

Kirov Saga



Book VI in the Kirov Series

Fallen Angels

John Schettler

9 Days Falling
Volume II

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9



Kirov Saga:
Fallen Angels
Nine Days Falling
Volume II

By

John Schettler

A publication of:
The Writing Shop Press
Kirov Saga: *Fallen Angels*, Copyright©2013, John A. Schettler

Discover other titles by John Schettler:

The Kirov Saga: (Military Fiction)

Kirov - Kirov Series - Volume I
Cauldron Of Fire - Kirov Series - Volume II
Pacific Storm - Kirov Series - Volume III
Men Of War - Kirov Series - Volume IV
Nine Days Falling - Kirov Series - Volume V
Fallen Angels - Kirov Series - Volume VI
Devil's Garden - Kirov Series - Volume VII

Award Winning Science Fiction:

Meridian - Meridian Series - Volume I
Nexus Point - Meridian Series - Volume II
Touchstone - Meridian Series - Volume III
Anvil of Fate - Meridian Series - Volume IV
Golem 7 - Meridian Series - Volume V

Classic Science Fiction:

Wild Zone - Dharman Series - Volume I
Mother Heart - Dharman Series - Volume II

Historical Fiction:

Taklamakan - Silk Road Series - Volume I
Khan Tengri - Silk Road Series - Volume II

Dream Reaper – Mythic Horror Mystery

Mailto: john@writingshop.ws
<http://www.writingshop.ws>
<http://www.dharma6.com>

**Kirov Saga:
Fallen Angels
Nine Days Falling
Volume II**

By

John Schettler

*“Nine days they fell: Confounded Chaos roared,
And felt tenfold confusion in their fall
Through his wild anarchy, so huge a rout
Encumbered him with ruin: Hell at last
Yawning received them whole, and on them closed;
Hell, their fit habitation, fraught with fire
Unquenchable, the house of woe and pain.”*

—Milton, Paradise Lost

Kirov Saga:
Fallen Angels
9 Days Falling ~ Vol. II

By
John Schettler

Day Four

[Part I – Ziggy](#)

[Part II – Argos Fire](#)

[Part III – Quantum Sleepers](#)

[Part IV – The Bull](#)

Day Five

[Part V – Night Stalkers](#)

[Part VI – Arrangements](#)

[Part VII – The Mission](#)

[Part VIII – Twilight](#)

Day Six

[Part IX – The Black Hole](#)

[Part X – Fallen Angels](#)

[Part XI – Breakout](#)

[Part XII – War In Heaven](#)

Day 4

*“I think and deem it for thy best that thou follow me, and I will be
thy guide, and will lead thee hence through the eternal place
whew thou shalt hear the despairing shrieks, shalt see the ancient
spirits woeful who each proclaim the second death. And then
thou shalt see those who are contented in the fire...”*

Dante Alighieri, The Inferno - Canto IV

Part I

Ziggy

“For in this modern world, the instruments of warfare are not solely for waging war. Far more importantly, they are the means for controlling peace. Naval officers must therefore understand not only how to fight a war, but how to use the tremendous power which they operate to sustain a world of liberty and justice, without unleashing the powerful instruments of destruction and chaos that they have at their command.”

Admiral Arleigh Burke

Chapter 1

CV Ticonderoga -Flag- TF.38.3

Ziggy Sprague signed off and placed the handset in its overhead cradle. So it wasn't over yet, he thought. Some son-of-a-bitch wanted to carry on the fight. First Babe Brown gets mixed up in a surface action and loses ships without ever setting eyes on the enemy...Now this. I send five *Hellcats* up to have a look around and not one comes back. Sprague turned to the ship's Captain, William Sinton, where he was standing by the flag plot.

The celebration on the news of Japan's unconditional surrender the previous evening was apparently premature. Sprague was reading the communiqué, shaking his head. *'...it is according to the dictates of time and fate that We have resolved, by enduring the unendurable and bearing the unbearable, to pave the way for a grand peace for all generations to come.'* Time and fate, he thought. They had nothing to do with it. The US Navy decided the matter, but apparently something was left undone.

"Looks like we hit the bottle a little early," said Sprague.

"Admiral?" Captain Sinton had just returned to the bridge and was checking the positions and status of other units in the task group as TF.38.3 steamed north off Hokkaido. He had been with the ship six months after relieving Captain Dixie Kiefer, who had been seriously wounded by a Japanese kamikaze attack in January. Two planes hit the ship and caused serious harm, one on the flight deck and a second right on the superstructure of the island. *Ticonderoga* had to steam all the way home to Puget Sound after that. When the repair job was finished, the lines of her "measure 33 dazzle scheme" camouflage had been painted over with new slate gray. Yet even without her old war paint or skipper, "Big T" was still a hard fighting ship.

Captain Sinton worked into his new position well enough, bright, competent, and eager to please. But with an Admiral on board you never quite warm the seat in a command position. Sprague was an old salt, with as much raw experience as any man in the fleet, and Sinton admired him greatly, though he did tend to feel he was always walking in his shadow.

"We lost Redeye One," Sprague said flatly.

“The whole flight?”

“Sounds that way. I was just on the TBS with Mulholland on the *Benner*.” He was referring to the “Talk Between Ship” radio system in use late in the war. “Five planes, five missing. That’s lousy math any way we look at it, Captain. So now we put some real iron in the sky and get up there and see about this business.”

“You figure the Japs are still fighting, Admiral?”

“Someone is, and on this watch *I* do the fighting.”

“Scuttlebutt says the Russians might be involved.”

“Yeah, I heard that too. Well, I don’t care if it’s the Russians or the Japanese. We’re going north in force and if we have to knock a few heads together, so be it. Would you get down to Flight One and Brief Ingalls and Kanaga on this?”

“Of course, sir....But what are we looking for, Admiral?”

“Anything with a rising sun painted on it. You see any meatballs—they get the deep six, no questions asked. As for the Russians, that’s a different matter. Word is they’re involved in amphibious operations up in the Kuriles, but Halsey thinks they’re getting pushy over Hokkaido. We don’t want Russian troops of any sort on the main Japanese islands. That’s official, so that’s the line on this one, Captain. If we see evidence the Russians are planning such a landing we let them know, in no uncertain terms, that it will be opposed by the United States Navy.”

Sinton raised an eyebrow at that. “I hear Patton was spitting tacks and ready to go after the Russians in Germany a while back,” he said. “Now here we are facing them down over Japan. It seems to me we could send this message via radio.”

Sprague nodded. “Something tells me we’re going to be holding the line in both places for a good long while, Mister Sinton, and it starts right here. This is my watch, and I intend to lay down the law. If we can do it on the radio, well and good. If not, I want *Helldivers* and *Avengers* in the air, and well escorted. Coordinate this operation with *Wasp* as well. No fooling around this time. Have the flight crews ready in thirty minutes.”

“I understand, sir, but what exactly are the rules of engagement here?”

“Get up there and find out who put five of my planes and airmen in the deep blue sea. Cover any search and rescue operation being mounted by *Benner* and *Sutherland*. If we find as much as a Japanese fishing boat out there, it goes down. If we find Russians, then here are the rules of

engagement—just one— either they back off or we come in shooting. We order them to do a 360 and stay 20 miles off the coast of Hokkaido at all times. Any ship that crosses the line will be presumed hostile and engaged. End of story.”

The Fighting 87th was the air wing assigned to *Ticonderoga*, comprised of four squadrons: two fighter squadrons, one dive bomber, and one torpedo squadron, eighty-six planes in all. Lt. Commander Chuck Ingalls was already hopping mad after the news that he had lost five planes and airmen before noon that day. All the planes were from VF-87, F-6F5 *Hellcats* on a simple recon operation up north. That left him with 24 more planes, and 12 in reserve with VBF-87. He was told to have 18 ready to go within the hour, half his total fighter force. Ingalls men would be escorting *Helldivers*, the business end of *Ticonderoga*’s air wing that day, with all of thirty two dive bombers reporting ready for action. There would also be a dozen TBM-3 *Avengers* from VT-87.

The dive bombers of VB-87 were the first to get the word whenever the ship wanted to flex some muscle. The squadron had been busy in recent days, and was ready for action. In previous weeks they had flown strikes against the surviving Imperial Japanese Fleet units at Kure on July 24 and 28, and then bombed factories near Tokyo. When “Big T” led the task force north in August the squadron hit targets at Aomori and Ominato, their final strike being mounted just a few days ago against the Yokohama docks on the 13th.

One lucky pilot, Lt. JG Everett Wheeler, received the Navy Cross for gallantry in the face of intense anti-aircraft fire, holding steady to put a 1000 pound bomb right smack on the forward deck of the Japanese heavy cruiser *Tone*, another ship with lines of fate deeply entangled in this strange new twist of history’s rope. The dour Captain Iwabuchi was not present when *Tone* was finally put out of action. He had already slit his belly open in the last awful hours of the massacre in Manila, refusing to surrender to the bitter end.

After a taste of the bubbly, the pilots of the 87th thought they would be on Easy Street for a while until word came down to assemble in the briefing room for yet another mission. Lt. Vern Higman was already seated and ready for the briefing as a number of other pilots reported in. His wing mate, Wendell Stevens spied him in his old favorite chair and was quick to his side.

“What do you make of this one Higgs,” said Stevens. “Word is the Russkies are mixed up in this brawl now.”

“Russians? They’re a little late to the party, I’d say.”

“Me too, but that’s what I heard in the radio room. That recon flight thought they were overflying three Russian ships in the Kuriles up north. They made one pass, then came round a second time for the photo run and *bam*, one of those bastards lit up Billy Watts, and he went right into the drink. Flight leader was so pissed he swung round for a strafing run, but that was the last they heard from any of them.”

Higman didn’t like the sound of that. The *Hellcat* was a fast, reliable, and sturdy workhorse that could take a good deal of punishment and still come home in one piece. To lose five like that was reason for raised eyebrows, but he said nothing, arms folded on his chest as he watched the other pilots finding seats. He still remembered that harrowing day when a Japanese ship put a 4 inch shell right through his wing and fuselage near the canopy. His baby, “Round Trip Ticket” had a hard ride home after that, but the plane lived up to its name and brought him safely back to his carrier.

Now Stevens had more to say.

“Heard something else, Higgs,” he always called Higman that, and the other man instinctively leaned his head to one side as Stevens lowered his voice.

“More scuttlebutt, or was this from the radio room intercepts?”

“This stuff was right in the clear! The pilots on those *Hellcats* said something about rockets before they went down.”

“Rockets?”

“Damn right. How you figure it? I mean, we use ‘em ourselves. Old *Holy Moses* packs quite a punch.” He was referring to the HVAR, or High Velocity Aircraft Rocket, a 5 inch (127mm) weapon that was unguided, but could penetrate four feet of reinforced concrete.

“Yeah, but I’ve never heard much about ships using the damn things,” said Higman.

“Brits use ‘em. They’ve got a thing they call the Three Stooges, or something like that. I hear they named ‘em Curley, Larry and Moe.”

“They call it the Stogie,” Higman corrected him. “Probably because you have to be stupid to use the damn things. I saw one once on one of their carriers a while back when I had to land there. The Brits tried those out on the Kamikazes, but they only had six, or so I heard. You can’t do a whole hell of a lot with six rockets, and good luck hitting anything with those anyway. Ask me and I’d just as soon stick with my MGs and a good 1000 pound bomb.”

“Tried and true,” said Stevens, yet he was still thinking about those rockets, and wondering what it would be like to get a couple *Tiny Tims* under his wings. They were much bigger than the HVAR rockets, and hit much harder. Before he could say anything else Lt. Commander Ingalls called the briefing to order and laid it out, plain and simple.

“Alright, listen up,” he began. “Somebody took down Billy Watts and Tom Haley’s group. Bushwhacked the whole bunch on a photo run. You find me a Jap ship still floating and I’ll believe it was Tojo trying to paddle his way north out of harm’s way. So we think this might have been a group of Russian ships. The damn commies are getting a little too big for their britches, so we’re going up to say hello and let them know who’s running the show around here.”

This received an enthusiastic murmur in response, and Ingalls nodded his considered approval. “Alright,” he continued. “These ships were flying a white naval ensign with a blue letter X across the whole field. Someone says that could be Russian Navy, at least on the colors, but we’ll see soon enough.”

“Yeah, soon enough, LTC,” Stevens piped up. “We get rockets this time out, or do we just sink ‘em like Higgs says here and use the old dead lead?”

“Use whatever they put on your plane, Stevens, but nobody drops an egg on these ships unless Iron Mike or I give the say so. We’re to find them, and then I’ll do the talking from that point on.”

“What if they give you some lip, LTC? Russkies speak English these days?”

“If I can’t raise them on radio we’ll show them the whole damn formation and see if they feel like taking any more sucker punches like that. If they get stupid, I’ve got authorization to plaster them.”

More murmurs, all happily raring to go. “And one other thing,” said Ingalls. “*Benner* and *Sutherland* are heading north to look for our downed pilots, which is another reason nobody needs to get trigger happy unless I give the word. They’re watching these ships on radar, and we’ll handle the rest. Now, suit up and be up on the flight deck in twenty flat. Dismissed.”

Stevens was excited and ready to go. After all, he thought, this may be the last chance he would get to plaster somebody with anything. But he was about to learn more about rockets than he ever wanted to know.

* * *

Far to the north US destroyer pickets *Benner* and *Sutherland* had joined up and were steaming together towards the site of the action. It was their intention to get in and rescue their downed pilots in the water before the sharks or the cold finished them off. If need be they could also find and shadow the ships the US Navy wanted to hold responsible for the incident. Each destroyer was fast at 35 knots, and packed six 5 inch guns along with a set of five torpedo tubes on one side of the ship with 533mm fish. The other torpedo mount had been removed for electronic and radar equipment to give *Benner* and *Sutherland* better eyes. Commander John Mulholland, the squadron leader on *Benner*, figured he still had enough punch to move in close and get the contact in his field glasses for a good long look. He had heard the order from Ziggy Sprague, “steady as you go,” and he knew the whole of TF.38.3 was right behind him.

Sprague was as tough a fighting Admiral as anyone, he thought. He knew that the four carriers in the main body would most likely have planes up within the hour, riding his locator beacon signal north. A man like Ziggy Sprague at your back did a lot to bolster confidence. And behind Sprague there was another fighting admiral out there in Bull Halsey. He commanded Vice Admiral McCain’s TF 38.1, Ballentine’s 38.2, and Radford’s 38.4, all mustering for the surrender ceremony being planned in Sagami Bay off Tokyo. In all there were four fast carrier task forces in theater, and the British would throw in another with their TF.37. It was more naval power than the world would ever see amassed in one location like this, and intended to make the strongest possible show of force when the fleet anchored off Tokyo.

This is what we have left *after* we put your whole damn navy on the bottom of the sea, thought Mulholland as he spoke inwardly to the Japanese. So if the Russians want to play now, they had better realize just what they’re dealing with.

* * *

The problem was—neither Mulholland, nor Sprague, nor Halsey himself had any real idea what *they* were dealing with, or that the dictates of time and fate would indeed have a great say in the events about to transpire. One man had a strong suspicion that day, and he was already on a plane heading for the USS *Independence*, steaming just a few hundred yards off the starboard bow

of “Mighty Mo,” the Fleet Flagship, BB *Missouri*.

His name was Admiral Bruce Fraser, and he had made an urgent call to see Halsey right away. As soon as the plane landed Fraser was piped aboard with all due ceremony, but he waved off the welcoming committee and wasted no time getting into a launch to take the short ride over to *Missouri*.

Halsey was watching him come across from the weather deck off the bridge, and had a welcoming committee of his own down on the lower deck in dress whites to receive him. Fraser had been there just a few days ago to deliver the thanks of his grateful nation to Halsey in the form of an official pronouncement admitting the Admiral to a very exclusive order. He was now officially a Knight of the British Empire.

Something tells me that Sir Bruce isn't here for tea and company with a fellow Knight, thought Halsey as he watched. Fraser was a fighting Admiral too. He had fought in the Med and then went after the Germans again 1943 when he put the battlecruiser *Scharnhorst* at the bottom of the sea to finally avenge the loss of his old command, HMS *Glorious*, which met her end under the guns of that same German ship.

He had also heard that Fraser had been involved in some top secret Royal Navy operations over the years. Word gets around, even if it has to go all the way across the Pacific. Halsey had heard the British had a scrap with something in the Med, and Fraser was there. Then there was that intelligence out of FRUMMEL HQ down under about a battle the Japanese fought during the Guadalcanal campaign. FRUMMEL said it involved an entire Jap carrier division and a couple battleships, but the details were sketchy. What irked him about it was this: Halsey had been in nominal command of that campaign, even if he was laid up in sick bay. He nonetheless had reports of every action by US subs, ships, or carriers, and there was nothing at all about these engagements. Who were the Japanese fighting, he wondered? And who took a pot shot at Babe Brown up north? Who took down Ziggy Sprague's recon flight?

It probably has something to do with the Russians, he thought, and he had the distinct feeling that the British Admiral was bringing him bad news.

He was correct.

Chapter 2

“**Suffice** it to say, Admiral, that we may be dealing with more here than meets the eye.” Admiral Fraser met Halsey’s eye now, a look of frank seriousness there, and a bit of a warning.

Halsey was of no mind to be frightened by anything his British colleague was saying here. Dour faced and well blooded in battle over long years of combat at sea, Bull Halsey was as hard as they came. His eyes had a sparkle in them, beneath bristling grey eyebrows when he smiled, but when he frowned in anger there was a steely resolve there that was a good part of the reason why his fleet was waiting to receive the surrender of the Japanese Empire.

“You’re telling me the Russians are behind this?” he said. “And you’re sure of this? What possible reason would the Soviet government have to pick a fight with us now?”

“This may not have anything to do with the Soviet government at all,” said Fraser, a bit delicately, as if tiptoeing around something more unsaid, and Halsey noticed it immediately.

“What do you mean by that? Are you saying this is a renegade ship responsible for this attack? I suppose I could believe the Russians might do something like this to get our attention and make sure they have a seat at the table next week. A stunt like that would be just like them, but a renegade?”

“That may very well be a good word for it, Admiral Halsey,” said Fraser. “In point of fact, we have some knowledge of this ship, if I’m not mistaken about it now. I saw the damn thing with my own eyes once. We gave it a code word back then. A word you Yanks will be familiar with I suppose—*Geronimo*—a renegade indeed.”

“Geronimo...” Halsey had heard rumors of a ship given that name. “Yes, I did catch something about that some years ago.” This was it, he thought. This was that secret operation in the Med.

“Indeed,” said Fraser. “Well, let me share a few things about it with you, Admiral. The first and foremost thing is this—the ship is dangerous. It’s fast, possesses advanced weaponry, and seems to have no qualms about using everything it has if it comes to a scrap at sea.”

“Any good fighting sea Captain would do the same,” said Halsey. “I don’t have to tell you that this ship is dangerous as well.” He was referring to the Fleet Flagship, the battleship *Missouri*, one of America’s superb new fast battleships.

Fraser considered what to say next, knowing there were limits to what he could discuss here. How to convince a man like Halsey that this situation needs a good long look and careful consideration—real caution? How to redefine the word dangerous for him here in a way that would make it stick?

“Admiral...” he began, still thinking. “I’m sure you recall the incident in the North Atlantic before Roosevelt declared war.”

“You mean that business with the Germans? Well, they caught us flat footed out there and jumped on the *Wasp* while she was ferrying unarmed planes to Iceland. You don’t forget something like that.”

“Yes, well if you were briefed on the incident then you’ll know what also happened to the *Mississippi*.”

Halsey frowned. “I was in the Pacific at the time, aboard CV *Enterprise* and worrying more about the Japanese. Yes, we heard *Mississippi* went down but, to be frank, I never knew the details. Thank God we got the bastard, that’s all. The boys of *Desron 7* did us all proud, and one thing more. They got us into this war when most of the country was too blind to see it coming. So whatever happened out there it was all for the good in the end.”

“I see...” This gave Fraser pause. If the American government had not seen fit to inform a man like Bull Halsey of what really happened in the Atlantic, then he wondered if he was making a mistake here. Yet he knew that Halsey was the man on the scene now. It would be his word commanding the forces most likely to be involved if this was indeed another ‘incident’ in the making. Something told him to proceed with caution, yet at the same time there was an obvious urgency about the situation.

“May I ask if you have any further information on this incident with your scouting force?”

“You mean Babe Brown’s group? He’s back in the fold, Admiral, but hasn’t been able to tell us very much. I haven’t seen the full report yet, but those were a couple old cruisers on patrol up there, both of them ready for the scrap heap. He claims they were closing on a surface contact when they were hit by kamikazes, but we’ve seen no sign of Japanese activity off of Hokkaido since.”

“And your reconnaissance?”

“Bushwhacked on a photo run, and whoever did that is going to pay for it —Japanese, Russians, I could care less. You say it was the Russians, then I’ll believe you, but it won’t make any difference. I sent Admiral Sprague up to see about it, and we’ll settle the matter. If this is some kind of political hot potato, I’m afraid I’m not the sort to play those games, Admiral Fraser. Call me rash, even bull headed, but I’ve been called worse. The Russians don’t get a pass from me if they take to shooting down American planes.”

“I understand how you feel, Admiral, but one thing in this report set my mind on this and prompted me to get over here and see you. Is it true that your reconnaissance flight reported the use of naval rocketry in that incident?”

“Rocketry? Like those Stooges you’ve been experimenting with?”

“Something of that sort.”

Halsey wondered what Fraser was driving at. He seemed to be nibbling about the edges of something, and the Bull was not one to be indirect. “Yes there was some mention of rockets in the radio intercept. Our radar picket was monitoring the flight when those ships opened up on our boys. You would think, Admiral, that if these were Russian ships, our *allies*, that they would be a little more discreet in picking their targets.”

“Might they have suspected your planes were Japanese?”

“You and I both know that’s a load of bull feathers,” Halsey brushed the notion aside. “We were flying big blue *Hellcats* with a bright white star of the wings. All five planes overflew the contact, so those ships must have gotten a real good look at them. Our boys came around for a photo run and they opened up on them, and that’s the end of it. Now, I don’t care if they have some kind of amphibious operation up there in the Kuriles or not. We have no interest in that. Hell, we even gave the Russians the goddamned troop transports so they could land on the islands! This is one hell of a way to say thank you. Nimitz thinks they have plans to land on Hokkaido, and I’m sorry to say that they will do nothing of the kind.”

Fraser realized that none of this was getting him where he needed to go. He’d come all this way to see if he could gain more information on this incident, and to possibly let the Americans know what they might be dealing with, but Halsey seemed as clueless about the situation as anyone else. He had to find a way to convey the real danger in the moment, and now he began to see that half truths and innuendo would simply not do. A man like Halsey wanted it straight and undiluted, like a good shot of whiskey. He decided he

had better fill his glass.

“Admiral, suppose I told you that your *Desron 7* had nothing whatsoever to do with the outcome of that incident in the North Atlantic. There was no heroic sacrifice by your gallant destroyers as reported in your newspapers. Suppose I told you that the ship you believed was a German raider was nothing of the sort, and that it wasn’t sunk that day—the day your *Mississippi* went down. Suppose I told you that you lost that ship, and the others in TF.16, when it was hit by a weapon of unimaginable power, enough TNT to take out an entire fleet if it was concentrated like that, or to obliterate an entire city. I think you know what I may mean when I describe a weapon like this. You Americans have been working on them; so have we.”

Halsey leaned back, arms folded, eyes narrowed under his wrinkled brow and heavy eyebrows. The British Admiral had unloaded quite a bit just now, one hell of a broadside. The look in his eye was quite different. He wasn’t mincing words any longer, which is just the way Halsey liked it. But what was he saying here?

“Are you talking about the bomb?”

That was what they called it now—the bomb. There were a hundred different kinds of bombs, and millions had already been dropped over Europe and Asia in the last seven years, but this one was so different, so frightening that it overshadowed them all. It was *the* bomb, the *atomic* bomb, and only a very few senior officers even knew it existed. It was hell in the belly of a B-29, waiting on an airstrip at Tinian, though thankfully it had not been necessary to use it in battle. The Japanese had come to their senses and finally surrendered.

“What else could I be talking about with that kind of power?”

“But we’ve only just deployed the damn things—though let’s keep that between the two of us.”

“Don’t worry, I’ve been fully briefed.”

“Well that was 1941 when *Mississippi* went down. Nobody had the bomb back then. And another thing.... what did you mean this was no German raider? What else could it have been?”

“That’s exactly what we first thought, Admiral. What else could it have been? It came out of the Norwegian Sea and ran the Denmark Strait, not two months after we sank the *Bismarck*. We thought it was *Tirpitz* at first, then *Graf Zeppelin*, but it was neither, because it wasn’t a German ship at all. And when it hit your TF.16 with that weapon we worried for months the next one

would land right on London.”

“You’re saying this ship actually *had* an atomic weapon? In 1941?”

“Precisely.”

“And it wasn’t sunk? Then what happened to it? What happened to *Desron 7*?”

“If you were to nose around and dig deep enough you would find that five ships from that destroyer group reported back to Argentia Bay twelve days after they disappeared. The crews were interviewed, dispersed all over the fleet, and the ships were stricken from the register, repainted, renumbered, and are still in service today. It was covered up pretty well—even you didn’t know about it—and then the onset of the war pushed it under a fairly thick carpet. It’s still there if you know where to look, and I’m afraid there’s more to this story. It wasn’t until we ran into an unknown ship in the Med that we really found out the truth of the matter.”

