KIROV III

Pacific Storm

John Schettler

Military Fiction

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By

John Schettler

"The death of God left the angels in a strange position."
— Donald Barthelme

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"On the sea the boldest steer but where their ports invite;
But there are wanderers o'er Eternity
Whose bark drives on and on,
and anchor'd ne'er shall be."

—Byron: Childe Harold III.lxx.

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Author's Note:

This a novel presenting an alternate history of WWII as a result of variations in the historical timeline caused by the presence of the battlecruiser Kirov and its actions in Volumes I and II of this series. Events depicted, however are well underpinned with good historical research.

While the ship and crew of the Russian battlecruiser Kirov are of my own making, every other ship and character mentioned, from the highest officers on down to the lowest able seaman or pilot, is a historical figure, placed in the roles and locations where they served during the action describe.

Prologue

It was a long night for Charlie One and Strangler Mackenzie out on the Melville Island group. Strangely named, they were a pair of very diligent Aborigine coastwatchers working in a unit called the "Black Watch" established by patrol officer Jack Gribble from the Native Affairs Branch at Snake Bay. The native contingent was doing some very effective work. American pilot Lt. J. Martin had been rescued after a grueling 214 kilometer overland trek by these able scouts, and the Army was thankful for it, and for the capable eyes these men brought to places few others could even travel.

Gribble had pulled together thirty-six men in all, Aborigine natives, and given each one an easy handle he could live with and pronounce, as their own real names were beyond his grasp. The unit worked out of a small ration station, and the natives were given all the tobacco they could ever want as an advanced payment for services, with a promise that they would be paid in real cash at the end of the war, whenever that came.

Dem darn blurry Japs gonna make war for a very long time, thought Charlie. Who knew how long it might take before they would ever see any real money, but at least the nice new naval uniforms, regular food, and a new rifle with the tobacco were good prizes in the short run. Charlie had trained with Ginger One and Harry One on how to throw grenades, mount and use a machine gun in a coastal lighter, and best of all, how to ride in an undersea boat, all the way out to Timor Island to have a look at what the Japs were up to there.

Blurry Japs put men on dat island too. Gonna fill dem trees with snipers in time. Very dangerous there on Timor now. But methinks dey come here now too, right on dis Melville Island, and very soon.

The coastwatchers had been brought under tighter Army control in June of 1942, with the aim of finding and rescuing downed allied pilots, capturing enemy pilots, locating and investigating plane crashes from either side, and also providing assistance as spotters for the West Point Defense Coastal Battery. On occasion they would even serve as guards for the Australian Naval Headquarters at Darwin, and Charlie One had recently finished a tour there before heading back up to the north coast of Melville Island as a coastwatcher. He was very glad to be where he was when he saw the Japanese planes heading in for Darwin again that day, and heard the distant

explosions, saw the tall billowing columns of smoke on the horizon to the south.

Yup, he nodded inwardly, *blurry Jap soldiers be follerin those planes in just another day or two now. All these places out amonga mangroves soon be crawling with bad men carrying rifles.*

In fact, on this very day he had been sent here with Strangler Mackenzie to look for an unidentified plane. It was feared that the Japanese were already landing early detachments on the island from seaplanes. But it was no seaplane Charlie One saw that evening as he peered north from the coast of Bathurst Island. It was a flock of enemy planes chasing something much bigger and getting some real trouble for their effort.

"Strangler!" he called insistently. "Lookie here!" His mate was soon up at his side, eyes wide as the two men watched the battle scene unfold. They saw the arrival of enemy torpedo planes, swooping down on a distant ship, large and menacing on the seas. Then they gasped in awe at what they saw next, and sat mesmerized by the smoke and fire of anti-aircraft guns. Strangler had the presence of mind to pull out his picture box and was snapping photographs of the scene as best he could in the waning light.

"What dem blurry Japs chasin'?" asked Charlie.

"Somethin big!" said Strangler.

"We best be done gawkin' and take that picture box south to Darwin. They be wantin' those photos on a plane straight away."

"Heather 16 be dokin' at Darwin now," said Charlie. "That's Bin Sali's boat. He can give dem pictures to his Lieutenant."

Heather 16 was a coastal lugger that had been operating in a small fleet of pearling boats along the Kimberly Coast, and was now pressed into service as a patrol boat out of Broome, owned by Lt. D.L. Beau Davis. A capable man, Davis spoke both Russian and German in addition to several dialects of Aboriginal language, and even a little Japanese. Not to exclude anyone, his lugger was now crewed by seven Chinese, two Timorese and one Malay in addition to Bin Soli and Lenny Leonard, two Aborigines. He plied the waters off the coast for years, trading tobacco and turtle shells with the local natives, along with dingo scalps and sometimes even a pearl or two nestled in a good clay pipe.

Well known in these parts, Davis made the acquaintance of an enterprising journalist, and this is what Charlie One had in mind, for he had seen the two men together drinking in bars at Darwin and talking long into

the night.

“L.T. be givin’ us a pearl for dem photos,” Charlie suggested, “cause he be givin’ dem to dat reporter for some good money.”

Strangler nodded eagerly as the two men set foot south, ready to run down to the coastal lighter tied up at the shore and sail all night from Bathurst Island across Beagle Gulf to Darwin. What they carried was indeed a pearl of great price, for their photos would soon find their way into the hands of that curious newspaper correspondent and journalist, a man named Cyril Longmore who had come out to document the war on the Kimberly Coast.

When Longmore got them developed that same day, he gaped at the images, amazed to think the Japanese would have been engaged with such a large and formidable looking vessel in the Timor Sea. He knew for a fact that there were no Australian or British ships in the region, and a few long conversations with associates on the telephone soon convinced him that there were no American ships about in these waters as well.

As it happened, Longmore, later to be Captain Longmore, was good friends with the Australian Prime Minister John Curtin, who was an old journalist and newspaper man himself. So he was able to get the photos quickly into the right hands to attempt to answer the very same questions running through his own mind. Curtin had also just been sworn in as Australian Minister of Defense, and when Longmore called, the photos got some very high level attention, very fast.

So it came to pass that knowledge of a strange, unaccountable warship in the Timor Sea soon traveled from the eyes and ears of two Aboriginal scouts, to journalist Cyril Longmore, and thence to Prime Minister John Curtin himself, and right into the hands of Allied intelligence units. Copies went out quickly to Brisbane, Sydney, Melbourne and Perth, and then on to the British Naval Station at Trincomalee on Ceylon by plane for a flight to Alexandria. After that it was just a few quick hops to Gibraltar where other curious eyes were soon to see them and note the uncanny similarity to a ship they had confronted just days earlier. The next plane to England would begin to unravel the long mystery that had baffled British intelligence for a very long year, and the word “Geronimo” was soon again being whispered in exclusive circles, and carried once more to the arcane halls of Bletchley Park by a most able and determined man.

Part I

The Interval

"So long the path; so hard the journey,
When I will return, I cannot say for sure,
Until then the nights will be longer.
Sleep will be full of dark dreams and sorrow,
But do not weep for me…"

- Russian Naval Hymn

Chapter 1

A car drove quickly up the lane towards a stately estate, its buildings clustered one against another in an odd mingling of architectural styles. Bletchley Park, or 'Station X' as it was called, was one of ten special operations facilities set up by MI6, where 'Captain Ridley's Shooting Party' was supposed to be enjoying afternoons on the adjoining sixty acre estate, with shotguns and hounds to hunt down quail. Yet its real purpose was derived from the feverish activity of the Government Code and Cypher School, England's code breakers, a collection of brilliant and dedicated men and women who would generate the vital intelligence information needed to prosecute the war.

Here there were walls of colored code wheels, strange devices like the Enigma machines and odd looking equipment fed by long coiled paper tape, dimpled with a series of small black dots of varying sizes. The minds of Bletchley Park were already in the first stages of digitizing the analog world into forms their nascent computing machines could digest and ruminate upon. A year later the estate would see the installation of the first "Colossus" machine, a rudimentary computer housing all of 1500 vacuum tubes to power its mechanical brain.

The car stopped, its door opening quickly as Admiral Tovey stepped out, a thick parcel under his right arm. He did not approach the styled mansions up the main walkway, but veered left towards a green sided extension—Hut 4, the heart of naval intelligence. A year ago the men who worked there had been reveling in their first breakthrough, the deciphering of the German Enigma code. Then came the unaccountable appearance of a strange ship in the Norwegian Sea, and it set the whole community back on its heels.

Tovey walked past the row of white trimmed windows and entered through a plain unsigned door. He was immediately greeted by a Marine guard, who saluted crisply and led him down the narrow hall to the office of Alan Turing, who had been reading a volume of Byron's poetry as he waited for the Admiral.

"Good day, Doctor," said Tovey as he walked briskly in, his hand extended. Turing set his poetry down and rose to greet him, his dark eyes alight with a smile.

"Call me 'Professor,' Admiral. Everyone else does here, though I haven't

been given a formal chair as yet. The word doctor always seemed a tad sterile for me."

"Very good, Professor. I've brought you a little something more for your file boxes," said Tovey.

"Ah," said Turing, "The photography!"

"Indeed. Two reels of film here with photos, and a full report. I've collected the logs of all ships involved, so you'll have a good time sorting it all through before it gets filed away with everything else on this *Geronimo* business."

"Very good, sir," said Turing, his curiosity immediately aroused. "I wonder, Admiral. Might I persuade you to allow me to fly out to St. Helena one of these days and have a look for myself?"

Tovey raised an eyebrow, his face suddenly serious, and seated himself, his eye falling on the open volume of Byron's poetry. He scanned the lines, reading inwardly:

"On the sea the boldest steer but where their ports invite;
But there are wanderers o'er Eternity
Whose bark drives on and on,
and anchor'd ne'er shall be."

With a heavy sigh he looked at Turing, and all the unanswered questions in his mind took a seat there with him, waiting to have their say. "I'm afraid I have some rather interesting news for you, Professor," he said quietly. "And I think it's high time that you and I have a very frank chat."

"News, sir?" Turing received most information that might be considered news well before anyone else, so it was unusual, and even interesting to hear something he might not know.

"This ship—*Geronimo*—well it's vanished again."

"Vanished?" The word got Turing's attention immediately, and he leaned forward, waiting to hear more.

"Indeed, and just as the escort reached St. Helena."

"Are you saying it sunk, sir?"

"No, Professor, I am saying it simply vanished—sailed into a bank of fog and disappeared. Oh, we put divers down and scoured the sea floor. There was not a trace. We had two cruisers and three search planes look in every direction, and there was no sign of this ship whatsoever. There was no visible

or audible explosion, so we have ruled out accident or deliberate scuttling as well. By God, some magician pulled this rabbit out of his hat, and then just waved his hand and made it disappear again! It sounds impossible, but what else are we to conclude? The ship is gone, or at least that is what we thought….Until *this* came in today."

Tovey handed him another plain Manila envelope, much smaller than the first, a raised eyebrow betraying his obvious excitement. "Sorry to tell you that any photographic evidence related to this *Geronimo* business has been re-routed to Admiralty first. Admiral Pound was none too happy with the decision I made to parley with the Admiral of this rogue ship, and even less amused when it pulled this incredible disappearing act. I daresay the Prime Minister was rather teed off as well. Neither man can accept the ship has vanished without a trace. That said, I managed to keep my head on my shoulders, though if Admiralty knew what I have for you in this second envelope it the gallows might be waiting for me soon."

"I see," said Turing, his own excitement rising as he opened the envelope and slipped out five badly exposed photos, clearly not proper gun camera shots, or even military formatted photos. "You must tell me about this man—the Admiral you parlayed with."

"In due course, Turing. First have a look at those photos. No one else in the Kingdom has seen them outside of Admiralty Headquarters. They were taken by a pair of eagle eyed coastwatchers on the Melville Island group north of Darwin three days ago." Tovey crossed his arms, watching Turing closely. He noted how he immediately took up a magnifying glass and stared intently at the images, moving from one to another, then back again. When he looked at Tovey it was evident that he was deeply concerned.

"It's *Geronimo*," he said quietly. "There's no question about it. The silhouette is unmistakable. And those other ships are Japanese cruisers."

"Indeed," said Tovey. "Those photos were taken August 24th. Now Professor, might you tell me how this ship, which was a thousand yards off the Island of St. Helena on the morning of August 23rd, could suddenly *vanish*, and then reappear off Melville Island, a distance of 7,800 nautical miles away in a period of twenty-four hours? That is ten days sailing time at a high speed of thirty knots, and even if this ship could fly it would be hard pressed to cover that distance in the time allotted."

Now it was Turing's turn to raise eyebrows, both of them. He studied the photos, his eyes moving from the images to Tovey and back again. Then he

took a deep breath, and blinked, shutting his eyes tightly for a moment. When he opened them there was a quiet determination in them, and a light of fire.

"Well, Admiral," he began. "As you so ably point out, no ship would cover that distance in a single day. It's quite impossible. Then again, no ship that I know of is like to up and vanish without a trace as you claim this one did. Oh, there have been hundreds of lost ships, sir, accidents, storms at sea, but as you describe it, *Geronimo* disappeared right under the noses of some very experienced naval personnel sent to St. Helena to keep watch on her. Yes, I heard something unusual had happened through channels…some rather dark channels, and I've been trying to come to grips with it for these last three days. Admiralty may sit on all the photography they want, but things have a way of getting round to the people who can do anything useful with them, as your presence here proves quite plainly."

"Yes, well I went out on a limb to bring you this material, Turing, because I believe exactly that. Now what do you make of it all?"

Turing looked at the photos in his hand again. "Unless I am completely mistaken as to my interpretation of these photos, then we are faced with yet another profound mystery here, sir."

"*Could* you be mistaken, Professor?"

Turing smiled. "Not today…"

"Of course. Then how *does* a ship move that distance in a single day? After I spoke with you at the Admiralty I gave considerable thought to what you were telling me about these wonder weapons used by this ship. Yes, they were at least graspable. We've known about rocketry and such for centuries. Yet both you and I know that the rockets we saw used in the North Atlantic and the Med were clearly a cut above anything we have in development now."

"Clearly."

"Yes…well the rockets I can live with, Professor. But a ship that can move about willy nilly and travel such distances is something else entirely—an impossibility I am not able to grasp in any wise."

"I'll agree with you on that, sir," said Turing. "No ship could move that distance in space in a single day. No ship could vanish from the North Atlantic and appear in the Med a year later, only to vanish yet again. These things are all impossibilities, but if these photos are indeed *Geronimo* then it moved there some other way, sir, and there is only one explanation I can now offer you, strange as it may sound."

“I’ve become more willing to entertain the impossible since all this business began, professor. Don’t keep me in suspense.”

“Well sir, the ship would have to move in *time*. It’s the only thing that might account for this sudden disappearance and reappearance half a world away.” He stared at Tovey, the two men locking eyes for some time until it was clear to them both that they had hold of the same elephant now.

“You’ve held this view earlier, but said nothing about it.”

“I had my suspicions, sir,” said Turing, “but it didn’t seem as though I might have any luck conveying an idea like this to Admiral Pound.”

“You were trying to put me on to it, weren’t you—in that last conversation we had after the meeting at the Admiralty.”

“I was, sir. Without coming right out with it. You see they pay us to reach for certainty here, not fanciful speculation. They listen to us because they want facts, not imagination. I had very grave doubts about this ship from the moment I first set eyes on it. We’ve gone round and round on it, eliminating it from one navy after another. The conclusion I was coming to was not likely to be well received, and I must say, Admiral Tovey, that I am already shunned in many circles as it is. Somewhat of a dreamer, they say of me. Somewhat of a peculiar odd fool is perhaps what they really mean. Well they can say what they will. When they can crack the Enigma code on their own let them play me for a fool. Our own Sherlock Holmes would give me some comfort when he said that once you have eliminated every other possible option, what you are left with must be the truth, as impossible as it may seem. Things move in two ways, Admiral. They move in *space* and they move in *time*. Now, while we’re accustomed to moving there and back again in space, travel in time has been stubbornly in one direction—forward—until this ship appeared in the Norwegian Sea a year ago. Not a German ship, as we now know. Not an Italian or French ship, and now it’s half a world away fighting with the Japanese!”

“Moving in time? Well I have to say that the notion did cross my mind—one for the likes of Jules Verne or H. G. Wells, eh? Yet how can I believe this, Turing? It’s astounding!”

“Can you explain it any other way, sir?”

At this Tovey frowned, clearly perplexed. “They hit us at Darwin,” he said, steering a new compass heading for the moment and hoping to find safer waters.

“Yes, sir. I did hear that as well.”

“Then let me share a little more, Professor,” Tovey smiled, hoping to give the young man the comfort of confederacy. “You see, I had the opportunity to have a little chat with the Admiral commanding this phantom ship, and it was most enlightening. First off, your suspicions expressed earlier were correct. The man was Russian. His crew was Russian, and I am led to believe that his ship was Russian built as well.”

“Another impossibility,” said Turing, “at least at present. The existing Soviet Union could not build anything like that ship.”

“Quite so, but no more confounding than what you have just suggested, Professor. A ship moving in time? Funny thing is this…The man disavowed any affiliation with Stalin and the Soviet Union. In fact he was quite pointed about it—claimed Stalin would not have the slightest inkling that his ship even existed. Yet he knew of Churchill’s meeting, at that very moment, in the Kremlin. That was most revealing. Very few people knew of that arrangement, even in the highest circles here, yet he spoke about it as if… well as if it were __”

“As if it were history,” Turing cut in, a gleam in his eye.

“Exactly!” Tovey had hold of the teacup now, and there was nothing more to do with it but drink. “In fact he spoke of the war, our ‘world war’ as he called it, as if it were history as well. When I pressed him with the fact that Russia was our ally and asked him to throw in with us, he said something very odd—that Russia was our ally for the *moment*. He told me things change, hinting that arrangement might not be stable. At first I took that as a warning that Stalin may be ready to switch sides and join Hitler. Perhaps this man and his ship were the vanguard of that decision. But Churchill has come to some very different conclusions after his meeting in Moscow.”

“I think we can safely keep Russia on our side of the fence for the time being,” said Turing. “But who knows how this war ends, sir? Who knows what the world will look like ten years from now, twenty years, fifty?”

“This man seemed to think he knew,” said Tovey. “I pressed him on his port of origin, yet he would say nothing, even suggesting the question was dangerous to ask. At one point he gestured to the fortifications above us on the cliff and asked me how I might explain my battle fleet to the Moors that built them. Then he said he could no more explain his presence here in a way I could comprehend, and that he was just trying to get his ship home again, wherever that was. Believe me, all I could think of at that point was this Captain Nemo.”

Turing smiled. “There was more to that than you might think, sir. Nemo may be a good image for this man, though it doesn’t sound as though he was vengeful.”

“Quite the contrary,” said Tovey, scratching the back of his head. “He seemed most accommodating, very sincere. I wanted to believe everything he told me. Well, that bit about the Moors… I thought about it for some time. It was as if the man was suggesting he had come from some far future.”

Turing sighed, greatly relieved. “That is, in point of fact, what I am now suggesting,” he said with confidence. “Consider it, Admiral. His ship is a marvel of engineering, highly advanced, so powerful that it held the whole Royal Navy at bay in the Atlantic, not to mention the American fleet as well. It sees us before we know it is even there, and it flings weapons at us we won’t be able to manufacture or deploy for decades—yes, *decades*. It used a working atomic weapon of enormous power, something we all know is in development, but not nearly ready for deployment. Yes, that’s very hush, hush, but things do get around in the circles I frequent. The real point is this: something like that would take the resources of a major power to design and build, and yet if any nation tried it, we would surely know about it. I was very pointed in telling you that earlier, hoping to jog your thinking along these very lines. You see… none of this made sense when we assumed this ship came from our world, from the here and now reality of this war. Yet it paints an entirely different picture when we make a different assumption—that this ship was built in the *future*—yes, built by the Russians I suppose, but not by any Russian engineer alive in 1942, that I can assure you.”

“But why, Turing? What are they here for? Was this ship sent here deliberately? How could it possibly happen? Time travel is a thing for fanciful writers to bandy about.”

“We may probably never know the how or why of it all. But we do know the facts we have witnessed, Admiral. The ship was here, then it vanished and appeared in the Med a year later. That’s why we never saw it waving at us in the Straits of Gibraltar or Suez. It was somewhere else, moving in *time*, Admiral. Then it vanishes at St. Helena and re-appears 7,800 miles away overnight! Again, it could only do so by moving in *time*, or possibly through some higher dimension. We may never know this either.”

“Have they come here for a purpose? This is a warship. Were they sent here with some mission? After all, the history of this period is fairly critical, and as I think on it now, this ship was making a beeline right for the

conference between Churchill and Roosevelt at Argentia Bay, and it bloody well blasted anything that tried to stop it, the American Task Force 16 getting the worst of it."

"What you say makes a great deal of sense, Admiral," said Turing. "Can you imagine that atomic weapon falling at Argentia Bay and killing both the Prime Minister and the American President in one fell swoop?"

"Believe me, I've had nightmares about it, Turing. The Government has had nightmares about it ever since, though now I think we can safely say that the Germans don't have these weapons after all—not the naval rockets or the warhead that was so terrible to behold. You should have seen it, Professor. It was rather chilling."

"And again, now this question of why we have seen no other deployment of these rockets by the Germans in a long year makes perfect sense. They never had them! Oh they're working on designs of their own now, but not like the rockets that have been pounding the fleet, eh?"

Tovey sighed, his eyes searching, concerned. "I had a perfect opportunity to see just how many rockets this ship had left, Turing, and I let this devil go. Had it by the tail and let it slip away."

"That may have been the wisest course, sir," said Turing earnestly. "If you had fought your battle, and lived through it, then we might not have come to this conclusion here today."

"It's just that the man claimed to want nothing more to do with our war, as he put it—this Captain Nemo. He said he was only trying to get his ship and crew home. I wonder if this whole affair is some kind of macabre accident?"

"That may, in fact, be the simple truth of the matter," Turing suggested. "Perhaps they are as bewildered about all this as we are. Perhaps the ship does find itself here by accident, and has not been sent here for some darker purpose. But one thing now looms as a most grave and dire threat either way. The *presence* of this ship has surely changed the course of events, sir. That engagement in the North Atlantic, the use of precision rocketry, atomic weapons…I'm afraid this ship has opened Pandora's Box, Admiral Tovey. I am aware, as you may now be, that His Majesty's government has undertaken to disperse its leadership assets all across the Kingdom, and has intensified several projects involving high level physics… It's as if they were preparing for something they fear might come—something to do with these weapons this ship has so ably demonstrated."

“I can’t say I find that prospect comforting,” said Tovey.

“Yes, and consider this…Surely these engagements would have never been fought in the Atlantic or the Med were it not for the strange presence of this ship. Why, we’ve canceled the planned air raid on Kirkenes and Petsamo, pulled Force Z off Operation Pedestal early, canceled Operation Jubilee, delayed the Torch landings. Those decisions must have had some impact on the course of the war. Beyond that, the Americans declared war because of the actions of this single ship and, were it not here, how long might it have been before that country really got involved in this conflict? Now the Japanese are in for it! This ship is a rock in the stew they have planned for the Americans.”

“Indeed,” said Tovey. “There’s a big operation underway in the Pacific. The Japanese are definitely coming south. FRUMEL HQ is all up in arms about it in Melbourne. This Darwin business is perhaps only the tip of the sword.”

“Think about it from another perspective, sir. We’ve fought with this ship. Men are dead now who might have lived out this war, and others may be alive that might have been killed. Surely you realize that could change everything from this day forward.”

“I see…” said Tovey, considering this for the first time.

“Well I can’t imagine the Americans would have come to the fight as soon as they did, in spite of Churchill’s hopes to the contrary. This ship made that certain when it attacked Task Force 16 and sunk the *Wasp*. It might have done that intentionally, as you proposed, though I can’t imagine why. Surely they must have realized that such an act would have dramatic consequences.”

“Perhaps, Turing, though this Captain Nemo did hint that there was some disagreement aboard *Geronimo* as to how they should act, and that he was indisposed when that action was fought. I came to the conclusion that there may have been a wolf in their fold, a hard liner in command at that time. This Admiral seems to be a good measure more sensible.”

“It’s chilling to think about in any wise, Admiral. Consider it…if this ship is from the future, then they have tremendous knowledge. They know everything that happens from our day to theirs!”

“And where to stick a crowbar in the corners of history, if they ever had a mind to.”

“Precisely, sir.”

Tovey rubbed his forehead, still bewildered by it all, and half way

shaking his head at the notions they had discussed here. “Well, Professor Turing, those photos were taken three days ago. I’ve had my ear to the ground on these events ever since I received them. We’ve already sent word to FRUMEL to keep an eye out for this ship, and I suppose we’ll have to tell the Americans about this as well. Whether they’ll believe what we’ve just discussed here is another matter entirely, but we’ll have to tell them. I’ve got a man in mind for the job, but I’m afraid a great deal has happened in the Pacific since these photographs were taken. You may have heard about it through these dark channels you mentioned earlier, but it’s quite a story indeed.”

“I’m all ears, sir,” Turing smiled. “And I have all afternoon if you’d care to join me for lunch.”

Chapter 2

23 August, Year Unknown

Minutes after they arrived at the distant island outpost of St. Helena, Rodenko knew something was wrong. He had been tracking three aircraft, and the two British cruisers, *Norfolk* and *Sheffield*. The planes were orbiting at intervals to cover the seas around the island, while the two cruisers had maneuvered to skirt each side, one sailing down past the small harbor at Jamestown and the other bearing along the northeastern shore. They were to meet at Sandy Bay to watch *Kirov* drop anchor, but minutes after the big battlecruiser slipped into the thick gray fog north of the island, Rodenko glanced at his screen and saw that all his contacts had vanished. All the drama and struggle of the world they had been sailing in vanished with them, and in time it became clear to them all that they were again lost on an empty sea, in a forsaken world.

Admiral Volsky circled round to the north cape and when they saw the complete destruction of Jamestown harbor, they knew they had slipped into that nightmare world again, perhaps of their own making, where every shore was blackened with the fire of a war they could scarcely imagine.

They were days at sea before they saw land again. St. Helena was as isolated as any island in the world, a thousand miles east of Angola, Africa in the South Atlantic. The route south was even more barren, if the sea could be described as such, empty of life or any sign of human activity whatsoever. They sailed around Cape Town, finding it, too, had been the recipient of a multi-megaton payload of death. What the continent looked like inland they could not say, but no man wanted to go ashore to find out.

They soon found themselves in the Indian Ocean, sailing well south of Madagascar and heading east. There would be nothing to see for days on end, but in time they reached the distant shores of Australia, angling along the northwest coast of that continent, past Barrow Island and into a dappled archipelagos stretching west of Dampier off the coast of the Northern Territories. The seas were calm and cobalt blue, beneath a cloudless azure sky, and the temperatures were warm and balmy, much to the delight of the crew. When they caught a glimpse of Malus Island, saw the pristine white sand beaches and unspoiled reefs, they all took heart. Crewmen spotted

manta rays and schools of fish in the clear waters, and the stony cliffs were circled by terns, ospreys and sea eagles. Farther out in the Indian Ocean to the north they spotted squadrons of blue nose dolphins leaping in the ocean spray. The place was actually a series of small islets, connected by sandy tails that were more prominent at low tide so that one could walk along them from one to another. Compared to the charred shores they had visited earlier, it seemed a paradise.

Admiral Volsky decided to drop anchor briefly here, at a location Fedorov named Whaler's Bay, and they put men ashore to check on the general condition of the island and take water and soil samples. The main island to the northeast was empty, but they were elated to find eight intact dwellings along the southern shore of the western islet, dubbed Rosemary Island. There were also the remains of old whaling and pearling stations that operated on Malus Island in the late 1800s. No sign of recent human habitation was seen, though the homes were all in good condition, summer dwellings and vacation spots that had survived the war.

"This gives me some hope, at least," the Admiral said to his young first officer, and Fedorov nodded.

"It seems there was nothing here to merit a missile."

"Thank God for that. With any luck we may even find people alive on this coast. Perhaps not in the major cities or ports, but in scattered enclaves like this."

"It was largely uninhabited," said Fedorov, "even in our time. We might find something more at Port Hedland, about a hundred miles up the coast. Then again, that was a major industrial port, one of the largest tonnage wise in Australia, even though the town there is relatively small. It might have been targeted. Beyond that lies Broome, then Derby on King's Bay, Wyndham, and then Port Darwin. Yet it is a thousand miles to Darwin from our present location. Australia is a very big place."

They would spend six hours there, largely because there was water to be found that tested safe, and they wanted to set up a brigade to haul it to the ship and replenish their stocks. Several men had rigged out makeshift poles for fishing from the gunwales, and the mood of the crew was better than it had been for many long weeks. The place seemed a fisherman's paradise, and the men hauled in nets with coral trout, red emperor, scarlet sea perch, snapper and other specimens they could not name.

On the bridge, Captain Karpov walked over to the Admiral's chair, a

smile on his drawn face. “Have we finally found your island, Admiral?”

Volsky laughed. “I’m not so sure. This one doesn’t seem large enough for the crew, and I don’t see any palm trees—or pretty young girls. Perhaps we will keep looking, but I think we have finally reached the edge of paradise at long last. The world north may be blighted by the insanity of war, but there is no sign of it here. If our luck holds we may find my island in due course. Anything on the map that looks promising, Fedorov?” He craned his neck, looking for his *Starpom*, the ex-navigator who had proved such an invaluable pillar during their last ordeal in the Mediterranean Sea. He found him staring up at the ship’s chronometer, a worried expression on his face.

“Fedorov, what are you doing there? A watched clock never chimes.”

“This one will,” said Fedorov. “We’ve been sailing eleven days and eighteen hours since we left St. Helena.”

“Yes, and all we have had these last days at sea are endless empty hours. Why are you counting them?”

Fedorov said nothing for a moment, though he wore a look of obvious concern. “Will the shore parties be long?”

“What? The shore parties? Oh, I would think they will finish up in a few hours. Would you like to go ashore yourself?”

“Me sir? No, I think it best to stay on the ship just now. In fact, I think it would be wise to make certain we get all the men back aboard as soon as possible.”

The Admiral frowned, his eyes admonishing beneath his heavy brows. “What is it now, Fedorov? What are you worried about?”

“The time, sir. We’re nearly at the twelve day mark, and… well every twelve days we have moved in time. We may still be moving for that matter. It could be that we have not yet settled in the here and now, if you follow me, sir. If that is the case, I would like to make sure we have everyone aboard well before midnight. And I think we had better tell Dobrynin in engineering to keep a good ear on the reactors. They act up every time we have moved into the past.”

Volsky’s expression faded. “Dobrynin is running a maintenance operation now. Don’t worry about the reactors. As for the men, there will be many who might prefer to stay right here,” he mused. “If given the choice of this island or another ride on this ship, I might be sorely tempted as well. But let us suppose you are correct.” He turned, leaning towards the communications station. “Nikolin!”

“Sir?”

“Radio Sergeant Troyak and have him wind up his detail as soon as possible. I would like every man aboard by 20:00 hours. It will be getting too dark for safe operations ashore in any case.”

“Yes,” said Karpov. “If any man is tempted to drop anchor here we had better be wary. Let us not forget Orlov.”

“Agreed,” said Volsky. “Mr. Karpov, can you signal those men fishing from the foredeck and see if anyone knows how to snorkel?”

“Sir?”

“Yes, see if they can find us a few nice fat lobsters, or even crabs. I’m tired of galley food and the taste of something fresh would do us all some good. Anyone care to join me for dinner?”

Rodenko, Tasarov and Samsonov were quick to make their reservations, and though they would enjoy their seafood fest that night, time had other plans for them.

* * *

It would be many long hours before they realized what had happened. Troyak’s men searched the island for anything else of use, skirting along the white strands to more rocky shores where they saw images of strange creatures carved in the red stone. They searched every building, finding some magazines and newspapers, all in English, and they brought them back to the bridge for the officers to review. Fedorov found them of particular interest.

“At last!” he said enthusiastically when the Marine corporal brought them in. “Now we find out what happened!” He took them eagerly. There was a copy of the NT News out of Darwin and his eye immediately ran to the date: 15 September, 2021, and the headline was dark and ominous. Fedorov knew just enough English to know what it meant:

WAR ESCALATES!
MAJOR ACTION IN SOUTH CHINA SEA!
RAN FRIGATE SUNK!

“Nikolin,” Fedorov said excitedly. “Read this and translate, will you?”

Nikolin took up the paper and read, his eyes dark and serious as he translated. “Hostilities escalated today in the South China Sea with a nuclear

ballistic missile attack on the US Carrier task force *Eisenhower*. It was reported that up to ten missiles, were used in the strike, at least two with nuclear warheads, and five ships were sunk in the attack: *Eisenhower* and four escorts, including RAN escort frigate *Darwin* which was operating as part of a combined fleet security force. United Nations Security Council was quick to condemn the action as a flagrant escalation, though any formal resolution was vetoed by both China and Russia."

Fedorov's face registered real surprise, and both Karpov and Admiral Volsky drew near, looking at the newsprint with obvious misgiving.

"People are still firing nuclear missiles at battle fleets," said Volsky…No offence meant, Karpov."

Karpov nodded. "None taken, sir. But it does feel somewhat odd to realize I was the first man with his finger on the trigger like that—and just a matter of seven weeks ago in the actual time we have lived out here on the ship, yet it seems another life to me now."

"It is another life, Karpov," said Volsky. "You're another man now, and better off for it."

"Aye, sir."

"There's more, Admiral," said Nikolin, continuing. "SinoPac representatives claimed the US task force was violating territorial waters, which American representatives immediately denied. Ambassador Stevenson stated categorically that the fleet was sailing in international waters and vowed the strongest possible measures would be taken in reprisal. The attack followed the controversial sinking of the sole Chinese aircraft carrier *Liaoning* on September 7th, presumably by torpedo attack from an American submarine as the carrier embarked from Dalian and entered the East China Sea south of the 38th parallel. Analysts believe the attack may have been a reprisal for the sinking of the American attack submarine USS *Key West* by a Russian cruiser August 28th in the Pacific, as well as a warning to the Chinese not to press their demands for full integration of Taiwan into the People's Republic of China. Tensions between SinoPac and the West have been high since the loss of a Russian ship in the Arctic Sea in July and several incidents involving both Russian and British planes in the waters around Iceland."

"Nothing seems to change," said the Admiral. "Our pilots have been thumbing their noses at the Americans for decades, and they have done the same with us. What else, Nikolin?"

The young Lieutenant continued. “It was also learned that US Naval forces have now put to sea on full war alert, sailing from ports on the east and west coast of the United Sates and that the US was now on a full wartime footing. Meanwhile, missile attacks continue on the beleaguered isle of Taiwan after hostilities began there earlier this week, further ramping up the tension. No use of nuclear weapons has been reported. NATO representatives in Europe have also detected a large Russian buildup along the German border, and increased activity at bases in Poland.”

“So it began in Asia,” said Karpov. “The Chinese patience ran out with Taiwan and the Americans sunk that old relic we sold them after they lost that sub.” The *Liaoning* had been originally built by the Russians, laid down as the *Riga* on December 6, 1985 and eventually launched as the *Varyag*, The ship was never really completed, lacking electronics, weapon systems and other key components. When the old Soviet Union broke up it was given to Ukraine and began to rust away, eventually stripped of most useful equipment before it was put up for auction. An enterprising Chinese businessman bought the hulk under the pretense he was hoping to create a floating theme park with it at Macao, and it was summarily turned over to the Chinese authorities, refitted and completing sea trials in 2012.

“That ship was built at Nikolayev South,” said Fedorov. “Shipyard 444. That’s a very unlucky number for the Chinese. It looks like it was ill fated after all. I wonder why the US targeted that ship for reprisal.”

“I was slated to serve on that ship,” said Volsky. “Better to die in battle than sit there as an amusement park like *Minsk* and *Kiev*.”

The Chinese had also acquired those aging Russian carriers. *Minsk*, once the heart of the Russian Pacific Fleet, had been docked at Shenzhen to create a theme park called “Minsk World” for Chinese tourists, and *Kiev* was now the centerpiece of the Binhai Aircraft Theme Park at Tianjin. The Russian Navy had become a laughing stock, their once proud ships now places for Chinese tourists to amuse themselves… Until the new *Kirov* was launched.

“This could have been one of a number of incidents that preceded a general war,” said Fedorov. “So it didn’t happen during the first cold war. The future we saw was the result of a war fought in our day, and just after we displaced in time. It looks like Russia and China squared off against the West and it came to more than harsh words in the Security Council.”

“So nothing really changed,” said Karpov. “It was still old unfinished business where Russia and the West are concerned. As for China, this attack

against Taiwan was inevitable. I have no doubt that the Americans were moving that carrier group up as a show of force. The Chinese taught them a lesson. Good for them. Is there any further news?”

“That looks to be the latest paper. Apparently whoever owned those homesteads on the island took off for the mainland soon after this date. I suppose if we investigate the other towns to the north we may find more news sources like this.”

“I think we must do this,” said Volsky. “As much as I hate to discover more ruined cities, for the sake of the men, I think we must discover what really happened—how this business ended.”

“We have already seen how it ended,” said Karpov, “and thinking I was the man who started it has not been an easy thing to carry.”

“Don’t be too hard on yourself, Captain,” said Volsky. “The choice to use nuclear weapons in war was not ours this time, not yours either. What chills me now is the thought that we can never get back to our old lives again. *This* is our world now. This is home, gentlemen, all that’s left of the world after the war that began in 2021. We slipped out the door just before it happened, like a thief in the night, but now we live with what remains—if anything does remain.”

“So much for our visit to paradise,” said Karpov.

Chapter 3

Kirov sailed north that night, passing Port Hedland just before dawn, but seeing no sign of life there. They were well out to sea again, some fifty miles off the Australian coast and heading north for the small port of Broome at about 18:00 hrs when Fedorov saw the ship's chronometer finally pass through the twelfth full day. It was a tense moment for him, though the other officers were not aware of it and many were below decks at the time on rest shifts. He wanted to be on the bridge when the second hand swept out the last of the twelve day interval, and was peering keenly through the viewports for any sign of a discoloration or disturbance in the sea. Yet he saw nothing, and a call to engineering also reported no fluctuations or odd vibrations from the reactors. All seemed as it was before, and he watched the sun rise on August 24, year still unknown, without realizing that the ship was about to cruise through an unseen barrier, completely imperceptible, through the reefs and shoals of nowhere to a place where the rising sun they would next see would be something quite unexpected.

They moved northeast, bypassing Derby as it was deep within King Sound, and soon they were entering the calm waters of the Timor Sea, skirting the sculpted red rock and terraced hills of the Kimberly Coast, near the famous Montgomery Reef off Doubtful Bay, which just seemed to emerge from the sea at low tide, revealing opalescent strands of pearly white and aquamarine tide pools fringing the green islands. Night fell, and it was just near dawn again on August 25 after they navigated the Bonaparte Archipelago, and rounded the capes at Bougainville and Londonderry north of Wyndham. As the sun rose, Rodenko began to see some odd signal returns to the northwest, about a hundred and fifty kilometers off the coast of Timor Island.

"It comes and goes, sir," Rodenko explained. "I think I'm seeing something at about 250 to 300 kilometers out near maximum range on the Fregat-MAE-7 system, then I lose it, and I can get no clear signal processing on the POYMA data unit."

"A signal return at that range would have to be an aircraft, yes?" Admiral Volsky was back on the bridge and and sitting squarely in his chair watching the distant Australian coast shrouded by haze, his island reverie interrupted

by Rodenko's report.

"Yes, sir. I can only see surface contacts out to about 120 kilometers."

Volsky thought for a moment, wondering, and thinking discretion would be advised, no matter what their present circumstances might indicate—that they were still adrift on an empty sea in an equally empty world. "Perhaps we should investigate this further with the KA-40. What does my *Starpom* think?"

"I don't like it, sir—the signal fading in and out like that. It leads me to suggest we keep everyone, and everything, aboard and simply await further developments."

"I see..." Volsky gave his First Officer a long look, then nodded his approval. "Very well, we will keep all our eggs in one basket for the moment. But I was climbing a ladder a few weeks ago and got a very rude awakening. Let us bring the ship to condition three alert, and I think we should make an announcement. The crew has had a good long rest on the voyage from St. Helena. You may do the honors, Mister Fedorov."

"Aye, sir. If you wish."

Fedorov made a short statement over the ship's PA system, announcing that they were receiving some unusual traffic on the radar and a precautionary drill to battle stations was in order. They could almost hear the collective groan from the crew, and initial response was sluggish, but in time midshipman and warrant officers were reporting to the bridge as one station after another was cleared for action, and the crew stood its level three watch on all systems. Fedorov saw Samsonov activating panels in the Combat Information Center.

"What are you doing, Samsonov? We have no hostile contacts for the moment."

"Correct, sir, but a level three alert requires me to key and initiate all systems and report general readiness for action." The big man continued working even as he spoke, his arms moving as if in unison with the ship's systems, human servomechanisms opening toggle guards and flipping switches to feed life to his CIC panels. A few seconds later he finished, finally swiveling his chair to face Fedorov and make his report.

"Sir, I report all systems nominal, and our current missile inventory now reads as follows: Moskit II, nine missiles; MOS-III, nine missiles; P-900 cruise missile system, eight missiles; S-300 SAM system, thirty-five missiles; Klinok SAM system, thirty-seven missiles; *Kashtan* system has not been used

and is at full load-out; *Shkval* torpedo System, six available; Vodopad tubes with UGST Torpedo System, fifteen available; 152mm deck guns, eighty-six percent; 100mm deck gun, ninety-eight percent; close in defense systems, ninety-four percent."

"Thank you, Mister Samsonov."

Admiral Volsky looked at his First Officer, frowning. "Running a bit thin on SSMs."

"We're lucky to have even those available, sir. But it's the SAM systems I am more concerned about for the moment. Seventy-two missiles is a fairly weak air defense umbrella."

"We still have good munitions for close in defense," said Volsky. Both the Gatling guns and the *Kashtan-2* system seem to be well provisioned."

The Admiral looked out the forward view panes, taking in the glorious seascape and the distant silhouette of the Australian coast, broken by green archipelagos of sandstone islands circled by reefs in the clear blue waters of the Timor Sea. "I must tell you that I was very tempted to drop anchor permanently when I got a look at that Montgomery Island, Fedorov. Aside from the missing native girls, it was as close to paradise as any man is likely to get on this ship. And now here we are squinting at the radar screens, flipping switches and rattling off missile inventories." As he spoke he quietly gestured to Fedorov to come closer, and when the young officer was at his side he leaned heavily on one elbow, inclining his head and speaking in a lowered voice. "Alright Fedorov…What are you worried about. Out with it, but quietly please."

Fedorov blinked, then clasped his arms behind his back and spoke just above a whisper. "The interval, sir. We are well into our thirteenth day now, and all seems well…but it does not *feel* well, if that makes any sense. I don't like that signal fading in and out like that. And I would not be surprised to find that the ship is not yet stable, or confident that we still remain in a time beyond the year listed in that newspaper, 2021."

"Explain this interval business to me again."

"Well, sir, the initial accident that shifted our position in time occurred on 28 July and just as we rolled into 9 August, the detonation of the warhead Karpov fired shifted us forward in time again, or so we believe. Twelve days later we were in the Med, and shifted backwards, only a year later. Twelve days after that we disappeared just as we reached St. Helena."

"And with no nuclear detonation to help us on our way," said Volsky.

“That is what bothers me, sir. The shift was not accompanied by those strange effects as before. It was almost imperceptible, and the only way we realized it was when Rodenko’s radar began to malfunction. That same interval was reached again as we left Malus Island, and we have been cruising for some time with no signs of any further shift. Everything seems the same—the sea is naturally this color, and not altered by the strange effects we experienced before, but it does not *feel* the same. I can’t explain it, Admiral. I’m just worried about it.”

“We’ve seen nothing on radar—until this report Rodenko made a moment ago.”

“True sir, but these waters would not be much traveled, even in nineteen—” he caught himself, but Volsky realized what he was thinking.

“You believe the ship is trying to settle into some proper time, but it is a time in the past?”

“I do, sir. I explained it once like a rock skipping over water. We were thrown back to 1941, then skipped forward, arcing up through that bleak future time, and landed again, only this time in 1942. In the meantime we are able to move freely in space, and so we sailed from the Atlantic to the Med and found ourselves in quite a dilemma when we landed back in the middle of the war.”

“I understand…Yet these waters were fairly quiet, even in 1942, or even 1943 supposing your theory holds true and we skip another year forward.”

“That is one consolation,” said Fedorov, “if the history holds true, that is.”

“What do you mean?”

“In that last episode there were instances where ships were committed to battle early, and found to be in places the chronology of the real history says they should *not* be, Admiral. Things are changing, sir. Our presence in the past has obviously had some effect on the course of events. And then…well what about Orlov?”

“Yes, yes, what about Orlov,” Volsky repeated. “God only knows what he might be up to if he did survive as we now suspect.”

“It’s a real problem, sir. Before we had the chronology, and certain knowledge of every enemy we faced, right down to the exact ships and numbers of planes in each task force. Now I’m not so sure, and as serene as these waters may now seem, this theater of the war was a titanic naval struggle.”

“Yes, but these variations you reported from our operations in the Med—

they were minor, were they not?”

“Seemingly so, sir, though they brought us within range of 15 inch guns…” He let that sink in for a moment, and Volsky nodded his understanding.

“Suppose we do return to the 1940s. Suppose we are even marooned there indefinitely. After all, this stone skips only so far on the water, Fedorov. It must land somewhere.”

“Right, sir. If the interval holds, then we might skip slightly forward again, perhaps to 1943 or even 1944. Action in this region was mostly over by May of 1942 with the conclusion of the Battle of the Coral Sea. That was the Japanese attempt to take Port Moresby on New Guinea, and it resulted in the first carrier to carrier battle of the Pacific war. The Americans lost the *Lexington*, a high price to pay, though they sunk a light Japanese carrier and hurt the *Shokaku*, one of their bigger fleet carriers as well—and they stopped the invasion. That said, sir, I can’t even be certain that battle was even fought now.”

“What do you mean? Not fought?”

“America enters the war three months early, sir. At least I assume as much. It was our destruction of their Task Force 16 in the Atlantic, and the sinking of the *Wasp* that most likely prompted a declaration of war against Germany. If Japan sided with the Axis powers, then they had no reason to launch the Pearl Harbor attack if war began here in the Pacific at that same time.”

“Yes, I recall our earlier discussion on this.”

“Well don’t you see how significant that is, Admiral? If there was no attack on Pearl Harbor, then the whole chronology of the war at sea in the Pacific might have been severely altered. Major battles like Coral Sea and Midway might not have occurred. These are much more significant events than the early deployment of a few Italian cruisers in the Med, or even the movement of those two battleships to La Spezia. If there was no Pearl Harbor attack, or no operation against Midway, it would change everything. It could even be the real source of the variation in the history that has led to the war we read about in those newspapers.”

Suppose this interval holds true and we land here in 1943. What lies ahead?”

“We will have some real trouble on our hands if we stay on this course, Admiral. The Americans and Japanese were still locked in a bitter struggle

for the Solomons, at least in the history I know."

"You are speaking of Guadalcanal?"

"Well by February of 1943 that island had been secured, but the action shifted northeast to New Georgia and by August there was fighting for Vella Lavella, and also action in New Guinea as MacArthur drove on the vital airfield at Lae, and then against the Bismarck Barrier."

"Ah yes," said Volsky. "MacArthur, Halsey, Nimitz and Yamamoto. All circling one another like a pack of great sumo wrestlers."

"Yamamoto would have been killed in April of 1943, sir. But I can't be sure of this any longer. The history may no longer be reliable. If any one of these major battles was not fought, then there is no telling what might be happening in this theater, and that being the case, it won't be as easy to pinpoint our location in time."

"I see why you have been brooding so long over this, Fedorov. Your history has been all fouled up, and you've lost your way—we all have lost our way. Now I'm afraid we will have to yield that god-like advantage we had of knowing the enemy's every move. It evens things out somewhat, yes? Something tells me that both the Japanese and Americans will prove determined and dangerous foes in this theater, and we would be wise to avoid them and look for our island somewhere else. Perhaps we should reverse our course now and seek out safer waters."

"That might be wise, Admiral. Ahead lies the Torres Strait, the Coral Sea and the Solomons. Those were all violent war theaters in 1942 and 1943."

"Maybe we should have sailed south of the Australian continent."

"Indeed, sir. But who can say? We are still not sure where we are—in time that is."

"Yes, but you have that inner misgiving gnawing at you, Fedorov. It is just like my tooth when we get up north in the Arctic Sea. I've learned to pay attention to it, and so I take your warning here to heart. We will reverse course."

It was a sound and wise decision, they both knew, but one that would never come to pass. Rodenko was suddenly alert, his eyes fixed on his primary long range radar screen, and very intent.

"Signal returns again," he said quickly.

Both Volsky and Fedorov came to his side, their eyes searching the screen. "Where?" asked Volsky, squinting at the milky green readout of the radar.

“Here,” Rodenko pointed. “About 175 miles northwest of our position. It looks like a weather front developing, but then I lose it and everything is clear—no signal and no weather front.”

Volsky walked slowly to the starboard side of the bridge and peered through the viewport. The day was clear and warm, the pristine waters of the sun dappled Timor Sea stretching out behind them to an empty horizon. He watched for some time, thinking he saw the barest glimpse of white cloud there, but all seemed well.

“Here, sir,” said Fedorov. “We have another signal.”

The Admiral hastened back in time to see the cloudy returns of something building on the northwest edge of their radar scope. He craned his neck toward the viewport again, thinking to see telltale signs of a weather front.

“There, Admiral,” Rodenko pointed. “Do you see them. That’s a formation of aircraft. Look at the structure. It can be nothing else.” The signal quavered, clouded over, and then was gone again.

“We’re pulsing,” said Fedorov in a low voice, “shifting in and out of some more definite time frame.”

“If we only had some point of clear reference we might spot changes in the environment around us,” said Volsky, “but we are too far off shore. The ocean looks the same in every direction, and that distant coastline is lost in haze at this hour.”

“That’s Melville Island up ahead, Admiral,” said Fedorov. “We’re just west of the Beagle Gulf that would take us into Darwin.”

“What about the weather front?” said Rodenko. “It was the same way the first time. The weather changed abruptly.”

“Are you sure your equipment is sound?”

“All systems report green and nominal, Admiral. We had everything checked very thoroughly over the last eight days and we’ve even replaced the systems that were damaged by the first strafing run that caught us by surprise in the Med. No. My radar is not malfunctioning.”

“It’s not the weather I’m worried about,” said Fedorov, “though that is reason enough for concern. We have cloudless skies now, and nothing on the horizon, but you say the reading appears to be a *formation* of planes—multiple contacts, yes? That is not common in peace time.”

“Agreed,” Volsky said quickly. “I think it best that we move to level two alert, and if there is no objection I will come about and begin a graceful withdrawal from this sector. We’ll head west again.”

Fedorov thought for a moment. “I suggest we wait for a moment, sir. I think—”

“Level two alert, Mister Fedorov,” Volsky scolded. “A good *Starpom* immediately seconds a command level order, particularly one involving ship’s security.”

“I’m sorry, sir.” Fedorov turned to a watch stander and repeated the order. “Signal alert level two—ship wide alarm.”

“Aye, sir.”

The claxon was now clearly audible, and Volsky nodded his head, satisfied. “Now,” he said. “You have an opinion on our course?”

“If we assume the worst, that we are again settling into another time, and supposing it is still the 1940s, then those planes would either have to be flying from bases at Kupang on Timor Island, or else they are off carriers.”

“Could you get a read on their heading, Rodenko?” The Admiral wanted more information.

“The signal returns were too brief to process, but I did note the range was decreasing, not increasing.”

“That doesn’t sound very reassuring,” said Volsky. “If these were planes from a carrier group, where would they be headed, Mister Fedorov?”

“There were no major naval actions in this region, sir, except perhaps the raid on Darwin in February of 1942.”

“Could this be what we are seeing then?”

“Perhaps, sir. But it would mean we have slipped farther back. Thus far the interval has always seen us move forward in time, never appearing earlier than our first displacement.”

“Yes,” said Volsky, “and I suppose the good Admiral Tovey might have mentioned it if we did appear in February of 1942, and that becomes quite a puzzle if it is the case. We are missing weapons we would not have expended for another six months when we appeared in the Med!”

“I agree, sir,” said Fedorov. “A bit of a paradox when viewed from any perspective other than our own.”

“Then let us pretend Mother Time does not like her skirts ruffled too much, even if she has shown us a little leg. We already have a hand on her knee—our presence in 1941 has clearly caused a great deal of trouble. Perhaps she will not let us go any further with such a thing as you describe—this paradox business.”

“Then I can think of no major carrier action here in 1943, or later. But as I

have said, I cannot be sure of anything now. The course of events in the Pacific could all be radically different.”

“There it is again!” said Rodenko. “Much closer now! It looks like 150 kilometers and closing. Something coming out of a nice fat thunderstorm about fifty klicks behind it. …now it’s gone again, sir.”

The Admiral looked at Fedorov. “You are thinking a turn west would bring us into contact with a hostile carrier task force?”

“I can think of nothing else, sir.”

“Very well. Let us turn north for a time and see if we can get more information. But something tells me no matter which direction we head now, we are likely to find trouble. Helm come about to course zero, zero, zero. Speed twenty.”

Part II

The Operation

"The most dangerous thing in the world is an Admiral or a General with a map and a compass."

- Murphy's Law Of Combat #63b

Chapter 4

Yamashita set his teacup firmly on the table, savoring the nutty flavor with some satisfaction, and looked at Nagano with a glint in his eye. “It can be done,” he said with an air of calm assurance. “In light of our successful landing at Port Moresby, it is the logical next step.”

“You are aware that the army opposes any further consideration of operations on the Australian mainland.”

“Of course I am, but that is of no concern. They fret and chafe because they have ninety percent of the infantry in China now, and more to deal with than they expected. The fools. What has the invasion of China brought us but an unending war of occupation with 700 million Chinese, neh? Where are the resources this brings home to Japan?”

“Agreed, but the army will use this very same argument against the Australian operation. They claim that it will take at least ten divisions to control Australia, and they will not provide even a fraction of that willingly.”

“You and I both know that is ridiculous,” said Yamashita dismissively. “I took all of Malaya with just a single division—30,000 men against four times our number, and yet we prevailed. At this moment I have enough resources in 25th Army to carry out this operation alone. First off, the notion that we must occupy and control the whole of the Australian mainland is fallacious. It will do us no more good than the war in China. But what the army must realize is this—the resources and oil we have secured thus far in our drive south must be defended if they are ever to be of benefit. And to defend them we must build a strong outer line. The southwest perimeter now stretches from Singapore, through Batavia, Surabaya and Kupang, and its proper anchor is Darwin, not Kupang on Timor. By occupying Darwin our line cuts across the Timor Sea and is securely anchored on the Australian mainland. And Darwin is all we will need for the moment. From there our bombers can range on most other settlements of any consequence in the north.”

Osami Nagano sighed, his hand running over the back of his bald head as he considered. Chief of the Imperial Japanese Naval General Staff, his support would be essential if Yamashita was to have even the slightest chance of gaining approval for his operation. “I understand your logic, but the Army will say that bases on Timor will be sufficient.”

“Perhaps,” said Yamashita, “but leaving Darwin in enemy hands will tempt them to strongly occupy that place as their sole bastion in the north capable or projecting power into the Timor and Arafura Seas, and the Dutch East Indies…or even a return to New Guinea. B-17 bombers are already striking our establishment at Port Moresby—and this from airfields at Cairns and Cooktown on the other side of the Coral Sea! If the Americans put those planes at Darwin, and can protect them with fighters, then they will be able to bomb all the key oil and resource centers in Indonesia—perhaps even Jakarta, and these were our primary reason for driving south in the first place. A child can see this, and the Army must realize it as well.”

Nagano nodded, his eyes searching, considering. “How many divisions,” he then asked bluntly. “What will it take?”

“A single division, and I have that in hand now. With that I can secure Darwin, and then raid or occupy most of the minor ports on the northern coast as well. Of course, if the Army can spare me one further division, I can do much more.”

“And if the enemy sends reinforcements from the south?”

“Let them try. The roads are abysmal, bare tracks that are all but impassable for half the year. The whole area is wilderness. The distance from Darwin to Stanley is greater than that from London to Moscow! Their supply lines will have to stretch over some of the most barren and inhospitable terrain in the hemisphere. This is why we do not need to operate further south. If I push as far south as Katherine that will be more than enough to provide a trip wire defense should the enemy plan such a reinforcement. If they do so, our planes at Darwin will pound them to dust as they march north, and they will have no bases close enough to provide adequate air cover for their operations. For our part, if the navy cooperates, we can easily keep Darwin supplied by controlling the Timor Sea. With strong bases at both Darwin and Kupang, that will not be difficult.”

“Where will you land?”

“A direct assault is feasible, but I will also land troops to the Southwest near the Daly River or perhaps further east. We can launch this operation from Kupang and Amboina now. Give me that second division, and we can strike from Rabaul and Port Moresby and I will take Cooktown, Cairns, possibly even Townsville and secure the Coral Sea.”

“You are aware that Admiral Yamamoto is not in favor of this plan?”

“Yes, but perhaps he could be persuaded.”

“At the moment he has his eyes fixed on another operation aimed at drawing the American navy into a decisive engagement. He has wanted this from the very beginning, and when the operation against Pearl Harbor was canceled, and the Americans declined to rush boldly in with their War Plan Orange to relieve the Philippines, he was left unsatisfied.”

“What is the target this time?” Yamashita was increasingly frustrated, sighing heavily.

“Midway Island.”

“Midway? It is thousands of miles away, a bare speck in the sea! What could he possibly want with that island? It will not prove suitable for a base of operations against Hawaii, and will be impossible to keep well supplied. This is nonsense.”

“Perhaps, but that is what the Army is saying behind *your* back, Yamashita, that this plan to invade Australia is gibberish.”

“They say this because they believe we will need ten divisions, but I have shown clearly how a limited invasion can be successful, and very beneficial to our war aims. Combined with an operation to further isolate Australia, it becomes even more enticing, and strategically sound as well. We should be striking south from the Solomons to capture New Caledonia and even Fiji. Then where will the enemy base his operations? Samoa? You must convince Yamamoto that this operation can succeed.”

“But he will not have his decisive engagement—not here at Darwin.”

“That remains to be seen, Nagano. If not at Darwin, then he will have it in the Solomons. The Americans are not stupid. They will quickly surmise the danger that any thrust at New Caledonia will portend. They fought to save Port Moresby for a reason. If we take Darwin and threaten New Caledonia, and they will fight again. Mark my words. With Australia isolated they will have to come at us from somewhere else, the mid-Pacific, and this will take long-ranged sea power protected by aircraft carriers. Yamamoto will have his opportunity to smash the last of their carriers right here. At the moment you outnumber the Americans by more than two to one in that category, is that not so?”

“At the moment.”

“Then use this advantage to press for our most promising strategic options now! The isolation of Australia, and control of all the sea lanes from Guadalcanal and New Caledonia to Timor is a decisive advantage. Neutralize the waters north and east of Australia! Striking at Midway is stupid. It makes

no sense!”

“I cannot say I disagree. But Admiral Yamamoto…”

“Yes, Yamamoto. Always ready for a decisive engagement yet ever the reluctant admiral when it comes to the real necessities of strategic warfare.”

At this Nagano raised an eyebrow, and Yamashita was quick to sweeten his remark. “I mean no disrespect, of course.”

“Of course… but you must be careful, Yamashita. Tojo was not pleased to see you in the limelight after your Malaya Campaign. He wanted to get rid of you and send you to useless garrison duty in Manchukuo. It was Tojo who issued those travel orders to prevent your rightful welcome as a hero in Japan, and it was he who prevented your audience with his Imperial Highness.”

“I am well aware of Tojo’s opposition, both to these plans and to me personally.”

“Then you must realize that you can ill afford another enemy—particularly Yamamoto!”

“I understand…” Yamashita shook his head, lamenting his long rivalry with Tojo ever since the fateful *Ni-niroku jiken*, or 2-2-6 Incident as it was now called—the ‘deplorable incident in the capital’ that had seen an attempted coup. His appeal for leniency for the officers involved was not looked on kindly by the Emperor and, ever since, Yamashita had been skating on thin ice. Yet his military prowess was undeniable, and compensated for his failure in the more personal power squabbles involving army personnel.

“That said,” Yamashita moved on, “if Yamamoto could be persuaded to use your current naval advantage with this operation, I will deliver Darwin as the icing on the cake. I have the troops I need now. Just give me two carriers to cover the invasion, and enough transport, and I can take Darwin within a week. Please convey this to him, Admiral. Only you have the standing and authority to make this argument in a most convincing manner. I implore you. If we can convince Yamamoto, and the Navy can stand fast, then the Army will give us enough troops for the limited operations we propose. With two divisions, three at most, we could isolate Australia and perhaps even knock them out of the war.”

“A worthy goal,” Nagano agreed.

“Yes! The Americans will see this as surely as I do now, and they will fight. They tried to stop our Port Moresby operation and lost a carrier for it.

The *Lexington* is at the bottom of the Coral Sea. Thankfully Shigeyoshi Inoue had the backbone to press the invasion home in spite of the American counter operation. Now we have Port Moresby, neh? Now the Americans are denied a base from which their B-17 bombers would be pounding Rabaul. Soon we can also have Darwin and deny them that base as well. The Americans will see the noose tightening around Australia, and believe me, then Yamamoto will have his decisive engagement, I can assure you."

