexus. As of this moment, you are now Watchstander G1. Godspeed."* His eye lingered on the typewritten signature, his own name plain to see.

"Curious," said Tovey. "I have no recollection of ever writing this note, but seeing these words now gives me an odd feeling that I did write this, odd as that may sound."

"Admiral, there's more to all this than I was able to share in our full meeting. This device I was led to. I believe it did not originate in our own time. In fact, I believe it was brought here from the future."

"The future? By whom?"

"I haven't determined that, but your name was on the list, as you can see by the presence of that note there in the device itself."

"Well," said Tovey. "I might also share something odd with you, Miss Fairchild. It concerns our Mister Turing. It seems this isn't the only piece of

paper my name has been put to. He told me he had come across something most unusual in the archive at Bletchley Park.”

Most unusual indeed, he thought. And he told her about the box of files, reports and photographs, intelligence gathered in years he had not yet even lived—in 1941 and 1942, and yet his name, his signature, was right there on them all, and to his great amazement.

“Turing and I had a good long talk about those files. They had to come from somewhere, and when I presented the matter to the Russians they believed the files might have been brought here, just as you say that box was brought here, from the future. Only I assumed that was from the time the Russians lived in. It never occurred to me that this whole affair may go both directions—deep into the future even as it has come here, into your past—our present.”

“Yes,” said Elena. “Those fissures in time that Director Kamenski mentioned. What makes us think they only move in one direction?” She folded her arms. “There it is—that note was brought here by someone, right along with that device, and now I need a good stiff drink! Care to join me?”

Chapter 11

The Italians had not been idle during the conference off Crete. By the time *Invincible* rejoined the main battlegroup, fleet reconnaissance off the carrier *Eagle* had spotted a large enemy force at sea southeast of Messina. At least six large capital ships were reported, and though the British did not know the exact ships involved, they were able to take a good guess. In fact, the battleships *Roma, Venetto* and *Littoro* had just transited the Strait of Messina, sailing to join *Andrea Doria*, *Duilio* and *Conte Cavour* from Taranto, with four heavy cruisers, several light cruisers and fourteen destroyers.

Far to the northwest, the Vichy French would contribute another powerful fleet led by the pride of their navy, the battleship *Normandie*, battlecruisers *Strasbourg* and *Dunkerque*, with two heavy and four light cruisers, and ten destroyers. Admiral Jean de Laborde was in command, a man who placed little faith in Darlan, liking him even less. Yet he also loathed the British, and the actions off Mers el Kebir and Dakar had made him a determined foe.

Strong enough on its own this second fleet was even more potent with the addition of the Germans task force arriving from Gibraltar. Admiral Lütjens still sailed independently, but he was within close supporting distance to the French fleet with *Bismarck* and *Hindenburg*, escorted by their light carrier *Goeben* and the new fast battlecruiser *Kaiser*. This combined force was still in the Tyrrhenian Sea, and heading south.

Tovey and Cunningham were quick to appreciate the advantage this situation now presented them. They determined that it was now or never if they were to have any chance in this engagement, and the British fleet mustered some 300 kilometers southeast of Syracuse. As they expected, the enemy was not without eyes in the sky as well, and the threat of preemptive air strikes was the first attack they encountered.

The Italians had put up three SM-79 Squadrons for their initial attack, about 60 planes in all with escorting fighters, and they would soon be supported by the thickening presence of German aircraft. The boast made by Volsky and Captain MacRae concerning fleet air defense would soon be put to the test. *Kirov* received word of the initial incoming strike wave at 08:00

hours on the morning of January 31, 1941. Admiral Volsky was on the bridge when Rodenko reported the data feed had been sent by *Argos Fire.*

"So it seems the British Sampson is as good as they claim," said Volsky. "We have not picked up those planes with our own Fregat system yet."

"We will in five minutes," said Rodenko.

"Yes, but five minutes is an eternity in modern combat. Thankfully we will not be fighting the British today. What is our situation?"

"It looks to be a fairly large formation, sir. At least sixty planes."

"Sixty? Mister Samsonov? What is our SAM inventory?"

"Sir… We have 25 S-400 *Triumf* missiles ready in silos, 94 missiles on the Klinok system, and 50 Kashtan missiles still available with the close in defense systems."

"Very well, we will open the defense at long range as promised. Salvo of five S-400s please. This is something the British cannot do, eh Rodenko? No matter how good their radar is, it hardly matters if their *Sea Vipers* can only provide a defense out to 30 kilometers. Our S-400s can fire now, and even our Klinok system more than doubles the range of the British missiles. The ship will come to Air Alert One. You will fire on my command, Mister Samsonov."

There seemed a weariness in the Admiral's tone, which Rodenko perceived at once when Volsky settled into his chair, his heavy features clouded over with inner thought. It's not his tooth this time, thought Rodenko, it's this endless war. We've already fought our way through 1941 and 1942, not to mention that little sortie to 1908! Then we back stepped to 1940, and here we are back in 1941 all over again. The Admiral is tired, and not just of standing his watch here on the bridge. It's the killing that bothers him most, which is something that never preyed on Karpov's mind. That said, I'd rather have Volsky here in command. Karpov knew no limits, and for all his tactical prowess, his hubris continually put the ship at grave risk. I wonder what would have happened in that final battle against Togo if *Kazan* hadn't pulled us out of the borscht?

Rodenko looked at his bridge crew, as he was now acting Captain in Fedorov's absence. The men were still fresh and ready for anything. Tasarov was listening under his ASW headset, in spite of the liability with the loss of their bow dome sonar. The towed array was still an order of magnitude better than anything of this era, and he had every confidence that the submarine

threat could be answered. And Samsonov was his old self, stalwart, broad shouldered strength with lightning quick reactions, like a good heavyweight at the CIC. He had circulated among the crew, and found them to be remarkably buoyant with Volsky back at the helm. The shadow that Karpov had cast had lifted, and the men seemed eager for the coming fight. But what of the ship itself?

Kirov was holding up as well as might be expected. Their reactors and propulsion systems had been running smoothly, in spite of a brief glitch just before Fedorov departed on the KA-40. The hull repairs were holding up, but would need attention soon. As the British fleet could make no more than 20 to 24 knots, speed was not an issue now, and so the stress on the hull was lessened. The crew had just completed a full inspection and maintenance evolution on all weapons, and *Kirov* was ready for action. There was only one concern Rodenko still had in mind, their missile inventory. It still seemed ample now, but he noted that Volsky was committing only five of the S-400s here, and knew they would switch to the Klinok system soon after this salvo.

His new radar man on the watch caught his eye, and he knew they now have solid contacts with the Fregat system. So Rodenko notified Admiral Volsky, and soon they were watching the first missiles fire from the long, forward deck. Off they went, the five fingers of doom, a fist of supersonic fire and steel that would soon catch the Italian bomber formations well before they could ever expect to be targeted. The enemy learned this lesson from us once, thought Rodenko. The British adapted fairly well, and the Japanese too. Let's see how the Italians learn. That air defense fire was at fairly close range over the Suez canal when we arrived in theater. This time we're hitting them nearly 300 kilometers out. They are probably still forming up after takeoff from their bases. The shock is going to be very telling here.

It was. They watched the digital track of the five missiles as they traveled unerringly to the target zone. Rodenko was counting down the range, until he saw Volsky raise a finger. So he waited, allowing an interval of silence until the missiles were on target. Then he leaned over the radar display, waiting for the system to refresh. He could already see that the S-400 attack had the effect of poking a bee hive with a sturdy stick. The once regular contact formations had disintegrated into a confused scatter. He waited for the digital readout, then reported.

"Admiral, Fregat system now reports 42 contacts still airborne. The strike

had taken down an astounding eighteen planes. Perhaps not all of those were kills, Rodenko knew. The S-400 had a very wide blast radius for its fragmentation rods. It likely damaged enough wings, rudders and canopies to thin the herd, though he knew they had probably killed half the planes that were now unaccounted for in the contact count. Some would be limping back to base now, and outside our coverage zone. I wonder what they will have to say to their wing leaders when they hit the ground?

"Contact reorganizing and continuing on a projected intercept course," said Rodenko. "Range now 220 kilometers at about 4500 meters altitude. Speed increasing to 400kph."

The Savoia-Marchetti SM-79 Sparviero, *or "Sparrowhawk"* was a fast and durable three engine airframe, often called the "Hunchback" by the men who flew it, because of its distinctive dorsal hump on the forward superstructure near the canopy. Though it looked awkward, it had set pre-war speed records, and was really a fast and reasonably agile plane in combat. But its duralumin and plywood skin was easily penetrated by the fragmentation warheads of a good SAM, and not one missile fired would fail to find a target. It would simply come down to how many missiles could be used here, and Volsky had decided he would only spare five of the precious S-400s.

"Ready on Klinok system," said Volsky. "Twelve missiles please, three salvos of four each, and you may launch at your best maximum range."

They would wait until the enemy formation was inside 80 kilometers before Samsonov caught Rodenko's eye, his hand hovering over the firing toggle.

"Effective range now," said Rodenko. "You may fire."

The claxon rang, the deck erupted with white smoke, and the missiles streaked away to find the unseen enemy. A more selective weapon, each missile would vector in on a single plane, with a much tighter fragmentation burst. *Kirov* would quickly trade those twelve missiles for fifteen SM-79 bombers, and Rodenko reported the updated situation report as before.

"Fifteen enemy planes confirmed down, but our radar count now reports only 25 aircraft still inbound. I show two other planes aborting, most likely with secondary damage."

"Very well," said Volsky heavily. "Contact the British destroyer. Tell them we have thinned the herd as promised and will now turn the engagement over to them. Let us see how their *Sea Viper* does. We have

already given the fleet a nice little spectacle."

They would have to wait another five minutes for the *Sparrowhawks* to come into what *Kirov* would call a close defense range. To the British, it was the outer limit of their Aster-15 missile at 30 kilometers. The Aster-30 could do better at 120 kilometers, but MacRae had waited to use his shorter range system. In truth, he could have fired much sooner with his Aster-30 missiles, but had decided not to speak of those in the briefing. The last time he had used that particular missile, he had been firing at Russian SU-24s! Now here he was all chummy with the Russian battlecruiser.

"No doubt they enjoyed lording it over us on the range of those missiles," he said to his Executive Officer Dean.

"That first salvo was most likely their S-300 system," said Dean.

"Or the S-400s. Damn impressive. What was their secondary battery?"

"Most likely the SA-N-92 Gauntlet system, sir. About 80 Kilometer range."

"Good enough, but our Aster-30 will beat that, eh?"

"It will indeed, sir. Any reason why we aren't using them?"

MacRae gave him a wry smile. "I told the Russians we would cover at 30 klicks, and said nothing of the Aster-30. We've only 50 of those left. Our missile count on the Aster-15 is much higher. It's always wise to keep something under your kilts, Mister Dean. The CIC will activate forward deck *Sea Viper* system, number fifteen please, and standby."

"Aye, sir, *Sea Viper*-15 activating and standing by. The ship is now at Air One."

"Prosecute your contacts."

"Sir, aye sir!"

"Mister Boyle. You will switch to control guidance and feed target data to the *Vipers* from the Sampson system." Normally the Aster was an autonomous system that would use its own RF seeker to find and prosecute its target. But Dean realized that planes of this era would not be "emitting" on any of the typical spectrums the missiles would sniff. He was turning the whole engagement over to Sampson. So where *Kirov* placed the man by that name at the CIC, the British high domed radar set would be coordinating their strike, in close cooperation with the CIC computers.

The missiles began to fire, lance quick into the sky. They were extremely fast and agile, and there was no way any plane was ever going to spoof them

or out maneuver them, no matter how good the pilot was. Twelve were fired, and they all found planes. The last baker's dozen left alive in the SM-79 strike had seen enough and finally lost their stomach for the fight. They turned around and dove low for home.

"Enemy contacts breaking off and now outbound." Dean updated the sitrep and waited.

"Secure *Viper* system," MacRae ordered. "But the ship will remain at action stations. That may not be all they throw our way. Signal the Russian ship and give them our kind regards. How many more of those long range SAMs you figure they have, Mister Dean?"

"Full loadout would be 64 missiles, sir, but we've no way of knowing how many they've used up until now."

No we don't, do we, thought MacRae, and that's what bothers me. But he said nothing of this, turning the bridge over to Dean to go below. He wanted to check on the situation below the forward deck, and see how the crew was settling in to this full wartime status. Yet the question still nagged at him like an itch he could not reach, so he caught hold of Mack Morgan in a corridor and voiced it again.

"We know this ship tangled with the Americans in the Pacific, right? Well at the briefing we heard they mixed it up pretty well here before they came to their senses and sided with us. Why would we not know about those engagements? Wouldn't they be history to us from where we were back in 2021?"

Morgan did not quite know what to say. He had never considered the question and had no immediate answer for MacRae.

"Good point there, Gordie, if you don't mind my using the handle."

"Not here, between the two of us, but in front of the crew you'll stick to Captain."

"Aye, sir," Morgan gave him his toothy white smile. "Well what about that Nexus talk Miss Fairchild laid on us."

"What's that?"

"Well the lady said we were in some kind of Nexus point as I recall it. And to be honest, who had their nose in the history books with all that was going on these last few weeks."

"True," said MacRae, "but you haven't forgotten who led the assault at D-Day, did you?"

“Good old Monty.”

“Yes, but the Yanks will say it was Eisenhower.”

“Let them. Monty was the de facto commander on the ground.”

“That’s the point I’m making, Mack. If this damn Russian ship raised hell with the Royal Navy in 1941, then why don’t I remember ever hearing about it in school?”

“You’d best ask her ladyship,” said Morgan.

“I’ve missiles to look after for the moment.”

But MacRae made it a point to ask when he could, and was never quite happy with the answer he got from Elena.

Chapter 12

Tovey was on the bridge of HMS *Invincible*, watching the missiles score the blue sky with their white tails. The spectacle seemed to stir a memory within him, and not of the missiles he had seen in the recent North Atlantic engagement, or above Suez. No. It was something deeper, that odd feeling again, just as he felt it welling up when he heard the word *Geronimo*. Miss Fairchild's mention of the Watch also had the same effect on him, and he was thinking deeply about that note she had handed him.

The woman seemed convinced that this device, as she called it, had come from the future—not her own future, but years even more lost and distant beyond her time. The conclusion they had come to, that the fractures in time might extend in both directions, was most disturbing. Yet that was not what bothered him, it was his name affixed to that note.

"*Should you read this your mission will have concluded as planned…*" As planned? That suddenly had a rather ominous tinge, for he realized that his name there implied he was most likely aware of that plan, if not its author. Yet how could that be possible? How would I get hold of something like that, a box from the future with something in it capable of moving that ship in time. Why, the whole matter seems like it was designed to bring that ship here, to this moment, to serve in this hour of need.

A sudden thought occurred to him, and brought a smile to his lips. This whole business with none of these people knowing about the Orenburg Federation is rather telling, isn't it? Why, it's as if they all came from a completely different world, a copy of this world, yet different. In fact, the Russians fairly well confirmed this. The words of Admiral Volsky came to mind now, from that fateful meeting aboard the Russian ship off the Faeroes... *"Quite frankly, the world as it now stands does not seem to be the one we left. This will also be difficult for you to grasp, but the history we knew did not see our homeland divided in civil war as it is…"*

They claim they met with me off Gibraltar in 1942, to parley, and the evidence of that meeting was plain to see in the archive. Why, I even knew the name of the place—Las Palomas. It just popped into my mind like I had

lived all that through in *this* life, a memory emerging from some hidden depth, like a fish leaping from the unfathomable sea, and then it was gone…

Who's memory was that? Mine? It couldn't be. The thought of another John Tovey out there, interacting with the Russians, establishing the shadowy group that came to be called the Watch… well it gave him a bit of a shiver. The more he thought about things, the deeper the feeling became seated in him.

These odd feelings and notions aren't simply hunches or intuition, he thought. It's a powerful sensation, like déjà vu, a shadow of a deeply hidden memory upwelling in my mind. These must be remnants of those other lives… echoes. In fact, Turing felt them as well, though Cunningham seemed completely unaffected this way. He was properly astounded by what he learned at that briefing, and I'll have to keep a good eye on him now, but I sense no deeper root in him like the one that seems to be growing within me—at least not yet.

It was more than memories, much more. There were *tangible things* from that other world in this one, the intelligence files he had just told Fairchild about, and the strange box aboard her ship—the device she mentioned. And what about Turing's watch! There was another little mystery that was as yet unsolved. It went missing in this world, and then turned up in a box from some other telling of these events. How could all these things from other times find their way into this world? How were these memories emerging from within him?

A box from the future—a device… Fairchild said she had instructions that led her to Delphi. Someone must have a flair for the dramatic, he thought, hiding the damn thing beneath the Oracle's shrine. Now that I think of it, that young Russian Captain intimated there were other places like this, where the rifts in time caused by all these massive detonations had become permanent. Think on it—gateways in time, portals to other worlds. Yet, from everything the Russians have told me, things done in one world seem to have an effect on all the others!

That was why the Russians remained here, and why Admiral Volsky has thrown in with Great Britain. They're trying to prevent things that happened in their own time, things they have seen, a great doom that comes upon the world in 2021. It was a doom of our own making, or so they have led me to believe. These missiles they fire, scratching the blue sky, driven on with

relentless yellow fire, like mindless sharks—that is what put an end to their world. Yet how ironic it is that we need them now, in this war, to give us any hope of seeing they never consume the world in the next one.

A bell rang, turning over the hour, and setting the new watch. He suddenly became aware of his senses in the here and now, the smell of the sea, the light on the water, the streaks of dark grey in the distant clouds that promised the threat of rain.

My life is wound about this Russian ship like a vine now, he realized. My God… I believe I saw this ship decades ago, in the Straits of Tsushima, aboard *King Alfred*, off Iki Island. Then boxes of reports and photographs appear, and notes from the future, bearing my name. The Russian Captain came to the same conclusion as Miss Fairchild did about all this. He could still hear Fedorov's voice… *"How could images of events we lived through in 1941 and 1942 be here, a year before any of that ever happened, in the year 1940? Unless—and this is the only possibility we could grasp at—unless they were brought here, from some future year, and by someone we have yet to identify who is also capable of moving in time."*

He smiled now, a strange light in his eye. Someone planned it, the mission for this *Argos Fire*. The order went out through the Watch, the organization I supposedly founded. The note bore my name. Why feathers and fiddlesticks…. I think I may know who brought these things here, and it wasn't old H.G. Wells with his Time Machine as I told the Admiral.

"Excuse me Admiral. Message from the Russians."

Tovey was again pulled from his reverie into the urgency of the moment. He took the decrypted message and read it quietly…. *Argos Fire* had radar contact at long range on the Italian fleet. CONTACT ON LARGE ENEMY FLEET REPORTED, BEARING NW AT 120 KILOMETERS. The coordinate of the contact followed, and estimated composition. Many ships. Steel in the water, and an impending battle at sea rising with the weather off his bow. RECOMMEND YOU JOIN A.B.C. - HOSTILITIES IMMINENT.

That was an understatement, thought Tovey.

"Mister Towers, send to Captain Bridge on *Eagle* and have them reconnoiter this contact and ascertain ship type and number. I want to know what we're looking at."

"Right away sir."

* * *

That was a question on Admiral Volsky's mind as well that morning. Rodenko had reported no less than thirty separate contacts! At a range of 120 kilometers, the two forces were closing the distance between one another by at least 40 kilometers per hour. They would have the enemy on their horizon in under three hours time, and by noon the battle would be fully engaged. Yet Volsky had no intention of waiting for the enemy to get within gun range. He could have fired an hour ago, but chose to take the time to coordinate his actions with the other fleet elements.

As with the air strike, it was decided that *Kirov* would open the action, followed by *Argos Fire*. Then they would observe the enemy's reaction, take battle damage assessment, and decide how to proceed.

"Well," Volsky said to Rodenko. "I was laid up in sick bay with Doctor Zolkin when we last faced the Italian Navy. What kind of fight can we expect here, Mister Rodenko?"

"I suppose that depends on the men commanding that fleet," came the answer. "They didn't like our missiles, and we'll again have the advantage of first shock. If we hit them hard enough here, we just might drive this fleet off."

"That is my hope," said Volsky. "We have thirty-two SSMs, correct Mister Samsonov?"

"Yes sir, nine Moskit-II, nine MOS-III, and the new missiles we received from *Kazan*, fourteen P-900s."

"Then let us begin with a salvo of four P-900s. We'll hit them and then see how they react. Can we target their capital ships?"

"Radar signal processing is fairly conclusive, sir," said Rodenko. I can designate capital ship targets with high confidence."

"Then I see no reason to wait any further. Fire your salvo, Samsonov. The ship will come to full battle stations."

* * *

The man on the other side was also a familiar face in these actions, one Admiral Angelo Iachino, the very same man who had faced the wrath of *Kirov* off the Bonifacio Strait. When Da Zara's cruisers had encountered a

fast enemy ship in the Tyrrhenian Sea, and come off badly damaged near Calabria, Iachino was urged to sortie with his heavy battleships from La Spezia.

The history was different then. In that world the British attack on Taranto had occurred in November of 1940, and the ships Iachino had at his disposal were those last survivors of that very successful attack. *Cavour, Duilio* and *Littorio* had all been damaged in that attack, but it had never happened. Iachino inherited the command of the Main battlefleet from Admiral Campione, who was deemed too cautious in the early encounters with the Royal Navy in 1940. Those battles had been inconclusive, and Iachino was now in command of a force capable of settling the entire issue of the war at sea in the Mediterranean, or so he believed.

"Wait for the Germans, wait for the French." He shook his head when Admiral Bergamini cautioned him in a meeting they held aboard the battleship *Caio Duilio.* "I will do no such thing!" We have the entire fleet here, Bergamini, six battleships. The British have only four, and we match them in cruisers and destroyers as well. I'll have the entire matter settled before the French ever get to the Straits of Messina."

Iachino had every reason to be confident, but it was a boast he would soon come to regret. He had no conception of what was about to happen to his fleet, and he would soon face an attack that would come completely 'out of the blue.' The weather was still behind him, and ahead the skies were open and clear—until the first missiles came. His watch reported something in the sky, a thin white contrail, and he reached for his field glasses, raising them with a brown gloved hand. Iachino was a man in his early 50s, yet grey haired beneath his officer's cap. He was in the second division, his flag aboard the new battleship *Littorio*, a ship that had been built to counter the French *Dunkerque* design.

Where *Dunkerque* had eight 12.9-inch guns and 225mm armor, *Littorio* would be built with nine 15-inch guns and 350mm of armor at the belt. Ahead of his ship, in the first battleship division, Admiral Bergamini had placed *Conte Cavour* in the vanguard, following with his flag on *Caio Duilio*, and with *Andrea Doria* rounding out that division. Iachino followed with the newer ships, *Littorio, Veneto* and *Roma*. Now Iachino spied the contrails in the blue sky, thinking it must be high flying planes. But he soon saw that they were moving much too fast. What were they?

“Enemy planes!” he shouted, with the only explanation that would rightfully come to his mind. “Fast!”

“Look sir, they are diving!” The watchman pointed, and Iachino could already see the AA guns on the battleships well ahead of him starting to train their barrels skyward. He gave the order for battle stations, the bells sounding as the men rushed to their weapons. “Arrogant,” he said aloud, clearly seeing four contrails now. “These must be fast reconnaissance planes. They think they can get down low and sneak in on us, but don’t they ever look over their shoulder? Those contrails can be seen for fifty miles!”

Then he heard a clamor from the men, raising his field glasses again to see what they were fussing about. The planes were swooping low—so low that it seemed they would crash right into the sea! Then, to his amazement, they began a shifting maneuver, a dizzy dance as they approached his leading battleship division. Some crazy pilots were thinking to make themselves difficult targets today. What were they doing? Were these torpedo bombers to be coming in that low? They were certainly not the lumbering British *Swordfish*—my god! Their speed!”

It was then that he saw the first dark fist of black smoke mushroom up from the ships ahead. The planes had suddenly put on a tremendous burst of speed, flashing in at *Conte Cavour* and *Duilio*. They had hurled themselves right at the battleships in a suicidal charge that sent all four to fiery deaths!

“What in god’s name has possessed the British,” said Iachino. “Are they so desperate that they are willing to sacrifice the lives of their pilots like this to get hits?”

Apparently so. But these planes had come in so fast that the battleships had barely trained their flak batteries before they struck home. No plane could travel at such speeds. He soon got the alarming reports from Bergamini. Both his ship and his lead battleship had been struck, and now a fatal flaw in the redesign of *Conte Cavour* was exposed. The ship had been completed in 1915, given several overhauls between the wars that extended her length and beam, upgraded AA guns, and even bored out her main guns to 12.6 inches. Her deck and barbette armor had also been thickened, adding weight that had caused her main belt armor to be completely submerged at full load. So when the P-900s struck, they hit the ship well above this heavy armor, and the 200 kilogram warheads moving at two and a half times the speed of sound during the final high speed run, carried a considerable impact.

Bergamini reported bad fires amidships on *Conte Cavour*, and the hull holed in two places with gaping black tears, over ten feet wide, that were now belching torrid flames with heavy smoke. His own ship *Duilio* had been struck at a different angle, with one hit on the sturdy conning tower about thirty feet below the bridge. The ship had not seen much of the fire of war. It had served only seventy hours at sea in WWI, then went through extensive refits similar to *Cavour*. She was nicked at Taranto, by the British attack there in the old history, but missed altogether in this altered history, as that attack had never been launched. Her initial wartime patrol had failed to find the enemy the previous year, and so the ship's first real taste of battle would be this hard slap in the face from a P-900 *Sizzler*, and a punch to the gut when a second missile also struck her amidships.

In one hot minute a third of Iachino's battleships were hit and burning. He gritted his teeth, angry that he had not insisted on fighter cover over the fleet. That would be something he would soon have to correct. But if the British were going to simply crash their aircraft into his ships like this… Was it desperate bravery on their part now? They knew they could not face me ship to ship here. Or was it simply madness?

He would soon learn that it was neither, for the missile attack had only just begun. It started with the fires, bright and fierce, but they would soon become burning coals in the guts of his battleships that would burn with unquenchable heat.

Part V

Turnabout

"Turnabout is Fair Play."

— The Life and Uncommon Adventures
of Captain Dudley Bradstreet
(1755)

Chapter 13

Johannes Streich, commander of 5th Light Division, was at his wits end. He had been ordered to move his battlegroup south yet again, in another of Rommel's wide enveloping movements. Bypassing Tobruk was one thing, and something Streich had real doubts about. It was difficult enough to get fuel and supplies up to the fighting units as it stood, and with the Australians holed up in Tobruk, there was always a threat they would break out and raise havoc if the Germans moved too far east.

For some days now the British seemed to have no stomach for battle, withdrawing first to Bardia and Sollum, and then yielding those positions to move further east. Now the Germans had come up against a new division, the 2nd New Zealanders, and they looked to be well dug in and prepared to make a stand. They spent a day moving units up and reconnoitering the situation, seeing that this was the place the British had determined to make their last stand. About 30 kilometers due south of Bug Bug on the coast, the long escarpment that had formed Wavell's castle wall in the desert made a dog led at its farthest point from the sea, and then extended northeast in the general direction of Sidi Barani.

Just south of this dog leg the ground was very bad for armor and vehicles, with numerous silted depressions in some places, and hard rocky ground in others. There were also several hills and ridge lines that formed natural defensive barriers, and it was here that the 2nd New Zealand Division had been placed on defense. The remnant of 2nd Armored was held behind the lines of entrenched infantry to act as a fire brigade, and the position looked very strong to Streich. His troops were tired, his tanks needed maintenance, and there was always too little fuel to go around.

"Move south? Again?"

"I will not be handed a battle of attrition at Tobruk," said Rommel stolidly. "If the enemy is there it is because that is where he wants me to attack him. Well I will not oblige him. Instead I plan to swing around the flank of that division like this." He pointed to the map, his finger tracing out

the route he had in mind.

“Bir el Khamsa,” said Rommel. “The roads meet there, and beyond it is a British railhead in the making near Mishiefa, which we can use. They are extending the rail line from Mersa Matruh to that place, so it looks to be a big supply center. There is your gasoline, Streich. Sidi el Razig and Bir Thalata will be your primary objectives. It is presently undefended, and this whole area is only being screened by light reconnaissance units. Once we take that we will be in a good position to cut the rail line operation and outflank any planned defense of Sidi Barani.”

“Then you are not going to attack up the main road here?”

“Not directly. I’ll give that job to the Italian Ariete Division.”

“The Italians?”

“Yes, they won’t break through, but it will serve as a nice demonstration while we maneuver, as before. 15th Panzer will lead this envelopment, we will follow with 5th Light. Once we appear well behind the enemy on his flank, those infantry will think twice about holding on to their entrenchments. We will do with gasoline what might otherwise cost us men and material.”

“Assuming we have the gasoline!” Streich objected.

“Take what you need from non-essential vehicles, the flak batteries, except the 88s. They will be useful in case the British have more of those Matildas at hand.”

“But sir… Yes, we can probably move another 25 kilometers to Bir el Khamsa, but when we get there we will be wanting fuel, water, food, all left behind in this maneuver. Why not wait for the supply columns to come up and replenish before we make this turning action? That way, when we do reach Sidi Razig, there will still be gasoline in the tanks to do something more.”

“The longer we wait, the more time we give the British to regain their balance,” said Rommel. “This is their last division of any consequence.”

“Yes, but it won’t do us any good to get strung out in the desert again here. Keitel messaged us yesterday to say he is landing the 90th light at Tripoli. Each move we make like this also extends our seaward flank to the enemy. It is being covered by the Ariete Division, but they can only do so much. If you move another twenty or thirty kilometers east, we’ll have to post flak batteries to hold that flank.”

“Don’t worry about that. Do you honestly think the British are going to

come out from behind that escarpment and try to attack us there?”

“There is always the possibility.”

“Nonsense!” Rommel was tired of bickering with Streich. The man had been dragging his feet for some days now, since Michili, when he had flatly refused an order to attack that vital British supply depot and airfield for these same reasons. That led Rommel to call him a coward to his face, and Streich had been so infuriated that he tore off the Knight’s Cross he had recently been awarded and demanded an apology or he would throw it at Rommel’s feet. Since then there was little love between the two men, and less cooperation. Rommel had decided to replace the man, but he was here now, and he would have to push him if he wanted to get anything done.

“Listen, Streich, I am not asking for an opinion here. This is what we are going to do. You have your orders. Are you going to disobey your commanding officer yet again and bellyache about gasoline? That Knight’s Cross around your neck only goes so far. I have one as well, along with the Blue Max. Haven’t you noticed?”

Streich tightened his jaw, clearly unhappy. “Only too well,” he said sullenly. “Very well, Herr General, I will do as you ask. And when my tanks and vehicles run out of gasoline, we’ll ask the British if they can spare us any!”

Rommel gave him a wan smile. “Don’t ask politely, Streich, just go and take it from them. Now get moving! And remember, you were given that medal for following my orders and carrying them out successfully, not for disobeying them. I don’t command by committee here. I am *Befehlshaber* of the Afrika Korps. Understand?”

The action started the following morning, even as Fedorov began the reconnaissance mission with Kinlan and O’Connor. 8th Panzer Regiment of the 15th Panzer Division led the way, running into a few Morris armored cars and light infantry carriers of the 9th Australian Cav, posted to this flank well away from their division, which was north behind the escarpment. The Aussies fell back, joining the cavalry elements of the 2nd New Zealand that were also there to watch that flank. I/8th Panzers had 27 Panzer IIIH, and 18 lighter Panzer IIF tanks, which was more than enough to outgun the armored cars, and Bir el Khamsa fell that afternoon. The Germans were now about 12 kilometers from Mishiefa air field, screened by the imposing height of hill 748 and some old ruins that were so common in the desert, the crumbled forts

and towers of empires long gone.

Rommel was up to his old habits again, leaving the bulk of his headquarters staff behind and moving forward in a few light Kubelwagons with two or three handpicked officers. He had acquired a big armored British truck which the Germans had taken to calling the Malmut, or ‘Mammoth,’ but he found it too cumbersome during a battle. When an engagement began he was tireless, forsaking food, sleep, and even water to make certain the action was proceeding according to his plan. Learning that Bir el Khamsa had fallen, he was headed in that direction, intending to make it his HQ location for that night.

Along the way three British *Hurricanes* swooped down to strafe his column, but his men sustained no casualties and all the vehicles remained in working condition. He reached the small well, which was little more than a cistern tucked away in the desert camelthorn scrub, and a few untended cultivation plots where itinerate tribesmen had once thought to grow something.

That evening there was still fighting up ahead, and I/8th Panzer managed to get tanks around Hill 230, only to find that a British Machinegun Battalion was there at another small well site called Bir Arnab. It was also learned that the old ruins five kilometers to the southeast at Makhzan el Talat were also occupied by the 28th Maori Infantry Battalion, a tough, determined band that was to become the most decorated battalion in the New Zealand Army before the war was over.

Hauptmann Hans Kummel had the 1st Company in the 8th Panzer Regiment, and reported back that the ground ahead was strongly held, and there was no light for an attack, and even less fuel. His lead Panzer IIs were down to 30% and the Medium Panzer IIIs were equally dry. He had enough to attack, but thought they should wait until morning, given he had what looked to be two full battalions in front of him now.

Rommel knew that Kummel was no slouch, nor was the Regimental commander, Oberstleutnant Cramer. When the British decided to stand and fight, the Germans had learned to be a little cautious. The first commander of the 15th Panzer Division, von Prittwitz, also a holder of the Blue Max, had charged off to scout an artillery firing position for the Italians near Tobruk and was killed instantly when a hidden British 2 Pounder anti tank gun put a round right through his chest. If Kummel wanted to wait, then Rommel

decided he had better have a look for himself.

Just after sunset he moved forward to scout the enemy position, satisfying himself that it had indeed been heavily reinforced. His instinct was to continue to jog right, outflanking the defense, but each move like that forced him to leave elements of his division along the extended front, diluting his combat power at the point of that maneuver. To make matters worse, the motorcycle reconnaissance troops of 200th Kradschutzen from 15th Panzer Division had reported back that the hill he had hoped to reach the following day was now being strongly occupied by what looked to be a full brigade of infantry.

“A brigade?” he asked the Leutnant reporting. “Are you certain your eyes are not playing tricks? Where would the British get yet another brigade to throw on the line?”

“These did not appear to be British troops, Herr General. They looked to be Poles from the unit markings and flags we observed.”

“Poles?” Rommel shook his head. “Didn’t they get enough back in ’39? Very well, you may return to your battalion. But I want that position scouted again at dawn. Move out before sunrise.”

The unit was, in fact, the Carpathian Infantry Brigade, which was Wavell’s last reserve. It had been moving up from the vicinity of Mersa Matruh, and had reached the scene at a most opportune time, for the report gave Rommel pause and he decided to wait until morning before pressing the attack further.

Streich will be happy, he thought. He can siphon some petrol from his flack units and dust off his tank tracks. Then he set about to see how much of his division was within arm’s reach. He would collect what he could and plan his attack for the following morning. It would be a long and sleepless night, and Rommel was upset that things were not going as he had planned. Somehow the British had managed to read his intentions and stolidly move blocking forces into position to frustrate him.

I should go right around them, he thought, but the more he circulated among his troops, the more he came to hear the same complaint. They were running low on fuel. The movement east from the Egyptian border had already taken them nearly a hundred kilometers on fuel tanks that weren’t topped off when they started. The Panzer III Medium tanks that constituted his primary striking force for maneuver had a range of about 165 kilometers,

and now they needed fuel. Streich had been correct, as much as Rommel hated to admit that. So he issued orders that all non-essential vehicles should be cannibalized for fuel to support the combat elements, and he would take the night to catch his breath and prepare a renewed offensive for the following morning.

"Where is that Hungarian?" Rommel looked over his shoulder, rattling the old map he had been brooding over.

"You mean the Sonderkommando?"

"I want him to have a look south and east tonight to see where the enemy flank is. The British cannot have very much more to throw at us. Something tells me this is the end for them. This Hungarian has good desert eyes, does he not? Send for him at once."

* * *

The man with good desert eyes was the enigmatic figure of Hauptmann László Almásy, commander of an elite unit of long range scouts operating with Rommel's force, the Sonderkommando. Almásy knew these deserts well, and had explored them before the war when he launched several expeditions with other British explorers to search for a legendary lost Oasis in the Libyan desert called Zerzura. The place was rumored to be a fertile, hidden valley, accessible only through a hidden wadi that ran between two mountains. There it had been reported that strange men held forth, tall, blue eyed and with very unusual speech and weapons. One legend held that they were Crusading knights who had become lost in the desert on the way to Jerusalem, and founded a city of bleached white stone that ran with fresh water from hidden springs and wells, the fabled land of Zerzura.

Almásy had searched for it in 1932 and the spring of 1933, and had also crossed the Great Sand Sea, and explored the other well known oasis sites like Kufra, Bayhira, Giarabub and Siwa. He was the Deutsche Afrika Korps' answer and foil to men like Popski and the British Long Range Desert Group, and had actually worked with many of the men now serving in those units before the war. He met and traveled with Godfrey Jones Penderel, a WWI ace who was presently flying reconnaissance with No. 201 Group R.A.F., and Sir Patrick Clayton, who became the official surveyor of the Libyan Desert and later joined the L.R.D.G.

Almásy did not know it at the time, but at that very moment, Major Clayton was out with T Patrol with 30 men and 11 trucks of the L.R.D.G., in a planned operation against the Italian Held Kufra Oasis. His small band would be spotted by an Italian airplane, and soon engaged by a much larger force of the Italian Auto Saharan Company, and Clayton would be wounded and captured that very morning.

The intrepid Hungarian arrived at Rommel's command tent just after midnight, eager to get new orders directly from the General.

"Here," said Rommel, fingering his map. "The Carpathian Brigade was seen in this area. I want you to get over there tonight and have a good look around. But take your time. Move south with the other Oasis Patrols, and see what you find. Note the condition of the ground. Find the enemy flank, and then find me a way to move east around their left shoulder. I'm told you're a man of some experience in these deserts. You should know what to do."

Hauptmann Almásy saluted, assuring Rommel he would return before dawn, and that he had every confidence that he could find an easy way around the enemy flank.

It was the last thing he ever said that he thought he could be sure of, for this would not be another simple night reconnaissance for his Sonderkommando. The border zone he was about to scout now was the edge of oblivion, and the enemy looming like a vast shadow on that frontier were apparitions from another world.

Chapter 14

The desert seemed endless to Lieutenant Reeves of the 12th Royal Lancers. He had been here twelve months, and still could not grasp the enormity of all the desolation around him. There was nothing in the desert, except the occasional camelthorn, weathered limestone, sandy salt marshes, camel dung and the inevitable hordes of black flies. It was no place for any sane man to be, and even less so now, with this impossible news that had just been laid on all the battalion commanders.

Insane… This was the way he felt inside now, empty, desolate, thunderstruck to the point of madness. The meeting he had just had with Brigadier Kinlan had left him slack jawed with disbelief. All the other battalion commanders had reacted the very same way, amazed and perplexed with what the General was telling them.

Something had happened when the Russians attacked them, some unaccountable exotic effects of the nuclear detonation. That was the way he had tried to explain it. There was blast, radiation, electromagnetic pulse—all three well known and guarded against. But this was something altogether different. This was an effect on time itself, the fourth dimension. The detonation caused displacement in time for a limited quantity of mass within the effect radius.

Displacement in time!

He shook his head, still dazed with the news, hearing Kinlan's words like an echo in his mind. *"… It's happened to the Russians themselves, who knows how, but that's how they lost that battlecruiser in the Norwegian Sea. We all heard about the suspected accident there—a nuclear accident. We all knew they lost that Oscar class sub, and the word was that Kirov went down with it, but that was not so. The damn ship turned up in the Pacific a month later. Well, here's some more news for you. This Russian Marine detachment Reeves collared with that KA-40 was commanded by the Captain of that very same ship! He was the one who put this explanation forward. I thought it was a load of rubbish just like you must now, but the evidence has been mounting*

with each passing hour, and it leads to only one conclusion. Sultan Apache, the odd differences in moon phase and star data, the loss of all satellite and comm-links—it's all adding up to only one thing—time displacement. It's happened to us, gentlemen, and from everything we've been able to piece together at Brigade HQ, we've been blown clean out of the 21st Century! We figure the date and time now is the 2nd of February… in the year 1941!"

That had been greeted by blank stares, an uncomfortable shift in posture from the men assembled, a smile from others who thought Kinlan was just trying to lighten the mood before the brigade set out on what was likely to be its last road march. But it was no joke.

General Kinlan knew he had to tell the men something before they moved north with the prospect of battle before them. Yet he could not tell them everything, just as the Russian Captain had urged. Some would have to know, but not to the whole rank and file. They would learn just as the crew of that ship learned the hard truth. In the end he decided to limit the news to his senior officers. He had to place faith in their training and discipline, and hope for the best. He made an all points announcement stating they had been informed of enemy activity ahead, a large unidentified force attempting to block their move north. He said they were using antiquated equipment, but that there was a lot of it, tanks, artillery and anti-tank guns. "Who knows," he concluded, "maybe it's Rommel and his Afrika Korps."

He had tried to be a bit light hearted about it, saying they had also encountered Russians, but determined them to be no threat. They were apparently traveling with British officers, and should be treated as friendly. Then his voice became more serious and he related the disturbing news concerning Sultan Apache, saying it was a matter they were still looking into. That got quite a few men scratching their heads, but they gave it little mind and buckled down for action as any good soldiers would. Reeves heard the announcement over his comm-link command set radio, as did every man in his unit. He knew much more—the full briefing from Kinlan still clawing at him within, but he could not be forthcoming with the men just yet. He had been handed the job of going out to obtain the final evidence on all this.

"If any of this is true," Kinlan had told him, *"then you should run into the German Army out there somewhere. Take your battalion north and scout well ahead of the main column. I want to know what we're looking at here, no ifs, ands, or buts about it. I don't want photographs or thermal imaging data, I*

want flesh and blood men, and the cold hard steel of a vehicle. You're the best in the business, Reeves. Get this done…"

"How you figure that?" said Sergeant Williams, a voice suddenly filling the void within him and bringing Reeves back to this impossible here and now. "The whole place gone?"

"What? You mean Sultan Apache? The Russkies must have hit it again," Reeves answered sullenly. It was the only thing he could think of to explain the situation.

"The General said there was no sign of another attack. You heard it—they went over the site and detected no radiation. No blast damage either."