“In the Med? This ship got clean away and ran east for the Med?”

“It turned up in the Tyrrhenian Sea, to be more precise. We got a good look at it, and some rather telling photos. Then it ran west for Gibraltar, and raised bloody hell the whole way.”

“It slipped into the Med without being spotted?” This was the operation Halsey had been wondering about. Fraser was getting down to brass tacks with him now.

“Apparently. But as I say, we got a very good look at it after that. In fact I was personally involved in that incident, on HMS *Rodney*. She was riding side by side with Admiral Syfret in HMS *Nelson*. Good ships, the both of them. Slow as molasses compared to a ship like your *Missouri* here, but well gunned with nine sixteen inchers. It was just our luck that we were well ahead of this raider and managed to cut it off as it ran west—or nearly so. There was a battle...”

“I heard about this,” said Halsey raising a finger, the light of interest in his eyes. “Something about a renegade French battlecruiser. You were there?”

“I was indeed. Though upon reflection I might say it was just our bad luck we caught up with this ship—and it wasn’t French. We learned that first hand. Our Admiral John Tovey took the wise precaution of reinforcing Gibraltar with Home Fleet the moment we got word of this ship in the Med, and it looked like it was coming down to one of your classic Western showdowns. Then the other side agreed to parley.”

“Amazing,” said Halsey.

“Indeed. Well our Admiral Tovey met with the commander of this ship on a small islet near Gibraltar. He was Russian! The entire crew was Russian, only they denied any affiliation with the Soviet government at the time.”

“This was the same ship you mixed it up with in the North Atlantic?”

“We are ninety-eight percent sure of that. The other two percent suggested it came out of the Black Sea and that these were actually two different vessels, but that was flatly contradicted by this Russian Admiral himself.”

“What happened?”

“We made an arrangement. They accepted quarantine at the Island of St. Helena in exchange for safe passage there. Then the ship simply vanished. We had two fast cruisers in escort, planes overhead, yet the ship sailed into a bank of low clouds and slipped away. We never saw it again, though we believe the Japanese did.”

“The Japanese?” Halsey felt like a boxer kept constantly off balance by a good stiff jab from his opponent. Each time he began to settle into some understanding of what Fraser was telling him, the story leapt ahead in some startling new direction.

“The Japanese. They ran across it very soon after it disappeared off St. Helena,” said Fraser. “It happened during your Operation Watchtower.”

“That was on my beat,” said Halsey. “I was in nominal command of that operation, but the truth is I was down for the count with a skin ailment that put me in the hospital for months. I didn’t get back in the saddle until October of...well that was 1942, Admiral. TF.16 was hit in late 1941 just before we got into this mess.”

“Quite so,” said Fraser. “There was a considerable time lapse before we found this ship again in the Med.”

“A year? I find that hard to swallow. How could a ship with that kind of attitude remain undetected for a whole goddamned year?”

“We don’t know, but as we learned this Russian Admiral claimed he wanted nothing more to do with our war, we concluded that the ship must have dropped anchor somewhere in the South Atlantic or Indian Ocean, well away from sea lanes in some isolated area. We’re not sure how it managed to slip into the Med undetected, but we do get some very foggy nights off Gibraltar, and this vessel has seemed a bit of a phantom at times. Well, to make matters short, it eventually turned up on the coast of Australia and ran

into the Japanese.”

Fraser wasn't telling Halsey the entire story now—that the ship was spotted off Australia not two days after it vanished at St Helena, a journey of thousands of miles that it could not possibly have sailed in that brief time. That had been the one salient clue that had led Bletchley Park, and a very select group of men, to some very startling conclusions about this ship and its true origins. That information might extend the bounds of credulity just a wee bit too far in this conversation, and he felt himself lucky enough to have dragged this bull out of the pen and into the field with what he had already revealed.

Halsey rolled his eyes, thinking. “Yes...we did hear that there was some kind of engagement in the Coral Sea, right smack dab in the middle of our operations against Guadalcanal. Yet I never got any report on the matter. None of our ships were involved.”

“*Geronimo* was the culprit. It gave the Japanese hell this time. They paid a very high price when they tangled with this ship. In fact, that may have worked to your favor. It seems at least two Japanese fleet carriers were involved in action with this ship, and therefore unable to reinforce the Japanese counterattack against your Guadalcanal landings. It also left a Jap battleship stranded like a beached whale on a coral reef, and after that it locked horns with Yamamoto himself on the *Yamato*.”

“*Yamato*? We didn't even know the Japanese had that ship until very late in the war!”

“Yes, well British intelligence is very good, Admiral. We knew about it, but as it was laid up for extensive repairs there was no need to pass that on until the ship re-entered service.”

Halsey took that in for a moment, the conclusion obvious from what Fraser had said. “This ship—this *Geronimo* as you call it, it fought with *Yamato* and got the better of it?”

“That's putting it mildly, Admiral Halsey. It beat the *Yamato* to a flaming wreck. The Japs managed to get it back to the home islands and it was in dry dock for two years before your Ziggy Sprague made the acquaintance again in that battle off Samar. Does the word dangerous say enough about this ship now, or must I look for another word?”

“A Russian ship beat *Yamato*...” Halsey shook his head. “That's hard to believe.”

“I'll agree with that, but we have the intelligence. I can see that you

receive a copy of the file if you wish. The fact is, Admiral, this is no ordinary ship. As I said earlier, it's fast, it has advanced weaponry—naval rocketry in fact—and it can strike from a great distance, even beyond the range of those big sixteen inch guns out there. It looks like a battleship if you ever lay eyes on the damn thing, as I did one black night. There wasn't a gun on it bigger than a QF five incher, but it could pound a ship like *Yamato* to near scrap. Needless to say, this is an extraordinary vessel, and so are the men that built and crew this ship."

"There are no extraordinary men," said Halsey, "just extraordinary circumstances that ordinary men are forced to deal with."

"Well I'm afraid that we have exactly that on our hands here—extraordinary circumstances—very extraordinary. The only question now is how do a pair of ordinary blokes like us deal with the matter?"

"We deal with it the same way we dealt with the Japanese, Admiral. We put more steel and fire in the sky and on the sea than the Russians could possibly imagine. I don't care how good this ship of theirs is, or even how they managed to build it for that matter. Old Uncle Joe Stalin may have been holding some cards close to his chest, or he may have even stacked the deck. None of that matters. No matter how big and tough they build them, ships sink. You just ask the Japs what they know about that. They floated a couple of real monsters in *Yamato* and *Musashi*, and we put both of them at the bottom of the sea. Now, I've got Sprague's TF.38.3 up there looking for this ship. In fact he's probably got planes in the air at this moment."

"Planes in the air?" Fraser had a worried look on his face now. "They're going up after *Geronimo*? Admiral, you must recall them, at once!"

"Recall them? What for? The Russians asked for it. Now they'll take a few lumps and we'll finish all this hubbub over Hokkaido once and for all."

"It's not the Russians I'm worried about, Admiral. It's *your* planes. Get them out of there—before it's too late!"

Chapter 3

The planes were forming up over Sprague's fast carrier group, mostly off *Ticonderoga* and *Wasp*. The "Big T" was sending 18 *Hellcats*, 24 *Helldivers*, and 12 *Avengers*, 54 planes in all, with 30 in reserve. These were joined by 15 *Helldivers* and an equal number of *Avengers* off CV *Wasp* from Air Group 86. They were escorted by another 24 *Corsairs*, the F4U-4 model, to bring the total formation to 108 planes. It was only about 40% of his total air wing, but Sprague deemed this more than sufficient for a show of force, and the planes were already on their way. If need be he could throw another 60 aircraft up off *Ticonderoga* and *Wasp*, and then he still held another 90 planes split between the two smaller carriers in his group, *Bataan* and *Monterey*. Both these ships were converted light cruisers that had become the *Independence* class carrier that played such a vital role alongside their bigger *Essex* class fast fleet carriers.

Chuck Malkasian was on his way to his duty shift in the *Wasp*'s engine room that morning as a water tender. He was passing a couple of seamen putting the final touches on the carrier's "scorecard" for its effort thus far in the war. It was mounted on the forward bulkhead, of the hangar deck level, just behind the forecastle, and laid out the tally. CV *Wasp* had destroyed 14 enemy planes in the air with her own gunfire, and her air groups had taken down another 230. They also caught 405 on the ground and put them out of action, a total of 649 planes.

"Let's hope they get one more," said Malkasian. "650 is a nice round number."

"Ain't nothin' flying for the Japs these days," said one man as he dabbed paint on a kill flag symbol. "They get many more and we'll have to find more space on this bulkhead." Beneath the air flag toll there were score marks for 114 ships sunk, and another 234 ships damaged, a fairly impressive tally. The tonnage of bombs and rockets dropped and fired was also compiled. It was ample evidence that the carrier was the preeminent weapon of war in the world, a template that would hold true for decades to come.

"You're going to have to repaint all those numbers if things get hot today, and save room for more ships too," said Malkasian. "Only paint the next three red. Scuttlebutt says we're going after the damn Russians now."

“The Russians? What are they getting into it for?”

“Beats me, but our boys will finish the job.”

Seaman James Long scratched his head. “I got room here for two more ships, and that’s it. Someone tell the flyboys to lay off the Russkies and let Big T handle them. Then they can spend another hour revising *their* scorecard.”

“Right,” said Malkasian. Then he was off to the engine room, expecting another dull day at sea keeping the big turbines cool.

Wasp, (CV-18) was a short hulled *Essex* unlike her companion *Ticonderoga*, the first of the long hulled carriers in that class. The flight deck had been busy that morning as the planes were spotted and launched, but the air crews were feeling light hearted. There had only been fifty-four planes to arm and spot and the air crews were accustomed to running out the whole ship’s compliment of nearly a hundred planes, so the work seemed light that day.

Originally slated to be named the *Oriskany*, the *Wasp* was, of course, renamed in honor of the venerable CV-7, sunk just before the war in the Atlantic off Iceland. There was another plaque near the scorecard on the bulkhead that read: “*Dedicated to the men of CV-7, who never got their chance.*” The men of CV-18 were going to get their chance today, and more than they imagined.

Gunner’s Mate 3rd Class Alfred J. Lewis was also going to get his chance as he reported for duty that morning. He was a “Plank Holder,” on the ship with an official certificate to prove it, #408. He displayed it proudly above his bunk below decks where it read: “To all sailors of the sea and aviators of the sky wherever ye may be—Greetings! Know ye by these presents that: Alfred James Lewis, Gunner’s Mate Third Class, was a member of the original crew which commissioned the USS *Wasp* and is therefore entitled to all the rights and privileges of a Plank Holder on said ship, including a clear and unencumbered title to one plank in the flight deck.” It was signed by C.A.F. “Ziggy” Sprague, right next to the buxom mermaid in the corner and the two fish giving her ample chest a wide eyed appraisal. Silhouettes of all three plane types adorned the certificate, and the image of the *Wasp* herself was drawn at the top.

AJ, as the rest of the crew called him, was also known as “Lucky Lewis” for his skill at cards. He had already staked out his claim to a plank on the carrier’s flight deck, a place he often liked to sit with his buddy “Ski”

Kotoski, right up near the bow. Now he was settling in behind a quad 40mm and looking into the clear skies up ahead.

It was finally over, he thought, or very nearly so. If it were really over then why would he be sitting behind these four steel barrels? If it were really over he's be out on his plank on the bow taking in the sun and sea with Ski. The Emperor had thrown in the towel and made his announcement, but there were many who would refuse the order to surrender in Japan. At that very moment dissident Japanese airmen were flying over Tokyo and dropping leaflets urging revolt and a continuation of the war. Their actions prompted officers loyal to the Emperor to order all Japanese warplanes disarmed and drained of their fuel, but some slipped away, the last of the Kamikazes led by Admiral Ukagi.

"You figure this thing is ever really going to end?" AJ asked his buddy.

"Everything ends, Lucky," said Ski. "Don't worry. The day will come when you'll miss your time on this ship."

"Well I'm taking that plank with me when I go," said Lewis.

"Who says they'll retire the ship as soon as we make port, AJ?"

"Well if they don't I'll leave it here on lend-lease, but nobody scraps this baby without checking with me first. I get my plank, one way or another."

* * *

Karpov was staring at the big Plexiglas display illuminated in luminescent green, blue, and red to indicate the position of all surface traffic in the vicinity.

"I knew they would push things," he said to Rodenko, his acting *Starpom*. "That's a sizable task group heading our way."

"What's the plan, sir? Are you thinking to engage or avoid conflict here?"

Karpov thought for a moment, then took a deep breath. "If we're going to start changing things it may as well begin here."

"We could just as easily sail due east if you need more time to consider the situation, sir."

"Yes, we could sail east, but that won't stop what you just reported Rodenko, will it? Those are planes in the air, and heading our way. Every time I turn around someone is flying an air strike my way. I just beat off the best the US had on CVN *Washington*. Now these little men want to pick a bone with me. What does our SAM inventory look like?"

“We used half our S-400s and a good number of other missiles in that last defensive action before the Demon blew its top. That leaves us with 100 medium range missiles on the *Klinok* system, but only 32 long range S-400s. Close in *Kashtan* system fired 12 missiles, leaving us with 52 there. That means we have exactly 184 SAMs of all types for this ship.”

“Have the other ships reported in?”

“Yes, sir. *Orlan* was in the inner screen with S-400s as well. They fired only 16 missiles and have a substantial inventory remaining, 180 in all. These are the 9M96E and E2 missiles, sir. They will only range out between 40 and 120 kilometers. The long range S-400s are with us, the 40N6Es, but *Orlan*’s missiles are lightning fast—Mach 15 and capable of thrust vectored high G maneuvers. The damn things can pull 60 Gs at sea level and 20 Gs at 30,000 meters!”

“A superb air defense ship,” said Karpov. “I want her station keeping on our bow at all times.”

“One more thing, sir. This is a hit to kill weapon system. *Orlan* is going to have to put a missile on every plane they take down.”

“No proximity fragmentation warheads?”

“Not on this particular version, sir. We have them, but not *Orlan*. That said, I’ll guarantee one thing—they’ll hit what they fire at.”

Karpov thought about that, then decided he would also cover his undersea battle space. “*Admiral Golovko* will be out on the starboard side as an ASW picket, and I trust Tasarov has the horse tail sonar out behind us.”

“He does, sir.”

“I’ll want a KA-40 up as well.”

“It will be ready in ten minutes, sir.”

“Good. *Golovko*, is not configured for air defense. They have *Kashtans*, but I’ll use the frigate for some good SSM punch if we need it. That means we’ll have to provide the air umbrella along with *Orlan*.”

“Feels a little different this time, Captain, now that we’ve got company here.”

“It does, but I have no idea how the officers and crew on the other two ships are responding to this situation. We may have convinced the two Captains, but the rest of the crew will have a lot to learn.”

“It took us all a good long while to come to grips with this,” said Rodenko, “and for the life of me none of us still really know why this is happening.”

“We were in the wrong place at the right time,” said Karpov. “Or you can look at it the other way around if you like to feel better about it. I say we were in exactly the right place at a decisive time. Now we’ll see what we can do about the situation.”

“Well sir, with *Orlan* and our own inventory, we’ll have 364 SAMs. Throw in the *Kashtans* on *Golovko* and we’re looking at over 400 missiles in the flotilla.”

“More than sufficient,” Karpov nodded.

“For the time being, sir,” said Rodenko, with just the slightest edge of a warning in his voice. He remembered all too well those tense moments as the ship’s SAM inventory dwindled away to nothing. “When we made port in Vladivostok there wasn’t a single SAM left on board, and we had exactly eleven surface action missiles left. We would not have had even those if not for the reloads we were carrying for live fire exercises. Our missiles are the one great advantage we have now.”

“I’m well aware of that,” Karpov said quickly. “So here we are back in the same old borscht. I’ll have to conserve that missile inventory as much as possible, but realize that the Americans will have something to say about it as well. If they get pushy, we’ll have to respond.”

Rodenko nodded. “We had the KA-226 up with good long range feeds earlier, Captain. There’s a considerable naval presence in this region at the moment.”

“Yes... I’ve been reading Fedorov’s book. Nikolin has also identified this force here from radio traffic as the American TF.38.3. The history notes it is commanded by an Admiral Sprague.”

“I’m reading at least six large capital ships in the core, sir, and then two large groups in the outer screen—looks like a great many destroyers and light cruisers.”

“I can name them all for you, if that book holds true.”

“And they have planes in the air now, Captain. We have about twenty minutes to make a decision here. The *Fregat* is indicating over a 100 aircraft.”

“The Japanese hit us with that many planes on two occasions.”

“And those attacks drained a considerable percentage of our SAMs, sir. Even so, we took a near fatal hit. If that plane had struck us anywhere other than the aft citadel, things could have been very bad.”

Karpov recalled those attacks, the Japanese screaming in on the ship from all compass headings, missiles firing in selected barrages, the Gatling guns

burning down the rest. But they had to be 100% accurate. They had to get them all. If even one got through to deliver its bomb or torpedo...

"I intend to warn those planes off," he said. "They'll probably pay no attention, but it's worth a try. I owe Fedorov at least that much."

"I understand, sir. But if we had not engaged that smaller American scouting force earlier..."

"What's done is done, Rodenko." The Captain walked briskly over to the communications station where Nikolin was monitoring radio traffic.

"They're very chatty," he said. "Everyone has two names."

"Nicknames, Mister Nikolin. The Americans love them."

"Yes, sir. I believe one of the flight leaders is called 'Iron Mike.'"

"Can you broadcast on that band?"

"Of course, sir."

"Then warn those planes off. State that we are on a diplomatic mission to Sagami Bay. We are not to be overflowed by armed planes, and if any attempt to do so they will be opposed."

Nikolin translated and broadcast the message, but the voice on the other end of the line didn't seem too accommodating. "He says they have orders to investigate the downing of five American planes, and that's what they intend to do, sir. And he doesn't sound impressed by our threat to oppose an overflight. He wants us to identify ourselves."

That was expected, thought Karpov. Identify ourselves. Just who in God's name are we in this world now? Could he say he was on a mission from the Soviet government? That may provide some thin cover for a time, until inquiries were made and it was denied. How could he possibly explain his situation and intent to a fighter pilot named "Iron Mike?" He might just as well try to explain it all to a dog, or so he thought in that moment. The notion that he was bigger, better, more evolved and definitely more powerful than the men behind those radar blips on the ship's screens was evident to him now.

"Tell them this is Captain Vladimir Karpov on an independent diplomatic mission, and that if they do not break off and alter heading within ten minutes we must assume hostile intent."

The word came back a minute later. "He says they have no intention of altering course and advises us to reduce speed and prepare to be overflowed. He says boarding parties will be dispatched from nearby ships and we can take up our diplomatic request with the proper authorities."

The proper authorities, thought Karpov. As if I am answerable to these men for my presence and actions here! Their immediate assumption is that they hold all authority, that they are the law and rule the day. There was a brief flash of anger in his mind, and his next words reflected his mood well enough.

“You tell Iron Mike that he has no authority over this ship, over these waters, or anything else in this region. We will not be boarded, nor will we be overflowed by armed aircraft. He has about five minutes to divert his heading.”

Nikolin listened intently, turning to Karpov, his brown eyes large under this head phones now. “He’s talking to his superiors now sir...Here he is again...” He translated as he listened. “Captain Carp, or whoever you are, might makes right, and we have both, as you will soon bear witness. The United States Navy is presently the sole authority in all these waters now. You’ll give way and heave to for boarding and inspection or be damned. If it is found that you are not an authorized agent of an allied government, then you and your crew will be arrested, the ship impounded, and your case heard before a properly formed military tribunal. We will not divert.”

“The United States Navy...” Karpov’s tone carried the obvious disdain he felt now. “They’re all the same,” he breathed. “This one is no different than Captain Tanner was eighty years hence. They will hound us from this moment until that volcano erupts. This is where it all started, but not this time; not on my watch.”

Rodenko gave the Captain a wide eyed look, but said nothing. He knew what was likely to happen here, and feared the worse from the moment he saw those radar returns on the incoming planes.

“Mister Nikolin. Contact destroyer *Orlan*. Signal Air Alert One and prepare to oppose incoming strike wave. Tell them to track and prepare to fire at any target crossing the 100 kilometer range line. They are to use their medium range S-400 system, salvos of eight until I give the order to cease fire. *Admiral Golovko* is to hold fire and observe unless directly attacked. They should be especially vigilant for any sign of undersea activity. Once you receive confirmation of that order from Captain Yeltsin, contact this Iron Mike again and tell him if he moves inside the 100 kilometer range line, then he and his planes will be presumed hostile and will be fired upon and opposed with deadly force.”

Rodenko looked at his screen. The planes were 140 kilometers out now

and moving at about 400kph. In six minutes they would cross the 100 kilometer range line. He informed Karpov of this, and the Captain nodded. "Tell them they must break off in five minutes or we must assume they intend to attack."

Nikolin translated again, and there was a long minute before he had an answer.

"What was their response?"

"They say we can go to hell, sir. They're coming."

Karpov's eyes narrowed. "We can go to hell, is it? Very well, gentlemen. Let's show them what the real estate there looks like."

Part II

Argos Fire

“If you're going to try, go all the way. Otherwise, don't even start. ... You will be alone with the gods, and the nights will flame with fire. You will ride life straight to perfect laughter. It's the only good fight there is.”

—Charles Bukowski, *Factorum*

Chapter 4

“**Cruise** missiles positively identified now, sir,” said Haley on the *Argos Fire*. The radar man was at the Sampson system, his head and hands protected by white flash proof headpiece and gloves as he worked. “Those are SS-N-27s, subsonic and coming in at 15,000 feet. Looks like they’re targeting *Princess Irene*, and they’re getting close. They’ll be diving soon, sir.”

A good play, thought Captain MacRae. *Princess Irene* is still north of Poti and we’re down here well to the south. I didn’t think they’d make this move, but here it is. Some bastard has decided he hasn’t enough arrows in his quiver to get us all, so he’s using his longest range asset to go after the closest target.

“*Iron Duke* is firing more *Sea Ceptors*, sir!” Haley’s voice was edged with the excitement of battle.

The Russian Black Sea Fleet had been ready for mothballs for years, but now it came out to fight like an old boxer with new legs. The old flagship, *Moskva*, was renamed *Slava* and sent to Severomorsk in 2018 where its most significant accomplishment had been towing and placing target barges for live fire exercises. The cruiser *Kerch* was retired, leaving only two old *Krivak* class frigates that had been rusting away for years. To save face, however, the Russians delivered three new frigates, the *Admiral Grigorovich*, the first of its class, along with *Admiral Essen* and *Admiral Makarov*.

Built in Kaliningrad, they were laid down between 2010 and 2012 and delivered to the fleet by 2018. Much more had been planned and promised, but never came. So the Black Sea Fleet was in no position to do much of anything in a general war. Its best play would have been to stand on defense, but seeing an opportunity to hurt the West by further restricting its access to oil and gas supplies, Captain Sergei Pomilov took his three new frigates out that day for a trial by fire, with the two old *Krivaks* in the vanguard of his tiny fleet. The Captain didn’t have much to shoot with on his five ships, but there were some fairly inviting targets to his south, three fat oil tankers escorted by a pair of British warships, and he had a few missiles that could hurt them badly. He sortied to take a position NNE of Poti, just under 300 kilometers, approaching the maximum range of his cruise missiles.

True to form, he coordinated a combined air/sea operation that day, sending in all that was left of his 43rd Independent Naval *Shturmovik* Air Assault Squadron. They were flying SU-24s on a saturation SEAD mission to try and suppress the enemy radars in the two British escorts. One had been identified as the frigate *Iron Duke*, and the other was simply reported as a *Daring* class destroyer. To see British ships this close to Russian home waters was rare down here. They held the line against the Northern Fleet in the Atlantic, but seldom entered the Black Sea. Pomilov planned to make them pay a high price of admission this time, and he set his sights on the nearest oil tanker, seeing it as easy prey.

The SU-24s came in with the element of surprise, but the British were not sleeping and were quick into action with their newest SAM defense systems. They proved more than capable, and the SU-24 pilots were not able to get anything through for a hit, losing one plane for their trouble. Yet Pomilov had also let loose with a salvo of anti-ship missiles.

The three new frigates had eight missiles each, four speedy *Oniks* at Mach 2.5 and four of the subsonic 3M-54E Klub cruise missiles, the same P-900 “*Sizzler*” as on *Kirov*, with improved range to 370 kilometers. He fired the cruise missiles first from all three ships, a salvo of twelve missiles heading south through the dark skies.

* * *

Captain Ian Williams on HMS *Iron Duke* was point man in the battle now. His ship was standing picket duty about twenty kilometers NNE of *Princess Irene*, close enough to cover the tanker with his *Sea Ceptors*. He was also about 300 kilometers southeast of the Russian formation, feeling just a little lonesome as he considered the tactical situation.