Nagano breathed deeply, nodding his assent. "I will present your proposal at the next meeting of the Imperial General Staff. Captain Tomioka in the planning division has also argued that we could take Australia with a token force. You are not alone in your views."

"Tomioka has a good head on his shoulders. Remember the Army-Navy agreement earlier this year which determined the strategic importance of Papua New Guinea and the Solomons in the first place. We must deprive the Allies of key positions they will most certainly use in their counter operations, and Australia is the foundation of their whole defense in this region. This plan is merely an extension of those same ideas. But do not say we will 'take' Australia. Argue that we will secure vital bases to defend Indonesia while isolating Australia at the same time and forcing the Americans to a decisive engagement here, where we have adequate resources and land based air power to support our carrier operations—not at Midway, a thousand miles east on an axis that leads us nowhere. This whole operation can be done with two divisions. Throw in one more, or even a few brigades for the Fiji-Samoa operation and we will have a decisive advantage in the Pacific for years."

"Very well, General. It is at least encouraging that someone in the Army is willing to side with the Navy and see the big picture. If the Tiger of Malaya says these things can be done, perhaps others will be convinced as well."

"Do not flatter me, Admiral. Just support me."

Nagano smiled. "Between the two of us," he said "we can hardly muster a single handful of hair, but our heads may prove to be of some use to the empire after all."

Chapter 5

Admiral of the Fleet Isoroku Yamamoto sat in his private cabin aboard the Battleship *Yamato*, and considered. His eyes played over the map, thoughts moving from one island to another in the long chain of the Solomons, imagining the position he would have three months from now, six months, a year. And always as he considered, it was the establishment of vital air bases that was uppermost in his mind. He had been a strong proponent of the Naval Air Arm for decades, opposing the construction of large unwieldy battleships like the one now serving as his headquarters—'Hotel *Yamato*,' the men called it, for the ship had done little in the way of real fighting thus far in the war.

Now, as his eye strayed east to the tiny islet of Midway, he still pictured the great ship leading a long line of battleships, the heart of the fleet, but to what end? The carriers were tasked with finding and destroying the enemy fleet, not his battleships. If he took the big ships east what would they do beyond burning up enough fuel to run the entire navy for the next three months? Did he really expect the Americans to sortie with their battle fleet at Pearl Harbor? Those old battleships were already obsolete, he knew. They could not find his fleet, nor could they catch it if they did.

No… It was the carriers that would decide this war. He had been wrong about Pearl Harbor and was inwardly glad the operation had been deemed unnecessary. Was he wrong about Midway now? The more he considered, the more Nagano's arguments began to make sense to him. It was the carriers, the carriers, the *carriers*. Every operation conceived by the navy thus far had begun with the assignment of the vital carrier division to be responsible as both a primary strike force and defensive covering force. And where were the American carriers now? Were they east at Midway? Were they in Pearl Harbor? Intelligence answered both these questions with a certain negative. *No*. They were operating southeast of the Solomons, from Noumea on New Caledonia and Suva Bay in the Fiji Islands. He wanted a decisive engagement, but where would he find it, in the east against Midway and Pearl Harbor, or right here in the Solomons?

He had three carrier divisions at his disposal now—right here, right now. There were at least three enemy carriers operating in these waters—right

here, right now. To launch his Midway operation he would have to take all these ships home to Kure and other bases in Japan to refuel and rearm for the long sea voyage east. Yet he could launch this operation "FS," as it was now being called, from his present position, right now. And Yamashita's plan for Darwin was also correct, he knew, though he could not condone any further attempt to occupy the vast Australian mainland. But Darwin could be taken easily enough, particularly with Yamashita in command.

He sighed…What was he waiting for? They called him the 'Reluctant Admiral' behind his back, though no man would ever dare such disrespect to his face. In some ways it was true, he knew. He had vigorously opposed the useless invasion and occupation of Manchuria, and strongly argued against war with the United States. These were positions that made him a very unpopular man, so unpopular at one time that he had been informed of plots against his life. So the Navy sent him off to sea, away from the mainland, and believed in his promise that if war ever did come, he would raise hell…for six months…for a year he had told them, and then he could guarantee nothing more.

Of course they did not wish to hear that last bit. But thus far it was the American Navy that had been most reluctant to engage him. When Pearl Harbor was wisely canceled, he thought the attack on the Philippines would immediately trigger their War Plan Orange, and was surprised to see that the Americans did not rush boldly in as so many believed they would. Nimitz and Halsey had been crafty, and very elusive. Instead they began to build a center of gravity in the southeast, on New Caledonia, Fiji and Samoa. They had begun moving vast amounts of equipment and supplies to Australia, and avoided major engagements until the recent 'Operation MO' had forced them to fight for Port Moresby. And now he realized that this was the only way to bring them to battle—by threatening a key base of operations that they dearly wanted to retain.

What did they prize now? Where were they building strength? Midway was said to have no more than a single battalion and a few old fighters and seaplanes in garrison. Yet at Noumea the enemy strength was building day by day. What would he use that force for? The answer was obvious: they would begin a drive northwest into the Solomons aimed at eventually reaching Rabaul. From there they would be able to outflank our new bastion at Port Moresby, and our positions at Buna and Lae in Papua New Guinea as well. From Rabaul they would have a strong air base to strike this very place where

he sat in Hotel *Yamato*, pouring over his maps—the island of Truk, Japan's chief naval base in the Pacific.

The longer he considered it, the more he saw the truth in Nagano's words, and the wisdom in Yamashita's plan as well. Yamamoto was a gambler in his heart, and had once remarked that 'people who don't gamble aren't worth talking to.' He had embraced his Midway operation for its daring element of surprise, and the risk inherent in the operation was a cherry he savored at the top. Yet even as initial preparations were being made for the operation he knew he would get if he wanted it, joint staff planning for 'Operation FS' continued as well. Imperial General Headquarters Army and Navy Section orders, were already being formulated, and he had the initial drafts in hand.... '*Carry out the invasions of New Caledonia and the Fiji and Samoa Islands; destroy the main enemy bases in those areas, establish operational bases at Suva and Noumea; gain control of the seas east of Australia, and strive to cut communications between Australia and the United States….*'

Now he saw that the safer play, the wiser play, was to push his chips out onto the Solomons, and beyond, as these orders envisioned. His Midway operation would be nothing more than a grand distraction and a waste of valuable fuel, and above all, a waste of precious time. If he moved east he might find and destroy anything the Americans sortied against him from Pearl Harbor. If he moved south—he would find and destroy their carriers. It was now so obvious to him that he was amazed at his own bull-headedness in not seeing it sooner. And so he decided, with a heavy sigh, and let go of his dreams of landing on Midway and threatening Hawaii.

The enemy is right here, and I will fight him here, he thought, as he pushed the map aside, reaching for the bell to summon his personal attendant. It was time to write his letters, a ritual that he kept to every night, and tonight he would spend time in his mind and heart with his friends and family back home, and with his dear Chiyiko, the Geisha that waited for him in Tokyo.

I will give this to my Chief of Operations tomorrow, he thought. Kuroshima will know what to do. Let him seal himself in his quarters for a week in a fog of incense and cigarette smoke and he will deliver a plan worthy of our efforts. In the meantime I will tell Yamashita to get his men ready for Darwin, and the stubborn mules in the Army can go to hell. I am Isoroku Yamamoto, Admiral of the Combined Fleet! What I put my will to, and name to, will be done. But first…the plan….the operation. It must be honed and sharpened like the finest sword, and balanced and timed like the

workings of a clock. Yes, the operation.

* * *

Weeks later Yamashita had what he wanted. Nagano informed him that the Navy's 5th carrier Division, would be dispatched by Combined Fleet to support a limited operation to seize Darwin and deny the Allies that vital base as part of an overall plan aimed at isolating Australia. Reconnaissance as far south as Katherine would be permitted, but no further. The Army had been pacified with assurances that no attempt would be made to seriously occupy the continent, but they had been finally convinced that the occupation of Darwin would both anchor the defensive line that stretched all the way back to Singapore, and also provide a base from which Japanese bombers could pound and neutralize most other enemy holdings in the Northern Territories of Australia. Yamashita's boast, that he could take Darwin with troops he already had in hand, was called. There would be no further troop assignments for the Darwin operation unless they came from the 18th Army on New Guinea. But they reluctantly released the Nagoya 3rd Division, *Ko-heidan*, the Lucky Division as it was called. One of the oldest veteran formations in the Imperial Army, it had a long record of achievement as far back as the first Sino and Russo-Japanese wars, and it had served with distinction in Manchuria.

A second division was designated as a strategic reserve for the operation, the Osaka 4th Division, presently in the home islands and again headquartered at Osaka Castle. These would be the only bones they would throw the navy for some time, still obsessed with their campaign in China, but they would have to do. The Lucky Division would be moved forthwith to Rabaul, where sufficient transport would be gathered to enable operations aimed at Noumea and Suva Bay. The Osaka division, sometimes called the Yodo Division after the river that wound its way through its home province, would eventually be moved south to stand as a theater reserve for all Navy operations associated with 'Operation FS.' In the meantime, positions recently secured on Guadalcanal and at Tulagi would be strengthened as forward bases for this campaign.

With the Midway operation canceled, planning went forward from May through August of 1942, when it was deemed that all was now in readiness, awaiting only the final approval and order of Yamamoto himself. The date

was finally set: August 24, 1942, and the Darwin operation would begin hostilities led by the 5th Division carriers *Zuikaku, Shokaku,* and the light carrier *Zuiho*, as it would most likely prove a compelling distraction to draw enemy attention to the west.

In the meantime, the Combined Fleet would embark from Rabaul and Truk with two more assault elements. The 2nd Carrier Division with *Hiru* and *Soryu* would cover the main amphibious thrust southeast from Rabaul, while Yamamoto would lead the heart of the fleet with the 1st Carrier Division under Nagumo comprised of the venerable *Akagi* and *Kaga*, the largest carriers in the fleet, and a strong surface action group centered around his own flagship, the largest battleship in the world, *Yamato*. And there was more… *Yamato's* sister ship, dubbed "battleship number two" for the long years of its top secret construction program, was now also ready for operations. The ship was over three months ahead of schedule, commissioned into the fleet as *Musashi* in April of 1942. She would take her rightful place in the First Battleship Division alongside *Yamato* and the older battleships *Mutsu* and *Nagato* by June. Her gunnery trials had been completed at Kure by August 5th, the original date scheduled for her commissioning, and so Yamamoto ordered the ship to sail for Truk, where it arrived August 10th.

Yamamoto's thought was to keep the ship at Truk as a reserve, and use it for headquarters operations there, freeing *Yamato* for operations at sea. As a last component of her training, he had *Musashi* work out in aircraft drills with the carrier *Zuikaku* before it was released for the Darwin operation, and when he met with the Commander of the 5th Carrier Division, Admiral Hara, he received a request for one more battleship to be assigned to the western prong of the operation at Darwin.

"Why not send *Musashi*," Hara smiled. The big man was nicknamed 'King Kong,' not only for his size but also for his disposition after too much Saki. He was proud of his victory over the Americans in the Coral Sea, the operation that had given the empire Port Moresby, and ready for yet more glory. The thought that he might wrangle away a new battleship for the Darwin operation was enticing. "*Musashi* performed very well in our recent drills, and so she is already well coordinated with my carrier staff. She would be a wonderful addition, and her guns would pound any garrison in Darwin into submission very quickly. Yamashita will simply waltz ashore and set his men to cleanup operations."

"You've already got three of my carriers, Hara, and now you are after my

battleships! I assigned you this mission based on your skill as a carrier commander. You did a fine job with Vice Admiral Takagi in the Port Moresby Operation. I must tell you that Takagi wanted this operation as well, but Imperial General Staff has sent him to Taiwan to take command of the Mako Guard District. So you'll have complete control of the carriers this time out. As for *Musashi*, the ship is just commissioned," said Yamamoto.

"A perfect first trial for her," Hara pressed. "Leaving her in Truk while everyone else is out on operations will be bad for morale. We built these ships to use them, neh? You'll still have plenty more battleships at Truk. Give me *Musashi*, and I'll return her in short order with her first battle star."

Yamamoto smiled. "I'm afraid that is impossible. *Musashi* will be assigned to fill out 1st Battleship Division. And remain with *Yamato* at Truk. Combined Fleet Headquarters will be moved to that ship. In its place you will be assigned *Mutsu* and *Nagato*, both to be sent to Amboina where elements of the ground operation will embark for Darwin."

"Very well," Hara relented. "They will do. We do not expect any serious naval threat in the Darwin Operation. With our air base at Port Moresby operational now, the Americans cannot enter the Coral Sea without our knowing about it, let alone try to navigate the Torres Strait. This will be a very simple operation."

"I am glad to hear your confidence," said Yamamoto, "because after you secure Darwin you will bring your carriers into the Coral Sea and stand by for further orders. Your destroyers may refuel at Moresby if necessary. Pending the success of Operation FS, you may either be ordered to strike the allied airfields at Cairns and Townsville, or to move southeast to support our operations against Noumea. Bring *Nagato* and *Mutsu* with you at this stage, as they will return to Truk when the overall operation concludes. And of course, you also have the battleship *Kirishima* in your carrier screen force. Bring all those ships as well."

"Captain Iwabuchi is on *Kirishima*, and I would be most happy to trade him and his ship for *Musashi*." Hara tried one more time, this time with a smile. Both men knew the irascible and unpredictable nature of Captain Iwabuchi, and Hara would just as soon be rid of the man, though he needed his battleship for his screening force as it was one of the very few that could run at 30 knots and keep pace with his carriers.

"Nice try, Hara, but I'm afraid you will have the pleasure of commanding Iwabuchi and his ship for the moment. *Musashi* stays at Truk."

“Very well,” Hara concluded. “We will smash Darwin and then come east to the Coral Sea and be ready for any operation you devise, I can assure you.”

“Good.” Yamamoto looked at the clock. “Our submarine screens should already be deploying, and air search operations will commence in two hours. Now it is time to see if we can wake up these sleeping dogs and get them into a fight.”

Even as the Admiral finished, he realized the true meaning of the idiom, ‘best to let sleeping dogs lie.’ It was an obvious warning, yet with nine carriers seven battleships and a host of cruisers and destroyers at his command the threat seemed remote. If this was to be the great battle he had sought from the beginning of the war, then Japan must surely win it decisively.

It will buy us at least another year, he thought, his mind turning to a distant future that he could dimly see. How many carriers do the Americans have in their shipyards at this very moment? They lost one in the Atlantic before the war even started and have been holding the others in a tight fist ever since. I have to find them this time, and finish them…Before they finish me.

Chapter 6

Lt. Commander Kennosuke Torisu peered through his periscope, a surge of both fear and excitement animating him now. The Captain of *I-63*, he had been cruising south, heading for the Australian coast to scout out the area prior to the planned operation. The Timor Sea and coastline of Australia had been a backwater sideshow in the Pacific war thus far. 1942 had seen Japan occupy Papua New Guinea and conclude successful operations aimed at Port Morseby and the Solomons. The Allies still clung to a makeshift base at Milne Bay, but had otherwise fallen back on New Caledonia and the Fiji-Samoa Island groups where they were slowly building up supplies and resources for a counteroffensive that was certain to come in the near future.

The American Admirals and war planners had been uncommonly cagey and elusive. The battleship squadrons Japan had planned on targeting with their abortive attack on Pearl Harbor had been proven as useless as more contemporary strategists had argued. A few had been moved to Suva Bay, the *Maryland*, *California* and *New Mexico* had been identified there to provide a little muscle as a deterrent to any major Japanese attempt to bombard the nearby island facilities from the sea. But the remainder of the older battleships once thought to be the backbone of the fleet remained berthed at Pearl, too slow to operate with the fast carrier groups that were the real striking power in the Pacific now.

As 1942 grew into late summer, both sides had consolidated their positions, with Guadalcanal being the front line in the Solomons and the place most likely to see conflict in the immediate future. The Japanese had troops at Tassafaronga, Lunga and Tulagi, though these places were not yet well established or fortified. The newly won Port Moresby was being prepared for use as a forward bomber base, but was itself visited daily by small squadrons of American B-17 bombers out of Cairns and Townsville.

A simmering stalemate had developed in the Pacific, with the Americans apparently not yet ready to take the offensive, and the Japanese fretting over how they could best provoke the United States into committing its forces to a decisive engagement. The Army and Navy had been squabbling with one another for long wasted months, thought Torisu as he scanned the horizon.

Now they have finally decided to act.

I-63 was at the forward edge of that action, a major operation aimed at Port Darwin, the westernmost thrust of a two prong attack that was now finally underway. Two hundred miles northwest of Torisu's position Admiral Hara steamed with the navy's newest carriers, *Zuikaku* and *Shokaku*, and the light carrier *Zuiho*, their crews already arming the planes to make the initial air strikes on Darwin.

Two hundred miles further, the transports at Kupang were already loading troops of the 21st Infantry Regiment, 5th Infantry Division, as well as the Kure 26th SNLF battalion and one mountain artillery battery, all forces that had been combed from General Yamashita's 25th Army in Indonesia. The remainder of the forces slated to make the Darwin attack would come in the second wave, embarking from Amboina and Kendari. The 2nd Recon Battalion was released to support the operation by Lt. Gen. Ilatazo Adachi commanding 18th Army in New Guinea. Other forces consisting of engineers and IJN Base force personnel would move in once the port had been secured. A reserve force of the 1st Amphibious Brigade was to be used to make secondary landings at Wyndham and perhaps even Broome. These troops had been scheduled for deployment in the Marshall Island group, but were diverted by Imperial General Headquarters for this mission.

Torisu's mission in *I-63* was simple and straightforward. Scout the way forward and report any enemy naval activity. The first three days of his mission had been uneventful, but now he was rubbing his eyes and squinting through his periscope at a large and dangerous looking warship cruising in the distance, too far away for him to do anything about it, yet far too close to the area of planned operations. It could pose a dangerous threat to the landings, and he knew he had to report it at once.

He looked away to consult his navigation charts and determine the ship's position, and when he looked again he was surprised to see his scope empty, with no sign of the contact. Yet a moment later he saw what looked to be a shimmering mirage on the horizon, and seconds later the ship was there again, a dark silhouette above the clear blue sea, set in sharp relief against the azure sky.

There must be low lying clouds obscuring his view, he thought when the ship seemed to fade and vanish again. He turned to his executive officer and ordered a radio buoy sent up at once. "Signal one ship, cruiser, perhaps bigger, and give our present coordinates. Heading is presently north as far as

I can make it. There is something wrong with the periscope today—either that or my eyes," he finished.

"It's the headache you have from all that toasting to victory in the ward room yesterday. Time to settle into operations, Captain, and make good on our hopes. Can we attack this ship?"

"Not at this range," said Toriso. "Our Type 95 torpedoes do not have the range of their older brothers." He was referring to the lethal Type 93 torpedo carried by most Japanese surface ships, capable of ranging out to 40,000 meters. It was so effective at long range that it would be dubbed the "Long Lance" by historian by Samuel Eliot Morison after the war, though it was largely unknown to the Americans in 1942—until their ships exploded far outside any perceived range of torpedo attack.

"I'm afraid all we can shoot with is our radio this time," said Toriso. "Send the signal. This is what we are here for—to spot enemy shipping. And from the looks of this ship I only hope it does not spot us! Quite the ghost dancer! It moves in and out of shadows on the sea, but it looks powerful, and very fast."

The message was tapped out at once, quickly received by Hama's carriers, but it was not necessary. The sharp eyes of a Japanese squadron leader had already seen the ship, and he was eager to attack.

* * *

Lt. Tamotsu Ema was glad to be airborne again, riding his favorite warhorse into action at long last. He was leader for the EII-2 squadron of the carrier *Zuikaku*, flying his lucky plane, number 235. His formation was well up, at 15,000 feet, cruising at 240kph with twenty-seven planes spread over three full squadrons of nine planes each. Lt. Akira Sakamoto led 1st Squadron, on his left, and Lt. Hayashi had 3rd Squadron on his right. He was privileged to assume the role of *buntaicho* and lead in second squadron, in the center position, the place of honor that Lt. Sakamoto had been kind enough to grant him as a reward for scoring the first hit on the Americans three months ago.

It seemed such a long time since that first wild clash with the Americans in the Coral Sea and he was eager to get back in the fight. Admiral Hara's 5th Carrier Division, comprised of *Shokaku* (White Crane) and her sister ship *Zuikaku* (Lucky Crane), and *Zuiho* (Lucky Phoenix) now occupied a

prominent place in the Combined Fleet. They were first to find and blood the enemy carrier groups in the Coral Sea, sinking the USS *Lexington* two months ago during Operation MO and insuring the successful landing that had secured Port Moresby. Ema's Aichi D3A1 dive bombers had scored three hits on the big flattop, smashing her flight deck and igniting a raging fire when the aviation fuel ignited below decks. Lt. Commander Matsua's torpedo Bombers off *Zuiho* had finished her off.

Now the sky was clear and bright ahead, though behind them came the burgeoning white clouds of a thunder storm, grey-white fists rising on the far horizon, where the carriers were laying in wait and running before the rising wind. Today they would be *Jinrai Butai*—the Thunder Gods at the edge of a storm, and they would bring their anger to their enemies and herald the imminent invasion that would soon follow on their heels.

Ema looked down, noting something off his right wingtip, a strange shadow on the sea below that soon glinted in the bright sunlight—a ship! He thumbed his short range radio, calling the *hikotaicho* formation leader and reporting the contact.

"Lieutenant Sakamoto. Ship below at three o'clock. It looks like a big cruiser!" Even as he reported he wondered if the Australians had somehow learned of the operation and sortied a screen of fast cruisers to look for signs of the attack. If so, they would soon find more than they bargained for.

"Shall we attack?" he asked his *hikotaicho* again.

"Hold formation," Sakamoto returned. *"I will send Hayashi on the right. His squadron is in better position to make the attack. Hayashi, are you reading this? Get down there and give them hell!"*

A moment later Ema looked and saw Hayashi peel off, the planes of his 3rd Squadron following in three neat *shotai*, the three plane units that would make up each squadron of nine. The drone of their engines filled the air and got his blood up for action, and now he wished he had been posted on the right, and that it was his planes diving on the enemy from above. Naval combat was what he and his men had trained for, and lived for. Yes, they would strike Darwin and soften the enemy up for the invasion, but sinking a cruiser would be so much more satisfying.

He smiled, hearing the cheers of the nine pilots as they dove to the attack, and sighed. Who knows what is good or bad, he thought. He would press on at altitude with Sakamoto's group and pound Darwin to dust instead. After all, none of the planes had armor piercing bombs at the moment. They really

should not be making this attack on a ship with incendiaries, but the cruiser could not pass unchallenged.

Above them he saw the A6M2 *Rei-sen* fighters streak ahead on top cover, the vanguard of the formation, clearing the way for his dive bombers. Far to his left he could see the planes off *Shokaku*, another formation of twenty-seven Aichi D3A1 dive bombers with many fighters in escort. The torpedo bombers were not deemed necessary on this ground attack mission, and were still waiting aboard the carriers. He looked at his comrades diving, expecting to see the smoky white puffs of flak at any moment as they closed for the kill, but what he saw instead would haunt him for the rest of his days.

* * *

The sound seemed to be coming from all around them now, faint and far away at times, and then ominously close, wavering in the still air above the Timor Sea. They had been steaming north for thirty minutes in an utterly calm sea until a watchman on the bridge reported seeing something on his starboard quarter. Rodenko thought he saw something as well on radar at that same moment, and then his screen seemed to crackle with interference.

Volsky was in his chair, Fedorov at the navigation station where he kept his history reference materials, and there came a sudden vibration, increasing as the sound around them wavered in and out.

“Something is happening,” said Fedorov, eyes wide as he looked to the condition of the sea, but all seemed calm.

Admiral Volsky had a grim expression on his face, brows lowered, eyes intense as he listened. “What is that sound?”

It was a long distended drone, quavering in and out, and multiplied ten and twenty times in a welter of dissonance. Behind it all was a low rumble, deeper, more pronounced, and with a more steady rhythm.

“Mister Fedorov, call engineering and see if we have any problems there.”

“Aye, sir.” Fedorov made the call. “Dobrynin says he heard something earlier, sir, and he still has some odd flux readings, but the reactor is stable.” Even as he finished he was distracted when he saw something in the sky above them, strange shadows moving in the vibrating air. Then he caught the wink of sunlight on metal in the sky and turned quickly to Rodenko. “Any signal data?”

“I have nothing on radar.” Rodenko spoke up over the growling noise, a confused look on his face. His systems were now unreadable.

“Look!” Fedorov pointed.

All eyes followed his arm, but Volsky could see only shadows, high overhead, as if a flight of storm clouds had joined in formation and were moving impossibly fast on a windless day. The droning sound settled on a lower, more sustained note that was now clear and recognizable. It was the sound of aircraft engines—propeller planes, and it had a powerful and dangerous overtone.

“God almighty,” said Fedorov. “We’ve shifted again, and right into the middle of a strike wave. Look!”

Now when he pointed the others could see the shadows slowly dissipate and become silver crosses in the sky above and well off their starboard side. They suddenly sharpened, as though a camera lens had focused, and now they were clearly silver-white planes with bright red meatballs painted on each wing, and prominent unretracted landing gear.

“Battle Stations! Alert one! Those are Japanese dive bombers—right on top of us!”

* * *

Karpov heard the second alarm, and was now rushing to the bridge, making his way through the long corridors and up ladders to the command level deck and the armored citadel.

“What is happening, Captain?” the men asked as he passed. “More fighting?”

“Spakoyna. Nye Boytyes” he said, “Stay calm. Don’t be frightened. Just man your post as always. Admiral Volsky is on the bridge, and we will handle matters.”

He pressed on, but caught a *matoc* seaman mutter that at least the Admiral was not locked up in sick bay this time, and his eyes darkened. They have every right to feel as they do, he realized. One day I may win back their respect again, but he gave it no more thought.

As he worked his way to the upper deck heard the loud drone that had spooked the crew and set them on edge. What was it? By the time he reached the bridge he could hear the low thrum of distant engines and then a long wailing scream of something coming at the ship from above. He burst

through the hatch, sealing it behind him quickly, and seeing Fedorov and Volsky gaping out through the forward view panes. What was happening?

The sudden geyser of seawater exploding up off the port side told him all he needed to know. The shock of the abrupt appearance of planes right on top of the ship had stunned the bridge crew, but Admiral Volsky was suddenly animated, turning quickly to Samsonov.

“Engage all airborne targets,” he said gruffly. “Weapons free!”

Samsonov stared at his board, eyes wide as he looked for data points that were simply not there. The Admiral’s orders had not been clear and specific. No weapon system was named, and he hesitated. “Sir—I have no radar locks!”

“Nothing?”

“No data, sir.”

“What are we fighting, Fedorov,” said Karpov coolly, his eyes set and a fierce expression on his face.

“Aichi D3A1,” Fedorov started, then realized this would make no sense to Karpov. “Dive bombers! High angle attack. They will come in from a cruising altitude between ten and fifteen thousand meters. Right on top of us!”

The drone of the diving planes grew louder, and a second bomb splash fell closer, an angry geyser of seawater not fifty meters off the port side of the ship.

Karpov reacted immediately. Striding quickly to the CIC, his eyes alight. The AK-760s will not elevate high enough, he knew at once. They had been designed to defeat sea skimming missiles coming at the ship on a low attack trajectory. He needed to use the an older system.

“Helm, ahead full battle speed!” Karpov shouted. “Samsonov, *Kashtan* system! High azimuth arc. Target zone zenith plus and minus ten degrees and fire all systems. Full missile barrage! Use infrared!”

“Aye, *sir!”* Samsonov shouted, and his hands moved like lightning over his system board, toggling switches until they heard the high swish of missiles firing. Thus far the older CADS-N-2 *Kashtans* had not come into play in their many combat scenarios. Their ancestor ships in the original *Kirov* class had up to six of these weapon systems installed, the earlier CADS-N-1 system. When the AK-760 Gatling guns replaced their older counterparts, it was decided to leave at least two of the *Kashtan* units in the order of battle for *Kirov*, adding just a little more defensive coverage for arcs

of fire not well served by the AK-760.

The *Kashtans* sat like two squat heavy armed robots on each side of the ship. The head was a rapidly rotating radar antenna working in tandem with a larger dish on the unit's chest. The two arms were the business end of the module. Each had a set of four short range missiles above what looked like a long black steel pipe housed in a sleek metal cage. The pipe was actually the outer casing of a six barreled 30mm Gatling gun, and the whole unit was a self-integrated system, independent of the ship's primary radar systems that seemed to be completely fogged over. Two other guidance and ranging systems were also built into the unit, one for infrared and another for high powered optics and TV control.

The unit swiveled rapidly, its big missile laden arms reaching for the sky, and two tiny caps flipped open on the IR and TV sensor tubes. Moments later Samsonov had a real time TV image on an auxiliary screen and he was able to quickly designate targets and fire.

A full barrage released all four missiles on each robot arm, sixteen in all between the two units. It was much more firepower than they actually needed, but in the heat of a dire emergency with bombs raging down on them, Karpov took the most expedient measure possible and fired everything he had as ready ammo.

It saved the ship.

The Aichi D3A1 was the best dive bomber in service during the early years of the war. It had good speed in a dive, with adequate maneuverability in spite of the fixed, non-retractable landing gear, and it could deliver a 250kg bomb mounted on the main fuselage and two smaller 60kg bombs on the wings. As the plane attacked in a steep dive, a trapeze system flung the bomb away from the rotating propeller when released, and the Japanese had developed very good accuracy with the plane. It would end the war as the most successful Axis dive bomber against Allied shipping, killing sixteen warships in the mix of vessels sunk, including an aircraft carrier, the *Hermes*, three cruisers and twelve destroyers. Even fast agile ships could not easily evade the deadly high angle attack, which was extremely difficult for most gun systems to defeat—but not for missiles capable of vertical launch angles, as the *Kashtan* was.

The missiles ignited in a wash of white steamy smoke and danced into the sky above, locking on to any target within their arc of fire. The system could track only eight simultaneous targets, but eight was enough. Within seconds

the sky overhead erupted with one explosion after another and the missiles found and killed the relatively slow planes with fragmentation warheads that would create a sphere of shrapnel upon detonation out to a five meter range. The air above the ship was soon a wild spray of shrapnel. Two kills…three…five…Then a another bomb fell just ahead of the ship and sent a wild spray of seawater over the bow. *Kirov* rolled as she ran over the detonation, her sharp prow cutting through the seething water.

Karpov's mind raced. Killing the planes was not enough, he realized! The bombs may have already been released. "Samsonov! *Gatling system* on full automatic! *Now!"*

The snarl of the Gatling guns joined the cacophony of noise as the *Kashtans* flung thousands of rounds of 30mm shells from their heavy arms, the six barrels rotating rapidly within the long black pipe that housed them with an evil whirring sound, their muzzles spitting out enormous fiery jets of flame. Karpov was filling the sky above the ship with a lethal barrage of metal, and three falling bombs were hit and exploded high above the ship, one too close for comfort.

That accounted for six of the nine bombs on the planes in Lt. Commander Hayashi's EII-3 Squadron. Two more died before they could be released, their brave pilots waiting too long as they sighted on the enemy ship beneath them. Yet it was bomb number nine that finally found its target and struck an avenging blow—Hayashi's bomb, striking the ship and broiling up in thick black smoke and fire.

Kirov had finally been hit, but not by the 20mm rounds of a British Beaufighter this time, most passing harmlessly through the target that was not quite there.

This time it was a 250 kilogram bomb.

Part III

Engagement

“Although the concept of defense is parrying a blow and its characteristic feature is awaiting the blow, if we are really waging war, we must return the enemy's blows. . . . Thus a defensive campaign can be fought with offensive battles. . . The defensive form of war is not a simple shield, but a shield made up of well-directed blows."

- Clausewitz on War

Chapter 7

The bomb hit near the edge the aft deck, about fifty feet behind the number three 152mm battery, and abreast and below battery number two. It penetrated the upper deck, killing five men in and near a stairwell and then exploded, the force ripping the overhead deck apart and sending a blast of metal fragments, smoke and fire up into the air in a broiling column.

It was a dangerous place to be struck, as the underdeck magazines for two of the ship's three 152mm batteries were only two bulkheads away, and the outermost barrier had been badly buckled. *Kirov's* designers had provided 100mm armor plating around all munitions storage areas, and there was no immediate threat of secondary explosion. Fortunately, the attack had come from the other side of the ship and the angle of descent on the bomb actually saw it driving outward towards the exterior hull, and not inward, so most of the damage was in access corridors and the stair well area, though a fire started that could pose a real danger if not rapidly contained.

On the bridge they felt the ship shake with the explosion, and the Admiral's eyes darkened with misgiving. Fedorov was quickly to the comm link to get initial damage reports and Karpov was activating the aft Tin Man HD video display to get a good view of the exterior damage. They could see troops of sailors dressed out in their bright yellow vests, with orange helmets and heavy duty mittens rushing to the scene. Unfortunately the bomb had destroyed two of three fire hose mounts in that location, and they were only able to bring one hose to bear on the flames in those early minutes, sending a white jet of water into the breach in the deck, which thickened the smoke and made it difficult to see what was really happening.

"We were lucky," said Karpov. "It missed both deck guns and was well forward of the Klinok silos on the aft deck."

A call from Engineer Byko quickly confirmed that the hit was not threatening and the damage could be controlled in twenty minutes. "But we lost men," Byko finished. "I won't know how many for some time."

Fedorov reported this to Volsky while Karpov assessed their present situation. They could still hear the flights of aircraft overhead, though the sound was diminishing. Rodenko's screens were wavering and generating unclear data, but he was beginning to get close range signal returns again, and

could now track the planes that had attacked them.

“Shall I engage them, sir?” Samsonov asked.

“No,” said Volsky quickly. “Hold fire. Rodenko tells us they are headed away from the ship, and therefore pose no immediate threat. We must conserve weapons ordinance whenever possible.”

“They must be headed for Darwin, sir,” said Fedorov. “That’s the only target of opportunity southeast of our position. We shifted into this time frame right beneath them! This could be the Japanese raid on that port we spoke of earlier, though it would mean we appeared here even before we emerged in the Med if that is so.”

“Just our damn bad luck either way,” said Volsky hotly, staring at the thick column of smoke as imaged on the HD video display.

“I would not curse our luck just yet, Admiral,” said Fedorov. The Russian psyche, long accustomed to facing hardship and unexpected setbacks in life, had been inured to the whims of fate and fortune for many generations. A man could never escape his fate, they knew, and the vagaries of chance and sheer luck often played in the balance.

“If I am correct then those planes would have been loaded with incendiary bombs,” Fedorov explained, “not armor piercing. A well placed hit from a heavy armor piercing bomb could have gone right through the bottom of the ship. We’ll have a fire there, but Byko is getting it under control and things could have been much worse. From what I saw we were only attacked by a few planes—perhaps a single squadron. If the others had come in as well…”

Volsky shuddered.

“At least I was not out there on a ladder this time,” he muttered, upset with the smoke and fire aft and the thought that *Kirov* had been finally struck a hard blow by the enemy. “Thus far much of the damage we have sustained has been self-inflicted,” he said. “We’re missing two helos because of missile misfires and Orlov. But this time they let us know we are in for a fight, yes? They gave us a nice hard kick in the rump to let us know we will find no welcome in these waters.” He shrugged, then looked to Karpov who was huddling with Samsonov.

“Mister Karpov,” he said in a clear voice.

“Sir?”

“Come here, please.” The Admiral waited, a serious expression on his face, and the others on the bridge half turned their heads, thinking Volsky

was about to berate the Captain for his actions during the engagement. After all, he had imposed himself, taking control of the engagement as though Volsky were not even there. Karpov stiffened, then approached the Admiral where he now was settling into his chair.

“Mister Karpov,” Volsky continued. “I gave Samsonov an order to engage those aircraft, weapons free.”

“Yes, sir, but I thought—”

“Just a moment, Captain Lieutenant, if you please.” Now Volsky stood up, and reached out, placing his hand on Karpov’s shoulder and speaking in a loud voice. “Look here,” he said “this man intervened in a critical moment, overriding my spoken orders, and he saved the ship just now. My orders were unclear. I specified no weapon system, yet Captain Karpov immediately assessed the situation and selected the only weapon system that could have possibly engaged the enemy given the angle of this attack, and he saved the ship. I have long believed that Captain Karpov was one of the finest tactical combat officers in the fleet. He proved that in the Med, and today he has proved that yet again. I commend him for his action and hereby advance him to Captain of the third rank. Well done, Karpov.” The Admiral broke into a broad smile.

Several of the men turned and congratulated Karpov now, particularly Samsonov, who nodded his head in affirmation, a look or pride in his eyes.

“Thank you, Admiral,” said Karpov, clearly pleased. “ I was only doing my duty, sir.”

“As we all are,” said Volsky. “And something tells me we’ll have a lot more duty ahead of us, so take a lesson from this man,” Volsky shook a finger at the rest of the bridge crew. “Be sharp. Be professional. Think clearly and do your jobs as best you can. With officers like Karpov on the bridge, we are in good hands. And now…” He looked for Fedorov. “We need more situational awareness. Rodenko, does your radar tell us anything?”

“I’m starting to get intermediate range returns now, sir. I have echoes of the Australian coastline south of our position, the island ahead, and I am still tracking that outbound formation of planes. Fedorov is correct. They are bearing on Port Darwin.”

“These planes are from an aircraft carrier, Fedorov?”

“Yes, sir. Japanese naval dive bombers, the Aichi D3A1.”

“Then where would this aircraft carrier be?”

“Most likely northwest of our present position, sir.”

Rodenko spoke up now. “Given their heading I can back trace a probable point of origin if I knew the combat radius.”

“Figure 350 nautical miles,” said Fedorov. “My best guess is that they are cruising southeast of Kupang, right in the middle of the Timor Sea. There would be no urgent need for them to strike at maximum range, so I would put them about here.” He was at the navigation station and displayed a map on the clear Plexiglas wall, the landforms outlined in neon green. “This position would allow them to strike Darwin, with plenty of time on target for the planes. And there would definitely be two carriers, sir. I counted over fifty planes above us and we were engaged by another nine or ten. A single carrier would not have that many dive bombers.”

“Two carriers?”

“Yes, sir. A full carrier division. There may even be a light escort carrier present in the task force, and I must tell you, Admiral, it is not likely they would use their torpedo bombers to raid land based targets unless they felt it absolutely necessary. They know about us now, sir, and those carriers will have twenty or thirty torpedo bombers being spotted on deck by now if I was in command.”

“Wonderful,” said Volsky, “just what we need with that nice black column of smoke hanging a sign for 150 miles in every direction saying: here we are.”

“Byko should have that fire out in ten minutes,” said Karpov.

“I suggest we get north of Melville Island, sir,” Fedorov put in. “We're too exposed here. There will be screening units associated with that carrier task force, fast cruisers, destroyers, perhaps a battleship as well.”

“Speak of the devil!” Rodenko put in, his eyes fixed on the surface contact radar screen. “Con, surface contact bearing 295 degrees at seventy-five kilometers and now on a heading due east.”

“That would be an intercept course based on our current heading,” said Fedorov.

Volsky looked at the map. They were still cruising due north and he immediately altered course. “Helm, come right to 50 degrees east-northeast. Thirty knots.”

“Coming right to 50 degrees, sir. Speed thirty.”

“I would rather go due east as well, but that channel south of the big island looks a bit narrow. We’ll have to get north of that island, as Mister Fedorov suggests, so it’s going to be another race gentlemen. What do you

think our prospects are?”

“It will depend on the composition of that surface action group,” said Fedorov.

“My systems are clearing, slowly now,” said Rodenko, “just as they did before. I read six contacts, one more prominent, two with weaker signal returns.”

“A typical screening force,” said Fedorov. “The larger contact is probably a battleship, the weaker signal returns would be destroyers. Everything in between is likely to be a cruiser class vessel.”

“Will they be able to cut us off before we reach the north cape of that island?” Volsky asked.

“That will depend on the speed of the battleship, unless their commander is determined to engage us, he will likely keep his task force together. If he sends cruisers out in front, they might make thirty-three knots. The destroyers could be even faster.”

“Karpov?” Volsky looked to his new Captain of the 3rd rank for a tactical assessment.

“If they send lighter ships forward our deck guns can outrange them. What is the range of the guns on those cruisers, Fedorov?”

“We don't know what class yet, but if they are heavy cruisers they will be carrying eight inch guns that will range out to 25,000 meters.”

“We can beat that range with our deck guns,” said Karpov quickly. “If they get too close, say 30,000 meters, we can begin discouraging them with the 152 millimeter batteries.”

“A good plan,” said Volsky.

“Don't forget the battleship, it can fire at 35,000 meters, though it probably won’t hit anything at that range.”

“We've had quite a few scraps with battleships in recent days,” said Karpov. “Our best bet if that ship poses any real threat would be at least one Moskit-II targeting their superstructure, and we must do this before the ship gets in effective range.”

“Agreed,” said Volsky. “I do not wish us to be dancing about in the midst of sea spray from fifteen or sixteen inch shells again.”

“They'll probably be fourteen inch guns,” said Fedorov, though he realized the difference was negligible when it came to a round of that size impacting the ship.

“Very well,” said the Admiral. “I suggest we prepare to possibly repel

another incoming air strike from these torpedo planes Mister Fedorov mentioned. And then we will see if our speed can keep us ahead of this enemy surface action group.” He shrugged. “I'm afraid we'll have to wait for those island girls a little longer. Stay at alert level one, and please check on the damage control situation, Mister Fedorov.”

“Aye, sir. Alert one, all hands stand ready.” The order was passed over ship’s intercom, though the attack had clearly heightened the crew’s awareness of impending battle. They were in it again, facing off against these impossible shadows from a distant past, but yet the explosion of a 250kg incendiary bomb had made these shadows painfully real.

“Now then,” said Volsky. “What do we do about these carriers? Do you think we are likely to receive another airstrike in the next hour or two Fedorov?”

“I would plan on it, sir. The dive bombers must have been armed with incendiary bombs. They had no business coming in on us like that at all. But the next wave will most likely be torpedo planes, and the Japanese were very skilled at low level attacks. Remember, they have trained for months to make an attack at Pearl Harbor. They will have to be engaged before they get anywhere close to us.”

“How many planes can we expect in this attack?”

“There will be at least eighteen on each carrier, sir. Possibly twenty-seven. I'm going to make a guess that this is Carrier Division Five, with *Zuikaku* and *Shokaku*. They were Japan's newest carriers, big and fast at thirty-four knots. Those ships were active in the East Indies, the Indian Ocean, and the Coral Sea early in the war, though we don't really know what the date is yet. In any case, the torpedo planes will be carrying the Japanese Type 91. They range out to about 2000 meters after launch. Nothing we want to fool with.”

“Agreed,” said Volsky.

“With Rodenko's radars operating now, we will see these planes well before they pose any threat,” said Karpov. “For that matter, it would not be difficult to scout the location of these aircraft carriers and send them a message.”

They all knew what he meant.

“It will come down to a choice then,” said the Admiral. “Which missiles do we use, our dwindling anti-ship weapons, or our air defense systems? Diminishing the strength of either inventory is not a happy prospect.”

“I suggest we wait,” said Fedorov. “Let's see what they throw at us. Only then can we determine what weapon systems would be best. But I think we should conserve our anti-ship missiles at this point and use them only if absolutely necessary.”

Karpov expected this from Fedorov. The young ex-navigator was still cautious, and on one level he perceived that Fedorov was still very reluctant to target ships, planes, and men that had glowed in the soft light of his history books for so many years. Karpov had no such scruples, and looked at the matter solely from a military point of view. If the carriers were threat they could be dealt with, but he decided that they could just as easily handle an air strike as long as their air defense missile systems had ammunition.

“If each carrier has twenty-seven torpedo bombers,” he said. “That will be a big drain on our SAM inventory if they attack in force. I would hate to have to be forced to make that decision when we might use one or two missiles to forestall such an attack. We have only to locate these carriers, and if they are beyond our surface radar range at this juncture we should use the KA-40. That failing, then we can wait and receive the blow, and deal with it when it comes, but we both know that the best defense is a good offense.” He folded his arms having given the assessment that he felt was most tactically sound for the situation. The rest would be up to Volsky.

“I'm not surprised that you both have differing views on this,” said the Admiral, thinking. He took a long breath and then gave an order. “As we do not now know the location of the enemy carriers, we must wait. But I want better situational awareness. I want to know exactly what we are facing, because Fedorov here says we can no longer rely on his books. For that matter we don't even know what *year* this is. Is it 1942? 1943? I think Captain Karpov’s suggestion on the use of the helicopter is prudent, and I want the KA-40 ready for immediate operations. Once we know what we're dealing with I will make a final decision.”

“Very good, sir.” Fedorov gave the orders and the word was soon passed down to the helo bay to prepare for operations. *Kirov* had again been surprised just at the moment of her arrival in the dangerous and unfriendly waters of the Pacific region. They would not be surprised again.

The ship was going to war.

Chapter 8

Admiral Chuichi Hara received the news of an enemy surface ship with some surprise. He was steaming with Carrier Division Five, his flag aboard *Shokaku*, and her sleek sister ship *Zuikaku* was a thousand meters off his starboard beam. *Zuiho* was in the van, selected to participate in the next strike mission with her CII-3 *Datai* and 12 fresh torpedo planes commanded by Lt. Commander Kasi Matsua. Five destroyers formed a small fan ahead of the three carriers, a fairly light escort considering the value of these ships to the empire. His heavier ships were already seventy-five miles out in front, screening the approach to Darwin with orders to follow-up the air strikes with a good saturation bombardment—all save one. The heavy cruiser *Tone* had been left behind to ensure the safety of the carriers from any surface action. Hara had not expected any Allied naval activity in this sector, but was cautious nonetheless, and followed protocols. Now he was surprised to learn that a sizable ship had been spotted by one of the screening submarines, Torisu's *I-63*.

What could be out there, he wondered? An Australian cruiser out of Darwin? The initial reports from the first strike wave aimed at Darwin came in soon after. They had spotted what looked to be a large cruiser class vessel steaming north. Strike leader Sakamoto had detached a single squadron of nine dive bombers to deal with it.

The reports were sketchy, but it now appeared that a hit had been scored and the ship was seen to be on fire, a thick column of char black smoke staining the clear blue sky. But Sakamoto's men had paid a very high price, losing 8 of 9 planes to intense enemy anti-aircraft fire. Squadron leader Hayashi had been the only survivor, but this shame was mitigated by the fact that he had been the only plane to score a hit. The rest of Sakamoto's planes had continued on to Darwin, being armed with incendiary and HE bombs, not suitable for naval action. Hayashi's reports on the radio spoke of some new weapon engaging his planes, but made no sense. He was ordered home and told to land on *Zuiho* instead of his home ship, and ordered to brief the strike wave forming up there even now. It was a not so subtle indication of Hara's opinion on the strike he had just led. There was nothing of his squadron left now on *Zuikaku*. He was an orphaned plane and pilot.

Sakamoto was too eager, thought Hara. I would've just reported the ship and continued on to Darwin. Doesn't he remember that I have torpedo bombers waiting here? Angry at the loss of the 8 planes and pilots, he turned and gave the order that everyone on the bridge expected.

"Signal *Zuiho*. Lieutenant Matsua's CII-3 *Daitai* is to be spotted for immediate air strike against this naval target. Arm with torpedoes. We will keep our planes in the nest for the moment. Matsua's twelve torpedo bombers should be sufficient to handle a single ship, particularly if it is just an Australian cruiser. But tell them to be ready for heavy flak. This may be an AA defense cruiser."

* * *

Lt. Commander Matsua received the news with much excitement and was soon up on the flight deck, pulling on his leather flight gloves and adjusting his goggles and ear flaps. He surveyed the planes already spotted on deck, six from 1st Squadron with the first planes of 2nd squadron already on the elevators. It would be another ten or fifteen minutes before the remaining planes were ready, their pre-flight checks completed and communications with the air bridge underway for takeoff. In the meantime, he watched the slow approach of a plane, which he soon recognized as a D3A1 dive bomber. It was trailing a thin wake of light smoke, and he presumed it was from Sakamoto's group, a wayward flyer with engine trouble who had been sent home.

He watched as the plane lined up for landing, looking somewhat shaky as it came in, touching down with a bump and then finally hooking up with a secondary retaining line and skidding to a loud stop, its engine spinning fitfully in the light wind. There were no other dive bombers assigned to *Zuiho*, his CII-1 Squadron was all for air defense operations with twelve A6M2 Fighters. A smaller ship, *Zuiho* could carry no more than thirty planes. Why didn't this plane land on its own mother ship?

Flight crews ran to maneuver the plane off the main flight deck to keep it clear for Matsua's torpedo bombers. Yet as the pilot of the D3A1 slid back his canopy, he could immediately see that something was wrong. He squinted, then noted the plane number and realized it was Squadron Leader Hayashi, an old friend, his face ashen as he eased himself out of the pilot's seat. There was no movement from the rear of the canopy where the radio

man should be, and Matsua had a sudden strange feeling of dread as he watched the flight crews ladder up the plane and climb to assist Hayashi. He rushed to the scene, waiting below as the men brought the pilot down. One man called up to the still open canopy for the second crewman serving as radio operator and gunner, but Hayashi tugged at his sleeve, shaking his head. Matsua could see blood on Hayashi's flight jacket.

"Hayashi! What happened? How were you hit? Did you come all the way from Darwin?"

Hayashi looked at him, his eyes distant and glazed over with pain. Then he recognized Matsua, and forced a wan smile.

"Matsua…No, we never made it to Darwin. There was an enemy cruiser about a hundred and twenty kilometers off the coast and Sakamoto sent my squadron after it."

"Yes! Rumors say you scored a hit!" Matsua looked over his shoulder thinking to see the remainder of Hayashi's squadron coming in for their recovery. "Where are the others?"

Hayashi looked down, his eyes dark with fear and his spirits dampened with shame. "No others," he said quietly.

"No others?"

Hayashi looked at him, his face almost pleading as he spoke. "I have never seen such a defense," he quavered. "My men pressed home the attack…Two scored near misses. A third put his bomb right off the enemy's bow and they ran right over it. Then something came up at us..." He covered his eyes, then composed himself and stared at Matsua, clearly shaken. "It was like we were flying through hell itself, a rain of metal… steel serpents that hissed in at our planes like demons! My men were cut to pieces. I released my bomb and veered away, and when I looked over my shoulder to see the hit on the enemy ship, all the others were gone. I saw the last two go into the sea…"

Matsua waited, allowing his friend the time he needed now. He was *buntaicho,* Squadron Leader. Sakamoto had chosen him to make the attack, and he was now responsible for the result. The hit he scored was commendable, but in the balance he would come to the briefing room when he eventually returned to his ship and find eight empty chairs where his men should be seated, their cheeks red with energy, faces alight as they readied for battle. He put his hand on Hayashi' s shoulder.

"We have been ordered to find this ship and sink it," he said firmly. "We

will avenge you, Hayashi. By all Gods and Kami, we will make certain your men died with honor. I *swear* it, my friend. I will put my Thunder Fish in this ship's belly! Or die trying."

Hayashi just looked at him, a longing in his eyes, as if he knew at that very moment that he would never see Matsua again, and perhaps never see many of the pilots who were gathering on deck now, their planes near ready, some up on the wings and climbing into the cockpits, eager for battle. He clenched his jaw, and nodded.

"Good luck, Matsua. Now I must go and make my report. For now…*Sayonara*…"

"Not so formal, Hayashi," Matsua clasped his friend's shoulder with a smile. "Tonight we will drink on it, neh? *Mata-ne*, my friend. *Ja-ne.* See you soon."

* * *

Aboard the Battleship *Kirishima*, Captain Sanji Iwabuchi was scanning the far horizon with his field glasses, well aware that eagle eyed watchmen were doing the same, well above him on the tall pagoda main mast of the stately ship. But he was eager to find this enemy, and bring it under his heel.

Iwabuchi was a hard man, steely in battle, and often cruel, impatient and abusive to subordinates. He was short tempered and too quick to find fault, and he was clearly unhappy with the sudden change of orders he had just received. His guns had all been primed and loaded with HE and incendiaries for the planned bombardment of Darwin. Now he would have to unload his eight big 14 inch guns and reload with heavy armor piercing rounds, but the propellant charge bags were all wrong as well, and getting them out of the breeches safely would take time. He summoned his gunnery officer, Commander Kimitake Koshino and asked him how long the procedure would take.

"We have been ordered to find this enemy cruiser that has been giving Hara's pilots fits. It is somewhere ahead, and if this ship is not ready for action heads will roll, Koshino!"

"Please excuse me, Captain," Koshino said politely. "Incendiary rounds use only three powder bags instead of the usual four. We will have to remove all three to get at the shell, then remove it before we reload the new armor piercing round and four more powder bags. Getting the shells and bags *into*

the guns is very fast, sir. Getting them back out is another matter. It could take twenty minutes for all eight guns.”

“Too long!” Iwabuchi’s face indicated his displeasure. “Murajima is out ahead in the float plane looking for this ship now, and if he spots it I want to be ready for battle.”

“Well, sir…” Koshino hesitated, then spoke his mind. “There is one way to speed things along. It could reduce our reload time to just three or four minutes. We need only fire the guns. That will remove the unwanted rounds and powder bags in short order. Then it is only a matter of normal reloading.”

Iwabuchi’s face reddened. He struck the table with his fist, glaring at his gunnery officer. “Very well, Koshino. Fire the guns then, and be quick about it! Notify the cruiser escorts that we will fire ranging salvoes so as not to look like complete *fools*, neh? Then get those armor piercing rounds in fast, and consider how long it will take you to *pay* for the rounds and powder we must waste because of your incompetence!”

Koshino knew better than to say anything now. He merely lowered his head, then saluted and rushed off to give his gunnery crews their orders. Moments later they saw the forward turret rotate away from the escorting cruiser squadron and fire. The sound was deafening, and Iwabuchi shouted after it, venting his own anger with the brilliant orange fire from the muzzles.

If this ship is nigh at hand, he thought, then let them hear the roar of our guns, like thunder on the horizon. It is one thing to bat aside Hara’s mosquitoes, but it will be quite another to escape the anger of *my* guns, neh? He turned to his signalman and gave another order. “Send the cruisers on ahead as a forward sweeping unit. The destroyers will remain with us for the time being.”

Cruiser Division Five had been assigned to his covering force, three fast heavy cruisers, the *Haguro*, *Myoko*, and *Nachi*, all sleek hounds with a strong bite in their ten 8 inch guns.

Kirishima was very fast as well, particularly for a vintage old ship as she was. Her hull was laid down at Mitsubishi Zosen Kaisha's ship yard on the 17th of March of the year 1912! Venerable indeed. Her design was not entirely the work of Japanese shipbuilders either. Sir George Thurston of the British shipbuilding firm of Vickers-Armstrong had designed both the plans and the guns for this ship, which was built largely in response to the British Navy’s escalation in the commissioning of the armored cruiser HMS *Invincible*. That ship had eight 12 inch guns and a speed of 26 knots, more

formidable than anything in the Japanese navy at the time. So Japan secured plans for a ship that was bigger and faster than *Invincible*, and the *Kongo Class* battleships were the happy result.

Kirishima was one of four built, and her eight 14 inch guns, now firing off the last of the troublesome incendiary rounds, would trump *Invincible's* 12 inchers, her speed besting that ship as well. *Kirishima* could run at all of thirty knots if pressed to the task. She was called an armored cruiser when words were bandied about in the naval treaty negotiations, but she was rightfully a battleship at over 40,000 tons fully loaded, and she looked the part, her pagoda style superstructure rising tall and proud above the big threatening gun turrets. She would be overshadowed by many other battleships in time, some exceeding 70,000 tons like *Yamato*, and there would be many who still called her an up-armored battlecruiser, but she was to prove herself a tough ship before she met her fate. And fate had a peculiar way of placing her in the thick of action, or so it would seem to one given the hindsight of history.

Now she cruised with the last two ships in Iwabuchi's task force posted on either side, the destroyers *Minizuki* and *Fumizuki*, there to discourage any enterprising American submarine commander who might be in the area. A big ship like *Kirishima* was an inviting and very tempting target for a stealthy submarine captain. In fact, his ship was supposed to have been found by an American submarine, the *Nautilus*, while *Kirishima* was escorting Nagumo's carriers during the operation against Midway that had now been canceled—though Iwabuchi knew nothing of that unlived history. *Nautilus* would have fired a Mark 14 steam torpedo at the old battleship, eager for a kill, but from a range of over 4000 meters it would miss by a wide margin.

The insult would be answered with a salvo from *Kirishima's* forward batteries when the periscope of the *Nautilus* was sighted, but to no avail. Hunting submarines was work for a destroyer, and the escort *Arashi* would have been detached to take up the hunt while *Kirishima* sailed off in a huff. It was once to be a most fateful incident that would cost Japan more than anyone then alive could realize. *Arashi* was not able to find and sink the *Nautilus*, and eventually gave up the hunt and turned to rejoin the Japanese carrier force, the fast *Kido Butai* mobile group that was hoping to savage the American fleet. It was the wake of this very destroyer that would have been spotted by the American commander Wade McCluskey, Jr. in his SBD 'Dauntless' dive-bomber, and it would lead the U.S. formation directly to the

heart of the Japanese carrier fleet. The rest was all part of the ‘Miracle At Midway’ that would crush the Japanese fleet and mark a decisive turning point in the war….But it never happened.

The battle of Midway was never fought. Instead *Kirishima* found itself here, leading the leftmost arm of a two pronged attack to the south aimed at isolating Australia, Operation FS. But the ship’s magnetic charm would hold true yet again. It would not be an American submarine that would set the strange chain of events in motion this time, but a ghostly sea demon that had appeared from thin air, to pose the greatest challenge any sea captain of that era could ever face—the battlecruiser *Kirov*.

Chapter 9

Matsua's torpedo bombers soon discovered the ship that had put fear into the eyes and soul of Lt. Commander Hayashi. There were twelve planes sent to make this attack, two light squadrons of B5N2s, the plane the Allies would call the "Kate." The ship was just where Hayashi had reported it, and Matsua wasted no time sending his men in for the attack. Number one squadron would swoop in from the port side with six planes, and he would lead number two squadron to the starboard side with the remaining six. Together they would smash this ship with their Type 91, 'Thunder Fish' torpedoes.

The Type 91 was a formidable weapon, having moved through several evolutions in its development to make it a reliable workhorse for the B5N squadrons. They had put three into the USS *Lexington* three months ago, sending that carrier to the bottom of the Coral Sea. Now they were ready for more. The growl of the planes was exhilarating as they swooped to their low elevation approaches, deploying air brakes to slow the planes down to no more than 160-180kph so they could safely launch their weapons.

What was Hayashi talking about? Matsua could see the dark silhouette of the ship ahead now, perhaps 15,000, meters out, and there was no sign of these serpents rising up to devour his planes, nor any wisp of flak from the target ahead. But he would soon find out what Hayashi meant by a rain of metal, for the low and relatively slow approach of his torpedo bombers were the easiest possible target for *Kirov's* lethal close in defense systems.

* * *

"Steady, Samsonov," Karpov whispered. "Any second now."

They were tensely watching the approach of Matsua's planes, having seen them on radar long ago. It was Karpov's first reflex to immediately engage them with the Klinok medium range SAMs at that time, but there were only twelve discrete targets, and he thought he might save those missiles with another tactic. Karpov looked over his shoulder to find their resident historian.

"Fedorov, you say these planes must get inside 2000 meters to make an effective attack?"

“That’s right, and if they can get inside 1500 meters they’ll be even happier.”

“Then I have a proposal to make, but it will take cool heads and more than a little nerve.” He turned to Admiral Volsky now, knowing the final decision would lie with him. “We’ve been debating whether or not to strike the carriers before they launched this attack, but now that is a moot discussion. They are coming for us. The only question now is whether or not we should expend our primary SAM munitions and take them out at long range.”

“Both the Klinok system and the S-300s are running low,” said Volsky. “We have enough in either weapon system to stop this attack, but it will may take twelve missiles to do so.”

“I have another option,” said Karpov. “We can simply hold fire and use the close in defense guns. The AK-760s can range out to 4000 meters. That’s twice the firing range of those planes. We have two on each side of the ship, and we can add in the Chestnuts I used against those dive bombers.” He was referring to the *Kashtan* ‘Chestnut’ gun system, with its twin Gatling guns thrown into the mix.

“We took out those Italian torpedo bombers easily enough in the Tyrrhenian sea. This should be no different. It will mean we allow them to come in close, but I have no doubt that we can hit these planes before they do us harm.”

“Yet if they get their torpedoes in the water,” said Volsky. “What then? We can dodge one or two by maneuvering the ship, but not twelve.”

“The Captain may be right,” Fedorov put in. “We can hit them well before they enter firing range, but it’s a very brief firing window. One or two bursts should be enough to drop one of these planes. The guns have the accuracy and rate of fire to do the job—at least from what I’ve seen,”

“We can hit anything we target,” Karpov assured him. “That’s the critical difference eighty years of weapons development has made. A single burst can put hundreds of 30mm rounds on a single plane. What we target, we kill. Period. We’ll use both laser and radar tracking for pin-point accuracy.”

