

Kirov Saga



Season 3, Vol 6 in the Kirov Series

Turning Point

An Alternate History of WWII by:

John Schettler



Sunda Strait

Batavia

Tanger

Bogor

Kirov Saga:
Turning Point

By

John Schettler

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Author's Note:

Dear Readers,

The chase is on, yet no one on the Allied side really knows what's at stake. Tovey has another mystery on his hands in those strange photographs that have been delivered to Hut 4 at Bletchley Park, but Fedorov is too far afield to solve the riddle for him. So we'll begin where we left off, as *Kaiser Wilhelm* and the *Goeben* attempt to slip by the Royal Navy with their hidden cargo.

The long awaited Soviet Winter Counteroffensive will be presented next, a real turning point in the war that is often overlooked by historians in Fedorov's books. It wasn't really the loss of 6th Army at Stalingrad, or the grinding attrition of Kursk that turned the war in the east. It was that desperate and stunning Russian counteroffensive in the winter of 1941-42.

After that we move to the Pacific again, where Churchill has a most difficult decision to make, and "the Rock of the East" gets a new assignment. Then, one of those moments I truly love in this process happened while I was wading into that segment of the story. Like the strange dream that took us to Admiral Knight in the Siberian Intervention, another of those moments occurred while I was staring at a map of the great barrier islands, Sumatra, Java, Bali and east to Timor, Japan's final objective in their stunning opening offensive of the war.

What resulted from that muse will be much in keeping with the general premise that first bloomed in the opening novel, *Kirov*. Yet it creates a thorny problem for all those involved, and will weigh heavily in the outcome of the Pacific War. Sometimes a Turning Point lurks in some quiet, insignificant corner of unrecorded history, like the hidden Pushpoints Professor Dorland might expound upon from his Berkeley Arch facility. Other times it comes in the violence of thunder and lightning, and in a way no one, not even I, expected when I started writing the opening chapters of this volume.

By the end of this novel we will have reached April of 1942, with the Allies contemplating offensive operations for the very first time. Yet 1942 remains a year of precarious and quavering balance. The Axis powers reach their high water mark, but still find the Allies unbowed. Britain holds on in

the Libyan desert, and now boldly contemplates the end of Rommel's Afrika Korps in one final battle. The Soviets struggle to consolidate hard won gains from their Winter War, but the coming of warmer weather and good ground after the Spring thaw will see Germany renew its offensive, and with newly equipped divisions that are even more potent than before.

Each side will have real opportunities and also vulnerabilities, for while the Turning Point comes here in this novel, it is not fully appreciated or understood by those struggling in the thick of the fray. There are still two more volumes in this season, and a lot of war to cover in 1942. The conflict in the west will be much different, as the Allies must plan how to deal with the French colonies in Northwest Africa, and the issue of Spain and Gibraltar. Germany will not want those vital territories to fall uncontested, and OKW must find badly needed divisions to face the threat slowly blowing in from the Atlantic like a storm at sea. Yes, the Americans are in the war now, and they are coming to the story soon as Eisenhower makes his debut in the war in the west in Book 23.

You will forgive me as I leave our favorite battlecruiser for a time in this novel to focus on these many operations that need to be covered. But I assure you that we will soon be back with Karpov, Fedorov, Rodenko, Nikolin, Tasarov, Zolkin, Orlov, Dobrynin and all the rest. Things in the Pacific are about to get very complicated, but for now... the winds of war are swirling in listless currents, and find in some lone forsaken place, a turning point.

Enjoy.

- *John Schettler*

Part I

The Chase

“Slow animals always become prey in the end.”

— **John Connolly:** *The Wolf in Winter*

Chapter 1

The sun was low on the horizon, about to be swallowed by the blackness of the sea. There, sharply silhouetted in the distance and crowned in gold, were two enemy ships. Kapitan Heinrich had thought they were battleships, and knew his only course was to attempt to break away. He didn't need orders for that, for even with *Goeben* by his side, he would be badly outgunned. Increasing to 30 knots had not been enough, which puzzled him at first, for he knew the British *King George V* class battleship topped out at 28 knots. Yet still they came, even closing the range at that speed, which told him his initial assessment of these ships had to be wrong.

But what could they be? They weren't battlecruisers, as both *Renown* and *Repulse* had been dealt with off Fuerteventura. Could these be the new large cruisers Naval Intelligence had warned about? It was thought that those ships would not be commissioned for some months, but something was out there, firing at him with gunnery patterns that made it look like a *King George V* class ship, and a silhouette to match. Yet they were running like the wind. Even at his best speed of 36 knots, he had only barely edged away, opening the range ever so slowly. But he knew he could not hold this speed for very long. He had perhaps an hour, in which he would burn off all the fuel he had so greedily taken on from the *Ermland* before this encounter, and Casablanca was very far away.

At the urging of Kapitan Falkenrath on the *Goeben*, they had decided to split. It was the only thing to do. To begin with, an engagement here would risk the loss of all their valuable cargo in one place. Darkness and the coming storm would prevent any air operations off *Goeben*, and all her main gun turrets were mounted forward. At 36 knots, a scenario where she would need to fight a gun duel while in flight with an enemy riding her wake, never entered the minds of the designers who built her. The ship was built to hunt and kill, with all its teeth up front like a shark. The plans for the *Goeben* were drafted knowing the fastest British Capital ship was HMS *Invincible*, and the *Goeben* could even outrun the speedy British 8-inch gunned cruisers.... But not these cruisers, if that is what these ships were. If they had been *County* Class heavy cruisers, they should already be lost in the gathering darkness,

left well behind the foaming wakes of the two swift German ships.

Yet there they were, the bright wink of their gunfire now barely discernible against that blazoning sun. The two senior officers on the German ships waited through tense moments, flashing lantern signals at one another until a decision was reached. They would go their separate ways, and the turning point was selected at a specific time. Kapitan Heinrich would wheel about, making a bold challenge to his pursuers, while *Goeben* veered off to the east. He wanted to hold the British here for a moment, giving the light carrier the chance to slip away, and it was looking like that was going to work.

Three booming salvos were fired, with high golden water splashes illuminated by the last rays of the dying sun. He clearly saw the enemy guns answering, the big rounds falling very close off his port side. Then his ship passed into a squall line, the sudden rush of rain very heavy, the seas higher. Even though he was running full out, the ship's true speed might be only 33 to 34 knots now in the choppy swells. But the gloom and rain imposed a protective masking curtain between the two sides.

"Can't see a thing," said his Chief Gunnery Officer, Schirmer.

"The same will be true for them," said Heinrich. "Helm, bring us back on zero-six-zero northeast and steady on."

"Aye sir, zero-six-zero northeast and steady, engines ahead full."

But not for long, thought Heinrich, looking at his watch. I just don't have the fuel to run like this. "Radar, do we still have them?"

"Aye sir, range about 16,200 and holding."

Kaiser Wilhelm had a FuMO 23 search radar on her rangefinder tower, and a *Timor* antenna for the FuMO 4 *Samos*. That reported range was nearing the maximum for this equipment combination. The Germans were always tinkering with their radars, mating different sets with different antennae, and there was never any single standard from one ship to the next, even within the same class. This suite might range out to 18,000 meters for active surface search under ideal conditions, but that was not the case here, and *Kaiser Wilhelm's* radar hold on the enemy was very tenuous.

The gunfire ceased, and now it was storm, sea, and darkness that would be the primary factors in the engagement. That and the minds of the two commanders involved.

Off to the southeast, Captain Sanford stood on the bridge, thick legs

planted firmly on the deck, one hand on his field glasses, which were now useless, his eyes casting about, like a frustrated man who was looking for something he could not find.

“Curtains,” he said under his breath. “We won’t get a sighting in this mess.”

“No sir,” said Laurence, the steady Executive Officer at his side, and quite his opposite, a head taller, thinner, trim and cool under fire. He was a good balance to the Captain’s squirrel like energy, for he was never ruffled, always composed, a proper British gentleman. “It’s work for the radar now.”

The British cruisers had the latest Type 218 search radar sets, mounted high up on the mainmast. It was really an early warning radar, with a good range out to 220 kilometers for aircraft at high altitude, 20,000 feet or higher. That diminished if the planes came in lower. Aircraft at 10,000 feet might be detected out to 170 kilometers, or 120 kilometers at 5,000 feet. For surface contacts, it was just a bit better than the German system, capable of seeing another ship out to 22 kilometers. Under these conditions, with wind and rain battering the antenna about, they might keep contact out to 18 clicks.

“Yes,” said Sanford. “Work for the radar, and the boilers. How is our propulsion?”

“Running smoothly, sir. 34 knots, though we’re likely making less in this weather.”

“Same for the enemy,” said Sanford. “A pity we couldn’t get to them sooner. We had three ships on radar earlier. In my mind, that third vessel was most likely a tanker.”

“A reasonable assumption, sir.”

“That ship broke off due east. We could double back and have it for a late supper, but the real action is right in front of us. We’re good in a chase, Mister Laurence—six guns up front on each ship. If that is *Kaiser Wilhelm* out there as we suspect, then they’ll only have two guns aft. Is *Galahad* keeping pace?”

“That they are, sir.”

“Good... Good... I’d expect nothing less. The Germans have pulled a fast one on us just now. They’ve split up. That must be the carrier we’ve heard about, the *Goeben*. They’ll have nothing aft that can bother us at all, and they can’t put those damnable *Stukas* up in this weather; not at night.”

“A good read on the situation, sir.”

“Yes it is... A very good assessment. Well, we have a decision to make now then, don’t we.”

“We do indeed, sir.”

“Which ship would you get after, Mister Laurence?”

“Well sir, two guns aft isn’t much, but they are 15-inchers, and if they do get lucky, our deck armor won’t stop those shells. In effect, their main battery is *Bismarck* class, and we were trained to avoid engagement with battleships. They turned just now to warn us off, and if we do press them, they’ll likely turn again if they have to give battle. Then we’ll be facing all six 15-inch guns. Under the circumstances, gunnery is likely to be less than accurate, but it is a risk we’d have to consider. That ship is running up towards the cape at La Guerra, but the carrier had to break away to the east. They’re going to run out of sea room there, and eventually turn north.”

“Right,” said the Captain. “Then if we persist as though we were after this other ship, it would still leave us in a good position to cut that carrier off when they turn, correct?”

“I would think as much, sir.”

“And I as well. Very good then, we’ll keep after the Germans on this heading. Ignore the carrier for the moment, but I think that will be our real quarry later.”

“You intend to turn soon sir?”

“That remains to be seen. A turning point in an action like this is a rather delicate thing. Get it wrong and you can muck up the entire works. What I do intend, however, is getting up towards the cape at La Guerra and putting myself right astride the route that carrier will have to take. We’ll get well north of them as they run east now. I think we can cut the bastard off. How does that sound?”

“A good plan, sir. I’d advise it. And let’s not forget that HMS *Formidable* is still off to the south. Yet they’ve an appointment in the Indian Ocean to keep. I wonder if Admiral Somerville can afford to come north now?”

“He might not,” said Sanford. “In which case the whole job is in our lap. Let’s keep after this *Kaiser Wilhelm*, and we’ll see what the situation warrants, hour by hour.”

They were going to have to play it that way, play it by ear, assuming the radar could keep a hold on the speedy enemy ahead of them. The Germans were already getting within range of their air cover out of lower Spanish

Morocco. That area had once been called Rio de Oro and Spanish Sahara closer to the Canary Islands, and the Germans southernmost airfield was at El Aaiun, about 15 kilometers inland from the coast. Another hundred kilometers to the north, they had more planes at Tarfaya.

Sometime later, Captain Sanford went over to the chart table. "Let's have a look at the situation," he said, with Laurence following in his wake.

"The Germans will have planes here," he pointed. "We've no worries tonight. It's thick as a brick out there, and the moon will be down at about 02:00. That closest enemy field is about 500 miles northeast of our present position."

"They may have Ju-88s there sir, and we've seen them used in a shallow angle dive bombing role before, with decent accuracy."

"I'm not worried about those," said Sanford with a dismissive wave of his hand. "They won't hit a fast ship like this. It's the *Stukas* that bother me. Now, where will we be in the morning? I suppose that depends on how long we run full out like this... Five hundred miles to that airfield.... That's about 800 kilometers. We're running at about 60KPH now. When is sunrise tomorrow, Mister Laurence?"

"05:40 sir."

"Then we would gobble the distance up and be approaching that airfield by the time the moon sets. It will get very dark after that, weather or no weather. Those last three hours before sunrise will be pitch black."

"No need to bother with the threat from aircraft in that interval," said Laurence.

"Then at sunrise we would be roughly 720 kilometers further on at this speed. Right under their noses by the time they can get planes up. That must be what Jerry is planning. He'll run up there and then they'll stick it to us with anything they have, rain or shine, tomorrow morning."

"That sounds likely, sir."

At that point the radar watch sounded a warning. "Sir, range decreasing. My contact is much stronger now, I make it just under 18,000 meters, and closing."

"Closing? Then they've fallen off in speed." The Captain's eyes narrowed. He wondered if his enemy had turned to give battle again. "How fast is that range diminishing?"

"Very slowly sir. I'd make their current speed at about 24 knots."

“24? Then they’ve gone to ahead two thirds. Steady on at this speed for the moment...” He looked at Laurence. “What do you make of this? He hasn’t turned, because the range would be diminishing much faster if that were the case, but why reduce speed like this? Might he have difficulties with his engines?”

“Possibly,” said Laurence. “But they’re running into the thick of that foul weather out there, so he may have reduced in rougher seas. Then again, it might be a fuel issue sir. We don’t know how much they might have taken on before we interrupted the party.”

“I’m inclined to think that,” said Sanford. “Let’s close up to about 16,000 meters and then reduce to match their speed. If we do keep on at our best, then we’ll catch him in about two hours. If he is in the thick of that storm, we would be too. It would be all gunnery by radar, and we haven’t a lick of training under our belts with that. Those salvos we fired back there were the first gunnery trial we’ve had. Engaging a cagey enemy in a close quarters gun duel by radar doesn’t seem advisable.”

“I would agree.”

“So we’ll ease up to get a better fix on his position with our own radar, and then fall off to match his speed. In the meantime, we’ll have to keep an eye over our shoulder for that carrier.”

In another twenty minutes, they fell off to 24 knots, and the range to contact held steady. There was no sign of any contact to their south or east. The *Goeben* had made a clean break, but they knew it was out there somewhere, and it could come only one direction soon—north. Captain Sanford’s plan of getting astride that route was a good one, and it was going to toss the hot potato to the Germans in short order, and force some difficult decisions on them.

Chapter 2

“Are they still closing?” Kapitan Heinrich was getting concerned now. It seemed that he was going to have to fight, one way or the other here. They had fallen off to 24 knots, and had been watching the enemy slowly close the range. Even at this speed, he was burning more fuel than he wanted to, but now his plan had changed. There was no way he could run all the way to Casablanca, but soon they would have daylight, and a good possibility of strong air cover, depending on the weather. He had already messaged the Luftwaffe to demand any support they could fly, and when Admiral Raeder seconded that request an hour later, the local commanders at those southern airfields were already planning to get crews out in the rain to prep the aircraft.

Then he got the answer to his question. Their pursuers had also fallen off in speed. The range was now holding steady at about 16,000 meters. Just to discourage them further, he had Schirmer fire off one salvo by radar, but nothing came back at them. At their present speed, it would be another 16 hours cruising time to the German held coast of Spanish Morocco, about 740 kilometers northeast now. By sunrise they would cut 500 kilometers off that distance, and be just within *Stuka* strike range. Every minute after sunrise favored his game, but he wondered what the *Goeben* was doing.

The carrier had gone radio silent, knowing the British had Huff Duff teams all along the African coast, and not wanting to let them triangulate to get a fix on their position. But the *Goeben* had to be well south, the distance being determined by how far they ran to the east before they would have to turn north. This was what Kapitan Heinrich was assuming, and it would mean that the pursuing British cruisers would probably get themselves into a position to cut the carrier off. *Goeben* would not be able to fly her aircraft in this weather, not off that small flight deck in these seas. If they were caught, they would be badly outgunned.

That would put a tough choice before him. It was agreed that if either ship was again engaged in what looked to be a fixed battle, they would send a signal to that effect, as their position would already be known to the enemy. If he got such a message from *Goeben*, should he then come about to render

assistance? Or should he cut cards with the enemy, and continue north at his best speed, hoping to save at least one half of his precious cargo? That was the dilemma. Admiral Raeder had told him to avoid combat, but the thought of abandoning *Goeben* in her hour of need galled him.

Yet you accepted this risk when you agreed to Falkenrath's request to separate, he thought. As it stands, neither one of us can make it to Casablanca at anything over 18 knots now. Every minute I run north, even at 24 knots, I come closer to the moment when I might find this ship dead in the water, with all our fuel exhausted. I will have to reduce to 18 knots in an hour, and that might get me to Agadir with a little left in the bunkers, assuming the British don't get to us first.

Then he got a strange coded message. It was just one line. "FM: GW, TO: KW - 005 - 022642 / 21:42 - MEET YOURSELF OFF SPANISH MOROCCO - ZZZZ." The first two code words were simple plays on initials. GW was Group West, and KW was the designation for *Kaiser Wilhelm*. The number 005 indicated the number of words in the message segment, followed by the date, and time. Then came the message...

Meet himself? Of course! The German carrier *Prinz Heinrich* was still up there, and Raeder had been using it to run aviation fuel out to the Canary Islands. They had installed fuel pumps and hoses on that ship. If we could make a rendezvous with the carrier, it could serve to refuel us enough to reach Casablanca. But again, what about the *Goeben*? Perhaps I could make that rendezvous, transfer my cargo to *Prinz Heinrich* and take on enough fuel to turn south and give battle. That was going to be his hope and plan, though he still wondered if the *Goeben* could survive an engagement with those two new enemy heavy cruisers long enough for his effort to matter.

He did not know it then, but he was worrying for no reason. The *Goeben* broke off to the east, but it was not coming north now as both Heinrich and Sanford expected. Like a falcon on the wing set free by its handler, Kapitan Falkenrath had run due east until he was out of radar range of the enemy, then he made a wide turn, not to the north, but to the south. He came about, and then took a course due west again, back-tracking, about 20 kilometers south of the position where the two ships first separated. All the while the two British cruisers ran northeast at high speed after *Kaiser Wilhelm*, and *Goeben* was now free to ease on out into the Atlantic.

There was no way the *Goeben* would ever reach Casablanca now, or so

Falkenrath had deduced. But he had no intention of taking the course the enemy most expected. He was heading west instead, intending to find *Ermland* again, and then he would drink his full and slip out into the Atlantic, looking for fair skies and open seas.

* * *

“A sticky situation,” said Somerville to Wells aboard HMS *Formidable*. “The Germans are making a run to the northeast. It appears they have no intention of operating against our convoys. The last message from Captain Sanford indicated they had been attempting a refueling operation with a tanker at sea. He broke that up, and then got into a footrace northeast with the Germans.”

“He should have taken out that tanker first,” said Wells, which prompted Somerville to smile. He liked this young man. Wells was thinking like an Admiral here, and not a hot headed cruiser Captain. Get that tanker and you have hurt the enemy’s ability to operate here by a good measure. Yet Sanford, probably eager to blood his ships in battle, had elected to get after the German warships, and had been exchanging occasional salvos with them at ranges too long to matter in the present sea conditions.

“Yes,” said Somerville, “get the pawn the enemy offers you first before you think to exchange Knights. That is what I would have done. The question for us now is whether we can delay here any longer. Mountbatten is in the Indian Ocean southwest of Java, and there are rumblings of trouble brewing there. My orders were to assure the safety of this convoy to Freetown, then get down around the Cape to join the Eastern Fleet. I’m afraid we’ll have to leave these German ships to Captain Sanford and his two new cruisers.”

“Then we’re heading south sir?”

“That will have to be the order, Mister Wells. Admiral Tovey has been after me to get moving, and so it’s down to Freetown with us tonight. Godspeed Captain Sanford, and wish the man luck.”

That decision was going to take HMS *Formidable* out of the equation in the little drama shaping up off the African Coast. The weather was going to render carrier operations null and void for the next day in any case, or so it seemed. Unable to wait, Somerville turned south in haste now, as he had a very long way to go. *Formidable* had 6400 nautical miles to travel before

reaching Mountbatten. At 24 knots, and with one stop at the Cape to refuel, he was looking at 12 days to the Java coast. Now he was worried he would arrive too late to lead the Eastern Fleet in any meaningful way to stop a planned enemy invasion of Java. He might not get there until the 9th or 10th of March, and by that time, the Japanese might already be well established on that island.

He expressed these concerns to Wells, wondering what the young Captain thought. “Well sir,” said Wells, “if Monty is hard pressed, we may end up having to cover his evacuation to Australia.”

“Possibly,” said Somerville. “But getting him to Darwin might be difficult at that point, particularly if the Japanese have managed to get planes on Timor and Bali, or even Java itself. In that instance, and considering the enemy is fond of covering their invasions with carriers as well, we may have no other choice but to fall back on Perth to the south, or simply pull out to Colombo.”

“I don’t think Montgomery would like that,” said Wells. “The action is likely to move to Darwin after that, which is where he’d want to be.”

“Precisely, but we may not be able to get him there. If this does come to pass, then Churchill will probably send his Rock of the East back to North Africa. Wavell wants him back there for his next operation, or so I’ve heard—the Rock of the Middle East.”

“He’s a good man, east, west, or anywhere else,” said Wells, and Somerville agreed.

Yet events were soon about to change near Java, and in a most unexpected way. At the moment, the little chase then underway in the Atlantic was going to matter more than either Somerville or Wells knew. For they had no idea what *Kaiser Wilhelm* and *Goeben* had hidden below their heaving decks....

* * *

Pitch black. There was still heavy cloud cover, and the moon was long gone, the sun still more than an hour off. *Sir Lancelot* and *Sir Galahad* continued to probe their way northeast, slowly creeping up on the German raider by occasionally increasing speed. Radar was the only thing with a hold on them now, and Captain Sanford closed to 14,000 meters, risky as that was.

He reasoned that the shorter the range, the flatter the trajectory for those heavy 15-inch rounds. His 152mm belt armor might then take the hit instead of the 50mm deck armor.

Though it had fewer guns, *Kaiser Wilhelm* was still a much bigger dog at 35,500 tons full load. The German ship had 200mm armor on the main belt and conning tower, with 120mm on the decks. From every account, their optics and gunnery were also very sharp, and they had already put a good number of ships under the sea, *Suffolk* being the last victim to feel their hard bite.

Cruisers have no business in a fight with a battleship, thought Sanford. That's what I might have in front of me in another 90 minutes with the sun. Yet by God, I'm one hell of a cruiser, and with *Sir Galahad* at my side we've twenty 10-inch guns to bring to that argument, while they have only six. We're going to get hits, and our throw weight will hurt that ship, I'm sure of it. The weather is still overcast, but the rain is abating, and the dawn promises clearing skies. That may not be good.

I'd rather fight it out in the haze grey, ship to ship. But come sunrise we'll be just 100 kilometers south of that enemy field at El Aaiun. They'll likely have recon planes up, no matter what the weather holds in store. That hardly matters. *Kaiser Wilhelm* will have radioed our position, and they bloody well know we're coming. So the Bofors may be just as important as my 10-inch guns at dawn. With Somerville off to Freetown and points south, we'll have no air cover ourselves, and can't even launch our seaplanes with the sea running this high.

So it will come down to the guns and armor, unless we get swarmed by enemy planes. The sun will be in front of them if they run east for the coast, and they'll be silhouetted. This time we'll have the blanket on, at least until the sun gets up a bit.

He looked for his coffee mug, finding it cold after the long night. He managed about four hours sleep, in the small ready/rest room he kept off the bridge, just big enough for a cot. They had fired three salvos from A turret that night, just to check gun ranging, and harry their quarry. As they could not see the shell falls to judge range, that exercise was fruitless, and did more to jangle the nerves of the crew than anything else. The enemy never altered course, and continued on, now at an even more sedate 18 knots. It was as if they were daring him to come on up and have a go.

That was what Sandy Sanford planned to do at first light. But he kept a rabbit's foot in his pocket just the same. He had it thirty years now, and it always brought him good luck. He was going to need it that morning if he persisted on this course, but as fate might dictate, this time expressed in the will of the Admiralty, he would soon find himself on another heading.

The flight of the *Goeben* did not pass without notice. There, lurking on the convoy route south to the Cape Verde Islands, the British submarine *Trident* under Commander Sladen had been diverted from a planned sortie into the North Atlantic to serve as a security patrol between the Canary and Cape Verde Islands. The boat should have been hunting *Prinz Eugen* and *Admiral Sheer* as they thought to transfer to a Norwegian port, but the former was sunk, and the latter was quietly sleeping at Kiel in this history. So *Trident* was well south of the Canaries when it came across a solitary merchant ship, moving in great haste to the southeast.

It wasn't part of any convoy in the region, as warning concerning the German raiders had diverted most of that traffic. After reporting the sighting, Sladen soon received an Admiralty order to follow, with an indication that this ship might be a German auxiliary that was known to be operating in the same region. The British had made a very good guess, for Sladen was now slowly creeping in the wake of *Ermland*, en route to its planned rendezvous with the *Goeben*. A little faster in the heavy seas, *Ermland* slipped away, and *Trident* radioed its last reported position. Realizing that Captain Sanford's cruisers were very near the location, the Admiralty sent him a perplexing order on the morning of Feb 27th. He was to turn about and pursue this contact.

"What?" Sanford could scarcely believe it. "Break off and pursue this other contact? My god, man, we're just about to head into battle here!"

It was another occasion where Sanford was killing the messenger, and Ensign Bob Willard stood there with a sheepish look in his face, not knowing how he could respond. Thankfully, the Captain realized the Ensign was not the man he needed to confer with now, and stormed off to find his First Officer.

"Mister Laurence," he said. "What in the world do you make of this?" He handed the man the signal, and Laurence read it dispassionately.

"Admiralty order," he said. "They must have wind of something sir."

"Yes? Well, while they're sniffing about in the wind, I've had my hand

on the tail of this German raider all bloody night! Now what's this all about?"

"Might it be that third contact we had on radar sir? We know there's a German tanker out here somewhere. They've been trying to refuel their ships, and it may be that the carrier broke off last night to do exactly that. Whatever the case, HMS *Trident* made the sighting, and tickled the Admiralty's fancy."

"Right, and now they want us to leave the bird we have in hand and go running off to look for another in the bush!"

"Two in the bush, sir. The German carrier must be out there planning to meet up with this tanker. Didn't you say that ship would likely be our best prey? If we can catch them in the act, we might have a better time of it than we would running up north after this battlecruiser, and under German land based air cover."

"But that carrier broke off to the east. This order will send us southwest."

"Indeed," said Laurence. "The carrier might have doubled back," he suggested. In any case, *Trident* must have seen something of interest..." He let that dangle there, eyeing the Captain to gauge his reaction.

Sanford thought about that. It was, in fact, the same assessment the Admiralty had made, and the recent loss of *Suffolk* had also weighed in their decision. These were two shiny new heavy cruisers, and they reasoned the crews had little or no time to cut their teeth for battle. In spite of Sanford's arithmetic on the disparity in guns for the prospective engagement in front of him, *Kaiser Wilhelm* had already amassed a fearsome record at sea, with a proven, battle hardened Captain and crew. The gallant charge Sanford was planning to make seemed much more appealing to him, but as his First Officer had just pointed out, it was also going to be much more dangerous. And here was an Admiralty order in hand, compelling him to turn about and make his best speed to the southeast to look for this tanker.

"Damn," he said unceremoniously. "Well orders are orders. We'll come about to the heading indicated in that message. The Admiralty knows damn well what I have in hand now, and instead they give me this business to attend to. So it seems we'll have time for breakfast after all. Be certain *Sir Galahad* gets the message, if they bloody well didn't get it first, like the last time. The turning point will be in ten minutes." He looked about for Ensign Willard, but he had also made an abrupt change of heading after handing off the signal, and was already well on his way back to the W/T room.

"Now where has that infernal signalman gotten himself to?"

Ten minutes later the two ships made a graceful bow and turned away, and with that one simple maneuver the war itself reached a grim turning point, and one that no man involved on either side could perceive in any way at that moment.

Orders were orders...

Chapter 3

Falkenrath lowered his field glasses, satisfied to have verified the watchman's count of four men on the upper weather deck of the ship ahead. All the other signal lights had been proper, and so he was confident that they were slowly coming up on the *Ermland*.

Seas were still rough, too rough to spot planes, and now he wondered if they would be able to keep the ships steady enough to even take on fuel. *Goeben* had very long sea legs, some 18,000 miles, but by his estimate, they had come 8000 miles since last taking on fuel deep in the south Atlantic, and there had only been enough on hand to fill his bunkers a little over half way at that time. He was down under 10 percent remaining, enough for about 1700 miles at 18 knots. That was only half the ship's top speed, and if he had to ramp up the power, that fuel could diminish very quickly.

We might make Tan Tan if I were to turn now. Yet god only knows whether they have any fuel bunkered there, or even the means to get it onto my ship. Casablanca is about 1800 miles northwest, and I would have to reduce to 12 knots to make that. So we will have to try to fill our belly here and now.

He could already see the German crews working to position the long fuel hose aft as *Goeben* crept into position astern of the tanker. An hour later, after trying to float back the line three times, they had to give up and reel it back in. The seas were simply too heavy and the hose was swamped half the time, or batted away by the waves. It could not be snared and secured, and even if they had managed that, sea keeping would have been near impossible. Under the circumstances, they had no choice but to cruise in formation and attempt to wait out the weather. And since every hour was another hour of valuable fuel lost, the two ships turned northeast on a heading of 060, a course that would take them towards the narrow channel between the Canary Islands and the southern edge of Spanish Morocco.

That decision had just set up a very dangerous collision, for like a train coming from the opposite direction, Captain Sanford and his two Knight Class ships were now heading straight for the Germans. They had been close enough to *Kaiser Wilhelm* for the German radar on that ship to see them

break off and take a new heading, and feeling just a little more secure, Kapitan Heinrich decided to break his radio silence and send *Goeben* a warning—*be advised, two British cruisers now on a heading of 220 SW.*

That was good news for *Kaiser Wilhelm*, for it meant that there would be no battle that morning to decide the fate of the hidden cargo that ship carried, but it was now a very big problem for the *Goeben* and *Ermland*. The tanker signaled that they might attempt to cruise abreast of one another at 6 knots and try to secure the fuel hose that way, but it was soon found that they needed to maintain at least 12 knots in the heavy swells to prevent either ship from being batted about by the waves.

After an hour of difficult navigation, they relented and tried one last time to attempt to receive the fuel hose, with the *Goeben* astern and very close to the *Ermland*. This time a burley crewman on the bow of the *Goeben* exerted himself and finally managed to snag the line, and six men leapt to the scene, ready to pull the hose up and get it attached. They battled against the tug of the sea to do so, but managed to prevail. Yet the connection was very dangerous, with the bow of the carrier rising and falling in the swells, and the line prone to tightening and loosening as the two ships moved.

Once secured, Kapitan Falkenrath looked nervously at his watch. The sun was now well up, lightening the pale grey skies as the refueling operation began. They would need several hours to take on any significant amount of fuel, but anything that came to him now was most welcome. At one point, a rogue wave nearly threatened to sever the line, coming very close to snapping it from the fuel mount as the hose tightened. Yet it was not the sea itself that would be their undoing, but an enemy lurking in the silent depths below the turbulent waves above.

HMS *Trident* had been dutifully following in the wake of *Ermland*, hanging on all through the night, though Captain Sladen did not believe they would ever catch up to the ship again. As dawn rose, his boat batted about by the heavy seas, he was about to submerge and run in the relative quiet below when the last watch shouted down the sighting—*Ships ahead!*

That prompted an immediate dive order, and *Trident* slipped beneath the swells, soon finding that it was difficult to even maintain periscope depth. Sometimes the up-swells would swamp the periscope, and at other times the sub's conning section would be dangerously exposed in the trough of a wave.

Trident was a T Class Submarine, and had been operating off Norway

with the *Tigris*, the very same boat that had ferried Admiral Volsky to the UK. She could make 15 knots on the surface, but no more than 12 in the heavy seas, and 9 knots submerged, which was barely enough to stay close, until the two ships altered their formation and heading and he saw they were approaching his position. A powerful boat, *Trident* had six internal forward facing torpedo tubes, and four more external tubes, which was a very severe bite as submarines went. Now this silent shark had what looked to be the perfect target ahead, a carrier and tanker.

Elated, Sladen moved off axis hoping to position himself to get a good spread of torpedoes into the water. Twenty minutes later, the hydrophone operator on the *Goeben* thought he heard something, and called out a warning.

“Kapitan! I think I am hearing high rev motors in the water. Torpedoes sir!”

“Damn!” Falkenrath swore and immediately passed an order for the watchmen to be on lookout. The refueling operation had to be immediately terminated, and crews that had labored so long and hard to secure that line, now rushed forward onto the heaving bow to release the hose clamps and set the fuel line loose. Unfortunately, the word was slow to reach the *Ermland*, and they did so before the flow of diesel pumps had been shut off at their end, which sent a wash of black fuel oil all throughout the narrow interval between the two ships.

“Torpedo off the starboard side!” The shrill alarm sent men to the gunwales with fearful eyes looking seaward. One man pointed, aghast to see the sleek wake of a torpedo slice right through the dark oil between the two ships. Seconds later there was a loud explosion forward, and they saw the *Ermland* struck full amidships by a torpedo. Then a second explosion tore into the front of the tanker, and the forward fuel tanks erupted in a terrible explosion that was so fierce that it rocked the *Goeben*, well astern now as the carrier fell off and turned away to port.

* * *

Out on the far horizon to the northwest, Captain Sanford saw the thick smoke climbing up into the sky, like an ominous dark thunderhead.

“My, my, have a look at that Mister Laurence. That’s not weather to my

eye.”

“No sir, must be a ship on fire. Possibly that tanker we were told to look after. Remember, HMS *Trident* is out here. That Admiralty order mentioned that boat as having made the original sighting.”

They had turned in the pre-dawn hours, gone to 30 knots, and had been racing southwest ever since. Now it was nearing 11:00, and the stain of windy dark smoke was giving them a clear indication of where their prey was at that moment.

“That’s a good deal of smoke, sir. It looks to be a very bad hit.”

“Well, they might have left something for us to nibble on. Have the gunners ready in any case, and keep the lookouts handy for that carrier.”

The *Goeben* would not be seen by the lookouts for some time, but the radar operator on *Sir Lancelot* soon called out a contact report bearing 15 degrees from their starboard side, which immediately prompted Captain Sanford to order his cruisers to make a swift coordinated turn in pursuit. Now he was bringing those twelve 10-inch guns he had forward between his two ships to bear on the point of contact, and the flight of the *Goeben* was about to become a very complicated and dangerous affair.

* * *

“Contact sir! Two ships off the starboard aft quarter. They should be on our horizon any minute.”

Kapitan Falkenrath rushed to the weather deck to squint through the telescope, cursing under his breath. Damn the British and their constant meddling, and damn every cruiser Captain they ever put to sea. These have to be the ships *Kaiser Wilhelm* warned us about, and they followed that smoke like sharks swimming to the scent of blood in the water.

After breaking off from *Ermland*, he had gone to 18 knots, and came round due north. The thought that he had to now abandon the stricken tanker ate at him, but he had cargo aboard that simply had to be protected, more valuable than the lives of every man aboard that doomed ship. *Ermland* would not survive such a hit, he knew, and now, with the coming of those two cruisers, the crews on that ship were busy destroying coding equipment, charts, rendezvous books, ship’s logs, and preparing to scuttle the ship as per their orders. That was going to eliminate the only tanker now operating in the

mid Atlantic, and put an end to German surface raider operations there for the foreseeable future.

I had hoped to fill up and get well away from the convoy routes, he thought. Then, once I deliver that infernal rocket below, I could get out to sea and do some real hunting again with *Kaiser Wilhelm*. That is looking very chancy now. I could go to 36 knots and probably break off here, but that would burn up everything we've taken on in the last two hours in as little as twenty minutes time. I could probably run for another two or three hours at that speed if these cruisers give chase, and then I would have used up so much fuel that I would be lucky to get anywhere near our bases on the African coast at 12 knots after that.

While I do run, those damn enemy ships will probably take pot shots at me, and I've no guns aft to answer them. This ship was meant to chase and kill the enemy, not to run. The only sting we have to bother those cruisers in a situation like this is our aircraft, but look at that flight deck pitching about now. That will be worse if we put on more speed.

It was then that Marco Ritter strode grimly onto the bridge, his greatcoat wet with sea spray. "I've been down on the flight deck," he said. "I think we should try to spot a few planes and attempt a launch."

"In these seas? The planes would careen right off the deck if you try to spot anything now."

"We can keep them cabled to the deck while I run up my engine full out, then release just as we start our takeoff. There are still intervals in these wave sets. If we time it right..."

"Assuming you do get off in one piece, you'll never get back. A landing would be impossible in these conditions."

"Possibly. If need be we could ditch in the sea, or run for the coast."

Falkenrath shook his head in the negative. "Have a look here," he said, striding over to the chart table. "We're 780 air miles from our nearest field at El Aaiun."

"Look," said Ritter. "My 109s can make that easily. As for the *Stukas*, they have an internal 780 liters of usable fuel, but this model can carry two 300 liter drop tanks. It will limit weapons load to only one 250 kilogram bomb, but we'll have a full four hours flying time with that extra fuel, and at 350KPH in this weather, that would take us 1400 kilometers, nearly 870 miles. We'll have just enough fuel to get to the African coast." He looked at

the Kapitan, waiting, ready, like a hawk on the other man's arm, chaffing to fly.

Damn, thought Falkenrath. We're an aircraft carrier. That's how we scout, and how we fight, and the fact that I have kept these planes below deck is the reason *Ermland* is burning out there now. If Ritter had been up there we would have seen those damn cruisers long ago and taken evasive action. Now here he is, ready to attempt this impossible launch operation, and saved *Ermland* at the same time. Yet it is either that or my falcons sit below decks while I turn and try to fight off those two cruisers with the forward deck guns. One good hit to our flight deck and Ritter's proposal would be off the table. It's now or never. Decide!

"How long would it take you to get armed and fueled for takeoff?"

"I ordered that last night. We're ready to go now."

"You had planes below deck armed and fueled all night? What if that damn British submarine had put a torpedo into us?"

"What if? That horse never won a race, Kapitan, but I'm telling you I can win this one now. I can get those planes up, and we can damn well get after those British cruisers, weather or no weather."

He gave Ritter a stern look, his eyes expressing both his admiration and the anxiety inherent in what he was now ordering. "Go," he said. "But I do not think you can even contemplate trying to return to this ship. You'll have to run for the coast."

Ritter smiled, nodding as he turned and hastened away. "Your worries are over, Kapitan. My boys will do the job. You'll see."

It was no idle boast. These were some of the best pilots in the Luftwaffe, Ritter, Heilich, Hafner, Brendel, Ehrler, and Hans Rudel, all itching to get off that ship and up into those grey skies. That flight would be the first to go, three Messerschmitts and three *Stukas*. The flight deck was a wild place, but the ship came into a very stiff wind and it was going to provide the planes with a good deal of lift. Ritter insisted he be the first, grilling the flight deck crews on how to hold his plane cabled while he revved up to full power. We should have a catapult installed, he thought, but they didn't, and so he would do this the old fashioned way, with one plane spotted and launched at a time to make maximum use of the available flight deck. They timed the takeoff attempt right when the *Goeben* was tipping over the crest of a high swell and heading down into the trough.

When the flagman waved him off, the roar of his plane's engines was loud in his ears. The Messerschmitt went careening down the pitching flight deck, until it fell away beneath the fighter, and Ritter gunned his engine for all it was worth. He was airborne, climbing up and over the next high ocean swell, and even waving his wing tips with glee.

There were no bombs on his fighter, but he had plenty of MG ammunition, and his cannons, and he was damn well going to use them to give those two cruisers a piece of his mind. Even as he banked to make his first turn, he saw the sea erupt well in front of the *Goeben* with the telltale splash of heavy shellfall.

Minutes later he was over the enemy ships and into a screaming strafing run, which caught the AA crews by surprise. He riddled the forward deck of the lead ship, seeing his rounds snap off the armored main gun turrets, but as he did so he was surprised by the configuration, a quad forward turret with a twin gun mount above and behind, just like the *King George V* series. Battleships! Should he radio Falkenrath that information? While Kapitan Heinrich had already solved the riddle on *Kaiser Wilhelm*, word never filtered down to Ritter on the ready deck where he huddled with the flight crews. If he told Falkenrath he was up against a pair of battleships, he would certainly run, but that was what he was going to do in any case, as soon as the last plane made it off the flight deck.

He pulled up, elated with his attack, his blood up, and seeing Heilich and Hafner coming in to make the same strafing run. The skies were pocked with AA gunfire now as the enemy ships fired. Then he saw the first *Stuka* laboring up from the *Goeben* off in the distance.

"Is that you Hans?"

"*One and the same,*" came Rudel in his headset ear phone.

"Well take your pick, another pair of battleships for you to send to the dry docks."

"*Dry docks? I'll put the damn things right under the sea! But those aren't battleships, they aren't fat enough. They have to be those new enemy cruisers. No matter, I'll get busy here in just a moment.*"

That was a boast Rudel would not be able to make good on this time, though he would try his best. He had only one 250kg bomb amidships, his wings being laden with those two 300 liter drop tanks. Up he went, climbing to at least 5000 feet to line up on the targets ahead with his flaps and elevator

at cruise position. Then he tripped his rudder to cruise, put the contact altimeter in the ON position and set it to his desired release altitude of 1500 feet. He put the supercharger on automatic, closed his throttle, shut his cooler flaps and opened his dive brakes. That sent his nose down at once, and he was into that screaming 600kph dive in to the target, the *Jericho* trumpets wailing with his approach.

His single bomb was away, but he held on, refusing to toggle the knob on his control column that would trigger the automatic pull out from that six G dive in the event he blacked out. He grunted and swore, and then did something that shocked Ritter when he saw it. Rudel released both his 300 liter drop tanks, intending to jettison them just as if they were wing mounted bombs, adding fuel to the fire he was certain he was going to start amidships on the lead ship in that formation.

His 250 KG bomb was right on target, coming down behind the aft stack on *Sir Lancelot*. Then the two fuel tanks came in right after, with one striking the ship and exploding in a broiling mass of fire when it did. The second was a near miss, but one was enough. Sandy Sanford was going to have a very bad day.

Part II

Winter War

“Colder by the hour, more dead with every breath.”

— John Green

Chapter 4

When the long overdue Soviet counterattack finally came it was still a great shock to the Germans. They had been huddling in the charred and broken remnants of Moscow, controlling two thirds of the massive city, which then settled into a nightmarish quagmire of fighting from cellars and sewer lines to rooftops and attics, block by block. And as Russia stretched on for thousands of kilometers, the city never seemed to end. It became work for small assault teams, engineers, snipers, with the entirety of the war being reduced to small and bitter contests over a particular house or building that promised decent shelter, a commanding view of some important intersection, or fresh furniture that could be used for firewood. Through it all, one of the coldest winters in a hundred years had descended over the land, and it would stay that way for longer than any realized.

From Moscow the lines stretched west to the Baltic and south to the line of the Don, and the German assault sat frozen in Fahrenheit temperatures that often reached 30 to 50 degrees below zero. On January 26th it reached 63 degrees below. It was so cold that the oil froze in the Panzers, and to even start the tanks, the crews had to kindle fires beneath them to warm the engines. Needless to say, that was not going to make those units capable of any rapid reaction to an enemy attack. At other times, field mice found their way into the vehicles, and chewed on electrical cables and rubber hoses, rendering them unusable.

In places, the major roads would become impassible unless plowed, which ended up creating huge snow berms on either side that would harden to near ice, restricting any lateral movement. Vehicles broke down, and the sluggish supply deliveries saw no spare parts readily available. So other vehicles were cannibalized to keep some still running, and the landscape was soon haunted by the derelict trucks, tanks and prime movers that were now good for little more than shelter from the wind for nearby troops. In some cases, the men used working prime movers to haul these abandoned vehicles into metal laagers, and set up small encampments within. Everyone wanted to be the lucky ones who could spend the long cold nights inside a truck cabin, and small fire lit beneath the trucks kept water heated in the radiators, which

the men used for many purposes.

Food would freeze on the short hauls from division mess kitchens to the men on the lines, leaving the troops icy bowls of frozen lumps to eat. Frostbitten feet swelled in the boots unless socks were changed regularly to keep them dry, a most uncomfortable task. Without adequate heavy winter clothing or boots, the troops, and horses they relied on to move heavy equipment, suffered terribly. Throughout the lines, more casualties were reported from frostbite than anything else, sometimes as many as 800 per day in a given division. Frostbitten cheeks, ears, noses hands and feet were the norm, and over 1.5 million horses would die that winter from wounds, cold, lack of food, and exhaustion. In such conditions, any shelter, even that of a few buildings in an isolated farm, became extremely desirable, and towns and villages were fought over with any strength remaining on either side.

In such conditions, mounting regular patrols and recon operations was near impossible. The thick white blanket of snow covered every landmark, transforming the terrain into a uniform carpet where the troops could easily lose their sense of direction and wander off, particularly when snow blizzards reduced visibility to near zero. The troops that could move identified the proximity of a village by listening for the sound of birds that would aggregate and roost there.

Out in the long lines of the infantry divisions, it was often so cold that the bolt action rifles froze when it was found that the grease used in them was not frost resistant. Soon many machineguns became useless beneath layers of ice. Trenches could not be dug into the hard frozen ground, so troops in the field had only snow bunkers, long icy tunnels stretching through the sea of white. Against enemy artillery fire, it offered no protection at all, so the men began melting segments of the snow to try and re-freeze them to harder ice for some modest protection against small arms and shrapnel. Even a minor wound in such circumstances could become an easy death sentence.

Troops that attempted movement in the deep snow, sometimes over twenty inches, soon became utterly exhausted. It was here that the winterized Siberian divisions, dressed in warm white parkas and with a high number of ski troops, truly excelled. They had mobility, and could infiltrate through gaps in enemy lines, encircling positions and further complicating any defensive reaction to the attack. The Soviet tanks, with higher ground clearance and much wider tracks, became the most mobile force available,

yet they often blundered into near invisible German infantry positions, and units who were able to fire the new Panzerfaust weapon exacted heavy tolls on the enemy.

When it did finally come, the Russian attack had one major aim—cut the Germans off in their effort to secure the remains of Moscow and consolidate for any further operations. In the east, every available unit was thrown against the German defense on the long line of the road from Serpukhov to Tula and down through Orel, backed up by strong reserves finally arriving from rear areas. They did not have far to go, for in many places, the Germans being obsessed with their drive north, the road and rail was buffered by no more than ten or fifteen kilometers behind a thin line of infantry outposts. Even though movement along that corridor was limited by the awful weather, the Soviets nonetheless struck both north and south of Tula, and at all the places the Germans had fought for so bitterly on Guderian's drive—Gorbachevo, Chern, Mtsensk and the principal attack aimed at the city of Orel.

Dmitri Lavrinenko was in on this attack, his 4th Tank Brigade fleshed out by newly arrived T-34s. As always, he moved with purposeful determination, cutting the road north of Tula in a drive that would eventually force some hard decisions on the Germans.

“The infantry will be following us, right in the hardened snow packed down by our tank treads,” he said. “We will make a particular effort to secure any small tree lines or woods where they can then form up for a major ground attack.” He would have the services of two rifle divisions behind him, and in places where there would be no covering terrain, these troops would begin to dig snow tunnels towards the enemy positions, their long, icy cold fingers reaching for the German troops already near frozen on the open exposed ground.

In places, the Soviets paid a high price for these attacks. Where the Germans could keep their machineguns operating, the casualties were very heavy in the first wave of any attack. Then the second wave would come forward, right over the dead and slowly freezing bodies of their fallen comrades, using them as a means of getting forward faster, and even falling to the ground behind the dead to use them as a shield from enemy fire. It was a cold, ghastly business, with the white snows stained red with blood on both sides. Five, then seven, or even ten waves of infantry would continue forward

like this, until the manpower of the attacking Rifle Division was simply exhausted. Then a new rifle division would form up to roll forward over that grisly trail of death, and continue the relentless attack.

Since the German defensive doctrine saw the infantry clustered around farms and hamlets, creating an archipelago of strong points, there were deliberate gaps in the line through which the enemy infantry infiltrated, particularly the Soviet ski troops. They were aided by small partisan units, rising up from ungarrisoned towns behind the German lines, and raising havoc. At times, a mounted cavalry unit provided more mobility than any motorized formation, and these units, the hardy Siberian horsemen, swept through the lines like ghostly vapors. Some of these units even pulled sleighs laden with more infantry to bolster their attacks. Not having the benefit of roads and vehicles over decades of hard life in the cruel Siberian winters, these troops were well adapted, and knew how to move in these harsh conditions, the old fashioned way.

In the beginning the Germans thought these thrusts were merely massive spoiling attacks to try and close the major line of communications up to Serpukhov. Orel was the first real crisis point. There the Soviets threw the weight and mass of three full shock armies in an all out drive to break through and reach Bryansk. Once the extent of this attack was realized, the Germans finally knew this was much more than they expected from a foe they thought was already beaten.

The aim and scope of the attack was truly ambitious. Since so many German troops had been diverted to the drive on Moscow, the massive “Kirov Pocket” still remained encircled, shaped like a huge rib eye steak well behind German lines. The Soviets still held Bryansk at the bottom, Kirov at the center, and terrain stretching fifty to eighty kilometers from there in all directions. The Germans, thinking the fall of Moscow would result in enemy capitulation, never pressed any real concerted attack to reduce this pocket, largely because they kept pulling forces off the perimeter to support their drive on Moscow. Now the Soviets were going to attempt to reach these beleaguered troops from both sides of the battlefield.

The main drive was the attack aimed at Orel, which simply overwhelmed the defense, breaking through like a flood tide of Red Army soldiers. Though it moved slowly, the Russian advance was inexorable, and left small islands of resistance behind at both Gorbachov and Metsensk. The former town

would have been lost if not for the timely intervention of the new 103rd Panzer Brigade, fresh off the train just before the attack, and with good operational vehicles. It joined elements of 29th Motorized and 4th Panzer Division, and shored up a shoulder of defense that marked the southern end of the German line near the breakthrough.

The Soviets cut the main road at Chern to the south, and then completely surrounded the 267th Infantry Division huddled around Mtsensk. The breakthrough pushed all the way to Bolkov behind the German lines where Von Schweppenburg had his headquarters. Both he, and then Guderian himself, with the entire army command staff, had to leap onto any vehicle they could get running and flee north. Hit by the main weight of the attack, Orel could not be held, and a massive gap opened in the line over a hundred kilometers wide. Soon 18th Panzer Division was another small island surrounded south of Orel, as were the remnants of the 167th Infantry Division.

Tired and cold, Guderian found von Schweppenburg near a small village to assess the situation. "This is much bigger than we may realize," he said. "I can feel it. Under these circumstances, with Orel overrun in the south, we have two options. We can either hold these small resistance points at Mtsensk, and Tula, keeping the benefit of the shelter the cities offer our troops. But they will end up surrounded—isolated pockets until some relief can be mounted to reach them. The only problem is finding a force we can keep moving to do that, which could take considerable time."

"And the other option?" asked Von Schweppenburg, now a haggard man after the hard fighting and precipitous retreat he had just made with his headquarters and staff.

"The river bends south from Serpukhov, and we still control that city. We could abandon the ground to the east and pull back behind the natural front of that river. Cover will not be as good for the troops as in Tula, but that was largely held by mobile troops. I don't think we will want to leave them in a pocket there. If we get them back over this river, then I may be able to build several operational *kampfgruppen* to form fire brigades."

"I agree," said von Schweppenburg. "Can we hold Serpukhov even long enough to get the troops back over that river?"

"Model is there," said Guderian, and that was enough to satisfy von Schweppenburg that the place would be held. So this was what the Germans

decided to do, orders going out that day. 2nd Panzer Army was strung out like a tattered rope, and now Guderian was hoping to loop it back and coil it up behind that river and build up some semblance of a mobile force again.

“I think you are correct that this is bigger than we think,” said von Schweppenburg. “The last reports I had spoke of another big push from the northwest aimed at Smolensk.”

“They are trying to reach the Kirov pocket,” said Guderian. “It was foolish to leave such a large force encircled behind our main thrust at Moscow, and I said as much long ago. That’s where most of the infantry was tied up, but since we pulled all the good divisions out to push for Moscow, that infantry could not reduce the pocket before the really cold weather set in. Now we had better get moving. The Russians are still on our heels, and they could be here any minute.”

The decision reached in that abandoned farmhouse would end up having dramatic repercussions. As news of the great winter counteroffensive reached Berlin, and reports streamed in of the loss of Orel, the abandonment of Tula under Guderian’s plan, and the threats to other key cities like Smolensk and Orsha, Hitler went ballistic. It was not the first tirade he had leveled at Army planners in OKW headquarters, but it was certainly the most severe. He ranted for over an hour, his fist pounding the map table, shaking troop markers from their positions, which he would then reset to a place of his liking. The greater disaster was that he resolved to take personal command of the field armies, and a spate of “Führer’s Directives” began to stream forth from OKW, ordering that no German division would make a withdrawal.

As for Guderian, he was summarily recalled to Berlin, where the last battle he would fight for some time would be with Hitler himself.

“What did you intend by such a stupid and untimely withdrawal? In a few days you hand the enemy back terrain our troops fought for months to acquire!”

“Had I not done so the troops would now be completely isolated. This attack was far stronger than you may realize, and the men were simply worn out.”

“And the Generals,” said Hitler. “It is obvious that you have lost any command of your senses, let alone the aggressive spirit necessary for a front line commander to lead his troops. What was the purpose of this withdrawal?”

Guderian decided he could not mince words here, and so he turned to the Führer with one blunt sentence. “To save the 2nd Panzer Armee from annihilation.”

Hitler stared at him, his lower lip quivering as he tried to hold his temper in check. But the shocking candor of Guderian’s words would haunt him for days after.

Chapter 5

“Annihilation? We had only just completed the capture of Serpukhov. Your forces were preparing to mount the final drive to enfilade Moscow from the southeast.”

“That may be what you believed was happening from the vantage point of OKW,” said Guderian, “but I assure you, the reports I sent were frank and straightforward. The army had lost 80 percent of its mobility. The roads were of minimal use in the heavy snows, and off road movement was near impossible—that is for the few units which still had fuel. As for supplies, I came across one platoon of Panzergrenadiers that had been collecting the boots of their fallen comrades, slicing up the leather and boiling it for food! All the living flesh in the horses that had died by the thousands in the freezing temperatures had already been consumed.”

Hitler brushed the lock of dark hair from his forehead, his eyes deep set with dark circles, his face pallid and drawn. Guderian could not fail to notice the slight tremor in his hand. The Führer had seen the dream of victory finally come to him when his panzers swept into Moscow behind the raging flames of the fires set by the traitor Beria and his renegade NKVD. Moscow had finally fallen, and the Nazi flag flew over the Kremlin. Yet all the city was good for was rudimentary shelter in the winter, and the charred remnants of the buildings that had burned were collected to make coals to be distributed to the men on the line. The long desperate struggle had finally given him his objective, but his enemy simply refused to capitulate.

It all had a haunting echo of the fate of Napoleon’s Grand Army. That force could defeat any enemy it faced, save one—General Winter. It sat in Moscow in 1812, and the city had also burned as it had here in 1942. 130 years of European history had passed, but it seemed that nothing had been learned. Half a million men in that Army died in that dreadful winter, and it was a decisive turning point in the wars of Napoleon against his many enemies.

“How?” said Hitler, with the despair obvious on his face. “How could they have found the troops to make such an attack?”

“It is our estimation that the collapse of Volkov’s Volga Bridgehead allowed the transfer of three full armies from that sector. We also identified

three more Shock Armies, all Siberian troops freshly arrived and well winterized. Their ski troops moved like the wind, right between our strongpoints. Their T-34s rolled right on after them with those wide tracks for snow movement.”

“And what about the Lions! What about the Panthers! The Tigers!”

“My Führer, where those units fought, the line was held, but there were simply too few. Only two or three of the panzer divisions had received them, and the main allotment concentrated in those special brigades could not be everywhere. One bright note was the Panzerfaust. When the infantry had that weapon, the strongpoints could not be broken by the Soviet Armor. But they simply bypassed those resistance points and moved into rear areas. If I had not pulled the Army to the line it now occupies, I would be having this discussion with Sergei Kirov, in a Soviet prison camp. My headquarters was nearly overrun, and Von Schweppenburg and I barely escaped capture, or worse.”

“Very well, very well...” Hitler waved his arm. “Under the circumstances, I find it impossible to send you back to the front as an operational commander. I will take command of 2nd Panzer Armee personally, and you will be appointed Inspector General of the Panzertruppen. Your role will now be to make an overall assessment of the Panzer arm of the Wehrmacht, identify units needing refit and replenishment, and coordinate with homeland production centers to see to the timely delivery of new armor to the front. Understood?”

Guderian simply nodded, and then Hitler turned his back on him. “That will be all, Herr General,” he said with no emotion.

* * *

The decision made that day at OKW would end up being all for the good, and even Guderian had mixed feelings about it. On the one hand, seeing the reins of command taken from him stung, and the thought that Hitler would be trying to command his divisions from his post at OKW made him shudder. A sense of fatalistic shame fell over him, and the fatigue of these long months in the field now became utter exhaustion. After the long bitter struggle there was no sense of victory, no toast to the fallen heroes. All he had in his mouth was the taste of defeat. On the other hand, events were soon to see his Army

pass to the hands of a most capable man.

On the other side of that massive pocket the Soviets had also put considerable pressure on the lines of communications from Moscow to Minsk. One main attack was pushed through to recapture Vyazma, eventually reaching the heavy wooded zone beyond. Further west, Wiktorin's 22nd, Schubert's 23rd, and Heinrici's 43rd Infantry Korps were the object of a big Soviet pincer attack, the one von Schweppenburg had heard about in his hectic conference with Guderian. The left pincer stormed through Vitsyebsk, with the right pincer aimed at Smolensk on the other vital communications line leading to Moscow. The Germans did everything possible to get fresh infantry forward on the limited rail system. Orsha, west of Smolensk, became a vital communications hub that was nearly overrun by a fast moving brigade of Soviet tanks.

There, the newly arrived 85th and 100th Gebirgs Regiments pulled from Army Group North reserve had leapt from the trains and just barely managed to hold on to the city. It commanded the major rail line leading east to Smolensk, and if that city were to fall, and the Russians reached the lines of their encircled comrades that had been stubbornly defending Kirov, then that pocket would suddenly form the southern and western wall of a new pocket that would be four times its size—only this time the tables would be turned and it would be filled with German troops, every unit the Wehrmacht had thrown at Moscow. It would leave over 50 divisions encircled, and with no secure line of communications back to points south and west, and Germany.

One particularly vital train just squeaked through Orsha carrying units of the 11th Army that were taken from the forces assigned for the Crimea. These vital fresh infantry divisions would attempt to stop the encirclement of Smolensk, at least on the westernmost side of that double pincer attack.

This halted the retrograde movement made by those three infantry Corps between Orsha and the lines east of Smolensk, and now they would be under threat of encirclement should the Russians achieve their strategic aims in that sector. In other places, Hitler picked up wood blocks representing the panzer divisions that had been withdrawn to rear areas for refitting, and began to assemble them in a group he intended to use to smash the Soviet attack. The only problem was the fact that these unit markers could be moved on the map far easier than the units themselves could be moved on the field, and attack orders would soon reach bewildered Panzer Commanders where no

concentration of battle ready troops even existed.

Halder was having his own fits, and threw up his hands in utter frustration with Hitler's ceaseless fuming diatribe. It also galled him that, in the south, no major enemy offensives had been aimed at Manstein's forces, which created the impression in Hitler's mind that his new favorite General was now the only commander he could rely on, the only one not in distress and still contemplating offensive operations.

Yet soon the full breadth and scope of the Soviet attack would finally be seen, and Manstein's offensive, poised to resume operations towards Volgograd as soon as weather and ground permitted, would find itself caught up in the winter war blowing in from the icy north.

* * *

Far to the south, where temperatures were less severe, Manstein's drive between the Don and Donets had also ground to a halt in January. If viewed on a map, the line of his advance resembled a massive wolf's head, with the eyes and forehead of the beast being the position of his tough SS Divisions. Realizing conditions were not favorable for continuing his attack, he had waited to bring up 14th and 16th Panzer Divisions, and the 25th Motorized Division into the snout of the wolf, where they were planning to strike south towards the vital crossing of Voroshilovgrad on the Donets. If taken, it would cut off 18 to 20 divisions north of that river above the Donets Basin. Without either destroying or forcing the withdrawal of these units, Manstein could not continue his planned offensive east towards Volgograd, which now had to be postponed until the Spring.

To smash this force and compel its withdrawal, he had been husbanding all the new heavy tank brigades being sent from Germany and holding them in the city of Kharkov. There were 501, 502 and 503 Schwerepanzer Brigades, and three more smaller Panzerjager battalions that had been receiving new equipment, with 88s mounted on a mobile chassis, called the "Nashorn." He decided to move them east on the short open rail line to Kupyansk, and use this mass of armor as a hammer to break through there and aim another drive at Lischansk on a looping bend in the river.

Yet just as this force assembled to begin its operations, the news of the massive enemy offensive to the north came in, and Manstein himself was

summoned to Berlin. After a long cold flight home, he met with Hitler in OKW headquarters and learned the real reason he had been recalled from the front.