"Sounds loony to me," said Reeves. "Maybe he got his grid coordinates wrong. General Kinlan is no fool, mind you, but something just doesn't add up here. So that's where we come in. When brigade wants information, who do they call? 12th Royal Lancers, that's who. So tighten your chin straps, boyo, and be sharp."

"Yeah? Well that bit about keeping our eyes peeled for enemy ground troops was rich. Keep a look out for Rommel and the Germans, eh? And we advance in battle order instead of column of march? It certainly sounds like the General knows something he hasn't told us yet."

"Oh, he told us alright," said Reeves. "Battalion officers were briefed, but none of that falls on you, Sergeant. You just settle affairs here on squad level. We're 12th Royals and were out on point. I'll want the Scimitars up front this time, three squadrons in battle order, and we'll follow with the Dragons in the center. Pass the word. I want thermals and night opticals at all times. Report any contact to me directly."

Four hours later Reeves got his first report, and from a bemused Sergeant in 2nd Squadron who sighted light vehicles ahead. They had encountered a desert patrol of some kind, and Reeves ordered his men to move up in their Scimitars and see about it. What they saw soon boggled their eyes, and quashed the rounds of humorous comments about General Kinlan's briefing. The men had a good long laugh as they set out before dawn, but just before sunrise the laughter stopped, drowned out by incoming tracer rounds from heavy machineguns.

As was so often the case in desert war, the recon elements of the two opposing sides were the first to tangle with one another. Reeves listened to the chatter between his units on his headset, and soon learned that 3rd

Squadron on point had also run into something. When his men came under fire he gave the order to return in kind, thinking they had run across groups of irregular militias riding about in SUVs and pickup trucks, out to raise havoc and then disappear into the desert again. But here? What would they be doing so far south of the coast? Then he got news that really raised an eyebrow, and reminded him that there were no SUVs if this was 1941. Lieutenant Wright radioed in from the left flank in 2nd Squadron and said he had prisoners.

"More bloody Russians?" Reeves inquired.

"No sir… well Lieutenant… It's bloody Germans, just like Kinlan said! I have five men here, all decked out in old style German army uniforms. I interrogated the lot, but haven't the foggiest. Sprechen sie Deutsch?"

"Germans? Somebody playing army out here again?"

"They had a Kubelwagon, right out of the museum, and a nasty 50 Caliber MG on it. I had to use the main autocannon, and that was that. The rest gave us the hands up soon after, but one vehicle took off north and slipped away."

"Very well," said Reeves, wondering how he was going to keep this cat in the bag. "Stick them in one of the support vehicles, and keep moving. Secure that long ridge line up ahead and wait there. I'll be up to have a look. Reeves out."

A Kubelwagon with a 50-cal? That was a new spin. He'd bet get one of those back to Kinlan. They were accustomed to Ford pickup trucks with old ZSU 23's mounted in the back, but this was a first. He reported, surprised by Kinlan's subsequent order to stop at Ridge 699 and wait for the Mercian Battalion to come up. Then he was to jog left, set up all his Squadrons in attack echelon, and wait for the Highlanders to come up on his right. The General was playing it by the book. He was deploying the whole damn brigade in battle formation! It was as if he thought we were about to tangle with a full enemy division out there somewhere.

They were about to do exactly that…

* * *

Hauptmann László Almásy crested the barren desert hill that morning, and he was late. Almásy had been scouting on the extreme southern right flank of Rommel's advance, with his Sonderkommando unit comprised if 12

scout cars and a few squads of light infantry. Another patrol, the 3rd Oasis Group, had been reconnoitering near an ancient tomb site near Gabr el Shubaki when they thought they saw the telltale signs of vehicles approaching from the south. Almásy heard about it, and one look at his map told him he could scout the area well from the top of this hill, number 728, about ten kilometers due east of the tomb. He would be late reporting back to Rommel, but at least he would have the very latest information in hand when he did. He reached the hill he had in mind just before dawn, in spite of the fact that his scout cars were also very low on fuel, and he wondered if he would have enough to get back north.

So it was that the famous Hungarian explorer would come to make a new discovery that morning, and see a strange group of men, tall, strangely attired, and with weapons the like of which no man alive in his world had ever known. The sun rose, painting the stark desert terrain in a rosy hue, and the light soon illuminated the whole valley floor to the south. To his amazement, there, stretching for many kilometers in a long dark column, was a large mechanized force. He could clearly make out eight wheeled armored cars in the vanguard, and behind them he could see tanks. There were other odd looking vehicles, topped with strange metal discs spinning fitfully, and whiskery antennae waving in the morning breeze as the column slowly came to a halt.

What he had seen was actually Reeves 12th Royal Lancers, the eight wheeled Dragons and a line of Scimitars in 2nd Squadron that was now following. The Scimitar was a vehicle that bore some resemblance to what Almásy would conceive of as a tank of this era. Even the 30mm RARDEN cannon looked to be about the size and scale of a typical 2 Pounder. Had he seen a Challenger II, his mind might be on other things now, but as it stood, the presence of this force was enough to get him moving again.

Good god, he thought. What unit was this? It looked to be at least another full battalion in strength, and he could already begin to hear the rattle of the tanks rolling over the cold desert ground. I have to get word of this to Rommel!

“Hans!” he rasped. “Get to the nearest radio. No time to get back there. Tell Rommel we have visitors! That looks to be a battalion of British armor out there, and it’s heading north, right on our exposed right flank!”

László Almásy had never really found the lost realm of Zerzura, but he

had just discovered something that was about to change the entire history of the Second World War. And his fate, in the maelstrom that was now emerging from the vermillion shadows of a distant ridge, would be the least of things to be taken by the storm.

* * *

Rommel reacted to the news with great surprise. A British armor battalion? Behind him? Yet the evidence was plain for him to see. The lone scout car from a small oasis patrol had come barreling in on its last legs just moments ago. The back end of the vehicle was shot to pieces by what looked to be a round in the caliber of a twenty to thirty millimeter flak gun. It might have been exactly that, he thought. The British had been throwing together small ad hoc columns, like a German kampfgruppe might be formed. They would scrape together whatever they could find, trucks, stray tanks, a few flak guns, or a single towed artillery piece.

They must have run into one of the British Jock Columns, he thought, smiling. His signalmen had picked up the phrase on radio intercepts, though he did not yet know where the handle came from. The men of the Oasis patrol were wide eyed with reports of new, fast moving British tanks that could engage from very long ranges and seemed to have eyes in every direction.

“Their optics must be superb,” one man had reported. “They hit us from well over two kilometers—and well before dawn! The moon was down and it was still very dark. We lost three vehicles in the first minute, and I was only lucky to have escaped because I was at the back of the column and had the good sense to get here with this report!”

Almásy’s report had come in soon after, a battalion sized force of tanks and armored cars was on his deep right flank. How could this have happened without him knowing about it earlier? That damn sand storm, he muttered inwardly. It had prevented him from getting airborne in the Storch to make certain he would not suffer a surprise like this. Thank god I had the foresight to send that Hungarian out last night. It seemed his enemy had more forces at his disposal than Berlin claimed. The German spy network in Cairo had informed him of the arrival of the 2nd New Zealand Division, but not this other formation. Angry at himself as much as anything else, he stormed out,

leaving his adjutant standing there with two staff officers. They had seen him do this many times, and knew the General was going off to war, and might not be found again for hours.

Yet Rommel was still not entirely convinced this could be much of a threat. He knew Almásy was a reliable man, a skilled observer, and one who knew these deserts like the back of his hand, but he wanted to see for himself. “Tanks” was a fairly broad category these days. He had Panzers labeled one thru four in his own division, and the British had things from the light Mark VI machine gun tankettes, to the heavy Matilda infantry support tanks. So he leapt into a nearby Kubelwagon, collaring a driver, and sped off towards the highest ground he could find, the hills above the ruined tomb southeast of Bir el Khamsa. From that height he should be able to see anything moving on the desert to the south, particularly any sizable force, which should be kicking up a lot of dust by now.

When he got there, his surprise was complete. Almásy was correct! This was a fast, mechanized force, and he could clearly see armor just behind the leading fan of armored cars, which looked to be something new as far as he could tell through his field glasses. The mutter of small arms fire and the distant rattle of a machine gun told him this force was still sweeping through the thin cordon of desert patrols, small platoons of his oasis groups that had been screening this sector.

“Damn!” he swore aloud. “This Wavell has more guts than I realized. Turnabout is fair play, or so it seems. This must be all the armor he could scrape together, and he’s sent it in a wide enveloping maneuver, just as I would have done. He’s beaten me to the punch!”

His spies had also told him that the British 7th Armored Division, the force that had been the undoing of the Italians a month earlier, was also refitting near Alexandria. Could they be ready for battle so soon? Was this the 7th Armored, appearing like a mad Jinn on his flank just as his battalions were moving into the dawn attack he had ordered? Now he would have to call off that attack and quickly disengage. Cursing, he rushed back down the hill to the vehicles waiting below, and was quickly on the radio.

“Streich! Never mind the attack! Get your tanks south of Bir el Khamsa, and form as many Kampfgruppen as you can. We have uninvited guests for breakfast!”

Streich was incensed. His men had just fought a hot action to storm the

230 meter hill overshadowing Bir Arnab, Now he was being ordered to give it back to the enemy, disengage, and regroup 15 to 20 kilometers to the south, a maneuver he had not factored into his careful fuel rations. He bawled this over the radio until Rommel cursed at him and told him to be silent and do what he had ordered. Then he acted, with skill and determination in spite of his rising anger.

This headstrong General already had the entire Afrika Korps strung out for nearly a hundred kilometers from Sollum to Bir el Khamsa. In places that long front was being screened by small detachments of flak batteries, their gasoline plundered to feed the hungry maneuver elements. Meanwhile, without their defensive AA umbrella, the troops were being increasingly harassed by enemy aircraft. The British seemed to sense that if they were to lose this battle, Egypt might ride in the balance. They were throwing everything they had at Rommel now, beating troops to quarter from every corner of their empire. They had even managed to field this Carpathian infantry that appeared so suddenly at dusk the previous evening.

Orders were one thing, but disengaging from a forward action and re-directing that effort 180 degrees to a new axis was no small matter. The Germans were disciplined, skilled troops, and managed to extricate their valuable tank battalions and get them headed south. Rommel had the 8th Machinegun battalion in reserve, which would form the nucleus of one Kampfgruppe. Streich put together another with I/5 Panzer Battalion supported by the division reconnaissance unit. A third kampfgruppe was formed with the Division Pioneer battalion and II/5 Panzer. There was plenty of artillery around to support all three while still keeping suppressive fire on the British position.

“Let them think we’re reorganizing for another attack,” Streich told his subordinates. We’ll finish off this British unit to our south first, and be back by noon to do just that—assuming I have any gasoline to get here! Then we’ll finish the job with this New Zealand Division.”

Confidence was a good thing in a commanding officer, but Streich was wrong, and by noon that day the situation would look a good deal different than anything he could imagine.

Chapter 15

Rommel was not the only man up on a hill top that morning with a good pair of field glasses. Lieutenant Reeves had come forward to look over the scene of the night engagement, surprised to see what looked to be authentic German Kubelwagons from WWII. They even had a mud slurry finish and light markings in typical German insignia. The German cross was very evident. Someone could have dug one of these old warriors up in this desert, he thought. Lord knows there's a good many old wrecks from the war still out here. But this was not an old, rusting hulk. It looked to be in perfect working order, except for the holes his Scimitars had blown through it with their 30mm cannons. Otherwise it might be described as being in mint condition, something that would be very rare in 2021.

But it wasn't 2021, or so he had been told. It was supposed to be 1941, and in that year the presence and condition of this vehicle would make perfect sense—not to mention the five German soldiers he had stowed away in an enclosed FV432! *German* soldiers, not Libyans, not Egyptians, not Berbers… Kinlan had sent him out here to look for the hard evidence of what this Russian Captain had been telling them, and damn if he didn't have the first bit in hand at this very moment.

So he went up to the ridge he had ordered his Scimitars to wait behind, and took a good long look to scout the position with human eyes. He did not like what he was seeing. There was a strong defensive position forming, with one flank anchored by what looked to be a line of hastily emplaced guns. Their profile was quite prominent, but he could see camo netting going up and troops digging in to create some semblance of cover for the heavy guns. What was even more disturbing was the nagging thought that refused to silence itself now. The barrels on those guns were leveled for close in action, not elevated as artillery might be. Those were anti-tank guns, and for all the world they looked like…. German 88s! They were being screened with infantry digging in to good positions on stony ground. It was not a position he would approach without heavy tank support or artillery preparation. The skin on his Dragons and Scimitars was not thick enough, even with armor module additions, to reliably stop a round from an 88.

Lord almighty, he thought. Am I actually seeing this? Everything I've seen since I picked up that Popski fellow is evidence that all points in the same direction. I haven't seen a single thing out here that I could reliably date to the 21st Century. Looks like we've really done what this Russian Captain said, and slipped right down the rabbit hole! And if those are 88s we're going to need tanks up here, and soon.

* * *

The sun washed over the Panzer III tanks of the 1st Battalion, 5th Panzer Regiment where they waited in concealed positions beyond a low rise. When they arrived in Libya the vehicles had been painted the deep charcoal grey of Panzer Grau in color, but they had been quickly repainted in the light yellow orange and tan hues of Gelbbraun, which would make them very difficult to see in the ruddy early morning sun. They still bore the runic symbol that had identified them when serving with the 3rd Panzer Division—new clothes, but an old heritage in this strange new battlescape unlike any other in the war. The armored cars of the 3rd Recon Battalion had launched into action too soon off the docks at Tripoli, and had to settle for mud slurry to cover their darker paint scheme so they could blend in on the sere grey and sallow tan terrain.

These were the first available troops to arrive at the line Rommel had selected to greet the incoming British attack. As 15th Panzer had borne the brunt of the fighting in his attempted envelopment of Bir Arnab the previous day, it would fall to Streich and the 5th Light to answer the call this day. The division was designated "light" for a good reason. While it had two Panzer battalions as any other Panzer Division might, it was light on infantry. Instead of two Panzergrenadier regiments of three battalions each, it had only one, designated the 200th Schutzen Regiment, with the 2nd and 8th Machinegun Battalions. It also had a pioneer battalion in reserve, and Rommel had bolstered it by assigning a number of his 88mm dual purpose flak batteries, adopting a defensive posture that he would make famous in one telling of this war.

German doctrine differed markedly from British tactics when it came to armored warfare. The Germans seemed to master the art of combined arms and maneuver almost instinctively, and their command system made them a

highly flexible, adaptable force. Within hours of Rommel's pointed orders to Streich, three Kampfgruppen had been assembled to face the oncoming attack. Rommel knew that the British would be tank hunting with their armor, and if they were bold enough to launch such an attack, they most likely had Matildas with them, the one tank the German guns had trouble penetrating with their lighter caliber guns.

But the Germans did not see their own tanks as the primary foil against the British Armor. Tanks were for maneuver, exploitation, and shock against enemy infantry and artillery positions, not for dueling it out with other enemy armor. The primary weapon they would deploy against enemy tanks were the Panzerjagers with their AT guns and, in this case, the division battalion was augmented by three batteries of the formidable 88s, the very same guns Lieutenant Reeves had scouted.

The line faced south, and the 605th PzJager Battalion had twelve PzJ-I self-propelled 47mm AT guns on the extreme left of the position. They were good enough to deal with the light British Mark VI MG tanks, and could bother any of their existing cruiser tanks as well. At ranges of 500 to 600 meters, the gun could penetrate 45 to 50mm of armor, good enough to beat the 30mm armor of the British Mark II A-10 Cruisers. If the Matilda's led the attack, with heavier 70mm armor, then the 88s would answer the call.

Designed as an anti-aircraft weapon against high altitude targets, the 88 had become a superb anti-tank weapon. In fact, the expression bomber crews used to describe the sharp burst of fire and explosive wrath of the gun, "Ack-Ack," was a mangling of the German "Acht-Acht" for the number eighty-eight. it was Rommel who would seal the 88's legacy as a 'dual purpose' gun. The wide open spaces of the desert, devoid of trees or other covering terrain, made the 88 an ideal weapon for long range AT fire. It was a big static gun, on a heavy, unwieldy carriage weighing over 7000 pounds, and so it had to be transported to the battle site and set up, but by now the Germans had mastered the deployment of the weapons and honed it to a fine art. They could unlimber and deploy in under three minutes.

The gun's one liability on that big flak carriage was that it presented a very high profile, but it made up for that by being able to outrange any tank gun it might face. Against aircraft it could hit targets flying as high as 39,000 feet, and when the long steel barrel was leveled for ground target action, its range was an astonishing 7600 meters, though gunners seldom could see or

hit a target that far away. Tanks of that day might only reach good firing ranges at 1000 meters or less. The 88 could penetrate 84mm of armor at twice that range, and up close, the powerful gun could smash through up to 200mm of armor, an armor thickness that no British tank of this era would ever attain. Rommel had proved the weapon's virtue in France at Arras, where he used his 88 batteries to stop the British armor. Today it would be no different, or so he believed when he ordered the guns south to meet the oncoming attack.

Out in front of the 88 batteries were the hardened troops of the machinegun battalions, ready to cut down any infantry that might be moving in support, though the British seldom used combined arms at this stage of the war. They massed their tank formations and used them like armored cavalry, bold dragoons in the desert, charging against the enemy line.

Streich was out on Hill 222 with a light 37mm flak battery posted to defend a small section of three 150mm howitzers. He slid his sand goggles up onto his forehead and raised his field glasses, frowning when he saw the dust being kicked up by the enemy armored vehicles, perhaps ten to twelve kilometers distant. He shook his head. The fools, he thought. They're late! They should have hit us just before sunrise when all that rosy red dust would not be visible. It's a miracle I was able to get my Kampfgruppen re-established on this line but, now that we're here, the British will pay the piper!

He called back to the main artillery group. Well behind him and set up to provide suppressive fires that he would be calling in. If the British were planning one of their little tank charges, they'll get a dose of that artillery first, he thought. Then the 88s will settle the matter, and I'll order my tanks to swing left and hit their flank. This should be over in an hour.

There was a long, thin desert track that ran to the left of a sinuous wadi that rooted its way down from the hill he was on. That would serve as a nice anti-tank ditch for anything they send up that road, and it was well covered by another hill designated 198, where four 88s had been positioned. So they'll have to move to their right, away from that wadi, under fire from my 88s the whole time. He smiled. All these years in Egypt and the British still couldn't read a map! There was no way they could push armor up that road and live to tell about it. The wadi funneled the track toward an old dry well site called Qabr el Shubaki on his map, and a crumbled stone tomb marked the place. His men had scouted it the previous evening when he first got the

order to re-deploy here from that irascible braggart, Rommel.

To the left of the tomb from his perspective, there was a sharp rise that pointed directly at his position. That would hinder tank movement in that direction as well. They'll have to flow around either side if it, and won't be able to support one another as they do so. Once they do flow around it, they'll be right in front of my infantry position, nice stony ground that will slow them down about 1500 meters out.

The sound of vehicles came to him on the cool morning air now, a faint, distant rumble that was growing in strength and power with each passing moment. They're coming, he thought, looking at his watch. Another ten minutes and we should be able to make out the lead vehicles.

"Pass the word to the artillery," he said to the Leutnant commanding the small battery he had posted here. "Your guns start the show. In ten minutes I want you to start spotting rounds on either side of that ridge. See? The main battalions will fire for effect on my command."

They were coming.

Tanks.

Other vehicles were behind them, but nothing that he had seen the British use before. What are they? Matildas? He could not quite see in the dust and ruddy red light of the dawn. They were moving fast… too fast for Matildas, but too big to be anything else.

He looked at his watch again.

* * *

The leading tanks of 3rd Sabre, Scotts Dragoon Guards, 15 Challenger IIs, had been ordered to move ahead when Reeves reported his long range imaging had identified a considerable force ahead, many gun positions, in a line stretching several kilometers!

It had to be the bloody Egyptian Army this time, thought 1st Lieutenant William Bowers in the lead Challenger II, and he made his report… But with German mercenaries fighting with them? How did they know we would be making this march to Mersa Matruh? How could they have found us here, and deployed like this so efficiently? It wasn't like the Egyptian Army at all. They had not shown this kind of aggressive pluck for many months.

Then the uncomfortable alternative he had been avoiding asserted itself.

He had been in on the briefing with General Kinlan, yet found it all too much to swallow. Now Reeves was reporting gun emplacements, infantry, even artillery setting up for a fight. What if these weren't mercenaries, he thought? What if they're the real thing?

He decided to try and get more confirmation, got on the radio, and keyed Reeves call sign. "Sabre One to Royal Lance. Do you copy? Over."

"Royal Lance here. Copy your signal Sabre One."

"What's the story on that position out there Johnny? Have we got rag heads, rabble, or the Kaiser's brood?"

"Wrong war, Bill," Reeves familiar voice returned. *"You're looking at 88 millimeter AT guns on your left, good infantry screen. Better let the RHA in on this one before you lead in the Mercian Battalion. That 88 is not anything to trifle with."*

"Didn't know the bloody Egyptian Army was using those," said Bowers, fishing. There was a long pause, then Reeves came back again.

"Didn't expect that either," he said. *"But seeing is believing. You heard what the General said same as I did. Let's leave it at that."*

"Good enough Johnny. Bowers out."

Well, let's see what they want to do when I move my Sabre up. If they have these guns they will be dug in to either side of that hill. I'd better call for the RHA to shake things up first like Reeves says. But after that I think my Challengers can fill out the dance card easily enough. That wadi is a nice little obstacle on my left. It funnels the attack right at the base of that hill. Once I get round that, those AT guns will have a good field of fire at us. Then again, I'll have the same, and I can move and fire on the go. So let's drop a few rounds to see what happens. The last thing those fellows out there expect is for me to come gunning up the side of that wadi—so that is exactly what I'm going to do!

He tapped his driver's shoulder to stop his Sabre, and put in a call for three rounds of artillery, warning fire. Usually that had been enough to send any irregular force scrambling for their SUVs and hi-tailing it into the desert, and he watched as the first 155s came in, deliberately short, right in front of the hill… one… two… three…

The Desert Rats had just thrown their hat into the ring, and Bowers waited, watching his optics screen closely for signs of retrograde movement that he expected. What he got instead was somewhat of a surprise. The

enemy, whoever they were out there, answered those opening three rounds with three of their own, right across that sharp ridge that pointed at the enemy position. Streich and his three 150s had answered the challenge.

He got on the radio and reported to Kinlan at Brigade HQ as ordered. “Sir,” he said, the surprise evident in his voice. “They’re answering with artillery.”

“Very well, Lieutenant. Hold your position. The RHA will be clearing its throat in another minute. Standby.”

Well to the rear, the self-propelled guns of the Royal Horse Artillery were about to increase the tempo and send in a full salvo. Bowers was attached to lead in the Mercian Battalion on this flank, and they had sixteen AS-90s in support. The fireworks were about to begin.

Part VI

Lessons of War

"Experience is a hard teacher because she gives the test first, the lesson afterward."

— Vernon Law

Chapter 16

Aboard *Argos Fire* Captain MacRae noted the initial Russian attack with some interest. Their IFF coding, received from the Russian technicians, was enough to tell him what they had fired.

"Four of their P-900s," he said to Dean, "The same damn missiles that put *Princess Irene* under the Black Sea."

In spite of their newly forged pact with the Russians, he still harbored some resentment and bitterness over that attack. He knew his tankers were fair maritime targets, and that the war was firing up in all the world's key energy centers. They knew the risks when they first pointed their bows north to the Bosphorus. The Black Sea had been a Russian lake for decades. He expected opposition, and was not surprised when it came on the missiles that struck *Princess Irene*, but that didn't make things any easier.

Is that why you said nothing of your Aster-30 missiles, he asked himself. This Grand Alliance we've put together here will take some getting used to. The Russian Admiral seemed accommodating, a fair man, but the business end of his battlecruiser was just as deadly as ever. Dean soon informed him that the Russians had scored four hits.

"Batting 1000," he said. "Well let's see if we can do the same." By agreement they had decided to each commit four missiles to the initial barrage, with the Russians beginning. "Now we'll show them what our *Gealbhans* can do. Let the sparrows fly, ladies and gentlemen. Four missiles, just like our Russian friends."

The GB-7 was a new design, produced by Fairchild's company, and meant to be an upgrade to the British *Sea Eagle* missile. It was a hypersonic sea skimmer much like the deadly Russian *Sunburn* missile, and it put the fire into the ship's name to be sure. The missiles deployed from vertical silos that emerged when the covering deck panels opened like two large trap doors. Then the missiles fired, one canister of four, leaving MacRae another 20 missiles under the forward deck. He would have had more, but expended a number of missiles during the fighting in the Black Sea.

The results would be much the same. All the missiles found targets, with a hit on each of the three leading battleships, and one on the heavy cruiser *Pola*, which had taken up a position forward of *Conte Cavour*. *Argos Fire* was also batting a thousand, in a numbers game that was to be particularly one sided. The Italians saw the missiles coming, but this time no one with eyes could believe they were planes. This was something else, and rumors spread through the Italian fleet as fast as the fire was spreading through *Conte Cavour*. The battleship lost several boilers when secondary explosions below decks stoked the burning coals. The third hit by a Mach 3 missile blasting into her superstructure had given the ship a hard shudder, and it was steering off the line, speed falling off and in no condition to serve in the vanguard of the fleet.

MacRae waited, as per previous arrangement. They wanted to see if the Italians would still have the stomach for a fight after taking eight hits from an enemy no man among them had even laid eyes on.

* * *

Aboard *Littorio*, Admiral Iachino watched with growing dismay. Those were not British planes. Every report he was now receiving was describing the attackers as a kind of lightning quick rocket weapon. His lead battleship division had taken a fearful pounding, but there was no sign of any enemy ship on his horizon. How could the British have such weapons, and how could they see his fleet to even use them?

Now he dimly recalled the odd rumors of the German engagement in the north above Iceland. He had heard something about naval rocketry, but had given it little mind. Could this be what he was facing here? What else? The Greeks were certainly not out there shooting these amazing new weapons at his battleships. The question now was what could he do about it?

Iachino signaled Bergamini aboard *Cailo Duilio* for a status report. The ship was fighting bad fires in several places, but the encouraging report was that none of the magazines had been threatened, at least not yet, and all her guns were unharmed. He learned the same from the Captain of the *Andrea Doria*, which had only taken one hit, on the starboard side aft of the two stacks, and very near the secondary mast. The gun directors there had taken some damage, but the main turret was unharmed.

So we still have all our guns, thought Iachino, making a fateful decision. He considered waiting. He could report this attack to the other Axis fleets and see what they advised, but Italy had been bailed out of one action after another in the war, and hounded by the British in damn near every engagement. They've chased us out of the Horn of Africa, and destroyed the Tenth Army in Egypt and Libya, but not here. There's nothing wrong with our guns, if these rockets can find us, then the enemy must be very close. Perhaps they are using a submarine to spot for these new weapons. We shall see.

He gave the order to increase to battle speed, in spite of a protest from Bergamini, who claimed it would make it much more difficult to control his fires. But Iachino persisted, determined to get the enemy out there under his guns. As soon as we darken their horizon, I'll show them what my 15-inch guns can do.

Or so he thought….

* * *

Admiral Volsky had to decide what to do. He still had 28 SSMs, but this was only his first major engagement here. How long might this war go on? He knew the answer to that even as he posed the question. Italy would fight until Sicily was invaded and occupied in mid-1943, more than two long years away. Those 28 missiles represented overwhelming power at this moment. If he had followed common Russian Naval doctrine, he would have sent in a barrage of at least twenty SSMs, putting serious damage on an equal number of ships.

That would break them, he thought, and then all I have to do is live with all those dead souls out there, and hope my last eight missiles will get me safely through this war. *Kirov* would still be a threat, but a fast burning one after a salvo of that magnitude. Then what would we be once those last teeth were pulled—a toothless shark on the high seas, with little more than a bad reputation to throw at the enemy.

Now he realized what must have gone through Karpov's mind when he was faced with the convergence of both British and American fleets in that very first run he made through the Denmark Strait. Karpov knew he had one weapon to clear the seas of his enemies, and one that would still leave his

primary missile inventory intact. It made ruthless sense now as Volsky looked at the hard numbers before him.

"Mister Rodenko? Have we obtained any battle damage assessment?"

"We don't have the KA-40 for long range visuals, but from radar returns the lead ship we targeted has fallen off and reduced speed. I think we can assume a good amount of damage there. We hit two ships, the British hit three. One of those was a smaller class ship, probably a cruiser."

"And we have 28 missiles remaining…" Volsky thought, and Rodenko was watching him very closely. He had seen what Karpov's choice would have been—argued against it, and suggested they disengage from Admiral Togo's fleet, but Karpov had been determined. It took the mutiny of the entire bridge crew, and Doctor Zolkin's timely intervention, to stay the Captain's hand. One thing in Rodenko's mind was still unanswered.

"Sir," he said. "We haven't heard from *Kazan* of late. Do you have any idea where Gromyko is?"

Volsky looked at his watch. "He is most likely on the other side of Sicily. I told him to see about closing the Sicilian narrows, but he is running silent until 16:00. Then we will see what his situation is, so that leaves this battle to us."

"We could step aside now sir. The British have four battleships out there."

"Yes? Well the Italians still have six. We do not yet have good battle damage assessments. So I am inclined to proceed here, but I would prefer to conserve my missiles."

"We could try one more salvo of four, sir."

"Would four more P-900s do the job? I wonder. Let us try another approach, Mister Rodenko. Activate our Vodopad system. When will we have range with that?"

"The Vodopads?" Volsky was asking about their torpedoes. The name meant "Waterfall," probably meant to describe the way the torpedoes would fall from the side of the ship, dipping into the sea before they ignited their rocket engines. For a time they would become a missile, streaking out to their assigned targets before entering the sea again to finish their approach as a wake homing torpedo.

"Yes," said Volsky. "I've never been really happy with the performance of those torpedoes, but this is a target rich environment now. If we fire we are almost certain to find targets. Is that system cleared for action?"

“Yes sir, and we still have nine Vodopad torpedoes ready. I saw to the inventory myself after the maintenance evolution.”

“Good. Let’s use a few. We have the range now, if I am not mistaken. Samsonov?”

“That system is on Tasarov’s board, sir.”

Tasarov had been lost in the sea again, listening to the Italian fleet, memorizing the sounds as he filed them away in his mind. Then he dimly heard his name and sat up at attention.

“No undersea contacts, sir.”

Volsky smiled. “Good to hear that. Am I to understand you are the firing officer for the Vodopad torpedo system we are now discussing?”

“Sir? Yes sir. The Vodopad system. I have that on my board. My inventory reads nine torpedoes.”

“Good enough. Do we have range on this system yet, Mister Tasarov?”

“Yes sir. We can fire now with the Vodopads, or use the UGST type 53 at 50 kilometers.”

“Very well. Vodopad system. Target the heart of the enemy formation. Salvo of four torpedoes please.”

“Aye sir.” Tasarov finally had something to do.

* * *

When the torpedoes fired they appeared again as rockets in the sky. The Italians were on edge and began firing at the oncoming streaks as soon as they saw them, the battleships putting out a barrage of flak that was totally useless. They did not know that however, and when the torpedoes completed their rocket assisted phase and fell into the sea, there were cheers on the bridge of the *Littorio* and throughout the fleet.

“See there!” said Iachino. Our gunners have a keen eye today! These new British rocket weapons can be stopped after all.”

He had no idea what was happening, that four lethal torpedoes were now boring in on his formation at 50 miles per hour. The torpedoes made a wakeless approach, and homed in by seeking the frothing wakes of the ships they targeted. The cruiser *Pola* was the first to feel their bite, with a large explosion aft from the big 300kg warhead that nearly blew the entire stern off the ship. The cruiser was still fighting fires in the van from the missile hit it

had taken, then it suddenly exploded.

Before the shock and surprise had set in, *Caio Duilio* took a hit. The torpedo had run up beneath the battleship's hull, exploding to send a massive shock dome of water that was intended to break the ship's back. These were not torpedoes that would aim to strike a ship on the side and simply blow holes in the torpedo bulwark. The old ship was severely shaken by the heavy explosion, her hull breached at the bottom of the ship and water flooding in.

A destroyer was unfortunate to be the third victim. There were fourteen hovering about, largely on the flanks of Iachino's formation, and the *Folgore* was the fish that was speared, with an explosion that did break the ships back, sending the ship into the dark sea within minutes. Admiral Iachino's battleship *Littorio* took the fourth hit, right on her rudders and screws, with catastrophic damage there. The Vodopads had acquitted themselves, but Iachino believed he had been hit by lurking submarines!

Outraged by the attack, he bawled orders to his destroyer captains, which immediately set the ships frothing about and pinging wildly with their sonar sets to look for the suspected British submarine. None would be found. The culprit was fifty kilometers away, and a grim smile slowly settled onto Admiral Volsky's face when Rodenko reported four more hits, and two on primary contacts. Within ten minutes Rodenko was able to report that a second capital ship had dramatically slowed and appeared to be wallowing, then a third.

The Italians had suffered a severe blow, and all without ever seeing an enemy ship. *Conte Cavour* was still burning badly, her boilers involved, and unable to make more than 12 knots. She had fallen out of Iachino's battle line and was now attended by four destroyers. Cruiser *Pola* was gone, *Caio Duilio* wallowing with a near broken back aft of her mid section. Now *Littorio* had lost all propulsion on three screws, and had severe rudder damage that sent her into a wide, slow circle.

Iachino was forced to transfer his flag to the nearest ship, battleship *Veneto* following right behind the *Littorio*. Admiral Bergamini had also decided to move to the battleship *Andrea Doria*, which had only taken one rocket hit and had managed to control the resulting fire. Now three battleships were decidedly out of the action, and it was a naval disaster of the highest order. Iachino knew he would be foolish to proceed under these circumstances, and set about issuing orders for heavy cruisers to take the

stricken battleships in tow. He would form a new covering force with his remaining three battleships, *Roma*, *Veneto* and *Andrea Doria*, but this fight was over, all thoughts of seeking the enemy now banished from his mind. Instead it would be all he could do to try to get these wounded warriors safely back to a friendly port before he lost a battleship.

But that was not to be.

Pleased with his torpedo attack, Admiral Volsky informed Tovey that if he so desired, the battle was now his, and Tovey was quick into action.

Chapter 17

HMS *Invincible* was an awesome beast when it bared its fangs that morning. Tovey had rejoined Cunningham's fleet, then decided to scout on out in front with *Invincible* and a couple fast heavy cruisers. He took *York* and *Kent*, leaving *Berwick* with Cunningham, though he also borrowed a fist full of destroyers. The remaining three British battleships increased speed, and the hunt was on.

Tovey signaled Captain Bridge aboard the *Eagle* and told him to prepare to launch everything he had. When he finally heard the high mast call out enemy ship sighted, he was eager for action. All thoughts of time travel and altered history were gone for the moment. He would make some new history here in the anger from the nine 16-inch guns of *Invincible*.

He had been late to the party when Admiral Holland got himself into trouble up north, and he had been unable to find and chase down the *Hindenburg* when it fled south after that dastardly attack on the Faeroes. He did manage to sight the German task force, but wisdom had advised him to wait for *King George V* and *Prince of Wales*, but they were too slow to catch up to the action.

This time things would be different. He looked over his shoulder, almost expecting to see the young officer he had taken under his wing there with eager excitement in his eyes, Christopher Wells. But the man was long gone, now serving as the Captain of the carrier *Glorious* with Somerville's Force H.

Never mind. Now it was time to fight. He opened the action at long range, more to announce his coming than anything else when he finally found the Italian Fleet. Iachino immediately answered with the guns from *Veneto* and *Roma*, his two best ships. Tovey got lucky with the first hit, adding insult to the injury Iachino's fleet had already sustained. A 16-inch round struck the *Andrea Doria* forward, very near the main turret there, the blast canting one of the three 12-inch guns upward with the violence of that explosion. The shell penetrated deep, setting off the forward magazine, and Iachino's fate was sealed.

He stared, wide eyed at the massive explosion on *Andrea Doria*, cursing under his breath. Damn the British! Damn them to the deepest hell, because

that is where they are sending my ships, and the only place I am ever likely to get my revenge!

He stayed in the fight. His honor demanded it, though all the while he fretted that the enemy would unleash another barrage of those rocket weapons upon him. None came. *Roma* acquitted herself well, framing the British battleship with good, accurate fire, but getting no hits. Thinking his battleships finally had the range, and knowing he still outgunned the British with *Veneto* and *Roma*, Iachino took heart, until his lookouts reported a large formation coming up from the southeast. Cunningham's fleet had arrived, and the distant flash from the dark shadows on the horizon told Iachino the enemy was firing.

Then the last straw came when flights of British torpedo planes came buzzing in off the *Eagle* and *Hermes*. The skies were soon filled with hot fire and smoke, even as he felt his ship roll heavily from a near miss of a heavy round. He gave his destroyers the order to make smoke, and reluctantly turned. Only his speed could save him now. *Andrea Doria* was lost. The British gunners would make short work of her, but his two fast battleships might yet escape.

The next minutes were a wild gauntlet of attacking *Swordfish* torpedo bombers trying to cut off his retreat, vectoring from every side and forcing him to make hard turns to avoid the torpedoes. The adrenaline of the moment chased the bile of defeat from his throat, but he knew he was as badly beaten as any Admiral at sea. Only one British battleship had the speed to stay with his retreating covering force, and Iachino was in a hot gun duel with *Invincible* for the next twenty minutes. The British ships unique gun turret placement allowed all three to fire if Tovey simply made ten point turns. His central turret, forward of the two vertical stacks, could then easily engage any target he was pursuing. So as *Invincible* approached, the ship seemed to be tacking this way and that, like an old sailing ship. even though he was outnumbered two battleships to one, he was able to use nine main guns against only six from the rear turrets of the fleeing enemy. He would score two more hits, neither enough to slow Iachino down. Then his radar operator picked up the main Italian fleet, and this was reinforced by a message from *Kirov*, giving him the position and size of the formation he was now approaching.

Good enough, thought Tovey. We've given them one hell of a beating,

haven't we? His destroyers were out dueling with the Italian destroyer screen, and his cruisers were following in his wake, but now he could see they were up against a large number of Italian ships, too many to wisely engage with his much smaller task force. So he decided to break off, turn about, and rejoin Admiral Cunningham. When he returned to the scene, he could see that *Queen Elizabeth* had taken at least one good hit, with a small fire amidships, but the British had beaten the *Andrea Doria* to a pulp. Cunningham had already given the order to cease fire, humanely, and he had ordered several of his escorting destroyers to rescue the Italian crew gone into the sea.

For their part, the airmen off *Eagle* and *Hermes* were unable to get a hit on Iachino's remaining fast battleships, but two flights found the main body, and bravely charged in to put another two torpedoes into *Conte Cavour*, and one more into the foundering *Caio Duilio*. The Italians would lose more than half of their battlefleet that day, with *Caio Duilio*, *Conte Cavour* and *Andrea Doria* all going down with the stricken heavy cruiser *Pola*. Two cruisers vainly tried to tow away the *Littorio*, but her rudders were so badly damaged by the Vodopad torpedo hit that the ship could not be steered. The British fleet was soon on the horizon again, and rather than suffer an ignominious pounding at the hands of the enemy. Iachino sullenly ordered the ship to be scuttled, saving as much of the crew as he could.

He made for the safety of the Strait of Messina, and half way there he was overflown by flights of dark winged German *Stukas*. The action was now drawing within the circle of their combat radius, but he shook his fist at them with anger.

"Where were you an hour ago!" he shouted at the planes. "Where was *Regia Aeronautica?"*

It was a catastrophic defeat for Italy, and a victory that gave the British Mediterranean fleet back everything they had lost in the aborted attack at Taranto. Only *Roma* and *Veneto* escaped, attended by a flock of cruisers and destroyers. Iachino himself was sacked upon his return to Naples, and he was so humiliated that he left the service of the navy, disappearing from the pages of this cruel alternate history, never to be heard from again.

Yet the battle for Tovey and Cunningham had only just begun. Another powerful fleet had been making its way south through the rising waters of the Tyrrhenian Sea. The Russian Submarine *Kazan* had hoped to find it in the Sicilian Narrows, but instead the fleet went by way of Naples and Messina.

Now the line of steel grey ships was emerging to greet Iachino's battered flotilla as he reached that place.

The sleek hulled new battlecruisers *Strasbourg* and *Dunkerque* led the way, with an escort of the lightning fast French super destroyers. Behind them came the pride of the French Fleet, the battleship *Normandie*. And after they led the last of their escorting cruisers through the narrow channel, another shadow darkened the waters, the storm clouds licking the steel flanks of the ship as it emerged—the *Bismarck*. Behind that formidable ship came an ever greater shadow, the hulking mass if the mighty *Hindenburg*, the battlecruiser *Kaiser* in her wake with the light carrier *Goeben*.

There the decks were awash with the cold sea, but the Germans were still making ready to launch. Marco Ritter was waiting near his BF-109, and when he saw the *Stuka* formations overhead he shouted out to his young protégé, Hans Rudel.

"Come on Hans! Can't you see the crows are on the wing!"

Ritter smiled, pointing to the dark formations overhead, riding the tops of the gathering storm clouds.

It was far from over.

* * *

Argos Fire saw the planes on radar, forming up over the southwestern cape of Sicily, dark and threatening, like the storm clouds behind them. In spite of the impending bad weather, the Germans decided to strike while they could, and the force they were sending was considerable.

Goering had been building up German air strength on Sicily for the Malta campaign for some time. By January of 1941, Fliegerkorps X had 80 Ju-88A4 bombers in LG1 and 12 Ju-88D5 reconnaissance planes at Catania. These were augmented by 80 Ju-87R1 *Stuka* dive-bombers of StG 1 and StG 2 at Trapani on Sicily. This model was a special long range naval strike variant that would prove a formidable foe, with two 300 liter drop tanks on the wings that more than doubled the fuel and improved the range to just over 960 kilometers. They had been pounding Malta for some days, but now would get their first crack at the Royal Navy. These planes were joined by another 27 He-111H6 torpedo bombers of KG 26 at Comiso, and 34 Bf-110C4 fighters of ZG 26 at Palermo, with another 24 Bf-109s from Gr 12.

60 of the *Stukas* were up that day, soon to be joined by the small contingent of *Stukas* from the *Goeben*. They would be joined by 40 JU-88s, 20 He-111s, and covered by all 24 Bf-109s, and a dozen Bf-110s. In all, this came to 125 strike planes protected by 36 fighters, more than twice the size of the Italian air strike. The preliminaries were over, and the main event was now about to begin.

"That's one hell of an air strike coming our way," said MacRae.

"The Russians are firing now, sir," said Dean.