“And one more thing,” said Fedorov. “These are Japanese pilots. They will not break formation and scatter when we hit them like the Italian SM-79s did earlier. Shock or no shock, this is the cream of their naval aviation at this point in the war. They will come straight in on their attack runs, unwavering, just as they have trained, and we’re going to have to kill each and every one.”

They sat with that for a moment, a heaviness in the air. As they realized what they were going to do, ambushing an enemy that would have no idea what was going to hit them. It was a feeling that had lodged in the hearts of many other warriors, on both land and sea, while they sat behind their weapons waiting for an enemy to charge, knowing the bravery it took, knowing the fear their foe must feel and yet overcome, knowing they had to kill him.

Or be killed…

And so now they waited, and it was indeed taking cool heads and a lot of nerve as Karpov had warned. The sight of those torpedo planes swooping in with their blue wings glinting in the sunlight was somewhat awesome, and every eye on the bridge was watching out the view screens of the citadel. Admiral Volsky was sitting stiffly in his chair, waiting. The drone of the distant engines increased, and he turned slowly to Karpov, a sadness in his eyes.

"Mister Karpov," he said quietly. "Kill those planes."

"Sir…" Karpov turned quickly to Samsonov and nodded his head. "Fire at 4000 meters."

* * *

Matsua saw the first bright muzzle flashes spit fire from the side of the ship. So few guns, he thought, remembering the gunnery trials for the battleship *Yamato* against simulated torpedo attacks. That ship could literally blacken the sky with its flak guns, but this—"

Then he saw Lieutenant Tomashita's plane erupt in flame to his left, and felt the rattle of metal strike his own plane. He grabbed the stick, tensely trying to steady his approach. Yet as he looked left and right he gasped to see one plane after another being torn apart by lethal fire, the hot tracers coming out at them as if they had eyes. Every stream of fire found one of his planes, and the heavy rounds were grinding them to pieces—wings shredded, torpedoes blasted from beneath torn fuselages and spinning wildly into the sea, canopies shattered and engines ripped into mutilated fragments, so deadly was the fire.

Now he knew what Hayashi had experienced, and what he was trying to describe to him…and why he had chosen to part with the formal farewell of *sayonara.*

But Matsua remembered his promise, and knew he would not die without first firing his weapon. He screamed at the enemy ship, firing his wing mounted machineguns even if it seemed a feeble and fruitless reprisal. He was almost there. The visual rangefinder in his pilot's head told him he was crossing 2000 meters, and so with one final yell he pulled his torpedo release, even as a stream of bright red and yellow rounds found his plane and shook it with terrible rending impact.

Hayashi's face…his face…his eyes when he spoke that last word!

Sayonara…

* * *

Aboard *Shokaku* Admiral Hara was waiting for reports on the air strikes, expecting good news at any moment. His radio officer, Onoshi, rushed in, jubilant as he reported that the Darwin attack had been a great success.

"Flight leaders report good hits. A destroyer was sunk in the port along with two other cargo ships trying to leave the harbor. Enemy gun positions on the coast were given a real pounding. Yamashita's men will have no problem getting ashore, particularly after Iwabuchi's force finishes the initial bombardment."

Hara seemed thoughtful. "Casualties?"

"Only two planes reporting light damage, sir. The enemy was clearly unprepared."

"What about the cruiser?"

"Sir?"

"The cruiser that gave Sakamoto's planes so much trouble. Didn't you hear Hayashi's report?"

"I'm sorry, sir. We have no news from Lieutenant Matsua as yet."

"He should be on his way back by now." Hara was not happy at the silence from his torpedo planes. It had a tinge of foreboding in it, and he was glad he had signaled Iwabuchi on *Yamashiro* to alter his course and look for this cruiser before he went in to complete his preliminary bombardment at Darwin.

"Let me know the moment you hear from Matsua. And signal the screening force. They must have some news, neh? Why is everyone so tight lipped?"

"At once, sir," said Onoshi, heading for the radio room.

No news was never good news, thought Hara. This cruiser had been a stone in his shoe from the moment Sakamoto's planes first sighted it. It would be another hour before he recovered all the planes he had out on strikes at the moment. He still had plenty of strike capability aboard, eighteen more torpedo bombers on *Zuikaku* and another eighteen on his own ship. There was no point spotting them on deck now with an inbound recovery operation imminent to bring all the dive bombers home. He would wait and see what the reports from Matsua and Iwabuchi revealed, but he was not happy.

"A very simple operation," he said under his breath. That was what he had told Yamamoto, but the simplest things have a habit of spinning off in wild directions during combat. Nothing was ever certain. The calm seas ahead were deceptive, he knew. One should always keep an eye over his shoulder.

He turned and look there to see the storm front that had been following them building on the horizon. He would probably recover all his planes before the winds came up. Then he could run before the storm, his mission plan still sending him southeast towards Darwin.

A very simple operation…

* * *

Aboard Battleship *Kirishima* spotters from the high pagoda could see something ongoing to their south, and hear a faint rumble of gunfire. They sent the report down, and Iwabuchi was quick to contact his floatplane to have them investigate.

Fifteen minutes later Lt. Murajima was up in his F1M2 Floatplane, called "Pete" by the Allies during the war. *Kirishima* carried two on its aft deck for local area search operations exactly like this one. Apparently the torpedo bombers off *Zuiho* had found a battle to the south, but there had been no details. Cruising at 5000 feet he could see over 80 miles in a every direction before the horizon blocked his view, a pair of good, experienced human eyes standing in for the lack of long range radar.

Just ahead of him he could see the three fast ships of Cruiser Division Five spread out in a wide fan. South there seemed a smudge of gray against the blue sky near the ocean, and he turned to investigate. A few minutes later he found what he was looking for, peering through a pair of binoculars to get

a better look. He was on the radio immediately, sending only his name and a coded phrase indicating ‘ship sighted’ and the approximate position speed and heading relative to his own position. He sent one more code: ‘shadowing.’ And then decided it best to gain a little more altitude.

Within ten minutes he smiled to see the cruisers effect a wide turn to starboard, coming around to assume an intercept heading on the contact. Then he saw something in the sky ahead, another aircraft which he first took to be a straggling plane returning from the Darwin mission, yet when he looked through his binoculars he could not make out what it was, moving low and slow, and with no apparent wings! He was going to have a ring-side seat to a most dramatic event.

* * *

On the bridge of *Kirov* Rodenko was now receiving good data from the KA-40 and fine tuning his contact reports to feed the information to both the navigation station and the CIC. The KA-40 had been aloft for some time, and was now on the backward leg of its search pattern, but the telemetry it had been sending, along with HD video footage, was enough to finally paint the picture of what was happening around them.

Fedorov was analyzing the data, reviewing the video footage and looking up references from his books and other materials at navigation while he plotted positions on a digital map. He sat with a perplexed look on his face, as nothing seemed to make sense. When Nikolin reported that he now had clear radio reception and could pull in shortwave signals, they were able to finally establish the date as August 25, 1942.

“We must have lost all the days we sailed from St. Helena to this point,” said Fedorov. “In fact, I think we may have started shifting into this time as early as yesterday. I could feel something was wrong. This is most unusual,” he said as the briefing began.

“That is an understatement, indeed,” said Karpov. “I’m still trying to shake myself awake every time I realize we have been shooting at planes that went out of existence eighty years ago.”

“We may have more yet to come,” Fedorov warned. “The KA-40 has located the *Kido Butai* for this operation, the main mobile carrier group. It was able to get a little long range HD video footage but was wary of enemy combat air patrols over the target and turned east. It was enough. I studied the

footage very closely, and I am certain that a force comprised of the carriers *Zuikaku* and *Shokaku*, escorted by another light carrier and the heavy cruiser *Tone* with five destroyers is here—" He pointed to his navigation Plexiglas board, and then fed the signal to the overhead HD monitor as well.

"The carriers are northwest of our position now, about 175 kilometers out. That is very close considering the combat radius of their aircraft. We are still well within their strike zone."

"I have already given my opinion on how we should handle the matter," said Karpov. "Two missiles would be enough to disrupt any further operations against us."

Admiral Volsky listened, nodding, but saying nothing for a moment. Then he asked about the overall picture painted by the data.

"There appears to be a major operation underway against Darwin," said Fedorov. "Only it is completely a-historical. It should not be happening. It never *did* happen, particularly on this date. All the action should be in the Solomons now, at Guadalcanal. But from what I've been able to piece together, I believe 'Operation FS' is now underway, or some variation of that plan."

"Operation FS?" Volsky wanted more information.

"It was a plan to isolate Australia by continuing the drive south through the Solomons with the aim of striking New Caledonia, and eventually Fiji and Samoa. Hence the initials F and S for those islands. This attack on Darwin must be a part of the overall plan. It was debated in early 1942, largely opposed by the Japanese Army, and then eventually discarded for the Midway operation. But if it is underway now then I can only conclude that Midway was never fought—or if it was fought, then the Japanese fleet must have been victorious."

"They were supposed to lose four carriers in that operation, Yes?" asked Volsky.

"Correct, sir," Fedorov continued. "Yet if they IJN has the capability to launch an operation of this scale and scope, they must have sufficient carrier forces in theater. This bit we've sailed into is the sideshow. It was never part of the original FS plan, at least not formally, but it has apparently been added. With two fleet carriers here, then the Japanese must still have their other main carrier divisions intact in the Solomons for the drive south. They could never successfully move troops without strong air cover. As for *Zuikaku* and *Shokaku*, they should not be here either. They should be east in the Solomons

this month, supporting operations near Guadalcanal. In fact, they were supposed to be dueling with the American carriers *Enterprise* and *Saratoga* on Aug 24-25 of this year… but that was only because the other four fleet carriers were lost at Midway. I suppose if that battle was not fought their presence here makes a great deal of sense."

"I think we can safely say that these facts you refer to are no longer viable," said Karpov.

Fedorov shrugged, a sullen expression on his face. "I'm afraid I will have to agree, Captain. What we are looking at here is a complete restructuring of the history of the war in the Pacific. Nikolin has been very busy the last two hours. The radio intercepts he has from Allied sources clearly indicate that Port Moresby in Papua New Guinea is also Japanese controlled, which means that Coral Sea was a Japanese victory, or perhaps never even fought. This is a radical deviation from the history we know, and we are right in the middle of a very well stirred bowl of soup now."

"Yet you say this is 1942," said Volsky. "What happened to this interval business you were talking about earlier? We did not move forward this time?"

"It was just a theory, sir. I concluded we might move to 1943 if we shifted again, based on our previous displacements, but Nikolin is convinced that this is 1942, so we have been pulled back into the same year we were in the Mediterranean."

Volsky laughed. "What will Admiral Tovey think if he gets a report about us now? You say we may have started shifting here yesterday? We vanish at St. Helena on August 23, 1942, and then appear here, thousands of miles away, in just a day's time? That will befuddle the British if they ever hear about it!"

Fedorov considered that, coming to a startling conclusion, but saying nothing about it for the moment, being more concerned about their immediate situation. Volsky caught the glint in his eye, and a flash of trouble there, though he did not pursue the matter, listening intently as his young first officer continued the briefing.

"Given that the *Chronology of the War at Sea* is of no further use to us in the broad sense, we can only make our decisions now based on the immediate tactical situation. There are two other contacts to report. One is here, about forty kilometers north of our position, a group of three fast cruisers, and they have now turned south. They will be in range in short order. The second is

here, about seventy kilometers north, and vectoring east-southeast on an intercept course. We got very good footage on that group. It is a *Kongo* class battleship with two destroyers—most likely the *Kirishima*, as that ship had been operating with these carriers throughout this period."

"Well if the broad strokes of the history are all wrong now," said Karpov, "what makes you think these details will hold true?"

"I can't be certain, of course. You make a valid point, Captain, but I can make educated guesses here based on my general knowledge. Our advantage is no longer as precise as it was, but some patterns in the history do still seem to be holding true, like the composition of the carrier division we spotted. Battleships screening carrier forces would need the speed to keep up with them. The *Kongo* class ships can run at 30 knots. The same puzzle pieces are here, but they just make a new picture now. Those were the same ships that fought the Battle of the Coral Sea, along with another light carrier. The Japanese still seem to be pairing them up like that as they did in the history we know. I am also very sure about the battleship. There was no mistaking its silhouette, and if it is the *Kirishima*, it may still be captained by Sanji Iwabuchi, a formidable foe. We would be wise to stay well ahead of that ship."

"We had no trouble with the two Italian battleships," said Karpov. "And for that matter we kept all the British battleships we engaged at bay as well."

"True, Captain," Fedorov returned. "But these are not the Italians. You saw what happened when their torpedo planes came in. They died, yes, but they kept on coming just the same. You can expect this same determination from Iwabuchi. He was adamant. In fact, he fought the very first action where battleships on two opposing sides faced one another in the Pacific. His ship was heavily engaged in a night action off Savo Island near Guadalcanal with the American battleships *Washington* and *South Dakota*. I have a document detailing that battle and I have prepared a slide showing the hits sustained by *Kirishima*." Fedorov displayed a profile of the ship on the overhead display, and they could see that it was riddled with red and blue dots indicating locations where the ship had been struck by shells.

"Take a good long look at this, and count the large red dots. *Kirishima* was hit by no less than *twenty* 16 inch shells, each one with a striking power almost as great as our missiles! Note that most of these hits were at or below the main deck. The lighter blue dots on the upper parts of the superstructure were from the 5 inch secondary batteries, another seventeen hits from those.

The ship took damage to her rudder and engine compartments. They had to flood gun magazines due to the fires. Her armor was breeched and she was holed below the waterline, but both the ship and its crew kept on fighting through the whole engagement until her flood control officer was unable to stop her from capsizing….” He paused, letting the image speak for itself, and hoping he had made the impression intended on the other officers, particularly Karpov.

“*Kirishima* sunk during that battle, in November of this very year. Her captain was pulled alive from the sea and eventually posted to the Philippines. During the final American invasion there, he disobeyed an order to withdraw from Manila and stubbornly defended the city, block by block, leaving it utterly devastated and killing all of a hundred thousand Philippine citizens in the fighting. He died, some say by committing suicide, as the American troops closed in on his last positions. It was later known as the ‘Manila Massacre,’ and the overall commander, General Yamashita, was executed in 1946 though he had given a direct order to abandon the city to prevent this from happening. One charge of war crimes filed against him was that he failed to restrain the subordinate officer who provoked this fight for the city—Sanji Iwabuchi. And that very same man may now be sitting about seventy kilometers off our starboard aft quarter. If he has not heard already, he will soon learn what happened to the carrier planes that attacked us. I have no doubt that he will be ordered to find us, and do everything in his power to sink us.”

No one said another word.

Chapter 9

The cruiser *Nachi* was leading the charge south as the sun began to drift lower, illuminating the rising grey tops of the thunderstorms off to their northwest. *Myoko* was a thousand meters to the right, *Haguro* to her left, both a little behind. The three ships had been reunited again as Cruiser Division Five after *Nachi* spent some time in the north. Now her Captain Takahiko Kiyota was given overall command of the division, a competent officer, and ready for battle.

Kiyoya's ships were all of the same class, built in 1927 and 1928, over 660 feet long and just shy of 15,000 tons fully loaded. They had good armament, in an unusual design with a tight cluster of three twin 8 inch guns forward, and another two turrets aft. The forward cluster was only made possible by mounting the number three turret with its guns facing aft, but it gave the ship some extra firepower in the forward arc to about 23 degrees on either side of the ship. Clearly, the ships were ideal for scouting and chasing, built for speed, and fast enough to catch most any adversary, strong enough to hurt them if they did.

Even the two forward stacks had been elegantly inclined backwards in a graceful curve, and mated together as one, with a third smaller stack amidships. When the ship closed on its prey, they could also bring another formidable weapon to the action, the highly effective Type 93 "Long Lance" torpedo, with a range exceeding any other in the world at that time, capable of running all of 40,000 yards before its oxygen based propellant system would be expended. In action, however, the torpedoes would generally be fired inside 20,000 yards, but this was twice the range of similar ship borne systems on most US and Allied vessels.

We will get the first crack at this enemy ship, thought Kiyota. And it would be good if we handled the matter before Iwabuchi gets into it. The last thing that man needs is another feather in his cap. He would signal Captain Mori on *Haguro* and Yamazumi on *Myoko*: 'Assume a heading of 160 on approach and engage with forward turrets on my signal. Torpedoes to launch at 15,000 meters.' And for the sake of decorum and protocol, he also signaled Iwabuchi: 'Sighted ship, engaging at15:30 hours.'

* * *

Aboard *Kirov* there was little time to debate. Karpov wanted to engage the nearest enemy task force at once, though the Admiral asked about the possibility of outrunning the Japanese ships.

"Not this time, sir," said Fedorov. "They can make 34 to 36 knots, so unless you want another gun battle, we must decided what to do at once."

"We can engage now with our deck guns," said Karpov. "Rodenko has the range plotted for CIC operations."

They were racing for the north cape of Melville Island, but the Japanese screening force had used their superior speed to get a slight lead on them and now the cruisers were aiming to cut them off. Volsky decided they had no choice but to engage. The art of waiting in defense had been ably demonstrated when they watched the slow approach of the Japanese dive bombers, this time they had to take the initiative, and let their offensive be the shield.

"Should we use missiles on these ships? Our Moskit-IIs would have quite a shock value."

"Yes," said Karpov, "but we have only nine left, and twenty-six total SSMs in all. We must not forget the battleship is still out there. I suggest we use the 152mm batteries first."

"Very well, Mister Karpov. You may commence your action now."

Karpov nodded and turned to Samsonov. "You have your targets keyed, Mister Samsonov. Fire at will."

"Aye, sir."

They watched the forward turret rotate and train on a still unseen target in the distance. "Range, 37,200 meters, and firing now."

There came a sharp crack…crack…crack… with both barrels in the turret recoiling as they fired at three second intervals, and the radar guided shells were on their way.

* * *

When *Nachi's* spotters saw the dark silhouette ahead wink at them from its forward segment, they called out incoming fire. Kiyota was surprised at

the range of the action. This must be a battleship to fire at that range, he thought. Could the Americans have a task force here? Yet only one ship? No escorts? Might it be a British capital ship running out of Darwin that we did not know about? That made more sense to him. There was no way the Americans could have slipped through the Coral Sea and Torres Strait. And no heavy cruiser he knew of had guns that could range over 35,000 yards like this. So he had a British battleship, or perhaps one of their fast battlecruisers at hand, and he rubbed his hands with the excitement of the chase. But Kiyota was in for another surprise. He did not expect the lethal accuracy of the enemy rounds.

Two small geysers fell very close to *Myoko* off his port quarter now. Then he was startled to see that ship immediately struck on its long, sleek foredeck, an explosion just forward of the first turret, a second right on the barbette, and one of the two guns there was canted upward when it exploded. Two more rounds just missed the cruiser on its starboard side.

Two hits on the very first salvo, thought Kiyota? Yet these were small caliber weapons. The small water splashes and the effect of the weapons was not characteristic of a main gun from a battleship. Such range and accuracy! A small gun that could outrange his own bigger 8 inch batteries was very surprising. He decided to give the order to make smoke now, and he could discontinue when they were inside 25,000 yards so as not to hinder his own gunners. Soon artificially induced smoke joined that from the small fires beginning on *Myoko*, and the whole scene was shrouded in grey. He had to come fifteen points to port so as not to outrun his own smoke, and was pleased to see his division smartly turning on cue, a maneuver that they had practiced many times. The turn would also allow his aft turrets to begin training on the target, yet he was soon discouraged to see the smoke had no effect on the accuracy of the enemy fire. His ships were still being closely straddled. The salvos came in sets of six rounds, with a hit in virtually every set!

This ship could not possibly be using optics, he thought. We are barely showing them our main mast at this range. He made a mental note to make a log entry suggesting that this must be a new British radar controlled naval gun. Then his own ship was struck with a hard thud and black explosion, just below the main superstructure foreword.

“Fire below decks!” said Harada when he receive the report over the voice tube. “Not serious, however.”

Kiyota nodded, raising his field glasses. It would take them another ten to fifteen minutes to close the range on this ship before his own 8 inch guns could even come into play! Before that happened he would stand there, furious to see more and more hits being scored on his cruisers. *Myoko* had taken two more hits amidships, one on her aft funnel. *Haguro* was on fire at the bow. He gave the order for the formation to begin a ziz-zag approach, now estimating the range at 32,000 yards, but to no avail. The enemy rounds still found them, dogging their every maneuver. *Haguro* had just taken another hit forward on her number one turret and it looked like a bad fire there.

Kirov was fighting them like a skilled boxer, at a long arm's range but with a stinging jab to the face. Finally, in great frustration, Kiyota gave the order to fire before the enemy put more of his own guns out of action. The boom of Nachi's 8 inch guns sounded the charge: "Ahead full!"

* * *

Aboard *Kirov* the crack of the deck guns punctuated Samsonov's report, "Target Alpha, two hits—Target Beta, hit." For the next ten minutes they listened as Samsonov fired a total of sixty rounds, putting 24 directly on targets, with many others reported as 'close hits.' It could have been much worse. He was firing at a measured pace and not using the full rate of fire the 152mm guns were capable of.

"Just like the Italian cruisers," said Karpov. "We'll riddle them to pieces before they get in range."

"They are firing now," said Rodenko. "Rounds inbound… trajectory is short." They saw a salvo pattern fall very short in the distance, though it was remarkably tight.

"Mister Fedorov," said Volsky. "Will we have to sink these ships with gunfire?"

"Most likely, sir. They will press home the attack until they at least reach torpedo range. Our rounds are hurting them, but they are not fatal blows."

"A little something more then, Karpov. Let's use a MOS-III, shall we? I want to shock them."

"Very well, sir. Target discretion is yours, Mister Samsonov. One missile please."

"Aye, sir, firing missile number nine now." The number ten missile had

been used by Karpov to savage the American Task Force 16 in the North Atlantic—with a nuclear warhead. He hit the firing pad and the missile fire warning sounded, the hatch on the forward deck opening and catapulting a sleek missile up, its declination jet firing precisely and the roar of the powerful engine vibrating the deck at it hurtled into the sky. The 'Starfire' was the fastest missile on the ship, though its warhead was 100 kilograms smaller than the Moskit-II Sunburns. Samsonov called out the time to target as 18 seconds. They soon saw a brilliant orange explosion on the horizon, and thick black smoke billowed up.

What we target, we hit, thought Volsky, remembering Karpov's words. He wondered if the enemy would be discouraged, because now their SSM count slipped one more notch to 25 missiles. Rodenko was watching his signal returns closely and reported one enemy ship had reduced speed and was falling out of formation. It was *Haguro*.

* * *

Kiyota saw it coming, first high in the deepening blue of the sky, a long white tail of smoke behind a fiery dart. It moved impossibly fast—faster than any plane he had ever seen, so fast that he had barely time to point at it when he saw it suddenly swoop low, then level off and come thundering in at *Haguro* on his left. It struck like a hammer, the explosion and fire awesome to behold, right against the forward bow of the ship and just below the triple batteries there, and he gasped to see that it blew completely through the ship, sending fragments of torn metal and fire out the other side.

What demon from a thousand hells was that? It was *Raiju*, the thunder beast that falls from the sky like a ravenous wolf wrapped in lightning, and with that horrible thunderous roar. Then the magazines for the six forward eight inch guns exploded in a cataclysmic uproar. He saw the entire bow of the ship ripped apart, one of the massive 8 inch turrets hurled up into the sky like a toy. *Haguro* immediately was swamped at the bow, settling deeply in the water, and he knew she had been dealt a fatal blow.

"Signal *Kirishima*," he said. "Tell them this is no cruiser, but a battleship! Tell them we have hold of *Mizuchi's* tail, and we have lost *Haguro*."

Mizuchi was a legendary and much feared water dragon, in Japanese and Chinese lore. He could now dimly see the enemy ship in the distance, then felt the thud and explosion of yet another round against his side armor. His

forward batteries fired again, but the range was still 28,000 yards and he knew it would be long minutes before they had any hope of even spotting their own rounds, let alone doing any harm to the enemy. He saw the ship turn away from him now, running towards Melville island to prevent the range closing. He could probably outrun it, but by how many knots per hour? How long would it take him to get within a decent range? In time the enemy ship would have to turn to port to avoid the island, but how much damage would he take before then? His guns fired again, the rounds still well short as he watched through his binoculars.

There were over 700 men on *Haguro*, and most would soon be in the water where they might be saved. Should he press on with his attack? Five minutes later he received an order to break off, and steer a shadowing course outside the range of the enemy guns. Iwabuchi was dispatching his two destroyers to the scene for rescue and recovery. He was to maneuver to lead the enemy away from the area or effect a rendezvous with *Kirishima*, which was rushing to intercept the enemy ship at her top speed of 30 knots.

"Very well," said Kiyota as he gave to order to turn. "Our big brother is coming, *Mizuchi*, a fair fight this time, and then we will see how much thunder you have left!"

* * *

Rodenko reported the advancing cruisers had altered course, one now dead in the water. Admiral Volsky immediately gave the order to cease fire.

"Thankfully these men were not of a mind to sacrifice themselves for their empire," said Volsky.

"The maneuver we made turning in towards Melville Island may have helped, sir," said Fedorov. "They weren't going to close the range before we reached the coastline and the damage they were taking may have been enough to let them realize they were no match for us."

"I still have a large signal return vectoring on our position," said Rodenko.

"And we will have to turn north in ten minutes to get around the headlands soon. I'm taking us right between Parry Shoals and Mermaid Shoals, and up around Cape Van Diemen."

"What about the battleship?"

"Still vectoring in at 30 knots. It looks like the remaining two cruisers are

maneuvering to join it now.”

“How long before it could engage us?” asked Karpov.

“If we could stay on this heading we could keep it astern indefinitely, but we must turn, as Fedorov says, and in that instance I would say they could be within 30 kilometers in shortly after our turn.”

“Fedorov?”

The *Starpom* did some hasty calculations and then tapped the Plexiglas screen. “They’ll be in firing range here, sir. Just as we round the tip of Cape Van Diemen. I’ll have to take us through Beagle Gulf south of Marie Shoals. Thereafter we can turn due east and run full out. It will allow us to slowly break away from them, though our speed advantage is only two knots and we may be under fire for a time.”

“Due east…” Volsky tapped the arm of his chair. “They are running us out of the Timor Sea! Not a very hospitable welcome.”

“Yes, sir,” said Fedorov. “But if we take any other heading we will have to confront this battleship, and don’t forget the carriers west of our position as well.”

“What happened to the aircraft that were sent to bomb Darwin, Rodenko?” Volsky asked.

“I tracked them northwest and that signal is diminishing,” said Rodenko. “I’m losing the contacts one by one as they descend to lower altitudes.”

“That is probably the recovery operation. It may take them another thirty minutes to an hour, but I would say they could have a new strike wave spotted on deck by 16:40 hours. That’s still enough daylight for them to hit us again.”

“We can stop the carriers from launching just like we hit that cruiser, with a couple more MOS-III Starfires,” said Karpov.

“That may not be necessary,” said Rodenko. “That weather front is moving at over thirty-five Kph now and creeping up on them. It could inhibit flight operations soon.”

“Yes,” said Fedorov. “They will have to turn into the wind if they want to launch, and that would take them right into the storm front. I’m not saying that would dissuade them, but it is something they’ll have to deal with.”

Volsky thought for a moment. “How long can this battleship stay with us?”

“It has long legs, sir. Really quite a remarkable ship, all things considered. *Kirishima* could steam for 10,000 miles at 14 knots. At high speed that range

will diminish, but they will be with us for a good long while if they choose to follow."

"I think this man you described to us earlier will want us by the throat in short order," said Volsky. "And from that chart you displayed it will take a little more than a few missiles to dissuade him. And so, gentlemen, we will run. I have no intention of engaging this ship unless we are forced to do so. Soon we will have darkness on our side."

"We will be entering the Arafura Sea now, sir, but ahead lies the Torres Strait."

"Another bottleneck," said Volsky. "Very well. Let's get up around this cape and see if we can slip by this monster. Then it is into the Arafura Sea, and God only knows what lies ahead once we pass the Torres Strait."

Part IV

Thunder Gods

"Never had the gods of all the tribes
put upon the seas such monsters
as man now sends over them.
Their steel bowels, grinding and rumbling
below the splash of the sea,
are fed on quarried rock.
Their arteries are steel, their nerves copper,
their blood red and blue flames.
With the precedence of the supernatural
they peer into space.
Their voices scream through gales,
and they whisper together over 1000 miles of sea.
They reach out and destroy
that which the eye of man cannot perceive."

~ Homer Lea, *The Valor Of Ignorance*

Chapter 10

Captain Sanji Iwabuchi was growing impatient, and impatience in a man of his disposition became a real vice in short order. Kiyota's cruisers had been badly overmatched. The loss of *Haguro* stung him like a whip lash on his face, and he was quick to pass the pain along to any man near him.

"A shameful display," he said to his executive officer, Koro Ono. "Our forces were scattered. We had no *chi* in the attack. This ghost dancer appears from thin air, neh? What ship is this, Ono? Surely not an American battleship cruising alone in these waters."

"It must be British, sir. They are trying to reinforce the Australians. It could have come out of the Indian Ocean while we were assembling for this operation north of Timor Island, and before our submarine picket lines were deployed. It might even have reached Darwin and is only now sent fleeing from its hole to avoid being sunk by Admiral Hara's planes."

"Yes, and we are supposed to be shelling that place at this very moment!" Iwabuchi's dour face clearly indicated his displeasure.

"Kiyota has a good name for this one," said Ono. "*Mizuchi*—the ancient sea dragon. He says it took the bow off *Haguro* with just one bite, and engaged them at well over 30,000 yards with secondary batteries."

"That is nonsense!" Iwabuchi fumed. "We will see how this ship fights soon enough. In the meantime, what about Hara's carriers? It would be best if we could coordinate a strike with this engagement. Signal him at once."

Ono bowed, and was off to the radio room to send a coded message. When he returned his face was set, lips tight, and he saluted before he spoke. "Sir, Admiral Hara reports that his task force is now experiencing force 7 winds with worsening conditions and severe thunder storms. He has elected not to launch another strike wave under those conditions."

Iwabuchi just looked at him, his jaw tightening, eyes narrowed and threatening. He had been known to kill the messenger on more than one occasion, but he composed himself, staring ahead at the relatively calm seas in front of them.

"Ship ahead! Thirty degrees south." The call came down from the high pagoda mast. Three bridge officers raised binoculars, and one man was already working out an estimated range.

“About 30,000 yards,” he said and the Captain grunted.

“Sir,” Ono continued. “Admiral Hara suggests we shadow this ship and keep contact throughout the night. Our bombardment mission to Darwin is canceled and we are herewith detached to pursue this vessel.”

“Detached? What about the invasion?”

“Sir, Admiral Hara still has *Tone* and five destroyers. And he has *Mutsu* and *Nagato* with the second wave troops coming out of Amboina and Kendari as well.”

“Yes, I hear he haggled with Yamamoto for them, and was even trying to get his hands on *Musashi!”*

“The plan has changed, Captain,” Ono continued. “The first wave troops out of Kupang are also experiencing high seas. They will be delayed enough by this weather to make a rendezvous with the second wave troops more feasible. Hara now plans to land both waves at once, and use the ships he has for cover. We are detached to pursue this British battleship, but the Admiral plans to operate his carriers well east of Darwin tomorrow morning, where he can support both the landings there and our action in the Arafura Sea.”

“Then we are to chase this *Mizuchi* and hold on to his tail,” said Iwabuchi. “So be it.” He looked darkly at the bridge crew. “Range to target?”

“Sir, we estimate 28,000 yards, but they are turning to Starboard now, running just north of that cape. The range is opening. They appear to be very fast.”

Iwabuchi raised his field glasses, eyes puckered, and finally saw the distant enemy ship himself. Hara was probably correct not to launch now, he thought. It would be another hour before the planes got here, and then he would be faced with a recovery operation in high seas and gale force winds. All the better for me, he realized.

“So this ship is fast,” he said. “Then it is not one of their old fat battleships. It must be a battlecruiser—most likely the *Renown*. Or perhaps even one of their newest ships.”

“We still have *Nachi* and *Myoko*, sir,” said Ono. “They have taken five or six light caliber hits each, but only one gun has been put out of action on *Myoko*, and there is no flooding or damage to the engines on either ship. We have the speed to keep this ship in sight, sir, and we can run all night before the wind.”

Iwabuchi liked the sound of that, and allowed himself a taut smile. “Gunnery officer!” Commander Kimitake Koshino was quickly at his side,

bowing respectfully. “Fire at that ship. Both forward batteries. We will let them know we are coming.”

* * *

The first salvo came in short by over 1000 meters, and well off their port quarter, but Volsky noted how tight the splash pattern was, and the odd blue color of the water when the shells landed.

“That was typical of Japanese naval gunnery,” said Fedorov. “Their salvos will space no more than a hundred yards at times. It made for a lot of near misses, and fewer hits, but when they did find the target they could often score multiple hits at one time with a shell fall pattern that tight. That blue you see in the water splashes is dye, sir. The *Kongo* class battleships each used a different color dye so their spotters could distinguish which water splashes were from their own guns, *Kongo* used red dye, *Hiei* black, and *Kirishima* used blue dye.”

“Then they are not radar controlled?”

“No sir, but the Japanese had superb optics, and were excellent night fighters as well. They can put rounds on a target at long range, though there are no recorded hits in history beyond 26,000 yards or so. That said, I suggest we maneuver a bit to make it just a little more difficult for them to find the range.”

“What is the caliber of the guns?”

“14 inches, sir. Most likely Type 91 armor piercing rounds.”

“Not something we wish to experience firsthand,” said Volsky. “I have no desire to be painted blue and smashed by a 14 inch wide hunk of steel! We are making thirty-two knots?”

“Yes, sir. But Byko is complaining. That bomb hit we took aft was very near some of the hull damage we sustained in the Med.”

“Yes we have had our backside kicked more than once: the misfired Klinok, the helicopter incident, and those near misses the British sent our way. Now a bomb hit there. What does Byko say about it?”

“The hull is breeched sir, but well above the water line. We were spared serious damage due to the angle of the bomb, slightly off vertical, and it nearly missed us. It struck very near the outer gunwale before it penetrated two decks and blew out a three meter hole in the hull from the inside. It was also aft of our armor belt, sir. Most of the explosion was directed outward,

away from the ship. He is doing his best to seal off the area and reinforce that sector with some metal work now. But remember the engines, sir. We had a vibration on the right turbine in the Med and there was some flooding there earlier. Byko says he has it well in hand, but it will remain a weak point to watch closely, particularly if we are running at full battle speed like this."

"An Achilles heel…" Volsky folded his arms. "Very well, Mister Fedorov. You may maneuver the ship."

"Excuse me, sir," said Karpov. "Shall I return fire with the aft deck gun?"

Volsky looked at him, blinking. "No. I think we will remain silent. He is just shaking his fist at us, Mister Karpov. Hitting him with a 152 millimeter round or two is only likely to enrage the man, and steel his determination. Are we opening the range, Rodenko?"

"Yes, sir. Over 30,000 yards now with our turn east."

There was no further fire from the pursuing ships, but Rodenko noted that two smaller signal returns were moving slightly ahead of the battleship now, and creeping up on them.

"Those must be the cruisers we fought off earlier," said Fedorov.

"I make the speed at 34 knots at the moment," said Rodenko.

Fedorov did a quick mental calculation. "With a two knot speed advantage they will only gain 3,700 meters on us per hour. That would put them at the maximum range of their guns an hour from now. The sun is behind that storm front, and we are losing light rapidly. Given that they must sight us optically, they probably won't fire until they get closer. I think we have two hours before we should be worried about them."

Volsky was satisfied. "Then unless that battleship persists in lobbing shells at us, we will rely on our speed for the moment. I am going below to speak with Dr. Zolkin about the casualties. Mister Karpov, if that battleship puts rounds close enough to pose a threat, slap his face. Use one MOS-III, not the deck guns, and hit his superstructure. He has fired and thrown down his gauntlet. I have heard his complaint, and I have not answered, but I will not be goaded indefinitely."

"Very good, sir."

* * *

Mizuchi slipped away, slowly sliding beneath the far horizon insofar as the battleship was concerned, though *Kirishima* was still pressing hard at 30

knots. Iwabuchi ordered the two cruisers to use their superior speed and advance close enough to keep the ship in visual range, but not so close as to provoke another engagement. The lesson learned earlier had been a hard one. To attempt to close on this sea dragon now would mean a slow, plodding gain, possibly under fire for hours before they could come into effective range.

The Captain was ill tempered, pacing the bridge at times, short with the men and in a very sour mood. When it became clear that they could do little more now, he finally relented and turned the bridge over to his executive officer Ono, going below for food and rest.

When the surly Captain had gone, Ono breathed a bit easier. He turned to Lt. Commander Ikeda, in charge of the ship's secondary batteries with a knowing look. "It appears we have a situation here," he said discretely.

Ikeda raised an eyebrow. "With the mood the Captain is in this could become something much more," he said in a low voice. "Vendetta would be a better word. Iwabuchi will not take the loss of *Haguro* lightly. In fact I think he will take it very personally."

"This enemy ship is fast! It has already slipped over the horizon."

"The cruisers will keep hold of her, and we will get a seaplane up at first light again."

"What do you make of this, Ikeda?"

"Something slipped in the planning, what else? The British had a ship at Darwin, and it is running for friendly ports on their east coast."

"Most likely," said Ono. "I believe there is a new squadron assigned to our airfield at Port Moresby, a group of G3M *Rikko* bombers. Perhaps we should notify them that this ship appears to be heading for the Torres Strait."

"They won't be able to hit a ship with this speed. That's work for a carrier."

"Initial reports were that a hit was scored when the ship was first spotted, but we have heard nothing since."

"It will take a more concentrated strike by Hara's carriers tomorrow," Ikeda agreed. "Hara will get the job done. Either that or he can slow this one down enough for us to catch him."

"Yes, old King Kong is coming east right behind us. But something tells me that this enemy ship is going to cause real trouble. It may be running now, but did you hear the report from Kiyota? He says they were taking small caliber hits at 30,000 yards!"

“He must have been mistaken,” Ikeda said politely. “I know secondary batteries and they can’t range much beyond 15,000 to 20,000 yards.”

“Yet I saw the damage when *Nachi* and *Myoko* joined us,” said Ono. “Those were not large caliber hits. They would have crushed those ships if they were from 14 inch guns like our main batteries.”

“They must have misjudged the range.”

“I’m not so sure, Ikeda. Captain Kiyota aboard *Nachi* is a skilled sea captain. He was working to get into torpedo range and we both know he could have fired with his Type 93s if he was inside typical secondary gun range. This ship could be something we’ve never seen—a new ship, with all new guns.”

“What was Kiyota talking about with this nonsense about *Raiju*? He said *Haguro* was hit by something new, fast as lightning, and with deadly accuracy and power.”

“It was most likely a large caliber shell from their main batteries,” said Ono. “What else could do such damage? The ship’s bow was practically ripped apart with that hit. A lucky shot, neh? Kiyota’s cruisers are good in a hunt, but no match for an enemy battleship. We were wise to order him to break off and rejoin us.”

“Yes, and I fear Iwabuchi will not rest until he brings this ship to battle.”

“Agreed,” Ono shrugged. “Get some rest, Lieutenant. Something tells me we’re going to be very busy the next few days, that is if these old engines can keep us in the hunt. It’s going to be a long night.”

Chapter 11

All that night Hara's *Kido Butai* carrier force ran east, skirting the northern coast of Melville Island where Charlie One and Strangler had seen the action involving *Kirov*. But by now the two Aborigine scouts were far to the south, well away from the thickening squads of Japanese naval infantry from the Kure 26th SNLF that were now landing on the island in force.

In the pre-dawn hours of August 26, 1942 the planned invasion of Port Darwin was well underway. The heavy Bombardment Group centered on the two big battleships Admiral Hara had wrangled away from Yamamoto were now pounding the coastal shore batteries and inland positions where remnants of a small Australian defense force that had been evacuated from Port Moresby now held forth. *Mutsu* and *Nagato* fired salvo after salvo, their big 16 inch guns blasting the shore and sending huge columns of smoke into the grey dawn. Closer in, the light cruiser *Tama* and destroyers *Onami, Kiyonami,* and *Okinami* used their smaller guns to good effect as well.

Just before sunrise, the transport fleet began to disembark wave after wave of troops from the 21st Infantry Regiment, the Shimada Regiment from Yamashita's 5th Division, the very same tigers that had so baffled the British forces defending in Malaya. It was all he would need. The Darwin garrison was no more than battalion strength, and would be overcome by persistent Japanese attacks within a few days.

Hara was so pleased with the work done by his battleship bombardment force, that he canceled a planned second air strike on Darwin and thought instead of his pursuit force further east. He turned to E-I flight leader Masafumi Arima aboard *Shokaku* where he set his flag, and asked for an update.

"Where is Iwabuchi and the pursuit force?"

"Sir? About 250 miles northeast of our position. The cruisers managed to shadow this enemy ship all night, but *Kirishima* slowly fell behind, even running at her very best speed, sir. The British have edged away, but Captain Kiyota aboard *Nachi* now reports Iwabuchi is just over twenty miles behind in the chase."

"Amazing," said Hara. "For that old battleship to stay so close at high speed like that is quite a feat. We must now think about slowing this British ship down, even if we have to disappoint Iwabuchi by sinking it. Prepare a

major air strike this time. Sakamoto should have never sent only 9 planes with incendiaries yesterday, and I was equally remiss by sending only twelve torpedo bombers off *Zuiho*."

That had been the one thing to darken Hara's mood the previous day, for no report was ever received back from Matsua's B5N2s. They waited well into the night, with *Zuiho* bravely running ahead of the storm to make for a safer recovery operation, but not a single plane returned. Now they were all presumed lost, the whole of *Zuiho's* strike element. All she had left was Hidaka's twelve A6M2 fighters and Hayashi with his sole surviving dive bomber, the hapless leader of that first ill-fated strike on this enemy ship. Hara had been taught a strong lesson. He would not repeat the mistake. This time he would use his more experienced pilots off the two fleet carriers, with the correct ordinance, and this time he would strike in force.

"Twenty planes gone," he muttered. "At least we managed to fish half the pilots out of the sea. The Navy can give us more planes easily enough, but finding skilled men to fly them is another matter. Well, Captain, spot a good mixed strike wave this time. Use our squadrons as well as anything you need from *Zuikaku*. I want to avenge the men and planes we so foolishly lost yesterday. Let us attack this ship properly today, and put it on the bottom of the Arafura Sea."

"Aye, sir! Seaplanes from Iwabuchi's ship and the cruisers will have a good fix on the target. Who should I task to lead this attack, sir?"

"Sakamoto, who else? Let him use all of Ema's dive bombers, and Yamaguchi's as well. Assign Ichihara from our torpedo bombers, and Subota from *Zuikaku*—9 planes each. I do not think we will need many escort fighters, but send one squadron. Use *Zuiho's* planes for top cover escort. We'll keep our fighters for Combat Air Patrol over the fleet. I want a good coordinated strike." He held up a finger, admonishing.

"Very good, sir. Sakamoto will handle the matter this time."

"Oh yes," Hara put in one last note. "Hayashi is still on *Zuiho*. Tell him he can join the attack as well, if his plane can still fly. It will do him some good. He's most likely brooding at the edge of seppuku by now. Let's give him the honor of riding in the van—one more chance to set things right, neh? Who knows, he might even get us another hit!"

* * *

Hayashi was indeed in a dark and somber mood. He sat in the flight briefing room aboard *Zuiho*, alone, staring at the empty chairs. His last goodbye to his old friend Matsua was indeed final, and now he was responsible not only for the death of his own men, but for the lives of Matsua's men as well. The shame was too much to bear. He sat with his hands on his head, a miserable and forsaken man, on a forsaken ship.

What good was a carrier with no planes, no fire to breathe at the enemy? The ship had once been a sub-tender, and in his mind she was good for little else now that her only strike squadron was gone. It was all his fault, he knew. If he had completed his mission as first assigned then all these men and planes would still be here, and tonight he might drink with Matsua, as in old times, better times before the war.

Above he could hear sounds of activity as flight service crews seemed to be readying the last twelve fighters aboard for some action. Then a mechanic from the flight deck came rushing into the room his face red with excitement.

"Lieutenant Hayashi? There you are. Your plane is ready, sir!"

Hayashi did not move, then slowly turned, his eyes dark and sullen. "What are you talking about?"

"Your D3, sir. I've been working on it all night! I replaced the struts that were damaged from spare parts, and patched up both wings, sir. There is still a dent in the forward prop blade, but I have hammered it as smooth as I could. The engine will run a little rough, but I replaced all the oil and hydraulic fluid, and two damaged lines. They have already mounted your bomb, sir. The plane is on the elevator now!"

"Bomb?"

"Haven't you heard, Lieutenant? You have been ordered to take off with Lieutenant Commander Hidaka's fighters and lead in Sakamoto's strike wave."

At this Hayashi was suddenly focused. "Ordered to take off? By who?"

"We just got a signal from *Shokaku*, sir. You should come up on deck! They have spotted a big strike to go and kill this British ship that took down our brothers. *Zuikaku's* planes are mustering on deck as well. You are the only strike plane left aboard *Zuiho*, and the Lucky Phoenix will fly with you today, Lieutenant. I was sent to find you. Takeoff in ten minutes, sir."

Hayashi swallowed hard, surprised and honored to hear this news. His mood lifted considerably and he stood up, sniffing the sweet warm air and standing taller. The mechanic smiled. "I'll see you on deck, sir!"

Hayashi nodded, looking around him now for his gloves and not finding them. No matter. If his plane would fly, then he would fly as well. Those orders could have only come from one man, he knew, Admiral Hara himself. He started for the door, then stopped, turning once more to look at the rows of empty chairs. Then he bowed silently, saluted, and rushed for the flight deck, listening to the drone of engines as the first fighters began to take off.

By the time he reached the upper deck he could see that his plane was already spotted and ready, with a subsection of three A6M2s, right behind it. A young fighter pilot came to greet him with a bow. “Lieutenant Hayashi? I am Yoshimi Minami, *shotai* leader assigned to you as escort. I have the honor to fly with you in the vanguard, sir.” He smiled, eyes bright with youth and fire beneath his flight bonnet. Then he gestured, pointing the way.

Hayashi nodded and then strode boldly across the white striped flight deck to mount his plane. The engine was already started and a mechanic jumped down, saluting as Hayashi climbed.

“I’m sorry sir,” the man shouted. “But we have no radio man to send with you.”

“Not necessary,” said Hayashi, and everyone who heard him knew why. Hayashi had been given a rare and special honor. He would be privileged to relive the past, and this time he was determined to acquit himself and redeem not only his own soiled honor, but that of all the men of his own squadron who had died, and those of Matsua’s squadron as well.

The flight deck leader stepped quickly to the front of his waiting plane and bowed. He made the signal that would only be given to the *hikotaicho,* strike leader, and Hayashi swelled with newfound pride.

Hayashi saluted crisply and slid the canopy shut tight, strapping himself quickly into this seat and breathing deeply. His left arm still pained him where a shell had grazed him before it killed his radio man in a the rear compartment. This time he would fly alone—just one wounded man in one wounded plane—the last and only strike plane aboard *Zuiho* that day.

The chocks were removed and the flag man waved him forward. As he began to rev up his engine tears glazed his eyes, as he knew in his heart of hearts that he would never return.

Sayonara, he thought to all he loved back home—to mother, father, elder sister, and all he had ever known. *Sayonara*, Matsua, and to all my brothers waiting for their chance at another life. I now have mine, and I will spend it gladly to avenge your deaths, and strike this demon like a Thunder God.

Today I am *Jinrai Butai!*

The sky above was filling up with droning formations of dive bombers and torpedo planes. They were mostly circling high above the three carriers, but one group flew low, a squadron of 9 torpedo bombers roaring over the long flat deck of *Zuiho* just before Hayashi took off. The last of them tipped its wings back and forth, and Hayashi knew it was Lt. Subota off his mother ship *Zuikaku*. Then he heard Reijiro Otuka's gritty voice over his short range headset. He was radio man aboard Subota's plane.

"Come on up, Hayashi. Everyone is waiting for you!"

Hayashi gunned his engine and his plane hurtled down the long flight deck and labored into the sky. Behind him the last three fighters of *Zuiho's* escort followed in his wake, soon climbing with him and taking up positions to either side, with one behind and above, a princely escort of three A6M2 *Rei-sen* fighters. Then he heard another voice in his headset as he reached altitude, joined by nine more fighters off *Zuiho*.

"Lieutenant Hayashi!" It was Sakamoto, the strike commander and veteran of so many successful battles. *"Steer 67 degrees northeast. You may lead us in!"*

Hayashi reached up to engage his microphone and spoke proudly. "It will be my honor, sir!" He opened his throttle and maneuvered his plane to the van. Behind him were wide formations of D3As, nine led by Sakamoto and nine more under Lt. Commander Ema. Just behind them there were eighteen more dive bombers led by Yamaguchi off the carrier *Shokaku*. The wave would finish up with nine B5N2 torpedo bombers under Subota, and another nine led by Ichihara from *Shokaku*. There were all of fifty-four strike planes behind him now, this time all the dive bombers properly armed with armor piercing bombs, the B5Ns prominently carrying their long *Koku Gyorai* 'Thunderfish,' the type 91 torpedoes. He was plane number 55, the chosen swallow in the lead, with an escort of all twelve of Hidaka's fighters off *Zuiho*, their white wings bright in the sun.

He breathed in deeply. It was a glorious morning, and a glorious way to die. He would join his brothers soon.

* * *

They saw the planes on radar at a few minutes before 06:00 hours at a range of 225 miles, Rodenko shouting out the contact in a clear voice. Battle

stations sounded and men rushed to take up seats at the lightning fast computer stations, the milky green screens winking out data, lights flashing system readiness. Karpov was holding down the watch that morning, and Fedorov and Admiral Volsky were soon to the bridge, the latter somewhat winded, but finally awake after the long climb up to the citadel.

"Admiral on the Bridge!"

"As you were, gentlemen," Volsky huffed, walking straight to Rodenko's radar station for a look at the reading.

"A large contact sir. I'm reading over sixty discrete units, about 200 miles out now. They will be nearly an hour closing the range at their current speed."

"Sixty planes? Someone wants to ruin our pleasure cruise for sure this time. Samsonov, what is our SAM inventory?"

"Thirty-five S-300s and thirty–seven Klinoks, sir."

"Seventy-two missiles," Volsky shook his head. "And after that we become a sitting duck, as the Americans might say, at least insofar as air strikes are concerned. Opinions?" His eyes moved from Karpov to Fedorov.

"This is probably the heart of the remaining strike aircraft off the two fleet carriers," said Fedorov. "It will be a mixed strike composed of both dive bombers and torpedo bombers—only this time I think they will coordinate the strike to hit us with everything they have at one time."

"We could have hit those carriers with a Moskit-II early this morning while they were arming and fueling. Was it so hard to assume they would mount this strike?" Karpov had a dejected look on his face. "We have been too reluctant to do what is necessary here, and now we pay the price. For that matter, we should have pounded those cruisers last night as well, then shaken them off and used a few SAMs to shoot down their seaplanes. Then we could have broken away and they would not know where we are."

"But they know where we are headed," said Fedorov. "The Torres Strait is the only channel east we can use, and we will have to slow to 10 knots there. It will undoubtedly be watched by planes out of Port Moresby as well. So it is just a matter of time before their search assets locate us. We can't expend vital missile inventory shooting down seaplanes, not with combat strikes like this one heading our way."

"Then we will have to break that formation up at range," said Karpov. "Just as we did with those strike waves off the British carriers."

"You recommend we engage at once with the S-300s?" Volsky raised a

heavy eyebrow.

“I do, sir. We can start with one missile canister at 125 miles, a second barrage at 100 miles if necessary.” Each canister would house up to eight missiles, so Karpov was proposing they expend just under half their remaining S-300s in the initial attacks.

“It will be necessary,” said Fedorov. “We’ll shock them, and definitely hurt them, but they will not break off and run. They’ll press in the attack with every last plane.”

“I assume as much having seen the first two strikes,” said Karpov. “We can expend half our S-300’s and see what remains of their strike assets. Then at 40 miles out we can hit them with the Klinok system if their numbers remain high. Any that get through that will be grist for our Gatling guns, just as before.”

“A sound plan,” said Volsky. “Half our S-300s and then probably half our Klinok missiles as well. That means we can only play this game one more time! What else will those carriers have left, Fedorov?”

“This will be the heart of their strike planes, sir. Those two carriers could hold seventy-two planes each. We’ve already killed twenty of a possible 144. That leaves 124 planes, with fifty-four of them most likely being A6M2 fighters. That would leave seventy strike planes, and Rodenko says he has nearly that many contacts. They may have some fighters or torpedo planes in reserve, but not more than a dozen.”

“What about the third carrier?” Karpov asked.

“A light escort carrier,” said Fedorov. “They usually carried two groups, half fighter and the other half strike planes of one sort or another. No more than twenty-four planes in all. These may be their reserve.”

Volsky shook his head, remembering that first British plane he ordered shot down with an S-300. Then the ship’s silos and magazines had been full, glutted with reloads for the planned live fire exercises. Now every missile he fired brought them one step closer to a condition where even these old propeller planes, obsolete seventy years before *Kirov* had ever been built, could pose a real threat. One had already blackened the aft deck and put a hole in the hull above the waterline. *Kirov* already bore an unsightly scar from a war that would just not let them be. He sighed.

“We talked our way out of some real trouble a few weeks ago at Gibraltar,” he said. “Something tells me these men will not be so accommodating as Admiral Tovey, even if we did have someone aboard who

could speak Japanese.”

“No, sir,” said Karpov. “I’m afraid we will have to let our missiles do the talking here.”

“It seems so. And what you have said about taking a more proactive stance in these matters has not gone unheard, Captain. You may be right, Karpov. We are measured against a foe here that will be implacable. The Americans had to burn and blast their way from one desolate island to the next in this war, and it ended with Hiroshima and Nagasaki. If we *do* manage to evade the Japanese, let us not also forget the Americans. They will have a considerable score to settle with us too if they ever realize we are the same foe they faced in the Atlantic. Very well, gentlemen. Man your stations. Mister, Fedorov, you will maneuver the ship in this action.”

“Aye, sir.”

“Mister Karpov, you will make the tactical weapons deployments… Fight your battle.”

Chapter 12

The Missiles rose into the violet of the early morning with sudden fury, the sound of their rocket engines shaking the air when the main engines ignited. The current model of the S-300 system aboard *Kirov* was a vastly updated variant of the older S-300P missile, a rotating canister of eight missiles mounted in an underdeck vertical silo. They ranged out to 150 miles, and would streak out at a blistering speed exceeding Mach 6.0 to deliver a large 150kg warhead if the missile got anywhere near the target, and sending a hail of withering shrapnel in all directions. They would have little or no difficulty finding targets in a massed formation such as the one headed *Kirov's* way now. They were so accurate that they could even be used against short range ballistic missiles if necessary, but the relatively slow planes in their long formation lines would make perfect targets.

One after another they fired and went on their scorching way, and for the flights of planes that saw them coming it was a nightmare the like of which they had never seen—save one.

* * *

Hayashi saw the evil contrails climbing up for them at a hideous rate of speed and the awful memory of the death of his squadron returned. The pulse of fear hit his gut, but he steadied himself. The Dragon has fired, he thought. Last time we were right on top of this demon, and these rockets tore my formation to pieces, then came the flak guns, so lethal that he was amazed his single plane had managed to survive intact. This time it will be even worse, he knew. Our planes are just waiting to be struck, all lined up like birds on a fence! In a flash he knew what he had to do, clutching the microphone at his throat he shouted out his warning.

"This is Hayashi! All squadrons—disperse, disperse, *disperse!* We will regroup at 12,000 feet!" And he immediately put his plane into a steep dive. The three fighters escorting him were surprised by the sudden maneuver, but they soon recovered, tipped their wings and dove with him. Above and behind, other squadrons close enough to hear Hayashi's plaintive warning reacted in different ways. Some kept stubbornly on wondering if Hayashi had lost his nerve after all, and waiting for further orders from strike leader

Sakamoto. Then they saw the missiles clawing up through the clear blue sky and their eyes widened with surprise.

Yamaguchi's D3A2 squadrons off *Shokaku* were the first to be hit. Three S-300s ignited right across their flight path and the whole of 1st squadron's nine planes flew directly into the hail of metal shrapnel. Of the nine Vals, five were hit, three so badly that they tailspinned down out of control, the remaining two were badly shaken and one was afire. 2nd Squadron was above and a thousand meters behind, and when they saw what happened to their brothers, and spied three more missiles heading their way, Hayashi's warning made immediate sense.

"Follow me!" One man shouted as he put his plane into a steep dive. The missiles veered to a new intercept course that took them right through the remainder of 1st squadron, where two found planes and ignited in great fireballs blazoning in the clear blue sky.

Several thousand feet below, the torpedo bombers all got the word and began to disperse in groups of three, their *shotai* leaders taking them down well below the 12,000 foot elevation Hayashi had called for. One group was sought, and hit, by the last two S-300s, and all three planes were destroyed, cut to pieces by the intense shrapnel in the exploding missiles.

Yet the tally at the end of that first salvo from *Kirov* was disheartening. For eight missiles they had destroyed eight planes and damaged two others, one so badly that it had to turn for home, a bad fuel leak making its prospects for a safe landing now very unlikely. Instead it would look for the pursuit force and ditch in the sea near *Kirishima*, and its valuable pilot would live to fight another day.

Minutes later they saw more white contrails arcing up into the sky, and the pilots braced for another round, their engine throttles now open full as they bravely charged, yet not a single man had even sighted the ship they were supposed to be targeting!

Three of the escorting A6M2 Zeros bravely raced towards the oncoming missiles, their machine guns firing in a vain effort to engage the sky demons. But the missiles were simply too fast, faster even than the machine gun rounds that sought them out, and the fighters had no chance in the world to ever shoot them down. Yet what they did have was a chance to sacrifice themselves so that some of their brothers in the strike planes could push on to the attack. Three of the eight missiles found Zeros, blowing them to pieces, while the five remaining missiles pushed into isolated groups of two and

three planes, their contrails twisting like vapor rope as they maneuvered, vectored in on targets, and blew them from the sky.

Three dive bombers died, along with two more torpedo bombers. A third Kate had its wings so riddled with shrapnel that it lost too much lift and fuel, and had to jettison the heavy torpedo it was carrying. It was effectively out of the battle, and the count was now eighteen planes lost for sixteen missiles. This left twenty eight Vals and twelve Kates still aloft and inbound as the strike wave crossed through the ninety mile mark. Nine more fighters remained as well, a total of forty-nine planes still headed *Kirov's* way.

* * *

Aboard *Kirov* Karpov watched the results on radar, with Rodenko reading out these same numbers to tally the score. It was most disheartening.

"They seemed to react very quickly," said Rodenko. "Look how they dispersed in all directions, not like the first two groups, which held formation the whole way in."

"It seems they learn fast," said Karpov. "Just like the British. How long before they come in range of the Klinok System?"

"Fifteen minutes."

"Very well. Secure the S-300 system, Samsonov. We will shift the defense to our intermediate range systems now. I want to retain some long range defensive umbrella, and our S-300 missile inventory has reduced to just nineteen missiles. This is not the way to adequately repel an attack of this scale, but given our missile inventory, it is all we can do at the moment."

Kirov's systems were fully capable of defeating a force the size of Admiral Hara's strike wave, though in modern combat the application of firepower in the defense would be much greater. If these had been sixty American strike planes off one of their nuclear carriers, the ship would have fired with everything they had. In modern combat it was always a do or die proposition, and the careful, measured application of defensive firepower was likely to only produce one result—a sunk ship. The tension mounted as they waited, watching the slow advance of the enemy on radar.

"They seem to be reforming at 12,000 feet," said Rodenko.

"When will they spot us?" asked Karpov?

"At that height? The horizon is all of 130 miles away for them. They can see where our missiles contrails are leading now, and soon we'll be big

enough to pick out with an unaided eye on the sea.”

“One disadvantage of our missiles, eh?” said Karpov. “They lead the enemy right to our doorstep.” He stood up, looking at the ship’s chronometer. “With your permission, Admiral, I will begin the next engagement in ten minutes with the Klinok system.”

Volsky nodded. “Carry on, Captain.”

The Klinok missiles could strike targets at almost 20,000 feet, and the strike wave was right in the middle of this range envelope, moving inside forty miles. Sometimes called the Kinzhal as it was a variant of the older 3K95 missile system. The Klinok, or ‘Blade,’ had once been an export version of the weapon, but this latest variant was given that name when installed on the newly remodeled *Kirov*. A cold launch system, the missiles were ejected via gas catapult before their engines fired, and then sent on their way and controlled by two radars, one for long range acquisition and the second for target prosecution.

Each underdeck canister in the system held eight missiles, though the radars had been designed to prosecute no more than four simultaneous targets per canister. Klinok was, therefore, designed to double team each contact, allowing for two missiles to vector in on the target to assure its destruction. But given the circumstances, *Kirov* did not have the luxury of expending its vital munitions in such an extravagant manner.

“Ready, Samsonov? These will be single fire scenarios. No barrage. I want each missile to track and acquire before we fire the next, clear?”

“Aye, sir. Switching to single fire mode and all systems report ready.”