He read five ships in the Russian formation, three newer frigates, and two old *Krivaks* that were of no concern. They were ASW ships and most likely only there to form a screen. His XO was keen to point that out as they studied the chart plot board, ready to engage. Williams took a long draw on his pipe, filling the air around them with the aromatic smell of *Top Black Cherry*. He seemed calm and unruffled, in spite of the fact that they had just been in the thick of it, beating off a SEAD strike by a gaggle of Russian SU-24s, and now they were tracking a salvo of cruise missiles closing on their position at just under Mach 1.

“*Sea Ceptors* engaging this salvo now, sir,” said XO Lt. Commander Colin Firth. The missiles were a ‘soft launch’ system, piston ejected from the forward deck VLS canisters and then turned over by gas jets before their main engine would ignite to send them on their way. *Iron Duke* had the new ‘Quad Pack’ that housed four missiles in each of her 32 firing tubes, giving her a considerable inventory of 128 missiles. They had fired 32 of these already to repulse the SEAD attack off those SU-24s, and Williams was more than pleased with the results.

Now he watched another salvo firing, but the target had already completed its subsonic cruise phase and was diving steeply for the deck to begin its final supersonic run. It was missile against missile now, each about the same speed, one with active radar seekers probing the darkness to find its prey, the other executing a series of pre-programmed maneuvers as it settled into its sea skimming run and rapidly accelerated towards Mach 2.5 They had to get them all as they came in, and Williams watched as they recorded kill after kill. Yet the range was diminishing rapidly and two of the twelve were good enough to evade the defensive salvo. Williams saw them streak by the ship in the distance, two bright fiery tails well off his port quarter. They were obviously bearing down on *Princess Irene*, and they were well out of range of the ship’s close in gun systems.

“Once again, gentlemen,” he said, “and be quick about it.”

Four more *Sea Ceptors* were launched, accelerating rapidly in pursuit, but the *Sizzlers* were now burning full out and were reaching their maximum speed. The *Ceptors* could not catch them, and both hit their target with a thundering explosion. The heavy warhead blew through the outer hull and their kinetic impact started a raging fire in the tanker’s fuel compartments. The combined force of the two missiles put 800 kilograms of explosive power on the ship, and the rest of the damage was done by the burning oil. It was a fire that would not be put out by any means, and the ship was doomed. Fairchild had lost its youngest daughter, and the bridge crew on the Russian flagship, *Admiral Gigorivich*, clenched their fists in a victory cheer. First blood in the battle was their claim now, black oily blood spreading over the sea near the stricken tanker and surrounding it in a halo of fire.

But it was far from over.

* * *

Captain Gordon MacRae got the bad news a few minutes later and considered what to do. The damn Russians had one thing on him in this engagement—range. Their missiles had long reach, exceeding his own anti-ship systems by just enough to matter. That was the deadly calculus of modern war at sea. The speed and range of a missile could make all the difference in the engagement. If he wanted to repay the Black Sea Fleet in kind he had to get up north with *Iron Duke* and close the range a bit.

Fairchild had pressed a new ship-to-ship missile prototype into sea trials on the *Argos Fire*, the GB-7, or *Gealbhan* for ‘Sparrow.’ It was faster than the *Harpoons* on the *Iron Duke*, and had range almost equivalent to their Block 1D version at 320 kilometers, but he was too far south. The Duke could fire back now and their Captain Williams was doing so, but the frigate only had enough for one good punch, just eight *Harpoons*.

“Come about to 340 degrees and ahead full,” he said grimly. “We just paid a high price for a chance at getting at the oil quickly. Now it’s out there burning on *Princess Irene*.”

His Executive Officer Dean had a troubled look on his face. *Iron Duke* was alone, fighting the brave fight while *Argos Fire* was escorting the core of what remained of the Fairchild flotilla, two larger tankers with a million barrels each in their holds. MacRae reasoned that he could defend the tankers as long as he kept them inside the circle of his air defense umbrella, and the ship’s *Sea Vipers* could range out 120 kilometers.

Argos Fire surged ahead, her engines quickly developing 30 knots. With the Russians still heading southeast at 25 knots, the two sides would be closing at just over 100 kilometers per hour. That would put his *Gealbhans* within range in just a few minutes, and he was ready to engage.

“Wake up the birds,” he said to Dean. “Salvo of eight. *Iron Duke* has na’ but a handful of those *Harpoons*, and they’ll be lucky if they get even one through.”

Ten minutes later the *Argos Fire* engaged, but Captain Pomilov was ready with his final salvo of *Oniks* missiles as well. His three new frigates were able to get their salvo off before they had to go defensive and switch to SAM systems. He soon had another twelve P-800s in the air and targeted at the *Iron Duke* this time, intent on taking out a warship after his initial salvo had found and killed its commercial target.

The *Oniks* was the missile that had eventually been merged into the *Yakhont/BraMos* project for the Indian Navy. It was a successor to the

original SS-N-22 *Sunburns*, fast, furious, and with a 250kg warhead. It's ideal flight trajectory over the 300 kilometer range was a high altitude approach followed by a rapid descent to sea level for the final 40 kilometers. So while the eight *Harpoons* off *Iron Duke* forged in on the deck, low and slow, the Russian response was climbing high.

* * *

The frigate was firing with her *Sea Ceptors* and the deadly dance was on again in the midnight black of the starlit sky. Bright new shooting stars clawed the heavens as the missiles engaged, and all the while the *Gealbhans* off *Argos Fire* accelerated to join the fray.

The *Harpoons* found an old *Krivak* and two got through to break its back that night. A third made it through to hit *Admiral Grigorovich*. Yet the Russian missiles were fast and, in spite of a violent defense from her 30mm Mark 34 Bushmaster IIs, *Iron Duke* took a hit on her aft quarter, igniting the helo deck area in a torrid fire.

Captain Williams was on the bridge in command of the action, pipe in one hand, the other steadying himself against the roll of the ship. He shunned the Captain's chair, preferring to stand out his watch whenever he was on the bridge. There was a lot going on in the heat of combat, but Williams was a steady rock, with typical British reserve and a well of calm in his gut that would not be rattled. He felt the ship quaver with the missile hit, but a raised eyebrow was the only outward sign of reaction.

"Took one on our backside," he said calmly to his XO Lt. Commander Colin Firth."

"That we did, sir."

There were two other near misses, one spoofed by ECM and chaff, the other bearing in, right amidships.

"Mister Simms, look to your Bushmasters," said Williams firmly.

The rattle of the frigate's two automated cannons scored a lucky hit, igniting the last missile not thirty feet shy of the frigate. The clatter of shrapnel striking the hull was evident to them all, and a junior midshipman exhaled loudly with obviously relief. The demonstration drew a stern eye from Captain Williams, who quietly reached into his pocket and found his tobacco tamp.

Then the *Gealbhans* broke through the Russian defense to get the second

Krivak and put another missile into *Grigorovich* that would make a fiery end to that ship's brief career. A third found the *Essen*, striking amidships, and the Black Sea Fleet had had enough.

* * *

Back aboard *Argos Fire* radar man Haley turned to report .

"The remaining ships are executing a high speed turn, sir. They're coming around on a new heading of 340."

"They're turning tail and running for home," said MacRae. "But they've already done their worst. Miss Fairchild won't like the news tonight. We just lost twenty percent of our oil, and a good ship and crew with it."

"Aye, sir. Lucky *Iron Duke* had its Westland Merlin helo up on ASW watch. They're vectoring it to *Princess Irene* for rescue operations. Chances are we'll bring a good many home."

The entire action had taken little more than an hour. It would end with three Russian ships on the bottom of the sea, and both *Iron Duke* and *Princess Irene* hit and burning. Captain Williams was on the radio from *Iron Duke* with his report.

"Well, we took one on the fantail," he said "But it looks a whole lot worse than it is... Sorry about *Princess Irene*. We'll get to the crew, but may have to send our Merlin your way until we sort things out here. Those damn Sizzlers...We took down ten, but two got through."

"Aye, Captain," said MacRae. "You've given your best, and we sent them home three ships light with a fourth on fire. I don't think we'll see much more of the Black Sea Fleet from here on out."

"Seen more of it than we needed already," said Williams. "Damn bloody business."

"If you can still make way would you join us off the Turkish coast? We're coming up to give you just a wee bit more missile umbrella."

"Much obliged, *Argos Fire*. We can only make 20 knots at the moment, but that should get us south well enough. *Iron Duke* over and out."

That night the survivors aboard *Admiral Grigorovich* lowered the body of Captain Pomilov into the last launch and made way to join *Makarov*, the only ship in the fleet that had come through the battle unscathed. The flotilla leader would burn for another three hours before it keeled over and sank, joining the two *Krivaks* that had already gone down.

Command fell to Captain Tsukov on the *Essen*, senior officer in the fleet

after Pomilov's death. His ship had taken significant damage, but was still seaworthy and could make 25 knots. The flotilla had expended its entire SSM missile inventory in the brief, violent action. So now he turned and led what was left of the Black Sea Fleet home to Novorossiysk, his war over for the moment.

In his wake, far to the south, *Princess Irene* would burn all night before her hull gave way and she listed heavily into the massive oil slick blighting the sea. Turkish ships were out on a rescue operation, trying to fish as many of the crew out of the sea as possible. Half a million barrels of oil would go down with her, and now the hopes of the Fairchild company rested on those two last tankers, slowly creeping west along the Anatolian coast and soon joined by two more Turkish Frigates in escort. NATO was late to the game, but they were welcome, as were the flights of Turkish fighters up now to provide additional air cover.

By dawn of the fourth day of the war, *Argos Fire* had but one last charge to recover. The ship still had three of her X-3 helos and thirty Argonauts in the Caspian Sea region, and each minute that passed extended the range and stretched the tether of safe recovery thinner and thinner. Captain MacRae headed to the Executive cabin to see the company CEO and explain what had happened. He was determined to push for the immediate extraction of the Argonauts and a speedy run for the Bosphorus before the Russians could scrape up more aircraft for another attack.

When he got there the little nightmare of naval combat that had darkened his watch was about to deepen to yet another shade of black.

Chapter 5

“**Steady** on that winch!” said Dobrynin, hands on his hips as he supervised the loading operation. They had a crane up on the upper roof of the *Anatoly Alexandrov*, and they were hoisting up a long metal tube that might resemble a missile canister to any watchful eyes. Cover of darkness and overhead clouds would prevent satellites from looking in, but they had seen NATO drones earlier, and it was obvious that someone was taking an interest in the operation being mounted on the Caspian coast.

Dobrynin watched until the tube was safely hoisted up and lowered into an ordnance mover. It wasn’t a missile canister, but a radiation safe container housing some very special cargo, a fresh delivery from Admiral Volsky that had been flown all the way from Severomorsk up north. The Admiral had spoken to him an hour ago on a very secure channel.

“*Is Rod-25 mounted, Dobrynin?*”

“Yes sir, and I have the reactor up and ready for operations.”

“*Good news. Well, I’m sending you a backup.*” The Admiral went on to explain the complex new twist in the mission they had planned, and the longer Dobrynin listened, the more he began to silently shake his head.

“1945?” he said incredulously. “How could it happen, Admiral? We had Rod-25 safe with us here.”

Volsky explained what he could, but the fact remained that it was all still a mystery. *Kirov* was gone, and so were *Orlan* and *Admiral Golovko*. Aside from his submarines he now had no Red Banner Pacific Fleet to speak of, and the Black Sea Fleet had just been gutted and largely neutralized as an effective fighting force in a scrap with the British. Everything was now riding on this mission, Volsky explained. It wasn’t only to try and bring Fedorov home again, or even Orlov. Now there were three ships and over 1500 officers and crew to worry about as well.

“*I’m sending you a big helicopter and a lot of extra aviation fuel.*”

“But Admiral, we can’t bring the ships home with that. What is this for?”

Volsky explained, and Dobrynin’s eyes got wider and wider. “*As for your part,*” the Admiral concluded, “*you just focus on Fedorov. Bukin is going to handle the mission involving the Mi-26. My question to you is this—can the landing pad on Anatoly Alexandrov hold up if we land the Mi-26 there?*”

“Yes sir. It’s a heavy, reinforced structure. In fact we used Mi-26 helos to

load the reactor elements and other equipment and supplies last year when we commissioned the barge.”

“Very good. Carry on, Chief. I’m counting on you. You may launch your mission when ready. Remember our briefing. Your first task is to discover the year and date!”

Yes, yes, Dobrynin remembered the briefing. The key dates were September 30 thru October 5, 1942. He was to secure the *Anatoly Alexandrov*, then get a scouting detail ashore north of Makhachkala and begin his search. Troyak would be broadcasting his position, and he had the exact frequency so he could monitor it 24/7. Once a signal was received he was to put men ashore in force with any of the equipment that made it back with him, and use any means necessary to secure his objective and get safely home. Yet two more control rods had been received, one from Vladivostok and this last one from Severomorsk. They were to be loaded on the helicopter the Admiral mentioned. What was in the Admiral’s vodka this time?

The Mi-26 had been used to move in the last of their equipment, and was now at rest, its enormous bulk squatting on the roof of *Anatoly Alexandrov* like a giant bug, the eight long props drooping toward the landing pad like enormous spider legs. Bukin had been promoted from Corporal to Sergeant and he was now in charge of a small detachment of Marines, five men. One was a pilot, and the others stood in as flight engineers, but all were trained for combat, and armed to the teeth. They had supplies consisting mostly of food and ammunition, and the entire cargo section of the helo was packed with as much aviation fuel as the Mi-26 could carry.

Wherever they are going it must be some good long way, thought Dobrynin. He had enough to worry about getting the reactor certified and ready for use. Let Bukin handle the helicopter mission.

* * *

Now Volsky sat in the deep underground bunker beneath Naval Headquarters Fokino, a precaution given the steady buildup of American bomber assets in the Pacific. That and the rain of ash fall from the Demon volcano had cast a pall over the entire region, imposing a lull on operations as nature revealed her awesome temper. It was humbling to look out and see the titanic column of smoke and ash billowing up into the atmosphere, even to the edge of space. The first night after the eruption had been black beyond

measure, as if the sky itself had been broiled to char. No moonlight could penetrate the thickening air, and a muffled silence fell over the sea and land as more and more material billowed up into the brimstone night. It created a deeply ominous feeling in the gut, a sense of warning and desperate urgency settling over the Admiral's mind.

This war was a ragged and haphazard affair, he thought, and a tempest in a teacup compared to that Demon. Hokkaido Island is being inundated with ash, and the Americans have pulled everything they had out of Misawa in northernmost Honshu for bases on the main island further south. China seems single mindedly focused on Taiwan, and now the North Koreans are launching missiles for the Americans to shoot down.

The great standoff with the American fleet was suddenly held in abeyance. CVBG *Nimitz* had altered course and was now steaming to join the stricken *Washington* strike group in the Marianas. The third carrier, CVBG *Eisenhower* had also diverted from its course and was heading east through the Sulu Sea and into the Philippines, apparently also bound for Guam. They were moving their principle assets to a secure forward base to reorganize prior to resuming operations.

Karpov had beaten the *Washington* group with his daring and aggressive tactic of getting in that all important first salvo. Volsky wondered what he might have accomplished if he had carried out the remainder of his plan. After code *Longarm* sent the last of their longer range missiles out after the carrier, the fleet itself was going to execute a hard right and make a high speed rush south. Karpov planned to use the initial plume from the smaller eruption of the volcano as top cover, surging south beneath the pall to get his ships inside the 300 kilometer range. At that point he had P-900s on all three ships in the core fleet for another massed barrage of 42 missiles. These would fire even as the fleet continued south at their best speed, and if they got inside 200 kilometers the Moskit-II *Sunburns* on *Kirov* would fire next, followed by the high speed MOS-III *Starfires*, 30 more missiles with another eight P-800s on *Golovko*. After that it would be down to deck guns.

Against a single carrier battlegroup we had the force to prevail, he thought. But the US Navy was not just a single battlegroup. They could bring that same force to the battle five times over here in the Pacific. We have fleet enough to hold our own credibly against only 20% of their real naval power here. Satellites were already picking up movement west from the 3rd Fleet sector on the US Pacific coast. CVBG *Ford* was coming.

Against that I've got *Admiral Kuznetsov* hiding up in the Sea of Okhotsk to get away from that ashfall and have the benefit of land based air cover. Perhaps I can keep that ship afloat for another week. The two *Udaloy*s that made it back to Vladivostok are useless in an offensive role. All I have left are the submarines, safe from the Demon's wrath as they cruised deep beneath the sea.

Reports there had been mixed. The Americans had found and killed an *Oscar* after the Russian subs revealed their position when they fired at the carrier. The other *Oscar* fled north, and *Yasen* was also still alive, but running silent. He did not know what the Americans had beneath the sea, but there were probably a fistful of deadly hunter killer subs on the prowl by now. What to do next? The battle was over for the time being, and his thoughts drifted to the operation underway in the Caspian.

If I had it to do over I would have put that control rod we found in Vladivostok on a submarine. Then it would have been right here to find Karpov and surface to deliver the rod. Perhaps it could have hovered beneath the ship and come home when *Kirov* shifted, but the more he thought about his plan the wilder it seemed. How do we even know these new rods will work? Kapustin had been very confident, and his revelation the previous night had been very telling.

"Because I told you," he told them with certainty. "I know everything there is to know about these control rods, where they were manufactured, where they were shipped and stored, and one thing more—where the materials used in their manufacture came from..." He let that dangle, a teasing look in his eyes.

"Very well," said Kamenski, "enlighten us, Gerasim."

"There's nothing unusual about the manufacturer," Kapustin continued. "Rosatomica makes a good percentage of our control rods, but I ran down the materials composition and source data, and found something very interesting. It may be nothing, but then again..."

"Yes, yes, what is it?"

"Well the materials are sampled for purity, of course, and any residual elements or minerals are documented. That's what caught my eye, because this Rod-25 seems to have a higher reading for calcite and calcium carbonate particles."

"I don't understand," said Kamenski.

"I'm not sure I do either," Kapustin admitted. "But that reading led me to

check the materials source. These rods are basically steel tubes housing materials that easily absorb neutrons without undergoing fission. They use lots of things, silver, indium, cadmium, boron, cobalt and a witch's brew of other elements, many I've never even heard of. The Americans use something called hafnium in their naval reactors—very rare—but we've been experimenting with some new substances and alloys of various sorts, like dysprosium titanate. The engineers note it has a much higher melting point and is very stable, producing almost no radioactive waste. It's a ceramic material, a kind of spin ice with magnetic properties. And this is interesting, the readings that caught my eye were for a material called Silverberg. It's also called Iceland Spar because it was originally mined in Iceland, and they called it silver-rock there. If you had a lump in your hand it would look like a big crystal, and it has some very interesting properties in addition to magnetic effects. It splits light! Some say it was used as a navigation aid centuries ago."

"A navigation aid?" Volsky did not follow him.

"Yes, yes," said Kamenski. "I have heard of this. The Vikings called it Sunstone. They could hold the crystal up under a completely overcast sky, and by moving it across the sky and observing the stone they could find the position of the sun. It can polarize light—even infrared. In effect, it's a doubly refracting Calcite. They use it with lasers in our day and who know what else."

"You mean something like a prism?" Volsky had some grasp on it now.

"I think more like a doubling effect of the light. It takes the light rays and decomposes them into two rays. Double or nothing, eh?"

"This material is in Rod-25?" asked Volsky.

"Yes," said Kapustin, "and in very high residual quantities relative to other impurities listed. And now comes the real surprise. I ran down the purchase orders to find out where these materials were mined. This particular batch had a significant shipment from a mining operation just north of Vanavara, a little strip mine right on the river there." He tapped his pen on the computer screen as if to indicate the place.

Kamenski's eyes seemed to glitter, the light of his thinking doubled as the Inspector went on, but the Admiral had a clueless expression on his face, and it was clear he was not seeing the importance of any of this.

"Vanavara? And the name of the river where this strip mine is located?" Kamenski asked the question as if he already knew the answer, and Kapustin

smiled.

“I knew you would make the connection, Pavel.”

“What river?” said Volsky.

“The Stony Tunguska.” Kapustin folded his arms, a satisfied grin on his face.

“Tunguska? You mean the place where that asteroid fell?”

“Correct,” said Kapustin. “In fact, the mine is located right on the outer rim of the area scientists have delineated as the perimeter of the explosion. They’ve been looking for exotic materials there for some time now.”

“Very interesting,” said Kamenski, the light of recollection in his eyes. “A team of Italian researchers think Cheko Lake is the actual impact site there, and they have been trying to take samples of compressed material beneath the lake that may be from the asteroid itself. So what you are telling us is that this Rod-25 has a high percentage of residual material—this Iceland Spar Calcite—and it was mined along the Stony Tunguska River north of Vanavara?”

“Precisely, and it may have come from the same mysterious object that exploded over Tunguska.”

“And this Iceland Spar is refractive; it splits and doubles light rays passing through it.”

“Correct.” Kapustin smiled. “It’s distributed all through this particular control rod, scattered like powder. If it can split light rays, who knows what else it might be doing when exposed to the radiation within a nuclear reactor?”

“Amazing,” said Kamenski. “The other two rods from this batch, do they also show this same residual material?”

“Of course. Like father and son. In fact, the one we had stored here had even higher readings than Rod-25. So these other control rods may exhibit the very same properties and effects, unless all of this is completely irrelevant. Who knows?”

“I don’t understand the science,” said Volsky, “but there is no denying the effects. I’ve lived them. It was mere happenstance that we eventually came to see the twelve day shift pattern aboard *Kirov*, and mate it with Dobrynin’s maintenance schedule on the reactor. And you have already told me that a significant nuclear explosion produces time displacement. That alone is cause for amazement.”

“Or a massive geothermal explosion,” Kamenski put in. “Perhaps this control rod redoubles the effects of nuclear fission in some way when it is

inserted into the reactor,” Kamenski held up a finger, thinking about it further. “We won’t figure all this out here, but let’s put some good minds to work on this—quietly. In the meantime, we have already seen the effects produced by this control rod, and seeing is believing. If these other two rods also have this material in them, and they work as we hope they will, then we may have made one of the greatest discoveries in human history. Congratulations, Gerasim! You may have just discovered the secret of time travel!”

Volsky recalled the look on the Inspector’s face, a restrained jubilation, clouded by a squall of confusion and surprise. Yet he realized now what Kamenski was saying—they could now willfully create these control rods, experimenting with different materials and quantities of this strange substance mined from the perimeter of the Tunguska explosion, and yes, they would figure this all out in time. In time...Assuming they had any to spare in the enterprise.

What have we done? If these other control rods also work...if these effects can be duplicated any time we wish...What have we done? The implications of the discovery loomed like a massive eruption of that volcano in his mind, clouding his thoughts with the ashfall of a thousand generations.

Chapter 6

“**You** want us to attack the operation?” MacRae had an astonished look on his face. “With three helicopters and thirty men?”

“Can it be done?” Elena Fairchild knew that if she wanted it done something would happen, but she wanted to know what her odds were.

“That depends,” the big Scott folded his arms, thinking. “What does Mack Morgan have for us on the situation?”

“They’re up to something. That much is clear. The activity is centered on this floating nuclear reactor site, the *Anatoly Alexandrov* I told you about earlier. Mack says they’ve moved in hovercraft from the naval base at Kaspiysk, and set up additional SAM batteries there. Now he’s learned there’s a contingent of Russian Naval Marines out on that ship, barge, whatever it is. And they’ve moved in a big helicopter as well. Drones got a good look at it before the Russians painted them with targeting radars and NATO pulled out. They’re loading a lot of aviation fuel, and something that looks like missile canisters.”

“Well there’s a war on, and you may have noticed that when *Princess Irene* went down.” MacRae was frustrated, and still bothered by his failure on that score. “Why and God’s name do we have to get involved? To even the score?” Now he realized his remark was a bit too pointed, and he apologized.

“Don’t worry about that, Gordon,” said Elena. “The oil doesn’t matter now.”

That took MacRae by surprise. “It doesn’t matter? Don’t tell me you’re giving up the ghost on this mission because we lost *Princess Irene*. Look, we’ve still got two million barrels of oil on the other two tankers, and we’re well protected now that the Turks have thrown in with their naval/air assets. And Mack tells me they were able to get a significant amount of oil off *Princess Royal* and pump it into another empty tanker. No room to bunker it at Fujairah now. The Iranians made a mess of the whole storage sector, and they’ll be fighting fires there for weeks. But we got a goodly amount off and you can count that toward your debt to Chevron. With the oil at \$300 a barrel now you’ve still got good margins here.”

“That may be so, but there’s something else involved.” She seemed to hesitate, as if about to say something and then catching herself. He could see

her thinking, wondering, as if she desperately wanted to tell him something but was holding back.

MacRae decided he had enough good will in the bank after his years of service to press her. “What is it, Elena?” There, he’d did it. He finally used her first name, dropping the veil of propriety and protocol now and taking the matter to a personal level.

She could hear it in his voice, the softening of his tone, and see it in his eyes now as he looked at her. He had the look of a man who would do anything he could to take the burden from her shoulders, and she had seen it in the eyes of few other men in her life. Deep down, she wanted to think she saw love there, real love, not mere concern and dutiful attendance from a subordinate in her employ. And when she looked at him her heart ached to tell him more, to tell him everything, and to finally feel that the burden she carried might be shared by the two of them, up on his broad shoulders where she knew he could carry it easily—everything she had dragged about in her life for decades, all in his big arms. And they’d carry it together.