"Let's hope they still have a few arrows in their quiver…." MacRae thought for a moment. He had 50 Aster-30 missiles that could join the long range air defense, but he had said nothing of these to the Russians, and had not sent them any IFF data on those missiles. Now, seeing the obvious threat coming at them, he felt foolish. The Russians were out there with the Naval Ensign flown by Nelson himself on their mainmast. They were fighting right alongside the Royal Navy, and the thought that he held on to the enmity between Britain and Russia in the 21st Century now seemed an embarrassment.

I'd best let that go, he thought. No sense dragging that war into this one. If the Russians are willing to square off against the Germans, then by god, the enemy of my enemy is my friend.

"Mister Dean… Have Haley contact the Russians. Tell them we are prepared to cover intermediate air defense zones out to 100 kilometers. We can fire after they conclude their initial barrage."

"The Aster-30s sir?"

"I've a feeling we'll need them. All hands!" He raised his voice now. "Prepare to oppose incoming air strike. Ready on all systems. We begin with Viper-30."

* * *

Volsky got the message just after he had fired his initial salvo of 12 missiles from the Klinok system. They had seen the incoming strike on the Fregat system as soon as it emerged from the storm infested cloud cover over Sicily. Apparently many of the formations had formed up over the mountainous terrain there, and they were now moving at good speed to make their strike.

“I was afraid of this,” he said to Rodenko. “They were probably forming behind the mountains, getting up just ahead of that storm front.”

“Agreed, sir. That’s why we didn’t see them earlier. The terrain on Sicily provides them with lots of dead zones in the radar coverage, but I have over 150 contacts now.”

“Then we had better get busy. As before, Mister Samsonov, but give me six S-400s, wide dispersal please. I want to give them something to think about. Perhaps they heard what happened to the Italians. You may fire at once.”

There was a tense expression on the Admiral’s face now. Air power… It was the one factor in this whole situation that could change everything. If the British fleet could not be protected, then everything they won against the Italians might soon be lost. The problem he faced was evident in the strength of the incoming attack, but more than that, he was worrying about their SAM inventory now. Then, shortly after the first missiles were up and on their way, he received a message from the *Argos Fire.*

“Ah,” he said to Rodenko. “It seems this Captain MacRae has decided to come clean and empty his pockets after all.” He smiled.

“Sir?”

“That ship is a refit of a British Type-45 destroyer, Mister Rodenko. That class carried both Aster-15 and Aster-30 missiles. The British made no mention of the latter, did they.”

“No sir, we only received IFF data for their Aster-15. You knew they had these missiles?”

“It was a very educated guess. So now it appears they’ve had a better look at the situation and suddenly remembered they have the number 30 missile under their forward deck as well. Good enough. We’ll be forgiving. Mister Nikolin, signal the *Argos Fire* that they may now cover for long range fires. We will resume inside 80 kilometers with our Klinok system. You may designate it the SA-N-92 in your communication.”

They watched as the first six missiles exploded in the midst of the enemy formation. The naval engagement with the Italians had opened at about 275 kilometers east of Sicily, but moved within the 240 kilometer range before it was concluded. Now the enemy air strike was coming from the vicinity of Syracuse and Catania, with planes spread out over an arc that was 50 kilometers wide. The six S-400s had found a segment of that arc infested

with Ju-88s from Catania, about 220 kilometers out, and Rodenko soon reported nine kills and three other planes aborting. They had traded the six missiles for twelve German planes, but now there were only 14 more S-400s in the magazines. One of Germany's most successful aircraft, they would build 16,000 JU-88s before this war ended…

* * *

"Looks like the Russians are getting stingy with those long range missiles," said Dean. "They only fired six."

"Aye," said MacRae, "which tells me they must be running thin. Alright then, we fire at 100 klicks. Full cell salvos of 4 missiles each. Ready on cells one thru six. Target that formation coming in here." He tapped the thick cloud of radar contacts approaching from Syracuse, and a minute later the missiles began to fire.

Aster-30 was a very capable system, the very same one that Kinlan's air defense battery had used to get up after those incoming MIRVs from a Russian ICBM, though he had been using a special Block 2 version designed for that kind of defense. The missiles aboard *Argos Fire* were a derivative of the Aster PAAMS system, developed to seek and destroy incoming enemy missiles. As such they were very fast, agile weapons even when hurtling at their top speed of Mach 4.5. They could target virtually any kind of airborne threat with a high probability hit to kill ratio. During the "end game" when it would close for the kill, it had a lateral thrust pulse propulsion mode that allowed it to make incredible turns to get after an evasive target. It also used what was known as a directional blast warhead, where larger warhead fragments are directed towards the target on detonation. In short, it was going to get hits and kills, though the ratio was going to be closer to 1 to 1 than the Russian S-400, which had a very wide fragmentation radius when it exploded near a target.

The German *Stukas* of StG 1 were the unfortunate crows to be hunted down that day. They saw the incoming streaks in the sky, remembered the warning that had passed to them from the pilots off *Graf Zeppelin*, but no warning was good enough to protect them from what was coming at them. The reality of being hunted by these fast, lethal missiles was something no pilot would ever forget. The *Vipers* began to explode, sending the remaining

Stukas wheeling in evasive maneuvers. The planes were chased by the hot fire of the missiles, and one by one they went down. Of the 30 *Stukas* in that formation, sixteen were killed with direct hits, and the missiles also got six Bf-109s that had vainly tried to swoop into the swirling engagement, their guns blazing on defense. Two more Ju-88D5 reconnaissance planes that had been assigned to fly point on this mission also went down. StG 1 had been all but destroyed, though it still had fourteen brave pilots in the sky, and they were slowly trying to reform after the attack, cursing and calling to one another on their headsets.

It was a hard lesson of war, but in the end the success or failure of this attack would come down to only one thing—how many missiles were *Kirov* and *Argos Fire* willing to use?

Chapter 18

The planes came on, pressing through the 80 kilometer mark after 24 *Vipers* had smashed the initial formation of *Stukas*. Now the Klinok system on *Kirov* would come into play, the missiles rising to the challenge to strike at targets throughout the incoming arc. *Kirov* had only 82 of these missiles left, and so Volsky determined to fire 20 in two salvoes of ten missiles each. One salvo would find the JU-88s again, with nine kills and one plane there taking two missiles. The second salvo would take a significant bite out of StG 2 *Stuka* Squadron, and get eight kills there. The remaining two missiles found escorting fighter planes.

Disorganized and shocked by these deadly attacks from lightning fast rocket systems, the Germans struggled to regroup as they passed the 50 kilometer mark. Now Admiral Volsky had a difficult decision to make.

"That lowers our medium range defense system to 62 missiles," he said to Rodenko. What is the status of this incoming strike now?"

"Sir, the situation is confused, but we're still reading about 116 air contacts inbound."

"More than all our remaining medium and long range SAMs," said Volsky. We cannot engage further. I will turn the defense over to the *Argos Fire* and see what they can do. Who knows what we will be facing after this?"

Now he wished Fedorov were here with facts and figures on the German and Italian air strength they might be facing in the days ahead. Yet Volsky knew they could only do so much. He could hurt the enemy further, but at what cost to his future operations capability? So they waited, switching over to their Kashtan system, reserved solely for close in defense. The only missiles they would fire now would be aimed at any aircraft that managed to penetrate the final British defense and target *Kirov*.

The *Argos Fire* had topped off its ready ammo bank on the Viper-15 class missiles. MacRae had 48 in the silos now, and began firing just inside the 30 kilometer mark. They would hit nine more JU-88s, twelve more *Stukas* and three fighters with the first two salvos of twelve each. But the strike was coming in at speeds of 450 to 500 KPH and would be over the fleet in no

more than 5 minutes. Firing cells of four missiles each, *Argos Fire* was lighting up the sky with missile tracks. They got eight Heinkels and four more Ju-88s, and then Dean announced a new contact on his long range radars.

The Germans had launched their second wave.

Ground controllers had heard the frantic calls from the pilots, and they had already learned what had happened to the Italian SM-79s. General Fiebig was coordinating the attacks, and was considering calling off his second wave, until he was informed that the Italians were mounting yet another effort, eager to avenge the beating their fleet had taken.

"Well," he said. "If the Italians can take losses like that and still be brave enough to fly, so will we. Get everything we have into the sky, before that weather front makes further operations impossible!"

Everything they had was another twenty *Stukas* with an equal number of JU-88s, thirty operational BF-110 fighter bombers and seven more Heinkel-111s. Fiebig would put a second wave of 77 planes in the sky, and the Italians had another mixed bomber formation of 48 planes. So just as the brave survivors of the first wave were finally over the British fleet, the long range radar sets were reporting another 125 planes inbound. By sheer attrition, the enemy would wear its way through the SAM defense.

80 planes were over the fleet now, and among them the five planes that had risen from the deck of the light carrier Goeben. They were a little late into the game, and on the extreme northern edge of the attack, and so had managed to avoid the worst of the missile shoot.

"Look at that!" Ritter called. "Amazing! We had better get our business done soon, boys. We're losing a lot of good men out there today."

The five planes would go in together, Ritter leading in his Bf-109 in case the British had any fighters up, and the other four planes were *Stukas* being flown by some of the best pilots available, Rudel, Heilich, Hafner, and Brendel. They found the main British fleet and dove relentlessly on the battleships and cruisers of Cunningham's squadron. Heilich put his bomb right into the guts of the heavy cruiser *Berwick*, still seeing missiles in the sky aimed at other planes to his far left. Hafner's bomb missed, but closely straddled the *Malaya*. Brendel was a little better, staying in his dive through blistering flak and feeling his plane shudder with a shrapnel hit. But he scored his hit on *Malaya's* foredeck, very near A Turret. It was Hans Rudel

that would again strike the most grievous blow, coming down right on top of *Queen Elizabeth* in a screaming dive and putting his 500 pound bomb right behind her large trunked funnels.

Captain Claud Barry had just ordered hard a port and ahead full, but it did not fool Rudel's deadly aim. As the turbines of the big battleship spun up to maximum rotation, there was an audible clatter, as though someone had thrown a spanner in the works.

They had.

Queen Elizabeth had spent time at Fairfield's Works, Glasgow, and there was a man there who was working for the other side. During that maintenance overhaul, he had dropped not a spanner, but a long metal file into the enclosure. It was a miracle the problem was not discovered for 18 months, and the British would only trace the sabotage to Fairfield's Works when another report was filed by the cruiser *Suffolk*, with turbine damage on that ship as well. It also had maintenance there, and the Admiralty became suspicious. Once the turbines were closed and sealed off, they were almost never opened while in regular operations. The file had been there, but caused no noticeable problem beyond occasional odd noises, but that was because *Queen Elizabeth* had had a rather sedate start in her deployments, and she never really pressed her engines to top speed. Now, with the seas rising and her turbines running full out, the metal file raised havoc.

That problem and the bomb which penetrated to one of her boilers, saw the ship quickly slow to 16 knots and fall out of Cunningham's formation. With the air duel still thick about them, the Admiral ordered *Queen Elizabeth* to turn about and make for the safety of open sea. He would detach a pair of destroyers with the ship, but now would have to face the wrath of the combined Franco-German fleet one battleship light.

The action remained hot and furious over the fleet for another ten minutes, with three more British ships taking bomb hits, and *Malaya* taking a torpedo from a daring attack by a low flying He-111. Only twelve of an initial twenty Heinkels had survived, but those that did accounted for two hits. *Calcutta*, *Coventry*, *Orion* all took bomb hits from the remaining *Stukas*. *Invincible* was spared serious harm, as was the light cruiser *Ajax* and both *Kent* and *York* sailing close by. Of the 12 destroyers, *Echo* was unlucky enough to run right into the path of a torpedo and the ship was a total loss.

When the action finally cleared, and the ragged formations of enemy

planes turned for home, they took stock and realized they had come off better than might be expected. Being well behind the action with the carriers now, neither *Kirov* nor *Argos Fire* were found or attacked, and *Eagle* and *Hermes* were able to recover their own strike planes unmolested.

It was mid-day, and Tovey had just been informed by Admiral Volsky that another strike wave was inbound. He went into the plot room and leaned heavily over the table, noting the last known position of the Franco-German fleet. That was soon updated, and he could see that he would shortly have another major fleet action on his hands. They were just emerging from the maw of the Strait of Messina

The enemy's second strike wave was now just thirty minutes away, but the weather was clouding over much faster than anyone expected. The collision of warm and cold air masses was causing thunderheads to mushroom up well ahead of the planes now, and Tovey saw in them a brief possibility of shaking the fleet loose from the hounding enemy aircraft. Admiral Volsky communicated one last message. ANTI-AIR MUNITIONS LOW, BUT WE ARE PREPARED TO CONTINUE DEFENSE. ADVISE YOUR CURRENT INTENT.

Munitions low… He knew there were limits to the power of the sea gods that had come to raise their swords and shields for the Royal Navy. This would not be the last time they might face the enemy like this, but now Tovey realized it could not be here, so close to Sicily and the airfields thick with German and Italian planes. He already had achieved the victory he had come here to fight—giving the Italian Navy a severe shock. Instinct now compelled him to end this engagement. If he persisted, and now attempted to engage the Franco-German fleet, he might throw away everything he had just won.

So he decided, collaring an aid and sending him off to the W/T Room. "Signal all fleet units. Come about and steer one hundred degrees southeast at best speed. The fleet will reform at point B as planned at 18:00."

He was going to live to fight another day. Point B was also Plan B, which stood for Benghazi. It was a fallback operation they had chosen should it seem impractical to proceed to Malta for the fire support mission there. Instead they had chosen a coordinate off Benghazi to give the Italian garrison there a taste of some good naval gunfire. By moving south now, Tovey hoped to get out from under the immediate threat of enemy air strike, and possibly

compel the Franco-German fleet to pursue him into waters where they would not enjoy the advantage they now possessed.

As it happened, the Italian planes followed a vector that took them much too far to the north, thinking the British had continued that way in pursuit of their own fleet. The second German strike of 77 planes reached the scene 35 minutes later, but by then the fleet had already dispersed as per prior orders, so as not to present a single target. Both *Kirov* and *Argos Fire* decided to commit another 12 medium range missiles each if necessary, but the worsening weather was enough to keep the enemy from doing any serious harm. The German pilots realized the British were on the run, and seeing the thunderheads rising all around them now, they turned back for their bases. So the missiles stayed in their silos this time around.

What Tovey did not realize, however, was that the enemy also had a plan. It had been partly foiled by the impatience and hubris of Admiral Iachino, who had decided he had the strength to engage the Royal Navy on its own. Lütjens had strongly argued that all three fleets should combine before facing their enemy, but that was foiled. Now the German Admiral was also looking at his map aboard *Hindenburg*, with Captain Karl Adler at his side.

“What do you make of this, Adler? All reports from Tenth Fliegerkorps indicate the enemy has dispersed and is now withdrawing.”

“They had more than enough from the Luftwaffe,” Adler said calmly.

“I’m not so sure. The British are very cagey, and they seldom do anything without good reason. They have been very aggressive here, and in past operations, always so eager to get into the hunt.”

“But now we are the hunters, Admiral. They may have taken significant damage in either the naval battle, or from this air strike. The pilots are claiming their hits in the squadron rooms by now, and we may soon know more.”

“Their last reported course was southeast. Do you believe they are retiring to Alexandria?” Lütjens tapped the map with his pencil, pointing the route they would be likely to take.

“Where else?” said Adler. “We showed them that we now control the Central Mediterranean. There’s only one place where they can sail with any confidence now, and they will head for the safe shores off Egypt.”

“And we will follow.”

Adler raised an eyebrow at that. “Into the Eastern Med?”

“Of course not, but I am not so sure that is where the British are heading just yet. Signal the fleet to steer for Crete as planned. That way we’ll be shadowing the British if they are heading for Alexandria, and Operation Donner may proceed as planned.”

“And shall I inform Fiebig?”

“Of course. We’ll want his squadrons redeploying to airfields on Greece as soon as this weather clears. For now it will provide us with welcome cover as we make this move east. We’ll steer southeast, then east to muster in the Messenian Gulf off Greece. That will give Fiebig time to move his air strength to Greece to cover us again. Then we visit Crete as planned to begin softening that place up for the planned air operations. We’ll hit the ports and airfields around Chania, Souda Bay and possibly even Heraklion if things go well.”

“Has the Führer approved?”

“I hear he was more than pleased with how the attack went in against Malta. So yes, we have authorization to carry out Donner as a preliminary operation. As to the invasion plans for Crete, that remains to be seen. In the meantime, we’ll show the British they are not the only ones able to utilize sea power in the Mediterranean now. This is a whole new kettle of fish here, Adler. Now we fight in fleet actions like the British, not as solo raiders trying to sneak past Iceland and joust with the convoys. We leave that to Doenitz and his U-Boats. So we will carry out Operation Donner as planned. Let’s see if the British have the stomach to come up and do anything about it.”

Finally, thought Adler. Lütjens has found his backbone after all. This is good. If we make a strong show of force here, we demonstrate that they are no longer masters of this sea while we remain a strong force in opposition. Yet he had one misgiving. They had thought to achieve complete sea dominance with this action, but the Italians were now a most questionable element in their equation.

“You realize we may not be able to count on the Italians,” he said with the obvious reservation in his voice.

“When have we ever been able to count on the Italians?” Lütjens smiled, but the point Adler raised was going to matter more than he realized, because the British fleet wasn’t sailing for Alexandria, and it would not be long before they would find that out.

Part VII

The Battle

"There's only one principle of war and that's this. Hit the other fellow, as quick as you can, and as hard as you can, where it hurts him most, when he ain't lookin!"

— British Sergeant Major: *Unknown*

Chapter 19

Hauptmann Hans Kummel had a frustrated look on his face that morning. He was commander of 1st Company. I/8th Panzer in Cramer's regiment, but thus far his war in the desert had been a headlong rush east over tractless sand and limestone gravel, through occasional briar scrub and camelthorn, and over parched, wrinkled wadis barring the way. The mid-day heat was intense, even now in the winter, so he had one consolation knowing the coming fight would be in the morning, with the chill of the desert night still heavy on the barren landscape. He was eager for it, a real fight at last with a British Armored force, or so the rumors had it.

"So the British found their backbone," he said to his driver, a man named Kruschinski. "See that ridge line there? They will have to flow to either side of that. It will split their force, and when they come, we'll take the company on a wide swing to the east and catch them on the flank. Our job is to get at their support group. The Panzerjagers will engage the tanks."

"Good enough, Hans. You aiming to get a third Iron Cross this morning?"

Kummel smiled. He had three medals already pinned to his uniform, two Iron Crosses and a Panzer Assault Badge for work in Poland and France. Yes, he thought. A third cross is good luck for me, and bad luck for the British. He saw the beginning of the little artillery duel, three rounds on either side, and then heard the whine of heavy shells coming in, which surprised him. He looked to see the small hill where the Commander of 5th Light had been observing. It erupted in smoke and fire and he saw what looked to be a heavy gun tossed up into the air with the power of the explosions.

"Those are big guns!" he shouted to Kruschinski. "At least 150mm! I would not want to be on that hill."

More rounds came, seeming to walk westward along the German line now, right through the Pakfront that had been set up there to cover the wadi approach. It was difficult to see what was happening, but he saw at least one big 88 flak gun blasted onto its side. How the British could have registered that fire so accurately amazed him.

What he did not see that morning was the battery of AS-90 Braveheart self propelled 155mm howitzers, well behind the advancing British force. With shells that could range anywhere from 25 to as far as 40 kilometers, all it needed was a good target call, and that had been provided by spotters using lasers to tag the hilltop. The position of the spotting vehicle was seen on the digital screen of the firing Bravehearts, which then knew that the target was 3000 meters beyond that, and with precise coordinates on the digital map. The hilltop had been a known terrain feature, and a bad choice for Streich and his small battery of 150s.

Lieutenant Reeves had also done his work and he was out on the left flank, about 5 kilometers from the German Pakfront he had seen on his thermal imaging systems. Now he was painting the suspected gun positions with a pulse coded laser. The Bravehearts picked up the signal, and gunners loaded the new Excalibur Laser Guided Rounds, programming them to the same code. When fired, the rounds would activate a seeker as they approached the target, and fins would deploy to allow the round to guide itself to the spot being lazed. It was not as accurate as GPS guided munitions, but there were no satellite links, and it was good enough on a cloudless morning like this. Reeves' artillery call would take out three 88s before their crews ever sighted the enemy.

The artillery was the opening round of the battle, and only the first of many shocking surprises for the Germans that day. Kummel was restless, his head and shoulders jutting up from the open top hatch, his eyes squinting through a pair of field glasses as he watched the incoming fire.

"Come on, Kruschinski, we had better get moving before that artillery finds us too!"

His company was behind and to the left of the 8th MG Battalion from 5th Light Division, and he gave the order for his 18 Panzer IIIGs to move out. He would be the unseen counterattack emerging from the gloaming of the rising sun to the east, staying on low ground so as not to be silhouetted. If the British attacked true to form, they would send in their tanks first, followed later by infantry in small carriers from their support battalions. These were the prey he had his mind set on, and if he swung deep enough, he might also find this enemy artillery as well. He knew where it might be, given the typical range of a British 25 pounder, but could not know that he was very wrong about that guess. Kruschinski kicked the tank forward, and Kummel radioed

his company to follow.

* * *

Lieutenant William Bowers watched the artillery fire come in to silence the hilltop battery and then engage suspected gun positions on his left. His Sabre had the wadi limited approach that led right up to that hill, a narrow channel that the enemy obviously thought was well protected from direct attack by armor. He radioed back and told the Mercian Battalion to hold in place, but to be ready with infantry on his call. Then he gave the order to move out.

The tanks broke column and spread out in lines, three abreast, five lines deep. Behind them a company of the Mercian infantry in their Warrior IFVs waited on call. The next three rounds to come in were smoke, giving his force a thin mask to make their approach, an advantage he hadn't called for and really did not need. It had been designed to frustrate the optics and thermals of enemy T-72s, but that beast was not their enemy today—not if Lieutenant Reeves had his head screwed on right that morning. Instead Bowers would end up facing the best guns the German army had for killing tanks, bar none, the weapon that would make a legend for itself here in this very desert, the dual purpose 88.

As Bowers advanced, his gunner had not seen a smaller gun position at the base of the hill and off to the right. It was there that Streich had placed a Pak 50 and two smaller 37mm AT guns in defilade within the wadi. The guns were below the ground level the tanks were using, and therefore not seen on the thermal imaging system until the crews suddenly pushed them forward to the edge of the wadi and began firing. The first indication Bowers had of their presence was a small clink against his frontal armor—a sound that was much more than an errant stone kicked up by the grinding tank tracks.

"I think we just took a small caliber round," he said, though the tank showed no signs of any damage. "Gunner, track left."

The big turret, nearly the length of the entire tank, rotated fifteen degrees left and saw the guns. Another muzzle flash marked the position, soon followed by a dull clink as yet another round struck the tank. "Target marked!"

"Shoot!"

The HESH L31 was the first round to be fired by the Royal Scotts Dragoons. It was a thin cased shell with plastic explosives inside that splayed out on the target and were ignited milliseconds later. Useful against fortifications, the man who had first developed the idea, the British engineer Charles Dennistoun Burney, was probably working on the project even now, along with other ideas he spawned for gliding torpedoes and bombs, and recoilless rifles that came to be known as “Burney Guns.” He might be gratified to know the terrible form and shape his ideas would take in the 21st Century, and to learn his HESH round had struck the first real blow by ground forces in the battle that was now beginning. The Pak 50 was immolated, the shrapnel from the explosion also taking out the gun crew of a nearby 37mm gun.

“All tanks on the left—watch that wadi for enemy gun positions. Give it some gas!” His tank surged ahead, two others increasing speed to follow as the Dragoons charged forward. Two groups of three would sweep to the left of the hill, two more groups would break off to the right, and the last three tanks would remain in reserve to support either flank.

“Whatever that was, it didn’t bother us much,” said Bowers.

The 37 and 50mm AT guns were utterly useless, as the Germans quickly found out. Bowers’ tanks took out six gun positions without so much as a paint scratch from the initial defensive line Streich had set up. If he had been alive to see what was happening, Streich would have immediately had the sense to get his men out of harm’s way, but he was dead, struck down by that first thunderous barrage from the Desert Bravehearts that pounded his hilltop position with six heavy rounds.

It was Bowers on the left who would face the 88s. His tanks rounded the hill, their khaki paint schemes blending in perfectly to the chalky terrain around them. The ground dipped slightly, then rose, and when he hit that higher elevation his tank was immediately struck by a much more powerful round. The noise and concussion told them something much bigger had taken up the fight, the Germans’ one hope to stave off this terrible new enemy.

The resounding hit was the first bold challenge, the business end of the German defensive line, weakened by the British artillery, but still potent, with nine 88s still ready for action. The battle had begun, but this was an enemy far more powerful than any tank the Germans had ever faced, or ever would face, in this war. It was an order of magnitude beyond even the very best

German tank that would emerge from the cauldron of this terrible conflict, the dreadful *Königstiger*.

Throughout its combat history to that time, fighting in Iraq, Afghanistan and Egypt, not a single Challenger II had ever been lost in combat to enemy fire! A Challenger II tank could sit faced off by forty medium German tanks of this era and methodically destroy every one of them while the enemy fired away in utter futility. The Germans could fire round after round against that laminate Chobham armor, and do no harm whatsoever.

But German doctrine never intended to allow for such a duel. Instead they would now pit the dread 88 against this new foe, the most powerful anti-tank gun they would field in the war. It could penetrate 200mm of armor at near point blank range, less at this range of just over two kilometers when the Germans fired. That was more than enough to deal with the best British tank, the stolid Matilda with 70mm frontal armor, but this was not a Matilda.

"Damn good shooting," said Bowers to his gunner.

"Got them on thermals, sir. Shall I return the favor?"

"Please do. No sense scratching up this beast any more than we have to."

The Challenger II had armor composed of exotic materials, composite ceramics, carbon nanotubes, boron and silicon carbides, aluminum, titanium and syndite, a synthetic diamond composite. Protection levels were calculated against both Kinetic Energy Penetrators, and High Explosive rounds. The frontal armor of a Challenger II had protection levels against KE or HEAT rounds of at least 600mm of standard RHA armor, the type any WWII tank might use. In places, that protection level exceeded 1000mm, and on the heavy turret armor that had so awed O'Connor when he first set his hand on it, this protection rose to an astounding 1250mm against KE penetrators and 1980mm against HEAT rounds!

During operations in Iraq, incidents occurred where a Challenger II had been ambushed and hit by as many as *seventy* RPGs, weapons that actually had far more penetration power than the German 88s, and yet the tank survived with only minor damage and was back in operation six hours later. No one inside was killed or wounded. In fact, the only instance of a Challenger II destroyed in combat had occurred in a friendly fire incident where one tank mistakenly targeted another at near point blank range, and the shell went in through an open hatch. It was a beast that could only be killed by its own kind.

In short, the Challenger II was completely impervious to destruction by any anti-tank weapon that would ever be developed in WWII. Period. The enemy might get a lucky hit and damage the tracks, but do little else, and tactical deployments could prevent track hits easily enough. There were places on the tank that were more vulnerable to good hits. The flank and rear were not as well protected, but Bowers instinctively sensed this, and gave an order to back up so his tracks would be just below the elevation he had scaled. Then he squared his frontal armor off to the enemy and began lighting up targets. His tank was effectively "hull down" where its tracks were below the sight lines of the enemy guns while its imposing armored turret remained above to engage. And when these Desert Rats attacked, they would ravage their enemy completely.

The gunner had good thermals on the German Pakfront now, and the big 120mm gun began to fire. One, two, then a third 88 battery was blasted away, and the remaining gunners, astounded to see their rounds glancing harmlessly off the enemy tank, had the good sense to run their rigging drill, gun the hauler's engines, and begin a hasty retreat to the rear. Only seven of the twelve guns would survive. Bowers tank had single handedly defeated Rommel's heavy flak company, meant to anchor this end of the German line and stop any attack through this defile cold. The defense here broken, he would now lead his 15 Challengers forward to a position where they could begin ravaging the German infantry positions of the 5th Machine Gun Battalion.

The call came out—infantry!

"Sabre one to Ruby Red. Ready on that short order. The main course has been served. Bring out the Bubble and squeak."

"Copy that, Sabre One. Bubble & squeak it is!"

Bubble and squeak was a traditional English dish made with the leftover vegetables from a full roast dinner. It was mixed with potatoes and fried up, named for the sound of the dish frying in the pan, which would bubble and squeak. But in this case it was meant to indicate a second course, the leftovers after the Challengers had eliminated the primary long range AT threat to the Warriors. It was the handle Bowers had assigned to 1st Company, the Mercian Battalion, waiting to be served.

Old habits were well ingrained. Bowers had defeated the enemy's long range gun defenses, but now he had open ground, at least two kilometers, to

cross. There could be infantry dug in anywhere out there with fistfuls of RPGs. Reeves might have told him not to worry about that. The Germans had no effective man held anti-tank weapon at this stage of the war, but Bowers radioed back to his supporting Warrior company in any case, calling up the IFVs. His tanks had two MGs each, but the Warriors had that nice upgraded 40mm Bofors autocannon, and it would provide superb suppressive fire on infantry positions while he determined what else was in front of him.

He got on his Sabre channel and passed the word. “Tally Ho, gentlemen. We’re leading in the charge. Follow me!”

The deep engine growled and the heavy tracks lurched the tank forward. They came out of the defile and onto the stony plain, gathering speed like a storm of steel. Thermals were hot, picking up enemy positions ahead, and he could hear his men tracking, marking targets, and firing. In the heat of battle he had to remind himself of one last order from Kinlan’s briefing. They had to watch their ammunition count very carefully. He got on the radio to remind his tankers of just that.

“Be stingy with main gun fire, boys. Use it only if you must. We’ve got Warriors right behind us.”

Off in the distance the Germans infantry of the 5th Machinegun Battalion could see and hear the awful thunder of those fifteen Challengers on attack. The dust rose, still red in the ruddy dawn, and something was coming at them from another world, a bolt from the blue, a power that no man among them could ever redress in this first mad hour. The tanks would crash into the German line like elephants treading down ant hills. The Germans watched them come, their machine guns and 37mm AT guns firing furiously, but to no avail.

And so it began…

Chapter 20

The shock of the attack was complete. Even though the Germans were a well trained and disciplined force, they had no answer for the storm that came out of the blood red morning that day. The 88s had been positioned on and around a hill feature designated 198 on Bowers' map. It lay to the left of the thin track that ran north, with the wadi on the left. The first three Challengers to be engaged had taken out the AT guns with accurate return fire, and three guns had managed to retire behind the hill heading north, their crews shaken to see their rounds striking the enemy tanks, but unable to harm them in any way. The best German defense against tanks had been defeated almost before it could acquire a target!

As the tanks led the charge onto the more open ground, the infantry of the 5th and 8th Machinegun Battalions quickly called for supporting artillery fire, as Streich had planned. Streich was dead, but his orders were still alive. The gritty Sergeants on the line radioed back for artillery fire, and the rounds came in soon after. Yet they were immediately answered by lethal counter battery fire. Radars were watching and recording the arc and fall of the incoming shells, and computers were calculating the position of the guns for the AS-90s. Six guns went into burst mode and quickly put 6 rounds each on the German gun positions—36 heavy 155mm rounds that wreaked havoc. The hasty defense had not given the Germans time to dig their guns in. Realizing what had happened, the only defense was to move the artillery or be destroyed, and by the time they reached a new location the attack would be over.

The Challengers led the way, followed closely by the Warriors with their new 40mm Bofors guns putting deadly accurate fire on the German infantry positions. They were ideal for taking out small AT and infantry guns, and behind them the company self-propelled mortars were laying down good fire with their 81mm tubes. Then they got the first surprise of the morning with the sudden appearance of enemy tanks.

"Thermals right!" A gunner in the leading three Challengers on that flank called the warning. "Tanks! Tanks!"

"Gunner track right. Engage!" The Challengers saw the Panzers coming

in at just over 2000 meters, and their big turrets rotated, guns firing as the tanks moved. That was a feat the Germans could not duplicate, as they needed to stop to get a stable firing solution on a target, though that really didn't matter.

* * *

Hans Kummel had been waiting with his company of Panzer IIIGs near an old cairn site, and when the action began he led his tanks out through a low depression, intending to move south and then turn west to take the advancing British on the flank. He thought he might get at the enemy artillery, but had no idea it was almost twenty kilometers to the south. Now his tanks emerged from the purple shadows of the higher ground behind him, charging in to engage, but what he saw was not British 25 pounders, but tanks!

Kummel would need to charge forward another full kilometer to get into optimal firing range, and before his eighteen tanks had covered half that distance, the three Challengers had put needle nosed armor piercing sabot rounds through six Panzer IIIs. He was lucky his own tank had not been hit.

"Kruschinski! Find cover! Look at those monsters out there! Albers!" He shouted to his gunner now. "Can you hit them?"

Albers loaded furiously, sweat dotting his forehead even though the morning chill was still on the air, and the temperature inside the tanks had not reached that awful scalding boil that they often suffered. But he knew his Company commander well, and he could hear the desperate edge in his voice. Kruschinski had backed up to maneuver behind a sandy hummock covered with low desert scrub, and now Albers saw what Kummel was shouting about. A massive hulk loomed in his sights, well lit by the rising sun, a tank unlike anything he had ever seen. He knew the enemy armor silhouettes well, and what to expect at this range. He could distinguish the tall, squarish shape of a Matilda easily from the lower, flatter profile of the cruiser tanks, but this was something else.

He looked at his range finder, thinking they were much closer than he thought. How could it be so huge? The tank was easily twice the size of a Matilda. Then he saw another Panzer III on his left stopping to fire, recognizing the number as Schuber's tank. The thin barrel of his 50mm gun

spit yellow flame at the enemy, but he watched in shock as the round simply glanced harmlessly off the enemy turret, which now rotated ominously in their direction. The gun barrel was the size of a tree trunk, or so it seemed. It had to be an artillery piece! No tank gun in the world could be that size. And then it fired, blasting Schuber's tank to pieces with a single round.

"Back! Back! Back!" Kummel's strident order could barely be heard over the noise of the explosion. He had seen all he needed to know. Now their only hope now was to get back behind the knobby protrusion of a wind scored rock formation. The engine strained and the Panzer III jolted, backing furiously way a just as the massive enemy turret and gun began to rotate his way.

The Germans took heart, suddenly seeing platoons of their own tanks charging from the shadow of a long elevation, Hill 209 to the east. But their jubilation was short lived when they saw one tank after another blasted apart, turrets flung wildly into the air with the impact of devastating rounds. Just three enemy tanks had stopped the entire German formation. The Panzers had fired bravely, but their guns did no more damage than the 47mm guns in the Panzerjager units. Dismayed to see that even the powerful 88s had no effect on these new British tanks, a barely restrained panic set in.

All down the line it was much the same. The Challengers stunned the defense, eliminating any potential threat to the lighter skinned infantry carriers. The Warriors stood off and used the range and firepower of their 40mm cannons to pound the German infantry positions. Kummel survived, making the shadow of the hillock just in time, but the 5th MG Battalion was now being decimated by these fierce new British armored vehicles. 8th MG Battalion to the east fared little better.

Ten minutes later Bowers had his Challenger II up on Hill 222 where Streich had taken up his position that fateful morning. From there he could see the enemy retreat was now well underway. Pockets of infantry scurried back from their holes, seeking the protection of a low escarpment on his right. The thin track he was on headed that direction, and his digital map showed it would work its way about four kilometers north through increasingly broken ground to a place called Bir el Khamsa.

2nd Sabre was on that flank mopping up the enemy tankettes that had attacked them. That was how he saw the Panzer IIIs, and could not imagine what possessed the enemy to dare an attack against his Challengers with

vehicles that light. Then he remembered his briefing, shaking himself to try and get the message. Those weren't Egyptian radicals out there this time. The evidence was plain to see all around him now—two mangled heavy guns, a third abandoned, and men lying dead in the rising sun, all wearing the uniforms of the German army from the Second World War.

"Hey Lieutenant," said his gunner. "Just who are these guys? Those tanks we hit looked like relics."

Bowers looked at him, saying nothing. "Just watch your thermals, Mister Alten. I don't care who they are while they're shooting at us."

He got on his comm-link radio, seeing 2nd Sabre was well ahead of his position now, rounding Hill 205 and approaching a water cairn site south of Alam Uweida on the right. "Sabre two, any further opposition? Over."

"Looks like we have them on the run, Lieutenant. Shall I push on to Bir El Khamsa?"

Bowers had been told what to expect in the briefing before the fight, but he could not believe it. Yet now the evidence was all around him, littering the ground with the carnage of what was once a fairly well established enemy position. He had been told to break it, and move it, and that he did. Yet a quick check with HQ on the situation handed him an order to stop in place and await further orders. He remembered Kinlan's final admonition about conserving ammo, and suspected that it was the real reason behind that order.

I could take my tanks right on through, he thought. But my God… what's out there? This whole damn thing is true! What in the mad hatter's world has happened to us? Then he realized that men in all his tanks, and the soldiers in the Warriors that were now deploying to work over the ground around them for any threats, would all have this same bemused question. Now he knew why Kinlan was stopping here.

Yes. Easy does it, he thought. Kinlan wants to wade in gently here, and expose the men to this madness by slow degrees. In the heat of battle you move and fight, picking targets, firing, a thing of synapse and long hours of training and drill. Now, here, on this blasted hill with the wreckage of war all about them, the questions come, whispering up like the ghosts of these men laying dead here.

He knew that every man out there would soon be asking them, just as his gunner had—what was going on here? Who were these men they had fought this day? What had happened to us? He keyed his headset and confirmed his

order.

“Rodger that, Brigade. Holding in place and awaiting orders. Sabre Three standing by. Over and out.”

* * *

The Afrika Korps was not holding in place. The line had been smashed. 605th Heavy Flak was down to three guns now. 5th and 8th Machinegun Battalions had retreated in the face of the enemy attack, barely making it to their vehicle parks where the disheartened men were scrambling up onto the trucks and hoping they still had fuel to get north. Kummel’s company came out of the action with seven of his eighteen Panzer IIIs intact. He soon learned that the entire battalion had been beaten up, with third company all but destroyed.

Rommel had seen one flank of the enemy attack from his hilltop position, aghast as the heavy armor blasted away his defense. His mind was awhirl, the shock of the battle on him as heavily as it was on his men. He heard the frantic calls for artillery, the resounding crash and swell of the battle, and he knew the sounds of his division well enough. This was one he had seldom heard before. There had been those hours, in the headlong rush across Cyrenaica, when Streich would stop and complain about the fuel situation, or columns would be lost and immobilized in the drifting sand, but this was something else—it sounded like a word he would stubbornly refuse to speak aloud, even in his own mind—defeat.

He knew his flank had been crushed, and now he had two divisions strung out for over fifty kilometers between this place and the roads leading to Tobruk. How big was this force that had attacked him? From all reports the men seemed to say they had seen no more than ten or fifteen British tanks in any given place. But what were they? He listened to the wide eyed reports of his officers and Sergeants as he passed among them, and they all said the same thing. These were massive, unstoppable heavy tanks, something altogether new. Yet in spite of their size and power, they could move like gazelles, firing at the gallop, and hitting targets with deadly precision. They had torn the German defense apart in ten minutes. Then the smaller vehicles came, fast and furious, with a lethal flak gun that was chopping up the infantry positions. Any time they tried to get a heavier gun into position to

engage, the long, evil barrel of those tanks would rotate and fire, blasting it away at impossible ranges with pinpoint accuracy.

Rommel had heard quite enough, and through the shock and dismay he realized now that discretion was the better part of valor. If he didn't act quickly, his Afrika Korps could disintegrate into a mass of confusion and disorder. Any thought he had about pressing further east was now gone. It would be all he could do to save his two divisions and get back to Tobruk.

So he moved, a grey ghost racing in his staff car, from one frantic unit to the next, field glasses in one hand, a map in the other. "We ran into something we did not expect," he told the men. "It is my fault. Now I want you to move your battalion here. Get any vehicle that can still move on this road and follow it west. Our defense was too hasty. We'll find better ground to the west and regroup."

Units of 15th Panzer and 5th Light were all intermingled now, but the troops still cooperated and moved off as he ordered. The German command structure was so flexible, and the unit training so thorough, that his units retained tremendous cohesion, even in a confused retreat like this. Rommel watched them go. The ones who had not yet seen the enemy tanks were the bravest, ready and quick to move with any order. The men coming back from the front line were quite different, sallow eyed, pale, bloodied and dispirited. He did his best to rally them, worrying now that the infection of their loss would soon spread through his army.

In time he managed to get his divisions sorted out, and was grateful that the British attack seemed to stop. He had gathered together elements of his recon battalion as a fire brigade to throw in should the enemy persist in their attack, but they stopped two kilometers south of Bir el Khamsa.

Thank god for that, he thought. They must be strung out as badly as we are. What I need to do now is extricate my battalions and get to better ground. I'll consolidate later, but now it is time to move. Then I'll huddle with the division commanders and we'll determine what to do next. He heard nothing from Streich for some hours, until he was told the man was reported dead. So he took personal charge of the division, driving them west with tireless energy.

The Desert Fox had been outwitted by the British. The sudden appearance of this enemy armored force had completely unhinged Rommel's plan. As one unit after another peeled off and began the retreat, it exposed other units

in the long line that stretched nearly eighty kilometers along the stony escarpment that pointed north to Sollum and Halfaya Pass. And he had the Italians to worry about as well. Once he was satisfied he had his two divisions moving as he wished, he sped off north to find the Ariete Division where it was operating on the main road just south of the escarpment.

As the day lengthened, a shadow fell over his mind and soul that whispered that unspeakable word—defeat. They would get half way to the Egyptian border before the retreat would halt for the night, and he would spend long hours helping the columns get fuel wherever they could find it. That was his main concern now. Though he knew he would not sleep that night, or have any time to spend writing his dear Lucie about what had happened, he was already composing the letter in his mind.

"Dear Lu… We've hit a bit of a setback today, a force of British reserves that we had not expected. It seems they have been reinforced with new tanks, and I can only wish I could say the same thing! The men are tired, with a long month of fighting in these harsh desert conditions laying heavily upon them, but they are still good soldiers. The worst of it is that we have no fuel. I have had to leave many non-essential vehicles behind, siphoning off their gasoline so the lorries and tanks can move, and I can get my flak batteries and artillery to better ground. I can see now that until this situation is cured, I can make no further move to the east.