“Hold fire until they are inside twenty kilometers.”

“The radars were acquiring targets well beyond that, but the missiles would be much more effective inside that shorter range envelope.

Samsonov began to key missiles to targets with quick taps of his light pen on the screen. This was modern combat. He was not hunched in the pilot seat like his enemy, listening to the roar of his plane’s engines as they surged ahead through the wild missile fires, their hands and feet tight on the yoke and throttle, faces set and grim. Instead he sat in an air conditioned room, tapping glass to glass on a computer controlled data screen, quietly completing all his missile assignments.

Karpov turned and nodded in his direction.

“You may begin.”

* * *

When the next round of missiles came they seemed sleeker, more deliberate, their contrails fine lines in the sky as they reached for the planes. First one came, and it sought out a D3A Val. The pilot spun away, tipping over and trying put his plane into an evasive dive, but the missile would not be fooled. It maneuvered in a tight turn and struck the plane full on, obliterating it in a bright orange and black explosion.

Another and another came up for them, a slow, deliberate procession of contrails in the sky. Hayashi heard a shout of '*bonzai'* in his ear and saw three A6M2 *Rei-sen* fighters veer off to head for the missiles, as if they might dogfight them. Their powerful engines and superior speed sent them surging ahead of the main body of strike planes, where they quickly gained the attention of the lead missile. The computer brains in the missiles adapted, re-acquired, and targeted the Zeros. All three planes died spectacular deaths, one by one, and then three more vapor thin contrails arced up at them as the deadly game continued.

Kirov traded eighteen missiles for planes in the attack. Every missile fired found a plane, but the inventory also fell to a dangerous low of only nineteen missiles remaining. Eight Vals, four Kates and six brave Zeros died, leaving only the three that had been assigned to Hayashi as his personal escort. Before it was over Hoashi, and Ichihara were dead, both squadron leaders off *Shokaku*, but all the other *buntaicho* leaders survived. The strike wave had been largely destroyed. Only twenty-eight strike planes and three fighters remained, and the Japanese would have had a much more satisfactory result by simply bailing out to save their pilots once they crossed into the lethal target envelope of the missiles, but that factor was simply not in the equation for them. They pressed on, thirty one planes now able to see and target their enemy for the first time.

They were ten miles out and coming fast, and Hayashi heard Sakamoto shouting orders to his widely dispersed *shotai*. The dive bombers would come down from their present altitude, though Sakamoto was taking his section up to 15,000 feet to overview the attack. The last eight torpedo bombers were taking an everyman for himself strategy, and diving to lower altitudes to approach from all compass headings.

Hayashi and his three fighter escorts were somewhere in the midst of it all now, and he signaled to those planes nearest to him. "Stay with me. We'll all go in together, brothers, *Jinrai Butai!"*

There was an agonizing wait as the planes drew ever closer to the dark ship below them, then Sakamoto gave the order and the Aichi D3As tilted their noses into the gleaming sun and started to dive with shouts and curses and exclamations of *bonzai!* The attack was finally pressing home, with fewer than half as many planes that took off from the carriers.

* * *

Karpov immediately engaged the same system he had used earlier to repulse the first surprise dive bomber strike—the deadly *Kashtans*. The missile element of the system sent up sixteen rockets in two barrages of eight. Traveling at nearly 3000 feet per second, they were quick to the targets just after the planes began their dives.

The first planes were hit, some by two missiles at once, and sent spinning wildly out of control. One had a wing sheared off, which in turn was struck by another missile and incinerated. In all the sixteen rockets claimed another twelve Vals, leaving only eight intrepid planes who got close enough to try and drop their bombs. Of these the lethal Gatling Guns rattled out death and destruction for three. Five bombs were actually released, two were from Squadron Leaders Ema and Sakamoto, and they straddled *Kirov* with two near misses that shook the ship very hard and sent steel fragments into systems along the lower port side weather deck. The other three bombs fell wide off the mark, while the AR-710 main Gatling gun systems were quickly engaging the eight torpedo bombers with sharp, deadly bursts of riveting fire. Of these, six were knocked down on approach, and only two got close enough to release their torpedoes, which ran wide of the mark, being poorly aimed in the frantic energy of the battle.

Then Hayashi and his three Zeros came screaming in, and the *Kashtans* rotated their long black barrels to train on the targets. The horrid whir and sharp rattle of the guns split the air and the whine of the oncoming planes seemed a terrible agony. Two of the three Zeros were struck and on fire, their engines riddled with 30mm shells, power lost and sent into steep unrecoverable dives. But Hayashi kept on, he was very close now and should have quickly released his bomb, but his face was set in a deadly mask and he opened the throttle full out, forsaking his dive brakes. Then he felt his lumbering plane hit first on one wing, then another, astonished to see segments of both wings sheared right off. The stick jolted in his hands but he

was no longer concerned to aim or deliver his bomb. Instead he struggled with all his might to keep the plane aimed at the enemy ship, and then the last of the Thunder Gods, the brave *Jinrai Butai*, the last plane off *Zuiho*, rode his flaming D3A right into the heart of the ship.

Lt. Ema had managed to evade the awful close in Gatling fire, only because his plane had not yet been targeted, and he was skimming low on the water, craning his neck over his right shoulder when he saw Hayashi's brave dive. There was a massive explosion, just aft of the second tower where the Fregat 3D radar system rotated fitfully to trace the battle out in milky green screens on the main bridge. Smoke and fire broiled up from the heart of the ship.

"Bonzai, Hayashi!" he yelled *"Bonzai!"*

The first to find and hit *Kirov* was now the last, and Hayashi had scored one more vindicating blow in trade for the lives and planes of Hara's entire strike wing.

The battle was over.

Part V

Damage Control

"When we mourn those who die young –
those who have been robbed of time –
we weep for lost joys.
We weep for opportunities and pleasure
we ourselves have never known.
We feel sure that somehow that young body
would have known the yearning delight
for which we searched in vain all our lives.
We believe that the untried soul,
trapped in its young prison,
might have flown free
and known the joy that we still seek."

— *Josephine Hart, Damage*

Chapter 13

Hayashi and his plane struck the ship about seventy-five meters from the stern, smashing right down onto the armored roof of the aft auxiliary command citadel. The “battle bridge,” as it was sometimes called, this facility had been used by Admiral Volsky to regain control of the ship during the ‘Karpov incident’ in the North Atlantic. It served as an auxiliary command center for the ship in the event the main bridge was damaged or otherwise out of action. It had control stations for every vital ship system, including a combat information center, helm station, communications, radar and sonar, and it was also protected by an armored shell of 200mm Kevlar coated hardened steel armor, just as the main bridge. That was the only thing that prevented the plane from plunging right into the guts of the ship at that point.

The armored roof buckled, then collapsed under the intense kinetic impact of a plane weighing over 5,600 pounds, and the immolated D3A ravaged into the citadel, her bomb then exploding in what was essentially an armored box with 200mm reinforced steel for walls and flooring. Nothing in the box survived, the equipment, computers, ship’s stations, were all completely destroyed, but the box itself held as designed, and the explosion was prevented from doing further damage below decks. The facility was not in use at the time, but three duty officers there were killed instantly.

The explosion was largely directed upwards through the already penetrated roof, and seared fragments of the D3A and the exploding bomb, became a rain of shrapnel that shot up like grapeshot and caught the spinning panels of the Fregat-3D radar system, severing control wires, smashing sensors and immediately darkening the ship’s primary long range defense radar.

Kirov groaned with the hit, but it was not to be a fatal blow. That said, a fire started in the blackened battle bridge, and fire was the nemesis of every ship at sea since the Greeks had first used it as a weapon in ancient times. Damage control parties scrambled to the scene and the ship shuddered, still at high speed until Volsky gave the order to slow to twenty knots.

On the Tin Man HD display they could see that the Fregat system was no longer rotating, and one of the fire control radars for the Klinok system silos mounted under the aft deck was a blackened wreck as well. It had been on the

roof of the aft citadel.

It wasn't long before Byko had an overall assessment. The fires would be contained within an hour, but the battle bridge was a total loss, destroyed beyond their capacity to ever repair. Three men were dead, seventeen injured. All things considered, it was good news. If Hayashi had struck another fifty meters forward he would have blasted right into the rear of the main tower, where two hidden steam vents stood in for what was once a smokestack on older warships. With no armor to speak of there, his plane would have plummeted deep into the ship, perhaps not stopping until it struck the armored shell that surrounded the ship's reactor core.

"We'll need time, sir." Byko pleaded on the intercom. *"There were two other near misses, one very near the reactor core amidships. Thank God they didn't hit us, but I would advise we put divers down for a quick assessment. You can't continue to run at this high speed. These fires are serious."*

"Tell him we have reduced to twenty knots and will slow to one third if he cannot contain the fires. When the divers are ready, have him call the bridge." Volsky folded his arms, a worried expression on his heavy features.

"Gentlemen," he said gravely, "that was nearly the end of us. It was well fought, Karpov, particularly considering the situation with our missile inventories. Yet we have long known of the determination and reckless bravery of the Japanese. This attack was a perfect example. They were willing to die to a man to get this one single hit, and God help us if we ever forget it in these waters again."

"The Japanese Navy was perhaps the most skilled fighting navy in the world at this moment, sir, said Fedorov. Their equipment was not the best, but their knowhow and tactics were second to none, and no one will ever question their bravery. I believe we have just taken the first ever kamikaze attack of the war. That did not happen until much later in the war in the old history."

Historically the *Tokubetsu Kogekitai* units had not even been formed yet. The first attacks were not made until October of 1944 when Masafumi Arima, even now aboard the carrier *Shokaku*, led an attack much like this one against an American carrier task force. One of the planes struck the USS *Franklin*, a large *Essex* class carrier, and Arima was immediately elevated to the status of a demigod by the war propagandists. The Special Attack Unit was formed that month. Shortly thereafter the cruiser *Australia* was hit, and a few smaller ships, but the first official attack by the special Kamikaze unit

itself hit the USS *St. Lo*, a light escort carrier in the Battle of Leyte Gulf.

"Well now they have the idea a few years early," said Volsky. "Who knows what they will do to the course of the war? What does Byko say about our radar?"

"The Fregat system is off line, sir. We won't know how bad the damage is for some hours, at least until they put the fire out and can get men up on the aft mast. The smoke there is too thick now. We lost the Klinok aft fire control radar as well, so it may be wise to move any missiles in those aft silos to the forward deck."

"Have Martinov see to it," said Volsky, squinting out the window and frowning at the smoke and fire aft. "That will be sending up a charcoal marker into the sky to designate our position for miles in every direction. Where were those pursuing ships, Rodenko?"

"I last noted them about twenty-seven nautical miles behind us, sir. I am trying to switch to the active phased array systems now in place of the Fregat, but some of my panels are yellow lighted, and not responding."

"Most likely the aft panel that was on the citadel there," said Karpov. "I doubt it survived that hit."

"Most likely, sir," Rodenko agreed. "That will leave us with panels forward and to both sides of the ship, and it will only give us a 120 decree arc of coverage to port and starboard. Without that aft panel and the Fregat system, we now have a hole directly aft where we are relatively blind on radar."

"We still have the Voskhod-2 Top Mast radar," said Karpov. "It's not a fully integrated 3D system, but it has excellent range and we can still use it and route signals to the CIC."

The Voskhod or 'Dawn' radar system had once been a main 3D defense system, but the new Voskhod-2 had handed over that task to the updated Fregat system and was now used primarily for long range weather forecasting and general surveillance. Then Fedorov had another idea. "We also have the KA-40, sir. We can mount an Oko panel and get good returns that way."

"Fedorov," said Volsky. "How long before that pursuit force might get in range to cause us any concern?"

"All they need to do is get inside 30,000 yards to start lobbing shells our way again, sir. That would be a little under fifteen nautical miles out. So they only need to cut twelve miles off our lead. At our present speed of twenty knots, they will do that in about ninety minutes. They can probably see our

position now with the smoke column, and I have little doubt that they are heading this way."

"Ninety minutes," Volsky mused. "Considering the damage we have already sustained, I will take no chances with these ships. Mr. Karpov, the instant that pursuit force puts rounds within a thousand meters of this ship, use your best judgment and hurt them. Hurt them badly. We cannot have this madman in a battleship on our heels at the moment. Understood?"

"You can rely on me, sir," said Karpov, and every man on the bridge knew it was no boast.

* * *

For the Japanese the price of Hayashi's second hit was higher than any expected. Of the 67 planes that formed up over Hara's carriers that morning, only seven would return to land on the forsaken decks of *Zuikaku* and *Shokaku*. For *Zuiho*, not a single plane would return. Sakamoto and Ema were among the survivors. Two more planes would ditch close to Iwabuchi's pursuit force and he would send his destroyers to the scene of the attack to look for pilots. Only twelve were found still alive. The Japanese had lost sixty planes and forty-six precious pilots, a hard and stinging blow.

When Admiral Hara finally got the news from a haggard Sakamoto on the bridge of *Shokaku*, his face was grim and set. His carrier task force was now little more than a fast scouting unit. He still had eighteen B3N2 torpedo bombers that had been held back, yet all his D3A dive bombers were gone, save the seven that barely survived the attack.

"Hayashi had it right," said Sakamoto, his face grim and downcast. "This is a demon from hell! *Mizuchi* is not half a word for what this ship did to our squadrons. I lost half my planes before we ever set eyes on the target! The range and accuracy of these rockets is astounding! It was as if they had eyes—yes, Admiral—they were not merely fired with the hope of striking us. It was a certainty! In the second wave every single rocket fired was able to find one of my planes. A sane man would have called off the attack after that first barrage, but I do not have the luxury of such sanity in the heat of battle, and with orders to strike our enemies."

"You did all that any man could," said Hara. "Look what Hayashi did! Two hits, and one he strikes with his own life in the bargain. Such bravery will be remembered."

“Shall we spot the remaining planes for another strike, sir?” Sakamoto said bravely.

“No, Sakamoto. It is yours to suggest this. Honor demands it. But I will be the one sane man here today and refuse to send the last of my pilots to their doom against this ship. If what you say is true it would be foolish. We hit them with over sixty planes just now. What good will an attack with our last eighteen torpedo bombers and these seven surviving D3As do? The British have trumped us today. This new anti-aircraft rocket system you describe is truly formidable. I must immediately inform Admiral Yamamoto. If the Americans have these weapons as well, then our string of victories could reverse itself very quickly. A single ship with these weapons can render our entire naval strategy based on aircraft carriers obsolete overnight.”

“Yet our primary mission was accomplished successfully,” said Sakamoto. “We have troops at Darwin and will have that in hand soon enough.”

“Indeed, but we were to take the Fifth Carrier Division through the Torres Strait, along with *Mutsu* and *Nagato* of the bombardment group. Yamamoto will be expecting us in the Coral Sea in a few days, but what use will we be to him now?”

“The pilots, sir. We must do everything possible to rescue the pilots. Many died when those rockets came in at us, but a good number may be in the water still, and alive if we can get to them before the sharks. The Navy can always get us more planes.”

“Destroyers are racing to the scene even now,” said Hara.

Sakamoto shrugged. “How do we fight this demon if our planes cannot get through, Admiral?” He had a vacant, empty look in his eyes.

“With battleships,” said Hara, an air of finality in his tone. “Only a battleship has the armor to close with this monster and grapple with it. We will see what Iwabuchi can do. He is right on this ship’s wake, and we will detach *Tone* and three destroyers, and send them after this enemy ship as well. The battleships from the bombardment group will rendezvous with us soon and we will have them for more than adequate escort.”

“Sir, there were two *shotai* of D3As at Kendari training there. They could fly out to reinforce us, and we can also get fighters from Amboina and arm them with bombs. Rabaul will also have a couple of dive bomber squadrons they can transfer to us if need be.”

“They are not carrier trained, Sakamoto.”

“Yes sir, but we can put men in them who *are* trained. All they have to do is land on our carriers.”

Hara nodded. “Here we are trying to scrape up enough planes and pilots to make at least one of our carriers operational again.” He was deeply distressed. “It is even more likely that we will be recalled to Kure when they hear what has happened this morning.”

“I will apologize—”

“You will do nothing of the kind,” Hara cut in sharply. “The responsibility is mine. I will do my duty with whatever we have, and I must return *Mutsu* and *Nagato* to Combined Fleet as well. In the meantime, let us hope Lieutenant Hayashi’s bravery has slowed this demon down.” He turned to a signalman. “Get a message to Captain Iwabuchi aboard *Kirishima*. Tell him I am sending him another heavy cruiser. The honor now falls to him. He must find and kill this ship as soon as possible!”

He gave Sakamoto one last look, pointing. “Get those dive bombers from Kendari,” and he said nothing more.

* * *

When the message came in Captain Sanji Iwabuchi smiled for the first time in many days. He had little to be joyful about. The air strike had been a complete disaster, but ahead on the horizon he could see a column of thick black smoke, and it seemed that it was growing ever larger, ever nearer as *Kirishima* pressed on, her old engines straining to keep up the speed.

They had slowed down slightly, but were still making 28 knots, and he could see that the lead the enemy had managed to open in the long overnight chase was not so fat after all.

“Koshino!” he said, elated as he called for his gunnery officer.

“Sir?” Kimitake Koshino was at his side with a hasty bow.

“I trust the guns are ready.”

“Yes, sir. Everything is in order.”

“Good, because from the look of that smoke we will be up on this enemy ship in little time. Sound battle stations. Signal Captain Kiyota aboard *Nachi*. His cruisers are to fall off and join us as one group for this action. We will not have the destroyers, as they have been sent to look for downed pilots to return to Hara’s carriers. He is sending us *Tone* in their place.”

“That will be more than enough, sir.” Koshino considered the addition of

Tone, with eight more 8 inch guns and more than enough speed to run this enemy down. She could easily reach 36 knots.

"Ono!" Iwabuchi called for his Executive Officer, and Ono was quickly at his side. "Study that smoke. How long before we sight that ship and get in firing range?"

"Ah, it looks like Hara's planes have done us a real favor, sir. The ship was gradually slipping away, but our seaplanes now report it has slowed considerably. We are closing the range now. I make it no more than two hours and we should be able to engage."

"Excellent!" said Iwabuchi. "A fine morning as well. Soon we will see what has been giving Hara's pilots their nightmares, neh? They are calling this ship *Mizuchi*, the sea dragon, and from our rescue operations it is killing planes and pilots like flies. Yet we will have something more to say about it in due course. We are going to attack at high speed, all our heavy ships in line abreast, and we will not break off until this ship is sunk, is that understood?"

"Of course, sir."

"Good, then. We've had this *Mizuchi* by the tail all night. Now we will see if this ship really breathes fire as Kiyota's claims. Soon we will be breathing fire ourselves. Where will this engagement be fought?"

Ono walked to the map table and placed a thin finger there. "About here, sir. A hundred miles west of the Torres Strait."

Chapter 14

It was a long hour fighting the fires aft before Chief Byko reported they had the matter under control. Three more men were injured in the fight, scalded in spite of their heavy gloves and damage control aprons. They had rigged the external pumps to bring in long jets of seawater, and the fire teams bravely held a line just forward of *Kirov's* second 152mm battery, and the vital ammunition magazines beneath it.

On the old *Kirov*, the place struck by Hayashi's plane had once been a series of small towers where the Volna 'Top Dome' and the 3R95 'Cross Sword' fire control radars had been installed. In the major refit that produced the new ship, these older radars had been removed, replaced with alternate systems located forward, and the small towers had been re-metaled into a squarish structure that became the aft battle bridge. It was a spitting image of the main bridge, which had been moved well above and behind the old forward bridge, high on the main mast.

The equipment destroyed in the aft citadel would remove their primary backup should any damage ever occur on the main bridge, but the ship could still function efficiently without it. The fact that the facility was completely redundant, with its own unique cabling, wire and power leads, limited the damage to the rest of the ship's power and electronic systems.

Byko did have one concern while the fires were still being fought. The Vodopad torpedo launchers had been located directly beneath the aft citadel, just below the main deck level, where long, sleek weapons were also stored in underdeck magazines. Were it not for the second barrier of the aft citadel floor, another 200mm thick reinforced armor plate, Hayashi's plane might have plunged right on through to those magazines and set off an even greater explosion.

By the time the fires were finally out, and Byko could get men up on the pyramid of the aft mast, the pursuing enemy had slowly made up half the long lead *Kirov* had built up with its small two knot speed advantage overnight. The ship was just over the horizon, her main mast perhaps not even visible to the enemy yet. Byko reported he had divers ready, but Volsky was concerned and wanted to increase speed as soon as possible. He decided to postpone the undersea hull inspection, and ordered a small increase to 25 knots.

It was either that or they would soon have a gunfight on their hands, and he was again hoping that speed could be used instead of vital missiles. The Torres Strait was just under a hundred miles east, and Fedorov advised that they would have to be cautious in those reef-infested waters where the main sea channels were very shallow. Speed now, caution later, thought Volsky. Then he relinquished command to Fedorov and went below to check on the men. After a hit like the one they had just experienced, he thought it best to see to his human assets as well. Morale was also a vital part of his ship's fighting quality, and he wanted to take the measure of the crew and give them heart.

The infirmary was a natural first stop, and the Admiral was disheartened to see the long line of men waiting for Doctor Zolkin's attention. They all smiled, saluting crisply when they saw him, at least those with good right arms. A few looked fairly well bruised, but their injuries were not serious. Volsky spent time with each man, walking the line and thanking them for their service, promising them better days ahead. When he finally reached the sick bay he peered inside to see Zolkin attending to a man prone on his surgery table, his face masked, intent on his work. The blood stains on his jersey were evident, and for a brief moment their eyes met, though no words were exchanged.

The Admiral moved on, heading aft until he finally neared the section where the damaged battle bridge would have been. He was a deck below the aft citadel, but the ladder up opened to clear sky now. And he could see all the way up through the open hatch into to the citadel and noted the gaping hole in the armored roof. 200 millimeters of armor, almost eight inches of hardened steel, had once seemed a safe and sturdy barrier to him, but when he saw the sharp edges of the twisted metal, blackened with fire and soot, he realized just how vulnerable the ship was to any weapon their enemies could deploy against him.

He spent some time with Byko there, asking about any possible secondary damage until he was satisfied that the ship could still function without any major system failures.

"I'm sorry to have to put you and your men to work this early," said Volsky. "And I'm afraid it may be a long day, Byko."

"Just my job, sir," said Byko. "But you will have to excuse the condition of the ship aft of this point. I still have hose lays from here to the helo bays, and men with acetylene torches are still cutting metal."

Surgery on the men, thought Volsky, and surgery on the ship. Thankfully neither the crew nor the ship had been dealt a fatal blow.

"What about those turbines, Chief? We may need more speed soon."

"That minor leak I reported earlier is well repaired, sir. We've taken a few hard blows, what with those near misses and the helo explosion, not to mention the missile misfire. We'll need some metal work aft if we can ever make a friendly port again, and a good paint job."

Volsky smiled. "Come to the officer's dining room tonight. I've a good cigar to share with you, Byko. You've earned it."

The Admiral clasped him on the shoulder, and then turned to head forward again, looking for the nearest ladder down. He wanted to check with Dobrynin next, and see how the reactor was faring, and he soon found him leaning over his monitors, squinting at the dials and gauges there.

"I trust all is well here, Dobrynin?"

"Sir," the Chief Engineer saluted. "No problems to speak of. Considering the work we've given them on this outing, the reactors have been fairly stable."

"What about those odd sounds you reported earlier?"

"Those were quite strange, sir," said Dobrynin, scratching his head. "It seemed there was a neutron flux in the core. I could almost hear it, if that makes any sense. You get to know every sound these systems can possibly make in time, and I could hear a distinctive difference."

Volsky nodded. "Any idea what may have caused it?"

"Nothing comes to mind, sir. At first I thought the core could have been affected by radiation from those other nuclear detonations, but it's too well shielded, sir. No. Whatever caused it was an event inside the reactor itself."

"When was the last time you heard anything odd?"

"Well, sir…" Dobrynin seemed to be fishing for his thought. "I believed I heard something two days ago, but it was very subtle, not at all like those earlier events, and the flux readings in the core were barely disturbed. I would have reported it, but it settled down, then came and went for a while. I thought I was hearing something, then when I would listen it was gone."

Volsky raised an eyebrow at that, thinking of how Rodenko's radar systems had obtained contacts, then lost them before the signal finally firmed up and they knew they had shifted in time again. The *reactors*, he thought. Maybe it wasn't the accident, or even the detonation of that warhead in the Atlantic. Perhaps this odd time displacement is being created by something

going on in our own reactors!

"I understand you have been concerned about cooling problems?"

"Just a minor malfunction on some feed water valves. I had it corrected in a few hours, sir."

"Have you kept regular log entries on these variations?"

"Of course, sir. And we have a digital record of the entire system performance readouts being logged in real time and stored to memory."

"I see…" Volsky rubbed his chin, thinking. "Dobrynin…Could you have a look at that data for me? Take particular notice of anything odd, anything that might have accounted for this vibration or sound you report—this flux business. See if you can chart it out for me."

"Very good, sir. I'll have the men run a full readout report and we'll go over it with a fine toothed comb."

"Good man," said Volsky. "And if we have to make speed soon, any potential problems you can foresee?"

"None, sir. You can go to full battle speed, that is if Byko says the turbines have no problems. I can give you all the power you need."

"Very well, Dobrynin. Carry on."

The Admiral would make one last call before returning to the bridge, to Martinov in the weapons bay, hoping to see if there were any old missiles still stored away in the corners of his main magazine. But what he found out in that conversation set him immediately on a heading to the bridge, a quiet anger simmering in his chest.

* * *

They watched the steady approach of the pursuing enemies using the long range weather radar to plot their position. In the first hour the hunters made up all of eight nautical miles on them, closing the range to thirty-five kilometers. Over the next hour they could clearly see the enemy ships darkening the distant horizon behind them, though the increase in speed to 25 knots only allowed them to gain three nautical miles.

Rodenko estimated the range at just under thirty kilometers, 30,000 meters, still a long shot, even for a battleship. It seemed like the enemy may not be gaining on them for a while, but thirty minutes later a lookout spotted a bright flash from the center of the pursuing silhouettes behind them, and seconds later they heard a distant rumble of thunder. *Kirishima* had fired her

challenge, though the rounds came in very short. Karpov reached for his field glasses and peered back at the enemy ships.

“I can put them on HD video for you,” said Fedorov. “The aft Tin Man was very near that explosion, but it sustained only minor damage. A shrapnel fragment just grazed the lens cap, but it held.”

He tuned in the display, and they looked to see the clear silhouettes of three ships, one much wider abeam and with a tall pagoda main mast; two smaller, the cruisers that had tried to close with them earlier.

“I’ll say one thing for the men of this era,” said Karpov, “they are damn persistent.”

They waited some time but no further rounds were fired. Iwabuchi had merely announced his presence, as if to taunt them with the fact that they had run all night at their best speed and failed to shake him off. Karpov watched the ships, a look of disdain on his face, shaking his head.

“If I thought this might be our final battle I would sink those ships in five minutes,” he said to Fedorov.

“That’s the catch,” said Fedorov. “We have only twenty-five anti-ship missiles, and who knows how many more situations we will have ahead of us. Each time we have displaced to the past we have been marooned there for at least twelve days. This is only day three this time. I think we began shifting in and out of this timeframe three days ago, though it took a while for us to manifest here this time around.”

“So you think we may disappear again in another nine days?”

“It’s a possibility. Who can say? The Admiral made a good point in our discussion about this earlier. A rock skips only so far on the water. It must settle somewhere. Did you notice how subtle these last two shifts were? We vanished at St. Helena like a whisper in fog, then appeared here before we really perceived it. There were no odd effects like the earlier displacements, and none of that strange static or color in the sea.”

“What does this mean, Fedorov?”

“I cannot say. Only it seems to me that the energy of our movement in time is dissipating, weakening.”

“And what if there isn’t enough left to take us somewhere else in nine days. What then?”

Fedorov just looked at him. “Well, Captain, then we’ll stay right where we are, won’t we. And in that case I can assure you that this will definitely not be the last time we have to call the crew to battle stations.”

They saw another bright flash in the image on the HD display, and heard the rumble of thunder again, as if a bad storm were riding their wake. This time the rounds fell a little closer, a spread of two closely spaced water plumes falling about 2000 meters behind them.

“I may have to do something about this soon,” said Karpov.

“That was only one turret firing,” said Fedorov. “I think they are just clearing their throats, Captain. But it may be wise to prevent them from getting any closer.” He turned to the helmsman.

“Ahead thirty and five points to starboard.”

“Aye, sir. Starboard five and speed thirty.”

He looked at his navigation map on the Plexiglas. “We should reach the Torres Strait in three hours or so. That’s about 600 kilometers west of Port Moresby. They’ll have planes there, but I would not expect a strike until we are through the strait and well into the Coral Sea. We’ll have to sail well east of Daru, here,” he pointed to the belly of New Guinea, just above the tip of the Cape York Peninsula where it jutted at that great island. “Then we turn south into the Coral Sea. At that point we’ll be in range of anything they have operating out of Port Moresby.”

Nikolin seemed to perk up, fiddling with his radio set and adjusting the gain and reception. Fedorov caught his sudden energy out of the corner of his eye and turned his head.

“Something on the radio, Mister Nikolin?”

“A lot of traffic all the sudden, sir. I’m getting ship to ship, air to ground, and a lot of Morse code in the middle of it all. It sounds like something big is going on.”

Fedorov frowned, looking at Karpov. “Most likely the other half of the operation we’ve stumbled upon here,” he said glumly.

“This one isn’t in any of your history books?”

“I’m afraid not, Captain. But I can make some fairly good guesses about what is going on. This operation against Darwin is nothing more than a side show. The main event is further east, and if the Japanese are trying to isolate Australia, as I think they are, then they are aiming for one or two places of strategic importance: the lower Solomons, Espiritu Santo on Vanuatu, or New Caledonia. To attack any of those locations they will need a lot of aircraft carriers in the Coral Sea, probably two divisions, at least four fleet carriers if they have them, and I’m inclined to believe that they do if they were able to assign two fleet carriers and a light escort carrier to the Darwin

operation. They know we are here, but it's a very big ocean out there. It would be my guess that Yamamoto is leading the main attack, and that his *Kido Butai* is already in the Eastern Coral Sea, perhaps about here." He fingered a location on the map roughly equidistant from the northern tip of New Caledonia and Vanatu Island.

"Frankly, I would take Espiritu Santo first, and build an airstrip that can work in tandem with the field on Guadalcanal. From there the Japanese could strike at either Noumea on New Caledonia or Fiji by using land based aircraft."

"And the Americans?"

"That's the real unknown for the moment. We don't really know whether they got hit at Pearl Harbor, and we don't know how things have gone since. It's obvious they lost the Battle of the Coral Sea, as the Japanese have Port Moresby. You killed *Wasp* in the Atlantic, so that will leave them *Enterprise, Lexington, Yorktown, Saratoga,* and *Hornet.* They may have lost one or more of these by this point in the war, but we do not know. Their intelligence was fairly good. They had broken the Japanese naval code before Midway was supposed to have been fought in May of this year. It could be that they are well aware of the Japanese plan and preparing to make a counter thrust of their own."

"So what may lie east if we keep sailing this direction?"

"Perhaps one of the largest air/sea battles in history," said Fedorov, his eyes alight. "There will be at least four fleet carriers on the Japanese side, and three or four on the American side, each with over seventy planes, and we would be presumed hostile by either side if we get mixed up in it. If the Midway battle wasn't fought earlier, then it will be fought here, now, in the Coral Sea, and the outcome will decide the war in the Pacific theater for years to come."

"I see," said Karpov, a gleam in his eye as well. "Our missile inventory is wearing thin, but I must remind you that we still have weapons aboard this ship that can also prove decisive. We have the power to decide the outcome of this campaign as well, Fedorov. Don't forget that."

Fedorov said nothing more.

Chapter 15

"Admiral on the bridge!"

The first watch called out the return of Admiral Volsky, and the men saw him make a perfunctory salute as he strode quietly towards the aft briefing room. "Mister Karpov," he said curtly.

Karpov turned and saw it was clear that Volsky wanted to speak with him in private. His heart leapt, and he immediately knew what this must be about, but he steeled himself, and followed the Admiral to the briefing room. Volsky shut the hatch, folding his arms.

"Do you recall a conversation we had in the sick bay some weeks ago when I gave you a direct order that none of the nuclear warheads were to be mounted on missiles?"

"You've spoken with Martinov," said Karpov.

"I have."

"Sir, it must have been obvious to you that I countermanded that order when I fired that MOS-III."

"*Disobeyed* that order, Karpov. Don't mince words here."

"Very well, I will not argue the point, and yes, I ordered Martinov to mount two warheads, one on the MOS-III and one on a P-900 cruise missile. I think I have given you reason enough as to why I did this. I do not say I am correct to have disregarded your order, but there it is."

"Damn right," said Volsky, clearly upset. "Yes, I was well aware of this transgression, at least insofar as the MOS-III was concerned, but so were you, Karpov. And all these weeks the second warhead has been sitting on missile number 10 in the P-900 bays, and you said nothing!"

Karpov breathed deeply, his chin raising, then clenched his jaw, silent for a time. He looked down. "It would be just like me to say I assumed that you discovered the warhead earlier, and had it removed," he began in a low voice. "But that would be a bowl of *lozh*, just another lie from the man I was back then, and it would seem so right to me to serve it up to you. I would have seasoned it with reasons and arguments and justifications. But I will not lie to you now, Admiral. I remembered what I had done when we began using the P-900 missiles in the Med. I wondered if the warhead was still there, but did nothing more about it. It's been in the back of my mind, and I must say that I haven't given up the thought of what we might do with it. I was just hinting

about it with Fedorov. He seems to think we could run afoul of a large air/sea battle in the Coral Sea, with many more ships and planes to contend with than we have missiles for. I'm sorry, sir. I should have brought the matter up with you."

Volsky looked at him for some time, then he nodded. "Very well… I am going to tell you I did *not* have that warhead removed, as insane as that now sounds. It's still there, Captain, on the number ten missile, so have a care if we have to use cruise missiles again. The system has been reset to require two keys before it is used, however. I have one around my neck, and Fedorov has the other."

"As it should be, sir."

"Yes, as it should be, the commanding officer and his *Starpom* make any decision as to the deployment of tactical nuclear weapons. But we are in a combat zone now, and the hole in the roof of the aft battle bridge has made that painfully apparent, not to mention the line of men waiting for Doctor Zolkin. I have already suffered combat injuries myself, and spent a good deal of time with Zolkin in the sick bay. So it has occurred to me that it is entirely possible that we may be hit again before we find safe waters, and also possible that key officers might die. You understand?"

"I do, sir."

"In that event the normal protocols of rank will still apply. Should I be killed in action, Fedorov will immediately advance from *Starpom* to Captain of the ship, and you will immediately advance to *Starpom* as his Executive Officer. In fact, those are your presumed ranks whenever I am not on the bridge. The two of you performed ably in the Med, your cooperation was exemplary. You asked me to give you a chance and I did so. I will not say that I have been in any way disappointed with your performance, but I wonder, Karpov…Is there any remnant of that old man still alive in you?" He gave his Captain a searching look.

Karpov met his gaze, unflinching. "A man may never purge himself entirely of his bad habits and faults, Admiral, or fully atone for his sins. But if he is a man, he can control himself and do what is right. This you have taught me well enough."

"No, Karpov," Volsky poked a fat finger on the other man's shoulder. "That you learned on your own." He smiled, obvious absolution in his eyes now.

"I tell you this because it may happen, by one circumstance or another,

that you find a missile key around your neck again one day. Then you will have to decide what you have learned or failed to learn, particularly if I am no longer here to weigh in on the matter with this substantial belly of mine."

Karpov smiled, relieved by the tack the Admiral had taken. What could have been another bitter argument, a scolding, retribution and the revisiting of that dark old stench of shame, had instead become something more akin to a discussion a father might have with a son, and one he had every hope for. Karpov appreciated Volsky more than ever now, and realized why he was so loved by the men.

"I would hope to find the courage to be half the man you are, sir, if I ever do find that key around my neck again."

"Yes…" said Volsky. "If God dies, then we see how the angels fare. In some sense that is true for all of us now in this God forsaken world." And he said nothing more. The distant rumble of thunder told them that they were being fired on again. Volsky opened the hatch, and the two men stepped out onto the bridge in time to see four tall geysers rise from the sea, directly abreast of the ship, though a thousand meters off their port side.

"Port fifteen," said Fedorov turning the ship towards the enemy rounds. He looked over his shoulder at Karpov and Volsky. "I believe they have finally found the range, Admiral."

Volsky nodded. "It is time we do something about it then," and he looked at one of his archangels, Michael with his gleaming sword. "Mister Karpov…"

* * *

Captain Iwabuchi saw the first missile easily enough. He had been watching through his field glasses, eying the tall silhouette of the enemy ship ahead, still far away, but a real and tangible thing now, not the stuff of legends and lore. *Mizuchi* was a battleship, of that much he was certain. And as powerful as they were, any ship might die. He had every mind to kill this one, and avenge the loss of *Haguro*, not to mention Hara's planes and pilots.

His pursuit squadron had closed to about 28,000 yards, still a long shot for his guns, but within their effective range. *Nachi* was 500 meters off his starboard side, and *Myoko* an equal distance off his port side, the three ships in line abreast, now charging at *Kirishima's* top speed. He had assembled his war demons on the bridge with him: gunnery officer Koshino, and secondary

battery commander Ikeda. Supply officer Kobayashi was on the battle bridge, marking off rounds fired. Flood control officer Kyshichi Yoshino was also standing by the voice tubes in the event the ship took any serious hit requiring his attention. His Executive Officer, Koro Ono, was standing by the helmsman, ready to maneuver the ship.

Then they saw the first rocket, and Iwabuchi finally knew what Captain Kiyota aboard *Nachi* had been talking about. He had called it *Raiju*, the thunder beast that falls from the sky, the lightning wolf that haunted children's dreams back in the homeland on stormy nights. A good name for it, he thought, what speed!

Then the missile came at his ship like an arrow, his eyes widening as it roared in to strike his forward turret dead on, exploding in a massive brilliant orange and black fireball. The ship rocked with the blow, metal shrapnel flaying the tall pagoda superstructure, and shattering one window on the bridge. It was as if the gods had hurled metal brimstone at his ship, and when the main explosion finally cleared he could see that the forward turret had been jarred half off its barbette, one gun canted upward by the concussion. The turret itself had a large blackened indentation there by the twisted gun barrel, the place where the hard tip of the warhead must have struck.

Now fires fed by excess jet fuel broke out on the forward deck all around the turret, and he knew the heat there must have killed every man inside. One shot, one hit, but with what? This was no anti-aircraft rocket! This was a demon from the blackest of all hells set loose on him. *Raiju* was not word enough for it. His face reddened, anger surging.

"Return fire!" he yelled, watching the guns of the number two turret train and then belch their own fire and brimstone at the distant enemy ship, their concussion helping to snuff out fires on the forward deck, so great was the blast wave of the guns.

Spotters on the high main mast of the pagoda watched the rounds hit, slightly long, their blue dyed waterspouts churning into the sea about 500 meters off the port side of the enemy ship. It seemed a feeble response given the impact and shock they had just sustained. Lookouts were already shouting orders through voice tubes to the fire control men below, and the turret was re-training to correct even as the heavy shells were being hoisted and shoved into the breech, followed by four powder bags required for the range.

Then Iwabuchi saw the dark shadow of the enemy ship wink at him, almost like signal lamps, one, two, three. Seconds later he heard the whine of

incoming shells, amazed to see two rounds fall not twenty meters off his port side. Then the main pagoda mast was struck hard by one, then a second explosion, more windows shattering on the bridge. The last two rounds were near misses to starboard.

"Those were small caliber rounds!" shouted Ikeda, surprised at their range and accuracy. He had not expected that his own secondary batteries would come into play in the engagement until they closed well inside 18,000 meters, but it did not seem as though they were gaining on the ship any longer. In fact, when *Kirishima's* main battery fired again, the spotters clearly called the rounds short. The enemy ship was again slipping away.

Wink, wink, wink. More rounds were loping into the sea, this time one hitting the main mast above the bridge and taking down a watch station, and another striking well below, where it started a small fire. A third round hit close off the port side scudding against the main belt where it did little harm to the thick eleven inch armor there.

The Captain was enraged. It was as if the other ship had stepped up and delivered a hard fist to his nose with that first blow, and now followed it with the insult of these lighter slaps in the face. He considered ordering his cruisers to go to full speed and close the range on this beast, but realized they would only be peppered by these long range secondary batteries for at least an hour while they struggled to get in close, just as Captain Kiyota had reported. The accuracy of the enemy's weapons was uncanny! Every round they fired had been pointedly targeted at his own ship, a certain message that they knew where the real threat in his task force was.

Frustrated and angry, he clenched his fist, ordering his last forward battery to fire again. It was more for honor's sake than anything else. The rounds were falling short again. This *Mizuchi* was slowly pulling away. It had lingered to see if he would dare engage, and delivered one hard blow to test the mettle of its pursuers. Iwabuchi reluctantly gave the order to cease fire.

"Twenty-eight knots," he said darkly, listening to his old engines straining. How much longer could they keep the boilers fired up like this and run at high speed? The heavy cruiser *Tone* was rushing to join him, and he would soon have three fast cruisers again. *Tone* could make 36 knots and she also had six seaplanes for scouting and shadowing. He knew that the enemy would not be able to slip away, not today.

What ship was this? Certainly not the *Renown* as he first thought. There had been no fire from any large caliber gun, only these jabbing pricks by

what seemed no more than a six inch round. But that rocket weapon was truly fearsome. This ship had real power, he knew. He could not catch this beast, but by all gods and kami he would not give up the chase. He would follow in the wake of this demon if it took every last drop of fuel, and if he ever did close the range he would kill it quickly and mercilessly…or he would kill himself trying.

* * *

"**That** got their attention," said Fedorov. "I think they are falling off in speed a bit."

"Confirmed," said Rodenko. "I would estimate the battleship is now at 28 knots." *Kirov* had gone to full battle speed earlier, and now had a four knot advantage on the enemy.

"Any sign those cruisers are getting curious?"

"No, sir. They are matching the speed of the battleship at the moment. But my readings aft are not precise. I've been using targeting radars of secondary systems, and I also painted the ship with a laser."

"Looks like they put the fire out quickly enough," said Fedorov, "but the last few salvos were only from one turret. We may have knocked that forward turret out, at least for the time being. This ship has four twin turrets, so half its firepower is out of the battle as long as they have to pursue us like this. It doesn't seem like they're giving up the chase either. The man may have a real bone to pick, Captain. I think we are safely out of range now, and I suggest we cease fire."

"Very well," said Karpov. "Secure the 152mm gun systems, Samsonov. I won't waste any more missiles on this ship for the moment either. The cupboard is starting to look rather empty."

"We'll run full out for the Torres Strait, but when we get there we'll have to slow down considerably to navigate those shoals and reefs properly. We may be in action again sooner than you think."

It was more than an obvious conclusion, for the unknown history ahead was to send many more surprises their way before night would fall.

Part VI

Vendetta

"If you prick us, do we not bleed?
If you tickle us, do we not laugh?
If you poison us, do we not die?
And if you wrong us, do we not revenge?"

- William Shakespeare

Chapter 16

Admiral King had been the one to start it all. First King, then Marshall. The feisty admiral had been so distraught over proceedings in the Pacific that he had become all but unbearable. A surly man by nature, King was also never one to be unimpressed by his own intelligence, and seldom believed any other man was his equal, particularly when it came to the complexities of naval strategy. King's steely eyed look was enough to back down most anyone, but when it came to convincing President Roosevelt, he needed the more reasoned approach of Marshall to help his cause.

What he wanted was *action* in the Pacific. Not the slow logistical buildup, the slow steady turn of the coiled spring that had been underway since the outbreak of the war. When 'War Plan Orange' had been canceled, King brooded that the loss of the Philippines was an insult the navy would have to atone for one day. Yet, in his heart of hearts, he knew the plan itself was drafted in a bygone era when the old battleships formed the backbone of the fleet. Had they sallied forth from Pearl as the plan expected, the Japanese would have had a field day with their carrier fleet.

King was wise enough to realize the day of the battleship was fading. He knew the carriers were already carrying the ball when it came to operations in the Pacific, the problem was, there was all too little forward movement. The U.S. had been on the defensive for a long year now, with little to show beyond Doolittle's daring raid on Tokyo. The string of Japanese victories had gone unbroken, challenged only once by two American carriers in the Coral Sea when the Japanese pushed for Port Moresby. They had lost his old lady, 'Lady Lex,' when she went down in that battle, and it galled him to no end.

The code breakers had been able to penetrate the JN-25 naval code, and warned that a big enemy operation was imminent. It did not take them long to determine that Fiji and Soma were the strategic end points of this planned attack. The Japanese had already put troops into the southern Solomons at Guadalcanal and Tulagi, and had both a seaplane base and an airfield under construction in those islands, though they were not yet strongly held. Now the attack would be aimed at either Espiritu Santo or Noumea, and if either one fell it would put Jap bombers in range of both Fiji and Samoa. Australia

would be virtually cut off, and King would have none of it.

The fiery admiral vigorously argued that sitting back on defense and trying to parry the Japanese thrusts would simply not do. “We have to hit the bastards somewhere,” he said hotly. “Stick a boot right where it hurts.” And he fingered Guadalcanal as the perfect place to start. To make sure it happened he pushed on Nimitz to replace the equivocating and fretful Admiral Ghormley and appointed a new commander in theater, Admiral Bull Halsey.

Halsey was a strong proponent of the fleet air arm’s ability to project decisive power through fast, mobile aircraft carriers. The time honored maxim of getting there first with the most men had been applied to army maneuvers since Confederate Cavalry commander Nathan Bedford Forrest first explained his tactics during the Civil War. Halsey applied this same principle to carrier warfare when he said: “get to the other fellow with everything you have as fast as you can and to dump it on him.” In any encounter at sea he was prone to immediately let his planes do the talking with a shoot first attitude.

The few feathers the Navy had at this point in the war were already in Halsey’s cap. He was involved in the Doolittle Raid, and pointed attacks on the Marshalls and Wake Island. The burden of driving these operations soon found him in ill health, and he had been hospitalized for several months before asked to take command of the American counterattack again, arriving in Noumea August 15, 1942, a full sixty days before his arrival date there in the history Fedorov knew.

When outgoing Admiral Ghormley conveyed his misgivings over the planned operation against Guadalcanal, saying it was likely to create another Bataan all over again, Halsey waved it away dismissively. He was a fighting Admiral, and the operation was just what he wanted. He had three carriers in hand now, and he would use them to support a lightning swift attack, right into the heart of the enemy’s forward position in the Solomons.

When cryptanalysts winnowed down the planned attack date for the new Japanese operation as August 25, King argued that the U.S. should be ready, with troops at sea, and hit the Japanese where they might least expect it, at Guadalcanal.

“They’ll expect us to be sitting on our duffs waiting for them at New Caledonia or Vanuatu,” King argued. “Let’s kick them right in the nuts with the 1st Marines!” Halsey agreed wholeheartedly.

It had been a long, uphill fight. Many said that putting Marines in transports with the Japanese carriers at large was sheer madness. It would force the US carriers to shepherd them to their planned invasion beaches, anchor them there for days and yield complete freedom of movement to the enemy as they swept south.

Halsey argued that if the attack were launched at least two days in advance of the Japanese invasion date, it could unhinge the entire enemy operation just as it was getting underway. “It will attract Jap carriers like flies, I know it,” he said, “but we’ll have a fist full of flat tops as well, and we can hit them as they come at us. It’s either that or we just sit at Noumea and wait for them. And what good is that? Let’s hit Guadalcanal and take that god dammed airfield there and put Wildcats and Dauntless dive bombers on the ground. That will give us one more carrier that they can lob shells at all they want and never sink.”

In the end Marshall was convinced to side with King and win approval of the President and authorization for the pre-emptive counterattack, which they called ‘Operation Watchtower.’ The 1st Marine Division went to sea on August 20th, escorted by everything the U.S. had, including the carriers *Enterprise, Hornet* and *Saratoga*, twelve cruisers, twenty-one destroyers, and two new additions to the fleet, the superb fast battleships *Washington* and *North Carolina.* Notably absent was the carrier *Yorktown*, which had been transferred to the Atlantic Fleet after the loss of CV *Wasp* to provide much need air cover over the seas around Iceland. Even as Japanese task forces were forming at both Truk and Rabaul, the Americans were at sea.

In-theater reserves were also substantial for the Americans. They had moved three old battleships to Suva Bay, Fiji: the *California, New Mexico,* and *West Virginia.* Too slow to operate with carriers, they nonetheless provided a strong deterrent that could discourage any Japanese surface action group from making a run at the vital US bases in the region. Two light cruisers and ten reserve destroyers were also part of this force, and they were actually using extra fuel bunkered in the big battleships to sustain local operations by the destroyers.

Yamamoto had planned to come at his first target, Espiritu Santo, in a wide pincer attack, like the twin horns of a bull. He was going to take the big fleet carriers *Kaga* and *Akagi*, with light carrier *Ryujo* from the great Japanese naval base at Truk and then make a run for the Island of Naru, which would be taken quickly by an SNLF battalion, being largely

undefended. In the wake of the fast carriers would come his powerful battleships, *Yamato, Hiei, Fuso* as the heart of the bombardment group. Six heavy cruisers, four light cruisers and two dozen destroyers would be assigned to this pincer, which intended to deliver elements of the Nagoya 3rd Division to their landing sites on Vanuatu, Espiritu Santo.

The other horn of the bull would originate from the forward base of Rabaul where fleet carriers *Hiryu*, *Soryu* light carrier *Ryuho* would lead the attack, down through the Solomon Sea, escorted by four cruisers and seven destroyers with the second wave troops of 3rd Division. This force was to dip well down into the Coral Sea, then swing up again to come at Vanuatu from the Southwest while Yamamoto's main group appeared from the northeast. It would also serve as a screen for anything the Americans might sortie out of Noumea. The two moves were to be timed to converge in unison and bring over fifty warships, including six carriers, together near Vanuatu in a massive mailed fist.

The American counterthrust at Guadalcanal would be King's well placed kick just as the enemy closed these two powerful arms on their intended target, and it worked as planned.

Both Japanese task forces were well out to sea when the Marines set sail, yet too far away to threaten them. By the time the convoy was eventually spotted by a seaplane out of Tulagi, the two prongs of Yamamoto's navy were widely dispersed, hundreds of miles from one another. He had to make a decision—should the operation go forward as planned, or should one or both pincers be re-directed to blunt the American thrust at Guadalcanal? The outcome of the entire battle would rest on that choice, but the United States 1st Marine Division had much to do with forcing the reluctant Admiral's hand in the matter. They stormed ashore at both Tulagi and Guadalcanal with such élan, that within a day they had overrun Japanese positions at Lunga on August 25th, where they captured the airfield and were working feverishly to make it ready to receive planes from nearby U.S, airfields and carriers. The "Cactus Air force" as it would come to be called, was about to be born.

The news shook the staff at Combined Fleet headquarters at Truk, and the consensus was that the operation against Espiritu Santo would do nothing more than to create an isolated outpost, over 950 kilometers behind an active battle front at Guadalcanal, and one within range of two other strong American bases at Noumea and Suva Bay, Fiji. If the Americans were allowed to secure and establish a strong base at Guadalcanal, the whole

operation would come unhinged. It was therefore decided that the bold attack would have to be crushed, and Japanese control of the Solomons made undisputed. Only then could the next move against Espiritu Santo be contemplated with any hope of success.

Yamamoto considered how to proceed, first thinking to send Admiral Yamaguchi's smaller Western force to engage and repel the operation, or proceed directly to Guadalcanal on his own. Many officers argued that both horns of the bull should be used in one crushing blow, and Yamamoto was about to make that very decision when he suddenly received some rather startling news from Admiral Hara's Operations force against Darwin.

Like all dispatches, it began with glowing returns of the successful air raid and surface bombardment of Darwin, and Yamashita's easy invasion, claiming to control the port and airfield within 24 hours. Then details of a rather unexpected "incident" were related that described the presence of an enemy capital ship that presumably had sortied from Darwin with some very unusual weaponry. The description was terse, with few details, but related intense anti-aircraft capabilities and noted that Hara's attempts to engage and sink this solitary ship had met with less than satisfactory results. Yamamoto was wise enough to read between those lines, and he immediately sent a signal to Hara asking him to state the present condition of his air strike arm, wondering whether it would be needed in the Coral Sea now, given the American counter thrust.

He received a most disheartening reply. Hara's 5th Carrier Division had started the campaign with fifty-four D3A dive bombers. They had seven left, and six more in reserve flying in from Kendari. He had all of forty-eight B5N1 torpedo bombers, and only twenty of those remained. Only in his fighter element was there any real strength left. He reported fifty operational A6M2s out of an initial allotment of sixty-six. The losses to the strike planes were staggering! Seventy-three percent! And all this against a single enemy ship that was still reported at large, poised to enter the Coral Sea at that very moment, and being pursued by Captain Sanji Iwabuchi leading a small task force aboard the battleship *Kirishima*.

The report made no sense. Hara's force was as seasoned and skilled as any in the fleet. They had savaged the Americans just months ago and assured a victory at Port Moresby. That thought set his mind to that airfield, where he knew several squadrons of G3M2 and G4M1 bombers were mustering. But those planes had only a modest capability against naval

targets at sea, particularly a fast moving capital ship as this one was reported to be. It was given the code name *Mizuchi*, and the word was flashed from one fleet command to another. Where was it heading? Was it merely fleeing for a friendly port, trying to escape the Japanese trap sprung at Darwin, or did it have a darker purpose? How could intelligence have missed its presence in Darwin in the first place? There were too many unanswered questions.

Yamamoto thought hard that night, aboard the massive solid presence of the battleship *Yamato*. He could send Yamaguchi's carrier division after this enemy ship, but that would mean confronting the American carriers at Guadalcanal with only his own force under Nagumo. Something warned him not to dilute his naval air striking power, particularly after the loss of the airfield at Lunga. So he made a decision that he believed adequate to the requirements of both tasks before him.

"Send to Yamaguchi. He is to detach the light carrier *Ryuho*, two cruisers and two destroyers and send them northwest towards the Torres Strait to operate in conjunction with Admiral Hara in pursuit of this enemy ship. The remainder of his task force, including *Hiryu* and *Soryu* will proceed immediately to Guadalcanal to coordinate air strikes with Admiral Nagumo's force. I am taking my heavy units due west into the Solomons and will position the invasion force northwest of Guadalcanal off New Georgia pending the destruction of the American carrier task force covering their invasion. Admiral Nagumo will proceed to Guadalcanal from our present position, and the two carrier task forces will crush the Americans between them. After that is accomplished we can proceed with the invasion of Guadalcanal in force, but this cannot be risked with American carriers at large."

It was to be a fateful and decisive moment in the newly written history of WWII, a good plan considering the agility with which it had been surmised. The loss of only one light carrier to reinforce Hara's group seemed insignificant, though somewhat embarrassing considering that Hara already commanded a full fleet carrier division! It would lead to a disaster that was simply impossible for Yamamoto to see in the confident light of his own military mind at that point.

Chapter 17

Novak had to say it was one of the most unusual happenings of the entire war, an informal meeting to review routine photo intercepts from coastwatchers that had blossomed into a major "incident," as he ended up calling it. The meeting was being held at FRUMEL Headquarters in the Monterey Apartments of Queens Road, Melbourne Australia. FRUMEL itself was an acronym for Fleet Radio Unit MELbourne, one of two major cryptanalysis units still active in the Pacific, the other being Fleet Radio Unit H or 'Hypo' in Pearl Harbor, Hawaii. There had once been three such units, but the third had been hastily evacuated from Manila Bay as the Japanese closed in on that city in February of 1942. Many of the specialists that once staffed that unit had slipped away on the submarine *Sea Dragon*, along with 1.5 tons of equipment and materials vital to their operations, and now they served to augment the vital intelligence work here at FRUMEL. Novak was one of them.

The unit occupied most all of the third floor of the posh Monterey Apartments, and he looked lazily out the window at the green lawns and breezy foliage of the trees as he waited for his associate to review the dispatch.

"British have something in the Coral Sea we don't know about?" The question was tossed across the desk like a piece of loose paper, by Commander Oscar Osborne, another specialist in cryptanalysis called in to review some very unusual photography that morning. Sometimes called "Ozzie" by his associates, or simply "The Wizard" after the popular 1939 movie 'The Wizard of Oz,' he had been part of the group ever since the submarine *Sea Dragon* made it safely away from their old intelligence unit on Corregidor.

"Waters got his hands on that photo yesterday," said Novak. "He's one of our boys up at Darwin. God knows what's happened to him by now. Probably half way to Katherine on that hell of a road if he managed to get out. Lucky for us these photos made it out on a plane. Funny thing about this one…It went right to the very top. A journalist, fellow named Longmore up there on a whim, well he kicked it all the way up to the PM's office. Looks like he was an old friend of John Curtain."

"Curtain is an old newspaper man," said Osborne. "The two were

probably thick as thieves."

"Well good for that. Have you taken a look at that photo?" Novak gestured to the packet that had come in on the morning motorcycle run from the airfield, and Osborne obliged.

"What the devil is that?" Osborne was staring intently now, and looking around for a magnifying glass. "Get the British silhouette book over there."

Novak smiled. "Don't bother," he said. "It's not British. I went through the whole Royal Navy this morning and even called Perth as well to talk to their liaison officer. They assure me they had nothing at sea on the Kimberly Coast when that was taken—nothing at Darwin either before the Japs hit the place—nothing they *know* of, that is. This fish is something else entirely."

Osborne was looking at the image closely now. "Good size ship," he said in a low voice. "Not much in the way of big guns."

"Well this tale becomes quite a riddle, Ozzie," said Novak. "This ship isn't British, but apparently no one bothered to tell the Japanese that. They've been after the damn thing hammer and tongs ever since they spotted it. Those are Jap torpedo planes in those photos. It seems the ship ran afoul of their operation against Darwin. Coast watchers have had the show of a lifetime up there. They say the Japs hit this thing with every plane they had. One report says he counted over sixty planes attacking this ship, and there was a hell of a lot of fireworks."

"I see…" Osborne kept staring at the photo. "Did they sink it?"

"They hit the damn thing, but it slipped away. So the Japs went after it with their screening force for the Darwin operation. Coastwatchers reported a surface action too. Japs have a fast battleship and several cruisers out after this ship, and it's running for the Torres Strait, should be there tonight and into the Coral Sea if it managed to survive. Radio intercepts have picked up a name that seems to repeat every time they reference this ship, so we think it's a convenient handle, or code word they're using for it: *Mizuchi*."

"What does it mean?"

"Sea dragon." Novak smiled, the reference to the submarine by that same name that had brought them all here obvious and glaring.

"Sea dragon?" Osborne allowed himself a smile, then looked closely at the photo again. "Well it's not a British ship." Osborne finally realized the importance of that simple fact. "It's certainly doesn't belong to the U.S. Navy either, that much I can tell you from this photo alone."

"I followed up on that one too," said Novak. "You're correct. And the

Dutch haven't got anything in the area either, in fact they haven't got anything that big at all. It's every bit a battleship from the looks of it."

Osborne raised his eyebrows. Every so often the tedious routine of radio intercepts and decoding actually morphed into something really interesting. But this was more than that. It had an air of downright mystery about it, and a thrum of excitement stirred in him as he looked at the photo. Then he recalled something he had gotten wind of through channels…something about a ship that had given the British fits just days ago in the Med.

"Say Novak…" he was reaching to recall the information. "I heard talk about a ship in the Med that raised quite a ruckus last week. It seems everyone and their mother was after it. Italians tangled with it up near Bonifacio Strait, and then it ran west for Gibraltar."

"Yes I caught that rumor too," said Novak. "It had to be something out of Toulon. A French ship, more than likely."

No, thought Osborne. It wasn't a French ship, though he kept that to himself for the moment, not sure of what Novak may have known. There was much more to that incident than they first thought. Yes, official word was that a disaffected French battlecruiser had made a run out of Toulon as Novak suspected, and it eventually surrendered to the British at Gibraltar for internment at St. Helena. But Osborne had heard a few other things about it, that Bletchley Park had been very wrapped up in the matter…that the British Admiralty was throwing a thick, black overcoat over the whole incident…that someone was supposedly en route to FRUMEL HQ at that very moment to brief them on the matter. The Brits were apparently willing to share a few secrets with their friends after all.

"*Mizuchi*," said Osborne. "Japs are out after a sea dragon, eh?"

"Yes, and mad as hell about it from the sound of the radio traffic." Novak scratched his head. "I decrypted some traffic this morning in that batch we sent over to Halsey. The operation against Guadalcanal must have caught Yamamoto flat footed. They've had to improvise on their planned attack against Espiritu Santo."

"You mean they've re-targeted the whole thing at Vandegrift's 1st Marines on Guadalcanal."

"Exactly. But I caught one odd order in the mix—a small detachment, light carrier and a few cruisers and destroyers. They sent it north from their Western task force."

"North? What for?"

“Take a look at that photo again, Ozzie. North to the Torres Strait, eh? They want a bite of this sea dragon too. ”

“I’ll be damned,” Osborne breathed.

Then the phone rang and the lives of Novak and Osborne were about to get much more interesting that morning. Mystery was not half a word for it.