“The incompetence of my Generals astounds me,” Hitler began. “After months of hard fighting, they have given the enemy vital ground back and put our forces in real jeopardy—particularly Guderian. He was the worst of the lot. His withdrawal order led to the collapse of the entire flank along the road from Orel through Tula to Serpukhov. I have had to relieve him of command and will now take control of the situation personally.” He pointed to the map, which Manstein now saw with updated positions neatly drawn in by Halder’s staff.

“As you can see, Guderian allowed them to push right through Orel and all the way to Bryansk to reach the Kirov Pocket. They have also reached this pocket from the north at two places, though I have ordered our infantry to hedgehog in place. To make matters worse, a second wave of this enemy offensive has begun north and south of Kursk. I cannot imagine where they have found all these troops to fling at our positions.”

“My Führer, I can tell you that in one word—Volkov.”

“Volkov? What did he have to do with this?”

“His offensive across the Volga north of the city has been stalled for some time, because the Soviets poured massive reinforcements into that sector. In one sense this was helpful for us, as those were troops that might have otherwise gone to the battle for Moscow. Yet now, Volkov’s position west of the Volga has collapsed. He gave the order to withdraw east of the river two weeks ago, and this has changed everything. I sent reports to this effect at that time. Were they heeded?”

“Halder has turned this entire headquarters into a shambles!” Hitler fumed. “I was not aware of this development until it was too late.”

“Well that is the reason the enemy has fresh, well tested troops to make this attack in the Kursk sector. Once Volkov withdrew, the defense on the Volga could be managed by a single army posting good divisions on the few available crossing points along the river. This left the bulk of the troops, possibly three or four field armies, free to be moved west to Kursk. Halder informed me there was a new enemy offensive underway there, but I was not aware of its extent.”

Hitler shook his head, his anger barely contained. “Under the

circumstances, your big offensive in the south will have to be postponed. I will need your mobile troops and the new Panzer Brigades, to deal with this Kursk situation. Can you move them?”

Manstein studied the map. “My Führer, realizing the gravity of the situation, and knowing that you would take immediate steps to salvage it, I have already taken the liberty of withdrawing 14th Panzer Korps from the snout of the Wolf’s head, here. I am moving them west, back through Valyuki to Belgorod. As for the SS Korps, it is only now being relieved by newly arriving infantry. We have the enemy well contained on the Crimean peninsula. They are holed up in Sevastopol, and have no offensive capability there. So I took the liberty of sending the Italians there to relieve 17th Army. Those infantry divisions are well rested, and they can take over positions in the Wolf’s Head while I move the SS west to deal with this Kursk offensive. Once we restore the front there, then we can meet to plan how best to undo the enemy gains in the north. In the meantime, who has taken charge of 2nd Panzer Armee if Guderian was recalled?”

“I am managing that personally.”

“My Führer, as you will have much to do in the vicinity of Smolensk, may I suggest that Model take command in Guderian’s place?”

“Model? He is just a division commander.”

“I know the man. He has a particular genius for defensive operations like this. If you give him the latitude he needs for a flexible defense, rest assured, that that segment of the front will be rendered secure. Then we can focus on Smolensk. That city is vital. The Russians are attempting to cut the lines of communication back through Minsk, and this will take some smart generalship to undo. I will coordinate with Model in the east, and let us see what kind of pressure we can bring to bear. This may help relieve the situation around Smolensk. In the meantime, you will need a good man on the scene there to see that your orders are properly carried out. I recommend Rundstedt, but my Führer, you must allow him to make adjustments to the front lines to secure a proper defensive front again.”

“If you mean withdrawals, then I will have no patience with such a strategy.” Hitler folded his arms, his dark eyes smoldering.

“Tactical withdrawals may be necessary in certain circumstances,” said Manstein. “A blanket stand fast order ignores the situation on the ground, and communication to this headquarters may be spotty at best. We may think a

division is securely in place, when in fact it may have its flank or rear areas exposed.”

“Then they should adopt an all around defense. The ground must be held. We have fought for it too long, and at great cost.”

“Mere terrain,” said Manstein dismissively. “There will be segments of that ground that are of no use to us. Look here, this sector being held by three valuable infantry Korps is one good example. See how the Soviets are attempting to encircle it? Note the lack of good roads into that area and then realize supplying those troops will be damn near impossible. Yet if those valuable infantry divisions were here,” Manstein pointed to the vital road from Smolensk to Orsha further west. “Then they would be well concentrated, and possibly capable of counteroffensive operations that will be impossible to contemplate where they are posted now. This is smart generalship.”

Manstein pulled off his gloves, then decided to reinforce his advice with flattery. “I am certain you would have seen this if properly informed of the situation on the ground. You would have ordered those troops to this vital road sector at all costs. Look how this Soviet push down from Vitsyebsk is so desperately reaching for that area as an objective. We must not allow them to occupy that ground. However... this position just southwest of Vitsyebsk should be held—not one backward step! We will need it later when we retake that city and pocket all these enemy forces west of Smolensk. As for this last pincer west of Orsha, it was meant merely to cut the rail lines coming up from Minsk and Vilnius. It is not a serious threat, and Armee Group North should be able to deal with it.”

Manstein’s manner, a calm deliberation that exuded confidence, impressed Hitler. While the entire center of German operations had been flung into disorder and distress, Manstein’s southern front was still secure, and so much so that all its mobile units could now be moved to stop the enemy offensive from Kursk. He had just pointed out things in the long sinuous front lines that Hitler’s mind had never even seen, let alone understood. His casual remark about the recapture of Vitsyebsk hinted at plans and strategies already hatching in his mind to restore the situation. It made Hitler feel as though the disaster he had been facing was now salvageable, and gave him some heart.

“Very well,” he said. “I will see that the orders go out to move those

troops as you advise.”

“Excellent,” said Manstein. “With your permission, I will return to the front and get to work! Remember—Model and Rundstedt. They are your eyes and ears on the ground. Rely on them. They will not let you down.”

Chapter 6

The man who would now take command of 2nd Panzer Armee would become a whirlwind of dynamic energy on the field to replace the lassitude that had fallen on Guderian in those final terrible months in the snow. Model now began establishing his new line of strongpoints behind the river, and then he slowly pulled units out to build mobile *kampfgruppen* behind that line, also sending equipment and vehicles into certain units to begin building at least one or two divisions up to full strength. He had his shield well in hand, but now he needed a sword.

By the time Manstein returned to organize his counterattack the winter was slowly thawing into late March, though temperatures were still very cold, and the ground remained firm. He had selected the key road and rail hub at Belgorod north of Kharkov to form up his legions, with the 14th Panzer Korps north of that city, and his SS Korps to the northwest. Further west, the big second offensive launched from Kursk had already pushed outliers some 200 kilometers to the southwest. These were mostly small, fast moving cavalry, recon, and light tank units, probing forward on a wide front. Fighting continued well behind them, where the main attack had enveloped and swarmed around the unlucky 42nd Infantry Korps under General Kuntze near Oboyan. He was seeing his three divisions systematically destroyed, regiment by regiment being isolated and then stormed by continuous waves of Red infantry supported by tanks.

Realizing that more help was needed to stem the advancing tide, Hitler had ordered five fresh infantry divisions in a new 51st Korps under Von Seydlitz to the scene, and Manstein used them as a blocking force to stop the enemy outliers from advancing further, and slowly roll them back. In the meantime, he began throwing his mobile divisions against the main enemy attack, which had pushed down through Oboyan and was aimed right at him. There at a small hamlet called Prokorovka, Germany's new heavy tank brigades would lead the assault in what would become a smaller version of the much greater Battle of Kursk that was fought later in the old history.

Yet his divisions had taken some time to be relieved from the Wolf's Head position, and get onto trains leading into Belgorod, so they were

arriving piecemeal. He kept jogging left, hoping to find the flank of the enemy advance while the situation was still fluid, but these moves only pulled in more Soviet units freed up as the 42nd Korps was overcome. Soon a great bulge was formed in the front, the Kursk Bulge, and whether by happenstance or fate, many of the units now assembling near Belgorod were the very same troops that had made an ill fated attack there in one recording of the history in 1943.

Kuntze would be captured with his men and go into a long cold life in a Soviet prison camp. By the time Manstein's forces even got close to Oboyan, the 42nd Korps had virtually ceased to exist. On April Fool's Day the Spring thaw would finally set in, making the ground soft and boggy. Both sides knew it would only get worse over the next few weeks, and so the fighting was more aimed at staking out a good line on either side, and positioning forces in favorable locations for renewed offensive operations after the ground firmed up again.

Even though it had come late, the Soviet Winter offensive had achieved remarkable gains. The massive pocket they had formed by breaking through to their own beleaguered troops around Kirov was now holding most every unit that had participated in the drive on Moscow. There were 7th, 9th and 53rd Infantry Korps, the SS Poletzei Division, all of Guderian's old 2nd Panzer Armee, (now commanded by Model), and all of 3rd Panzer Armee under Hoth. Another six divisions and scattered units from other broken formations were in a much smaller pocket about 100 kilometers from the city of Kirov, and now the action was focused on German efforts to re-establish a line of communications to troops further south and west.

To this end, Model ordered Reinhard to take the two Panzer Divisions he had been laboring to bring up to strength, the new 24th and the veteran 6th, along with 36th Motorized Division. They were to move southwest and mount a breakout operation to reach that smaller pocket, which had no viable supply source.

"We cannot simply throw those divisions away," said the fiery Model. "Infantry is worth its weight in gold these days. In places, those divisions are manning the line with headquarters companies and bridging battalions! We simply have to get through. Moscow is now serving as a supply hub. All the Army stores are there, and along the major roads in reserve depots. The engineers have even found a good number of small machine shops in the city

that can be put to good use. We'll use them for vehicle repair shops. But your job is to get through to that infantry. Then we can truck in supplies. Beyond that, this operation will be a preliminary move to reestablish communications with Armee Group Center."

Now it was down to this, small thrusts to open supply corridors, mop up rear area pockets, and plug holes to tidy up the new front lines that had formed. After the long misery in the frozen winter, the mud returned again, imposing a forced halt to most major operations. The troops were exhausted on both sides, supplies low, everything sinking into a morass of boggy ground. Reinhard's attack ran right into the veteran 91st Siberian Rifle Division, part of the 24th Siberian Army that had fought hard to link up with outside forces earlier. The action was in densely wooded terrain, with a single road that the Siberians stubbornly defended over two days of hard fighting.

This was going to be Germany's war from that moment on. The Soviets had finally tasted blood. In spite of losing most of Moscow, they had not only surprised their enemy with the strength and scope of their attack, but they had recovered vast segments of lost territory, destroyed ten German divisions, pocketed another 50, and threatened or cut the two vital communications lines the Wehrmacht had used in their Autumn offensive. The line through Orel, Mtsensk, Tula and on to Serpukhov was now completely in Soviet hands. The line from Moscow through Mozhaisk to Vyazma and on to Smolensk had been completely overrun between those last two cities. The Germans managed to hold Smolensk, but were heavily pressed from the eastern quadrant of that city. Further west, they were still fighting to clear the road back through Orsha that led to Minsk.

Even with Sergei Kirov's government operating from a farm house hundreds of miles north of Moscow, they had held the Soviet State together, and Georgie Zhukov had managed to do what he had long planned and promised—what had been foretold to Kirov in the scorched pages of the "the Material" burned in the old Red Archives. The mighty Wehrmacht had finally been stopped. If Germany would lose this war, this is where historians would say it had happened, where the sweeping tide of the German war machine had finally crested around the stolid rock of Moscow. The turning point in the long bitter war had finally been reached—the Soviet Winter offensive of 1941-42.

Now both sides would count their dead, mark the staggering losses, with

over a million men dead for the Germans, and twice that number fallen for the Soviets. Hitler would think back on those early days of 1941 when Raeder was urging him to go all out and smash the British in the Middle East, and come to regret that he had not heeded that advice. For now a strong new enemy had come to stand with the British, and the Western Front was already simmering up with plans for operations to turn the tide there as well. What ten or twelve divisions might have done in early 1941, would now be on the shoulders of over 250 divisions in Russia.

* * *

Yet something had happened in the restless waters off Africa in the middle Atlantic. It was a little drama compared to the hundreds of thousands of men struggling in the winter with their machines, and dying in that terrible cold. It was just three ships at sea engaged in a long anticipated battle after a frenetic chase. Close at hand, a fourth ship wallowed to one side, stricken and burning, the last hours of the auxiliary tanker *Ermland*. The submarine *Trident* had seen to her fate, but the Germans had come raging back in reprisal.

Marco Ritter could scarcely believe his eyes when he saw what Hans Rudel had just done. He dropped his small 250 KG bomb right on his target, but then gave the enemy both his fuel tanks as well! Rudel's plane came up out of that dive, his wings wagging with defiance. Below him, the lead British ship had sustained that bomb hit well enough, but Rudel had poured 300 liters of aviation fuel on the small fire, and it ignited with short lived fury, though it looked much worse than it actually was. The second fuel tank narrowly missed the enemy ship, but it was amazing that the first had even struck home.

"My god Hans!" said Ritter over his short range radio. "That was certainly dramatic, but now how in the world will you get to Africa?"

"I won't get to Africa," said Rudel in his ear. "If I can't land back on the *Goeben*, I'll bail out and they can fish me out of the water. I've a good two hours fuel now. This weather could break by then."

"Good enough Hans. I'll get you a medal for that one."

"Keep it," said Rudel. "Just get the other boys down after those ships."

Two other *Stukas* were already in a dive, both straddling that same lead

ship and shaking up Sandy Sanford's teacups on the officers dining table. They had been left there abruptly when the sighting came in, and now Sanford was on the bridge, dismayed when he suddenly found his cruisers under enemy air attack.

"Mister Laurence! What's happened with that hit amidships?"

"A ruddy fire sir. Engineers say it took out both seaplane catapults, and they're trying to keep it off the torpedo mounts."

"Launch all Torpedoes," said Sanford. "Can't take the chance they'll go off in the tubes, for then we'd really have a problem amidships. Any threat to the engines?"

"No sir, we're running well at 33 knots. In fair seas we'd be at 35, but it's this weather, sir."

"Good, good. Well mister Kingston, that damn aircraft carrier is launching everything it has at us here. Get after it with the guns!"

"Range is 16,200, but we don't seem to be closing Captain. They're running sir."

"As well they should. Then get busy with them. There's nothing wrong with our guns."

Sanford was not happy. Why hadn't the enemy chosen *Sir Galahad* for their parlor tricks? Now his nice new cruiser was burned and charred amidships, though reports indicated the crews would get the fire under control in another twenty minutes. His bloody gunners were firing, but they hadn't yet scored a hit, which was most aggravating. The Captain was somewhat of a busybody, and he was hovering around the fire control station like a mother hen, watching the men work. He knew it would be difficult shooting. The seas were still high, and the pitch and yaw of the ship was going to make for a most unstable and changeable gunnery platform.

It was that, more than the brave but largely fruitless effort of the German pilots, that served to frustrate the British gunners. They managed to put rounds very near their quarry, putting some splinter damage on the *Goeben's* hull, but the carrier then slipped into a bank of low clouds and the action was down to Ack Ack fire at those bothersome planes. Five of the six *Stukas* had dropped their bombs, but only Rudel had scored a direct hit. The last, flown by Hansen, came very close to putting a bomb right in front of that quad turret on *Sir Galahad*, but the seas conspired to move the ship out of harm's way.

Captain Sanford saw them wing away to the northeast after a final strafing run by a speedy Messerschmitt. The bullets snapped off his conning tower armor, and one round shattered a glass pane, which prompted him to shake his fist at the enemy. Then the last of the fighters banked away, and a calm fell over the scene. To Sanford it was a most unwelcome calm. He had his mind set on fighting his gun battle with that carrier, though not one single enemy round had been fired back at the two cruisers for the hundred rounds they sent *Goeben's* way without scoring even a single hit.

That was par for the course. One or two percent would be a typical hit ratio for gunnery under these conditions, but Sanford was not at all happy.

"Radar? Do we still have them?"

"Contact at 18,000 meters, but they're slipping away sir."

"Mister Laurence, are we running full out?"

"Aye sir, engines all ahead full."

"Well my lord, that's a fast ship out there, but to my mind they were running low on fuel. Otherwise what would they be doing here with that tanker?"

"A fair assumption, sir."

"Yes... Well let's keep after them. Keep after them. Mister Kingston, keep nipping at their hind quarters. Fire by radar while we still have a link on them."

Kingston knew that was mere fist shaking at this range, but he nonetheless ordered B turret to put out two rounds to satisfy the Captain. A moment later they lost that radar contact, and the *Goeben* had broken away, off over the grey, uncertain horizon.

"Damn," said Sanford, stroking his chin. "Now they might turn anywhere. They could turn south and we'd run right by them, wouldn't we. Then again, I doubt if they'll go south if they have a fuel problem. No, they'll want to get north and then northeast, right in the wake of those planes. Where in blazes are those planes off to?"

"Africa, sir," said Laurence. "It's clear they won't make a landing on that carrier under these circumstances."

"Right you are. Then this carrier will want to get to the African coast as well, so what we'll do is stay inshore of the little demon, and keep ourselves in a good position to cut the bastard off at the knees if he tries to slip by us. But we'll have to do better than that on the gunnery, Mister Kingston. We'll

have to do a good deal better. I want the first hit to go to *Lancelot*. After all, we took the first enemy bomb. That will only be fitting. Is *Galahad* still firing?"

"No sir," said Laurence. "They've secured main guns as well,"

"Oh we haven't secured ours, Mister Laurence. No sir. We simply have nothing to fire at. Crews will remain at action stations., and now we've a difficult decision here. If we stay together, we'll be putting both our chips on the same number. If we split up, we might have a better chance of one or another making contact again."

"A sound assessment, sir."

"Yes, but we'll be halving our firepower."

"Yes sir, that we would, but I'd say either one of us can handle that carrier out there. Particularly now that the crows have flown."

"Right. Well then, order *Galahad* to make a 30 point turn to Starboard. They'll look for that devil up north. We'll carry on this heading for a while, and see what we find."

It was as good a move as Sanford might make, trying to cover as much seascape as possible, and sending his ships into different segments of the compass rose. But high overhead, one of the crows was still lingering. Marco Ritter had loitered for a time to see that the British would do. He saw the maneuver made by *Galahad*, and then radioed Captain Falkenrath.

"Sorry we couldn't get you more hits," he said. "You'll have one ship on your present heading, just over your horizon. The second has come about 30 points to starboard. They're splitting up. You'll know what to do."

Kapitan Falkenrath smiled. "Come left full rudder. We're swinging off to port. Assume a heading of 180 true south. We'll run on that for 20 minutes ahead full, then go ahead one third. That damn cruiser will run off west thinking he's still on our hind quarters, but we'll be well south. Then we'll double back and ease on up to the northwest. Any plane that hasn't taken off will remain aboard. We may need them later."

The flight and fate of the *Goeben* was still in the wind, but as for Kapitan Heinrich on the *Kaiser Wilhelm*, he would make an easy run up north that day under considerable escort from flocks of JU-88s and Heinkels. By dawn the following day his battlecruiser would slip into Casablanca, and he would make his report to Admiral Raeder. The German navy had a naval rocket! And it had a load of complicated looking radar equipment and antennae that

had been stripped from the Norton Sound. It also had something that neither man would be aware of for some time, a small, fully functioning atomic warhead sleeping quietly in the tip of that missile.

The Grand Admiral had flown to Casablanca to be there when *Kaiser Wilhelm* arrived, and he was elated. When he first set eyes on that rocket.

“Shall we have it moved ashore, sir?” Heinrich suggested.

“Certainly not. What good would it do there? No. Leave it right where it is, in the belly of a fast armored battlecruiser. I want you to refuel today, and then tonight you steam for Gibraltar. From there you will move to Toulon the following night, and I have arranged a heavy escort for you the whole way. From Toulon, we’ll put that rocket on a fast train to Germany. Well done, Kapitan Heinrich. Let us hope the *Goeben* gets through as well, and *Kormoran* with that prize ship. The more, the merrier. Now then, let us meet over dinner to discuss this mission. I want to hear your entire report.”

Heinrich smiled. He was holding a plain leather brief, and inside it he had placed many of the papers and logs his crew had taken from that strange American ship, and the most unusual magazine he had shared with Kapitan Detmers. It was going to make for very interesting dinner conversation, to say the least.

Part III

Too Many Cooks

“Too many cooks will spoil the broth.”

— **Proverb**

Chapter 7

Plan Orient was dead. It had been little more than a dream, to sweep into Syria, down through Palestine and possibly into Iraq, taking the oil fields at Baba Gugur in the process and then thinking to link up with Orenburg through a friendly leaning Iran. That was not going to happen now, but Admiral Raeder's daring Operation Condor had been trying to resurrect some advantage from the capture of Gibraltar, and revitalize Rommel's position in Libya.

They had tried to move into the Middle East, but the British Operation Scimitar had fought the Franco-German axis to a standstill in Syria and Lebanon. Hitler had authorized just enough force to stabilize the French, but it soon became clear that to achieve any real victory there, that force would have to be dramatically augmented. Halder insisted that any real offensive aimed at rolling back the British would require another three divisions at bare minimum, and five to seven to assure success.

"And suppose we do retake Damascus," he argued. "Then what? Do you honestly propose we should continue on through that desert into Iraq? That is where the British will be, and they can fall back and consolidate there indefinitely, always on our flank if we go for Egypt. Do we then plan a major operation in Iraq? To do so we will have to first drive them out of the north, take Mosul, Erbil and Kirkuk, and then push on to capture Baghdad. After that we will have to pursue them all the way south to Basra."

"What about the oil fields at Baba Gugur?" Raeder had argued.

"Suppose we were sitting on them today?" said Halder. "How do you propose we move any of that oil to Germany? They can move the oil by sea out of Basra—we cannot. It will have to be trucked over 600 miles to ports in northern Syria and then another 700 miles to Athens by sea, always at risk. The only other option is to move it over that antiquated rail system in Turkey. Barbarossa could link up with Orenburg in the Caucasus in three months, and then, with command of the Black Sea, we can move all the oil he controls easily to ports in Rumania and Bulgaria. That is the oil we should set our minds on obtaining, not this nonsensical adventure in the Middle East."

"And what if those troops were turned south into Palestine instead?"

Hitler's eyes played over the map.

"It will need at least three divisions driving down the coast from Beirut, four or five to push through Damascus to Amman and Jerusalem. That is a bare minimum, and then we would also have to cover that wide open flank all the way to the Turkish frontier, because the British can move troops by sea to Iraq. That would require another three divisions, possibly more, and they would all have to rely on supply lines through Turkey, and anything else we manage to deliver by sea to northern Syria, which would then be trucked hundreds of miles inland. See the difficulties? What you must do here, my Führer, is make a major commitment to open this new front and sustain it indefinitely. And bear in mind that these troops will have to be mechanized—high caliber divisions. You must either commit the force necessary to smash the British, or face a long drawn out campaign that will become nothing more than a fruitless holding action, just like we have in North Africa. And bear in mind, all these troops will have to be taken from the southern wing in Barbarossa."

At that Hitler had taken a long breath, quietly shaking his head. He was simply not willing to compromise the long standing plans for Barbarossa. He had listened to Raeder, given him the benefit of every doubt, but the operations had only handed him a stalemate, in both North Africa and Syria. He decided.

"The plans and troop allocations for Barbarossa will not be disturbed. I can see this adventure in the Middle East is entirely fruitless. Make arrangements to withdraw Steiner's troops for Barbarossa. As for the Mountain Division, send it to Rommel. The 22nd Luftland Division and other airborne troops will be returned to the General Reserve."

That spelled the end of Plan Orient, which had really been little more than a dream in Hitler's mind all along, urged on by Raeder's whispered promises. His fixation with the necessity of destroying the Soviet State was now uppermost in his mind, and Barbarossa was launched on schedule.

The withdrawal of German support led to a quick collapse of French resistance in Syria and Lebanon. They were forced to abandon Beirut, withdrawing north while they still had German support, and consolidating their entire force to hold Northern Syria from Homs to Aleppo. The British pushed up the Euphrates as far as Ar Raqqa, and then occupied Palmyra astride their vital pipeline route to the coast. They were able to advance as far

as Tripoli on the coast, but then their eyes strayed to the Libyan Desert, largely at Churchill's urging after Rommel nearly stormed Tobruk.

The British Operation Crusader had been the first major attempt to push Rommel back, but it had also ended in a stalemate. The British tank losses would take some time to replenish, and the new cruiser tanks they had fielded proved completely unreliable. A lull descended on the desert campaign, with neither side able to take offensive operations with any real prospect of success. In this vacuum, Japan's dramatic entry into the war commanded the attention of Western planners, but then, Germany's surprising Operation Condor was launched, using some of the very same troops that had been committed to the ill fated Syrian operation.

Raeder had managed to convince Hitler that a Reichspfening spent here could make a Reichsmark in due course with the capture of the Canary Islands. His arguments as to how this would cut the British supply lines to Egypt and enhance the U-Boat campaign finally fell on good ground, and Hitler approved the operation in January of 1942.

The Germans had made a daring attack, leaping from bases and airfields on the African coast to attack the island of Fuerteventura. The arrival of Force H and Home fleet mustered the bulk of the Royal Navy to make a bold attempt to sever the sea communications in the channel between the islands and mainland Africa. It resulted in the largest naval engagement of the war, with the Franco-German fleet going head to head with the Royal Navy in a desperate and costly battle. Good ships and good men were lost on both sides, including the loss of Admiral Volsky, who gave his last breath at the wheel as he struggled to steer HMS *Invincible* to safe waters. His sacrifice had already saved Tovey, and ended up saving that ship, but the cost was his own life, a hard blow when the news finally came to Fedorov. In the end, it was a matter of logistics that eventually compelled the British fleet to withdraw north to Madeira and the Azores for refueling.

The Germans managed to take Lanzarote, Fuerteventura and the main island at Gran Canaria. The British still stubbornly held on to Tenerife, La Palma, La Gomera and El Hierro, with their main strength on Tenerife around the port of Santa Cruz. Now both sides began to plan how to continue that struggle, and logistics would again figure prominently in the game.

"Now that they've put troops on these islands," said Tovey in a meeting at Admiralty headquarters, "they'll have to keep them supplied, and that goes

double for what is perhaps their most dangerous asset, the Luftwaffe. I'm told the army left the airfields in bad shape when we pulled out, and we sunk an old WWI destroyer in the entrance to the Grand Harbor, but the Germans will cure that in a matter of weeks. Then it comes down to who can keep the troops and planes fighting and flying. Our intelligence indicates that those German raiders have now returned. One got through to Casablanca. The other is still operating near the Canaries, and we hope to run it down. In the meantime, the navy must do everything possible to contest the littoral zones around the islands. I'll be sending *Duke of York* back to work soon, and *King George V* as soon as possible. But we can't afford to lose another battleship here. Those heavy units will be there to discourage moves by enemy capital ships, but the rest will be up to our cruisers and destroyers, backed up by aircraft carriers."

"How will the Germans get fuel for their land based planes?"

"By sea. They might fly some in, but in the main, it will have to be brought by ship. We think they may be using their new aircraft carrier as an aviation fuel ferry to the islands, a rather clever idea. The German Navy has never had to think and act this way, realizing the importance of logistics in projecting naval power at sea. For them it was all about the U-Boats, where they fight that battle on a grand strategic scale. But now, and for the first time since their Norway operation, they must use their navy to sustain troops overseas. It was their inability to do this that eventually allowed us to face them down in Syria. Now they must succeed here, or they will lose these islands, and we will spare no effort in defeating them."

"At the same time," said Admiral Fraser, "we shall have to make every effort to hold on to Tenerife and La Palma. Those islands have the last of the good ports and airfields. They are birds in the hand, and if we lose them, then it will take the planning and execution of a major amphibious operation to ever get them back."

"Right," said Tovey. "They will also be instrumental as forward bases for plans being laid for Operation Gymnast. Soon we'll have much more support from the Yanks, and that will make a good deal of difference. French North Africa will become a major new front in this war and, in that campaign, we also have the issue of Gibraltar to settle with the Spanish."

"I don't see how we can do all this now," said Pound. "Mister Churchill has been shuffling off divisions to Burma, and the Australians are pulling

their best troops out of the Middle East.”

“We certainly can’t contemplate such an offensive for some time,” said Tovey. “But the planning is still going forward, and the Navy figures prominently in every aspect. We can’t take the Rock from the sea. The only way to do it is from the landward side. Therefore, Spain will have to be dealt with first, and that is a major offensive that will most likely come through Portugal.”

“I’ve had a look at those plans to date,” said Fraser. “That operation is to be timed with another landing at Casablanca. It all depends on the Americans. Without them, all we could do is hold our own in Egypt.”

“Well,” said Pound, “the homeland will have to get serious about building up battle ready divisions soon, but that is a matter for the army. For our part, we’ll get all the transport shipping we need from the Yanks, and more destroyers. But we’ll have to get our own fleet back as a solid fighting force as soon as possible.”

“I’ve checked the yards for progress after Fuerteventura,” said Tovey. HMS *Invincible* has been given the highest priority, and she’ll be ready in March. Then we’ll have *Anson* in May, *Howe* in June, but those are the last capital ships we can count on for the foreseeable future. The *Lion* class is still in the brewing vats, and will be for some time. The *Knight* Class cruisers may help fill in for the loss of *Renown* and *Repulse*. Let’s get more of those ships to sea as quickly as we can.”

“The Round Table is forming,” said Pound. “*Sir Gawain* and *Percival* are already fitting out, and after them come *Pelleas* and *Baudwin*. I note that *Sir Lancelot* has already tangled with those German raiders, but with mixed results.”

“Teething troubles,” said Tovey. “That was a real baptism by fire for those ships and crews. Yet I’m given to understand that the Admiralty diverted Captain Sanford at a critical moment, and sent him off to look for a German tanker instead of closing and engaging with *Kaiser Wilhelm*. That won’t do if we want to sink German ships.”

“We’ve sunk the *Ermland*,” said Pound. “Thanks to *Trident*. I was responsible for that order, and frankly, given the state of our battleships, we will have to be just a little more cautious as to how and when we can engage the enemy now. *Kaiser Wilhelm* had 15-inch guns. We’ve enough ships laid up as it stands, so I looked for easier prey.”

Tovey nodded, thinking. He had been criticized in some Admiralty circles for being too quick to get the navy into a fight. The losses sustained of late had been very heavy, but he still had Churchill's backing, and intended to run Home Fleet as he pleased. "Getting *Ermland* was a good feather in our cap," he said at last. "Getting the *Goeben* will do even better. Sanford is still in the chase, in spite of that hit he took amidships, and I intend to support him as best I can."

"Strange that these raiders did little or nothing on that last sortie," said Pound. "They go all the way into the South Atlantic to shell an airfield, then simply turn about and return home. We had convoys out there on the way to the Pacific, and the Germans never bothered any of them. It was as if they were trying to avoid engagement, particularly on this homeward leg."

"Yes... That was odd," said Tovey, his mind running to the strange photographs Turing had shown him, and the mystery they still represented. He would not mention any of that here. Admiral Pound would remain 'in the dark' concerning the real identity of *Kirov*, the Russians, Kinlan's Brigade and all the rest. Photographs of ships at sea that had yet to be commissioned, or even laid down, would not be the sort of thing Pound would deal with easily. Nor would Tovey draw water from the bottom of that well for some time, though he made a mental note to see what Turing was up to as soon as possible.

"Sanford believes they had fuel problems. In that case, your orders to go after the *Ermland* may have been just the ticket, Admiral Pound. Good show. Logistics at sea, gentlemen. Jerry is late to the game, and let us all vow to keep him on the sidelines as long as we can. If they do get well established in the Canary Islands, and well supplied, then we've a whole new bowl of stew to get through. German *Stukas* on those fields will force all convoys to Freetown and the Cape to divert by at least 350 miles, and lord help us if they get U-boat pens set up there. This is why we need to rethink what we're doing at sea with another vital arm of our force projection—the carriers."

"We've had to send three off to the Pacific with Somerville," said Pound, "but that still leaves us three with Home Fleet, and three more at Alexandria."

"The more the merrier," said Tovey, but it's not the ships I'm thinking of now, but the planes they carry. "Look what the Japanese accomplished at Pearl Harbor. Why, they've practically re-written the textbook on how to

equip and utilize their carriers at sea. In the Pacific, every operation they undertake is centered on their carriers. Their naval air arm is simply superb, and on that score, the F.A.A. could not hope to match them. Now, we have adequate fighters. The Martlet and Seafires are coming along nicely, and giving us good capability for fleet defense. The Albacore is there as a torpedo bomber, but gentlemen, we need a better dive bomber. The Fulmar simply won't do, and without a decent aircraft in that role, we're like a boxer with one arm tied behind his back."

"The Buccaneer is coming along nicely," said Pound. "It will be a dual purpose aircraft, taking either torpedoes or bombs, just like the new model the Americans are working on, the Avenger."

"We might want to have a look at that plane if we can talk them out of a few. Putting better strike aircraft on our carriers gives us some real offensive punch. The days of fluttering in with Swordfish are long over. Jerry is building aircraft carriers, and they've got the *Stuka*. We've all seen what they can do with that combination. God forbid they ever develop a good torpedo plane." There was a moment of silence at that, and the Admirals took Tovey's words to heart.

"I'll put in a word to Admiral King concerning those Avengers," said Pound. "Frankly, our projection of power at sea has always been built around the battleship, but you may be on to something here, Admiral Tovey. HMS *Glorious* has done well with those old Stringbags, and now she has Martlets and the Albacore."

"It wasn't the planes," said Tovey, "it was the man that sent them out to do the job. We need more like this Captain Wells."

"Yes," said Pound, "he certainly put *Bretagne* and *Provence* under the sea, but we paid a high price for them—France..."

That statement fell like a hot coal in cold water, and there was a silence about the conference table, until Tovey lifted his chin and responded. "I might add that he sunk those ships on orders from the Admiralty, and against the wishes of his senior Commanding Officer on the scene, Admiral Somerville."

"I'll not dispute that," said Pound, "but we must admit that was one situation we might have handled differently. Had it not been for Churchill's bullying, things might have gone otherwise."

"It isn't what we might have done that matters now," said Tovey, "but

what we might yet do. I daresay Hitler is probably wishing he hadn't crossed the Soviet border as he did. And there will be time enough for all of us to sit with our regrets in a cold dark closet before this war is over."

"But we'll muddle through," said Fraser.

"Aye," said Tovey. "That we will."

Chapter 8

It was one of the most difficult decisions Churchill would make in the entire war, and he stared at the letter he had just received from Wavell with an almost unbelieving expression on his face. The prospect being put to him now by his Theater Commander seemed preposterous, and yet, as he read on, the cold military logic in Wavell's arguments could not be denied. Now he sat with his newly appointed Chief of the Imperial General Staff, General Alan Brooke, relieved to have him at hand now instead of Field Marshal John Dill, a man Churchill never fully appreciated, and one he quietly maneuvered out of the chair he now gave Brooke.

Given the central role he would play in planning the war, Churchill had found it necessary to take Brooke aside and confide the one great 'truth' to him that had shaken the history to its very foundation. Brooke was absolutely amazed, as any man might be upon hearing such a story, but when Churchill handed him a photograph taken in Siwa of Kinlan's battalion of heavy Challenger IIs, the General had removed his eye glasses, and leaned in very close.

The shock of knowing he was looking at men and machines from another time, Britain's far flung future, was almost too much to take. Churchill confided he felt the same way, until the reality of what he was looking at finally banished all the arguments his mind put forth as to his own insanity. With those men, those machines, the Allies could win the war.

The Heavy Brigade was now something Churchill treasured beyond the worth of all the Crown Jewels and all the gold in the nation's treasury. He had in that single brigade, the means of decisive victory at any time and place of his choosing. Beyond that, Kinlan knew the outcome of the war, even as Fedorov had. He was a road map to the victory Churchill was laboring to bring about, yet was isolated there in the Middle East, far from the War Cabinet, and all the decisions that would have to be made there.

At one point Churchill thought he would summon the man to London, and keep him at his side to navigate the stormy waters ahead, but the young Russian Captain Fedorov had convinced him of the danger inherent in the knowledge of future days.

“Knowing what once happened will not necessarily bend the course of this war to follow the same path,” he had told Churchill. “In fact, simply knowing the outcome of any battle could become a fatal poison in the brew. It removes the uncertainty from your thinking, and could introduce a cavalier attitude to the decision making process that might be fatal. For it was only in the dark of the night, with enemies on every side, beset with fear and that awful uncertainty, that you could truly weigh the risks, and the consequences of the choices you had to make. I could hand you a book that would lay out every battle, every misstep and lost opportunity, every advantage before you, but that would take the passion of life out of you, and without that, you would never be the same man again. Understand?”

“I suppose I do,” Churchill had said. “It would be like knowing the outcome of every flirtatious proposal you might make to a lady, and whether you might win through to capture her heart, among other things. Would a man risk his pride and honor to woo a woman he knew he could have at his whim? I think not. There would be nothing at stake, and he could therefore neither feel the elation of his conquest, nor the pain of his loss should he fail. Yes, Mister Fedorov, I do understand what you are saying.”

So it was that Fedorov remained very careful and cautious with the information he had on the outcome of the war, and he had also privately urged Kinlan to be equally reticent. “These men may know they can win this war, but not how, not by chapter and verse. They must write this history themselves now, with the sweat of their brow, and the blood of the men they send to do battle. Besides—from everything I have seen, this entire history seems to be a house of cards. Change one thing and the whole of it could come tumbling down. We have no way of knowing which events could cause such a catastrophe. We can speculate and guess, but never know to a certainty. Tell them everything, and the weight of all that knowledge could be too difficult for them to bear.”

The weight had seemed that way to Churchill, and he eventually decided he had to bring someone ‘inside’ on the truth of the matter, someone with dignity, authority, and the broad respect of his peers—someone like Sir Alan Brooke. He needed a foil to his own mind on the war, and Brooke would become that for him, though he would once write of Churchill: “A complete amateur of strategy, he swamps himself in detail he should never look at, and as a result fails to ever see a strategic problem in its true perspective.”

The two men would have a very tempestuous relationship in the years ahead, but it was one where something would arise from their interaction to define a new truth. Like yin and yang, they would both oppose and define one another at the same time, and something sublime would result.

“Well General,” said Churchill, “We have a rather delicate situation here. Wavell wants Montgomery back for his big operation in North Africa, but the man has only barely warmed the chair in the Pacific. ”

A veteran of the First War, Brooke specialized in the hammering work of the heavy guns in that nightmare, developing a tactic that came to be known as “the creeping barrage.” His thunder was heard at the Somme, and at Vimy Ridge, and after that war he moved on to the Imperial Defense College. There he met many of the men who were now running the war, including General Montgomery, who had 3rd Division in Brooke’s II Corps in France. Both men saw eye to eye. In fact, it had been Brooke who quietly put forward Montgomery’s name when the decision was made to relieve Percival.

“I recommended him wholeheartedly,” said Brooke, “but it will seem a bit of a snub to Percival to have Monty say ‘there, I’ve gone and fixed your little mess, and now I’m off to my desert again.’ The problem is, Monty is just enough of an old goat to say something along those lines. He can be somewhat blunt at times.”

“That is the least of it,” said Churchill, handing Brooke Wavell’s latest communication. “After all this shuffle and bother, Wavell wants to pull out of Singapore! He’s of a mind that, in spite of every effort made to hold it, the place is now indefensible with the Japanese landing on Sumatra. Outrageous!”

Brooke studied the letter for some time, with Churchill pacing about the close confines of the War Cabinet Map Room beneath the Treasury building near Whitehall. Here was a perfect case of the danger in knowing too much. Churchill had learned the truth from Fedorov as to the actual force disparity between the Japanese troops and those under Percival. He had then dispatched his close advisor Brendon Bracken to try and convince Percival to stand fast, but he remained a weak stone in the wall there. Montgomery had been the solution, but now, in spite of that intervention, events were already conspiring to undermine that whole effort. It seemed Singapore was a rock destined to sink, and the question now was what would it take down with it when it fell?

“I know on the face of things that your reaction would seem fully justified,” Brooke said at last. “Quite frankly, I must tell you I personally never believed there was much hope of saving Singapore. Montgomery did a bang up job, stopped the Japanese right in their tracks, but now that island is no more than a solid rock in the stream.”

“Exactly,” said Churchill. “The Rock of the East. Do you realize the political and moral capital we’ve put in the treasury as a result of this one small victory? Here we finally find a General who can win in a good fight, and now Wavell loses his nerve and wants to simply give it all back to the enemy! And for what? Java? We couldn’t hold Gibraltar, and losing it we virtually lost the Mediterranean, at least in the public’s eye, even if Admiral Cunningham still holds sway in the east. To lose Singapore will mean we’ve lost the Pacific, and with the war there only months old.”

“It may mean that to the man on the street,” said Brooke, “but to those of us lurking in the War Cabinet, we must take a wider and longer view.” Brooke quietly laid Wavell’s letter on the table. “Yes, I certainly never expected to see things fall apart as they have,” he said. “I was of a mind to send the British 18th Division to Rangoon instead of Singapore, but Monty made good use of it, and was bull headed enough to stop the Japanese. Yet now they have gone right around him with these landings in Sumatra. They’ve gone after the airfields he was counting on for air cover over the island. Without them, we’ll be forced back to Batavia, and with the Japanese already on Borneo, Singapore will be sitting there like a pearl in a Japanese clam. It will be completely isolated. Mister Prime Minister, the fact of the matter is this.... For the moment we hold that island on the strength of our ground troops there, and the man who led that defense. Yet to hold it further, we will need control of the air and sea around it.”

“You will recall my proposal to secure a lodgment in northern Sumatra?” Churchill wagged a finger.

“Yes, I do recall it, but there was simply no suitable port. Banda Aceh was the only prospect that could be supported from Colombo. Pedang on the west coast was just too small.”

“Yet we might have made a good fight there on Sumatra.”

“With what sir? The Australians have just recalled their entire first Corps from North Africa, and they certainly would not hear anything about sending them to Sumatra. Would you have us divert the 70th Division from Burma to

Sumatra? That would be madness. It was all we could do to get the 18th Division to Singapore, but I think all we have done is throw good money after bad. Percival lost his battle before we gave Montgomery a chance to win it for him. He lost it on the Malayan Peninsula. The fate of Singapore always rested on the assumption that we could hold Malaya for at least six months. His Operation Matador decided everything when it squandered all his strength in piecemeal defensive battles followed by chaotic retreat. By the time those troops got to Singapore, they were beaten three times and ready for another good licking. It was a miracle that Monty pulled things together, but remember, he did that with fresh British troops, including the New Zealand Brigade Wavell sent him.”

“But do you seriously propose we should now simply abandon the city? It would give the Japanese the greatest harbor in the Pacific!”

Brooke smiled. “They don’t need it. All they wanted there was a moral victory.”

“And we denied them that, while savoring the very same dish ourselves. Singapore was about the moral fiber of this Empire, of the fighting British soldier, and of the word we gave to our friends and allies that we would hold it safe and secure.”

“All well and good,” said Brooke, “but to the Japanese, taking Singapore was a defensive move to shore up their right flank as they push south. They won’t be using it to carry out further offensives, as the only prize west of Singapore is Burma, and they already have troops there. That’s also a defensive move, and one we should strongly oppose.”

“Agreed,” said Churchill. “If they push us out, they’ll be knocking on the door to India.”

“Possibly,” said Brooke. “I rather think they will have other designs in the near run. They’ll take Sumatra. The Dutch can’t hold out for long there, and we simply can’t get sufficient reinforcements there to stop them, but we might do better on Java. That’s where they will turn next. If they take Java, and the islands leading east, then things point in a very dangerous direction—Australia. That’s why the Aussies are pulling their troops out of the Middle East. They’ll need them at home, and on New Guinea. We’ve also received disturbing intelligence that the Japanese are looking over the Bismarck Sea. That would be a prelude to a move into the Solomons, and once they have control of those islands, Australia would be completely cut off. They already

have the New Hebrides. When the Yanks ever do muster up to get into the war, they'll have to operate from Fiji and Samoa. Now then... we might wail over the loss of Singapore if we take Wavell's advice, but consider the loss of Australia. It isn't Java we may be trading now for Singapore, it's Australia."

That remark so darkened the air in the room that Churchill remained silent, sitting with the grim prospects of their situation for some time. "I see it as plainly as you do," he said sullenly. "Wavell's arguments certainly sting. We can't control the Malacca Strait because the Japanese are sitting on all our airfields in Malaya. The front door is closed, and the only other way in is through the back door in the Sunda Strait between Sumatra and Java."

"And to use that," said Brooke, "we'll have to hold Batavia. You can be sure the Japanese know that, and Java will be next on their list. So even if we hold Singapore, those troops will just sit there, and with dwindling supplies, and no further air cover. After we lose that, the convoys won't get through in any case. We can't cover them from Batavia, which is 550 miles from Singapore."

"Then where do we stand? When do we dig in our heels and tell the other fellow no more. I had hoped we could do that with Singapore, and now you tell me it was all for nothing."

"Not entirely," said Brooke. "We've taught them a lesson on Singapore. We've shown them they aren't invincible—they can be stopped. Yet now we must learn the hard lesson they are teaching us—that control of the sea is the essential element in all of these maneuverings. That's what we've built this Empire with—the Royal Navy. The Army can't go anywhere without them, and that is the simple fact of the matter. It comes down to sea power, and control of the air space over those seas. The Japanese have gone and knocked the Yanks off their bar stool at Pearl Harbor, and it may be a good long while before they get up off the floor. In the meantime, the Japanese Navy is the undisputed master of the Pacific, and if we're going to stop them anywhere, we'll have to pose a credible threat to that sea power."

Churchill shook his head, regretfully. "I wanted to send a pair of heavy warships to Singapore, but this Russian Captain let slip they would go down in a Japanese air attack. A hard lesson indeed, General Brooke, but we're learning it. Our battleships have taken the hard knocks of late in this dirty business off the Canary Islands. So now it's down to cruisers and aircraft carriers. We'll be forced to fight the way we should have been fighting all

along—by projecting air power at sea.”

“Correct,” said Brooke. “Admiral Tovey knows it. I had a discussion with him when he was in London a while back. He wants to send Somerville to the Pacific, and with three aircraft carriers, and he wants a new dive bomber.”

“That’s the way the Japanese have pulled off their parlor tricks,” said Churchill.

“Indeed,” said Brooke. “I noted Wavell leaned on that rather heavily. He wants to try and salvage something from our stand on Singapore—the Army we sent there to do the job. At the moment, the Dutch are sitting with about 25,000 troops on Java, mostly native units. The Aussies have a brigade there, and there’s a battalion of Yanks in the mix as well. Wavell wants to pull out of Singapore while we still can, and get those troops to Java. To do so we’ll have to be quick. In another week to ten days the Dutch will be pushed right off Sumatra. The Japanese have already taken Airfield P1 near Palembang. They haven’t found P2 yet, but they will in good time. The 18th Division might just slip away from Singapore if we act quickly, but just barely. Otherwise, I’m afraid those troops are as good as lost. In another two weeks we’ll never be able to get them out, nor will we be able to keep them supplied.”

“And the civilians?” said Churchill with a look of anguish. “That is the other side of the moral issue here. There’s a million people on that island. Do we just abandon them? Do we just leave them to the mercy of the Japanese? You know what they did at Hong Kong.”

“Only too well,” said Brooke. “Yet it comes down to losing Singapore now, or losing it later. It’s only a question of time. Mister Prime Minister, we put up the good fight, but our enemy is smarter than all that. Mark my words—they’ll take Java before spring, and then hop their way east towards Australia, whether we still hold Singapore or not.”

Chapter 9

“My god man,” said Churchill, “you make it seem as though we haven’t a shred of hope in any of this.”

“Forgive me if I sound jaded.” Brooke stood there with complete poise, in spite of the gloomy mood that hung over the scene. “I’m a realist. I won’t stir honey into your tea here, because the day I stop telling you what I truly believe, is the day I will be of no further use to you. As to Java, yes, I have my doubts about trying to reinforce it now. Assuming the 18th Division does get to Java safely, I would make arrangements to pull it off in due course. We could use it in Burma. If nothing else, such a maneuver might buy us time. We just might slow them down enough to let the Yanks get back on their feet. You know damn well that we can’t beat the Japanese in the Pacific alone. We’re just hanging on by our fingernails in the west. We need the Americans, and we need Australia. That’s the long view of it all; the hard view. A million souls sit there in Singapore to pay the price for the tens of millions that will fall into the darkness if we lose this war.”

The ticking of a clock on the wall seemed unbearably loud as Brooke waited. Then, slowly, Churchill drew back a chair and sat down. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a cigar, lighting it with quiet, methodical movements, his eyes fixed on the flame as it began to scorch and burn the tip.

“We can do both at once,” he said. “Make quiet arrangements for the withdrawal of the 18th Division and the Australian and New Zealand Brigades to Java. Mister Curtin will likely want those troops back on Australian soil, and I agree that the 18th Division would be better posted in Burma. Montgomery won’t like it, but we don’t have to tell him anything until the orders have been sent. Get discrete word to the Governor that he should see to the arrangement of daily convoys to move as many civilians as possible off the island. The Indian divisions and the Malaya Brigade, along with all the Fortress troops, will stand the line. We will hold Singapore as long as we possibly can, but make it seem that contingencies compel us to reinforce the Dutch, particularly with the threat that an early enemy occupation of the Malay Barrier Islands would pose to Australia.”

“You realize that by dividing our forces we risk both ends of this

equation,” said Brooke.

“True, but I once told the Australian Prime Minister that as long as we hold Singapore, the Japanese would not dare to attack his homeland, and that should they do so, we would respond by sending a battle fleet. It was only on the assurance that Singapore would be held that the Australian government agreed to join us in North Africa and the Middle East. Those troops were a godsend. Without them we could not have held the line there. We owe them. So now we must fight, as best we can, to retain some footing from which we can restore what we have lost when stronger forces become available. In the short run, I have finally scraped together that battlefleet I promised. Somerville’s job will be to project as much air cover over the area as possible, enough to cover these withdrawals and deter a Japanese invasion of Java. If need be I’ll send a full squadron of Spitfires over there. This is the least we can do, and all we can do for the moment. As for Java... How long can we hold there? Will we be having this same conversation in another two weeks?”

“Everything depends on Somerville. If he can cover Batavia, deter or prevent a Japanese landing on Java, then we might have the time to get our shirts tucked in and make a stand there as we did on Singapore. In this light, I’m of a mind we should leave Montgomery in the Pacific until the question of Java is settled. I told you the Japanese never needed Singapore, except to deny it to us. What they do need, however, is Java. If we do try and hold them off, expect a fight there, and for all the other islands leading east to Timor and Darwin. As for Somerville’s prospects of forestalling an invasion, I very much doubt that. He would have to take his carriers through the Sunda Strait and into the Java Sea to oppose any landing on the north coast. That would be dangerous. He’d find himself boxed in, and if the Japanese move planes to Sumatra, he’d be under their land based air power.”

“And if we lose Java?” Churchill’s question betrayed his uncertainty. He took a long drag on his cigar, and now his wandering eye sought out his brandy flask.

“Then we will fight them from Darwin,” Brooke said flatly.

It was what happened the following day that finally put the real fear into Churchill’s soul. The Japanese bombed Port Darwin. Their attack was meant to prepare the way for planned invasions into the Celebes at Kendari and Makassar, and an attack aimed at Amboina and eventually Timor. It was

thought that any naval forces worth the name that might be mustered in Port Darwin could be eliminated as easily as the American Navy had been humbled at Pearl Harbor.

When Churchill got the news, Brooke's words about trading Singapore for Australia were finally riveted home. Orders went out from the Chiefs of Staff immediately:

19 Feb, 1942

TO: ABDACOM

FROM: COMBINED CHIEFS OF STAFF

In light of Japanese operations now underway against Tarakan, Samarinda and Balikpapan on Borneo, and against Menado, Baubau, Makassar and Amboina in the Celebes region, it is anticipated that further enemy operations will be directed against the Malay Barrier Islands as early as 24 Feb, 1942. It is therefore ordered that:

1. JAVA should be defended with the utmost resolution by all forces present on the island. Every day gained is of importance.

2. You have discretion to augment defense of Java with available naval forces and with U.S. aircraft now at your disposal assembling in Australia.

3. Land reinforcements to be moved from Singapore should augment defense of points in your area vital to the continuance of the struggle against Japan, namely, Java, Bali, Sumbawa, Flores and Timor. Of these, Java, Bali and Timor are to be held with the utmost tenacity, and every provision must be made to cover and defend the Port of Darwin on the Australian mainland.

4. HQ Fortress Singapore is hereby reinstated to overall command of General Percival, and will defend in place with the following forces now assigned as permanent garrison:

- 11th Indian Division: 28th Indian Brigade, 41st Indian Brigade

- Malaya Brigade, S.S.V.F. Brigade, and all Fortress Troops.

5. Insofar as available shipping permits, every effort will be made to see to the safe transit of civilians by sea to friendly harbors.

6. HQ staff and personnel assigned to General Montgomery will be withdrawn in such a manner, at such time and to such place within or without the ABDA area as the commanding officer may decide, but its timely withdrawal, concurrent with forces listed in paragraph 7, is essential, and will

be given the highest priority.

7. Forces to be assigned to Java Command are as follows:

- All brigades of the British 18th Infantry Division
- 6th New Zealand Brigade
- 22nd Australian Brigade augmented by 2/26th Battalion
- Maori Battalion and all Gurkha Battalions on Singapore
- Dalforce units selected at Commander's discretion

8. JAVA CMD forces will coordinate with Commander in Chief, Eastern Fleet, Admiral James Somerville, especially in regards to all operations requiring naval air cover by the fleet.

9. In light of paragraph 7, control of Sunda, Bali and Lombok Straits is deemed essential to permit offensive or defensive operations as may be deemed necessary and prudent by the Commander, Eastern Fleet.

10. Every effort will be made by the Army to hold major ports on Java secure, notably Batavia, Semarang, and Surabaya, so that they may serve as embarkation points for relief and supply convoys routed to Fortress Singapore. To this end, the ports of Tjilatjap and Bantu on the southern Java coast should be held secure in the event operations in the Java Sea cannot be undertaken with reasonable expectation of success.

It was all bravado, except for the reality inscribed in that last line, and like all plans and devices in the whirlwind of war, these orders and dispositions would soon be put to a severe test. A powerful force was now rising in the southwest Pacific, and nothing Churchill or Brooke would devise was going to stop it.

* * *

It was immediately clear to Percival that he was now to be offered up as the sacrificial lamb on Singapore, as the command he had so badly managed prior to Montgomery's arrival was now to be stripped of its best fighting units. His situation would have been seen as hopeless, if not for the fact that the Japanese had also made substantial withdrawals to pursue objectives in Sumatra and prepare for operations against Java and the barrier islands.

To this end, the entire 5th Division was pulled off Singapore Island, leaving only the 18th Division holding the western segments taken during their ill-fated assault. The new commander, Nishimura, was not content to see

his forces divided by the marshy Kranji river, and saw no point in leaving the 18th Division in place there. He therefore gave orders that it should withdraw on the night of February 20th and move to reinforce the positions being held by his own Imperial Guards Division. In his mind, the possession of the Causeway Bridge, which his troops and engineers had fought for so gallantly, was the one essential avenue to supply any Japanese presence on the island itself.

In the short run, with his divisions badly depleted, and no ammunition for the artillery remaining beyond a few rounds for each gun, a lull fell over the battle for Singapore, with both sides digging in and doing little more than probing at the enemy lines for purposes of reconnaissance. While Montgomery and the better units still remained on the island, he worked with Percival to outline the best defensive dispositions possible given the limited forces that would remain.

The 28th Indian Brigade still held positions on the northern coast of the island, blocking the way to the old naval base. 41st Indian relieved the Australians and took up positions astride the Mandai Road. The Malay Brigade took up positions on the defensive works formerly occupied by the British 18th Division near Tengah Airfield, and also stood up one of its battalions as a local reserve at Bukit Pandang on the Mandai Road. Elements of Dalforce, their ranks now swelled by over two thousand Chinese Volunteers, were forged into a makeshift screening force that now patrolled the northwest sector that had been the scene of so much fighting earlier. The S.S.V.F. Brigade took up similar duties along the exposed northeast and east coast of the island, and Fortress Troops remained in and around the city to act as a constabulary force and impose order on an increasingly frightened population.

No matter how discrete and quiet the withdrawal was, rumors were soon flying that the British were pulling out, and the frightened disorder in the harbor swelled to a near panic, until Montgomery gave strict orders to quell the disturbances until his troops could board available shipping for the transit to Java. It was a hard and desperate thing for the people to see the very same men who had come to their rescue weeks ago now leaving them, but the stalwart effort made by the men to stop the Japanese attack had at least bought the troops the goodwill of most everyone who came into contact with them.

“Tojo has a mind to get his hands on Java,” a Captain in the 53rd Brigade told them. “Now we can’t have that if we want to keep the supply convoys running in here with food and such. You just stand fast while we get over there and settle the matter.”

It was a very narrow escape the night of the 23rd of February. Just a few days earlier on Feb 21st, a Japanese task force centered on the light carrier *Ryujo* had covered operations to land elements of the 229th Infantry Brigade of 38th Division, which had embarked from Hong Kong. Their target had been the port and airfields near Palembang on Sumatra, where fighting was already underway with Dutch garrisons sparring with Japanese paratroopers that had landed to seize Airfield P1. Once those troops were ashore, *Ryujo* had moved into the Malacca Strait to cover further operations against Medan in northern Sumatra. This left a brief window where the British forces could make their dangerous move by sea to Java.

To cover the operation, British squadrons remaining on Sumatra at Airfield P2 flew defensive missions, and the carriers *Illustrious* and *Indomitable*, already on the scene in the Indian Ocean, were ordered to slip in towards the Sunda Strait. Somerville was still delayed aboard HMS *Formidable* and would not get there for some days. Those land based planes, augmented by the F.A.A. squadrons off the carriers, were just enough to provide air cover.

It was also fortunate that Japanese surface units were out of position to intervene or interdict the sea transit. The *Ryujo* Group was still far to the northwest with Rear Admiral Jisaburō Ozawa’s Western Covering Fleet, composed of five cruisers and an equal number of destroyers. Other Japanese surface units in the region were gathering at Balikpapan, where shipping was already assembling for the planned invasion of Java. Commander Ohashi in submarine *I-56* spotted the convoy, designated SJ.3 for “Singapore-Java 3.” He was able to put a torpedo into the ammo ship *Derrymore*, but could do little more that night.

The following morning Montgomery’s relief force, and now the heart of his new Java Command, would arrive safely in the harbor of Batavia and begin debarking. They had left much of their heavy equipment behind, leaving as many guns in place as possible to support the Singapore defenders. Yet they found that several of their own artillery regiments had finally reached Batavia to join them, diverted there in those halcyon days just before

the main battle at Singapore.

Advised on the planned British troop arrivals, the Dutch forces in and around Batavia had begun moving east by rail towards Semarang, Cirebon, and Surabaya. Montgomery would then plan to send additional troops by rail east to bolster the Dutch defense as needed.

As it happened in the history Fedorov knew, Java fell in a matter of days once the rag-tag Allied surface fleet under the Dutch Admiral Doorman was defeated in the Battle of the Java Sea. This time, that battle might be very different. The Japanese might find a much stronger Allied naval presence ready to oppose the Java landings, including two fleet carriers.

On the night of February 24th, *Illustrious* and *Indomitable* moved back out to sea, intending to wait for Somerville and the remainder of the Eastern Fleet. Though the battleship *Royal Sovereign* had come round the Cape to Colombo, the Admiral elected to assign it to the vital convoys carrying the Australian 7th Division. The British had hoped to divert them to Rangoon in an attempt to save that city, and by extension, Burma, but Australian Prime Minister Curtin would not hear of it, demanding the unit return home.

Churchill relented, but made one last attempt to salvage this veteran unit for the impending operations now gathering like a bad storm in the Java Sea.

“Your government might see the defense of Java, a prize dearly coveted by the Japanese, and one for which we have put our most important base in the Pacific at risk, as being instrumental to the defense of the Australian mainland. For if Java and the remaining barrier islands should fall, it would be no great leap of either logic or imagination to see the Japanese putting troops ashore at Port Darwin within 30 days time.

“To forestall this dreadful possibility, I have ordered the stalwart defenders of Singapore to make a hazardous journey to strengthen the Dutch position on Java, and make another gallant stand on that wall, imposing themselves between the enemy and your homeland. Might the leading elements of the 7th Division now join their brothers on Java and fight side by side with Brigadier Bennett and his heroes of Singapore? Might they now join the New Zealand Brigade, which we have released at great sacrifice from our dwindling forces in the Middle East in this grave hour? If, however, your government still insists on repatriating these troops, then, at the very least, I strongly urge you to consider debarking them at Darwin, where their presence will act as a strong deterrent to invasion there, and also place them

close to Port Moresby on New Guinea, where you will unquestionably need them should we fail to stop the Japanese here and now.”

They were certainly going to be needed, because the Japanese offensive continued to sweep south like an unstoppable wave, and even Montgomery was going to soon wish he was back in the relative calm of the Libyan desert.

Part IV

Feather Light

*“Loyalty and honor are heavier than a mountain,
and your life is lighter than a feather.”*

— Samurai Code

Chapter 10

It was an argument that John Curtin found difficult to dismiss. The movement of the British 18th Division from Singapore was certainly audacious and risky, and the fact that the 22nd Australian Brigade and 6th New Zealanders were also included in that withdrawal was difficult to overlook. Yet Curtin still had grave reservations. If Timor were to be taken by the enemy, Japanese air and naval units operating in those waters would sever sea lane communications between Darwin and Java, isolating the latter. Curtin therefore cabled Churchill:

“Deployment of our 1st Expeditionary Corps to Java is seen as a risky proposition, for it demands that all the barrier islands between Batavia and Timor be held as well. Enemy occupation of Timor, or any of the other islands, would effectively cut off our forces in Java, and make the prospect of their safe withdrawal to Australia a less than encouraging proposition. Notwithstanding the value of resources in Java itself to the enemy, it is the considered opinion of this government that any ‘last stand’ to be made in this theater would best be fought in Australia itself, for only here will there be found a base of sufficient strength to build up forces arriving from the United States, and plan the inevitable counterattack against Japan.