"Perhaps that is for the best, Lu, as it will give me time to meet with Paulus and make my case. I smell a little intrigue here from the General Staff, most likely Halder again, but Paulus is a good man, and above most of that. You remember him, my good friend from the early days. We were both Company commanders together at Stuttgart. He's been sent over to take stock and see what might be done to better the supply situation. I am told that I'll get another division soon, the 90th Light, but what I really need now is another good Panzer Division, and the gasoline to keep the tanks running! I'll write more later, once our position is secure. For the moment, it's a few steps back to Libya, that is all. Then we'll dust ourselves off and see about Tobruk. Perhaps I was unwise to bypass that fortress and leave it to the Italians."

Yes, he thought, very unwise…

Chapter 21

The British advance was equally disorganized. O'Connor had stayed with the 7th Brigade during the attack, working hand in hand with Kinlan, advising him on desert conditions, and what he would be likely to encounter from the Germans.

"They're tough, professional troops," he said. "The shock must have hit them very hard, but they are far from beaten. If I were in Rommel's place I would be doing exactly what he's up to now—a good fast retreat to El Agheila and Mersa Brega. I've seen that ground, and it is very strong terrain for defense. What we need to do now is get General Wavell out here and see what we can muster for an advance."

"And go through the show and tell again with him?" said Kinlan. "I'm still pinching myself, General, and I have no doubt you are too."

Fedorov came in with Popski, congratulating them both on the quick victory. "It was as I expected," he said, "but I would not become complacent here. The Germans will learn and adapt."

Fedorov knew that the Germans had suffered a similar shock in Russia when they encountered the Soviet T-34 and heavy KV-1 tanks. They were nowhere near as capable as the Challengers, but they did shock the Germans when they realized that none of their existing tanks could penetrate the armor on a T-34, let alone the KV-1. But the Germans adapted their tactics and were able to cope until they could field better tanks in the Panzer IVF, Panther and Tiger models.

"They will be discussing new tactics down on battalion and company level even now. The next time you will meet a much more prepared defense."

"What we need now is good intelligence," said O'Connor. "From reports I've heard, our own boys don't really know the whole story on this brigade yet. All they know is that the 7th is back, or so I've heard on the radio."

"And that is all they need ever know," said Fedorov. I can understand that General Kinlan will eventually have to present the reality of this situation to all of his men, but the inverse would not be wise. General knowledge of the real origin of this brigade must remain a secret."

"Well," said O'Connor, "Wavell will want to know what in bloody hell the men are talking about, because he knows damn well the 7th Armored

Division is still at Alexandria. That hat will fly off in the wind in due course."

"Wavell will be briefed, but that doesn't mean the rank and file must know everything. Most would have a good laugh at the story, and not believe a word of it. It is simply too fantastic to explain what has happened—I'm sure you understand this General O'Connor. What they will believe, however, is that Great Britain has a new unit here in the desert, a highly secret unit. Men of war inherently understand the need for secrecy in battle. That is the card we must play here. This is very important—critical in fact."

"Agreed," said O'Connor, but if these men are to fight alongside our boys, it will certainly get chins wagging when they see this equipment."

"General Kinlan's brigade can operate independently," Fedorov suggested. "Perhaps it could secure the extreme southern flank as you move west again. That is the flank Rommel will always need to use should he attempt another mobile battle. Placing the 7th Brigade there would serve to check that and confine any renewed German offensive to the coastal region."

"Perhaps," said Kinlan, "and I understand what you are urging us to do now, Captain Fedorov, but war is not often so tidy. Military contingencies might compel me to render close support to existing British or Commonwealth units here, and in time, I will need their support as well. My brigade has limited supplies of food and water in train, not to mention ammunition. I'm not sure anything can be done about the latter, but we'll need other supplies, including fuel for our vehicles, and it will have to come from the existing logistics network here."

"I might suggest we establish a dedicated forward depot to support your troops with these necessities," said O'Connor. "I can arrange this for you. I'm not sure how your men will handle bully beef tins and biscuits, but I think we can keep you fed. Hauling fuel and water south into this desert is another matter, particularly if you move further west. It will take some planning, and the trucks of course, but it could be done."

"How is the fuel situation?" asked Fedorov through Popski.

"We have the Challenger IIE, here, the upgraded model with the improved 1500hp Europack powerplant. It's very efficient and left room for much more fuel in the tank. Our range is about 550 kilometers. We've come about 150 kilometers north from Sultan Apache, so I've plenty of fuel in the tanks still, and the supply train has fuel enough to refill all our vehicles one time. After that we need diesel to keep moving."

They hovered over the map and Kinlan began to point out a plan he had been considering. “You hold the oasis at Siwa, do you not?”

“We have men there, but remember that Italian division we observed. They’ve relieved Giarabub, but don’t seem interested in doing anything more for the moment.”

“Then I propose to move them out of Giarabub directly. That was what your Aussie battalion was wanting to do, but it’s clear they won’t have the force. Once I do that I can establish my main supply hold at Giarabub. You wouldn’t have to move supplies for me all the way to the west. If you can run supplies from Mersa Matruh down to Siwa, then my trucks can pick them up there and move them west to support my move to this position…” He pointed to the edge of the Great Libyan Sand Sea that stretched west to a point above the Jalu oasis.

“If I move along the edge of that desert, we can secure Jalu for an additional source of water, and then that will be built up to a new forward supply base. Once I settle in north or northwest of Jalu, I’ll be in a position to bushwhack any move the enemy makes on your southern flank, and also free to operate with the intent of threatening the enemy flank as well. My force is capable of standing against anything they throw at us, at least as long as our munitions hold out. So if you can move supplies to Siwa, principally fuel, I’ll handle the rest.”

“Excellent. I think we can manage that, General Kinlan.” O’Connor was very excited now, but did have a question that needed asking. “Yet you’ve mentioned ammunition on more than one occasion. How long can you operate before you’ll need replenishment?”

Kinlan looked at Fedorov as Popski translated for him, then folded his arms. “Sergeant Major!” he looked over his shoulder, and the Sergeant was quick to attention.

“Sir!”

“Fetch me a Charm round from the Brigade HQ troop stocks.

“Right away, sir.”

When the man returned, Kinlan could hand O’Connor something tangible by way of answering his question. The round was an Armor Piercing Fin Stabilized Discarding Sabot, with a bright orange base that narrowed to a thin molded frame. That eventually widened to a silver rimmed base from which a long, black spike projected, the business end of the penetrating round. It used

both Tungsten and depleted Uranium to make it the lethal weapon it was, and its unorthodox shape and configuration immediately answered one question.

“I don’t suppose your people have any of those lying about,” said Kinlan. “That round uses materials your industry will not have at the moment, and I’m afraid there is no way it could be duplicated. So this is a come as you are party for us, General. Once we fire the last of those little devils, the show is over. My tanks have a mix of various munitions, but I’ve no more than 150 rounds per tank. That said, if we make them count, each one of these demons can put one of Rommel’s tanks out of business, and then some. He’s already seen what they can do, and that has everything to do with why he’s headed west now. That and some precision artillery fire from our long range 155s.”

“I understand,” said O’Connor, hefting the round and handing it back to the Sergeant. “And I don’t suppose we would be much help with your maintenance issues either.”

“I’m afraid not. No General, you can send us food, fuel, water, and perhaps small arms munitions. I’ll put my people on it and we’ll see what, if anything, we can use.”

“I suggest I go to Wavell now in the KA-40,” said Fedorov. “I can speak Russian with him, and prepare him for what he will find when he arrives here. Perhaps a note or some communication as to the urgency of our meeting, from you General O’Connor, would be useful as well.”

“Certainly,” said O’Connor, tapping his riding crop. He was beginning to feel right at home here, his eyes still transfixed whenever a Challenger II was near. The thought he had such a force within his grasp now was rousing, after scraping along with Mark VI machinegun tankettes and old cruiser tanks that could barely get fifty miles before they broke down. He had seen the brigade in action, and was awesomely impressed. The power they represented was fearsome, even though he understood it was limited now, as Kinlan had clearly explained. His mind looked ahead to what would follow this victory, and the immediate moves the British might now undertake.

“The problem now is occupying all the Ground Rommel has decided to give us back,” said O’Connor. “We did it once, but it took us a good long month. I was able to clear the Jebel country with the 6th Australian Division, while I took everything else across the base of the peninsula to Agedabia and Beda Fomm. We’ll likely do that again, but that report of Italian troops massing on Benghazi is bad news. If they decide to hold out there it would

require us to invest the place, and we just haven't enough infantry yet to do that, and also hold a front facing the Germans at Mersa Brega."

"I think General Wavell will be recalling the 4th Indian Division from the East African campaign," said Fedorov. "You'll have the 2nd New Zealand Division too."

"Even with those troops our prospects for any further offensive will be slim. They will barely be enough to hold a line along the coast near Mersa Brega, which is where I believe Rommel is heading. Your Brigade can be the tip of the spear, General Kinlan, but as you've explained, you only have so much ammunition in train, and you'll need to be supplied just like any other unit in this environment. My instincts tell me to dash off in hot pursuit here, but that's just what got Rommel into the stew he's eating now. No. I think it best we arrange these logistics before contemplating any major move west. I'm sure this is what Wavell will advise. Our men just made the long slog from Agheila to Tobruk, Bardia and beyond. They'll need rest and refitting before we can ask them to turn around and move west again. Given your situation, I think we'd be much better off planning the next offensive carefully, so we can get the most from your force while it remains viable."

There it was again, thought Fedorov—the 7th Brigade represented power that was absolute, but finite. He knew full well how Kinlan must feel now. He would have to get back to Alexandria to brief Wavell, and then his own ship would be needing him soon. He felt reluctant to leave, wanting to help guide and advise Kinlan at this most critical initial phase of his experience here. At the same time, he harbored a lingering feeling of guilt for being the man who had let the bear out of his cave here. He knew the knowledge of Kinlan's presence was very dangerous, and wanted to watch over things and prevent further contamination. On one level, he knew he was being foolish. Events had now been set in motion that would gather their own momentum, for good or for ill. At least I've manage to move things in the right direction, he thought. We've stopped Rommel's advance, and saved Egypt for the moment. That was no small feat.

Beyond all this he still had the Germans to worry about, and yes, what they needed now was good intelligence. He needed to get up and find out what was going on, but he had limited fuel. He would have enough to get to Alexandria, brief Wavell, and then he would need to return to *Kirov* to refuel and huddle with Admiral Volsky again.

For now, he thought, it will be a long slow advance for the British as they try to re-occupy Cyrenaica, just as O'Connor said. I'll have to have faith in him, and in Kinlan. There is nothing else to do. I certainly won't be the man running operations here, so it's time I returned to the ship.

It was then that a runner came in with more news off the radio, and it was most welcome.

"There's been a battle at sea," he said. "Apparently the Royal Navy has given the Italians quite a beating."

"Good show," said O'Connor. "They'll be happy to know we've done the same to Jerry here, thanks to you fellows showing up in the nick of time. Well then, I think we all will have our hands full in the next few days and weeks. Let's get on with it."

Fedorov turned and shook hands with both men, wishing them well. He told them that he would report soon on his meeting with Wavell and relate the General's intentions.

"Now," he said himself in English. "I have ten hungry Marines to feed, and a ship to look after. Good luck to you both!"

He saluted, and took his leave, heading for the KA-40 where Troyak and the Marines had assembled, more than ready to be moving again. They had stewed in confinement for some time, until Fedorov managed to forge his alliance with Kinlan. Most had no idea what was happening, but they had followed Fedorov's orders to sit tight and stay quiet. He spied Orlov, a thought coming to mind.

"Chief," he said. "What ever happened to that thing you say you found in Siberia?"

"You mean this?" Orlov reached in his pocket, producing the strange tear shaped object, about the size of a small egg. Fedorov simply extended his hand, waiting for Orlov to hand it over. "Something wrong?" he asked.

"I'm not sure," said Fedorov, "but I'd like to have a closer look at this thing, if you don't mind. Maybe the ship's engineers can figure out what it is."

"Dobrynin? I was going to ask him about it, but he was too busy."

"You say you were near the Stony Tunguska River when you found this?"

"Very close. We spied something from above, and I thought someone was signaling me. So Troyak and I went down to have a look. I told you what happened. The Sergeant calls it the Devil's Teardrop. Good name for it.

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

"Yes… Well, I think I'd better hold onto this."

"Be my guest," said Orlov, "but be careful. It gets warm sometimes. Damn thing almost burned my hand—right when we saw those odd lights in the desert."

Fedorov thought about that, but said nothing. He took the object and tucked it into his service jacket pocket, his thoughts musing on the possible connection between this object and the incident involving Kinlan.

Just what I need, he thought, another mystery to solve.

Part VIII

The Sheepdog

“While it's Tommy this, an' Tommy that, an' "Tommy, fall be'ind,"
But it's "Please to walk in front, sir," when there's trouble in the wind,
There's trouble in the wind, my boys, there's trouble in the wind,
O it's "Please to walk in front, sir," when there's trouble in the wind.”

— Rudyard Kipling

Chapter 22

The British fleet steered south, away from the action and on a heading that would take it down to Benghazi as planned. Tovey worried that the Franco-German fleet would attempt an immediate engagement before they could slip away, but he was heartened to learn that his radar picket, *Argos Fire*, reported the enemy was heading east.

What could they be up to, thought Tovey, but he soon realized that Crete could be the target, and the enemy might be planning to strike there even as the Royal Navy steamed on Benghazi. Under any other circumstances I would be trying to engage that fleet, but not with so many ships licking wounds from that air strike. We were lucky to get off as well as we did. Without that rocket defense things would have been much worse. My God, they must have shot down sixty planes, a hard knock to the Germans and Italians, but yet they kept on coming.

And that is the sticky wicket, he thought. They *will* keep coming. All those planes can be replaced, but not the missiles that shot them down. There is really only so much *Kirov* and *Argos Fire* can do for us. It will come down to a steady hand and good fleet air defense from the FAA in the end, just as it always has. What we need here now are more aircraft carriers. *Eagle* and *Hermes* can barely do the job, and we simply haven't the fighter strength in theater to challenge the enemy.

In that he was very correct. There were no more than 77 *Hurricanes* in the Mediterranean theater at that very moment, and the few FAA fighters that had been assigned to the two carriers. Everything they had sent to Malta was gone. The 12 *Swordfish* and the Wellington bombers had managed to evacuate, but none of the fighters survived. Most of the German fighter strength had then shifted to North African airfields, but most of the *Stukas* were still on Sicily, and as long as they remained there, they could dominate the waters of the Central Med unless we can challenge them with good fighters.

All that day the two fleets were on divergent courses, but the British progress south was limited to the 16 knots that *Queen Elizabeth* could make.

Malaya was in no better shape with the torpedo she had taken, but the flooding had been controlled and the ship was in no immediate danger of sinking. The three cruisers that had also taken bomb hits, *Calcutta*, *Coventry*, and *Orion*, were all still seaworthy, though they would all need repairs when they returned to Alexandria.

Argos Fire continued to shadow the Franco-German fleet, steaming about 100 kilometers to the south on a parallel course. Captain MacRae continued to feed updated reports on the enemy location, and Tovey was amazed at the accuracy. There's something to be said for these advanced radars, he thought. They provide a situational awareness that is unsurpassed.

With this knowledge, Tovey concluded that the enemy was definitely heading for Crete, and warning alerts were sent out to see if the RAF there could return the favor and hit the enemy fleet. But in communication with Cunningham, Tovey received a coded message updating him on current air strength for Crete. Twelve *Hurricanes*, and eight old Gladiators made up the fighter defense. For strike aircraft they had 27 *Blenheims*, and while the airfields had adequate fuel for operations, there were no spare parts for maintenance. RAF had made the difficult decision to eventually pull the remaining aircraft off to North Africa. Meanwhile, disturbing reports continued to show German air strength building up in Greece—over a thousand planes.

Crete will be next, thought Tovey. So it looks like my little visit here will be extended. After all, *Hindenburg* is here, and there is simply no way I can return HMS *Invincible* to Home Fleet at the moment, Cunningham will need me, and every ship I can give him. For starters, I think I'll have to bring in another carrier as soon as possible. That thought immediately brought the face of his young protégé to mind, Christopher Wells on the carrier *Glorious*. He turned to an aide and asked for an update on ongoing operations with Force H, and he soon learned that Somerville had concluded the occupation of the Canary and Cape Verde Islands, and was now maintaining a guarded watch on Casablanca. There was a new carrier just about to join the fleet, HMS *Victorious*. That now made it possible to shift carrier strength here, so he cut orders to have *Glorious* steam for Alexandria at once.

Good enough, he thought. Now we'll give the Italians a good pounding at Benghazi, and hope our boys don't get too much of the same on Crete. Yet one day soon we'll have to face that Franco-German fleet, and that will

decide who controls the Eastern Mediterranean. At the moment, we risk losing the whole thing! I have *Invincible*, *Warspite* and our friends from another time. Who knows how long it will be before I get *Queen Elizabeth* and *Malaya* back in shape? I had better get them to Alexandria as soon as I possibly can.

He made the decision to detach those two old warriors, and send them home directly with an escort of five destroyers and the cruisers that had also taken bomb damage. The guns of *Invincible* and *Warspite* would be more than enough to pound Benghazi.

* * *

"Any deviation in that course track, Mister Healey?"

"No sir. I still have the main body heading 090, due east at 24 knots. But a couple of smaller contacts look like they are getting a bit curious about us. I have two ships bearing on our position." He toggled his history track on those ships and saw they had broken off from the main body just five minutes earlier.

"These ships are fast, sir. I'm making them at 36 knots!"

"I knew we should have taken that spotter plane out an hour ago," said MacRae. They had seen a single incoming aircraft coming in from the north, high and slow. MacRae had decided not to waste a missile on it, and now knew that he must have been spotted. Fair enough, he thought. Anybody gets too nosey and they'll get more than a nasty surprise for their trouble.

"Keep an eye on them, Mister Haley. What is the range now?"

"Seventy five kilometers and closing, sir."

"Notify me if they cross the 50 kilometer line. Mister Dean, please message the British and see if they have any sheep astray. I'll be on the helo deck aft."

About forty minutes later MacRae got that notification at the fifty kilometer mark, and he was back on the bridge, this time with Mac Morgan in tow.

"Two fast ships inbound," said MacRae. "We could give them a nice poke on the chest, but at this range I really don't know what I'd be shooting at. British fleet says they have nothing on that heading, and this contact was seen to break off from the main body we've been tracking at long range."

“Easy enough to assume these are a couple destroyers sent to look us over.” Morgan stroked his thick beard. “Well don’t look at me to give you the name of the ships, Captain. I’m your intelligence master, but nothing has come in over the black line from sources since we arrived here, if you know what I mean.”

“Well enough, Mack. From here on out we rely on conventional methods for intelligence gathering. You’re probably correct, but I’d prefer to look a man in the eye before I punch him in the nose.”

Morgan nodded, leaning close so only MacRae might hear him now. “Look Gordon, are you going to let every ship we run into out here get within gun range to satisfy your proprieties?”

“I see what you mean,” said MacRae. “Very well, air contacts have been clean for a good long while. Let’s get an X-3 up to have a look. I was just on the helo deck and the birds are all oiled and ready for action.”

“Suit yourself. But they have got to be destroyers, and if I can get the first good punch off in a bar fight I always feel I got my money’s worth.” He smiled, and MacRae sent the order down to the helo deck. His caution turned out to be unwarranted. Twenty minutes later the X-3 helo reported in that they had long range cameras on the contacts, two fast destroyers, flying the tricolor of France, and they were beating to quarters.

This wasn’t the Georgian Coast Guard, thought MacRae. Mack Morgan is right. I’ve got to re-set my watch to war time. It’s no good thinking I can back down a potential combatant with a warning or the simple flash of our deck gun. These ships undoubtedly mean business, just like the Russian Black Sea Fleet did, and so that’s what we’ll have to get down to here.

“Mister Dean,” he said stiffly.

“Sir?”

“Stand up the Gealbhans, a single missile to begin. Target those close contacts. You may take your pick as to which ship you hit. I want them to know what we’re capable of.”

“Aye sir.” Dean spun on his heel, ready for action. “You heard the Captain. Light up the forward cell and sound deck claxon.”

The blaring warning came and the forward deck was cleared as the covering plates opened to expose the missile cells. Seconds later the missile was away, fast on its way to find a pair of troublesome birds in the two French destroyers.

Agile and *Vautor* were the uninvited guests that day, the *Eagle* and *Vulture*. They had been coming at their top speed, all four stacks darkening the sky with smoke, with crews at the ready on their five 138mm guns. Their mission was to find the ship reported by the German reconnaissance plane out of Greece, and to ascertain whether the British fleet was on a parallel course south of the main Franco-German force. MacRae did not know it at that moment, but he was about to tell the enemy exactly what they wanted to know.

The missile came in low and fast, a sleek sparrow out to challenge the bigger birds of prey. *Vautor* was the ugly duckling that day, its crews spying something bright and low on the horizon. The missile came so fast that the ships barely had time to swivel their AA guns on the heading before it pulsed in to find its target, a silver streak of death. At just a little over 3000 long tons, full load, and no armor to speak of, the *Vautor* was exactly the kind of ship the missile had been designed to kill. It penetrated the hull easily, and the resulting explosion set off the big 22 inch torpedo tubes, with catastrophic results.

Captain Degarmo aboard the *Agile* stared with disbelief at the chaos when he saw the other destroyer erupt in angry fire and smoke. A rocket, just as he had been warned. He did not believe the tales circulating about these new British naval weapons, until he saw the skies laced with the ragged remnants of the winding white contrails from the aerial missile defense. Yet he had not actually seen any of those rockets in action, and the thought that one could come at him like this, so fast and low over the sea to unerringly strike his squadron, was most unnerving. He found himself spinning this way and that on the weather bridge, field glasses pressed tight against his eyes in a vain attempt to spot the enemy who had fired upon him.

Nothing was to be seen.

Mon Dieu! Could they have hit us from beyond the horizon? Was this fired from an unseen aircraft that sped away after delivering its weapon? He immediately sent a signal to the main fleet, warning him that he was under attack by rocket weaponry, and the die that would decide the fate of many on the sea that day had just been cast.

Admiral Jean de Laborde received the message with some concern, turning to his aide, Lieutenant Giroux. “Rocket weapon? Then the British do have these things as reported. Notify the Germans. It seems the enemy is

south of us, and on a parallel course as we suspected."

This had implications for the planned German attack against the harbors and airfields of Crete. They would have to move north of Crete into the Aegean to strike the main harbors, which would allow the British to steam north and try to seal off the roughly 100 kilometer passage between Kithira and the main island. This would either force a battle there, or compel the Axis fleet to take the longer route around the eastern tip of Crete before moving west again. So a quick conference with Lütjens resulted in a most unexpected decision—they would turn south now and face the enemy full on.

IF AIR COVER POSSIBLE, WE ARE READY TO PROCEED, Laborde signaled to seal the deal. The plan had been to always operate under the protection of land based aircraft from Sicily, Italy and Greece, but Lütjens was not concerned. German intelligence had also counted the planes on Crete, and they were not deemed a major threat. So they would go hunting, and the fleet turned, riding high seas from the passing storm front, and surged south through the grey squall lines in search of their prey. What they would find, if they stayed on that heading unimpeded, was the flotilla of wounded warriors, *Queen Elizabeth, Malaya* and the damaged cruisers.

Aboard *Argos Fire*, MacRae watched the signal returns on the radar change their track and head south.

"They've come round to 170," said Healey as he watched the radar screen. "Speed has increased to 28 knots."

Morgan gave the Captain a look. "Well it seems we've invited more trouble than we needed," he said.

"Aye, that we have. In for a penny, in for a pound. How many ships in that battlegroup?"

"I'm reading 22 separate contacts, with at least five or six large capital ships based on signal strength and density. They all just executed a well coordinated turn, and they move like silk. I don't think we've seen all the speed they're capable of yet sir."

"The ship will come to full battle stations. Signal the British and advise them of the new heading and speed. Let me see the situation on a map, Mister Healey."

"Aye sir, this is the position of the enemy fleet…" Haley pointed to the digital map screen to the left of his main station. "And this is the British fleet bound for Alexandria."

“A pair of old battleships, three cruisers and five destroyers, and all of them at 16 knots. Be sure those ships are notified of the new threat.”

“It won’t do them much good,” said Morgan. “I do have good ears still, and I’ve been in on all the signals traffic between the British fleet units. *Queen Elizabeth* has a problem with her turbines, and she’s lost a boiler due to that bomb hit. Warning or not, that ship isn’t going to make any more speed than those sixteen knots, and I doubt any of the other ships will leave her behind.”

“I don’t like the looks of that,” said MacRae. “The enemy has more than enough speed to intercept the British if they get wind of them.”

And they did.

Chapter 23

There was trouble on the wind that day, swift before the spinning storm as the Franco-German fleet turned south. The long, grey bow of the *Normandie* was breaking the swells easily, the massive bulk of the ship taming the heavy seas as the squalls slowly dissipated. Admiral Jean Laborde was on the bridge with the ship's Captain, Charles Martel, a man with a very famous name. He was a tough, disciplined officer, and ready for battle at any time, so it was no surprise that Captain Martel was also quickly given the nickname *Le Marteau* from his namesake, Charles "the Hammer' Martel, the man who had stopped the invasion of the Moors into Europe at the Battle of Tours.

Now the hammer was eager to fall on his perceived enemies, the British fleet that had so boldly and ignominiously attacked the French off Mers el Kebir. They had moved south to find the two destroyers that had been detached, seeing that the *Vautor* was a total loss, with heavy casualties among her crew of 125 men. It was just one more slap in the face insofar as Martel was concerned.

"The British certainly gave the Italians a lesson they will not soon forget," he said to the Admiral.

"And they will likely sit in La Spezia now for the rest of the war!" Laborde shook his head, his eyes following the rise and fall of the distant silhouette of the *Dunkerque*. "But I seem to recall that we gave the British a little lesson ourselves off Dakar. Yes?"

"We did indeed, sir."

"Tell me, Captain. What do you make of all this talk of these new British rockets?"

"Hard to make any sense of it, Admiral. *Agile* reports it was a rocket, low on the water and very fast, and there is no mistaking its effectiveness. One hit and *Vautor* was a flaming wreck, or so I was told."

"How many men were rescued?"

"Sixty-three, most all transferred to the *Strausbourg* now. She'll be coming up to take her station on out port side in due course."

"Naval rockets… *Agile* saw nothing else?"

“No sir. No sign of an enemy ship on any horizon.”

“Then it must have been a plane. I have heard the Germans are working on weapons like this—radio controlled bombs.”

“They saw no aircraft, sir.”

“Probably ducked into a squall line. How could any ship fire at a target it could not see? Captain Degarmo on the *Agile* is not blind.”

Laborde could not be faulted for the assumptions he was making. Over the horizon radar was not something that would have come readily to his mind as a possible solution. French investment in radar technology was sparse at best. By 1935 a single French ship had been equipped with a “collision avoidance device,” and on land the French had tinkered with the “barrage electronique.” They had purchased a few radar sets from the British, and one of these was installed on the *Normandie*, but amazingly, it was disregarded as a useful device, and switched off. *Strausbourg* had an air warning set installed and operational, but saw no threats.

“There is one thing I do not understand, Admiral.” Captain Martel was adjusting the fit of his gloves. “If the British have these weapons, why is it we saw nothing of them at Mers el Kebir or Dakar?”

“Possibly a new development. It may be limited in deployment, and only available on a few ships. The British flagship is here, or so say the Italians. It was HMS *Invincible* that caught the Italians as they withdrew, but it used the good old fashioned way of doing battle at sea, those nice big 16-inch guns.”

“Perhaps we’ll get a crack at that ship today, sir. I’ll match our twelve 15-inch guns against her nine any day and come off the better man.”

“Undoubtedly,” said Laborde. “Well with this weather clearing, let’s get spotter planes up and verify the position of this enemy fleet. Notify the Germans that we will launch at 15:00.”

“Very good sir.”

* * *

MacRae was pacing on the bridge, his deliberate, steady movement from one side to the other like the motion of a pendulum.

“Keep that up and you’ll wear a path in the carpeting,” said Morgan, but he turned his head to see that Elena Fairchild had come up to the bridge to see what was going on.

“Greetings, Mum,” he said politely.

“I heard the alarm,” she said. “What were we firing at this time?”

MacRae drifted over, speaking in a calm, quiet voice. “A pair of French destroyers were thinking to get cozy with us a while back. I sent them a message to discourage that thought, but it seems my strategy backfired.”

“In what way?”

“We’ve another 22 ships heading our way now, and here we are between the wolves and the sheep, just one little sheep dog on the watch.”

“I don’t understand.”

“The British are about 20 kilometers south of us, and we’ve taken up the radar and air defense picket for this detachment. They’re heading for Alexandria—the ships that took damage from that air strike.”

“That was unfortunate,” said Fairchild. “Why couldn’t we stop that attack?”

“Oh we might have—that is if you don’t mind my using damn near every SAM we have aboard. The Russians took a bite out of them as well, but it was clear they were trying to husband their missile inventory as well.”

“And what about the destroyers?”

“It looks as though we put one under, and that has the rest of the lot a wee bit bothered. They’ll be on our far horizon in fifteen minutes at the speed they’re making. So I sent down a message to let you know we may have to do some serious shooting, and very soon.”

“Well how are we fixed for missiles ourselves?”

“On the SSMs, we’ve seventeen Gealbhans remaining.”

“Seventeen?”

Twenty two enemy ships… Seventeen missiles. The mathematics did not give her any comfort.

“What about the deck guns?” She folded her arms, clearly unhappy.

“Oh, Aye, we’ve plenty of ammunition for those. But Mister Haley there says we’ve a good number of heavy ship sin that formation, and a 4.5-inch gun won’t make much of an impression on their battleships. We can use it to fend off a destroyer rush, should it come to close quarter action like that.”

“A destroyer rush?” She gave him a long look. “Walk with me, Captain, if you please.”

“My pleasure…” The two exited the aft bridge hatch, with several crewmen looking over their shoulders as they went, and Mack Morgan giving

one a big grin until he heard Miss Fairchild's voice calling for him as well.

They moved out to the officer's wardroom behind the bridge, and Elena closed the door, folding her arms. "What in god's name are we doing, Gordon?"

"We're screening the British fleet. That's what we agreed to do when we took up this post."

"Where is the Russian ship?"

"Kirov? They're doing the same for Admiral Tovey's detachment, off to Benghazi. I can't say as I like the idea of dividing the fleet like this, but the ships we're screening all took hits in that air action, so it seems they want to get them safely to Alexandria. It's really my fault, Elena. I took a pot shot at a pair of destroyers getting nosey, and put one under. Perhaps if I'd waited and used the deck guns I might have driven them off and avoided the situation we're in now."

"Perhaps," said Morgan, "but they may have just come at you all the same. I put him up to it, Mum. I gave him a good nudge in the ribs about letting those destroyers get too close."

"True enough," MacRae agreed. "But the responsibility is still mine. I'm Captain of *Argos Fire,* and it was my decision."

"Well what about the British?" said Elena. "They have battleships south of us in that detachment, correct? They can defend themselves?"

"Aye, they've *Queen Elizabeth* and *Malaya* south of us, with three cruisers, and all with damage. They'll fight if it comes to it, but I think we owe them the benefit of anything we can do."

"What do you propose?"

"A sheep dog isn't worth the hair on his back if he'll cut and run from the wolves, Elena. We started this, I started it, and there it is. I can't see as though I'd do anything different, except perhaps ask the good Admiral if he'd mind assigning us a carrier. But it seems they deemed the air threat low on this heading. I suppose he was correct, until I stuck my thumb in it."

"So now what? That doesn't answer my question, Gordon."

"So now we fight, Madame. It's just that simple. A man in a bar got in my face and I gave him a good hard shove on the shoulder. Who knew he'd come at us with half of windy Wales?"

"How many missiles can we afford to use here?"

"I suppose that will depend on how much backbone they have out there.

We might hit them, and back them off if we do it hard enough. Then again, they just might get their dander up and come at us with everything they have."

"That's what it looks like now," said Morgan.

"Damn," Elena swore. "Seventeen missiles? Alright, Gordon. You can use seven. Those missiles are all that stands between us and a re-commissioning of *Argos Fire* as a cruise liner."

"Well, it wouldn't be that bad, but I take your point."

"What about the helicopters?"

"I was just going to get round to that. We can put *Hellfires* or *Sea Skuas* on the X-3s, These are smaller missiles that might hurt their lighter ships if we need them. And they've a mean chain gun."

"Use them if necessary, but keep them safe. Those ships have flak guns, don't they?"

"That they do, so the *Hellfires* may not be the best choice here, They range out only 5 kilometers."

"What about my birthday present?" said Mack Morgan.

"Birthday present?"

"Elena purchased a pair of *Hellfire* AGM-114N Thermobaric missiles from the Americans. They call them MACs." He smiled. "They'll suck the bloody air right out of one of those destroyers."

"Wonderful," said MacRae. "Eight kilometer range. No, we'd better use the *Sea Skuas*. We've four for each helo, sixteen in all since we have missile stocks left over from the bird we lost in the Caspian Sea. They'll range out to 25 kilometers, which will be well outside ship flak defense of this era."

"Alright," said Elena. "Two helicopters, with four missiles each. The rest stay in the hold."

"And so then what'll we do if the 15 odd missiles you're giving me won't turn that fleet around? This is war, Elena. When we fire people over there are going to die, and when they shoot back there's a chance people will get hurt or killed on our side as well. You brought the ship here, What did you expect?"

"Have the British been warned?"

"Fifteen minutes ago."

"Alright then…. Seven missiles. Eight on the helos. That's all we can do for them here. Understand?"

MacRae looked at Mack Morgan, then slowly nodded. “As you wish. I know what’s in your mind. It was a bloody long war, but if we beat these fellows now, we won’t have to face them again later. It takes three or four years to build another battleship.”

“I understand, but we have to be cautious. Signal the British that we will engage, but we’re just one ship, a good ship no doubt, but we can’t win the whole thing for them. They’ll have to understand that.”

Back on the bridge the crew was silent as the three came in. They had seen Miss Fairchild in this mood before, and knew she wasn’t happy. Yet the Captain took his seat and immediately issued orders.

“Mister Dean, send down to the helo deck. I’ll want two X-3s up with *Sea Skuas* in ten minutes. Ready on the GB-7 system. Two missiles please. One minute delay between shots. Target the center of their formation so the whole lot gets a good look at the results.”

“Aye sir. Ready on GB-7.”

“You may fire.”

Dean looked at his CIC officer and seconded the order. The warning claxon sounded, the missile fired, and the battle was joined at 15:40, with the enemy fleet at 35 kilometers range, not far over the grey horizon.

* * *

“Sir! Mainmast reports a plane on the horizon. Very fast, sir, and dead ahead!”

“Sound General quarters,” said Laborde, looking at his Captain. “A spotter plane? Are ours in the air yet?”

“We’ve only just launched, sir.”

“Shoot the enemy plane down.”

Several destroyers posted well out in the van were already firing, but the effort was futile. They could simply not sight on a weapon moving at Mach 3, or have any chance of hitting it. Their only hope was to throw up such a wall of flak that the missile might run into something, but with only this one target, the threat did not seem to warrant such action. Thirty seconds later Admiral Laborde and Captain Martel saw the new British weapon.

As if the men off the *Vautor* were cursed, the missile locked on to the ship they had been transferred to after being fished out of the sea, the battlecruiser

Strausbourg, cruising off the port side of the *Normandie*. The missile had been programmed for a popup and dive maneuver, or it might have blasted right into the forward face armor of the A turret. Instead it struck the base of the conning tower, but found a sturdy structure there, with 270mm armor, over 10.5 inches of steel that had been designed to stop a shell weighing many times the 200kg warhead on the missile. The resulting blast and fire were considerable, but the missile did not penetrate that armor. That said, the fire from the fuel and the shock of the kinetic impact were a severe blow to the ship, and on the bridge of *Strausbourg*, the crew were picking themselves up off the deck and seeing the thick pall of acrid smoke blinding their view forward.

The deadly duel of missile versus armor had begun.

Chapter 24

It was a battle that *Kirov* had learned to fight in the crucible of war, the ship's missiles matched against some of the toughest and most powerful battleships ever built. The Russians had already dueled with ships like *King George V*, *Rodney* and *Nelson*, fought the best battleships of Italy and then slugged it out with the Japanese Behemoth *Yamato*—all in previous worlds that had now spun into the ether with this latest revision of the history when the ship appeared in 1940. And Karpov had also faced down the American Navy in two eras, with a massive battle in 2021 against CVBG *Washington*, before displacing to 1945 to confront Halsey, Ziggy Sprague and the most powerful fleet the world has ever seen. There he dueled with the intrepid battleship *Iowa*, taking the most extreme measures in the struggle to prevail.

In all of this combat, the officers and crew of *Kirov* had learned hard lessons on the application and limits of their power. They had retuned their ECM jammers to frustrate the enemy radar and communications of this era, and reprogrammed their missiles to rise and strike the superstructures of the ships they targeted, thus avoiding the thick, heavy belt armor of the battleships. For some they had altered the angle of the missile attack to hit from above, to plunge through the thinner deck armor and into the heart of the enemy ship.

All these measures and tactics had made *Kirov* invincible on the sea, the shock and power of those supersonic SSMs stunning the unsuspecting Admirals and Captains of the 1940s, the searing heat and fire of nuclear warheads becoming the ultimate hammer the ship could wield. In these many duels, *Kirov* found that the one weapon the enemy had in abundance, and one that posed the greatest threat to the ship's survival, was air power. It was the dogged, if suicidal attack of Admiral Hara's carrier pilots that scored the first telling blow against the Russian ship, when Lieutenant Hayashi came screaming down to fly his plane into the aft reserve citadel command bridge of the ship, braving a missile defense that had sent so many of his comrades to their deaths.

And it was the massed air power of Halsey's fast carriers that rose to challenge Karpov, even with two other modern ships at his side. The sheer

number of aircraft the American Pacific Fleet could put into the sky was like a great wave that threatened to swamp the ship, depleting its missile inventories and leaving it open to destruction from above, as so many other great ships had died.

Thus far, *Kirov* had avoided serious harm. Yet the ship was wounded, by the shrapnel of enemy shells, near miss torpedo explosions, and the raging attacks of enemy planes. It had survived all these battles through the skill of its officers, the sheer power of its weaponry, and at times pure luck. The U-boat Kapitan Rosenbaum had caught the ship by surprise where he lurked in Fornells Bay off Menorca, and the torpedo he fired came within inches of striking a devastating blow to *Kirov's* hull. Even in 1908, the dogged attacks made by Admiral Togo's fleet had managed to put damage on the ship, and the mine struck there had forever destroyed *Kirov's* forward 'Horsejaw' sonar dome.

Now *Argos Fire* was in the same crucible of war that *Kirov* had faced, but they had not had time to learn any of these lessons. They had great strengths relative to the enemy they were facing. They could see them on radar over vast distances, and had the speed to use that advantage to keep their distance and strike with long range missiles. Yet they had not faced ships of heavy armor yet, and their missile inventory was nowhere near the size of the one *Kirov* had brought to this world. *Argos Fire* had only 24 Gealbhan *Sparrow* missiles under her forward deck, and of these many had been used in the Black Sea. They had only seventeen left now, and the first to strike the oncoming Franco-German fleet had found a worthy target in the battlecruiser *Strausbourg*, sending fire and wrath against her forward conning tower, but it was not a fatal blow like the missile that had easily gutted the lightly armored destroyer *Vautor*.

The thickness of the armor on the ships they were now facing would make all the difference, as long as the officers commanding them had steel wills and backbones for the fight that was now unfolding.

Admiral Laborde saw the second missile flashing on the horizon, and it looked to be heading directly for his ship. "Hard to starboard!" he roared, as if he were attempting to outmaneuver an enemy torpedo. The helmsman spun the wheel, turning the ship slowly as the missile flashed in, low on the sea. Seconds later it was the *Normandie* that felt the shuddering impact and fire, which might have hit the long bow if it had not been for that instinct to turn.

Instead the missile struck low on the side armor of the battleship, just beneath the massive B turret, and there it made a glancing blow that looked far worse than the damage it actually inflicted.

Bright orange fire blazed against the side of the ship, but the armor held, and the fires caused by the residual fuel were the worst of the damage, scorching the hull black from just above the water level to the gunwales. Both hits had been shocking to all the men of the fleet. The leading destroyers were amazed to see how the missiles had even changed course to deftly avoid the screening ships and vector in on the heart of the formation. But that shock was the worst of it, and it did not break the steel in the men that day. They would fight.

Admiral Lütjens was steaming three kilometers off the port side of *Normandie*, his flotilla of four ships slightly separated from the French Fleet. It had been an uneasy alliance, as the French were reluctant allies here, and he knew there may be many men on those ships who still tasted the bitter bile of their defeat at the hands of the Germans. He lowered his field glasses and looked at Kapitan Adler, a wry smile on his face.

"So the British have rockets here as well," he said, stating the obvious. "How are they spotting us?"

"Perhaps just as we surmised in the Atlantic," said Adler. "They must have a submarine close by to send the general coordinates of our fleet."

"But the accuracy of these attacks is uncanny," said Lütjens. "Did you see how that second rocket avoided the destroyer screen? It was as if the damn thing had eyes!"

"Yes," said Adler. "We would have taken a hit like that on the *Graf Zeppelin* if our destroyer had not been right alongside at that moment."

"How do we beat a weapon like this?" Lütjens shook his head, clearly impressed, but Adler stood taller, his hands clasped behind his back.

"They must be firing from just over the horizon, Admiral. We have speed—let's use it! Look, the French heavy ships are still in formation. They will control those fires and I am willing to bet they are not seriously harmed. What we do now is charge with the heavy cavalry, sir. How many of these rockets can the enemy have? We may take hits, but they cannot sink us all before we get them under our guns. Then we settle the matter the old fashioned way."

Even as Adler finished they saw another thin contrail in the sky, this time

a SAM fired to take down the seaplane spotter that had just launched from the *Normandie* minutes before. It exploded with the unerring hit, sending murmurs through the bridge crew that prompted Lütjens to turn and give a stiff rebuke to his men.

"We are not here to ooh and ahh at the British fireworks! We are here to find and crush them, and that is exactly what we will do!" Then to Adler he said: "Signal Admiral Laborde. If their ship can still make way, I advise we increase to full battle speed and sail right down that heading." He pointed a gloved finger at the smoke trail low on the sea from that second rocket strike.

"Shall I signal the *Goeben* to launch *Stukas?"* Adler waited on the Admiral's order.

"Not just yet, he said. The French are launching more seaplanes. Let's see how they do before we give the British more targets for these rockets. Now… helmsman, all ahead full!"