* * *

Kirov raced east for the Torres Strait, and behind her, chastened but undeterred, the enemy task force kept doggedly on their heels. The senior officers traded shifts on the bridge, each snatching an hour or two for some much needed sleep. Fedorov ran the ship at thirty-two knots for three hours, and managed to extend their lead by another twelve miles to just over twenty-seven nautical miles, or about 55,000 yards. Then, as they approached the reef infested waters of the strait, he was forced to slow the ship to twenty knots. If the enemy kept on at the twenty-eight knots they had been making, they would get into firing range again in an hour and forty-five minutes.

The Torres Strait was a very hazardous body of water, and shipwrecks littered the seafloor there as silent testimony to the dangers hidden beneath the aquamarine sea. In centuries past, the local natives on the islands in the strait had a nasty habit of massacring stranded sailors, so the place had a dark and well justified reputation as being perilous. It was, in fact, one of the most dangerous stretches of water in the world. With strong tidal currents and a five-meter tidal range on the eastern side, navigation was a slow, careful affair, and Fedorov knew he would soon have to reduce to ten knots or less.

“These waters are very shallow,” said Fedorov. “No more than thirteen meters and our draft is just over nine meters. Ahead one third and I want sonar active for the next hour Mister Tasarov, lookouts to port and starboard, please. There are no pilotage channels designated here for us, as in our day.”

“Aye, sir,” said Tasarov. “Going to active sonar now.”

“I’m taking us through the Prince of Wales Channel, just north of Hammond Island. It’s only 800 meters wide at its narrowest point. And has strong tidal surges. I’ve spent the last half hour working out our tidal window for a draught of nine meters, and we won’t have much water beneath us when we transit.”

“My radar propagation is also being affected by this sea mist,” said Rodenko. “But I’ll still have decent returns on any aircraft.”

They knew this would be a perfect place for enemy aircraft to make a strike, but thankfully, the scope seemed clear of air contact for the moment. They navigated the narrow channel without incident at ten knots, then Fedorov steered the ship for the North East Channel towards Bramble Cay to enter the Coral Sea through Bligh Entrance. The passage was slow going, past many hidden shoals and submerged reefs and rocky outcrops, and the time ticked away.

Soon they could clearly see the pursuing enemy ships on HD video fed by the aft Tin Man, and when the range had closed to under 28,000 meters again, they heard a distant boom of thunder and then the whine of incoming shells.

“Damn annoying,” said Karpov when the first two rounds fell off their aft quarter, short by at least a thousand meters.

“We’ll have to maintain this slow speed for some time yet,” said Fedorov. They were approaching Burke Islets, with the Warrior Reefs off their port side. “Once we get past York Island ahead I can probably increase to fifteen knots up to Bligh Entrance.”

A second salvo of two rounds came in, this time corrected nicely, and 500 meters closer. The blue dye was evident now in the tall waterspouts.

“This is getting dangerous,” said Karpov. “Mister Samsonov, ready on the P-900 system.” He looked at Fedorov. “With your permission, sir.”

“Granted,” said Fedorov. The sight of those tall geysers was enough for him to realize that they had to hit this enemy battleship harder.

“Very well,” Karpov stood taller, his arms locked behind his back, eyes on the overhead HD video. “Two missiles, Mister Samsonov, and I want them on the superstructure, please. Use your laser rangefinders and HD video for in-flight targeting.”

“Aye, sir. Missiles seven and six ready in silos and firing at five second intervals.”

“Fire.”

The sound of the warning claxon was loud on the forward deck, and Karpov turned to watch the hatch flip open. The missile ejected, declining and igniting its engine flawlessly. Seconds later it was followed by the second missile. They had put one 450kg warhead on the target earlier with a Moskit-II; this time Karpov would hit them with two 400kg warheads on the cruise missiles. Samsonov was now using an HD video display, and designating his target with a light pen on the image itself. In effect, he was using his own eyes to fly the missile to the point he wanted, the tall pagoda

main mast of the ship making for an inviting target.

They saw the enemy fire a third time just before the first cruise missile hit home, striking low on the pagoda with a distant roar. Seconds later the second missile hit higher, right into the heart of the tower, and the ship was soon masked in flame and smoke.

* * *

Executive officer Koro Ono saw the missiles first, gaping at their fiery tails and thin vapor trails. “Enemy fire!” he shouted, and Captain Iwabuchi instinctively braced himself near the binnacle. The slower approach of the P-900s was spellbinding, and then they began a wild evasive dance, low over the sea, and every man on the bridge stared out the forward viewports, one junior officer shirking just as the first missile came driving in at the base of the tower. There was a shuddering explosion, two men thrown from their feet, then the second missile struck even higher on the tower, just below the bridge itself.

Ono was thrown back as the windows shattered and a violent spray of broken glass and shrapnel flew in. Iwabuchi clutched the binnacle, managing to stay on his feet, but three other men were down, and Tokono Horishi, Ikeda’s second officer for the light gunnery detail, was also wounded.

Ono lay stunned on the deck as black smoke billowed in through the broken windows. The men were coughing, shielding their eyes, and groping for bulkheads to steady themselves. Through it all Iwabuchi stood stalwart, a light of fire and anger in his eyes, a streak of blood on his cheek where glass had cut him. He screamed out the order to fire, but the forward guns did not answer. The first round had struck the number two turret, and it was put out of action, the concussion enough to stun the men inside, their ears bleeding from the shock. Even for a slow missile, the P-900 packed a hard wallop. Designated the P-900 Kalibr-NK missile by the Russians, it was called the SS-N-27 “Sizzler” by NATO when it was first introduced in 2012. It weighed over 1700 kilograms, adding a strong kinetic attack in addition to the 400kg explosive warhead.

Kirishima was shaken and hurt, with fires below the bridge and around number two turret, but she was in no danger of sinking. Enraged that he could not return fire with his forward guns, Iwabuchi gave the helm an order to turn north so he could bring his two aft turrets into action. He had not yet come to

the Torres Strait itself, so there was plenty of sea room for him to maneuver. But by the time he had effected the turn, and the fire control parties had lessened the thick black smoke shrouding the ship, *Mizuchi* has slipped north as well, out of the narrow channel and into more open waters beyond.

Koro Ono was back on his feet, clutching a bleeding right arm where he had been grazed with shrapnel. “Sir,” he said. “Those rockets must be *piloted*. It is the only way they could dance over the sea like that and then turn to hit us so accurately! The channel ahead is too narrow to fight here. We will have to slow to ten knots or less to navigate the strait. If they send more…”

“Don’t bother me with navigation,” Iwabuchi batted the remark away. “Koshino! Are the aft batteries ready to fire? What is taking so long?”

“The smoke has made it difficult to plot the range, sir.”

“Fire anyway. Fire both turrets at once! Then do your spotting, you fool!”

“Aye sir.” Koshino rushed to a voice tube and gave the order to fire, the aft turrets answering soon after with a mighty roar.

Iwabuchi smiled when he heard the guns, and his eyes found Ono’s. “We must let them know they have not hurt us,” he said darkly. “You say the British must be piloting those demon rockets? Yes, it seems so, though I find it hard to believe. Where are Hara’s planes now? Let his pilots show the same bravery and smash this ship. This is a perfect time to strike from the air while they are at reduced speed in these restricted waters.”

Ono blinked away the smoke, coughing. “Hara’s planes are mostly at the bottom of the sea, sir, as we may be if you do not proceed with more caution here. I remind you that we must sail these same waters if we are to continue this chase.”

Iwabuchi turned on the man, a rage in his eyes, but he said nothing. His body language was enough.

* * *

“That hurt them,” said Karpov. “Those fires will make it very difficult for their gunnery officers.”

They watched yet another salvo, this time four shells, but it was very wide, the rounds falling well beyond the Warrior Reefs to their port side.

“I have an idea,” said Fedorov. “Do we have any mines in the magazine, Captain?”

Karpov's eyes lit up at the suggestion. "We may have some MDM-7s. Good Idea, Fedorov! I must be slipping. I should have thought of it myself. Let me call down to Martinov and I will see about it."

The MDM-7 was a ship launched mine that could be dropped in their wake, activating two minutes later to give the ship time to avoid its own weapon. It could be rigged to explode by contact, or by acoustic trigger, which was a preferred method, and the large 1500kg warhead was a powerful explosion that could cause severe damage if it detonated anywhere near a ship. In the narrow channel, they could prove a perfect weapon against the pursuing enemy ships.

Martinov called back minutes later. They had ten MDM-7 mines and six older MDM-3s, which were an air dropped version. "Let's lay some eggs," said Fedorov. "I want the KA-40 up at once, and have them lay all six MDM-3s in the Prince Of Wales Channel. We can also drop five or six MDM-7s around these islets as well." It was a perfect defensive strategy, and it would mean they would not have to use any more missiles if the enemy ships chose this same route.

"Once we reach the Bligh Entrance ahead we'll be turning south to take the Outer Channel past the Portlock Reefs to Pandora Passage. We'll drop the last of the MDM-7s there. It's the last narrows before we get out into the Coral Sea."

"Pandora's Passage," said Karpov. "What are we sailing into there, I wonder?" The ancient warning concerning 'Pandora's Box' was in his mind, the jar that contained all the evils of the world.

"That jar was opened long ago," said Fedorov. "Just look at this war we've been sailing through these last weeks. We crossed the whole of the world and still it finds us. But there was one thing left at the bottom of the jar after Pandora opened it," he smiled at Karpov now. "*Elpis*, the Spirit of Hope. We will have to hold fast to that once we Get into the Coral Sea. Work out the mining operations, Mister Karpov. I'll have to keep my eyes on these navigation charts for the next forty minutes to an hour."

Chapter 18

Pandora had yet one other thing in the bottom of her jar, the Japanese *Kaichu* Type submarine *Ro-33*. She was a double hulled sub, K-5 class and she packed a dangerous sting with four forward torpedo tubes firing the deadly Type 95 torpedo, the submarine variant of the dread 'Long Lance.' *Ro-33* was a prototype model, 960 tons, with a large planned rollout, but only two boats were ever built in the K-5 series, the *Ro-33* and her sister *Ro-34*, though there were twenty K class boats in all, mostly designated the K-6 variant. The sub could make nearly twenty knots with her two diesel engines on the surface, and 8 knots when submerged on two 1200 horsepower electric motors. Only one of the twenty would survive the war.

Her number was the same as the year of construction at the Kure naval yard when she was laid down on August 8, 1933. Seven different men commanded the sub in her early pre-war years, and she was eventually designated the flagship of SubDiv 21 in May of 1941.

To date number 33 had had little luck in the war. She had been involved in patrols supporting the Malay campaign, and in the Java Sea earlier that year. Out in the Indian Ocean she took a shot at the destroyer USS *Whipple* when she came up on it involved in a rescue mission for a damaged oiler *Pecos*, but the nimble destroyer evaded her lance. Some months later she was instrumental in scouting out the Russell and Deboyne Islands for anchorages prior to Operation MO and the successful seizure of Port Moresby.

Lt. Commander Shigeyuki Kuriyama took over the boat after that operation and on August 6 he was out on the fourth war patrol for *Ro-33* when he happened across the Australian merchant ship *Mamutu* off Murray Island. The shallow waters and reefs in the area prompted her to surface and start a merry chase, using her 3 inch deck gun to hunt down the hapless 300 ton motor vessel, and she immediately scored two hits, one silencing the radio room and the second killing the ship's Master. A half hour later *Mamutu* was listing in the water, easy prey, with many of her 108 passengers already in the sea. Kuriyama was merciless, ordering his boat to sail past the burning ship and machine gun the survivors, killing many passengers as he went by. It was the only notch in the sub's belt after four long patrols, and the crew was eager to put their torpedoes to better use.

They got their chance in the early evening of August 26th, 1942 while

they were hovering just off Pandora's Passage. A coded message bearing the name *Mizuchi* had come in three hours earlier, and it ordered the boat to leave off its defensive patrol near Port Moresby and make haste for the Torres Strait. A big enemy ship was running the gauntlet of reefs and shoals there, and attempting to break out into the Coral Sea. *Ro-33* was to assume a blocking position and wait for the beast, and she was in position well before the looming silhouette of *Kirov* was sighted by her commander, his eyes alight with the first opportunity to fire on an enemy warship in nearly six months.

Three days from now in the history Fedorov might have read in his *Chronology of the War At Sea*, *Ro-33* was supposed to have been in the Gulf of Papua west of Port Moresby where she would spot the 3300 ton merchant ship *Malaita* escorted by the Australian destroyer *Arunta*. She would put a torpedo into the *Malaita*, but later be found ten miles southeast of Port Moresby by the *Arunta* and hit with Mark VII depth charges, sinking the boat and killing all of her 70 man crew. Yet fate had ordained that she would not make that appointment on the 29th. The Australians had lost Port Moresby and neither the *Malaita* nor the *Arunta* were anywhere near the area now. Instead *Ro-33* was three days early to the grinning smile of death, where he waited for her on a ship the like of which Kuriyama had never seen. But with torpedoes that could fire at a very long range, he would not go down without a fight that evening.

Four Type 95 torpedoes were in the tubes before Tasarov found the sub, hovering silently, some 15,000 meters off the exit to the Pandora Passage. He had been just making ready to cease active sonar when his well trained ear caught a return that sounded much different from the echoes of rock and shoal he had been processing for the last hour. No…This was different, and it had a sinister edge to it. He immediately announced possible submarine, confidence high, and designated the contact Alpha One, feeding targeting information to Samsonov.

Karpov was quickly on alert, as the ship was still in the Pandora Passage making a slow ten knots and with no room to maneuver at the moment. He noted that the KA-40 had just completed its mine laying operations and was over the ship again, preparing to land.

"Comm Officer. Send to the KA-40. Belay the landing order and move to a position ahead of the ship to begin ASW operations, alert level 1." Then he

looked to Fedorov. “Will this sub need to be in close as the others we’ve encountered?”

Fedorov had been leaning over his old navigation station working with a junior officer there to make the final course adjustment to clear the passage. The word submarine jarred him as well, and he suddenly realized the danger they were in.

“No!” he said sharply. “They may very well have the Type 95 torpedo. It has tremendous range and this boat could fire at us the moment he sees us. The closer the better, of course, but there were instances where Japanese submarines fired from 12,000 meters.”

He was all too correct. Tasarov sat up suddenly, one hand on his headset, and called out another warning. “Con, I have torpedoes in the water! One, three, no, make that *four* torpedoes inbound at over 40 knots!”

“Samsonov, activate forward UDAV-2 system,” said Karpov sharply. “Fire a barrage at maximum range. Now!” Unable to maneuver the ship, Karpov was going to immediately use the powerful 300kg rockets to lay down a barrage of fire in the sea ahead of the ship as a defensive barrier. It was a good idea, the very same weapon they had used to blast away at the minefields in Bonifacio Strait, and again when they were fired on by the German U-Boat off Fornells Bay, Menorca in the Med, but it was ill timed. The explosive barrier had expended itself before the torpedoes reached the 3000 meter range mark, and they pressed on through the churning waters, all aimed for the exit of the Pandora Passage where *Kirov* lumbered forward at 10 knots.

If they had been homing torpedoes, the ship would have be dealt a mortal blow then and there. But these were torpedoes that ran where they were pointed, with a unique kerosene-oxygen fuel that made them very reliable and gave them tremendous range. They did tend to wander, left or right, but no more than 270 yards at maximum range. Kuriyama had fired all four of his forward tubes to account for wander, and was hopeful that at least one of his lances would strike home with its big 406 kilogram warhead, all of 893 pounds.

He was not disappointed.

While the two torpedoes on the outermost portion of his fan of four were both well wide, the center two were running true. The left torpedo had the misfortune to scud against a submerged rock, and the collision sent it wildly off to one side, and well away from the target before it struck the Ashmore

Reef and exploded. The last came in on *Kirov's* port side, and in spite of a quick 5 point turn intended to evade it, the torpedo was close enough to the hull and exploded amidships, the powerful concussion rolling the ship heavily.

Lights winked on the main bridge, and then went to red briefly until the emergency battery backup systems kicked in and the electronics sputtered to life again. The sudden loss of power to the CIC meant Samsonov could not select the next weapon Karpov wanted to call for, the lethal *Shkval* super-cavitating torpedo that had made a quick end of the Submarine *Talisman* in the Med as they neared Gibraltar.

But the KA-40 already had dipping sonar in the water ahead of them, and had enough data from the ship's telemetry before they began to prosecute to get a good bearing on the hidden enemy's position. It fired back an airborne ASW active/passive acoustic homing torpedo, the APR-5, with a warhead much smaller than the type 95 at only 76 kilograms. It was quick to the target with its solid-fuel pump-jet propulsion engine, and minutes later it found *Ro-33* while the crews in the forward torpedo room were rushing to seal the hatches on another round of fresh Type 95s.

Kuriyama was allowed that brief moment of elation when he saw the high water spout of the explosion on the side of the oncoming ship. Then he felt his submarine shake violently when the APR-5 struck it right on the nose, exploding and setting off all four of the fresh Type 95's there as well. The front of the sub was virtually ripped apart, and every man aboard quickly met the fate they evaded at the hands of the destroyer *Arunta*, only three days early.

Mother Time was balancing her books.

* * *

Kirov had almost avoided the hit. The torpedo actually was triggered by a small stabilizing fin extending perpendicular from the hull called the 'UK-134-6' system, designed to minimize roll and create a more stable missile firing platform. The reinforced metal work there actually helped the ship, though they lost the entire port side stabilizing fin. As it was the warhead did not strike the ship full on, but detonated near the hull at her widest point abeam, where the 100mm anti-torpedo bulwark had been built to provide some protection and help deflect and absorb the explosive power of the

torpedo. Behind the bulwark was a void filled with seawater, another 50mm armor plate and then the inner hull. The 406kg warhead was powerful enough to blast through them all, ripping an eight foot gash in the ship and sending a cascade of seawater into two interior compartments.

Flood control alarms sounded all over the ship as water tight doors were automatically shut and crewmen scrambled to seal all hatches. Damage control parties were on the move at once in a well drilled routine that the men never once thought they would have to practice in reality. Yet reality had a hard bite at times, and *Kirov* was wounded, a hit far worse than the bomb that had grazed her, and even more threatening than the incredible damage inflicted by Hayashi's headlong dive with his D3A1. Damage below the waterline was the bane of every sea captain for centuries. Two things could kill a ship faster than anything else: fire above was one of them, but water below was feared even more.

Directly above the area hit was the Korall–BN2 module that was integrated with the Combat Information System to control the P-900 cruise missiles Karpov had just used against *Kirishima*. It was hit by fragments of metal and put off line. A small boat mounted on the weather deck also suffered slight damage, but the threat was deeper in the bowels of the ship, where water had forced its way to a point two bulkheads away from the reactor core. The crews fought to get pumps active at once while Byko was coolly directing their efforts. In time they managed to pump most of the water that had penetrated beyond the outermost compartments, but those two sections were fully flooded, and it would take divers in the water with metal hull sealers to close the compartment from the outside before they could hope to use the pumps again on that area.

It was going to be another long night.

When the news came up to the Bridge Fedorov knew they had again been very lucky. "Had it struck us full on amidships the damage could have been fatal," he said.

"We're listing a few degrees to port," said Karpov. "It's very slight, but I can sense it. We won't be able to make anything much over this speed until we seal that hull breach. So if that battleship and its hound dog cruisers behind us get close again, I'm afraid we're going to have to get serious, in spite of our missile inventories."

The power stabilized, and the mains came back on, the quiet hum of the equipment reassuring. Then they heard a distant explosion, deep and

powerful immediately followed by another as if a Thunder God had struck a great kettle drum in anger. Fedorov's eyes were drawn to the Tin Man video feed where they could see the shadowy silhouette of the Japanese battleship against the sun. It seemed shrouded in mist. Then he saw a huge column of water rise up near one side of the ship and he immediately realized that the enemy must be in the mined Prince of Wales Channel, the narrow 800 meter wide segment where the KA-40 had laid her eggs, the six MDM-3 anti-shipping mines.

"I think that battleship struck one of our mines!" he said, somewhat relieved. He was wrong. *Kirishima* had run afoul of *two* of the powerful MDM-3s, both on the starboard side of the ship, and the combined weight of their explosive power was all of 3000 kilograms, over 6600 pounds! The hull shock factor of the twin explosions was tremendous. The shock effect to the ship itself was enough to shake it so violently that the engines and boilers were detached from their iron moorings and thrown against the bulkheads of their compartments. The crew were flung madly about, hundreds stunned an unconscious, limbs broken, necks snapped, skulls fractured. It was as if the hand of God had simply reached down and smashed a fist against the side of the great ship, bashing a hole in her side in spite of the heavy armor, and sending in the cobalt blue and aqua green waters of the sea.

Kirishima was dying a very painful death, as if a sleek and powerful shark had been seized upon and slammed down on the hardest of rocks. On the bridge the supply officer Kobayashi was dead, his spine broken when he was thrown against the edge of an open hatch. Secondary battery commander Ikeda would not get a chance to test his gunnery skills if *Kirishima* could have ever managed to get within 18,000 yards. Main gunnery officer Koshino was below in the damaged forward turret trying to get it operational again, unconscious but alive. XO Koro Ono had been out on the weather bridge and was thrown completely off the ship.

But amazingly, one man survived unscathed, bruised, shocked, but alive and livid with rage. Captain Sanji Iwabuchi struggled back up onto his hands and knees, gasping for breath. He could feel the heavy list of the ship, and when his mind cleared he instinctively called the name Yoshino, his flood control officer. He had seen no rockets this time. What had happened? His dazed mind would not function properly, but his instincts told him the ship had been dealt a fatal blow.

Thankfully not every man aboard was incapacitated, and small parties of

white coated junior officers were making their way to the bridge. The ship was clearly sinking, but she had little more than seven meters of water beneath her at that moment and not far to go. She settled quickly, her hard metal hull scudding against the bottom and then rolled heavily to starboard, her tall pagoda main mast tilted crazily beyond thirty degrees. With a horrid grinding of metal on stone, *Kirishima* came to rest in the shallow reefs just south of the main channel, and there she would lie for a good long while. With most of her port side weather deck and superstructure still well above the water line. She would never meet with the US battleships *Washington* and *North Carolina* in the equally dangerous waters off Guadalcanal, and never founder and sink to the bottom of Iron Bottom Sound on the day she was appointed to die, November 15, 1942.

When Iwabuchi finally realized what had happened he reluctantly gave the order to abandon ship. Two of his cruisers had tried to find passages farther north, leaving the main channel to *Kirishima*. The last cruiser, the *Tone*, had finally caught up and joined his task force that evening. She was two kilometers behind the big battleship, ready to enter the channel, but now her captain ordered all stop, amazed at the spectacle of the battleship keeling over just ahead.

"I will transfer my flag to *Tone*," said Iwabuchi angrily to a nearby officer. "See that the Emperor's portrait is handled properly and notify me when it is safely aboard a life boat. I will follow."

The venerable battleship would block the channel completely, and now he knew that the enemy was likely to slip away into the gathering shadows to the east. But I will follow, *Mizuchi*, he said to himself, a cold anger in his gut. Yes, I will follow….

Part VII

The Long Night

"Not the torturer will scare me,
nor the body's final fall,
nor the barrels of death's rifles,
nor the shadows on the wall,
nor the night when to the ground
the last dim star of pain is hurled,
but the blind indifference
of a merciless, unfeeling world.

—Roger Waters

Chapter 19

Kirov moved slowly south into the gathering darkness, the sun blazoning gold behind her, and the threat of distant storm clouds fisting up over the shadowy green folds of Papua New Guinea to the north. They moved south for an hour, then slowed to five knots so Byko could get divers in the water with acetylene torches and hull sealing plates.

This was a new innovation the Russians had developed in 2018, designed specifically for waterborne ship hulls. It was a series of panels that could be placed on the exterior hull to cover a gash or hole. They had elastic sealing edges to eliminate caulking and pre-drilled joining holes with rivets that could be mounted at specific points along the existing hull and then secured by durable welds. The panels were four feet by eight feet, and the wound in *Kirov's* hull required three to create a patch that was eight feet high by twelve feet wide. Once in place Byko could then activate pumps to void the flooded compartments of seawater, and then men could get inside that area to further reinforce the breach from within. That work would take considerably longer, but at least the ship could get underway with the exterior patch in place.

It took the divers over an hour to cut away jagged metal with underwater torches and prepare the area for the seal, and then another ninety minutes before the panels were in place. They had the KA-40 up behind the ship watching for signs of further activity from the Torres Straits, but the obvious presence of mines in the channels there had forced the Japanese to wait for destroyers to come up from Hara's carrier force to sweep the area before capital ships could be risked again in the restricted waters. The lesson of *Kirishima's* fate was evident for all to see, though Iwabuchi steamed aboard the cruiser *Tone*, angry at the delay. There were also a thousand men aboard *Kirishima*, in no danger of sinking further, but marooned on a derelict ship that would be an easy target for allied B-17s out of Cairns or Townsville. Hara's A6M2 fighters were up at dusk over the stranded battleship, until darkness lessened the threat.

In the meantime, the crew of *Kirov* used the time feverishly to complete hull repairs and make the ship seaworthy for higher speeds. They were making the last of the welds on the hull patch when Rodenko reported he had something more than storm clouds on his radar at 21:20 hours, a signal out of

the east that appeared to be a small formation of planes.

"Those will have to be out of Port Moresby," said Fedorov. "Most likely Japanese bombers, or perhaps seaplanes out on a search pattern."

They were, indeed, a squadron of G3M2 twin engine "Nell" bombers that had been sent to look for the enemy ship near dusk and mark its position. There were twelve in all, and they were flying a widely spaced search fan out of Port Moresby to the west, grouped in four *shotai* of three planes each. Only one of the three had been mounted with torpedoes, however, so the threat was not as great as it first appeared on radar.

Third *shotai* was lucky, or unlucky enough to be on a search vector that took them directly toward *Kirov*, and Fedorov could see that the other planes were on headings intended to cover areas north and south of their position. They considered whether or not to engage at long range, but realized that would simply reveal their position. So they waited, hoping that the enemy planes might not find them, but they were soon disappointed. Three planes began to descend in altitude, obviously getting down to make a possible torpedo run, and Karpov, with a free hand insofar as tactical defense of the ship was concerned, decided it would be best take them out with missiles from the Klinok system. The aft silos were void now but they still had nineteen missiles in the forward deck silos. He used three, downing all three planes at a range of ten miles.

When Number 3 *shotai* failed to report or return, the Japanese knew they had an approximate location for the enemy ship they had come to call *Mizuchi*. Yet the commander on the ground at Port Moresby was unwilling to commit more of his precious bombers to a naval strike. His squadrons had not been fully trained for anti-ship operations, and his primary task was to answer the daily bombing raids being sent his way from Cairns, and to soften up the last enemy outpost in New Guinea at Milne Bay. For this reason, he reported the probable location of the enemy ship to Admiral Hara, and let the matter go.

Darkness and rain were welcome friends that night as *Kirov* completed her hull repairs and eventually got on her way sometime after 21:40 hours. It was slow going at first, ten knots to test the integrity of the hull patch. When it held satisfactorily, Fedorov ordered twenty knots, and then went below to find the Admiral and make a full report. Karpov turned the bridge over to Rodenko as the ship moved slowly south through a warm light rain, into the deep blue Coral Sea.

At that time Hara's carriers had reached the western approaches to the Torres Straits, and his destroyers were busy sweeping a channel for their passage. With the main Prince of Wales Channel closed by the imposing hulk of *Kirishima*, an alternate route was sought that night. The Dayman and Simpson Channels to the north were too shallow for the 8.8 meter draft of the carriers so it was decided to risk going south of the large Prince of Wales Island and into Endeavour Strait near Cape York. The Japanese had good charts of the region, and the depth of Endeavor Strait was typically between ten and thirteen meters, enough water to slip the carriers through, though they would come under the watchful eyes of a small Australia Command Outpost on Horn Island.

There Lt. Commander Fenton's Horn Island Detachment was surveying sites for a possible airfield, guarded by a small militia battalion under Lt. Commander Davies. They got a good look at a small procession of Japanese ships, five destroyers, the heavy cruiser *Tone*, light carrier *Zuiho* and then the sleek new fleet carriers *Zuikaku* and *Shokaku*. The two other cruisers *Nachi* and *Myoko* were able to find passage north of *Kirishima's* position, their shallower draft of 6.3 meters enabling them to navigate the waters there better. Far behind, the large battleships *Mutsu* and *Nagato* would follow the carriers in time, with another fist full of destroyers.

The men on Horn Island would get a more than a few rounds that night as the price for their front row seat to the parade. They hunkered down in slit trenches with field glasses trained on the glassy sea, sweating it out in the mud and rain as the Japanese fleet moved slowly through the strait. Something big was obviously up if all these ships were moving east, and they made a full report by wireless to coastwatchers on the York Peninsula. Australia Command was soon informed that the Japanese seemed to be moving heaven and earth to get after a mysterious ship that was still at large in the Coral Sea—a ship that had managed to sink heavy cruiser *Haguro*, leave the battleship *Kirishima* a burning wreck in the channel, and beat off every air strike the Japanese threw at it.

* * *

Things were getting very interesting at FRUMEL Headquarters in the Monterey Apartments of Melbourne. Osborne and Novak worked the whole afternoon, taking phone calls from British liaison officers out of Perth that

seemed to muddy the water more than anything else. In the meantime, decrypts of Japanese naval signals indicated that the enemy seemed to be extremely concerned about this mysterious ship they had come to call *Mizuchi*. Osborne and Novak were equally concerned, as there seemed to be no way to explain the ship's presence, until a strange signal was received from the British near dusk on the 26th of August.

It seems someone had sent a message all the way from Bletchley Park. It hopped into Gibraltar, went out as coded signal to Alexandria where it was relayed to Colombo on Ceylon. From there it was sent to Perth, and then phoned in to Melbourne. The shock was that the British stated their belief that the ship now being scrutinized by FRUMEL analysts had been the same one escorted to the Island of St. Helena, arriving there three days earlier and then simply vanishing.

"Vanishing?" Novak looked at Osborne, clearly astounded. "They used that exact word?"

"They did."

"The British actually think this is the raider they were after in the Med? My, God, Man. It's thousands of miles away!"

"7,800 nautical miles, to be more exact," said Osborne.

"In 24 hours? The damn ship was spotted by our coastwatchers on the 24th. The British have had a little too much brandy, Ozzie. This is nonsense."

"It came right from Bletchley Park. Hut Four."

That was enough to give Novak pause, but he was still shaking his head. "Look, you and I both know—"

"Some very big names have signed off on this message, Admiral John Tovey for one. Alan Turing for another."

"Turing? Well they've got it wrong. It won't be the first time. They kept insisting the Japanese were going to hit us at Pearl, but what came of all that? Nothing."

"No, but they damn well hit us at Manila, didn't they, and they've been hitting us ever since."

"That's another matter," Novak was adamant. "No ship can move nearly 8000 miles in a single day. I don't suppose this message cares to explain that little detail, does it?"

"No, it doesn't. But they have their own name for this ship, this sea dragon the Japanese have been after the last three days. They call it *Geronimo*."

“Well they can call it whatever they like, it can’t be the ship they escorted to St. Helena, and they’re fools if they think it is.”

Osborne, took a long puff from his pipe, exhaling slowly, and looking at Novak with a serious expression on his face now. “I may be going out on a limb here,” he began. “Ever hear that code name before, Novak?”

“*Geronimo?* Can’t say as I have.”

“Well I’ve heard it, and it doesn’t surprise me that neither you or anybody else knows about it.”

“What’s so special about you, Mr. Wizard? Where did you get wind of it?”

“That would be telling,” said Osborne evasively. “Let’s just say that the British have held this one close to their chest for at least a year. You know about that incident in the North Atlantic last August, eh?”

“Of course. I knew men on the *Mississippi*. Nazis made a big mistake setting their U-boat fleet loose on that ship. What did it get them?”

“It wasn’t a U-boat attack,” Osborne said slowly, an edge of caution in his voice.

Now Novak looked over his shoulder at the man, suddenly quiet. Then he turned and pulled out a chair, sitting down and leaning heavily on his elbows, one hand in his dark wavy hair. “Suppose you tell me what really happened then,” he suggested.

“Can’t say as I have all the dope myself,” said Osborne. “But I do know it was no U-boat attack. There was a raider at sea, and the British sortied damn near the whole Home Fleet to go after it. Seems this ship was using some rather formidable weapons—rockets used against both ships and planes.”

“Rockets? Well the Russians have been using them for years. What’s so new about that?”

“The accuracy,” said Osborne slowly. “The impact. These were not like the Russian RS-82 and RS-132s. Not like the British 3 inch rockets, or even our own Forward Firing Aerial Rocket project for ASW work. They were something much bigger, deadly accurate, enough to take out an incoming strike wave of planes miles before it ever got anywhere near the firing ship.”

“I see…” Novak was now very interested.

“Yes, and they had bigger stuff as well. Anti-ship rockets, incredible range, pinpoint accuracy. They walloped the British something fierce. Put a couple of their carriers in dry dock and sunk the *Repulse*.”

Novak’s eyes widened. “You mean to say *Repulse* was sunk by this

raider? There was no U-Boat attack there either?”

“No U-boat attack. It was this ship they started calling *Geronimo*, the one the US claimed as a trophy after *Mississippi* went down. You read the reports —*Desron 7* was supposed to have taken the bastard down, though not a single ship survived that attack, right?”

“That’ s the way the official report reads.”

“Well the official report is bullshit,” Osborne tapped his pipe in the ashtray, picking at some loose tobacco as he did so. “The whole *Desron 7* thing was nothing more than a cover story. Now you keep this quiet, Novak,” he lowered his voice, a warning evident in his eyes behind his dark rimmed spectacles, “but I can tell you this much. Five destroyers showed up at Halifax twelve days after they supposedly disappeared during this incident with the raider. You want to know their names? *Plunkett*, *Hughes*, *Madison*, *Gleaves* and *Lansdale—Desron 7*, or at least the last five destroyers from that group. They told quite a story too. Said they returned to Argentia Bay and there was nobody there—no ships in the harbor, no airbase, absolutely nothing. They claimed they searched the whole area, even put men ashore, but that the whole place was abandoned, flattened.”

“But the Atlantic Charter conference was going on at that time. That’s ridiculous!”

“Yes, it certainly is, but this is what the skipper off *Plunkett* claimed, a fellow named Kauffman. They interviewed every man on every goddamned ship and they all corroborate what this Captain Kaufman says. The men say those destroyers pulled up anchor and headed south for Halifax, and they just come waltzing into the harbor some days later. Hard to believe, but that’s what really happened to *Desron 7*. The Navy got hold of those ships, painted over their hull numbers, renamed every last one and scattered them to harbors all over the Pacific Coast.”

“Are you serious? How did you get this information?”

“I never did get it. *You* never heard about it either, Novak. Use your head. This stuff is buried as deep as they could dig the hole, but I have a few contacts here and there that I can’t mention, and I got the scuttlebutt from them. Either it’s all a crock of shit, or something really strange went down in the Atlantic last year.”

“Then if *Desron 7* didn’t get this raider, this *Geronimo* the British are talking about, what happened to it?”

“It just vanished…” Osborne let that dangle for a moment. “And that’s

what they say right here in this message, Novak: Contact lost, 23-AUG-42, no sightings. Confidence high this is *Geronimo*. Details to follow."

Novak leaned back in his chair, clearly nonplussed.

"Well I'll be a monkey's ass," he said slowly.

Osborne lit his pipe again.

Chapter 20

Fedorov found Admiral Volsky in the reactor room, leaning over a table with Dobrynin. The floor was still wet with an eighth inch of seawater, and men were working mops in one area of the compartment. Two bulkheads away they could hear the sound of the pumps running, and the clatter of tools on hard metal. It had been very close, he thought. If the reactor room had been flooded….He didn't want to think about it further.

"Mister Fedorov," said Volsky. "Just the man I wanted to see! Come have a look at these printouts."

"These are charts of the reactor performance data the Admiral asked me to produce," said Dobrynin.

"Is there something wrong with the core?" That was always a great hidden danger on any nuclear powered ship.

"No, don't worry about it," said Dobrynin. "The core was never threatened. Just a little leakage from the outer hull breach, a little seawater is all that made it in here. The men will have it mopped up in no time."

"But have a look, Fedorov. Notice the line of that chart."

Fedorov leaned over, staring at the chart, a bit like a seismograph reading it seemed to him, and he noted a series a vertical lines pointed out by Dobrynin with a heavy thumb.

"Each line is one day, marking the end of a normal twenty-four hour period. This red line is the total power output, so you can see where it increases when we were running the ship at high speed. This violet line however, those are flux levels in the core."

"Do you notice anything?" Volsky asked, eager to see if Fedorov saw what the other two men had been discussing.

"Well it looks like the line spikes every so often."

"That's what I saw," said Volsky. "Dobrynin here tells me its normal, however."

"It's just a routine maintenance operation," the engineer explained. "We're running a 24-rod reactor core here. Twenty-four control rods, but we have to inspect them at regular intervals. So what we do is pull one rod into this containment structure," he gestured to a point high up above the main equipment in the room. "We can look the rod over for decay with inspection equipment, even on a microscopic level if need be. While we do this we have

to insert a spare rod that descends from that metal tube there," he pointed again. "That's rod twenty-five. It gets a dip into the core every so often when we pull one of the other rods for this inspection routine."

"Then you are saying you get reactor core flux events whenever you do this procedure?"

"Correct," said Dobrynin, "but not immediately; not during the procedure itself, but just a little while after, sometimes a few hours, sometimes a full day. I suppose that's why I never connected the two events."

"I see," said Fedorov. Then something occurred to him, and his next question was obvious. "Chief…How often do you perform this maintenance routine?"

Admiral Volsky smiled, folding his arms over his broad chest with a wink at Fedorov. "Go on Dobrynin," he said. "Tell him."

"Well every twelve days, sir. We pull a rod every twelve days, but I never associated the flux event with the procedure until—"

"Until I had him run these performance charts," said Volsky.

Fedorov's eyes widened, a quiet light there now. "Every twelve days? The interval, Admiral! This could explain a great many things!"

"Indeed it might," said Volsky. "It could be that the answer to this entire mystery has been right under our noses the whole time. We thought the explosion on *Orel* set off this crazy chain reaction, this time displacement we've been trapped in."

"Perhaps it did," Fedorov suggested, "but my hunch about the interval is certainly telling."

"What's this talk about an interval?" asked Dobrynin.

"I've been tracking the dates closely," said Fedorov. "Every twelve days there has been a time displacement. We either move forward, or back again. Let me see the dates of these maintenance checks…"

He leaned over the chart, his head nodding with the excitement of discovery. "Yes! Look Admiral. There was a rod just before our live fire exercises were scheduled. Then look here, another procedure the day before we vanished near Argentia Bay. Dobrynin… when was the last procedure run?"

Dobrynin squinted. "Why, three days ago. I pulled the number eight rod, stuck in number twenty-five and—"

"And here we are," said Admiral Volsky, "shooting missiles at Japanese planes and ships!"

“Then this is even more evidence that the cause of these displacements is not some external event,” said Fedorov. “It could be right here, right in our own reactor. We could be causing it just by running this maintenance procedure.”

“Which means…” Volsky’s eyes were bright under his heavy gray brows. “It’s just as Doctor Zolkin suggested. He told us to go tell Dobrynin to fiddle with his reactor and send us home. He was speaking in jest, but now we find that this may end up being the truth after all.”

“What do you suggest we do, Fedorov? Should we test it?

“You mean complete the maintenance procedure and see what happens?”

“Of course! Dobrynin, is there any reason why you could not run this procedure now?”

“Now, sir? Well, nothing in principle, except I think we should wait for the men to clear the last of this seawater. The rods are just absorbing neutrons produced by the fission in the core. They just moderate the temperature of the reaction and control the flux.”

“Why would this maintenance procedure cause these neutron flux events you’ve recorded? They were very unusual, yes? Not normal?”

“I’m not exactly sure. If there was an air leak in the inspection module and the zirconium alloy coating the rods came into contact with air we could get oxidation there that would produce hydrogen. But the monitors have not detected any unusual hydrogen levels. I could also check the cooling water for contaminants. It must remain very pure, no ions, no chlorides.”

“Run some diagnostics, Dobrynin, and if possible, try to complete a normal maintenance procedure as soon as possible. Be sure to inform the bridge when you do so.”

“Very good, sir.”

“This is going to be interesting,” said Fedorov. “How long will this procedure take, Chief?”

“I should have everything ready to go in an hour. After that, the rod inspection normally takes two hours.”

“Then do it exactly as you would any other time,” said Volsky. “I want it perfectly routine. No rush. Just let us know when you complete it. Come now, Fedorov, let us get to the bridge. What were those three missiles I heard a while back?”

“Japanese planes out of Port Moresby. They were flying a typical search pattern and one group got a little too curious. Karpov took them down.”

“It sounded like the Klinok system. I thought as much. Well, Fedorov, now that we’ve got the repairs well in hand what next? We are in the Coral Sea, where should we steer?”

“We’ll want to stay well away from the Solomons. They would be east of our present position. I suspect there will be fighting there, whether the history has changed or not. Some places just have strategic magnetism about them, and the Southern Solomons is one of them insofar as this campaign is concerned.”

“Should we try to go north?”

“I wouldn’t advise it, sir. That’s all Japanese territory, and New Britain Island, the Bismarck barrier, will force us into restricted channels within range of Japanese air bases at Lae and Rabaul. The Bismarck Sea north of that Island is a Japanese lake at the moment. No, I think we must go south.”

“What about the Americans. Should they discover us they may be as dogged as the Japanese, particularly if they should manage to put two and two together and realize we are the ship responsible for that attack in the North Atlantic.”

“That would be quite a stretch, sir. I suggest we stay on a heading of 135 degrees southeast. That should keep us in the Coral Sea for a good long while, but well off the Australian Coast. There will not be much threat from the Australians. They had very little air or naval power to speak of at this point. New Caledonia is another matter. There’s a big American buildup underway at Noumea. We should keep well away from that place, and this course will give us a 400 mile buffer. We’ll eventually approach New Zealand on that heading, but we can turn on 90 degrees due east well before that and head into the South Pacific. That will take us down below the fireworks in the Solomons, and who knows, sir, we might even find your island girls out there somewhere. Tonga is 400 miles southeast of Fiji, then there is Niue, the Cook Islands, French Polynesia, Tahiti, Bora Bora, even Pitcairn Island. That’s the most isolated place I can think of on earth. The mutineers from the old ship Bounty settled there, but it’s virtually deserted.”

“Let’s have a look at French Polynesia first,” said Volsky. “That is assuming we can slip away from these Japanese without any more dive bombers coming through the roof.”

“We should know more near dawn, sir. With *Kirishima* down they may lose their ardor for the chase. They already know their cruisers are no match for us, and I’m guessing that their other carrier divisions are much further

east, near the Solomons. Nikolin says radio traffic is really heavy."

"French Polynesia sounds much better to me," said Volsky. "But Fedorov, if Dobrynin completes his maintenance, we could see changes in a matter of hours, assuming our little theory here proves to be true."

"Possibly, sir."

"And supposing we do move again, start shifting. It was very subtle last time. How will we know?"

"I think we'll get enough clues—the radio traffic would suddenly disappear, we can look for changes in known weather patterns, even time of day. Remember when we shifted into the Med we went from night to day in just a few minutes time."

The Admiral sighed. "Well now we get to choose which nightmare we end up living in, I suppose. If it was Dobrynin's maintenance routine causing us to move, we can control that, yes? We can choose to stay put. The only thing is this: will the world still be empty if we shift again? Will we still be sailing from one dark radiation blighted shore to another?"

"Well, sir, we can't really know. We're changing the history each time we appear. We have no way to predict what we will find if we do displace forward in time again. But even if we do, I tend to think French Polynesia will not be on anyone's target list."

"I would hope not," said Volsky sadly.

Fedorov completed his report as they walked, and then, seeing the Admiral was looking very tired, he suggested sleep. "Sir, it's just after midnight. I can see to the last of the damage control work with Chief Byko. Why not get some rest."

"I was considering that. In fact I think I will do so. Thank you, Mister Fedorov. But wake me if Dobrynin reports anything unusual."

"He said it could be hours after the procedure before he might notice anything, sir, even a full day."

"In that case I will sleep well, but don't hesitate to wake me. And if you can get some rest yourself, that would also be good."

"Thank you, sir."

* * *

The night folded quietly about the ship, the seas rising a bit with the rain, though the storm was not severe. A little after 02:00 hours Fedorov was

awakened by the deep drone of planes, high up, and called up to the bridge to find out what it was. Rodenko reported that there was a small flight of six planes coming up from the south, at high altitude, and on a heading that would take them to Port Moresby.

“Those will be American B-17 bombers, Rodenko. They probably took off from Cairns or Cooktown a few hours ago for a run up to Port Moresby. It obviously isn’t a serious raid, just harassment. I would not think they pose much of a threat. In fact, I don’t think they even know we are here.”

“We’ve been running dark all night,” said Rodenko.

“Then leave them alone. Take your next rest leave, and I’ll be back on the bridge soon. You can turn your station over to Kalinichev.”

Rodenko took the friendly advice and was glad that he did. It was to be the last chance for a little peace and quiet the ship would have for some time.

Events to the east were broiling up into a major air/sea battle, and far off in the Solomons, another Admiral was taking undo interest in these reports coming from Hara’s group. The name *Mizuchi* was discussed, and decisions were made—decisions that would pose the greatest challenge ever faced by the beleaguered Russian battlecruiser and its weary crew.

Chapter 21

The reports coming in from the Western operation were very strange. Staff spent hours sending coded messages trying to sort them all out before they brought them to Admiral Yamamoto, and now it was time to brief him in full. Yet Yamamoto had already learned the worst about the incident, and the name *Mizuchi* was uppermost in his mind as he gazed at the plotting table before the circle of men. The starched white uniforms were immaculate, the gold braided caps and cuff bands representing decades of seasoned naval experience, all gathered here on the eve of a decisive engagement.

Chief of Operations Captain Kimetake Kuroshima and late arrivals fresh off the cruiser *Nagara* had just entered the room: the Chief of Staff of the First Air Fleet, Rear Admiral Ryunosuke Kusaka and staff officers, Captain Tamotsu Oishi with Commander Minoru Genda. A raft of junior officers followed in their wake.

"The plan, like all plans before it, has been altered due to action by the enemy," said Yamamoto beginning the meeting. "Tonight we decide whether or not we can adequately cover a counter operation aimed at Guadalcanal. Kuroshima has worked out the details." The Admiral looked at his God of Operations, obviously intending him to take the floor.

"The enemy attack at Guadalcanal was not unexpected, but the timing achieved the element of surprise in light of our present operations," said Kuroshima. "It has been necessary to maneuver both arms of our planned Operation FS to an earlier closing point now aimed at Guadalcanal. The difficulty is that our invasion elements are now widely dispersed. Our bombardment group, with three battleships and supporting units, is presently with the first wave troops of the 3rd Division poised off New Georgia and ready to strike south to support our counter invasion at Guadalcanal. But second wave troops are still well out into the Coral Sea, and moving northeast. The need to mass both carrier divisions will leave these troops exposed. The two carrier strike groups assigned to this operation are now converging on Guadalcanal, leaving only an escort of five destroyers with the second wave convoy." He gestured to a table map where small wooden models indicated the positions of principle task forces involved in the operation. "We expect a battle with the American carriers somewhere near Guadalcanal within twenty-four hours."

“It is my belief that the Americans will be northeast of the Solomons,” said Genda, one of the Fleet’s most experienced air planning officers.

“The General Staff concurs,” said Kuroshima. “Yet our worry is that the two arms of our carrier forces might be engaged separately by the combined American force, and defeated in detail. It is therefore necessary to closely coordinate our air strikes, so that both our carrier divisions function as a combined unit. This will require close coordination with all air staff officers, who will report to Genda in eight hours to finalize our strike once we have pinpointed the enemy’s location.”

“With four fleet carriers we should outnumber the enemy,” said Yamamoto.

“Correct, sir, but the aircraft ratio will not be great. The American carriers can support over eighty aircraft each. If there are three carriers present that will give them at least 240 planes against the 280 aircraft our four fleet carriers can bring to the battle.”

“Yet our experience and skill further multiplies our numbers,” said Air Fleet Chief Kusaka.

Genda spoke again. “It will be very simple,” he said. “Whoever strikes first will prevail. We are already initiating an aggressive search to locate their main body.”

“What about Hara's group?” asked Yamamoto, and the question prompted an uncomfortable silence around the table.

Kuroshima was the bringer of bad news. “Sir, Admiral Hara’s carriers are still attempting to transit the Torres Strait at this time. It seems the operation against the British battlecruiser has become more complicated than expected.”

“Complicated?” There was a flash of anger in Yamamoto's eyes. “Yes, I call the loss of over seventy percent of Hara’s strike aircraft a complication indeed. *Zuikaku* and *Shokaku* are now little more than cruise ships on a sightseeing voyage. Now we have further news. Hara informs me that the battleship *Kirishima* has run aground in the Torres Strait, though I suspect there is more to the story than we have been told.”

Kuroshima knew the worst, that the battleship had been hit multiple times by some lethal new rocketry, and that her guts had been ripped apart by a massive explosion as she attempted to follow the enemy ship through the narrow waters of the Torres Strait. Now she wallowed like a beached whale, waiting to die on the coral shoals and reefs north of Cape York. But he said

nothing of this to Yamamoto. The Admiral's anger was well justified, and he did not wish to bring shame into the equation as well. Yamamoto continued.

"This enemy ship has moved into the Coral Sea and is now headed southeast. It is said to be using some very unusual weapons, naval rockets, and with these it savaged Hara's strike wing, kept Iwabuchi's covering force at bay, and has outrun them all to now threaten the troop convoy out of Rabaul… Kuroshima?" It was clear that Yamamoto now wanted an explanation, and the recommendation of his Chief of Operations.

"Another unpleasant surprise, sir. We have not been able to determine what this ship could be, or how it came to be involved with the Darwin operation in the first place."

"That is of no concern now," said Yamamoto. "The ship is in the Coral Sea. What should we do about it?"

"Sir, we have already detached Captain Furuichi and the Light Carrier *Ryuho* to reinforce Hara's 5th Carrier Division."

Yamamoto smiled, shaking his head. "Do you realize how ridiculous that sounds? A light carrier sent to reinforce the entire 5th Fleet Carrier Division? That will put four carriers in the Coral Sea and they won't be able to muster fifty strike planes between them! Plenty of fighters, yes, but what good are they against naval targets? Hara is of the opinion that this ship must be engaged by heavier units, and I have come round to that opinion as well. He was hoping Iwabuchi would catch it before it passed through the Torres Strait. But apparently that will not happen now. Furthermore, we also lost a submarine, *Ro–33*, another victim of this unexpected enemy ship."

Clearly the Admiral had already been briefed, thought Kuroshima, the heat rising on the back of his neck "But Hara reports they have hit this ship," he put in, trying to salvage the situation.

"Yes," said Yamamoto, "and it has hit *them* as well. We have lost the cruiser *Haguro*, seventy percent of Hara's strike planes, a submarine, and now a battleship is sitting on a reef in the Torres Strait like a big fat goose waiting for American B-17's to pay a visit! This is disgraceful."

All the officers lowered their heads, but Kiroshima spoke again, a new plan in mind. "Sir," he said. "Given that most of the second wave transports are still in the Coral Sea, and considering the fact that we appear to have no capital ships in Hara's task force capable of engaging this enemy ship on even terms, I suggest this is a job where armor and guns may do what Hara's planes have failed to accomplish.

One way to move things along was to agree with your commanding officer, he reasoned. “Perhaps we should detached one or two battleships and send them west to cover the transports and intercept this British ship, whatever it may be. We could send *Hiei*, sir. She can make 30 knots. *Fuso* is too slow.”

Yamamoto thought for a moment. “What about this ship? We have the necessary speed, and we certainly have the guns. Hara's report indicated they had difficulty closing the range against this enemy ship. The fourteen inch guns on *Kirishima* proved inadequate to the task. Our guns can fire at much greater range, and with better accuracy.”

“But sir, this is Combined Fleet Headquarters. This ship is irreplaceable.”

“Oh? It has already been replaced, Kuroshima. Combined Fleet Headquarters has been moved to *Musashi* at Truk, as you know all too well.”

“But sir, this ship is a symbol of Japan’s prestige and power. It cannot be risked in battle.”

“Listen to yourself! Do you realize how ridiculous that sounds? We render this ship powerless in one stroke with that mindset. I took this ship to sea with the intention of using her. Yes, I have heard what she has been called, gentlemen, but I will tell you now that this is no longer *Hotel Yamato*. This is a fighting ship and I believe we have exactly that in front of us now, a naval surface action. That appears to be the only solution to this British interloper. It is time the Imperial Japanese Navy taught the British a lesson once and for all.”

It was clear that Kuroshima was uncomfortable with the notion of his commanding officer sailing into the danger of major surface engagement, but he was in no position to contradict Yamamoto under the present circumstances. He expressed his concerns, and now proffered a brief bow acceding to the Admiral's wishes.

“In that event, sir, I would suggest an escort of several cruisers and at least three destroyers, all with the speed to form a scouting force and screen for *Yamato*. And perhaps we should send *Hiei* as well.”

“That will leave only *Fuso* to support the planned landing on Guadalcanal. No. If this ship cannot engage and sink a British battlecruiser then we had no business building it. *Yamato* will be sufficient, but yes, we will detach cruisers *Yura*, *Nagara* and *Jintsu*, along with three destroyers. It will be my intention to move west at once, and I wish to be well south of Milne Bay by dawn.”

“That will mean running at high speed all night, sir.”

“Yes, it will. See that the orders are given. Now…Where will Hara and Furuichi be at dawn tomorrow?”

Kuroshima shifted, then set his mind to the plotting table, extending a wand and gently pushing two carrier models as he spoke.

“Sir, assuming Hara has no problem transiting the Strait, he should be north of Cooktown and 170 miles west of the enemy. Approximately here. As for the *Ryuho* group, it will be about 175 miles southeast, approaching the enemy’s present course head on. Both carrier forces will be within easy strike range.”

“And where do you anticipate we could be at that time?”

“About here, sir. A hundred and fifty miles due east of where we expect the enemy given their present course and speed.”

“A little too far for even our guns.” Yamamoto smiled.

Genda spoke up now. “Sir, Hara should coordinate an air strike at dawn.”

“And lose the remainder of his aircraft?”

“That may not happen this time,” Genda suggested. “That ship was hit before and it can be hit again. Hara must buy us the time we need to close and engage with *Yamato*.”

“My thinking exactly,” said Yamamoto. “And once we have dealt with this ship we will be in a perfect position to cover and support the second wave troops in the Coral Sea. Do I hear any objection?”

No man at the table spoke further.

* * *

The rain slowly abated as *Kirov* slipped southeast, resolving to a fine humid mist in time, and drifting patches of fog hugging the quieting seas. The principle officers took advantage of the calm for much needed sleep, all except Nikolin, who had spent the night dozing at his radio station, in and out of sleep as he monitored the increasing radio traffic. He could not decipher some of the code words used, but it was clear to him that ships and planes were talking to one another, calling to one another in the night, and he imagined men up in search planes now, their eyes darkly scanning the grey horizon, looking for enemy ships, perhaps looking for *Kirov* as well, with bad intent.

A little before three in the morning he got a message from engineering.

Dobrynin was reporting his maintenance procedure was completed without complications.

"Very well," he said. "I will inform the senior officers at the next shift." Then he forgot about the matter, settling into his chair again and quietly dozing off.

Two hours later a bleary eyed Karpov came slouching onto the bridge, and a watchman saluted.

"Captain on the bridge," he said, sticking to protocols.

"As you were," said Karpov, then he yawned heavily, moving slowly to Kalinichev. "Anything to report?"

"Without the Fregat system our range is limited," said Kalinichev. "But I did get a return on a surface contact with our Top Mast radar at 02:00 hours, sir. I keyed its position, course and speed, and the predictive plot algorithm would have it here, sir, a little beyond the range of that antenna now."

Moments later Fedorov appeared, and yet another captain was announced on the bridge. He joined Karpov, near the radar station as other senior officers were slowly appearing to relieve the night shift. Rodenko was back, and Tasarov shuffled in to take up his post at sonar. The burly Samsonov was an early riser. He had just come from the mess hall and a good breakfast, and now was well settled into his station at the CIC.

"That predictive plot will probably be the carrier group that attacked us earlier," said Fedorov.

"We could go have a look with the KA-40. It proved invaluable yesterday. It may be wise to get an Oko panel up and have a look around this morning."

"I agree," said Fedorov. "See to it, will you Captain?"

"Sir," Karpov tapped off a three finger salute and went to rustle Nikolin from his daydreaming and have him send the order down to the helo bay. Nikolin blinked, chasing the sleep from his eyes, and then remembered the message from Dobrynin.

"I'm to tell you that Chief Dobrynin has completed his maintenance operation, sir," he said.

"Yes, yes," Karpov waved a hand. "Good enough. Just get that order out for the KA-40, Mister Nikolin."

Twenty minutes later the Helo was up, its twin rotors beating fitfully as it increased power with a roar and gained elevation. With every foot it rose, the range of its radar increased in a slowly expanding arc. At 05:10 hours it was

high up over the ship, its Oko panel deployed and beginning to feed telemetry to Rodenko's station.

Rodenko settled in, his eyes focusing on the screen as he toggled switches to receive the data stream. What he saw was most disheartening.

"Con, Radar. Multiple airborne contacts inbound in two groups. Large signal returns east-northeast at 150 miles and closing at 200kph. A second group southeast, range 170 and closing. Recommend Air Alert One."

Karpov shrugged, looking at Fedorov. "Sleep time is over," he said. "It looks like we have uninvited guests for breakfast. Air Alert One. Sound battle stations."

The long night was over. The sound of the alarm was a shrill warning that cut through the warm dawn and sent a chill down Fedorov's spine in spite of the apparent calm on the seas around them. He looked out the forward view panes, noting the vermillion sky lightening to the east, and suddenly the day had a grim and sallow tinge to it with the realization that men were going to fight and die here soon. How many planes this time? How many men? They had thirty-five SAMs left in the dark silos beneath the forward deck.

Part VIII

Shadow Dancer

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

— *Steven Erikson, House of Chains.*

Chapter 22

Lieutenant Akira Sakamoto was up on the flight deck early, standing in the warm morning mist, breathing deeply. He watched while the flight crews pushed the last of his D3A1s from the elevator, their wings glistening with a light sheen of moisture. The steam rising from the hydraulics beneath the main deck formed subtle wisps and then folded into the mist, a shadow dancer on the thick morning airs.

Too few, he thought. So many planes gone…. So many men. He now had more pilots aboard than aircraft. They had been able to patch up the seven D3A1s that had survived that disastrous first strike mission, and two *shotai* had been flown in from the reserve at Kendari, six more planes to give him a total of just thirteen dive bombers ready for operations that morning. All the D3A1s had been grouped here on *Zuikaku*. There were also nine B5N2s being readied, their long sleek torpedoes being checked even now as the first two came off the elevators. An equal number would be making ready for operations aboard *Shokaku*, cruising sedately off their starboard bow. That would give him eighteen torpedo planes to add to his strike, barely a third of the wave he might normally hope to lead against a naval target.

And this was no ordinary ship. He still shivered with the memory of those deadly rockets arcing into the sky, their fiery tails spitting flame as they came at his planes like piranhas, cutting his squadrons to pieces.

The words he had spoken to his men earlier in the briefing room returned to haunt him. “These rockets flung against *Kirishima* could not have found the target on their own. Every single one hit home, or so I am told. It is clear that they must be piloted, and so we must not underestimate the bravery of our enemies. I do not have to remind you that it was only the courage of Lieutenant Hayashi that enabled us to find and hit this demon. He did so *twice*, his life counting for nothing in the face of duty. Let that be a lesson to us all. It may be that we, too, must ride our planes to a flaming end this morning.”

He remembered the look on Lieutenant Ema’s face, another survivor of the first wave, and spoke one last time. “It is for those of us who have already seen this monster to lead the way for the others.” It was clear what he meant, and Sakamoto had every intention to follow in the wake of Hayashi that

morning, to another life if need be, and to end the sorrows of this war insofar as his small part was concerned.

The last of EII-3 Torpedo Squadron was up from below and being spotted behind his dive bombers for takeoff. He could feel the carrier turning, noting the wide sweep of her foaming wake cutting through the green seas, and he took a long, deep breath. It was time.

Sakamoto drew out a boson's whistle from his flight jacket and blew a high, shrill note. The rise and fall of the flight deck leader's voice called in return and the men were now moving quickly to their planes. He was up and into the cockpit of his D3A1 like a shadow fleeing from the rising sun, and soon he heard the grinding whirr of the engine, firing sharply as the forward prop slowly rotated, then sputtered to life. He fed it power, reassured by the heavy thrum of the engine and the whirl of the glistening propeller. A flagman was already out in front of his plane, slowly walking backward, the white flag in his hand catching a slight morning breeze as the carrier faced the wind.

Seconds later he saw men dash in under his wings and felt the chocks dragged away, he was ready to fly. The flagman waved him forward and his engine revved to high rotation as he readied himself, the adrenaline in his chest sending his heart beating faster. *Raijin*, God of Thunder, he prayed silently. Give me your lightning this day.