“To therefore risk our most capable and combat effective divisions on Java would seem to be unsound strategy. We would rather suggest that every available unit in theater should be moved to Australian soil as quickly as possible. To that end, we now find it necessary to insist the 7th Division return home, followed by the 6th Division, and request the immediate withdrawal of the 9th Australian Division presently operating in Libya as well. We will, however, strongly consider debarking this division at Port Darwin as you have suggested.”

In trying to hold one cat by the tail by tussling for the 7th Division, Churchill was now about to see two others slip out the back door. It was all a clear case of supposed allies unable to come to a common view of the purpose before them. Upon receipt of his orders, Wavell had looked the situation over and come up with a grand plan employing not only those forces he was receiving from Singapore, but both the 6th and 7th Australian

Divisions as well. One would be sent to hold southern Sumatra and keep open the left flank of the vital Sunda Strait that led to Batavia, and the other would go to central Java. While he was floating this grandiose idea past the Australians, Churchill had been wrangling to get the 7th Division to Burma, and Curtin was dead set on clearing the board of all his pieces and then setting up a new game on the home soil of Australia.

They were all like blind men about the elephant, each with a different view of how this massive, unwieldy animal should look. Yet it was not Churchill, nor Wavell, nor Curtin who would decide the matter. It was not even Brooke in his new post as Chief of the Imperial General Staff. Weeks ago, a Sergeant was managing the loadout of the 7th Australian Division in the Suez Canal. His name was Bill Thornton, and he was a stickler Stevedore with an eye for detail, and a short temper when anything that mattered to him was botched or overlooked.

Sergeant Thornton was supervising the embarkation of the Australian 7th Division, flipping through a clipboard of unit registries, cargo manifests and other information relating to the movement. It was his job to get the troops loaded on the troop ships, the guns and heavy equipment loaded on the cargo ships, and it was a fine art that was called “tactical loading.” In a nutshell, it aimed to group ships with guns and equipment belonging to the proper brigades and battalions in the same convoy. If this was not done correctly, the troops would arrive without their equipment, and it could then take weeks for the division to sort itself out.

The interesting thing about Wild Bill Thornton, as he was called on the docks at Suez, was that he was not supposed to be there. He was to have been down with a bad case of dysentery, laid up for nearly a month, but in this retelling of events, the malady had not struck him, and he was fit and on the job when the 7th Division got orders to move. Four separate convoys would end up moving the troops, some composed of just a few ships. The first of these was just a single ship, the *Orcades*, which had pulled into the harbor at Batavia in spite of an order from the homeland advising it not to disembark there.

Once *Orcades* arrived, Wavell wanted to unload the AA guns and troops all neatly mated up and sent off by Sergeant Thornton, so that they could “protect the aerodromes” on Java. The Australians advised him that once disbursed on Java, it would seem impossible to ever safely withdraw the unit.

It was a bit like quibbling over the movement of a pawn in the early stages of the game. Once pushed forward, the Australians argued it could never take a backward step, and they feared it would soon be lost in the fray.

Behind *Orcades*, three other small convoys were strung out between Bombay and Colombo. These “flights,” as they were called, were composed of larger troopships coming from the Suez that would first offload the men at Bombay, and then re-load them onto smaller ships for the final leg of their journey to Colombo and points further east. These were the heavy pieces in the division, carrying the 25th, 21st, and 18th brigades in that order.

Yet this was a chess game where there were two players on the same side vying for control of the Knights and Bishops. Churchill actually gave orders for the lead flight to divert north to Rangoon, only to find Curtin countermanding those orders and sticking to his guns that the troops should come home. One argument he would make was that the units had not been “tactically loaded,” and if the division went to Burma or Java it would still not be able to organize for operations until all the other flights arrived and all the equipment could be sorted out. In Curtin’s mind, the final destination of the first flight was going to determine where all the others would have to end up, and so his hand was heavy on the mane of that Knight’s horse, and he tugged the reins firmly to lead it east to Australia.

This time, however, Curtin’s argument could not be made, at least to Churchill. Sergeant Bill Thornton had seen to all of that in Suez, and the flights were all tactically loaded. In what would now become a perfect illustration of the maxim that amateurs talk strategy while the experts talk logistics, Thornton’s intervention had swept away Curtin’s arguments before they could matter. His methodical mind for logistics had seen the ships off in proper order, with all equipment correctly assigned to each brigade flight. Because of this, each flight was now capable of landing at any friendly port, and of functioning as a fully effective combat unit the day it arrived.

Yet Curtin did not know that, and assumed the hasty withdrawal from Suez would have seen the division embarked willy nilly, and scattered all over the seven seas. He had a subordinate issue a cable that *Orcades* should not debark at Batavia, and instead return home, and that all other flights should follow this same course.

At this point, another methodical man came on the scene at the quay in Batavia, demanding to know why the *Orcades* was sitting there idling about

when it might be unloaded in a matter of hours. His name was General Bernard Law Montgomery, fresh off the boat himself and rubbing his hands together as he contemplated his new command and the defense of Java.

“Good show,” he said when he learned this ship had the leading elements of the Australian 7th Division. 2/3rd MG Battalion under Lieutenant Colonel Blackburn and 2/2nd Pioneer Battalion under Lieutenant Colonel Williams would be a most welcome addition to the forces now building up on Java. He was lucky the ship was even there, for in the history Fedorov knew, it had been diverted to Oosthaven on the southern tip of Sumatra, where its units would act on orders to form a provisional brigade and advance north on Palembang and the vital airfields then under threat from the Japanese.

Montgomery knew the men of the 7th Division, for this was a unit he had in his corps in North Africa, and he also knew its fighting merit well. With it, and the troops he was already sorting out from Singapore, he had every confidence that he would hold Java secure.

“See here,” he said, collaring the dock master at Batavia. “Get that ship unloaded at once. What is all this dawdling?”

“But sir,” the man protested, “we’re still waiting for authorization on that one. It’s not yet on my clipboard.”

“Damn your clipboard!” Monty fumed. “Get the men to work on it this very instant. I am your authorization, and I won’t hear of any further mucking about. The Japanese will be on our backs in a hot minute, and those troops will do us no good on those ships. What if the Japanese bomb this port? They’ll be sitting ducks. Now get it done!”

Faced with the wrath of a full General, and with Montgomery’s unflinching will applied to the task, *Orcades* was summarily unloaded—the very day that the Japanese bombed Port Darwin. Curtin and the Australian War Cabinet were all caught up in the news, and the word sent back concerning the fate of *Orcades* never got through the chaos of that day.

Even Wavell had not been informed that the *Orcades* had debarked, and that the other flights carrying 7th Division had all altered course to Batavia. Australian officers on the scene came in to make a formal protest to Montgomery, but left that meeting knowing the meaning of yet another well turned line in the annals of history—‘*ours is not to reason why, ours is but to do or die.*’

In effect, the efficiency of Sergeant William Thornton, and the meddling

intransigence of Montgomery, had effectively taken hold of the Australian 7th Division by the nose. Even while Curtin and Churchill exchanged long cables laying out arguments and counter arguments as to why the 7th Division should or should not go to Burma, it was steadily moving to Batavia, and then one more unaccountable fact would determine its destination point once and for all—fuel.

It was going to come down to the level of fuel oil remaining in the ships after their long Journey from Suez. All the strategy and high level wrangling that had pulled in heads of state as far as Washington DC when Churchill appealed to Roosevelt to pressure the Australians, would come to nothing. Strategy was now the servant of a fuel hose. Once diverted in that odd meeting of Thornton's mindfulness and Montgomery's iron will, the flights of the 7th Division could not easily turn about to other ports. They needed more fuel to reach Australia, and Batavia was now the best place to find it. The only other place they could land would be Colombo.

By the time this was all realized by the higher ups in both governments, the 25th Brigade was nearing the Sunda Strait, and the Japanese were hastily preparing to launch a series of blows that were intended to deliver the real prize in this region, the resource rich island of Java.

* * *

In sharp contrast to the divided and sometimes chaotic dispositions of the Allies, the Japanese war machine continued to move with a single minded purpose, and ruthless efficiency. The forces they had arrayed to strike the barrier islands would form nearly three full divisions, a force the size of the army that had conquered Malaya. A full regiment of the 38th Division was already on Sumatra, forcing scattered British and Dutch units there to flee south to Oosthaven and get aboard any ship available in the harbor to make good their escape to Java. Among them was a small detachment of light tanks, the British 3rd Hussars, and it would soon employ the services of the *Orcades* to make the trip over to Batavia.

For the attack on Java, the entire 2nd Infantry Division would form the Western pincer aimed at Batavia, and it would be reinforced with a fourth regiment, the 230th 'Shoji Detachment' from 38th Division. This force was covered by the light carrier *Ryujo* returning from the Malacca Strait, light

cruisers *Natori*, *Yura*, and *Sendai*, along with three destroyer divisions, (12 ships), and mine sweepers. Beyond this, the entire 7th Heavy Cruiser Squadron was present with *Kumano*, *Mikuma*, *Mogami*, and *Suzuya*.

The Eastern Task force would bring the entire 48th Division to attack central Java west of Surabaya, again augmented by a fourth regiment, the 229th Regiment of 38th Division. It would be covered by light cruisers *Naga*, *Kinu*, and *Jintsu*, another dozen destroyers, and the 5th Heavy Cruiser Division with *Haguro*, *Nachi*, *Ashigara*, and *Myoko*.

Yet that was not all. The Japanese were leaving nothing to chance here, and after its successful covering for Operation R at Rabaul, 5th Carrier Division sailed under Admiral Nagumo to support the attack on the barrier islands. This would bring the new fleet carriers *Zuikaku* and *Shokaku* into the Arafura Sea, escorted by battleships *Kirishima*, *Kongo* and *Haruna*. Another three heavy cruisers led the way, *Atago*, *Maya* and *Takao*, and the force was screened by light cruiser *Abukuma* with another ten destroyers.

All told, the Japanese were sending three carriers, three battleships, eleven heavy cruisers, seven light cruisers, 34 destroyers, four minesweepers and a number of auxiliaries. It was an overwhelming naval presence, and the reason why the Japanese advance had been unchecked up until that moment. It would also be backed up by no fewer than 420 aircraft based on land and sea. When it came to planning and execution, there was no quibbling, no equivocation, no misread orders at cross purposes, and nothing more than a skillful concentration of force and will that had produced one victory after another.

Against this irresistible force, the British would throw the best they had available, Admiral James Somerville with three of their new fleet aircraft carriers, cruisers *Exeter*, *Cornwall*, *Emerald* and *Enterprise*, with destroyers *Jupiter*, *Electra* and *Encounter*. The battleship *Royal Sovereign* had been joined by *Ramillies*, but those two ships would remain on duty as convoy escorts.

Soon the tide would break upon the distant shoreline of the barrier islands, and the last line of defense shielding Australia from possible attack. There, on the largest island rampart of Java, Bernard Montgomery, pleased to take the moniker of 'Rock of the East' upon himself, would hastily organize his defense. He had stopped Rommel at Tobruk, just barely, and then stopped Yamashita on Singapore. Now it was his to hold or lose this last bastion of

Allied strength in the Pacific.

The Japanese plan was straightforward and strategically sound. Even as Prime Minister Curtin had argued his homeland was the only suitable base of supply that could host, sustain and build up a credible war fighting machine against Japan, the Japanese also saw Australia as the one place the Allies could use to mount a counteroffensive. Port Darwin was the closest location where sufficient port and airfield capacity permitted this, and the daring bombing raid that struck there was the prelude to operations now underway.

The decision had been made to sever the lines of communication between Port Darwin and Java, which would mean the Allies would then have to rely on the much more distant port of Perth for logistical support of the island. It was 1,750 miles from Perth to Java, but the route to Darwin was 400 miles shorter, and it was also much closer to resources in eastern Australia. The Japanese had two objectives in mind, both considered valuable for one reason only—their airfields.

The first was Bali, hugging Java's easternmost coast, and with a good airfield at Denpasar. The second was the large island of Timor, with good operational fields at both Dili and Kupang. Once taken, these islands would effectively cut off all forces in the archipelago between them, allowing the Japanese to occupy them at their leisure. These operations were principally intended to secure the left flank of the planned invasion of Java, and they would begin with a scrappy, if chaotic naval duel off Bali on the pitch black of a rainy tropical night.

Chapter 11

Badung Strait – 25 Feb, 1942

The airfield at Kendari on the southeast coast of the Celebes was the largest and most modern base in the region, placing Japanese aircraft in good positions to operate over Java. It had but one liability, that being frequent and persistent fog and rain. To assure uninterrupted air support for “Operation J,” the Japanese therefore decided to invade and occupy Bali for its small but useful airfield at Denpasar. They would do so about a week later than these events transpired in the old history, but the outcome would be remarkably true to those events.

For this mission, a single battalion of the 48th division, the 3rd Battalion of 1st Formosa Regiment, was designated the Kanemura Detachment. It was hoped that this small force could slip in quietly undetected, but it was soon spotted and word was flashed to the local naval commander on the scene.

Rear Admiral Karel Doorman was determined to put his patchwork fleet to good use that day. Familiar with the Dutch East Indies from his youth when he served aboard survey vessels mapping the waters there, he eventually returned after the Great War and an abortive stint as a pilot. So it was off to the navy, where he was posted at Batavia, eventually working his way up to command the cruiser squadron composed of *Sumatra* and *Java*. Today he was aboard *De Ruyter*, a light cruiser of about 6,600 tons, with seven 5.9-inch guns and ten 40mm Bofors.

The first sign of a Japanese invasion fleet had been spotted in the Java Sea, but after his abortive attempt to impede the Japanese invasion of Sumatra a few days earlier, his little fleet was now divided into two widely dispersed groups. He had taken the light cruisers *Java* and his flagship *De Ruyter* down through the Sunda Strait to the relative safety of the port at Tjilatjap. That was where he was now, along with destroyers *Piet Hein*, and two American DDs, the *John D. Ford* and *Pope*. The Admiral was hoping to have better luck when he got the news that an operation was now underway against Bali, and decided to launch a two pronged attack.

He would lead his small task force out from Tjilatjap, along the southern

coast of Java, and strike through the enemy landing site like an arrow. At the same time, the remainder of his forces at Surabaya on the north coast, would sortie with RNN light cruiser *Tromp*, and USN destroyers *Stewart*, *Parrott*, *John D. Edwards* and *Pillsbury*. If he was able to drive the Japanese off with his own group, they would then run right into this second force coming into the Badung Strait east of Bali from the north.

Admiral James Somerville had not yet arrived on HMS *Formidable*, diverted by the hunt for a pair of German raiders near the Cape Verde Islands. This left the carriers *Illustrious* and *Indomitable* as the nucleus of the Eastern Fleet he was to command, now under the capable hands of another rising star in the fleet, Captain and Lord Louis Francis Albert Victor Nicholas Mountbatten. Men of his ilk tended to stack up names like that, and medals along with admission to select orders and societies to go with their titles.

The squadron had been well out in the Indian Ocean to conceal their presence from the Japanese, lingering in low rolling fog and clouds. As soon as they received word from Doorman that he had detected the Japanese fleet and was ready to sortie into the Java Sea, Mountbatten turned northeast running towards the Sunda Strait on the southern tip of Sumatra. Unfortunately, Doorman received word that the British fleet would not arrive in time to support him, and so he undertook to engage the enemy with this daring pincer attack.

He would be opposed that day by four Japanese destroyers of the 8th DD Division, *Asashio*, *Oshio*, *Arashio* and *Michishio*, escorting the Kanemura Detachment aboard two troop transports, *Sasago Maru* and *Sagami Maru*. Doorman would be late to the party, and the Japanese landing would already be underway when his southern pincer approached through the low clouds threatening rain, a little before midnight on February 25th. Cruiser Java led the way, followed by Doorman in his flagship and the three destroyers. They caught the Japanese still lingering near the sandy coast of Sanur at 22:20.

Doorman was squinting through his field glasses, frustrated by the darkness and looming presence of the island of Bali. Then he heard the cruiser *Java* open fire ahead, and the entire scene was soon illuminated when the Japanese fired off star shells to see what they were up against. A confused action resulted, with both sides opening up in a high speed dual that came to nothing. Strangely, Doorman decided to barrel right through the strait heading north where he expected to find his second task force.

The Japanese, however, turned away to the south, where they found the three allied destroyers that had been about 5500 yards behind Doorman's cruisers. Captain Jan Chompff on the *Piet Hein* saw them coming, got rattled, and executed a sharp turn to come around to the south, firing his deck guns and launching torpedoes as he did so. It was then that an unaccountable thing happened. A crewman on the bridge of that destroyer lost his footing in that turn and fell onto a button that controlled the 'Make Smoke' command. Thick smoke poured from the funnels, and completely obscured the scene, frustrating the gunners on the American destroyers behind *Piet Hein*. Putting on speed to try and break through the smoke, the US destroyers emerged just as the Japanese returned torpedo fire against the Dutch DD.

They were firing the dread Long Lance, and its fabled accuracy, range, and power would not fail the Japanese that night. *Piet Hein* was struck a fatal blow, and peppered by accurate naval gunfire as she rolled to one side. The two remaining American DDs swapped gunfire with the *Asashio* in a brief five minute duel before Captain Jacob Cooper on the *Ford* began to also make smoke. They had already fired off their port side torpedoes, hoping to hit the transports, but failing to do so. So now Cooper came about in an attempt to get his starboard tubes into play, and this brought him right across the bow of the Destroyer *Oshio*, and into heavy gunfire.

Destroyer *Pope* fired off five torpedoes, all missing wildly in that action, and Ford swung around behind her, still making smoke. In spite of that, the sea around them was erupting with shell splashes that were close enough to wet the decks on both destroyers, and they decided trying to turn back north to follow the Dutch cruisers as ordered would be most unwise. The Americans broke off, running south in the confused action that saw the Japanese opening fire on each other at one point, with the Captains of two of their four destroyers claiming kills that never happened. It was all too typical of night actions, and the high speed in those restricted waters led to the haphazard results.

With his train of supporting destroyers now out of the action, Doorman was alone with his two light cruisers, though help was not far off. This time the four American destroyers of the northern pincer led the way with orders to charge in and attack the Japanese anchorage. They made a brave torpedo run, confronted by a pair of bulldogs when *Asashio* and *Oshio* came around to challenge them. The Japanese gunfire was again very accurate, and the

American torpedo strike a miserable failure. Of 21 torpedoes fired, fifteen would miss, four would fail to explode and two would be jammed in the launch tubes.

The US flotilla had the enemy outgunned with their combined sixteen 4-inch guns to only twelve 5-inchers on the two Japanese DDs, but simply could not get hits. In the meantime, the Japanese saw the thin illuminating beams of searchlights from one of the American ships, slowly fingering the darkness. This gave them a perfect target, and they quickly put two hits on the USS *Stewart*, damaging her engines and forcing Captain Harold Smith to break off and turn back to the northeast.

As the remaining US destroyers came about to follow, *Parrott* and *Pillsbury* nearly ran into one another, and that near miss also forced the *Edwards* to make a sharp turn to avoid a grand pileup. The whole mess lurched north, with the Japanese running parallel between those ships and the Dutch cruiser *Tromp*. Though they brought another six 5.9 inch guns into play, the Dutch could not get hits either, but the two Japanese destroyers had a field day.

Captain Jan Balthazar de Meester on the *Tromp* decided to make the same mistake the American destroyer *Stewart* had made, switching on her bright searchlight to try and find the enemy in the heavy darkness. As the flashing light searched about, it clearly revealed the position of the cruiser to the enemy, and both Japanese destroyers opened fire.

Asashio pummeled the bridge and conning tower of the Dutch cruiser, her guns firing rapidly, the shell casings careening off the forward deck. The experienced gunners would get no less than eleven hits in a brief, hot engagement that was going to put *Tromp* out of the action, and lay her up in Australia for months after for repairs. Thus far, these two intrepid Japanese destroyers had been attacked by three cruisers and seven Allied destroyers, and come off the better. Now the odds would shift even further in their favor when *Arashio* and *Michishio* came up to join the fray.

As she turned to fall off to the north, *Tromp* got in one good hit on the bridge of *Oshio*, inflicting a number of casualties and temporarily shaking that destroyer badly enough to cause the torpedoes it had just fired to miss badly. Misery loves company, and the American destroyers *Stewart* and *Edwards* were inshore of the action near in the vicinity of the damaged *Tromp*, now attended by the US destroyer *Pillsbury*. The four allied ships

suddenly found themselves under attack by the two newly arriving Japanese destroyers, which ran right between the two groups in a brazen attempt to decide the battle then and there.

With the two sides passing in opposite directions, the Japanese destroyers were about to run a dangerous gauntlet of fire from two directions. It was a fast and furious gun duel, but this time the two undamaged US destroyers *Pillsbury* and *Edwards*, acquitted themselves by putting accurate and damaging fire on the lead Japanese destroyer, *Michishio*. Tromp joined the action and the Allies riddled the ship with hits that would kill 13 and leave another 83 of her 200 man crew wounded, and the ship itself foundering, and nearly dead in the water.

Once the ships were clear of each other, the darkness folded her cloak over the scene, and the gunfire ended. Neither side wanted any more of the other, and the *Arashio* maneuvered to position herself to take her damaged sister ship *Michishio* in tow. That ship was so badly damaged that it would have to be towed all the way back to Japan. *Oshio* would be laid up for at least six weeks with extensive repairs required on her bridge, but the other two Japanese destroyers suffered only minor damage. They could claim a tactical victory in having faced down a vastly superior Allied fleet, while successfully shielding the final stages of the embarkation of the Kanemura detachment at Sanur.

An hour or so after the guns had fallen silent and the smoke cleared, nature intervened with a hard driving rain. It was the kind of weather that would always halt any active operations by Allied forces, the darkness alone often serving to prompt them to settle quietly into defensive positions. For the Japanese, however, it was perfect fighting weather. They would use the cover of darkness and rain to steal up from the shoreline and through the groves of trees towards the airfield at Denpasar.

There they would find the place defended by a company of irregulars in an outfit known as Korps Prajoda. It was a native contingent, 600 strong, recruited from the local population. While mostly armed with spears instead of rifles, and officered by only a few Dutch regulars, the company at the airfield was backed up by a few old armored cars. Far to the north, the main body of this force would defend, stupidly, at the coastal town of Singaradja. The Japanese had long ago written that site off as a potential landing point due to the steep rocky shoreline in the area. Furthermore, it was the airfield

they really wanted, and that is where they attacked with the full battalion now safely ashore.

Soon the natives of Korps Prajoda would be facing the veteran Japanese troops that had already fought and won in the grueling battle for the Philippines. It was no contest. The airfield fell that night, and little more than a week later, two companies of the Kanemura detachment would sweep the island and overcome the meager resistance of the remaining Korps Prajoda “troops” at Singaradja.

So it was that with no more than a single pinky on the hand of the Japanese 48th Division, just one battalion, the valuable airfield on Bali was delivered into their hands. They had done this while Montgomery was still busily sorting out the haphazard arrival of his troops from Singapore. With that airfield secured, the Japanese would prepare to move air units there to support the next stage of the attack on Java.

That same night that part of the plan would swing into motion. General Takeo Ito would take in the veteran 228th Regiment of the 38th Infantry Division, which had taken Hong Kong earlier, intending to seize the vital bases on Timor. Five ships would carry the regiment. *Miike Maru*, the largest ship at 12,000 tons, held the regimental HQ and support units. *Africa Maru* carried the 3rd Battalion, *Zenyo Maru* the 1st Battalion, *Yamamura Maru* the 2nd Battalion, with 1st Mt Artillery aboard *Ryoyo Maru*. With a force so small, the loss of any single ship could be disastrous, but the recent action at Badung Strait gave them confidence, and the little invasion fleet would be well covered.

This same force had just defeated a small combined Australian Dutch force on Ambon Island to the north, and now it would face a similar defense for the attack on Timor. To put the scale of the operation in perspective, Timor was an island roughly twice the size of Crete in the Mediterranean, some 340 miles long and 90 miles wide at its greatest point, compared to the 150 mile length of Crete. Its land mass would exceed the total of all seven of the Canary Islands, which had been fought over so bitterly in recent weeks. Yet to conquer an island of this size, with nearly a million native residents, the Japanese were sending a single regiment, three battalions, and the Allies were defending with even less.

If Prime Minister Curtin clearly perceived the importance of that island to operations then underway, the units and equipment Australia sent to defend it

belied that assessment. In fact, the troops did not even have a reliable radio link from Dili to Darwin. Curtin's problem was that all of his core veteran fighting units had already been sent overseas, and the British always seemed to find one place or another where they were desperately needed. The rest of the Australian Army was ill equipped, barely forming and largely untrained. There were also many other places under threat, New Guinea and Rabaul being uppermost on the list. So the only forces that could be found were small ad hoc battalions given the code names Sparrow, Lark, and Gull. These three little birds flew out to face the might of the Japanese Army, but they could be no more than a brief delaying force.

Lt. General Sturde, Australia's Chief of Defense, warned against this policy, seeing it as a "penny packet" dispersion of otherwise valuable battalions. What he wanted was a concentration of force in Australia, and was much behind Curtin's insistence on recalling home the expeditionary divisions. His misgivings were soon proved correct when Lark Force went to Rabaul, where it arrived just in time to be overwhelmed and captured by the Japanese there in Operation R. Gull Force had already been met and defeated on Ambon by the same troops now coming to Timor. The last bird on the wire was a scrappy band of hearty defenders in Sparrow Force, which was also augmented with a company of Commandos that would prove particularly troublesome to the Japanese.

Elsewhere, Australia's real birds of prey, the tough, experienced divisions now en route from the Middle East, were still mostly on the sea. The Eagles and Hawks were coming, but the question remained as to whether they could get there soon enough to matter.

Chapter 12

Timor – Feb 26, 1942

The landings at Timor were as audacious and brilliantly conceived as any of the other operations Japan had carried out. Utilizing a remarkable economy of force, the Japanese would send two battalions south of Kupang in a surprise landing, and then move north to attack the port. A third battalion would land near Dili in the northeast. These were the only two locations with airfield and port facilities worth having, and if controlled, the remainder of the island was largely irrelevant.

Major General Takeo Ito was arriving on the scene six days later than the actual invasion in Fedorov's history, but with the same exact force in hand. With Dutch Admiral Doorman licking his wounds from the action at Badung Strait, these landings would be unopposed. The southwestern group came ashore between 02:35 and 04:00 on the morning of the 26th, with 1st and 3rd Battalions of the 228th Regiment, 38th Division, under Asano and Nishiyama. They moved inland quickly, through thickening stands of Mangrove trees, with their first objective being the airfield at Penfoi.

They would not find it in working condition when they arrived. While Sparrow Force had found themselves all deployed to defend the harbor, when they realized what was happening they immediately began to move inland. At the airfield, the dogged Engineers of 2/11 Field Company, R.A.E., had set up nine dumps packed with fifty 500lb bombs each. When they set those off the resulting explosions heavily cratered the field, putting it out of action for the near run. It was ironic that this force had been seen by Wavell as essential to the preservation of that airfield for a way station for shorter ranged planes out between Darwin and Java. The Japanese operation there was precisely aimed at eliminating that asset, and claiming it as a forward airfield of their own. But the first act of the defenders was to blow the place to hell.

The main force was 2/40 Tasmanian Battalion, otherwise designated as "Sparrow Force," under Lt. Colonel William Leggatt. The Tassies had come a very long way to Timor, shipping into Darwin for a month leave before the war, where they soon ferreted out all the best pubs. Otherwise they trained

hard, then lolled about, swimming in the Adelaide River where a Padre from a nearby Catholic Church would regularly hunt down crocodiles with a rifle. The men came to call him 'Crocodile Bill,' and some even took to barbecuing some of the Crocs he put down. When the Japanese hit Pearl Harbor, the fun was over and the troops shipped out on the *Zealandia* and *Westralia*, where they were finally told what had happened.

For some time all they had seen of the enemy were occasional flights of fighters that swooped in to strafe the airfield at Penfoi. They had dug out weapons pits, laid barbed wire, and then waited for their turn on leave in Koepang to hit the pubs and quaff down some good French Brandy. All that was soon to be over, and now they would finally meet the enemy face to face.

Alerted to the landings, the main body of Sparrow Force moved out from Koepang, intending to clear the road to the airport, but ran into more unexpected guests. In the third Japanese parachute operation of the war, the elite 3rd Kure SNLF Battalion had dropped after sunrise, at about 10:45. The Japanese interpreted the Australian movement east as a retreat, but in actuality, it was meant to clear their lines of communications back to Koepang, where a group of engineers and auxiliary troops was still holding the port.

Lt. Colonel William Leggatt wanted to secure the special supply depot established along that road at Champlong in the event they might be forced to move further east. At this point, there was no real appreciation of how big the Japanese operation was, so prudence dictated the line of retreat should be secured first. The SNLF paratroopers had no idea there was a supply center at Champlong, but had landed to try and prevent just this sort of eastern movement, hoping to net the Allied defenders into the battle for Koepang.

Once he had moved east, Leggatt soon found that he could not keep the road open behind him back to Koepang. He therefore decided to press on to Champlong to try and secure those much needed supplies, but kept running into stronger detachments of enemy paratroopers, first at the village of Babao, and then on the Usau Ridge beyond.

"We've got to push on through," said Leggatt to his Company commanders. "Position the Vickers Machineguns to provide good cover fire. The Lewis Gun teams will move up with the rifle squads. Lieutenant—"

"Sir?"

"The Japs have worked up a roadblock ahead. Can your sappers deal with

it?”

“Right away, sir.” Lieutenant Stronach was a big man, and at his side was Sergeant Couch and Lance Corporal Kay. They rounded up four more sappers and crept into position to get closer to the obstacle, all under enemy fire. It was cleared away, and the Tassies tramped on through.

It was hard fighting, but they cleared Babao, and then pushed on up to that ridge. At one point, with the Japanese putting up stiff resistance, Leggatt came forward to see what was happening. It would be no good to let his men get pinned down on that barren ridge, and he could think of only one thing to do, his hard voice shouting out the order for all to hear—“*Battalion... Fix Bayonets!*”

It was an order that had been heard on countless battlefields over the last centuries, for the bayonet was a weapon made more of dread than steel. Now, all along the line, the hard click-click of the bayonets being fastened to the barrels of those Lee Enfields broke the stillness. The sound brought back awful memories to Leggatt, a man of 47 years who first heard it as a much younger man during the terrible trench warfare in France. He would do now what he had seen so many times before when a unit was faced with a determined enemy in entrenched positions. He would attack, the old fashioned way....

The battalion mortars would open the attack with a good barrage, hoping to keep enemy MGs pinned down. Leggatt looked at his watch, waiting, and almost reflexively reached for a whistle to sound the attack, but he had none. So instead he raised his pistol and gave the order to charge—one last push. It was to be the last bayonet charge mounted by a battalion sized Allied unit in history, but he could not know that. Captains Roff and Johnston would lead the attack, and the Australians charged on up that hill, braving the enemy fire, and falling on their enemy like banshees out of hell.

The Japanese instinctively knew what was happening. This was *gyokusai*, the ‘shattered jewel’ attack made by units who could see no other way out of their dilemma, and meant to be one last attempt at victory, or an honorable death if it should fail. The men of the 5th and 18th Divisions had made just such an attack on Singapore, their ranks swarming across Tengah airfield into the riveting fire of Montgomery’s stalwart defense. Such attacks often failed, but they were glorious, even in defeat, the very essence of warfare. It was men with rifles and flashing sharp steel, face to face with each other in the

trenches in a moment of rage and terror that could leave only one or the other alive. Bayonets would clash with samurai swords wielded by the Marine officers, where the skill of those swordsmen was matched by the sheer brawn and guts of the Tassie soldiers.

For the men who made that charge, it was raw nerve and reflex, pushed on by the pounding pulse of adrenaline in each man's chest. Up that hill they went, arms extended, big hands gripping the haft of their rifles, leaping into the enemy trenches and giving them the hard stiff forward thrust with the bayonet. As if to underscore the terror of that deathly hour, at one point a platoon swept over the ridge and down into a hollow that had been used as a graveyard. There, crouching behind the makeshift headstones, stolid Japanese Marines lay in waiting, suddenly rising up like walking dead and joining the action. The charge swept into the cemetery, becoming a furious, ghoulish hand-to-hand combat among the tombstones.

Men will do things in the heat of such a moment that would be unthinkable to them at any other time. They fired their weapons until they were empty, then fought with the bayonet, man to man. When one Corporal's bayonet was bent and useless, out came his knife. It was hands on throats, head butts, ear biting work in that dead man's den, with the hard muscle and brawn of the Tassies simply overpowering the smaller Japanese soldiers, even though the enemy Marines were all trained in martial arts. But nothing was going to stop the Tasmanian Devils that day—nothing.

They swarmed over the defenders inflicting terrible losses on the enemy to clear off the last resistance. This was no small feat, for the men they had faced were elite Special Naval Landing Force Marines, all veterans of China and Malaya. 2/40th lost 80 men killed, and another 69 wounded in that hellish fighting, but they won through.

The mortar fire during the attack on Babao had set many of the village huts on fire, and pallid grey smoke hung over the scene when the action subsided. Sparrow Force had sustained 149 casualties, but they gave much worse to the enemy. As the sun set, it was finally over, the last of the Japanese falling back towards Champlong. Hundreds of Japanese paratroopers had been cut down, and they had less than a company remaining. In spite of that terrible defeat, they doggedly established yet another blocking position on the road further east.

Night fell, and now Leggatt had to make another difficult decision. His

men had fought long and hard, and come all the way from Koepang. He still had no idea of the size of the enemy force he was facing, and as company commanders reported in, the tally of wounded men rose from 69 to 132, with many others down with malaria.

“Tough fight today,” he said. “The men need rest, and any food and water we can get to them. We’ll just have to get patrols out ahead, and try to move on to Champlong before sunrise.”

He knew well enough that the enemy behind them were going to use these hours of darkness to good advantage. Word came that Koepang had fallen. There were only 111 men with the Fortress Engineers and some of 2/11 Field Company, with another 320 men in the AA gun batteries and some signals and service troops. They were not able to hold up the main strength of two Japanese battalions, and the city fell near dusk on February 27th.

As soon as it was secured, the Japanese sent one reinforced battalion in hot pursuit of Sparrow Force on the road to Champlong. They would march all that night to the scene of the battle, moving like tireless spirits in the gloomy murk of the darkness. By dawn on the 28th, they had caught up with Sparrow Force on the road, but hearing of the heavy casualties taken by the SNLF troops, Colonel Nishiyama decided to try and pull a Yamashita with a bold bluff.

Two men approached the Tassie encampment under a white flag, and a meeting was arranged. There they told Leggatt that Koepang had fallen and 23,000 Japanese troops had just landed the previous day, including a full battalion of tanks. To add thunder to their story, they had moved up all the tanks of a single company that had landed with the troops, and while the Australians were deliberating, Japanese bombers swooped in to bomb the head of their column. This infuriated Leggatt, but he took some solace in learning that several of the planes had also unloaded sticks of bombs on the SNLF positions.

Yet there he was, between the proverbial rock in those stubborn Naval paratroopers, and a very hard place. All his wounded and sick were at the back of the column, and they would be the first to go if those Japanese tanks made a run at them. They were cut off from Koepang, and still blocked from reaching their supply depot at Champlong. If he decided to fight, the Company Commanders indicated they might have two hours before the ammunition ran out. With great regret, and realizing he could ask no more

from his men, Leggatt decided to seek terms with the enemy. Had he known the caliber of the men he was facing, the cruelty and barbarity they were capable of, he might have thought twice about surrendering.

The Japanese first order of business was to force the Australians to gather up all the dead bodies of their fallen SNLF troops. They had them lay them in great piles, and then calmly poured gasoline on the corpses and set them on fire. It seemed a horrid and undignified way to treat their own fallen soldiers, something that shocked and reviled the Tassies. Those men had given all they had in a fight to the death, and now the Japanese officers seemed to regard them as carrion trash. One Japanese soldier even took out his knife at the edge of the burning pyre, and was carefully extracting gold crowns from the dead paratroopers' charred faces. It was as if their lives, and their service, meant nothing to them now. They were like empty, spent shell casings.

The stench of burning human flesh was never forgotten by the men of 2/40th that survived the war. They were then ordered to build the camp that would become their first prison, using the same barbed wire that they once strung out as a defense against this invasion. Their lot would be a hard one from that day on, making friends with hunger, thirst, cruelty, dysentery, gangrene and malaria. The troops were fed, but the Japanese swept weevil larvae and mice droppings into the rice bowls, laughing as the hungry men ate whatever they were given. The war was over for Sparrow Force, but their ordeal had only just begun.

Farther north, Colonel Alexander Spence was defending near Dili airfield with 2/2 Independent Company, a group of gritty Commandos who had special training in guerilla warfare. Each man had been handpicked for the unique skills required of a Commando unit. They were hardy young men, physically fit, bush-crafty, and able to live off the land. There were no slackers among them, and they wouldn't stop for tea, for darkness or weather in any circumstance where their lives counted on them fighting.

2/2 was a unit of strapping, bruising misfits, many who had been plucked right out of a brig or detention facility and interviewed for the job they would now be given. If someone wanted to pick a scrap with them, they had best beware. Now, after extensive training in Guerrilla tactics, each man wore a distinctive double red diamond insignia, and they would soon prove they were a real gemstone in the actions that followed. In the early hours, no one had been informed of the enemy attack at Koepang, as there was no radio

link. When the transports carrying Colonel Sadashichi and the men of 2nd Battalion appeared off shore, they were first thought to be Portuguese ships bringing in long awaited reinforcements.

Colonel Spence suddenly heard the sound of gunfire from the Dutch Coastal gun positions. He got on a field phone and rang up the nearest post to see if he could find out what was happening.

“It’s a Japanese submarine out in the harbor,” said the local Dutch Commander, Colonel van Straaten, but it was soon apparent that something much more than that was going on. When the ships began disgorging Japanese troops, the company began to fall back from the harbor towards the airfield, screened by one group as a rearguard under Lieutenant Charles McKenzie, with 18 Commandos of No. 2 Section.

The Japanese were too bold in their attack, thinking to simply overwhelm the enemy defense and storm into the airfield, and the tough Australians, with good prepared positions, inflicted a fearsome toll. Those 18 men fought all night, answering enemy offers to surrender with their Bren guns. They held the position until just before dawn, when McKenzie gave orders to slip away after demo charges were set on the airfield. They finally broke off, only twelve able bodied men remaining, four walking wounded, and two more unable to travel and refusing treatment so as not to hold the others up. No. 2 Section then joined the withdrawal, but not before they had inflicted some 200 casualties on the enemy, the barrels of their machineguns so warm that they had to be wrapped with the men’s shirts to be carried during the fight.

Another section of 15 men had been up in the highlands, completely out of touch, and were now heading towards Dili in a truck, not even knowing the invasion had occurred. They thought they would go into town to scrounge up some food for breakfast, but they were on a deadly road that day. Caught unawares, they blundered right into an ambush laid by Japanese troops, all captured before they ever had a chance to fight. Shortly thereafter, the fate they suffered would be a warning to the remaining men of the company. They had been taken by a small 50 man detachment of the 3rd Yokosuka SNLF, under Lieutenant Hondo Mitsuyoshi. No one knew exactly why he would act as he did, or whether he had heard of the terrible losses suffered by the others in his unit that had parachuted to the west.

An incident occurred on the road when a Dutch militia group fired at the Japanese column. Enraged, Mitsuyoshi quickly sent a platoon to deal with it.

Then he selected out four of the 15 Aussies, ordering an officer to force them to kneel in the road and shoot them one by one in the back of the head. It was a spiteful act of cruelty, all too common in this theater. Every army would have lapses and failings in the ranks, and atrocities would come hand in hand with war, but the Japanese army would prove to be specialists at the art of this depravity.

Five years earlier, they had set their troops loose on Chinese prisoners of war, and civilians, in the city of Nanking in one of the greatest atrocities of the century. Chinese were bayoneted, beheaded, raped, burned, starved, buried alive, and infants were even thrown into pots of boiling water. It was cruelty and barbarity on a scale to rival the atrocities committed by the Germans in their concentration camps. Over 200,000 were killed in Nanking, for the Japanese mindset seemed to regard a fallen enemy as subhuman, particularly one who would suffer the dishonor of surrender instead of fighting to the death. Just weeks ago, after the desperate defense of Laha Airfield at Ambon, scores of Australian and Dutch P.O.Ws were executed, many simply beheaded as they knelt, bound and blindfolded. The Naval Marines were again behind the incident, where over 300 prisoners were put to the sword.

There was a saying among these hard minded warriors, coming down through the ranks from the days of the Samurai: *"Loyalty and honor are heavier than a mountain, and your life is lighter than a feather."* A human life counted for nothing in those days. It could be taken at the whim of a Samurai lord, for the most trivial of reasons, and in many ways the modern Samurai of 1942 held the same mindset towards their enemies. Their lives were feather light. Whatever Lieutenant Mitsuyoshi's reasons were here, he took those four lives that day, and later, he had the remaining men herded into a shed and summarily beheaded, one by one.

The rest of 2/2 Independent Company soon saw that they were badly outnumbered, and learning of the demise of Sparrow Force, they knew they would get no help from the west. Yet Timor was a very big island, and they had a clear line of retreat, which they soon took, hiking up into the highlands. The decision was made to disperse the company into small groups, and to fight on guerilla style until relieved. Soon their only connection to Australia would be a single radio cobbled together from spare parts found and collected over months by signaler Joe Loveless. When it finally came to life and

actually worked, they promptly dubbed the radio “Winnie the War Winner.”

With ‘Winnie’ operating, the Commandos were able to make regular intelligence reports to the homeland, and also receive messages as to when they might expect secret shipments of air or sea dropped supplies. They soon became a band of shirtless bearded rogues, and the bane of the Japanese for long months. When asked if they wanted to be extracted, the men instead simply requested delivery of more ammunition for their Tommy guns. Their choice to fight on alone prompted Churchill to smile and give his own tribute, which would become the official motto of the unit: “*They Alone Did Not Surrender.*” It would be a long year in the steamy jungles and tortured highlands of Timor before they would finally be pulled off in Fedorov’s history. Yet here, in these altered states, that story would soon change....

Part V

A Roll of Thunder

“Thunder is good, thunder is impressive, but it is lightning that does the work.”

— Mark Twain

Chapter 13

The Japanese plan for the invasion of Java would be dubbed “Operation J” in this telling of events. With Bali and Timor well in hand, the main thrust for the offensive was now about to begin. It would employ three full divisions, the first being the tough 48th Division under General Hitoshi Imamura coming from the Philippines. Among the best divisions in the army, the 48th had special training for amphibious landings, and had performed as expected on the Philippines, participating in the capture of Manila. It would be further strengthened by the “Sakaguchi Detachment,” a regimental sized gift from the 56th Division in Burma.

This division would land well west of Surabaya at Kragan, push southeast and attack that city by indirect means, as the Japanese had done at Koepang on Timor. The Sakaguchi Detachment had a special assignment, ordered to drive south through the city of Surjakarta and along the south coast of the island to the port of Tjilatjap. If taken it was thought this would prevent any successful Allied attempt to evacuate.

The 2nd, “Courageous” Division, was a reserve unit taken from the Sendai region of Japan. As such, the 2nd was not one of the veteran fighting units of recent months. It had seen action on the Siberian front and China years earlier, but after being recalled home, it languished to a point that Prince Mikasa once said it had become the worst equipped division in the army. All that had to change, and quickly, and the man to change it was Yamashita’s confederate planner and master strategist, Colonel Masanobu Tsuji, the man who had cherry picked the best fruit in the army to assemble Yamashita’s 25th Army for the Malayan Campaign.

The 2nd had once been a “Square division” with two brigades of two regiments each. After its recall to Japan, it was made triangular, leaving one regiment behind to form a nucleus for forces being raised to replace it at home. For this operation it would be made square again by receiving the support of the 230th Regiment of the 38th Division, under Colonel Toshihari Shoji. The “Shoji Detachment” would land east of Batavia on the coast to block the enemy retreat and take a valuable airfield, and the remainder of the division would land west of the city near Merak on the Sunda Strait, and

Banten Bay. This main force would send two of its three regiments at Batavia, and loop one further south to take Bandung in the center of the island, the location of the Allied Java Command HQ.

It was a well conceived plan, and in Fedorov's history, with only the Dutch and a scattering of Allied units present, it became overwhelming force. This time, however, the entire British 18th Division was on the island, along with a reinforced brigade of Australians, two battalions off the *Orcades*, the 2nd New Zealand Brigade, and the Gurkhas. Allied strength on Java was now more than doubled.

It was for this reason that the entire 5th Division had been pulled off of Singapore Island after Yamashita's departure. Once perhaps the strongest division in the Army after Colonel Tsuji had buttressed it with the best units he could find, it had been badly worn down from the long campaign in Malaya, and the heavy casualties sustained at Tengah Airfield on Singapore. Now it could muster no more than a Brigade strength unit, with six battalions under Major General Takuro Matsui, formed into two regiments, the 11th and 21st. Most of the rest of the division was dead, and the living had been told the enemy they faced at Tengah Airfield had made a cowardly withdrawal to Java, and that now they would have the honor of hunting them down and finishing the battle that had been joined earlier. Now they would avenge their fallen dead.

Bandung, Java, HQ Java Command, 27 Feb, 1942

Montgomery had wasted no time taking command from General Sitwell and assembling his senior officers. He had commandeered a car in Batavia and drove immediately to Bandung, entering the city past the long rows of squat houses, their roofs looking like truncated pyramids, the streets lined with small rickshaws left idle in the disconsolate rain. One lone man was walking a main street, seeming a lost soul in the gloom. Everyone else was hidden away, huddled in shelters, fearful that the war was at last coming to their island. The rain seemed an outlier of worse things to come, and now here was this scrawny, determined man emerging from the weathered 1938 De Soto Sedan, a red beret cap and British Army jacket his only protection from the weather.

Behind him came Brigadiers Bennett, Clifton, and Blackburn,

commanders of the ANZAC troops, the last to arrive. They would find Brigadiers Backhouse, Massy-Beresford and Duke of the 18th Division waiting for them in the bungalow that had been chosen on the southwest edge of the town near a once thriving banana plantation. Monty was all business from the very first.

“Well met, gentlemen, the last of the transports have unloaded and the disposition of the troops is well underway. Now it comes down to our plan for the defense. As I see things, we have two options. We know what the enemy will want here, and we can stand in such a way to deny it to him. That will mean we deploy to defend the key ports at Batavia and Surabaya, and the nearby airfields. Without them the enemy will have difficulty keeping themselves supplied. Unfortunately, these ports are all on the north coast of the island, and it does not seem likely that we will command the Java Sea.”

“There’s one good port on the south coast,” said Blackhouse, “Tjilatjap. We’ll have to hold that to the last. It’s the only way we can get our own reinforcements and supplies in.”

“Right,” said Montgomery. “Your battalion is here in Bandung. Why don’t you take it south by rail today and position yourself to control that port. Most of the Dutch garrison here has moved to the eastern portion of the island. They’ll hold Surabaya.”

“Not for long,” said Bennett. “They’ve very little in the way of good equipment, and frankly, they’re completely untested. If the Japanese hit us there, we can count on losing that port in short order.”

“Then they’ll need support.”

“My 2/20 Battalion is at Malang,” said Bennett. “The rest of the brigade is still at Semarang , another port we have to keep an eye on, and Clifton’s New Zealand Brigade has reached Surjakarta. Do you want us to push on to Surabaya?”

“That’s the dilemma,” said Montgomery. “At Singapore we were able to concentrate our entire force and face down the Japanese along a very narrow front. Here we’re sitting on an island that’s 600 miles from one end to the other. If we try to hold everything, we could find ourselves outmaneuvered. The enemy will be able to choose their landing sites, and we can’t simply sit in a central position and wait for them to come with any hope we can move reinforcements where they’re needed in time. The rail lines here are useful, but they’ll likely be hit very hard by the Japanese air power when this game

tees off. So I propose that we select one sector of the island or another, and concentrate there, defeat the enemy landings in at least one instance. The question is where will that be?”

“Surabaya is closer to Darwin,” said Bennett. That’s where supplies will originate.”

“We can also expect regular convoys from Colombo,” said Montgomery. “I understand your point, but we’d have to move the 18th Division east rather smartly, and we don’t have sufficient rolling stock, road transport, or perhaps even time. At present, things got rather muddled on the lift over from Singapore. The men are doing a bang up job getting sorted out, but I’ve had to rebuild the brigades as they arrived. Now we’re strung out all along the roads and rail line from here to Batavia, and I propose we stay right where we are.”

“Hold Batavia?”

“Precisely.” Montgomery folded his arms. “The airfields here can cover the Sunda Strait, and Batavia is the nearest hop to Singapore. We mustn’t forget Percival, and all those civilians in the city. If we can hold the Sunda Strait, the run in to Batavia under our air cover might allow us to receive supply convoys out of Colombo. If the Japanese take it, then Singapore is as good as lost. The Japanese have already taken Denpasar airfield on Bali, and they’re on Timor as well. So we can’t count on anything coming by air from Darwin, and frankly, I don’t think we can expect much support from there in any case. No. Our line of communications will have to be the sea lanes to Colombo, or down to Perth. That will be Somerville’s watch.”

“Then you’ll pretty much abandon all the barrier islands from Java to Timor.” Bennett shook his head. “They won’t like that back home.”

“It can’t be helped,” said Montgomery. “We don’t have the forces to even consider garrisoning those islands. I’ve a mind to see about using the Gurkhas to raid Bali. Word is the Japanese didn’t put much more than a battalion there. If we can take that back, then we at least have a line through the Badung Strait to Surabaya, for what it will be worth.”

There was silence for a while, then Brigadier Duke of the 53rd Brigade came out with the one obvious element in this plan that had gone unspoken. “You realize that if we concentrate here, then we’re basically leaving the Dutch to wither on the vine out east. You know damn well that if we do hold Batavia, the Japanese will go all out for Surabaya. They’ll have little other

choice.”

“General Duke, the Dutch expected to have to hold this entire island without us. They might be grateful if we at least keep half of it safe. We won’t be abandoning them. If hard pressed, they can fall back on our positions here.”

The others nodded, and there seemed to be no other dissenting voice. So Montgomery doled out his orders, and the die was cast. Japanese troop transports were already loaded and “on the water,” but the determination of Dutch Admiral Doorman was about to force a brief delay in the invasion.

Java Sea, 11:40, 27 Feb, 1942

Regrouping back at Surabaya after the fracas at Badung Strait, Doorman had received intelligence that the Japanese were coming. Another man might have looked at his weary sailors, battered ships, all needing maintenance and repair, and given up the ghost, but not Doorman. Even if he had no business doing what he now set out to do, credit must be given for his sheer audacity. He was going to take out anything he had at hand, and give challenge.

So it was that Doorman steamed out into the Java Sea, his ships battered and bruised, many old four stack destroyers dating to the last war. His crews had little rest in the last 18 hours, but they stood to their posts, in spite of a general pall of misgiving that had fallen over the little fleet. They had just faced their enemy, outgunning them by a wide margin, with nine ships against four in the Badung Strait, and they suffered a convincing defeat. So nerves were raw as they set out, eyes swollen and tired, some men even falling asleep at their battle stations.

To make matters worse, it was a much weaker force in this last sortie than the one made by Doorman in Fedorov’s history books. The entire British squadron, cruiser *Exeter*, and destroyers *Electra*, *Encounter* and *Jupiter*, had steamed off with the Australian cruiser *Perth* to rendezvous and support the arrival of Mountbatten and the two British carriers. If that weren’t enough, the US cruiser *Houston* was no longer afloat. Captain Rooks had made his fateful decision to screen the *Antietam* and *Shiloh* in the battle of the New Hebrides, and his valuable piece was no longer on the board. So instead of fourteen ships, Doorman had only eight, mostly destroyers.

To bolster this force, he called on the four American destroyers that had

returned to Tjilatjap. They would join the four that had returned to Surabaya, and he would also press the cruiser *Sumatra* into service, even though it had been laid up with engine problems for some time. So he would end up with a baker's dozen that day, the fleet limping out of Surabaya at no more than 26 knots.

The first American destroyer squadron led the way, with *Edwards*, *Jones*, *Alden* and *Ford*. Then came the Dutch squadron, the cruisers *Java*, *Sumatra*, *De Ruyter*, and two destroyers *Witte de With* and *Kortenaer*. Lastly he had the second US destroyer squadron, with *Parrott*, *Pillsbury*, *Stewart* and *Pope*. It was the last hurrah of what was once called the US Asiatic Fleet, and the final act in the drama the Dutch Navy would play in this campaign.

The Japanese knew the enemy was out there. Doorman's fleet had been spotted by search planes off the cruiser *Natori*, and the fleet was subjected to a probing air strike at 14:20 that afternoon. No hits were scored by the few Japanese planes that came in, and Doorman reformed and pressed on. He was going to meet a different mix of forces this time out, largely from the Western Screening Force led by Rear Admiral Jisaburō Ozawa. He had been well north in the Malacca Strait, but learning of the British evacuation underway from Singapore, he moved quickly south to interfere. Though he had arrived too late to stop Montgomery and his troops from reaching Java, he was now in a perfect position to cover the western segment of the Java landings.

Ozawa had a fairly powerful group, light carrier *Ryujo*, 7th Heavy Cruiser Squadron with *Kumano*, *Mikuma*, *Mogami*, and *Suzuya*; light cruisers *Natori*, *Yura*, and *Sendai*, along with 12 destroyers in three divisions of four each. One division, and all his mine sweepers, stayed with the invasion convoy carrying 2nd Infantry Division. The rest of his covering force was out to give battle.

Doorman could feel in his bones that he was going to be overmatched that day, but true to his roots in Naval Aviation, he put out a call for air support as soon as the lead formation of Japanese destroyers was sighted. The British still had 36 of the 48 Hurricanes that had been operating from Sumatra. Now they were based at fields near Batavia, and they ran to answer the call. They would join a group of 16 Blenheims, and a few Hudsons and a squadron of Buffalos in an effort to gain air superiority over the Java Sea. Against this force, *Ryujo* would put up 16 A5M fighters and 12 B5Ns, and there were

several squadrons of land based fighters coming from Balikpapan, with 25 Zeroes, and another 11 A3M Claudes in the first wave of Japanese air strength. The drone of their engines tipping over in a dive was the opening overture of the Battle of the Java Sea.

Chapter 14

Destroyer Flotilla 3 under Rear Admiral Hashimoto was the first to sight the Allied fleet. He had been steaming as part of a wide screening line of destroyers, his flag on the cruiser *Sendai*, with destroyers *Fubuki*, *Hatsuyuki*, *Shirayuki* and *Shirakomo*. *Sendai* opened the action at 16,000 yards with her 5.5 inch guns targeting the lead US destroyers, *Edwards* and *Jones*. The Japanese DD Flotilla then put on speed and charged in at the tail of that column, their guns engaging *Alden* and *Ford*.

Further south, the 5th DD Flotilla under Rear Admiral Hara aboard light cruiser *Natori* swung up to the northwest to engage the Dutch. Destroyers *Asakaze*, *Harukaze* and *Matsukaze* were in a good position to make a torpedo attack, and they put down a spread of 12 Long Lance torpedoes, firing from 15,000 yards. Behind them came the heavy cruisers *Kumano*, *Mogami* and *Mikuma*, and their bigger 8 inch guns already had the range to begin firing.

These three cruisers, all in the same class, had been cleverly designed in 1934 with five triple 6.1-inch gun turrets to be classified as a light cruiser. Yet the ships were over 8,500 tons, and 646 feet long as opposed to a standard Nagara Class light cruiser of about 5,300 tons and 534 feet in length. The barbettes for those five turrets were also secretly enlarged so they could accommodate a bigger turret during refits if desired. It was a deceptive little shell game played by Japan early in the treaty years, when they felt snubbed to be allocated fewer ships than the so called “Major Powers” like the US and Britain.

So in 1937, these ships all had their facelift, receiving better 8-inch gun turrets to deftly move them into the heavy cruiser class. Later on, the lead ship, *Mogami*, would be converted to a hybrid seaplane carrier, with 11 planes aft on a long flight deck, and three turrets forward, much like the *Tone* class.

Those three ships combined for thirty 8-inch guns, and they were going to wreak havoc on the thin skinned old destroyers. The American Tin Cans charged into the teeth of that fire, making smoke as they came, but visibility was good, the seas steady, and the Japanese aim was dead accurate. In the swirling duel that followed, *Edwards*, *Pope*, *Alden* and *Ford* would all take

damaging hits, with the first three sinking within the hour, and *Ford* dead in the water. The engineers managed to get the screws turning again, and *Ford* limped off, fated to run into light cruiser *Jintsu* and come under the guns of heavy cruiser *Haguro* as it passed very near the Japanese landing zone, en route to Surabaya.

The Japanese destroyers lunged in towards the center of Doorman's battle line, and the Long Lance torpedoes were again in the water, this time from the south. Yet the Japanese had little luck with this deadly weapon that day. One hit would take Dutch Destroyer *Kortenaer* aft, and the resulting explosion put so much damage on the screws and rudder that she would wallow helplessly for the next 40 minutes, eventually sinking at 18:20.

The line of three heavy cruisers then engaged Doorman's force, and the ensuing battle would close to 8,000 yards and see hits on every side. *Sumatra* was so badly damaged that one of her boilers exploded, and the resulting fires would gut that ship in an hour. The Flagship *De Ruyter* was pummeled by no less than five hits, and had only one main gun operational thirty minutes into the fight.

This Japanese gunnery was superb compared to the results another set of heavy cruisers had obtained in the old history. There they had fired over 1600 rounds, getting only five hits, with four of those failing to explode. Those ships had been of the older *Myoko* Class cruisers. In this action it was all *Mogami* class, and they had scored at least sixteen hits for roughly the same expenditure of ammunition, an average of one hit per hundred rounds fired.

This was combat at sea in WWII, and nothing like the almost certain calculus that *Kirov* enjoyed. It was all a haphazard affair, one part seamanship, one part sweat and skill, three parts sheer luck. Doorman himself was wounded, his bridge clotted with heavy smoke, and he realized that his brave charge had done all it could. He turned about, hoping to make Surabaya before his ship lost power, and the remaining four US destroyers wheeled about to lay a heavy smoke screen and cover the withdrawal.

The Japanese were more than happy to see them go, and not inclined to pursue. *Kumano* had one forward turret out of action, *Mogami* two turrets that had sustained heavy damage, and *Mikuma* had her aft turret jammed by a hit near the barbette that prevented it from rotating. It would send the entire squadron home after the invasion for the refits that would see *Mogami* move from a caterpillar to a butterfly. The loss of *Chikuma* in the north meant the

fleet needed fast scout cruisers with search planes, and this class was always eyed with that in mind.

So the Japanese had done exactly what a covering force was supposed to do, and protected the invasion convoy, putting five enemy destroyers and the cruiser *Sumatra* under the Java Sea. They would not lose a single ship, and the invasion would now proceed as planned.

Doorman's surviving ships made Surabaya, and the haggard Admiral came ashore, his arm in a bloodied sling, realizing that he could do no more with his tattered squadron. He was, in fact, a Zombie now, for in the old history, his intransigence and persistence in leading his outgunned ships after the enemy would end with his death. This time he would have a very long night ahead to think about the men and ships he left behind. The four remaining American destroyers would slip off to try and reach Darwin, leaving him nothing much to fight with.

Doorman's fleet had bothered the Japanese invasion of Sumatra, failed to stop the landings on Bali, and was now convincingly crushed in the Java Sea. The strategic result of his actions was nothing more than a brave, futile defeat, and his many sorties resulted in the Japanese now having total control of the Java Sea. Yet the naval game was not entirely over. Mountbatten was too late to intervene here, but he would arrive the following day just as the landings were underway.

It would put him in a very good position to cause trouble, but at that moment he did not know that another Admiral was steaming west in the Arafura Sea, Chiuchi Nagumo, with the 5th Carrier Fleet. *Zuikaku* and *Shokaku* had finished their work at Rabaul and now they came west, with three battleships, and trouble would not be half a word for what Nagumo had in mind.

* * *

That night, the 2nd Division convoy would make its approach to Merak, and the Eastern Covering Force moved into position to screen off any further sortie from Surabaya. The 48th Division followed it, with the Sakaguchi Detachment, and in the pre-dawn hours the ships deployed their paravanes and glided slowly towards their assigned anchorage sites. This detachment would be the first troops to set foot on Java at Kragan, a small fishing village

on the north central coast. It had been chosen precisely because it offered a stretch of long shallow beaches, and was not near a port where the enemy might be expected to defend. As such, the landing achieved complete surprise, and was unopposed.

The troops moved quickly inland, reaching the rail line coming from Semarang through Lasem. Soon the remainder of the division would expand this beachhead east to Tuban on the road to Surabaya. One key objective were the oil fields at Tejapu, about 40 kilometers south of Kragan. This was assigned to Colonel Sakaguchi, as it was on the road to the large inland city of Surjakarta, which opened the route to the south coast.

The Dutch were the first to hear of the landings, and quickly dispatched their 2nd Cavalry Battalion positioned northeast of Surabaya to investigate. As it approached Tuban, it ran into 1/1 Formosa Battalion of the 48th Infantry, advancing quickly along the road in column.