* * *

Aboard *Argos Fire* MacRae was leaning over the radar map with Mister Healey. He had seen the firing tracks of his first two missiles, and they waited briefly, looking for any diminishment of speed in the two contacts that were hit. Five minutes later it was clear that the enemy was undeterred. Smaller, faster contacts were increasing speed. They saw two groups of five, which appeared to be destroyer squadrons increasing to nearly 36 knots. Many ships were also now launching seaplanes, as these were carried even down to the light cruiser class in the French Navy. They saw six more planes aloft and fanning out ahead of the fleet.

"Look at that," said MacRae. "Do we want to commit another six *Vipers* against seaplanes?" He looked at Morgan now.

"Twenty minutes and they break our horizon in any case. If you want my advice, I'd begin retiring on the British Fleet now and try to stay ahead of those bastards. Save your missiles. It's only a matter of time until they make contact with us."

MacRae agreed, and ordered the ship to come about to a heading that would take him west of the British squadron. No sense leading those brigands any other place, he thought.

"Well, our opening salvo doesn't seem to have made much of an

impression." Gordon looked Elena's way, but she stood in icy silence, watching the operations but saying nothing. Executive Officer Dean was quick enough to realize what had happened. Miss Fairchild had ordered the Captain to conserve ammunition, which was understandable. He had looked at the results of the initial missile strikes and realized the difficulties.

"If I may, sir." He said, drifting to MacRae's side. "We might make better use of our SSMs if we target their lighter class ships. The core of their fleet is most likely well armored battleships. Some of these ships have belt armor exceeding ten inches thick. Our missiles weren't built to penetrate that, but against their cruisers and destroyers we'll likely get a mission kill with every hit. It's either that or we'll have to program every missile for popup maneuver and try to hit the superstructure, but even the conning towers of the heavier ships would be very well protected. We'll shake them up and start a fire, but going after the escorts is our best bet. It might winnow down the odds a bit."

"Aye," said MacRae. "Let's see what we can do. One more missile, Mister Dean. You make the target selection."

Dean huddled with Healey to get his best advice and then they decided to fire at what looked to be an escort cruiser. It was moving out in front of two other ships, and making just over 30 knots. They did not know it at the time, but they were fingering the light cruiser *La Galissonniere*, lead ship in a class of three that formed the 3rd Cruiser Division of the High Seas Fleet at Toulon. The missile was away, and it would do considerably more harm when it struck. Yet even for a light cruiser, *La Galissonniere* was protected with side armor exceeding 100mm, and 95mm on the conning tower where the blow fell. The missile had sufficient kinetic impact to blast through, but just barely, and the resulting fire was very bad on this smaller ship of just over 9100 tons full load. The bridge was put out of action by the smoke and flames, but the message got passed aft and the engines reduced speed. One brave soul stayed with the helm and brought the ship around, turning about and seeking safety behind the fleet to try and fight the fire. Dean had been correct. The fires were bad enough to take the ship out of the fight, a mission kill if not an outright sinking.

"That's a little better," said MacRae when they saw th eship turn on radar. "I'll want those X-3s in the air at once, Mister Dean. They are to look for light destroyer class vessels and put their *Sea Skuas* to good use. The British

will have enough on their hands without having to worry about the enemy torpedo runs."

As the first helo lifted off Morgan found MacRae and spoke quietly. "This isn't looking good, Gordie. When those big fellows out there catch up to the *Queen Elizabeth*…"

"I understand," said MacRae. "But we'll do what we can."

* * *

"Let's move Tommy," said Lieutenant Ryan as he strapped himself into his X-3 helicopter. His co-pilot, Tom Wicks was in and settled in his seat in no time, and the props were turning on the sleek new bird, a hybrid craft that would ascend like a helo and then use a pair of turbo props to achieve speeds well over 470KPH, nearly as fast as fighters of that day. It was swift, agile, and today it would have four *Sea Skua* missiles aboard, two on each outer pylon. It could also carry *Hellfires*, *Hydra-70* rocket pods, and had a lethal chain gun in the nose. The *Sea Skuas* would take up all the room on the pylons, leaving only two points on the outer edge for a pair of ATAS Air-to-Air *Stingers* for defense against planes. But the chopper's best move would be its speed, aerodynamic agility and stealth.

"Fast and low, Tommy," said Ryan. "That's the recipe here. I'll want both helos to go in tandem. There's something on the wind today, and we're out to give them a good sting."

That last attack order he had received in the Caspian had been sheer madness when they had flown into the teeth of the Russian 847th Coastal Air Defense battery, equipped with the Triumf S-400, the same deadly long range spear that *Kirov* used against enemy aircraft. His wing mate, Matt Wilson, had gotten the wrong end of one of those, and when Ryan saw his intended target, a nice big fat floating power plant, simply vanish from his radar screen, he figured the Russians had some slick new jammer to spoof his electronics. Either way, it added up to a quick abort. That decision, and a little luck, was the only reason he and Tom Wicks were still alive that day. But this time things would be different.

This time there would be no enemy radar to paint them red, and no deadly volley of S-400 SAMs to confront. They would need no ECM jamming, only a steady hand on the stick and a good eye on the radar for target data. That

was Tom Hicks' job, and once they were inbound he saw a formation of five contacts soon enough.

"Five ducks up ahead, Lieutenant, and I don't think they see us. At least they're not shooting at us yet!"

"See us or not, we're on their horizon now. But remember, Tommy, these fellows don't have any missiles. This is World War *Two*, me boyo, and *we've* got the thunder this time out. Let's not fool around. Put two missiles on each ship."

"My pleasure!" Wicks tapped out his targets and the missiles were away, not the lightning fast supersonic darts that the ships would fire, but a decent high subsonic speed missile that could range out 25 kilometers, well beyond any danger of enemy flak. They would approach low, rise as they neared the target to acquire it with radar, and then bore in with a semi-armor piercing warhead that was enough to penetrate the thin skin of a destroyer. Once through the hull, the small 28kg high explosive warhead was still enough to do some serious damage.

Tempete and *Tornade* were the two ships to feel the X-3's bite. One missile blasted the superstructure, and the second pierced the hull of the 1300 ton destroyer *Tornade*. Blast, shrapnel, smoke and fire were soon enveloping the small ships, and the second X-3 scored four more hits on two others in the formation. In one hot minute the X-3s had bludgeoned the destroyer flotilla, *Mistral* and *Orage* faring little better than Ryan's targets.

"Well that's that!" said Ryan with a smile. "Talk about an unanswered punch. They don't know what hit them! Let's use those *Stingers* to take out a few spotter planes and be done with this." He pulled to get altitude, the other X-3 following smartly, but once they climbed, the radar was alive with new contacts.

"Blessed Savior," said Ryan, staring out the wind screen when they got close enough to see the enemy fleet. "I told you there was trouble on the wind, Tommy. No wonder they wanted us out here. There must be twenty ships, and not this lot that we've been poking at. Look at the size of that big fellow! Let's get back to the *Argos Fire."*

"Aye," said Wicks as the X-3 banked for home. The words of Kipling were suddenly on his lips, and he gave Ryan a smile as they sped away. "*While it's Tommy this, an' Tommy that, an' "Tommy, fall be'ind," But it's "Please to walk in front, sir," when there's trouble in the wind…"*

Part IX

Strange Bedfellows

"This is no fish, but an islander, that hath lately suffered by a thunder-bolt. Alas, the storm is come again! My best way is to creep under his gaberdine; there is no other shelter hereabout: misery acquaints a man with strange bedfellows. I will here shroud till the dregs of the storm be past."

— Shakespeare: *The Tempest, Act 2, Scene 2*

Chapter 25

Karpov had a new airship. He had ordered its construction shortly after he took command of the Siberian Air Corps, and now it was finally ready to join the fleet, larger and more powerful than any other Zeppelin in Siberia, if not the world. With airships named for every major city of note, he decided to christen this one with a regional name, derived from the river valley where the ship's duralumin metal frame had been mined and forged, in the cold, inaccessible north. So it was that *Tunguska* joined the fleet in late January of 1941, with a full 225,000 cubic meter volume, and the best recoilless guns and most advanced radars that Siberian industries could produce.

Tunguska was 250 meters in length, larger than any other airship in the Orenburg fleet, and bigger than the *Narva* in Soviet Russia by a full ten meters. It was even slightly larger than the mighty German Zeppelin *Hindenburg* that had been destroyed in a tragic fire that ignited its hydrogen lifting gas in 1937 before the war. To avoid that, this airship would use the rare helium gas, which had been mined from now classified sources within Siberia, and conserved to support the fleet. By reaching those metrics in her design, *Tunguska* would rightfully claim the title as the largest aircraft ever to be built and fly on the earth, three times the length of the biggest jumbo jets of modern times.

With all that lifting capacity the ship was endowed with a suite of 24 recoilless rifles, six more than Volkov's flagship *Orenburg*, and the advantage was all in the bigger 105mm rifles on the main gondola. Better yet, there were secret racks of new rocket designs that Karpov had initiated a year ago for this project. They were based on the RS-82mm and RS-132mm rockets that had been in development as early as 1920 by the Soviets, but Karpov had used the information he commanded in his service jacket computer to modify them, and give them much better aerodynamic performance. They were unguided, and still too inaccurate to use against small ground targets, which was the reason the Russians abandoned them as a potential tank killer, and moved to the more promising PTAB bomblets instead. But Karpov believed they would still be useful as an area saturation weapon, like the dread Katyusha rocket that appeared in the Soviet arsenal,

though that was not his primary use for the weapon.

Another airship was a very big target, and airship duels could often occur at very close ranges. So Karpov had a special swiveling rack installed forward of the main command gondola, and there he hid away his little surprise, one of several built into the design of this new airship. After seeing the success 'Big Red' had with his air fuel bomb, he also had a special bomb delivery rack installed on this ship so it could easily accommodate that weapon. When finally completed and commissioned, *Tunguska* had more guns and sheer fighting power than anything in the sky, and a double thick self sealing lining on the interior gas bags. With six powerful 1200hp engines, a third more power than the *Hindenburg*, it was capable of reaching speeds of 115km per hour in spite of its mass, or just over 70 miles per hour. And it could climb higher than any other airship then designed, capable of reaching 15,000 meters and still operating safely, which was well above the service ceiling of any fighter aircraft of the day.

Karpov had his *Kirov*, a fighting airship that he believed was unmatched by anything that might try to challenge him. *Tunguska* was twice the size of the *Abakan*, and so he naturally transferred his flag the day of the commissioning, and promoted his trusted Captain Bogrov to this new command. He was told to scour the fleet and select the very best air crews to serve aboard *Tunguska*, and he assigned it a company of his best troops for security, led by his Intelligence Chief Tyrenkov.

Striding aboard that day, Karpov was in a high mood, his newly shined boots hard on the metal mesh deck as he walked the long central passage from nose to stern. He greeted the new crew, spoke with them at their assigned action stations, touring every corner of the airship, from the high top platforms where machine guns and even 76mm recoilless rifles were mounted, to the Topaz Radar in the nose, and finally his secret rocket turret. He had business that day, a very special inaugural cruise planned for *Tunguska*.

The meeting had been arranged just after the collapse of the Omsk accords. Enraged at Volkov's treachery, Karpov had made quiet contacts with Soviet Russia, and he convinced Kolchak that they should explore possibilities for cooperation in that area. So he was flying to Moscow that day, high above the Siberian cloud deck, where no other airship or plane could find or follow him. Yes, Volkov would learn of his arrival in Moscow

soon, as his intelligence network was simply too good, but by then Karpov would have already achieved his aim.

Let him find out when I arrive over Red Square with *Tunguska*, he thought with a smile. That will put some ice in his veins. I've stopped his little offensive on the Ob, and his bid to quickly eliminate me as a threat on his eastern flank has been foiled. Now the Soviets are pushing hard in the Caucasus, and Volkov will be getting just a bit worried. Good! Let him stew and think I'm here to sign a new treaty with Sergei Kirov. He'll likely go running off to Hitler again and whine that he needs more air support to stop Kirov's troops.

The meeting was conducted as an official state function, with the proverbial red carpet rolled out in the Kremlin Square, and an honor guard and rousing band waiting when Karpov exited his vehicle with Tyrenkov, and a troop of personal security men following in his motorcade from the hotel. It was exhilarating to be back in Moscow again, and Karpov breathed deeply, taking in the clear, cold air that smelled sweeter than he ever remembered. It spoke of home in a way that affected him deeply, and one day, he thought, I may just make this place my home. I'm twenty years younger than Kirov, am I not?

After the formal greeting from a line of state officials, with publicity photographs and hearty handshakes. Karpov's pulse was up when the door to the gilded, octagonal Hall of the Order of Saint Vladimir in the Kremlin Palace was opened by a white gloved attendant, and he stepped inside. That was a nice touch, thought Karpov, as he had been named after that saint, and someone was making a subtle gesture by staging the reception here. He walked into the hall, his eye straying along the pink stucco pillars and up to the high vaulted dome lit by a skylight by day and an ornate chandelier by night. There he saw the words of the insignia and motto of Saint Vladimir, "Good, Honor, Glory."

The Red Security contingent was there, and his own personal guards joined them, departing through a doorway on the right, while Karpov was steered in to the meeting room beyond. He found himself alone for one minute in the lavishly appointed room, standing near a comfortable satin lined couch near a warming hearth. The door opened and a voice announced the arrival of the Secretary General, Sergie Kirov.

Karpov's heart leapt a beat as the man entered, his presence like that of a

figure stepping from old memories of the past, a statue made real, endowed with the luster of history. Kirov had been an almost legendary figure in Russia at one time, and here was the man himself, a strong and vital presence, slightly gray, but with a ruddy, healthy face and sturdy build. He walked over to extend his hand, greeting Karpov warmly as he gestured for him to be seated.

Karpov had removed his officer's cap and set it aside on a marble topped table. "It is my very great pleasure to meet with you," he said politely.

"And my pleasure as well," said Kirov, who then got right down to business, with no dawdling on pleasantries. "I must tell you that I wondered if you might wished to take this meeting after what happened at Omsk, in fact I was looking forward to it."

"Indeed," said Karpov. "That was most unfortunate at Omsk, but the matter has evolved since then, and Ivan Volkov will come to regret his distasteful behavior."

"Undoubtedly," said Kirov, eyes narrowing, as he looked Karpov over, taking the man in. He had been told to be wary of this man, warned by Admiral Volsky and his young Captain Fedorov. So this was the former Captain of the Admiral's ship, that amazing vessel that had come here from the future.

"A most impressive airship you have out there. Is it new?"

"Just commissioned," said Karpov. "It was christened *Tunguska*, as its duralumin and steel rivets were mined and forged there."

"A good name. I see you have a fondness for large ships and the power they can wield."

That comment had an edge to it that Karpov did not fail to perceive. He shifted uncomfortably, knowing that *Kirov* had been at Murmansk, and that the appearance of the ship there meant the Soviets had certainly come to some arrangement with Admiral Volsky. He decided to be equally pointed and spoke his mind directly.

"It has come to my attention that a most unusual ship has been seen in your harbor as well, Mister General Secretary."

"Please, simply call me Kirov… That is the name of the ship you ask about. Yes?"

Karpov's pulse quickened again with that. How much did this man know? "Then you have seen this ship? You have met with its commanding

officers?”

“Admiral Volsky? Yes, I traveled to Murmansk to see just what had dropped anchor there—also very impressive. I must say that I found him to be a most ingratiating and remarkable man, just as his ship is remarkable.”

“I see… And may I ask what you learned about this ship?”

“You wish to fill in the blank pages on your intelligence reports? Has your man Tyrenkov been slacking off?” Kirov smiled, deciding something inwardly. “I must be frank and tell you that your name was mentioned in that meeting, Admiral Karpov.”

“Then they told you? You know who I am?”

“Perhaps you can fill in a few blank pages in my intelligence book.”

Karpov knew he was on thin ice here. He could not allow this meeting to fail. Too much was riding on it. If this man met with Admiral Volsky, who knows what they discussed. Would Volsky have been bold enough to tell Kirov everything? He had to find out, but to do that he would have to reveal much here about himself. This was dangerous, he knew, but he started out across that ice, hoping it would hold.

“It may surprise you to learn that I know quite a bit more about that ship and its crew than you may realize,” he said. “And no, this information was not provided to me by my intelligence people. Let me say I have some firsthand experience in the matter. But before I go beyond that, I must understand what you have learned about this ship.”

“Yes, the mysterious ship. We thought Volkov had built it at first—who else? You have no major ports under your control, nor the industry to build a large capital ship like that in Siberia. There it was, and with a Russian crew—a real mystery when it turned up in the North Atlantic, and then an even bigger mystery when it sailed and fought to support the Royal Navy! It was then that I received a message, one that struck a particular note with me. It was from a man named Fedorov—Captain Fedorov I later discovered, from that very ship. It referenced an incident from my past—very many years ago, but one I could never forget or even truly explain. So I was compelled to learn more, and was delighted when this ship sailed north to Murmansk as it did.”

“And what did you learn from your meeting with this Admiral you mention?”

“Enough to know this ship could never have been built by the Orenburg

Federation either. It certainly wasn't a British ship, nor of any other nationality. It flew the Russian Naval ensign, and by god, it was named in my honor—what a surprise!"

"Then Volsky told you? You have learned the real origin of that ship?"

Kirov folded his arms now, enjoying his little chess game with Karpov. The man was trying to be very cautious here. He suspects everything, but really knows nothing. What should I tell him? If he is, indeed, the man I was told about, then this game can lead only one place. It could go on like this, move after move, check and escape, so why not just end it and come to the heart of the matter. He looked at Karpov, a determined expression on his face.

"Admiral Vladimir Karpov, First Air Commandant of the Siberian Aero Corps…. I was told a man by that same name was once a senior officer aboard that ship. Suppose you tell me plainly now, and then we can get to the real questions that need answers between us. Are you that same man?"

Karpov pursed his lips, instinctively defensive, yet he appreciated the other man's candor, and directness. He decided he would be equally direct. "I am. Before I assumed this rank I was a Captain, but not in the Siberian Aero Corps. No. I was a Captain in the Russian Navy, commander of the battlecruiser *Kirov*, the very same ship we are discussing. So anything you may have learned about that ship, its origins and true nature, applies to me as well, Mister Secretary."

Karpov set aside his doubt and worry now. He realized who he was, and the power he had at this moment. Kirov must understand that as well.

"I see… Then you were the man they struggled with, correct? There was a power struggle on that ship, and you opposed your Admiral?"

"Yes, that is true."

"And it is clear that you did not prevail. Most unfortunate for you, but in appears you are very resilient. How was it that you came to your present post?"

"That is a long story, and one we need not go into here. Yes, I failed in my bid to assume full command of that ship, and we parted company. Call me Lucifer if you will, thrown out of heaven when he thought he could rival God himself. That is my sad fate, but I have made the most of it. Now I rule here, in this little corner of the hell we've created of our motherland."

Kirov smiled. "Then you came from the upper floor as well, right along

with Volsky and Fedorov.”

“I don’t understand. Upper floor?”

“Just a metaphor that Captain Fedorov used to explain himself to me. Imagine a simple boarding inn, lost on some forgotten stretch of railway. Imagine the people boarding there all come from different places, which is not that unusual. Yet now throw in a most remarkable twist—say they all come from different pages in the history, different eras in time. The bottom floor houses guests who lived before the revolution, the middle floor is reserved for travelers from this day… and the upper floor? Suppose men from tomorrow board there. Men with ships no one ever heard of, impossible for any nation on earth to build today, and with weapons so potent and advanced they become a most decisive force in little disagreements like this sad war we’re fighting. There, Captain or Admiral if you prefer the loftier title now. Is that enough for you?”

Chapter 26

“Fedorov told you all this?” Karpov could not keep himself from leaning forward, the implication of what he was hearing now obvious. He suddenly realized that this story, this metaphor, was very telling. It was not just any railway inn, but a very particular one.

“Then you know about Ilanskiy?”

“Of course. And it seems Ivan Volkov knows about it as well, or what was that little spat you had with him there? I believe he lost a pair of airships and some good men in that little raid—a bold maneuver, even for him. Well let’s put it this way. Let’s say we all seem to have one thing in common here, you, me, the men I met off that ship, and even Ivan Volkov. We have all signed our names in the register of that inn. Have we not?”

Karpov’s mind spun round and round with that. Yes, that was where Volkov disappeared, in the year 2021, so the man obviously knew about Ilanskiy if he was ever smart enough to put two and two together. But what did Volsky and Fedorov have to do with it? And how did Sergei Kirov learn of Ilanskiy?

“You know everything? About that inn, the stairway there. You were behind that mission to destroy it?”

“Destroy it? Is that what was going on there?”

“That was the result of that engagement. Whether Volkov intended to destroy it or not, I do not know. Are you saying you had no part in that? If not, what was a Soviet airship doing there, ferrying men off my old ship to the scene of the crime?”

Kirov knew the details of that mission. He had given his permission to use *Narva*, sending the go ahead through Admiral Golovko, and he had been informed of the results in a message from Admiral Volsky. Since frank truth seemed to be the best way forward here, he was forthright again.

“The mission was conceived by your former comrades. Admiral Volsky requested the use of an airship, and I provided one. He has already been of great service to me in return. I think I had better tell you about my stay at that inn, and then everything will be clear between us.”

Kirov continued, relating the strange events of that morning in 1908 when

the loud roar lit up the sky with a second sunrise, and a strange young man appeared at his breakfast table—a man named Fedorov. He told him of his curiosity, and how he ventured up to the second floor to satisfy that. And he told him of that fateful whisper in his ear when Fedorov let him go.

“So you see,” he said at last. “That curiosity of mine got me into some real trouble in the past, but not this time. This time it put me here!” He gestured to the setting all around them, the palace, the Kremlin, the Soviet State he now ruled.

“I went back to that inn, and took a few more trips up those stairs. It told me very many things, terrible things, and they were centered on the name of one man—Josef Stalin. I knew who he was, just a minor rabble rouser in the early days of the revolution. The Okhrana was hounding us all, throwing us into the nearest prison on trumped up charges, and I found out which one Stalin was in one day… The rest is history, at least for the moment, unless someone else gets a notion to try their luck on that back stairway.”

“Amazing,” said Karpov. “Yes, now it all makes sense. Removing Stalin opened the door for you here, but you did not count on Ivan Volkov.”

“Nor did I count on meeting that man Fedorov ever again, until I received that message. And to be honest, I did not count on you either, Karpov. They say knowledge is a powerful thing, and I suppose knowing what the days ahead are likely to bring is a good stiff vodka. So it doesn’t surprise me that this man Volkov outmaneuver Denikin, or that you are going to replace Kolchak in due course. The only question I have is whether you think you will be replacing me?”

Karpov smiled at that. “I would never presume such a thing, but we must reach some understanding, you and I. As you say, we seem to be common fated, our names written in the same ledger of time.”

“It looked to me like you had hoped to engineer something quite different at Omsk. Yes?”

“That was… Unfortunate.”

“Yes it was. And now that Volkov has shown you his true nature, you come to me.”

Karpov hardened, knowing this awkward issue would have to be dealt with, but pressed on. “The Free Siberian State needs friends, Mister Secretary. You need friends now as well. I tried to make peace with Volkov because we have the Japanese to worry about at our backside. Volkov had

other plans, and he has also chosen to ally himself with Hitler, which is something I would never do. I know the man from my time. He was a petty operative in Russian Naval Intelligence assigned to inspect my ship, and a nuisance. My meeting with him was meant to sound out his thinking and see what he had under his fingernails. Well he has shown me that, hasn't he, and he got a nasty surprise the other day for getting too pushy. I won't mince words here. You and I both know that Russia is in grave jeopardy now. Volkov sits atop all that oil and curries alliance with Hitler. At the moment the war is in North Africa, but you and I both know that it will soon be here—and not the back stabbing civil war we have inflicted upon ourselves, but the German Army."

"True enough," said Kirov. "They moved another infantry corps to the border near Moldavia. That is where they will cross soon, and drive on the Crimea. They would be fools to try and push for Moscow."

"They did both in the history I know," said Karpov.

"Yes… I learned that the hard way on one of my excursions up that stairway. They swept all the way to the Volga!"

"Where you have divisions presently facing down Ivan Volkov. If they do this again, they will bring misery and hell to your world, Kirov, and eventually to mine. Hitler and Volkov—what a pair they make. I wonder if Volkov is smart enough to realize what Hitler will eventually do to him after he gets his oil. So yes, I came here to seek an alliance. There is much I can offer you. I can bedevil Volkov on his eastern front and force him to keep a substantial military presence there. You don't want him free to use those divisions against you, do you?"

"Certainly not, but as I see things Volkov has already decided what he wants to do with those divisions, and that is to crush you."

"Let him try. He'll get more of the same medicine I gave him at Novosibirsk—and that's another way I can help you. I have information, Kirov, knowledge of how this war played out once, and knowledge of all the advanced weapons systems that were born from it. I can be very useful to you and your war industries. Your tanks, for example. Most of your units are still equipped with older T-26 infantry tanks, and the light BT-Series tanks. They will not do the job when the Germans come."

"Don't worry, we have other designs on the drawing board."

"Yes, the new T-34. But your generals want more of the older tanks, do

they not? You must silence them and shift all production to this new tank. Believe me, Kolchak found out the hard way in our skirmishes with the Japanese. The T-26 is a metal coffin in battle. It is prone to catching fire, because you don't use diesel fuel. Beyond that, the welding is bad, and the riveted armor plating is a faulty design. One hit from an enemy shell and the rivets break off and become steel bullets inside those tanks. They are all but useless, and this was against an inferior tank fielded by the Japanese. If you do not quickly build this new T-34 tank, you will be crushed when the German Army comes east. I can tell you what to do, warn you of wrong turns in the production cycle. I can be very useful."

Kirov's eyes narrowed as he considered this. "I could get this same information from your Admiral Volsky."

"Possibly, but I am here, and Volsky is out to sea. The war will be won or lost here, Kirov. Hitler will not invade England, and at the moment he has no more than a few divisions deployed in North Africa against the British. You think he is serious about that little side show? No. He is planning to move on the Crimea, just as you say. That will stop your drive into the Caucasus. You want the oil at Maykop. Yes? Well you had better hurry, because once the Germans invade you will have a very short lease there."

Now Kirov began to hear things that struck close to the bone. This man knows why I have opened my offensive in the south. He knows I need the oil too! Maykop is nearly within our grasp, but what he says is true. How long can I hold it? And if the Germans take it, then where do I get my oil?

"Go on," he said quietly. "What do you propose, Karpov?"

"It's very simple. You can build these new tanks, but you'll need the fuel to keep them operating, Just like Hitler covets the oil Volkov is sitting on. Well you may be interested to know that I'm sitting on billions of barrels of oil at the moment. Reserves are found in Siberia that make Russia one of the top producing oil countries in the world in my era. I know exactly where these fields are, but we do not have the means to drill for them, nor the equipment. You can provide that, and if you do so we can get you all the oil you would ever need. And we have men who will fight, tough, hardy soldiers. The Siberian divisions were among the very best in the war. But we lack the heavy industry to give them the tanks and artillery they will need. Don't you see? By cooperating we are much stronger together than we could ever be alone, and if we do not join hands now, we will fall under Hitler's shadow,

and that is a certainty. Oil and industry, Kirov. That is what will win this war. How many of these new tanks do you have in production?”

“That is classified.”

“Oh? Let me guess. You produced about 400 last year in 1940. Correct? Before this war ended in the history I know, it took over 35,000 to beat the Germans. And that is just for the initial design with the 76mm main gun. A newer model with a better 85mm gun comes later, and it took nearly another 30,000 of those too! And that is just for the T-34 model tank. Now do you begin to see the urgency of this moment? 400 tanks? That is bird feed! You must scale up production dramatically, and make this a matter of the highest priority. Don’t you see what’s about to happen? Hitler will sweep into the Ukraine, take the Crimea and make a quick end of your little adventure in the Caucasus. Then the combined might of Orenburg and Germany will turn north. You won’t last a year, and once the Soviet Union falls then they’ll come east and finish me. They could do all this before the United States even enters the war, and that will be that. Hitler will dominate all of Europe, and he will join with Japan in the far east. The Axis empire will be invincible. Even with the United States and Britain allied, it took them until mid-1944 before they could muster the strength to invade the continent. And that was with a united Russia still locked in combat with 80% of the Wehrmacht.”

“I must say that I have considered all this, and you describe the nightmares I have been having very well, Karpov. I know full well how vulnerable Soviet Russia is. This man from the upper floor, Volkov, has made German victory almost inevitable.”

“Yes? Well you have been up those stairs, Kirov, and I am a man from the upper floor as well.”

Karpov thought for a moment. He still had a few cards in his hand to play, cards that might trump all others. Should he speak of this? Kirov was no fool. He was a shrewd and determined leader, and he could be ruthless when pressed, even as Stalin was. So he will certainly not fail to understand the power I hold. Power is one thing he knows well enough. He pressed on.

“As to the matter of my disagreement with Admiral Volsky,” he began. “It centered on the power inherent in the ship we commanded. Volsky was taken ill, and I assumed command. I immediately realized the power I had at my disposal, and I was determined to use it. Volsky was not so inclined.”

“So you tried to seize the ship?”

“I did take it, but the crew eventually sided with Volsky, damn them all. They could not see what I saw—the necessity of using power to the fullest when necessary to achieve your aims. They wanted to dawdle about, thinking they could prevent changes in the history. Me? I wanted to write it all anew. Well, we have seen what their dawdling has produced. If they had done things my way, Russia would be supreme today, and not the broken, fragmented state it is now. Power, Kirov. You are no stranger to that bedfellow if you fought your way to the top here. Well… Before this war ends there will be weapons designed and deployed that will trump all others—weapons of unimaginable power. Volsky has them aboard that ship at this very moment, but he is too timid to use them. I know how they will be designed and built, Kirov. Understand? The Germans and British are tinkering with these weapons programs even as we speak. The Americans too! Yes, they will all be in a race to see who can deploy these weapons first. Thankfully, that time is many years off, but beware. Ivan Volkov knows this as well. He may have a similar weapons program underway too, and if he is successful…”

Karpov did not have to say anything more. Kirov was listening, his mind focused, his thoughts darkened with the burden of impending war.

“And I have one more thing…” Karpov hesitated, then pressed on. “Ilanskiy,” he said, “that lonesome railway inn. You wanted to know why Volkov would throw away a couple old Zeppelins and a few battalions of troops to raid Ilanskiy? Well, I learned something during our conference at Omsk. That was where Volkov went missing in our time—he was foolish enough to tell me so. After the conference ended, I got curious and went there to have a look around. It was only by chance that I ventured up that back stairway, and discovered what could happen.”

“I see,” said Kirov. “Yes, Ilanskiy. I begin to see why Volkov is so interested in driving east now. It is not merely to settle his flank so he can turn his full force on me. He wants Ilanskiy.”

“Correct, and he was stupid enough to think he could take it with this raid and drive all the way from Omsk in one fell swoop. Well he failed, on both counts. We are stronger on the ground than he realized. He won’t get over the Ob easily, if at all. I can stop him, Kirov, and I have Ilanskiy. Do you understand what I am saying now?”

“Only too well,” said Kirov.

Yes, Ilanskiy, he thought. That was what this whole affair between Volkov and Karpov was about. Two men from the upper floor were having a nice little tussle for control of that stairway. They know the power it represents, even as I do. I used it to see tomorrow—to see this time from where I was on the bottom floor, and I used that knowledge to eliminate my enemies and take control of the revolution. But I did not count on Ivan Volkov, and I certainly did not count on this man Karpov.

Yes, he's every bit as dangerous as Volsky said, a bit of a viper, this one. Can I keep him in a basket if I join with him now? He has Ilanskiy…

"What's to stop me from sending ten divisions east to do what Volkov failed to do?"

"Don't be foolish," said Karpov. "You would have to start from as far away as Perm, and its 2500 kilometers from there to Ilanskiy. No force on earth is going to take that place from me. Understand?"

"So what do you propose to do, Karpov? Are you going to sneak up those stairs and bring back these terror weapons you spoke of?"

Karpov smiled. "I suppose I could do that, but that stairway goes two directions, does it not?"

Now the full implications of what Karpov was saying struck Kirov like a hammer. My god, he thought. That is true! What if this man were to start on the upper floor and go *down* those steps? Why, he could do what I did with Stalin! He could do that to any man alive in that time… .even me…

"Unfortunately, the place was destroyed, Karpov. You said as much yourself."

"Yes, it is destroyed," said Karpov, deciding to play his Ace, "a nice pile of rubble—for the moment."

Chapter 27

“For the moment? What do you mean by that?”

“I mean that if an inn was built in that place once, an inn with a nice back stairway leading to heaven and hell, then one can be built there again. Yes, their little mission was successful and they destroyed the stairway. But I could rebuild it.”

Karpov knew it was dangerous to reveal this, for it would show Kirov the full breadth of the power he had at his disposal. What would he do now? Here I sit, right in the heart of the Kremlin, and with no more than a company of security men and the *Tunguska* hovering overhead to protect me. Kirov could lock me away in a heartbeat, or worse. Yet if he would do that now, then he would also do it later, under other circumstances. Yes? So I must measure the man, and find out where he stands. He will either be my enemy, or my friend here. The die is cast.

“Rebuild it?” Now it was Kirov who leaned forward. “Would it still work?”

“Perhaps. That remains to be seen. I have found the original plans and construction diagrams, though the builder is long dead. That said, I have skilled men on the job this very moment.”

“I see… Then you intend to use that stairway again? In which direction will you go, Karpov, back to your upper floor to fetch a devil’s brood of new weaponry for your army, or back to the time of the early revolution?”

Karpov smiled. Now he had this man’s full attention, but he had to be very careful here. Kirov could be sounding me out to determine what to do about this situation, he thought.

“I have not decided to use it at all, except perhaps to test and see if the gateway still remains open. Once I learn that, simply having it there presents me with a final option should things ever go wrong for me. Think of it, Kirov. That stairway represents ultimate power—the power to pluck out any weed that might one day bloom in your garden, and long before it ever gets rooted and goes to seed. I have ringed Ilanskiy with my best troops, and stationed three airships there now. That and the vast distance any army must march to reach the place make it a castle I can easily defend and hold.”

“I suppose that is true. You would see any threat coming long before it could reach you. But what if Volkov were to throw his entire airship fleet against you, with every ship carrying a full battalion? He has twenty four Zeppelins! That could carry over two full divisions of his best troops to that place, and your air defense could not stop him.”

“He has twenty-two Zeppelins, remember? And now I have nine. Yes, he might still win that air duel, but he could not win the battle on the ground—he learned that the first time he tried to raid that site, and he would be foolish to try again.”

“What if he were to use other means? Assassination could solve his problem easily enough. One good man with a rifle could do what all his airships might not accomplish. You know how good his intelligence service is.”

“I’ll match my security forces against his any day,” Karpov folded his arms, confident he could prevent such an attack.

Now it was Kirov’s turn to smile. “Suppose I have you taken out and shot this very moment, Karpov. I could eliminate your little security contingent, and then turn every flak gun in Moscow on that overinflated balloon you have out there.”

“Yes, you could do that if you wish. I was very bold to come here, and even more rash to tell you all of this. You could kill me here and now—but not my plan—and you could not get force to Ilanskiy before it was carried out. So you see, I am neither stupid nor foolhardy. I determined that you would either end up my enemy in this war, or my friend. I had to know which was to be. Coming here like this would answer that question, for if you are determined to be my enemy, then you should kill me—here and now—because you know that I can do to you what you once did to Stalin. Do that, however, and you now make a permanent enemy of the Free Siberian State. You decide the fate of your own nation if you kill me here, for in that instance, Soviet Russia, and your regime, could not survive. No. Your only hope is to find in me the strongest possible ally you could ever have—stronger even than Admiral Volsky and his fighting ship. *Kirov* is a great foil at sea in this war, but it only has so many missiles in its hold. Once they are gone, that ship is no more than a dangerous looking cruise liner. So what is it to be, Mister General Secretary? Do you want my death, and the eternal enmity of the Free Siberian State with it, or do you want my friendship in a

grand alliance?”

Kirov nodded his head, leaning back now and reaching for a flask of vodka and two glasses that were on a side table. “You have thought this through very well, Karpov. You are a very daring and determined man. I can appreciate that in a man. You understand power like few others, and you know how to use it. So no, I do not think I will have you taken out and shot today, because I understand power as well, and I know how to wield it when necessary.”

He slowly poured two small glasses of Vodka, handing one to Karpov. “So there is no poison in this glass. Instead I will extend my hand to you in friendship, if that is what you truly pledge here. I have no doubt that you could be a strong ally, and one I desperately need at this moment. But can you remain loyal, Karpov? Yes, there I do have my doubts, as your infighting with Admiral Volsky has shown you will not think twice about opposing any man who disagrees with you. The threat you leveled at me just a moment ago will overshadow all our dealings, would it not?”

“Pardon me for that,” said Karpov. “But I had to make it clear to you that I have a power now that cannot be matched in any way. And yet, it is clear that without your help, your leadership here in the heartland of Russia, the Free Siberian State will remain nothing more than a cold backwater wasteland on the fringe of this war. Then one day, just as I have warned, the tanks would come for me. Could I find a way to prevent that by venturing up or down that back stairway at Ilanskiy? Possibly, but why take the risk? I don’t want you dead, Kirov, nor do I want to sit in this gilded palace in your place. What I *do* want is the survival of our nation. Everything I have done in the past was to further that aim, and not merely for my own personal aggrandizement. The Motherland must survive!”

“Then let us drink to her good health,” said Kirov raising his glass, and he took a long sip of the vodka, breathing deeply with the heat of the liquor on his throat. Karpov drank as well, heedless of any risk of poison. It was all or nothing where Kirov was concerned. He had determined that the moment he decided to come to this place.

“Together we can try to save her,” said Karpov. “Together we save Russia from the cruel fate that looms on our horizon. It was never supposed to be this way, Kirov. This endless civil war should never have happened. We caused it, unknowingly, and now it threatens to destroy our nation if we do

not stand and act to save it. Volkov does not see this, thinking that Hitler is too powerful to oppose. He knows that the Germans will not be stopped while Russia remains divided. He has seen the history of this war, and its outcome."

"What does happen, Karpov? I have not ventured up that stairway to your floor. My sorties only took me to this time, and then back to 1908, never anywhere else."

"What happens? I cannot say that for certain now. In our history we prevailed in this war, driving all the way to Berlin and crushing Hitler and his Third Reich under the tracks of our T-34s. Build them, Kirov! Build them by the thousands. Only you can do that. Russia needs you now more than ever, as I need you."

"But after that? After the war?"

"Fifty years of guarded enmity with the West. They never trusted Stalin, and soon we had the terror weapons they developed in the war, and so we sat, like two men on opposite sides of a great stone wall that had been built between us, and we never knew real friendship. Russia was strong, Russia was powerful, but they worked to undermine us, a death of a thousand small cuts. We were never really welcomed as a European state, always mistrusted. In my day we were a provider of the oil and gas—the energy they needed to build and run their glittering cities. And just as the oil will eventually bring Hitler's armies to the Caucasus, so the wars for control of that energy began in earnest in the 21st Century."

"Another great war?"

"Unfortunately," said Karpov. "I reached an accommodation with Admiral Volsky, and put to sea as the Captain of the battlecruiser *Kirov* in 2021. I fought the opening rounds of that third great war—for Russia! Then that slippery fish of a ship displaced in time again. It is too complicated for me to try and explain it all to you here. Suffice it to say that the ship took its own journey, all the way to the time of the bottom floor—the time of your youth, Kirov. There I found myself in a most interesting position! I could start anew, and re-write the pages of the history that has been so cruel to our Motherland. That was what I planned, but Volsky, Fedorov, they had other plans. They are always scheming, those two, and they found a way to stop me and regain control of the ship. I need not go into all the details now. Perhaps they have already told you all this."

“Somewhat,” said Kirov. “Well I will tell you that I have also extended my hand in friendship with Volsky, even as I do so with you here. Will that become a problem for you?”

“I cannot say. They will not think fondly of me, nor I of them just now. Both sides feel they were betrayed, and that is a hard fence to mend.”

“Consider trying, Karpov, for the Motherland you say you are so dearly hoping to protect. You know as well as I do that we would all be stronger together as one. If I could persuade Volkov to join us, I would do that as well.”

“That would be a fruitless venture,” said Karpov. “Volkov has made his choice in the matter, He makes it each time he orders his guns to fire on your forces, and on mine. If there is any man I might wish to eliminate from the world stage, it would start with Volkov. Who knows. I just might go down that back stairway and collar the man before he can cause all this mischief.”

“And what about Hitler. Have you considered that?”

“Of course. But one must be very careful here, Kirov. We had no intention of causing these changes in the history—at least that was the way Admiral Volsky and Fedorov tried to play it. Yet Volkov slipped through, probably by sheer coincidence, and here he is now, a boil on our backside and the undoing of the Russian State. Perhaps I was rash and thoughtless in believing I could deliberately re-write the history, and have it all come out they way I might choose. I have learned a few things, Kirov—learned the hard way. Loyalty means something. Power is one thing, but it is not something one can wield thoughtlessly, and it is sustained and nurtured by those the powerful hope to lead.”

“Or so I have learned as well,” said Kirov. “So then you will think long and hard before you rebuild that back stairway at Ilanskiy, or ever think to walk those seventeen steps again.”

“Seventeen? I hadn’t taken any notice of that.”

“I did. I counted them every time I went up those stairs, and every time I walked back down. It is dark there, Karpov. There is a frost on that stairway that chills one to the bone, to the root of your soul, the cold breath of infinity. Rebuild it, if you must, but be cautious. Fear that place, Karpov. You may think it is the stairway to heaven, Lucifer, but it can also be the stairway to hell, just as you said earlier.”

“I understand what you are saying. That said… Have we reached an

understanding here? Do we stand together as allies and friends?”

“I will draw up a formal accord, if you wish, and we can make it a diplomatic reality. Hitler will take notice, as will Ivan Volkov. Who knows, this news may even compel them to move against us sooner, so there is some risk in all of this.”

“Yes, but you know they would come one day soon in any case. Perhaps now they will take pause, and know that they will find stronger opposition than before. There is much we must do, Kirov. Build those tanks! I can send you my engineers with plans for new weapons that I believe your industry could bring to life.”

“These terror weapons you spoke of earlier?”

“No, merely more advanced versions of the things you may be designing even now. Yes, we could build the awful weapons I spoke of, and perhaps we will be forced to do so in time. We must certainly be ready to do so, and we must use all the skill and guile we can muster to determine whether our enemies are building these things. Volkov is the real threat. Hitler has the industry and the military might, but Volkov has knowledge of things that can lead Germany forward as well. We must know what they are up to, and be prepared to oppose it.”