Then the flagman waved him on with a sharp movement rotating and kneeling, one arm extended towards the long forward flight deck, pointing out the way. Sakamoto pushed the throttle to full and felt his plane lurch forward in response. It rumbled down the runway with a roar, until he felt that airy lightness as the wheels ran out of deck and his plane growled to gain altitude. He dipped slightly, his eyes playing over the opalescent green froth at the bow of the ship, and then he was up, climbing into the sky through a bank of low lying clouds, the air sweet in his lungs and a smile on his face.

It was a beautiful dawn, the last morning of his life, and knowing that simple fact brought an elation he could not hold within him. It glistened as a tear, wetting his cheek as he climbed. And then he banked left to look over his shoulder to see Ema's plane rising in his wake, and a third D3A1 running swiftly along *Zuikaku's* deck for takeoff. Beyond that he could see the swan white wings of the A6M2s off *Shokaku* rising in force to escort the strike planes in.

He would not die alone.

* * *

As the planes drew ever closer, the men aboard *Kirov* now had a good look at what they were facing. Admiral Yamamoto's estimate had been a little off the mark. Hara's strike was now composed of thirteen D3A1s, eighteen B5N2s and twenty-four A6M2 fighters in escort, fifty-five planes in all. It was reasoned that each fighter along for the mission would present the enemy with yet one more target. Increasing the chances that one of the strike planes would get through.

Rodenko was able to estimate the size of the force at fifty plus planes, already more targets than their remaining SAMs on a one for one basis. To make matters worse, the second airborne group coming up from the south returned another thirty-six discrete contacts. They were now facing over ninety planes against the thirty-five SAMs they had left in the silos.

"God help us this time," Fedorov whispered under his breath. He looked at Karpov, ready to hand control of the engagement to the able Captain, and for a moment their eyes met, a question in Fedorov's, a hint of uncertainty in Karpov's, firming to resolve. It was the first time they had faced an attack without the calm assurance that they could bat it aside. Had their magazines been full, all systems nominal, that would again be the case, but now each one knew they were under real threat, particularly if the Japanese pilots pressed home their attack with the same intensity as before.

Karpov took a deep breath, realizing that the eyes of the bridge crew were on him now, waiting. He stood straighter, clasped his arms behind his back as he often did in combat, and then gave his orders.

"Mister Samsonov," he said calmly. "We will engage with the S-300 system as before. Range one hundred kilometers; a salvo of six missiles to target each group. I want your firing interval longer, ten seconds."

"Aye, sir, weapons locked on targets and system ready."

Rodenko looked over his shoulder, nodding at Karpov to indicate the targets had crossed the range line, his eyes big and white as he did so.

"Commence firing."

The warning claxon, the snap of the forward deck hatches, the first long sleek missile up from below, the wisp of its aiming jet as it declined the sharp pointed nose before the roar of the engine sent it lancing away from the ship in a wash of pure white vapor… The Second Battle of the Coral Sea had

begun.

One by one the deadly S-300's charged forth to meet the enemy, each one accelerating so fast that they soon left the roar of their own engines far behind, and became silent steel javelins in the bright morning sky, reaching impossible speeds in a matter of seconds. A man firing an automatic assault rifle would see his bullets fly off at twice the speed of sound. The missiles were four times faster. To the enemy planes that chanced to see them coming they would seem a blur of lightning coming up at them from some angry sea god unseen on the ocean below. When they exploded, a tight bundle of long steel rods would fragment into a rain of metal, out to a ten meter radius around the point of detonation. Any plane close inside that radius would be torn to shreds, only the heavy engine compartment surviving intact. Targets farther out could be riddled with shrapnel, their wings damaged, fuel tanks ruptured, canopies shattered, pilots run through with lethal wounds.

One missile came, then another and Sakamoto, flying at the top of his strike wave with the squadrons of *Rei-sen* fighters, could see two planes down from the first rocket, then another, then three more, one killed outright in a violent explosion, and the remaining two B5N2s streaming smoke, but still doggedly holding formation. He shouted an order to his fighter escorts, and the zeros tipped their wings and roared down, right into the thin smoke trails scratched into the sky by the first three rockets. They would surge ahead like a pack of sleek greyhounds, willing now to take the worst of anything more that reached for their brothers behind. Five more died when the next three rockets came, and then a surreal calm settled over the scene as Sakamoto watched the last of the five ride its own smoking tail into the sea. He craned his neck to see what remained of his formation, the brave pilots steady on as they came.

He had lost seven A6M2s in all, three B5N2 torpedo bombers and one dive bomber, eleven planes hit or lost to six enemy rockets. They were birds on a wire. He gave the order to disperse by *shotai* and then for each group of three planes to fly a wide pattern, well off the wingtips of their brethren.

"They are dispersing," said Rodenko. "The main formation is breaking up. I can now read about forty-five contacts in Group One, twenty-eight in Group Two to the south."

"One more time, Mister Samsonov, salvo of six per group. Ten second

intervals."

"Samsonov paused briefly as his light pen reached to select his missiles. "Sir," he said, "we have only seven S-300s remaining."

Karpov turned, "Of course… Three missile salvo to each group then, and fire when ready."

"Firing now, sir."

The second attack was equally deadly, but it found fewer planes. Sakamoto's tactic had worked, and with the A6N2s well out in front now, the fighters took the brunt of the attack, their wings bright with machine gun fire that had no hope of hitting the missiles, the voices of the pilots strident and wild in Sakamoto's head set. The wide dispersal of the strike wave meant the missile kill would fall to a one to one ratio again. Three *Rei-sen* fighters died in the second barrage, one for each rocket that came at them. Two others were scored by shrapnel, but still flyable.

The Southern group off the light carrier *Ryuho* had yet to climb the learning curve, and its planes had stolidly closed formations again after the first rockets thinned their ranks. When the second salvo of three missiles hit them, it took out six more planes, four of them brave fighter pilots that had charged into the vanguard of the attack wave and two strike planes. There were still two of six dive bombers alive and flying, and nine of twelve torpedo bombers. On they came, soon crossing the fifty kilometer range line.

Karpov's palms were sweating, though he clasped his hands tightly together as he waited. There was now only a single S-300 missile remaining. Steady and calm, the Captain gave another firm order.

"Switch to Klinok system, enable infrared and optical guidance systems." They had lost one of two fire control radar sets for that system when Hayashi's plane had come thundering down on the aft battle bridge. Their forward radar could not process all the contacts they were still facing at one time. They would use it to give the missiles their initial heading and range to target, and then allow infrared and optical tracking systems to take over if necessary.

There came a slight vibration, barely perceptible, and then the comm link buzzed and Fedorov went to receive the call. It was Admiral Volsky.

"What is happening, Fedorov?"

The young Captain quickly briefed the Admiral.

"Very well, carry on as best you can. I will be in engineering with

Dobrynin.”

At forty kilometers the medium range Klinok system began to fire, the last missile gauntlet to be run by the enemy before they could get in actual visual range of their target, but they had only sixteen remaining. Karpov sighed heavily and gave the order.

“Two salvos of eight,” he said. “Ten second firing intervals, as before.” They still had plenty of time before the enemy could threaten the ship with direct attack. He wanted to be sure each missile acquired a target before a second was sent on its way, to avoid any possibility that two missiles might expend themselves on a single plane. The tactic worked as planned. Eight more planes would die in each oncoming group, but five minutes after the first missile streaked away a strange silence settled over *Kirov’s* long forward deck, the warm morning breeze slowly driving off the last of the steamy smoke and vapor from the missile firings. The Klinoks were gone. Samsonov’s light pen still hovered over the screen, but he had no more missiles to select. Only the last S-300 remained.

“Helm,” said Karpov. “Ahead thirty. Mister Fedorov, will you take charge of maneuvering the ship?”

“I will,” said Fedorov grimly.

There was a second shudder from below decks, and this time Fedorov noticed it, worrying that the hull patch might fail at high speed. This had been the very first time the new innovation had been tested under actual combat conditions. Yet *Kirov* plowed ahead, her sleek bow kicking up a white wash as the prow of the ship cut through the jade green sea.

“Thirty Kilometers and closing fast now,” said Rodenko.

“Ready on *Kashtan*-2 system, Samsonov.”

“Aye, sir.” It was now up to *Kirov’s* close in defense systems.

The *Ryuho* Group to the south had been hit very hard. All six of the dive bombers there were gone, and only seven fighters and seven torpedo bombers remained. Sakamoto’s more experienced pilots presented a stronger threat. Only two of his dive bombers had been hit, and he had eleven left. There were still fourteen of the eighteen torpedo bombers as well. But his brave fighters still dancing ahead of the strike wave, had paid heavily. Only nine of twenty-four remained.

“I can hear them now,” said Nikolin, his brown eyes dark beneath his head set. The shouts of one pilot to another were evident, and though he did not know what they were saying, he could sense the emotion, hear the iron in

their voices, and he knew they called to hearten one another, and bolster their resolve.

The *Kashtan* system still had thirty-two close range missiles to augment its two twin Gatling gun mounts, and then there were the four AR-710 single barreled Gatling Guns as well, and plenty of 30mm ammunition. The weapons were computer controlled, with radar, laser range finding and optical backup systems as well. The four single Gatling guns could even be fired by a human crew that could man a control harness from a nearby position on the deck. They had forty-eight planes to kill.

In they came, brave to a man, unyielding. Not one pilot ever considered peeling off and turning away. Sakamoto gathered his dive bombers into two fists of five or six planes each at the top of the formation and he saw his torpedo bombers under Lt. Subota slowly dropping down to begin their low altitude runs. Off to the south they could see what was left of *Ryuho's* strike charging in on a well timed attack, both groups arriving within minutes of one another. It was time. He tipped his nose down and yelled for his men to follow, and the D3As were soon screaming down like a flock of merciless falcons swooping on their prey.

Chapter 23

The old *Kashtan* system sat like a gray crab at the base of the aft secondary mast that was topped with the Fregat radar system, one on each side of the ship. Directly above it the stolid robot-like figure of the Tin Man seemed to stand a solitary watch as the enemy planes came in.

The arms of the gray crab were now heavy with four barreled missile canisters above the Gatling guns, each capable of ranging out to 10,000 meters, and Karpov wasted no time firing them. Their smaller warheads could still generate a fragmentation sphere five meters in diameter when the missile detonated, and so they posed another strong threat with a high probability of interception for approaching air targets, and a follow-on engagement of surviving targets at a close-in range with the intense gunfire generated from the long black six-barreled Gatling guns.

The old *Kirov* had six such systems installed, but four had been replaced with the AR-710 Gatling guns given the new ship's substantial SAM inventory. But now, Karpov found himself wishing he had all six *Kashtans* back, as they proved to be a most capable close in defense system.

Half their missiles were gone in a flash, a barrage of eight from each unit. Then the heavy crab-like arms rotated skyward to retract the missile tubes vertically, and a rotating canister below decks quickly moved in the last remaining missiles. The reload was very quick, under two seconds, and soon the missiles were ready to fire again.

The head of the crab was a rapidly spinning fire control radar painting the sky with microwaves intent of finding and assigning targets. After the first barrage it noted that there were still twenty-six targets to the northeast and nine to the south. The second and final barrage of missiles fired, sixteen in all and their lean vapor trails wound out like thin threads in the sky seeking the planes with precision accuracy. *Kirov* did indeed seem like a great sea monster with white smoky octopus arms reaching up into the blue skies to lash at the oncoming planes. When the *Kashtans* had expended the last of the missiles there was a breathless hush over the scene for a moment. They looked out the forward view panes and could see all that was left of Sakamoto's strike wave of fifty-five planes. Subota had six torpedo planes gliding swiftly over the deck, and from above came the last eight dive

bombers, both Sakamoto and Ema still alive.

"I should have saved the last of the Kashtan missiles," Karpov breathed. "Now it's down to the Gatling guns."

He stepped quickly over to the view panes, reached for his field glasses where they always hung there on a hook, and snapped them quickly up to his eyes. Then he saw something unexpected—more missiles streaking in from high above and vectoring in on the hurtling D3As. He had forgotten the KA-40!

The helicopter had climbed to high elevation over 16,000 feet, and was hovering well above the strike wave now. The Japanese Zeros had been so intent of sacrificing themselves to the missiles that not one of them had seen the helo, and now it fired off its load-out of four air-to-air missiles. Two Zeros and two more of Sakamoto's dive bombers were hit and flamed by the helo, but it could do little more.

Sakamoto screamed in on the ship, streaking through a thin cloud. His vision seemed to blur, and he reached for his goggles to remove them as the ship seemed to resolve into shadow. Then he saw it again, pulling on the stick to re-orient the angle of his attack, but the target was wreathed in an undulating veil of cloudy mist, a glimmer of light was winking at him then flashing out from the ship below. He was so disoriented that he lost his concentration, and saw two other planes swoop past him. He shook his head, trying to clear his senses. Then he heard his men shouting in his head set: *"Where is it? I can't see it now—off on your left, bank left!"*

He saw a stream of hot tracer rounds zipping up from below, and knew he would be hit but, to his amazement, the rounds seemed to pass right through his plane—one right through his canopy—yet there was no visible damage! Then he saw the lead planes swoop and climb, their bombs arcing down at a shadow on the sea. It must be making smoke, he thought, seeing a third brave pilot, his bomb gone, still resolutely aiming his plane for the enemy ship. This Shadow Dancer is trying to throw a cloak of black and gray over itself to hide from us!

He looked again, and then again… The ship was not there. Stupefied, he banked his plane this way and that, thinking he had lost consciousness and drifted off course, but he could see nothing. Then Sakamoto pulled hard on the stick, his engine straining, dive brakes shuddering as he struggled to pull up and avoid crashing into the empty sea. He was astounded to see three thin white streaks on the ocean below, wakes of torpedoes that had been aimed

right into the heart of the ship, but now they crossed each other, heading off away from the scene. There was a great water splash there where one of his dive bomber pilots, his bomb expended, had flown his plane right into the empty sea! The torpedo bombers were still low on the deck, and now he saw them fly past one another, banking away to avoid colliding, and heard the pilots calling to one another: *"Where is it? Have we sunk this demon?"* Yet no man among them had seen any bomb or torpedo hit the ship. Their target had simply vanished!

A submarine! Thought Sakamoto. It was the only thing that entered his mind at the moment to explain what had happened. The ship must have been a submarine! It has dived beneath the sea! Amazed, and yet exhilarated by the thrill and the fear of the attack, he steadied his plane and started to climb again.

"This is strike leader Sakamoto," he shouted through his microphone. "All planes form on me. This Shadow Dancer has slipped beneath the sea. We're going home…"

* * *

Aboard *Kirov* they braced themselves for the attack. Karpov saw the AR-710 Gatling guns jerk to life and spit their lethal flaming fire at the oncoming torpedo planes, two were found and quickly flamed. There came a third shudder, so noticeable now that every man on the bridge instinctively reached to brace themselves, and the Captain wondered if the ship had already been struck by a bomb. He saw another bomb fall off the starboard side, a tall geyser exploding upward in the sea, but the whole scene seemed veiled and strangely out of focus. The *Kashtan* system was now firing its twin Gatling guns, almost straight up in a snarling rattle of violence and flame. Then the planes he had been squinting at on the horizon seemed to blur and waver in his field glasses and he reached to adjust the focus. As he looked again, he saw the planes were gone, then there again, driving through the smoke of a fallen comrade downed by the AR-710s.

Then the ship seemed to quaver, the lights winking on the bridge, a strange ozone smell was in the air and a crackle of static. Rodenko pushed back away from his radar screen, thinking that a power surge was shorting out his board. They heard an awful, distended roar that seemed to stretch thin to a terrible wail. Something was coming in at them from above, like a

shadow of death, and it suddenly seemed to pass right through the ship wailing like a banshee. Two men on the bridge actually cowered, reflexively shielding their heads and crouching low, but it was all sound and shadow, then an eerie calm, and complete silence.

The guns had ceased firing, their fire control radars spinning fitfully as they searched in vain for targets that were no longer there. Rodenko's system winked on again as the bridge lights quavered to life. He saw nothing on his screen and thought that his radar was down, the delicate phased array system shorted out by the static charge they had experienced.

Karpov was standing by the foreword viewport, shifting his field glasses this way and that, up and down, yet he saw nothing, heard nothing.

The enemy was gone.

* * *

"We must have shifted again!" Fedorov said excitedly. "Right in the middle of that attack! I wasn't aware that Dobrynin had completed his maintenance procedure."

Admiral Volsky was on the bridge with them now, smiling broadly. "From the sound of things we were in the thick of it," he said. "I could hear the missiles firing, but the sound of the planes just kept getting closer and closer. Believe me, it was very worrisome."

They explained what they had discussed with Dobrynin to Karpov, who listened with great interest "Amazing," he said at last. "Nikolin told me something about Dobrynin, but I had the ship's defense on my mind and could think of nothing else. It's a pity! We fired every last missile we had at those planes. Had I known we were going to pull this vanishing act, I would have saved us the missiles."

"No, Karpov," said Volsky, "it has been a hard lesson these many weeks, but I think we have learned to shoot first and ask questions later."

"It was astounding," said Rodenko. "At the very end I thought I saw something pass right through the ship—just like those shells came through the citadel when we first appeared in the Med, yet caused no damage."

"We were pulsating for a while again," said Fedorov,"

"Yes!" the Admiral put in. "I was down with Dobrynin, and he reported those strange flux events in the reactor core again. This time I could hear it myself, when he pointed it out, and sure enough, the data stream monitors recorded the event as well."

“It’s shuddering to think that one of those planes must have plunged right through the ship,” said Fedorov “but we were just enough out of phase with that time frame that there was no substance to us then. We were here, but *not* here, not in the exact moment the plane was. And I think that we would have be exactly in phase with the plane in time for it to strike us physically.”

“This is all more than I can fathom for the moment,” said Volsky. “The only question is this: where are we now? Are we back in the future again? If that turns out to be the case I think we will stay for a while. The world there was empty and bleak at times, but at least no one was shooting at us.”

Nikolin spoke up, saying he had nothing at all on his radio set now. “The bands were virtually jammed with radio traffic earlier,” he said, “not only with the local traffic from those planes, but also with more distant signals. I think there was a big battle underway somewhere.”

“And thank God we are no longer a target,” said Volsky. But he spoke too soon, his elation quashed by another call from engineering. It was Dobrynin.

“It’s back again, sir. I can hear it, and I have the same confirming flux data sets on the recorders, except this time the line is below the median, not above like the others. Very strange, sir.”

The Admiral set down the receiver, listening, his senses keenly alert, looking around him as if to see signs and effects of what Dobrynin was talking about there on the bridge, but all seemed calm and quiet. He walked slowly to the forward view pane to look at the sea, thinking he felt a slight shudder, and a ripple of movement underfoot.

“Did anyone else feel that?”

“Yes sir,” said Fedorov. “It was very subtle, and I felt the same thing before those planes came in.”

Nikolin was suddenly alert again, his head cocked to one side, and a perplexed look on his face. “Admiral I… I think I’m hearing something again.” But the signal was gone, an echo lost in the wash of static.

Fedorov had a grim expression on his face. “It isn’t over,” he said. “We’re still moving, pulsing again. Perhaps we have not yet settled into a new timeframe.”

They felt it a second time, a deeper thrum, followed by a slight roll of the ship, as though it had hit an unseen wave and was jostled about, though the seas were still and calm. Nikolin heard much more now, voices and signals quavering in his headset. Rodenko’s Top Mast radar screen seemed to trace out cloudy contacts, but when the line swept around to that point again, the

scope was clean. Then his scope seemed to come to life, the signals clear and sharp. Nikolin confirmed that something had happened as well.

"I have heavy radio traffic again," he said. "Just as I did earlier."

"Conn…Airborne contact at ten thousand feet and descending. Strong signal!"

Everyone instinctively looked up, as if they expected another Japanese dive bomber to come barreling through the roof of the citadel at any moment. Then Rodenko blinked at the screen. "Wait a second—it's the KA-40! I just got IFF telemetry and it's reading green."

"I had almost forgotten about the helo," said Karpov. "I saw it fire its air defense load-out at those dive bombers!"

"Contact that helo, Mister Nikolin." The Admiral came shuffling over to his radio man's station.

"Mother one to KA-40, do you copy, over?"

They had an answer seconds later.

"KA-40 to Kirov, thank God we've found you! Where have you been? We're running low on fuel. Request permission for immediate landing." It was Lieutenant Alexie Rykov. He had been top of the duty list for helo operations that morning and had seen the show of a lifetime as he watched the Japanese planes come in for that last attack. He fired off the only four air-to-air missiles he had, then could do little else. When his telemetry link to the ship faded out, his first thought was that *Kirov* had been hit, but he could see no sign of an explosion below, and the Japanese planes still seemed to be buzzing about like agitated flies. Yet there was no sign of the ship, visually or on his radar. In one heart-rending moment he thought *Kirov* had sunk, and he had been searching for the ship ever since, long hours, putting sonobuoys in the sea and using dipping sonar in the water, but finding nothing.

'Tell him to land immediately," said Volsky. Then he looked at Fedorov.

"Well our little experiment worked, Fedorov, yet not for long. The presence of that helicopter out there tells us we must have shifted back again, yes? Back to the same point in time we have just come from. Surely it did not move with us."

"I have no further contact on those Japanese planes," said Rodenko. "My screen is clear."

"Your radar always acts up when we move," said Karpov. "The ship is still at alert one. Let's leave things that way."

"Probably best, Captain," said Fedorov, "but I don't think we have

anything more to worry about from those planes. Look at the sun!”

For the first time they noticed that the sun was high in the sky, well past its zenith for the day. The entire morning had passed in less than an hour, lost in the welcome peace and calm of some other era, and they would never know exactly where they had been. Only one thing was certain. The KA-40 could not have moved with them to that other time. It was simply too far away from the ship. But if they were now watching it land on the aft fantail deck, they must surely be back on the date and time they had come from.

It was August 27, 1942, yet they had reappeared seven hours later, at 12:30 hours, and the noon day sun was already falling towards the sea.

Chapter 24

At a meeting of the senior staff in the officer's briefing room Yamamoto listened quietly to the report made by Kuroshima, his face a mask, eyes set and distant. Events to the east near Guadalcanal had not gone well that morning. The American carriers had been found easily enough, but they had put up a ferocious fight. Admiral Nagumo had been first to reach strike range at dawn, approaching from the deep Pacific but there had been a strange radio communications failure just after sunrise. He had been unable to ascertain the exact position of the Western pincer under Admiral Yamashiro, and even communications at short range to his forward screening force had proved spotty, the airwaves broken up by an undulating wave of static.

Frustrated, he had come to conclude that the Americans must be using some new kind of jamming equipment, and paced nervously on the bridge of his flagship *Kaga*, trying to decide what to do. He was approaching the northernmost region of the Santa Cruz Islands and, unbeknownst to him, the Americans had been operating several seaplanes from Graciosa Bay off Nendo Island there. His task force had been spotted and a signal sent before his fighters could get to the seaplane and shoot it down. Now he realized that the Americans must know exactly where he was, and that it would be imperative that he get his planes in the air as soon as possible.

The Japanese knew where the Americans were as well, northeast of Guadalcanal, just as Genda had argued. And he had also emphasized the importance of striking first. Yet the two arms of the Japanese pincers were coming from different directions, widely separated from one another, and Yamashiro's warning to coordinate their operations was also in his mind.

At 05:20 hrs, Nagumo decided he could wait no longer. No matter where the Western Group was, he had to strike now, lest he see the morning skies filled with American planes, catching his own strike wave flat footed on the decks of *Kaga* and *Akagi*. It was a fateful decision. Just after his formations finished their launching operations and began winging their way southwest, the alarms rang out. A large enemy air strike was heading his way, and the A6M2s were already scrambling to intercept. But they would not be enough.

The Americans had emptied the decks of all three of their fleet carriers grouped in a tight fist northeast of Guadalcanal. There *Enterprise*, *Hornet* and *Saratoga* stood a worrisome watch over the second day landing operations

for Vandegrift's 1st Marine Division at Guadalcanal. Their strike wave was massive and well coordinated, and in spite of a gallant defense mounted by Nagumo's fighters, it blew through the combat air patrols and soon the air was filled with the gleaming of Dauntless dive bombers as they swooped down on the Japanese task force.

Ten minutes later both *Kaga* and *Akagi* were on fire, the latter listing heavily from two torpedo hits amid ships. The heavy cruiser *Chikuma* had also taken two bomb hits, and two destroyers were sunk. The *Kaga* was still seaworthy, but her flight deck had been ripped apart by three bombs and the fires had proved difficult to control. It was soon clear that *Akagi* could not correct her list, and the carrier began to slowly capsize at 06:30 hours, hastened to her doom by a torpedo fired by one of her escorting destroyers. The Americans would not be permitted to take her as a trophy.

Nagumo stared at his shattered carrier division realizing that he now had only the small light carrier *Ryujo* operational. It had taken one bomb on the fantail, but the damage had been controlled. Neither of his fleet carriers could receive the returning waves of planes, and *Ryujo* could accommodate no more than thirty aircraft. He had sent eighty strike planes and twenty fighters against the Americans, pleased to learn that they had scored hits on two of the three carriers there, and that a battleship had also been hit. Thirty planes had been lost in the attack, but where would the remainder go? He also had fighters aloft and needed *Ryujo* for defense operations over his task force, or he would certainly lose *Kaga* should the American planes return for a second strike. The dogged American Marines had also wrested control of the airfield on Guadalcanal at Lunga, so his surviving planes could not land there.

He had no choice but to order them to fly southwest in the hope of somehow finding the Western Task Force under Admiral Yamashiro where they could land on *Hiryu* and *Soryu*. This they did, eventually finding that task force south of San Cristobal and east of Rennell Island, but the haggard formations of Nagumo's precious strike planes arrived at a most inopportune time.

Yamashiro had been unable to get any radio communications through to either Nagumo or Combined Fleet Operations in the Kondo Bombardment group. The radio waves eventually cleared up, but unlike Nagumo, the urgency to strike at once was not as great for him. The Americans did not know where his ships were. For all they knew, Nagumo's force represented the only real threat to their operations. He therefore held his strike wave on

deck—until the airwaves suddenly cleared a little after 06:00 hrs that morning and he heard the urgent calls coming from Nagumo's planes as they desperately tried to locate his carriers.

Realizing that he now had to receive some fifty planes in a recovery operation, he hastily began launching everything he had to make room on the already crowded decks of his two fleet carriers. Nagumo's planes arrived short of fuel, and many had to be given immediate priority to land. If he had kept his third carrier in hand, the light escort carrier *Ryuho*, he could have started bringing Nagumo's planes in there, but the *Dragon Phoenix* was well to the north by now, coordinating with the Hara Group for a strike on a mysterious ship that appeared to be threatening the second wave transport fleet where troops of the 3rd division were still riding at sea.

Yamashiro had only *Hiryu* and *Soryu* available, but he managed to juggle his operations and get most of his planes in the air, ordering some below decks, still fully armed, so as to make room on the decks for the recovery. It was a matter of controlled chaos for a good long while, and by the time his strike wave was finally headed northeast to look for the Americans, the enemy had already learned of his location as well.

The American carriers moved boldly west, like a boxer side stepping in the ring and slipping into a corner. Their superior damage control had enabled them to clear their decks, recover most of their planes and turn them around into another strike wave while Yamashiro was struggling with his own recovery/launch operation further south. Yamashiro's planes flew to the last reported positions of the US fleet and began search operations, but the lucky American strike wave led by Lieutenant Commander Wade McClusky off the *Enterprise* found and followed one last straggler from the Nagumo group, and it ended up leading them right to Yamashiro's carriers.

The resulting air strike was catastrophic. The Americans dove on the enemy while Lieutenant Commander John Waldron's Torpedo 8 off the *Hornet* came in on the deck. Yamashiro looked out to see yet more planes coming at him for recovery before he realized what was happening, and then controlled chaos became utter chaos. The American planes found their primary targets and rained hell upon them. Bombs penetrated the flight deck of both *Hiryu* and *Soryu*, some deep enough to smash the armed remainder of his strike planes that had been taken below. The resulting explosions were ripping his carriers to pieces, and then the torpedoes came.

By 07:00 hours both *Hiryu* and *Soryu* were gone, and he had transferred

his flag to the cruiser *Chokai*, shaken and much distressed. He was now commander of little more than a screening force with two cruisers and four destroyers. His planes would eventually find and strike the Americans, hitting the *Hornet* hard enough to put her at the bottom of the sea and also damaging both *Enterprise* and *Saratoga*, but when they concluded their strike there was now nowhere they could go. No friendly flight deck could receive them in the Western Group.

In an astounding feat of flying and carrier management, some twenty planes were told to look for Nagumo's last remaining light carrier *Ryujo*, the *Prancing Dragon* as it retired to the north. There Nagumo managed to juggle operations and launch planes from *Ryujo*, and then receive the valuable strike planes from Yamashiro's savaged carriers. He would refuel them and then send them up again while he recovered the fighters as their fuel ran out, and on it went as the last of Nagumo's force hastily retired towards Rabaul. The planes from *Hiryu* and *Soryu* that could not take part in this flying circus were forced to ditch near Guadalcanal and, though they were total losses, their precious pilots would make it ashore there to fight again another day.

Yamamoto's face was ashen as he listen to the reports. The entire operation had come flying apart. The odd radio interference had prevented close coordination of the two pincers and the Americans had done exactly what the Japanese feared they would, defeating each horn in detail. He had lost *Akagi*, *Hiryu*, *Soryu*, and *Kaga* was making a pathetic twelve knots as she limped back to Rabaul. Her damage was severe enough that she would be many months in repair, and effectively lost to the fleet for the remainder of the year.

Then he heard the result of Admiral Hara's strike, and his mood darkened further. Lt. Commander Sakamoto was alive, though many more planes and pilots from *Zuikaku*, *Shokaku*, and *Ryuho* had been killed. His force was now spent, and could be of no further service to the action around Guadalcanal.

Yamamoto shook his head sullenly. "Four decks sit there, almost empty considering *Zuiho* has also lost all her planes, and here we learn of Yamashiro's planes having to ditch off Guadalcanal. This is a disaster. We had nine carriers to the enemy's three! We could have smashed the Americans if we had only coordinated our strikes more carefully."

"This odd radio interference, sir," Operations Chief Kuroshima explained, an almost pleading look on his face now. "It could be another example of advanced jamming capabilities developed by the enemy. This ship we have

been chasing, this *Mizuchi*, has also been a most unsettling affair."

"Most unsettling? That ship has passed through our entire operation like a bullet! Well, Kuroshima, what about it? Did Hara's planes sink it this time?"

"We have very strange reports, sir. Sakamoto says the ship seemed to simply disappear as the strike planes were making their final attack."

"Disappear?"

"The reports are very confused, sir. None of the pilots reported hits this time, but the ship was masked by smoke, or so some of the reports read this way. Then it could not be found minutes later. I was of the opinion that it had been hit and sunk, sir, possibly by one of our submarines, but—"

"But we had no submarine in that area, yes?"

"Correct, sir. Then we received this last report from a seaplane off the cruiser *Tone*. Captain Iwabuchi has his flag there now, and he reports that this *Mizuchi* has been spotted again, about forty miles east of the position where Sakamoto's planes made their attack. The odd thing is this, sir. They made that sighting at 12:20 hours, just ten minutes ago. We've only just received the report." He held out the decrypted paper like another excuse.

Yamamoto frowned. "The distraction of this ship has proved fatal. It has unhinged our entire operation, from Darwin to the Coral Sea. Thank God Yamashita's troops made good their pledge and at least took Darwin. That is our only consolation in this whole sad affair. We lost three fleet carriers today, and *Kaga* is a complete wreck as well. Hara's group has no teeth either. Do you realize that we now have virtually no naval air power we can use here, and that is likely to be the case for months! I wanted a decisive engagement, but who could expect this? Operation FS must be immediately canceled. Kondo cannot hope to take those transports to Guadalcanal now. It will be all we can do to safely get the men of the Nagoya Division to friendly ports. The American carriers have been hit, but they do not sink!"

"We do report one carrier has been abandoned and scuttled, sir. The *Hornet*."

"Yet they still have two carriers operational, not to mention control of the airfield at Lunga. Now we will have to operate at night, running fast cruiser forces south through the Solomons to land troops in the dark, like shadows skulking ashore before the dawn chases us north again. This is disgraceful."

There was a long silence in the room before Kuroshima spoke again. "And this enemy ship, sir? This *Mizuchi?* Captain Iwabuchi has asked permission to take the cruiser escorts from Hara's group and hunt this sea

dragon down again.”

Yamamoto’s eyes were like frozen fire. “Where is this ship?” he asked, his voice low, with a dangerous edge.

“It is now reported heading southeast, sir, and on a course that could still threaten the second wave troop convoy in the Coral Sea.”

Yamamoto gave him a hard look. “Then we turn to join the hunt as well,” he said. “Plot an intercept course at once, and tell Captain Iwabuchi he may proceed. Let his hounds flush this bird out and we will do the rest. It will be a long voyage north to Japan after this is over.”

“I will personally apologize to the Emperor, sir. It is all my responsibility.” Kuroshima lowered his head, the shame apparent, his shoulders slouching.

“No, Kuroshima,” said Yamamoto. “I will apologize to the Emperor—for the sinking of the *Akagi*, and all the rest. The responsibility lies with me.” The *Akagi* had always been a much loved and favorite ship for the Emperor. “But before I do so I will finish off this *Mizuchi* once and for all…Or die trying.”

“Sakamoto had another name for this ship, sir. How strange that his men lost contact with it in the middle of a fight like that, only to find it a mere forty miles away over six hours later! He called it *Kumuri Kage*, the Shadow Dancer. Everything we have learned about this ship is most unsettling, sir. It has endured two major air strikes and yet survived. That last attack by Hara’s group threw everything he had at the ship—over ninety planes! It has sunk a cruiser, killed a submarine, beached a battleship and still it eludes our grasp.”

Yamamoto gave Kuroshima a last sullen look, a strange uncertainty in his eyes now, chased by sudden determination. Then he gestured with his hand. “That will be all.”

Nothing more was said.

Part IX

Decisions

"Choices are made in brief seconds and paid for in the time that remains."

— Paolo Giordano, *The Solitude of Prime Numbers*

Chapter 25

Doctor Zolkin looked at Voloshin, trying to understand what the man was saying, and mustering as much sympathy as he could. The Able Seaman had come to him soon after the last attack, shivering with fear. It would not be the first time a man at sea faced the terrors of naval combat and came away shattered by its horror. Yet the story Voloshin told him had a nightmarish edge to it, a surreal quality that Zolkin found unbelievable.

True to the conventions of *vranyo*, the Russian game where one man's stretching of the truth was quietly received by another without objection or complaint, he listened attentively as the man told his tale. He had seen something pass through the ship, a shadow at first, then what looked like a plane. He had been right in its path, servicing the missiles beneath the long forward deck, turning to see it coming for him with no hope of escape. Then the face of a man, his features frozen in a strange agonizing scream. He said he could actually see the face of the pilot as the shadow came hurtling for him, passing right through him, the leering face, the wailing sound, like an angel of death itself.

He had fallen to the deck, terrified, shaken badly, and even now he was still struggling to suppress involuntary shivers, so great was the man's fear.

"Now, now, Voloshin," said the Doctor. "This business has every man aboard on edge, yes? That plane that came in on the ship a while back has sent twenty other men in here to see me as well. You must remember that this is the first real look at combat for this crew, and you are no exception. It is very harrowing, most frightening. You must allow yourself that fear and yet still manage to do your duty. Even the Admiral has come to see me about it. Yes, Admiral Volsky himself! You know he was hit by those planes that found us in the Med, yes? Well take an example from him. Now he is up on the bridge, as a good fighting admiral should be when his ship is in danger. And you, Voloshin, you are a good fighting Seaman of the battlecruiser *Kirov*. What you have seen is frightening, to be sure. But you must put it aside, and find a way to remain stalwart."

Voloshin nodded, still shivering.

"But I have a prescription for you first." Zolkin was writing now on a small pad of paper. "This is going to tell the ship's quartermaster to admit

you to the junior officer's mess hall. I want you to go there right now and have a nice long meal. The food is much better than the men's mess below decks, so take every advantage. There is nothing like a good meal to give a man back his strength, eh? After that I want you to take two of these pills." He held up a small medicine container, shaking it to rattle the pills inside.

"Take only two, yes? Then go to this cabin, number 147 on the third deck, and go to sleep. I will check on you in four hours."

"Third deck, sir?"

"Yes, the officers quarters. Don't worry, I'm writing it all down here. If anyone asks what you are doing there say you have been sent on my orders. I am a Captain of the Second Rank, did you not know? And you have heard of 'Doctor's orders,' so follow these well. Two pills—only two—and cabin 147. Have a good long sleep. I will check on you later, and see how you feel then. But first, go and eat."

"Thank you, Doctor."

"Good then. On your way. I hear they have very good food on the menu today. Don't let anyone bother you. Just hand the kitchen master that note, and eat well."

Good food and sleep, a couple of aspirin with just a little tranquilizer in the mix. That was the prescription for Voloshin, and Zolkin sighed after he left, wondering how the rest of the crew was holding up. There was a knock on his door and he was pleased to see Admiral Volsky step into the sick bay, removing his cap with a smile.

"Are you hungry and sleepy too?" asked Zolkin, and he told the Admiral what had just transpired.

"The men have been under a lot of strain," said Volsky. "I have been making the rounds below decks again, but I thought I would talk to you briefly. No, I am fine. I got several hours sleep last night before this latest attack.

"And the ship?"

"Still here," said the Admiral, at least we think it is. Voloshin was not imagining things, Dmitri. One of those planes went right through the ship."

"We were struck again? I did not feel any impact. I heard nothing."

"Correct. It went *through* us, but something was happening at the time. The ship was moving to another time. This is what Fedorov thinks. He says that if we are as much as a second or two out of sync, then they cannot touch us. But it is frightening how we still see the shadows of the other time for a

few brief moments when we shift. We are here, but yet not here. It is all very disturbing and completely mind boggling at the same time. But we were lucky we did move, or Voloshin would not be alive now. Perhaps the ship itself would have been struck a fatal blow. Where did he say this happened?”

“He was down tending to the missiles, under the forward deck, very near the gun mount there.

“A very bad place for a plane to strike us.”

“Udachi,” said Zolkin. “Our luck is still good. But how could this have happened. We have moved again in time?”

“Do you remember what you said during one of the meetings in here while we were in the Med, Dmitri?”

“You mean about the atomic weapons?”

“No, not that—about Dobrynin and the nuclear reactors. Fedorov was talking about this confounding time displacement, and trying to link it to a strange flux in the reactor core. You said something that stuck with me ever since. You asked if we had considered telling Dobrynin to fiddle with the reactors a bit more.”

“Yes, you were all wondering what to do about Gibraltar, so I suggested you just have Dobrynin crank up the reactor and send us somewhere else. I was joking, of course. Just trying to lighten the mood of the discussion.”

“Well,” said Volsky with a broad smile. “We took your advice, Doctor! Fedorov and I conspired a bit and we found out something very odd. Dobrynin was running a maintenance routine on the reactor core, and every time he did it the ship ended up moving some hours later. Moving in *time*, mind you. So Fedorov and I decided to conduct a little experiment. We had Dobrynin run the procedure, and sure enough, the ship moved again!”

Zolkin was truly surprised now. His fanciful suggestion had been right on the mark. “You mean this is no longer 1942? We are somewhere else?”

“Not exactly, Dmitri. We did move, but the interval was somewhat short lived this time. That’s what Fedorov is calling these time shifts—intervals.”

Zolkin nodded, his eyes bright behind his dark spectacles, charcoal brows bobbing as he spoke. “A bright young man.”

“Truly,” said Volsky. “He has worked very efficiently with Karpov, and I must also say that my little experiment with the Captain has worked out to much good as well. He’s saved the ship on more than one occasion. A truly exceptional performance as a tactical combat officer. If I had listened to him, and struck at the enemy carriers as he advised, you would not have men in

here talking about planes flying through them. Together the two of them have kept us all alive. I'm afraid I'm starting to feel like a big fat suitcase on a badly filled airliner. There's not much room for me on the bridge now. Those two have the matter well in hand."

"It's good they both have performed so well," said Zolkin. "Particularly what you say about Karpov. I must tell you that I had my misgivings about the man when you first returned him to duty."

"Don't worry yourself about it, Dmitri. I don't think he will try anything like he did in the Atlantic. We seem to have reached an understanding. The men have also seen him in the middle of it all up there." He pointed to the ceiling, fingering the main bridge somewhere above them. "They have come to respect Karpov in a way they never did before."

"Yes," said Zolkin. I've had *matoc* and *mishmanny* in here talking about Karpov as well. They call him our strong right arm, now. The word is all over the ship. Things are much better with the crew now that Orlov is gone. They say Karpov has been giving the enemy hell. Only I hope he won't be contemplating nuclear bombs any time soon."

"No, we have also reached an understanding about that. Do not worry about it. But Doctor… A little more advice from you, if you would be so kind. We tried out this maintenance procedure with Dobrynin, but now we have regressed—that is what Fedorov calls it. I don't really understand it all. He says the ship seems drawn to this time period, and that it has regressed to this date and time. Who knows why?" He held out his big empty hands in gesture, clearly indicating that he did not have the answer.

"The KA-40 was up at the time on surveillance operations. Fedorov suggested that it could have acted as a kind of anchor. It belongs to us and it seems Mother Time wants us to collect our things before we go anywhere again. That is the only way I can understand it. The helo was well away from the ship when we moved, shifted, and though we were only gone an hour as we experienced it, when we regressed the Helo found us and was nearly out of fuel. It had been searching for us for over six hours! It was already past noon, though we first noticed the odd movement a little after six in the morning. We lost all those hours, just like we seem to lose many days while we are in that other place, a future time when the world seems so empty and forsaken. Now it does not seem such a terrible place to me. The Japanese have pressed us very hard. The ship has been hit three times. We've taken some very severe damage and the money I will have to pay damage control

Chief Byko for overtime is adding up."

"Put me on your payroll as well," said Zolkin.

"Yes, I know it must be very hard down here. The casualties have been mounting up as well. How many have we lost?"

"Thirty-six."

Volsky sat with that for a while, saying nothing, his face drawn and concerned. "I appreciate all you have done, Dmitri. But hear me out. We may have a solution here after all, thanks to you. We have just discovered that we can cause the ship to move on our own—in fact we were causing the ship to move in time all along! Dobrynin was running this routine maintenance procedure every twelve days. And Fedorov says every twelve days we have moved."

"Then it wasn't that accident on the *Orel?"*

"Who knows. He thinks that may have catalyzed the first incident, caused some change in our reactor. Then every time Dobrynin completes this procedure, we move in time."

"Amazing," said Zolkin. "Then do it again, Leonid. Get us away from these Japanese before they line more men up at my doorstep, or put another kamikaze dive bomber into the ship."

"That is exactly what I was thinking to do. I just thought I would see what you suggested."

"Do it, Admiral. It's clear that we remain in grave danger here. We are not wanted. This Mother Time you speak of must be very angry with us, and not simply for forgetting our helicopters!"

"Fedorov is worried we have changed all the history and caused that holocaust in the future. In fact, none of the operations we have uncovered here are in his history books now."

"We've done all this?"

"I'm afraid so. We started the war early for the Americans, raised hell in the Mediterranean with the Italians and British. It's as if we have slipped into Time's mansion and broken quite a lot of china. She has finally taken notice of us and yes, she may be quite upset about it. It has occurred to me that there may be some kind of backlash for what we have done. Consequences for us as well as that future time we have blighted."

"If I were Mother Time I would certainly want to find a good way to get rid of us," said Zolkin.

"Well…" Volsky sighed. "The Japanese may take care of that for her. We

have run out of surface-to-air missiles, my friend. All we have now to stop those planes are the close in Gatling guns, and when the ammunition runs out on those…”

“I see.”

“Another thing. Rodenko’s radar has sorted itself out again. He has spotted enemy ships bearing down on us from two directions, so we may be in another battle soon if we stay here much longer. We have two choices, Dmitri: we can either run like hell and try to get past these ships out into the South Pacific—”

“And find that island you’ve been yearning for?”

“Exactly. Either that or we run this maintenance procedure and try to pull another disappearing act.”

“Do it, Leonid. In fact, why not do both? Run like hell, and while you are at it have Dobrynin do his maintenance. Get us as far away from the Japanese as you possibly can. Send us into a thousand tomorrows, but don’t fight here any longer than you have to. I think we have been lucky so far. Very lucky. That could change.”

Admiral Volsky nodded. “Ah, but there is one small problem, Dmitri. Dobrynin cannot complete his procedure while the ship is running at any speed over ten knots. It involves retraction of one of the control rods in the reactor core. When we run up at higher speeds the reactor must have all the rods in place. He can’t remove one or we might risk overheating the core.”

“So it’s one or the other,” said Zolkin. “We either move in space, or in time. You have to decide, Leonid, and that quickly. We make our decisions on the spur of a single moment, and we pay for them for a lifetime, so choose wisely. I wish I could help you, but I can only say that I think it would be good to just get us out of here, any way you can.”

“Good advice, my friend. I think I’ll go find Mister Fedorov and see what the other officers suggest. We may have a little time before those enemy ships can get close enough to cause us trouble.”

The warning claxon suddenly startled them both, and Zolkin met the Admiral’s eyes.

“I think you had better hurry,” he said, and the Admiral wasted no further time.

Chapter 26

Admiral Volsky found Fedorov on the bridge conferring with Karpov at the clear Plexiglas navigation display. He was tapping out positions with a light pen and luminous lines would appear on the glass, indicating possible courses and predictive plots.

"We have obtained some very detailed information from the KA-40," said Fedorov. "Good HD video feed as well. Those surface contacts Rodenko reported have now been positively identified."

"What are we facing this time, Mister Fedorov? I hope we haven't stumbled across another carrier task force."

"No sir, but our old nemesis is back. While we were gone the KA-40 spent a good while searching the whole region around us. It had ample time to track the movement of the carriers that attacked us at dawn. They have moved south along the Australian coast and regrouped about 160 miles northeast of Cairns. Apparently the Allies have nothing much to bother them there. B-17s do not make for very effective naval bombers. Here sir, I isolated some screen shots and I can put them up on the main monitor."

He tapped a key at the Nav station and the main monitor now displayed a formation of four aircraft carriers. "That will be Admiral Hara, from what Nikolin has been able to ferret out of the radio traffic. Those two larger carriers are *Zuikaku*, and *Shokaku*, the smaller two are escort carriers, this one is the *Zuiho*," he pointed. "The flight deck lines are very distinctive, and I matched it to photographs from my library. The other carrier looks to be *Ryuho*, the only ship in her class, a converted submarine tender. But the thing to note, Admiral, is the lack of aircraft on deck. Look, there's not a single plane aboard *Ryuho* or *Zuiho* and only those four fighters are visible on *Zuikaku*, two more on this last carrier. They may have other aircraft below the flight deck in the hangers, but we kept a good tally of hits from the two strikes these ships mounted against us. There can be no more than fifteen planes available between all four carriers, and some of those may even be damaged."

"That is some comfort, given the fact that we have lost our SAM umbrella."

"Right, sir. As for the other Japanese carriers, we haven't sorted it all out

yet, but Nikolin thinks the Japanese lost their battle with the Americans off Guadalcanal."

"More good news, at least I think that may be good. That leaves them fewer ships to send after us! Now what is the bad news?"

"Here sir…" He indicated two contacts on the board. "This is a fast cruiser group, and the name Iwabuchi has been heard in the radio traffic. Two of those ships were in his screening force, *Nachi* and *Myoko*. We engaged them near Melville Island, but the Captain held them at bay with our deck guns. This other ship is the cruiser *Tone*, very fast at 36 knots, and with four twin 8 inch gun turrets, all mounted forward of the main bridge. Her entire aft deck area was used to mount up to six sea planes. This is a classic high speed scout ship, sir. Without our SAMs to destroy those search planes the enemy will find and mark our position very easily. And I believe this Captain Iwabuchi off the *Kirishima* may have transferred his flag to *Tone*. He may be a bit reckless, sir, and he is now steering on a course to block our further passage southeast, with some rather formidable company."

Fedorov indicated a second contact point almost due east of their present position. "These ships have been moving southwest from the Solomons for some time. The KA-40 spotted them at 10:00 this morning while we were still…elsewhere. The hours we lost this morning were hours this force gained. We might have easily slipped by them earlier but now I fear this group is also in a position to intercept us." He tapped the Plexiglas screen and two predictive plot lines vectored out to a point to the southwest, and a bright red dot appeared, winking on and off.

"If we hold to this course they will cut us off right there."

"What is this second group composed of?"

"One battleship, three cruisers and three destroyers. It's the battleship that worries me, sir…the *Yamato*."

Volsky had heard of the ship, and he folded his arms, concerned as Fedorov continued.

"The largest battleship ever built, sir, excepting her sister ship *Musashi*. She was nearly 72,000 tons fully loaded. That was 27,000 tons more than the American Iowa Class battleships, and more than twice our displacement. She has nine 18.1 inch guns, in turrets so heavy they would weigh as much as a typical destroyer of this era. They can range out to 45,000 meters at full elevation, though it isn't likely to hit anything at that range. I believe the longest hit ever recorded by a battleship on a moving target was at just over

26,000 yards. So we can hit her before she gets too close, but that said, this was one of the best protected ships ever built. She has 650 millimeters of armor on those gun turrets. That's twenty-six inches thick, sir."

"650 millimeters?"

"Yes, sir. The US Navy conducted ballistic tests on that face plate after the war using a turret that had been built for the *Shinano*, another ship in this class, and they found that it required nearly point blank range to fully penetrate using a 16 inch armor piercing shell. They concluded that at normal ranges there was no naval gun then in service that could penetrate it. As for side armor, her main belt was 450 millimeters, and she had 200 millimeter deck armor as well."

"Her *decks* are as thick as our armored citadel?"

"I'm afraid so, sir. This ship is a veritable floating fortress of steel. And for all that she was relatively fast at 27 knots."

"Thank God for small favors," said Volsky. "At least we can outrun that monster at thirty-two knots."

"Yes sir, but every one of these other ships can match or exceed our speed. If they release the hounds on us, they will catch us, and we simply do not have the missiles left to take on six cruisers and three destroyers, let alone face down this battleship. And one more thing, sir. *Yamato* will most likely be commanded by a very distinguished guest. It was formerly Combined Fleet Headquarters at Truk, and Admiral Yamamoto is likely to be aboard at this very moment."

"I don't suppose he might like to have a little chat with me either," said Volsky. "No, we are not going to talk ourselves out of this one. I just had a lengthy discussion with Doctor Zolkin. It seems we have a choice now, to go to full battle speed and try to outrun these ships in space, or to ask Dobrynin to run his maintenance routine again and try to slip away in time. The catch is this: Dobrynin cannot complete his procedure if the ship is making more than ten knots. So we have a difficult decision here, gentlemen. What will it be?"

"Why don't we reverse course," said Karpov. "We are over 100 miles from each group at the moment. That's a considerable lead, particularly if we can make thirty-two knots after the procedure."

"It would mean we have to transit the Torres Strait again, and perhaps our own minefield is still in place there." Fedorov was not enthusiastic about that prospect.

"Hopefully the Japanese will not get curious and manage to get their

hands on one," said the Admiral.

"Another thing, sir. There was a heavy bombardment group in the Darwin operations. Nikolin managed to get the names from Australian radio traffic, the *Mutsu* and *Nagato* were identified and said to be moving east away from Darwin. *Mutsu* was part of first Battleship Division based at Truk. These ships may be returning via the Coral Sea and, though they are slow, they could easily block the Torres Strait. Then we have another fight on our hands, this time with *two* battleships."

"Not very appealing," said Volsky.

"Then what about turning due north," Karpov suggested. "That would leave these cruisers we faced earlier well to the south and out of the action. We could only be intercepted by the *Yamato* group. It might give us better odds."

"True," said Fedorov, "But then we would have to pass between Milne Bay here and the Louisiade Archipelago, and enter the Solomon Sea. North from there the way is blocked by the Bismarck Barrier, and the big Japanese base at Rabaul. We would have *Yamato* on our tail and be trapped in some very dangerous waters, most likely subject to land based air strikes and even submarine attacks. Moving north would set off a lot of alarm bells. It's right into the middle of their main defensive perimeter."

"Then if we run south east as we have been what is the likelihood these two groups will intercept us?"

"Very high," Fedorov did not mince words here. "I've shown you the predictive plot. We're going to have to fight if we hold this course, I can assure you."

"Then I suggest we fire up our time machine again," said Admiral Volsky. "Suppose we turn northwest at ten knots while Dobrynin completes the procedure again. How long before they would catch up to us?"

Fedorov tapped the screen, entering some data and then called up the predictive plots. "The procedure takes at least two hours. We got very good results last time. The effects were almost immediate, but there is no guarantee that will happen now, even if we do shift in time again. So assuming the worst… we hold at ten knots for a little over two hours, then increase to full battle speed. *Yamato* will gain thirty four miles on us in the first two hours, but then they lose five miles each hour thereafter. If they are nimble and pick up our new heading quickly, then we would have four hours, perhaps five before we are confronted by *Mutsu* and *Nagato* coming down from the Torres

Strait. Then all bets are off. If we haven't displaced in time again within that time frame then we could be facing both pursuing groups, as well as *Mutsu* and *Nagato* southwest of Port Moresby."

"And if we continue on our present heading?"

"Then they will cut us off much earlier, three hours, maybe four at the most."

"That's barely enough time to run the procedure. It takes at least two hours, longer if there are any complications." Volsky was deep in thought now.

"I have one other possibility," said Karpov, looking at the situation he would probably have to fight in any case. "What if we start the procedure immediately, turn south by southwest now. That takes us away from *Yamato*, the slower enemy group, and makes it more difficult for that ship to catch up with us. The other group is just these three cruisers. I can smash them with what we still have in the missile silos."

"And those carriers?" Volsky pointed.

"We can beat off fifteen planes if that is all they have. Our CWIS system is superb, even if we can't engage them at long range. And we still have one S-300."

"Make a run towards those carriers and we will be hitting a nerve," said Fedorov. "If the Japanese got hurt badly by the Americans, then they will do everything possible to protect their remaining carrier assets. There are two more light cruisers and ten destroyers escorting Hara's task force. We'll have to assume they would attack with that entire force. That's a lot of work for the deck guns. Some of those ships will get close enough to get their torpedoes off—unless we want to use our remaining SSMs."

"I like our chances to the northwest better," said Volsky. "There's still a lot of sea room between our position and New Guinea. Let's turn north, start the procedure at once, then we can dance, gentlemen, and see if we can evade them. We don't have to enter the Solomon Sea. We can just work our way east again and then southeast into the South Pacific. Any objections?"

It seemed the one option that would buy them the most time, and so Fedorov and Karpov agreed. The orders were cut and the ship came about smartly on a new heading, true north.

* * *

Down in the reactor room Dobrynin received the order and shook his head, turning to the system engineer on duty.

“Prepare to begin rod replacement procedure,” he said calmly. “Rod number seven.”

“Again, sir? We just ran the procedure for rod eight a few hours ago. Isn’t the interval twelve days, sir?”

“Very astute, Mister Garin, but no questions, please. Begin the procedure for rod seven at once. This comes right from the bridge. Monitor your temperatures carefully. ”

He walked to Koslov’s station, taping his monitor panel. “Keep a good eye on your prompt neutron flux, Mister Koslov. Very well, let us begin. I will initiate in five minutes. Start the data recorder please.”

The nuclear engine at the heart of *Kirov* was a delicate balance of a fission reaction that wanted to increase exponentially being carefully controlled by the insertion of rods made of materials that would absorb the excess neutrons generated by the fission. It was all about temperature in the end. The reactor temperature had to be kept within a narrow range by these rods, supported by a system of constantly circulating purified and de-ionized water. The water would circulate through the core, absorbing heat, then pass through a heat exchanger in a series of “U” tubes that were in turn cooled by a secondary water flow inside that chamber. This water was allowed to boil to generate steam, and this is what turned *Kirov’s* turbine engines. In effect, the reactor was a nuclear pressure cooker of sorts, and the temperature, pressure and heat were all critical variables in the mix.

The withdrawal of one of the control rods would naturally increase the fission reaction, so a replacement rod was inserted first, rod number twenty-five. At this point the temperature would drop enough that power output to the turbines would be very limited, and the ship could run at no more than a third of its rated speed. Both the insertion of Rod 25 and the and removal of Rod 7 were slow, careful procedures. One rod lowering, the other raised in an effort to maintain a steady control function on the reaction. A misstep could cause catastrophic results.

Dobrynin sat down in his chair, closed his eyes and began to listen to the machine he had operated for so many years. The sound of the reaction was like a song in his head by now, and he knew every note, every cadence and rhythm, his highly trained ear slowly listening to the nuclear symphony.

Sometime later he hear it, a strange note in the score, like a flute that had

run off on its own, soaring above the clarinet section, a lilting phrase that remained in harmony with the overall song, but was clearly never sanctioned by the conductor.

There it is again, he thought. Was it something in the system, the coolant flow, or perhaps in Rod 25 itself? That rod was the one common denominator in all of these strange flux events—Rod 25. He focused his mind on the wayward notes, following their rise and fall, a strange new soloist in the orchestra.

“I think we have a little flux reading now, yes Mister Garin?”

“Right sir, just as before, but nothing serious, sir. It is well within limits.” How could the Chief Engineer know what his gauges were reading, he wondered? He was twenty feet away with his eyes closed.

Something was happening here that Dobrynin did not quite understand, but he knew that Admiral Volsky would soon want to know what it was. Perhaps after this I will suggest we have a look at Rod 25, he thought to himself. Then, thinking of Volsky, he opened his eyes, picked up the comm-unit, and called the bridge.

“Dobrynin here. The procedure is now underway. Please hold at ten knots or lower for the next two hours…And tell Admiral Volsky I can hear it again. He will know what I mean.”

Chapter 27

Yoshida was up in his E13A, designated "Type Zero Reconnaissance Seaplane" by the navy, and called simply "Jake" by the Allies. He had been quietly shadowing the distant ship on the horizon, keeping a careful distance as ordered. He had heard the stories of sky serpents that reached for a plane and devoured it in a single bite! Now he noticed the shadow on the sea seemed to grow larger, a telltale sign that the ship was turning, briefly presenting its full silhouette. He sighed, realizing he would have to close the range now to ascertain the new heading, and fed power to his engine as he banked.

Some minutes later he had a fairly good read on the ship's course by again aligning his plane with the distant white wake and reading his own compass. Due north, he thought. The ship has turned. Where could it be going? Nothing north, except perhaps the last Australian outpost at Milne Bay.

He turned to his radio man, telling him to send the new heading. "No change in speed," he added. The ship seemed to be in no particular hurry. If it knew what was hunting it, perhaps it would be running at high speed now. Then again, every ship and plane that had ever encountered this demon had either died or sustained serious damage. He mastered his curiosity, resisting the urge to get closer and see this *Mizuchi* for himself. No, he thought. I have no desire for an unplanned sea landing. You may tickle this sea dragon's tail, but don't provoke it. Yoshida was a very wise man.

The message was soon decoded and flashed to all surface action groups presently in the hunt. Admiral Yamamoto was informed a little after 12:40 hours by Operations Chief Kuroshima in the officer's dining room where the fleet commander was just finishing his lunch.

"The ship has turned on a new heading, sir. Due north."

Yamamoto raised an eyebrow at this. "Are you certain?" he asked setting down his chop sticks on the white linen napkin.

"It was first reported by a seaplane off the *Tone*, and has been verified by search planes from the *Mutsu* as well, sir."

"North, Kuroshima? What is this ship up to?"

"It could have spotted us as well, sir. It was obvious that we were in a

favorable position to intercept if it continued on its old heading. Who knows, sir. Perhaps it is running for Milne Bay now that we have herded it away from ports on the Australian mainland. Hara has a large screening force out west with his carriers. They may have spotted it."

"Was there a speed indicated?"

"The pilots estimated no more than ten or twelve knots, sir."

That again seemed to surprise Yamamoto, and he looked at his Operations Chief now, his lunch finished. "It does not seem that they have any fear of battle," he said. "Ten or twelve knots?"

"The ship could have been damaged by our air strike, sir. This is good news. I suggest we alter course to intercept at once."

"Give the order, Kuroshima. Yes, this is good news, though very surprising. Perhaps they do not realize we have two more battleships to their northwest. Well enough. How soon might we catch this ship?"

"That remains to be seen, sir, but we can cut the range considerably now if we run full out."

"Make it so. And keep me informed if the enemy makes any further heading or speed change."

"Of course, sir." Kuroshima bowed with a quick salute, and turned to send the new heading order up to the bridge.

Yamamoto leaned back in his chair, thinking about this new development. He was immediately relieved that this ship was no longer threatening Hara's carriers. Those ships had to be preserved at all costs. Without their strike squadrons intact, they were little more than ducks in a pond should any other American carrier be operating in these waters. Six fighters, he thought darkly. That was all Hara had left to put over his carriers, two *shotai*. And below decks there were no more than ten other planes, many bearing scars and shrapnel wounds from the incredible attack concluded that morning against this enemy ship. It was most unsettling; seemingly impossible! How could the seasoned pilots of Hara's group have failed to bludgeon this ship with over ninety planes in the morning air strike? He could still not believe the results, or the baffling reports of aerial rockets that had been so deadly, intercepting and killing Hara's planes before they ever set eyes on their target.