The two of them...

“I... I can’t say more, Gordon. You’ll have to trust me on this.” The words stumbled out, even as she chided herself inwardly for not going further, for not reaching for what she longed to take hold of in her mind and heart. Gordon MacRae, she thought in a wink of her soul. My God, I love the man...

MacRae looked at her, seeing more there than she realized she had shown him. He put his hands in his jacket pocket, surprised to feel the note he had received from the Black Line days ago warning of the imminent attack on *Princess Royal* in the Gulf. He realized he was still wearing dress whites! One thing had led to another and he never found time to switch out to his navy blues. Now he stood there, his mind alert enough and perceptive enough to know that she was hiding something she dearly wanted to reveal. And the only big mystery in the woman’s life is right behind that movable bulkhead on the other side of the room, he thought. Then he spoke his mind.

“It’s that damn red phone back there, isn’t it?”

She looked at him, lips tightening.

“Another call came in, am I right? What is it, Elena? Is it government business? The Prime Minister chewing on your ear for something? Well, the Royal Navy has been able to see to the Crown’s business for the last thousand years well enough. What in God’s name have we got to do with

this? It was good of them to lend a hand here with the *Iron Duke*, but we've no need to repay the favor."

"It's something more," she said it before she could stop herself. "And it has a long, long tail, Gordon."

"Yes, and you've had hold of that tiger since the first day I set foot on this ship. What is it, Elena? What's so damn important about that red phone?"

She lowered her head, eyes glassy, her hand on her brow. The stress of these last days had been heavy on her, and she needed sleep. Her head suddenly felt as light as her heart as she imagined herself telling him everything, opening up the doors and letting him in at long last. Then she did what women have done for generations when there was simply no other way to cross that last impossible gulf between a man and woman so obviously drawn into the well of one another, but forever harried by the curse of forbidden love.

She fainted.

"Elena!" MacRae saw her legs go limp and stepped forward quickly as she fell, taking her in his arms. He lifted her easily, carrying her to the nearby sofa and laying her gently down. As he did so her eyes fluttered open again, unfocused, and she felt the heat of the moment, a sheen of perspiration on her forehead.

"You're not well," said MacRae. "Fainted dead away on me. Here, let me get you some water."

He was up and over to the wet bar and soon had a glass of cool ice water in hand. He put one big hand behind her head to help her as she took a long sip. Then she closed her eyes, flushed with embarrassment, yet somehow feeling she had just leapt over a great crevasse between them.

"Oh Gordon," she said softly. "If you only knew what I know..."

"What? About this business in the Caspian? Alright, so you've got your private line there and the Government leans on you from time to time for special favors. I understand. You've called in a number of favors yourself in your day, or why else is *Iron Duke* out there watching our backside, eh? What's the big secret this time? You want me to send those men out there in after this *Anatoly Alexandrov*? Why? Has the government gotten wind of something? What's itching the Prime Minister's backside this time?"

She smiled. "No, it isn't that," she said skirting the edge of the hidden truth again. "It's not the government. Neither Whitehall nor Ten Downing Street has anything to do with it."

“What then? Will you at least give me that much before I give the order. Can we hit this operation? Yes we can, but we’ll likely lose good men if we do this, not to mention the X-3s. Tell me why Fairchild Inc. needs to get in on this bar fight, Elena? You tell me that and I’ll move heaven and earth for you. You know I will, but I’ve been mucking about in the dark all these years, carrying on behind these Captain’s stripes. Ours is not to reason why...You know the drill. I’d give you the world if I could hold it in my arms, but you’re a damn hard woman to love...”

My god, he thought. I’ve said it.

And she heard it at once, heard what she had been longing to tell him for years. She did something that surprised him now, though it seemed a natural thing to do in the situation, reaching up and touching the side of his face, her hand soft on his cheek, a longing in her eyes, and the beginning of tears. “Gordon MacRae,” she started.

Words came to him, in the old tongue he still loved and knew so well: “*Tá sé níos fearr chun iarracht a dhéanamh ná mar a súil,*” he said. “It’s better to try than to hope.” Then he did something that surprised himself even more, and he leaned down and kissed her...

* * *

Captain MacRae got his answer, though he sat for a good long hour trying to understand what it meant. Lieutenant Ryan with the X-3 Helo contingent got his orders soon after. He was out on the tarmac at Buzachi airfield north of Fort Shevchenko, watching as the air crews finished up the refueling operation and were rolling the tanker truck away. It wasn’t much of an airfield, just a single hanger and fuel station and a simple asphalt runway. A thin, dull brown road led west toward the Caspian coast and the oil worker’s settlement. His three sleek X-3s sat like birds of prey on the landing strip, the only aircraft there that day, and though he knew he had one of his men over in the number three bird watching radar returns, he still found himself looking north with apprehension.

The Russians, he thought...They let loose on the company and put *Princess Irene* on the bottom of the sea. I hope to God we gave them a bloody nose for that one. Word is they have a reinforced rifle division up on the Kazakh border ready to roll on a moment’s notice. If they do move, that will mean they’ll have air cover up as well, and they know exactly where

every airfield in the region is now. The longer he sat there on the tarmac the more vulnerable he felt, and he was itching to get his men aboard the X-3s and heading home—until the call came in from Captain MacRae on *Argos Fire*.

“Well now,” he said, his Irish blood riled. “A bar fight, Tommy.” His co-pilot Tom Wicks was checking one of the twin turbo-prop engines on the nearest X-3. “Looks like somebody got her skirts ruffled over that incident in the Black Sea.”

“What skirts?” said Wicks. “She’s got a pair of legs on her, no question about that, but her ladyship never gives us a look at them. Always prancing about in those pants suits and all.”

“You have it in for the CEO, Tommy?”

“Me? I’ll have it in anywhere I get a welcome,” he smiled. “What’s this all about, Lieutenant?”

“I can’t say as I know,” said Ryan. “Just like us Irish. We never know what we want, but we’re prepared to fight to the death until we get it.”

“Is Fairchild Irish? I thought she was proper British.”

“That she is, but there’s a wee bit of good Irish honey in her blood, and those lips have kissed the blarney stone, eh? Why else would she plant the company flag on the Isle of Man, right smack in the Irish Sea?”

“Missing Bradytown, are you?”

“Aye, we’re a long way from home out here, Tommy. Now we get this new mission and something tells me a good many of us may not ever get home again.”

Wicks thought that one over, his eyes drifting to one of the rifle squads resting in the open hanger across the way. “What is it we’re supposed to do, exactly?”

“There’s a Russian base on the other side of that big lake out there.”

“Lake? You mean the Caspian Sea?”

“Right-O. Well, we’re paying them a visit, if you know what I mean. Mack Morgan thinks they’re ready to run some kind of Spetsnaz operation from an anchorage just off shore. They want us to crash the party.”

“Lord almighty! What are we up against?”

“Not much off shore. Just a big floating power plant, but the Russians seem to be using it as a staging base for some pending operation. They want us to shoot the damn thing up before they get it underway.”

“Where is the place?”

“About 15 klicks off the coast near that naval base at Kaspiysk. I make it about 350 kilometers from here.”

“That sounds like a run and gun mission, Lieutenant. We taking the Argonauts?”

“Well we’ve got to get them home some way, right? But you’re right, we won’t much need them on a mission like this. My plan is to get them down to Baku—that’s a 500 kilometer run, so we’ll need to refuel there again at the BP facility. Then we run up the coast, go in fast and low, paint the target, and let the missiles do the rest. We can pick the Argonauts up on the way back.”

“If we make it back,” said Wicks with a shrug. “We’re packing Hydra-70s in the rocket pods. Their effective range is 8,000 meters, and they’re unguided, so we’ll have to be pretty damn close. You think the Russians might know we’re coming? They’ll sure as hell have radar and SAM batteries at that naval base. We’ve got a fairly small radar cross section, but they’ll see us in time.”

“Aye, and they won’t be happy when they do. Things are getting pretty dicey now. Russians beefed up the 414th Naval Infantry at Kaspiysk. There’s a motorized column from their 58th Army heading for Makhachkala. Could be trouble, and Morgan thinks they mean to make a move on Baku, and grab the Kashagan superfields up here while they’re at it.”

“What’s this world coming to, Lieutenant?”

“No good,” said Ryan. “Well, the birds are all fueled and ready to go. Let’s get the Argonauts loaded and get on with it.”

“What about those Chevron people?”

“What, Flack and the rest? They come too, at least as far as, Baku. The birds will be heavy but we’ll lift them easily enough. That will take more fuel, which is why we top off at Baku again after we get back. It’ll be another thousand kilometer run back to *Argos* in the Black Sea. So take a good look at the Caspian while we’re here, Tommy. And I hope to God we never see the damn place again.”

Ryan turned to the open hanger and gave a loud whistle, waving at the men there. The Argonauts had done what they came for. It was no problem scaring off the local militias near the oil fields. One look at these dangerous looking men in jet black military garb was enough to convince them that their little oil war would best be conducted some other day. They melted away, and Lieutenant Ryan was able to pull out good number of Chevron workers and get them safely back to Buzachi. They were shutting down. The place

was just too dangerous now to contemplate any further operations. There had already been a brief air duel between Russian fighter patrols and the Kazakh air force, and it was looking like the conflict would get rolling on the ground any moment.

They're just waiting on fuel and equipment, he knew. Once they do move, however, they'll come hard and fast, and that Kazakh Ready Brigade will have its hands full. Who knows, perhaps this Spetsnaz outfit off the Caspian coast is figuring to be part of that attack. Mack Morgan says they're moving in a big fat helicopter as part of the force. So I guess we'll see what kind of sting my X-3s have after all.

He looked at them, three of his four little darlings, one of the fastest helicopters he's ever flown. He could fly circles around the Apache in his X-3, but when he thought about the Russian SAM batteries his bravado was quashed. There's one thing the damn Russians get right, me boyo, he thought, and that's missiles. We're going to be out there alone with the gods, and the night will flame with fire.

And that soon...

Part III

The Bull

“I never trust a fighting man who doesn’t smoke or drink.”

—Admiral Bull Halsey

Chapter 7

Airman J.D. Pickett was scouring the seas ahead in his *Helldiver*, leading in a section of five planes that morning. Behind him were the lines of the remainder of the squadron, two more flights of five SB2C-5 *Helldivers* like his own, followed by three groups of five TBM-3 *Avenger* torpedo bombers. A thousand feet above them were the *Hellcats*, long lines of fighters, and many with 500 pound bombs under their wings in the fighter/bomber role. Others carried the HVAR Rocket System the men called “Holy Moses” due to the reaction they had when the airmen first saw the weapons fire and streak in towards their targets.

They were about to see something an order of magnitude better, and then some. Pickett spotted it, coming up at the formation with impossible speed. “What in God’s name is that?” he called through his headset. “Coming up on my twelve o clock! Rocket! Rocket!”

The explosion said the rest as the rocket flashed in and struck a *Corsair* flying off the rightmost wing of his flight. He craned his neck to see the bright yellow fireball consume the plane and saw the smoldering remnant falling from the sky.

“Holy shit!” he yelled, all thoughts of Moses blown from his mind by that fireball. “Did you see that? Anybody see what fired that? I don’t have anything on radar. Can’t see a thing.”

The first missile was a warning shot. Karpov had ordered *Orlan* to fire this single missile at the first planes they could track inside 100 kilometers. He was back on the radio to see if Iron Mike might have a change of heart, but the effect of the missile shot was a bit like poking a stick into a hornet’s nest. The Americans quickly shook off the shock and they were calling to one another, orders barked sharply over the airwaves.

“*Louis! Get your Avengers down on the deck! Pickett, you peel off to your left and swing round on 290. Everybody upstairs get ready to rumble!*”

Vern Higman heard the order and reached in to pat the dash board of his plane—‘Round Trip Ticket.’ They were going in again, but even though he had seen planes shot up pretty bad he always came through in one piece. This would be no different. He looked out his cockpit window and saw Wendell Stevens and Lowell Chamberlain both give him the thumbs up. The others

were itching to dive the instant they laid eyes on the target—Bob Nouall, Mike Hallard, J.G. Wheeler, who already had one Navy Cross on his chest for blasting the Japanese Cruiser *Tone* a while back.

“Let’s get down and dirty,” Higman called to his *Helldiver* flight mates. “I’ve got me a round trip ticket to the action and a thousand pounds of metal in my belly that I plan to put right on Ivan’s foredeck! You ready Pickett? Lead the charge!”

Pickett was ready, but so was *Orlan*.

* * *

“**Fools** rush in,” said Karpov, shaking his head as he watched *Orlan* firing off his starboard bow.

“Where Angels fear to tread,” said Rodenko at his side, the duty on his radar assigned to a Lieutenant. He was acting *Starpom* now, and promoted to Captain Lieutenant. When the ship was at action stations he was up and at Karpov’s side, inwardly proud of his promotion and ready for both the new authority and responsibility it brought him. Always a level headed man, Rodenko remained cool under fire and was a natural leader for all the junior officers in his section during the ship’s earlier ordeals. While he had never mustered the courage to confront Karpov in the beginning when he opposed Admiral Volsky, he regretted that now that he knew what it felt like to be standing in command level officer’s shoes.

When Fedorov had been promoted to *Starpom*, and then ship’s Captain during Karpov’s rehabilitation in the Med, Rodenko never fretted or felt passed over. He saw how the young Fedorov was struggling to assume his new role, seeing he was over his head in many ways, and tried to help him as much as he could. The cooperative relationship he managed to forge with Karpov was inspiring to the entire bridge crew, and with Orlov gone, things seemed much more stable on the ship. Now his tactical sense, overall situational awareness born of his years as a radar man, and his general competence made him perfect for the role as the ship’s *Starpom*, Executive Officer and second in command after Karpov on the fleet’s flagship.

He admired the Captain’s skill at the helm, particularly in combat, and it was true that Karpov had saved the ship many times in tight situations. But Rodenko had seen, and knew well, the darker side of Karpov, and now that the ship had regressed again in time, he began to perceive the Captain’s

shadow thickening on the deck of the bridge again, and flashes of his old self—his ambition and yes, his arrogance was apparent at times, particularly after their battle with the US Captain Tanner and CVBG *Washington*.

Rodenko knew that had been a real threat, and that circumstances and strong support from both the Naval Air Arm and the undersea boats had been decisive in the engagement. If the fleet had faced the Americans without them, things might have been very different. The initial eruption of that volcano had also forced the Americans to divert left and right to avoid the ashfall. While Karpov was clever in moving the ship south beneath the ash cloud that morning, they had still seen a *Harpoon* come within a whisker of striking the ship. *Varyag* had saved the day, and then all hell broke loose when that volcano erupted again.

Now, thrown back into the same impossible situation as before, Karpov seemed to regress in his behavior, his own inner Demon restlessly awakening in the heat of imminent battle. Rodenko had seen how both Volsky and Fedorov had served as strong counterfoils to Karpov before, and wondered how he would measure up to that task. In the end he realized it was his job to give the Captain his best judgment in any situation they encountered, and his best effort at the helm.

“They have no idea what they’re facing,” said Karpov. “And that’s why they seem so brave, I suppose. If they knew there was no way they could penetrate our SAM defenses, they might fear the skies over this ship.”

“But they don’t know,” said Rodenko. “Which is why it hurts a bit to watch this.”

Karpov turned his head, lowering his field glasses, but said nothing. The light in his eyes was lit by the flames of battle. The action had moved inside the 50 kilometer range circle, and radar reported that the formation was pressing doggedly forward. *Orlan* had fired three salvos of eight, and she was near perfect. Two of the missiles had consumed the same plane when they tracked in on fireballs, moving too fast to switch to a new target in time. They had listened to the reports on radio from *Orlan*. 22 kills, and yet they came. Karpov was holding all his precious S-400s in reserve and letting *Orlan* do the fighting at this point, but now he turned to communications with an order.

“Mister Nikolin, signal the flotilla. Tell Captain Yeltsin aboard *Orlan* that they have led the way ably and we will now join the action with our *Klinok* system while they switch to short range munitions. *Admiral Golovko* will continue to hold fire unless directly attacked, and then they are authorized to

use their close in defense systems.”

“Aye, sir, signaling now.”

“Medium range SAM system, Samsonov; salvos of eight. Track and fire when ready.”

“Sir! Firing now.” Victor Samsonov was only too eager to get into the fight. The aft deck of *Kirov* sounded off the loud warning claxon, and the hatches opened. The missiles were up soon after, jetting away on fiery tails with ash-white smoke in their wake.

Four...Eight...Twelve...Sixteen...the weapon was called the *Klinok* shipboard multi-channel self-defense system, NATO designation SA-N-92 *Gauntlet*, and the pilots of the oncoming strike wave would soon be running the gauntlet of fire and steel. The short reaction time and high rate of fire for the missiles made it ideal in this role, and the missiles *Kirov* fired had much improved range over the initial system developed two decades earlier. It was a tried and true multi-channel tracking system with the ability to use laser, TV, or radar to find targets. Each radar could simultaneously prosecute eight targets, and reassign remaining live missiles in the salvo to new missions if their original target was destroyed.

Karpov turned to Rodenko, who was keeping one eye on the Plexiglas situation plot adjacent to the radar systems. “How far away is the main body?”

“About 250 kilometers southwest of our position, sir. Speed thirty knots, heading due north at 360 degrees.”

“Fools rush in. Very well, let’s send them a message that should give them something to think about. How soon before we have them in SSM range?”

“You’re moving to a surface action, sir?”

“A preemptive action, Rodenko. If we give them a hard shove on the shoulder now, it could spare us a much more involved battle later. If I can get them to back off here, all the better. At the moment they may be under the illusion that we are nothing more than a small surface flotilla—Soviet ships, or even Japanese. I want them to know we can hit them at range, strike them like an aircraft carrier. It should give them something to think about, and perhaps it will take the starch out of their collars down there and we can talk sense.”

Rodenko nodded his agreement, though he still wondered what the Captain had in mind for that conversation. What was he thinking to say to the

Americans now? Yet this was not the time or place for that discussion, so he considered their surface action missile loads. They had left Vladivostok with a standard load of ten P-900 *Sizzlers*, ten MOS-III *Starfires*, and twenty *Moskit-IIs*. Four P-900s were expended earlier against American patrols in the Kuriles.

“Sir, we can fire the P-900s now, but we have only six remaining for that system. The *Moskit-II* system should be in range momentarily. At our present speed due south, the range is diminishing by about 100 kilometers per hour. We can fire in about fifteen minutes.”

“Very well. Mister, Samsonov. Ready a half salvo on the P-900 system—four missiles please. Target the core of the enemy fleet. Set ship target profile preference to aircraft carrier. On my command fire at thirty second intervals.”

“Ready on P-900 system, sir.” The deadly missiles could be programmed to seek out a specific target profile, analyzing a ship’s silhouette to determine the target type. They could also fly evasive low level approach runs to avoid screening targets to get to their primary, an evolution that made them particularly effective.

“Are these missiles reprogrammed for plunging fire?”

“I’m sorry sir, they are all in standard configuration. We have had no time to reprogram the overall attack profile.”

“Nor did we have any reason to in 2021,” said Karpov. “No matter, the sea skimming approach should do. There are four aircraft carriers down there, and my guess is that they will have more planes than we have seen thus far. I want to make their lives a little more difficult and discourage any further launches. Sorry if we have to spoil their lunch.”

Karpov was jaunty, pacing back and forth in front of the citadel view screens, the ocean beyond clear and calm. The sound of the SAM defense batteries was loud in the air, and their white tails scored the sky as they sped away, but as yet not one of the distant American planes they were seeking had come within visual range. It was Beyond Visual Range naval combat, and they could not see the carnage they were inflicting some thirty kilometers away now, only the green blips on the radar turning red when a missile hit its target.

Yet Rodenko was at least encouraged by the fact that Karpov was fighting the engagement in a measured way. He could have sent a withering saturation barrage at the American ships, and inflicted tremendous damage. By using only four missiles he would give them a stiff, painful jab in the face, and still

preserve the ship's vital missile inventory.

Even as he thought that, Rodenko realized those missiles would more than likely run out again, and perhaps sooner than they thought. And without our missiles, he thought, we are nothing more than a fast cruiser, and not a particularly well armored one either. Karpov was taking things slowly here, and at least they were not alone this time. They still had *Orlan* and *Admiral Golovko*, but what else did the Americans have down there, and were they prepared to use it? Would they negotiate with Karpov after an engagement like this; after losing planes and men, or even a carrier when Samsonov lets loose that salvo?

* * *

Orlan was particularly effective with its lethal missiles traveling so fast at Mach 15 that the pilots had no time to even react once they caught sight of the approaching contrails. It was hideous, and in Higman's flight they were two planes light already, with Nuall and Hallard both dead and gone into the sea. But Higgy Higman was still there in Round Trip Ticket, bravely pressing his *Helldiver* forward. He thought he saw something on the distant horizon now—yes, there was a ship, then another, and those damn rocket trails pointed out the way.

"Ships at eleven-o'clock!" he shouted. "Pickett? You still up front?"

"Yeah, I see 'em. Going in now!" Pickett was there, bravely leading the charge, and it was already one for the record books. Of the 54 planes off *Ticonderoga*, only 22 remained. There were seven *Helldivers*, five *Avengers* and the rest were fighters. The squadrons off *Wasp* had also been ravaged by the deadly precision rockets that had claimed one plane after another in a hellish nightmare in the skies. But the American pressed on.

Higman grimaced and shirked when he saw Stevens plane hit above him. It was a near miss, but a small fragment of shrapnel struck his windshield on the right side and he could see the glass spider out in a crack. He pulled the stick and threw his helldiver over to get ready to dive. Then he heard something he had never once heard before in battle. It sounded like Iron Mike Mulligan was throwing in the towel!

"All units; all flights, this is Mulligan. We have orders to abort. I repeat, break off and do a 360. They want us out of here on the double."

Hot damn, thought Higman. I've got the bastards right in front of me and

lost two good men getting here, and now they want us to bug out and fly home? What kind of stew was Mulligan serving up today? The same thing had happened over Tokyo a few days ago. Maybe the brass had negotiated a settlement to this conflict, but it sure didn't look like it from his point of view.

"What's up, Big Mike? Why we turning tail?"

"Orders from Flag! Pull on it and get out of there, before one of those rockets lights your ass on fire!"

Higman shook his head, distressed, angry, but knowing he couldn't take the fight to the enemy alone. It would be all he could do to get what was left of his squadron back to *Ticonderoga*, and there would be a lot of empty chairs at the flight debriefing this afternoon. Hell! They must have lost thirty planes in ten minutes. He had never seen anything like it. At the "Great Marianas Turkey Shoot" they had taken down over 500 Japanese planes while losing only 23 on the first day. By that stage in the war the fine edge of pilot training, tactics, and the new planes the US deployed was enough to make for a decisive and overwhelming victory in the most lopsided aerial duel in history. It had been a long time since the US took a licking in the skies over the Pacific.

There was something not right about this, thought Higman. It just isn't right. Those aren't planes we're fighting out there. They aren't men. We're up against some kind of slick new rocket system, and it's eating us alive. Who knows how many we lost today? Whatever the Russians had up there on the horizon, it was a real game changer. We're going to have to hit them with every goddamned thing we have to get through a defense like that... Everything we have.

Chapter 8

Back on *Ticonderoga* that was the new consensus too, though Ziggy Sprague wasn't happy about it one bit. He wanted to press on up north and settle the score, but word came in from Halsey on the *Missouri*—pull the boys out.

Apparently some starchy British Admiral had chewed on his ear and convinced him the Russians might have more up north than we bargained for, he thought. Well how in God's name would they ever know that unless we get up there after them? The fleet had nothing on surface radar returns, but the two radar pickets were still in tight on this Russian task force, though they reported it was difficult to track them. The ships came and went on the radar screens.

He could not know that the architecture on the two newer ships, *Orlan* and *Admiral Golovko*, incorporated reduced radar cross section features, odd angles and special reflective tiling and paint that made the ships very slippery when even modern radars tried to finger them. Sprague's two radar pickets would get a contact on *Kirov*, see other ships nearby, and then they would vanish again.

Yet orders were orders. Halsey wanted to coordinate with the British and was also moving up his own task force. The Russians were playing hardball, and it looked like the Bull wanted to double up on them to make sure they got the message. That was the only way Sprague could figure it...until the missiles came in.

They had nothing on radar. Then one man thought he saw something. The P-900s were just too fast to track on their terminal run at Mach 2.5, over 3000 kph. The US antenna swept the horizon once every ten seconds. If an operator managed to get a lucky return blip on the missile, by the time the system swept around for another look the *Sizzlers* would have traveled eight and a half kilometers. Instead of a steady inward approach like the aircraft they were used to tracking, the blip would seem to hop across the screen sweep after sweep, covering over 50 kilometers range in a single minute! By the time the radar operator interpreted this as a threat instead of a glitch, it was too late. Even as he turned his head to report the anomaly, something came at the fleet, low and fast, and it found the *Wasp* about a thousand yards

off the starboard side of *Ticonderoga*.

The ship just blew up in an angry orange fireball forward of the island, and all Sprague could think of when he saw it was that some rogue Japanese submarine had slipped inside his destroyer screen and put a torpedo into the carrier. A minute later the second *Sunburn* came in, and this time Sprague had his field glasses up and saw something blur in on *Bataan*. That ship was hit amidships, and a huge column of smoke billowed up to mark the kill. He looked up, thinking he might see Kamikazes diving on the task group, but he could only see his fighter reserve on combat air patrol over the carriers. What was going on here?