“How do you think Volkov will react to our newfound accord here?”

“He already considered that when he launched his attack at Omsk. Frankly, I believe he thinks he can beat us to the punch by standing with Hitler.”

“Yet he knows about Ilanskiy. He must fear that you could wield that ultimate power against him.”

“Perhaps. He obviously had some reason to try and seize that place. I do not know if he fully understands what that stairway opens, but he was suspicious enough to try and find out. Well now that opportunity is lost to him, and I will make sure that he never gets his chance there again. I will be calling up more troops from the east soon, enough to begin a real offensive on Volkov’s exposed right flank.”

“You will be calling up troops? What about Kolchak? What about the Japanese?”

“We have time, Kirov. Not much time, but a little breathing space now before Japan gets serious about entering this war. In our history they did not become an active belligerent until December of 1941.”

“But can you be sure that will repeat?”

“Not entirely. In our history the Japanese never took Vladivostok, and all of Amur province from us either. I was trying to see to it that they never could pose a threat to us again, but as I have said, Volsky interfered and this is the outcome of his stupidity. Who knows how much time we really have, but we may have some months yet before Japan becomes a strong threat in the east. When they did enter the war, they drove into the South Pacific and incurred the wrath of the United States. That was their undoing. As they already have a strong position on the Asian continent, and all of Amur province, my best guess is that they will drive for the South Pacific Islands again.”

“Why would they do that?”

“Oil again,” said Karpov. “Oil is the blood of war. Over half a million men died on both sides in the fighting to control the Caucasus. Your operation has already began that tally. So the Japanese needed oil, rubber, and natural resources to sustain their empire. The US and British initiated oil and steel embargos against Japan in August 1941. The Netherlands East Indies followed along, so the Japanese just took them. They nearly drove all the way to Australia.”

“I see… Is Kolchak prepared for what might happen?”

“Kolchak, he is a tired, sick old man. I’ve been handling this entire affair with Volkov, and as you said, I will soon replace him. That is one thing I *am* certain of.”

“Well enough. Kolchak was never going to amount to anything in any case.”

“Yes, in our history your Red Guard had him executed! But it was Stalin’s Red Guard that time around. Things will be different this time, Mister General Secretary, very, very different.”

Karpov extended his hand, and as Kirov took it, he felt, on one level, as though he were shaking hands with the devil. The man called himself Lucifer, he thought. I must be very careful in my dealings with Karpov. There is more driving his ambition than his love of the Motherland. But for now… I think I will build those tanks!

Part X

Better Late Than Never

"I fell in love with her the moment she was late, though neither one of us knew it at the time because she hadn't arrived yet."

— Jarod Kintz: *This Book Has No Title*

Chapter 28

The helos landed with deck crews ready to service and re-arm the X-3s, though they were waiting on orders from the bridge. It was there that Captain MacRae was taking final stock of the situation noting that the enemy destroyer group targeted was badly disrupted. Three of the five destroyers had reduced speed dramatically, their officers frantically radioing the flagship that they had been attacked by rocket fire, with heavy damage. While most of the ships were still seaworthy, two had been struck aft and had fires that were threatening the powerplant and boiler rooms. A third had a holed hull very near the water line that would force it to seek a friendly port. These ships could no longer run at the speeds necessary to fulfill their mission. Half the French destroyers in the fleet had now been largely taken out of the fight.

"Those *Sea Skuas* are good for something," said MacRae. "A pity we didn't bring more along."

That was their real dilemma now. They had left port in 2021 with ample munitions to carry out their expected mission to the Black Sea, but somewhere they had crossed an unseen border to this new mission, and there had been no time to replenish the ship's stocks. They had hit a battlecruiser and the French flagship, but with uncertain results. Both vessels were still on an attack heading and making 30 knots. They had hit a light cruiser and five destroyers, but the core of the enemy fleet remained intact.

The Captain huddled with Miss Fairchild, Mack Morgan and Mister Dean, and the look on MacRae's face spoke volumes. "So it's come to this," he said. "With the last four missiles you've authorized for this fight, we might put some serious hurt on at least one of their capital ships, but I think we'd have to use them all."

"That would even the odds a bit," said Morgan, but they'll still outnumber the British fleet nearly two to one."

"Aye. It's either one good blow like that, or we wait for this bar fight to actually begin and then break a bottle or two over the heads that seem to be doing the most damage on the other side. Mister Dean?" MacRae looked to

his XO for an opinion.

“It will be a rough go for the British,” he said. “The enemy will have a tremendous speed advantage, and the weight of superior firepower. Yes, we might take one out if we use four GB-7s in a tight attack salvo. That’s going to put 800kgs of high explosives and a lot of excess fuel for the fire on one ship out there. That will likely take it out of the fight. But that will also still leave them four capital ships to the two British battleships, and from the intelligence report these are some tough fellows out there, The *Normandie* alone has enough throw weight in firepower to take on both the older *Queen Elizabeth* class battleships with a good chance of winning that fight.”

“So do we hit that ship now, or wait and see what develops.”

“I’ll say this much,” said Morgan. “If we hold until the action opens we can still hit them with one good shot, or jab at them as you suggested. And at least they’ll see us fighting. Fire now and we just have to tell them we’re done and wave goodbye.”

MacRae nodded. “Miss Fairchild?”

“I like Mack’s angle on this. Let’s see what they actually do and then, when the action opens, you do as you see best, Captain. But I’ll have to hold the line on that missile count. God only knows what lies ahead, and those missiles could save this ship in a difficult situation, and everyone aboard.”

“Understood.” MacRae took a long breath. “Inform Captain Barry on *Queen Elizabeth*. Tell them we’ve hit seven enemy ships, but they’re still coming at them like banshees on the fen. We’ll stay in the fight, but they need to stand to arms and be prepared for a tough battle here.”

So it was decided.

* * *

Aboard the *Hindenburg* a final signal was flashing out to *Bismarck* —‘take position ahead.’ and *Kaiser* was ordered to stand off with *Goeben*. The Germans had decided to commit just two ships to the fray, the heavy battleships that now moved to cooperate more closely with the French Squadron. Lütjens had seen the missiles in the sky again, and saw the flaming descent of one seaplane spotter after another.

“That air defense is too precise and effective against a small number of aircraft,” he said. “So I am ordering *Goeben* to stand her air crews down. No

sense sending those planes and pilots up to be blown out of the sky by these rockets. Any word from the Luftwaffe?”

“Goering was none too happy with the losses reported by the Tenth Fliegerkorps, sir. Fiebig wants to husband his planes on Sicily. That said, Eighth Fliegerkorps has planes massing for the planned attack on Crete. They have promised us support, and by the time we catch up to the British they may be close at hand.”

“Good then. Let them provide the primary air threat and we can save the handful of *Stukas* we have for better use.”

“One of Ritter’s young new pilots has been making quite a name for himself—Hans Rudel. He’s the same man who hit the British battlecruisers up north.”

“Oh? Well if the air situation looks promising I will order them up. For now they stay in reserve. How long before we can sight the British?”

“At the rate we are gaining on them, no more than an hour.”

“Good. That will be enough time for me to address the crew. We have not had our chance against the Royal Navy, but now we test our guns and armor, Adler. Now you get the battle you’ve been waiting for.”

The Admiral spoke to his crew, telling them not to fear the new weapons of their enemies, and to rely on their skill, and the guns and armor that made their ship the finest in the world. Axel Faust, the brawny commander of the ships Anton Turret, was listening with a smile.

“Hear that boys?” he said. “Now we get to earn our keep. Let’s hope Wolfgang has sharp eyes today. We’ve waited a long time to get our hands on the British.” He was referring to the forward gun director where Wolfgang Fuchs would be sending him his targeting data. His job was to see that the turret was properly trained and sighted, the guns elevated to make the appropriate range, and the big shells properly chambered for firing. Faust was the best in the fleet, scoring more hits in gun trials in the Baltic than any other turret, or any man before him. He had put a good many target barges under the sea, and now he wanted to test his hand against a real enemy ship. Pounding the airfield on the Faeroes was nothing more than a throat clearing operation, as far as he was concerned.

The red light glinted off the dome of his large bald head, for he never wore his cap when it came time for action, and he often removed his coat, particularly when things got hot in the turret during a fast paced gunnery trial.

He had served aboard *Bismarck* when that ship went through trials, but was glad to be selected to this prominent post aboard *Hindenburg*. He and Hans Hartmann in Bruno Turret were the forward might of the battleship, and would most likely be the first to fire given the approach they were making.

High above in the bridge, Klaus Jaeger was watching his radar for any signs of the enemy fleet, and he was soon able to report his first contact.

"Radar contact, bearing 140, south by southeast at thirty-five kilometers. Hydrophone confirms."

"*Bismarck* sees it as well, sir," said Adler looking at a message just handed to him by a breathless signalman. The other ship was alongside now, moving ahead to take the vanguard of the two ship German group. About two kilometers off their port side they could see the shadowy silhouettes of the French ships. The heavy cruiser *Colbert* was leading, followed by *Strausbourg*, *Normandie* and *Dunkerque* in the main battle line. Another heavy cruiser, *Algerie*, cruised with the light cruisers *Marseilles* and *Jean de Vienne* off the forward port quarter of this line, and three fitful cats, *Lynx*, *Tigre* and *Panthere* were fanned in front of this formation as a destroyer screen.

There were two other ships in the French Fleet still unscathed by the missile strike. Destroyer *Aigle* was attending the wounded light cruiser *La Galissonniere*, which was still struggling to put out fires and retiring to the nearest German controlled port in Greece, along with the survivors of the X-3 missile attack. The last ship was one of the five superb large fast destroyers, *Indomitable*, which were really a light cruiser class vessel given their size. Capable of 45 knots, it was the fastest ship ever built, and had been assigned to assist as a screening ship for the German carrier *Goeben*.

"We should sight them soon," said Lütjens. "You may signal *Bismarck* and tell Lindemann that he has a free hand and may fire at his discretion."

"You will not reserve the honor of the first salvo for *Hindenburg?"* Adler gave Lütjens a searching look.

"Kapitan Adler, it is not the first salvo that matters, but the last."

The Admiral tipped his officer's cap, then strode out onto the weather deck to use his field glasses. Soon he heard the watch on the mainmast call out the alarm, *ship ahead*, and he knew a fateful hour had come. This ship was conceived and designed long ago, built over many years by artisans from all over Germany. It had the latest guns, the best Krupp steel armor that the

nation could provide. Then it spent months working out in trials before making its daring breakout at a place the British least expected. All that comes down to this hour, he thought. We build these ships at enormous cost, invest them with as much national pride as anything else. They steam and sail and we proudly thump our chest. But when it comes to the bottom line, it is a single hour like the one before me now that really matters.

It is surprising to me that I even find myself here at this moment, in the Mediterranean Sea! Kurt Hoffmann did his job well, he thought. The British have learned to fear the Twins, and as soon as they got wind that *Scharnhorst* was at large and heading for the Denmark Strait, they reacted just as we expected and moved their heavy ships too far west. That allowed me to stride right through the Faeroes gap, shelling that airfield as we went. By the time the British realized what was happening, they could only get one ship south after us, HMS *Invincible*. That is the one ship I must be wary of. It matches me in armor, firepower, and even betters me in speed. Is it out there today?

They were running with the wind at their back, which was always good, thought Lütjens. He studied the enemy fleet as the ships began to appear on the horizon. They must be the old WWI battleships the British have patched up and kept floating all these years. No wonder we're closing on them so quickly. He saw the battle ensign hoisted on *Bismarck's* mainmast and knew the time had come. The roar of his lead ship's forward guns cracked like thunder and he saw the bright orange yellow fire ahead. A full salvo, he thought. Lindemann means business. Time I was back on the main bridge.

"Kapitan Adler," he said with a proud smile. "Fight your battle!"

"Aye sir!" Adler was quick to get reports from his gun directors, and his senior artillery officer, Lutz Eisenberg called out the opening range at 28,000 meters. *Bismarck* had come ten points to starboard to continue closing while allowing *Hindenburg* an unobstructed line of fire.

"Helmsman," said Adler. "Follow Bismarck's wake. Fire when ready!"

Eisenberg was ready, and then the guns of the *Hindenburg* shook the wind with their power, the only 16 inch guns in the fleet. The waters seemed to burn red with the reflection of that blast, and the glow was soon masked by the deep brown smoke of the guns, billowing out like a pyroclastic flow from some wrathful volcano, as tall as the ship itself and many times its beam in width.

Down in Anton turret, Axel Faust was moving from one station to the

next, receiving information from the gun directors and checking to see that all was well. He could also use optical sights in his turret in the event communications with the director were ever interrupted, and he had the good habit of always using them to compare his reading to the information he had from the director. Now he was watching for shell fall, and *Bismarck* had correctly waited for *Hindenburg's* rounds to register on the distant targets before firing again. Faust smiled when he saw the rounds fall very near the enemy ships, and he could tell they were short when the upwelling of white water was superimposed on the long dark silhouettes of the ships. If the two formations had been running parallel, he might add 200 meters to his next salvo, but they were closing the range at nearly fifteen knots, and so the calculation was much more complex.

He waited until the next target data came down. "Elevation thirty," he said in his deep throated voice. "Bearing 152. Range 26,500." Then he took one last look in his optics and grinned. "Make it twenty-six four! Fire!" Anton was going to fire the long end of a 400 meter bracket salvo aimed at the heart of the enemy formation. Hans Hartmann in Bruno would fire the short end. They would therefore have two points of reference to adjust subsequent fire.

"Attention…" came the voice of Eisenberg over the intercom from the main gun director. *"Shellfall! ... Bruno short; Anton Straddling!"*

Axel grinned. That extra hundred meters had done the job. That was a good long shot for a straddle on the second salvo. Now he knew what he had to do as Eisenberg's voice sent down the next bearing and elevation to announce his settings. "Adjust, adjust!" Faust shouted at his gunners. "Track two degrees right, and steady on elevation!" At any minute they would get the order he was waiting for: "Rapid fire!" Eisenberg's voice called out, and Faust clenched his fist as Anton's guns boomed again.

"Nobody hits anything at this range," said gunners mate Albert Lowe.

"Think like that and you never will," said Faust. "*Scharnhorst* hit that British aircraft carrier at this range, and we can do better!"

They did do better, but just barely. The next salvo, the third from Anton, was right near the lead capital ship they had been targeting, and the bright orange fire that Axel saw through his rangefinder was not the enemy guns returning the insult. They had scored a hit, and he knew it was his, because Bruno had fired five seconds later and he now saw both those rounds fall

right after his own. He could feel it in his bones. They had beaten *Scharnhorst's* record for the longest hit ever obtained by a battleship at 26,465 yards, which was 24,200 meters. HMS *Invincible* had also bettered that mark when it scored a telling long shot against the Italians, but no one knew these things in the heat of the action. They would only be calculated later, once the after action reports were all typed up and compiled… and by the men who survived.

Chapter 29

Queen *Elizabeth* was struck forward, right near her number one turret, and the resulting damage was plain to see when a large secondary explosion blasted from the gunwale, obscuring everything forward of the conning tower with a heavy black smoke that was so thick it defied the wind.

The 16-inch shell had penetrated the deck, just missing the heavier 11-inch side armor on the turret and striking the upper portion of the barbette instead. Here the armor was much thinner on this older class ship, between four and six inches above the main belt armor where the penetration occurred. It was a design flaw that had been corrected in the newer *King George V* class, which had barbettes with twice that armor thickness at 12.75 inches, but that did not comfort the stately Queen at that moment. The round had detonated one of the four magazine areas where the powder bags were stored, and with near catastrophic results. The bulkheads between the magazine and upper shell deck were blown apart and every man there was killed instantly. The working room just beneath the upper gunhouse was devastated, and the side of the ship itself was rent asunder with the blast.

On the bridge, Captain Barry struggled to keep his footing, instinctively flinching and raising an arm to shield his face when fragments of shrapnel flayed the conning tower. The ship shuddered and rolled with the force of the secondary explosion, and then the heavy black smoke obscured all. The sound had been deafening, and now he could barely hear the hoarse shouting of a man on the voice tube. He felt a warm wetness on his neck, and reached up to the side of his right cheek, his fingers wet with blood trickling from his ear. In spite of the shock he shouted an order, his voice seeming a bare whisper in the chaos of that moment. “Starboard twenty!” He was turning his wounded bow away from the heat of the action.

Captain MacRae saw the sea erupting around the British ships, heard the booming report of their guns, and was taken with the savage power of a close quarters battle at sea. His was a ship that had been designed to fight an enemy it should never see, except in the digital traces on the radar tracking screens.

The sight of the smoke and fire, the resounding crack of the big guns, the brilliant orange flame blooming from the distant silhouettes when they fired, were all as exhilarating as they were terrifying. Then he saw the result of the hit Axel Faust had guided home on *Queen Elizabeth.*

"That looks bad," said Mack Morgan when they saw the huge eruption of black smoke on the horizon ahead.

Argos Fire was well behind the main British formation, thinking to lead the enemy ship off their pursuit, but the enemy had not been fooled. They kept to an intercepting course against the main body, slowly turning to run parallel, and then converging by small five or ten point turns to gradually close the range. At that moment they were still behind the British, and just barely on the horizon from the perspective of *Argos Fire.* The enemy was closing the range on the British with their 15 knot advantage in speed, and there was no way the fleet would escape from the battle that was now being joined.

Queen Elizabeth was making no more than 14 knots, her forward hull opened very near the water line to allow the heavy swells to surge in. It had the saving effect of flooding the whole region, and preventing further explosions, but the ship would soon be down at the bow, a wounded water buffalo, and the wolves were rushing in to finish her off.

Malaya was directly behind when the explosion occurred, but did not match the turn made by the other ship, her Captain Arthur Pallister instinctively knowing it had been a near fatal blow. Three cruisers and three destroyers were ahead of the Queen, and carried on as the battleship fell off the line to the starboard side. The cruiser *Berwick*, behind *Malaya*, followed in her wake, but one of the two trailing destroyers turned to attend to *Queen Elizabeth.*

"That was quick shooting," said MacRae, "Who's the culprit, Mister Haley?"

"Radar traced shellfall from the number two ship in this formation here, sir." Haley was fingering the *Hindenburg*.

"Well, we'd better answer that. No one raises their hand against the Queen on my watch, by god. Target that ship with a GB-7. Let's see if we can get their attention."

"Aye sir." The missile was keyed and away, making a lightning swift run to the target that seemed only brief seconds, still accelerating to its top speed

when it struck home and exploded, right amidships, but on the heavy belt armor of the ship. As with the hit on *Normandie*, the missile would not penetrate the 360mm armor, over 14 inches thick, but the large excess fuel reserve would cause a fire.

“That looks worse than it probably is,” said Morgan.

“I don’t think we can penetrate the armor on these ships, sir. We can’t fire in Mode A. If we don’t hit the superstructure, these ships will simply shrug off our missiles and put out the fires.”

MacRae nodded, inwardly kicking himself for firing without thinking this through. The GB-7 was a sea skimmer, defaulting to that attack profile unless reprogrammed for a popup maneuver. They had to strike above that belt armor.

“Reprogram the next three to mode B,” he said. “Two missiles—same target.”

The whine of a heavy shell headed there way sent a chill up his spine. They watched as two neatly spaced geysers fell about 500 meters ahead of the ship, much too close for comfort.

“Come right thirty degrees and ahead full,” MacRae said quickly. “We’d best slip back over the horizon.”

A minute later they returned fire, the missiles arcing up, then diving for the sea to make the run in to the target, over 25 kilometers away. This time they would pop up just before the attack, and plunge into the heart of the ship. One would strike a 5.9 inch gun turret there and do serious damage, the second would plunge into the superstructure, blowing through the outer wall and three bulkheads, but in a section of the ship that was largely empty at the moment, the starboard side crew’s quarters, forward of the number one stack and behind the conning tower. The fire there thickened the smoke already streaming from the stack as the ship raced on at 30 knots. It was a hard blow, and *Hindenburg* bled from the enemy lances, but it was not fatal. Crews were already scrambling to get water into the blazing compartments. A launch mounted just above the point of penetration could not be saved, and the secondary gun director had to be abandoned due to the heavy smoke, but otherwise the ship was still functioning and capable of staying in the fight.

“Well,” said MacRae, seeing shells still falling in his wake as *Argos Fire* sped away at its top speed of 32 knots. “We won’t be able to take a peek at the damage, but something tells me that wasn’t enough yet, Mister Dean.”

They now knew that they were not going to sink their target, or even drive it off, unless they were willing to throw considerable more firepower at the enemy.

"I've one arrow left," said MacRae. "We'd be better off putting that on one of their cruisers or destroyers." He gave Elena a sidelong glance, but said nothing more.

They were now well off the starboard side of the British fleet, and drawing closer to those ships. MacRae could see them firing, *Berwick's* 8 inch guns blasting away, but even those shells, with much heavier throw weight than the missiles, would not seriously harm or deter the *Hindenburg*.

* * *

Aboard *Queen Elizabeth* the situation was going from bad to worse. The forward turret was inoperable, and the flooding had spread through gaping holes on the innards of the ship to begin swamping the lower decks of B Turret as well. When they most needed it, the ship had lost half its firepower. The two aft turrets had been firing at the lead ship in the German formation, and the bridge crew took heart when they saw they had scored a hit there. It was well forward of Anton Turret on the *Bismarck*, holing the deck and plunging through the bow section, but on an angle that saw it cut through the ship and exit to the sea.

Queen Elizabeth was slowly falling behind, and was on a divergent course away from the rest of the formation. Up ahead Captain Barry saw the *Malaya* bravely carrying the fight to the enemy, but now the French ships had joined the action and the *Normandie* was taking aim at that ship while the other two battlecruisers targeted the *Calcutta* and *Coventry*, outmatching them with their heavier guns and armor.

He saw three destroyers angling in on his position, their bows white with the haste of their charge, and he knew they were thinking to put their torpedoes into his ship and end her reign on these waters. Then he marked the fall of shells off the bow of one destroyer, and the flash of a hit there by secondary armament.

"Good show," he breathed. "One of our 4.5 inchers has found the mark. He was correct, but the gun was not aboard *Queen Elizabeth. Argos Fire* had seen the enemy ships maneuvering on radar and began using both her single

barreled 4.5-inch turrets to put deadly accurate fire on the onrushing destroyers. The radar guided shells were finding the mark, and the sheepdog bravely tried to hold off the wolves, or in this case the big cats prowling to get at the battleship's flanks

The French destroyer *Lynx* was the ship Barry had seen, hit three times in as many minutes, and burning forward. He saw the defensive fire shift to the second destroyer, *Panthere*, but then the urgency of the ship's condition pulled him away.

"Sir, we're starting to list to port side, and the bow is down five degrees." A harried young Lieutenant reported, his face blackened with the smoke from that first massive explosion.

"Counterflood," said the Captain, though he knew that by trying to correct his list he was only going to worsen the flooding problem. It was only a matter of time, and there comes a moment in the heat of battle when a ship's Captain realizes this, and thinks of his men. He could order them into the life boats, try and save as many as he could, or he could stay in the fight as long as possible, hoping the time might by him a hit on the enemy ships.

"Signalman! Notify *Malaya* we're foundering forward and not likely to correct the problem any time soon." It was a hard message for the young ensign to bear, but the man saluted, and was off at the run to the W/T room.

Then *Queen Elizabeth* shook again with the heavy jolt and explosion of another big round. This time it was *Bismarck* that had laid its hands upon her, a 15 inch shell plunging into the ship near the funnel. The explosion batted the long cantilevered seaplane catapult away at an odd angle, flames licking the steel trellis as it moved with the roll of the ship. Shrapnel from the explosion struck a ship's bell, and the sound rang out, a mournful note of pain.

It was then that Captain Barry saw something in the western sky, bright fiery lights with tails of smoke high up, but diving for the sea like meteors. He watched, spellbound at the scene as they pulled out of the dive, coming low over the restless sea.

* * *

Argos Fire saw them coming as well. The radar had identified the missiles as Russian P-800 *Onyx* systems, a weapon that was not on the IFF

list given to him by Admiral Volsky. So the old man was keeping something under his hat as well, he thought with a smile. The missile warning was sounding loudly, and he gave a sharp order to terminate the alarm. *Argos Fire* wanted to get after the missiles with her *Sea Vipers,* but MacRae kept a firm hand on the reigns.

"Belay that Air defense system," he said with a growl. "That has to be the Russians. Where are they, Mister Healy?"

The Lieutenant looked over his shoulder, the surprise in his face plain enough. "I don't have them sir. No other surface vessel on that heading within range of our SAMPSON system."

"Then he must have better eyes than we thought. Mister Dean, what's the range of those missiles?"

"Sir… I'm reading them as SS-N-26, the Russian P-800 *Onyx*—eight missiles—range 300 kilometers for high altitude flight profile, 120 for low altitude trajectory. But sir, Lieutenant Healy has radar tracks and the point of origin is no more than fifty kilometers west of our position."

"What's that you say? Fifty klicks west?"

"Yes sir. We should be seeing the Russian battlecruiser on SAMPSON, but he's just not there. I have no contacts on that heading whatsoever."

"Well fancy that," said MacRae, watching the missiles screaming in towards the enemy ships. "Who the hell is firing those missiles?" He looked at Morgan now, instinctively eyeing his intelligence master as if he had the answer to everything on a note pad in his shirt pocket, and only had to look.

"Beat's me," said Mack. "But it reminds me of a lady I was courting once. My cab was late on our first date, but she turned up late too, and that's when I fell in love with her."

* * *

"Missiles report target lock, sir," said radarman Yevgeni Gorban. "They should be down on their terminal run now."

The Captain ran a hand over his close cropped hair, eyes looking up as though he were seeing it all through the hull. Gromyko had fired, and instinct serving him well, he had quickly maneuvered off his firing axis, diving as any submariner would.

Kazan had been a long time coming, all the way from the Cape of Good

Hope where they had rendezvoused with *Kirov*. It was a long, silent journey, passing several convoys which they identified as British ships, but making no contact. Admiral Volsky had told him to keep his presence here a secret as far as was possible, and with a submarine as stealthy as *Kazan*, that was an order Gromyko could easily fill.

The boat had sailed right through the British operations aimed at the Cape Verde and Canary Islands, moving like a silent murmur in the sea. It was not until they had reached the Western approaches to the Strait of Gibraltar that Gromyko spent some time consulting his charts. He had entered there many times before, drifting silently through the channel, and always at night. He found the strait was patrolled by three French Destroyers that were now operating from Gibraltar, but they had not heard a whisper of the quiet passing of *Kazan*. Once in the Alboran Sea, Gromyko increased speed to make for his assigned patrol post off the Sicilian Narrows, over 1400 kilometers to the east.

By the time he reached that place the Franco-German fleet had already decided to make their transit at Messina, and even as they emerged to drive off the British Fleet, Gromyko decided to move east between Malta and Sicily and see what he might find. He had been ordered to maintain operational silence, and communicate only in the event he found it necessary to use his weapons.

As he approached the scene, his sonar man Chernov painted the picture for him. The British fleet had split into two groups, one on a course to Alexandria, the other heading south with *Kirov*. The enemy fleet he had been told to find did not seem interested in either squadron, moving east until something happened that surprised Gromyko. Chernov thought he heard a very familiar sound as he monitored the seas, and when he put his profile computer to work on it he was proved correct—a *Daring* Class destroyer!

That report sent Gromyko's head spinning. What was going on here? Had they slipped again in time? Were they back in their own miserable war again? That was quickly disproved by Gromyko's report.

"No sir," he said, "I still have a firm hold on the ships we've been tracking. This new signature joined the British Squadron heading for Alexandria."

"*Daring* Class? You are certain of that?"

"It sounds a little different, sir, but all my data points are very close. Give

Lieutenant Gorban an antenna and he could verify."

"Make it so," Gromyko said to his Executive Officer Belanov. "The boat will come to periscope depth, and ahead one third."

They had raised an antenna, and Gorban confirmed that he had readings for a SAMPSON radar on his IFF board. "It's a British Type 45, sir, at least from the radar it's using. And from the looks of things it's hot in the thick of a good fight. What is this all about, Captain?"

"Signal Volsky on the secure channel," said Gromyko, and he soon had his answer. The British ship was to be considered friendly and the Admiral was now asking Gromyko to do whatever he could to lend support.

"Do whatever?" Gromyko smiled, crumbling the message in his fist. He had his boat at a good depth for missile action, and had no worry that he might attract the attention of a deadly American attack sub. He also had sixteen supersonic *Onyx* missile's ready, the system he had retained after lending *Kirov* the bulk of his P-900s. So he did the simplest thing he could think of—he picked his targets and fired.

Better late than never, he thought, realizing he had just become an active combatant in the middle of the Second World War.

Chapter 30

Gromyko was going to fight this battle as he had fought the Americans in the Pacific. *Kazan* had been part of the three boat missile barrage that Karpov had ordered against the *Washington* battlegroup, and had been the only sub to escape after taking that daring risk. Russian naval tactics knew the importance of getting in the first blow, the struggle for the first salvo, and when they fired against a modern adversary, they meant business.

Now he decided that the size of the enemy battlegroup ahead needed a good strong salvo here as well, and so he committed nearly half his remaining missiles to the attack. The eight air breathing P-800s were fast at Mach 2.0. closing the range to the target in brief minutes. Nearly nine meters long, the missiles weighed 3100 kilograms, a good portion of that from the T-6 kerosene fuel, and packed a 250kg warhead. At this range the monopulse active/passive radar locked on, hopping from one frequency to another as if it were trying to spook enemy ECM jamming that would not exist for decades.

The Russian word for the missile meant "Ruby," the red gem of wrath, and the formation of eight missiles were carrying a combined warhead weight of 2000kgs, over 4400 pounds on eight times that in the weight of the missiles themselves. With range out to 300 kilometers, they were only going to use a small portion of the kerosene fuel to reach their targets, and the remainder was going to ignite a holocaust on any ship it struck. It was a lightning fast salvo of heavy armor piercing fire bombs.

The watch on *Hindenburg* called out the alarm, seeing the missiles arc up in the sky and then dive for the sea like a formation of dragons. Some of the men stared in awe as the formation came in, and then slowly fanned out as the missiles began to acquire specific targets. One missile in the salvo was acting as leader, ruling on target acquisition like the chairman of the board. It had been programmed to allow no more than two missiles to lock on to any single ship. Gromyko wanted to spread the joy around.

Hindenburg and *Bismarck* would both take two hard hits, right amidships on the squadron flagship, with one missile very near the bruised and blackened armor from the GB-7 strike from A*rgos Fire*. The roar of the

missiles thundered in, and the hour that Lütjens had mused on now became a crucible of searing fire. The kinetic shock of the missiles were tremendous, as they were many times the weight of the GB-7. Nearly fifteen inches of cemented, face hardened Krupp steel stood in their way. The armor scheme had been conceived by designers who assumed the ship would most often fight in the misty cold waters of the North Atlantic, where visibility was low and range for gunnery duels was often very short. As such, the layout and angle of the armor was designed to repel flat trajectory attacks, like the one the missiles were delivering, as opposed to plunging fire attacks that might be delivered from shells fired at a greater range.

Like MacRae on the *Argos Fire*, Gromyko had not had the benefit of the long trial and error that *Kirov* had, and there had been little time to brief him. So the missiles would strike the ship at its strongest point, a case of the irresistible force meeting the immovable object. The face hardened armor was dual density, with the bulk being ten inches of very hard steel that was meant to blunt the nose of an incoming projectile, de-capping the shell and therefore reducing its penetrating power. The inner four or five inches were of softer density, designed to prevent the armor from fragmenting and producing shrapnel splinters that could wreak havoc inside the ship. The slope of the armor itself further increased its resistance to penetration, an ingenious design that would make the ship all but invulnerable to full belt armor failure from a flat trajectory attack—or so the designers believed.

Two blazing battering rams struck at the hardened citadel of the ship that day, the place where *Hindenburg's* defense was meant to protect the machinery, boilers, generators, power switchboards and the gun plot rooms. It was struck with a combined warhead weight of 500kgs, but had been designed to resist single shell hits twice that heavy, in the range of 800 to 1000kgs—but not shells moving at Mach 2 driven by a 3000 kilogram rocket! The armor would de-cap the warheads, and they would fail to penetrate, but the tremendous force behind the attack would buckle the steel and blast it with massive heat and shock. The fire that erupted from all that excess kerosene was terrible. Men anywhere near the point of impact literally had the oxygen sucked from their lungs, and the ship was scalded with searing heat. Most of the damage control crews that had been fighting, and slowly suppressing the fire from the GB-7 hit, were now simply immolated by the attack, and *Hindenburg* burned, a fierce, raging fire that enveloped the

entire starboard middle segment of the ship, with flames so hot that the gunwales above the point of impact literally melted.

Amazingly, the armor held, just as it was designed, for in fact, it would have taken an 18-inch gun from the *Yamato* at near point blank range to fully penetrate due to the ingenious scheme against flat trajectory rounds. It would be the damnable fire that would eventually rule the hot hour Lütjens had come to. He could feel the ship roll with the punch, and he also saw that *Bismarck* had taken two hard hits as well, one slightly aft and a second amidships. One look at the fires that enveloped the ship told him what was happening now on *Hindenburg*. Unless these fires were quickly controlled, they might spread and do damage that could put both vessels in the repair docks for a very long time.

"Starboard twenty," he shouted. "Come about!"

The helm answered, and the ship turned, the wind fanning the flames and driving the heavy smoke past the bridge viewports.

"We are turning?" Captain Adler had been watching *Bismarck* with his field glasses. "What are you doing, Admiral?"

"One look at those fires should tell you that. Signal *Bismarck* to follow."

"Then you are breaking off? We must continue! There is nothing wrong with our guns."

"There will be if those fires reach a magazine. Look at them! Look at *Bismarck!"* Lütjens was pointing at the raging smoke and flame, and the desperate struggle to get more damage control parties to the scene, but Adler's eyes were trained with the big forward turrets of *Hindenburg*. Bruno turret fired, the power of the volley shaking the ship.

"Look at *that* fire," he said. "We can crush the British!"

"Those flames are nearly as high as the bridge, Captain. If they aren't controlled soon we may not be able to even breathe here, let alone have these nice little arguments in front of the men." He paused to let that sink in, but Adler had the heat of the battle on him now, and propriety was the farthest thing from his mind at that moment.

"Sir," came a report from a young officer, "Main gun director reports the smoke is too heavy for accurate sighting."

"Because you have turned to starboard," said Adler, "right into the wind and everything is blowing across our beam!" The Captain was clearly unhappy.

“Kindly look to port, Mister Adler. A turn in that direction would have put us right across the bow of the *Normandie*. No, we will come about as I have ordered. If these fires cannot be quickly controlled, then this battle is over. I was not given this ship to see it burned to a blackened hulk. The Führer would never forgive me.”

Down in Anton turret, Axel Faust had felt the blow and knew the ship had taken a hard hit, though he had not seen the rocket attack. His turret was still trained on the British battleships, but no data was coming from Eisenberg or Fuchs.

“Trouble with the gun directors!” he shouted, settling in behind the optical gun sights available in the turret itself for just this contingency. “Elevation twenty, five degrees right. Fire!”

The turret roared, and the men leapt to their evolution, human sinew in the workings of this vast machine. The breech opened, the shell loading bogie slid into position and the massive shell was rammed home. The five seconds for the rammer to return seemed like an eternity to Faust now. The gun had to be moved off elevation while the loading progressed, then elevated again and re-trained with the sighting data. Faust saw the fall of his shells and knew the shot was close enough for rapid fire, but he suddenly felt the ship turning.

“Track right! Five degrees! More… one degree more… Hold! Elevation eighteen point five. Steady… Fire!”

The German ships had turned to disengage, but were still firing, with no damage to their turrets beyond the loss of director control. It was Axel Faust that made the difference now, his well schooled eye at the turret optics making good on the reputation he had earned as the best gunner in the fleet. His last salvo had been right on the mark, and *Queen Elizabeth* would not survive the hit he scored, with the heavy round plunging in behind the funnel. The ship’s recent refit had improved her deck armor over machinery sites to 2.5 inches, but the 16-inch shell from *Hindenburg* would penetrate twice that at the range fired, and it gutted the ship, exploding three decks below the point of impact, destroying two more boiler rooms.

Down seven degrees at the bow and still listing, it was now only a matter of time before the ship sunk. Captain Barry knew the worst when his chief of engineers reported that damage from that last hit could not be controlled. A fire had reached ready ammo store for one of the secondary batteries, and a second explosion rocked the heart of the ship. With a heavy heart he signaled

all fleet units that he was forced to abandon ship. The crews were ordered to any boat they could deploy, but he knew that many men were going to die here today. Axel Faust had signed their death warrants with the guns of turret Anton.

The heavy missiles off *Kazan* had done more to turn the action than anything else. A British *Harpoon* weighed only 691kg with booster, and the GB-7 was in that same class. The *Onyx* missile was nearly five times heavier and three times as long. The shock and fire they delivered was many times that of the British missile, and the results were plain to see. Both German ships were burning badly and now turning away from the main action.

Strausbourg had been slightly ahead of the Germans, firing with her twin quadruple turrets that were ideal in a pursuit scenario like this. But that ship had been struck twice as well, beneath the forward A turret and again much closer to the bow, which was more lightly armored and was rent asunder by the heavy blow. Her fires were not as bad due to the location of the hits away from the main superstructure, but the damage to the bow was causing severe flooding forward and the ship turned, falling out of the battle.

The cruiser *Colbert* got the worst of it. At 12,700 long tons she had only 20% of *Hindenburg's* displacement. And no more than 60mm armor on the belt. The two supersonic missiles blasted clean through this, erupted in a massive fireball of ignited fuel and broke the ship in two.

Admiral Laborde watched in horror as *Colbert* died an agonizing death, well out in front of his ship. The *Normandie* had been screened by the two German battleships, and thus had not been targeted. His ship had taken one GB-7 hit, a close straddle from *Malaya*, but his gunners were slowly finding the range with the two forward turrets, and at a little under 20,000 meters he raked *Malaya* with a spread of 15-inch shells, finally getting a hit. He gave an order to turn ten more points to port, away from the Germans, and was soon able to run completely parallel to the British line, and bring all twelve of his guns to the action.

Malaya was wreathed in heavy smoke, and the cruiser *Berwick* had interposed itself, and now had the misfortune of becoming the new target. The twelve guns roared and scored a hit. The next salvo would log two more, and the cruiser, already damaged by a 500 pound bomb, was suddenly penetrated to magazine level and exploded. It would sink in the next ten minutes.

In other action the three remaining French cruisers had pounded the *Calcutta* to a smoking wreck, but Coventry and Orion had scored enough hits to discourage their closer approach to the scene. The French cruisers broke off, but the heart of their battle fleet, *Normandie* and *Dunkerque*, remained undamaged, and undaunted.

Dunkerque had been in on the action against Calcutta, scoring at least one good hit there before turning the battle over to the cruisers and looking for bigger prey. Now the battlecruiser joined the action against *Malaya*, adding another eight 12.9 inch guns to the heat of that engagement.

It was then that Admiral Laborde saw the streaking tail of yet another missile pierce the heavy pall of drifting battle smoke, and lance into the heart of the light cruiser *Jeane de Vienne*. The resulting explosion told him the ship had taken heavy damage. The missile had popped up and come down on the 38mm deck armor, plunging deep into the ship and nearly exiting through the bottom hull.

Damn these naval rockets! Look what they've done to the German battleships. He was receiving reports from every ship in the fleet, keeping a mental tally of his losses. Of his ten destroyers, *Mistral*, *Orage* and *Vauban* had been sunk, with damage to *Tempte*, *Tornade*, *Lynx* and *Panthere* that had forced them to retire. He had clearly lost the heavy cruiser *Colbert*, and the same might now be said for *Jeane de Vienne.* The hits to *Strausbourg* were serious, and the ship was struggling to control bad flooding as it shrunk from the fight. Both German battleships had turned away, though their aft turrets were still firing.

He had two good ships in hand, his flagship hit but undaunted, and *Dunkerque* was practically the only ship in the engagement that had come through without so much as a paint scratch. *Queen Elizabeth* was clearly a lost cause for the British, and he could stay here and pound the *Malaya* senseless if he chose to do so, but how many more of those rockets might find his ship? The fires he could still see burning on the *Hindenburg* were enough to convince him that this engagement had run its course.

The Franco-German fleet had been hit with fifteen supersonic missiles and eight more of the lighter *Sea Skuas*. They had also faced the gunnery of the British fleet, which had scored many hits in the battle to cause further mayhem. It had been a terrible hour, and one of the most costly naval engagements in history when the final tally was registered on both sides.

Considering the losses that had been sustained by the Italians, the Axis fleet had taken a severe mauling.

It was then that the sole surviving spotter plane sent in a report that another squadron of enemy ships was approaching, seven ships in front at high speed, another six ships, and aircraft carriers among them that appeared to be launching planes. That was enough to convince La Borde that he had tarried here too long. He gave the order to break off, just after 18:00, and the heavy smoke soon obscured all view of the enemy as the *Normandie* began its turn. Now he looked to the skies, sending orders that the fleet should regroup on a new heading and prepare to defend against enemy air attack. In all this time, he thought, where was the air cover he had been promised by the Germans?

The Luftwaffe would come, but far too late to make any difference in the action. His column reformed, beat off one half hearted attack by British *Swordfish* torpedo bombers, and then the skies began to darken with the growl of the German planes. It was a formation of thirty Bf-110 twin engine heavy fighters, more than enough to discourage any further air action off those carriers. As it was soon determined that these planes were no direct threat to the fleet, both *Kirov* and *Argos Fire* preserved their SAMs, and the action slowly dissipated.

When he learned the enemy fleet had diverted from its easterly course and turned south, Tovey had turned about with *Invincible* and all his cruisers, leaving *Warspite* to escort the carriers with a few more destroyers. *Argos Fire* saw them coming on radar, the ships appearing on her screens just after that missile strike by *Kazan*. The formation had come upon the scene too late to take any decisive action, but its sudden appearance had been the last factor compelling La Borde to break off.

It was better late than never for Tovey. The damage had already been done. The British were going to lose two battleships that day. As that terrible hour ended, the stately *Queen Elizabeth* finally rolled to one side, bow down and slipping beneath the tempestuous sea. Only 728 men would be saved from her crew, and Captain Barry would not be among them. He knew the life boats would only take a portion of his men to safety, and had given the order to abandon ship, remaining on the bridge.