If the British built this ship, he mused, then it truly is a monster. Perhaps it was a new ship, something the intelligence masters and the bright young men of the Naval General Staff had been unable to discover. After all, his

own ship, the super battleship *Yamato*, had been shrouded in secrecy for all the many years of its construction. Virtually everything about it, its displacement, armor, the true size and caliber of its guns, had been closely guarded state secrets. Was it so difficult to believe that the British could have built a fast and deadly ship like this, and engineered these marvelous new rocket weapons?

Thinking of *Yamato* again, he realized the tremendous resources it had taken to build, the seemingly endless work in the foundries and factories. Three of these superb battleships had been ordered, but only two delivered. The final ship would become a carrier instead, and that was probably very wise, he thought…unless…

The fate of Hara's squadrons weighed heavily in his mind now. What if this ship, these new rocket weapons, changed the delicate balance of power at sea yet again? It had been a world of dreadnaughts and battleships, with nations signing treaties to stubbornly restrict the size and power of these deadly vessels. Then the British flew a flock of outmoded planes against the Italian battle fleet at Taranto and showed what even slow, obsolete aircraft might do against the steel dragons of the sea. Three of six Italian battleships there had been either sunk or damaged so badly they had to be beached. If a few British planes could do this at Taranto, he realized, then what might the superb fast carriers and naval aviators of the Imperial Japanese Navy do against the Americans at Pearl Harbor?

The plan was just a few months from being realized when the Germans stupidly struck the Americans in the North Atlantic, just a little over a year ago now. The Americans declared war, Japan foolishly sided with Germany instead of pursuing an independent course, and the Americans obliged by declaring hostilities against the Empire as well, on September 1, 1941. The Pearl Harbor attack plan was suddenly nothing more than stacks of useless paper!

Yet even though his carriers did not get the chance to prove their skills at Hawaii, they had performed flawlessly ever since, screening, scouting, providing decisive air power when needed as Japan rolled south into the resource rich island archipelagos of the Pacific. The old American battleships that the navy planners had been so eager to kill were still largely berthed at Pearl Harbor, too fat and slow to keep up with the speedy hit and run tactics required by the carrier fleets. Now this…

A ship that could defend itself against an entire carrier task force! A fast,

deadly ship that had held Iwabuchi's cruisers at bay, killed submarines with no destroyer escort, left the battleship *Kirishima* a steaming wreck in its foaming wake, and was now in a perfect place to strike at Hara's carriers, their hangers largely empty, or at the slow transports bearing troops from the Nagoya 3rd Division. These reports of rockets that had even bloodied his ships were most confounding. His staff was of the opinion that they would have to be piloted to be so accurate. They struck targets the enemy could not even see!

While this made some sense to him, it would be most unlike the British to produce a weapon requiring a pilot to give his life. Perhaps the pilots were ejecting once they had aimed their weapons, but no sign of this had been observed, and not a single enemy had been found in the sea. It was a profound mystery.

Only one thing was certain, this ship changes everything, he thought. Now it will no longer be a war of carriers and planes, though they will always have their place in any well balanced navy. No. From everything he had heard, it was now the daring pilots of these rocket weapons who would decide the fate of nations, and only a ship capable of withstanding their warheads could close and engage the enemy in a gun duel…. A ship like *Yamato*, the largest and most heavily armored battleship ever built. If ever there was a real dragon of the sea, he was standing on its armored back at this very moment. His guns could tear any ship then known to pieces if they could get in range.

That was another mystery. Iwabuchi's cruisers and even the *Kirishima* reported being hit by small caliber deck guns, yet at ranges exceeding their own main batteries! This ship used these infernal rockets in place of the monstrous gun turrets all other big ships would carry, and it gave the enemy the ability to strike at impossible ranges. How were they seeing his ships? One report had indicated a strange aircraft was spotted. They must use seaplanes as we do on our fast cruisers and battleships. It was the only thing that made sense. So here was a battlecruiser that could fight like a carrier, and with a lethal defensive shield against his own carrier planes with these new rocket weapons. The world had changed, right beneath his nose, and he had not seen it happening. This ship was a true nightmare, a revolutionary leap in naval thinking and design.

Then, inexplicably, this Shadow Dancer simply turns north, forsaking all the valuable targets it still had within easy reach. It was baffling, to say the

least, but thankfully he could now focus his attention on finding the enemy and holding them accountable for the havoc they had caused in the seas around Australia. It may be the only one of its class, he thought. If I sink it, this would prove that the old strength of guns and steel can as yet prevail. What was it up to, he wondered?

If this ship were still out hunting for new prey, it would not make such a sudden and stupid maneuver. Perhaps this beast is wounded, as Kuroshima suggested. Or perhaps it has limited ammunition or fuel and must now run for a friendly base. But Milne Bay? There is nothing there but a few stubborn battalions of Australian infantry. Could the ship have other intentions? Could it be planning to attack Rabaul? Would it be so daring as to sail right into the arms of our main defenses? Then again, perhaps it was only trying to escape…

Every hunter needed good dogs to find and flush out his prey. He had three fast cruisers with him, *Nagara*, *Yura* and *Jintsu*, fast as the rivers they were named for at 36 knots. He could turn them loose and have them try and run this sea dragon down. The enemy seemed in no hurry, or better yet, it seemed to be limping north now, perhaps even crippled as it fled. Let them harry her, he thought, and we will see if Kuroshima is correct. Well enough. They can put their torpedoes to good use if they catch up with the enemy. If the cruisers find themselves overmatched, they can always fall off and simply shadow this beast. It seemed a good idea, and he called for an orderly, telling him to convey his wishes to Rear Admiral Takayanagi on the bridge at once.

The chase was on, but Yamamoto reserved a measure of caution, even if he was in the most powerful ship in the world, or so he believed. A wounded animal is most dangerous, he thought. This ship has eluded our forces for days. It must be stalked carefully, professionally, and dealt with mercilessly. And I will see it at the bottom of the sea, one small flower I can take to the Emperor.

One small flower…

* * *

Captain Sanji Iwabuchi received the order with much excitement. At last, he thought. I am no longer chained to Hara’s carriers. I am free to find and kill this enemy ship again, and avenge the insult and shame I have suffered in losing command of *Kirishima*. Captain Okada has been more than

accommodating to have me here aboard *Tone*, and I cannot dishonor him, or myself, any further.

When the *Kirishima* struck those mines in the narrow waters of the Torres Strait, Iwabuchi had been ordered to wait and escort Hara's carriers through the narrow passage, to sweep the channels so they could move east and do what he had abjectly failed to do.

Yet now old King Kong knows what it feels like, neh? Hara's neck is a red as mine! His entire carrier air wing was nearly wiped out, and now he, too, was eager for revenge. With Yamamoto's orders to protect his carriers with everything he had left, I have little doubt he would still have his hand on my waistband, keeping me close. But with the arrival of two more light cruisers and three destroyers in the *Ryuho* group, he now has enough ships to screen his precious fleet carriers, and I am once again unleashed, the rabid dog set loose again.

Tone is a good ship, fast and with good eyes in the six seaplanes she carries. True, she does not have the power I once commanded with *Kirishima*, but at least I can catch this *Mizuchi* now. It can no longer edge away in the night to set cowardly traps as it did in the straits. Yes, I can catch it, but can I kill it?

He considered what had happened to *Haguro*, and the damage that had been sustained by *Myoko* and *Nachi*. The 8 inch guns he had in front of him now were much weaker than the 14 inch guns on *Kirishima*. No matter. He would use speed this time, get in close and run this sea dragon through with his torpedoes. It was more than duty, more than his need to stand for his comrades in arms here. Now it was personal.

If I do not prevail, he thought, then it is very likely that I will be relieved of my command when this is all over and the children in the Naval General Staff start asking their questions about what happened here. Before I stand accused of incompetence, and endure their insults, I will first have a victory to hand them—to silence the whispers behind my back, to make an end of the sullen eyes that follow me, and most of all, to have my just vengeance.

He had been cruising almost due east for the last hour and a half, on a course that would both screen Hara's carriers and race to cut off the advance of the enemy. This time things are different, he thought, this time I am ahead of this beast. But soon he was disheartened to learn that one of his seaplane scouts had reported the enemy had altered course and was now steering due north. Now he was again behind the action, and forced to run at his best

speed to creep up on this demon. He gave the order to swing round to a heading of five degrees north and all ahead full. In doing so he knew he would begin to outpace both *Nachi* and *Myoko*, as they could not quite match his speed. So be it.

Somewhere to the east he knew Admiral Yamamoto was watching, and steaming even now to find and punish this interloper. Captain Iwabuchi wanted to get there first, and with a nine knot speed advantage over *Yamato*, he had a very good chance of doing exactly that.

I may not be able to match this ship on my own, he thought, but I can take hold of its ankle, and sink my teeth into it nonetheless. He smiled when the bell rang out the course change, the helmsman's voice rising and falling in echo to his own.

Heavy cruiser *Tone* turned smartly about, and surged north, her sharp bow cutting the seas with her haste and a long white wake behind her for the other cruisers to follow.

The chase was on.

Part X

Clash Of Titans

"Now shall I become a common tale,
A ruin'd fragment of a worn-out world;
Unchanging record of unceasing change.
Eternal landmark to the tide of time.
Swift generations, that forget each other,
Shall still keep up the memory of my shame
Till I am grown an unbelieved fable."

—Hartley Coleridge, Prometheus

Chapter 28

Rodenko watched the slow approach of the enemy, wishing he had his Fregat system to get better data, but doing what he could with the Top Mast antenna. The first two hours were the most difficult. He could see the enemy task force to the east clear enough. It had been heading about 247 degrees southwest at twenty-five knots on a course to intercept the ship, but sometime after *Kirov* turned north he saw it come round on 292 degrees and by 15:00 hours it had closed to a range of 125 kilometers east of their position.

When Dobrynin reported his maintenance procedure was complete, Fedorov gave the order to go to full battle speed and turned the ship on a parallel heading, running away from the *Yamato* group, but the Japanese had a surprise for them.

"My contact to the east is splitting," he said. It looks like they are sending out a faster ships to try and run us down. He could see a group of contacts moving ahead of his primary, and to make matters worse there was a very fast contact coming up from the south as well, and moving at all of thirty-six knots.

"That would have to be the heavy cruiser *Tone*," Fedorov confirmed. It's moving ahead of those other cruisers we faced earlier. It looks like we have a bit of a foot race on our hands now."

"But where are we going, sir? This course will take us back up to the Torres Strait."

"Leave that to me," Fedorov was squinting at his charts. "There's plenty of room in the Coral Sea for the moment. We'll give them a run for their money."

"But what about those other two battleships, Captain?"

"*Mutsu* and *Nagato*? They cannot match our speed. They won't get anywhere near us, but I plan on running in their direction until I'm forced to turn on another heading. Hopefully that will keep us well ahead of these other two faster groups to the east and south, and buy time for the displacement to kick in."

"Are you sure it will happen again, Fedorov?"

"Who can be sure of anything? We've stumbled on a possible trigger point for this madness, and I can only hope it will work for us one more

time.”

“What if it doesn’t?”

Fedorov gave him a long look. “Then we fight, Rodenko. We fight—what else?”

They ran on that heading for two hours, but Fedorov calculated a predictive plot that showed the cruiser *Tone* getting uncomfortably close if he persisted on 292, so at 17:00 hours he turned north again, running away from the cruiser and nervously watching the ship’s chronometer, counting the time since the reactor maintenance had been completed. There had been no signs of anything unusual for the last two hours. The sea was calm, Nikolin’s airwaves were steady, Rodenko’s radar was functioning without interference, and the Japanese were still following, bearing in on him from multiple headings. Three pesky seaplanes were marking *Kirov’s* position steadily now, growing a bit bolder and venturing nearer as they shadowed the ship.

“Damn,” said Karpov, “I miss those five S-300s we wasted on Orlov.”

“They may have been well spent, Captain,” said Fedorov, “but I understand what you mean. It feels a bit naked knowing we can’t do much of anything against an aircraft unless it gets in close now. At least we still have some punch on the main missile deck.”

“Twenty-two missiles,” said Karpov. “That was more than the original load for the first *Kirov*. The old ship carried the big P-700 Granit missiles back then, but only twenty of them. They were slower, big fat missiles weighing over 15,000 pounds, but they had twice the range of our Moskit-IIs, and a huge 750kg warhead. The only problem was that they made too good a target for enemy SAMs, but I wish I had a few of those as well. Lob one on these Japanese cruisers and we could sink a ship with one shot. Our NATO friends called them the ‘Shipwreck,’ and it was a good name for them.”

Karpov folded his arms, gazing out the forward viewports. “The sea is so calm,” he said. “Stare at it for ten minutes and you could almost forget we’re in the middle of the greatest war ever fought on this earth.”

“At least the greatest one we know of,” said Fedorov. “Something tells me it wasn’t the last world war. We’ve seen aftermath of the next one first hand.”

“You think it started in 2021 then? Here in the Pacific?”

“Those newspapers seemed to indicate as much, one of our cruisers got restless and took out that American sub. A trigger point like that could have cascaded into a big crisis in the Pacific, and then the Chinese got into the act

over Taiwan. The Americans hit their carrier, they hit back and sunk the *Eisenhower*. On and on it goes. Both sides were just playing the same old game all along, a slow escalation of tension that can lead to no good. What do you think we put to sea for? Live fire exercises. They were getting ready for a war they saw coming, and we were the tip of the sword."

Karpov nodded solemnly.

"Then perhaps our presence here in the past hasn't really done much harm after all. Have you lost your fear of disturbing the history, Fedorov?"

"Yes, Captain, I think I have, though it still bothers me. Nations have put men in trenches, ships at sea facing off against one another for centuries, but now I see what it comes down to in the end. Very few fought for God or even the Rodina. They fought for the fellow next to them in the line."

"And to save their own damn skin," Karpov agreed. "Well, if we don't move again, in time, then I'm going to have to put some serious harm on anything that gets close enough to threaten us."

"And you want to know what I'll think of that, yes?"

"It crossed my mind, Fedorov. After all, if what you have told us is true, Admiral Yamamoto is out there this time. He's a bit of a demigod in your history books—his ship a legend as well."

"He was…" Fedorov had a distant, empty look in his eyes. "Yes, the ship was a legend once. In our day it was a broken wrecked hulk, 1200 feet below the sea. That's where legends end up all too often, Captain, and the world forgets. This war practically destroyed all of Europe and Asia, and yet they still build the ships and planes and missiles in our day. The world forgets."

Karpov nodded, a sudden melancholy coming over them now, a taste of bitter *toska*, the old Russian yearning for a better day. "I wonder if they forgot about us as well," he breathed. "I mean Severomorsk, Suchkov, the navy, the whole stinking mess of a country we set sail to defend. From their perspective we simply vanished that day. I suppose they blamed it all on that accident with *Orel*."

"Most likely," Fedorov agreed.

"Mighty *Kirov*," Karpov smiled. "We take on all comers, the British, Americans, Italians and now the Japanese. And they probably don't have the slightest inkling about us."

"I'm not so sure," said Fedorov. "The British learned a great deal when the Admiral met with Tovey. If word of our presence here has gotten back to the Admiralty by now, it will give them the last clue they needed to come to

the only conclusion that could possibly explain who and what we are."

"Clue? What clue?

"We vanished on August 23, 1942, Captain. And then we reappeared just a day later, but over seven thousand miles away. A ship doesn't move in space that distance in a single day. If they do spot us here, and put two and two together, then they could only conclude one thing—that we moved in *time*. And they have a few people there in Bletchley Park who are quite good at math, Mister Karpov. Quite good indeed."

"Hard to believe," said Karpov. "This whole affair."

Fedorov looked at his watch. "Why don't you get some food and rest, Captain. Something tells me we'll be very busy by sunset."

Karpov gave him a knowing look.

"Fedorov…" he started, then paused, thinking. "I never did tell you how wrong I was before. I thought you were a wet nosed school boy, and I was… well, I was very stupid."

"Forget about it, Captain. We all make mistakes. We live and we learn. I've learned a great deal watching you these last weeks, and one thing you have taught me is this: a man is always bigger than he thinks he is, bigger than the burdens he carries that would want to crush him, even bigger than his fear. Your service here has been something to admire, and we are all grateful for it."

* * *

An hour later, at 18:00 it was clear that the two Japanese battleships to the north, *Mutsu* and *Nagato*, were now on a good course to intercept. *Kirov* had opened the range on the *Yamato* group to 150 kilometers, but the fast screening force out in front of the battleship was now inside 112 kilometers. His earlier turn had frustrated Captain Iwabuchi aboard *Tone*, which was now left just over 200 kilometers to the south. But the slow approach of the two big battleships forced a difficult choice on Fedorov. He could either turn west now, out into the Coral Sea, in which case he would likely have to engage both battleships and the fast cruisers of Iwabuchi's force, or he could turn and run east, which would put *Yamato* in a good position to try and cut him off as he approached Milne Bay.

The odds seemed even no matter which way he turned, but something pulled at him from deep within. If he turned east he might just lay eyes upon

the greatest battleship the world has ever seen, the ship he had studied and admired for all these many years. Be careful what you wish for, he mused. He couldn't say that thought decided things for him, but the fact remained….

He turned east at sunset, following the night, the sky a brilliant smear of red and orange behind him. The ship's new heading was 68 degrees northeast, running for the southern coast of New Guinea. The dogged seaplanes would have difficulty following the ship after sunset, but they caught the course change in time to get warning to *Yamato*. Some minutes later Rodenko reported that the battleship had altered course to 45 degrees northeast, and Fedorov kicked himself for not waiting until well after dark before he changed his heading.

He looked at the ship's chronometer, biting his lip. When would they move again in time? The last change had taken only a few hours, but it might be a long day before anything happened. He now concluded that if *Yamato* was cagey, and her cruiser screen agile enough, they might be able to catch *Kirov* somewhere south of Bona Bona Island on Orangene Bay, the south coast of New Guinea. *Yamato* would be right behind the cruisers. Karpov returned from his rest period two hours later, clear headed and ready for battle, and he did not have long to wait.

"Those cruisers are getting very close now," said Rodenko. "I make it about fifty kilometers. They're moving at 36 knots, and there's a small group of three ships about ten klicks behind them at 33 knots."

"Most likely a destroyer group," said Fedorov.

"We can take them out now with missiles," said Karpov, raising an eyebrow at Fedorov.

"Would that be your recommendation, Captain?"

"Our ability to strike at range is a great advantage," said Karpov. We should use it now and thin out the odds. Otherwise it will be work for the deck guns in another hour, and they may get those long range torpedoes in the water you talk about."

Karpov was correct. The first factor in the engagement was going to be range, he knew. *Kirov* could find, target, and strike its enemy anywhere inside a 200 kilometer radius of the ship. The cruisers would need to get inside 20,000 meters, just as before, and that was the decisive difference.

Yamato had to first close inside the 45,000 kilometer range of its main guns, and even then it would not be likely to obtain any hits until it got inside 26,000 meters. It was Ali vs Frasier. *Kirov* could put one hard jab after

another on the lumbering hulk of her enemy, like a fast, lean champion dancing around her foe. *Yamato* had to simply tuck in its chin and drive in for a body shot, and in this instance, with the coast of New Guinea to the north, she was hoping to eventually pin her elusive enemy to the ropes.

Unlike Ali, *Kirov* did not have the armor to take much punishment. There would be no 'Rope a Dope' strategy if that happened. So Fedorov was maneuvering east to avoid the land mass to his north, but in doing so he would soon be skirting the effective range of *Yamato's* big 18.1 inch guns. It would then come down to how long the battleship could stay in any kind of effective firing range, for time was a factor in obtaining a hit, in a very convoluted process that relied on the successful coordination of numerous elements to get just one good result. One thing *Yamato* had in her favor was durability. Her armor would let her take hits and keep fighting as long as the Japanese had the will, and Fedorov would never underestimate that factor.

"Very well," he said. "Engage the cruiser screen at long range. These are lighter ships. Their belt armor is little more than sixty millimeters."

"Then any of our missiles will hurt them badly. I suggest we start with our smaller warheads and see if we can break their speed advantage by lighting a few fires. Mr. Samsonov…"

"Sir!"

"Sound alert level two. Secure for missile combat. Activate MOS-III missiles, a bank of three, please."

"Aye, sir. Activating missiles seven, six, and five. System reports ready."

The warning claxon sounded, and Samsonov keyed his missile prime toggles, waiting for targeting information to be sent to his panel. A battle that had been talked about, ruminated, argued in forums and naval colleges the world over was now about to begin, for the cloak of darkness would prove to be only a thin veil of protection for *Kirov* that night, and a clash of titans was now almost inevitable—the most powerful ships of two different eras facing one another in a final confrontation that would decide the fate of nations and perhaps humanity itself.

Yet none of this entered the minds of Fedorov, Karpov, Rodenko or the other men on the ship. Their only thought was whether this battle would see them through to a good breakfast the following morning. The world and time could wait. For them it was simply a matter of surviving yet another day.

Chapter 29

They saw it light up the night, a bright fire against the dark, climbing up and then arcing slowly down, growing more prominent with each passing second. The watchman on the light cruiser *Jintsu* pointed to his mate, eyes wide, then called out a warning. It looked like a distant plane on fire, plummeting down to a watery death in the sea, but as it fell it suddenly leveled off and seemed to skim right over the water, brighter, closer, impossibly fast! There was a second fire in the sky, then a third following the very same path.

Jintsu was the second of three *Sendai* type light cruisers, commissioned in 1925 and intended as fast destroyer flotilla leaders. She had four stacks venting the steam from ten Kampon boilers and four shaft Parsons geared turbines driving her at just under 36 knots. Her seven 5.5 inch guns were waiting silently in their turrets, her four 610mm torpedoes sleeping in their tubes. They would never get the chance to fire at the enemy the ship was stalking that night, nor would those on the two ships following her, *Nagara* and *Yura*, both fast three stack light cruisers with similar armament. The supersonic missiles would find them some fifty kilometers away, and come boring in on their side armor, a 1.5 ton missile with a 300kg warhead flying at Mach 5, one of the fastest missiles in the world *Kirov* had come from.

The damage was immediate and near catastrophic. *Jintsu* was struck amidships, her armor easily penetrated and the missile smashed through four of her ten boilers before exploding, blowing away two of her four stacks in the process. She reeled with the hit, her side ripped open, severe fires amidships and thick black smoke choking the life out of her crew. The ship immediately fell off in speed, slowing to under twenty knots and taking water fast.

Nagara and *Yura* received equal treatment, their side armor simply too thin to stop the missiles from penetrating to do severe damage deep within the ship. Of the three *Nagara* came away the best, and she had turned to avoid the chaotic scene of *Jintsu* ahead, and the angle of the missile that struck her saw it scudding along her side armor, detonating outside the ship, and buckling her hull badly, right at the water line.

Karpov had used three, fast lethal darts to skewer the cruisers, and they were suddenly out of the equation as serious threats, their speed reduced,

crews frantically struggling to fight the fires and flooding. *Jintsu* would not survive the hour. Over 120 of her 450 man crew were dead after the missile impact, and the remainder would be in the sea soon after when the ship keeled over in a rasp of steam and smoke, her guts flooded with seawater hitting the hot boiler fires. She sunk in twenty minutes. *Yura* was little better off, her fires threatening to consume the ship. *Nagara* stood by, calling for help from the three destroyers in the wake of the cruisers. There were too many men in the sea for her to contemplate continuing in the hunt.

So it was that the lighter screening forces Yamamoto had sent to find and harry his prey came to a desperate fate. The destroyers would help in the rescue operation, and then bravely turn to seek the enemy again, but they were of little concern to *Kirov* now. She had bigger fish to fry, a 72,000 ton behemoth still bearing down on an intercept course that Fedorov did not think they could evade. Yet the Russian battlecruiser still had nineteen ship killers under her forward deck, more than enough to deal with a single adversary, or so he thought.

The chronometer read 20:10, just an hour after the waning gibbous moon rose, a hair off full, casting her pale wan light on the sea. Rodenko reported the fast screening force had been decisively stopped, at least on radar, and Karpov breathed a little easier.

“This shark still bites,” he said. “The MOS-IIIs did the job well enough. Are there any other targets close in, Rodenko?”

“There’s a seaplane getting a little too nosey,” he said, “it’s been following our wake for some time, most likely calling out heading and speed estimates. I now have a faint reading on those other two battleships. They look to be just under 200 kilometers due west of us, and they are losing ground. I make their speed no more than 25 knots, but without the Fregat system up these are only approximate readings. There is another fast contact southwest at 36 knots and closing slowly. It has turned on a course that will take it very near the cruisers we just hit.”

“We probably put a lot of men in the water just now,” said Fedorov. “They are vectoring in assets for the rescue operation. I think we can leave it be for the moment. It’s *Yamato* I’m more concerned about.”

“That ship has now increased to 27 knots and is on an intercept heading, about fifty kilometers off our starboard bow.”

“You said this ship’s main guns can range out to 45,000 meters, Fedorov? Then it could fire on us any minute now.”

“Don’t worry,” Fedorov held up a hand. “They have to spot us first. Under good light conditions they might see us at twenty-eight kilometers, but not at night like this, even with the moon nearly full. We have some time yet. I’m looking up information on her radar sets now. It looks like *Yamato* had only one tactical surveillance radar. It operated on a wave length of 1.5 meters with an average range of twenty kilometers.”

“Then they are blind,” said Karpov. “We can hit them right now and perhaps put enough damage on that beast to give it second thoughts.”

Fedorov hesitated… battleship *Yamato*… Admiral Yamamoto. What was he about to do here? This ship and its Admiral had glowed in his mind for many long years of blissful study and research. He had built a model of it in his youth, admiring the sleek, powerful lines, the massive guns, the tall proud superstructure. It was his love of great ships that had seen him join the navy, and work diligently to gain his post on Russia’s very best, the new battlecruiser *Kirov*. In those quiet hours alone at his desk he had often imagined *Yamato* dueling with the American *Iowa* class, and contemplated how the course of the war might have been altered if Yamamoto’s plane had not been caught by those American P-38s and sent to a fiery death. And now he had to order the death of the thing he so loved, and the demise of all these fond memories, realizing in the end that this was war in its most cruel demeanor.

The history of the Pacific war he knew was already shattered, barely recognizable now, and he was as much to blame as Karpov or anyone else. He remembered his conversation with the Captain earlier. *Yamato* was nothing more than a dead legend, a broken hulk, a great Prometheus chained to the bottom of the sea where the fish would eat its liver day by day. That was the great ship’s fate, but now it was still in its full glory, all 72,000 tons of it, driving through the quiet night, bathed in the liquid silver of the moon, her massive prow sweeping up a frothy bow wave, her crew of nearly 2800 men anxiously at their battle stations, lookouts squinting through binoculars from the high watch stations on the main mast. Compared to *Kirov’s* incredible situational awareness, the enemy was groping her way forward in the dark like a blind man with a cane…and three triple barreled twelve gauge shotguns.

He decided.

“The battle is yours, Karpov. I’ve informed Admiral Volsky as well. He is down in the reactor room with Dobrynin, but has told me we are to use our

best judgment. Protect the ship."

"Alright, Fedorov. Let the log entry read that battlecruiser *Kirov* commenced surface action engagement against the battleship *Yamato* at 20:18 hours, on the night of August 27, 1942. Anton Fedorov commanding. Tactical officer, Vladimir Karpov."

A junior Lieutenant called out the confirmation: "Sir, log entry recorded."

"Very well."

Karpov clasped his arms behind his back and turned to Victor Samsonov, the gleam of battle in his eyes.

* * *

Admiral Yamamoto received the news from his operations chief with much chagrin. "All three cruisers damaged? The entire squadron?"

"Yes, sir. I have just received a coded distress signal. The screening force was hit by suicide rockets about twenty minutes ago. We have lost *Jintsu*, and both *Nagara* and *Yura* are heavily damaged. The destroyers from our escort screen are nearby and rendering assistance."

"I see…" Yamato's eyes darkened, his brow set with concentration. "So the rumors of this ship are proved true after all. Iwabuchi was not exaggerating with his stories of flying devil fish raining fire and hell on his ships. How close are we?"

"Sir, we are just inside our maximum gun range now, but we have no target. There is good moonlight but even our best spotters will not be able to report anything until we get much closer. They are launching more seaplanes now."

Yamamoto stood up, reaching for his white gloves and putting them on one after another, a slow, deliberate process that had an air of gravity about it. It was time to fight, if he could only find his enemy first. He reached slowly and took up his Admiral's cap, squaring it on his head as he turned.

"It's time we were on the bridge, Kuroshima. Walk with me."

As two men left the briefing room Kuroshima cast a wan look at the map table, noting the tiny wooden ships that had been moved about as the chase unfolded. In one glance he took it all in, *Mutsu*, *Nagato*, *Tone*, and the rest of Iwabuchi's cruisers, Hara with his carriers, and the whole of the entire remaining fleet already limping north to Rabaul and Truk. They had already lost three fleet carriers, not to mention the chaos here in the Coral Sea. His

entire plan was a shambles, the Combined Fleet completely unhinged, and all because of this solitary raider, this Shadow Dancer in the night that could command the darkest kami in the seven hells and fling them against his ships, which now seemed no more useful than these same wooden toys, he thought. Our cruisers and carriers have been good for little more than sport here, and now the fate of the war and our nation and people hangs in the balance.

What was this ship? *Hachiman*, the god of war? *Mizuchi*, the dreaded sea dragon? *Susanoo*, the storm god? He closed the door, his heart heavy as he followed the Admiral forward to the nearest stair well up. Before they had reached the stairs Kuroshima heard a distant low rumble, resolving to a louder roar. Then the warning bells were ringing all over the ship, and the strident calls of the men jarred him to keen alertness.

He felt the ship move, a thudding vibration followed by the sound of an explosion. Yamamoto turned, his eyes bright with fire.

"Hurry, Kuroshima, it has begun!"

* * *

The P-900 missile had used its solid fuel propellant to quickly gain altitude before activating its ARGS-54 active homing radar seekers, sweeping the calm night with microwave energy to locate its target below. Two short, squarish stabilizing wings deployed with a metallic rasp. Then the missile settled into approach mode briefly, its air breathing engines cruising at sub-sonic speed for a time as it made its high altitude approach. Minutes later the sharp nose of the rocket pointed downward towards the glistening sea and it swooped low, leveling off just feet above the water where the low-flying supersonic terminal stage of the missile saw it accelerate in a dizzying dance of zigs and zags at nearly Mach 3. It had been designed to defeat another computer controlled SAM umbrella, but no such defense was in place.

The men aboard *Yamato* watched it come with blinding speed, a wild light dancing over the sea aimed right at the heart of the ship, where it flashed against the heavy side armor with a roaring explosion. It's 400kg warhead was enough to buckle and burn its way through twelve of sixteen inches of hardened steel armor. But it could go no further, though the ship felt as though a Thunder God had struck it with an iron hammer. *Yamato* rolled slightly, then easily righted herself. There was a fire, her port side blackened and scarred, but by and large she had not been seriously hurt.

When the second missile was spotted in the sky, officers screamed out commands, their arms stiffly pointing out the target with batons. *Yamato's* substantial anti-aircraft suite began to fill the night with metal and fire as few other ships of her day could. Years later it would be vastly upgraded to 150 guns to defend against her real nemesis, enemy planes, but it had nowhere near that number at this point in the war.

The ship was built like a massive steel castle. Her huge gun turrets with three 18.1 in barrels each were mounted two forward and one aft. Her central con tower, main mast, superstructure and stack were then surrounded by what looked like several concentric circles of armored gun positions. In all there were twelve more 152mm 6.1 inch naval guns in four tripled turrets, twelve more 127mm 5 inch guns, eight 25mm triple barreled AA guns and four more 13.2mm AA machine guns. Most every gun on the port side of the ship was blasting away now, but it did them little good.

The second missile was too fast to be targeted and killed by a concentrated stream of AA fire, and only random chance would see it possibly struck by a round as it made its dancing approach to the ship at low altitude. The fire control officers watched in awe as the low aimed gun rounds plowed into the sea—and then before they could think to redirect, the missile plowed into the ship. The second hit was slightly higher, approaching the upper weather deck but still catching the side armor, though the explosion seemed more severe. Part of the 200mm armored deck was ripped up and sent flailing against the base of the main pagoda con tower, knocking out the open top twin 127mm gun there, and leaving every man at that station dead. The rest of the blow fell on the heavy side armor, which again weathered the hit, charred and bruised, but unbroken.

Instinctively, the ship turned its big turrets toward the source of the lights in the sky, and the long thin streaks of smoke that marked their low level approach, luminescent in the light of the rising moon. But up on the bridge the ship's Rear Admiral Takayanagi had already taken the initiative to turn the ship, steering at an angle to those long thin ghostly trails. The turn also leaned out his profile if the enemy was seeking to spot him in the night. It would make little difference, but at least he now knew where the enemy was. He could see flaring bright light and luminous smoke on the far horizon when the demon rockets fired, and a few more degrees off his port side he noted the angry glow of fire, his own cruiser screen still burning in the distance.

Somewhere beyond the charcoal edge of night, hiding from the moon and

still wrapped in gossamer thin shadows, battlecruiser *Kirov* contemplated what next to throw at his ship. The battle had only just begun.

* * *

“Two hits amidships,” a watch stander reported, pointing at the HD video being fed from the Tin Man. The cameras were set to infrared, and the silhouette of the enemy ship glowed in strange hues of white and green, as it might be viewed through night optic goggles.

“Range closing fast now,” said Rodenko. “I’m reading 32,000 meters.” The combined speed of the two ships was now almost sixty knots as they closed, though the angle they were riding toward a distant intercept point diminished the range somewhat slower.

“Any change in speed?” Karpov asked.

“No, sir. The target continues at 27 knots.”

“It will take more than a couple hits, Captain” said Fedorov. “I doubt if we seriously hurt them at this point.”

Karpov thought for a moment. “The P-900s are not as easy to program for a plunging descent, but the Moskit-IIs can be altered. We ordered them programmed for either low level attack or plunging fire, did we not?”

“Sir, I have three available with altered programs. The remainder were kept on the high speed sea-skimming setting for use against smaller ships.”

Three may just do the job, thought Karpov. They’ve obviously shaken those two P-900’s off. “Switch to the Moskit-IIs. It’s time we poked some holes in their deck.”

“Programming,” said Samsonov. *Kirov* had given the enemy two sharp jabs in the opening round, Now she wanted to throw a couple of real body punches.

“Those three destroyers are still bearing on our position, sir,” Rodenko put in. “They are due south at 28,000 meters, just beyond the that crippled cruiser screen.”

“All things in time,” said Karpov. “First we stop this battleship.”

Karpov spoke as if the result were a foregone conclusion, but he was soon to find out that there were few certainties in life, and even fewer in war.

Chapter 30

Lt. Commander Yasuna Kozono was a very enterprising man. He had been trying to find a way to up-gun his new J1N1-C "*Gekkou*" night reconnaissance fighter for some time. Dubbed the Navy Type 2 Reconnaissance Fighter, he had a small *shotai* of just two planes at Rabaul, early deliveries that had not been expected until later that year. One had a spherical turret behind the pilot's compartment with one Type 99 20mm cannon installed there, but the weapon seemed entirely too defensive in nature to him, and ill suited for taking the fight to the enemy. To use it against a bomber he would have to creep up on the target from below so the gunner could train and fire his cannon. It was most unsatisfactory, and it negated the one thing he most loved about his new night fighter, its tremendous top speed of 330 miles per hour on attack.

What he wanted was a better cannon on the fuselage to compliment the six smaller 7.7 mm Type 97 machine guns on his wings. He was so adamant about it that he secretly set about to install the guns himself in a field-modified version of the plane, hoping Central Command would never be the wiser. He would come to call his new model the *Gekkou*, or Moonlight, and it was to be tested in a very special mission, rising to greet its namesake that night. He had just the perfect pilot to test his new invention as well, Lieutenant Sachio Endo, a highly skilled flyer of Tainanku T-1.

The navy was chasing a sea dragon, and had called up to Rabaul to see if they could send any help. As the light faded they feared their ship launched seaplanes would not be able to keep watch on the enemy ship, and asked Rabaul if they had a night fighter or two to send in support. It so happened that they had exactly two, all the planes Kozono had, and he would send Endo in one, and fly the second himself, eager to convince the navy that his planes should be rolled into more significant production. Tonight he would get his chance.

As the sun began to set he fired up his twin 14-cylinder air-cooled radial piston engines and slowly taxied down the palm fringed runway, looking over his shoulder to see Endo right behind him. The two planes roared into the sky, climbing quickly and banking towards the setting sun, heading southwest to wait for the moon. It would be a long and possibly dangerous

flight, out to the limit of the plane's operational range, though Kozono had been wise enough to request drop tanks to extend his mission slightly. They would fly down the long curved island of New Britain, then over the Solomon Sea, tipping their wings to the rising moon a little over an hour later. Soon they would come to the shadowy folds of Papua New Guinea, crossing that landform to enter the Coral Sea. It was at least 800 kilometers out, and his effective combat radius was a little over 1120. That would leave him limited time on target, and he hoped he would find this enemy ship quickly, and surprise it if he could.

He opened the throttle a bit cruising at 300 kph. Three hours later he would find what he was looking for, strange lights on the sea, wild arcing trails in the sky, something moving at a blistering rate of speed far below them, explosions, the light and fire of a battle at sea.

"Endo," he called on his short range radio. "Do you see that? What is it?"

"Must be a plane in a fast dive," said Endo. "Let's get down and find out for ourselves. There! At three o'clock. That's a ship! It must be the one we are looking for. Let's give them a little more moonlight!"

* * *

"That sea plane is getting very close," Rodenko said again as Karpov conferred with Samsonov.

The Captain looked up, frowning. "How close?"

Rodenko squinted at his scope. "Speed increasing to over 450kph. Bearing on our aft quarter now. Range 35,000 meters and closing."

Fedorov turned suddenly, his face concerned. "Over 450kph? That's no seaplane!"

"Sound air alert one!" Karpov was quick to react. "Move Samsonov, forget the battleship for the moment. Give me that last S-300—Now!"

Samsonov's hands were quick and agile on the CIC controls. "Missile ready!"

"Fire!"

The plane was fast, thought Fedorov, too fast to be a lumbering seaplane. It had to be a strike aircraft of some kind, but from where? It couldn't be a Nell out of Port Moresby, not at over 450kph. It couldn't be a Val dive bomber at that speed either. Only an A6M2 Zero could run like that… Unless…

“This is a night fighter,” he said quickly. “Probably out of Port Moresby or Rabaul, possibly even Lae. If so, it’s a long way from home.”

“Don’t worry, it will be in a permanent home soon,” said Karpov, the S-300 will take care of it.”

But there were *two* planes. Endo had been right on Kozono’s wing, his precision flying ability on display that night as the two planes accelerated and prepared to make their strafing runs. Rodenko’s Top Mast, not truly designed for tactical scenarios, had read both planes as one.

Endo saw something flash up from the dark shadow on the sea they were bearing on, with amazing speed. He reacted on pure reflex.

“Kozono! Bank left, quickly! I’m going right.” And the two planes suddenly veered away from one another, just as the missile was ready to acquire. It now had to choose one of two targets, and Kozono’s luck ran out that night. The S-300 followed his plane and exploded in a bright fiery rain of shrapnel that took off his left engine and half the wing. Kozono was wounded, his hand tight on the stick as his plane began to tailspin down towards the sea.

“Get it Endo!” he said with all the strength that was left in him, and then he knew no more.

Endo saw him die, and his jaw tightened, he was right on target, so close that he could see small AA guns jerking up at him and taking aim. He suddenly swooped low, aimed, and fired Kozono’s two new 20mm cannons full out, the machine guns on his wings rattling out their fire as well. At that very moment he saw the ship belch flame from its own guns, like the baleful breath of a dragon, and his plane shuddered, riddled with 30mm rounds. His right engine was on fire, but he controlled his plane, banking around to try and evade. Yet computer controlled AR-710s could not be fooled by his maneuver. They fired again, and Endo and his plane were shot to pieces. He would not go on to become one of Japan’s leading aces later in that very same model plane, and the pilots and crews of at least eight B-29s would not die at the business end of his skillful trade.

But his own cannons had raked the back of *Mizuchi*, and the 20mm rounds dug deeply into the tall main mast aft section, where a series of steam vents for the rapidly spinning turbine engine vented up in a cleverly hidden stack. It was perforated, rasping out jets of hot steam, and a small fire started there, adding smoke and flame to the mix. It was not a serious wound, just a scratch really, but it would end up causing more trouble than anyone knew

when the damage control teams began to respond to the scene.

Chief Byko put his hands on his hips, shaking his head as he looked up at the steam venting sideways from a dozen holes. “Let’s get to work, boys,” he said wearily. “It’s going to be another long night.”

It was prophetic.

* * *

She bore the name of ancient Japan, *Yamato*, an awesome ship, 862 feet long with a 127 foot beam, nearly 72,000 tons of iron and steel, almost as much as the British battleships *Rodney* and *Nelson* combined! By comparison the American battleship *Nevada* that had been on Japan’s target list at Pearl Harbor displaced a measly 27,500 tons. *Yamato* outweighed *Nevada*, *Oklahoma* and a good heavy cruiser thrown on the scales as well, truly a super battleship, and no other nation would ever build anything in her weight class again. 23,000 tons of her weight was dedicated to armor alone. Yet when she launched in December of 1941, just in time for the hostilities planned against the United States, the Americans had no knowledge of her existence beyond veiled rumors of a ship believed to be in the range of 40-50,000 tons. The US would know little more about the ship until they eventually sank it in an enormous air attack with 400 planes, hitting her with twelve 1000 pound bombs and at least seven torpedoes years later, in March of 1945.

A six foot wide gold chrysanthemum crest crowned the sleek construction of her special hydrodynamic bow, which helped *Yamato* plow through the sea resistance and enhanced her speed. Driven by twelve Kampon boilers and engines that could generate all of 150,000 horsepower for her quadruple three blade propellers, she ran at 27 knots, an engineering marvel for her day. To do so she consumed 70 tons of fuel each hour.

Inside the ship was a maze of passageways and compartments, so complicated that the decks were painted with arrows indicating which direction was forward so her crew of 2800 men could find their way around. There were 1,150 watertight compartments in her hull design to restrict or allow flooding to correct a list if necessary. Even her massive fuel stores could be moved by pumps to special compartments to help correct a list as much as ten degrees.

Now the cranes and catapults on her enormous aft deck were feverishly

working to launch two more of her seven seaplanes. One was already in the air, but these two would be tasked with helping gunfire direction by spotting shell falls near the target, as her guns could lob shells well over the horizon. The ship already knew the approximate position of her enemy, and even now the range finders perched atop her hundred foot high main mast were scanning the dark glistening seas ahead to try and pinpoint their sighting. To either side of this point, two flat antennae jutted like squarish black ears, the Model 1 Mark 2 set, which ranged out to 20,000 meters. It would not work that night, as her foe was quietly jamming the 1.5 meter band to render it useless, though it seldom worked at all after the first firing of the enormous guns. The concussion was so great that the radar sets would be shaken senseless.

Yet even without her fire control radars, *Yamato* had other means of sighting and aiming her powerful guns. The quality of her optical fire control systems were matched only by the *Bismarck*, and for combat at night, she had no other equal on earth, until *Kirov* arrived. Yet the actual system used to control and aim her guns was primitive compared to the capabilities of the enemy she now faced.

The Type 92 *Shagekiban* low angle analog computer used on *Yamato* was first developed by the Aichi Clock Company in 1932. It was a complex system relying on information from numerous sources outside the computer itself, and the efforts of at least seven operators. A graphic plotter noted the basic heading and speed of the target, and calculated bearing change versus time. A range averaging panel selected out the most likely range by averaging results obtained from several optical rangefinders. The main panel of the device had displays for present range and rate of change, spot correction, the speed of the firing ship and its bearing, wind deflection, a compass card and other functions. It worked in close cooperation with the type 94 *Hoiban* gun director, and other control systems on the ship, and thus its overall operation could be degraded when any of these supporting systems were damaged or put out of action by enemy fire.

The entire effort of the machine was to produce one vital calculation: future target position. It was, in effect, a time machine trying to peer into the future and see where the enemy ship would be two minutes on. The seven man team saw one man reading range averages and bearing plots, a second slowly cranking a wheel to set the range change obtained by this control officer. Other men adjusted the settings for bearing, deflection correction,

ship speed, target inclination, compass course from the gyro, and then the final variable was the all important averaging of the range solutions obtained by different rangefinders. This man exercised his best judgment of the results he received, favoring one or excluding another that he deemed inconsistent or invalid. In short, he was making his best guess of the actual range from a weight of opinion obtained from three to five different rangefinders. As such, the system required a great deal of manual input, and as a gun battle continued, human factors such as fatigue, fear, distraction and other emotional responses all played a part in the final solution obtained.

By contrast, *Kirov's* electronic systems were a million times quicker to their solution, and there were layers of possible ways to target the enemy—radar, laser range finding and HD optics as well. The difference meant one thing in the end: *Kirov* found her enemy in the here and now. It did not have to predict where the target would be at some future time. What *Kirov* fired at she was going to hit, and virtually without fail. What *Yamato* fired at she might hit, given enough time and just a little good luck in the mix. The one remaining factor was this: did *Kirov* have enough warheads left to put damage on the target sufficient to 'mission kill' or sink it before *Yamato* obtained that one lucky hit that could cripple its enemy?

With the sudden appearance and attack by the Japanese night fighters concluded, Karpov now returned to Samsonov, intent on his principle target.

"Reset range to target data feeds," he said his breath now controlled as he imposed calm on himself.

"Target at 32,300 meters and closing."

"We'll continue with two Moskit II missiles now. Give me one for low level attack but key elevation at the number two strike setting. Then I want the second set for plunging descent. Clear?"

"Aye, sir, missiles keyed to targets and ready."

* * *

Admiral Yamamoto arrived on the bridge just in time to see them coming, two bright lights in the sky, faster than any plane he had ever seen. It was astounding! One came surging in at sea level, and the second fell from the sky like a flaming meteor, a bolt of lightning thrown from the Gods above. The sea skimmer hit first, rising ten feet just before it hit the ship to just barely clear the main weather deck and strike amidships, twenty feet to

the left of the fire still raging from the P-900 attack. Seconds later the ship was rocked again and the plunging missile came down from above, falling on the aft section where it struck right atop the armored six inch gun turret mounted just behind the main guns, penetrating with its tremendous kinetic impact and a 450kg warhead. The smaller turret was a total loss, and a large secondary explosion blasted against the back of the more heavily armored number three turret, shaking it badly, though its massive armor was not compromised.

Only the armor on that six inch turret had prevented the missile from plunging deeper into the ship, and while the secondary explosion was serious, it was not fatal with the much smaller rounds stored beneath the turret in a well protected magazine. It was only the ready ammo that had already been lifted higher into the turret itself that detonated in the second explosion. Elsewhere, the sea skimmer took out two 127mm batteries on the port side of the ship, then struck the main superstructure behind them, and flailed the tall inclined smoke stack with tearing shrapnel. *Kirov* had scored a powerful reprisal to the damage done to her own engine ventilation system, but the fires aboard *Yamato* were now much more severe.

Undaunted, the battleship charged ahead toward her enemy, and Admiral Yamamoto spoke in a firm controlled voice. “We will not allow this to go unanswered. Fire your main guns, Captain. Fire at once!”

Thirty seconds later they heard the bugles sounding over the roar and commotion of the firefighting effort aft. They were a warning for all crew members that the massive main turrets were about to fire their guns in anger at an enemy ship for the very first time. Yamamoto saw the two forward batteries elevate their barrels, rotate a few degrees to port, and then the night was ravaged by the enormous blast of six 18.1 inch guns. Any man who had not heeded the brave bugle call in warning was thrown from his feet, some knocked unconscious by the tremendous concussion.

Yamato had thrown her first punches, a strong right hook followed by an uppercut meant to find and demolish her foe, and end the battle in one titanic blast.

Part XI

Shadow on the Sea

"Ships that pass in the night, and speak to each other in passing,
only a signal shown, and a distant voice in the darkness;
So on the ocean of life, we pass and speak to one another,
only a look and a voice, then darkness again and a silence. "

- Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

Chapter 31

Down in the heart of the ship, Admiral Volsky sat with Dobrynin, watching the digital readouts for neutron flux levels in the core. The Chief Engineer fingered his monitor, pointing out a violet line. “You see that variation is ten points high, yet it is not sustained. Look how it pulses up and down, almost like a heartbeat.”

“And this only happens after you run this maintenance routine? Have you checked the earlier records—data from our sea trials before this mission?”

“I have, sir, but I had no such readings in the past until… Well until we installed that new maintenance control rod. It’s the number twenty-five rod, sir, and we installed a new one at Severomorsk just before we set sail for the live fire exercises. I ran maintenance on the number thirteen rod, and dipped number twenty-five for the first time about six hours before that incident with the *Orel*.”

“I see,” said Volsky. “It looks like thirteen was our lucky number, or unlucky, depending on how you look at it I suppose. Then every time you have used it since we have experienced these odd time displacements.”

The rumble and roar of the missiles firing above was a pointed distraction, their eyes looking up to the ceiling, as if seeing the battle begin through the many decks above them.

“What could be so special about this rod twenty-five?”

“I don’t know, sir. All I can say is that these variations occurred after it was installed.”

“Well, knowing this much is a good deal more than we knew before. Thank you, Chief. It was your keen ear for the equipment that put us on this trail. Now Fedorov thinks we can choose where and when we move the ship, in time as well as space, and from the sound of things I think he is getting eager to hurry on from this year and say goodbye to the 1940s for good. Listen, Dobrynin. Fedorov gave me this list earlier. He wrote down the times he believes we have moved and he wanted to compare it to the time log on your maintenance procedure. I think he is counting hours now, yes? He wants to know the average time between the completion of the procedure and our time displacements. Can you calculate it?”

“Certainly sir. Just give me a minute, I’ll have Mister Garin take care of it.”

Minutes later they heard the firing of yet another missile, and Volsky knew the sound of the weapons as well as Dobrynin knew the song of his reactor.

“That was a P-300 SAM,” said the Admiral, “the last one we had.” They heard a distant explosion, then the droning wail of aircraft engines growling louder, the chatter of machine gun fire followed by the sharp whirring rattle of *Kirov’s* close in defense systems.”

All Volsky could think of was that a seaplane had attempted to make an attack on the ship. Then Dobrynin’s eyes were pulled to a yellow warning light on his reactor panel.

“What’s this,” he breathed. “We’re losing ventilation pressure on the turbines.” He began fiddling with some controls, but it was not long before Byko reported that the main shafts at the rear of the tall central con area had been perforated by a strafing attack. It wasn’t serious, he said, but it was going to cause some variation in the pressure for a while.

“One of the rounds must have penetrated a little deeper,” he said over the intercom. *“I’m putting some men on it now.”*

“That will cost us some speed,” said Dobrynin. “You’ll lose two or three knots. I’ll see what I can do.”

They soon heard something Admiral Volsky had hoped he would never have to listen to again, the sound of a heavy caliber main gun shell screaming through the night, aiming for his ship. The distant swoosh and explosion of the heavy rounds in the sea was also audible, and it gave him no comfort to think that shells the size and weight of his car back home were now being hurled at his ship.

But *Kirov* had nothing to fear from those huge rounds for the moment. It was a much smaller shell that would cause the problem, just a twenty millimeter round that had pierced the ventilation shaft down low, near the base of the main con mast, and traveled inward deep enough to nick a small metal hose that was carrying the outflow from the reactor’s secondary cooling water cycle. The water was used to generate the steam that would drive her turbines. It seemed a small wound compared to the damage the ship had suffered earlier, just a pin prick in fact. But it was to have far graver consequences. Pressure dropped. The heat in the steam reaction changed with the reduced water flow. For a time the steam would actually increase with the

added temperature, but the heat was rising too rapidly there and the water flowing through the U tubes that would eventually return to the reactor core was getting too hot.

Temperature and pressure are part of the delicate balance in any reactor core, and Dobrynin was soon to have more on his hands than a strange neutron flux.

* * *

The big rounds fell wide and very long, as Fedorov expected the first salvo would. There was virtually no chance the opening salvos would find their target under these conditions, and he was surprised the ship had even fired with the range at 28,000 meters. The British battleship *Warspite* had managed a stunning hit on the Italian dreadnought *Giulio Cesare* at 26,000 yards, and the German battlecruiser *Scharnhorst* had achieved the same with a long range hit on the carrier *Glorious*, but these were rare events for the record books, and seldom achieved in most combat at sea.

He knew that spotter planes would be calling out the shell falls even now, and watching *Kirov's* wake closely to note any curvature that would indicate a new heading change. It would take some time for the enemy to slowly adjust her fire and find the correct range and bearing, and in that time *Kirov* had to punish the ship so badly that it could no longer pose a threat.

Thankfully they still had the means to do so. They could already see the fires flaring up amidships on the HD video screen, and knew they had hurt their enemy, putting more missiles on this target with four hits than any other ship they had fought, yet its speed was undiminished, and there was obviously nothing wrong with her guns. *Yamato* was still a dangerous threat.

Karpov noted the fires himself, reaching up to adjust the fit of his cap briefly. “Missiles remaining?” he asked calmly.

“Six Moskit-IIs still ready sir. Four P-900 cruise missiles; five MOS-III.” They were down to fifteen missiles.

“I read three small contacts closing to 24,000 meters” said Rodenko. “Those must be destroyers.”

“Very well. Activate forward deck guns, both the 152mm and 100mm guns please. Engage those targets at once.”

The Captain wanted to pepper the destroyers well beyond the range of their small deck guns, but he was forgetting the enemy torpedoes, and

minutes after the deck guns had begun their work he saw Tasarov stiffen, eyes alight, and his own heart leapt with the thought that they now also had a submarine to contend with.

"Torpedoes in the water!" said Tasarov, "multiple contacts. Three, now five… now eight contacts from a bearing of 225 degrees."

"Submarine?"

"No, sir. Those must be off those destroyers."

"I'll handle this," said Fedorov. "Helm, left rudder twenty. Come to 45 degrees northeast."

"Helm answering and coming around on 45 degrees, sir, aye."

Fedorov was turning his backside to the torpedoes, presenting the slimmest possible target. Though the Long Lance torpedoes could easily close the distance, he had little fear they would find his ship. They could not home on his wake, and all he had to do was watch carefully for their approach and steer an evasive course if necessary. He knew the Japanese destroyers had fired in anger more than anything else, as their own ships were straddled with *Kirov's* accurate gun fire.

"Two more Moskit-IIs on the battleship," said Karpov firmly. "Same program, above and below. We'll give them another one-two punch."

"Aye sir," said Samsonov, "missiles firing."

Yamato was going to suffer again, but even as the sleek missiles leapt up and declined to their aiming points, the men on the bridge saw the night horizon ripped open yet again as the enemy guns sought them in the darkness. The bright backwash of the missile firing lit the ship up, and the sharp eyes aboard the crow's nests tuned their superb night optics another few points to the good.

Yamato's second salvo would also miss; *Kirov's* would not. The Sunburns struck the ship aft again, one slamming directly into the massive rear turret this time, and the second plunging down on the broad fantail where it hit one of the huge cranes and exploded before its armor piercing warhead could strike the 200mm deck armor. The deck was still buckled downward with the explosion, and the missile fuel now ignited another fire aft, right in the midst of the seaplane tending operations. No more spotting planes would rise to search for the enemy, and two that had been spotted on the catapults were immolated.

As for the aft turret, it had been turned to face the distant unseen foe, and the missile struck just beneath the leftmost gun barrel, flush against its

hardened faceplate of 26 inch steel. The gun barrel was jerked upwards by the explosion so violently that the gears used to elevate and depress it were broken and made inoperable. The crew inside the turret took a fearful pounding, and new fires were raging outside their massive armored shell, but the armor held. Seven men had been knocked senseless, yet others were crawling up from the depths of the huge magazines below, to take their place. Two of the three guns could still be fired. The turret was still in the fight.

Damage control chiefs shouted reports to the bridge. The first fire amidships had been quelled, only to be restarted again when the Sunburns rekindled it. Thick black smoke still poured up from the heart of the ship, adding darkness to the night as the angry fires burned. Now desperate crews were rushing to fight the fires aft, where one of the two seaplane catapults, which would have been the height of a five story building if stood on its end, now jutted at a near 90 degree angle from the ship, bent and twisted.

Aboard *Kirov*, Fedorov skillfully maneuvered the ship as a fan of eight torpedoes approached, and when the danger had passed he returned to a heading of 67 degrees. The three Japanese destroyers would not get a chance to fire their second torpedo salvo. Now all three of *Kirov's* accurate 152mm guns were pounding them. *Hamikaze* was dead in the water. *Maikaze* was burning amidships, her captain dead. *Nowaki* fared a little better, making smoke in a futile attempt to screen the other ships. Her decks were already crowded with survivors from the cruiser *Jintsu*, and her Captain Kora thought the better of pressing his attack under these circumstances.

"Those destroyers have been stopped at 20,000 meters," said Rodenko. One is dead in the water, the others are withdrawing."

"Well enough, secure deck guns," said Karpov. "Any speed change on the primary contact?"

"No, sir. They are still making just under 27 knots."

"As are we," said Karpov. "Helm, I thought we were at full battle speed."

"Sir, my indicator is ahead full."

"But the reading is 27 knots," the Captain turned to Fedorov, raising an eyebrow. "You are correct about this ship," he said. We've put six harpoons in this whale and still it comes undaunted. But our speed is off, and that is a matter of some concern."

"I'll see about it," said Fedorov.

"We'll hit them again. Another round, Samsonov. Same as before. One above, one below."

“Just a moment, Captain,” Fedorov interjected. “Hold up, Mr. Samsonov.” His mind had been on evading the Long Lance torpedoes the enemy sent his way, then it suddenly occurred to him that they had Long Lances of their own!

“We’ve been attacking this ship’s superstructure since the hull is so heavily armored. But there’s another way to pierce the hull—what about torpedoes? We have torpedoes, don’t we?”

“Why… Yes,” said the Captain. “Yes we do! The Vodopad system has UGST-2 torpedoes.” The weapon was a highly adaptable modular system, allowing for different propulsion and warhead options, hence the “U” for its universal capabilities. The ship carried tubes on either side, the ports opening on the hull itself.

“What’s their range?” asked Fedorov.

“Over 35,000 meters,” said Karpov with a smile.

The ‘Vodopad’ or ‘Waterfall’ system was an apt description for the way the torpedoes would eject from the side of the ship, a waterfall of steam and gas in their wake, rolling down off the side of the hull. The torpedoes were capable of using nuclear warheads, though *Kirov* had none of these in inventory on this mission. After ejecting it would dip into the sea, propelled several hundred feet out before the tail fins and control elements would flip out and the pumpjet propulsor engine would activate. It was one of the first torpedoes to use an onboard digital computer and had wire guided control options, as well as a dual channel homing and detonation for either acoustic or electromagnetic operation. It also had integrated sonar that could detect ship wakes and follow them to the target. In effect, it was the Long Lance on steroids, and with all these redundant control systems, it was not going to miss a ship the size of *Yamato*, no matter what their captain did to try and avoid it.

Perhaps it was his distaste for submarines and torpedoes that had prevented Karpov from selecting the weapon earlier, his mind on the missiles, and pleased with the results he had been getting with them. Yet *Yamato* was as hardened a target as the ship would ever fire upon, and even now they saw her fourth salvo blast at them in the distance, as if to shout back that they were hit, but not hurt, and their guns were still seeking them in the night. These rounds would fall much closer, the Type 92 *Shagekiban* fire control ‘computer’ slowly walking the big shells to a point where they were now of some concern. The range had fallen to just under 22,000 meters.

“Ready on Vodopad system, Samsonov. Starboard side tubes.”

“Aye, sir.”

“Two torpedoes please, and you may fire when ready.”

Karpov was being stingy. His impulse was to fire the entire battery in a spread of five torpedoes and end this battle there and then. But the empty SAM silos and the rapidly diminishing missile SSM inventory was moderating his choices. He wanted to hold on to as much combat capability as he could. The torpedoes swished into the water and went streaking away, their wakeless propulsion system making them stealthy on top of the already lethal nature of the weapon.

“That may not be enough,” said Fedorov. “Yamato took seven American torpedoes before she sank, and that took an hour and a half.”

“Very well,” said Karpov. “One more for Mister Fedorov.” He looked at Samsonov with a smile, convinced they now had the battle well in hand. There would be no way the enemy ship could evade those torpedoes. They were carrying a 425kg warhead, and they were going to hurt anything they struck, and badly.

Then something happened that no one had counted on, except perhaps Lieutenant Commander Hayashi when he bravely dove his crippled Val dive bomber into *Kirov’s* aft battle bridge. That strike had occurred right above the Vodopad system, and only the second barrier of the citadel floor there, 200mm thick, had prevented it from going deeper to ignite the torpedo magazines. But there had been a fire, a very serious one, and not all the damage had been discovered and repaired in the brief time since the plane had flamed into the ship. Control cabling for the number three UGST torpedo had been burned, its wiring exposed, and when the fire order was given the tube itself also had a slight warp from concussion when the ship had been shaken with Hayashi’s hit.

The intrepid Japanese pilot who had first put a 250kg bomb on the aft quarter of the ship before riding his plane to death with a second hit was now reaching out from the grave to strike at his enemy once more.