Number 2 Armored Car Company was composed of 12 Alvis Straussler AC3D Armored Cars purchased from the United Kingdom in 1938. It was a speedy 13 ton four wheeled vehicle, with a hull mounted Vickers .303 MG and a turret mounted 12.7mm heavy machine gun. This small company stopped at Balud along the rail line near a bridge over the Solo River and began to set up a road block. The Japanese actually intended to cross this river at Bodjanegoro, about 30 kilometers west, but the position occupied by the Dutch was also on their list of objectives that day.

The only substantial fighting force for the Allies was well to the west, Brigadier Bennett's Australian Brigade, which was all that was left of the 8th Division forces that had been on Singapore. They were 100 kilometers from the Sakaguchi Detachment landings at Kragan, and Bennett now had to decide what to do.

There were two routes he could take east. One was through a broad valley that skirted south of a stubby peninsula formed by the mass of Mount Murjo. This road would take him to the small port of Rembang on the north coast, then east to the site of the enemy landings. The second route followed road and rail lines through another inland valley that would take him to those oil fields at Tejapu, and then on to Surabaya. There was high country between the two routes, with no good roads of any kind. Bennett's problem was that he would need to cover both routes. He got on the telephone to Brigadier Clifton, who was posted south at Surjakarta with the New Zealand Brigade.

“If we take the road to Rembang,” said Bennett, the Japanese could swing through Tejapu and then come west. That would bottle my brigade up near Mount Murjo. I would have to split my brigade and send at least one battalion by the other route as a blocking force.”

Bennett’s problem was they he could not walk two roads and yet one traveler be. Splitting his brigade in the face of uncertain enemy strength was not wise.

“If you decide that,” said Clifton, “then keep your main strength on the inland road to Tejapu. We know the Japs will want those oil fields. But I’ll go you one better. I can take my brigade up to Ngawa, right south of those fields. Then we’d be in a good position to support you.”

After contacting Montgomery, that was the order of the day, but it was specified that the airfields near Surjakarta and Semarang had to be garrisoned.

“We’ve heard the Japanese used paratroops on Timor,” said Monty. “Furthermore, we haven’t established that this is their main landing yet. Semarang is a nice cherry of a port. It will have to be held.”

That order was going to split Bennett’s Brigade three ways, and he wasn’t happy about it. He sent his 2/19 Battalion up to Rembang on the coast, and then took his artillery and 2/26 Battalion by the inland route. 2/18th Battalion deployed along the coast near Semarang. He had one more battalion, but it had been sent well south on the road to Malang, the “support” Monty had decided to provide to the Dutch forces in Surabaya.

As for Clifton, he found rolling stock and put his 24th Battalion on the line east. The Brigade then pooled its transport and sent the 26th Battalion by road, leaving the 25th Battalion in Surjakarta. So these orders were going to set four battalions in motion, advancing on a front that measured some 80 kilometers north to south.

Even as these troops set out on their marches, the next alarm rang far to the west at Merak on the Sunda Strait. Japanese troops of the Fukushima Detachment of 2nd Division stormed ashore there, swarming the Dutch and British defenders that had been watching that vital crossing point to Sumatra. The Dutch had just escaped from Oosthaven, welcomed by the single British battalion there, 2/5 Beds & Herts.

Further north, on the other side of a knobby mountain peninsula rising some 1900 feet, more Japanese transports had appeared in Banten Bay. It was

soon clear that this was to be the main attack against Batavia, and now Montgomery rocked on his heels. "They've split their forces in two," he grinned, "east and west. That gives us an excellent chance to defeat them in detail."

"Assuming this is all they have," said Sitwell, acting as his Chief of Staff due to his better knowledge of the scene there on Java.

"True," said Monty, but at the very least I think we can hem these landings in near Merak."

Then word came of the landing further east on the coast near a small hamlet named Patrol, and Monty's eyes lost some of their shine. "Any idea of the strength there? Any division identified?"

"It looks to be the leading edge of at least a regiment, but we have no further details. Collier's Royal Engineers are at the airfield at Kalidjati."

"That's what they want," said Montgomery, thinking. "They knew they needed Merak on the Sunda Strait to secure their communications over to Sumatra. But these landings at Banten Bay look substantial from all reports. I'm inclined to think this other landing to the east is merely a raid, aimed at securing that airfield. They wouldn't land that far east to make a go at Batavia. That's why they're in Banten Bay."

"Sir, we've got the Division Recon Battalion at Cerebon, and the 1st Sherwood Foresters on the road heading that way. Together with the Royal Engineers, we could put three battalions into that landing out east, and they'd be coming in from every side."

"Perfect," said Montgomery. "Make it so."

Those Royal Engineers were fairly well equipped. They had 27 squads in all, with 13 Vickers MGs, plenty of 3-inch mortars and even four Bren carriers. They set out towards the landing site immediately, and soon ran right into a much smaller detachment of engineers that were making right for that airfield. They would meet at Pagadan Baru on the rail line over the Punegara River, and a sharp engagement ensued.

The Royals reached the bridge first, with rifle fire from the advancing enemy snapping off the metal girders. They had no idea of the actual enemy strength, and there was soon help at hand to the east when the recon battalion came up in lorries and began to attack a small detachment of Japanese armored cars from march. They drove them back, but the Japanese were only falling back on the first of their three battalions of infantry in this landing,

and their defense soon strengthened.

Out in the Sunda Strait, Mountbatten had sent a pair of destroyers to screen and patrol, wanting to know if the Japanese were making any movement into the Indian Ocean. DD *Jupiter* heard the radio traffic near Merak, and steamed up to investigate, but Lieutenant Commander Norman Thew was running into trouble. He had just lowered his field glasses, after seeing the vast sweep of enemy troops ships and thought he would have a crack at them. Soon they began to receive enemy fire from small caliber guns, and he gave an order to maneuver, when there was a sudden violent explosion.

“Torpedo!” a man yelled from below, and it was clear the ship had taken a hard blow to the starboard side. In fact, *Jupiter* had struck a mine, making her appointment with fate exactly on schedule, in spite of the many changes in the order of these events. The mine had been laid to help screen the approaches to Merak the previous day, by the Dutch minelayer *Gouden Leeuw*.

So while spared the grave risk of the fighting in the Java Sea, *Jupiter* would nonetheless meet its ordained end here in the Sunda Strait off the rocky coast of Java. The tabular record of movement would report her end almost verbatim as it had in Fedorov’s history: “*During maneuvers to avoid enemy fire, ship detonated mine in position 6.45S - 112.6E and was totally disabled. Remained afloat for four hours before sinking. 84 of ship’s company were killed or missing with 97 taken prisoner and 83 were either able to reach the shore or were rescued by the US Submarine USS-S38.*”

Thus far, the enemy was ashore in at least three locations, but Allied resources had been close enough to reach them and move to contain the landings. But this was just the leading edge of the storm now blowing in from the Java Sea.

The real thunder was yet to roll.

Chapter 15

05:40, Sunda Strait, 28 Feb, 1942

In the early morning hours of Feb 28th, the distress signal received from destroyer *Jupiter*, along with the report that the Japanese were continuing their landings at Merak, prompted Mountbatten to act. Operating well south of the Sunda Strait, the flight crews on *Illustrious* and *Indomitable* were already beginning to spot planes for a planned airstrike at dawn. Mountbatten therefore decided to detach a stronger surface action group to move into the strait prior to that attack and scout the enemy position.

Destroyers *Scout* and *Tenedos* were already north of a small island group that sat in the middle of that strait, and they were probing closer to the Sumatran coast to ascertain whether the Japanese were making any use of the recently captured port of Oosthaven. Destroyers *Electra* and *Express* now led in a small task force to the south of those same islands, with light cruisers *Dauntless* and *Dragon*, followed by heavy cruisers *Exeter* and *Dorsetshire*. They soon encountered a screen of three Japanese destroyers south of Merak, and began to engage them with fire from the cruisers.

Captain Augustus Willington Shelton Agar, VC, DSO, was also a man to stack up names and titles, and he stood aboard *Dorsetshire*, watching the darkness ahead as the first salvoes fired. There followed soon after a slight quavering, which prompted him to look over his shoulder, thinking one of the other ships had fired behind him. All seemed quiet, so he looked forward again.

“That’s *Exeter* up ahead, is it not?” he said to the Officer of the Watch.

“Aye sir, she hasn’t fired yet.”

Thinking it was no more than an echo, the Captain turned to watch as *Exeter* finally fired, her 8-inch guns lighting up her silhouette some 2000 yards ahead. The guns barked, followed by a long, low rumbling sound that the Captain thought was thunder.

“Mister Dawes, are we expecting rain?”

“No sir, clear ahead and with a good moon. She’s nearly full sir. Should be good sighting once we close the range.”

The hydrophone operator on *Dorsetshire* had heard the sound as well, but thought it was nothing more than the dull rumble of naval gunfire, or perhaps even one of the destroyers dropping a depth charge on a suspected enemy submarine. Captain Agar looked at his watch, marking the time 05:48, and gave the order to increase speed to two thirds. The small bright flash of enemy gunfire appeared ahead as the Japanese destroyers realized their peril and began to fire back. No heavy guns yet, thought Agar, all the better for us, but we don't know what's back of that destroyer screen.

It wasn't anything behind that destroyer screen that he should have been concerned about, for there was something in his wake that was far more dangerous. He had felt something like this an hour ago as they entered the Sunda Strait, a fluttering in the air, as if the pressure was changing, though the barometer remained steady. There came a trembling in the atmosphere, a quavering vibration that rattled the ship, setting loose equipment to shaking. The engines would rumble like that at times, protesting a sudden change of speed, but *Dorsetshire* had been fairly reliable of late. She was due for a refit soon, and the Captain hoped he would not have engine trouble now as he entered battle.

There was a loud boom, followed by a low growl, like the sound of a long distended roll of thunder, but the skies were clear, the wind calm, save for the vaguest sense of unease on the breeze, as if something was happening, a subtle shift, not in the weather, but in the earth itself. Captain Agar looked over his shoulder again, the hair on the back of his neck prickling up, as though he was being stalked by some unseen foe, but there was nothing to be seen, at least at first.

Dorsetshire fired again, and he moved out close to the edge of the weather deck to have a look with his field glasses, but he was not looking forward. Even in the urgency of the battle, the discomfiture he felt, an almost queasy sense of unease that was akin to dread, had prompted him to look aft, and there he finally saw something low on the horizon, a dull red glow much akin to what the sun might look like in the first red moment of dawn. Moving quickly to the chart table on the bridge, his finger tapped out the spot where he thought he was seeing the spectacle. There came a low rumble again, like that of a tea kettle just before it boiled, and the sound of a distant hiss in the sky.

"Must be a bloody volcano," he said aloud. "But this one has gone

dormant, hasn't it?"

The Captain was an educated man, and new something of the world he was sailing in. The sea mount on his charts was in fact a cluster of small islands, Penjang, Sertung, and then a series of three peaks, Pertuban, Danan, and the highest being Rakata. They rumbled about from time to time, but seldom bothered anyone beyond that. Now it was the boom of *Dorsetshire's* third salvo that commanded his attention, and shaking his head, he turned to his battle without another backward thought.

Far to the southwest, the planes were lined up on the decks of the British carriers as the skies slowly began to lighten. *Illustrious* had suffered an odd collision with HMS *Formidable* in the old history, and repairs had kept her from this duty. But it never happened here. Somerville and Wells had taken *Formidable* on a private hunt, and so *Illustrious* was in fine fighting trim, her two newly installed radar sets alert to any sign of enemy planes. She had her flight deck enlarged by 50 feet, a new catapult installed, and ten more 20mm Oerlikon AA guns to beef up her defenses.

Just as *Illustrious* wasn't supposed to be where she was, an officer on her flight deck that morning was also off his appointed rounds. His name was Charles Bentell Lamb, not to be confused with Lieutenant Peter "Sheepy" Lamb who's fate we have already visited aboard the ill fated HMS *Audacity*. Charlie Lamb had come up through the Merchant Marine, then learned to fly with the RAF Coastal Command before being posted to *Illustrious*. He had a fondness for the old Swordfish torpedo bombers, spending many long hours in his Stringbag before it was finally replaced with the new Albacore. Before the war he had gained some notoriety as a boxer for the fleet, and now he was spoiling for another kind of fight, eager to get up and see what the Japanese were up to that morning.

Lamb was supposed to be in a jail cell in French North Africa, captured when he tried to fly in a special agent there, and his plane developed engine trouble and had to go to ground. He would have sat out most of 1942 there, waiting for his confederates to land in Operation Torch in November. But that had not happened either. It was just a small thing that had changed his fate, an errant tick mark on a flight officer roster that checked off someone else's name instead of his. So there he was, also in good fighting trim, and ready to board his Albacore, one hand reaching up to one of the wings as he completed his pre flight inspection.

Then, strangely, he felt the wing vibrating under his hand, thinking the ship had finally turned to find the wind, but that was not the case. He looked aft, but the wake of the carrier was calm and smooth. Mountbatten had not yet turned, the elevators were still working, and the last of this flight was still being spotted on the flight deck.

But there it was, a trembling vibration that rippled now from his hand on that wing, down his arm and all the way to his boots. The metal deck was quavering, and he thought he felt an odd stirring in the air. He looked around, finding the near full moon clear and bright as it fell towards the horizon. He looked at his watch, seeing it was just a little after 06:00. They had been under its pale silver light for some time, and it would not set for another hour, at about 07:00. Then, in that last interval of darkness, the planes would take off to race north before sunrise at 09:30 that day.

Lamb was enough of an old salt that he knew something was wrong in that vibration. Was *Illustrious* teething from that last refit? Had the work crews missed something in her engines? He would not find a chart and realize that it was only the occasional rumbling of the volcano that lived in these waters, one of so many that rose in tall misty cones along the Malay Barrier.

* * *

The long archipelago that military strategists of the 1940s referred to as the “barrier islands” stretched over 2,500 miles from the northern tip of Sumatra to the eastern tip of Timor. It followed the subterranean line of a great subduction zone, where the Indo-Australian plate slowly folds beneath the Eurasian plate. The resulting pressures created over 130 active volcanoes in the island arc, and among them were some of the great terrors in the panoply of Volcanic Gods.

In northern Sumatra, the mighty supervolcano of Toba sits beneath a serene blue lake, the largest in southeast Asia, that now covers its massive caldera. At its center sits the misty island of Samusir, almost as big as Singapore Island, and white falls of water now cascade down to the lake where hot flows of lava once shaped the flanks of those sheer cliffs. When it last erupted, over 70,000 years ago, scientists say it may have been a V.E.I. 8 on a scale of 9, where no known eruptions of V.E.I. 9 have ever been found. Some believe it nearly wiped humanity from existence, reducing the

population to perhaps fewer than 10,000 individuals.

The children of Toba dot the landscape of these verdant, steamy islands for thousands of miles. Rinjani, Child of the Sea, sits prominently astride Lombok east of Bali. Merapi the Mountain of Fire, dominates the rugged central mountains of Java. The legendary Tambora sits as the undisputed master of the Island of Sumbawa, and in 1815, just a few months before the battle of Waterloo, it produced the largest eruption known on earth in the last 25,000 years.

And then there was the demon of the sea, sitting right astride a dogleg bend in that subduction zone, where the thinner crust saw the fiery heart of the earth migrate upwards to produce another famous mountain of fire in the middle of the Sunda Strait, and one with a name that might now be a synonym for fear and dread—Krakatoa. These were the islands that had rumbled to bother Captain Agar that morning, and their stirring had quavered the wing of Charlie Lamb's plane, even though HMS *Illustrious* was 110 kilometers to the southwest.

In Fedorov's history, that volcano had last erupted in 1883, producing the loudest sound humans ever heard, resounding all the way across the Indian Ocean, and shaking seismographs the world over. Its explosive force was 30,000 times greater than the bomb dropped at Hiroshima, and its shock wave circled the earth seven times. The mountain itself was literally blown apart, but as terrible as its demise was, the volcano still refused to die. In 1927, it slowly began to rise again, a dull grey cinder cone emerging from the sea like some dreadful behemoth with a single glowing red eye. Called Anak Krakatoa, or the 'Son of Krakatoa,' it would grow at a rate of five inches per week, always restive, never really sleeping, like a man beset with fitful nightmares.

Of all the most explosive eruptions in human history, the top three were Tambora in 1815, Santorini off Greece in 1628, BC, and Krakatoa off Java in 1883—at least in the history Fedorov knew. In this timeline, more than human events had been found to change. Meteorological and geologic events had skipped a beat here or there as well. The 1920s earthquake in Japan that had damaged the hull that was being built for the battlecruiser *Tosa* had never happened, and now that ship was afloat as a converted aircraft carrier, standing in for the loss of *Hiryu* after Pearl Harbor.

No one had ever thought to look, not even Fedorov, for there was so little

time in the heat of all these events, and so much data to reabsorb. He had focused on trying to analyze what had changed in the history they were now sailing through, and why, but a flip through a geologic reference to see what the earth itself had been doing had never occurred to him. Perhaps he simply assumed that these “acts of god,” the storms, earthquakes, eruptions of the earth were all riveted in the chronology, destined to take place at their appointed times, but, as we have already seen, they were not.

The weather was so fickle that it could simply not be so harnessed. The wind would go where it wished, heedless of time’s ledgers and the urgencies of human endeavor. The storm that delayed Halsey and hastened the arrival of *Neosho* had been early, speeding the gritty Admiral into that confrontation with the *Kido Butai*, and sending *Neosho* to her fiery fate. That simple weather event had a considerable effect on the outcome of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, though no one ever took the time to finger the wind as the real culprit that day.

The interval from the 1800s to modern days is but a wink in geologic time, so to have two major eruptions so close together like Tambora and Krakatoa was strong evidence that the barrier islands were rumbling to life, the earth there shaking, even as it has in modern times, producing some of the largest earthquakes ever recorded on the planet.

Eruptions on this scale could radically alter the flow of events in the history they affected. The dire and weighty matters of war and strategy produced volumes in the brief outbreak of violence that was WWII, but relatively little has been written on the life changing powers possessed by these fiery mountains, and the restless angry Gods that hunched beneath their glowing cinder cones.

Vladimir Karpov might be one man who came to respect their power, for he had his entire battlegroup blown over a century into the past when the Demon Volcano erupted in the midst of a wild mêlée at sea in 2021. If he thought about that event, he might lay the blame for the massive fractures now rippling through the halls of fate and time right at the base of that volcano. For if that eruption had not occurred, nothing of his strange displacement to 1908, and the long confrontation with Admiral Togo’s fleet, would have ever happened. The Altered States that were now rewriting the history of WWII would have never taken place. Was it fate that he found himself aboard *Kirov* at exactly that place and time, the will of the great god

Vulcan, or mere happenstance?

Whatever force had moved the levers that day, it was moving again in the Sunda Strait, awakening from long troubled sleep, rumbling to life beneath the turbulent seas where uniformed men now steamed about in the rising swells on small metal ships, flinging even smaller hunks of metal at one another, and calling it history. The lines they would inscribe in that book would be nothing compared to the epic now about to be written by the Demon in the waters off Java that morning.

It was something that was never supposed to happen now. The violence inherent in that fractured spot in the crust of the earth was already supposed to have vented its wrath in 1883, but it had not done so. If Fedorov had taken the time to look, he might have discovered the grim possibility that was now rumbling to life. He might have learned that, for reasons he could never fathom, the eruption of Krakatoa in 1883 had never occurred in this time line, but better late than never, it was going to happen now, and it would change the entire course of these events.

Aboard *Illustrious*, Mountbatten was settling into the Captain's chair on the bridge with his early morning tea. Charles Lamb was sitting in his plane and ready to go find the sunrise, but he would never see it that morning. Something else was rising, from the depths of the earth, slowly throwing open the gates of hell itself.

Krakatoa was about to explode....

Part VI

The Gates of Hell

“Hell is empty, and all devils are here.”

— **William Shakespeare**

Chapter 16

It began at 06:40, on the last day of February in 1942. The vague misgivings, thrumming vibrations in the air, and dull and distant rumblings soon produced a vast column of what looked like white steam, rising up and up, a massive veil over the Sunda Strait. In the little gun duel that was then under way, every man on either side with a view to the south and west took notice, some standing spellbound as they watch the rapid ascension of the steamy white cloud. High up, perhaps over 11,000 meters, it caught the wind, its top sheared away and smeared across the dull grey sky.

On the shore where the Japanese had landed on Java, the small, once bustling port of Anjer had long since ceased to be the little paradise of Palm and Banyan trees, with the sweet trade winds laced with spices. First came the headlong rush of soldiers and refugees coming over from Oosthaven on Sumatra, swelling over the quays and docks, hastening inland on the roads to Serang and Batavia to the east. Ships came and went, pulling up anchor and then putting out to sea, for the enemy was said to be very near.

At night, the dark silhouette of a Dutch gunboat lurked off shore, then fled north around the stony Cape Merak. Soon the silver grey night saw those glassy seas broken with the coming of over fifty transports, their holds laden with troops and equipment, the Japanese 2nd Infantry Division had finally arrived. Destroyers churned in the waters to the west of the landing site, soon to be challenged, first by the probing of the ill-fated *Jupiter*, and then by the larger task force led by Captain Agar on *Dorsetshire*. But he had been too late to prevent those landings, and now the old village Kampong huts were burning from the fires of war, and the dull tramp of Japanese infantry had swept over the sandy shore as they pushed inland, driving off a company of hapless Dutch defenders, and then the hasty defense mounted by the Beds & Herts.

When that vast column of steam vented up into the sky, the last gleaming light of the moon illuminated the silken white veil, and the moon itself fell like a massive blue pearl into the troubled waters of the Sunda Strait, as if fleeing from what was now to come. It set behind the island group that had sent this first warning up, and any man who gazed west was awed by the

sight of the tall conical island, backlit by a violet haze that deepened to scarlet indigo at the level of the sea. The soldiers gawked for a time, then were urged on by the harsh throated orders of their officers. They had an invasion to see to, and no thought of what was now about to take place had entered any of their minds.

That morning, in the dark interval between moonset and the coming of the sun, the last of the landing parties cast off their lines, and anchors were pulled up on the transports. The first squadron was already heading north, hastening away from the rising sound of naval gunfire resounding from the west. Three of their guardian destroyers were already engaged, and out in the strait, a line of three more were hastening west like the winds they were named for, *Harukaze*, the Spring Wind, *Hatakaze*, the Flag Wind, *Asakaze*, the Morning Wind that was now about to become the breath of hell.

The pop of their gunfire was briefly heard, even as that vent of steamy sky reached upwards. Then the muffled report of the gunfire was suddenly smothered by the low growl of that isolated stony island in the sea, and this time something much more than steam erupted. The tip of the mountain's sharp cone belched with fire, and a huge billow of pinkish-grey smoke and ash piled up above those flames, surging into the sky with a loud roar. It cast a vast shadow over the glassy blue sea, which deepened as the column rose, a roiling mass of heat that carried the sulfuric taint of some long lost den of horror beneath the earth.

The ships at sea were caught up in a sudden wild disturbance of the water, not a wave emanating from the site of that eruption, but something affecting the entire area around the islets of Krakatoa, as if the earth beneath was heaving and bucking up, shaking the water above. The smaller destroyers lurched about in those wild seas, and on the bigger ship *Dorsetshire*, Captain Agar was forced to reach for a guide rail near the binnacle as his heavy cruiser rolled suddenly to one side. His gaze was now transfixed on the scene behind him, amazed by the spectacle of that darkening bloom of heavy ash rising above the volcano.

The day that had been slowly lightening, now darkened under that shadow, the impenetrable pall of Hades spewing forth until the gloom shrouded the entire scene. The smoky ash that blighted the sky gathered with unceasing volume, and tremendous speed, driven on by a series of thunderous reports, as if massive bombs were being set off. They were heard all over

Western Java, and dazed villagers came stumbling out of their huts and houses, staring in awe at the fisting shadow of doom that now rose into the violet grey sky. That fading color soon deepened to shadow, and darkness blackened the sky in every direction.

Out on the weather deck of *Dorsetshire*, Captain Agar gawked as a fine haze descended all about the ship. He reached out his ungloved hand, surprised to find a sheen of ash whitening the handrail. In a matter of minutes it had covered the cruiser from halyards to decks, a mantle of pallid grey-white ash that made it seem he was now Captain of some ghostly phantom ship.

The Japanese destroyers had careened about in that wild sea, and then turned rapidly northeast, as if they could sense the unnatural movement of the water beneath them was an omen far more dangerous than anything the British could be doing. The fume in their wakes seemed to underscore the chaos of the movement, but this was only the beginning, the first herald of the storm that was coming. It was only the first great eruption, which would persist until well after sunrise. Krakatoa was only just awakening from its long sleep, and for the next twenty hours, the gates of hell would be open, the host would issue forth, until it would end in a world shattering event that no man then alive could have possibly imagined.

* * *

At the bungalow HQ of Java Command near Bandung, General Montgomery had been up early to follow the reports of the battle that was now underway. So far the movement of the Australians to contain the landings at Patrol east of Batavia had been smartly carried out, and he had come to believe that lodgment was not the main event. In the heart of Western Java, he was 250 kilometers southeast of Krakatoa, but when that first eruption burst forth, he soon heard the loud rumble, thinking it was the sound of a Japanese airstrike nearby. Then a messenger ran in with a cable from Batavia, and news of what was happening.

The boom of the eruptions could be heard clearly, growing louder with each report, as loud as heavy naval guns. Calls from Batavia, a hundred kilometers east of the eruption, claimed that a heavy ashfall was now blanketing the city, and frightened people were rushing about, throwing their

meager belongings onto carts and rickshaws, and starting east on the road. The Japanese landings south of Merak were only 50 kilometers from Krakatoa, and there the rain of ash and pumice was far heavier, until the troops were themselves covered in ash, moving like pale ghouls through the thickening darkness. Even an hour after sunrise, the gloom was impenetrable, and all combat operations had to be immediately suspended.

Montgomery had one of his Brigadiers on the line in Batavia, learning that the city was not yet under attack. Then the line went dead, and a moment later there came a much louder explosion, the sound finally arriving from the distant mountain in the sea. It gave him a chilling, ominous feeling, and he wondered what must be happening there.

Windows were rattling in the city with each booming explosion, and battalion commanders further west, their men choking in the ashfall, were making frantic calls for permission to pull out to the east. Those orders were given, until the telephone system also went completely dead. The day that had promised nothing more than the thunder of war, had now descended into the wrath and chaos of nature, which was so all consuming of the sky that Krakatoa began to generate its own weather. Lightning streaked through the broiling mass of rolling black clouds, illuminating the bristling crown of the maddened Sea God.

As for flight Lt. Charles Lamb, safely out in the Indian Ocean, it was immediately apparent that he and his mates would not go out that day. All the planes on the two British carriers, still 150 kilometers from the eruption, were ordered removed from the flight deck and stowed below. Air operations were now completely impossible, and one seaplane that had tried to go up to see what was happening came plummeting down in no time, its engine completely clogged with ash.

Out in the Sunda Strait, Captain Agar had come about and was now withdrawing southwest. He would have to come within 25 kilometers of the volcano to leave the strait, and it would be a very perilous journey. Ships flashed lanterns at one another, until they could simply not be seen. Then the order was given to use the naval search lights, and long white fingers probed the ashen seas ahead and behind as the column proceeded at a cautious speed of 15 knots.

The ashfall was so heavy that it swept into any open hatch or stairwell, until the chalky white was tracked deep into the inner compartments of the

ship. No one on deck could stay there for long, and the Captain was forced to rig out tarps on the open bridge to stave off the cinders that now began to fall in pea sized fragments, still warm to the touch. These would increase to chestnuts, and eventually fist sized clumps of pumice that fell continually.

At one point he had to give a steering order when the watchman called out an obstacle ahead. It was narrowly averted, and Captain Agar saw that it was a broad raft of pumice, which now covered the sea itself, giving the ocean a ghostly, milky-white appearance. To the men unfortunate enough to be on the high mast mounting their watches, it seemed that the task force was covered in hoarfrost, frozen ships on a frigid white sea.

That ash fall was going to spread for hundreds of kilometers on the wind. Soon much of Western Java was under the fallout, and later there would be reports of ash accumulating to a depth of half an inch on Cocos Island, 1,155 kilometers southwest of Krakatoa. Ships at sea in the Indian Ocean would report the blanket of fine dust and ash while steaming over 2800 kilometers away, and some reported ashfall as far off as the Horn of Africa, over 6,000 kilometers distant. The rafts of pumice that gathered in pinkish-yellow patches on the open sea would persist for over a year, drifting all the way to the African coast.

In the old history, the events already described had happened in May, and the mountain continued to steam and vent off and on, until late August when the final paroxysm came. Here, the pressure building beneath was nearly 60 years greater, which was not much in geologic time, but something unusual had happened beneath the earth. A subterranean eruption had forced a vast quantity of magma up, but it did not break the surface, forming a massive dike or plug in the deep wells that were driving the eruptive process. It literally 'kept a lid' on the mountain for those six decades, but all the while more and more magma flowed up, and the pressure building beneath Krakatoa was much greater than in the 1883 eruption that had happened in Fedorov's history. This time, the entire process was going to be collapsed into a much shorter, and more violent event.

The explosion was so massive that it created a sound that would circle the earth seven times with its incredible pressure wave. To every man in Captain Agar's squadron, it was simply ear shattering, so deafening that the crews were literally stunned as if they had been struck by a hammer, the pain intense, their eardrums shattered. Many, were knocked unconscious, others

cowered below decks with their hands over their bleeding ears in shameless fear. They had been through rough seas, wind and storm, but never anything like this.

It was a sound so loud that it would be heard 85 minutes later in Perth, over 1700 kilometers to the south, as a strong explosive bang. Nothing like it had ever been heard before. Tambora's blast of 1815 was terrible, but did not produce this same explosive sound. As if to proclaim itself as the new pretender to the throne in the long arc of volcanic islands, the Sea Demon beneath Krakatoa was bellowing with a roar that moved the air around the island with an awful wrenching pressure.

The column of the eruption poured out and up, towering into the sullen sky like a living thing, a monstrous demon of earth, smoke and fire. Its smoky shoulders rolled upwards with incredible force, and then massive hunks of earth were seen in the sky, soon plummeting down into the turbulent sea.

This tremendous outpouring of gas and ejecta would go on for many hours, the sky growing ever darker, until it was near pitch black by mid-day. By then, the 54th Brigade defending near Merak had retreated east to Batavia, and the 53rd Brigade stationed there was ordered to move east on the road to Kilidjati Airfield. There was nothing that could be done about the 31 Hurricane fighters still on the airfields near Batavia. They simply had to be abandoned, for they could not fly. Some of the crews made a vain attempt to move ten or twelve on flatbed rail cars, but the ash was falling so heavily now that even the rail lines were hazardous. In the end, most of the planes simply had to be destroyed.

On the other side of the equation, The Japanese had a much worst time of things. There was already ash to a depth of many inches all along the coastal regions where they had landed. Half of the transports had fled north, but the remainder hovered furtively off shore, where three brave destroyers still stood guard. When it was clear that the situation was going from bad to worse, General Maruyama ordered any further landing of supplies, equipment, or vehicles halted, and began pulling his troops back towards the coast. He was going to attempt to re-embark as much of his force as possible.

The troops moved like zombies, their faces and eyes swathed in cloth, shirtless, ashen souls stumbling through the utter darkness in long lines, each man with a hand on the shoulder of the one in front of him. Many fell from

respiratory distress, collapsing in listless heaps on the roads and trails, and then the lightning flashed, thunder joining the constant rumble and roar of the volcano, and a heavy sulfuric rain began to fall. This created pools of ash mud and flows of tiny 'lahars,' a Javanese word that had been used to describe ash and debris flows from volcanoes ever thereafter.

Yet the cold lahars were not the flows to be truly feared. It was the sudden collapse of that massive volcanic plume that would pose the most danger, a pyroclastic flow that could originate from any of the big explosive eruptions now underway. It could form a fast moving current of hot rock, ash, and gas that would cascade down over the sea and spread out like a mantle of utter destruction, moving at the incredible speed of up to 700 KPH. To be caught anywhere near such an event meant almost certain death, and General Maruyama, having lived under the shadow of Mt. Fuji most of his younger life, knew enough about volcanoes to be mortally afraid.

A few battalions made it to the rafts and boats, desperately paddling back out to meet the waiting ships, which stood like frozen icebergs on a blanched white sea. At a little after 22:00, when the beginning of the end rattled the atmosphere so heavily that the movement of the air knocked the men from their feet, all the ships lurched about, their anchor chains barely holding them. Then came the noise that would be heard all the way on the other side of the Indian Ocean, a sound so powerful and intense that it shattered every window in Batavia, over 150 kilometers to the east.

Fifty kilometers from Krakatoa, at Anjer, it struck the men with a sudden piercing thunderclap, knocking them deaf, dazed and senseless, to the ground. As far away as 100 kilometers, the sound would be as high as 172 decibels, ear splitting, nerve wrenching pain, well beyond the threshold of endurance for any human being. It was as if each man had ice picks driven into their ears, and then all was deathly quiet—they would never hear another sound again.

There they wallowed in agony, blinded by the heavy ash, their eardrums burst and bleeding, their voices clotted and mute. The 2nd Division was deaf, dumb and blind, and yet that was the least of the afflictions that was now about to befall those men. The great upheaval from beneath the earth had finally begun. Up until that moment, the eruption had been emerging from cracks and fumaroles in the heavy cap of cooled magma that had sealed off the main chamber. Now it all gave way, and terror was not half a word for

what would happen next.

Chapter 17

The painful irony in General Maruyama's retrograde movement to the coast was that each struggling step his troops took in the hope of saving themselves brought them closer to death. Thus far there had been a regular series of powerful explosions that produced surging pyroclastic flows out to 10 or 20 kilometers from the volcano, much of that activity becoming undersea flows. The paroxysm that was now underway at Krakatoa was so intense that it would collapse huge segments of the main island into the sea. The resulting tsunami would surge out in all directions, but was particularly amplified as the displaced seawater entered the Sunda Straits, a bottleneck formed by the mass of Java and Sumatra.

Aboard *Dorsetshire*, Captain Agar managed to gather himself, his head throbbing with pain. He was completely deaf, but his long years of experience at sea kept him moving, helping the helmsman up and gesturing to the heading he wanted. It was no good shouting orders, for no one would hear them. In fact, no man aboard those ships would ever hear again either, but the Captain managed with hand signals, slowly getting his men up and back to their posts to re-establish control of the ship.

Then the waves came, the first produced by the massive pyroclastic flows near the island. They were enough to raise the line of ships heavily as they fled, and as the dazed and deafened crews struggled to life again, the vessels were rocked heavily with its passing. They had been following one another closely due to the limited visibility and smothering darkness, with searchlights probing to see the nearest ship ahead. When the helmsman of destroyer *Electra* fell senseless to the deck, the ship veered off, her aft section now batted about by the first wave, while *Express* behind her was carried on like an arrow about to hit a wall. The encounter she soon had was devastating when the two destroyers collided, with *Electra* skewered amidships by the bow of the other ship.

Dorsetshire's greater displacement and wider beam rode out the first few waves easily enough, though the entire column was now scattered, with ships losing contact with one another in the murky darkness and scattering in all directions. There was a gracious interval between those first two waves and

the great wave that would follow them.

Captain Agar could see the direction the waves were propagating, and steered in such a way as to best ride them out, but they were merely outriders in the storm. A huge segment of the island was collapsing into the sea, and it would generate a tsunami that would be well over 40 meters high. When the great wave finally came, the might of the sea lifted *Dorsetshire* up like a bath toy, her bow tipping down and then riding wildly up as it finally passed. The ship careened down with a heavy roll, ash and sea creating a wild white haze all around her, but *Dorsetshire* righted itself and eventually ran true again. *Exeter* had also escaped and was well off to starboard, but the light cruisers *Dauntless* and *Dragon* fared a little worse, eventually managing to ride the wave out, but seeing many men washed overboard. As for *Electra* and *Express*, the wave smashed the two together in a much more violent collision, and both would be completely swamped. Their crews would descend in terrified silence into the sea, lost to a man.

Off the coast of Anjer, the first two waves rolled through the anchorage site of the 2nd Division, again sending all the transports into a dizzying dance on the sea. These waves were big enough to swamp small boats laden with troops, and overturn rafts carrying artillery and equipment. Men clung to rope nets on the sides of *Sakura Maru*, desperately trying to keep themselves from being flung into the sea. The great wave would soon follow, smashing everything in its path with that wall of unstoppable seawater.

General Hitoshi Imamura, the overall commander of the Japanese 16th Army, would suffer a very peculiar fate. He was aboard the transport *Ryujo Maru*, a little over 100 kilometers from the fiery mountain, and well on the other side of Cape Merak above Banten Bay. When it finally came, the tsunami was still powerful enough there to create a 30 meter wave, nearly 100 feet. The ship rocked so heavily that he was thrown from the deck of *Ryujo Maru* along with his Vice Chief of Staff, and no one saw the two men go overboard into the ash covered water. He had been maneuvering to help coordinate the withdrawal, but now the operation would be completely unhinged.

The entire landing site descended into utter chaos. Minesweeper No. 2 was literally lifted up and flung at the transport *Fushimi Maru*, landing right astride the forward deck, and then the two ships rolled into the sea and the transport's back was broken by the tremendous weight. Anchor chains

snapped like tinsel, whipping through the water to sweep away smaller boats. Every deck of the 30 transports remaining there was heavily swamped, with 14 ships capsized and three others driven madly onto the nearest shore. The wave was so powerful that it would carry the *Dainichi Maru* twelve kilometers inland, where it would later be found on a jungle knoll, beached like Noah's ark.

The men of 2nd Division had struggled for hours to reach the coast, only to find a 40 meter wall of water surging in from the Sunda Straits, and carrying everything before it, boats, rafts, ships and men alike. Many of the troops had just recovered from the terrible sound, clustered in small groups on the shore, dazed and disoriented, only to find this new terror, a wave they could not even hear coming, sweeping them to their doom.

Transports *Brazil*, *Fushimi*, *Somedomo*, *Taketoyo*, *Tatsuno*, *Tofuku*, *Columbia*, *Maebashi*, *Genoa*, *Hoeisan*, *Atsuta*, *Dainichi*, *Tokiwa*, *Motoyama*, *Pacific*, *Kizzan*, and *Reiyo Maru* would all be a total loss in the waters off Anjer and Merak, and with them thousands of troops from the 2nd Division would perish. Only 12 of the 30 ships would manage to stay afloat, but everyone aboard was so dazed and thunderstruck by the disaster that they were virtually lost as an effective combat force. In one fell blow, the mighty Krakatoa had done what Montgomery had spent hours with his maps trying to plan and devise. The entire Western Task Force of the Japanese invasion of Java was completely shattered.

The great wave surged inland at Lada Bay south of Anjer, and would roll 10 kilometers inland, sweeping all before it. People, homes, possessions, animals were all caught up in the massive movement of water, with a death toll that would be counted in the tens of thousands. The water careened up the flow channels of streams and small rivers that found their way to the sea just south of Anjer, and into a broad, low valley, some six miles wide. It would inundate the entire area, creating a small lake there for weeks before the water eventually drained back to the sea. Farther north near Merak, the wave was powerful enough to sweep completely over the nine miles of lowland just south of the knobby wrinkled rise of the mountains that formed the Merak Peninsula. It would surge over the lower ground, all the way to Banten Bay on the other side of the peninsula, where more Japanese troops that had landed there would also be swamped and drowned.

Only the transports anchored well out in the bay had a chance to survive,

for the peninsula shielded them from the direct assault of the tsunami. So a few battalions and auxiliary troops that still remained in those ships would live to tell the terrible story of what had happened to their division, but they would be called the *Mimi nai danse* ever thereafter, the men without ears.

The great wave pushed completely through the Sunda Straits, around the small islands of Sebu and Sebesi north of Krakatoa, and into the long bay running up to the port of Oosthaven on Sumatra. There it would crash ashore, sweeping away boats, launches, docks, warehouses, and the entire town itself, rendering the port completely useless. It was so powerful that it migrated all the way to Batavia, and was still 28 meters high when it reached that major port.

As for the British, they fared a little better, being much further inland east of Batavia when the thunder and water came. The one forward deployed battalion, 5th Beds & Herts, was completely wiped out near the village of Serang when it was caught by the wave as it slogged east through the grey ash and rain. But most of the remainder of the division had already been given the order to pull out of Batavia hours earlier, and they were on the long road east when the thunderous roar was heard. The men dropped their rifles, covered their ears in misery, but the sound was not so debilitating there, the head of the column already 180 kilometers east of Krakatoa, and approaching Cirebon.

There it eventually blundered into a company of Japanese infantry from the Shoji Detachment that had landed at Patrol on the north coast with the intention of seizing Kilidjati Airfield. This regimental sized force had already been engaged by the 1st Sherwood Forrester Battalion, and the 18th Divisional Recon Battalion, with fighting about 50 kilometers west of Cirebon. The commander, Toshihari Shoji, had received word of the disaster at Merak and Anjer, and now realized that his was the only Japanese force west of the main landings at Kragan, completely isolated.

He radioed for instructions, but was unable to get through. Seeing that his transports were still off loading supplies, he took matters into his own hands and decided to preserve his regiment, withdrawing back towards the coast. This detachment would end up being the only effective fighting force that was delivered by the Western Task Force, and he would later be commended for his initiative in saving those troops.

The British were starting to deploy to engage that blocking company

when it slowly dissolved and withdrew, leaving the road to Cirebon open. So they pressed on, keeping a wary eye north, but found no further enemy presence. The ash fall was slowly thinning out as they reached that port, but the darkness persisted, and it would take all the next day just to sort units out and reassemble the battalions in some semblance of order.

Well south of that column, Montgomery had a real dilemma on his hands. All of Western Java was a zone of heavy ashfall, and anything that lived was fleeing east, creating massive jams of refugees on the roads and a humanitarian nightmare. The desperate natives pleaded for help and, where they could, the British rendered assistance. The war was over in that portion of the island, and while light ashfall was experienced over most of Java, the real debilitating pumice and ash ended near Montgomery's HQ at Bangdung.

Now he had to decide what to do with his Java Command Staff and a few battalions of the 54th Brigade he was holding in reserve. From all accounts, the chaos to the west was going to focus the remainder of his battle on the Japanese landing further east near Surabaya. Brigadiers Bennett and Clifton had already deployed there, and now he had most of his 18th division slogging east towards Cirebon. Word was that they found the rail lines operational there and could make good use of any rolling stock they could get their hands on. Krakatoa had pronounced its awful judgment on the strategies and plans of Generals on every side. Montgomery's plan to try and hold Batavia was now swept away with that thunderous eruption, and he set his mind on deciding how to proceed.

"There's nothing more we can do out west," he told Bennett on the telephone. "We'll have to come east and reinforce your defense of Surabaya. I'll move the division through Cirebon to Semarang as soon as possible, and take what's left of my reserve and headquarters to Surjakarta. It may be days before we can get sorted out, but we'll muddle through."

"What about Tjilatjap?" Bennett had asked. It was the only port open on the southern coast now.

"Blackforce is still there, with some local Dutch units and a few Aussie ships in the harbor. I can reinforce that position if need be, but I can't see any immediate threat to the place at the moment. The Japanese must be as shaken up as we are. The Devil only knows what happened to those troops they landed out west. What is your situation?"

"Not entirely satisfactory," said Bennett, with a characteristic

understatement. “We’re holding Semarang, but the Japs have taken Rembang further east, and I’ve just the one battalion blocking the coast road in the north. My lines stretch southeast from there. Clifton holds the oil fields at Tejapu, but his right flank is open, and there appears to be heavy enemy movement in that sector.”

“They’re trying to flank Surabaya,” said Montgomery, “and I doubt if we’ll be able to get anything over that way for days.”

“My 2/20 Battalion is on the road northwest of Surabaya,” said Bennett. “It’s the only thing holding that axis at the moment, along with a company of those old Dutch armored cars.”

Montgomery took a deep breath. “Frankly, unless the Dutch can hold on, it doesn’t look like we can keep them out of Surabaya. Your 2/20th is likely to become caught up in all that.”

“Right,” said Bennett, “but I don’t much fancy the thought of those lads in a Japanese prison camp.”

“If need be, have them fall back through Surabaya to Malang. We’re still holding all of east Java, but if the Japs do swing south of Surabaya, that could change. It may be that the best we can do is stand the line from Semarang to Surjakarta, and hold on to Tjilatjap as our principal supply port until I can organize a counterattack.”

“Counterattack?” Bennett seemed surprised. All he had been doing since December was fighting one stubborn holding action after another. “That’s going to be a problem. I’m all for putting up the good fight, but that port can be easily interdicted by the Japanese Navy. To keep it open, Mountbatten and Somerville will have to maintain a constant presence south of Java, and with Perth being their only good base of support well to the south. For my money, we should get the troops off this god forsaken island while we can, and hold the line in Australia.”

“But if we move deliberately we can use that time to concentrate our entire force on Surabaya,” said Montgomery. “7th Australian Division is at sea, and coming to support us. Run this last Japanese division off, and we’ve won this thing.”

“But our boys won’t be able to come in at Batavia now,” Bennett warned.

“Yes, getting through the Sunda Strait is impossible. Tjilatjap will have to do. Then we can put them on the train to Surjakarta. By the time they get here, we should be ready for a decent push east to relieve the Dutch,

assuming they can hold out that long.”

Monty's dander was up, but his plan was overly optimistic. The Dutch would not hold, and that became the real problem. On the 1st of March, the Japanese landed at Karagajar east of Surabaya with three battalions of the Shoji Detachment supported by a recon battalion and two more engineer battalions and artillery from Makassar. Soon the city was flanked on every side, and Montgomery received the bad news the morning of March 3rd.

There was only one battalion of Australian troops supporting the Dutch garrison inside the vise around the port, and looking at his map Monty began to see a situation forming up that, as Bennett would have put it, was less than satisfactory. In spite of the catastrophic nature of the disaster, he had been pulling things together, and planning his next moves. The opportunity he saw in getting to Surabaya first had now slipped away. Fighting on the outer perimeter was tough going, and he could see that his troops would not get through.

If he had the Australian 7th Division in hand, that might do the job, but the disaster at Krakatoa meant Batavia was no longer there to receive them, and in the mind of Prime Minister Curtin, Tjilatjap would not do. He reluctantly gave the order to turn the convoy back to Colombo, the only other port it could possibly reach, and it would creep slowly back to the west, out of the battle, barely making port before the fuel ran out.

Now, with insufficient forces to really go on the offensive, Montgomery would be forced to heed Bennett's advice and fall back on his only port at Tjilatjap. Obsessed with the capture of Surabaya, the Japanese did not attempt to pursue his withdrawal. The Dutch, and the brave stand put up by 2/20 Australian Battalion, would hold on just long enough for the bulk of the 18th Division to get down to the south coast, where they began boarding any transport shipping available.

The Japanese navy could have made a decisive intervention here, but all the ships were north of Java, and many had been sent to the stricken region out west in the hope of rescuing stranded troops of the 2nd Division. The destroyers and cruisers were plying through the dull grey seas, braving the ashfall, and pulling out a few hapless survivors adrift in the flotsam. One man in particular, would soon be found, and by a very important ship.

On the 5th of March, a flotilla of cargo ships arrived from Perth, and were joined at sea by Mountbatten with *Illustrious* and *Indomitable* backtracking

from their flight to Colombo to serve as a covering force. They looked like gaunt shapes carved from bone, with ashfall completely blanketing every exposed area of the ships. They began pulling the rest of the 18th Division off, and the battle for Java would be lost. In spite of the presence of those troops, and the Rock of the East in Montgomery, nature had pushed the history along with the sheer power of that mighty eruption. The Rock was pushed along with it, and soon Montgomery would find himself in Perth, contemplating nothing more than a long sea journey back to Alexandria where he hoped to get back in the swing of things for Operation Supercharge.

Java's fate had been decided, and Japan would occupy all the key barrier islands as they had in Fedorov's history, but something else had happened in the Sunda Strait when the mountain finally vented its wrath in that last massive detonation. It was going to change more than the weather across the globe in the months ahead, and its effect would ripple out like the shock waves and tsunami had from Java, reaching all the way to the North Pacific, where Vladimir Karpov was quietly plotting the demise of his enemies.

Chapter 18

Captain Takechi Harada stood on the bridge, still unable to believe the devastation he was seeing. All around him, the sea was frosty white, convulsing in the last throes of a great disturbance. The air itself was thick with ashfall, and the deep basso of some great thrombosis within the earth growled with an ominous persistence, a steady rumble that spoke of calamity. What in the name of all the Gods and Demons had happened here?

His ship, the destroyer *Takami*, was one of Japan's newest fighting ships, state of the art for her day, but now it seemed a deaf and blind thing in the heavy oppressive airs. All of the equipment was down, though engines were still hot and running smoothly in spite of the seas being clotted with ash. They had determined that there must have been a sudden, catastrophic eruption close by, for this island archipelago was infamous for its violent geology. A quick look at his charts named the likely suspect—Krakatoa.

At the moment, all he could think of was getting his ship to safety, and trying to find a way to navigate north away from the Sunda Straits to do so. They had been steaming about 110 kilometers northeast of the suspected eruption site, after passing through the straits and rounding the northwestern tip of Java at Cape Merak. They had been in a storm, skies darkening, winds up, with heavy lightning, and the ship was struck. The bridge blackened and systems failed just as they were cruising in the lee of a small island named Pulau Tunda according to their last charted position. Then the sound came, first a strange distended hum that descended into deeper tones, finally resolving to the awful roar and rumble they had been hearing for the last ten minutes.

The darkness intensified all around them, which they soon found was caused by a massive broiling eruption cloud to their southwest. It has to be a volcano, thought Harada, yet it was completely unexpected, as there had been no warnings or alerts issued. He wondered now at the fate of the other ships he had been maneuvering with before they broke off on separate courses.

Drawing a direct line from their presumed position to the volcano, the Captain saw that it passed right through that island, and then the northwestern tip of Java, reasoning that those land masses must have shielded his destroyer

from the worst effects of the eruption, particularly the heavy wave sets that he could now see rippling over the sea. Like everything else that had been happening in recent days, it had come out of nowhere, changing the sea and sky in just minutes, and now persisted with its ear thrumming roar.

“Any word from engineering,” he said to his first officer, Lt. Commander Kenji Fukada.

“They’re still working, sir,” said Fukada, tall and gaunt looking in his grey overcoat, and battle helmet. “We got hit pretty hard.”

The ship was still rolling in the last residual swells, and with ash descending, darkness pervading, it had been impossible to see through the forward view panes. The wipers only smeared the ashen slurry to a dull opaque wash. He posted a watch on every weather deck, and seconds later the watch called out: “man overboard!”

They saw something bobbing on the white sea, only 50 yards off the starboard bow, which was the outer limit of visibility in the deep ash and gloom. It was the first sign of anything else afloat and alive, yet as he stared at it in his field glasses it seemed no more than flotsam.

When the watch finally made the sighting, the Captain came to all stop, grateful that the auxiliary engine and steering controls were still functioning. They had only been on the weather deck off the bridge for a few moments, but the sheen of ash was already coating their foul weather coats and rain ponchos, dusting their shoulders and then running in pale grey streaks with the rain.

The Captain craned his neck, to see the man pointing at the very same location where he had spotted the wreckage. He looked again, adjusting his field glasses, and now he saw not one man, but two, desperately clinging to the broken remnant of an old raft. One of the two was slumped on the raft, the other with an arm over him to keep the man in place.

“Looks like somebody else made it through this alive,” said Fukada. “Shall I have KK get a boat over there?”

“At once.”

The First Officer had referred to Katsu Kimura, the Sergeant in charge of the ship’s small contingent of Naval Marines, always called KK by the officers. The word was sent down and some minutes later they watched as a small launch went over to the scene, the broad shoulders and stocky hulk of Sergeant Kimura prominent as he stood at the wheel, three helmeted Marines

behind him in full gear. The word came back—two survivors, one unconscious, but both alive, and they were both in uniform.

That set the Captain to wonder what may have happened to the rest of his squadron. They had separated an hour earlier, each bound for different ports in the rising tension of those last hours. He remembered feeling that impending sense of doom. His operation had proceeded smoothly enough, but then, with a suddenness that stunned every man aboard, chaos reigned over the scene. Perhaps he could learn more from these men.

* * *

Out on the turbulent water, the one conscious survivor was elated when help arrived. They had seen the ship appear, moving slowly through the heavy ashfall and rain. It seemed a sallow grey specter, deathly still, and frosted over with the ash that clung to its mast and odd looking riggings. He did not recognize the ship, but realized it must be one of the screening force units—most likely a cruiser from its size. He thanked the Gods that they had been found, and the long ordeal, clinging to that broken raft in the choking sea, would finally be over.

Being well over 120 kilometers from the massive detonation of Krakatoa, they had been spared the wrenching pain and deafness, though their ears were still ringing from the loudness of the event, even at that distance.

“Thank god you have found us,” he gasped when the small boat reached them, still bobbing in the high swells. He could see friendly troops there, four men, one using a grapple to secure the tattered raft, two others throwing life preservers. “This is General Hitochi Imamura!” he said with the last of his strength. “Take him first...”

* * *

General Imamura... Captain Harada was quite surprised when his chief medical officer came to the bridge, a bemused look on his face, and related that information.

“A General? An Army General? Out here? Did he say what ship he was on?”

“*Ryujo Maru*—a cargo ship from the sound of it. God only knows what it

was doing out here in this mess.” The doctor folded his arms, Lieutenant Isamu Hisakawa, coming over from the *Atago* when this new ship was commissioned. The Captain found him a competent, no nonsense man.

“He’s resting quietly now, but he was quite talkative for a while. He wants to know if we have any information from 16th Army General Staff—says they were operating out of Balikpapan.”

“16th Army?” The Captain scratched his head. “Japanese Army?”

“That’s what he says. They both have on military service jackets and uniforms, and the one man is well decorated. If he isn’t a General he’s something else, and fairly high and mighty. What do you make of it, sir?”

“All I know, from the last orders I received, was that we were to get back to port. Then all hell broke loose. What was this man doing out here? I wasn’t aware the army had anybody that high up in this region.”

“He says they were way down above Banten Bay when their ship was taken by a tsunami from that eruption. They both went into the drink and managed to grab onto that broken raft.”

“But we’re 70 kilometers north of Banten Bay.”

“Looks like they had a pretty rough ride sir. They must have been pushed all the way up here by that tsunami.”

Captain Harada sighed. He was a careful man, and the fewer unanswered questions in front of him, the better. “Very well... I’ll go down and have a look at them. I need to see Chief Engineer Oshiro. We’ve got to get the ship back on her feet. We barely have engine and steerage control. Everything else is down, and we can’t raise anyone else either. Gods are angry today, Doctor. Whatever happened out there, it’s created a real nightmare. Give me ten minutes and I’ll see you in the sick bay.”

* * *

“You are Captain of this ship?” The man squinted at Captain Harada, his eyes still red and swollen from the ash and seawater, face haggard, though he was a portly man, with a substantial belly. The Captain bowed politely.

“You are safely aboard the *Takami*,” he said. “I am Captain Takechi Harada. What has happened to your ship?”

“That I cannot tell you,” said the man. “I was swept overboard... wait—what did you say your name was?”

“Harada, *Itto Kaisa*, Captain of the First Rank.”

“*Itto Kaisa*? Don’t you mean *Kaigun-daisa*? And how very strange, another Harada. My Deputy Chief of Staff is from that family. Perhaps you are a distant relative? In any case, I am *Rikugun- Chūjō*, Lieutenant General Imamura, Commander of the 16th Army now conducting these operations. You have done us a very great service, along with that sailor in the other room who helped keep me from drowning on that raft. I owe the navy a great debt. Thanks to you and your ship, I was fortunate to survive, but it is imperative that we reach a friendly port as soon as possible. I must ascertain what is happening on Java.”

Doctor Hisakawa said he was talkative, thought the Captain. Yet the more he looked at this man the stranger he felt. There was something about him, stirring some old memories to life. He stared at the man’s uniform, seeing the prominent gold stripe, well soiled now, and the two silver stars on his shoulders. But he knew something of the Army ranks as well—a Lieutenant General should have three stars, and they were supposed to be gold on green.

“Where are you from?” the man asked.

“Sendai,” said the Captain.

“How strange, Miyagi Prefecture, I grew up there as well. I still miss the trees on Jozenji Dori. I always loved to walk there. In the winter they would shimmer with a thousand lights for the Pageant of Starlight.” The man forced a wan smile. “Yet I have traveled far and wide since then. This war will likely take me even farther before it is over, but I should not complain. I could have been a meal for the sharks out there, assuming any will survive in that hell. It was terrible... the sound... the sea...that terrible darkness.”

The Captain nodded. “From what we can determine, Krakatoa must have erupted, and very suddenly, right there in the middle of the Sunda Straits. There was nothing in any report or communication to indicate a hazard there, or any state of elevated alert for that volcano.”

“Nature will do what it wishes, we must simply try and stay out of its way.” The man frowned. “That’s what my Deputy Chief of Staff would always tell me. I’m afraid the 2nd Division on Java was on the wrong side of that advice. The casualties must have been very heavy from that tsunami. Well, I put it there, and so I suppose I must bear the responsibility.”

“2nd Division? From Camp Asahikawa? They had units out here? We were not informed.”

That confusion aside, the Captain was deeply struck by what the other man had just said, not for any sense of its eloquence or wisdom, but it was something he had been told long ago—by his grandfather. ‘To live a long and happy life, a man must be wise, lucky, but also careful enough to stay out of nature’s way.’ He tilted his head to one side, looking at the man very closely. A powerful sense of recognition swept over him, and now he realized it was the uniform the man was wearing. It reminded him of his grandfather’s old army uniform—yes—even the rank insignia was much like that on this man’s shoulders.

“Be thankful you are in the navy, and with nothing more to worry about than the doings on this single ship. In the Army, things have been very much different since this business in China started. I was Deputy Chief of Staff in the Kwantung army once—sorting out all the messes that other Generals would create. Things were not so bad in the Kwantung. No volcanoes there. Now I have a mess of my own making to sort out, so you must get me to a friendly port right away. I must make my report on what has happened directly to the Imperial General Headquarters. It looked like we had things running very smoothly, but who could have expected this?”

Captain Harada, blinked, quite surprised.

“Imperial Headquarters?”

“Yes, a stuffy place full of sour old men, if you want my opinion, but they will need to know what has happened, and Combined Fleet as well, if they don’t already know it. We must have lost many ships in that tsunami, and I’m afraid we won’t have much left of 2nd Division now. We will have to pull reserves from Nishimura’s troops at Singapore. A brigade of the 5th Division is already forming up—excellent troops. I had that division a year or so ago, and they fight like tigers.”

“Well... General... We were headed for Singapore when that volcano blew. I don’t think we caught the worst of it. I suppose we were lucky after all, and managed to stay out of nature’s way. Yet my ship still took damage—nothing all that serious from what the engineers tell me. It is simply a matter of time before we can get everything up and running again. In the meantime, I’ll be making way with some caution here. It isn’t only nature we have to worry about. The Americans and Russians have just had a good fight in the North Pacific, and something tells me things will be going from bad to worse here soon. Odd thing... this is the second mountain to blow its top this

week. Something in the Kuriles erupted three days ago, and all of Hokkaido is under this same goddamn ashfall.”

At this the General seemed quite surprised. “I had not heard that,” he said.

“Yes... Well sir, we’ll get the decks swabbed and be on our way soon enough. In the meantime, try to get some rest.”

“Just a moment Captain... Did you say the Americans were fighting with the Russians?”

“That is what we heard, and both sides lost ships, if the rumors are correct.”

I see.... And where did you say you were heading?”

“Singapore.”

“Impossible! Shouldn’t you rejoin the Western Screening Force? We will need to get to Balikpapan, or perhaps Makassar. Singapore is out of the question. That is Nishimura’s command now. Yamashita was brilliant, but sadly, he failed to finish the job.”

The Captain had started to edge towards the hatch, but he stopped again, turning his head. “I suppose I could get you up to Balikpapan, but why in the world is the army sending units there with all this trouble on Taiwan?”

That was going to end up being a very long story, and one we have heard before in this saga. It was going to be two men talking at cross purposes at first, each one failing to understand what the other was really saying. Yet if Captain Harada was listening closely to what this man was telling him now, he might have heard things that would have alarmed him a good deal more than those nostalgic memories of his grandfather. It seemed more was shaken than the earth, sea, and sky when Krakatoa vented its wrath. Pavel Kamenski might have had something to say about the unsettling nature of such massive explosions, and if Anton Fedorov had been in that room, he would have certainly picked up on the things the older man was saying about Yamashita at Singapore, and the 2nd Division on Java.

At that moment, however, the urgent business of the ship would pull Captain Harada away, though the encounter left him with a very strange feeling. For his part, the Major General might be forgiven for not knowing there *was* no Japanese destroyer by the name of *Takami*. That was the name of a mountain, and most destroyer class ships in the IJN were given poetic sounding names associated with wind, sky, sea, clouds, waves, frost or mist. Mountain names were typically reserved for bigger capital ships like heavy

cruisers, and sometimes carriers. *Kaga* and *Akagi* bore such names, as they were special ship conversions born from older battlecruisers.

Yet there was *Takami*, real as the grey rain still falling on her decks, and she was a very special ship indeed, though not one a man like Hitochi Imamura would ever be familiar with—not one even Admiral Yamamoto could name. Her full designation was JS *Takami*, and there was a third letter after her hull type, DDG-180....

Part VII

Down the Rabbit Hole

*“ ‘If you think we're waxworks,’ he said, ‘you ought to pay, you know.
Waxworks weren't made to be looked at for nothing. Nohow!
Contrariwise, if you think we're alive, you ought to speak.’ ”*

— Lewis Carroll

Chapter 19

Neither Pavel Kamenski nor Anton Fedorov were at hand on the bridge of *Takami* that day to deftly explain what had just happened. If they had been there they would have said that the incredible power of that eruption must have ruptured the time continuum yet again, and that *Takami* was just in the wrong place at the wrong time in 2021 when it rounded Cape Merak and started into the Java Sea. The ship had been on a small international maritime patrol with the Australian Frigate *Anzac* out of Darwin. They escorted the LHD *Canberra* back to Darwin, conducted brief maneuvers in the Timor sea for ASW training, and then *Anzac* departed, also returning to Darwin.