Wasp was hit again. He literally saw a *Hellcat* blown apart on the forward flight deck and a segment of the wing spin up through a red-black fist of fire and smoke.

“Signal *Wasp*!” He shouted. “How bad is it over there?”

The fourth *Sizzler* executed a late stage popup maneuver and struck the island flush, and the explosion was terrific. *Wasp* seemed to list from the shock alone, then slowly righted herself and continued wobbling forward through smoke and fire.

When the first missile hit, it struck right beneath the forward 5 inch gun battery and smashed on through the armor plating. The missile delivered a 400 kilogram warhead, and the additional kinetic impact was severe. Thankfully most of the missile’s fuel had been expended, but the shock and fire were immediate.

Seaman Ernest Bird had been on a ladder right near the impact site just a minute before the missile hit home. In that time he had casually climbed up to the flight deck, and strolled over to chat with Gunner’s Mate Ralph Cella. They called Ernie the “Lucky Bird” because fate had spared him a gruesome end earlier that year when his relief had been late, keeping him at his post instead of seeing him off to the mess hall that day. A thousand pound bomb came flaming in through the deck that morning, and uninvited guest for breakfast. Ernie’s luck was still good, but he was still close enough to the forward battery to be knocked on his ass by the concussion and shock when the missile hit.

The battery was soon embroiled in a raging fire, with hot jets of flame piercing through holes in the deck around the gun mount. Seaman Bird struggled to his feet and ran to do his job—fire control. He was going to be a very busy man that day.

When the second missile hit Chuck Malkasian had made it down to his post in the engine room. He was water tender on the boilers that morning, but soon had more water on his hands than he would ever need. A four inch thick steel bulkhead blew apart and the ocean came raging in.

“Close all water tight doors!” It was Chief Warrant Officer Woody Morrow. The ‘Wood Man’ was standing tall at his post, his deep voice clear even over the roaring rush of seawater. Crewmen rushed to the doors, struggling to get them shut against the force of the intrushing water from the adjacent compartment, their knuckles white on the iron securing wheels.

“Hey Wood Man!” Malkasian yelled back. “How the hell we gonna’ get out of here if we shut this last hatch?”

“Can it, Malkasian. Take the ladder up behind the boilers.”

“Well it’s hot as hell back there, Chief!”

Malkasian didn’t have to explain any further. The boiler exploded and he was knocked to the deck. He saw boiler man Red Riley thrown against a bulkhead by the explosion and killed instantly, his broken body lifeless on the deck as the water surged in. Chief Morrow was dazed but the rest of the crew in the compartment were all alive. Malkasian struggled up on his knees grabbed the Chief by his collar and began dragging him towards the safety of the still open hatch.

“Come on! Come On, Everybody out! There’s nothing we can do here. Get through and seal this last hatch!”

They made it through, tired, wet and shaking with shock and adrenaline. Malkasian was leaning forward, hands on his knees, amazed by what he had seen.

“I ain’t no water tender down here no more,” he said, breathing hard, then looked over his shoulder as a seaman came down a ladder.

“Up on deck!” the man shouted. It was Gunner’s Mate 3rd Class Alfred J. Lewis. “Hey Malkasian, grab a fire hose.”

“What are you doing here, Lewis. They hit the forward flight deck too. Your plank is out there.”

“The forward flight deck?” Lewis put his hands on his hips, the light of anger in his eyes now. My goddamned plank is on that deck!” Lewis was off at a run for the nearest ladder up. He was supposed to be on his gun at 09:00 hours, but his gun was blown to hell now. Nobody was going to burn up his plank while he was still alive on this ship. Nobody!

He was up on deck and stunned by what he saw. The main island was hit

square in the middle, and ragged metal shards gaped from the wound while damage control teams sent arcs of water into the fiery breach. Forward of that, the 5 inch battery was completely enveloped in fire and smoke, and he knew no one in there was getting out alive. The flight deck was tilted at least ten degrees off the horizontal, and the ship was listing. The main elevator was blocked by damage and fire, and out on the forward flight deck he saw what he had come to prevent, a fire raging, and very near the place where he imagined his cherished plank resided!

Lord almighty! We took three bad hits! He hadn't seen anything like this since that bomb that almost killed Lucky Bird Ernie, and he was off at a run to help manhandle a fire hose forward to fight the fire.

"Let's move it!" he shouted. "That's my plank out there!"

The damage control team fought its way forward behind two fire hoses, slowly getting good streams of water on the fires. Twenty minutes later they had doused the fire well, but it was still smoking badly, and in that time the ship had listed another five degrees.

"Hey, where you going, Lewis?" It was Merle Hart from the plumbing shop.

"I'm going up there to get my goddamned plank," said Lewis. "Can't you see this list? Why aren't you down below with a wrench plugging leaks, Merle? This isn't looking good here. Another five degrees and we could tip right over. Look how they're trying to secure those planes!" He pointed at a crew of five airmen who were desperately trying to stabilize three *Corsairs* on the aft flight deck.

Lewis had taken up a crow bar in his strong right arm and went forward through the blowing smoke, his feet unsteady on the wet, tilted deck. He managed to keep his footing until he worked his way very near the torn metal gridding near the fire they had been fighting. There, beneath a segment of overlaid metal grills, he saw the original wooden flight deck.

This place is as good as any other, he thought, and he knelt down to wedge his crowbar into the deck where a wood plank seemed nice and loose. He was going to get his plank, one way or another. Then he was going to go back to his bunk and get the certificate of ownership too!

As for CV-18, her proud career would soon be over. The damage below decks when the boiler exploded had compromised two more bulkheads, and they collapsed under the searing heat of the fires. The Captain, Wendel G. "Windy" Switzer, had seen enough to realize the ship was down for the

count. He gave the order to flood all magazines and to try counter-flooding to correct the list but the fire in the main island had now merged with the inferno below the forward 5 inch battery, and those magazines could not be flooded. They exploded not long after Lewis had retreated below decks with his plank, and the damage to the port side of the ship was now fatal.

CV *Wasp* was going to sink again, and Captain Vladimir Karpov now had the dubious distinction of sinking the same carrier, at least by name, twice. She would not be present years later when the Gemini capsules returned to earth, and another US carrier would have to pluck Stafford, Lovell and other intrepid Gemini Astronauts from the sea. The Union Minerals and Alloys Corp. of New York City, would have to buy some other ship in 1973 when the venerable lady was decommissioned and sold for scrap. There would never be another ship in the US Navy by that name again—it was officially retired.

The sinking of the *Wasp* put a set of strange bookends on the war, with CV-7 sunk just before it began to herald its terrible onset, and CV-18 sunk just after it ended, warning of a new conflict in the making at that very moment. Just what that conflict might entail, no man knew at that moment. In fact, all history was waiting for the outcome of the battle now engaged, for it would all be re-written from this moment forward. None of this had ever happened in the timeline that had brought *Kirov* through the war and safely into Vladivostok in the year 2021. This was all new.

As for Gunner's Mate 3rd Class Alfred J. Lewis, he made it to his bunk, and also made it off the ship with his plank. In fact, it kept him afloat until he could be picked up by a destroyer, and he held on to it for dear life—all his life, along with his certificate of ownership.

The hit to *Bataan* was not as bad, though they did lose five *Hellcats* on the flight deck there. That said, Ziggy Sprague was shocked to realize that he had suddenly lost a fleet carrier and was watching another escort carrier burn, and this without even knowing who or what it was that had attacked his task group! He was furious and on the radio to Halsey at once.

"Goddammit Bull! We just got hit up here! *Wasp* is a burning wreck and I think we'll lose her. She's listing bad and they can't seem to correct it. Windy Switzer is giving the order to abandon ship. What the hell's going on? Why are you coming out to the mound now when we're right in the middle of this thing?"

"Sorry, Ziggy. *It has nothing to do with you, but I've got two more task*

groups in the bullpen, if that's what you mean. Recover your strike wave and hold tight. I'm bringing the whole shit and shebang up north to reinforce you. Admiral Fraser has opened my eyes on what this threat may be up north. Apparently it's a fast battlecruiser with advanced rocket weapons, and it's been giving the Brits nightmares."

"Yeah? Well I've got some bad dreams to deliver as well. There's nothing wrong with the rest of my group, particularly North Dakota and South Carolina. Suppose I let the big guns roll on up north for a closer look? And I've still got ninety planes in reserve—at least until we got hit just now. We can recover our first strike wave, refuel and rearm in a couple hours and be ready to rumble again."

"Did you see what hit Wasp?"

"Hell if I know. Didn't see but a blur just before she went up in smoke. We had nothing on radar either. It just came out of nowhere."

"That's what Admiral Fraser told me. Look, Ziggy, this varmint has one hell of an anti-air defense too, and you have to swarm it to get anything through—just like we did with Yamato. We threw 380 planes against that ship. We do the same with this one when I get there. Fraser is bringing TF.37 up around the other side of Hokkaido as well. Between the three of us we'll have damn near a thousand planes, and more behind them if we need to get Ballentine, McCain or anyone else up there. I've got over 300 ready aircraft right now. More coming."

"Well don't be all day about it. How far out are you?"

"We make it to be just under 150 miles south of you, and we're coming fast. Look Ziggy, get your destroyers in tight on the carriers. Fraser laid a boatload on me as to how the Brits planned to fight this ship. Screen the carriers. Send your battleships northeast. We're going to form a fast battleship task force and ram it down their throats while we hit them with every goddamn plane we have."

"Now you're talking," said Sprague. "How's my namesake doing?" He was referring to the odd quirk that had seen two men rise through the ranks to command fast carrier task groups, unrelated, but both bearing the surname Sprague. The second was Rear Admiral Thomas Sprague in carrier division three, also a part of Halsey's fleet. The two 'Spragues' had also graduated from the same class at Naval Academy, and both served with distinction.

"We'll call on Tom Sprague's carriers if we need them," said Halsey. "He's replenishing now with Ballentine."

“What in heaven’s name do the Russians think they’re doing, Bull? Are they flying these damn suicide rockets like the Japanese?”

“We don’t know. Which is why I want you and the other task group commanders aboard Missouri for a powwow ASAP. I’ll send you the details later. In the meantime, hold tight until we reinforce. Fraser says if you go in piecemeal this damn ship will cut you to pieces.”

“Our air group took a pretty hard knock, and the planes never even got close enough to the enemy to let them have it. Now it sure looks like we’re going to lose Wasp.”

“Plenty more coming,” Halsey reassured him. *“I won’t let you down this time, Ziggy.”*

Halsey was referring to that disastrous battle Sprague had fought off Samar when he commanded Taffy 3 while Halsey had the fleet carriers off on a wild goose chase. It wouldn’t happen that way this time. The Bull was lowering his head, snorting loud, and pawing the ground hard before he charged. But when he did go in, Halsey planned to raise hell over Hokkaido, one way or another.

Chapter 9

Karpov received the report from the radar man with some gratification. His message had been delivered. Rodenko looked over the contacts and noted that they struck two ships in the core, most likely both carriers. The strike wave had turned back just inside the thirty kilometer mark and was withdrawing south. Karpov ordered all ships to cease fire at once, wanting to conserve as much ammunition as possible.

“Now perhaps they will listen to me when I contact them, and I can get someone senior to this ‘Iron Mike’ on the radio.” Karpov grinned.

“What do you plan to do, sir?” Rodenko was with the Captain in the briefing room off the main citadel bridge.

“A good question. I’ve given it some thought, but as you can see, these are dangerous waters. We’ve let events push us into action sooner than I might have desired. I heard what you said about those early engagements with the Americans in the Kuriles. Perhaps I was rash, particularly with the heat of the fight with CVBG *Washington* still getting my blood up.”

“I understand, sir. That Demon Volcano shook us all up as well. How did the other Captains come to grips with what has happened?”

“That remains to be seen. They performed well just now, particularly *Orlan*, but I can imagine they are all still scratching their heads and trying to figure this whole situation out. At the moment, they are doing their duty under extraordinary circumstances, but this last engagement was mere target practice. We aren’t facing supersonic jet aircraft and fast moving missiles now. The planes here are like drones—slow and witless. They have no ECM to speak of, and we can start jamming their radar in the next few hours, for all the good it does them now.”

Rodenko thought about that. “They came because of what they didn’t know,” he suggested. “Their scouting detachments ran into trouble, and this seemed more like a reconnaissance in force. But sir, Nikolin picked up some radio chatter. The American attack was called off by their Fleet Commander.”

“Yes, Admiral Halsey. You’ve heard the name. Halsey, Nimitz—these are the men they name ships for, even as we choose our old admirals to do the same. Well, they’re up against more than they realize now. At least they

came to their senses and called off that attack. This gives me hope that we might be able to talk some sense into them now.”

“But what will we say, sir? Are you going to present yourself as affiliated with the Soviet government here?”

“Another good question,” said Karpov, quickly. “The Soviets would deny this, of course, unless we contact them first and come to some arrangement. But I do not think we could be very persuasive to the powers that be in Russia now without putting in an appearance. We would have to sail to Vladivostok, and it would be just like the nonsense we went through earlier. They would send officials to look us over. They’ll want to ‘interview’ us; find out who we are, where we came from. Our ships would certainly raise some eyebrows, eh? We would have to reveal everything to gain their full cooperation. It could take months and I’m not about to stand for that any longer.”

“I still don’t understand what we are doing then, Captain.”

“Perhaps I don’t either, Rodenko. But my guess is that the Soviet government will not believe a word of what we might tell them. They will only believe what they see. They understand power, and they definitely understand how to use it to get what they want. I can show them power unlike anything they can imagine. The same may be true for the Americans here. We just showed them that they can’t send in a wave of strike planes and win the day. We showed them how vulnerable their precious carriers are now. They are dealing with something extraordinary, a force to be reckoned with, as they might put it. I want them to stew in that borscht for a while, and we might have to make a further demonstration of our power before we can get them to back down here and listen to our demands.”

“Our demands, sir?”

“In the end we *will* have to support the Soviet government in this post war environment. How can we do anything else? It’s our country. Stalin may be the great dark shadow on the land at the moment, but Russia survives Josef Stalin, and all the others. The question is this—will Russia survive NATO and that damn war we found ourselves in before that volcano sent us back here again? What do you think the allies were doing when we first showed up here? Churchill and Roosevelt were planning a secret meeting at Argentia Bay that would end up forming the basis of the NATO alliance. They called it the Atlantic Charter, and you will take note that Stalin wasn’t invited. And what are they doing now? At this very moment the Allies are getting ready to

set their watch on Russia and stand behind the Iron Curtain and the Berlin Wall until they come tumbling down and they finally go after us in our day. I'll tell you this, Rodenko. The world once thought we built those walls to keep people in and control them. The fact is that we built them to keep the Americans out! We've seen it, Rodenko. We know what they're going to do—all of it. There will be the big standoff over Cuba until Khrushchev backs down, and then they'll bleed us in Afghanistan, ride us and harry us until the old Soviet system finally collapses. But now we have the power to change all that."

"Do we, sir? I mean no disrespect of course. This ship certainly has power unlike anything in the world. But that power has limits as well as potentials. *Orlan* took the burden and fired thirty missiles in that engagement. They have 150 SAMs left in inventory. We fired sixteen medium range SAMs just now and that leaves us with 168. After using those four P-900s we have 30 SSMs remaining. Those aboard *Golovko* and *Orlan* combine for 32 more. We may have hit and badly hurt a ship just now. But it took multiple hits. And remember what happened during that fight with the Japanese battleship?"

"*Yamato*? Yes, that was quite a battle."

"We hit that ship with eight missiles and two torpedoes, and it still survived the battle to fight later in the war! Well I think the Americans have battleships here too, Captain. There are at least two in this task group approaching us."

"Yes, the obvious limitations of our conventional weapons will begin to weigh on us if this thing draws out much longer. We can hit them before they even know where we are, and very hard, but only for a limited time. So we are faced with the very same decisions we debated earlier. We either run out to sea and try to get away from the allied navies here and hide somewhere, or we do something with the power we have in hand at the moment, limited as it may be. We have what the American President Theodore Roosevelt might call a very big stick. I intend to speak softly in the beginning, but if I have to raise my voice to be heard, or use that stick, I intend to do so."

"Yet look what happened before, sir," Rodenko suggested plaintively. "We even used a nuclear warhead, and I say we used it, not you alone, sir. I was on this ship—on the bridge here, and I did nothing to impede that. I'm as responsible for what happened as you are, so I don't raise this point with any recrimination in mind."

Karpov wasn't sure he took much solace in that, though it seemed that

Rodenko was saying it that way to sweeten the tea they were now drinking together. “So what is your point?”

“Well sir, we used a warhead and it got us nothing, geopolitically that is. The war actually started early, and the Americans gained an even better position in Europe, or so Fedorov tells me. But by and large our action had little real effect.”

“Oh, it had an effect, Rodenko. I’ve thought about this for some time, and discussed it with Fedorov too. He’s of a mind that the world we returned to in Vladivostok was not the same one we left. Our actions in the past changed things, and our foreknowledge of the third world war to come also gave us a decided advantage. And I’ll tell you another thing...” He lowered his voice now, implying the information he would now disclose would be confidential. “We lost men on our little safari through the Second World War. Well, it turns out that in the world we returned to they never lived!”

“I don’t understand.”

“They never lived, Rodenko. They were never even *born*. Think about that for a moment.” He told Rodenko what he had discussed with Fedorov and Admiral Volsky, and his new *Starpom* was finally impressed.

“So something we did changed the history enough to affect men on this very ship?”

“It appears so, and it also appears that time found a way to account for that. We did something—who knows what? We killed men that may have lived, and spared others that should have died. It was enough to affect the personal lines of fate for crewmen on this ship—every man that died in action, except Orlov.”

“Orlov?”

“That’s the big deal now. Fedorov’s mission involving that floating nuclear reactor ship. It was all to go back and find Orlov. But now they have much more than the former Operations Chief to worry about. *We’re* here, with nearly 1500 souls aboard these three ships and no way to get home.”

Rodenko was silent for a time, considering this, and trying to sort the puzzle through in his mind. If this were true, if they had already changed history more than once, then what might happen this time?

“What if we change things again, sir?”

“That’s the point of this discussion, isn’t it?”

“Yes, but what if we do something that also affects our personal fates, like those men you say were never born. You said time got rid of them

somehow. Is that why they died in battle?”

“Fedorov thinks this is so. I, for one, do not think Grandfather Time is up there somewhere keeping score on everything we do. Call it God, or Fate, or whatever you choose. We speak of heaven and hell, Rodenko, but figuratively. Those places are simply the ends of our own desires, or our own mistakes. What we really know, deep down, is that we make our own heaven or hell by the choices we take in the here and now—right here on this earth. Every time we make a decision we affect our own personal time line—our own fate. I can’t live my life wondering whether something I do, or something I fail to do, will make an end of me one day. This world will make an end of us all. None of us asked to be here, but here we are, unless something happens as it did before.”

“What do you mean?”

“When I used that warhead, we vanished to a distant future soon after. I was in the brig at the time, but I learned what happened. I saw what was left of the world, I could see it from the port hole.”

“But I thought we moved because of the control rods in our own reactor system.”

“Yes, that’s the way Fedorov figured it out with Dobrynin. But we really don’t know. First we thought it was the nuclear detonations blowing a hole in time. Perhaps it was. Look what that volcano just did to us! Then we thought it was simply a matter of time, and no pun intended. Volsky and Fedorov saw an interval of twelve days between each time displacement. It was only then that Volsky and Dobrynin remembered those odd flux events in the reactors and mated that time interval to Dobrynin’s maintenance routine. So we came round to thinking this control rod was responsible—Rod-25. It suddenly became our own personal magic wand, except we never knew what would happen—where we would move in time if we used it. Then Fedorov began to take note of the fact that we always seemed to return to the approximate same time period in the past. It was his guess that Rod-25 would then allow him to go back to the 1940s and by god, his plan worked!”

“You mean the mission with Troyak and the others?”

“Yes...Fedorov got back safely. He left a letter for Volsky in an old storage bin, just as we did a few days ago.”

“Then the Admiral knows we’re here!”

“I hope so. He may get that letter, but who can say?”

“Well if he does, sir, wouldn’t he be trying to find a way to help us get

home again?”

“I’d like to think so, Rodenko, but what could he do? They shipped that control rod to the Caspian to try and rescue Fedorov and Orlov. Then we pulled our latest disappearing act and I don’t think they could send Rod-25 back to us again. We’re in 1945! How would they find us? Even if we still had it aboard at this moment there’s no guarantee that we could move all three ships back home again. But that is irrelevant. We *don’t* have the damn thing any longer, and if we need that control rod to move in time, then we’re stuck here. This is what I tell myself now. We’re stuck here in the middle of the Pacific in 1945 with the American fleet at our throats. We get to fight the battle we just started in 2021 all over again here, though I like our odds much better now.”

“Who knows, sir? The allied navy had enormous resources at this time in the war.”

“I’ve read all about it. Well it will come down to fight or flight, the same primal instincts that have influenced human choice since we clawed ourselves up from the jungle floor and learned to stand on two feet. I’ll tell you one thing I’ve decided. I’m going to fight.”

“But what if they see what they’re up against and combine their forces for a massive attack, sir? They may even be doing that at this moment? Why would this Admiral Halsey call off that attack?”

“Who knows? But you are probably correct, Captain Lieutenant. Do you like how that new title sounds, Rodenko? Well let me tell you something... You could be very much more than that in due course. We all could. With the power we have at our fingertips we can be real men of war now, not mere pawns in the game. We can re-write history, and put our names in those books where Fedorov always had his nose buried. We have only to make that choice, and then figure how to use the power we have to achieve the most decisive result.”

“It sounds like you’ve been thinking about this, sir.”

“That I have, Rodenko... That I have, and I’ll tell you what’s going to happen here. They are going to regroup and come back at us in force next time, and I’m going to meet that attack with equal force. Understand?”

Rodenko looked down for a moment, then he met the Captain’s eyes. “Are you speaking of nuclear weapons now, sir?”

“There are five tactical warheads aboard this ship. *Orlan* has three, and *Admiral Golovko* has one. As acting Fleet Tactical Commander I was

informed of this by Admiral Volsky before we left port. That's nine warheads under our control at the moment. With those we could be very persuasive, wouldn't you say? They could make for the worst nine days the allies could ever possibly imagine. That's what they did to Japan in the world we left behind at Severomorsk. They hit Hiroshima—a black day for Japan indeed. But when that wasn't enough they hit Nagasaki before the message got through. Fedorov tells me that never happened in the world we returned to at Vladivostok, so in one sense our actions, my actions, may have spared a great many lives. But we have nine warheads, Rodenko—nine days of hell on earth at our disposal if we have to send a message of our own.”

“Nine days falling...” said Rodenko, his voice somewhat forlorn and distant.

“I beg your pardon?”

“Satan fell for nine days when he was cast out of heaven, at least insofar as Dante and Milton told the story. He fell one day through each of the nine circles of hell. It was required reading at the university before I came to the navy.”

Karpov smiled. “Nine days falling...I like that. The only question I have now is this: who is taking that ride to hell? Will it be us or the Americans?”

Part IV

Quantum Sleepers

*“This war is not necessary.
We are truly sleepwalking through history.*

—Senator Robert Byrd

*“Anyone can escape into sleep, we are all geniuses when we dream,
the butcher’s and the poet’s equal there.”*

—Emile M. Cioran

Chapter 10

Ben Flack sat in the crowded rear compartment of the helo, staring out the window at platform *Medusa*. He had spent the last year and a half sweating the drilling and production operations there, supervising new rigs and equipment installations, pouring over lateral drilling schemes with the engineers, listening to complaints from the wildcatters, mudmen, down hole drillers, pump station crews, and the worst that the Boyz at corporate HQ back in Bollinger Canyon could throw at him. The Kashagan superfield was Chevron's last and biggest play in the great game, and now it looked like it was over, at least for the foreseeable future. Now the world belonged to men like those crammed into the compartment with him.

They sat there, in two rows, dressed out in black and charcoal cammo fatigues and cinder dark berets. Their jackets were bulging with ammo clips, and other accouterments of war, and each one carried an automatic weapon. Some had heavier equipment that Flack imagined useful against tanks or APCs, small hand held blowpipes with satchels of lethal sabot armor piercing rounds.

The world was theirs now. The fight had passed from men like Ben Flack to the Sergeants and Corporals in these dark uniforms. Rumors had it that the Russians rolled over the northern border into Kazakhstan early that morning with elements of their 58th Army. It was a tough outfit dating back to the Second World War when it had once been named the Third Tank Army. The NKVD fleshed out the rank and file of several divisions back then, and was responsible for security and order in the restive provinces that were now modern day Chechnya and Azerbaijan. It was blooded in two wars there against the Chechens, and again in the incursion into Ossetia and Georgia in 2008.