The men in the boats could hear the crewmen still on the ship singing ‘Hail Britannia’ as the battleship rolled over, the chorus quashed by the heavy

swells as men made that last desperate leap into the water to try and save themselves. The arrival of Tovey's ships would save many that might have otherwise died, and four hours later the fleet turned for Alexandria, bloodied, bruised, and missing *Queen Elizabeth, Berwick, Calcutta*, and the destroyers *Marne, Ledbury* and *Echo.*

Malaya was still afloat, and taken in tow, but the ship was so beaten and battered by the *Normandie* that it would never see action again. The enemy had lost the *Colbert*, with enough damage on *La Galissonniere*, and *Jeane de Vienne* to take them out of the war for the next year. Both *Hindenburg* and *Bismarck* eventually controlled their terrible fires, as the fuel sustaining them had burned itself away. Their armored sides were bent and blackened by the missile hits, but their propulsion systems and guns were all operational and they would fight again.

One other ship remained unseen beneath the sea, slowly following in the wake of the retiring enemy fleet. Gromyko had fired his missiles, and now began to look for wounded ships that would be easy prey for his torpedoes. The German ships sped away at good speed and evaded, but he came upon the *Strausbourg*, wallowing behind the main French fleet as it labored for Taranto at 18 knots.

It would never arrive.

Part XI

Taking Stock

“Take chances, be crazy. Don’t wait, because right now is the oldest you’ve ever been and the youngest you’ll ever be again.”

— Nishan Panwar

Chapter 31

All that week the British planes kept coming in to harass the retreating German columns. Even though German air cover was good, some planes inevitably would get through to make attacks. They seemed to select one segment of the front each day and concentrate their effort there. One day they would attack between Agheila and Agedabia; and on another between Agedabia and Benghazi, particularly against thin skinned vehicles, the vital trucks that would move supplies and petrol needed to sustain operations. Other times they would strike the long roads from Benghazi to Derna where the slower Italian infantry divisions that had been investing Tobruk slogged along on foot. The attacks were not heavy, but nonetheless effective.

British *Hurricanes* were now able to land at Tobruk and El Adem as good forward refueling bases, and conducted low level strafing attacks, always against moving columns, as it was learned that stationary vehicle parks would put up much heavier AA defense. The doughty Blenheim twin engine fighter bomber was very useful in the latter role. While it could easily carry 250 to 500 pound bombs, the air crews had modified it to use racks of much smaller bombs as light as 20 pounds, with HE fragmentation loads that would be thick on shrapnel in the hopes of penetrating any containers being used to transport fuel. Particular attention was given to the port of Benghazi, where strings of small incendiaries would be used against ships.

The supply situation was far from satisfactory, thought Paulus. Tripoli is all of 1100 miles behind the front, the distance from Hamburg to Rome! Benghazi is of limited use, as the British themselves learned when they held a brief lease on that port after O'Connor's first successful advance. Concentrated attacks there by enemy aircraft made it unsuitable as a functioning supply port. Now that we have it, it seems they have decided to return the favor, and Benghazi is visited day and night by enemy bombers. Until these interdiction campaigns were dialed up, the port had been useful for delivery of between 1500 and 1700 tons per day, and the engineers believed they could improve facilities and operations there to increase this to 2000 tons per day. I am aware of the Führer's order to hold this port, just as the British stubbornly held on to Tobruk. At its root, the order underscores

the need for viable port facilities to move supplies, but Rommel believes any attempt to hold Cyrenaica is foolish, and said as much to me when I came to assess the situation.

"Benghazi is not Tobruk," said Rommel. "It has no major fortifications in place, and can be approached from all directions. Anything we leave there is as good as lost. Our only chance of holding any line is here, between Agheila and Agedabia. The position at Mersa Brega is a bottleneck, with bad ground for mobile operations to the south. It is one of the best defensive positions in Libya. That is where I will make my stand."

Paulus smiled. "That is where you were told to set up your division as a blocking force last month! What possessed you to disobey the Fuhrer and go charging off to Tobruk?"

"The British were off balance. They were worn out and easily beaten. You saw how they retreated east when I moved. That would have continued, whether or not they held on to Tobruk. It was not until this new force suddenly appeared on our deep right flank that everything went to hell. We were right in the middle of an enveloping movement that had every prospect of breaking their last line of defense. Then I had to pull out of that attack and redeploy to the south, and the defense was too hasty."

Paulus was silent for a time, thinking. "I spoke with Cramer," he said in a low voice. "He said the British deployed new armored vehicles unlike anything he had ever seen—massive new tanks that make their old Matildas look like children's toys! He said the Matildas were trouble enough, even for the 50mm gun, but these new tanks are fearsome. He engaged and found his own armor was completely overmatched. They were able to see and strike our own tanks at ranges well beyond the effective firing radius of even our best Panzer IIIs."

Rommel's eyes had a haunted look in them now. "I heard this, but did not believe it—until I went forward to see for myself. I was looking for Streich, but heard he was dead. I hate to say it, but good riddance. The man was a thorn in my side from the very first. Kircheim will take the division now until I can find someone else. I requested Ravenstein."

"He's coming," said Paulus. "Too bad for Streich."

"Yes, his position was one of the first to spot and engage this new British force with a small battery of 150s. Unfortunately, he received direct counter-battery fire in a matter of minutes. My god, Paulus, everything Cramer said

about these new British tanks is true! They are enormous! I saw a company sized unit lead their attack, and the Pak 37s and 50s in the forward screen were no more effective than throwing gravel at the damn things! Fortunately, I had ordered the flak batteries to set up a Pakfront west of that hill. It was a good position. A wadi channeled the enemy advance right toward the hill where Streich died. I had twelve 88s covering that defile, and that should have been enough to end the matter."

He stopped, clearly bothered now, a desperate expression on his face. "But it *wasn't* enough, Paulus. They hit those gun positions with artillery and took out three or four 88s in a matter of minutes. The others returned fire, and I saw them getting hits, but could not believe it. The tanks just kept coming! I saw one hit three times, and it sustained no significant damage. Then they returned fire and took out three more guns. We were lucky to get the remainder out and retreat north. Do you understand what this means? Those were 88s, and they could not penetrate this new British tank armor! They were completely useless! We have no anti-tank weapon in the army that can better the performance of that gun. For all intents and purposes, these new British tanks are invulnerable, and if that is so…"

He did not have to say anything more, leaning heavily over the map, the weariness of many sleepless days of fighting very evident now. "So now you know why I have no intention of trying to hold Cyrenaica. It can't be held by a mobile force. I could order infantry into the Jebel country, but once the British push through to Beda Fomm as they did before, they will be completely isolated. If the Führer wants us to stand at Benghazi, then let the Italians hold the place. I will not leave my troops there."

"We'll have new reserves very soon." Paulus tried to encourage him. "The 90th Light is already arriving at Tripoli and will be heading east to join you. There will be more troops coming soon. A few weeks ago OKW moved 1st Mountain Division and the Grossdeutschland Regiment from Spain to Italy. They were the troops that broke the Rock of Gibraltar. I thought they were heading for the new front along the southern border near Ukraine, but I was wrong. They are coming here, and another Panzer division is being assigned to your Korps as well."

"Another Panzer Division? I can certainly use it, but we can barely support the two mobile divisions I already have. Add the 90th Light and we'll be lucky to get water to the men, let alone fuel and ammunition!"

“The supply situation is at the top of my list,” said Paulus. “That and the trucks to move it. You are correct in what you say concerning Benghazi. Tripoli is the only port we can rely on in the short run, but we are speaking with the Vichy French about Tunis and Bizerte.”

“Tunis? It’s 1400 kilometers from here to there!”

“Yes, but there’s a decent rail line from Tunis south—almost all the way to Mareth. That will cut the distance to a thousand kilometers. It’s farther than that from here to Alexandria. You didn’t seem to think that was a problem when you started east, did you?”

“Believe it or not, Paulus, I have learned a few things about operations in this desert in the last few weeks. It was going to be difficult to extend real force to the Nile even without the appearance of these new reinforcements for the British. Two divisions will simply not be enough. Five might do, but the British would match them in time, and supplying them that far east would be a nightmare. No. What we must do now is fight the British on ground of our own choosing, and beat them—decisively. We can only advance east again if we have that victory in hand, and destroy the British Army here…. Before they destroy us!”

“You are beginning to see things clearly now my friend,” said Paulus. “No more joy riding with inadequate force, and even less gasoline. You may have had trouble with Streich, but I’ve read his reports, and he was often correct. Logistics, Rommel, that is the key. I will advocate that we press the Vichy French hard for immediate use of Tunis and Bizerte. It is only 500 kilometers to good ports in eastern Sicily, or to Naples from Tunis, and only three hundred kilometers if we can use Palermo. A supply convoy can make that in one overnight trip, unload by day, and be ready to sail back again the following night. From there we use the rail line to Mareth, and begin extending it east as well. Engineers, Rommel. Trucks, quartermasters and good engineers! That is what we need now as much as another battalion of tanks. Your force will soon see a dramatic buildup in strength and material. And with this scaled up supply strategy, we will sustain these new divisions. It will take time, and the shortage of transport is the main problem, but between the French and OKW, we will get you the trucks you need. My only question now is this—what do we do here? A drive east again is out of the question.”

“For the moment,” said Rommel. “And if these new tanks are delivered to

the British in numbers, it will be out of the question entirely."

"Exactly how large was this new British force?"

Rommel gave him a grim smile. "Large enough," he said dejectedly. "I saw no more than ten or fifteen of these new tanks, but they had at least two mechanized infantry battalions in support. It could have been no more than a brigade, but it hit like a sledge hammer! They were enough to smash right through that Pakfront and nearly decimate my infantry. I had 2nd and 8th Machine gun battalions in good defensive ground. It was a hasty defense, but the men were in position when the attack came. The British also have an new infantry carrier—fast, and with a decent gun. It sounded like a Bofors. In fact, I thought they were tanks until I saw the infantry deploy. They put accurate suppressive artillery fire on us, moved up like lightning with these new vehicles, and shot the position to pieces. The infantry only deployed to mop up, because by that time our men had had enough, I ordered the retreat soon after, and if the Führer wants me to stop and defend this useless desert in Cyrenaica, he's a fool. Until we find a way to stop these tanks there will be no more good news from North Africa."

Paulus nodded. "And no more medals for Herr Rommel. Well, don't fret about it. This is merely a setback."

"Don't put such sweet icing on the cake," said Rommel. "I can do that with my letters home to Lucie, but we were soundly beaten, and for the first time in this war. If I had left my divisions in place they would have been destroyed. Casualties were heavy, and I will be lucky to have material for one good division between both 5th Light and 15th Panzer. We left the rest in the desert south of Bir el Khamsa. That's what they're calling it now—the Battle of Bir el Khamsa. I suppose I will have to live with it, our first major defeat."

Paulus folded his arms. "You thought we would win every battle, did you? That seldom happens in war, Rommel. A good defeat can actually be healthy for an army, as long as morale is strong and the officers and men learn from the loss they suffered. I will speak with the Führer and get him to understand why Mersa Brega is the best defensive line now, but learn a good lesson from this. You will have to re-think your tactics here. We were masters of maneuver warfare, but this new enemy armor has changed the whole balance. You may have to rely on defensive tactics until we can better assess this situation. This position at Mersa Brega looks strong. Dig in, Rommel. No more dashing off on the southern flank. Dig in behind mines

and wire, and site your artillery well. I don't care how thick the armor is on these new British tanks. They won't like a hit from a 150mm HE round. The concussion alone will knock the men senseless."

"True, if they hit anything. They are not the most accurate weapons, Paulus, as you well know."

"I understand, but you will have to use saturation fires at the point of the enemy attack. I'll see about getting you some good heavy nebelwerfers. We have rocket munitions too. Pre-register your guns! Think like an infantry division commander now. *Infantrie Greift!* Did you not write such a book? You cannot resort to blitzkrieg tactics with your tanks now."

"At least not against those heavy tanks I saw. We might be able to hurt their infantry carriers."

"Yes? Well, if the 88s cannot stop their heavy tanks, then use your artillery and infantry. Scissors, paper and rock, my friend. In war there are always alternatives. You cannot use the sharp, cutting scissors in your Panzer Divisions against this new British rock, so use paper—Infantry! I will see about getting better air support from Goering, which reminds me, he has also offered to send his brigade to bolster your forces here. It's in Italy as well."

"The Goering Brigade? Good. Tell the fat oaf to come along as well, and I'll put him right on the front line. The British will take one look at him and run the other way!"

Paulus smiled. "You are too hard on the man. That brigade has some tough men in it, good equipment, and we will need Goering's cooperation to make certain you get the air support. With his own brigade here, I can assure you he will be more than willing to send the *Stukas* our way. There is your answer to these new British tanks—500 pound bombs and good artillery, minefields in well prepared defensive positions. Mersa Brega is a narrow place. Dig in there, and if they try to push through, we'll see how things go this time. As for the supplies, I will get you everything I possibly can."

Rommel shrugged. Think like an infantry commander! His stock in trade had been that of the dashing Panzer leader, but he knew that Paulus was correct. He would have to adapt his methods and tactics to face this alarming new enemy armor. It could not be a very large force, and how they managed to get it positioned there on his deep right flank was yet another mystery, but it might be solved by tactics like those Paulus suggested.

"What about the Italians?" Paulus moved to a new subject. "You don't

really mean to leave them in Cyrenaica, do you?”

“The Italians… Yes, they are another problem,” said Rommel. “Those that manage to get east will be little more than mouths to feed here. If I had my way I’d have them all shipped back to Italy. I can use a few of their motorized divisions—or at least use their trucks, but the infantry is useless. If the Führer insists I hold Benghazi, then I’ll post the Italian infantry divisions there and we’ll see how long they last. O’Connor rounded up over 30,000 the last time he came west. Our best strategy might be to send them all the rest, and then let the British feed them!”

“Very well, defend Benghazi. The British will take it, but it will delay them and buy us some time to bring up fresh German divisions. Then, when they do take it, we can blame it on the Italians. If the Führer asks why no German troops were posted there, I will tell him we had to secure our main supply line back to Tripoli. That is the prize for the moment. Hitler sent you here to stop the British from invading Tripolitania and capturing Tripoli! Lose that and the Italians may soon lose their stomach for this war. After what happened in that naval engagement off Malta, Mussolini is on pins and needles. They lost several battleships!”

“That’s Raeder’s watch,” said Rommel. “I hear *Hindenburg* is in the Mediterranean now, so he had better be careful. It seems the British have more than these new tanks to bedevil us. What is this business about naval rockets?”

“Another surprise,” Paulus frowned. “I heard the rumors, but was never really briefed on the matter. Raeder is having fits! Thank God *Hindenburg* made it safely back to Toulon. I also hear Hitler was none too happy about the damage to the ship. In fact, he’s beginning to question this whole strategy in the Mediterranean again, and looking east at Kirov’s Soviet Russia. You were too quick with your boast about taking the Suez Canal in 90 days, Rommel. Be more realistic.”

“You heard about that?”

“Who didn’t? Tell the Führer things like that and he will actually believe you! That was a mistake. The British have proven to be a stubborn and resourceful foe. They will not give up easily, and we may have a long slow grind of it in the months ahead. I know that doesn’t suit you, but you will have to adapt. This war here will be won by the supply columns, on either side.”

“And the tanks,” said Rommel darkly.

“True, but considering logistics, we have two birds in hand now, both Gibraltar and Malta. That dramatically improves our prospects for supplying you here. To bend an old maxim, those two birds are worth more now than that single bird in the bush you were running after—Suez. Take your time! We had no idea the British weapons programs were so advanced—new naval rocketry, new heavy armor that can stand up to an 88. At the moment these new weapons do not seem to be widely deployed, or reaching the front in any great numbers. Doenitz will have to concentrate heavily on the convoy routes south. That is the only way the British can send Wavell any more of these tanks, eh? Time in battle, wear and tear, maintenance issues will all take their toll. So do not be so crestfallen. This is a new rock in the stream for the moment, nothing more. If we can solve the logistics problem, we’ll get you the troops to sweep right over this new British armored brigade. Just you give us the time. Be stubborn now! Fight a good delaying action and get on that defensive line you’ve chosen. Then dig in. Your war of maneuver is over for the moment—understand?”

“Only too well,” Rommel said sullenly. “They called my division the Ghost division in France, Paulus. Well that’s what we have on our hands here now, a ghost of what my Afrika Korps once was. This new British brigade is an apparition from the darkest corner of hell! But I have been to hell and back, Paulus, at Caporetto as a young man of only 25 years.”

During that war Rommel had distinguished himself as a young officer with the Wurttemburger Mountain troops. In difficult and rugged mountain country, he energetically embarked on a campaign that involved stealthy infantry marches, infiltration behind enemy lines and flanking maneuvers that once saw his detachment, no more than a battalion in strength, capture five Italian regiments. He had removed 9000 men from the enemy order of battle, losing only 6 men, with 30 wounded. He had an uncanny ability to see the possibilities in any situation, foresee enemy intentions and dispositions on the ground, and guess their probable reaction to his maneuvers. In most cases he specialized in making attacks from unexpected directions, demoralizing his enemy and unhinging their defense.

“Well,” said Paulus, “we’ve taken good stock of our situation here. I’ll do what I can to persuade Hitler. But you must do what you can to restore order here now. None of us are getting any younger. You must find a way to deal

with this.”

There was a glint in Rommel’s eye now, and his hand strayed to the prominent Blue Max on his breast pocket. “Yes,” he said. “Even in hell I found a way to beat the devil.”

Chapter 32

Paulus made good on his promises. The German buildup in North Africa accelerated with the infusion of fresh troops and equipment. The 90th Light Division had not been formed until late June of 1941 in the old history, but was already arriving at Tripoli in February of that year. The other units Paulus had mentioned were also being diverted to staging ports in France and Italy. The 90th Light had been motorized with the trucks provided by the Vichy French, as they had promised. The two other motorized formations were both brigade sized units, Grossdeutschland and Herman Goering. As for the new Panzer Division Paulus had mentioned, it would be 10th Panzer, but the unit had not yet been released. Paulus still had the difficult task of convincing Hitler this campaign still offered the prospect of victory.

The Führer leaned over the map table that day, the red swastika armband contrasting starkly with the drab brown of his coat. His eyes had a distant harried look in them, as if he were seeing things in some far off future, the struggle and conflict of a war that was only now threatening to take a dramatic new turn. He was not happy with the sudden and unexpected reversal in North Africa, and he let Paulus know this in no uncertain terms.

"What was that man doing galloping off into Egypt with only one division like that? The 15th Panzers only reached him a few weeks ago!"

"It seems he believed he had a promise to fulfill, my Führer."

"You mean his boast about taking the Suez Canal? I knew that was not likely."

"He might have done exactly that, were it not for this new force that appeared on the southern flank."

"I have read the reports," said Hitler. "What do you know of these new British tanks that seem to be impervious to our guns? Have you seen this, Paulus?"

"Not personally. I know only what was reported to me by the officers I interviewed. From all descriptions the British must have been building on the success of their Matilda heavy tank, and they have delivered another model with considerably more power. Troops say it is twice the size of the Matilda, and with a gun on it that is as big as a 25 pound artillery piece. Yet in spite of

its size it was very fast—very agile. The troops say it could fire on the move, and hit with amazing accuracy. And nothing they used against it was able to harm it in any way."

"How many of these new tanks do the British have?"

"This we do not yet know, and our operatives in Cairo have been unable to even confirm the existence of this new unit. How it came to reach its position south of the main battle area is somewhat of a mystery. Halder suggested it must have deployed by rail here, to the railhead north of the Al Farafrah Oasis, and then moved by road to Siwa."

"That is a long march. Why not simply deploy it in the north, along the coast?"

"We do not know. Perhaps they meant to achieve surprise by this maneuver."

"It seems they have done that well enough!" Hitler folded his arms, an elbow in each hand in the guarded posture he often took when unhappy.

"Reports indicate that no more than ten or fifteen of these new tanks were actually engaged," said Paulus, "so this may be a special Schwere Panzer unit that is only recently arrived. Donitz should see that no more arrive, because this new tank could unhinge the balance of power in a mobile battle, just as it did at Bir el Khamsa."

Hitler frowned at the mention of the name. "Our first major setback," he scowled. "I can see the British kicking the Italians out of Egypt, but not German troops!"

"Yet we had just two divisions there, my Führer. That is hardly a force capable of driving all the way to Cairo and beyond. Unless Rommel is strongly reinforced, you should expect he can do nothing more than hold on defense."

"At Benghazi? We will need that port."

"It will be held, but not by German troops."

"Then by who? You do not expect the Italians to hold it for very long!"

"That will be up to Mussolini. Yes, Rommel has posted six Italian divisions, largely infantry, in positions all along this line. Granted, these are not reliable troops, but there are 50,000 men there now, and if the British want Benghazi, they will have to commit several divisions to invest it and take the time to plan an offensive. At present they do not have sufficient forces in theater to do this while also building up a strong front opposite

Rommel at Mersa Brega.”

The delicate moment had come, for Paulus knew Hitler had ordered Benghazi held, and nothing had been said about any further withdrawal to the west. He folded his arms behind his back, with an almost casual air, as if the dispositions he was describing now were contemplated all along.

“Mersa Brega?” said Hitler. “That far west? What about Agedabia?”

“It is also occupied by the Italian armor and motorized divisions. They will form a kind of trip-wire to delay any move by the British into Tripolitania. Our forces will stage here, just where you ordered Rommel to take up his blocking position before he ran off into Egypt. I have finally talked some sense into the man, and he now sees the wisdom of your earlier orders. He told me personally that he would obey his Führer’s instructions and build a strong defensive position.”

There, Paulus had couched the decision to withdraw to Mersa Brega as something that was in accord with Hitler’s own wishes. The bird was out of the oven, and now he only needed to baste it well.

“You have an uncanny eye for good defensive ground, my Führer. How you managed to determine this from a simple map like this is astounding, but I saw that ground personally when I was there, and it is one of the best defensive positions in North Africa. Rommel has posted both his divisions there, and they will soon be joined by a third, the 90th Light Motorized Division. The delivery of 1200 trucks from the French at Tripoli allowed us to deploy this unit much sooner than we might have otherwise. So now the other troops you have scheduled for this buildup are staging at Toulon and Naples.”

“Other troops? What other troops?” Hitler had been mollified by the flattery Paulus had used, but now he asked a difficult question. He was given to issuing quick orders and then forgetting all about them when he wished. The matter of further reinforcements would be somewhat delicate, so Paulus had to be cautious here, and adroitly changed the topic briefly.

“Rommel and I have discussed how to handle these new British tanks, but it will need more troops and particularly more artillery.”

“Artillery? Why not more tanks?”

“Because they are useless against this new enemy armor. That was very clear from the reports I read on this encounter. We cannot use the new blitzkrieg methods in these circumstances. Instead we must used well tried

infantry tactics and good artillery, just as we did in the first war." Paulus knew that Hitler had fought in that war. The trenches of WWI were the place where he had learned virtually everything he knew about combat.

"You remember it well, do you not?" Paulus continued, taking Hitler back to those days in his mind. "When the first tanks made their appearance they were a fearsome new threat, but we adapted. They were few in number, and could be resisted by stout hearted infantry in good defensive positions—troops who will hold their ground even if overrun by enemy armor—with even better shock troops to back them up when the time came to hit back. The British cannot storm a position like the one you have chosen at Mersa Brega with a few new tanks, and if they try, they will face a sea of infantry that will wash over them like a storm of steel. That is the way we defeat these new tanks of theirs—we will pound them with artillery and then send in the infantry, just as we did before. Even our own blitzkrieg tactics are vulnerable if the enemy is resolute and holds the shoulders of our Schwerpunkt. We must do this now—hold like good armor on those battleships! Yes, I stopped at Toulon to have a look for myself. *Hindenburg* was hit and damaged, but the armor held, my Führer. In just the same way we will hold the line here and let them waste themselves trying to break through. Then, when they are exhausted, we can release our mobile units in a strong counterattack as before."

Hitler was silent, brooding, but Paulus could see something smoldering in his dark eyes. He had been a veteran of many hard engagements in the first World War, Ypres, the Somme, Passchendaele and the Marne, earning numerous citations for bravery and the Iron Cross 1st Class. Ironically, he had stumbled into the rifle sights of a British soldier, Private Henry Tandey, who had decided to let what he thought was a wounded and unarmed man go safely back to his lines. Hitler still remembered the incident.

"Then we fight a defensive battle now?"

"For the moment. That was your wish, my Führer. So we will establish a strong position there at Mersa Brega, and build up strength behind it like water behind the dam—troops and supplies—we need both in abundance if Rommel is ever to move east again. It is a thousand kilometers to the Suez Canal."

"Well he cannot march that distance with foot soldiers!"

"No, my Führer, but good motorized infantry divisions can get him there.

We must have mobile artillery to support them, and by all means, air power. This is the real genius behind your plan. I knew it when I saw you had selected the Herman Goering Brigade for service in North Africa."

Hitler could not recall this, but he listened as Paulus explained. "With those troops there, Rommel's requests for air support will get top billing. I have looked over the list of units you proposed for the Afrika Korps. They will do the job, my Führer. With the 90th Light, Grossdeutschland Regiment, 1st Mountain Division and the Goering Brigade, we will have the good veteran troops we need to stand against anything the British throw at us. And once we stop them, then we hit back, just like we did when you won that Iron Cross." Paulus pointed to the medal that Hitler still proudly wore.

Now Hitler recalled that he did, indeed, order the troops that had taken the Rock of Gibraltar to move to Italy for service in North Africa. But that had been when he was flush with the victory Rommel had handed him in overrunning all of Libya. He had been willing to overlook the fact that Rommel had disobeyed his orders to do so, and now the thought of rewarding both disobedience and defeat with the commitment of these elite troops seemed to gall him.

"Not so fast, Paulus," he said. "I must tell you that I have been having second thoughts about this business in North Africa. Greece has fallen, and we have the Balkans in our possession now. I have troops sitting right on the Turkish frontier at this very moment. One good push and we can take Istanbul and seize the Bosporus."

"It will do us no good as long as the Soviets still control the Black Sea," Paulus warned.

"That was why I allowed Raeder to move my battleships into the Mediterranean!" Hitler's cheeks reddened as he said that, his tone just beneath the level of a shout. "Now look what he has done with them! I am told that *Hindenburg* and *Bismarck* will both need repairs, and Raeder is asking me to send the steel to Toulon. Where did the British get these new rocket weapons? Why is it we knew nothing of this development until they were firing them at our ships? Now I am told the British have tanks that are impervious to our finest guns. This is an outrage!"

"I agree, my Führer, and I am certain we will quickly catch up with them. I have also seen the prototypes of our own new rocket designs, and they look very promising."

“Yes? Well they will look much more promising to me when I hear they are firing at British ships.” Now Hitler leaned over the map table again, a sullen expression on his pallid features.

“I did not get here by chance, Paulus,” he said, a strange tone in his voice. “I was meant to be here. Yes, we will pour everything we have into research on these new weapons. And we will get newer and better tanks as well. The proposals are already on my desk, and we will soon show the British that two can play at this game. But now I must decide about the Russians. What you say is true. As long as the Soviets control the Black Sea, then we will be unable to ship the oil through from Orenburg. So that will now be my number one priority. Understand? We will build up strength here,” he pointed at the borders near Moldavia and the Ukraine.

“I will smash through and take the Crimea—take the bases the Soviet Black Sea fleet must use if they are to impede those oil shipments. Once I have the Bosporus, and the Crimea, then no further occupation of Turkish territory will be necessary. So why should I send more troops to North Africa when I can put them to good use here?” His fist came down hard on the Turkish frontier, but Paulus held his composure, waiting for the storm to abate.

“A wise strategy,” he said. “Unless the British reinforce Turkey, as you know they will as long as they remain a strong and viable force in the Middle East. If we do not support Rommel now, what will they do with all the troops they pull from East Africa? I can read a map as well, my Führer. First they will put down this rebellion in Iraq that poses a threat to their own oil production. Then they will chase the Vichy French out of Syria, and after that, you will see British troops in Turkey and possibly even Iran to open a front against the southern borders of Volkov’s key oil production centers in the Caspian. There is only one way to prevent that—by keeping the British well occupied with a credible threat to Egypt. You must keep the pressure on them and force them to send troops into the Western Desert. Starve Rommel and he will just sit there swatting flies. Feed him and there is a chance we can push east again. This is a man you can rely on, in spite of recent setbacks. And there is another axis of attack that we can open against Egypt as well—Crete.”

“Crete?”

“Of course, my Führer. Again you correctly point out that it must be taken

to prevent the British from establishing strong air bases there. Now is the time for that—and this should be done before the Bosporus operation, and certainly before you contemplate any move on the Crimea. That means war with Soviet Russia, and do not think it can be confined to the southern region. The front will extend all the way to the Baltic, and once that begins it will suck in every division we have like a maelstrom. No. First Crete, then we have those bases to threaten Alexandria and the Suez, instead of British bombers over the oil fields of Ploesti. After Crete, we have the option of strongly reinforcing Syria, and stopping the British plan to support Turkey while also posing a direct threat to Palestine."

"Syria? Palestine? And how do you propose I get the troops there with *Hindenburg* and *Bismarck* laid up in the repair yards at Toulon? The Italians took a sound beating and have withdrawn their navy to La Spezia. I cannot send troops to the Levant by sea with the British fleet still at Alexandria. Must I rely on the French Navy?"

"I have spoken to Raeder on this," said Paulus quickly. "Yes, these new naval rockets the enemy uses have become a real problem, but he has ideas on how to deal with that. The British fleet also took heavy losses in the recent engagement, and we did prove one thing that Goering will certainly agree with—air power trumps naval power, particularly in narrow, confined waters like those of the Aegean and Mediterranean Sea. This is why we took Malta—to prevent the British from using air power to interdict our naval supply lines to North Africa. Now that we have that in hand, we can build up a strong force behind Rommel, and the British will have to answer that. They are scraping up every division they can find—Indians, Australians, South Africans. Yet here we sit with 150 divisions twiddling their thumbs when a decisive move now in the Middle East could secure your right flank for the planned drive against the Crimea. Everything you have planned is correct, my Führer, entirely sound. But to succeed we must make certain the British cannot interfere as I have described, and the time to do that is now, *before* we open the war against the Soviets."

"Yes, yes, I have heard all of this from Halder and Keitel. They have been talking to Raeder as well, and now they both believe Crete should be the next operation, but I am not so sure."

"It is not a question of either or," said Paulus. "Crete was always a target of your overall strategy." He continued to present everything as Hitler's own

personal plan. “Goering says he has over 1100 planes in Greece. The British have fewer than fifty on Crete. Now is the time to strike there, while our superiority in air power is overwhelming. You saw how Student’s Fallschirmjagers took Malta. They were able to do so because the British did not have time to build up defenses there. But you know they will on Crete—particularly if we do not keep the pressure on them in North Africa. Attack Crete now and it may fall easily. Then we can contemplate a move against Cyprus and Palestine—by air, my Führer. We can use our overwhelming air power to land troops by air. Once there, the Vichy French in Syria can help supply them. It is either that or the British will take the whole region in time. You know this as well as I do.”

Hitler narrowed his eyes, thinking deeply, remembering those terrible battles against the dogged British army in the last war. Paulus was correct. The British were a rock that would sit stubbornly on his flank if it was not smashed and destroyed… or buried…”

“Very well,” he said slowly, standing upright and nodding his head. “Get Rommel the troops and supplies he needs. Use any forces that seem practical. But get rid of the British, Paulus. Understand? I will give you until Summer. After that….”

He said nothing more.

Chapter 33

The time had finally come for Fedorov to return to the ship, and the KA-40 lifted off in a whirl of blowing dust. He looked out as they gained altitude, seeing the elements of Kinlan's brigade in company sized positions on the desert below. He knew it would not be long before the Germans were over-flying them as well. Kinlan had only so many air defense missiles in train.

He turned with a heavy heart, seeing Troyak sitting stolidly with the Marines, and realizing that he had neglected them for some time. He gave the Sergeant a long look, apologizing.

"Sergeant Troyak, I want to thank you for your patience and conduct in this situation. I know it was not easy for you when I ordered the men to stand down, but it was necessary to save what could have become a very serious situation."

"I understand, sir. No problem here."

"But I know you and the men didn't like it."

"No Marine ever wants to put his weapon down in the face of a threat," said Troyak. "But I could see what was happening. I handled the men, and we had good treatment from the British—most of them."

"Oh? There was a problem?"

"Just a Sergeant that thought he was too big for his trousers."

"Right," said Popski. "It almost came to blows."

"I see… Well I hope you understand that is the war we're trying to prevent. Fighting it here won't help us do that. The British must be seen as our allies now. Understand?"

"I do, sir."

"Very good. I want to thank you, and all you men as well. I realize it must have been a dull ride for you, and not nearly the mission you were up for."

Popski spoke up again. "They didn't get a chance with those Desert Witches," he said, and Troyak smiled.

Fedorov went on to explain to them what had happened, and what it could mean to the overall course of the war. They could see that both he and Popski had been changed by the incident, and did not really understand how it occurred. Popski had a strange, haunted look in his eye, as if he were now in

the company of unborn spirits from the future. He was, and that thought bedeviled him on one level. Fedorov seemed deeply troubled, almost as if he had built a sand castle on the beach, laboring with great intensity, and now had to leave it, knowing the tides would come. They wanted to know how all this had happened, and Fedorov had no real answer for them.

"It's like so many other things that have happened to us. We don't really know. Perhaps it was that detonation I told you about from our own ICBM. Yet it's ironic. It began in our time as an act of violence against a perceived enemy, but it ended up sending those men to us as allies in a time of great need here. Now they share the same fate we've been struggling with. God go with them."

There was a long silence, until Zykov spoke up, asking Fedorov a question that was on the mind of many of the men.

"Will we ever get back, sir—to our own time?"

Fedorov rubbed the weariness from his brow. "I wish I could answer that. I have often wondered what we would find if we tried again. We saw that world once or twice if you recall, and it wasn't very appealing. Some of you were sent ashore at Halifax. Well the devastation we saw there and other places leads me to believe there may not be very much left of our old world."

"But we did get back once," said Zykov. "What about Vladivostok?"

"That was before the war started," said Fedorov. "We appeared in that window of time between July 28 when we first disappeared, and the beginning of the war in the Pacific. We can never shift to a time where we already exist, so we couldn't revisit those same days. If we ever did try to shift back, we would have to appear after July 28, but before the date of our return in the Pacific, and that would be a very short lease, because we already have tickets to those seats, if that makes any sense. So the only safe shift would be for us to appear after the date *Kirov* disappeared while under Karpov's command. By that time the missiles would be in the air, as we have seen with this attack on the British brigade that sent them here."

"But sir," said Chenko, a young corporal. "If that is so, then will we find out things are being blown into the past all over the world? That was not the only missile that must have been fired."

"I think there was another factor involved in this incident," said Fedorov. "I'm not quite sure about it yet, but something else caused this breach in time here, something more than the detonation itself."

Orlov took notice of that, and the fact that Fedorov had asked him to hand over the thing he found in Siberia seemed immediately related to what the Captain was saying now.

"Maybe it was that thing I found," he said. "The Devil's Teardrop."

Zykov laughed at that, but Orlov was serious. "Did you see how it glowed when we saw the sky light up? Hot as hell too! I'd be careful with that thing, Fedorov."

The crew settled in for the flight to Alexandria, but Zykov had one more question. "Captain, you say we can't go anywhere that we already exist. Yes? Then what's going to happen in another few months? It will be July of 1941 soon, crazy as that still sounds. Does that mean the ship can't appear here like we did the first time?"

"We're working on that problem, Corporal. I've been discussing it with Director Kamenski, but you are correct. I don't think we can co-locate."

"Hey Zykov," said Orlov, lightening the mood. "Too bad, because now you can't go kiss your own ass come July!"

All the men laughed at that.

* * *

That was just one more thing Fedorov had to worry about. A strange object in his pocket, possibly a very dangerous one, but better there than in Orlov's pocket, he thought. I haven't time to sort out what will happen in July now. First things first. I've got to go through all of this with Wavell. At least I'll be able to speak with him directly in Russian, but how will I tell him about this? With Kinlan I had the impossible disappearance of Sultan Apache, and much more evidence. With O'Connor we had the shock of his seeing those tanks. But Wavell will be there in Alexandria, a level headed, no-nonsense man, and if I just come out with the truth he would think I'm a madman.

Thankfully, he did not have to fight that battle alone this time. By the time the KA-40 returned he had learned that the fleet was also close at hand, due in port within hours. So he radioed Admiral Volsky to tell him something very important had happened, but he needed to speak with him in person. Volsky told him to vector in on the ship and land there, and the two men had time to discuss the situation with Director Kamenski.

“I have a plan when it comes time to bring Wavell over the line,” said Volsky. “You have done well, Fedorov. It must have been a very difficult situation for you. I can only imagine your surprise, though we have had more than our fair share of that on this journey. A full British mechanized brigade?” Volsky shook his head. “Amazing. How did this happen?”

“I don’t know, sir. But it may have had something to do with this.” He reached in his pocket and produced the Devil’s Teardrop, setting it quietly on the briefing table in the plot room where they were seated. “Orlov found this on that mission to Siberia. They were off course for a time, and came to the Stony Tunguska River. He says they were investigating a sighting on the ground, and encountered a very strange artifact there that seemed to unnerve the whole away team. It was just laying on the tundra.”

Kamenski looked at the object over the top of his glasses, his cinder brows raising as he did so. “Very symmetrical… And you say Orlov said it reacted to the event that sent this British force here? Very interesting. The Stony Tunguska… This is obviously no coincidence. We already know that materials from that region found their way into that control rod that moved this entire ship.”

“What could it be?”

“Possibly a fragment of the object that fell. There is still much debate over what that actually was. One researcher, Menotti Galli, had a theory that tiny particles of the object might be stuck in the resin of the trees on the perimeter of the fall site. They did find stony particles in the trees, but not that size, and this… why, it looks metallic. It’s completely smooth, and note how it reflects the light, almost as if it were polished. Did Orlov do this?

“Not that I’m aware of. He says he just had it in his pocket. He was going to ask what Dobrynin thought about it, and I had that same idea. So I went by engineering right after we landed, and another odd thing happened. There was a problem with the reactors.”

This got Volsky’s attention. “What kind of problem, he asked?”

“It happened just as I arrived—some kind of flux event, and Dobrynin was not happy, so I left him to his work.”

“Very curious,” said Volsky. He reached for the intercom panel on the briefing table and punched up engineering.

“Chief Dobrynin, please come to the briefing room. This is the Admiral.” He looked at Fedorov. “We’ll get to the bottom of this.”

“You suspect something?” said Kamenski.

“We have had these flux events with the reactors before,” Volsky explained. “They always seemed to be associated with the time displacements. In fact, that was one of the clues that led us to realize our own reactors were involved in the process. Well… The Chief has a lot of ladders to climb. Let us turn to other matters for a moment. You say that O’Connor has been briefed, and this new British General has accepted his situation. Good enough. When we got the news of Rommel’s retreat, the Admirals were overjoyed. Now we know why! This is the force on land we needed, Fedorov. It is a most significant turn of events.”

“And a very dangerous one,” said Fedorov. “It was an agonizing decision, but I could see no other way. Kinlan had to know everything, and O’Connor as well. The British leadership here cannot be left in the dark.”

“Agreed,” said Volsky. ‘This is why we decided Admiral Tovey had to be let in on our little secret. Well, it may comfort you to know that we have also briefed Admiral Cunningham. So I will enlist their support concerning the matter of Wavell.”

Now he told Fedorov of the strange appearance of the *Argos Fire*, and Kamenski listened quietly, a light kindling in his eye as Volsky related the details of the meeting with Fairchild and MacRae, and the battles they fought with the Axis fleets. “They did not like our missiles,” he finished, but I will say this as well—I do not like their air power. Eventually we will run out of SAMs, and after that the situation looks very different for us. They can continue to build their planes, but we cannot build more missiles.”

“Kinlan will soon face this same situation,” said Fedorov. “Our power is waning, but we are still strong enough to make a difference. We stopped Rommel’s advance into Egypt, and you have seriously hurt the enemy fleets.”

“True, but have a look at that battleship they towed in. The British lost their *Queen Elizabeth*, and this one, *Malaya*, was badly damaged. Battered. I doubt if it will ever be serviceable again. Yes, we hurt the enemy far worse. The Italians lost at least three battleships—our Vodopad torpedoes performed very well this time—and the French lost the *Strausbourg*. Yet all things considered, and after tallying the roster of missing souls at sea again, the balance of power has not really changed. The two German ships were damaged, but I think they will sail again. So the Italians still have battleships, and the French have the *Normandie* and *Dunkerque*—not to mention the

ships they still have at Casablanca. Theoretically they could still amass a fleet that could overpower anything Tovey has left here. Without us he has only *Warspite* with his own ship, and those two carriers. So something tells me we may have to fight another major engagement soon. Yet we have bought the British time, and that counts for something."

"What about Gromyko, sir?"

"He's out there," Volsky pointed. "I have him on a defensive patrol to keep watch over the *Warspite* until it reaches port safely. He will join us soon."

Then we still have three kings here in the Mediterranean," said Fedorov, "*Kirov*, *Kazan*, and this *Argos Fire.*"

"Three kings with dwindling missile magazines," said Volsky. "We took inventory after the battle. Not counting the close in Kashtan system, we have 76 medium and long range SAMs left and 28 ship killers. Throw in the last four Vodopad torpedoes and that makes 32. *Argos Fire* has 106 SAMs left, but only 10 ship killers. As for *Kazan*, Gromyko said he used a salvo of eight missiles, and he put two torpedoes into the *Strausbourg* later. That leaves him ten more *Onyx* missiles and his remaining torpedo inventory, perhaps 30 fish. Given its stealth, his boat is perhaps the most powerful in the world now, but after those missiles and torpedoes are gone, he's no more threatening than a ride at an amusement park. On paper it sounds like a lot of firepower, perhaps it is more than enough to win the next battle we find ourselves in. But between the three of us 115 SAMs and 21 ship killers and torpedoes were used in this recent engagement. Yes, we have another good fight or two left in the magazines, but after that the numbers will get serious."

"Then we have to make our difference now," said Fedorov. "We are as strong now as we will ever be again."

"Yes, just as I am as old now as I have ever been, and younger than I'll ever be again!" Volsky smiled. "I am not so much worried about our ability to control the sea against their navy," he said. "It is their air force that plagues me. The strength of their air power was underestimated. We should have had you along to clue us in, Fedorov. They hit us with three waves, and thankfully, the third wave failed to find us in the storm."

"Understood, sir. And as for *Kazan*. I think Gromyko's boat might be able to use torpedoes from this era. The engineers could modify the torpedo tubes."

“Possibly…. This was a very long war, as you well know.” At that moment Chief Dobrynin arrived, just a little breathless from his five deck climb. He saluted, greeting the men Volsky gestured for him to take a seat.