Rising tensions with the action over Taiwan and the sharp engagement in the Pacific involving the US 7th Fleet had prompted the Allies to mount small security patrols like this with local assets in various theaters of the Pacific Region, and *Takami* had been stationed at Singapore. When Japanese fighters got pulled into the engagement off Hokkaido, tensions rose considerably. Being Japan's newest and most capable Aegis Fleet Defense Destroyer, *Takami* should be home now, yet caught overseas when hostilities began, the ship was ordered to return to Singapore to form the heart of a new task force there. They skirted the southern coast of Java, transiting the Sunda Strait before it all happened. They simply sailed right out of the world they were born to, and would never be seen there again. Kamenski might have called it a gopher hole, but it was more like a sink hole in time, or a temporal fissure caused by that eruption in 1942.

Perhaps it was just happenstance that *Takami* sailed right through that fissure, which came and went, sometimes there, sometimes not. It may have required the ship to be at just the right angle and alignment, at just the right location and at an exact speed to work its magic that day, much like the strange alignment of another similar fissure along the stairwell at Ilanskiy. No one could really explain it, but there it was, and that sink hole swallowed the ship whole, dragging it inexorably back towards the source of that fissure, the detonation of Krakatoa in 1942.

The tension on the bridge was very thick, as heavy as the night around them, and as threatening as the low growl of the beast that had blasted its way

up from the depths of the earth. Captain Harada could simply not make sense of what he was hearing, though he was grateful that Chief Engineer Oshiro had finally rebooted the ship's systems, and they were fully active now. All vital stations were manned and ready, Sensors, CIC, Damage Control, the bridge crew alert, if somewhat edgy.

Lieutenant Fukada was standing very near the Captain's chair now, and the two men were discussing something in low, hushed tones.

"Once we got systems up, SPY had contacts on every heading. There must be nearly 100 ships out here, most down near Jakarta and along the north Java coast."

"There wasn't that much sea traffic before that volcano blew its top. What's the story here?" The Captain seemed very flustered. He liked things all lined up, every shift well assigned, every eventuality contemplated and prepared for, but this was a situation that no one on that ship could have ever expected.

"Could be search and rescue operations underway down there," said his XO. That coastal area would have been hit very hard by the tsunami. Shipping could have been coming in while we were down and dark."

"What about submarine threats?"

"Too much subterranean noise. It's just loud as hell with that eruption under way. No way I can put Nakano on that station with a headset, good as he is. We'll have to rely on the computers sorting the signals out."

They had moved above a group of low lying islands north of Jakarta, once called Batavia, and the devastation they saw there was complete. The tsunami had been high enough to sweep completely over those islands, and they were little more than barren specks in the sea now, with every sign of life gone. With radar back up, they could easily see and avoid other ships in the vicinity, and the Captain put on some speed, steering 060 northeast towards Borneo. He was looking for open sea, trying to get out from under that ashfall, but it remained thick enough to preclude any thought of air operations with the single SH-60K helo aboard.

What bothered him most, however, was the discussion he had with the General they had fished out of the sea. Nothing the man said seemed to make any sense. Who was this man? He looked as though he had been pulled right out of the last war, uniform and all. Once things settled down, he confided his uncertainty to Fukada.

“I’m not sure what to make of our senior survivor,” said the Captain. “He says he’s commander of the 16th Army out here. Ever hear of that?”

“We’ve got five Armies,” said Fukada, “and we don’t number them. They just have regional names.”

“He was talking about troops from our 2nd Division being on Java.”

“Java? That division is in the Northern Army, stationed up on Hokkaido.”

“Right... Camp Asahikawa. I have friends there.”

“I think we’ve got a 16th Mech Infantry Regiment in the 4th Division,” said Fukada, “but there’s no way it would ever be on Java. Maybe this fellow is playing games?” Fukada folded his arms.

“He sure sounded convincing. All he could talk about was getting field reports from forward deployed units, arranging reinforcements from Singapore, as if some kind of big operation was underway down here.”

“*Kyou ki no ookami*. Sounds like one crazy wolf. Are you really going to ferry him up to Balikpapan?”

“I’d sooner fly him there, or some other medical facility, but that isn’t going to happen in this ashfall. For now, we’d best forget about him and sort our situation out. So far we’ve no signals traffic on regular channels at all, and no satellite uplinks.”

“Why don’t I have Ensign Shiota monitor regular radio bands?”

“Put her on it. We ought to hear some news, unless that volcano is washing our those bands as well. Those damn things can kick up their own weather.”

Of course, the Executive Officer’s suggestion only made things worse, for the only news they heard was rather dated. Just to cover every base, the Captain went to the ship’s library to look up 16th Army... and there was General Imamura, right there in black and white photographs, right down to the uniform the man in his sick bay was wearing! The details of the man’s career were all laid out, and he was indeed Commander of the 16th Army... but in 1942, and the troops and divisions he had mentioned, the operation also underway, were all a part of the invasion of Java in February, 1942.

The Captain sat on that for an hour, thinking Fukada must have been correct when he called the man a crazy wolf. But like any dangling thread, unattended task, or misplaced item, he could not rest until he had it in place. So he went back down to the sick bay to speak with his Chief Medical Officer, Lieutenant Hisakawa.

“Take a look at this photograph,” said Harada. “Then tell me that isn’t the same man in there asleep on your cot.”

“I’ll admit the resemblance,” said Hisakawa. “But taking it any further is plain stupid.” A former university professor in Japan, the man was not given to flights of fancy, and he had seen enough of the world’s misery in his profession to be the grim realist he was. During an accident three years earlier on fleet exercises, a helicopter had experienced engine failure on landing and came down very hard on the deck of the helicopter destroyer *Izumo*, where he had been stationed at the time. When they brought the injured flight crew in, he took one look at the co-pilot and immediately pronounced his wounds would be fatal. That kind of bedside manner was unusual for a healer by profession, but it was Hisakawa, who could be a hard, difficult and blunt man at times.

“Call me stupid then,” said the Captain. “But you know better than that, Doctor. The man isn’t a wax figure from a museum. Have you spoken with him at length? Believe me, the longer you do, the more you realize something is wrong.”

“Well considering that we just pulled him out of that ash laden sea, it doesn’t surprise me. He’s likely suffering post-traumatic stress. You can’t place any faith in what he might babble out under these circumstances. What he needs now is a good hospital in Singapore.”

That’s how it would go in the beginning, until the men dressed up like wax figures multiplied around them at an alarming rate, in ships out of museums, many which should have long ago been resting on the bottom of the sea. The officers and crewmen of *Takami* all knew of their ancestors in the navy, the ships they took to war, as much as any US sailor might know of Halsey and the USS *Enterprise*. It was a very slippery path now, and it led to only one place, a rabbit hole of madness, impossibly deep, and a wonderland of nightmare which would become a crucible for each and every man and woman aboard.

Way would lead on to way as Captain Harada began to walk that path. Along the way he would come to question his own sanity on more than one occasion, but reality has a very hard bite, particularly when it shows up as a surface action task force off the southern coast of Borneo. They had to come about 600 kilometers northeast of Krakatoa to get out from under that awful blackness, the light of the sun completely blotted out in all directions from

the eruption. It had forced Mountbatten to withdraw to Perth, and also prompted Nagumo to take his carrier task force well up into the Makassar Strait off Balikpapan. That was where the Western Screening Force had fled when the eruption drove them deeper into the Java Sea, just as *Takami* was probing north for clearer skies.

Prevailing winds from the southwest had driven the worst of the ashfall up over Sumatra and into the lowermost portion of the South China Sea as it approached Singapore. They had radio intercepts of heavy ashfall in Singapore itself, adding more misery to the refugee crisis Percival was struggling with. Then they got the strangest report, of renewed fighting on the Island of Singapore, and news of Japanese troops breaking through to the city.

Without Montgomery's 18th Division, and the tough Anzac troops, the steamy General Nishimura had taken advantage of the chaos and darkness to launch a surprise attack. The Indian Division posted astride the road from Kranji to the city could not hold, and Nishimura's Imperial Guards broke through, following their remaining tanks to the city, supported by the 18th Division. Percival was unable to salvage the situation, and would now make his appointment with a Japanese prison camp, the event a sad echo of what should have happened a month earlier. Now Singapore was Nishimura's problem to govern, and he would rule there with a very hard hand.

Bewildered by what they were hearing, consistent across all radio channels they could tune in, and being unable to reach any level of the command structure above his pay grade, Captain Harada was in a real quandary. His equipment was finally running, but his men did not reboot so readily or without some distress, nor did he. Rumors began to fly, with talk of calamity and war, with a heavy dose of confusion over the entire scene. When they heard news that the Makassar Strait and Celebes Sea were largely clear of ashfall and darkness, that became the best course he could set. The fact that it was on the sea road home to Japan also weighed in the Captain's decision. Nothing made sense any longer, and he instinctively wanted to return to the certainty of navy life back home, but it soon brought him close to the precipitous edge of bedlam.

They saw the ships on radar this time, edging closer to have a look. Harada had it in his mind that they could be other ships in distress, for they seemed to be gathered listlessly in one place, steaming at a sedate 10 knots

southeast of Balikpapan. The ash was finally clearing, though it still left a dull haze over the entire scene. They got close enough to use the optics, but that only made things worse. Fukada was soon convinced he was looking at a pair of old heavy cruisers from the IJN. He knew their silhouettes well, as he had built the models as a hobby for many years, and had several on the shelf of his cabin.

“By god,” he breathed. “Captain, that’s a *Mogami* Class cruiser out there or I’m a goat!”

And we all know where the story went for them soon after that little discovery. It was a progression, a madness that so many others on either side of the time line had gone through in these events, a creeping psychosis that hardened in their brains to a realization that they were no longer in the world they had been in when they left Singapore. There was surprise, astonishment, denial, even anger in the mix of emotions as they debated what they were seeing, what they were asking themselves to now believe.

Yet the world around them was going to be entirely too convincing, too consistent in its insanity—every radio transmission, every ship encountered, every other human being they would ever see there from that moment on, would all stand implacably on the side of the only impossible conclusion they could come to. It would not be something any man among them could dismiss, and along with that, there would not be a single vestige of the world they had come from to balance the scales on the other side, where all they had now was awful doubt, fear, uncertainty, and a quiet rage against the folly of what they were being forced to believe.

It was days before any of them could truly internalize what had happened, but it was only hours after that sighting before they were sitting in the officer’s wardroom with a very uncomfortable question before them. Brigadier Kinlan did not have to deal with this last inconvenience when his 7th Brigade appeared in the Western Egyptian desert. With the help of Fedorov, and the evidence of his own eyes, he had been eased over the line and knew where he could take his place on the battlefield. It wasn’t long before he was sharing a brandy with Churchill over the matter, and there was never any question in his mind like the one now plaguing the officers of the *Takami*.

It was something the Russians aboard *Kirov* had gone round and round with, a very thorny question indeed. If all of this were true, these ships, the

men on them, the news on the radio, then they were right in the middle of the Second World War! If it were true, if they were really sailing in the Java Sea of 1942, then who's side were they on here? They were sitting on a ship with the power to do what *Kirov* had been about for all these many long months. They were sitting on an *Atago* Class Guided Missile Destroyer, laid down in 2015.

The first two ships in the original class, *Atago* and *Ashigara*, had been commissioned in 2007 and 2008 respectively. His ship was a new, improved model, state of the art, and arguably one of the best fighting ships in the world when it was commissioned in 2021, just after its sister ship *Takari* entered service the previous year. Both were in the new 27DD subclass for the *Atago* Class, that number being the chosen because the first would be launched in the 27th year of the current ruling Emperor Akihito. *Takimi* was the latest and greatest.

There was a reason why General Imamura had thought he was rescued by a cruiser, because in spite of the name, that was the real weight class *Takami* fought in. DDG-180 was over 8600 tons when empty, and was now just over 11,000 tons fully loaded. And aside from her crew and supplies, much of that extra weight was sheer muscle for the mission of modern era naval combat. A variant of the American built Aegis *Ticonderoga* Class Cruiser, the ship had a sensor suite second to none, with the AN/SPY1D(V) phased array radar, along with the AN/SQQ-89 Sonar system.

Were they to come on the scene of a typical WWII sea engagement such as that fought recently in the Java Sea, they could not only accurately track the course and speed of every ship, but also of every round being fired, right down to the level of machine gun bullets. The sensors were so good that they could even tell you whether or not an 8-inch shell that had just been fired was going to hit its intended target.

Primarily an anti-air/fleet defense ship, *Takami* had two Mk 41 VLS Modules, with 64 cells on her forward deck, and another 32 on the superstructure above the helo bay aft. Those cells could mount canisters of several missile types, mostly US developed systems. There was the RIM-66, also known as Standard Missile 2, (SM-2), which was the ship's primary SAM for air and missile defense. For ballistic threats, there were cells mounting the RIM-161, Standard Missile 3. These two systems paralleled the British Aster 15 and 30 systems installed aboard *Argos Fire*.

For submarine defense, *Takami* could also fire the RUM-139 ASROC guided rocket torpedo from its VLS cells, and against other warships a separate system mounted Japan's latest indigenous SSM project, known as the Type 12 Anti-Ship Missile. Weighing 720kgs, it could push a 300kg warhead out to a range of 200 kilometers at high subsonic speeds. It wasn't as good as anything the Russians had, but it was nonetheless deadly against any modern ship it might hit. The forward deck mounted a Mark 45 (Mod 4) 5-inch naval gun that could range out 56 kilometers, and the ship also had two triple torpedo tube to either side amidships, with the Type 68 (Mark 32) 324mm torpedo.

For close in defense, the ship had the very latest in weapons development from native Japanese industry, the long awaited JAX-Heisei-27 Naval Rail Gun system, and the combat ready TR-D1 Laser CIWS system to go along with the two older Phalanx gun systems for close in defense. That rail gun was a new evolutionary leap in thinking and application for naval gunnery. Its main role was not to stand in as a heavy anti-ship battery, but a lighter, quick firing anti-air and missile defense gun. It could fire a 23lb projectile at the dizzying speed of Mach 7, and out to a range of 110 nautical miles, or just over 200 kilometers. There was no explosive warhead at all, but at that speed, a projectile of that weight would deliver 23 mega joules of impact energy to any target it hit.

By comparison, the 16-inch guns on an *Iowa* class battleship would deliver about 160 mega joules when they hit, so the rail gun was not something designed to go through heavy armor. Against light skinned missiles, planes, or even ships, it could still be lethal, and the round it fired was virtually unstoppable by any other CWIS system of the day. Considering *Takami's* brilliant situational awareness in the sensors it employed, the lightning quick efficiency of its computers, the ship was not one any sane sea Captain would ever want to tangle with.

And there it was, in the Makassar Strait off Balikpapan, in 1942, with cruisers, destroyers and transports of the Imperial Japanese Navy on every side, and a flag fluttering over *Takami's* aft gunwale that bore the image of the rising sun.

Chapter 20

“Alright,” said the Captain. “We’ve been round and round on this, and nothing any of us have said will change the fact that most every ship we’ve seen out here should have been sunk or scrapped long ago. We can either believe it, or just say we’re all lunatics, but for the sake of this discussion, let’s just assume it is true.”

The ship’s senior officers were all gathered in the wardroom. First Officer Kenji Fukada sat next to the Captain, a steady figure of efficiency. With a logical mind and calm demeanor, the unsettling nature of the last 36 hours was weighing on him heavily. Many of the men had little or no sleep, and the tension on the ship was wound up fairly tight. The news had been hard for a man of his disposition to swallow, but he nonetheless harbored a secret delight in the thought that the ship models he had doted over as a boy, and still treasured as a navy man, had become real things on the seas not 20,000 meters off their starboard bow—as big as life.

Senior Lieutenant Hedeo Honjo, CIC Chief, was also in attendance, his implacable presence reassuring. A heavy set, thick necked man beneath short cropped hair, Honjo had a bullish aspect about him, and the temperament of a sumo wrestler. He was a distant relative of Shigeru Honjo, former commander of the Kwantung Army during the Mukden incident that led to the Japanese invasion of Manchuria, and a man who had been a close confidant of the infamous proponent of the “Strike North” strategy, Sadao Araki.

Junior Lieutenant Koji Nakano was a 22 year old wiry young man watching the Sonars on the ship. No legends surrounded him. He was not ever thought to have the ‘best ears in the fleet’ as Alexi Tasarov was aboard *Kirov*. He didn’t need the best ears in the fleet, he simply had the best sonar, and serviced radar systems that were second to none.

Nakano would team up with Senior Lieutenant Ryoko Otani, the senior ranking female on the regular bridge crew, and the eyes behind the screens of that AN/SPY-1 Phased Array Radar. Women in the navy first started exclusively as nurses, then moved to communications positions. A very few reached higher ranks of command, and women still made up no more than

6% of the SDF. Otani represented them well, a bright, intelligent woman who was well liked and often noticed by the other male officers. Her father was a navy Captain on a helicopter destroyer, so they minded their manners, but Lieutenant Otani could fend for herself in the largely male dominated seas, and it was her keen eye and radar systems that led the ship through these waters now.

Chief Engineer Ryota Oshiro was a pragmatic workman with a penchant for cleanliness and order. He kept his station that way, and prowled the ship's engineering plants like a schoolmaster, imposing his rigid standard of excellence on all work completed. When the entire ship's electrical systems went down, he was ceaseless in restoring order, for every light shined with the borrowed light of his energy, and he kept things running with unfailing dedication to his craft—much to the chagrin of the section crews that had to serve under him. Well done was never good enough for Oshiro. It was either done right, with excellence, or it was done again until that standard was achieved.

Lieutenant Michi Ikida was the ship's Navigator. A quiet man, he was always lost in his maps and charts, and often reported directly to Chief Oshiro on plotted courses so the engineering section could gauge probable fuel usage and engine output requirements for the mission. Otherwise he kept to himself, and a few friends he had below decks with the Warrant Officers.

Lastly there was Katsu Kimura, the sturdy Sergeant in charge of ship's security. Far from the stern and rock like aspect of a man like Sergeant Troyak, KK was an amiable man, well liked by everyone on the ship. He had a well developed sense of humor that often led him into ill considered pranks. But when it came to managing the Marine contingent, he was all business, all brawn, and the men respected and relied on him, looking up to him as the leader he was.

Assuming this was all true, everyone there had living ancestors at large in this world now. That was the most unsettling thing to think about. Somewhere, out there, were their grandfathers or great grandfathers for the younger crew, though with no one over the age of 33, their parents would have been born well after the war ended. So there was no chance any of them would ever meet their father or mother here as a young man or woman, but the famous "Grandfather Paradox" was alive and well in their minds. For now, they all had a bigger fish to fry here as they gathered around the

wardroom conference table—what were they going to do?

In 2021 Japan had healed from the convulsions of WWII, coming to terms with what had happened on one level, whitewashing it on another, and with vast segments of Japanese society simply forgetting it all in the neon glow of cell phones and digital wonders. For some it was all a regrettable skeleton in the history of their nation, not thought of any more than an American citizen might bother themselves with dark memories of Wounded Knee, the Trail Of Tears, and the genocidal treatment meted out to native Indians, or the depravity that was inherent in institutional slavery that was a part of American history until the mid 1860s.

So it was not surprising that official recounting of the history of WWII was presented in softened language, where the Rape of Nanking was referred to as “an incident which led to the killing of many Chinese.” Most accounts of the war were rather dry and emotionless. There were no war heroes to be elevated, no sense of nationalism, no glorification of the military. History books in Japan that crewmen on the *Takami* had carried around with them in school were not patriotic narratives. For some, the war was seen as a disastrous mistake, and one that was never fully repented. For others it was a war of liberation against Western Imperialism. It was not unusual then, that a cross section of the crew on *Takami* would find a fairly wide range of opinions on the war.

But now these men and women were *in* that war, and they could not escape the inexorable gravity of those momentous days that would compel them to a decision on what they should do about it. Because they *could* do something about it with the ship beneath their feet. It was not a question of whether or not they could bring themselves to act, but one of how they should act, and it would not be an easy decision.

“Now we can sit out here on the edge of things for only so long,” said the Captain. “This Imamura fellow down in sick bay will be wanting us to weigh anchor at Balikpapan tomorrow, and the sight of this ship easing into the harbor is going to roll a few eyes, that’s for sure.”

“We can fly him over,” said Fukada. “Ashfall here is negligible, and the helo can get him over there easily enough with Honjo’s men as a nice little escort.”

“And they will roll eyes at that as well,” said the Captain. At 33, he was the oldest man on the ship, coming to his new post here that very year, for

Takami was commissioned in February of 2021. “What if someone panics and opens fire on the helo?”

“We can radio ahead,” Fukada suggested. “Tell them we’ve rescued their General Imamura, and that he will be flying in on a very special aircraft. Impress upon them that no one is to fire at this aircraft. We can even give them the exact ETA at Balikpapan.”

“I suppose that might work,” said Captain Harada. “Now we get to the deeper question in all of this. Is he *their* General Imamura, or ours as well?”

There was a silence as the other officers digested that.

“You’re asking what side we’re on?” said Fukada.

“Correct. I don’t want to get technical here and cite Article 9 of the Constitution, but this is something we’ll have to decide, and soon. We have no way of knowing if we’ll ever get back to our day... Hell, we still don’t even know how this happened.”

“The volcano,” said Chief Engineer Oshiro sullenly. “Remember that report we got on the Russians up south of the Kuriles when the other one erupted?”

“You mean the Demon Volcano on Iturup Island?” said Fukada,

“Right. That was just three days ago, and we got that SITREP yesterday indicating the Russian flagship and two other ships went down in that eruption. Now this one goes off, and look what happened here to us.”

“You’re suggesting the same thing happened to the Russians?”

Oshiro scratched his head. “Well, it might explain the other SIGINT traffic we’ve picked up on shortwave.” He looked at Ensign Hiroko Shiota, the other woman on the bridge at communications. At only 20 years, she had just made the ranks of *Santo Kaii*, technically a 3rd Lieutenant, or a position the Navy might call an Ensign until she made 2nd LT.

“Ensign, what is he talking about?” Captain Harada folded his arms, waiting. He had not been informed of any new message traffic.

“I received a coded signal an hour ago sir,” said Shiota. “It didn’t make any sense, until I realized it must have been transmitted in the Japanese Naval Code of this era. So I programmed that into the computers, and—”

“You programmed the entire Japanese Naval Code into our SIGINT dBase?”

“Yes sir. It only took a couple hours. I was going to bring you the results when this meeting was called.”

“She was still working on the damn thing in the officer’s mess,” said Chief Engineer Oshiro. “I got curious.”

“I see... Well Ensign, what does this message say?”

“Ship movement orders for a task force forming in the Sea of Japan. I think it has to do with the Russians sir.”

“The Russians?”

“Well sir... I’ve been listening on other radio traffic concerning combat operations underway in the North Pacific. It was mixed in with all the other traffic, but this new code caught my attention. From what I can make of it, that theater is hot now—a shooting war, and there were at least two intercepts referring to the use of naval rockets.”

“Naval Rockets?”

“Aye sir. That was the exact phrase used. Ships were to be alert to the usage of enemy naval rockets, and screen capital ships accordingly.”

“That was in the message stream?”

“That and a hundred other messages. I’ve been trying to log them all, sir—mostly about operations underway in the South Pacific.”

“You mean the stuff you gave me this morning.”

“Yes sir.”

“Well when were you planning to get around to informing me of this decoded intel message, Ensign?”

“Sorry sir, I wanted to make sure I got it right first.”

Captain Harada rubbed his chin. “Alright... Let’s not jump to conclusions about that yet.” He looked at Chief Oshiro, who then spoke up, focusing the question before them again in a very practical way.

“Here’s the SITREP from my perspective down in Engineering,” he said. “I’ll make it as plain and simple as I can. We topped off the fuel bunkers when we made Darwin three days ago. After that we transited the Timor Sea into the Indian Ocean, twiddled our thumbs at Christmas Island, and then swung up through the Sunda Straits, and right into 1942, crazy as that still sounds. Since then we’ve eased up here off the coast of Borneo and finally found clear air. That little trip was about 2075 nautical miles. Now we’re talking about delivering the General down there in sick bay to Balikpapan. Well I tapped Lieutenant Ikida’s shoulder on that one, and that would put us a little over 3000 nautical miles out of Darwin when we get there, assuming that’s what we do. We’ll be at 70% on the fuel bunkers, so in another couple

thousand nautical miles, we're going to dip below the 50% mark and need to start looking for fuel. If we don't shake hands with a smile at Balikpapan, then the closest port on the other side is back to Darwin, another 1330 nautical miles, and by the time we get there again our bunkers will be at under 55%. So I hope they have what we need, because if they don't, then everything else out here is run by our great grand dads in the IJN."

That put a fine point on their situation. *Takami* was not a nuclear propulsion vessel. The initial two units in the class had exclusively used the high performance GE LM2500 gas turbines, which used a highly refined and somewhat expensive fuel. It was great for quickness and fast acceleration, but produced limited range of 4,500 nautical miles. As a quiet testament to Japan's thinking about slowly building a more capable blue water navy, the last two ships in the class had been modified to use a Combined Diesel and Gas system, known as CODAG.

Japan Diesel United Ltd. had pioneered the design of what was regarded as the most efficient prime-mover in the world at their Aioi Works plant. Designed for large container ships, these turbo charged Diesel engines soon came to the attention of the Navy, and a new 6 stroke model was purchased for *Takami*. At slower cruising speeds, the ship would switch to this engine, which could use regular diesel fuel and achieve much longer ranges. For a high speed burst, they would engage the Gas Turbines. This combination more than doubled the sea range of *Takami* over the lead ship in the class, giving her a range of nearly 11,000 nautical miles.

"Thank you for that report, Chief," said the Captain. "So it comes down to wondering where our next meal is coming from."

"And wondering whether we'll get any kind of a reception at Darwin if we do head back there," said Fukada. "If I recall the history, the IJN just bombed the place not too long ago. Oh, I suppose we could ease into port, but we'd have to strike our colors, and even then what in the world will they make of a ship run by an all Japanese crew? How do we politely explain that we're on their side now... and if we do, how in the world do we ever explain it to anyone back home? From that moment on, we'll be at war with our grandfathers, our own people. Now then.... Imagine if we end up killing one of them? Imagine if we put a missile on the Chief's old *Ojiichan*? What happens to him?"

Silence....

The XO's comment all underscored yet another point. The flag on their ship was the Japanese naval ensign. The nation they were pledged to defend was their homeland, the land of their grandfathers, who would soon all give birth to their parents. It was their blood, in a very real respect, that was now running in their veins. Who were they going to fight for here? They were no closer to a real answer to that on the intellectual level, but emotionally, there was movement in that room, and you could see it on many of the faces of the men around that table. The thought of taking DDG-180 out to sea to fight against Japan was going to be very uncomfortable.

The Captain could read the atmosphere in the room easily enough, yet he also perceived the consequences of what he was now mulling over, and thought it best that he voice them.

"I'll be the first to say this isn't the war we ever thought we'd be fighting. Three days ago, it was the Russians and Chinese we were worried about. From what I gather, Japan is at war with them both at this very moment, but the Grandfathers of our old American friends are not their allies here. That's a bit awkward for us, to say the least."

"Yes," said Fukada. "They whipped us pretty damn hard in 1945, occupied Japan, imposed a constitution on us, and here we are in a ship with the American Aegis combat system running the show, and US built missiles in the decks fore and aft. Now we could throw salt in the wounds and turn all those lovely missiles on our own people, but then again, we could also do just the opposite, and give them back to the Americans when they come for Hiroshima and Nagasaki... That's where my great grandparents live, and that's where they died too. Their only child, my grandfather, was fortunately at Fukuyama visiting relatives when the bomb fell. Otherwise I wouldn't be here now..."

Chapter 21

The words of Executive Officer Fukada cut to the bone. In spite of the fact that many of the officers and crew of *Takami* might have believed Japan's war was misguided folly, a disastrous gamble that brought nothing but misery to their homeland, and most of Southeast Asia, blood ties run very thick in Japan. Then Lieutenant Ryuko Otani spoke up, voicing a concern that was still at the base of all this discussion.

"Alright," she said. "These are our people here, our ancestors, impossible as that still seems to me. But let's not forget what they did. This war was unnecessary. We came south to seize oil and other resources, all in the interest of the new Japanese Empire. A minute ago we were talking about delivering the General to Balikpapan. Well, when the Dutch set fire to destroy some of the oil facilities there, our grandfathers responded by killing every last Caucasian in the city—all of them. The good General there was leading the invasion of Java, where the U.N. reported after the war that three million locals died under the Japanese occupation by 1945. And let's not forget the invasion of China, the atrocities committed there, and throughout this entire theater. They were simply wrong—no, that doesn't even begin to say it. They were criminal, and the men who perpetrated or condoned them filled our enemies hearts with everything they delivered to Hiroshima and Nagasaki."

"There were atrocities on both sides," said Fukada. "Our soldiers called the American 41st Division 'the Butchers,' because they never took prisoners—though they made sure they got every gold filling out of the mouths of the men they killed."

"Oh?" said Otani, "and shall we talk about Unit 731 and the bio-warfare experiments now? They froze prisoners to death just to assess their tolerance to cold. Then they boiled others to see how long they could survive in the heat. And then there was Manila, where our troops raped and butchered 100,000 Pilipino civilians before that city fell in 1944. It goes on and on. How can we support these men, these Generals and Admirals who allowed this to happen? How can we support a man like Tojo? Let's face it. Some of our ancestors were real monsters."

“Perhaps we can’t,” said Captain Harada. “Maybe our best option here would be to try to be neutral in all of this—find a safe haven where we can ride this out and try to make sense of what’s happened to us, or find a way back to where we belong.”

“To do that we will have to reach an accommodation with the Japanese armed forces here now,” said Fukada. “The Chief made a good point, we can’t cruise about here for very much longer. We’ll have to find some safe port, and believe me, we may not find one anywhere in Australia. So as I see it, our only option is to sit down to tea with the Japanese authorities here.”

“That would mean we’d have to answer quite a few questions,” said Chief Oshiro. “And I’m not sure we have any of the answers yet. I mean... well we can’t just come out and tell them who we are, can we? For one thing, they’ll likely just laugh in our faces. *I no naka no kawazu*. How would they possibly comprehend who we are, and what we’re capable of?”

As the Japanese often did, the chief had thrown out the opening lines of an old proverb to make his point. *I no naka no kawazu*, roughly speaking meant ‘a frog in a well,’ and the full proverb read, ‘a frog in a well cannot conceive of the ocean.’

“I’m not so sure,” said Fukada. “To begin with, the very existence of this ship will be somewhat of a mystery to them. There was no *Takami* in the IJN in 1942, and certainly no ship like this one. They’ll take one look at us and wonder who the hell we are. Certainly they could never understand our computers and technology, but one look at a missile coming off that forward deck will stand in for a thousand words. They’ve apparently seen them in action before, which is a mystery we’ll have to solve. In any case, I’m inclined to think they would end up believing us. No matter how deep their well is, how else could they account for our presence here?”

“Well then,” said Chief Oshiro, “if they do believe us, then I can’t imagine they’ll want to simply fill up our fuel bunkers and let us go happily on our way to look for another volcano. Give them one look at what we’re capable of, and they’ll want us front row center in their fleet. At the very least, they want to get their hands on those missiles.”

“Gold coins to a cat,” said Lieutenant Otani, throwing out a little proverb of her own.

“I agree with that at least,” said the Captain. “We keep our missiles and technology under the decks here where they belong. Besides, there’s no way

they could make use of any of it. It *would* be like giving gold coins to a cat. Our weapons would be nice and shiny, and certainly command their attention, but that's as far as it would go. There's no way they could even reverse engineer any of it. The technology is simply too advanced."

"Then they'll want us to fight for them," said Fukada. "They'll expect it, and to express any reservation would mean we would have to tell them more about how this war ends than they might want to hear."

"Agreed," said Captain Harada. "That's another thing we have to consider. We all know information is power. Tell them they're going to lose this war and it will only increase their ardor for battle. They'll insist we fight to prevent that outcome."

"What if we tried to facilitate a negotiated peace?" said Lieutenant Otani. She had been fiddling with a pen, head down, her long black hair all tucked neatly up under her service cap. A beautiful woman by any standards, her face was troubled now. It was clear the thought of joining WWII on the side of the men who ran the Japanese Empire was difficult for her.

"What do you mean?" said Harada.

"Well... if we could get to the real decision makers, a man like Yamamoto perhaps, then we might convince him of the futility of prosecuting this war, given the inevitable end we all know is likely to come. Perhaps we could convince them to sue for peace with the Americans."

"After Pearl Harbor?" Fukada shook his head. "Not likely. The Americans would never agree to it."

"We might make them see things differently," she persisted. "We can stop them right in their tracks if they won't listen. We have the power to do that."

"Perhaps," said the Captain. "At least this year, and possibly next year, but they ramp up production and put more carriers into the Pacific than we might want to tangle with by 1944. And let's not forget what they'll have by 1945. I don't have to remind anyone here that no ship in our navy has ever carried nuclear weapons. So in a matter of just a few years, they'll have the proverbial big stick, and as Lieutenant Commander Fukada pointed out earlier, they won't hesitate to use it."

"Then we can't let things go that far," said Otani. "We have to convince them to make peace before they become the unstoppable force they were by 1945."

"A little like trying to pacify a tiger after you've just raided its den and

killed a few cubs,” said Fukada. “Frankly, I think they’d tell us to go to hell, and then they’d go right on with their war. Oh, we could try to sit on the sidelines, but remember what happens after they get bases close enough to bomb Japan. I’m not talking about Hiroshima now. Don’t forget what the fire bombs did to Tokyo. At least 100,000 died there in a single night, with a million more injured and homeless. That was a napalm attack, with the E-46 Cluster Bomb. The lead bombers just came in over the center of the city and lit up a nice little burning letter X. Then the rest of them, another couple hundred or so, just used that for a target. The resulting firestorm nearly burned the entire city to the ground. Yes, the men running this empire were ruthless and cruel, but so were our enemies, so was General Curtis LeMay. That was the most deadly bombing raid in history. What are we going to do, just sit on some island out here and let it happen again?”

“We’re a long way from that,” said Lieutenant Otani. “We can try and divert the course of these events before it ever gets to that point.”

“How?” Fukada was adamant. “By threatening the Americans if they won’t agree to terms? Well they won’t. I can tell you that much right now. So any threat we make will have to be backed up with this ship.”

“But sir, respectfully, aren’t you saying that to try and prevent this war, we have to go to war? That doesn’t make any sense.”

“It will to our enemies...”

No one in the room failed to pick up the obvious fact that Fukada had made up his mind in this matter. Captain Harada was giving everyone a wide latitude to express any opinion or feeling on the matter, no holds barred. It would have to be that way if they were ever to reach a consensus on what to do, for it had to be a consensus. There was no other way. He couldn’t order these men and women to do anything they could not fully support or embrace with their own conscience. In a way, they had to finally decide why they put on those uniforms now. Japan’s military had been considered a civilian body for decades. They were meant to be a defensive force, and specifically prohibited from developing or bearing overtly offensive weapons.

And yet, quietly, almost surreptitiously, the navy had been putting new ships into their order of battle. It was very much like the little shell game the Japanese played with the Washington Naval Treaty, designing cruisers with 6-inch guns, only with barbettes enlarged so they could be quickly converted to full 8-inch gun heavy cruisers. There were two of them out there right

now, just over the horizon. They built seaplane tenders and commercial ships with specific requirements that would facilitate the easy conversion to an aircraft carrier. And in modern times, the new “Helicopter Carriers,” all ostensibly for defensive ASW patrols, could now easily receive the new F-35 strike fighter and become offensive carrier platforms. *Takami* had also just received a more powerful SSM, for defense against enemy ships at sea, or so went the logic. Yet it was a defense that could only be used by attacking the enemy. In accordance with another old proverb, any good officer in a modern day fight knew that the best defense was a good offense.

“Alright,” said the Captain. “We have a very limited range of choices here. We can pick one side or the other, but if we do, we won’t be able to go in half way. It will be all or nothing. Then again, we could try what Lieutenant Otani suggests and try to facilitate a negotiated peace here. That may seem fruitless, but consider the lives we would be saving if it worked. The only other choice is to stay out of it, but Chief Oshiro makes a pretty good point as to the difficulties in that. We’ll need food and fuel, and a safe harbor where we can ride it out.”

“You may get the food and fuel,” said Fukada, “But let’s face it—this war is going to find us one way or another, no matter where we go, unless you’re thinking of Antarctica, or perhaps sailing to South America. We couldn’t stay anywhere in the Pacific, and all the while, we’ll be listening to news of what’s happening over here. And one more thing—do this and we can never go home. I’m going to assume we never find a way out of this mess—that we’re stuck here. So we can stand by and do nothing, but try showing your face again back home in three years—assuming there’s a home left standing in Japan. That message Ensign Shiota was talking about gives me something else to think about. Who else would have rocket technology this early in the war? It has to be the Russians, and if there is fighting up north, then something is amiss here. That never happened until 1945.”

“All the more reason to make some kind of high level contact here and try to find out what is really happening,” said the bullish CIC Chief Hideo Honjo. He was already wanting as much data on their situation as possible.

“That could be dangerous,” said Oshiro.

“Everything we do here from this day forward could be dangerous,” said Fukada. “But the Lieutenant has a good point. If we can meet with a man like Yamamoto and reach some accommodation, then we’ll be in a much better

position. Strong as we might seem, a single arrow is easily broken, but not ten in a bundle. That's where the Chief's wisdom shines. We can't go it alone here, so why not take his advice, and Lieutenant Otani's, and see if we can arrange a conference with the Admiral of the IJN. Yamamoto, of all the personalities at large here, is a man we might deal with."

"Aye," said the Chief. "Wade in slowly. No need to jump to any quick decision here now. These people are going to learn about us one way or another. With a man like Yamamoto in our camp, we have many more options than we would if we tried to go it alone."

The Captain looked at Lieutenant Otani now, giving her a chance to speak again. "Better talk than anything else. I'd support that course of action, but we'd have to be cautious. Wading in slowly sounds like a reasonable proposition, but first the man takes a drink, then the drink takes a drink, then the drink takes the man." She looked at Fukada with that, but said nothing more.

"The Lieutenant has a point. In the beginning, walk slowly. I'm not sure we can avoid stepping on toes here. A warship like this can be a very indelicate thing. That said, we can be cautious, as Lieutenant Otani suggests. Alright, I'll support that course of action. Any other opinions?"

No one else spoke.

"Then, Ensign Shiota, I have a job for you. Use those ears of yours, and that nifty IJN naval code breaker, to find out where a man might find Admiral Yamamoto. In doing that, you might want to nail down exactly what day it is."

"Oh, I already know that sir. It's been on all the intercepts I get each day. This is March 1, 1942, and I think Admiral Yamamoto is at Rabaul inspecting the new base there."

"How do you know that? If you got this from the ship's library files this may not be anything like the March of '42 written up in the books. That damn volcano is evidence enough of that."

"No sir, I'm not much for history books. I just picked up a signal yesterday indicating he would be at Rabaul for the next week. They just finished up some kind of big operation there."

"I see... Good work, Ensign. Now do something else for me. Use those ears and try and put together a good SITREP. I want to know what is happening in this war. If something as big as that eruption has happened, who

knows what else has changed here. Find out, and report to me as soon as you can. In the meantime, I think we should revisit the question how we deliver the General to Balikpapan, or whether we even do so.”

“He’s likely to insist,” said Fukada. “At least that’s what I’ve been hearing from Doctor Hisakawa.”

“He can insist all he wants,” said the Captain. “I’m navy. In fact, the more I think of it, the more I begin to feel we should keep the good general right where he is. We could tell him we’re a top secret outfit, and that Yamamoto has personally ordered that we find and rescue him, and then bring him to meet with the Admiral. I think he’d go for that one. Mister Ikida, what is it you’re pecking away at with that tablet?” He had noticed his Navigator, Michi Ikida, had been absorbed for some time.

“Sir? After the Chief Engineer’s discussion on the fuel situation, I was just doing some preliminary course plots to various locations. I think I can get us to Rabaul from here in six days at an average speed of 20 knots, which is the upper limit for cruising speeds. If we cruise at 15 knots, we’re looking at eight days, but we would have more in the fuel bunkers when we get there.”

“Either way this fuel issue is going to loom bigger and bigger as we proceed here.” Harada was concerned, but his XO made a quick suggestion.

“What about Japanese fleet oilers? These operations must be supported by replenishment ships. In fact, that General down there might know something about it. If we tell him we need fuel, he might be able to order in support.”

“Can we even use their fuel?” The Captain looked at his Chief Engineer.

“If it’ll burn, I can use it, at least in the diesel system. That’s what we’ve been mainly sipping on this deployment. I’ve only had to use the Gas Turbine system when we needed acceleration. The diesel used here may not be as refined as the stuff we’re used to, but I have some additives aboard that could help. We might have a bit of indigestion, and I may not get the best efficiency from the propulsion system, but I can keep us running if you find me the fuel. As for speed, you’ll have it as long as I can feed those Gas Turbines. We’re at about 92% on that bunker. It’s a very refined fuel, more like aviation fuel, and we won’t find a drop of the stuff here, so keep that in mind.”

The Captain nodded. “Well if we can find diesel here, then I suppose it’s worth a try,” said Harada. “As to Yamamoto, what if he’s gone by the time we get there?”

“Perhaps we could have Ensign Shiota work up a coded signal requesting a meeting with the General,” said Fukada.

“That would seem a bit chancy. How would we identify ourselves in any way that would be convincing enough for the fleet Admiral to respond to such a message? I’m guessing a lowly destroyer Captain won’t have much pull here.”

“But we have a man aboard who just might,” said Fukada. “If this fellow is telling the truth, we have the senior commanding officer of the 16th Army, the force presently conducting the biggest operation they have running at the moment. That eruption has had to shake things up. We can say we’ve rescued this guy, and are en-route on his orders for an urgent meeting at Rabaul.”

“I like that XO. Good call, assuming our guest plays along.”

“He doesn’t have to, sir,” Fukada smiled. “We just tell him he’s been summoned to Rabaul and we have orders to get him there ASAP to coordinate future planning with Combined Fleet HQ.”

The Captain nodded. It could work. “Outstanding. Let’s make it so. Mister Ikida, verify those fuel numbers with Chief Oshiro.” He looked over the room, proud to have this group with him now, good officers, each and every one.

“Mister Kimura, we haven’t heard your wisdom on any of this. Anything to add?”

The Marine Sergeant, shrugged. “At the moment I haven’t quite swallowed this whole fish yet, sir. I do know one thing. We’ve arrived, somewhere. And to prove it, we’re here!” Yankee Catcher Yogi Berra could not have put it any better. He smiled

Part VIII

All or Nothing

*“If you do not enter the tiger’s cave,
you will not catch its cub.”*

— Japanese Proverb

Chapter 22

Yamamoto did not quite know what to make of the request when he first received it through channels. General Imamura, presumed lost in that terrible disaster off Batavia, had been found and rescued at sea by a destroyer. That was good news, for the entire operation on Java had ground to a halt in the chaos that erupted from that volcano.

We make our plans, he thought. We prepare so carefully, assigning men to ships, building our task groups, and timing everything to achieve the desired outcome. Yet nature has humbled us all. The initial reports on the losses most likely sustained by the 2nd Division are quite alarming. I had counted on using that unit in the Solomons after Java was secured, but that will clearly not happen. And now it seems that the entire area near Batavia will be useless from an operational standpoint for months. The harbor is wrecked, the roads impassible, the airfields covered with ash that still hangs heavily over the entire span of Western Java.

This will make the capture of Surabaya more important than ever, so I suppose the General wishes to coordinate with the navy to determine how we can now move to reinforce troops already landed in that sector. My understanding is that the 5th Division has been taken from Singapore for that purpose, so it will need transport and the assignment of a covering force. General Nishimura at least salvaged one pearl from this clam. His renewed attack on Singapore finally delivered that city and its excellent port, yet it too is under heavy ashfall for the time being, and the city itself is choking with refugees. I'm afraid things will get very ugly there, and Singapore will be of no use to the navy either, and for quite some time.

That ash cloud extends for a wide area, and well out into the Indian Ocean. It was astounding to think I could have heard that eruption even here at Rabaul, over 5000 kilometers from the Sunda Straits. At least we can be thankful that operations in the Solomons will not be affected. After Nagumo successfully covered Operation R, I sent him west with Carrier Division 5 to support the Java Operation, but I will need him back here soon. So perhaps it is best that I meet with General Imamura, and determine what the situation is in the Java Sea. Yet he would be some time coming here, and I am scheduled

to move on to Davao. So I will have him meet with me there, a good midpoint between Rabaul and the Java Sea where he was found.

He took a quiet sip of tea, thinking. There was still trouble in the north to consider. Yes, that was as unexpected as this sudden eruption in the south. When we received that ultimatum from the Siberians, no one took it seriously. After all, what could they do? Now it appears that the Siberians have been at war with us since the day of that attack on Pearl Harbor. That they could have sunk *Hiryu* as Nagumo returned home was most disturbing—not to mention the damage we sustained to both *Kaga* and *Akagi*. Thankfully, that was not serious, and both ships were scheduled for refit at this time in any case.

Naval Rockets...

We have heard reports from the Germans on these for some time, but never really paid them any coin. Now it appears we were remiss in that as well. Naval Intelligence Group now believes that the ship that has caused such havoc in the Atlantic for the Germans has moved into the Pacific. If that is so, they could only have come by the Northern Route, and before the ice set in. That must be the ship that is now operating with the Siberians. They used it to cover their operation against Kamchatka—another lapse of both intelligence and planning that I must now account for to the Emperor.

The Army is fuming that they were not supported, but look what happened to *Mutsu* and *Chikuma* when they tried to intervene against the enemy landing operation on Kamchatka. Those were good sturdy ships, but now both are wrecked to a point where we will not have them back again for over a year! Perhaps we should proceed with the plans to convert *Mutsu* into an aircraft carrier, or a hybrid. That might be easier than trying to restore an old battleship that was already obsolete when it sailed north to that encounter.

I will have Kurita meet us at Davao as well, and we will then discuss operations in both the north and south at the same time. We may be taking on more than we realize with the opening of all out hostilities on the northern front. Things should be relatively quiet, but when the ice abates, and it allows us to operate in the Sea of Okhotsk, there will have to be a reckoning with the Siberians. They used the northern port of Magadan as their primary base, and that must be taken, or smashed.

Then there is the loss of *Joyaku Kazantochi*, the land of volcanoes on Kamchatka. Let us hope none of the fiery mountains that live there, and on

our Kurile outposts, ever have a mind to rage as this one did here. Now that the Siberians have been bold enough to take Kazantochi, we will certainly have to plan a counterattack. Our real power was in the northern Kuriles, at Karamushiro and Shumushu, but the port and base we lost to the north was very useful, and we cannot allow the enemy to control it. Beyond that, they have seized all the airfields we were building there, an insult the Army will have to account for, though they will most likely find a way to blame the Navy.

Plans are already in the making. Tojo has recalled Yamashita, and they are assembling a new Army in the Amur region with divisions pulled from Manchuria and Mongolia. Yet soon I will hear that the navy must provide sealift there as well, because there are simply no roads leading to the next likely place of contention, Northern Karafuto, the place the Siberians call Sakhalin.

So... we finally get the one nightmare we had thought to avoid, a war on both our Pacific and Siberian fronts at the same time. It will require swift action, before the Americans can organize for offensive operations. We must deal with this Siberian threat, and complete the conquest of the barrier islands and the Solomons before I face the United States again at sea. Until both those sectors are well secured, I cannot contemplate any further offensive operations aimed at the Americans. The only question is this: what are they now contemplating? We have already seen a slow buildup underway at Fiji and Samoa, which was not unexpected. This makes the early occupation of the Solomons even more essential than Java from my perspective, and I will have to express that opinion to General Imamura. He will be expecting to focus all our energy to salvage the Java operation now, but there is really no threat from Australia, and we have time in our favor. I will need troops from his Army, so I must be very accommodating to any request he may make of the Navy. He already owes us a life, thanks to that destroyer plucking him out of the sea. Strange that the name of that ship was never reported to me.

Now... With Singapore fallen at last, the British have no real strategic reason to project power east of Java. They have fallen back on Colombo, and are more worried about losing Burma than anything else. Taking that was necessary, to cut the Burma Road and Isolate the Chinese, though I have long thought that the Army was wasting itself in this quagmire that China has become for us. Now, with the disaster that has fallen on the 2nd Division, we

will be scrimping for troops for South Seas operations for the foreseeable future. So I must bargain well with this General Imamura. Too much is riding on the Solomons campaign.

His mind went round and round like this for some time, circling the Pacific like a restless shark, swimming from one operational zone to the next. He was thankful that his navy remained one of the strongest in the world. Even though it had been weakened by the loss of *Hiryu* and the damage and subsequent refits for *Kaga* and *Akagi*, he still had a most formidable carrier force, and the best trained naval aviation on the planet. Now was the time to fight, to employ every measure, every resource, to obtain the strongest possible strategic position before the end of 1942. Then, perhaps, if they enemy can be held at bay and convinced of the futility of fighting on, a negotiated peace might be obtained, though he had serious doubts about that prospect.

Now then... to this meeting with General Imamura. I will make arrangements to depart for Davao at once.

* * *

The plan they had devised to get their meeting with Yamamoto was going to work. As Lieutenant Commander Fukada had suggested, the General did not have to give his consent. They could simply say that because of the urgency of the moment, Yamamoto had requested this top level meeting to re-evaluate the situation around Java. They kept the General in private quarters, well isolated below decks, and gave the crew orders to stay clear. The last thing they wanted was for him to get restless and wander about. Thankfully, a leg wound sustained during his ordeal at sea saw to that. He was laid up in bed, under Doctor Hisakawa's supervision, and all his meals were served there. The Captain paid him a visit to deliver the news, saying that they had been ordered to Davao on Mindanao to confer with Yamamoto.

To dissuade Imamura from coming up with any other ideas he might then fashion into an order, Captain Harada instructed his communications team to contact local Japanese commanders at Balikpapan, Makassar and Kendari. To do so he first had to relieve Ensign Shiota, realizing that a woman would never have such a position on a warship at sea in 1942. She understood his concerns, and he kept her as supervisor, coordinating all signals traffic and

code work. The voices on any radio transmission, however, would have to be spoken by men.

Using call signs and codes provided by Imamura himself, they were able to establish a number of comm-links, and obtain status reports on the operations then underway. This allowed the General to arrive with his wits about him, as he was going to have to know these details with Yamamoto. Getting into the meeting itself was the next problem. Captain Harada wondered how they would arrange that.

“Don’t ask,” said Fukada. “We just go, the two of us. We’ll accompany the General, and no one will be the wiser.”

“That may get us to the meeting site, but I’m talking about the door that might end up between Yamamoto, Imamura and the two of us. I don’t think we’ll be offered chairs at that table.”

“Oh, yes we will,” said Fukada. “The instant we ease into the harbor, every head there will be fixed on us. We’re unlike anything they have ever seen at sea.”

“I’m not so sure they’ll be all that impressed,” said the Captain. “After all, we look a bit like a sleek fleet auxiliary ship, and with just that one visible deck gun forward. Sure, we’re much bigger than any destroyer of this era. Our displacement is three times that of a typical WWII destroyer. We’re in the heavy cruiser weight class here, but to them, it will seem like we wouldn’t get past the first round with one of their ships. We look like a seaplane tender. We look toothless.”

“Let’s count on curiosity first,” said Fukada. “They’ll certainly want to know who and what we are. There’s no *Takami* in the IJN fleet at this time.”

“Should we even use that name? Would it be easier if we just identified ourselves by hull number?”

“No,” said Fukada. “The IJN ditched simple hull number identification in favor of ship names long ago. I say we just call it like it is. We tell them were Destroyer *Takami*, or even Cruiser *Takami* if that feels better to you. Then they’ll want to know what’s going on. It may not get us a seat at Imamura’s meeting, but I’m willing to bet they’ll want to sit down with us afterwards.” Fukada had been thinking about this situation for some time, running through the possibilities in his mind.

“Damn,” said the Captain. “This whole thing still seems absolutely crazy. I still pinch myself every time I get up from the cot to see if I’m not

dreaming. Kenji, you seem like you've warmed to it all in just these few days, but how in the world could this have happened to us?"

"I just don't know sir. That eruption may have had something to do with it. That's all I can say. Sergeant Kimura had the best line on it. We're here. I can't argue with what my eyes, ears and nose tell me. Those ships we passed off Balikpapan were all vintage 1940s IJN warships. Believe me, to an old modeler like me, it was a real feast. I still can't believe it myself, but I've accepted it as real, and dangerously so. We've got to use our heads now. Our presence here is very significant."

"No question about that," said Harada. "But do you realize what we're considering here? We're talking about intervening in history, am I right? No man can see the far ends of his choices, but if this ship gets entangled with this war, things are going to turn out different. They would have to be different."

"They already are sir..." Fukada let that hang.

"What do you mean?"

"I've been hanging out with Ensign Shiota."

"I always thought you had eyes for her." The Captain smiled.

"It's not that," said the XO dismissively. "I wanted to see how that SITREP you wanted was coming along. Well get this... The Japanese are fighting with Siberia up north. We've intercepted three messages that alluded to that."

"The Russians?"

"The Siberians. That is what is strange about that traffic. From what I could gather, there was some kind of attack on Kamchatka recently."

"Kamchatka, did we ever hold that during this war?"

"No, just the northern Kuriles, but this traffic clearly talked about Japanese units being withdrawn from a place called Kazantochi."

"Can't say I've ever heard of it."

"Me neither. But there's more. We picked up traffic indicating additional naval support was to be sent to Urajio. That one I looked up—it's Vladivostok, an old name from the 1800s."

"Vladivostok. You're saying the Japanese are sending ships there?"

"Three destroyers and a cruiser were ordered there yesterday, and the odd thing about it was that it seemed as though the place was already Japanese occupied territory."

“Well that doesn’t make any sense,” said Harada, “but considering I’m sitting in the Celebes Sea in 1942, I guess I shouldn’t be picky. What else have you turned up?”

“BBC radio broadcasts. Shiota got an earful last night—a big offensive underway in Russia.”

“That I can understand.”

“Except from what she could gather, the Germans were in Moscow, and the Russians were trying to push them out. Well, I went down to the ship’s library. Come to find out, the Germans never set foot in Moscow. They got close, but the Russians held them off, yet not according to these news broadcasts. And here’s another thing. There’s been a mention of a man named Sergei Kirov running things over there.”

“Some Russian General?”

“The title was General Secretary—of the Communist Party!”

“Wasn’t that Stalin?”

“Right. He held the office until 1952, but there’s been no mention of him at all. It’s all this Kirov fellow. Whatever’s going on here, things appear different. The history is already twisted—just like that damn volcano was never supposed to erupt this year. I looked that up too. It was supposed to happen in 1883. Something is really strange in all of this.”

“That’s one hell of an understatement.” Harada looked very troubled. “This can’t be happening XO. It just can’t be happening.”

“We better get past that sir, and quickly. It is happening, just like Kimura said. We’re here, and right in the middle of the Miso soup. The only question we should be asking ourselves now is what we’re going to do about it.”

Chapter 23

It was three days from the coast of Borneo north of Batavia to the port of Davao in the southern Philippines. That was good news insofar as their concerns about fuel had been uppermost in mind. There they saw a sight that put an end to any vestige of doubt in the minds of any who saw it, the mighty battleship *Yamato*, 72,000 tons of steel reality anchored well out in the bay, and surrounded by a gaggle of destroyers. Lieutenant Commander Fukada stared and stared, in awe of the ship, and the realization of what they were now planning to do. There, within that massive fortress at sea, the legendary Admiral Isokoru Yamamoto was waiting, if they could convince him to receive them.

A medical team accompanied them to see to General Imamura's comfort, along with Katsu Kimura and three Marines. They moved the General and the other man out by a route that would reveal as little as possible of the inner workings of the ship, and soon they were in a launch and scudding across the bay towards the imposing hulk of the great battleship.

Yet, as Fukada had predicted, there was a good deal of curiosity directed their way as well. Men on the destroyers gawked and talked among themselves, wondering what this new ship was. While its design certainly made it seem like a warship, they had more guns on their small destroyers than this ship had. Perhaps it was a secret courier ship, they reasoned, or a ship devoted to command level operations at sea. Here it was delivering an Army General, Commander of the 16th Army in the current Java Campaign, so it must be important.

Sergeant Kimura waited at the launch below, sending one Marine up the gangway with the officers and medical team. The General's leg had healed enough to allow him to walk, and he asked the medics to remain below, as a matter of face. He would not greet the Admiral of the Fleet as walking wounded. He was, in fact, the senior officer in the Imperial Japanese Army for hundreds of miles in any direction, and he acted as if he expected everyone else around him to know that. It was no surprise, then, that they were greeted respectfully, piped aboard, and politely escorted up to the Admiral's conference room in the main superstructure of the great battleship,

a trip that delighted Fukada. They were all decked out in their dress whites, ghosts from a distant future, walking among legends of the past.

Reaching the conference room, an aide invited the Captain and his First Officer to a table set with white linen and a stylish tea serving. Imamura was greeted with respectful bows, and ushered through a door on the far wall.

“May I ask a moment of the Admiral’s time after this conference?” said Captain Harada. “We have urgent news that could not be transmitted by signal for reasons of security.”

“Very well,” said the aide, a smallish, flat haired man with round wire eyeglasses. “I will make the request to the Chief of Staff, but cannot promise anything myself.”

Some moments later, a man entered the room, dour faced and well decorated. Recognizing authority when they saw it, the two men immediately stood, bowing politely and saluting.

“Rear Admiral Ugaki, Chief of Staff,” said the Aide.

“Be seated, gentlemen,” said the man, his eyes hard, taking notice of their uniforms and insignia, and with a look that bordered on suspicion. He softened briefly, seating himself. “I am told General Imamura owes you a life. Your rescue operation was most fortunate, and you are to be commended.”

“Thank you sir,” said Captain Harada.

“You have news that needs to be conveyed to the Admiral?”

“We do, sir. It concerns our ship, among other things, and it is imperative we speak with him privately.”

“Privately? That will not be possible,” said Ugaki. “But you may speak with me here. What is this news you bring along with General Imamura?”

Captain Harada’s concerns about being on the other side of a wall from Yamamoto were now realized. Here was a human firewall, the tough Chief of Staff of the Combined Fleet, who had decided to fly a final Kamikaze mission personally, to atone for the inability of his pilots in 1945, and he did so after he heard the Emperor’s order for all forces to lay down arms and surrender.

Captain Harada was not familiar with the man, or the long naval history that saw him reach this position of authority, but Fukada was. He had taken it upon himself to study up the previous evening, knowing he would have to navigate the waters of the Combined Fleet Headquarters with its floating

command center, the battleship *Yamato*.

“If I may, sir,” he said quietly. “Meaning no disrespect, we have been sent with this information for the ears of Admiral Yamamoto only.”

“Sent? On that ship?” Ugaki folded his arms, eyes narrowing with that look of suspicion. “Are you aware of the fact that the name you have given for your ship does not presently exist on the registry of commissioned ships in this navy? For that matter, that ship is not familiar to me at all. It is most unusual. And now you tell me you were sent here with this important information? Explain! Are you *Kempeitai*? *Tokkeitai*? Who sent you here?”

Captain Harada gave his First Officer a disparaging look. He had not expected this story from Fukada, and his instinct was that it would come to no good. It implicitly took the line that they were men of this day and time, on some nefarious operation, and with a ship that had been held in secret, even from the highest officers in the Navy. It did not seem like it would wash, then again, he could think of no alternative to what Fukada was saying. They simply could not come out with the truth, and tell this man they were time travelers from the future, here by accident, and with information vital to the outcome of this war—at least not right at the outset. They had barely been able to convince themselves that was what was happening here, but convincing this man, or a no-nonsense realist like Yamamoto, now seemed an impossible task, and something that would be ludicrous to even attempt. But what else could they do?

That was perhaps the reason Fukada took this approach, he thought. We can’t tell them who we really are yet, because we would simply not be believed, at least not in a situation like this conference. It was going to take a little shock and awe, as the Americans of their own time might put things. If they could demonstrate the amazing technical superiority their ship represented, then they might get their first hold on these men. But even then, could they move them in any meaningful way? This whole scenario seemed a dangerous and fruitless thing to him now. They should have fled for any open sea they could find, and stayed as far from the men of this era as possible. They should have sailed for South America, beached their ship, and set the destroyer on fire. Yet that was a sea journey of over 11,000 miles, impossible unless they found fuel along the way.

He had considered that, after the long discussion that set them on this course. Hide the ship somewhere, beach it, then burn it to the ground to

prevent any of its secrets from ever being discovered here. That was the safe course, one that might prevent them from influencing this history, but they had not seriously discussed that. It would have meant the entire crew would be marooned, and that they would live out their lives here, very special and knowing men and women, yet they would all have to be sworn to keep the secret they buried with the ship, and for the rest of their lives.

Yet they had never gone that deep. The meeting to decide things had bounced from concerns over fuel, a matter of self preservation if they were to keep the ship operational, and then to which side they might be on, with opinions and feelings running deep on both halves of that question. Clearly Fukada seemed to think and feel that they could not abandon Japan now, or ever return home again if they did. They would be strangers in this strange land, outcasts from their own nation and people, no matter which course they took. Every road left them pariahs. Now where was Fukada going with this?