The Russians had crossed in force, with the whole of the 19th Motor Rifle Division supported by the 67th Anti-Aircraft rocket Brigade, the 1128th Anti-Tank Regiment, the fast moving helicopters of the 487th Regiment and the 11th Engineers. They were joined by the 7th Air Assault Mountain Division out of the major Russian port at Novorossiysk, with regiments based in that location and in Stavropol. The 108th Guards Cossack 'Kuban' Regiment was leading the assault, swarming over the border in dark helicopters flanked by

sleek Mi-24 attack choppers. They were now sweeping down the Black Sea coast towards the same terminals the Fairchild tankers had used to secure their oil cargos. What they could not accomplish at sea or in the skies they would accomplish on land, and this time NATO had nothing there to stop them. The whole region was their back yard, and they would soon have a stranglehold on all the oil and gas.

Flack had worried about security, fretted over KAZPOL, haggled with Mercs like the men he was riding with now, but all that was over. It was going to take a major operation on the ground to dislodge the Russians now—something on the scale of the Persian Gulf wars that bridged the 20th and 21st centuries with such fire and violence. He knew back then that it was all going to burn one day. All of it.

Flack was close enough to the pilot's cabin to listen in on the radio feed being monitored and it did not sound good. The Russians were hitting hard in typical fashion. There had been a heavy rain of artillery all along the border before the skies blackened with helicopters and aircraft high overhead to cover the operation. Against this the Kazakh Army had initially moved the 35th Air-Mobile brigade as a blocking force to give them time to muster additional forces from the reserve motor rifle brigades assigned to various military districts of the sprawling nation. But the Russians were moving fast, engaging and then bypassing the blocking forces and quickly securing the oil rich Tengiz and Kashagan superfields by airborne envelopment.

The X-3s of Fairchild Inc. had slipped away with only hours to spare, and now they were flying low over the Caspian on the approach to British Petroleum facilities in Baku. Flack gave his sidekick Ed Murdoch a wan glance. "Looks like we're out of a job Mudman," he said dejectedly. "We kept bellyaching for military support out here, and now look at it. From what I've heard on that radio the Russians are raising hell at Kashagan. The folks back home are in for a real surprise now."

"What? You mean the damn Russians are just taking the place over?"

"Sure sounds like it to me."

"How can they do that, Flackie? All that equipment—all those rigs—that's Chevron property. Where's the damn Army when you need 'em?"

"Yeah, where was KAZPOL when we ever needed them? It's the same old story, Eddie. The Banks will cover their bets on the equipment and operations, but they never stop to think about security. It was easy enough to get the Army and Navy to stand a watch in the Persian Gulf, right? They had

lots of bad guys there like Saddam and the Ayatollah. Now that Ghawar has run drier than a bone and the action moved up here, we've got nothing in the area to stop the Russians. They'll take the whole place, lock, stock and oil barrel. That new platform we sweat to get moved up from Baku—the Russkies will own it by nightfall. That along with *Medusa* and all the others. Wait until corporate HQ realizes what happened. The game is finally over here.”

“You mean we ain't comin' back?”

“Take a look around, Mudman! See these guys in black here with the assault rifles? They were all that was between us and an early grave. The shit has hit the fan, my friend! Persian Gulf is shut down by the Iranians, and missiles are raining down all over the region. Gulf of Mexico is a real mess after *Thunder Horse* went down, and I heard that the Russians did that deliberately with a submarine. All Hurricane Victor did was spread the oil from the spill out, nice and thick. It'll be months before they can get operations there back to normal—if ever. They shut down the BTC pipeline, and my bet is that they'll cut the Trans-Georgia line to the Black Sea coast within 24 hours. All we have now is our rigs in the Niger Delta.”

“Well shit, Flackie. Where in God's name are we going to get the flow to keep all those cars running on the freeways back home? Friggin' frackin'?”

“Fracking? We sure as hell won't get it from the Bakken Oil Shales, or that bullshit operation at Eagle Ford Texas. Media served up a crock of shit to the public and made it seem like we could squeeze oil out of shale indefinitely, and they could all rest easy and keep shopping at Wal-Mart. What a load of bull that was. My guess is that right about now the lines at the gas stations are starting to look pretty darn long. They'll do the odd-even thing for a while, and talk more bullshit with the Strategic Petroleum Reserve, but that won't last out the year without regular deliveries. That's what these guys are all about.” Flack thumbed at one of the dour faced sergeants in the nine man squad they were riding with.

“Did we get enough bunkered in Baku for this Fairchild group?”

“Yeah, we made our quota alright,” Flack shrugged. “But that's the last feather in my cap for the foreseeable future, that is until the men with guns sort this business out. It's looking like another god-damned world war, Mudman. They'll fight for the crude all over the globe, unless they blow themselves to hell first with nukes.”

Mudman gave him a wide eyed look. “Nukes?”

“Christ yes! The Chinese were talking that line in the UN last week. Now they’re out after Taiwan and there was a big naval battle in the Pacific. One of our aircraft carriers was damn near sunk! Then that volcano blew its top and things settled down a bit. But this isn’t over, Mudman. Its only just beginning. Someone’s got a serious hair up their ass over oil and gas, and that’s where the fighting will be until they start throwing the ICBMs. I’ll tell you one thing...” Flack looked over the rim of his wire frame glasses. “It’s going to be one lousy Christmas shopping season this year. Folks back home are going to be boarding up their track homes in a matter of weeks and hunkering down.”

“You a Prepper, Flackie?”

“A what?”

“A Prepper—you know, one of those guys with a bunker and stockpiles of food and ammo waiting for the zombies or Nibiru or some other shit to happen.”

“Nibiru? That was all baloney. We don’t need zombies or rogue planets to bring it all down, Mudman. We seem to be doing the job well enough ourselves.”

“Well... What are we going to do now? What are you gonna do when we get home?”

“Me? I’m fixin’ to buy one of those new *Quantum Sleepers*. I’ll load the damn thing up with Snickers Bars, popcorn and a couple cases of beer, and crank up the music nice and loud.”

“What the hell’s a *Quantum Sleeper*?”

“Haven’t you seen the ads in the magazines and Internet? It’s a nifty self contained sleeping chamber, big as a California King if you want to lay out the bucks for one. Damn things have TV, stereo, Internet, food and water, and they close up tight as a clam shell—bullet proof too. They even have filters for gas and radiation contaminates. Yup, that’s what I’ll do if we make it back to the States. I’ll get me one of those *Quantum Sleepers*, and then the world can go to hell and I’ll watch it on TV and eat popcorn the whole damn time. It’s what most of them have been doing over there the last 20 years anyway, so I may as well join the party.”

“Shit, Flackie! Sounds like a gilded tomb!”

“Not too far off the mark, Mudman. They can bury my ass in a titanium lined sleeper, and that’ll be that. But hey, if you have to check out, you may as well do so in style, eh?”

“Big enough to fit in some babes?”

“I should be so lucky. Nope. I’ll be stuck in there with my wife... Hummm, on second thought I may just buy one for her too. Then she won’t have to hear me burping through my beer foam.”

It was as good a plan as anything else Flack could conceive at that moment, and amazingly, not too far off the mark for some in the US. The nation had gone into a kind of holiday weekend shopping mentality. Not since 9/11 or the openings days of the two Gulf Wars had there been anything quite so riveting on the news crawl. People were out at the shopping markets and malls stockpiling and panic buying as if the Chinese were about to mount a full scale invasion at any moment. News of the battle in the Pacific and the damage to several US Navy ships, including a big aircraft carrier, had people spooked.

Yup, thought Flack. The folks back home are going to realize that they are now just hours, days at best, from the plug being pulled. And everything ran on the juice coming through that plug. America, land of the free, was about to go dark. The entire cellophane crackle of people’s lives was about to be suddenly reduced to a very few simple common denominators: guns, ammo, gold, food, water, shelter.

And the more he thought about it the more he also realized that he could shorten that list easily by throwing out the gold. You couldn’t eat it. You might use it to trade for really useful things in the short run, but in a matter of weeks people would realize the gold was really useless. It depended on a functioning financial sector to be redeemed, and the banks wouldn’t survive another month. It depended on the hope of a future where it would once again be traded into dollars for that never ending trip to Costco and the shopping malls. It was just a hunk of rock that primates fancied because it was shiny; nothing more than a gentlemen’s agreement. It had no inherent value beyond a few industrial applications. So now it was just guns, ammo, food, water, shelter, or it would be in a matter of days.

Maybe Mudman was on to something with this zombie shit he was talking. He was kidding him earlier, but that *Quantum Sleeper* was sounding better and better every minute.

Chapter 11

The alarm woke Robert Wagner promptly at 7:30 AM, the digital numbers seeming to flick on the radio, merging the last fleeting strands of a dream with the voice of the announcer. He lolled for a moment in the plush warmth of his Tempur-Pedic memory foam mattress, hearing that dollar days were almost over at his local Ford dealer. He had to hurry so he would not miss out on the biggest savings event of the year, a blockbuster 1.9% APR and \$2000 factory cash back after signing!

He opened his eyes, seeing the familiar pale blue glow of the interior light above him. He was still nestled in the enclosed space of his bedtime cocoon—the *Quantum Sleeper* he had installed last fall when the terror alert level reached Orange again. It was a special bed, with an outer shell that closed overhead like the roof of a convertible car and created an environment that was completely safe and secure from the outside world. The titanium frame and polycarbonate siding of the outer shell was finished off with finely lacquered wood. Once sealed, however, it created an impregnable refuge, airtight, water-tight, and with every comfort a person could desire to sustain them through the night, or a long, lazy morning should they care to linger in the protective shell before rising for the day.

The *Quantum Sleeper* had a console that activated a flat screen plasma television on the upper roof, so he could watch HDTV or DVD movies while he rested in bed. The interior lighting and temperature could be completely controlled, and the air was filtered and conditioned so well that the unit was entirely safe from bio-threats, noxious gas, smoke or any other airborne threat—and that included dust, pollen, animal dander, mold, bacteria, and even airborne viruses! H1N1 would find no refuge here. He had been astonished to learn that the air inside his home could be up to fifty times more polluted than the air outside. It just made good sense to know that he could rest all night in a safe and filtered environment like his *Quantum Sleeper*.

Beyond this, the twin storage tanks hidden behind the headboard held up to three days of cool, pristine water, with hot and cold taps accessible on the panel behind his pillow where a little splash sink could be pulled out from the headboard. A small microwave oven was also installed there, along with an all band radio, CD/MP3 player with stereo speakers, and cabinet space for

snack food and reading materials. There were even emergency side compartments in the unit that could hold additional food, water, medical supplies and anything else deemed an urgent necessity. And the whole unit was backed up with a reserve battery that would last a full eight hours if the power ever failed.

And one day it would fail...soon...

Robert rolled over, unwilling to move from the satiny warmth of his pillows and blankets, noticing that his wife, Liz, has already opened her side of the unit and slipped out to start her morning. The mechanism of the outer shell was so whisper quiet that he had not even stirred when the other side of Sleeper had opened and closed. He considered having breakfast alone in the Sleeper that morning. There were still three breakfast entrees in the unit's refrigerator. He could pop one in to the microwave, activate the automated coffee maker, and have scrambled eggs, French toast, hash browns, milk, juice, or anything else he desired. He thought the better of it, wanting a nice hot shower now more than food. Besides, he was going to have to restock the sleeper soon. The world was going to hell.

Rob stretched, reaching up reluctantly to press a small silver button on the top of the enclosure, and waiting while the *Quantum Sleeper* opened, the top arching up and back, folding itself as it did to fit snugly at the baseboard of the bed when fully opened. He stumbled out of bed, scratching listlessly as he made his way over the thick wool carpeting to the marble tiled bathroom. The air was fresh and sweet with the scent of *Fresh Burst*, jasmine and lemon. It was a medley of odors meant to evoke the pristine fragrance of a summer morning, or at least that is what the label on the scent dispenser unit promised.

Rod stripped off his silk boxer shorts, pausing to admire his hard, lean body in the mirror. His smooth, nearly hairless chest was strong and well contoured, tapering down to a six-pack abdomen that he worked hard on to keep well cut. He turned, admiring the round firmness of his buttocks and the tanned flanks of his thighs. The workout in the gym yesterday seemed to have done him some good. He was following the patented *Slim in Six* program, where he gained the entire benefit of a full six month workout program in only six weeks. He had seen the ad on TV a few months back, and had been following the easy, programmed weight loss system, complete with aerobic exercise, power yoga, Pilates toning moves and, best of all, he had not paid three thousand dollars for guided training and diet counseling, or

even three hundred dollars—even though he would have expected to pay much more anywhere else. No, not Robert. He was too smart for that. By calling right away when he saw the TV ad, he was able to totally reshape his body, complete with a free six day maintenance plan and step by step guidebook, for only three easy payments of \$19.95. And he had obtained three special bonuses at no extra charge in the deal—all sent to him by rush delivery.

Fitness was an obligation that had been broadcast at him for decades and, by now, it had become a reflexive habit. His entire self image, his manhood, his sexuality itself, rested on the notion that he could still draw those envious stares from the receptionist at the office. What a difference the *Slim in Six* program had made!

He flexed a bicep, admiring the peak as he tightened the muscle of his upper arm. He needed to do just a little more work on his back, he thought. He wasn't into heavy muscle building, but he wanted his body firm and hard, two words that most men aspired to when it came to things physical. He watched his diet with the *Slim in Six* program, headed off the threat of saddle bagging in his mid section, got regular exercise, and made sure that he gave his body a good maintenance workout at least once a week.

Rod imagined that all his hard work would be well appreciated by everyone at the office. Yes, he was happily married, but it never hurt to know that you could turn the heads of the office girls, or even the other men there, and he often thought of how they were probably stealing glances at his firm tush when he strolled by the stock trading workstations to let them all know he was doing a first rate job as their supervisor. He enjoyed the thought that his infrared suntan, another feature he had built in to his *Quantum Sleeper*, would draw compliments from the pale white co-workers who shared his unit. He relished the idea that his pearly white smile, bought from a thousand dollar visit to the dentist last December, would never fail to please.

He stretched again, and stepped into the shower. A moment later his body was awash in refreshing jets of steamy water, and he was lavishing a thick palm full of *Lever 2000* body wash over his well muscled frame, frothing it up to a rich, luxuriant lather so he would be sure to get the best possible day-long deodorant control for all of his 2000 parts.

Drying off with the fresh cotton towel, he heard his wife Liz switch on the plasma digital television downstairs in the living room. The cavalcade of announcements floated up the steps with the distant sound and smell of

Maxwell House gurgling through the filter of the coffee machine in the kitchen. He passed a moment of brief longing for old Juan Valdez, the mythical coffee grower from South America who had ensured that the beans picked for grinding were the richest crop in a decade. Juan was fired when the competition from new coffee blends coming out of Southeast Asia had deflated prices and *Maxwell House* had been forced to pull its TV ad campaign. Such a loss, he mused.

Now the TV announcer was extolling the virtues of the *Magic-Kan*, an amazing new plastic container for your household trash. He focused on the words, mindlessly, reflexively, hearing that it was a must have for the kitchen, with a sophisticated design that was guaranteed to match any décor while keeping your trash neat, odorless, and out of sight.

His attention was soon pulled to the marble sink basin where he splashed a bit of lukewarm water on his face to prepare for shaving. What would it be today, he thought as he reached for the Edge protective shaving foam? The gel oozed out into his palm and soon bloomed up into a cool fragrant lather. Would it be the Schick Quattro or the M3 Power Razor? The Quattro sported four blades, so just one swipe of his razor would do twice the work of any normal double bladed razor. But the M3 had all the awesome power than any man could possibly crave. It's mini-vibe mechanism, operated by a AA battery in the handle, pulsed and vibrated as he stroked the blade, raising even the most stubborn stubble for the three bladed razor to whisk away. With the M3, five-o'clock shadow was a thing of the past.

He chose the awesome power, selecting the M3 and making short work of the whiskers on his neck and chin. He finished up, slapping on a bracing aftershave at the end of his routine. A bit of super-gloss hair gel would be all he would need today, and he quickly ran his glistening fingers through his hair, letting the shape and style have just that touch of the tousled look that was so popular today. Soon he was ready to dress and take on the day.

Liz was channel surfing again. As Robert slipped on his robe and shuffled down the stairs, he saw that the ubiquitous ads had been suddenly interrupted by a hair-raising scene from the Middle East. Christ, was the oil still burning there? Lucky for him he filled the tank on his Lexus the previous day, though it was costing him a fortune to drive these days. Liz clicked her remote, moving on to the local channel to take in the morning news bytes.

.... A mass murder suspect in Bakersfield, the crazed 2020 Olympic Bomber trial, new cases of SARS at a hotel—mostly bottom of the hour filler

before the breaking news headlines yet to come. Robert sighed as the news cast rolled on. The stock report crowded on the heels of that headline, and the 'tale of the tape' seemed bright this morning, as advances outpaced decliners by a hefty margin, mostly in the distressed energy sector. The transportation sector was getting hammered, however. It was no longer cheap or easy to fly anywhere these days. America was no longer "free to move about the country" as one airline put it in their TV ads. Below this, in the slow, steady crawl of the news ticker at the bottom of the screen, Robert saw that the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico was continuing unabated, the war in Asia was heating up again after that volcano imposed a brief time out, the Maine Potato Blossom Fest was in full swing and featuring a ladies' bikini mashed potatoes wrestling contest! Food to wrestle in, he thought. What a country.

The news segment wound up, but the cordial host threw out a teaser to keep everyone waiting for more. *"Another threat from Al Qaeda,"* she said glibly, *"We'll tell you which city needs to be on the alert when we come back."*

The hook was in, with just a little barb of fear at the end. So now they would just have to wait. Robert thought how easy it would have been for her to simply reveal the city's name, but then the lure of the tease would be lost. Now the whole nation would have to wait breathlessly through the next commercial segment to find out if *they* were the threatened city. And the commercial would most likely be a slick presentation by a drug company. They loved to litter the news segments and pushed the drugs hard and heavy each evening news hour. What would NBC do without Pfizer to bankroll them with all that commercial money?

From the sound of things the news was going from bad to worse but, whatever it was, the danger could not be all that great, because the commercials started rolling, with one fifteen second spot crowding after another—like people squeezing into a bus at a quick stop. The TV volume increased by 30% and the announcer stared out at the unseen audience with more dire warnings. *"You could be missing out! It's a fact: Mortgage rates are at an all time low, but they could go up at any moment."* It was time, therefore, to refinance the \$750,000 home he lived in, thought Robert. With all the distress in the market he was probably well underwater by now. The announcer confirmed that fact with a clear directive: *"Do it now!"*

He resisted the urge to go to the phone and begin dialing, even though he knew that operators were standing by, waiting for his call. They would just

have to wait a little longer, he thought. Then the next commercial elbowed its way onto the screen, and this offer made the last one pale. He learned that he could enter the new *Capital One* giveaway contest just by using his credit card for regular every day expenses and purchases. He could instantly win his own island—yes, a complete island that he could wander at his leisure any time he choose, a place to create his own paradise away from the hustle of city life, a lush tropical getaway. He passed a moment's reflection on the disastrous investments made in Dubai, but nonetheless made a mental note to make sure to charge as much as he could on that card this weekend. This was even better than the monthly promise of endless riches at the Lotto! Yes, the 29.9% interest rate might pinch a bit, But he'd sell a few shares of the AIG stock he bottom fished for the other day when it took off again, and make all well.

An ad for *Glad Plug-Ins* soon followed, with a great new feature! The new sleek design would not block your electrical outlets. Now he could have a summer fresh home all day and never have to worry about getting something plugged in again! *Gerber* was next, with fat, happy babies getting their doughy cheeks stuffed fatter yet with the processed puree of plentitude in a convenient new package that you could take with you anywhere you went.

Herbal Essence quickly demonstrated how easy it would be to apply sun-golden streaks to any hair style. *Oil of Olay* wanted everyone to know how complicated and confusing skin care was, and that loss of firmness was as bad as wrinkles for spoiling that smooth, youthful complexion we all strive for. Thankfully, they now had an automated computer program standing ready to make expert recommendations on which Olay products he needed to buy. Then a white garbed chef was taking the perfect boccacia bread from the oven—just what you needed for a scrumptious chicken sandwich. As if taking a cue, the next ad showed mounds of steaming crab legs on special for the *Lobster House Cajun Week*. A happy black couple was beaming as they stuffed the succulent crab meat into their smiling mouths, wiping a dribble of thick, rich butter away with a wink and a nod. Half the world was starving, but not in the good old USA.

The images of endless food on colorfully prepared serving platters made him very hungry, but Robert didn't need to worry. Whenever he wanted to come up with a quick snack, or cook an easy satisfying breakfast, all he had to do was turn on his *Express Cooker*, a Teflon coated appliance that streamlined his meal preparation by providing even heating from both above

and below. Instead of frying or baking, he could fully enclose his fresh cracked eggs in the *Express Cooker*, with two convenient cooking bays that whipped up breakfast for two in no time at all.

He wandered in to the kitchen, and did exactly that. His *Easy Chopper* quickly consumed a few slices of onion and green pepper, and he threw the whole lot into the *Express Cooker* for a perfect omelet in just three minutes. Other people might be out rushing to breakfast, waiting in line, struggling with confusing menus, and paying exorbitant prices, but not Robert. He had 101 convenient recipes in a little booklet that came with his cooker, and he had picked the whole thing up at the “As Seen on TV store” at the mall. A few moments later he had his delicious breakfast in hand and was off to the den to check his e-mail before heading to work in his SUV Explorer.

The iPad was waiting patiently in the nook by the kitchen. He settled into the chair and tapped the icon to activate his blazing fast cable modem Internet account. A moment later his only concern was the rush of unwanted SPAM messages littering his inbox.

As if timed by fate itself, the TV ad in the next room was showing a spot where another young man was settling in to read his e-mail, just as Robert was. An errant fly alighted impudently on the screen. Just as it was flicked away, three more arrived, then a dozen more, until the screen was darkened by flies as if it were a reenactment of some black evil from the exorcist.

“*Bugged by junk e-mail and pop-up ads?*” The TV announcer asked. Robert swiveled to pay attention, in full agreement. Thankfully, the solution was close at hand. “*Why not try our fast new Internet service, with free pop-up blocker, SPAM filter and virus checker, so you never have to wait to read your e-mail again.*”

Those damn flies were now all over the house in the TV ad, chased frantically by the lovely couple on the screen, their arms flailing about with frustration and annoyance. Robert pivoted back to his own screen, inwardly flicking at the litany of junk messages there... Advertisements claiming he could increase the size of his penis and keep it constantly erect with *Viagra*. He could unleash the power of his digital cable, fulfill all his pharmacy needs, visit with college co-eds as they stripped for the cameras, and so much more. Flies, he thought, damn little annoying flies buzzing about his screen.

But on second thought, he decided to click on the link to those teenage strippers. His wife would never have to know.

It was what he didn't know that would soon bring an end to the

sumptuous pixel driven life of luxury he had been enjoying. The markets didn't like the news cycle, and that was just the beginning. The Chinese were dumping more than missiles on Taiwan. It was going to get much, much worse.

Chapter 12

There was much more than war and oil on the news that morning. Other dark matter was being discussed that was going to cut close to the bone for Robert. The Treasury Secretary was huddling with bankers again, only days after another massive fund infusion supporting the banking industry. This time it was Wall Street investment house Goldman Sachs on the rocks, the maestros of the market who had heretofore navigated the roiling waters of the financial tempest with uncanny skill. They had made a killing in 2008-2009, selling investors bogusly rated AAA securities at one desk while aggressively hedging this with a raft of shorts on those same securities at another desk. When other houses like Lehman failed and AIG was on the ropes, they were able to extract 100 cents on the dollar for their swap deals. Then they deftly morphed into a “bank” in a few days time and went merrily on with yet more government bailout money that almost directly equaled their enormous bonus payouts that year.

But it wasn't the news from the troubled Caspian superfields or the outbreak of fighting in the Black Sea that was vexing the bankers now. This time something had happened in the wine dark sea of derivatives, where Goldman's exposure was astronomical. Word was that the Chinese were backing out of derivatives contracts, *en masse*, simply ordering their people to default and describing the whole scheme in the clearest possible terms—fraud. It was deemed part of their ‘war effort’ but the fact remained that it was now going to have a tremendous effect on the financial markets.

One by one other counterparties to the extensive web of derivatives agreements began to follow suit, emboldened by the statements emanating from Beijing. For years these trades had been accomplished in “dark pools” where pricing, transparency and reporting requirements were virtually nonexistent. As long as the right hand did not know what the left hand was doing, the Goldman magic act could continue unabated. But now someone had called them on the sham they had made of securities trading, and the game was over.

Goldman was in trouble. Puts became calls, and razor thin margins melted away. They needed cash to offset their leverage and staunch the gaping wounds in their trading schemes. The firm was teetering at the edge of the

abyss and desperately seeking a financial support. And since they basically ran the U.S. government as it was, Uncle Sam was being called in once more as the patsy buyer of last resort.

A run on other independent broker dealers like Morgan Stanley or even majors like Citigroup was now a distinct possibility as the shadow banking system, the other dark energy supply driving the nation, was also effectively 'shut in' just like the oil, with a paralysis gripping the derivatives trading desks. The dark pools had gone cold and stagnant. The financial system had relied on these unregulated trades to keep the wheels turning. Many investment houses were leveraged at impossible ratios, some as high as 80 or 100 to 1, but Goldman's position was far worse. As these positions became more and more untenable, the unwinding was ravaging the meager real capital base that supported the shadow trades.