“You wanted to see me, Admiral?”

“Have we had any reactor problems today, Chief?”

“Now that you mention it, there was one small glitch. You were there, Fedorov. Sorry to be so short with you, Captain, but when that flux alarm goes off it really gets my attention. It turned out to be a small event. The system settled down just after you left.”

“I see,” said Volsky. “Then the reactors are fine?”

“There was one other incident, just before the KA-40 mission was launched. It was the same thing, a flux alarm that got me all worked up, but before I could determine what was wrong, things settled down again.”

“Could this have anything to do with those control rods?”

“They aren’t in the system now, sir. I’ve retracted both to radiation safe containers, and I’m using an old spare in the number 25 spot now. Thankfully it doesn’t send us on a marathon through time when I perform routine maintenance.”

“Chief… Orlov found something that we’d like you to take a look at.” The Admiral gestured to the Devil’s Teardrop, still sitting on the briefing table near Kamenski. Dobrynin had noticed it, wondering what it was, but now he gave it a closer examination.

“Very strange,” he said. “It’s almost glassy smooth, and very reflective. Looks like it was machined, and then deformed to this shape by high temperatures. Yet there’s no heat damage visible. You say Orlov found this?”

“In Siberia,” said Fedorov. “Along the Stony Tunguska.”

“Why is it that name raises my hackles?”

“Orlov says it acts funny,” Fedorov explained. “It changes temperatures. In fact, it got very hot—too hot to touch—right when that incident happened in the desert, Admiral.”

Kamenski had been listening to everything, sometimes with his eyes closed, as if he needed a good long nap. The mention of Tunguska perked him up again, and now he spoke up.

“We know that materials from that region have produced strange effects, temporal effects. Is there any way you can examine this in the lab, Mister Dobrynin? Could you determine its makeup?”

“I’d be happy to have a look, sir.”
“Good, please do, because I think we may be in for quite a little surprise!”

Part XII

Scareships

"Supposing our friends the Germans are amusing themselves by carefully observing the fortifications and outworks of Norwich, and other strategic points on British soil… Maybe they are landing troops one by one, with instructions where to join the main army in 1915. I only hope they have provisions until then. That they are humorists there can be no doubt, otherwise they would hardly have given poor old Norwich a visit. Meanwhile, our nerves are all on edge, and some of the more flabby-minded will probably end by crowding out our well-filled asylums."

— A Letter from E. B. Nye: Norfolk News, 22 May, 1909

Chapter 34

Karpov was satisfied that he had finally reached an understanding with Sergei Kirov. He knows how useful I can be to his survival, he thought, and the survival of Soviet Russia. And he also knows how dangerous I could be as an enemy. Carrot and stick—that was the way to negotiate. I showed him what I could do when I stopped Volkov's offensive. Otherwise he might have perceived me as a weak, whining nobody, trying to enlist support in a fight I could not win. But I did win, didn't I. Volkov knows that, and now Kirov knows it as well.

Ilanskiy had been his real trump card, he knew. Kirov knows that there is no way he can get his hands on the place now, not after I have discovered what was going on there. I have no doubts that he was complicit in that little plan by Volsky and Fedorov to destroy the place, but no one suspected I would find a way to reverse that outcome. Of course not. They don't see all the angles like I do. They don't see the big picture. As soon as Kirov realized I had the power to walk those stairs again, he came around in good order.

He smiled, thinking about his next planned move. It was daring, even rash, but with *Tunguska* he had every confidence he could pull it off. If I'm ever to be taken seriously in this world, he thought, then I will have to also establish a relationship with Great Britain. As distasteful as that seems to me, if I have chosen to take sides with Sergie Kirov, then he is allied with Britain. So I will have to reach some understanding with the British, and they will soon have to learn to respect the name Vladimir Karpov as well. But what can a minor power, with eleven airships and no navy, locked in the heartland of the Asian continent, possibly offer Great Britain? I can't send them materials or supplies, or even troops. My forces are too far away to be able to support anything they are involved with. At present my only usefulness in their eyes might be the fact that I set myself in opposition to Ivan Volkov. But there is one other thing I can give them that they might find very useful. First, the journey. I will show them that backward Siberia has some tricks up its sleeve.

The car reached the great open field north of the Kremlin where *Tunguska* was docked to a high mooring tower, and Karpov took heart when he saw the

enormous mass of the airship again. With negotiations concluded here, he had checked his party out of the Moscow Hotel, his motorcade escorted by Kirov's "honor guard" all the way to the field at the Central Moscow Hippodrome, the largest horse racing track in Russia. Now the field was hugely overshadowed by the largest airship or aircraft ever to fly on the earth.

They look at it with a mixture of awe and derision, thought Karpov. Kirov himself called it an overinflated balloon, but they will soon see that *Tunguska* is not an anachronism or throwback from a bygone era. I will do something that none of their airplanes would ever attempt, at least not if they wanted to survive the experience. I will go to England, and not by a circuitous, roundabout way. I will fly directly over Hitler's precious Third Reich, taking photographs the whole way to prove it. *Tunguska* can fly higher than any aircraft of this day. They have no fighters that can bother me up there, but I could bother them a great deal, couldn't I?

In *Tunguska*, Karpov found a bit of the same old feeling he had in the Captain's chair aboard *Kirov*. He knew it was not the same. He had no SAMs or Moskit-II missiles, and he certainly had no nuclear warheads, his air fuel bomb components being a pale shadow of the power that he once had at his fingertips.

But I have the ability to go places *Kirov* could never venture, and to go there with a modest force at my disposal that can achieve the ends I have in mind. This time it will not be force that I demonstrate, but merely a capability that is beyond the means of anyone else on this earth. I can fly higher, and farther, than anyone else, and up there I can see things that can make me a very useful man.

The thought that he was flying to England now rankled him a bit, but the British were at war with the greatest enemy Russia had ever faced. Hitler's troops would devastate the homeland, and soon, unless he could do something to prevent that. It may not be possible, he realized, but there is no question which side I must take in this conflict now, particularly after what Volkov did. Yet I must demonstrate that I can do more for the Allies than simply tie down a few divisions in a humdrum backwater frontier east of Kazakhstan. So off we go.

"Captain Bogrov," he said as he exited the car. "See that the baggage is loaded immediately, and be ready to cast off within twenty minutes."

"Very good, sir. Will we be returning to Novosibirsk by the same route?"

“I will speak to you on the bridge,” said Karpov. “Is there anything we need here by way of supplies? We may have some high altitude flying to do.”

“No sir. The ship has already refueled, courtesy of the Soviets, and they even sent over a case of good vodka, with sausages, cheese, and some good black bread.”

“Excellent. We’ll discuss the route over dinner in the Officer’s Wardroom.”

That was one thing about Karpov, thought Bogrov. He doesn’t hold to protocols. Every Captain and navy man worth his salt knew that you never discussed ship’s business in the Wardroom. It was a sanctuary, reserved for good food and recreation, and a break from the otherwise onerous duties of the ship. But he said nothing of this, knowing Karpov well enough now. He could see that the man was scheming on something, and he had pulled more than a few surprises out of his hat in recent months. That little escapade to the mines for coal dust became something quite more than he ever expected. It was terrifying, but effective, and he saw how the weapon had helped to turn the tide against Volkov’s Grey Legion. What was it this time, he wondered?

“I’ll look forward to it, sir,” he said.

Tunguska cast off on the 10th of February, 1941, rising into the crisp, cold air of Moscow. Thankfully, Karpov had built some creature comforts into this ship, with pressurized, heated cabins that made the cold altitudes much more bearable, unless you were a man unlucky enough to pull duty on the inner rigging or upper deck exposed to the open sky on top of the ship, but those positions were normally manned only when the ship was at battle stations under threat of enemy air attack. Karpov had improved the Topaz radar sets forward, aft, and on both the top and bottom of the ship, and he had rigged out a radar room, *Kirov* style, where he appointed his Chief of Signals, Yuri Kamkov. He had four men sitting there watching the dull returns on the rudimentary screens of the radar sets, which were fixed antennae covering only their designated arc around the ship.

As *Tunguska* slowly climbed, Karpov looked out over the sprawling city, wreathed in a blanket of white snow, and realized it may be enjoying the last peace in the silent cold of winter for the next four years. The Germans had launched Operation Barbarossa on June 22, of this year, just months away. He knew the action and timing of that event would likely be very different in this history, but war was coming, as sure as the seasons turned. Would

Moscow stand this time? The Battle for Moscow had been fought in October of 1941, even as the Germans were pounding at the gates to the Caucasus at Rostov and the Crimea. His Siberian divisions had been the reserve that had helped to save the city, and he wondered if he would be leading his men back to this city next year to fight for Sergie Kirov. We shall see, he thought.

They would head due west for the next thousand kilometers, until he reached the Baltic Sea around midnight. Somewhere north of Kaliningrad, they would turn southwest and overfly Gdansk en route to Berlin. Karpov would seal his fame as the man who boldly overflew the heart of the German Reich. At midnight he ordered the course change and altered speed ahead two thirds. It was another 500 kilometers to Berlin, and he wanted to approach the city in darkness, but time his arrival there at dawn. He retired for a good night's rest, leaving orders that the ship was to be alert and ready to man air defense stations at sunrise.

The sun rose on a clear morning at a little after 08:30 that day, and the airship was approaching the city as planned, cruising at an altitude of 12,000 meters, which Karpov deemed safe enough. It was a dizzying height for that day, but he was soon to find that the Germans were not pleased to have his airship over their city.

A flight of three Bf-109s had been scrambled to investigate the unusual sighting. The first German Zeppelins had a service ceiling of about 6,000 feet, and this was soon doubled to 13,000 feet by 1916. They had also produced a rigid airship design known as the Höhe Bergsteiger, or "Height Climbers," to operate above 20,000 feet, but even at that height conditions were so harsh that they saw little service. Oil lines could clog up, windows would crack with the bitter cold, radiators would freeze, and the crew would battle dizziness, oxygen deprivation and bone chilling temperatures.

Karpov knew all this when he inserted himself into the design process for *Tunguska*, using the knowledge he had access to in his service jacket computer to correct all these deficiencies. Now he was able to achieve altitudes twice that of the best German Height Climbers, and so he knew he could not be opposed by any remaining German airships here either. But three Bf-109s were rising that morning, intent on investigating this impudent intruder that had been spotted by a flight of German bombers just after dawn.

Karpov had mounted the best cameras he could find for high altitude photography, and he had his camera crews busy with that job in a lower

gondola pod when the fighters were first seen.

“Enemy aircraft reported by the Topaz crews, sir. Number four operator has what looks to be three contacts climbing on our position.”

“Action stations,” said Karpov calmly. “We are a neutral country, and our insignia is plainly visible. Let’s see what they do here.”

Bogrov had some misgivings about that, and this whole operation seemed very risky to him. His eye strayed to his altitude gauge, noting they were level at 12,000 meters. He doubted the planes would get this high, but he was wrong. The Bf-109 was one of Germany’s highest flying fighters at that time, and the German planes were straining to get near the intruding airship, which loomed ever larger as they climbed.

The planes were among the fastest and best of the early fighting, with more aerial kills logged than any other fighter during the war. But this was a tall order. As Willy Beyer led his flight higher, he could feel his engine straining to make the altitude. As they approached he could see the insignia on the tail of the massive airship, though he did not know what it was. His only thought was that it looked to be Russian, and he reported as much on radio. The orders soon came back to fire warning shots across the bow of the airship. Still a couple thousand feet below his target, he nonetheless maneuvered his plane and fired a burst from his twin 13mm MG 131 machine guns, and this was followed by warning in German on the radio.

Karpov was not happy. These planes had climbed higher than he expected, and so he immediately gave Bogrov an order to gain another thousand meters in altitude. Even as he did so he stood his air defense crews up on the three lower gondolas, and soon they were training their twin machineguns and tracking the swift fighters as best they could. He found a German speaker and sent out a message that they were from the Free Siberian State, warning the Germans that any further hostility would be answered.

Willy Beyer had a good laugh at that. He reported that the Zeppelins were Siberians, and seemed to be intent on overflying the city. His ground control was adamant, order the Zeppelin off, or drive it off if it failed to comply. This was a war zone. He swung around, his plane a bit listless at the altitude, and saw that he could no longer climb. Amazingly, the Zeppelin was receding above him, slowly rising through a thin, wispy cloud. He had never heard of a Zeppelin that could fly at such altitudes.

Following his orders he decided to issue one further demand to turn north

at once, and was able to point his nose upward to fire yet another warning shot, which streaked in hot yellow tracers well below the main gondola.

“They order us to turn north away from the city at once, sir.” The radioman gave Karpov a wide eyed look, the thought of those rounds riddling the pressurized cabin none too welcome in his mind.

“They order us to do nothing,” said Karpov. “If they cannot fly up here and look at me eye to eye, then we are outside the boundaries of their controllable airspace.” Then Karpov heard the rattle of the fighter’s guns and saw the tracers streak by.

“Forward gunners!” Karpov shouted an order over the voice tube. “Give them the Fedorovs!” He was referring to the Fyodorov-Ivanov Model 1924 twin barrel machineguns mounted on his gondolas. It had been designed as an experimental main machinegun for the old T-18 tank, but Karpov got his hands on several for the airship, and was fond of calling it the ‘Fedorov Gun,’ after the navigator he knew by that same name.

When the planes came around again, Willy Beyer got a nasty surprise this time. *Tunguska* had two twin MGs on its forward gondola, four of the gun mounts on the main gondola, and two more aft. There were also guns on top of the ship in open air platforms, but Karpov had not ordered them crewed, as he did not expect any attack from above his current position. The two mounts forward opened fire, sending streams of rounds at the fighter as it swept by below the ship, and one gunner had led his target well and scored a hit!

Beyer felt the rounds bite into his wing, big enough to do some serious damage, and he immediately called out for his wing mates to engage. This time the Germans would use the bigger 20mm cannon, but *Tunguska* had been slowly climbing and was now another thousand meters higher, well above the service ceiling of the planes. They swooped and then tried to pull their noses up to engage, but the firing was misaligned with the sluggish performance of the aircraft at this extreme altitude. One burst of fire pierced the nose of the airship, but the new double thick Vulcan self-sealing gas bags took the hit and resealed. The rounds passed completely through the nose, just barely missing interior duralumin beams, but did no damage beyond tearing holes in the outer canvass.

This time all the twin MG mounts on the airship replied, and the fighters soon realized they were badly outgunned. Willy Beyer’s plane was already losing altitude and streaming a thin white smoke, and amazingly, the airship

was still climbing. They reported as much and were ordered home, but the Germans were not happy and decided to send up another plane, the JU-86 bomber, which could fly higher than any other aircraft in the service at that time. It could reach 13,000 meters, or 42,650 feet, and half an hour later the Topaz system caught a flight of three more planes climbing on their position.

“The fools,” said Karpov. “What is our present altitude?”

“13,200 meters,” said Bogrov. “We’re getting bad frost on all the windows. It won’t be easy to spot those planes if they can reach us.”

“Climb higher. Take us above 14,000 meters. The Gunners will engage any plane that gets close enough to fire.”

The bombers had only three 7.62mm machineguns, but it was soon clear that not even these planes could climb to an altitude where they could pose any real threat. One got close enough to fire, but it was answered by blistering return fire from the Zeppelin and easily driven off. Karpov was invulnerable in the high thin air, and the dizzy altitude of power that he felt now prompted him to do something that would have dramatic repercussions.

“That was an act of war,” he said. “The Germans think they can do whatever they please. Well they cannot touch me here, can they? But the inverse is not true. Let us leave a little calling card for the Berliners this morning, and let them know who they are dealing with.” He called down to the main ordnance deck of the command gondola.

He was going to bomb Berlin!

Chapter 35

The bombs fell, with no particular target in mind, but *Tunguska* was right over the heart of the city and they tumbled down in a fateful place. The tributary of the Spree wound its way through the heart of the city, and the first of the small 100 pound bombs fell there, doing little more than to crack the ice floes, sending a spray of white water up and startling a few birds. But the next bombs fell on the Admiralspalast Theater and nearby rail yard, blasting across the splayed out tracks in a string of three explosions. Others fell in Tiergarten Park, behind the famous landmark of the Brandenburg Gate, and very near the Neo-Renaissance parliament building of the Reichstag, though they did no damage beyond rattling the central cupola.

It was pure chance, random fate, that saw the bombs fall so close to those symbolic targets, and while Karpov was gloating with his unanswerable power from above, the news of the attack spread swiftly. Berlin had already been visited by British bombers in August of 1940, embarrassing Goering who had boasted the city could never be harmed by enemy aircraft. This embarrassment would have similar results, enraging Hitler who was in the city at that time and even went to a nearby window to look up and see what was happening. When he later got the news that these were not British planes, but a high flying Russian Zeppelin, he was outraged. He summoned the Soviet Ambassador and gave him a tirade about the violation of their neutrality pact.

“You claim to be neutral, and yet it is well known that you have been scheming and negotiating with the British for many months now. In fact you have signed an accord with them, but do not have the backbone to declare war on their enemies. So be it! Now you have the temerity to overfly Berlin like this, shoot down planes and even bomb the city! Do you think the German Reich will sit idly by and allow this insult? The German people are already demanding reprisals, and be damn well aware that I have the means to deliver them!” The German people had said nothing whatsoever about it, as most knew nothing of the incident, but that was a detail that didn’t matter at the moment.

The Soviet Ambassador said that he also knew nothing of the attack, and

a few telephone calls assured him that all the known Zeppelins still operating in the air service were nowhere near Germany, and certainly had not violated German airspace in any way.

“Then what was that thing over the city this morning? Another phantom airship?” Hitler was referring to the many incidents of airship sightings that had been reported in England and Europe in 1909, 1912 and later years before WWI. Much of it was written off to pre-war jitters and hysteria born of the fear of flying objects, as aircraft and powered flight were still a novelty at that time, and a subject that fired the human imagination. Hitler wagged his finger at the ambassador, his cheeks reddening as he promised the ‘atrocious act’ would not go unpunished.

That night German artillery opened a five minute barrage across the tense polish frontier, firing one shell for each and every bomb reported. Telephones jangled all the way to the Kremlin, but when the details of the report came in, Sergie Kirov ordered no reprisal. But the level of tension ticked up yet another notch, and Karpov was only just beginning his aerial reconnaissance of Germany. From Berlin he flew another 800 kilometers northwest to overfly the German harbor at Kiel that evening, lingering there all night until cloud conditions were favorable for good photographs the following morning. There he documented the presence of the German battleship *Tirpitz*, and something else in the slipways that he thought the British would take particular interest in. On the 12th of February he was looking through a high powered telescope at what appeared to be construction of a new aircraft carrier.

“This will get the attention of the Royal Navy, and I will soon prove my usefulness. Now we will see what they have in their trouser pockets at Bremerhaven before we cross the North Sea.”

“You aim to overfly England next sir?”

“How else can I visit London, Captain Bogrov?”

“But if you mean to land there we’ll have to radio ahead and make arrangements.”

“In due course.”

“But the blitz, sir. I realize the Germans have been winding down their air campaign over England to transfer planes to the Mediterranean, but it could be very dangerous if we get caught in the midst of a big air duel. Suppose the Germans are bombing tomorrow.”

“You worry too much,” said Karpov. “I will radio ahead after lunch and obtain the necessary clearance. I wanted to see what intelligence we could gather first, and we’ve seen a good deal. I have photographed the German troop dispositions on the Polish frontier, Berlin’s airfields, their two biggest harbors. All of this will now be my ticket to an audience with the British.”

“You mean to say they don’t know about this trip already?”

“They will learn everything they need to know this afternoon, Captain. Concern yourself with the operations of the ship. I gave Tyrenkov instructions and he will handle the initial negotiations.”

Bogrov was silent, and a bit sullen for a time. He had been watching the barometer and altimeter closely, and wished they could get the airship down to a lower altitude. Thus far *Tunguska* had performed flawlessly. Her fluids had remained sound and the engines were running smoothly. And they had only used about 20% of their fuel to cover all this distance, so he had no worries there. But something about this unexpected jaunt, about the quickness in Karpov’s step again, the glint in the man’s eye, made him feel very uneasy. He looked at the weather report again, noting the front that was slowly building over the North Sea. They might have thunderheads building and rising well above 50,000 feet, which was the maximum safe ceiling for *Tunguska*.

“We may run into some bad weather if we move west,” he said, making one last veiled protest in the weather report. Karpov paid him no mind.

For his part, Karpov had no scruples about his operation over Germany, and no fears about his imminent visit to England. He was demonstrating a power and capability that no other person on the earth had at that moment, and this was something that fed directly into that unfillable well of recrimination within his darkened soul. Later that evening he was satisfied with his photography of Bremerhaven, and gave the order to steer due west for another 300 kilometers before turning southwest for the coast of England near Norwich. Headwinds began to pick up, and they could not make more than 70 KPH, but Karpov was not concerned.

It was then that they ran into the storm.

The light was fading and they remained at very high altitude when forward spotters, and even the Topaz operators, reported a formation of black storm clouds ahead. Bogrov did not like the look of them, and immediately suggested they alter course.

“We must be 3000 meters above them, said Karpov, squinting through his field glasses.”

“Aye sir, they look to be up just over 10,000 meters, but some of these storms can go much higher, and there can be nasty surprises if we run into one, updrafts exceeding 120KPH, turbulence, wind shear, ice, not to mention lightning.”

“We’ve good lightning rods installed,” said Karpov.

“Yes sir, but we also have those nice expensive radar sets on the nose and brow of the ship, and they’ll do the same. It will be a rough ride, but at least the moon is up, and still almost full, so we’ll have some light when we make the coast—*if* we make the coast.”

Karpov heard the warning in the man’s tone. “Carry on for the moment. If this storm climbs any higher, we can always take an evasive course.”

The storm did climb higher, an unusual monster that continued to billow up and up with angry black fists of clouds, sewn with fitful flashes of lightning. It was a ‘trop buster,’ a storm that was so high that it broke into the troposphere, where the cumulonimbus clouds began to flatten out at the top in the classic anvil shape. By the time they realized what was in front of them, the storm itself was too wide to circumvent. They were going to have to ride it out, and the ominous rolls of thunder grumbled in the sky as they approached.

“All hands, secure for rough weather,” said Karpov, cursing his bad luck to hit a storm of this size.

The view panes were frosted over around the edges, but they were feeding a low current to the center of the glass where they had embedded tiny filaments of wire to heat the surface and allow for some visibility. The airship was shaken by stiff winds, the duralumin airframe shuddering an squeaking as the wind put unusual torque on the structure. At one point a hard jolt shook the ship, and a crewman in the aft section reported a rivet had broken on one of the beams securing the tail and rudder section. The engineers rushed down the long central aluminum mesh walkway, their boots clattering on the metal grating as they went. With their oxygen masks on, they looked like grim, ghoulish figures, the demon crewmen of a phantom ship.

Karpov went into the interior of the massive airship, leaving the heated cabin and venturing down the cold, drafty walkway. His breath came up short in the chilled, thin air, but he thought he could brave the environment,

wanting to show his men the iron strength of his will. It was then that he heard an odd thumping on the canvas high above, beyond the bulbous gas bags, and realized they must be running into hail or ice. The ship careened on the wind, a strong gust nearly knocking him from his feet as he gripped a nearby beam to steady himself. When he reached the aft section he could see that the engineers were busy applying a tough canvass restraining belt around the intersection of several duralumin beams where the rivet had failed.

"It's moving too much to try and get another rivet through, sir. We can't drill under these conditions and welding is out of the question. So we'll secure it this way and hope it will hold."

"Carry on, Chief," said Karpov, and as he turned to head back, *Tunguska* shuddered with another impact and a loud boom. He saw what looked like greenish blue lightning running along the interior framework in eerie streaks of Saint Elmo's fire. It was a weather phenomenon where luminous plasma formed in a coronal discharge. It could center on the tip of any sharp object, like the high mast on a ship, but he had never seen anything like this before. A strong thunderstorm could generate more power than a nuclear detonation, and produce very strong magnetic fields.

When Karpov made it back to the control gondola, he saw that Bogrov's face was white with apprehension. His men were battling the control wheels, straining to turn them this way and that as they struggled to keep the ship level and stable, fighting the heavy winds. Karpov took one look at the compass and saw the needle was spinning wildly around in jittery circles.

"We've blundered into ice, just as I feared," said the Captain, "and we've been hit by lightning at least twice. I've lost the number six engine aft and rudder control is very loose right now. This could get bad, Admiral."

"Should we get lower?" Karpov really did not know much about the aerodynamics of the airship. He was a commanding officer, but not a real Zeppelin Captain here. He had no sense of how to maneuver the ship in these circumstances, and was relying on Bogrov.

"We've no say in the matter now. We're icing up too bad and getting heavy. The gas bags are filled to the bursting point, and yes, I'd advise we let the ship descend."

"Then take her down, Captain."

The air seemed to have a strange smell of ozone, ionized by the storm, and the strange glow infused every region of the ship now. *Tunguska's* bones

were tingling with an eerie magnetic fire, infusing the metals that had been mined in the place that gave the ship its name.

“Candles of the Holy Ghost,” said Karpov, using an old seaman’s name for the effect he was seeing. When Charles Darwin had first noted the effect while cruising on the *Beagle*, he had described it thusly: ‘everything is in flames—the sky with lightning—the water with luminous particles, even the masts are pointed with blue flame.’ Karpov had seen it aboard *Kirov*, but under circumstances that gave him a chilling warning of grave danger here. Saint Elmo’s Fire was usually a fluorescent blue or violet color. The strange luminescent green rippling along the inner framework of the ship put a bad feeling in his gut.

It was a difficult ride down, taking all the skill that Bogrov had to manage the inflation and prevent a major gas bag from collapsing as the pressure changed. Helium expanded at high altitude, and contracted as they descended. He had to manage a careful balance but his crew was skilled, and the ship began to stabilize at lower altitudes.

They could see the tall angry storm off the starboard side of the ship, and Bogrov turned to try and avoid plunging into the billowing column again. Evil twisting wind spouts seemed to curl and form at the fringes of the column, and the bridge crew was deathly quiet as they watched.

“Land ahead!” a watchman finally called out the sighting, and Bogrov rushed to his navigation chart.

“Damn if we haven’t been blown another fifty kilometers southwest,” he said, moving his puckered eyes from the charts to the view panes, now wet with rain. “That’s England there, sir,” he pointed. “And we’re at no more than 5,000 meters now and still descending. I’m releasing helium from the reserve and we should level off soon.”

“You may keep us low,” said Karpov. “I doubt if we’ll run into any British fighters at night, and in this weather.”

His prediction was on the mark, except on one count. They descended lower and there was no sign of any other aircraft in the sky, and there was soon no sign of the rain or storm they had just come through either. But they were too preoccupied to notice this at that moment. One of the forward Topaz radars had been hit by lightning, and was no longer functioning, and reports were now coming in from all over the ship.

“We were lucky,” said Bogrov as he tallied the damage. “But she’s a

good ship, Admiral. *Tunguska* came through well enough. What we need now is a little time to catch our breath. Then I can see about that number six engine aft and everything else on this list. We can try making some of these repairs in flight, but it would be much better if we could find some high ground down there and anchor the ship in place. This storm seems to have moved well out to sea, and quicker than I thought. Not a sign of any rain now, and it feels much warmer, strange as that sounds. There should be cold air behind that front. Well sir, we can certainly get down to ground level now."

"As you wish, Captain," said Karpov. "Find us an nice bald hill somewhere with a tall tree and we'll anchor there. But the locals will get an eyeful, won't they."

They would.

Chapter 36

It was late that night and the train had just made its brief stop at Hoveton & Wroxham, a humdrum bywater of Norwich. Tom Willers had been on holiday to the north, visiting relatives in Walsham, and was now riding his motorbike home in the dead of night. He could have waited until morning, but he had promised to be back by midnight, and was running late. So when his late supper was finished he bundled up and gave it a go, ready for the short twelve kilometer ride south to Wroxham. He had had one too many nips at the bottle that night, but it would keep his blood warm for the ride, or so he dimly reasoned.

Tom was well known in these parts, and well off to have his own motorbike to ride about at any ungodly hour of the day or night. He putted along, taking a side road to the bridge at Wroxham over the broad sloughs of the River Bure. In modern times the area would berth many boats near a place called Summercraft, but these were not modern times, at least not times Karpov would describe that way.

The night was wreathed in misty drifts of grey clouds, and the moon was not yet up. It was a cold, lonesome time, even for May, and no time to be out, but he was almost home. He reached the bridge and started across, when the front lamp on his motorbike suddenly went out. So he coasted to a stop to dismount and have a look, not wanting to ride the rest of the way home in the dark. It was then that he saw it, catching something out of the corner of his eye, a dark shape above him that blackened the stars.

“Now what in bloody hell?”

Tom Willers looked up, stricken with fear to see a massive shape in the sky above him, huge and threatening, like a great behemoth of the night. Then, to his great surprise and discomfiture, he was suddenly illuminated by a blinding white light. It was a dazzling display, lingering on the bridge where he shivered by his motorbike until the light moved on, searching along the winding road ahead.

His eyes adjusted, and now he could see the dark mass above again, long, cigar shaped, with the faint drone of a whirring sound. He could also see that the light that had dazzled him was from what looked like a powerful

searchlight, now fingering the ground beyond the river, and a second light flashed from its other end, so far from the nose of the craft that it seemed to stretch half way across the county!

He was not the only one who saw the strange lights that night. Mrs. Turner of New Catton, Norwich, was near the window on the upper floor of her home, restless and unable to sleep. Her eye was suddenly caught by the brilliant columns of light, so bright that they illuminated the street outside as bright as daylight. She would later report the incident, saying that: "... I looked up and there I saw a big star of light in front, and a big searchlight behind... It was coming from the north-northeast, from the direction of the Angel Road School, and flying very low, so low that it would have touched the pinnacle of the school had it passed directly over it."

Others in Norwich reported seeing a similar strange shape in the sky that night, and a few minutes later, a man riding a bike in Tharston south of the main town said he saw a 'torpedo shaped' object in the sky, and with a powerful searchlight.

Tunguska had come down to a very low altitude, and they were making a search in the dark for a place Karpov was fingering on his navigation map. There had been no suitable hills about as they had earlier hoped to find, but Karpov could see a place denoted RAF Coltishall, which would offer plenty of unobstructed space for the massive airship to hover in place, anchored by the buckets they might lower and fix to the ground. The base had been established in 1938, and would serve until sold off in 2010 after its closure in 2006. It would give them a safe place to stabilize the ship for the repairs they wanted to make, and they could also clear their arrival with the R.A. F. Karpov gave the order to try and raise the base on radio earlier, but they had no response.

"I'm surprised they don't have fighters up after us by now," said Bogrov. "The storm is passing. Are the British pilots all asleep?"

"I'm more surprised that they do not answer our hails. Are you certain the equipment was not damaged from those lightning strikes?"

"It seems to be working, sir," said a signalman. I can hear signals, though they all seem to be in Morse code."

'Well why don't they answer? Signal in Morse then. We need to get this ship sorted out."

"Well we can't even seem to find the damn airfield," said Bogrov.

“Where’s the moon?” He seemed somewhat disoriented.

“It’s likely lost in that storm,” said Karpov.

“Storm? Have a look out there, Admiral. Its settled down to a fine quiet night. But where is this airfield? It should be right in front of us.”

“Are you certain these charts are accurate?” Karpov gave him an irritated look.

“The best I could find on short notice, sir. That’s the river there that we were illuminating with our searchlights a moment ago. If I keep it on our left then the airfield should be no more than 5 kilometers northwest, but I can’t see a thing out there. There’s certainly no sign of air activity here.”

“Well, there’s plenty of open ground about. We’ll just have to hover low and anchor in a field. Then get the engineers busy. I want to be over London at dawn, just as I surprised the Germans. *Tunguska* will be quite a sight over Big Ben, will it not?”

“I can only hope we get a better reception than the Germans gave us. We’re fair game down here, sir. And their *Spitfires* are good planes.”

But they saw no sign of aircraft, and heard no return to their radio hails. It was as if England had just gone to sleep, with only the faint snoring of Morse code over the airwaves, but that was not so. Tom Willers had been wide awake that night, as was Mrs. Turner of New Catton and Bob Thatch of Tharston, and the reports were soon coming in all over East Anglia. For *Tunguska* was not where Karpov thought to take it, at least not the hour and day he had hoped to arrive.

Something in the awesome power and magnetic energy of that towering storm over the North Sea had found affinity with the bones of the ship, the odd flecks of exotic metals that had been smelted into the beams which made up the massive structure. The dancing fire and rippling light that Karpov had seen was the telltale sign of its power, and the ship was *elsewhere* for some time, until it finally settled into the here and now—but not the one they had left behind them at nearly 15,000 meters, with the shaking winds and battering ice of that massive thunderhead. It stood like a great anvil in the dark tormented sky, and the hammer of god had descended upon it, falling on the ship that carried something from another world in the core of its very structure.

Karpov would not find that out for some hours, while the airship hovered like a great beached whale over the downs of Tunstead. There was a winding

road not far from the place where they ground anchored for repairs, and on that road was another late traveler on a bicycle, working his way along the track towards the old rectory. He was making a very early delivery at two in the morning, and he had promised the parson he would have fresh cheese, milk, and a morning paper well before dawn. He had come up Peter's Lane from Ice Well Wood, feeling the chill on the air as he rode, and then he saw it, the massive shape hovering silently above the ground, the shadows of men beneath it, and the sound of an odd language being spoken.

Tyrenkov's security men stepped out of the woods, brandishing submachine guns, and he made the sign of the cross, thinking the only thing that made any sense to his startled mind at that moment. It was the bloody Germans! That thing on the downs looked like one of their massive airships, and the invasion everyone had been worried about was finally on—but not the invasion that had been expected in 1940 or 1941. No. The date on the newspaper found in his delivery basket would say something quite different.

Soon Karpov would have another real mystery to sort out, and very little evidence to come to any real conclusion, except for the absence of one prominent thing in the sky. The date on that newspaper was very odd, and the fat gibbous moon that had grinned at them as they taunted the storm over the North Sea was gone. In its place, rising that very moment, was a thin morning crescent, almost entirely dark!

Karpov looked at it, the conjunction of too many ominous signs now stacking up in his mind in one sudden moment. The strange rippling fire in the ship… luminescent, green and violet light… the sudden disappearance of the rain and the warmer temperatures that they would not expect in February at this latitude. Then the radio calls that went without an answer became more significant, the scratch of Morse code in their place. The missing airfield… and now this…

He stared down at the newspaper Tyrenkov had handed him and read the headline: "Scareships over East Anglia for a second night – Constables on the Watch!" It was Dated May 18, 1909…

* * *

How could this have happened, thought Karpov. How was it possible? There was no detonation, no explosive volcano, and no Rod-25, but there had

been that massive storm they challenged, and the strange energy that had flowed through the skeleton of the ship was most unnerving. Beyond all that, he could feel that something was badly off its kilter. He had shifted in time too often now, and he knew the feeling, the odd discomfiture and disorientation, and the sudden inner sense that his life and being had been profoundly moved. He was somewhere else, not in space, but in time. How it had happened did not really matter. If it proved to be the case, then….

His mind now whirled with a thousand thoughts mushrooming up just as that storm had hours ago. They shook the outer canvass of his soul and rippled along the cold duralumin beams of his brain. We've moved! By god in his heaven, the whole ship has moved!

Now he had a sudden realization, and a heady feeling that was almost exhilarating. It was the same feeling he had when he realized that Demon of a volcano had blasted *Kirov* into another century, to the year 1908. He had managed to stay there only a few brief days, but in that time he had hatched a plan to reset the entire power structure of the Pacific. He could do this because he had a ship unlike any other in the world, with power unlike any other man alive.

Now he looked over his shoulder at the looming hulk of *Tunguska*—an airship unlike any other in 1909. There it sat, bristling with recoilless rifles, racks of incendiary and high explosive bombs, makeshift rockets in the nose and the makings of his thermobaric bomb aboard as well. Britain's first powered heavier than air flight had only been achieved a few months ago, by Samuel Franklin Cody on 16 October 1908. There were a few airships in the world, but they could barely navigate a distance of 700 kilometers or reach altitudes above 4000 feet. In fact, the British had only one or two, and the Germans only three. If the date on that newspaper is accurate, he was a demigod again, not merely a man desperately trying to earn the respect and attention of others greater than himself. He was invincible.

I'm here, he thought, and for a reason too. Time keeps sending me back. Then he suddenly realized that Ivan Volkov was here as well, but that he was just a very young man in the Russian Naval Intelligence, somewhere in Siberia… perhaps still somewhere near Ilanskiy…

And that place was there as well, wasn't it? That little railway inn was just sitting there, and so was that damn back stairway! He suddenly realized what he could do, his eyes widening with astonishment and a heady sense of

thrilling energy. He felt as big as the airship, as big as *Tunguska*, bigger than all of Siberia, better than them all.

"Captain Bogrov!" Karpov shouted to his men. "Can the ship make way?"

"Sir? We've nearly finished repairs on that aft engine. It was not as serious as I thought, and the engineers had replaced a few loose and broken rivets and stabilized the airframe."

"Excellent! Get the men aboard. Tyrenkov, let that idiot go and gather up your security team. We return to Ilanskiy at once."

"Now sir?"

"You heard the order, Bogrov. Now let's get moving!"

Yes, let's get moving, because I have miles to go before I sleep, and a lot of people owe me out there—owe me a great deal.

So now they are all going to pay.

The Saga Continues…

Kirov Series: *Hammer Of God*

The decisive battles of February 1940 on both land and sea present new challenges for the Germans and British. Paulus has convinced Hitler not to abandon his Mediterranean strategy, and strong new reserves are ready to move to North Africa even as a massive airborne operation is planned to seize the Island of Crete. The Germans hope to press this two pronged offensive while Hitler continues to build up forces for his next big operation, Barbarossa. This time the target is not Moscow, but the Crimea, where the German Army plans to stop Sergie Kirov's offensive in the Caucasus and link up with Volkov's Orenburg Federation.

At sea, the recent conflict has moved the scales in the balance of power, but the imminent threat to the Crimea compels Volsky and Fedorov to lay plans to come to the aid of their embattled countrymen. It will mean a daring and dangerous sortie through the Aegean to the Black Sea, and the gates of hell itself in the narrow Bosporus and Dardanelles. Meanwhile, Vladimir Karpov confirms that the mighty airship *Tunguska* has indeed moved in time, and now he plans how to use this sudden unexpected turn of events to his great advantage.

The action and mystery abound in this action packed continuation of the amazing Kirov Series!

Dear Readers,

Thank you for reading *Grand Alliance*, and especially if you have been with me from as far away as Book I in this series. I am still seeking a "Wiki Master" to build the Wikipedia entries to describe the series. Numerous examples exist for other fiction works on Wikipedia, but they prefer that the entries are made by third parties and not the author or publishers. Is there anyone out there who is a master of Wikipedia and interested in taking on the task to become the official historian of the *Kirov Series?* If so, please drop me a line and let me know.

My thanks also to all those who have written to me with comments, questions, suggestions, and reflections on the story, and in particular to Don Ursum who has been a valuable resource for the extensive research that goes into each and every one of these novels.

Best regards,
John

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 these books the powerful Russian battlecruiser *Kirov* is sent back to the 1940s in the Norwegian Sea where it subsequently becomes embroiled in the war.

Like 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 is resurrected again in a 9th volume entitled *Altered States*, which begins the third trilogy 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 as sets of trilogies linked by what the author calls a "bridge novel." The first three volumes form an exciting trilogy featuring much fast paced naval action as *Kirov* battles the Royal Navy, Regia Marina (Italians) and finally the Japanese after sailing to the Pacific in Book III. The bridge novel *Men Of War* is a second entry point which covers what happened to the ship and crew after it returned home to Vladivostok. As such it serves as both a sequel to the opening trilogy and a prequel to the next trilogy, the three novels beginning with Book V, *9 Days Falling.*

The *9 Days Falling* trilogy focuses on the struggle to prevent a great war in 2021 from reaching a terrible nuclear climax that destroys the world. It spans book 5, 6, and 7, featuring the outbreak of the war as Japan and China battle over disputed islands, and the action of the Red Banner Pacific Fleet against the modern US Fleet. It then takes a dramatic turn when the ship is again shifted in time to 1945. There they confront the powerful US Pacific Fleet under Admiral Halsey, and so this trilogy focuses much of the action as

Kirov faces down the US in two eras. This second trilogy also launches several subplots that serve to relate other events in the great war of 2021 and also deepen the mystery of time travel as discovered in the series. The trilogy ends at another crucial point in history where the ship's Captain, Vladimir Karpov, believes he is in a position to decisively change events.

The next bridge novel is *Armageddon*, Book 8 in the series, which continues the action as a sequel to Book 7 while also standing as a kind of prologue to the *Altered States* trilogy. In this third trilogy, *Kirov* becomes trapped in the world made by its many interventions in the history, an altered reality beginning in June of 1940. The opening volume sees the ship pitted against the one navy of WWII it has not yet fought, the Kriegsmarine of Germany, which now has new powerful ships from the German Plan Z naval building program as one consequence of *Kirov's* earlier actions.

Altered States also covers the German attack on the carrier *Glorious*, the British raids on the Vichy French Fleets at Mers-el Kebir and Dakar, and the German Operation Felix against Gibraltar. Other events in Siberia involve the rise of Karpov to power, and his duel with Ivan Volkov of the Orenburg Federation, one of the three fragmented Russian states. (And these involve airship battles!)

The sequel to the *Altered States* Trilogy and the bridge novel leading to the next set is volume 12, *Three Kings.* It covers the action in North Africa, with a decisive intervention that arises from a most unexpected plot twist at the end of that novel. Book 13, *Grand Alliance* continues the war in the desert as Rommel is suddenly confronted with a powerful new adversary, and Hitler reacts by strongly reinforcing the Afrika Korps. It also presents the struggle for naval supremacy in the Mediterranean as the British face down a combined Axis fleet from three enemy nations.

The Grand Alliance Trilogy continues with *Hammer of God*, and *Crescendo of Doom*.

You can enter any of these three trilogies that may interest you, though your understanding of the characters and plot will be fullest by simply beginning with book one and reading through them all!

The Kirov Series: *(Military Fiction/Alternate History)*

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Kirov - Kirov Series - Volume I
Cauldron Of Fire - Kirov Series - Volume II
Pacific Storm - Kirov Series - Volume III
Bridge Novel:
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Fallen Angels - Kirov Series - Volume VI
Devil's Garden - Kirov Series - Volume VII
Bridge Novel:
Armageddon – Kirov Series – Volume VIII

Third Trilogy:
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