“Sir... It is correct that our ship does not appear on any active duty register. The reason for this will be disclosed to Admiral Yamamoto, but to no one else. Those are our orders, and respectfully, they come from an authority beyond that which is vested in this Headquarters.”

In Fukada’s mind, it was now an all or nothing play to get this audience with Yamamoto. They could not allow themselves to run aground on the outer shoals of his staff here. That they had come this close, and so easily, was already a great windfall. Here was the Chief of Staff of the Combined Fleet, a most powerful man, but they needed to get to his boss, and as quickly as possible.

“Beyond this headquarters...” Ugaki smiled. “Then Nagano sent you?” This was the Chief of the Imperial Japanese Navy General Staff, and the one man now senior to Yamamoto himself.

“Sir, you press me for details that I cannot now give. This is understandable, but our instructions were very specific, and our oath prevents us from any other option. If you will grant us this brief meeting with the Admiral, all will be made clear.”

“I see... and if I refuse this audience?”

“Then we will have failed to carry out our orders, and would have no option other than seppuku.”

“Seppuku? I would be most happy to stand as *kaishakunin* in that instance, and even lend you my *Tanto* blade if you so desire. If that is the line

you draw now between us, then write your death poem, Lieutenant Commander. That is another thing I find distasteful. That uniform... those insignia. You come here on a strange ship, flying the Japanese naval ensign, and yet you are clearly not regular navy.”

“No sir, we are *not* regular navy.”

“And you speak out of place, with your Captain sitting there like a deaf mute.”

Captain Harada was dumbstruck. Fukada’s subterfuge had left him in a most awkward position. He either had to play along, reinforcing the stack of lies his Executive Officer was laying on the table, or what? He could think of nothing else to say here. But Ugaki’s last statement prodded him, and he knew he had to speak. He turned now to Fukada, trying to muster the thunder of real anger.

“Lieutenant Commander... That will be enough!”

At that moment the door to the conference room opened, and there stood the legend himself, Isokoru Yamamoto, his face unmistakable to them both, broad head, soft thoughtful eyes that had a great hidden depth to them, and a aura of calm surrounding his placid features.

“Admiral Ugaki,” he said quietly. “Please show these two officers in. I wish to speak with them.”

Ugaki raised both eyebrows, looking from Yamamoto to Fukada, clearly surprised. “Very well,” he huffed, his eyes firmly on Fukada as he stood, quite abruptly, his arm extended to the door where the Admiral waited. Now General Imamura emerged, a satisfied look on his face, and his eyes also found Fukada as the two officers stood, instinctively saluting Yamamoto, who returned with a subtle gesture toward the open door.

Admiral Ugaki was clearly not happy, but cautious about saying anything further in front of Yamamoto. Then he thought the better of that, and spoke up.

“Admiral, may I join you?”

“In a moment,” said Yamamoto. “Please be so kind as to escort General Imamura to the officer’s dining room. Then come back here and join us.”

Ugaki hesitated briefly, then made a polite bow, and his arm gestured towards the door, showing General Imamura the way. He had not failed to notice the look the General gave the Lieutenant Commander, an almost conspiratorial glance. That was what he suspected here, with this strange

ship, and two equally strange men in dress white uniforms with insignia that were clearly not regular navy.

The Captain had four bars and a star, when he should have four bars, with the last forming a circle, and then three stars on his shoulder boards. Who were these men? Were they *Kempeitai* as he had suggested, the secret police, or *Tokkeitai*, the equally shadowy group within the IJN? Were they sent here by Nagano, or someone higher in the civilian authority? As he escorted the General out, he could not help wishing he could see that impudent Lieutenant Commander slitting his belly as he proposed. Now he resolved to get the General to the officers dining room, and then return here as soon as possible to get to the bottom of this. Were these men searched? Did they pass a security check before they were sent up here?

Yamamoto waited for Ugaki and Imamura to leave, then gestured to the open door to his stateroom. "Gentlemen," he said. "General Imamura was most insistent that I speak with you. Please come in."

Now Fukada smiled inwardly, for he had gone to Imamura's quarters on the ship the previous night to secure the General's support for just this reason. He figured that Imamura would be granted immediate access to Yamamoto, and if he could persuade him to make the request, it might get them through any red tape to see the Admiral.

"General," he had said, "We have saved you from a certain death, and now I ask a favor of you. We have orders to speak with Admiral Yamamoto, but, the navy being what it is, we are likely to be tied up with a member of the headquarters staff. Can you help us?"

"Certainly," Imamura had told him. "I owe you a great debt, and I would be happy to make the request on your behalf."

How they came to that understanding, Fukada would keep to himself for some time. Yet it had worked. The General had made good his promise, and there they were at long last, face to face with the Admiral himself.

Now, thought Fukada, what do we really tell him here that will make any difference? The Captain wasn't prepared for the line I took with Ugaki. It took him a while, but he finally realized it was all or nothing here. Let's hope he understands what we must now do. Let's hope all of us understand the gravity of this situation. We're here, just like Sergeant Kimura put it. We're here, and we're going to matter, because, by God, I intend to make certain of that.

He smiled, realizing the challenge before him, but warming to the prospect of all it might bring, of everything he might change with the ship sitting out there, looking like a fast seaplane tender, but something very much more.

With that ship, there would be no disaster at Midway. No. With what I can find out and know about the outcome of this war, every mistake and misstep could be avoided. And the Americans... I always liked them back at home base, and they make damn good equipment. But realizing they have been sitting there for the last 80 years only because of the destruction and humiliation of our nation is too much to leave alone now. It was something to be borne, inwardly, silently, hidden away, because there was nothing we could really do about it. It was all in the past, an old ancestral shame that we all preferred to forget, though for me it has always been a part of my shadow. But now that's exactly where I am, right in the middle of this damn war, and with a ship that can change everything.

And whether Captain Harada knows it or not, that is what we must do now, even if it means I have to take matters here into my own hands.

Chapter 24

“**Gentlemen,**” said Yamamoto, taking a place behind his work desk. “Please be seated. General Imamura speaks highly of you, and it was fortunate that you and your ship came across him. As to your ship...” He paused, looking at them both as if he were trying to see some clue or sign that revealed who they really might be, for they were certainly not officers in his Imperial Japanese Navy, nor was that ship like any he had ever seen before. He knew every ship in his fleet, and it’s design was most unusual.

“I am told by the General that you are the senior officers aboard the *Takami*. You are undoubtedly aware that there *is* no ship by that name in the navy, and even though you pose as officers here, uniforms and all, nothing will convince me you are who you claim to be. The question now is why? Explain yourselves.” He folded his hands, waiting.

Fukada looked at the Captain, seeing him hesitate, wondering what they could say. They had determined to come here, but had not really sorted out exactly how they would convince the Admiral of their story. Fukada made one suggestion, yet the thought of actually carrying it out set the Captain’s heart thumping.

“Sir, I know that our appearance, and that of our ship, may raise these questions, but I am afraid I have no easy answer for you. In fact, we have not yet determined what really happened to us. We had just transited the Sunda Strait, en route to Singapore, when we heard that enormous roar—the volcano. To answer you directly, we realize our ship will not be familiar to you.”

“Then you admit you are not regular Japanese Navy? Yet you pose as such. You even fly the naval ensign of our nation. What shall I do now, have you and your crew hauled off as spies? Is that what you are, and why you are here on that vessel? You think you can just blithely sail about in our midst like this and not be found out? I should have you executed! Now who are you?”

The Admiral allowed just the right touch of anger in his voice, though his curiosity about these men and their ship was very great. He had spent some time studying the vessel closely from the port hole of his stateroom. It was

very curious, its mainmast angled back and bristling with odd antennae. The single deck gun forward was most unusual, but he could see no other weapons. When he learned from General Imamura that the ship's Captain and Executive Officer were waiting right outside his door, and asking to speak with him, he decided he simply had to get to the bottom of this little mystery.

"Sir," said the Captain. "I am Captain Takechi Harada, and this is my Executive Officer, Lieutenant Commander Kenji Fukada. We may not look the part, but we are indeed commissioned officers in the Japanese Navy, only not the force you now command."

"Not the force I command? Whatever do you mean... Captain? If you were going to pose as such, you might have taken the time to see to the details of the insignia you put on that uniform! I take a very dim view of a man who has not earned the stripes he wears. Too many others have sacrificed their lives and honor to wear that uniform."

"Sir, I have been in the service of our nation, in the navy, for ten years, and I assure you, I have earned the position I now hold. Yet we must explain something now that may be difficult for you to understand, or even comprehend. I was not sure how we could do so, or even if it was wise for us to request this meeting, but we find ourselves here, and... we are Japanese, every member of my crew, and sworn to the defense of our nation."

"If I may, sir," said Fukada. "We knew these would be your first questions, Admiral, and rightfully so. We will give answer, but I must ask you to please grant us the benefit of every doubt as we proceed. To answer you, our actions will speak louder than words. Yes. It is understandable that you would think we are imposters, or that our ship also flies that ensign to deceive. But I assure you, as my Captain has said, we are Japanese, and honorable men, sworn to the service of our nation just as you are. Allow us to prove this to you."

"Prove it?"

"Yes sir. If you will grant us your forbearance, then all will be made clear." He glanced at the Captain, an expectant look in his eyes, and Yamamoto thought he perceived a silent accord pass between the two men. They were in different bodies, but clearly of one mind, and though his suspicion darkened somewhat with this observation, the accusation he had just leveled at these men was a very serious one. This was, in fact, a life or death situation for them now, for if it were proved that they were imposters,

they would certainly meet with swift and unfriendly justice.

“Admiral,” said the Captain. “Is there a weather deck convenient where we can have a view of our ship? We have something aboard that will be of great interest to you—something that can be seen and immediately understood, where a thousand words might fail to convey the meaning.”

Yamamoto frowned. “You seem to be spending a good many words here, and end up saying nothing. Yet given the consequences of your actions, which I hope you both understand, I will indulge you. He called for his orderly. “Lieutenant Saito. Summon the Marine Guard, and then escort these men to the upper weather deck off the main bridge. I will join them in a moment.”

The Captain and First Officer knew implicitly that they had just been granted a great boon, but they also knew that their lives may now depend on the outcome. Earlier, they had gone round and round as to how they might convince Yamamoto to give them a fair hearing. The notion of simply telling him what they themselves still saw as an impossible truth, seemed fruitless. They would be taken for lunatics if they were to say they had come here from a far off future, on a ship built in the Japan of the 21st Century. Yet, Fukada had come up with the only solution that might work—seeing was believing. They had stared at *Mogami* class cruisers, seen Imamura in the flesh, the very image of the man in every photograph they could find in their ship’s library data. Without some similar shock to the senses, they could never get this man to believe their story, or have any credibility.

So they had devised this simple plan. Stand there on the deck of *Yamato* and show the Admiral something that even his mighty ship could not do. Both men were wired with small transmitters, which could be activated by merely pinching the gold pip on their collar. They both stood up, facing Yamamoto, and making a respectful bow, *Futsurei*, that they then extended even further, beyond the normal 45 degrees to *Saikeirei*. The former was expected with anyone in rank or authority above you, the latter reserved for rare and special occasions, for it conveyed profound respect or the deepest regret.

Then they were escorted out, under guard, and the adrenaline rose in each man’s chest as they walked the stairway up. This had better work, thought Fukada as they went. If it doesn’t, we won’t be able to bow our way off this ship. Everything depends on this... everything....

Yamamoto frowned, shaking his head when the door to his stateroom was closed. The effrontery of these men! Yet his curiosity had the better of him. They were very strange, and he knew his Chief of Staff had sat with them briefly, and come to some conclusion about them, so their request to adjourn to a weather deck allowed him the opportunity to consult with Ugaki. There came a quiet knock on the door, and the Chief of Staff was shown in.

“Well,” he said, “what is it they had to speak with you about?”

“I do not know that just yet,” said Yamamoto. “It is clear that they were not regular navy, and that ship isn’t ours either. And yet they are obviously Japanese.”

“That means nothing,” said Ugaki. “You and I both have many enemies, and as many Japanese among them as Americans or British.”

“Only too true,” said Yamamoto. “Your thoughts on this?”

“They may be *Kempeitai*, or *Tokkeitai* practicing their little security dance of *Kikosaku*. Then again, they might have been sent here by Nagano, or someone higher in the civilian authority.”

“Why?” asked Yamamoto. “Surely not to spy on us. If the *Tokkeitai* wanted to do that, they would be very sly about it. They would not come here on a ship like that, and dressed as they were. It would only invite the very questions I asked of them, and the rebuke I gave them in no uncertain terms.”

“Have you sent them to the brig?”

“Not yet. They were escorted under guard to the upper weather deck off the bridge. Kindly accompany me there.”

“What for?”

“That remains to be seen. They said they had something on their ship I would be very interested in—something they wish to show me. If nothing else, they have piqued my curiosity. They both know their fate will be decided by what happens next, and surely they knew that when they came here. It was clear to me that whatever they want to reveal, it was pre-arranged by the two of them.”

“Pre-arranged? What if they have some mischief in mind?” said Ugaki. “Remember, there have been death threats. That is why Yonai secured this position for you as head of Combined Fleet when you lost your position as Vice Navy Minister—to get you out of the country and avoid assassination. Frankly, I took one look at these men and began to feel they were up to something here. They would not answer my questions, saying they were

sworn to speak only to you, and the junior officer said he would have to commit seppuku if they failed to do so. Imagine that. The gall of the man! I was most eager to lend him my sword, and said as much. They may be operatives of the secret police, and in that case your life may be in danger now. I was even reluctant to see them enter your stateroom alone as you permitted. Something is very shady with these two. To begin with, where did they get that ship?”

“They have not answered that question just yet.”

“Then let us remove a few of their fingernails and find out before we put the sword to them.”

“Not just yet,” said Yamamoto, holding up a hand. “Then we begin to act like the *Tokkeitai* ourselves. I will indulge them briefly here. If this thing they wish to show me does not answer our questions, then I will deal with them, rest assured.”

“What could they show you? Perhaps they merely want to get you out onto the open deck and into an exposed position. What if there is a marksman out there on that ship waiting to assassinate you?”

“Then he will have to be a very good shot,” said Yamamoto with a chuckle. “We are anchored over 2000 meters from their ship. They are way over on the far side of the bay.”

“I still don’t like it...” Ugaki fumed.

“Do not worry about those death threats. Come. Let us go up and see the final act of this little drama. They will either be dining with us this evening in the officer’s hall, or eating their last meal on the cold metal deck of the brig.”

* * *

The way up did not take long, and soon Yamamoto and Ugaki emerged from the side hatch in the high conning tower of the bridge. Lieutenant Commander Fukada could see the stern aspect in their faces, and knew that this was the moment of truth. Yet he knew they had to enter the Tiger’s den one way or another here, and now he only hoped the demonstration they had arranged would be enough to impress these men. They made another respectful bow, and then asked if they might proceed.

“Please do so,” said Ugaki. “We have things of importance to attend to.”

The Captain nodded, pinched off his collar and spoke quietly, as if to

himself. Then he turned to the Japanese officers and gestured to his ship across the bay.

“Gentlemen,” he said. “I invite you to witness a brief demonstration. Please watch closely...”

A moment later, Ugaki squinted at the distant ship. Then moved to the nearby stationary binoculars, his face lost and only his bald head visible above the lens cups. He thought he saw something rise slowly off the aft deck, hovering briefly over the ship, and then rising swiftly up, gaining altitude and coming their way. As it approached, they heard a quiet thrum, and Fukada turned to Yamamoto.

“Sir, the Captain has asked me to explain this brief demonstration. That is a small target craft. We call it a drone, and I have given instructions that it should be flown closer to *Yamato* so you may observe it more closely.”

Yamamoto, looked at him, unimpressed. “You called me up here to see the launch of a target plane? Any ship in this task force could do as much.”

“Sir, this drone is unmanned. There is no pilot. It is being operated remotely by a technician on our ship. If you happened to notice, it rose directly up from our aft deck, unassisted by any catapult as with the launch of a seaplane. In a moment you will see that we can bring this craft to a complete halt, and hover in place.”

True to Fukada’s word, the small craft approached to a point where they could see the whirling props, four of them, all pointed upwards. Yamamoto could see that it had no wings or tail at all, and was unlike any aircraft he had ever seen. He raised an eyebrow, curious, yet the object seemed almost like a toy in his estimation. It drew closer, hovered in place, which he found quite interesting, and then on an order from the Captain it slowly began to climb, a bright strobe light now flashing to easily mark its position in the blue sky. It moved swiftly, angling out over the center of the bay, which was five to seven kilometers wide at this point, framed off by two islands near the city.

They had decided to fly it out over the bay to the south and then shoot it down with a RIM-66H from the Vertical Launch System.

“Please watch the forward deck of *Takami* closely sir.” Fukada pointed, and the Captain gave the order quietly, heard clearly by Senior Lieutenant Hideo Honjo back on the ship. Seconds later, they heard what sounded, and looked, like an explosion on the forward deck of the distant ship. Then something arced up with a fiery yellow tail and a trail of white smoke, the

audible roar heard ever louder as it streaked into the sky. The target drone was hastening south out to sea, but the missile tracked it unerringly, homing in and catching it with lightning quick speed. Then came the explosion, and Ugaki's head was out from behind the stationary binoculars. He watched, gawking, as the last vestige of the missile strike slowly dissipated.

The noise sent many of the crew out onto the decks, and some even rushed to man AA guns, until Admiral Yamamoto turned and growled at Ugaki.

"I gave no order that this ship was to come to battle stations. Tell those men to stand down at once!"

Ugaki nodded, shouting down at a Lieutenant near one of the Type 96 25mm AA guns. Then Fukada turned to explain.

"Sir, what we have demonstrated here is the use of a controlled guided missile, or rocket. Our ship is equipped with these weapons for air defense, and they are capable of seeking out and finding an enemy aircraft at ranges as close as you just witnessed, or as far away as ninety nautical miles for this version."

Yamamoto looked at him. "Did you say ninety miles?"

"Yes sir, nautical miles. That would be roughly 166 kilometers, and we also have extended range variants that can hit targets much farther out than that, and with the same precision and accuracy as you just witnessed."

"It can hit something that far away? Impossible. How would you even see the target to aim such a rocket?"

"Our ship will see it sir, with its highly sophisticated radars, and once launched, the rocket itself has its own radar to find and home in on its assigned target."

"Not possible," said Ugaki. "Ninety nautical miles?"

"Most defensive fire missions might occur inside that range," said Fukada, but yes sir, the rocket has that range. Now then, we have one last thing to show you, and then perhaps we can return to the Admiral's stateroom and answer any further questions you may have."

The last thing they had decided to demonstrate was the SH-60K helicopter, which now launched off the aft deck of the *Takami*, the distinctive thrum of its rotors pounding the air as it climbed up.

"With your permission sir, the Captain will instruct that aircraft to approach for closer view."

“You mean to shoot this down as well?” said Ugaki.

“No sir, that is a most valuable craft. We call it the Seahawk, and it is used for a number of purposes. It can complete air ferry operations from ship to ship, and land or take off from any open deck space. It could even land on that big forward gun turret there. Furthermore, it carries special buoys that can be dropped into the sea to listen for enemy submarines, and when it hears one, it can launch torpedoes to seek out that sub and destroy it, just as you saw our rocket take down that target drone. It is also capable of carrying smaller missiles that can defend it from other aircraft, or strike targets on land, but at a much shorter range than the missile we just demonstrated. We use it to carry Naval Marines, conduct search and rescue, or other special operations as may be required and ordered by the Captain.”

The helicopter approached, and to their amazement, it came to a complete standstill and hovered. Yamamoto had seen such a craft before, the rudimentary Kayaba Ka-1 autogyro being developed for the army as a potential artillery spotter. Yet it was nothing compared to this craft, which now hovered noisily off the side of the great battleship, its downwash flaying the sea beneath it. They could clearly see the pilot, who saluted smartly, and then the craft angled away, back towards the *Takami*. They watched it in silence until it hovered briefly above the ship, and then landed.

Yamamoto gave Ugaki a look, then turned to the two men, the anger and annoyance long gone from him now. “Gentlemen,” he said. “Please accompany Rear Admiral Ugaki and I to my stateroom. It seems we have much more to discuss here than your uniforms.”

“It would be our pleasure sir,” said Captain Harada, “and we thank you for your forbearance.”

Part IX

Resurrection

*“Fall down seven times, stand up eight...
Wake from death and return to life.”*

— Japanese Proverb

Chapter 25

“A moment ago you stated you could speak only with Admiral Yamamoto,” said Ugaki. “Yet I am his Chief of Staff, and he has asked me to attend this meeting. If that is not acceptable to you, then we will graciously grant your wish to visit your ancestors.” He looked at Fukada, his eyes cold.

That is exactly what we are already doing, he thought, visiting our ancestors, but he said nothing, looking at Captain Harada.

“Under the circumstances,” said Harada, knowing he had to diffuse the obvious tension between the two men, “it was I who ordered Lieutenant Commander Fukada that our information should be revealed only to the Admiral, and to speak as he did to you earlier. I can see now that was a regrettable error, and I ask your pardon, Admiral Ugaki.” He offered a suitable head bow, which Ugaki returned, his pride assuaged for the moment.

“Good,” said Yamamoto. “Now that no one is going to slit their belly, I have decided to keep your heads on your shoulders for the time being as well. So let us get down to the matter at hand. That was a most interesting demonstration. I must tell you that rumors concerning these naval rockets have been buzzing about the fleet like bothersome flies. And now I see the reality with my own eyes. Alright. Explain. Where did you get these weapons? Were you sent here by our government?”

In a way, Captain Harada was grateful the Admiral had asked him more than one question. That way he could answer the easiest one and overlook the others.

“These weapons were delivered by the Japanese government, but *Takami* is unlike any other ship in your fleet. In fact, no one in the navy, not even here at the very highest level of command, knows of the existence of this ship, which is why we were most concerned about secrecy. As you have seen, these are very capable weapons, most deadly. They can do everything we have already told you, and at the ranges Lieutenant Commander Fukada mentioned earlier.”

There, everything he had just said was true. He had just not made it clear *which* Japanese government delivered the weapons, or said anything about

his being a man from another time.

“A secret project,” said Yamamoto, “and one I knew nothing about? I suppose it would not be the first time information has been withheld from me. Yet someone had to issue orders, secure resources, for a ship of this size to be built. Frankly, that it could even exist without my knowledge is most troubling. Is there a shipyard hidden away somewhere that has been kept secret all these years? Who was behind the development of these weapons, the Army? Is that why they were withheld from Navy circles?”

Again, which question to answer? The Captain thought carefully. He was edging into waters here that he had once thought would not carry them where they wanted to go. He was making it seem as though they were men of this era, and his ship was a secret prototype—a lie that was like a beautiful woman’s body. It might hide for a time behind the satin folds of her kimono, but one day a determined man would lay her bare.

Fukada had suggested that only the real truth would give them the power they needed to really have some pull in this world. He had also argued the very same thing that was worrying Harada about his initial and carefully worded responses here—that the truth would eventually come out, and deception would only sow seeds of ill will and resentment. Yet Harada felt that beginnings were very delicate matters, and that if he could wade in slowly, reveal things over time, it might be a better course.

“The Army knows nothing of this either sir,” the Captain said at last. “No, this was not a development having anything to do with inter-service rivalry. *Takami* was commissioned into the Japanese Navy, but at a time and place unknown to you. The officers and crew aboard were all specially selected and trained.” Again, this was all true.

Yamamoto thought for a moment. This very ship, the *Yamato*, had been built under the highest level of secrecy. The shipyards and slipways were well screened from outside eyes; the workforce isolated and forced to live within a carefully watched construction zone. In spite of that, Yamamoto could not believe the ships were unknown to their enemies, even when they were under construction. It was simply impossible to hide a ship of such size and imposing power. And yet this *Takami* was something else entirely, a wolf in sheep’s clothing. It had but one small deck gun, and a launch deck for that interesting aircraft, also a nice little secret that astounded him when he saw the craft up close. Yet otherwise, that ship looked quite harmless, almost like

a fleet tender or auxiliary. Something like that could have been easily built in secrecy, right under the noses of navy brass, who would scarcely give it a second thought.

“Then these weapons are prototypes? Is that why you were sent here to make this demonstration?”

“Sir, the weapons are well beyond prototypes. They are fully functional, and not merely test models.”

Yamamoto raised an eyebrow at that. He had been appointed head of technical development in Naval Aeronautics late in 1935, and the thought that a project such as this should have escaped his notice was most disturbing. He had always been a strong proponent of air power, and even openly voiced opposition to the building of ships like *Yamato*, even before the efficacy and effectiveness of Naval air power had been proven. He had been behind the development of Japan’s cutting edge Naval Aviation arm, and also planes like the Type 96 land based long range bomber, seeing in that range a powerful means of striking their principle enemy, the American Navy. Now, this very hour, he had witnessed the unveiling of a weapon that could render that air power absolutely useless.

“Why am I being informed now?”

“Because we believed that the existence of *Takami* would inevitably become known to you, in spite of every effort to maintain secrecy. You were the one man in the fleet we believed in, and one we thought would well consider what we will now propose.”

“When you say ‘we,’ who do you refer to?” asked Ugaki, still suspicious. “Some group within the government?”

Both Yamamoto and Ugaki knew there were many such factions within the government and in both services as well. There were those that favored one strategy or political alignment over another, and they often worked at cross purposes, battling each other for ascendancy.

“It would be wise for me to say that this comes from an authority that would best remain undisclosed.”

“What? More obfuscation?” Ugaki did not look happy with that.

“Respectfully, this course is best for the moment. Yet you have not heard our proposal.”

“Very well,” said Yamamoto. “I remain very uncomfortable with splinter groups operating in secrecy outside the normal channels of government. It

was that sort of mentality that led to the unfortunate incident of February 26th. That said, I will at least hear what you have to say, as it is clear that *this* little incident has been very carefully arranged.”

“Sir,” Harada began, “the weapon we just demonstrated is very powerful. In sufficient numbers, it can be decisive. That ship, *Takami*, is at this moment capable of standing off and receiving an attack by three enemy carriers, alone, and completely defeating it, shooting down any plane that comes within range of our missiles. Beyond that, we have other weapons that can also be used against those same carriers, striking them at ranges well over the horizon, and either sinking them, or destroying their capacity to function as a viable ship in further combat.”

As he listened to this, Yamamoto recalled the meeting in Tokyo he had with Admiral Nagumo, when he reported on the incident in the North Pacific that had resulted in the loss of *Hiryu*. He could hear his own voice as he briefed Nagumo... *“I trust you have also read the intelligence reports. We believe this is the same ship that has confounded the Germans in the Atlantic—the one that also sank their aircraft carrier. It has a rocket weapon of great range and accuracy.”*

“I have seen it with my own eyes,” said Nagumo, *“but I would not have believed it possible had that not been the case. Reading reports and listening to rumors is one thing, watching that weapon strike our ships quite another. I can understand why the lower ranks now whisper of Raiju and Mizuchi. The weapon is deadly, and terribly accurate. It must be piloted to strike us with such unfailing accuracy, and its speed was beyond belief. The gunners could not even take aim before it danced away, with maneuvers that would be impossible for any plane we have. Akagi was lucky that none of her planes were armed and fueled when the first attack came in. Hiryu was not so fortunate.”*

And now I have also seen such a weapon with my own eyes, thought Yamamoto. We have suspected the Soviets had such weapons, and gave them to the Siberians, yet we never fully appreciated the danger. *Hiryu*, *Mutsu* and *Chikuma* were the result, and so this is an error I cannot make again.

“Go on,” he said, waiting quietly.

“Admiral sir, we have other capabilities that can prove decisive in any engagement, even if we were never to fire a single rocket. Lieutenant Commander Fukada spoke earlier of our new advanced radar. The range and

accuracy of those systems are beyond anything you might expect, or even believe, but I can show you how this works at sea. We can stand off and use that aircraft, which we call a helicopter, to easily detect another enemy fleet. Beyond that, the equipment we have to listen for enemy submarines is so sensitive that it could hear that enemy fleet hundreds of miles away. We call this situational awareness. One cannot strike an enemy he does not know is there, but with our ship, no Japanese fleet could be approached or attacked without our knowledge of the enemy's presence. And sir, what can be seen first at sea, can be attacked and destroyed first. This is a tenet of warfare that you will certainly appreciate."

"I see... Then what is it you propose?"

"First off, I would like to invite you, and also Admiral Ugaki here, to come aboard *Takami*, and see the equipment I am speaking of first hand—all of it, the advanced radars, undersea listening systems, and the naval rockets. I would like to go to sea with you, and if necessary, demonstrate that everything I am saying here is true, and nothing has been exaggerated. Then, after you have had time to fully appreciate what this ship is, and what it can do, I would like to discuss how it might be used to bring this war to a speedy conclusion. For I believe that your own assessment of the situation, while it may seem very optimistic now, will soon bow to the reality that Japan is now facing a most dangerous and determined enemy. Without *Takami*, and the secrets beneath its deck, this war will likely look quite different a year from now. In the interest of our nation—its very survival as you now know it—I beg you to consider this proposal, which I will clarify further after you have both inspected my ship."

Yamato smiled. He could sense a real determination in this man, and his confederate. A moment ago he was threatening their execution as spies, and now here they sit inviting me to tea on this unexpected addition to our fleet, and making proposals to end the war! My, how they wake from death and return to life.

On the one hand, I detested these hidden factions and their conniving political maneuvers... unless... Yes, unless they advocate a point of view that I myself believe beneficial to the nation. These men certainly present themselves as patriots. They do not seem at all like the cloak and dagger types, in spite of the evasive way in which they answered some of our questions. There is more to this situation than meets the eye here—much

more. There is a shipload of answers sitting out there in the bay, and so, if proper security can be arranged, I am included to agree to this proposal. Ugaki will worry about the security, but they walked boldly into my tiger's den here, and so I can do the same.

"Very well," he said firmly. "I accept your invitation, Captain Harada."

"But sir," said Ugaki, as Yamamoto expected he would. "Meaning no offense to these officers here, but if you are to board that ship, then a strong contingent of Naval Marines must accompany you. While these men seem accommodating, I do not have to remind you that they appear here under very unusual circumstances, and there has been more than one threat to your life."

"Of course," said Yamamoto. "Does the Captain have any objection to this?"

"Only one sir... The matter of secrecy. The fewer eyes, the fewer mouths to speak of what they have seen. You are both men of character and indisputable judgment. Your discretion in this matter could never be doubted. Yet a contingent of Naval Marines?"

"Yes, like those that accompanied you to *Yamato*," said Ugaki, his tone hardening again.

"Gentlemen," said Yamamoto. "I have long ago ceased to concern myself with my personal fate in regards to these foolish death threats. Karma is karma, and life is very short. But to satisfy the concerns of Admiral Ugaki, the forward turret of this battleship will be loaded and trained on your ship. I will board with Admiral Ugaki, however, should I fail to return within an allotted period of time...."

"I understand," said Captain Harada. "Sir, as these are most unusual circumstances, as Admiral Ugaki correctly points out, I accept. Damage to our ship would be a tragedy, given its power to influence events here. Yet it will not be your guns that will keep you secure, but my word. I will personally guarantee the safety and security of your lives, swearing now on my honor and that of all my ancestors."

"Then let us hope they rest peacefully," said Ugaki.

The bargain was struck. Captain Harada could hardly believe they had been able to pull it off, but curiosity is one of the most powerful lures in history, and he knew that both these Admirals were now very eager to get answers to the unanswered questions in their minds. Yet when they do get them, will the shock be too much for them to believe? Right now we are no

more than an unknown entity, a secret project with what looks like a very interesting bag of tricks. But when these men see the touch screen radar and control sets on the bridge? When they see the video of themselves on that weather deck as captured by our helo operator, what then? A missile was one thing, our technology is quite another. HD video alone would be astounding to any man of this era.

One thing at a time. Now we move to phase two of our little plan. The crew will all be waiting in dress whites, and we'll make a fine show of this visit. Then, after the magic, it's the formal dinner in the officer's mess, and the one conversation that might end this war before it goes any further.

It was as good a plan as they could have conceived, one that allowed them fidelity to their own nation and people, while also trying to mend fences and bring about peace with nations that would become firm allies in the decades ahead. But they would not be the only ones to make revelations during this visit, and things they would hear were going to set their course into dangerous waters, sooner than anyone thought.

Chapter 26

When Yamamoto saw the interior of DDG-180, he was dumbstruck. He had been piped aboard with all due ceremony, saluting the lines of officers and crewmen in starched white uniforms. With a good memory for faces, he found himself looking over the lines, thinking he would see men there he might have known, but they were as fresh and new as the ship itself. They were ushered inside a nearby hatch, and made their way down the corridors and up ladders to the heart of the main conning section. Yet it was not men with binoculars on high towers that kept the watch here, but the unseen eyes of high speed solid state digital electronics.

Takami was unlike any ship he had ever set foot on. The Combat Information Center was astonishing. There, in the velvety blue semi-darkness, officers sat in a long row before an array of lighted panels displaying colorful maps, with phosphorescent green radar fans tracking contacts all through the region. The Admiral clearly recognized the outline of the bay where they were anchored, realizing that these must be the advanced radars. Captain Harada even pointed out a contact on one screen, saying that was the battleship *Yamato*.

The Admiral stared in awe, watching the things the men were doing with what looked to be flat typewriters sitting before them. Yet he could not take his eyes from the colorful screens, seeing the men simply touch them with a fingertip to change the information being displayed. He had absolutely no reference point for them, and could not even begin to imagine what they were, and how they worked. His eyes strayed to Admiral Ugaki, seeing the perplexed look on the man's face. They were seeing things that they simply could not understand, and the longer they were there, the disquiet that fell on them deepened.

Captain Harada perceived their mood, and gestured to a table and chairs that had been cleared for just this visit. "Admiral," he said. "This is the room that receives signals sent from our radar equipment. It is displayed on these screens, analyzed, and tracked. If this ship were in combat, each and every enemy aircraft or ship would be shown on these screens, and to strike one, my officers need to simply touch the contact with a fingertip, or use another

pointing device. That command would then launch a missile like the one we demonstrated, and it will unerringly find, track, and kill the designated target. This ship is capable of tracking and engaging, scores of contacts at any given time. In effect, we could easily destroy the entire air wing of an aircraft carrier, and well before the pilots of those planes could ever come into visual contact with us.”

Yamamoto sat in silence for a moment, then turned and simply asked one question. “Captain, where was this ship built?”

Harada looked at Fukada, who sat dutifully at his side, realizing this was a first moment of truth. “At the Mitsubishi Heavy Industries Naval Plant, Nagasaki.”

“Nagasaki shipyard? I know that facility well. *Musashi* was built there, but this ship... all these flashing lights, those strange displays you speak of—they could never have been built at that plant.”

“No sir,” said Harada, looking the Admiral directly in the eye. “Not today. Not in the 1940s. The equipment and technology that you see here all around you is something that no industry in Japan could design or build today. The rockets we possess, with their advance capabilities, are also beyond the understanding of your engineers.”

“But the Russians have these things,” said Yamamoto. “They have given them to the Siberians, or so we have come to believe. They have even used these naval rockets against us in battle, which is why I gave you such wide latitude here when I saw that rocket fired from your ship. The men who died on the carrier *Hiryu* also bore witness to the power of these new weapons, as did Admiral Nagumo when the *Kido Butai* was attacked on its return leg from Pearl Harbor. We know the Russians have an advanced ship with these weapons, because it has bedeviled the Germans and Italians for months in the west. Now it is here, and then you come on the scene, in a ship no one has ever heard of. Was this advanced equipment, this ship, all obtained from the Russians?”

“No sir, the ship was engineered and built in Japan, as I have said. But if I may ask... You say a Russian ship attacked the *Kido Butai*?”

“That information is classified,” said Ugaki, casting a furtive glance at Yamamoto.

“Under the circumstances,” said the Admiral, “I believe we can safely divulge this to the Captain. Yes, our carriers, and aircraft, were hunted by

these naval rockets, just as you described a moment ago. *Hiryu* was lost, and both *Kaga* and *Akagi* damaged before Nagumo was able to break off and evade further contact—though he reports we never saw the ship that fired these weapons.”

Harada looked at his First Officer, both men finding this story hard to swallow. Yet here they were, about to feed Yamamoto a lump of concrete truth that would sit in his gut from this moment on. Everything was topsy-turvy in this world now. Krakatoa had apparently erupted here just days ago, when that had clearly not happened in 1942. And now here was the Commanding Officer of the Combined Fleet telling him that a Russian ship had sunk the carrier *Hiryu*.

“Our carriers were struck by rockets?”

“Correct,” said Yamamoto. “So it is clear that our enemies have these weapons as well. To find we now have them is a great relief, yet I for one cannot imagine how this ship could ever have been built in the shipyards of Nagasaki, or anywhere else in Japan.”

“You say it was built there,” said Admiral Ugaki, “and then in the next breath you contradict yourself and tell us this technology is beyond our capability to engineer. Which is it? Why do I have the unsettling feeling that you are hiding the real truth concerning this ship? Yes, every man aboard here is clearly Japanese, but it has occurred to me that this ship could have also been built by the Russians, and that you and your entire crew could be infiltrators, intending only to come boldly into the tiger’s den like this, and with a motive or mission we have yet to discover.”

“Sir,” said Harada, “I do not think the Russians of this day would possess anything remotely like the technology and weapons we have shown you. Yes, the Russians are beginning to develop missile technology, but it could in no way compare with ours.”

“I beg to differ,” said Yamamoto. “Admiral Nagumo claimed that our planes were struck by rockets, just as you demonstrated. And only a few days ago, there was another engagement off Kamchatka in the Sea of Okhotsk. There we had two ships also struck by these naval rockets, and both so badly damaged that they will not be useful again for years, if ever.”

Again Harada looked quickly at Fukada, and the two men were now concerned. They knew that no Russian ship of this era would possess that kind of missile technology. Then Harada thought about that damn volcano,

the impossible fact of his very own presence here, speaking with Isokoru Yamamoto. Earlier he had wondered about the disappearance of the Russian battlecruiser when the Demon Volcano erupted. They had all thought the Russians were lost at sea in that event, but now the possibility that they might have experienced the same fate as *Takami* bloomed darkly in the Captain's mind. The Russians.... A ship with advanced missiles shooting down planes and sinking Japanese ships.... He needed more information.

"What makes you think it was a Russian ship that attacked your carriers?"

"Because we were forewarned," said Yamamoto. "The Siberians made impossible demands of us, and when they were ignored, Siberia declared war the moment we struck the Americans at Pearl Harbor. This Vladimir Karpov is quite headstrong, quite brash, but he has apparently made good on his threats with the unexpected attack on our garrisons in Kazantochi."

"Where did you say you were attacked?"

"Kazantochi. The Siberians once called it Kamchatka, and apparently that will be its name again now, until we take it back, as we certainly will. This is also highly classified, and no one in the homeland knows a word of it, but we have lost that entire peninsula to the Siberians, and nearly lost *Mutsu* and *Chikuma* trying to stop their surprise invasion. That was my fault. We should have heeded the warnings and been more vigilant. Soon we will move with much stronger forces and settle the matter. If the Siberians do have a ship in the north, then they most likely got it from the Russians. Their use of naval rockets in the Atlantic has now been well documented."

That was all a lot to take in, and Yamamoto ended up stealing their thunder for a while as they considered it. At this point, neither Harada nor Fukada had any knowledge of how badly fractured the history was by 1942. They had no idea that the Soviet Union was divided, no knowledge of the Orenburg Federation, no idea that Japan had been sitting on Siberian soil for decades, and now controlled Vladivostok. Yet one thing Yamamoto had said struck Harada, and he asked about it.

"That Russian you mentioned a moment ago—what was his name again?"

"Vladimir Karpov, and he is Siberian, the head of the Free Siberian State in fact."

Harada looked at Fukada, a question evident on his face. "Pinch me again," he said under his breath, "but wasn't that the name of the Russian Captain who tangled with the American 7th Fleet?"

“Yes sir—Karpov. I can show you the SITREP we received on that engagement before the Russian flotilla went missing.”

“Very interesting....” Harada needed to think, needed time to digest this, but he could see that Ugaki was watching them closely, a look of suspicion and impatience on his face. At that moment, a junior officer came up, saluting, and leaned in to say something to the Captain.

“How far out?” said Harada.

“Sir, we have them inbound at 180 kilometers, and about 35 minutes out at their present speed.”

“Very well, come to air alert one, and sound action stations.”

Out of the blue, he thought. This whole insane scenario is exactly that. Now what in God’s name is out there?

“Admiral, would there be any friendly aircraft inbound to Davao at the present time? I have just been informed of an airborne contact approaching from the south.”

“From the South?” Yamamoto looked at his Chief of Staff.

“We have a squadron at Ambon,” said Ugaki, “but it has only just arrived and has been awaiting delivery of aviation fuel.”

The alarm sounded and new screens lit up all around them, with the radar plot and contacts clearly indicated on the map. Fukada pointed to one screen close enough for the Admirals to see, and noted the projected course line indicating the heading of the inbound contacts.

“They must be American bombers flying from Darwin,” said Ugaki. “They struck here last week as well, which is why I advised against this meeting here. If Imamura wanted to speak with you, he should have come to Rabaul. Perhaps the Americans learned of our presence here—of *Yamato*’s arrival, which may have been reported by enemy coast watchers still operating from these islands. This was risky, and now we see the cost.”

“Everything we do in this war will entail risk,” said Yamamoto quietly. “But if this Captain makes good on his boast, we should be in no danger. Yes?” He looked at Captain Harada, who realized that the challenge had been thrown to him now, and with each minute those contacts were drawing ever nearer.

“Sir, please excuse me and First Officer Fukada for a moment while we attempt to confirm this contact information.” He waved Fukada to his side and the two men stood off, conversing quietly.

“Unexpected visitors,” said Fukada. “Looks like we’ll have to get serious in taking a side here sooner than we thought. If those are American bombers, then you can’t let them get through.”

“Yes, but we haven’t confirmed that. What if they are Japanese planes?”

“You’ve already heard Ugaki on that, and if they are American bombers, they would probably be B-17s. I did some reading and found they had a squadron based at Del Monte Airfield here on Mindanao with B-17s. They evacuated to Batchelor Field near Darwin, and began bombing Japanese shipping near Davao, sometimes even landing there at Del Monte until we finally took that field.”

Harada had a pained expression on his face, and Fukada gave him a long look. “What’s the matter?”

“We’re about to cross a real bridge here if we engage.”

“What else can you do Captain? If you let those planes come in, and we just sit here and do nothing, then we’ll look weak, and everything we’ve said to these men will go out the window. It’s a matter of face. Beyond that, if one of those planes gets lucky....”

Harada nodded, taking a long breath. “Very well,” he said. The decision was his, and that was why the Captain’s stripes were on his uniform. This was what he got paid for, but the thought that he was now going to use American made radars and missiles to shoot down American bombers was still unsettling. He realized that if he engaged, the course they were on would pull them inexorably into this war as an active combatant on the side of Japan. There were still so many unanswered questions here....

“Karpov,” he said quickly, on eye on the contact radar track. “Could that be the Russian Captain?”

“It might be a coincidence,” said Fukada. “But what was all that about the Free Siberian State? That’s the same stuff Ensign Shiota has been hearing on the radio broadcast intercepts. She even monitored news out of Japan, and the Admiral was correct in what he said. As far as the homeland is concerned, they’re getting a much different story than the one we just heard, but there has been news about open hostilities between Siberia and Japan. I couldn’t make any sense of it, but then again, nothing that has happened in the last week has made any sense.”

“*Hiryu* sunk....” Harada’s eyes darkened. “And by naval rocket attack. We know damn well the Russians of this era would have nothing in 1942 that

could do that. Did you catch what Yamamoto said? He claimed there was a Russian ship in the Atlantic too, with confirmed use of rocket tech. What is this all about?”

“I haven’t any idea,” said Fukada.

“What if it’s that damn Russian battlecruiser?”

“You mean *Kirov*?”

“Yes, the same ship commanded by this Captain Karpov. I heard he was running his mouth for a good long while before they came to blows with the Americans. The word was that he and the American Captain Tanner had a little chat before the missiles went hot. Then that volcano erupts, and the Russians just flat out disappear. I got hold of some intel on that after it happened. The Americans slipped in a sub to look for the Russian flotilla, but there wasn’t a sign. They just flat out vanished, no wreckage of any kind, and nothing on the seabed. Frankly, nobody on the American side believed they were sunk, and so they started snooping up north for them in the Sea of Okhotsk. The Russians had a deep sea submersible operating up there. Some hotshot picked it up on a satellite.”

“Well did they ever find the Russian flotilla?”

“No. There was not a sign or whisper of them after that eruption. Now look at us here, about to take dinner and tea with Admiral Yamamoto...”

“Alright,” said Fukada. “Suppose the same thing did happen to the Russians. Let’s suppose that’s *Kirov* up north beating up on our fleet. If they showed up here, who knows when, they certainly decided who’s side they were going to be on easily enough. They were our enemy in 2021, and it looks like that holds true here as well. If that’s the case, then what are we going to do about it? You still want to sail off to Argentina and try to play this out being a neutral? Yamamoto just said they were getting ready to send a much stronger force up north. If that is *Kirov*, you know damn well what will happen next. You were just bragging about our capabilities to the Admirals. Well, we both know that Russian battlecruiser is one tough ship. This is going to get ugly, and hell, for that matter, those contacts will be on us inside thirty minutes.”

Harada nodded gravely. “They’ve seen the dazzle here in the CIC. I was about to explain the rest when this business concerning the Russians came up and threw me off my stride. Yet I don’t see any way around it now.”

While the Captain was away, Ugaki took the time to voice his own

concerns with Yamamoto. “Who are these men?” he said emphatically. “They are certainly not in the naval intelligence network. They seemed to know nothing of what has transpired these last weeks. Then they appear here out of nowhere. Well, who sent them? Why do they insist on this meeting, and what is the real motive behind all this glitter they have shown us?”

“This is all very strange,” said Yamamoto, “particularly this command center. Have you ever seen anything remotely like this equipment?”

“Never, but it could all be theater. Yes, we saw them shoot down that target plane, but I find their other claims hard to believe. How could they have all these advanced radars and weapons without the navy knowing it? And that assertion that this ship was built in the shipyards of Nagasaki is certainly a lie. You and I both know that much.”

“A real mystery here,” said Yamamoto. “And I have the persistent feeling that they are holding something back. We have not yet heard their whole story.”

“But we have certainly heard them boast. If that radar is real, and there are airborne contacts headed this way, then they are undoubtedly American bombers. How convenient that this should happen now, while we are both here on this ship, away from *Yamato*. Admiral—this could be a trap!”

Chapter 27

Captain Harada could feel the tension in the room when he returned with Fukada. Ugaki was looking at him with dark eyed suspicion again, and he did not fail to notice the man's hand had strayed to the hilt of the samurai sword at his waist. It was clear he still remained unconvinced, but here was a moment of truth, a well timed crises that was bringing everything to the edge of a very precipitous cliff. He knew he could not hesitate here, not show weakness, and that in coming to Davao, requesting this audience, he had cast the fate of his ship and crew to the winds of this war.

And there could no longer be a question as to which side they were on. Lieutenant Otani's warnings about the monsters inside many of these men were well taken, but they had come to this man, Yamamoto, knowing the caliber of his character. Were they foolish to think his power and prestige alone could set the war onto a new course that might avoid the years of bitter fighting, and the millions of deaths yet to come?

One thing was certain—if he could not impress Yamamoto that *Takami* was a war winner, then this whole mission was fruitless, and they would have done better to beach the ship and burn it, as he had mused earlier when this question first came up. He could sense the urgency in Fukada, and knew his First Officer had already made his own choice, and now he was urging him to do the same. The pressure was mounting, and he also couldn't forget that *Yamato* was out there, with a forward turret trained their way, effectively holding the entire ship quite literally at gunpoint to serve Admiral Ugaki's suspicions. Yet once I engage here....

Another long minute passed, and then he nodded to Fukada, moving back towards the Admirals where they were closely watching him, their attention sometimes pulled to the dazzling screens and displays of instrument panels lit up by rows of lights.

"Gentlemen," he said, a hollow feeling in his heart that he tried to mask. "If Admiral Ugaki is correct, and these are American bombers, then *Takami* will now defend the fleet."

"Mister Honjo!"

"Sir!"

“Designate inbound track as hostile and stand up the SM-2s. I will be on the bridge.”

“Aye sir, designating contact as Tango 1 and hostile. Standing up Standard Missile 2 system on forward cells.”

Now Harada looked at the two Admirals. “We are locking our targeting radars on those inbound contacts. We could conduct this engagement here, but I think you would have a much better view of things on the main bridge. First Officer Fukada will lead the way. I will be with you shortly.”

Yamamoto stood, and the Admirals followed Fukada to the nearby hatch, with Ugaki taking a last look over his shoulder, finding the Captain as he stooped over one of the stations, his finger pointing at the strange colored display.

Harada had passed a moment with his CIC crew, and with Hideo Honjo. “I won’t hide the fact from you all that we think those are most likely American B-17s inbound out there, so this is a difficult situation here. We came here to try and convince these men we could matter enough in this war to set it onto another course, but here it is. We’re still trying to make up our minds on all of this, but the war has found us, and it’s twenty minutes out and heading our way. If I let those planes come in and they bomb this harbor...”

No one said anything.

“Well, we can’t allow that just now. They’ll have to be stopped, and I don’t think a polite radio chat would do the trick. I know I’m asking you all to make a choice here, and if any man feels this is the wrong decision, you may stand down and nothing will be said about it. It will be treated as a matter of conscience and there will be no negative consequences. You all know who that was sitting there a moment ago, but beyond that, this can also be considered a matter of self defense. Now... “I’m going to let this contact get fairly close so the Admirals can see what happens when we fire. Those planes will be lucky to hit the broad side of a barn here, but if they do, a 300 pound bomb would not make us feel very good.”

That brought a few smiles, a small measure of humor relieving the tension. “So we’ll take them just outside 30 klicks. Very well... Carry on, and Lieutenant Honjo will handle any crew replacement necessary for this engagement. I will be on the bridge.”

* * *

Known as the “Shield of the Fleet,” the AN/SPY-1D radar resembled an elongated octagonal panel, 12 feet wide, and flush to the conning section of the ship. It was a ‘Phased Array’ system that had panels on every side of the ship for a constant 360 degree surveillance of the air and sea around the ship. It was keyed in to the VLS missile launchers, so if Lieutenant Honjo had an order, he could have a missile in the air ten seconds after first contact. It could perform detection, tracking, target illumination for over 100 active contacts, and could also be used in the terminal phase of missile approach to target for guidance. That help would not be needed that day.

The SM-2 missiles being fired were not out after a stealthy 4th or 5th generation strike aircraft, or a sleek sea-skimming missile. The targets were going to be lumbering B-17s, completely unaware of what was about to happen to them. With his conscience heavy, Captain Harada decided to fire a two missile salvo first, and then see what the reaction was on the target side. Yet even as he sent the order to the CIC to fire, he knew he was likely killing fifteen or twenty men.

Strangely, the same quick equation ran through his mind that had plagued both Volsky and Fedorov. Who were those men out there? They were here, sailing in the waters of their ancestors, but those men were also someone’s grandfather, or even great grandfather. Did any of them end up surviving this war? Who dies with them when they go down in a flaming wreck this hour? How many men or women that might have been alive in his time would never be born, and how far forward did that go in time? He realized that he was striking down multiple generations now, unseen faces, each with a long life line and personal history that could now be obliterated.

The order was given; the shrill alarm sounded. The hatch opened on the forward deck and the hot yellow flame erupted, directed upwards as the missiles appeared in a wash of fire and white smoke. Up they went, out after the men and planes of the 19th Bombardment Group that morning, one of the oldest outfits in the US Air Force.

Yet First Officer Fukada had not spent enough time in the ship’s library that day, and the five planes approaching Davao had a dual mission. They weren’t coming to bomb, but to simply photograph it. Two would make a moonlit recon run, and the other three would divert north to Del Monte, still in Allied hands as it was 200 kilometers away, on the north coast of the

island. The Japanese eventually took that field, but they did not have it yet in this history, and those three planes were out to make a very special rendezvous.

* * *

1st Lieutenant Frank P. Bostrom was one of the men out there that day, and yes, he would have a son if he survived this mission. Someone very important had been belly-aching and throwing his weight around, and a directive went out that the best planes available to the US Army Air Force, and its most competent pilots, were to be mustered for a special mission. Unfortunately, the battered old B-17s of the 19th Bombardment Group were barely flying, but three newer planes had just been transferred in, and Bostrom had one of them.

A man of 34 years, the 1st Lieutenant had jet black hair, but with a flash of premature grey at the temples that made him look just a little older when he was wearing his hat, and his darker hair could not be seen. He was a bit on edge that day, and for three good reasons. The first was the coffee, nearly eight full cups he had slogged down in preparation for this flight. It was going to be a long run out to Mindanao, some 1500 miles, and he needed to be fresh and alert at all times, particularly since it would be a night landing on an old, muddy field, lit by little more than a few flares.

The second reason was the fact that his flight path was going to see the bombers thread a thirty mile wide needle between two Japanese air bases in the Celebes. Though the war was young, the B-17 pilots had come to fear and respect the Japanese Zeroes, and he hoped that by taking most of the approach leg in darkness, they might avoid being intercepted.

The third reason was the mission itself, because the man who had been rattling everyone's cages for his aircraft and pilots was the self styled lord high master of the Pacific, one General Douglas MacArthur. Leaving the Philippines just a bit earlier than he did in Fedorov's history, the General and his family and staff had arrived on the north coast of the island after a long and very wet journey on PT boats, and was waiting at Del Monte Airfield for a ride to Darwin. Word was that he saw a single old plane there when he arrived, pronounced it as totally inadequate, and then bent ears all the way to Washington D.C. to wrangle the planes that were now in the air. He wanted

Army planes, not Navy, and he wanted the best pilots available.

I guess that's me, thought Bostrom, inwardly pleased to have been counted in the hand full of men who would be sent out that day. Five B-17s were found, two for the recon mission, and three more that would divert to Del Monte to pick up his Highness, the General.

"I hope Caruthers has his stuff wired tight tonight," said Bostrom to his co-pilot, Captain Edward C. Teats. As he was coming up through the ranks, his mates called him "Eddie Tits," but now that he had made Captain, he was Edward again, or just plain Captain.

"Caruthers has been over his charts three times," said the Captain. "He'll get us there, so don't worry. Beaton and Horn won't have much to do, cause this mission is completely dark. So I had them get with Wheatley to learn a few things, just in case."

Beaton and Horn were the Radio Operators on the plane, and the mission was ordered to fly in complete radio silence. Wheatley was a Gunner, so the two Radio Operators were ordered to bone up on the .50 Cals, as enemy fighters could always be on the prowl. But it wasn't Japanese fighters they would need to worry about that night, it was American made missiles, fired from a Japanese ship, and nothing Wheatley taught the other two men about those guns was going to matter. Life or death for Bostrom and his crew would come down to only one thing, how many missiles *Takami* fired.

The electronic eyes of that SPY-1D radar had spotted the incoming flight of planes over 200 klicks out, about two hours from Del Monte at a few minutes before 22:00 hours. Now the crew of *Takami* were standing at their battle stations, and their missiles were already primed to change the history of these events in a way none of them ever expected.

The sun set about two hours earlier at this latitude, but the skies were now lit by a fat gibbous moon. They had timed everything so the bombers would make their approach to Mindanao in darkness, and make landfall over Davao just after that moon was up. In a few minutes, Bostrom would take three planes and make a turn due north, to stay over the ocean for another hour and then come west again to Del Monte. That's when those first two missiles went up, their white tails catching the pearly moonlight as they went.

Bostrom turned, with nothing more than a quiet lantern signal flash to the other two planes in his flight, and the formation fanned out, separating into two groups as though they were flying evasive maneuvers. The other two

planes would carry on, bearing right down on Davao, and running right into those first two missiles. As with *Kirov*, the result of the attack was mathematical. The missiles fired, two B-17s were hit, erupting in fire and smoke to make a violent descent into the sea. They went down about 30 kilometers south of the anchorage, and everyone on the bridge could see the fiery glow in the dark skies when they fell.

“Two kills, but CIC reports the contact group has split, and there are still three planes veering off on a new heading.”

“Show me,” said Harada, well aware that both Yamamoto and Ugaki were watching all this now, amazed at what they were seeing. After casting odd looks at Lieutenant Ryoko Otani where she sat at the bridge sensor watch, their attention had been transfixed by the missile launch. There, in the dark of night, this ship had seen, tracked, targeted and killed two American bombers, and they had seen them fall like stricken demons with their own eyes.

“These last three appear to be diverting north,” said Otani. “They are either making a turn for home as well, or perhaps headed somewhere else.”

“Then they are no longer inbound on our position?”

“No sir.”

“Then leave them be. Our missiles are for clear and present threats. Let’s keep watching to confirm the new contact headings.”

Now the Captain turned to Yamamoto. “Admiral, he said. “It appears that those first two missiles have effectively broken up this attack. Frankly, I don’t think they would have hit anything trying to bomb this anchorage at night like this, but now we have made certain of that.”

“Sir,” said Fukada, “what about those last three planes?”

“Not a threat,” said Harada quickly.

“Not a threat to us, but suppose they have other targets, other missions? We should take them down as well.”

The Captain did not like what his first officer had just done, and he made a mental note to let him know it later, when the Admirals had departed. For now, he just looked Fukada in the eye and reiterated his order.

“Continue to track the contacts, confirm headings, and if there is no threat vector on this anchorage, then stand the CIC down. We have a dinner reservation to keep with our visitors.”

So it was that 1st Lieutenant Bostrom, flying B-17 number 41-2477, the

San Antonio Rose II, was going to make his appointment at Del Monte, and take aboard a weary General MacArthur that night, telling him a story that would certainly sound quite fantastic about B-17s being struck by white tailed lightning from below. They had just made their turn to divert when they saw something coming up at them. Seconds later they saw and heard the explosions that took down the two recon bombers, and they were the first Americans to endure that first moment of shock, and yet live to tell about it. Pilots Bostrom and Teats, Navigator Caruthers, the two Radio Operators Beaton and Horn, Gunner Wheatley and Engineers Haddow and Palmer were all going to live that hour as well.

But when Lieutenant Commander Fukada consulted the ship's library after dinner, their lives would again be on the chopping blocks of Time.

Part X

Fool's Paradise

“Fools rush in where Angels fear to tread.”

— **Alexander Pope**, *An Essay on Criticism*, 1709

Chapter 28

The first minutes passed politely, with the officers sitting down at the table and the orderly serving water and tea. But Admiral Yamamoto made good on his promise and immediately returned to the question Ugaki had pressed on him.

“Captain, that was again a most impressive demonstration, most impressive. With such rocket weaponry at your disposal, I can see why this ship has only one small deck gun, no bigger than many we put on our destroyers.”

“Yes sir, but that deck gun can range out over 50 kilometers.”

“50,000 meters? How is that possible for such a small gun. It cannot be more than a 5-inch barrel, and our best secondary batteries on *Yamato* can only range 27,000 meters.”

“If you wish a demonstration of that deck gun’s range, I would be happy to arrange it.”

“50 kilometers would be well over any horizon,” said Ugaki. “How would you even see the target?”

“With our helicopters. They could send information back to our deck gun and I assure you, we would hit any target we fire at, even at that range. Beyond that, we have a weapon that can fire four times as far, a new type of naval gun that can send a fast projectile out 200 kilometers.”

It was clear that Ugaki would never believe that, as he shrugged somewhat disdainfully at the statement. “Now you begin to sound like a fool,” he said. “And I have no patience for fools, be advised.”

Yamamoto gave him a sidelong glance, knowing his mood, but still quietly demanding civility here. Ugaki had seen the look many times before, and he folded his arms, unhappy with this entire situation, but tolerating it as best he could.

“This is a most unusual ship,” said Yamamoto, “but you will never convince me it was made in the shipyards of Nagasaki. The equipment I have seen here is beyond our capabilities. You said as much yourself. If we could build such a gun, it would surely be on *Yamato*, a ship that received the very

best weapons and armor we could give it. So then the question remains—where *was* this ship built? You have denied it came from the Russians, but I remain unconvinced. There is something more to all of this that you have not told us.”

“Sir, I have told you the truth all along. This ship was built in Japan, by Japanese engineers, and right there at Nagasaki as I stated. On the other hand, I have also told you that the equipment you saw below was beyond anything present day engineers in Japan could design. As Admiral Ugaki kindly points out, this is a contradiction, so now I will clear the matter up. I have told you *where* our ship was built, but I did not say *when* it was built. Therein lies the answer, though it will likely be as difficult for you to accept it as it was for us to grasp the reality of where we now find ourselves. This ship was not built in this era, not in the 1940s. The plant that designed *Takami* at Nagasaki will not even exist until well after the war, decades in the future.” There, he had said it, and now he waited for Yamamoto’s reaction.

“Decades? What are you saying?”

“To be completely blunt about it, *Takami* was laid down in the year 2018, and commissioned into the Japanese Maritime Self Defense Force in the year 2021.” He waited, saying nothing more.

Ugaki looked at Yamamoto, and when the latter simply laughed, Ugaki shook his head. “It seems you have already had your fill of that saké sitting there, and before you even offer it to your guests! More nonsense and evasion! So many words, yet nothing ever said. Such insubordination, and with the Admiral of the Combined Fleet sitting here before you!”

“Sir,” said Harada, “I know what I have said sounds like utter nonsense. We thought the very same thing just days ago when we transited the Sunda Strait. *Takami* was on a simple escort run from Singapore to Darwin. Then, all of a sudden, we found ourselves caught up in that terrible volcanic eruption. We sailed north, hoping to escape the ashfall, and that was when we came across General Imamura adrift at sea. It took us some time before we could believe he was the man he claimed to be—General Hitoshi Imamura, Commander of the Japanese 16th Army. You see, in our day, no such Army even exists, and we could see no reason why a Japanese Army officer would be where we found him. His uniform was archaic, even as you looked at our uniforms and insignia and knew something was amiss.”