So as Houston sat in the dark, the Gulf of Mexico bled oil, and the Russians moved on the Kashagan superfields, the Fed once again convened emergency meetings with the heads of all major Wall Street firms trying to find a way to prevent the avalanche of default that threatened to tear the system apart. The counterparties had to be persuaded to keep their stakes in the game at all cost, but that cost would soon be seen to be beyond the means of all of Wall Street's most venerable names, beyond even the power of the government itself to forestall the inevitable collapse. The whole system shuddered, like financial pipelines shutting down, one after another.

The dark matter of derivatives comprising the shadow banking system amounted to over \$680 *trillion* dollars, a sum exceeding the gross domestic product of the entire nation for the next 60 years. The energy flows had come to a near complete halt, with nervous investors unwilling to risk capital. Banks stopped lending to other banks. Loans became almost impossible to arrange. It was a freezing deflationary scenario, potentially much worse than the Great Depression, but no one really knew what the consequences would be, and with war looming as a real event now, no one cared either.

The massive derivatives market opened in a rare weekend session to allow investors to try and limit their exposure to damage should Goldman fall into bankruptcy the following Monday. Good money was scrambling after bad money, in a desperate effort to stop the losses.

The average person on the street knew little of the real danger. They were lined up behind the cash registers at Wal-Mart with shopping carts full of the last shipments of junk that would arrive from China for the foreseeable

future. Robert read the news intently that morning, wondering if he should act immediately to protect his own meager investment portfolio. He had a substantial slice of Goldman, and sent in a sell order to an old pit buddy, hoping to get out the back door in cash just before the building collapsed.

Somehow, images of those few survivors coming down the stairwells in the World Trade Center just before the first tower fell played on a haunting canvass in the back of his mind. He wanted to be one of them. What a metaphor, carved in reality now, he thought. But Jimmy, his contact in the trading pits this morning, wouldn't let him down.

When the call came in from the trading desk, he answered his cell phone quickly.

"Jimmy, my main man! I hope you've got some good news."

"Hey, Robert. *Things are really dicey down here, brother. I've got sell orders stacked up from here to Cleveland, and no buyers in sight.*"

"But you got me out, right? You sell it all?"

"*That's just it,*" there was a harried edge to the other man's voice. "*I can't move shit right now. Fat cats are three rungs ahead of me on the trading ladder, front running like crazy. I've got banks, insurance companies and fund managers hogging the wire. Every time I key something I get a bounce. These buggers have the whole system damn near locked up. And this is just a two hour special trading session. The big Boyz have the inside track.*"

"What do you mean locked up? Come on Jimmy, I've got too much riding on this. I need to unwind this shit right now!"

"*Hey, man. I'll do whatever I can, but this is some serious fuckin' shit going down here this afternoon. Never seen anything like it, not even when Lehman got thrown to the wolves. Gotta go, man. Somethin's up!*"

Robert heard a chorus of pit shouting just before the line went dead. He sat there staring at the screen on his cell phone, stunned. If he couldn't unwind this position he was definitely going to crash and burn. He'd lose everything!.

He awoke that morning, safely cocooned in his *Quantum Sleeper*, but the bad news was still filtering through the stereo speakers, through the endless commercials interlaced with the constant flow of advertising that never seemed to stop, and it had finally hit home.

His pit trader friend never called him back. Jimmy let him down. The news that Goldman had failed spread like a toxin, and fund after fund had

taken staggering losses, some losing 90% of their nominal value in a matter of hours. The near two thousand point drop in the markets that followed further decimated Robert's meager stock positions. As the radio announcer yammered on about one special offer or another, he found himself simply losing himself in the media stream, the commercials washing over his weary mind one after another like old familiar friends...

Still ahead! The biggest little sale of the year... Final clearance! No payments and interest until February. Free delivery, usually in 4 hours or less! Don't wait call now! And now this...Aqua Fresh whitening power is even better! Use every day for whitening teeth... Then...Tonight--A distillation of the very best, the weirdest, the wildest on NBC...

The commercials piled one on top of another, with one presenting a saccharine pastoral scene of a grandfather playing with a toddler and dog while a voiceover intoned a litany of horrific drug side effects for the latest concoction being foisted on the public. What happened to the simple, direct interrogation of the dairy industry commercial, he thought. It was just two words—Got Milk? A quiet tone interrupted the commercial stream, and the volume lowered 30%. The digital messaging system in the *Quantum Sleeper* had a message for him from the other room.

"Good morning," the voice intoned in the smooth, soft tones of a fresh young co-ed, and quietly announced that there was a fault reading on the central AC unit in the basement. *"A quick service call should take care of it today!"* the voice concluded. The Sleeper was hard wired to a device that checked on all his major appliances, letting him know when anything needed attention.

"What would you like to do?" The girl asked with sweet exuberance. *"Press one to initiate a service call... Press zero to cancel."*

Robert didn't want to think about it. He just wanted to forget the AC unit, the advertising, and the fact that he was now basically bankrupt, with every nickel of his retirement flushed down the toilet of Wall Street.

"What would you like to do?" The girl persisted in the same voice. *"Press one to initiate a service call... Press zero to cancel."*

Harried and angry, stormed into the bedroom and reached in to press the zero button on the overhead input panel.

"Thank you," said the girl. *"I'll be sure to remind you about this situation tomorrow. Until then, have a wonderful day!"*

Up yours, thought Robert, though that was a real push-pull for him. The

girl's voice was so sweetly compelling that if he awakened that morning to find her next to him in the Sleeper instead of Liz he would have taken out his frustration by other means. But she was only a digital recording, one he had chosen from a panel of six different voice options, all for just \$4.95 extra on his Sleeper monthly service package.

The radio came back up to volume, and the inevitably conservative slant on the show featured a commentator selling the new government bailout of AIG as good for business. *"These assets will recover in time,"* he pronounced. *"The government may even stand to make money on this deal. Let me be clear—this time AIG will not be obligated to Goldman Sachs for any and all insurance swaps written to protect the derivatives the Chinese and others have repudiated. We should be turning the corner on this situation in a matter of weeks, and things will be improving soon."*

Robert couldn't agree. The crisis might be over for AIG, defaulting on its swap obligation just as the Chinese had defaulted on the trash Goldman sold them, he thought, but it's not over for the rest of us, by any measure you could find. People were going to see virtually every last nickel of "equity" evaporate from their home, phantom wealth that was used as collateral for home consumer loans to buy new appliances, granite counter tops, plasma TVs, cars, vacations—now nothing more than a massive debt liability. So much for the dream and the false perception of benefit from home ownership, he thought. He suddenly realized that he never really owned anything but the debt related to the things he bought! The bank owned their home from the day he and his wife moved in, and then passed on the lien to some investor in Asia. Robert bought a place to live, and a massive debt. They could have rented a similar place to live at half the rate of home ownership, avoiding property taxes, maintenance, and all that interest!

What was happening to the world he had taken for granted for so very long? He knew there were millions of people like him waking up to the same bad news, the same despair, as the realization that all they had now was a paycheck if they were lucky enough to still be employed, a meager checking balance, and a little open space on a few credit cards finally sunk in.

Then something odd occurred to him...So what? The friggin' Chinese were going to war in the Pacific, the Russian were going to war everywhere else, the Iranians were blasting the Persian Gulf with missile after missile. What did his mortgage payment matter? Did he actually think there would be a bank waiting for it in 30 days or a pointy headed banker pouring over his

account as he contemplated foreclosure? Hell no!

Now it was coming down to just three things, he realized—food, fuel and security. That was it. He'd be swiping the cards at Ralph's Market and putting all the gasoline on his Mobile card he could find—that is, if the banks didn't decapitate the credit lines before he got to the front of the line at the pumps.

"Christ almighty," he breathed. Depression chased the optimism he had started the day with. He had no idea what to do, and hung on the news channel, thinking about that food and gasoline. Tonight he would join his wife in the *Quantum Sleeper*, he thought. Safer there with shit like this going on.

He was making a mental list of things they would need, food items, water, extra batteries. Somewhere he had a list of the hundred things to disappear first, and oddly, toilet paper was one of them. The once called it "mountain money" when they would go camping, one of those little necessities that you never gave a second thought. What else was he overlooking? Should he take the pistol with him when he went out? Where did he keep the ammo?

He sat down in his office, dejected, flustered, and beset with the feeling that he had a thousand things to do and too little time to get any of them done. Think! He imposed a moment of quiet on his mind. Sit down and think this through. What do you really need? It wasn't Zest, or that new power shaver. It wasn't Aqua Fresh, those 50 unforgettable getaways or a mid-sized sedan. It wasn't a new iPad or HDTV. All those desires had been swept away in a single moment in his mind.

It was just three things now: Food, Fuel and security.

Day 5

*“I came into a place mute of all light,
Which bellows as the sea does in a tempest,
If by opposing winds 't is combated.
The infernal hurricane that never rests
Hurtles the spirits onward in its rapine;
Whirling them round, and smiting, it molests them.
When they arrive before the precipice,
There are the shrieks, the complaints, and the laments,
There they blaspheme the puissance divine.”*

Dante Alighieri, The Inferno - Canto V

Part V

Night Stalkers

“Since well before the Kung's engine noise first penetrated the forest, a conversation of sorts has been unfolding in this lonesome hollow. It is not a language like Russian or Chinese but it is a language nonetheless, and it is older than the forest. The crows speak it; the dog speaks it; the tiger speaks it, and so do the men—some more fluently than others.”

— John Vaillant, The Tiger

Chapter 13

They crouched low, waiting. The sound of voices came to them in the night, edged with frustration. One voice was louder, sharp and demanding, obviously the officer in charge of the NKVD column upset over Sutherland's handiwork on the bridge. Haselden looked over at his mate and winked, giving him a thumbs up. But what would the Russians try to do now?

Then they heard it, a low growl of motors in the still air, faint and far off, but drawing closer. Haselden craned his neck, looking over his shoulder, eyes puckered to see anything in the murky darkness. The sound of bullfrogs and other night creatures seemed to rise in a frustrating chorus before he heard the distinctive rumble of trucks on the road behind them.

"Hold on Cobber," he rasped to Sutherland. "We've got company—behind us on the road!"

They could now hear another truck column coming up, and Haselden thought he could make out a line of squarish shadows on the thin track of the road. 'Bloody hell!' he said sharply. "This is no damn good. Who would have thought we get traffic on a road like this. They'll come right up on our ass." He leaned out of his cover, clicker in hand and snapped off a signal to Sergeant Terry on the other side of the road—*abort—abort—abort*. The Sergeant wasted no time, and half a minute later he was rushing across the road, crouching low, Bren gun in hand.

"Unexpected company," Haselden whispered when he arrived, his face set and serious.

"Now what?"

"It's no good here. We'll have to get down there and take cover in those reeds. Make sure you don't leave anything. Let's get moving!" He turned his head. "Nice and quiet like now."

"Right-O, Jock. Always did like a midnight belly crawl with the frogs." Sutherland winked at him, and the three commandos crept silently away from the road, seeking better cover in the reedy fringes of the marshland to the east. The bridge they had selected as a choke point was right at the narrowest neck of the Terek River as it flowed east to the Caspian. They had to move about a hundred yards to the reeds, but once there they found good concealment. Behind them there was nothing but murky, wet ground

descending to marshland now.

The fens fell off to a wide lake, festooned with reeds and floating muck. It separated the river from a long spit of sandy ground beyond it that pointed to the north like a great finger, marking the place where Corporal Severn waited on the coast with the swift boats. Haselden had radioed him earlier on the wireless and told him to move south that night under cover of darkness. With any luck Severn was due east of their position by now, though he wondered how things would play out from this point.

"This is no good here," said Sutherland. "We've no decent field of fire. Sergeant Terry's Bren won't do us any good at all down here." They could see the trucks coming up the road to the very place where they had been concealed just moments ago, and then slowly maneuvering to turn about. Sergeant Terry shook his head, unhappy.

"How in the world did I find myself lying here in a muddy bog on a night like this," he muttered.

"You were most likely a troubled youth," Sutherland jibed. Then they hushed, heads low as they watched the trucks pull up. Haselden was fishing about in his jacket for the map, and the wan gleam of moonlight gave him just enough light to read it.

"Nothing behind us, mates. Just a whole lot more of this muck and mire. That there is the delta of the Terek, six bloody miles of it to the coast."

"They'll get cross that river in half an hour and onto those trucks. This must have been arranged," Sutherland whispered.

"Right you are. The only question is what do we do now? We can't move south on their flank from here. The damn road is going to skirt the edge of that marsh lake behind us for a good eight miles, and we'd be easily seen. We could wait here and then follow them south, but they'll leave us well behind them in no time."

"Then we've no choice," said Sutherland. "They'll have to turn all those trucks about and will most likely load up. We'll have to jump the last one in the line. Maybe we'll get lucky and our man will be riding that one."

"Maybe not," said Haselden, "but I don't see any other way now, Davey. Let's work round to the right a bit. Good cover in these reeds but move slow. Fix silencers and it's pistols and knives now. We can keep our Stens, but that Bren isn't going to do us any good in a situation like this, Sergeant. I'm afraid we'll have to leave it."

Sergeant Terry nodded grimly, and was already looking to find a spot to

conceal the weapon and ammo belts in the reeds. Now it was coming down to stealth and subterfuge, not firepower and ambush. Their faces were painted black beneath their dark berets, and each man lightened his load, keeping nothing more than food, water and ammo. Haselden handed off his Sten and numerous ammo clips to Sergeant Terry to compensate him for the lost Bren. "I'll lead with pistol and knife," he whispered. "Let's move."

They worked their way slowly through the reeds, careful not to let them rustle and move as they passed. It was move, wait, listen, move again, slithering along the damp ground like snakes, but in this way they were able to get to a position on the Terek, very close to the bridge that Sutherland had blown. Now he saw that his demolition charges had only damaged the bridge itself, and the span remained largely intact. There was a gaping hole in the wood of the bridge bed, but still enough room to one side for a man to edge by and carefully cross. The NKVD were rigging ropes to provide additional hand holds at this spot, and they were sending the women from the column across first.

"Must have had a dodgy charge," Sutherland whispered.

"Hush up, Davey. I count five men there, and there's probably that many or more with those trucks. See that tall fellow? I think that's our man. Look, there he goes now."

They could see a tall, stocky man making his way over the bridge, with two NKVD soldiers following behind him. Haselden strained to see him as he crossed, and noted that he continued on past the last truck. Just our luck, he thought. Now we won't know which truck the man is in. But he decided not to curse his luck just yet. It remained to be seen just how this situation would develop. There would certainly be soldiers assigned to the last truck, but how many?

"Look, lads," he said quietly. "When we move it will have to be quick and dirty. "There will be men for that last truck, and we'll have to get them all, and quiet like. What we don't want is for one of those bastards to fire his weapon and warn the others up front, so I'll want to move just as the last of this lot begins to mount that truck. Move on my hand signal."

The other men nodded, realizing this was perhaps the most dangerous moment of their trek thus far. Yet it was their stock in trade, as each man was a highly trained expert in close combat, and ready for the job at hand. They were settling down on instincts born of training, reflex and adrenaline now, an ancient language of muscle and nerve. Another part of their brains took

over, and they became low, stealthy prowling things in the night, their senses keened up to a razor sharpness, eyes moving, minds calculating without words or logic; limbs ready to spring for the kill.

The soldiers had herded all the women forward, waiting for all the trucks to slowly back and turn themselves around on the narrow road. One man was issuing loud commands, pointing at men and gesturing. They loaded five or six women in the back of each truck, seven vehicles in all, and then two NKVD men boarded to keep watch on them. The officer walked forward, obviously to take up a position in the first truck. There were three men left over.

Haselden tensed up, hearing the engines gunning as the lead trucks in the column began to move out. The last of the three men had come from the bridge, a cigarette hanging from his lips as he hefted his rifle onto his shoulder. Two others were getting ready to mount the tailgate of the truck. It was now or never. The noise of the other trucks would provide perfect sound cover. He moved.

Haselden just crawled up onto his knees, stood up and casually walked to the back of the truck. The man with the cigarette turned his head, dumbfounded. The British Captain was holding out a pack of fresh cigarettes, smiling as he stepped up to the man. Then that moment of confused surprise became a blur. Haselden drove the base of his hand right into the man's nose, thrusting up in a hard blow. A second soldier had one knee up on the tailgate and a swift kick took out the support of his other leg. Both men were down and Sutherland was up next to the Captain now, easily handling the third soldier, parrying the blow of his rifle butt, slipping inside and getting the man's neck and head in a hold that saw him go slack in no time at all. A swift chop to the neck settled the man who had fallen with Haselden's kick.

The three NKVD soldiers were down and out, nice and quiet like, just as Seventeen wanted it. Then the three British commandos quickly removed the fallen soldiers' jackets and hats, and mounted the truck in their place.

Haselden tapped lightly near the back of the driver's cabin and the engine growled as the truck started down the road. He settled in with Sutherland and Sergeant Terry.

"Those three back there will have a long walk home," he whispered. "And a good long sleep until they wake up. Good that we didn't have to break any necks."

"Right, Jock," said Sutherland. "Allies and all. But where is this lot

going?”

“We’ll find that out soon enough, Davey Boy. For now, get the mud off your boots, slip into these nice warm coats and put on those Ushankas. We’re proper NKVD soldiers now. Enjoy the scenery.”

“Yeah? Well what’s the plan, Jock?”

“We wait a bit. It looks like ten miles to the next river. There’s a small town on the coast there as I read it, a place called Sulak. South is Makhachkala, another fifteen miles. This column won’t do much more than thirty miles an hour on these roads. It’s 10:40 hours now, so I’d say we’ll probably get down there before midnight, and perhaps they’ll stop.”

“Then what? That cigarette trick of yours was handy, but I counted eleven more men forward of this truck, including our driver. Lucky for us there’s no window in the back of that cab.”

“No worries. We can play this one of two ways now. We could work our way forward and find this man before we reach town, but that won’t be easy unless they stop again, and any slip up would blow our cover and start a row here. The other thing is to slip away just as we reach the outskirts of town. Then we work our way in under cover of these hats and jackets, looking all proper and such. We find this man in town and try to get him before dawn.”

“Right,” said Sutherland.

“Assuming they stop here.” Sergeant Terry wasn’t one for words, but he squeezed that out from beneath his thick mustache, eyeing Haselden in the dark.

“The Sergeant has a point,” said Haselden. “Well if they don’t stop, and roll right on through town, then they’re probably bound for Baku. We won’t know that one way or another until we get to Makhachkala and see what they do.”

“So we can’t very well slip away before then,” said Sutherland. “If they push on to Baku we’d be stuck. We’ll lose them for sure.”

“So we stay with the column,” Haselden concluded. “It’ll be dangerous. If they do stop and that officer comes mucking about we may have to act, and quickly. Eleven men or no, we’ll have to make our play.”

“In that event, let’s just hope they stop somewhere nice and secluded. I’d hate to start a brawl in the middle of town square.” Sutherland shook his head, the difficulty of their situation apparent. “Alright, suppose we pull this off and we do get this man. What then?”

“We get him east to the coast. If we’re in a settled area we look for a boat,

any boat, and head north up the coast to that finger of land where Corporal Severn is waiting. Still packing that wireless in one piece, Sergeant?”

“Aye, sir.”

“Good enough. We get this man, call up Corporal Severn with the swift boats and have him come south to meet us if things get hot. Then we get across to Ft. Shevchenko as fast as we can.”

“Sounds easy enough when you say it like that, Jock. Yet as you can see, things happen. This column could meet up with another. There might be a full company of NKVD at the other end of this road for all we know. We go in undercover and suppose we run into some hothead officer. What then?”

“If it comes to that then we’ll have to rely on our wits, stealth and the weapons we’re still carrying. As I see the odds now, the three of us should be able to handle the men in this column. After all, we’re 30 Commando.”

“Here, here,” said Sergeant Terry. “Wish I had a battalion of the lads with us now. Then it wouldn’t matter what we run into.”

“If wishes were horses, Sergeant Terry.”

“Aye, sir.”

They settled into silence, each man turning over the situation in his mind. For the moment they had a breathing space for a little welcome rest off the damp earth, but they knew it would not be long before they would have to answer all the questions they asked one another in the dark. Something told Haselden that Lieutenant Sutherland was right. A smile and a cigarette wouldn’t do the trick again. Now it was down to pistols, knives, and the two Stens.

Chapter 14

Fedorov stepped onto the plank leading up to the gangway, a wary look in his eye. The boson's mate gave him a glance, then saluted when he saw the decorations on his chest and the obvious insignia of a high ranking officer on his cap.

It had been a long and tiresome journey by rail south to the Caspian. The land seemed to stretch on and on in an endless wasteland of parched, tractless earth. In places the terrain was so untraveled that the rail line failed and they had to detrain to look for transport by truck. But over two days time they managed to reach their destination on the northernmost shore of the Caspian Sea at a town called Guryev, renamed Atyrau in the early 1990s.

The city was situated at the mouth of the Ural River, sitting right astride the border of Europe and Asia. The muddy brown water of the river wound through West Kazakhstan from the north in a long dull ribbon to eventually find the sea. Over the years the settlement became famous for its fish, but just off shore lay vast latent fields of undiscovered oil that would later become the Tengiz and Kashagan superfields. Decades into the future, big oil conglomerates would delve deep into the waters for the light sweet crude and lucrative gas fields, and Ben Flack would hold sway on platform *Medusa* at the edge of a growing conflict over energy supplies. Yet at that moment the town and its harbor on the sea seemed a lonesome and forlorn place.

In recent months, the threat posed by the advancing German Army had seen the arrival of long lines of barges and partially submerged cisterns of oil from Baku towed by commercial tugs. The Soviets were desperately trying to cap the threatened oil wells of Baku and transport the rigs and other equipment, along with as much oil as possible, to other shores far from the German advance.

When they arrived in town Fedorov learned that the Germans had finally cut the rail and road connections between Astrakhan and Baku, and he knew the way south would now mean a hazardous journey by sea. There was a small flotilla of commercial ships still making regular runs to Baku, but the only ship in port the day they arrived was the *Amerika*, an old oil tanker that would leave the following morning.

The quays and wharves were littered with rusty barrels, old sections of

weathered pipe, dilapidated drilling equipment, and abandoned vehicles that seemed as though it had been washed ashore by the ebb and flow of the tides of war. Handfuls of stevedores and dock workers rummaged through the scrap, and occasionally a column of three or four trucks would arrive to haul things away. The smaller boats in the harbor seemed useless for what they had planned, old rotting wood fishing boats that seemed the sole livelihood of lean, haggard men trying to scratch out a living for their families, so they had no choice but to board the tanker.

“I did not expect the port to be so desolate,” said Fedorov to Troyak as they boarded the ship. “The war has not yet reached this place, but it is very near. The struggle for Stalingrad is still underway, and the German Army is deep in the Caucasus. Now we set sail for lands inside the war zone itself. We will have to get south of Kizlyar to avoid the Germans, and this tanker stops at Makhachkala before going on to Baku. It’s our one chance.”

“Zykov has been chatting with a few locals,” said Troyak. “They say the Germans have mounted occasional air strikes on the shipping lanes to the south.”

“Yes, they tried to cut these supply lines by any means, and sunk a number of ships. This ship here, the *Amerika*, will be sunk in a few weeks time off Astrakhan by a German air strike—that is if the history I studied before we departed still holds true. After what I experienced back at Ilanskiy I have no idea what to really expect now.”

The more Fedorov thought of those narrow back stairs at the inn, the more he worried. It was strange how he was affected, literally walking down those steps to another time, and then having his experience confirmed so dramatically by the sudden reappearance of Mironov. That was more than coincidence, he thought. Here we are, officers and crew off the battlecruiser *Kirov*, now *Argonauts* in time, and I meet the very man that ship was named for! It was still astounding to consider, or even believe, yet the memory of Mironov’s eyes, the face of young Sergei Kirov, was burned in his memory. He recalled the overwhelming temptation to say something to the man concerning his fate, years hence, on that dark day in December when he would die at the hands of an assassin. Did he say too much?

Here he was on an impossible mission in time to try and find Gennadi Orlov because he suspected the man may have fatally changed the course of events, and then this happens! The thought came to him again, even as it had in that single pulse pounding moment when Mironov was brought in by

Zykov—what if this was the key moment in time? What if Orlov was nothing more than a big red herring meant only to bring him here to this place, to that darkened stairwell, and face to face with Sergei Kirov?

Before he knew what he was saying the words blurted out, an urgent whisper in the young man's ear. *'Do not go to St. Petersburg in 1934! Beware Stalin! Beware the 30th of December! Go with God. Go and live, Mironov. Live!'*

What have I done? Fedorov turned that question over and over again in his mind now. I meet one of the most important figures in modern Russian history, a man of the Great Revolution, and I say something that could change everything if Mironov were to ever remember it and act on my stupid advice. What was I thinking? Here I am trying to find a way to prevent that terrible future we saw, but we have been fumbling in the dark all this time. We really don't know what we must do, or change. Could this be the key?

What if Kirov remembers me; remembers what I whispered to him at the top of those stairs? What if he does *not* go to St. Petersburg? Would Josef Stalin still find a way to remove him? Would time find a way, just like all those crewmen on the ship who ended up never being born? A man like Stalin was such an overweening shadow on the face of history that it seemed impossible to think his fate might be changed. But what if Kirov survived... What if?