Chapter 32

The number three torpedo failed to eject, jutting like a broken finger from the side of the ship, jammed in its own firing tube, yet its firing cycle was still active. The preliminary propulsion jet was trying to engage, and yet the system fed a fault signal to the unit's computer brain, and internal backup systems were ordered to kick in after a five second delay.

"Misfire on the number three torpedo!" Samsonov shouted, his voice loud and deep.

"Abort!" Karpov's order was obvious, but Samsonov had already thumbed the abort switch. The torpedo's propulsion system shut down and its engine was stilled, yet now there was no way they were going to use the remaining tubes on that side of the ship until crews could get in and clear the misfire and check for further damage. That was not going to happen in this engagement, but at least *Kirov* had two torpedoes out and running true, two long sleek Moray eels in the water driving on at 40 knots, a little over twenty meters per second. Even at that speed their time on target was over seventeen minutes away. In that time *Yamato* was likely to get in many more of her main gun salvos, and now the range was falling to 21,000 meters. Ninety seconds later the big battleship fired again, the rounds falling no more than 800 meters off *Kirov's* stern, leading her now.

"What I wouldn't give for a few more SAMs" said Karpov. "Those seaplanes are feeding back shell fall corrections to that ship. Nikolin, can we jam all normal radio frequencies they might be using?"

"I'm sure we can, sir."

"Then do it! Wide area jam. Ready on Moskit-II system again, Samsonov. Two more missiles please, the same as before. We can't wait for those torpedoes." Karpov looked at his watch, then gave the order to fire. Two more Sunburns ejected and roared away at five second intervals, one sea skimmer and the last of those reprogrammed for plunging descent. *Kirov's* missile count now slipped to eleven.

* * *

Yamamoto had felt his proud ship taking one blow after another, yet she fought on. The bridge crew was intense at their stations, the gunnery officer

shouting out encouragement through the voice tubes to the men below. The ship's commander stood tall by the binnacle, bracing himself each time the bugle call gave the five second warning before firing. The spotters were eagerly watching through binoculars and longer range optics, looking for the huge white water splashes glistening up in the moonlight.

When the two brave night fighters out of Rabaul had come streaking in, the men on the bridge cheered, then saw them blown to pieces by the demon ship they were stalking. Now the Admiral stood by Kuroshima, in awe as he watched the dark horizon light up again, first hoping his guns had struck home, then realizing that more rockets had been fired at his ship. What was this enemy? If the British could build such weapons then he knew, beyond any shadow of a doubt, that the war was lost for certain. There was no defense against them, no answer but to doggedly close the range and endure one punishing blow after another, his ship on fire, men dying, thick smoke choking the open topped gun stations amidships.

Here they came again, one rocket blazing in just above the surface of the water while a second climbed high up into the sky to fall like thunder and lightning on his intrepid ship and crew—and they never missed. Surely they must be piloted as Kuroshima suggested, but now his hands were as white as his gloves on the nearest hand rail, body stiff as he braced himself for yet another series of hits. How much more could the ship take? Kuroshima's words haunted him as the missiles came in. This ship was more than it seemed. It was Japan's very best, the pinnacle of their naval engineering. Every man in the navy coveted a posting to *Yamato*, and not simply because of the relatively plush living conditions and better food. It was the flagship of the Imperial Japanese Navy. If he were to lose it here… All this passed through his mind in the barest instant, and then the thunder came.

The first missile struck just above the weather deck, slamming right into the heavy barbette of the forward main gun turret with a brilliant explosion that shattered two windows on the bridge and sent one junior officer careening against a bulkhead. The barbette withstood the blow, but the damage was sufficient to impede its easy rotation until crews could fight the fire and clear debris. In the meantime, the gun could not properly train on the target, and relief crews rushed inside to replace wounded men and re-man their positions. Five seconds later the second missile plunged down on the ship about 300 feet forward of that position, on the broad and relatively empty deck of the bow. There it smashed through the armor and burned into

the ship's interior, plunging through two more decks and igniting yet another major fire.

The ship now had fires from bow to stern, yet her speed was unimpeded and she turned slightly to allow the two functioning guns of her aft turret to join the battle. The next salvo came only from the number two forward turret, an angry reprisal that managed to drop shells short, but within 500 meters of the enemy ship. Spotters on the high main mast eagerly shouted out the news to their officers, who then relayed the information to the fire control station, and the crews hastily fed in corrections to make their next best guess at where *Kirov* would be in a hundred and twenty seconds.

* * *

Anton Fedorov did not want to make that rendezvous with an 18.1 inch shell. He gave the order ahead two thirds and starboard twenty, slowing and turning in towards the enemy ship. *Yamato* was now clearly visible in the distance, her massive silhouette illuminated by her own fires. He knew the enemy would correct their shortfall by firing longer, presuming he would maintain his old speed. By slowing and turning he hoped the next salvo would be long and well ahead of the ship. He was correct.

Three more rounds fell in a tight pattern, this time about 700 meters off his forward port side. Elated with his success, he turned to the helmsman and gave his next order. "Port twenty and ahead full!" He was chasing salvos, but now he saw what looked like three explosions near the aft quarter of the enemy ship. Both of Karpov's torpedoes hit home with a vengeance. The third explosion was *Yamato's* aft turret firing, and the officer in charge had not corrected based on the last salvo from the forward guns. He was using stale data, but it proved to be remarkably fresh when the spotters saw the results. To compound matters, when Fedorov called for renewed speed, it was not there. The damage worked by that small twenty millimeter round had forced Dobrynin to feed in much more cooling to the reactors, and they were slowly losing power.

Two rounds came withering in towards the ship, the sound of their approach magnified greatly. God, no, thought Fedorov. *God help us, no!*

The first round came hurtling towards the main mast, just a little high, but so close that it sheared away the Top Mast antennae as it screamed by and plunged into the sea off the ship's port side with a massive geyser. The

second round fell just shy of the ship's starboard side sending a huge column of water up beyond the height of the main mast, which cascaded down onto the weather deck in a great fall of seawater. The ship rocked from the wave action generated by the titanic rounds, careening through the falling spray and pressing on.

Fedorov finally released his breath. A straddle! The enemy had finally found the range and the ship had just come within a hair's breadth of annihilation. Twenty or thirty feet in either direction and those rounds would have broken her back.

Karpov was leaning over the radar screen with Rodenko when his monitor quavered and then went entirely black on the Top Mast system. *Kirov* had just taken a head butt and a hard thumb to the eyes. The Fregat system was still off line, and now they had lost their other long range weather and general surveillance radar. She was blind.

"I've lost Top Mast," Rodenko reported. "The entire system is down. Attempting to Cross circuit to the MR-212B system….No luck, sir. I've got yellow fault lights all through the navigation radar sets as well. The Active Phased Array is presently offline, and in reset diagnostic mode. I can give you short range returns with individual system fire control radars, but we have no effective long range coverage at the moment."

That was not all. Byko called up to the bridge and indicated the emergency hull patch had been jarred by the near miss and was again leaking. They were taking seawater amidships. Dobrynin seconded the matter by confirming he could only give the ship twenty knots while he worked to control his reactors. Events were stacking up like good cards in the enemy hand, and Fedorov could only think that *Yamato* was now about to play an Ace at any moment.

"Helm, port twenty and all the speed you can give me!" The young captain wanted an immediate course change, this time in the same direction he had turned earlier instead of a ziz-zag back to starboard. He wanted to get the ship off the range line that now must surely be plotted by the enemy.

"There was a second contact bearing on our position from the southwest," said Karpov. "We were looking at it just before we lost the radar scan."

"Sir…." Tasarov spoke up now. "I can hear it on sonar." He had been listening closely to the battle, both his equipment and inner ear sorting out the chaos in the sound field. When the big rounds came in so close he thanked God that his system was capable of detecting and muting sound spikes to

protect his ears. It was state of the art, and among the best surface sonar systems in his world of 2021. *Kirov's* own screws were a loud wash over everything, but Tasarov had that signature well profiled and he was filtering it well. He also had a good read on the deep thrum of *Yamato's* screws, but there was a third contact, faint but growing louder, higher in pitch, more distant, with a unique signal pattern, and he had been listening to it for some time now.

"That will be the heavy cruiser *Tone*," said Fedorov.

"I last marked it at about a hundred kilometers and closing fast at the angle we've been running on." Tasarov confirmed the estimated range, then noticed something more.

"The screw pattern for the *Yamato* contact has changed significantly, sir. I think they're slowing down too."

Tasarov had very good ears.

* * *

The torpedoes found their target easily enough after their long seventeen minute run. One activated its wake homing mode, easily profiled the big ship's frothing footprints, and rode them right into the rightmost screw, demolishing it with its powerful explosion. The second followed, slipped a few hundred feet wide and then detonated to damage the ship's hull very near the end of her underwater torpedo bulwark protection. There was an immediate hull breach and *Yamato* started shipping water across three compartments. The ship also reeled to starboard, her rudder batted violently by the explosion of the first torpedo, and also damaged.

The sudden movement threw off all the carefully plotted calculations that had enabled the guns to straddle their enemy moments ago, and now officers and crews were struggling to re-plot, as one new sighting variable after another was shouted down to the fire control operators, new roll, new speed, new bearing, new declination. They were essentially starting from scratch, with only a decent handle on the probable range to the target. The bugle sounded and the aft turret fired its two good barrels again, but the shots were now well off the mark.

"We are losing speed, sir," the helmsman reported. "Twenty knots… eighteen knots… I'm having difficulty getting back on our heading, sir."

The flooding had surged into two boiler rooms, and was now entering a

third. *Yamato* quickly lost 25% of her steam and the engines slowed, the grinding of the damaged screws now clearly evident as a rumbling vibration.

Yamamoto realized that the ship had been hit by torpedoes. So this demon has yet another sting, he thought. Their torpedoes are as good as our own! Now he had lost the speed he needed to stay in the chase and close the range. His guns were already at an ideal range now, but the ship's new heading had taken the forward turrets out of the action.

"Sir," said Rear Admiral Takayanagi, the ship's assigned commander. "I believe we have jammed our rudder with that explosion aft. We are circling. The gunners will have fits trying to plot solutions now. We will need to put divers in the water to clear the damage, and that flooding will cause us to list to starboard in time if it is not corrected."

Yamamoto looked at Kuroshima, the gravity of the moment apparent to them both. The ship could no longer continue the engagement. The fires fore and aft were one thing, now they also had flooding, loss of speed, and a damaged rudder. He could no longer maneuver adequately, and was, for all intents and purposes, at the mercy of his enemy now if they continued to fire those terrible rockets. When would the next torpedoes come?

"Begin counter-flooding. We will continue firing to harass the enemy as best we can," he said resolutely, knowing the situation was a lost cause. "There is no other course we can take for the moment. Do what you must to manage the ship Takayanagi, but this battle is over. Our concern now is saving the ship and any man left alive aboard her."

"Aye, sir."

She had taken hits from two P-900s, six Moskit-II missiles, but the two torpedo hits had been the telling blows. *Yamato* would not sink that night, but she could no longer fight effectively, and it was only the similar gravity of the damage control situation aboard *Kirov* that would end this battle in a draw, though Karpov would count the victory on *Kirov's* side nonetheless. It was clear to him which ship had administered the greatest punishment, and which had endured. Yet *Kirov* had come within a hair's breadth of having her back broken by an 18 inch shell, and the memory of that would not soon be forgotten.

The Russian battlecruiser was also taking water, her earlier wound opening to the sea again. A torpedo was jammed in her port Vodopad number three tube, her Top Mast radars blasted away, her ventilation conduits riddled with 20mm rounds and a slowly rising heat situation in her reactor was

beginning to cause Dobrynin more concern. He asked the Admiral, still at his side, if the ship could keep speed moderate, and Volsky was soon hastening to the bridge.

Both fighters seemed exhausted for the moment, and a brief interval of relative calm settled over the scene, punctuated only by the distant thunder of *Yamato's* aft turret, firing in protest, yet widely off the mark. Fedorov steered a course to open the range, wanting nothing more to do with the wounded behemoth that was still growling at them on the restless seas. He hoped the battle was finally over and that they could slip away into the night to lick their wounds, but these hopes would soon be dashed.

Off to the south a man stood stiffly at the forward view ports on the bridge of the cruiser *Tone*, his eyes pressed tightly on his field glasses as he noted the distant amber glow on the horizon. He heard a faint rumble, like thunder, and knew that a great battle was underway ahead of him, and that ships were burning, men fighting and dying on the heartless sea. His scout planes had been unable to contact him for some time now, the airwaves garbled with a strange wash of static, but he knew he was close. Battle stations had been sounded, the crews tensely alert, and all of *Tone's* four twin 8 inch gun turrets forward of the bridge were ready for the fight. Behind him came two more heavy cruisers, *Nachi* and *Myoko*.

He was Captain Sanji Iwabuchi, and he was marching boldly forward to the sound of the guns.

Chapter 33

It is hard to say what keeps a man in a fight when he knows he has already been beaten. Heavyweights had been beaten senseless by their opponents and yet still fought on, answering the bell with bloodied faces, swollen eyes, and broken ribs. In war it was much the same. Men fought on in one desperate lost battle after another, all through human history. They strove and grunted and charged their enemy under impossible circumstances, willing to die first before they would ever admit defeat.

Half way around the world the Russians and Germans would begin their grueling five month battle for Stalingrad this very week, and in a few months time, on that cruel December after the 6th Army had been encircled, the surrounding Russian troops would see something that amazed them on Christmas Eve. Every section and platoon in the surrounded German Army fired tracer rounds up into the sky, lighting up the massive perimeter in celebration, spending badly needed ammunition to also say, 'here we are. We are still here.'

The Japanese character was easily set to this mind, and though their navy had taken a severe beating in the last twenty-four hours, it fought on. No captain or admiral at sea in that era had ever faced steeper odds or a more powerful foe in a surface engagement. Had *Kirov* been in her prime, unblooded by weeks of combat at sea and still with full magazines, she would have fought the battle quite differently. *Yamato* would have never seen her, and never once been in a position to fire those massive guns. A salvo of ten or more missiles would have found her in the night, one single, lethal barrage that would have ravaged her superstructure and caused uncontrollable fires.

This is how Karpov might have preferred to fight his battle, with the struggle for the all important first salvo uncontested, the sole prerogative of the powerful ship beneath his feet. All the long discussions in the naval forums would mean nothing when those missiles hit home. End of story. Discussion over. Yet, given their strange circumstances, and the fact that he could not know what he might be facing in days ahead, he had to throw his punches in a slow and measured way, beating down his enemy by degrees, and hoping he could use as few missiles or torpedoes as possible in the process.

That said, the skill and determination of the Japanese Navy had seen them

harry and hound the battlecruiser across a thousand miles of ocean, and to within a hair's breadth of destruction. And there would be no discussion about that either, no meeting of the minds between Yamamoto and Volsky to find another way.

Yamato had taken every punch, every hit, and yet still fought on. Karpov watched it now, his head shaking in near disbelief as the ship continued to fire in frustrated anger, though its guns could not find their target as *Kirov* slowly slipped away. My God, he thought. There's something to be said for armor after all. That ship took eight missiles and two torpedoes, beaten, but not broken. I could put more torpedoes into it from my port side Vodopad tubes, but we desperately need every weapon we have now. There's no point in continuing this madness any further.

He turned to Fedorov. "I think we can safely move out of range now. Then we'll need to see to our own damage and determine what to do next. That cruiser will be up on us soon enough, and Rodenko saw ships behind it earlier, before we lost the Top Mast radar."

"Very well, Captain," Fedorov had a distant, empty look in his eyes. "We'll steer 45 northeast until we put some sea room between us and the enemy."

And so it ended.

Karpov turned slowly to the *mishman* at the log and spoke quietly, an almost solemn expression on his face.

"Let the log read that at 21:40 hours battlecruiser *Kirov* disengaged from her action against battleship *Yamato*, after achieving ten hits on the enemy and leaving a badly damaged ship in her wake. Report damage sustained by this vessel by referencing Chief Byko's log entry for this date. Anton Fedorov Commanding; tactical executive officer, Vladimir Karpov."

"Sir, the log entry has been recorded."

"As you were, *mishman*."

The Captain looked over at Fedorov, and saw his eyes had glassed over, a hidden pain there as he stared at the HD panel above them, watching *Yamato* burn on infrared. Karpov stepped to the young Captain's side and spoke in a lowered voice .

"It will get easier," he said quietly.

"I'm not sure I want it to," said Fedorov, and Karpov knew what he meant, nodding.

"Admiral on the bridge!"

Volsky huffed in through the main hatch, closing it behind him as he struggled to catch his breath. He wasted no time, his eyes quickly finding Karpov and Fedorov where they stood by the navigation station.

"We'll have to slow the ship again. Byko reports damage to the hull patch and renewed flooding near the reactors."

Fedorov nodded, "Ahead two thirds," he said "and steady on 45 degrees." He seemed a bit listless and sullen now.

"So the ship is in one piece after all. My God, is that what we did to the enemy?" He pointed out the forward view ports, seeing the dark silhouette of *Yamato* crowned by the wild dance of flame and fire. "Well done," he said. "Both of you. But I have more news. It's *started.* Dobrynin is seeing the same odd spikes in the core flux readings. He can hear it. There was also a vibration just now as I came up the stairs. Did you feel it? I think we may be shifting…moving somewhere else."

"That would be most welcome at the moment," said Karpov. Then they all felt yet another odd vibration, and a palpable smell of ozone in the air. Karpov instinctively looked about him, thinking a panel may have shorted out and they might have an electrical fire, but the crew sat attentively at their stations, and no one else seemed alarmed. For a brief moment he saw the glowering hulk of *Yamato* seem to dim and fade on the horizon, and assumed she had been masked in the billowing black smoke of her own fires.

"We're pulsing again," said Fedorov. "Thank God. I wish it had happened hours ago, and then we might have avoided that." He pointed, also noticing the fading glow on the horizon. "Let us hope we don't regress this time and end up back in the same borscht. I don't think we need another round with the Imperial Japanese Navy—let alone the Americans."

The ship was moving farther and faster than they realized, moving in and out of time itself, even as she slowed below twenty knots so Byko could reduce the stress on the dislodged hull patch. But something else was now going to happen that no man among them could have possibly anticipated, or even believed.

Kirov moved, the very fabric of her being becoming gossamer thin, a wisp of shadow on the sea, a vaporous menacing mist. It seemed only seconds to the crew, and no man could really say they noticed it, but the ship was indeed "pulsing" as Fedorov had come to describe it, fading in and out of the time period she had been trapped in, slipping into infinity and the limbo of uttermost nowhere. She loitered there but a few brief moments before

falling back into the turbulent waters of the Coral Sea and her private war on war itself.

What seemed like a few insubstantial seconds away in this otherworldly place and time, were actually long minutes in the realm she had come from, the wee hours of August 27, 1942. She had been sailing at twenty knots, still moving in space, yet ten minutes passed in 1942 for every second she was away, and that happened again and again as the ship pulsed in time. The enemy ship that had been chasing her now had ample time to close the range.

Tasarov heard it before anyone saw anything. The sound that had once been a faint, high whine in his headphones was now grossly magnified, and when he looked at the signal profile he was shocked to see the pattern matched that of the enemy cruiser that had been hastening to join the battle.

"Sir," he began, "that cruiser contact…I'm reading a range of only 50,000 meters now."

Karpov spun around. "What? That's impossible. That ship was nearly a hundred kilometers behind us just a minute ago."

"It was, sir…At least I thought as much, but it seems to have cut that range in half!"

Fedorov took keen notice of this. "From their perspective we moved nearly 8000 miles in a single day when we vanished on August 23rd and reappeared off the Australian coast just a day later. I guess Time loses the beat when she plays a new song for us. It could be that time slows down for us when we shift, and then re-synchs when we appear again—like an old cassette tape fast forwarded to a new point in the music. That ship is gaining on us every time we pulse."

There came a third vibration, and *Kirov* shuddered, slipping away again into the nameless void, a shadow on a sea of shadows now. Karpov walked slowly to the forward viewports, seeing the enemy battleship quaver and fade in the distance—and then the ship vanished. *Kirov* hovered like a single breath of God in time without end, then reappeared, gaining form and substance again in the real world of rock and sea and sky, and men in steel ships on the Coral Sea of 1942. Karpov suddenly saw what looked like a vast darkness looming off the starboard beam, a brooding, menacing thunderstorm, and then it seemed to sharpen to hard angles, as if a shadow had been frozen solid, resolving to the shape and form of a ship of war!

The moonlight gleamed on her long, forward deck, the white bow wave rising high as she came at the ship, hurtling toward them on a collision

course.

“My God!” He pointed, a look of utter surprise and amazement on his face. “My *God!* It’s coming right at us! Hard to starboard, ahead full! Brace for impact!”

He had desperately tried to maneuver the ship to prevent a direct collision, and *Kirov* shuddered, not only with the straining effort of her turbines, the sea still clawing at the open gash in her side, her rudders vibrating as they fought to turn the ship, but also she quavered again with the cold hand of Mother Time on her neck.

The captain and crew of the heavy cruiser *Tone* were equally astounded by what they saw, a formless shadow on the sea that must have been unseen behind an impenetrable cloud of smoke. It suddenly became the long threatening presence of a great warship! Then a strange light came over it, as if it had been struck by lightning, a Saint Elmo’s fire of doom crowning her tall battlements and gilded decks—and she began to fade away, just as the sharp forward prow of the *Tone* slammed into her hull in a massive unavoidable collision.

There came the sound of metal on metal, a grinding scream of agony, and then it faded away as quickly as it came, and to Captain Iwabuchi on the bridge, it seemed that his ship was slowly being swallowed by the enemy vessel, as if *Mizuchi* had opened its maw to devour the smaller cruiser.

Aboard *Kirov* they saw the ship plunge right into the starboard side of *Kirov’s* broad armored hull, and then there was absolute chaos. *Tone* was there, and yet *not* there, careening forward through the ship, her form and structure a luminescent, translucent green, a ghostly phosphorous phantom ship that cut right through the heart of the Russian battlecruiser. And they could see right *through* the ship, through her bulkheads and into the labyrinthine metal innards where they glimpsed ghostly figures of men standing their spectral watches.

They heard screams of men frightened beyond their capacity to understand and endure. Karpov covered his ears, his eyes bulging at what he saw—the contorted faces of the enemy crew as the tall bridge pagoda on *Tone* passed completely through the armored citadel. And there, in the midst of a host of leering wraiths from hell, came the stalwart and brooding face and form of Sanji Iwabuchi, his arms clutching the binnacle on the bridge of *Tone*, officer’s hat pulled low on his forehead above murderous eyes. And it seemed that the soul of that man passed right through Karpov himself, and he

suddenly felt his mind flooded with the awareness of another being, the dour Japanese Captain in all his wrath and ire, and all his carefully controlled madness.

The vision passed, as the ship plunged on through, and Karpov was doubled over with nausea, dropping to one knee, bewildered and beset with a fear unlike any other he had known in his life. The wail of frightened and panicked men followed in the wake of the ghostly ship, and it slowly faded, a long distended screed that diminished until it was devoured by the dark.

The sound of men screaming below decks still echoed through the ship, resounding through the corridors and passages, fading to a whimper of silence. Then a thick, cottony darkness enfolded them. Karpov turned to see Fedorov literally shaking with fear and shock. The Admiral was unconscious on the deck. Rodenko had his head buried in his arms, slumped over his lifeless radar station. Tasarov was just staring, his eyes unfocused, jaw slack. He heard the sound of a junior officer weeping at his station. Only Samsonov still sat on guard, his muscled arm poised over his CIC panels, an expression of shock giving way to the light of fire and anger in his eyes.

Somehow, Karpov forced his own limbs to move, fighting off the cold shiver of infinity. They had sailed through hell—or rather it had just sailed through them! They were somewhere else now. He looked out the viewport thinking to see the Japanese cruiser, but the sea was empty and calm. There was no sign of the angry glow of fire on the horizon. *Yamato* was gone as well. They had moved in time!

“Fedorov!” he had hold of the younger man’s shoulders now. “Fedorov! We’ve moved! We’ve shifted somewhere else. That ship…it passed right through us. God, what a nightmare! It went right *through* us. But we’re safe now… I think we are safe….” He was looking fearfully over his shoulder, as if the flaming hulk of *Yamato* might come boring in on them next, but all was calm. There was only the long wavering shimmer of the cold moonlight on the sea.

It was over.

Epilogue

“There are an infinite number of universes existing side by side and through which our consciousnesses constantly pass. In these universes, all possibilities exist. You are alive in some, long dead in others, and never existed in still others. Many of our "ghosts" could indeed be visions of people going about their business in a parallel universe or another time—or both.”

—Paul F. Eno, *Faces at the Window*

It took a long time before the crew was able to shake off the terror of that night. It was not simply the heat and stress of battle, the long hours tensely at action stations, the lack of sleep, the meals snatched between endless shifts. All that they could have taken in stride, holding to their discipline and training in spite of severe trial. They had been a ship of raw and untested men, and now they were as seasoned as any crew who ever fought at sea, veterans all.

No. It was that last insane and unbelievable moment, as terrifying as it was astonishing to them all, when heavy cruiser *Tone* and all her crew of 824 sailors and officers finally caught up with the ship they had been chasing, and drove right through its heart. In doing so they passed right through the minds and souls of an equal compliment of men aboard *Kirov*, and each crew knew something of the other, in a dark, macabre nightmare meeting at sea that no man among them ever wanted to recall, or speak of again. Ships pass in the night, wrote Longfellow, and speak to one another in passing.

Kirov had sailed east, slipping past Milne Bay at the southern tip of Papua New Guinea, a silent ship on an empty sea. They wanted to know that they would not regress, waiting breathlessly in those first hours and fearing that the ship would again be plunged into the cauldron of battle, scalded further by those turbulent and heated waters, the controlled insanity men now called the Second World War. But the ship seemed stable, the reactors showing no odd neutron flux, even though Dobrynin was now using manual backup controls to keep it running. It slowly dawned on them that the ship had reached some stable time, though they did not have any idea where they were.

The hideous collision with that phantom cruiser had a strange effect on all

the equipment on board. The electronics were fitful and computers off line, with systems failing all over the ship. It was all Dobrynin could do to keep the power stable, finally isolating the source of the damage that had caused his cooling problem and fixing it before events turned critical.

Nikolin could not even raise anything on his radio, which did not surprise any man among them. All they had seen, each and every time they shifted away from the horrors of the 1940s, had been an empty world, a blackened world, a world of shadows, destruction and shame. It was all that was left of the world they had left, and each man still carried some hidden doubt that *Kirov* was somehow responsible.

Admiral Volsky recovered, as they all eventually did, and they decided what to do next. East lay the islands he had yearned to find for so long, scattered peaks of paradise at the top of undersea mountains, surrounded by the pristine blue-green waters of the Pacific. They had sailed that way, slipping past San Cristobal at the tip of the Solomons, past Vanuatu and north of Fiji Island, hoping to ease past Samoa and find Tahiti.

All the while the ship's systems slowly began to wink back on, basic circuits operating again, lights and power stabilizing. It was as if *Kirov* was slowly rousing from some long and fitful slumber, a bad dream that had haunted them all these many weeks. Their chronometer read August 28th now, but it was any man's guess as to what year or day it really was. Then Nikolin tinkered with his radio sets and suddenly reported that he was getting a distant, faded signal!

"What is it, Nikolin?" It was the first stirring of the ship's higher level electronics. The mechanical things had kept on working. They had reverted to manual controls on many systems while the weary engineers tried in vain to isolate faults and reboot the main computers.

Samsonov turned, leaning on a brawny arm and called out to Karpov. "Captain, I have CIC control once again. My board is rebooting. Missiles green, torpedoes nominal, all systems checking in with good diagnostics, sir. We have teeth again."

"That's good to know, but all too few," said Karpov. It had been most unsettling to be sailing in these waters without computers, sensors or adequate control of their weapons.

With that first remote wash of sound in Nikolin's radio speaker, they suddenly realized that systems were slowly winking on again all over the ship. Dobrynin called to say he had computerized control of the reactor again

and could now give them normal speeds. Rodenko saw his short range radars snap to life again, and the longer range panels of the Phased Array were suddenly active. Tasarov's passive sonar was suddenly singing to him again, a smile on his face as he listened, indicating thumbs up.

All the officers gathered round Nikolin's radio station as he struggled to tune in the distant signal. Would they hear the heartless stream of coded signals flashed between men at war? He was hearing words now… English…. And with sinking hearts they first thought they were they back in it once again, in the merciless waters of the South Pacific of 1942, fated to meet the American fleet this time, their arsenals badly depleted and their luck surely running low as well.

Then Tasarov's elation suddenly became shock and surprise. He had his beloved sonar back again, and he immediately had closed his eyes, listening to the song of the sea, letting its sounds and rhythms and distant tempos enfold him again. He had been like a fish out of water as the ship sailed east, hearing nothing, knowing nothing of the sea around him, alone and struggling with the memories of that awful phantom ship and the reality of his own immediate uselessness. Now he could hear again, even as Rodenko could see again, but what he heard sent a rising pulse of fear through his system, and he was tensely alert, sitting up straight as he always did when he had hold of something, one hand on his headset, the other on his newly awakened sonar controls.

Karpov caught the movement out of the corner of his eye, turning his head quickly, watching the sonar man closely.

"Conn… Sonar contact… Possible submarine… No! Definitely a submarine, sir. Confidence high! He's very close. Two thousand meters off our stern and deep. Sir, I think this is an *American* boat—"

"Alert one! Rig for ASW defense!" Karpov reacted like a coiled spring, suddenly snapping and releasing all the pent up energy and tension that had been stored in the trial of their recent battles. A submarine! *Another damn submarine!* They were back in the thick of it again, and this time it was the Americans, even as they had feared.

The claxon sounded its shrill warning, and weary men rushed to battle stations, their brief reprieve in the silence and emptiness of the open sea now over.

"We will not give this bastard a single moment to breath," said Karpov tersely. "Can you see it yet, Samsonov? *Shkval!* Put it right up his ass the

minute you have a firing solution!" The Captain rushed to the CIC, Volsky in his wake, leaving Nikolin suddenly abandoned with his radio again.

Then Tasarov spoke up in a loud voice. "I have acoustic profile readings! A hull number resolution!"

Karpov was a single minded fist of anger now. "Feed that data to the CIC. Let's get him before they have a chance to fire. Ready on my command, Samsonov." He was all business, a deadly serious look on his face now, and his God of War was moving quickly, with clock like precision, opening toggle guards, enabling warheads, keying the lethal super-cavitating torpedoes for battle.

As Karpov watched he was suddenly shaken by the memory of that awful face, the ghostly visage of Sanji Iwabuchi as the dour commander had passed right through him, the dreadful sense of doom he had felt when the man's mind touched his, and the hopelessness of living in a world where such men were at large and at war with one another. Something broke through his fear, tugging at his mind with a certain desperation, a voice of warning and caution and alarm. My God! He thought, seeing how he had reached his own hand towards the firing switch even as Samsonov was fingering the kill button. His hand shook, his eyes widened, and then in a sharp instant he grabbed Samsonov's hand and yanked it away from the controls.

"Wait!" he said. "Belay that order!"

Three words had penetrated the blind surge of anger and thrum of fear in his chest, stopping the reflexive urge to fight and kill. They leapt in his brain past that reptilian root of his mind and up to a higher place where beast became man, and man became reason and choice. *Hull number resolution!* That meant they had the ship in their database!

Fedorov suddenly realized what was happening as well. A hull number resolution! Tasarov had listened to this ship before, and its unique signal return patterns and acoustic characteristics were already stored in his computers. It could not be an American submarine from 1942. It had to be from another time. But when?

"Hull number? What, Tasarov? What boat is it?"

"Boat 722, sir. *Los Angeles* class American attack sub."

"My God, said Volsky. *Los Angeles class*? Then this can't be 1942. We have moved forward again, back into the world this ship once knew, and it has just remembered a long lost friend."

"Or an old enemy," said Karpov darkly, his hand still poised near the

firing button, hovering over the switch, shaking with the realization of what he was just about to do, what he might yet *have* to do if this boat was hostile. But his mind was working now, the well honed tactical sense in his head telling him that the sub must have acquired them long ago when their systems were still dark, and it had crept up on them in a silent, stealthy watch that was all too typical of the old cold war days. It could have easily fired and killed them in those long, dark hours, and yet it did not.

Fedorov was at his station with a book, his hands a blur as he flipped pages to look up the reference. His eyes were wide as he looked at the line he had thumbed: *Boat 722, Los Angles Class Attack submarine. USS Key West out of Naval Forces Marianas. Home Port: Apra Harbor, Guam.*

With a sudden energy he leaned over Tovarich, shoving navigation charts aside to get at something he had stored in a drawer at that station. It was the newspaper the Marines had brought back from those abandoned bungalows on Malus Island. He had it, rushing to the CIC, his face alive and excited.

"Key West!" he said. "Look! That's the boat mentioned right here in this article. Nikolin, get over here! Translate this again."

Nikolin, eased away from his radio, still struggling to tune in a distant, undulating signal, and then took the newspaper again, looking to the lines where Fedorov was pointing.

"The attack followed the controversial sinking of the sole Chinese aircraft carrier *Liaoning* on September 7th—"

"No," Fedorov pointed. "Farther down… Here!"

"Alright…Analysts believe the attack may have been a reprisal for the sinking of the American attack submarine USS *Key West* by a Russian cruiser on August 28th in the Pacific, as well as a warning to the Chinese not to press their demands for full integration of Taiwan—"

"USS *Key West!* The sinking of that boat by a Russian cruiser in the Pacific was the trigger point that set the war off. Look at the chronometer —*this* is August 28th! And by God, if this isn't a Russian cruiser, then I'm a donkey." He smiled broadly, his astonishment giving way to relief.

"You mean to say…" Volsky raised a finger, equally surprised.

"Yes! It has to be. Later in that same article I remembered they said something about a Russian ship lost in the Arctic Sea. We were so busy I forgot about it. Look for that, Nikolin."

"Here it is, sir." Nikolin read again. "Tensions between SinoPac and the West have been high since the loss of a Russian ship in the Arctic Sea in July

and several incidents involving both Russian and British planes in the waters around Iceland."

"Why didn't we see it before? A Russian ship lost in the Arctic Sea.. *in July of 2021*. That was *us*, sir. That was *Kirov!* Our live fire exercises were scheduled for July 28. Then *boom*. We find ourselves back in 1941, eighty years in the past on that very same day. We thought *Orel* exploded, and that *Slava* was sunk as well. But don't you see? From their point of view it was *Kirov* that vanished—vanished just as we have been pulling that same damn disappearing act every time Dobrynin ran his maintenance routine on the reactors! And we end up here, exactly one month later in our time."

"And *we* start the war…"Admiral Volsky's face was grave and sad, realizing that it had been *Kirov* all along. His ship, his crew, his weapons of war.

Karpov's hand slowly eased away from the weapons firing switch, and it was shaking. His face had a look of pain and agony on it now, eyes wide and glazed over with tears, cheeks taut.

"Then I did it…." He struggled to control his breath now. "I was going to do it *again*, just this very second! I was going to blow that submarine to hell without a second thought. I did it! The war, those burned out cities all over the world, the whole damn thing!"

Volsky's face reflected the Captain's pain and distress, and he stepped forward, his big arms taking Karpov's shoulders, drawing the other man closer. "No, Karpov," he said quietly, softly, as a father might comfort his own child. "*We* did it. This ship; this crew. You have no idea who may have given the order. For all you know you could have been sleeping in your bunk and it may have been my fat finger on the trigger, or Fedorov's order. You can't take this on yourself. We are all equally responsible." He released the Captain, and Karpov struggled to compose himself.

Yet even as he did so he knew Volsky was wrong. It *was* him. He did it—in some other iteration of this same terrible journey they had all been on. Or perhaps he was set to do it, set like a coiled spring given the man he was back then, where a merciless and callous reflex for battle still dominated his mind; set like a clock about to jar the world awake to the terror and destruction of yet another world war. In some other life and time he had fired that nuclear warhead at the Americans without a moment's hesitation or regret. He had fired it with anger, and yes, with hatred too. When it came to war he had been a man without scruples, whether it was the petty infighting in the chain of

command or the grander sweep of battle at sea. He did what they had to do, what they *must* do, what a man like Sanji Iwabuchi would have done to them all if he had ever been given the chance to really get his cruiser in position to ram the ship.

But something had grown up around that twisted root of violence in his mind, even while he commanded the ship in battle. He fought for another reason now, to protect his ship and crew and no longer with the ruthlessness that had driven him in the past. And that thing, that flower that had bloomed on the vine of death and war in his soul, had been the one saving grace that had enabled him to stay his hand this time—and it saved the world.

He saw the eyes of the bridge crew on him, but there was no reproach in them, no hint of blame or recrimination. All he saw on the faces of the others was relief and understanding, a quiet sympathy and a silent awareness that they had finally come to the end of the terrible mystery and nightmare that had haunted them all these many months. Fedorov, God bless him. Fedorov had always been a guardian angel too, yet not so quick to the flashing sword of battle; restrained, thinking, feeling. Fedorov had been a real man, and now Karpov finally had the hope that he was going to be one as well.

He saw the young officer smiling at him now, and a surge of relief flooded through him. It was as if he had just set down a burden he had carried all his life, so alone, even as he walked through the crowded ranks of the ship, shunned by the men, never spoken to, always at the cold edge of any group that may have gathered and hiding behind his Captain's stripe. Now he saw the one thing he had always yearned for in the eyes of the men, comfort, understanding, acceptance, and yes, even admiration. They were his brothers now. They were all his brothers.

He knew, deep down, that as he fought these last weeks it had not been to strike a blow for Mother Russia, or to even the score of history, wrong perceived injustice in the wayward course of events. No, he had fought for *Kirov*, for the ship, for these men around him, and the crew struggling on below decks in surely the most impossible situation any sailors at sea had ever faced. He had fought for his brothers in arms.

"Yes," Fedorov explained, still excited by his discovery. "We did it, or rather we were going to do it just now. But I think that has all changed. We may have done it once before, and we have seen the result, but perhaps that was in some other life, some other universe, some other time. We may have done it a hundred times for all we know. Yes, *we* did it. The ship vanished on

July 28, 2021, and then appeared here in the Pacific one month later, the Russian cruiser that killed *Key West* and started the holocaust. But something sent us sailing through time and the fire and madness of war so we could have this one second—this one brief chance to ask a question before we fired our weapon this time. Here we are, battered, lost and right in the curious sights of an American *Los Angeles* class submarine—boat 722, the *Key West.* And with reflexes honed sharp by a thousand hours at battle stations these last months, we killed it. Then everything went to hell. But not this time. Not this time!"

He smiled. "Don't you understand? We're home! This is the year 2021 again, but *the war hasn't started.* It doesn't have to start now. We can avoid the future we've already seen. We're home!"

Volsky remembered how they had all felt that first time they shifted away from the past and into that bleak future, seeing the ruin and destruction of Halifax Harbor. "It looks like we stopped it this time," he said. "That alarm clock bomb you talked about, Mister Fedorov." It looks like we heard it ticking, and reached a hand out to turn it off just before that jarring sound could rattle our brains."

Karpov smiled. It had been his hand that stopped it, pulling Samsonov's away. It had been *his* hand.

Then they heard something that astounded them all. It was Nikolin's radio set, finally winning its struggle to tune in a distant channel, and it was music. Nikolin's eyes gleamed as he heard it, rushing to the radio to adjust the dial further and turn up the volume as the song faded in and out. The beat was steady, and every man among them knew the tune. It was the Beatles, beloved in Mother Russia for decades, and they were singing *Back in the U.S.S.R.*

"…Been away so long I hardly knew the place
Gee, it's good to be back home.
Leave it till tomorrow to unpack my case,
Honey disconnect the phone!
I'm back in the USSR,
You don't know how lucky you are, boy,
Back in the US
Back in the US
Back in the USSR!

Admiral Volsky was smiling ear to ear, Fedorov broke out laughing. Nikolin started to dance. They were home—but not in the U.S.S.R, they hoped. That old, reeking structure had collapsed decades ago, and this was a new Russia. Yes, now there was SinoPac, the Sino Pacific alliance initiated by the Chinese, and the spring of war was still coiled tight. But they knew what was going to happen now, what *might* happen if the world kept steady on the course it had been sailing, and they could do whatever they might to forestall it. They were men of real power now. God may have died in this world, but this was now a ship of angels.

Admiral Volsky smiled, an idea in his mind. “Mister Nikolin,” he said in a calm voice. “When you have finished crushing those grapes would you be so kind as to call that American submarine on the radio? We were about to send them a nice, fat super-cavitating cigar, but I think I would like to offer their captain a box of fine Cuban cigars instead. If I can parley with Admiral John Tovey, then by God I can speak with this man as well. Get them on the radio.”

And he did.

* * *

The world *Kirov* left behind in 1942 had a long time to consider the mystery of this strange interloper on the high seas. The code word *Geronimo* was kept a quiet secret, but the mysterious ship was never seen again. This time it had vanished for good. The British Admiralty locked away the files in a deep, deep cellar beneath Hut 4 in Bletchley Park, and few knew what happened to them once that facility was eventually closed after the war. Admiral John Tovey was one of them, following the reports of unaccountable engagements that week in the Coral Sea, and smiling to himself, then crumpling the decrypts and putting them to the fire.

He spent the next years serving ably in spite of Churchill’s desire to remove him for his transgressions, and was eventually promoted to Admiral of the Fleet, retiring from service in 1946 to pursue ‘other matters.’ Few ever knew what scope and scale of those matters actually were, but those close to him said he had been fond, in his later years, of reading novels by Jules Verne and the work of H.G. Wells. No one ever really knew that he still remained in the hunt for the mysterious ship that had once been code named

Geronimo, keeping a silent, vigilant watch on the world.

Alan Turing continued his amazing work as a cryptanalyst, eventually trailblazing the development of the computer with his "Turing Machine," and laboring on in logic and number theory. His work on artificial intelligence and encrypted speech transmission was also groundbreaking and well ahead of its time—and for good reason. The startling discovery that *Geronimo* had left one thing of great importance behind when it vanished set him on a search that was to consume him for the remainder of his days, and there were all too few left to him.

As for Novak and Osborne at FRUMEL Headquarters in Melbourne, they kept chewing on the rind of the orange they had been peeling that week. They did learn enough to know a great battle had been fought off the coast of Papua New Guinea, a battle the Japanese had apparently won, or so they read the tale when this strange enemy ship simply vanished, presumed sunk. But they knew it didn't go without a fight. A plane out of Milne Bay had managed to get a photo of a large and dangerous looking Japanese battleship, obviously bearing the scars of a major battle as it slipped by, escorted by a gaggle of cruisers and destroyers. It was Admiral Yamamoto and *Yamato*, bound for Rabaul and then Kure. The Americans never knew much about the *Yamato* incident, for they knew very little about the ship itself, or its sister ship *Musashi*, until many years later.

On the Japanese side, when the cruiser *Tone* made port at Rabaul, the crew was so distraught with the tale of a demon ship from hell that they were relieved to a man, scattered throughout the empire, and the ship was re-crewed. Yet ever thereafter the *Tone* was whispered to be a ghost ship, and men reported seeing strange lights in her dark and twisting corridors, and they had bad dreams. The ship would survive until July of 1945 when she was sunk in Kure harbor by planes off the USS *Monterey*. The final stroke was a rocket attack by planes from the resurrected carrier *Wasp*, on July 28, 1945, exactly 76 years before *Kirov* had first vanished.

Captain Sanji Iwabuchi was sent to the Philippines in some disfavor. He would never recant his story, that his ship had finally found and rammed the phantom enemy they had come to call *Mizuchi*, and sunk it that night. And he went on to stubbornly disobey his orders to withdraw from Manila years later, leaving tens of thousands massacred in the fighting there. No one else much believed his tale, though they never dared say as much to Iwabuchi's face. Yet the odd thing that no one had been able to explain was the slightly

crumpled bow of the cruiser *Tone*, damaged in that first split second of her harrowing encounter with *Kirov*, before the Russian ship slipped out of phase, sailing away on the cold drafty seas of time.

The Japanese never knew what had so bedeviled them in the Coral Sea. They sailed *Yamato* home, casting a cloak of shame and secrecy over the ship again as they set about to repair the extensive damage. No announcement was ever made to the public about the disaster, or the greater loss of three fleet carriers in the Solomons. Strangely, *Kirov* had restored the balance of power to what it might have been after the Midway battle that had never been fought. In some bizarre calculus known only to herself, Mother Time had balanced her books.

A young Ensign named Mitsuo Ohta had been deeply impressed by the dreadful "suicide rockets" the enemy had deployed. Watching them dance over the sea in their evasive maneuvers, and knowing nothing of computer controlled guidance systems, he could only conclude that they were piloted. He soon approached students of the Aeronautical Research Institute at the University of Tokyo for help in designing a similar weapon. His plans were submitted to the Yokosuka research facility, and the Navy Air Technical Arsenal began to produce prototypes of a rocket powered piloted cruise missile they would call the *Okha*, or *Cherry Blossom.* Its only liability was that the three solid fueled rockets it used were not yet powerful enough to launch it from a ship.

Instead the rocket had to be carried by a twin engine bomber to within 37,000 meters, and then it could launch to make its daring and final high speed run to the target, with a human pilot standing in for the missing computer and radar controlled brain that had guided *Kirov's* missiles. These developments saw the weapons deployed months early in the Pacific, though they were too few and still too late to tip the balance of power and salvage Japan's lost war. The pilots who flew them damaged and sunk several US Ships, the last cherry blossoms falling from the dying tree of Japanese empire, but American gunners at sea came to call them by another name: *Buka*, the Japanese word for 'fool.'

And so the war, the long terrible Second World War, played out much as it had in the old history that Fedorov once knew. The industrial might of the U.S. put one carrier after another into the Pacific, and the steady advance of the Allies was once again a certainty—only things ended differently this time. The Americans had seen firsthand what the horror of nuclear weapons

would be, though the public never knew about it. The loss of the *Mississippi* and the other ships in TF-16 was not enough to prevent them from building their own bomb, but it was enough to prevent them from eventually dropping it on Japan in 1945.

For his part, Admiral Yamamoto did not die in a plane crash, shot down by P-38s in April of 1943. The soup of the history was stirred just enough by *Kirov* to change his personal fate, and it also changed the whole character of the war in the Pacific as well. When Germany was finally defeated, Yamamoto had been instrumental in persuading the Army and High Command, and the Emperor himself, that Japan should lay down its sword, now and forever.

Hiroshima and Nagasaki never happened. Task Force 16 had been enough of a peek inside Pandora's jar. Instead the men of that brave new world reached in and drew out that one last thing at the bottom of the jar, *Elpis*, the Spirit of Hope.

Time had a way of smoothing over and healing the wounds the ship had made in the history of WWII, like the endless waves on the shoreline slowly blotting out the footprints of a solitary man. Only one thing remained to be done, or undone, and this time *Kirov* had passed the test. It was to be a new world now.

* * *

Vladivostok on the Sea of Japan was thousands of miles away, giving Admiral Volsky and his officers a good long time to think how they might explain the damage to the ship, her hull number and insignias all painted over, her weapons inventory depleted, and the presence of old twenty millimeter rounds in her hide, weapons that had not been fired for almost a century. In the end it was determined that the rounds could be found and removed, the hull number and insignia restored, and the ship would claim damage from the accident that did, indeed, send the submarine *Orel* to her death.

As for the missing missiles, Volsky had his story well in hand: live fire exercises. That was what the ship had been sent out to do in the first place, and then it was to have sailed to Vladivostok in any wise to replace an old cruiser there and become the new flagship of the Pacific Fleet. In fact, Admiral Volsky had been slated to assume command there when the ship

arrived in any case, replacing Admiral Abramov.

Radio failure was a convenient icing on the cake they baked to explain why they never called for help until they arrived in the far east, a long month later. As to why they did not simply sail their damaged ship home to Severomorsk, Volsky's power and prestige was enough. The Admiral passed it all off to the Russian Naval Command as a perfect opportunity to train his crew under more exacting conditions, simulating circumstances of a real wartime footing. He had simply chosen not to return, and continue his mission to the Pacific. An Admiral at sea is second only to God himself, and no one could question him and prevail. Suchkov could criticize him roundly, and demand his resignation, but old "Papa Volsky" was too well established to be easily pushed around, and too well loved and respected.

There was, however, considerable mystery surrounding the fact that *Kirov* had managed to complete her journey undetected by the normally vigilant forces of NATO. Volsky suggested that they claim to have tested and deployed a new regimen of special jamming signatures to hide the ship, but alas the system had been damaged in a small electrical fire while they were in the Pacific. "They'll probably end up calling us the Ghost Ship," said Volsky, "and it would not be too far off the mark."

Before they returned to Mother Russia, they had a long discussion about the reactor core, and Rod-25, and why it might have caused the strange displacement in time. In the end it was left a mystery, something they knew they could never determine on their own, and something they definitely decided could never be revealed to the engineers back home. Admiral Volsky told Dobrynin that he would stay in close contact with him on the matter, and the engineer devised a plan.

Then the Admiral sailed resolutely east to find his island, and the crew took a much needed shore leave on a mostly deserted speck in paradise, to their great satisfaction.

Days later they made a careful inspection of the ship, held long discussions with the crew about what had happened, and let it generally be known that the whole event was to be forgotten and never spoken of again. They were a select legion of ghosts and goblins now, and the crew of *Kirov* became an elite and exemplary unit, never breaking ranks on the secret pact they had made with one another. What would anyone believe if they ever attempted to explain it with the truth of what had happened? They would be thought insane. As the ship approached Vladivostok they purged their logs,

video footage and anything else that might have left an odd fingerprint of time on their intrepid ship. It was said to be a residual effect of the "*Orel* incident," the files damaged by EMP burst that had darkened the ship's systems for many days.

Fedorov secreted away a digital copy of the log books in a small memory key, and also carefully removed the newspapers they had found on Malus Island. A clever man, with much foresight, he went to the ship's library and quietly "took care" of any volume that might reveal a history that might not be in accord with the record written on the world they were returning to. He did keep a very few cherished volumes, however, in a dark and secret place. In particular, he coveted his old copy of the *Chronology of the War at Sea*, for he found its version of the history was markedly different from the narrative described in the very same book as published in the "new world."

Admiral Volsky thought he might retire some years after his return and lived out the remainder of his days on one of the Pacific islands he had yearned for all his life. Vladimir Karpov also found that idea appealing, tired in the service of war. He thought he might slip quietly away into a life of his own, a changed man, and some years later look for a wife, having finally found the capacity to love. Doctor Zolkin would leave the ship In Vladivostok, and take up a residency in the Naval hospital there. Many of the ship's officers and crew also found they wanted nothing more to do with *mishmanny*, missiles and the military. They had seen all too much of the fire and heat of war, and now sought out the better things of life, meaningful work, good friends, good food and drink, a love if they could find one, and time with a good book, or in a garden.

There was only one loose end that they could not account for, though Anton Fedorov spent many long hours trying. What had happened to Chief Gennadi Orlov? Where did he go? What effect, if any, did he have on the history that Fedorov could now spend long quiet years re-reading, re-learning, much to his delight? His curiosity and diligence would become a saving grace for the world, though he did not yet know that as he stood on the weather deck when the ship first returned to Vladivostok harbor. *Kirov* was coming home, but it would not be the last time she would see the fire of war.

As it turned out, fate was not so kind to Orlov. Yes, he found a new life as well after he jumped from the KA-226 that day, yet it was not the life he had imagined. Time, fate, and the British Special Intelligence Service had other plans for him. But that, dear reader, is another tale.

Thank you so much for reading this one!

- John Schettler

The Kirov Saga Continues…

Men Of War – *By John Schettler*

It is late 1942 and the war rages on, but buried deep in the hidden rooms of Bletchley Park are files and photographs of a strange ship that bedeviled the world's navies for two years, and then vanished. The men in Whitehall and Bletchley Park have not forgotten what they learned about this ship, which left behind more than nightmare visions and blackened ship hulls. There was a man, Gennadi Orlov, leaping to his freedom in a fit of jubilant violence—with a Glock pistol that would not be designed or produced for nearly 60 years…*and one thing more…*

Now the true nature of the threat posed by the ship they had come to call *Geronimo* is finally revealed to the dogged analysts at Hut 4, and if one ship appeared to challenge the power of the British Empire, when might the next one come? A 'Great War' is coming, this they now know, a war so devastating and final that they must do everything in their power to prevent it. Men have died that should have lived, and others walk the earth who should have perished. What might they and their successive generations write upon the tattered pages of history shorn by *Kirov's* private war on war itself? The realization is so startling, and so frightening, that a secret organization is established at Bletchley Park known simply as "The Watch."

Join the brilliant genius Alan Turing and Admiral John Tovey as they now lead the hunt for *Kirov* into darkened corners of history in an exciting intrigue of spymasters and sinister plots to control the course of all future history. In so doing they find that one other man has now become aware of their operations, in a future they can but dimly perceive—Anton Fedorov, who has become obsessed with the mystery of *Kirov's* disappearance and the secret of "Rod-25." Then something very strange begins happening to crew members who served aboard *Kirov* during that fateful voyage, and it changes everything.

The Kirov saga continues as Anton Fedorov joins with Admiral Leonid Volsky, and Captain Vladimir Karpov in a desperate effort to solve the mystery and heal the breach in time that was torn by their own bloodied hands in the heat of naval combat.

Men Of War, by John Schettler
Coming from the Writing Shop Press
Please visit www.writingshop.ws for publication date.

* * *

"Every book, every volume you see here, has a soul. The soul of the person who wrote it and of those who read it and lived and dreamed with it. Every time a book changes hands, every time someone runs his eyes down its pages, its spirit grows and strengthens."

— Carlos Ruiz Zafón, *The Shadow of the Wind*

OTHER BOOKS BY JOHN SCHETTLER

The Meridian Series

Book I: ***Meridian*** *– A Novel In Time*
ForeWord Magazine's "Book of the Year"
2002 Silver Medal Winner for Science Fiction
The adventure begins on the eve of the greatest experiment ever attempted—Time travel. As the project team meets for their final mission briefing, the last member, arriving late, brings startling news. Catastrophe threatens and the fate of the Western World hangs in the balance. But a visitor from another time arrives bearing clues that will carry the hope of countless generations yet to be born, and a desperate plea for help.

Book II: ***Nexus Point***
The project team members slowly come to the realization that a "Time War" is being waged by unseen adversaries in the future. The quest for an ancient fossil leads to an amazing discovery hidden in the Jordanian desert. A mysterious group of assassins plot to decide the future course of history, just one battle in a devious campaign that will span the Meridians of time, both future and past. Exciting Time travel adventure in the realm of the Crusades!

Book III: ***Touchstone***
When Nordhausen follows a hunch and launches a secret time jump mission on his own, he uncovers an operation being run by unknown adversaries from the future. The incident has dramatic repercussions for Kelly Ramer, his place in the time line again threatened by paradox. Kelly's fate is somehow linked to an ancient Egyptian artifact, once famous the world over, and now a forgotten slab of stone. The result is a harrowing mission to Egypt during the time frame of Napoleon's 1799 invasion.

Book IV: ***Anvil of Fate***
The cryptic ending of Touchstone dovetails perfectly into this next volume as Paul insists that Kelly has survived, and is determined to bring him safely home. Only now is the true meaning of the stela unearthed at Rosetta made

apparent—a grand scheme to work a catastrophic transformation of the Meridians, so dramatic and profound in its effect that the disaster at Palma was only a precursor. The history leads them to the famous Battle of Tours where Charles Martel strove to stem the tide of the Moorish invaders and save the west from annihilation. Yet more was at stake on the Anvil of Fate than the project team first realized, and they now pursue the mystery of two strange murders that will decide the fate of Western Civilization itself!

Book V: *Golem 7*

Nordhausen is back with new research and his hand on the neck of the new terrorist behind the much feared "Palma Event." Now the project team struggles to discover how and where the Assassins have intervened to restore the chaos of Palma, and their search leads them on one of the greatest naval sagas of modern history—the hunt for the battleship *Bismarck*. For some unaccountable reason the fearsome German battleship was not sunk on its maiden voyage, and now the project team struggles to put the ship back in its watery grave. Meet Admiral John Tovey and Chief of Staff "Daddy" Brind as the Royal Navy begins to receive mysterious intelligence from an agent known only as "Lonesome Dove." Exciting naval action and top notch research characterize this fast paced alternate history of the sinking of the *Bismarck*.

Note: *Golem 7 is the book that led author John Schettler to continue his exploration of alternate history naval fiction in the breakthrough Kirov series trilogy.*

Alternate Military History (Naval)

Kirov

The battlecruiser *Kirov*, is the most power surface combatant that ever put to sea. Built from the bones of all four prior *Kirov* Class battlecruisers, she is updated with Russia's most lethal weapons, given back her old name, and commissioned in the year 2020. A year later, with tensions rising to the breaking point between Russia and the West, *Kirov* is completing her final missile trials in the Arctic Sea when a strange accident transports her to another time. With power no ship in the world can match, much less comprehend, she must decide the fate of nations in the most titanic conflict

the world has ever seen—WWII.

Kirov II – *Cauldron of Fire*
Kirov crosses the Atlantic to the Mediterranean Sea when she suddenly slips in time again and re-appears a year later, in August of 1942. Beset with enemies on every side and embroiled in one of the largest sea battles of the war, the ship races for Gibraltar and the relatively safe waters of the Atlantic. Meanwhile, the brilliant Alan Turing has begun to unravel the mystery of what this ship could be, but can he convince the Admiralty? Naval action abounds in this fast paced second volume of the *Kirov* series trilogy.

Kirov III - *Pacific Storm*
Admiral Tovey's visit to Bletchley Park soon reaches an astounding conclusion when the battlecruiser *Kirov* vanishes once again to a desolate future. Reaching the Pacific the ship's officers and crew soon learn that *Kirov* has once again moved in time. Now First Officer Anton Fedorov is shocked to finally learn the true source of the great variation in time that has led to the devastated future they have come from and the demise of civilization itself. They are soon discovered by a Japanese fleet and the ship now faces its most dangerous and determined challenge ever when they are stalked by the Japanese 5th Carrier Division and eventually confronted by a powerful enemy task force led by the battleship *Yamato*, and an admiral determined to sink this phantom ship, or die trying. In this amazing continuation to the popular *Kirov* series, the most powerful ships ever conceived by two different eras clash in a titanic final battle that could decide the fate of nations and the world itself.

Historical Fiction

Taklamakan ~ *The Land Of No Return*
It was one of those moments on the cusp of time, when Tando Ghazi Khan, a simple trader of tea and spice, leads a caravan to the edge of the great desert, and becomes embroiled in the struggle that will decide the fate of an empire and shake all under heaven and earth. A novel of the Silk Road, the empire of Tibet clashes with T'ang China on the desolate roads that fringe the Taklamakan desert, and one man holds the key to victory in a curious map but from a trader in the Bazaars of Kashgar.

Khan Tengri ~ *Volume II of Taklamakan*
Learn the fate of Tando, Drekk, and the others in this revised and extended version of Part II of Taklamakan, with a 30,000 word, 7 chapter addition. Tando and his able scouts lead the Tibetan army west to Khotan, but they are soon confronted by a powerful T'ang army, and threatened by treachery and dissention within their own ranks. Their paths join at a mysterious shrine hidden in the heart of the most formidable desert on earth where each one finds more than they imagined, an event that changes their lives forever.

The Dharman Series: Science Fiction

Wild Zone ~ *Classic Science Fiction – Volume I*
A shadow has fallen over earth's latest and most promising colony prospect in the Dharma system. When a convulsive solar flux event disables communications with the Safe Zone, special agent Timothy Scott Ryan is rushed to the system on a navy frigate to investigate. He soon becomes embroiled in a mystery that threatens the course of evolution itself as a virulent new organism has targeted mankind as a new host. Aided by three robotic aids left in the colony facilities, Ryan struggles to solve the mystery of Dharma VI, and the source of the strange mutation in the life forms of the planet. Book I in a trilogy of riveting classic sci-fi novels.

Mother Heart ~ *Sequel to Wild Zone – Volume II*
Ensign Lydia Gates is the most important human being alive, for her blood holds the key to synthesizing a vaccine against the awful mutations spawned by the Colony Virus. Ryan and Caruso return to the Wild Zone to find her, discovering more than they bargained for when microbiologist Dr. Elena Chandros is found alive, revealing a mystery deeper than time itself at the heart of the planet, an ancient entity she has come to call "Mother Heart."

Devil's Garden - (Volume III in the Dharman Series, coming soon.)

Dream Reaper ~ *A Mythic Mystery/Horror Novel*
There was something under the ice at Steamboat Slough, something lost, buried in the frozen wreckage where the children feared to play. For Daniel Edwards, returning to the old mission site near the Yukon where he taught

school a decade past, the wreck of an old steamboat becomes more than a tale told by the village elders. In a mystery weaving the shifting imagery of a dream with modern psychology and ancient myth, Daniel struggles to solve the riddle of the old wreck and free himself from the haunting embrace of a nightmare older than history itself. It has been reported through every culture, in every era of human history, a malevolent entity that comes in the night… and now it has come for him!

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"The only sensible ends of literature are, first, the pleasurable toil of writing; second, the gratification of one's family and friends; and lastly, the solid cash."
—Nathanial Hawthorne

The pleasure has been mine in writing this, my friends have all been gratified, now it's your turn! Spread the good word, and thank you so much for reading!

John Schettler

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