“You persist in this?” Now Admiral Ugaki had a hand on the hilt of his

sword yet again.

“Do not be so quick to draw that blade,” Harada pointed. “Hear me out. You can believe it, or laugh it away when I have finished, but at least have the courtesy to listen. No man or woman aboard this ship thought we would ever find ourselves in a situation like this. Yes, I said woman, just like Lieutenant Ryuko Otani there at sensor watch. Women have served in the Japanese Navy for years, and she is a fine officer. As for this ship, no nation on this earth could build it, or even begin to understand or manufacture any of the equipment you have seen us demonstrate here. I just killed men and planes out there, and at night, firing a weapon guided by radar alone and at a range exceeding 30,000 kilometers. That capability will not exist on this planet for decades, in spite of what you have told me about the Russian ship you believe is operating in the North.”

Now he lowered his voice, still working through his own thoughts in his mind, less certain, but no less determined to have his say. “Concerning that, there was another incident in our time, the year 2021, and just days before this happened to us in the Sunda Straits. A volcano in the Kuriles erupted violently, and at that time, a Russian battlecruiser was leading a small flotilla very near that location. Those ships vanished, and we believed they may have been sunk. Yet now, after what has happened to *Takami*, I wonder... yes.... Because the Captain of that ship was a man well known to many of us in the Navy. We often sortied in the Sea of Japan when the Russian Navy would joust with us out of Vladivostok. His name was Vladimir Karpov...”

Yamamoto sat there, astounded, listening out of politeness but unable to accept what this man was saying. And yet, this Captain was possessed with sincere urgency, with an almost desperate need to be believed. What Kami has taken this man’s soul, he thought? And the other one, the First Officer, he is thinking much more than he is speaking, yet between them there is a strained rope that tethers them together in this. They believe this story! As much as Ugaki was correct that this was insubordinate effrontery, here these men stand, and knowing *Yamato* has three 18-inch guns trained on this ship, yet this is what they tell me here. It is simply the most outrageous thing I have ever heard, but yet both these men believe it. I can see that on every line of their faces.

He pinched the bridge of his nose, as if to chase the weariness of the hour. On the other hand, look what this ship just did, he thought. I saw those planes

fall with my own eyes. I saw officers below simply touching those panes of glass and lighting them up with maps and strange lines and symbols. Clearly this technology is equally outrageous in what it can accomplish. Is it real or theater as Ugaki suspects?

The death of those American planes was certainly reality. Could this preposterous story also be true? Could that be the real explanation for Nagumo's shameful lapse in losing *Hiryu*. Our men call this ship up north *Mizuchi*, a monster from the spirit realm, and now here I sit, swallowed and in the belly of yet another Sea Dragon. These men now claim that they appeared here by accident. This ship was not some hidden project kept secret from the Navy. Assuming, for the briefest moment, that their claim is true, what is it they think to accomplish in coming to me this way? And now they have made yet another astounding statement, that this Vladimir Karpov is another Kami from some distant world, and not a man of our time.

"Vladimir Karpov," he said. "You are telling me that this man is not...."

"He is not a man of this era sir. Yes. If this is the man I think it is, then he has come from our time, the 21st Century, and so has his ship. He was commander of the Russian battlecruiser *Kirov* in 2021, a guided missile cruiser, and perhaps the most powerful in the world. It has missiles, just like those you have seen us use against aircraft, and even more powerful rockets used to attack other ships. I am willing to bet that aside from that ship, there have been no other confirmed useage of these rockets anywhere else."

Yes, thought Yamamoto, that would explain quite a few things. But who could swallow such broth and still pretend he is a sane man sitting at his table for lunch? In spite of that, how do I explain the presence of this ship here now, these weapons and radars? I am left with the distinct feeling that we will learn that these weapons are not really being manufactured by the Russians, just as this man says. If they had them, why didn't they use them to defend Moscow? Why would they be on this single ship, and nowhere else... Yes... nowhere else. There has not been a single report of these rockets being used anywhere else, only with this mysterious Russian ship from the Atlantic.... Until this moment... Until a ship crewed by these officers and men, all Japanese, sail so boldly into my compass rose with this ridiculous story, and yet with power and a military capability that is simply astounding.

Ugaki wants to draw his sword and take this man's head. Perhaps he should, but what good would that do? Suppose instead I join this Kabuki

theater, and play my part. They are tapping out the rhythm, and so now, I will join the dance.

“Very well,” he said slowly. “Admiral Ugaki, if you squeeze the hilt of that sword any further you will shatter it. Kindly rest at ease. These men have certainly told us things no sane man could ever believe, though I do not think they mean any disrespect in so doing. After all these hours with them, I still do not know who they are, or where they have come from, but one thing I do know is this—they have power at their disposal that exceeds anything we have ever seen. And if they are loyal to our nation, then that power can make our fleet invulnerable to enemy air attack. Isn’t that what you claim?”

“For a time,” said Harada. “Like all other things in life, the power we possess is not unlimited. Our defensive capabilities can certainly shield any fleet we sail with, and keep it from harm, even if the enemy knows exactly where we are. *Takami* can detect and stop any air attack... until our missiles run out.”

“Run out? Then you cannot obtain any more from the designers of this ship?”

“No sir, none of the men and women who designed and built *Takami* have even been born yet, and our missiles cannot be reproduced, reverse engineered, or manufactured anywhere on the earth at this time. Once they are gone, we will have our radars as a valuable asset for fleet intelligence, but the missile shield will be expended. This is yet one more reason that argues to the truth of what I have told you. The designers are 80 years away, and quite frankly, since we do not even know how we come to find ourselves here, I must also admit that we have no idea how we might return to our own time. At the moment, we are marooned here, and needing fuel, we reasoned that we would have to make our presence known to the most reasonable man in the fleet. This is why we came to you, sir. You alone will know how this ship might best serve our nation now.”

“I see...” Yamamoto just looked at Harada, and at his First Officer. “You might have told me this ship was a highly secret project, and created by a small splinter group nested within the military. You might have said the ship was built for some other purpose, perhaps as a seaplane tender, and then secretly modified to receive and use these new weapons. That I would be unaware of such a development would be improbable, but still within the realm of possibility. But you did not tell me that at all. Instead you simply

hand me the impossible, an explanation that no man could ever believe, and one that prompts an otherwise proper and courteous officer like Admiral Ugaki to call you a fool, because he clearly thinks that is what you make us both out to be. Well, I am not a fool, and I do not think you are one either. Who would do such a thing, build such a ship, crew it with uniformed men, and come to me with such a story? Why would they do this?"

"Because it is the truth," said Harada flatly. "Yes, we could have lied to you tonight, and perhaps you would have believed that lie, at least for a while, until you had tested that story to the extreme and found it to be a falsehood."

"So instead you concoct an utter fantasy?"

"No sir, instead I simply related the fact of the matter. What I have told you is as real and true as the deck of this ship, built with materials, I might add, that do not even exist today. I could show you our computers, machines that process and analyze the signals received from our radars. We use them in that capacity, and for many other tasks, and they have not even been invented. Yet, they are here. I can place your hand on one, show you how it operates, and you will be unable to dismiss it as a fantasy, I assure you, any more than you can dismiss what we showed you this night. Reality bites, Admiral. It leaves its teeth marks in you, no matter whether you believe in it, or not. The men who died on those planes got the worst of it tonight, and that was a difficult thing for me to do—a difficult thing for me to order my men to do."

"To strike down our enemies is every man's duty and honor," said Ugaki.

"Well sir, here is another thing you may find difficult to believe. In our day, the Americans were *not* our enemies, but our stalwart allies. In fact, the radars and missile systems used on this ship were first developed by the United States in the late 20th Century, and that technology was then shared with the Japanese Navy. So it was more than ironic that I just used American designed missiles from a future neither of you could ever see or comprehend, to kill American made bombers in a past that *I* still struggle to believe. We all do. Each day we awake and cannot believe what is before our eyes. Each night we sleep and think to dream this all away, but when we open our eyes, there sits the battleship *Yamato*, a ship that cannot exist, at least as far as we are concerned. It sailed these waters for the last time on April 7, 1945."

"What are you saying?" Ugaki stood up, his eyes flashing with anger.

“I am saying *Yamato* was sunk by the American naval air force on that date. It was struck by no less than nineteen torpedoes, off the coast of Okinawa as our nation fought a last terrible battle for our survival before the end came, and with a terror that neither of you can imagine. In telling you this you will have the answer to the riddle you just posed, Admiral Yamamoto. Why tell a man the impossible when he might have swallowed the improbable? Because to tell you the truth, and to have you accept it as fact, then we have yet one more weapon at our disposal here—information. The war you are fighting now is our history. It is all written up in books sitting down in the ship’s library. You can go there with me if you wish and read them. Perhaps even see photographs of yourselves that have yet to be taken. Would that convince you? Would such a shock finally force you to accept what I have told you is the truth? And it may also shock you even more now to know that I can tell you the day and hour that each of you are fated to die.”

Chapter 29

The things they were hearing now sat scornfully upon the mountain of outrage these men have piled before us, thought Admiral Ugaki. How dare they say such things, speak of the death of the flagship of the fleet, speak of our own demise like this? If Yamamoto were not here, I would surely take this man's head. I would strike a man five times in the face with my fist for simply failing to salute properly, yet look at the latitude Yamamoto extends these men! To kill them here and now would, of course, be unpardonable, so I must defer to the Fleet Commander's wishes and hide behind a thin veil of manners. Yet I will be quite the ugly bride, and both these men will certainly know it. Does Yamamoto believe any of this nonsense? Why does he even treat with these men any further? We should simply order them to go slit their bellies and then commandeer this vessel, begin an investigation as to how, when, and where it was really designed and built, and find out who is behind it. Doesn't the Admiral see that?

"Now you begin to try even my patience," said Yamamoto, much to Ugaki's relief. "It is never polite to speak of another man's death, that is unless you are prepared to take his life."

Harada bowed deeply. "I mean no disrespect, but it was necessary to convey to you the degree to which the knowledge we possess can be useful. Had I come to you with the story you suggested a moment ago, saying this ship was a secret project within our own government, then you could never truly believe any of what I must now tell you. I had grave doubts about revealing what I will say next, and again, I beg your forbearance. Try to hear what I say in light of the great undertaking you personally set in motion when you insisted that Japan should attack the Americans at Pearl Harbor. I know you had your own reservations concerning this war. I know that you believed our fighting spirit—*seishin*—would push the blood in our veins as we strove for a victory that might be beyond our grasp. Many others had such reservations, men like Admiral Hara, who came to Admiral Ugaki's cabin aboard *Nagato* after the senior officers of the fleet were addressed at Hiroshima Bay. I was not there to hear that speech, because I was not yet born to this world."

“How can you know this?” said the stern faced Ugaki. “That was a private meeting, which now leads me to accept my suspicion that you are all operatives of the *Kempeitai*!”

“No sir, as artful and intrusive as they may be, not one man among them would know anything about what I will now reveal here. Hara expressed his doubts about waging total war. He asked if we might not simply strike south to seize the resources of Indonesia, while avoiding action in the Philippines against the Americans, but you told him it was too late to change the plans, that every diplomatic option had run its course, that we now had no choice except this war with the United States. A week after that conversation you began writing *Senso Roku*, the Seaweed of War, your personal diary.”

“What? Then you *are* a spy, as I have long suspected. How else could you know this?” He looked at Yamamoto now, his eyes wide. “You see? The *Kempeitai* are everywhere, and this fantastic story spun out here is simply a distraction. Now they begin to reveal who they truly are.”

“Sir, with all respect, we are not members of the *Kempeitai*. I also know that you both had entertained the same reservations expressed by Hara, and wonder whether this war will turn out to be a victory cup or a bitter dose for the future empire.” In saying that last bit, the Captain was making a direct quote from Ugaki’s own diary, and he cast a wary glance at him as he did so.

“I know this because I have read your war diary, Admiral Ugaki, and not because we are agents spying on your personal affairs. No. Your diary was published and widely circulated after the war. It is history. A copy of everything you will one day come to write in it now resides in our ship’s library. I will not speak further of this, firstly out of respect for your privacy, and secondly because we have seen that things are different here now. That volcano, for example, was never supposed to erupt. There never was a Russian ship dueling with our navy in the north. Siberia never invaded Kamchatka, largely because we never had troops there, and they already owned all that territory. *Hiryu* was not sunk after Pearl Harbor as you say here, nor was *Mutsu* and the cruiser *Chikuma* damaged as you spoke of earlier. So from what we can see, the history is different, and it may not rewrite itself as we know it. Therefore, your account of it may differ considerably if you continue to set your thoughts down in that diary, particularly if you allow us to make yet one more proposal.”

“Another proposal?” Yamamoto forced a smile, deeply disturbed now by

what this man was saying. How could he have known about something as private as Ugaki's personal diary. How could he have the effrontery to ever mention it openly like this if he did have knowledge of it. And now this claim that it was all published history neatly dovetails into their other impossible story, the grand theater in which they beckon me to take a part.

"What proposal?" he said, wanting to hear these men out before he finally decided their fate.

Ugaki was barely managing to contain his rage, but he forced himself to sit down again, and reached for the saké himself, in spite of Yamamoto's disapproving glance. It was the one chink in the otherwise unassailable fortress Ugaki stood watch on, his aspect always stern and expressionless, never revealing his emotion or inner thoughts. That he had shown such anger and frustration here was evidence that he was most upset with these events, and Yamamoto knew there would certainly be repercussions.

"Sir, we know of your own views concerning this war, and our prospects for victory. America has been struck a heavy blow, and they will rise now with great rage to prosecute this war. You yourself know this, and even though our present navy is now second to no other fleet in this world, that will not always be the case. The industrial might of the United States, and the vast resources they have at their disposal, will soon make any real victory in this war impossible for Japan. If we do fight on, it will be to our utter destruction and shame. This is what we now hope to avoid, for like Admiral Ugaki's diary, we know the entire history of this war, every battle, every decision and its outcome, every mistake and failure, every brilliant thrust. It is all history, and a fate that we sincerely hope we can avoid now. This is why, after finding ourselves here, we come to you so boldly, speaking like drunken fools, yet with the hope that you will still hear us and realize the potential we have before us. With this ship, you can re-write that history in a way that might save our nation."

"You have intimated twice now that the outcome of this war leads to our destruction," said Yamamoto. "It is as if it is all finished and resolved. Humoring you for the moment, tell us what you claim to know."

"Everything sir, at least as it once happened. We know that you hold to the notion of *kensho*, the daring and artful blow that can knock down your enemy with one strike. It was this thinking that led you to believe the attack on Pearl Harbor would smash the American Fleet before it could intervene in

any effective way to oppose the Strike South plan. In this you were correct, and you will now please forgive me if I claim to be putting thoughts into your head, but we came to understand that your desire for this one great and final blow will now lead you to plan an operation, in just a few months, that will seek a decisive battle with what remains of the American fleet. In that battle, Japan will suffer a catastrophic defeat.”

“I see...” said Yamamoto. “And just where will I fight this battle?”

“Sir, in the history we know, it was fought over Midway, Operation MI. You will send the *Kido Butai* east again, hoping to find and destroy the American carriers, but in that battle we lose the cream of our fleet carriers, *Hiryu*, *Soryu*, *Kaga* and *Akagi*. Yet you tell me *Hiryu* is already sunk, so as I have said, the history we know is already different.”

Yamamoto inclined his head, seeing Ugaki take yet another sip of saké, but saying nothing about it. “And after this battle?”

Harada now looked to his First Officer, who had prepared for this possible meeting by reviewing the history. “A long defensive grind,” said Fukada. “Our ability to conduct offensive operations is severely limited. The Americans, however, quickly replace any losses. In fact, at this moment they have twelve more fleet carriers building in their shipyards, and they will just be the leading edge of the storm that will soon come for us. They will deploy twenty-six in what will be called their new *Essex* class fleet carrier series, nine more in their smaller *Independence* class light carriers series, and these will all be added to the ships they presently have. Beyond this, they will build more battleships, cruisers, and destroyers and submarines in droves. They will use this force to put thousands of naval aircraft into the skies over this ocean, and they will eventually destroy the Japanese navy as an effective fighting force. We will see them take back one island outpost after another, bypassing those they do not deem suitable for their real war winning strategy.”

“And what is that?”

“Strategic bombing, sir. The Americans will develop a new long range bomber, the B-29. Once they take back the Marianas, they will develop a cowardly strategy of unrestricted bombing of Japanese cities—fire bombing. Tokyo will be literally burned to the ground, along with many other cities, and then late in the war, they will develop a terrible new weapon that will enable them to incinerate an entire city with only one single bomber. That

may sound as unbelievable as everything else we have said, but I can show you documents from our library concerning this, photographs of the actual bombing taken by American planes, and images of what happened on the ground when this weapon was used against us.”

“In effect,” said Harada, “our nation was devastated, humbled, and forced to surrender to avoid the certainty of complete destruction. After that, Japan itself was occupied by the United States military, presided over by a military governor—one General Douglas MacArthur.”

“A new constitution was imposed on us,” said Fukada. “We were forbidden to design or deploy military forces possessing offensive weapons, which is one reason why this ship, *Takami*, has fleet defense as its primary role.”

“Eventually the Americans become our friends and allies,” said Harada, “opposing other enemies that arise in our time.”

“What enemies?” asked Yamamoto.

“China, and its ally Russia.”

“China?”

“Yes sir, the war there is already a quagmire for the Japanese army, where most of our ground forces are deployed. And it was very bitter, with atrocities that the Chinese will never quite really forget or forgive. In our day, China’s military is very formidable, and they are the new Rising Sun in the Pacific, with a navy that is much bigger than Japan’s. This ship was built to try and address that balance, and as war seemed imminent, we were on heightened alert. Yet now we find ourselves in the midst of a war we could never have imagined ourselves fighting. Now we find ourselves at war with history itself. If my supposition is correct, and the Russian ship plaguing you in the north appeared here as our ship did, then someone else is at war with the history here as well—Vladimir Karpov, a man from our time, and not of this world. He has already put *Hiryu* at the bottom of the sea, and if not stopped, what else might he change?”

Yamamoto nodded his head. “What then do you propose?”

Harada hesitated briefly, looking over at Fukada, then spoke. “Make peace, sir. End the war now while Japan is at the apex of its imperial expansion. Find a way to come to terms with the United States.”

“Then you came here seeking this meeting, with this ship and its wonder weapons, in the hope of persuading me to negotiate terms with the United

States?”

“Yes sir, you are the only one with the prestige and authority who might do so, or so we believed, knowing the history. In a letter to Ryoichi Sasakawa, the financier and business man with whom you are acquainted, you yourself wrote that: ‘To make victory certain, we would have to march into Washington and dictate the terms of peace in the White House.’ Well sir, I do not think we can ever march to Washington, but we might be invited there by the Americans, and, if we do not attempt to dictate terms, but generously negotiate in good faith, we might have peace instead of the destruction of our homeland.”

“And do you think the Americans will seriously consider such a proposal?”

“Perhaps not, but if such a course were pursued as fervently as we now plan our war, there might be at least the hope of holding on to the victories we have already won, and yet obtaining peace instead of destruction.”

“Not likely,” said Ugaki now, finishing his third small toasting glass of saké. “Realizing this is all nothing more than a fool’s discourse, I will nonetheless join in, the saké tempering my anger, which is fortunate for the two of you at the moment. I do not believe the Americans will ever permit us to retain the territories we have already occupied, nor will the British. They will demand the return of Hong Kong and Malaya, and also demand that we withdraw our troops from Burma, Indonesia, and every other place we have taken in this brilliant offensive. As for the Americans, this General MacArthur you spoke of as our future military governor would never permit us to retain the Philippines, and they will want back Guam, Wake Island, and all the rest. You claim to have read my mind, Captain. Yet now I say the same thing to you that I said to Hara, it is too late. The water is already under the bridge, as the Americans might say. We could never relinquish these conquered territories without lasting shame, and so now if we must fight the Americans to retain our honor, so be it.”

“MacArthur will not be a problem,” said Fukada darkly. “We can see to that.”

“What are you saying?” asked Yamamoto.

“The history we know records that he will attempt to escape from the Philippines. He will come here, to this very island of Mindanao, and in a matter of a few days time. The Americans will send B-17 bombers to the one

airfield they still retain here, Del Monte on the north coast. If you act quickly, occupy that field and interdict the sea lanes leading to it, MacArthur can be eliminated before he ever gets a chance to become our lord and master. And with *Takami* at our disposal, we can make certain he is either killed or made our prisoner.”

Now even Harada looked at his First Officer with surprise evident on his face. “Lieutenant Commander,” he said quietly. “We have not discussed this.”

“No sir,” said Fukada, “we have not. I only discovered it in my research a few hours ago after we engaged those B-17s. But now, knowing what I have just said, we cannot allow this opportunity to escape us. Can we? If we do so, then we would be the fools these Admirals already take us to be. Let us show them otherwise.”

Chapter 30

“It seems this man has no qualms about pursuing our war aims,” said Yamamoto to his Chief of Staff. “The Captain talks of peace, but his subordinate wants to eliminate our foes before they can rise to oppose us. How to solve this riddle? What should I do here, with these men and their ship?”

“Arrest them both,” said Ugaki. “Seize this ship with Naval Marines while we have them under *Yamato*’s guns, and conduct a thorough investigation. I assure you, we will get to the bottom of all this after that.”

“That would be a most unwise course,” said Harada.

“Agreed,” Fukada echoed, once again in harmony with his senior officer, at least on this point. “As we have demonstrated, this ship is valuable. I would venture to say that with *Takami* added to your existing fleet, we can seek and fight that decisive battle with our enemies that will assure a final victory. My Captain believes in the hope of a negotiated peace, but I must agree with Admiral Ugaki. It is already too late to expect our enemies will agree to a negotiated settlement favoring Japan. But after one more great victory, we might *dictate* terms, and not by marching to Washington. If we eliminate the remaining American naval power, then we can force them out of their principal base in Hawaii; force them to retreat all the way to their west coast. After that, we can see that no shipyard along that coast ever builds a single warship. Rest assured.”

“Lieutenant Commander—”

“You said we could speak our minds, Captain. This is mine. This is what I believe we must now do. We can eliminate MacArthur, destroy the American fleet, interdict their west coast ports, and force them to terms. We could even destroy the Panama Canal, and force them to sail all the way around Drake’s Passage at the southern end of South America if they want to send ships here from the Atlantic.”

Ugaki smiled. “I begin to like this man,” he said as he took another sip of saké. “Perhaps I will not kill him after all.”

“For that I would be most grateful,” said Fukada. “As for this Russian ship up north, you claim it is using missile technology. *Takami* has recorded

data on all the weapons the Russians might be using. We can confirm our suspicion about this ship once and for all. Let us join any force you now contemplate sending north, and even the odds.”

“Lieutenant!” Now Harada allowed himself a flash of anger, and he deliberately left off the rest of Fukada’s title with that exclamation. “Our agreement here was to see if we could persuade these men to seek peace terms to end this war, not to begin planning out campaigns so we could continue it.”

“I understand that was *your* intention sir, and I agreed to come along as it was necessary for me to do so in order to present my own thoughts on the matter. As I have said, I disagree with the idea that we can now seek terms with the United States. I said as much earlier when the issue first came up. Yet I do agree that we can force the Americans to negotiate, and we can then dictate terms to our liking.”

“Interesting,” said Ugaki. “Now the two of them disagree. I must say, this is a masterful performance if these two came here to deceive us. But even if they have brought us this impossible story, they have also brought us this ship. They are all wearing uniforms. They fly our naval ensign. They claim to be officers in the service of our nation. If that is so, then they must first concede something here and now, and bow to our wishes in this matter. We will decide what happens here, so their opinion, and their disagreement, means nothing.”

“Just a moment,” said Harada. “Do not be so quick to relieve me of command here. I am Captain of this ship, and nothing will happen with it that I do not endorse.”

“More effrontery,” said Ugaki. “Well, Captain, even if your rank insignia is somewhat strange to me, you should well know that Admirals give orders in this war. Captains merely carry them out. We have extended you wide latitude here, much more than I would have ever permitted. Admiral Yamamoto has been more than gracious in sitting here through all this nonsense. Your story was as good as the saké you serve up, and it goes to my head the same way. What do you say, Admiral? What should be done with these men and their ship?”

Yamamoto looked at his Chief of Staff, a man he had not yet warmed to, and one he never requested in this post. Ugaki was an old school officer, with the mentality of a samurai. He looked fondly over his shoulder to the days of

past glory, and in some ways he believed that an honorable death in this war was now his only option, and was willing to take the nation with him to the same oblivion he sometimes sought out with too much saké.

Yet Yamamoto had spent time in the United States. He was well aware of its industrial capacity, which is why he openly stated that while he thought he might achieve swift victories at the outset, he had no confidence that the final outcome of the war would favor Japan. So very much had been said here by these men that was most troubling.

That business concerning Ugaki's diary was very interesting, he thought. I wonder.... He looked the men over, seeing them both looking to him now as the final arbiter of this little disagreement. In fact, they came to him for that very reason, both in league at the outset, now one an angel, the other a devil, perched on his shoulders and each one whispering advice. What to do here with this most unusual situation? He decided.

"Captain Harada," he said quietly. "Thank you for your demonstration, and this dinner. I would like it if you would now show me to this library you say you have aboard your ship. I would like to see some of the material you say you have there."

Harada had not expected that, and certainly Admiral Ugaki did not think that Yamamoto would give the story these men spun out even that much credence. Then again, perhaps he was now simply asking them to make good on their boastful pronouncements, so he said nothing in protest.

"I would be happy to escort you to the ship's library sir," said Harada.

"Good. Admiral Ugaki. Would you be so kind as to wait here with the Lieutenant Commander? If this kabuki theater has a script, I will now read it. If not, I will return shortly and give you all my decision."

* * *

When the Captain left with Yamamoto, Fukada decided to sit and drink with Admiral Ugaki. "I hope you will forgive what you now say were wasteful words shared here with you tonight," he said. "Perhaps I will never convince you otherwise, but we mean no disrespect, and we seek the best interests of our nation. Unfortunately, I believe the Captain and I will have different views, as you have seen, on how to best pursue those interests.

"You have a samurai's soul," said Ugaki, feeling his liquor just a bit more

now. “Well, you are sitting in front of one now. My family has a long history, and I have striven to live up to it. The lower ranks call me the man with the golden mask, because I am firm and unyielding, and my face is set and determined. Yet when your Captain spoke of my diary, I did not know what to think. I did name it as he said, *Senso Roku*, the Seaweed of War, and if you are truly a naval officer, and not *Kempeitai*, then you know well the anthem we often sing about corpses in the water.”

Fukada nodded, then spoke quietly.

*“Across the sea, corpses in the water;
Across the mountain, corpses in the field.
I shall die only for the Emperor,
I shall never look back.”*

“Exactly!” said Ugaki, raising his saké glass to Fukada’s with a clink. “My... A few moments ago I was contemplating cutting off your head. Now here I sit commiserating with you and sharing saké!”

“I am glad for that,” said Fukada. “for I wear the same mask as you do, Admiral. You have heard my opinion as to what I believe we should do. Even if you do not believe what we have told you, you must certainly believe what we have *shown* you. Actions speak louder than words. You once asked me to write my death poem when I told you I was prepared to take my life to further the aims we now pursue. Here it is...”

*Had I not known that I was dead already
I would have feared your sword when it flashed to take my life.
Yet we are nothing more than cherry blossoms
Falling on the wind...”*

“Ah,” said Ugaki. “I like that. ‘Let us meet again at Yasukuni, blooming on the same treetop!’” Now Ugaki was quoting another famous Japanese song that was played near the shrine of Yasukuni during the Grand Festival, which commemorated the fallen soldiers that gave their lives in defense of the nation, and dated to the reign of the Emperor Meiji. The souls of all the fallen were said to be enshrined there, like cherry blossoms on the wind.

“I know the place,” said Fukada. “While it also enshrines the hope of

peace, I am a realist. I know that it will take many more cherry blossoms falling on the wind to realize our aims in this war. Our Captain was bold enough to say that you would be one of them, and I must now tell you that yours was a most honorable death. Yes, it would be my honor to fall with you, and bloom again with you on the same tree.”

Ugaki had once been called the last samurai for the way he chose to end his life, personally flying the final kamikaze mission of the war after the Emperor ordered Japan to surrender. Fukada knew this, and he could also see that the saké Ugaki was known to have often enjoyed had tempered the sharp edge of his sword. He was quietly using this knowledge to curry favor here with this influential man, hoping he could convince him that they were of the same ilk and mind, two cherry blossoms on the same wind, and destined to bloom again on the same tree.

“Do you honestly still hold to that silly tale you spun out here?”

“What does it matter?” said Fukada. “*Takami* is real, that much I know without question.” He tapped his foot on the hard deck beneath them. “The missiles under our forward deck are real, and you have seen what we can do with them. You may find our behavior here unpardonable, but I beg you, before you take our heads, let us use them for a while so we can fight for Japan! With this ship, we can do exactly what I claimed a moment ago. We can certainly find the American carriers with our advanced radars, and then our planes can strike and destroy them, and without fear of reprisal. *Takami* can destroy any American counterstrike aimed at our fleet. Victory will be assured. Then, once we have sunk the last of their fleet carriers, we will reign supreme in the Pacific, just as I described.”

“They may be very cagey,” said Ugaki.

“Yes, but if we strike at a place that is vital to them, they will have to respond. This, I believe, is in Admiral Yamamoto’s mind. We also have the element of surprise, because they will not expect that we have such technology.”

“But they saw those rockets take down two of their bombers.”

“That was regrettable,” said Fukada. “It was why I spoke up and advised the Captain to destroy the remaining bombers. It was also unwise for us to boldly shoot down that target drone right here over the bay, but at that time we had no other option. We had to shock you with our capabilities to at least gain this audience.”

“But with such a strange story? Come now, how was this ship really built? Who was behind it?”

“Mitsubishi industries,” said Fukada with a wink. He was telling the truth, but making it seem that the company of this day was responsible.

“Then what was this business about MacArthur escaping from the Philippines? Don’t tell me you are reading tea leaves and foretelling the future. I did not ask to visit your library, because I am quite satisfied to live in this world as it is.”

“As am I,” said Fukada, with a strange inner feeling. He was not a married man, and had dedicated most of his young adult life to the service, coming up through the ranks to his present post, and hoping for a captaincy soon, his own ship. Now, however, he was dreaming of something more.

“Mark my words,” he said with a hush, as if confiding secret present day intelligence to Ugaki, and not now making fanciful boasts. “MacArthur will attempt to escape from Homma’s trap in the Philippines. He has plans to do exactly what I have said, and that was another reason I wanted to shoot down those remaining three contacts. They were most likely B-17s, yet I spoke with our Lieutenant Hideo Honjo, who conducted that engagement in the command center we showed you. He tells me those last three contacts diverted their course *before* we fired on the others, so they already had some pre-arranged plan. Our radar’s tracked them bearing north along the coast of Mindanao, before turning west again. They can have no other destination in mind but Del Monte airfield. I urge you to take it, and then let us see if this MacArthur will enjoy the accommodations we provide for him in an interrogation room before he presumes to become the Military Governor of Japan.”

He smiled, and got the same reaction from Ugaki, his golden mask melted away by the free flowing saké. It was the only time Ugaki ever allowed himself to drop his carefully guarded persona, the austere aspect he projected now softening considerably.

“What was all that nonsense about losing our own fleet carriers?”

“That was what the Captain fears if we are not careful. Of course, you and I know that may not happen at all, particularly not with *Takami* sailing with the *Kido Butai*! But tell me, Admiral, what was it that happened up north with *Mutsu* and *Chikuma*?”

“Both ships struck by naval rockets,” said Ugaki. “Just as Admiral

Yamamoto said. *Mutsu* was old, and ready for the scrap yards. In fact, we have been entertaining plans to convert that ship to a hybrid battlecarrier. There is no point in trying to salvage it as a battleship. If any guns remain functional, we should move them to the forward turrets, and then sweep away all the damaged superstructure and throw up an armored flight deck.”

“And *Hiryu* was also sunk the same way, by naval rockets?”

“We had some idea where the enemy was,” said Ugaki, his loose lips freely disclosing this otherwise classified information now. “Nagumo was preparing to launch, and when *Hiryu* was struck, the resulting secondary explosions and fire simply gutted the ship.”

“*Takami* can prevent that from happening again,” said Fukada. “Our missiles are good enough to even stop other naval rockets.”

“Oh? Our gunners certainly could not stop them. Nagumo thought they were piloted. They bore in on the targets unfailingly, but were simply too fast for our flak guns.”

“We can stop them,” said Fukada. “That is unless the Captain loses his nerve with all this talk of peace negotiations.” There, he stuck his pin in this voodoo doll, knowing that Harada could be the one major obstacle to what he was proposing to Ugaki now. “Tell me, what did this man Karpov demand before the outbreak of the war?”

“Oh, nothing much,” said Ugaki with just an edge of sarcasm. “All he wanted was Urajio back, and all of our Siberian provinces with it, including Karafuto.”

“Karafuto? You mean Sakhalin Island?”

“Yes, what else?”

“And what was that first place you mentioned?”

“Urajio, the old Russian port at Vladivostok. Can you imagine the impudence of that man? We have held that territory since 1908!”

Fukada resisted the urge to say anything more here, but he was truly surprised to hear this, a confirmation of his own hunch on the matter. Clearly the history was already skewed, but he could not imagine how that could have happened, unless it was all the doings of that Russian ship. Yes, that had to be the answer. He had attributed the other oddities they had uncovered in the radio news broadcasts to the presence of Karpov here, things that may have been changed by his deliberate intervention. Yet 1908 was a long time ago, and what was Ugaki saying to him now? He probed a bit further.

“So they want Urajio back?”

“That and all of Amur province with it, and all the other territories we took from them long ago. Well let me say that it will take more than this back stabbing attack on Kazantochi. He has done one thing with his brash declaration of war. He’s finally got our attention. Thus far, the setback on Kazantochi is not generally known outside top military circles, but now the Army has been ordered to plan an operation in the north. Tojo has even sent our Tiger of Malaya up there to coordinate everything.”

“Tiger? Ah, you mean General Yamashita?”

“Who else? He will get three or four divisions together from the Kwantung Army and put the Siberian incident to rest. Of that I have no doubt, but this Russian ship, Siberian ship, who knows what it may be. That is our concern. Can this ship of yours really shoot down those naval rockets, or was that another wild story?”

“No sir, it was the truth. We can track them as they fire, and then shoot them down. That is exactly what *Takami* was designed for—fleet defense.”

“Well, Lieutenant Commander, you may soon get your chance to prove this claim, that is, if Yamamoto doesn’t lose his nerve first.” He gave Fukada a conspiratorial wink, then shook his head. “After a few glasses of saké, you are much more tolerable, and a man begins to believe anything he chooses. Very well, I will not cut your head off today, but mind your manners tomorrow when I awake with the headache that will surely follow from my indulgence this night.”

Part XI

Supercharge

“You can be sure of succeeding in your attacks if you only attack places which are undefended. You can ensure the safety of your defense if you only hold positions that cannot be attacked, therefore, knowing where and when to attack, and where to defend, is essential.”

— Sun Tsu

Chapter 31

Admiral Ugaki and Lieutenant Commander Fukada had come to an understanding, though it was one that was going to pose a problem for Yamamoto in the weeks and months ahead. Their rambling conversation had turned to the future course of the war, and the millstone that the invasion of China had placed around the necks of Japanese leaders.

“If I told you China would one day rise to be one of the world’s great powers, what would you think?” said Fukada.

“China? There are 500 million of them over there, and we have only 70 million, yet we ride the Dragon’s back, and tame it well. They have no real military capacity, but they come in their millions to pose a challenge. The Army has been bogged down in that war, and that will likely remain the case. The Chinese cannot defeat us, but real victory has also eluded us there.”

“And the Siberians?”

“A mere nuisance. Yamashita will deal with them. If your ship can find this *Mizuchi* we face at sea up north, then we will settle that issue as well.”

“Well we must be very diligent with the Chinese. They could pose a real problem in the years ahead.”

“Yamamoto fears the Americans more,” said Ugaki.

“As well he should. This is only the beginning of the war. The Americans have tremendous industry. They will out build us, even as I spoke earlier.”

“Nonsense,” said Ugaki. “And what was that garbage you told Yamamoto about the loss of all our carriers?”

“Anything could happen,” said Fukada, hedging his bet. “Yet it is now incumbent upon us to make certain no such disaster ever takes place. What are your thoughts concerning our best bet for renewed offensive operations, if I may humbly ask?”

“We always planned to fight a short war, swift, and even brutal if need be. Yamamoto hoped to eliminate the threat from the Americans at Pearl Harbor, but it is regrettable that there were no carriers at the harbor when Fuchida led the attack in that morning. They were lying in wait for us, and we managed to sink one. Now we must find and sink all the others.”

“You sunk one?”

“The *Lexington*. Where have you been? On the one hand you make pronouncements as if you were privy to intelligence that only the *Kempeitai* might ferret out. On the other hand you seem surprised to hear of things that even rank and file crewmen might know.”

“Due to the secrecy surrounding this ship,” said Fukada, thinking quickly, “we were kept very isolated. Yes, much news of the war in recent weeks has not come to us.”

“Well you will learn soon enough. The offensive has gone very well, and we are poised to take Sumatra, Java, and the barrier islands. That will be the outer wall of our defensive line, and we will make it impregnable to enemy counterattack. Yet the best defense remains a good offense. Yamamoto is of a mind that we must still seek out the American fleet and destroy what remains of it in one great decisive battle. Yet you have the audacity to tell him this will end in our defeat. Believe me, he was very forgiving of your impudence earlier.”

“I meant no disrespect. I only said as much so that we could steel ourselves to avoid any possible mistake, and achieve the victory I know we can now have easily enough. *Takami* can make us invincible. And yes, we must destroy the American fleet, just as I spoke earlier. We must push them all the way back to their west coast, and keep them there.”

“And this terror weapon you blather about? What if they attack us with that?”

“They do not have the weapon now,” said Fukada. “And we must take steps to make certain they never obtain it.”

How he thought they could do that, Fukada did not say, or even really know himself at that moment. One thing was clear, however. His mind was firmly set on how Japan could prevail in this war, and talk of peace was the farthest thing imaginable as the wheels of his thinking slowly ground on through the saké.

“I must tell you one thing that I hope you will take very seriously, Admiral Ugaki. It is a matter of grave importance, no matter what plans might be devised for the future course of the war. The Americans have broken our naval code system.”

“What? How can you know this?”

“It is what I believe. How else could they have cleverly moved all their carriers out of Pearl Harbor just days before our planned attack?”

“I have had my suspicions concerning that.”

“Well founded suspicions this time, Admiral. They have broken our code, and we must make every effort to change it at once.”

* * *

“**This** is the ship’s Library, sir,” said Captain Harada.

Yamamoto looked around, somewhat confused. “But where are the books? I see nothing here but these tables and chairs, and those strange flattened typewriters. And what are those dark panels?”

“Information screens. This is what we call a virtual library. Those keyboards can be used exactly like a typewriter. You can use them to search our library data files, which are most extensive, especially concerning the Pacific War. Simply type what you wish to look for. You may also sit down before any of those panels and speak your request. Here, let me show you.”

Harada sat down, and then began speaking. “Shattered Sword, Midway.” Immediately a reference came up to a book by that title, *Shattered Sword: The Untold Story of the Battle of Midway*, by Jonathan Parshall.

“This man has done an extensive analysis of a battle you have yet to fight, the decisive engagement my First Officer was commenting on earlier, the Battle of Midway. It was there that we lost all four fleet carriers assigned to the *Kido Butai*, and over 300 planes with our best pilots, effectively ending our ability to cover offensive operations with naval air power. You are a great proponent of the naval air arm, and so you must realize how much this hobbled us and forced us on to the defensive. That was the great turning point in the war here, at least as we know the history. After Midway, the Americans took the offensive, and never relinquished it until they finally leapt from one island to the next, ending at Okinawa and planning the actual invasion of our home islands. It was then that the war ended, in August of 1945, with the terrible bombing of two of our cities, Hiroshima and Nagasaki, each destroyed by the weapon Lieutenant Commander Fukada spoke of earlier. Here, let me show you campaign maps and photography.”

For the next hour, Yamamoto sat mesmerized before what he had first called a flattened typewriter and strange black panel, which suddenly bloomed in full color maps overlaid with thrusting arrows showing the inevitable Advance of the United States Navy and their Allies. Then he was

stunned to see the images presented, of the ships, planes and men he knew so very well. The images would haunt him for the remainder of his life, particularly those of his carriers burning, the sinking of *Yamato* and *Musashi*, the terrible bombing of Japan, and the massive mushroom cloud over Hiroshima, the utter devastation after that bombing, and the terrible aftereffects.

He closed his eyes, thinking. Everything he had feared was depicted in these images and maps, written up in these documents with such astounding detail, as if it had already happened. How was this possible? Who could have concocted all this material, built this ship, crewed it with these men, and sent it to me like this? It makes absolutely no sense... Unless... *their story is true.*

After leaving the Admiral quietly at his workstation, Captain Harada finally returned and waited respectfully at his side. "Have you seen enough, or would you care to see more?"

Yamamoto turned to him, with an almost leaden slowness. The renowned leader was not a big man, only five feet three inches tall, and now he seemed smaller yet, as if weighed down by all he had seen, carrying it on his shoulders like a shroud in black and white. He rubbed his brow. Feeling the same dark mood that had fallen on him just after the successful, yet abortive attack on Pearl Harbor. They were going to lose this war, he knew. It was only a matter of time. *Hiryu* was already gone, *Akagi* and *Kaga* in the dry docks for upgrades. *Mutsu* had been pummeled by a ship they had never even seen, *Mizuchi*, the demon of the sea. Something warned him that if he ordered a major operation up north to secure that flank of the Empire again, that unseen demon would wreak havoc, and exact a terrible cost.

Could it also be a ship from the future, as Harada suggests? If so, what chance have we against its terrible weapons? Even as he thought that, he realized the answer to his fears was right beneath his feet. The Java operation had been rudely upset by the rage of nature, and then this strange ship and crew appeared, and with the most preposterous and outrageous story he had ever heard, but with a ship that dazzled him with its incredible capabilities, equipment and weapons.

"Admiral," said Harada, "I urge you to find a way to seek terms with the Americans—now, while we still have the navy mostly intact. Even if that means we must concede certain territories we have already taken, would not peace under those conditions be infinitely more preferable than the war you

were just looking at, especially considering the outcome. Seek terms, sir. Get the best deal you can for Japan while we still hold the advantage.”

“Your incredible story aside,” said Yamamoto, “what you say makes a good deal of sense. But realize that such decisions may not be entirely up to me. Tojo commands the Army, and I do not expect that he will wish to relinquish any of the territories this offensive has seized, or even consider what you are suggesting.”

“What about the Emperor, sir. You could go to Emperor Hirohito and make a direct appeal. If he could be persuaded, Tojo might be forced to comply with his wishes.”

“Perhaps...” The image of a child burned in the searing fires of Hiroshima was the last he had seen, and it lingered on the screen, haunting him. He stood up slowly, looked around the room, seeing nothing on this ship that in any way looked like the other ships in the fleet he commanded. It did, indeed, appear as though it had been built in another world.

“I have asked you to accept an impossible story,” said Harada. “I have tried your patience, or perhaps even courted death in what I came here to do. Yet in those images you have just clearly seen my motive. I urge you to strongly consider what we have proposed.”

“I will do this,” said Yamamoto, “but it seems your First Officer has other ideas.”

“I will deal with him privately, sir. That is my concern.”

“Very well... Captain Harada, I hope you realize the difficulties in what you ask. Suppose I do manage to convince the Emperor of the folly in continuing this war. Suppose he orders Tojo to find a way to negotiate terms? Then we have others to convince, the British, The Siberians, the Americans. They will demand we give back every territory they once possessed, and then Japan will be returned to the state it was in before the war. We struck south for a reason, to secure the oil and resources our Empire needs to survive. The American embargo had much to do with our decision to strike them at Pearl Harbor, even if it does seem misguided in light of the things I have seen here.”

“That is what we must negotiate, a lifting of that embargo to allow Japan free access to those resources. Yet instead of seizing them by force, we will purchase them from the Dutch.”

“That may sound reasonable, but realize that many men have died in this

war. The Army, and our own SNLF Naval troops have taken a very hard line, particularly in China.”

“That is another problem. China fights Japan now, and our presence there comes to no good. It sews the seeds of enmity for decades, even to my time. China will be torn by a terrible civil war after we leave, and the government that arises will be very austere and oppressive at the outset. Then, ironically, China becomes a major world power, with a massive economy and industrial capacity even exceeding that of the United States. Their navy has nearly 700 ships by 2021, while we have barely 150. Their vast population sees over 600 million men fit for active service, and another 20 million men reaching military age every year. No nation on earth could ever invade or occupy China again, and in my time, they are the ones seeking to use that navy to expand their grasp of vital natural resources.”

“It never ends,” said Yamamoto sadly.

“Unfortunately, the war we were facing in my time was far more serious. The terrible weapons that ended this war will threaten to destroy the entire world, civilization itself. If that could be prevented somehow... If a way could be found to make amends with China.”

Yamamoto smiled, then his face seemed lifeless and forlorn. “Does your library record an incident at the city of Nanking?”

“It does.”

“Then you know what the army did there.... I think it will be very difficult for the Chinese to forgive or forget. Captain, should I attempt to do what you ask, and fail to secure the cooperation necessary to achieve peace, then what? We will be forced to walk the road we have already chosen. Will your ship and crew fight for Japan, or for the enemy that became your friend and ally?”

“Sir, we were in the process of trying to answer that question among ourselves. This mission, to try and reach you with this proposal, was the first option put forward.”

“I see... And what other options did you consider?”

“Burning this ship, and marooning ourselves on some isolated place. That was one possible choice that entered my mind, yet my First Officer argued strongly that we had the ability to affect the outcome of this war—not only with *Takami*, but with the knowledge we possessed in this library. Coming here like this was a risky thing to do. Your Chief of Staff had his hand on the

hilt of his sword all too often when we told you who we really were. Then we learned of this Russian ship, and when I realized what this vessel might be, and who its Captain might be, I felt very conflicted. The Russians, you see, were our enemies in my time as well. You say there was already an engagement fought with this Russian ship, and you have seen the results. Be very careful, Admiral, very cautious. If that ship is the battlecruiser *Kirov*, it is extremely dangerous, with an array of ship killing missiles that you could not oppose. Do not send another task force north to confront this ship. Your losses will be very heavy, and I doubt you will ever see the enemy that inflicts this harm.”

“What about this ship, *Takami*? Your First Officer suggested we should fight together to vanquish this foe. Would you be willing to do this if so ordered? For that matter, are you willing to concede authority over the deployment of this ship to me, as Admiral of the Combined Fleet, or do you anticipate attempting to operate independently?”

Now Harada shrugged. He had not yet thought all this through, but he knew he had to give Yamamoto something here in exchange for all he was asking of this man.

“It was our faith in you that led me to choose this option and take the risk in coming here like this. Revealing the information I have just shown you was also a very great risk. Telling you I know the hour and day of your death was a daring thing to do, and I beg your pardon if I have offended you. Yet decisions are for both Captains and Admirals to make, in spite of Ugaki’s opinion, so I will make one here and now. Sir, I would be honored to serve under your command.”

Yamamoto nodded. “Then this day, we sail for Japan—Yokohama. I will request an audience with the Emperor, though I do not think it would be wise to reveal the things you have told me here, or even reveal the existence of this ship. When it comes to Tojo, I may have to take a different approach,”

“I understand, sir.”

“Very well, let us go and see if Admiral Ugaki has taken your First Officer’s head. These events have certainly taken mine, and I must find another if I am to command this fleet from this day forward. This war has only just begun....”

Chapter 32

For Britain, the war was already very old, a weary struggle that had seemed to have no prospect for real victory. The coming of *Kirov* had been the first ray of hope, and these strange interlopers from another time had come like King Arthur's Knights returning in time of greatest need. Churchill was delighted and relieved, seeing the arrival of Kinlan in the desert in just that same light. Now he was preoccupied with the shifting of forces precipitated by the withdrawal of the 6th and 7th Australian Divisions to the Pacific. To replace these troops, it had been necessary to call on the services of the South Africans, and they sent two divisions. To these they added the 70th Infantry division, and then began to make arrangements to send another first line unit, the 50th Northumbrian, from the UK. These troops, and the 4th and 5th Indian Divisions, were enough to hold the line in North Africa.

One Brigade of the 2nd New Zealand Division had already been sent to Singapore, and there were rumblings that the other two would soon have to go along with them. Yet Churchill was chafing to get the war moving in the other direction. It was one thing to make a brave stand, as Montgomery had done at Tobruk and Singapore. What he wanted now was some kind of an offensive that could put the enemy on notice and also convince the Americans that Great Britain was going to be a force worth supporting to the very end. Before these able troops from New Zealand were also withdrawn, he therefore began pressuring Wavell to plan yet another major offensive aimed at liberating all of Libya, and finally defeating Erwin Rommel.

"Rommel is weakened by withdrawals to support this German attack into the Canary Islands. We shall have to hold on there as best we can, for the Americans will soon be at our back with strong support. In the meantime, now is the hour to strike at Rommel, and roll him back to Tripoli! If this means that we must employ the whole of our special brigade, then by all means do so. That we should have such an asset in hand, and fail to use it, would be a great error. It has served us well as a steady shield, but now let it become a flaming sword, and the bane of Hitler's aspirations in North Africa once and for all."

That letter to Wavell precipitated a major planning session in Alexandria, with General O'Connor, Wavell, and Brigadier Kinlan. It was clear to them all that they could not languish on defense through the long year. Churchill's urgings would become an operational necessity, and with each day that

passed, the importance of that effort would be strengthened.

“The Yanks are in it now,” said Wavell. “I’m to meet with General Eisenhower next month to plan how joint operations can be arranged for this theater. If we’re ever to win this thing we’ll have to join hands with the Americans and start the long road back. The defeat of French forces in Northwest Africa is already being planned, and that will mean we’ll have to also take a crack at Franco and kick the Germans off the Rock. For our part here, the Yanks can send us material support, tanks and planes, but we’ll have to show Rommel the door.”

“My men are ready,” said Kinlan. “We’ve been languishing back near the old railhead for months now, and holding your coat, but we can have a decisive impact in a campaign like this. I agree wholeheartedly with Mister Churchill. Now is the time to act.”

“It’s been four months since Crusader,” said O’Connor. “We’ve got in shipments of those American tanks, and better cruisers from the UK. General Kinlan, the leg up you’ve given us concerning tank design has certainly helped. The Germans have also been reinforcing their three Panzer Divisions with new heavy tanks.”

“That’s been your problem,” said Kinlan. “The Germans were only supposed to have had two Panzer Divisions here at this time, the 21st and 15th. That third division, the 10th, was supposed to be in Russia.”

“If we don’t act soon, and destroy Rommel’s armor once and for all,” said O’Connor, “then he’ll use it to check every offensive we tee up. So if we go again, then I’ll want your full support. I realize there is a question of limited ammunition, but if we must spend it, then why not do it here and win through to Tripoli. That would put us in a very good position to coordinate with any operation the Yanks pony up out west. That’s what it will eventually have to come to. We’ll have to push the French out of their African colonies as General Wavell suggests, and then squeeze Rommel from east and west.”

“You have it exactly right,” said Kinlan. “That, in effect, is what happened in the history I know, and we can write that book again, here and now. Perhaps we can do a little better and box Rommel up in Benghazi.”

“That sounds interesting,” said Wavell. “If we do attack, what would be the plan of operations?” his eyes were moving from O’Connor to Kinlan, a weariness on him now that was evident to them both.

“Rommel has been sitting on his Gazala line ever since Crusader,” said

O'Connor. "He's built up Mechili as his major forward supply depot. Any offensive we plan will have to strike up the main coastal road along the Via Balbia. It's what Monty advocated all along. Once we take Tmimi, and push on to Derna, then Rommel will have to give up Mechili. But that will be work for the infantry, supported by whatever is left of the Matildas. As for our main armored force. I propose we muster the whole of 7th Armored here at Bir Hacheim," he pointed to the map. "From there we drive for Tengeder—that's where Rommel has posted the bulk of his panzers. If we take that, then we cut off Mechili from the south, and we can run right down the Trig el-Abd to Agedabia."

"Agreed," said Kinlan. "Only this time my brigade should be the tip of the lance. If you lead, it's likely Rommel will have just enough to stop you, and then, with your force expended, we've nothing to make that run to Agedabia. So I propose that my 7th Brigade should lead. We'll blow right through them—blow them to hell, and then you can run right on through the hole we make and cut the whole Afrika Korps off in Cyrenaica."

"And how might Rommel react?" asked Wavell.

"He's cagey now," said O'Connor. "He hasn't had the strength to attack, and I think it has been his plan to hold his panzers in reserve, and to try and use them against our infantry. I agree with Brigadier Kinlan. If I lead, then we'll just have a repeat of Crusader. We need to supercharge this attack right from the outset. Kinlan's force is our trump card, and now's the time to play it out."

"Once I take Tengeder," said Kinlan, "then Rommel will have no choice other than to take this inside track, retreating from Mechili to Msus, Antelat and onto Agedabia. It will be a race to the gulf of Sirte, and that's one I think we can win. If we do win through, then Rommel has no choice other than to fall back on Benghazi. If we can bottle him up there, all the better. Otherwise we'll have to chase him all the way to Tripoli, and beyond. I can tell you he fell all the way back to Tunis before he was finally cornered and destroyed. On that note, it would be my advice that General Montgomery should be recalled from Java."

"Montgomery?"

"No offense, General O'Connor, but as you'll be on the southern flank with me, we'll need a stogy old warhorse to push up Via Balbia. That's what Monty would advise if he were here. He's stopped the Japanese at Singapore,

and now he'll just sit there on Java. He's another asset that should not be wasted at a time like this."

"I tend to agree," said Wavell. "We did what Churchill demanded. The Rock of the East, that's what he called Singapore. Unfortunately, that rock became nothing more than a millstone around our necks. There were a million hungry mouths to feed in Singapore, and we could only supply them by sea. It was all we could do to fend off Japanese air power long enough to stop them from storming the city, so the prospects for that were very dim. I know it was a very difficult decision for Churchill, but he's finally seen the cold reality of the situation. We were damn lucky to get the 18th Division out, but who could have foreseen this business with Krakatoa? It gave no indication it was about to erupt until the lid came off."

"That put the Japanese in the stew," said O'Connor. "I heard they lost most of their 2nd Division off the Sunda Strait."

"Hell of a way to go," said Wavell. "Yet the fact remains that they retained command of the Java Sea. This means they could land troops anywhere they pleased along that northern coast, and Monty's plan to try and hold Eastern Java was fatally compromised. We've pulled him out, and the 18th Division is being sent to Burma, where it should have gone all along."

"Very strange," said Kinlan. "That was never supposed to happen—that damn volcano."

"Well you were never supposed to happen either, General," said O'Connor, but we're grateful you are here. So does Monty go to Burma with the 18th?"

"No, I've made the request to have him transferred back," said Wavell. "He'll be here by the time we're ready to go, his feathers ruffled a bit, but undoubtedly glad to be out of the wet heat of Java and back in the good old dry heat here."

"Out of the frying pan and into the fire," said Kinlan.

"And most likely keen to get on with the war," said Wavell. "As for Somerville, he's building a fast carrier task force to buck up any land based fighters we can send, but quite frankly, I don't think he contemplates any offensive actions with the Eastern Fleet. We're still completely on the defense in the Pacific. Now that we're giving up Java, we'll have Australia to worry about, and that would be very serious if the Japanese push on to Darwin."

“Have they hit Darwin yet?” asked Kinlan. “The setback at Singapore may have affected their timetable, but it’s on their list, General Wavell.”

“Oh, they’ve hit it once or twice, but there’s been no sign of an impending invasion. That volcano certainly stirred up the pot over there. That said, Australia is a prize we cannot lose. Singapore was just a useless medal we can pin to our chests. The Yanks won’t counterattack along that axis, and we certainly can’t do so this year, if at all. We’ve spit in Tojo’s eye, and given him a good stiff punch in the nose, but now it may be time to bow and make a graceful withdrawal to Australia. Churchill will have the final say on where Monty goes, and I think Brooke is of the same mind as I am on the matter. The Prime Minister has been gnawing on my leg to attack here, and I’m glad you gentlemen believe we can easily get this done. Churchill will want his hero of Singapore to return to Tobruk. That’s the way I’ll paint the picture, and I’m sure he’ll like it even better if we paint Rommel right out, and with a very heavy brush.”

“Good enough,” said O’Connor. “Perhaps there will be room for another hero or two when we push on through to Agedabia.”

“Here, here,” said Wavell. “Now then, we’ll want to mask the presence of Kinlan’s brigade as long as possible. I think that will be work for our Mister Dudley Clarke.”

Clark was a master of deception, and a man with a love of special operations that led him to assist in the founding of the British Commandos who had been fighting so stalwartly on the Canary Islands. He had set up a special command known as “Force A” that was tasked with the planning and execution of deception tactics. It had covered everything with his sleight of hand and magician’s cape, including the creation of a phony new order of battle that was leaked to deceive the enemy as to real British strength.

“I wish I had half the troops he’s dreamt up,” said O’Connor. “That bogus 10th Armored Division would come in handy.”

“We’ll just have to make do with the real divisions we have in hand,” said Wavell. “But Colonel Clarke says he already has the makings of a good plan. First off, there will be false radio traffic under a fabricated code name that we’ll intend the Germans to intercept. We’ve already planted a bad seed or two, taking unfortunate casualties of those recent German *Stuka* strikes and setting them out in the desert with a bag of false information on a wrecked motorbike. We’re relatively sure the Germans took the bait.”

“Good enough,” said Kinlan, but my Challenger IIs will be difficult to hide.”

“That is Dudley Clark’s specialty. He’s proposed holding your units back from the front as always, in what looks to be a reserve position. Then he’ll set up a phony forward position that appears to be a motorized infantry unit. We’ll use real trucks there, quite openly, but the night before the attack your boys will switch places with them, and he’ll work up dummy tanks to leave in your old position so the enemy won’t pick up that move at dawn.”

“Splendid,” said Kinlan.

“He’ll do a lot more—double bluff games with the artillery, a phony water pipeline leading to a bogus assembly area, complete with fake water towers, pump houses, and straw men in attendance. We’ll also have units assigned to simulate the movement of a massed armor formation, on the coast road coming up from Mersa Matruh. They’ll think we mean to heavily reinforce that portion of the attack.”

“All well and good,” said Kinlan. “Gentlemen, when do we kick off this attack?”

“15 March,” said Wavell. “We’re just waiting for 2nd South African to come up from Alexandria, and for Monty. He has a long way to fly.”

“And what might we call this operation?”

Wavell thought for a moment. “I believe General O’Connor had something there a minute ago. Supercharge. That will do quite nicely.”

Chapter 33

Rommel couldn't see it just yet, or even hear it, but he could feel it in his bones. A warrior's senses keened up at the edge of a battle, and strange unconscious things stacked up in his mind, quietly whispering a warning to him while he dealt with the humdrum business of the day. At night, asleep in a tent, set well away from his command vehicle as a precaution against air attack, he thought he could almost sense the faint rumbling of heavy vehicles on the move, the vibrations carried through the sand and shale to find his well schooled ear in the quiet of the desert evening.

Something was afoot. There had been three instances where his daily recon patrols had turned up what looked to be a bounty of new information, which was very rare. They had come by a fallen soldier and his motorbike, right at the edge of a crater in the dry earth, the apparent victim of a bomb or artillery round strike. A nearby brief contained papers and even a map showing what looked like a major plan to strike up the coast at Timimi towards Derna. The name "Montgomery" was boldly written into that sector, which raised an eyebrow, for that General was still thought to be in the Pacific.

Another instance of a slipped radio transmission that went out in the clear seemed to approve petrol and ammunition delivery in a special flying column that was scheduled to be on the road leading up to the front in that sector—a most tempting target for the Luftwaffe. Lastly, there was a good deal of talk in the bars and brothels of Cairo, but the message was too harmonious. That many slips of the tongue could not form such a sweet chorus, he thought, and all these little windfalls also point to the same thing, a big attack on the coast, supported by the Royal Navy. The British were going to try to kick in the front door and storm into Cyrenaica.

He didn't believe a word of it.

Instead he went to find Hauptmann László Almásy, the Hungarian born desert scout leading his long range desert patrol, the Sonderkommando. "Are your men out on the far southern flank as I ordered?"

"Yes, Herr General. The 300th Oasis Battalion is just east of Wadi Thiran watching that road."

“Good, because I believe they are about to have visitors. It may take you all day, but get hold of a good radio and get down there. I think the British are looking to try and turn our flank again. There are three tracks leading west in that area, one through the wadi itself, and two more north of the wadi itself. I think they will use them, and they all lead to one place.”

“The lodgments of our 15th Panzer Division,” said Almásy.

“I see you have already been snooping around. Well, stop there on your way and tell Crüwell I want to see him at this hill, number 535, an hour before sunset, but be sure you tell him personally, not via radio.”

“Of course. Do you think this will be a feint or probe? It is very far south.”

Rommel pursed his lips. “I think you may soon find more of those odd vehicles you first discovered south of Bir el Khamsa. I’m relying on you, Hauptmann. If you do see evidence of those vehicles, then contact me at once. Use the code word *Löwenbräu*, the Lion’s brew. Understand?”

“I will see to it at once.” Almásy saluted stiffly, adjusted his eye goggles, and was on his motorcycle heading south in no time. That afternoon, as Rommel had directed, he was up on hill 535, a high rocky crag that thrust out from the edge of a shallow escarpment. It overlooked a tumble of broken stone and dry wadis, terrain that was mostly impassable for vehicles, and even tortuous work for infantry. Beyond that ground, to the northwest, was the encampment for Ravenstein’s 21st Panzer Division, well behind the front line manned by the 90th Light Division. Crüwell’s 15th held the southern flank, reinforced by troops freshly returned from Russia, the Hermann Goering Division, though only a single brigade had arrived. The last of the three panzer divisions, the 10th under Fischer, was due north of Ravenstein’s positions, astride the Trig el Abd leading to Tobruk.

“There’s a battle coming,” said Rommel. “I can smell it. So we gather here to make certain there is no freelancing this time. The enemy has apparently gone to great lengths to convince me he is going to put his main effort up the coast road in a drive to Derna. They have even gone so far as to recall Montgomery from the Pacific. We learned that from Berlin at noon today. Well, I don’t buy it. Instead I think they will make their main effort well south, possibly even as far south as your positions, General Crüwell.”

“There is nothing down there but empty desert,” said Crüwell. “Believe me, I’ve been standing watch over it for weeks.”

“That desert is about to get very busy,” said Rommel. “ I sent the Hungarian with 300th Oasis Battalion out to have a look. In the meantime, have a look at this map. These three tracks lead right to your lodgment with 15th Panzer Division. I believe they mean to hit us there, and attempt to cut off the entire Afrika Korps.”

That would leave their attacking force dangerously exposed,” said Crüwell. “We could simply move the other two panzer divisions through 90th Light and counterattack. Tit for tat, then they will be the ones cut off.”

“Not if my suspicions are correct.”

“Your suspicions? What was it this time, tea leaves, a twitch in your left eye?”

“Don’t be flippant, Herr General. I have been out here long enough to earn my keep. No. The last time they hit us in the center, and led with their 7th Armored Division. We stopped them.”

“Yes, thanks to my timely counterattack.”

“Which cost us months on the defense while I had to rebuild all three mobile divisions,” said Rommel. “So let me assume our enemy learns from his mishaps, just as I hope you do. If they lead with their older armor as before, we’ll stop them again. This time I think they will do the opposite. They will hit us with the best tanks they have, the same monsters we faced at Bir El Khamsa, and again when your fabled counterattack was nearly smashed south of Tobruk. Thank God I got there in time to get the men out, and the enemy was too unprepared to pursue us. So we have sat on our Gazala line for months, slowly receiving our new tanks from Germany. The Big Cats now flesh out all three of our panzer divisions, and we have the Pz-IVF2 as a good medium tank, and even a few of the new Panthers. That is a rare privilege. Ask anyone back in 2nd Panzer Army about it in Russia and they will wish they had such tanks. But, as good as they are, the enemy has something even better. I think we will see those heavy tanks deployed in force this time.”

“Then what do you intend to do?”

“At the first sign of trouble, Ravenstein will move by this track here, past the old fort and Hill 522. That maneuver covers the rear of our main infantry front, which they will most likely assault with their own infantry divisions.” He looked at Crüwell now. “Your job is to delay. Get your recon and pioneer battalions well forward, and dig in. Keep the armor and Panzergrenadiers

back, and be prepared to move quickly on my orders. And general—follow those orders to the letter, in spite of any opinion you might have to the contrary. I will want you to execute a quick withdrawal maneuver, and then regroup for a counterattack here.” Rommel pointed at his map.

“Why not deploy the whole division on the line to stop this attack?”

“Because you *won't* stop it,” said Rommel. “We couldn't stop them at Bir el Khamsa, nor in the attack they made south of Tobruk. Steiner couldn't stop them in Syria either, and he had two divisions on the line. So they will get through. The only question is at what cost to us? If I read my tea leaves correctly, the purpose of this attack will be to go all the way.”

“All the way?”

“To the Gulf of Sirte. Yes. If they do stack up east of Wadi Thiran as I suspect, then they will push hard for Agedabia. We cannot allow them to occupy that position in force. It would leave the entire army bottled up in Cyrenaica, with Benghazi our only supply source.”

“Then what do you propose to do? We either stop this attack here, at the outset, or they *will* get through to take that position.”

“Their spearhead will get through, but not the shaft of that spear. I intend to let this heavy leading force pass, with as little cost to our mobile divisions as possible. Then we hit the troops that must inevitably be following that spearhead, and we hit them with everything we have.”

“And what if this spearhead does not proceed as you suggest? What if their intention is to engage and destroy our panzers?” Crüwell was covering every possibility.

“In that instance, the divisions will adopt the hedgehog defensive formation we have drilled on these last few months. In every engagement where you are faced with these new heavy tanks, the infantry is to make liberal use of the new Panzerfaust, and form the outer crust of your line. If they can get mines out in front of them, all the better. The panzers are to be held behind that front, and hull down wherever possible. They have a new main gun as good as our 88s, and with very long range. They were killing tanks well over a kilometer in range, so keep that in mind. Deploy your artillery and the infantry will call it in, but be ready to move it immediately. Their mastery of counter battery fire is demonic.”

“You have said nothing about my division,” said Fisher.

“Ah yes... On my signal you are to move it smartly, back through

Mechili, to this position here. Place your main front here along this wadi, and the bad ground to either side will protect your flanks. Gentlemen, if these dispositions are carried out as ordered, we will then have all three panzer divisions abreast, and we will attack south in one united push. Our intention will be to cut off the spearhead of their attack. Once it is isolated from the shaft of the spear, which I believe will be the regular 7th Armor Division under O'Connor, then that leading assault unit will have only two choices. It can either go on to Agedabia by itself, or it can turn to attempt to re-establish contact with O'Connor."

"And after that?" Crüwell frowned.

"Well, let us see what happens first, General Crüwell. Let us see if my tea leaves tell me the truth."

They looked out from the high point they were on, the bleak desert now swathed in hues of red and gold with the setting sun. Rommel took in the stony smell of the land, with just a hint of cooling in the air as night approached. The desolate beauty of the scene impressed him, but the thrum of anxiety within him belied the peaceful aspect of the land. This empty, forsaken place was soon to become a battlefield, and one where the fate of his Afrika Korps might be written in the sands with blood and steel. He could feel the night coming, growing, an ominous thing building at the edge of that painted horizon.

"The moon, such as it was, is already down," he said quietly. "It will not rise again until a little after 05:30 tomorrow morning. After that sun out there finally sets, it will be dark as Satan's cape. This is when they will come. So get to your units, gentlemen. If you hear me speak of the lion's brew, that will be the code indicating the enemy is acting as I believe he will. On receipt of that signal, move like lightning, and make certain your pathfinders mark the route well. Notify me the instant you have your divisions on their assigned positions, and go with god, because the devil is coming to dance with us this night."

"And if this battle does something you don't expect?" Crüwell remained the Devil's Advocate.

"I am more concerned that *you* may do something I do not expect, General Crüwell. But, if the situation deteriorates to the point where I believe a withdrawal is necessary, I will send the signal *Westfallen*."

"What should that mean?"

Rommel smiled. “Move west, Herr General, by any means possible, and as fast as you can. Get to Agedabia, or Mersa Brega, and stand fast. That is our last redoubt.”

The generals departed, and not twenty minutes later, as the first tides of that dark night gathered like the edge of Satan’s cape, Rommel got the radio call he had been dreading, from Hauptmann László Almásy.

“Herr General! You were correct! There is a large column of mechanized vehicles in the track heading west from Wadi Thiran! And I can see signs of another big move well to the north on the middle track.”

“Very good, Hauptmann. Save yourself, and screen that southern flank as long as feasible.”

Rommel waited for the briefest moment, then sent the word that he knew would be received by his generals with just enough time for them to react. The signal went out— *Löwenbräu, Löwenbräu. Move!*”

Almásy had run into 12th Royal Lancers, screening the southernmost column on that track with four companies of Dragons and Scimitars. They came up so quickly that one of his three detachments was overrun, and he barely had time to send his plaintive warning to Rommel. Behind them came the long lines of the 4th Indian Division, intended as the southernmost flank guard for this advance, but the main attack was that other movement he had detected on the middle track. Led by the 3rd Mercian Battalion, it was reaching like a steel gloved hand into the desert just south of the line Rommel had selected to post his three panzer divisions. Behind it came two more battalions, the Highlanders and the Scots Dragoons with the bulk of the Challenger IIs.

Three battalions. That’s all they were, but it had been enough in past engagements to smash right through a German panzer division like a wrecking ball. It would seem that the combined mass and weight of three German panzer divisions would be enough to roll down and smash such a small force, but things were not as they seemed in this desert war. The advantages possessed by Kinlan’s forces extended well beyond the thickness of their armor. Their mobility and firepower was many times greater than their size might indicate.

To begin with, from the German perspective, every vehicle they were seeing was a tank. The Warrior AFVs had a quick firing 40mm main gun that had the hitting power of a German Pak 50, yet one that could fire up to 200

rounds per minute on full automatic. That was seldom done, but compared to the typical rate of fire of a German 50mm gun, no more than 12 rounds per minute, a single Warrior AFV was therefore capable of putting out 16 times the firepower, and ranging out 2500 meters. The Dragon AFVs were equally capable, and the Scimitars could fling out their Armor Piercing Discarding Sabot rounds 4000 meters.

Then came the real tanks, the juggernauts that moved with alarming speed and smashed everything in their path. The Challenger IIs had topped off with 55 rounds each, a mix of HESH and CHARM 3 depleted Uranium armor piercing rounds. No armored vehicle the Germans possessed would survive a hit from the 120mm main gun, which meant each tank had the capability of destroying 55 enemy AFVs, and it could do so while remaining largely immune to enemy counterattack. The Chobham 3 Armor would defeat any weapon the Germans possessed. The only hope Rommel's tankers had was in inflicting lucky hits that might destroy external equipment, tracks, or perhaps a wheel, rendering the Challenger temporarily disabled, but not killed.

To get any of those lucky hits, the Germans had to fire from well inside the maximum range of the Challenger's main gun. Given the enormous sensory capability that Kinlan's forces possessed, there would be no surprise ambushes here either. Battlefield drones were up, scouting ahead of the columns to find enemy concentrations. These were then noted on a digital map and tracked by computer as updated information came in. This kind of 'situational awareness', even in the black night beneath Satan's cape as Rommel put it, was a massive force multiplier. The British optics and infrared were also invaluable when forces began to close with one another. So those 55 rounds in each Challenger II were going to find targets, well beyond the range of the German counter fire, and they were going to kill every one they hit. It was simply combat power beyond the reckoning of the German commanders, and the Devil was indeed coming to dance that night.

Part XII

Hill 498

“And so there must be in life something like a catastrophic turning point, when the world as we know it ceases to exist. A moment that transforms us into a different person from one heartbeat to the next.”

— **Jan-Philipp Sendker:** *The Art of Hearing Heartbeats*

Chapter 34

Gazala Line, 15 March, 1942

The battle that was now gathering form and shape southwest of Tobruk was a strange mirror image of the ‘Gazala Line’ battle that was fought in May of 1942 in Fedorov’s history books. In that battle, the British had established a heavily mined front backed up by brigade “boxes” to the rear at vital locations like Knightsbridge, Bir Hacheim and El Adem. Rommel moved four mobile divisions southeast, refueled in the night and then sought to complete a wide enveloping movement around the mines and boxes, sweeping up towards Acroma and Tobruk.

This time the inverse would be true. Chastened by severe checks earlier at Bir el Khamsa and Tobruk, Rommel had adopted a strategy similar to the one the British put up in the real history. It was *his* Gazala line this time. The defense was anchored astride the main coastal road to Derna, where the newly reformed Italian 10th Corps deployed two infantry divisions, backed up by the Ariete Armored Division, and both Trento and Trieste Motorized Infantry Divisions. South of the escarpment shielding Gazala, a line of German infantry began with the 99th and 100th Mountain Regiments, and then came the 90th Motorized Division with a newly arrived formation dubbed the 164th Light.

That unit had been in Greece, and was supposed to have been assigned as a garrison on Crete, but the attack there had never happened. It was therefore available as a replacement for the mountain regiment and Meindel’s tough Fallschirmjaegers that had been taken from Rommel to make the attack on the Canary Islands. The infantry was the hard outer crust behind positions that were heavily mined and fortified, and this outer line was backed by well sighted artillery, and then the three panzer divisions Rommel was fortunate to have were held in rear areas similar to the brigade boxes the British had posted.

The attack Rommel had felt coming would begin as yet another wide envelopment maneuver. All along that fortified front, the British had faced off against the Germans with their own infantry divisions. 9th Australian

Division, about to fight its last engagement here before being returned to Australia, was posted on the main coastal road near Gazala. It would be backed up by two brigades of the 2nd New Zealand Division, followed by the newly arrived 2nd South African Division, which was strung out along the coastal road back to Tobruk.

1st Army Tank Brigade was behind the Aussies, south of the escarpment that shielded Gazala itself, and it had 4th Indian Division on its left flank as the British line worked its way south towards Bir Hacheim, and 1st South African Division. These forces were all to be commanded by Montgomery, and Trigg Capuzzo was the dividing line between his XXX corps and O'Connor's XIII Corps. The 5th Indian Division was south of the Trigg, its lines facing off against Rommel's best infantry division, the 90th. Then came 2nd Armored Division, the 7th Armored Division, and the new British 50th Northumbrian Division to constitute O'Connor's primary maneuver element. Kinlan's 7th Heavy Brigade, as it was now being called by Wavell, was at the southern end of the line, intending to move through a long finger on the wrinkled hand of a terrain feature known as Wadi Thiran.

This was the place where Rommel's prescient inner sense had warned him to watch, and there was Hauptmann Almásy, the Hungarian, peering into the thick night with his binoculars when he saw the 12th Royal Lancers beginning their advance. The British plan was really a double envelopment. They looked at the center of the German line, a hard cauldron of well fortified infantry, and decided their best prospects lay in an attack on the flanks. It would be Monty's job to smash the Italians and open the road to Derna, threatening Mechili from that direction as well. Kinlan and O'Connor would conduct the sweeping southern envelopment, around the southern edge of Rommel's infantry line, which would put them in a good position to make that run to Agedabia that Rommel feared.

The plan the wily German General had devised would be to quickly move those three panzer divisions to that flank, all abreast and facing south. That would present his adversary with a difficult decision. If Kinlan continued west towards Agedabia, then Rommel could order all three divisions to attack the regular British troops as they attempted to follow Kinlan's troops. In Rommel's mind, any force bold enough to move west like that would have to maintain a line of communications to supplies back east. His attack plan was aiming to cut that line, leaving the advancing troops to wither.

When word came of the enemy advance, flashed to all mobile division commanders in that single code word, the lion's brew was slow to ferment. The only division that moved was 21st Panzer under Ravenstein, and that was because Rommel was there to set things in motion with his ceaseless energy. Neither Fischer nor Crüwell had arrived back at their respective division HQs, and so those troops still awaited orders. For the Italians, the only unit that moved when the British 1st Tank Regiment struck the Pavia Division south of the escarpment was the recon unit of the Ariete Division.

* * *

Down on the southern flank, Major Peniakoff, the colorful desert scout the British called "Popski," was still assigned to operate with Kinlan's troops. He had his eye on a small rise designated Hill 557, and wasn't surprised to see signs of German occupation of that outpost. There were vehicle tracks in the sand, and to his trained eye, a hasty withdrawal had just been made, probably by a small scouting force. So he radioed Kinlan immediately.

"Listen General," he said. "Jerry had eyes out here and its fairly certain they saw our boys move north of that hill. Too bad we haven't got that helicontraption the Russians were using. It might come in handy as a scouting unit in the pre-dawn hours."

"Good show, Colonel. But don't worry. We've already got up surveillance drones, and only one of the three panzer divisions has moved, well behind the front. You just ride with Lieutenant Reeves and watch the ground—keep the lads out of silt bogs and such."

"We're over that finger of Wadi Thiran already," said Popski. "So it should be good ground until sunrise." He signed off and went to look for Reeves, unable to dismiss the uncomfortable feeling in his gut.

This man Kinlan has a head on his shoulders, no question there, he thought. And he's got those monster tanks under him, and all the rest of this lot. But the other fellow out there is thinking too, and he damn well knows what we're up to here. That's not just any General on the other side, it's Erwin Rommel.

* * *

Yet even Rommel's orders had a way of being loosely interpreted by Crüwell, a General that thought he knew better given all his experience on the eastern front with Guderian. He looked at the map and could see that Ravenstein's division would take some time to reach the position Rommel had indicated, and so he called Fischer, asking where his division was.

"I'm on the Trigg al Abd, as Rommel wanted," said Fischer. "I'm supposed to cover that road."

"Yes, well where is Ravenstein? He's supposed to be on my right, but there isn't a sign of his division here yet. You are much closer. Why not simply move east and link up with my flank. Then Ravenstein will be in reserve when he arrives."

"But what about that Trigg?"

"Let Ravenstein cover it as he comes south. It's well behind our front, and there's no threat there."

"Rommel wanted all three divisions abreast, not two up as you are suggesting."

"Rommel wanted to go to Alexandria six months ago," said Crüwell sarcastically. "And look where we are now."

"Very well, General, but suppose you call Rommel and tell him what you have asked me to do."

"Don't worry, I'll handle everything on that end. Just get moving. Almásy has already seen those lighter enemy scout tanks on the move."

Crüwell had no intention of informing Rommel of anything. What he did want was Fisher's division right on his flank, because he was going to attack south as soon as the opportunity presented itself. He would not have long to wait, because the attack was coming to him in the swift moving 7th Armored Division under O'Connor.

The British advance aimed to turn the flank with two concentric shock columns, one composed of that division on the inside orbit, and the other being Kinlan's Heavy Brigade farther south. Crüwell had moved up as ordered, positioning his 15th Panzer Division due west of the southern end of Rommel's line, which was anchored by the tough Hermann Goering Brigade, battle hardened from the Eastern Front. That unit was up on a low plateau, dug in well, and the British had no intention of attacking it. O'Connor went right around it, following the track that led up to Bir Hubash and Sidi Mansur, an old shrine and mosque in the middle of the desert.

Crüwell's advance had seen his recon units arriving there just as O'Connor's tanks came up, forming themselves in a long line abreast, with 7th and 8th Hussars on the left, and 2nd and 3rd RTR on the right. The four battalions fielded all of 338 tanks, with over 90 of the new American Grants with a much better 75mm main gun. The tank was a big, blustering, ungainly and downright ugly vehicle. Compared to the sleek yet ominous lines of the German Lion, it looked like a throwback from the first war. The main gun was offset to the right lower portion of the chassis, and the high turret mounting the secondary 37mm armament gave the tank a prominent profile in combat, and made it an easy target.

The United States shipped all of 2,855 of these tanks to the British, and they had modified the secondary upper turret, which gave those tanks the name "Grant," while the Americans would use the original turret design and name their tanks after the famous southern General Robert E. Lee. It had many other drawbacks, riveted hull plating that saw the rivets break off and become internal bullets when the tank was hit by a round that failed to penetrate. It also lacked a radio in the upper turret, and the British thought the side hull mounted main gun was the least favorable position for that weapon. But beggars cannot be choosers.

Behind O'Connor's armor came the 22nd Guards Armored Brigade with another 277 tanks, making 615 tanks in a well concentrated mailed fist that was now moving right towards Crüwell's division.

The line he had established saw two infantry battalions and the pioneer battalion digging into the stony ground, with the recon battalion was on the right flank. The Germans had a well practiced defense, but the sheer number of enemy tanks was going to cause heavy casualties, exceeding 50%. Crüwell had been itching for a fight, and now he had one. In spite of Rommel's order to hold his tanks in reserve, if ever there was a time or place to commit those units, this was it. Reports had come in stating the British had a new tank, but that it was not the same as the monster tanks that had so savaged the German divisions in the past.

The General gave the order for his 8th Panzer Regiment to attack, and had no qualms about it when he did so. He had 168 tanks, including 48 Lions, 48 of the new Leopard medium recon tanks, 48 Pz-IVF2s and 24 of the new Panther tanks. Though he would be outnumbered nearly four to one, he hoped the German qualitative edge on tank design would at least give him

parity.

What ensued was a kind of Kursk like clash of armor at very close quarters when his panzers came charging in. His Lions might have done better by standing off and firing at range, but the swirling dust kicked up by so many armored fighting vehicles made that impossible. So it was all run and gun, with tanks careening over the sandy ground, through gravel beds and shallow mud pans, and into a titanic head on clash right amid the lines of the beleaguered German infantry.

The action was at point blank range in many instances, with tanks on both sides 'brewing up' one after another in the terrible duel. The German armor proved very tough, particularly the Lions, but the chaos of the scene saw tanks all mixed together, taking side and rear shots at one another. It was 7th and 8th Hussars that took the worst of it, and twenty minutes into that hot armored duel the entire scene was shrouded with smoke and dust. Stricken vehicles lay in burning hulks everywhere, the hot fiery red tongues of flame making the whole scene look like a bed of burning coals.

The 7th Hussars ended that duel with only 13 of 50 Grants operational, and 13 of 50 Valentines. 8th Hussars fared a little better, but still had only 19 of its 50 Grants, and 29 Valentines. The units had also lost the bulk of the new AEC armored cars that had been acting as the scouting force, with half of the 36 blasted to burning wrecks. Of the 222 tanks that made the attack in those two units, only 92 remained.

On the German side, losses were not as heavy, but 12 of those 48 Lions had been killed, mostly by side and rear shots from the 75mm guns on the Grants. 18 of the 48 Pz-IVF2s were destroyed, but only four of the speedy Leopards and six Pz-IIIJs were killed. The Lions loomed so much bigger in the heat of the fray, that they bore the brunt of the British gunfire. Some surviving tanks had been hit multiple times on that heavy sloped frontal armor, and still remained battle worthy.

The brief, violent action had proved one thing decisively—the German tanks were superior. They were better gunned, had much tougher armor, and the experience of the tankers who took them into that battle was unsurpassed.

When 22nd Armored Brigade came up on the scene, its commander wanted no part of the swirling mess of fire, smoke and dust. So he led his columns west, jogging around the action with the idea of taking the enemy on the flank, if he could find one. This was going to take his units into a

defensive screen manned by the 33rd Pioneer Battalion, and the 353 and 329 Light Flak Battalions. Behind him, O'Connor had sent the 2nd Armored Division right in the wake of his own armored fist, and so yet another wave of British tanks was lining up and ready to make a bold charge into the burning haze of the battle.

Crüwell's attack had proven the worth of his armor, but now he would feel the weight of yet another full division, with a situation developing on his front that was going to involve his units in desperate fighting for the next hour, and leave 15th Panzer Division a wrecked and broken formation when it was over.

Far to the west, Kinlan's Heavy Brigade was on the outer circle of the planned envelopment, its first units beginning to come up on the defensive infantry positions of Fischer's 10th Panzer Division. It was there that the real battle that would decide the fate of the Afrika Korps would now be fought.

Chapter 35

Fischer's 10th Panzer was the strongest of Rommel's three divisions, with four battalions of Panzergrenadiers dug in around the edge of a region of very stony ground. The recon battalion held the left flank closest to Crüwell's division, and the Pioneers the right flank, where Rommel had improvised and moved Ravenstein's 21st Panzer Division into the place Fisher was supposed to be. Now, with the 3rd Mercian Battalion jogging into the lead position near a low rise labeled Hill 498, Rommel thought he saw an opportunity.

He had poured over tactical reports on this Heavy Brigade, and had slowly pieced together its composition in his mind. It had at least two battalions of fast infantry, all riding in a swift moving medium tank, which was surprising enough. This was what he took the modern day Warrior AFV to be, as the 40mm gun it used was the equal or better of most tank guns mounted on British vehicles to date. These battalions were supported by other AFVs that mounted a kind of rocket weapon, very deadly against vehicles, but they were not in great numbers.

Now, behind the outer crust of the infantry defense of his two divisions, all of eight battalions including troops of the 21st Panzer, he held both panzer regiments in reserve, waiting to see what the tip of the spear would do here. Would it continue west, thinking to bypass this defensive front and look for an exposed flank, or would it turn and give battle?

Kinlan had thought that over himself for some time, and he came to the conclusion that moving west into thin air could be accomplished easily enough. But then what would he do? The farther he moved, the more he would place his brigade out of contact with O'Connor's two armored divisions. Knowing that they had already turned north, and that there was a hot battle underway against at least one German panzer division, figured heavily in his thinking.

"What do you make of this situation, Sims," he said to his able Chief of Staff.

"Well sir, It looks like O'Connor has his hands full well behind us. He'll probably be able to handle the one division he's tangling with now, but if we continue any further west, we'll expose his flank. Rommel could send one of

his other two divisions after us to keep us busy, and then use the other to swing down and get after O'Connor. The situation is fairly confused behind us, but signals traffic indicated they have had to commit 2nd Armored already, and that was supposed to be kept in reserve for the exploitation force. Drones can't really see what's going on. The whole area is wreathed in heavy smoke and dust from the silt we've been trundling through."

Kinlan nodded. "Under the circumstances, I think we should turn now and get to work. The point of this attack is to wreck the Afrika Korps—at least the panzers. Where are my Dragoons?"

"About 10 klicks back, sir. 3rd Mercian had better ground, and they nosed ahead as we turned. "They say they've come up on a line of infantry positions."

"Very well...." Kinlan looked over the map. "This feature here, Hill 498.... We'll make that our turning point. Swing the whole brigade north at that hill and tell Cooper he can attack. I'll want the Dragoons to stand by if we need them. We've put five challengers into each company with the Warriors, so they have some heavy tank support as things stand, but it may not be enough."

Kinlan had 60 Challengers, but he had taken half of these and parceled out five to each of the companies in the Mercian and Highland Battalions. The remaining 30 he kept in one concentrated force, three Sabers of ten tanks each in the Scots Dragoons. The action he had ordered saw the Mercians move up to strike the right flank of Fischer's position, falling on the 49th Pioneer Battalion and II Battalion, 69th Panzergrenadiers. There were 33 engineer squads with 18 Panzerfaust teams waiting for them in the Pioneer Battalion, but the Warriors were standing off and using that 40mm gun to good effect. The Spartan ATGM vehicles were also engaging with ranged missile fire. As German casualties mounted, a frantic radio call went out.

"Come on! Where is our armor support? They're picking my troops apart, mostly those medium tanks firing at a thousand meters."

Rommel now made a fateful decision. He reasoned that his armor could match those medium tanks well enough, and initial reports indicated only a very few of the heavy behemoth's had been seen. His pulse quickened. Fischer had 156 tanks ready in the 7th Panzer Regiment, and Ravenstein had another 142 in his 5th Panzer Regiment. That was a mailed fist of 298 tanks, and a few more in the HQ troops gave him over 300. He could smash this

enemy attack, possibly crippling a third of this deadly enemy brigade, and that was what he decided to do.

The two panzer regiments moved to contact, the Lions beginning to open fire at just over 1000 meters wherever visibility permitted. Colonel Cooper saw them coming on infrared, a massive moving heat signature kicking up a huge storm of dust as it surged forward. 1st Company, 3rd Mercian was going to take the brunt of the attack and now the five Challengers supporting 15 Warriors and 10 ATGM vehicles were firing for all they were worth. The sharp report of the 120mm gun cracked out in reprisal.

Had this been a static shooting contest, those five Challengers, each with 50 rounds of ammunition, could have theoretically picked off almost all of Rommel's advancing tanks. But it wasn't a static battle. The enemy was charging in at them at breakneck speed, taking many hits and leaving many wrecked tanks in its wake, but there was simply too little time to stop all those tanks. Cooper was in one of those Challenger IIs, and he felt one hard chink after another as enemy rounds were striking his tank, all defeated by that impenetrable Chobham 3 armor. They were seeing the Germans on infrared, the big turret tracking, firing, tracking again, firing, and blasting one German tank after another.

Kinlan had been afraid of this very development, but he could both see and hear what had been happening on his digitally linked command screen. That battalion was going to be swamped by hundreds of German tanks, and so he quickly ordered the Scots Dragoons into action.

"Come on Bob!" he said over the radio. "Time for the heavy cavalry!"

On they came, the three Sabers accelerating rapidly in a massive armored charge. The thunder of their coming was heard even over the din and roar of the battle already underway. Moving at 40KPH, they closed on the scene with alarming speed, then broke column and fanned out in a wide line, their desert camo paint scheme blending nicely into the terrain. 1/3 Mercian was fighting for its life, as any gun the German panzers had was going to hurt a Warrior at those ranges. The infantry squads had all deployed, and were hugging the ground as the desperate fighting thickened. The enemy line drew ever closer, an unstoppable front of steel and thunder. But it was about to meet a force that was simply irresistible.

The Challengers rolled up a low rise and Cooper gave the order to halt. Dust and smoke billowed about the tanks, and now he was going to volley

fire into the enemy advance at about 700 meters range. It was Fischer's 7th Panzer Regiment in the sights of those 30 Challengers now, and the rippling roar of those big 120mm guns sent a shock wave of molten steel tight through them. Not even the heavy frontal armor of the new Lions could stop those heavy depleted uranium and tungsten tipped rounds. Thirty guns fired on one side, and 18 German tanks were smashed in the first volley, some taking two and three hits. Seconds later the Challengers fired again.

German tankers careening forward through the heavy silt and smoke saw one tank after another struck and savaged by that deadly enemy fire. The carnage was stunning, and it immediately prompted the regimental commander to give the order to break off, his panzers now turning and racing for any cover they could find. When it was over, Fischer's 7th Panzer Regiment would stagger north into the more rugged rocky terrain and find they had 12 of 48 lions remaining, 18 of 48 Panzer IVF2s, and 25 of 48 Leopards, with seven of the twelve panthers still surviving. Of the 156 tanks in that Regiment that made that attack, only 62 remained.

Ravenstein's 5th Panzer Regiment was lagging on the far right of the scene, but when Rommel realized what was happening, hearing the desperate cries of his *Panzertruppen* on the radio as they died, he shouted an order.

"Get them out of there! Get them back!" The order would reach the 5th Regiment just in time to stop its advance, and Rommel reinforced that order telling Ravenstein to get that regiment back to screen the artillery. But the Challengers then renewed their advance, coming up in a wedge of Chobham and steel, those long 120mm guns blasting any target before them, I/5th Panzer would take the full brunt of their charge, and be completely destroyed, all of 80 tanks, and 30 to 40 other vehicles left as smoldering wrecks on the field as they Challengers systematically obliterated that battalion.

Rommel had hurt his enemy, but it was like a wolf biting the flanks of a bear. Now the beast had turned on him, and it was simply unstoppable, as it was at Bir El Khamsa, and at Tobruk. The swift moving heavy tanks had appeared on the scene to utterly smash his panzers. A brief lull ensued in the action, and The Scots Dragoons stopped to wait for the Mercians to collect themselves. Reeves 12th Royal Lancers was also coming up with his Scimitars and Dragon IFVs, and Kinlan ordered a brief halt to regroup his forces. An attack like that inherently scattered units about the field, and he wanted to keep the tip of his spear very sharp.

In that interval, reports from Crüwell were now also having a desperate edge on the radio, and so the commanders of the three Panzer Divisions arranged to meet above a withered mud pan north of the stony cauldron that had been formed by Fisher's infantry battalions.

"Damn it Rommel! I'm up against everything the British have! Fischer—where are your panzers?" Crüwell was incensed.

"I tried to get through," said Fischer. "I threw my entire panzer Regiment at them, but it was blown to hell in twenty minutes! Those heavy panzers appeared just as I was breaking through. The Regiment will be lucky if it can form two companies now. This is no good, Rommel. We simply cannot stop these enemy tanks, and without panzer support, our infantry can only hold another hour or two at best."

"What is happening with the rest of the front?" asked Crüwell.

"Montgomery is grinding his way past that escarpment south of Gazala," said Rommel. "But the Italians are putting up a good fight. They threw both the Ariete and Littorio Divisions at them, and now Trieste Motorized has also reinforced that position. I do not think the British will get through. As for the rest of the line, it was not even attacked. The two motorized infantry divisions were just faced off by two or three enemy infantry divisions—Indian troops and a South African division. Their main effort was to try and turn this flank, as I suspected, which is why I concentrated all three panzer divisions here."

"Well a lot of good that has done us," said Crüwell.

"May I remind you that it was your division that made a premature attack, General."

"I had no choice. O'Connor was rolling his entire division over my infantry. Was I suppose to just sit there and wait for the Commanding General's order to attack? Nonsense! Now what should we do here? We cannot attack without being utterly destroyed. We can stubbornly defend, but we will lose that battle in the end."

"We have to maneuver," said Rommel. "They haven't yet found our western flank, but they will soon. Crüwell, can you stop O'Connor?"

"I'm under too much pressure. They must have hit us with a thousand tanks in both the 7th and 2nd Armored Divisions. I'll be a light motorized infantry division in another hour."

"Well we can still get west if we move quickly," said Rommel.

“Retreat again?” Crüwell gave him a look of recrimination.

“Redeploy,” said Rommel. “All our supplies must move along Trigg Capuzzo and the Tariq al Abd to Bir Tengeder. If we do not protect those lines of communication, then they’ll bag the entire army. At the moment, the motorized Divisions and Hermann Goering can get back via Trigg Capuzzo easily enough. We’ll have more difficulty extracting our panzer divisions if they persist with their attack, but that is what we must now attempt to do.”

“And what will the Führer say about yet another defeat here, Herr Rommel?” Crüwell gave him a smirk.

“He can say I saved his Afrika Korps for him—again—only this time the price for that will be Cyrenaica. I took it from the British long before you showed up, so now I will give it back to keep this Army intact. We move to Agedabia with all speed. I will notify the Italians. Send the signal to all your units: *Westfallen*, and may god be with us on the road west.”

* * *

Looking at the situation now, Kinlan had yet another decision to make. Like O’Connor, he had a sense for the battle and could read which way the wind was blowing easily enough. His front line units were reporting the Germans were pulling out, leaving a thin screen of AT gun positions as a delaying force, mostly Pak 50s. The drones could see the long lines moving west along the Trigg Capuzzo. Rommel was on the run. The battle had spanned 18 hours of movement and fighting, and now he was waiting for fuel trucks to come up to his front line units.

1/3 Mercian had been savaged by the initial attack of Rommel’s ill fated panzer charge. But many of the vehicles were thought to be salvageable. Of 140 Warriors in the entire Brigade, only 16 would be registered as total losses, though 10 of 50 Warrior Milans would also have to be written off, along with four Scimitars. Two Challengers had been put temporarily out of action with non critical hits, but the engineers would be able to replace tracks, a jammed turret and external equipment to get them operational again. All the other losses would be collected, stripped for useful parts and materials, and then the carcasses would be hauled off to a special hidden depot in the desert, well away from prying eyes. The human cost to Kinlan’s Brigade was 55 dead, 118 wounded, mostly in the infantry that had fought dismounted.

The General found O'Connor late on the 17th, wanting to see what his mind was on the situation. "We've got them on the run," he said. "They're pulling out west. How are your divisions?"

"The lads are ready as rain, but its fuel we need now. When I chased the Italians west last year, I managed to put together a couple flying columns using vehicles that still had the fuel to go the distance. We're mopping up that line of delaying forces, but, with darkness falling and the fuel situation being what it is, I think it best to consolidate, sort the units out, and use the time to prepare for a concerted advance in the morning."

"Very well general," said Kinlan, extending his hand. "You've just beaten Rommel."

"Not so fast," said O'Connor. "Oh, we broke 15th Panzer Division alright. 7th Armored gave them a good fight, but we lost a lot of vehicles attacking their infantry hard points. Those damn Lions are formidable. They were wreaking havoc, even on the new American tanks we received. I don't suppose you had any trouble with them?"

"They mission killed two of my Challengers—lucky hits, but we'll have them both operational again as soon as the engineers can get to them. Otherwise, Rommel thought he'd bushwhacked one of my Mech Infantry battalions, but we saw him coming and the Dragoons smashed that attack. Frankly, that's one hell of a body punch to take in a fight like this. We must have wrecked 150 enemy tanks out near Hill 498. After that, Jerry had no more stomach for this fight, and that dusty road west looked a darn sight more appealing. My only regret is not getting far enough west to cut them off."

"You would have been on your own," said O'Connor. "Once the 15th Panzer came at us, one thing led to another. That fight just kept pulling my battalions in, until the weight of 2nd Armored Division decided the matter. So we win through today. But this isn't over. Tomorrow we'll get after him, and it's on to Agedabia!"

Chapter 36

They did not yet know it at that moment, but Hill 498 in the desert of Southern Libya was another turning point in the war that was now in its third terrible year. Disheartened but still determined, Rommel would make the long retreat to Agedabia and arrive there by nightfall on the 17th of March. It seemed at that moment just another movement in the long see saw struggle in that forsaken place. Yet after his brilliant opening offensive with Operation Sonnenblume, after that stunning first shock at Bir el Khamsa, he was never the same man again.

Rommel had tried everything. If he dug in his infantry behind mines, this infernal nemesis would use amazing wire guided chains that would explode to create pathways for those awesome heavy tanks. Once they were on the scene, they were simply invincible. In all the long months of this struggle, they had only one confirmed kill—and that had been laurels for the Luftwaffe, and not his own Panzertruppen. His frustrated tank crews reported hitting the enemy two and three times, but with no effect, and those were just the tanks lucky enough to survive to get in range of the enemy. The only way he could use his mobile divisions to attack now was to strike at the enemy infantry divisions, and as he made that long withdrawal west, he thought that was what he should have done.

I should have placed the infantry from 10th Panzer Division down on that flank, studding the line with all the anti tank and heavy flak guns I had, and backing it up with artillery. Then I should have taken the three panzer regiments and the rest of the mobile infantry and formed a massive strum group. We could have blasted right through that South African division, raced to Tobruk and taken the place before Montgomery could do anything about it.

But then what? Another voice spoke to him in the back of his mind. Then you would be sitting right there, in a port where no ships can call because of the damnable Royal Navy, and one where no supply trucks could call, because Montgomery would be sitting on the Via Balbia, and that Heavy Brigade would be sitting on Trigg Capuzzo.

No, he thought. ‘Should of’ never won a race. At least now you still have a secure line of communications to Tripoli. Now the issue of Benghazi comes

to the fore. Can we still hold it? If the Italians get back in time, they should have sufficient strength to do so. It will become my Tobruk, even if they cut the road between that place and Agedabia. That port can be supplied by sea, at least for a while, and it will force the British to deploy at least two infantry divisions to invest it, possibly three. Those are divisions they can ill afford to spare for that duty.

When I get to the Gulf of Sirte, I will be sitting on the best defensive ground in North Africa. The only place comparable is Halfaya Pass, or perhaps Gabes in southern Tunisia. They think they've beaten me, but they are a long way from doing that. They merely cemented one fact in my mind. We can beat them on even terms, but they still hold that one terrible trump card. Strange that with all these new American tanks that were delivered, no additional heavy tanks appeared. There seemed to be no more than fifty or sixty in total, but my god, that was enough. I spent three months husbanding panzer deliveries from Germany, and lost half of everything they sent me in one hot hour.

So now I sit on my defensive line at Mersa Brega, and let us see if they have the mettle to try and push me out. This is not a defeat, but a mere setback. It is nothing more than a strategic withdrawal. This is far from over, but Crüwell's words still bite. What will the Führer think? He is getting a lot of bad news from Russia these days, and now this. I salvaged my pride after that debacle at Tobruk last year by stubbornly sitting on my Gazala line. This time, they get Cyrenaica back, and all those good airfields.

A lot of good they did us in this fight. Where was the Luftwaffe? Most of the *Stukas* were pulled out west to French North Africa and Operation Condor. The British knew that, of course, which is why they struck me now. If I only had those *Stukas* back...

If wishes were horses, he thought, his weary mind completing a circle as he mulled over the battle. Thank God I had the backbone to admit what was happening and get the Army out in time. If the British had pushed further west before they turned north, we might have been cut off. So Crüwell's preemptive attack was the key, wasn't it. Of course I must never admit that to him, but that forced the British to commit their 7th Armored Division on his front, and he was just good enough in that attack to hurt them. Then O'Connor had to put in his 2nd Armored Division. Crüwell fought bravely today. I was the one who took the foolish gamble this time, and I risked

everything in thinking I could get to the infantry formations in that hellish Heavy Brigade.

I simply underestimated the incredible mobility of that Heavy Armored Battalion. There is something almost supernatural about those troops and machines. They seem to know what we are doing, every step of the way. They spot our defensive positions, through smoke and sand, and then fire right through it all to pick off our strongpoints.

We overran one segment of their line with our tank charge, but that heavy armor moves like the wind. It appeared on the scene just in time to wreak havoc. Watching those Lions burn was quite a shock. They are the best tank we have ever put in the field, and yet they could not even begin to match this British tank. Its capabilities are simply unnatural, simply stupefying. How could the British produce such a tank, and then still clatter about in those god awful machines they give to their main divisions? What am I not seeing here? Something is simply wrong in all of this, and Army intelligence must get to the bottom of the matter, and soon.

He rubbed his brow, weary with the lateness of the hour, closing his eyes. Agedabia first, he thought, then Mersa Brega. After that, Tripoli, and if they manage to get that far, and pry me out of that city, then I'll stop them again at Gabes. Yes, this is far from over. It is going to be a very long year....

* * *

“Just when I get up a good head of steam, Wavell wants to pull my lead unit right off the line!” Montgomery was exasperated when he got the news. “That South African division I threw on the fire did a fine job, but they certainly can't carry the offensive up into the Jebel country. In fact, without the Australians, I'll be lucky if I can get to Derna if strongly opposed. This is one fine kettle of fish.”

The Australians.... Without Bennett's two brigades he could not have held Singapore. If he had had either the 6th or 7th Aussie Divisions on Java, he'd still be holding that island as well. Now, without the 9th Division here, his prospects for any aggressive push west were quite dim, and he let Wavell know it in no uncertain terms.

“Don't worry,” said Wavell. “Take the time to catch your breath and tidy up. I'm going to take one of the Indian Divisions from O'Connor, and you

can have both the South African Divisions to re-establish your Corps.”

“50th Northumbrian would suit me better,” said Monty. “And when might we get in the Highland Division?”

“Soon,” said Wavell, but he could make no promises. He would have to dangle that carrot in front of O’Connor to keep him in line if he stole away that Indian Division. “Look Monty, You’ve done a fine job here, and fresh off the boat from Java. What we need now is the airfields up north. Make that your primary objective.”

“Alright,” said Monty, resigned to his fate. “How soon can I have that Indian Division?”

“I’ll cut the orders today.”

O’Connor was a frustrated man that day as well. Wavell had also contacted him, just as he had during Operation Compass when he pulled out 6th Australian right in the middle of the offensive. This time it was 9th Australian Division, and the two New Zealand Brigades as well. They were Monty’s troops, but that still pulled the better part of two divisions from the field just as he was hoping to move west again.

“We knew this was coming,” said Kinlan.

“Yes, but all we needed was another week to ten days!”

“And what would you accomplish? Rommel is going to beat us to Agedabia, and now Monty hasn’t the troops he needs to really push the Italians.”

“He won’t have to. They’ll have to fall back to Benghazi.”

“Yes, they’ll go because Rommel and the Germans have gone, but in their own good time. It may be a while before they evacuate the Jebel country entirely, and we may have to fight to pry them out of a few of those airfields along the way.”

O’Connor nodded. “Right, and Monty is already after my infantry divisions. The man had the nerve to call me an hour ago and ask about the Northumbrians. Well, he won’t get his hands on that division, but Wavell is sending him the Indian troops, and both South African Divisions. The question is, will the Italians try to hold Benghazi?”

“I would,” said Kinlan. “That will force us to invest it, and we’re already short on Infantry.”

“Yet once we get the RAF forward, and west of Derna, we can harass all supply deliveries to that port.”

“Don’t forget,” Kinlan cautioned. “There are two good airfields at Benghazi, and my bet is that they’ll be crawling with German BF-109s.”

“It will be Monty’s problem,” said O’Connor, dismissing the matter and chafing to get moving again. “What I want to do is take both armored divisions and get them moving west by mid-day.”

“Why the hurry? All you’ll be doing is extending your present supply lines by another 200 miles. Look, when you get to the other side of this desert, you won’t be looking at Italians as you found them at Beda Fomm. That’s Rommel out there, and I’m not at all convinced that we’ve beaten him here. You plan on attacking him at the gulf of Sirte? That’s the worst damn ground in North Africa, and by the time you get there, he’ll be dug in deep. They already have prepared positions there.”

“Then why not mass everything and just bull our way through,” said O’Connor. “We can make a phalanx of armor, with your boys right up front, just as we discussed.”

“Yes, we could, but there’s a question of ammunition. We expended a good deal in breaking that armored attack at Hill 498. It hurt both panzer regiments we were facing, but now we have to be a little particular about how we use what’s left.”

“How bad is it?”

“We’ve still got at least one more good fight in hand, perhaps two if we choose our targets well. The artillery will get resupplied with useable rounds from your own stores, but not our tanks and APCs. Our engineers are working back in the UK to see about trying to develop replacement rounds, but even if they do, they won’t be anywhere near as effective as the rounds we still have. There are materials in that ammunition that you simply can’t get your hands on. In fact, you won’t have them for many years.”

“So you’re telling me we have to pick our fights more carefully now, and our own boys will just have to put their shoulders to the wheel.”

“If you want my brigade up front—yes. Consider that you’ll also need at least two or three divisions to properly invest Benghazi. That leaves us with only the 50th Northumbrian and the 22nd Guards to support your armor if we attempt to move into Tripolitania. Rommel won’t put his panzers in the shop window at Mersa Brega. He’ll keep them well back, and his infantry divisions were largely unscathed in this attack. We’d better think this one over.”

O'Connor shrugged. He had the bit between his teeth and he wanted to run, but after two days of hard fighting, his troops would need rest, fuel, supplies, tank replacements. Kinlan was correct. All he would find at the end of another 200 mile run across the desert would be an intransigent enemy in good positions for a stolid defense. They would need the infantry to sweep and secure the Jebel country, re-occupy all the airfields, and then they had to move their own planes forward, and relocate all the artillery, all the forward supply depots. Wavell had promised him another infantry division, the 51st, but it was still en-route.

"I suppose we should sit down with Monty and Wavell and sort this all out," he said. "But I'll still want to pony up a strong brigade to shepherd Rommel west. It can act as a screening force as the infantry closes in on Benghazi."

"I'd agree with that," said Kinlan, giving O'Connor a sympathetic look. "General, I know how you feel. The job isn't finished and you want to get after it. But this was a victory here, even if we haven't forced Rommel to fall back on Tripoli yet. Give it time, we'll probably be ready to have a go at him again by May. Until then, count your feathers. You'll soon secure a good many airfields up north, and the RAF is getting much stronger here now. That will matter. Trust me. You win that air duel over Benghazi, and then the Italians will just have to sit there and wither on the vine. We could afford to leave men in Tobruk when Rommel first bypassed that port, but only because the Royal Navy commanded the sea, and the Luftwaffe wasn't really well established here at that time."

O'Connor looked at him. "Funny to think you know how this all turns out, don't you."

"I know how it all turned out once upon a time," said Kinlan. "I wasn't here for that, but neither were you. So the fact that we *are* here means the book we're writing now will be quite different. Let's just count our blessings, and see to the road ahead."

* * *

It was going to be a long road indeed, for Rommel as he looked over his shoulder, quietly picking his ground and planning his lines of defense, and for the British as they struggled to muster the resources to continue pushing

him. The next few months would also see a lull in the fighting in Russia, and both weary armies counted their dead, and the Soviets dug in on the new front line won by their stunning offensive. Guderian returned to Berlin to look over production of more new tanks for the battered panzer divisions. Manstein stopped the Russian advance south of Kursk, and then waited for Halder to find him more infantry so he could pull the SS Panzer Korps off the line and get ready for his next big offensive.

There would be some discussion as to how best to proceed, with Halder arguing the bulge in the line near Kursk should be the first German operation after the ground firmed up, and Manstein still casting an eager eye towards Volgograd. That issue would soon be taken to Hitler for a decision, and the Führer would now begin to reset his hopes for a victory in Russia as these operations were planned and debated at OKW. All the Generals were so busy thinking and planning, so caught up in the immediacy of what they were doing, that they failed to perceive what had actually happened, failed to clearly see that the war had reached a decided turning point, and the Allies were finally getting up off the mat and steeling themselves to come out fighting with the next bell.

Yet Kinlan's remark to O'Connor would prove to be very true. It was all going to be very different now, though some things would still ring true to the history he and Fedorov knew. Half a world away, George C. Marshall was looking over a long list of nearly 400 senior officers in the Army, all arranged in order of seniority. They were all candidates for the position of Supreme Commander of Allied Forces in the west, which he wanted for an American General, in spite of the fact that Britain had carried the burden of the war there for years. His finger would settle on name number 367, a man named Dwight Eisenhower, and he sent him east across the Atlantic to the British forward outpost in the Azores to carry on with the planning for the first major counteroffensive by the unified Allied forces in the European Theater—Operation Gymnast.

The plan would involve the first daring leap by a combined Allied seaborne force, and its principal target would be Casablanca. That port was the only facility deemed as both vulnerable to Allied attack and also suitable as a base from which subsequent operations would be conducted. In the Allied planners mind, its capture would effectively cut the naval and air supply links the Germans were now struggling to build to the Canary Islands,

rendering that outpost vulnerable to counterattack if the Germans did not withdraw of their own accord.

As all these plans and General slowly turned in the gyre of war, a man walked slowly down the cold stone corridor, deep underground at a very secret installation on the Baltic coast of Germany, about 112 miles due north of Berlin. He came to a sturdy metal door, where a pair of guards snapped to attention, one saluting as the man handed off his papers. After a cursory inspection, the guard nodded, and slowly reached for the lever that would open the heavy doors.

Another long corridor lay before the visitor, his footsteps echoing loudly, and seeming to carry the sense of anticipation he felt as they quickened. The corridor bent in a wide curve to the left, until a high stone arch opened on a vast underground chamber. There, swathed in a plain white canvass cover, something lay hidden in the depths of the earth, attended by more guards and several technicians in long white lab coats. At the visitor's approach, the technicians slowly worked off the canvass to reveal a long, needle nosed rocket, some 40 feet long, lying on its side and cradled within a low wheeled dolly. The thicker end mounted stubby fins, shaped like truncated pyramids, with a wingspan of nearly 8 feet, and to the visitor's careful and well educated eye, there were all of three separate stages in this rocket design.

The amazing rocket before the man could range out 135 miles, achieve an altitude of 250 miles, and a speed of Mach 14.5 on its final descent. As he looked at it he took a deep breath, astounded at what he was seeing, for he was no ordinary visitor, and his mind was already viewing the rocket as if it were on drafted engineering paper, the labor of endless hours work.

There, in that deep stony cavern, one Wernher Magnus Maximilian, Freiherr von Braun was now looking at a weapon that would threaten to change the entire course of the war, though he did not yet know what lay hidden within that long pointed third stage. His eyes glittered, and he rubbed his hands together, not because of the cold, but with eager anticipation. He could not wait to get his tooling delivered and see what he had in hand.

"That bulbous feature at the tip," he said to one of the other technicians. "It must be a warhead. I'll want to remove it first and give it a very close inspection."

The Saga Continues...

Kirov Saga: *Steel Reign*, (Book 7 in Season 3; Series Volume 23)

The strange events that brought USS *Norton Sound* into the clutches of Kapitan Heinrich aboard battlecruiser *Kaiser Wilhelm*, and JS *Takami* into the crucible of the Pacific War continue, and the fate of the original Russian ship *Kirov* begins to be revealed. As the Germans struggle to comprehend what they have found in that derelict ship, the Allies now plan their first joint US/British offensive of the war. It begins with a Great Raid against the vital French Atlantic Port of Saint Nazaire, in an effort to eliminate that base as a threat to a much grander invasion plan now sitting in the lap of a most remarkable man—General Dwight D. Eisenhower.

In the Pacific, the mysterious arrival of DDG-180 and crew casts a whole new light on the growing struggle. Yamamoto is keen to advance his next offensive into the Solomons, but he must also deal with the threat to Japan's northern flank from the Siberians. To do so, he dispatches Captain Harada and *Takami* at the heart of a strong task force assembling to lead a bold counterattack, and the next evolution of Karpov's Plan 7 soon meets a most unexpected challenge. Has the Steel Reign of *Kirov*'s long undisputed control of the seas finally come to an end?

Action abounds on land and sea as Season three careens into its closing two volumes in the amazing *Kirov Series*!

Coming 1 FEB 2016...
Kirov Series: Battle Book I
War in the West
Gibraltar, Malta & the War in North Africa
Jun 1940 ~ Jun 1941

As fans of John Schettler's *Kirov Series* already know, the author is presenting a detailed alternate history of WWII, with the course of events strongly influenced by the presence of the battlecruiser *Kirov*, and other war fighting forces from the year 2021, which have been displaced to the cauldron of WWII.

Now, in response to reader requests, we are presenting a series of "Battle Books" for all the major campaigns featured in *Kirov Series*. Often times the action depicting these battles is spread over four, five or more volumes of the series. Here we will extract all that exciting battle action from the many volumes, gathering all the disparate story threads pertaining just to that campaign, and presenting it as one continuous file, reviewed and edited by the series author. In effect, it's just the battles please, nothing more.

This first volume will present the great action presented for the Western Theater, starting with the dramatic and unexpected German attack on Gibraltar in *Operation Felix*. The alternate history 'point of departure' is presented in a brief prelude. The story then moves to the Western Desert for *O'Connor's Raid* and the battle of *Beda Fomm*, followed immediately by the coming of Erwin Rommel and his stunning first counteroffensive launched from Mersa Brega, *Operation Sonnenblume*. The fall of Malta is covered and, as the arrival of Brigadier Kinlan's 7th Brigade is so vital to the understanding of the story that follows, segments of that are presented as a prelude to Rommel's fateful alternate history encounter at the *Battle of Bir El Khamsa*. Soon the Desert Fox begins to rethink his tactics while awaiting strong reserves promised by Hitler.

Yes, we loved *Kirov*, the characters, and all the intrigue surrounding Ilanskiy and time travel, but the battle books are presented for the hard core WWII aficionado who is primarily interested in the history, and how it is changed and altered over the course of the war. As such, they will focus

mainly on the historical characters and the campaigns and battles they waged in this ongoing alternate history of WWII.

Battle Book II will present the action in the Middle East, with the British *Operation Scimitar*, German *Operation Anvil*, and the intervention in Iraq that led Fedorov and his Marines to the famous ruins of Palmyra. Then it is back to the desert again, as Rommel faces down the British *Operation Crusader*. After that we will present this ongoing desert campaign through 1942 and beyond, (after John writes all that!), but for now, Battle Book I, *War in the West*, covers all the exciting battles from June of 1940 through June of 1941, the first year when Britain faced the might of Germany alone. It's all here, extracted from scenes presented over seven *Kirov Series* novels, and concentrated in one continuous, uninterrupted narrative.

The Battle Books Series will do the same thing for all the fighting on the Eastern Front, covering all the material for *Operation Barbarossa*, the *Battle at Mtsensk*, *Operation Typhoon*, the fighting at *Tula* and *Serpukhov*, the dramatic *Fall of Moscow* and the desperate *Russian Winter Counteroffensive*. Later, after the series takes us deeper into the Pacific, we'll create a battle book for all that action too. If you are a WWII history buff, you will find here the concentrated juice of all the great WWII action presented in the amazing *Kirov Series*.

Kirov Series: Battle Book I

War in the West

Gibraltar, Malta & the War in North Africa

Jun 1940 ~ Jun 1941

Reading the Kirov Series

The *Kirov Series* is a long chain of linked novels by John Schettler in the Military Alternate History / Time Travel Genre. Like the popular movie “The Final Countdown” which saw the US Carrier *Nimitz* sent back in time to the eve of Pearl Harbor in 1941, in the opening volume, the powerful Russian battlecruiser *Kirov* is sent back to the 1940s in the Norwegian Sea where it subsequently becomes embroiled in the war.

Similar to episodes in the never ending Star Trek series, the saga continues through one episode after another as the ship’s position in time remains unstable. It culminates in Book 8 *Armageddon*, then continues the saga in *Altered States*, which begins the second “Season” in the series, extending through Volume 16. The series is presently mid-way through Season 3 with the publication of *Knight’s Move*, Book 21 in the series.

How To Read the Kirov Series

The best entry point is obviously Book I, *Kirov*, where you will meet all the main characters in the series and learn their inner motivations. The series itself, however, is structured in “seasons “ with 8 books in each season. In Season 1, the first three volumes form an exciting trilogy featuring much fast paced naval action as *Kirov* battles the Royal Navy, Regia Marina (Italians) and finally the Japanese after sailing to the Pacific in Book III. Book 4, *Men Of War* stands as a sequel to that trilogy and the bridge novel that links it to the second segment of Season 1, beginning with *9 Days Falling*.

The *9 Days Falling* trilogy focuses on the struggle to prevent a great war in 2021 from reaching a terrible nuclear climax that destroys the world. It spans books 5, 6, and 7, featuring the outbreak of the war in 2021 as Japan and China battle over disputed islands, and the action of the Red Banner Pacific Fleet against the modern US Fleet. It then takes a dramatic turn when the ship is again shifted in time to 1945. There they confront the powerful US Pacific Fleet under Admiral Halsey, and so this trilogy focuses much of the action as *Kirov* faces down the US in two eras. Several subplots are also launched that serve to relate other events in the great war of 2021, and deepen the mystery of time travel as discovered in the series. The season ends at another crucial point in history where the ship’s Captain, Vladimir Karpov, believes he is in a position to decisively change events, the season finale,

Armageddon.

Season 2 begins with the *Altered States* trilogy, where *Kirov* becomes trapped in the world made by its many interventions in the history, an altered reality beginning in June of 1940. It is here that a sequential alternate history retelling of WWII begins that will extend to the war's conclusion in 1945. The opening volume sees the ship pitted against the one navy of WWII it has not yet fought, the Kriegsmarine of Germany, which now has powerful new ships from the German Plan Z naval building program as one consequence of *Kirov's* earlier actions.

The *Altered States* saga spans books 9 through 16, initially covering the German attack on the carrier *Glorious*, the British raids on the Vichy French Fleets at Mers-el Kebir and Dakar, and the German Operation Felix against Gibraltar. Other events in Siberia involve the rise of Karpov to power, and his duel with Ivan Volkov of the Orenburg Federation, one of the three fragmented Russian states. (And these involve airship battles!)

The second half of Season 2 begins with *Three Kings*. It covers the action in North Africa, including O'Connor's whirlwind "Operation Compass" and Rommel's arrival and first offensive, Operation Sonnenblume. The main characters from *Kirov* and other plot lines from the opening 8 book saga figure prominently in all this action, with a decisive intervention that arises from a most unexpected plot twist. Book 13, *Grand Alliance* continues the war in the desert as Rommel is suddenly confronted with a powerful new adversary, and Hitler reacts by strongly reinforcing the Afrika Korps. It also presents the struggle for naval supremacy in the Mediterranean as the British face down a combined Axis fleet from three enemy nations.

Book 14, *Hammer of God*, covers a surprise German airborne attack, and the British campaigns in Syria, Lebanon and Iraq. It continues in *Crescendo of Doom*, the German response as Rommel begins his second offensive aimed at Tobruk on the eve of Operation Barbarossa. At the same time, the action in Siberia heats up in a growing conflict between Vladimir Karpov and Ivan Volkov.

Book 16 is the Season 2 finale, *Paradox Hour*, where the ship faces the prospect of annihilation on the day it first arrived in the past, 28 July, 1941. This impending event overshadows all else as *Kirov* joins Tovey in a pursuit of *Hindenburg* and *Bismarck* as they break out into the Atlantic.

Season 3 then begins with Book 17, *Doppelganger*, where the aftereffects of the Paradox are finally sorted out. Fedorov is strangely displaced, and appears on the newly arrived ship, while Vladimir Karpov survives in Siberia, even as another version of himself defies paradox and appears on *Kirov*. Now Fedorov struggles to prevent the same dominoes from falling and keep the ship from engaging the Royal Navy as it did in Book 1. At the same time, the Siberian Karpov plots to seize control of the ship, and that action invariably involves Ivan Volkov, who has his own plans to strike at Ilanskiy in Book 18, *Nemesis*.

The war then heats up on the East Front as the Germans launch Operation Typhoon, reaching a dramatic event on the outskirts of Moscow in Book 19, *Winter Storm*. These actions continue through *Tide of Fortune*, as Japan enters the war at Pearl Harbor, and the British again tangle with Rommel in Operation Crusader. The action continues through the Malayan Campaign and the battle for Singapore. The next page presents a list of all titles in the series. You can best enter the series at any point of interest by reading the novel that immediately precedes your desired entry point, as it also acts as a prelude to events beginning each season.

KIROV SERIES - SEASON 1: *Kirov*

- 1) *Kirov*
- 2) *Cauldron Of Fire*
- 3) *Pacific Storm*
- 4) *Men Of War*
- 5) *Nine Days Falling*
- 6) *Fallen Angels*
- 7) *Devil's Garden*
- 8) *Armageddon – Season 1 Finale*

KIROV SERIES - SEASON 2: *Altered States* (1940 – 1941)

- 9) *Altered States*
- 10) *Darkest Hour*
- 11) *Hinge Of Fate*
- 12) *Three Kings*
- 13) *Grand Alliance*
- 14) *Hammer of God*
- 15) *Crescendo of Doom*
- 16) *Paradox Hour – Season 2 Finale*

KIROV SERIES – SEASON 3: *Doppelganger* (1941 – 1942)

- 17) *Doppelganger*
- 18) *Nemesis*
- 19) *Winter Storm*
- 20) *Tide of Fortune*
- 21) *Knight's Move*
- 22) *Turning Point*
- 23) *Steel Reign*
- 24) *TBA – Season 3 Finale*

And yes, there will be a season 4 as the war moves into 1943-44

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