He thought about that for a good long while as they settled into a damp crew compartment on the *Amerika*. If Kirov survived how might his life and influence have changed things? He was very close to Stalin, almost like a brother. Yet Stalin resented his popularity, and his influence. It was clear that Stalin used Kirov's assassination to launch his great purge and remove thousands of potential rivals and opponents. As many as a million may have died, and surely he would not leave Kirov alive under similar circumstances. Yet if Kirov did live....If he managed to remain a powerful and influential figure, what might Soviet Russia look like once freed from the blight of Stalin's influence? Could Russia survive the rigors of WWII and still prevail without the 'Man of Steel,' Stalin, at the helm of that ship of state?

It was all too much for him to grasp at the moment, and Fedorov soon found that the mystery of that back stairwell was more than enough to challenge him. He had tried to describe the event as a rift in time, a tear in the fabric of *spacetime* that seemed to connect two points on the continuum, two years—1908 and 1942. The fact that his regression to 1908 brought him to

the very moment of the impact at Tunguska was very telling, and he still suspected that that strange occurrence on June 30, 1908 could have caused the rift to form. The stairwell at the inn must have just been perfectly positioned to allow one to pass through that rift! That was mere happenstance. If the inn had never been built then the rift in time would just be hovering in space at that location, a few meters above the ground. The position and angle of the stairs provided the perfect means of entering the rift, and traveling in time!

Now he wondered if there were other places like that, other rifts in time possibly caused by the violence and mystery of the Tunguska event. Even more so, he wondered how long the rift persisted. Clearly it did not always work, for Troyak claimed he went down those stairs and yet remained stable in the year 1942. He did not encounter the phenomenon that sent Fedorov farther back in time.

How long did the effect last? Was it intermittent, coming and going like that strange pulsing the battlecruiser experienced when it moved in time? If it first occurred in 1908, it was obviously still present 34 years later in 1942. The pulsing effect could explain why Troyak did not move in time. Perhaps one had to transit the stairway at just the right moment.

What if the rift persisted into modern times, thought Fedorov? Was it there in the year 2021? And if it persisted all those years, who might have come up those back stairs in all that time, and who might have passed down them to find themselves in the distant past, stalking through the lost days of history as he was even now? That thought was truly staggering. What if other men had discovered what he had just experienced, and vanished into time? If they could not get back by taking the stairs again, then what? They would be marooned in the past and forced to live out their entire lives there. My God! He realized that every time someone went down those stairs they could have a profound effect on all history.

They could change everything, just as Fedorov and his team were striving to change the history at this moment, and save humanity from a terrible future fate. He was suddenly filled with the urge to go back and test his theory again. At the very least he wondered if he could somehow get another message to the future, to Admiral Volsky. We must find out if the stairway still exists in our time, he thought darkly. We must!

Even as he thought this another man was answering some of the very same questions Fedorov was asking himself, for he has also come down those

same stairs and was about to make a most interesting discovery of his own.

* * *

“I am a Captain in the Internal Affairs Division of the Russian Naval Intelligence! How dare you treat me in this manner!” Volkov’s anger was apparent in the heat, which now colored his otherwise pallid cheeks.

“Is that so? Well I am a Colonel in the People’s Commissariat for Internal Affairs—Rail Security Division, Captain, if that is who you really are. Your identification card is most unusual. I have never seen anything like it. Your uniform, weapon, also very unusual. We see a great deal on this line; roust out every sort of thief and scoundrel imaginable, and we hear many wild stories. But this one I have never heard before. At the moment the irregularities I have already mentioned are enough to suspect you are not who you claim to be. This identification card for example...very strange.”

“That is standard navy issue. Or perhaps you have never seen proper credentials for a naval officer before? There is nothing irregular about it at all!”

Colonel Lysenko, cocked his head to one side, taking another long drag on his cigarette. “And you say you have never seen this man before?” He pointed to the other officer, the one who had fingered Volkov, the one who regarded him even now with narrow eyed suspicion behind his round wire framed glasses, Mikhael Surinov.

“I have not... And where are my men? Believe this, Colonel, if that is who *you* really are. You are now interfering in a matter of state security of the highest order!”

“Is that so? Then you must work for the Kremlin, eh? Who is this man you were holding at gunpoint?” The Englishman was being watched by one of Lysenko’s men at the front desk where Ilyana sat fretfully listening to the whole scene, not knowing what was happening.

Volkov folded his arms, defiant. “I was about to find that out when you barged in with this ridiculous charade. I have been searching every station on this railway—every lodgment and depot. We are looking for a man, and this fellow seemed suspicious—an Englishman! What is he doing here in time of war? So yes, I detained him for questioning, and I—”

“You were looking for a man? Who?” Lysenko exhaled heavily, the ashes of his cigarette low again.

“Another naval officer, a man named Fedorov, though he may be traveling undercover.”

“Fedorov?” The Colonel turned quickly to the shorter officer. “Is that the man you told me of?”

“Yes sir!” said Surinov. “He was very bold, just as this man here seems—very official. Yet there was something odd about him. He claimed he had come from Khabarovsk, and that was proved to be a lie as soon as I returned there to make my report. I have never met an officer in the Rail Security Division who acted as he did—humiliating me in front of my security detail, not to mention those pigs I was transporting to the detention centers!”

Now Volkov leaned forward. “You say you have encountered this man—Fedorov? How did you know his name?”

“That’s what he called himself—him and his Sergeant Troyak. That man was completely insubordinate, and the Colonel did nothing! He just stood there and let a common soldier threaten me!”

“Colonel? You say this Fedorov was passing himself off as a Colonel? Where?” Volkov almost stood up, but felt the hard hand of a soldier on his shoulder. He gave the man a look of real annoyance and continued, pressing his question on the man. “Where did you see this Fedorov?”

“We are asking the questions here!” Colonel Lysenko pointed at him with his cigarette, but to his astonishment Volkov swiped it from his hand, real anger on his face now.

“Get that filthy thing out of my face! Who the hell are you? What are you doing here? What in God’s name are you trying to pull, eh? You will pay dearly for this little prank, I assure you.”

Volkov reached up, pinched his collar button and spoke, eyes on Lysenko the whole time. “Jenkov...where the hell are you? Get down to the dining room at once. Bring the entire section!”

Colonel Lysenko gave him a wide eyed look, his surprise quickly transitioning to disdain as he waited. “Such theatrics,” he said with a sneer. Then he struck Volkov full on the face with the back of his hand. “You take me for a fool? Who do you think you were talking to? A ghost?”

There looked to be a scuffle, but the two other soldiers were quick to press the muzzles of their weapons to Volkov’s head. Then Lysenko leaned in, his breath foul with tobacco as he spoke. “The next time you try anything like that I will *kill* you—understand? I will take my pistol and blow your brains out!”

Lysenko composed himself, reaching in his pocket for a crumpled pack of cigarettes. "Now..." He placed a cigarette in his mouth, flicking a silver Ronson lighter he had taken from someone in the course of his many official interrogations. "Just who is this Jenkov you spoke of? I see no Jenkov here? What is this section he is to bring with him?"

Volkov was steaming, his eyes like coals. Every reflex in his body wanted to reach out and choke the breath from this man. But the feel of the hard steel of the muzzle of an automatic weapon at his temple gave him pause. His mind began to work, controlling that reptilian reflex, and oddities of the encounter began to filter in through the anger he felt. People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs? That was the name of the old NKVD! What was this man talking about? Yet the Captain was a wolf of a man, and not one easily threatened or frightened. He narrowed his eyes.

"You will kill me, you say? Blow my brains out, is it? Do you know who I work for? Do you have *any* idea who I report to? And what is this drivel you are spouting? There *is* no People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs!"

Lysenko listened, arms folded, face tightening with each word Volkov spoke. He could see that this was going to take stronger measures. His impulse was to do what he had threatened and simply draw his pistol and shoot this impudent man where he sat, but this business with Lieutenant Surinov...this part about a man called Fedorov aroused both suspicion and curiosity. Something was clearly wrong here, and he was going to find out exactly what it was. He decided to take another tack with this man.

"Fedorov," he said. "You say you are looking for a man named Fedorov... Why? Who is he that it should be of any concern to you?"

The tension in the room subsided as Volkov composed himself, his mind trying to determine what these men could possibly be up to. "That is a matter of state security," he said quickly. "And your interference is going to come with a very high price tag."

"So you claim to be an intelligence officer? You have been ordered to find this man? Then let us approach this another way, comrade. I am intelligence officer as well. You are either drunk or delusional if you do not recognize this uniform. And my Lieutenant here tells me a man calling himself Fedorov is masquerading as an NKVD Colonel and causing trouble. In my district any trouble eventually comes to my attention. So we came looking for this Fedorov as well. Who is he?" Lysenko wanted to find out what this man knew before he decided what to do here.

“Suffice it to say he is of special interest to Russian Naval Intelligence.”

“He is a spy then? He is attempting to infiltrate the NKVD?”

“NKVD?” Now Volkov suddenly recognized the insignia on these man's caps—yes, the light blue cap with the thin red band—the hammer and sickle of the old Soviet regime.

“NKVD? That institution hasn't been in existence for decades. Where did you get those stupid uniforms, at an army surplus store? You think this is some kind of a joke here? You don't know who you are fooling with. Well gentlemen, if you persist in this I will tell you that you have chosen the wrong man for your little fun and games, and I have had quite enough of this nonsense.”

Lysenko's anger rose again, and he stood up, very slowly, his hand drifting to his side holster.

Volkov met his narrowed eyes, unflinching. “I'm warning you one last time,” he said coolly, his voice low and edged with threat.

Chapter 15

He had been eight days tunneling, working hard in the rain these last few hours to be certain any sound of the digging would be well masked. The rain would also lessen traffic at the site above, which was another advantage, but it made for cold, dank work in the trench below the site. Yet Ian was a man accustomed to the elements, and well suited to the hard labor his project would require. In the end it would pay off handsomely, and the end was well in sight. Today was the ninth day, the payoff day. He had but another eight to ten inches of vertical drilling now, straight up through the hard bottom and into the center of the plot, and then he would finally have the prize.

This was the hard part of the job, the risky part. He would have to wait out the weather, hoping for a real torrent to mask the noise of the drill. His power cabling would be stretched out behind him, along sodden wet ground in spite of his effort to lay in a plastic tarp for cover. Here and there, he noted places along the length of the tunnel where water was seeping down from above, finding its way through cracks in the cobbled roadway between his rented cottage and the target site.

If the Duke only knew the trouble and toil he had gone to these last days to secure his prize. Yet he knew the Duke could care less. The only thing he wanted was at the other end of Ian's drill bit, soon to be laboring up through the last earthen and concrete barrier that separated him from his goal. Who would ever think the moldered remains above would be put to any good use beyond the novelty they offered tourists, a bit of history tucked away in a backwater hamlet.

Ian Thomas waited out the moments, squinting at his perfectly timed watch as the second hand swept in its endless round. Thirty seconds more and the clock on St. Martin's would begin its midnight toll, twelve long notes that would give him a full minute to complete his task. The high speed drill was perfectly positioned, and mounted on a small hydraulic jack that would apply just the right amount of pressure as the bit worked. He had applied the most expensive lubricant he could find for this job, to be sure the bit would not squeak, and he had muffled the drill itself with sound absorbent bale. That, along with the tolling of the clock tower, should be enough to mask the noise.

Ten seconds... Five. He quickly adjusted his face goggles and breathing

mask, then switched on the drill holding his breath at the noise it made in spite of all his precautions. It began to cut upward, showering the area in the tunnel below with a chalky powder. In exactly sixty seconds he would switch off and take his measurement. With any luck he would be within half an inch of breakthrough, and the last bit would be done with hand tools. Once the breech had been made he would have to insert his camera probe and document his position. GPS was telling him he was right on target, but one never knew for certain. The restoration work they had done here in the 90s could have changed things. Some idiot workman could have nudged something the wrong way—but the camera would tell him what he wanted to know. Then, if all was well, it would be a simple matter to insert his vacuum tubing and finish the job.

It was only a matter of time now, but he hadn't counted on the devotion of Mary Perkyn that night, or the gracious accommodation of the Rector at St. Martin's. It was going to be a very long night. He still had a lot to accomplish, but he was well on his way to success, and his patience would eventually pay him a handsome dividend.

Even now he imaging the look of profound satisfaction on the Duke's face when he handed him the parcel he would soon be packing diligently in his cottage. And even more so he imagined the look of profound satisfaction on his own face when the Duke handed him a check for a million pounds Sterling. The world could go to hell in a handcart, but at least he would enjoy the trip after he got his hands on money like that!

Yet he wasn't the only one to hear that last whining sound of his drill that night. Other ears were listening, and would complicate his little project in ways he did not yet know.

* * *

The Rector hastened down the cold stone floor to the east entrance, frowning as he listened to the insistent knocking on the door. Who in the world would be out on a night like this? Another poor soul come to beg a warm night out of the rain? No, the knocking had an urgency about it that gave him cause for concern. There was something harried about it, and there was fear in the sound. He hurried past the alcove shrine, forgetting to bless himself at the holy water fount, drawn to the insistent pounding at the door.

"There, there," he said as he slid back the door bolt. "Hold on a moment,

you'll shake loose the shingles with that racket."

The door opened with a squeak, and he squinted out into the dark landing, a cold breath of rain on his face. The caller lurched forward out of the heavy rain, but with an animated fretfulness that pricked an instinct of fear in the Rector. He was startled to see that it was old Mary Perkyn, a regular parishioner, her gray hair sodden under what passed for a rain bonnet.

"There now, Mary. What's gotten into you?"

"Oh Rector, you must come to the chapel at once! Oh, my lord, such a dreadful sound!"

"What's that you say? Whatever are you talking about, Mary? Here, come in out of the rain and let me close this door or we'll both likely be blown away with the storm."

The Rector managed to usher the poor old woman inside, closing the door hard against the intruding weather and pushing the bolt home again for good measure. "Now, Mary," he began when he had caught his breath. "You come into the sitting room and have a spot of tea. Do you good. Settles the nerves and warms the belly, right? Then you can tell me all about it."

"Such a dreadful fright I've had. A sound, like the wailing of a demon it was, and with all this storming and rain about to make it all the worse. You must go to the chapel and hear for yourself, Rector. I was praying me nightly votives, I was. Then all at once it comes, up from the ground itself, a wailing and gnashing and moaning, all just when the bell tower struck midnight!"

"Devotion aside, Mary, this is no hour to be out in such weather. Did you mean to sleep in the pew? I should think you would have been long at rest in a nice warm bed at home. Which is just where you *should* be, and I hope where you soon will be, once I get some tea into you."

"But Rector—"

"Now, now... just listen to that rain and wind..." he rolled his eyes at the ceiling. "The lord is wrathful tonight. It was likely nothing more that the wind in the trees you heard, rattling against the headstones in the grave yard."

Mary listened, but her eyes betrayed her doubt. There was real fear in them, and the Rector knew it would be some time before he could quiet the old woman down. She was getting on in years now, and taken to wandering at all hours like this. It was a shame that she had no relations close by to care for her but, that being the case, he made it his duty to look out for her, one of his long time faithful parishioners.

"Wind in the trees?" Old Mary gave him a frightful look. "I've heard the

wind, Rector, and sat up many a night at prayers through storms worse than this. Oh, no sir, this was something more. Ungodly it was! The way it wailed after that bell. And now that you mention, it *was* comin' from the churchyard. Such a disturbance! I'd know wind in trees, and this was something else altogether." She crossed herself with a shiver, yet allowed herself to be guided along the hallway and into the sitting room.

"Well now," the Rector decided to compromise. "If you'll promise me to sit here and take in a bit of tea, I'll do you the kindness of having a look at the chapel. It's more than likely a stray cat in a quarrel, but if it will set your mind at ease, I'll see that all is well."

"Would you, Rector? Such a fright it was, chasing a poor old woman from her votives. It would comfort me if you would go and make your blessing. But have a care! I know the wind when I hear it, and I know cats. Something in that churchyard let loose with a howl that was like to disturb the dead!"

The Rector smiled, reassuringly as he sat Mary down near the hearth. "Well, we mustn't have that," he said. "Not with such distinguished company resting in the yard." He was referring, of course, to the grave sites of the Churchill family, for the famous Prime Minister was laid to rest here at St Martin's, in the hamlet of Bladon, close to his birthplace at Blenheim Palace.

"Now you just sit tight, and drink this tea. Fortunate for you I'm even up this night but, as you can see, I was restless with the storm and reading to quiet my mind." He gestured to a thickly bound copy of Dante. "Talk of wailing and moaning! I was well absorbed in Dante's *Inferno*, with the good lord's harrowing of Hell, when you come to the door in such a fit. Warm yourself now, and if we get a break in the storm I'll see you safely back to your cottage on the Green."

"But you'll not forget the churchyard," Mary persisted. "It'll need your blessing for certain, Rector. For what I heard this night had little respect for the dead, no matter how many lordships and ladies may sleep in those graves."

"In a little while," the Rector placated her with a calming gesture of his hand. "Looks like the rain may ease a bit after midnight. Then I'll go and have a look if it will set your mind at ease. After that it's off home with you. I've an early day tomorrow."

The rector gave a reassuring nod and went on his way, down the long cold hallway to the cloak room so he could throw on a warm wool overcoat. The

things I do in the tending of my sheep, he thought. Old Mary is getting a bit daft these days. She's taken to keeping odd hours in the chapel, fitfully watching that graveyard as though she had an appointment to keep there soon. Don't we all, he thought. Yet the cold rain on his cheeks and the bite of the wind made him feel alive when he was finally out the door and headed over to the chapel.

He stood for a moment, looking at the iron fence around the churchyard, and thinking of the man who was laid to rest there. Ah, Winston, you were a man for your time. The world was falling into the inferno of the Second World War and you were there to catch it and hold the damn thing up on your shoulders like Atlas. What would have come of Western civilization without a man like Churchill to keep watch with his steely resolve and bull headed perseverance?

He went in through the side entrance to the chapel, listening, as though he thought he might hear the wail of a demon, but all was calm and quiet, save the quiet stippling of the rain on the roof as the storm abated. It was just daft old Mary, he thought. He'd best get back to her and see her off to her cottage in the village.

But it wasn't daft old Mary...It was Ian Thomas and his drill, and even as the Rector finished up and was making his way back along the gleaming wet cobblestone walkway, collar pulled high against the wind, a few yards beneath his feet Ian Thomas was creeping silently through the long tunnel he had dug, a night stalker making off with his ill gotten gain.

Stalking through history, he thought to himself as he reached the end of his narrow tunnel, slipping up the ladder and up through the floor boards of the cottage he had rented for just this little mission. He shivered, glad to be out of that long damp passage and back in a room that promised some warmth. But he had it now, the canister was well packed with enough ash to fulfill the Duke's purpose nicely enough.

Ian held up the sealed metal container, smiling. "Begging your pardon, Sir Winston," he said aloud with a grin. "I wouldn't be one to pilfer a man's grave, but the pay is so good that I could do nothing else. My, my...you don't look nearly as imposing sitting here in my metal jar—not at all like that towering figure you were in your day, champion of the West; bulwark of the British Isles. Look at you now..."

The edge of his lips was already tipped up in a devious smile, and that look of profound satisfaction was settling onto his features as he

contemplated his reward. All he had to do now was retrieve his drilling equipment and shovel, and fill in the hole again. No one would be the wiser. Then it would be off to see the Duke. There would be the usual rigmarole, of course—the DNA testing, the weighing and measuring of the sample, but he knew he would satisfy on both counts. Then he would hear the same old litany again, that he was not to breath a word of this to any living soul. Well of course not! Who would believe it?

Then his favorite part...the check, the million pounds tucked neatly away in his jacket pocket. This little caper was going to make his life very comfortable for the foreseeable future. Nine days of back-breaking work, a little stealth and imagination, and he was a wealthy man. Now he had the rest of his life to spend that money, and he was already thinking just what he would want to buy first.

But he did not know then that the rest of his life could be very, very brief. For the world was digging its own little tunnel at that moment—nine days on the journey to hell.

And it was already Day Five.

Part VI

Arrangements

*“Still, I am prepared for this voyage, and for anything else
you may care to mention.*

*Not that I am not afraid, but there is very little time left.
You have probably made travel arrangements, and know the feeling.*

*Suddenly, one morning, the little train arrives in the station,
but oh, so big it is! Much bigger and faster than anyone told you.”*

— John Ashbery

Chapter 16

He was standing by the tapestry, admiring the loom and color of the piece, and the exquisite artistry of the crest woven above his house coat of arms. Sir Roger Ames, Duke of Elvington, was also listening carefully to the account of his acquisitions agent, just back from Bladon where he had been working the operation under St Martin's church. The Duke was the latest appointment to the peerage, with lands and estates in the County of York. There had not been a Duke outside the Royal Family for generations, and so the appointment was a rare privilege, but then again Sir Roger Ames was accustomed to rarity and privilege, and had come to expect as much in all walks of life. Now he was assuring himself that a certain matter he had commissioned was completed to his satisfaction.

"And sir," the agent continued, "I can report that the operation was a complete success. The sample has been recovered, and with more than sufficient quantity, and the access has been resealed to a depth of six feet."

"Not the whole of it?" the Duke questioned.

"Six feet has proven to be more than enough in prior circumstances, your Grace."

"Yes, well that might do on foreign soil, Mr. Thomas, good for the tunnel work in Egypt I suppose, but this is the homeland we're speaking of. Can you assure me this won't make news one unfortunate morning with something on the order of a sink hole?" The Duke wasn't really concerned about it, but pretended nonetheless. There wasn't time to be worried. There were only four days remaining.

"Oh, most assuredly not, sir. All the reinforced wood work remains in place. There should be no trouble of the sort. In fact, I would venture to say the ground is stronger now than before. Remember that I was able to use that utility tunnel to get a good deal of the way. Otherwise I could never have completed a tunnel of that length in just nine days. The rest has been very well sealed."

"Won't it erode?"

"In time, sir, but the cavity is likely to simply fill up with rain water, which will give the whole scene the appearance of a natural aquifer if ever uncovered."

The Duke gave him a dubious glance, indicating that he simply didn't buy that argument, but the man didn't seem prepared to quibble the point further.

"Sufficient quantity, you say?"

"Seven pounds, your Grace—that's two pounds beyond the normal delivery specification. Quite adequate."

"Quite," said the Duke. "And certification?"

"Everything is in order, sir. DNA testing has come back double plus to the good. I have the lab reports right here with me as part of the delivery."

"Very well," said the Duke, turning now to regard the man he had been speaking to for the first time. Ames was a tall man, straight back, impeccable deportment, a thin twirl of a mustachio beneath a well used face, yet the lines there had given him a stately expression, haughty yet deepened with hint of hidden wisdom, the eyes dark and yet soft in their regard and lit with the confidence of intelligence. He was a man who had seen enough of the world to know the difference between good times and bad. And times were good on the Elvington Estate just now. Very good.

"Mister Thomas, might I inquire on another matter?"

"Certainly, sir."

"Have you any training in martial arts, military matters, weaponry and such?"

"I was a Lieutenant in Four Five Commando, Royal Marines, sir. Well trained in special combat arts and operations."

"Excellent. And would you be available for a very special assignment in the immediate future—say a few days time?"

"For you, sir, I am available any time at your convenience."

"This would be a rather long term assignment, somewhat dangerous, I suppose, but also somewhat exciting."

"I am yours to command, your Grace." Thomas knew better than to ask what the compensation would be. He knew he would be well rewarded, and was pleased to land a potential new contract this quickly.

"Very well...You may make your delivery then, Mister Thomas. Leave the report on my desk. The secretary will issue a sight draft for the agreed commission—all this subject to verification by the auditors, of course. I will contact you tomorrow regarding the new assignment I mentioned."

"Certainly, sir. And thank you, sir." Ian Thomas made a polite head bow, bending slightly, recognizing he had been dismissed without so many words. One had to have a keen ear for intonation when speaking to this sort, and

Thomas had done business with some of the wealthiest men in Europe.

He turned and walked back down the long carpeted hall, bowing slightly again as he backed out the door and pulled it gently closed. Only then did he allow himself the broad smile that finally stretched his wide features into a Cheshire Cat grin. The image of the sight draft he was about to collect was already running through his imagination. Not bad for a few days work, he thought, and an second assignment to boot!

In his office the Duke ambled casually over to his desk, hands clasped behind his back, eyes searching out the file the man had left him. He sat down in his comfortable leather chair, and opened the file, his lips taut as he read, with the occasional scratch of his chin.

“Ah, Winston,” he said aloud. “To think that you’ll soon be gleaming on a pendant.”

He thought on that...who to gift with this little treasure? It would buy the affections of the Lady Pomroy, yes? But he would have to show it round the group, and soak up a bit of the envy a good finished stone was likely to induce. Old Maitland would have a fit if I should trot this one out, what? The man thought he was firmly planted on the high ground with the Marlboro stone. We’ll see what he has to say about old Winston. Then again... I could take it with me when I leave.

He held that thought for a while, considering.

The Duke was a member of a very select club, one of many such gatherings in a wealthy man’s social circles. For years now they had been amusing themselves by seeking out the remains of famous people the world over, all long since dead and safe in the arms of history. Yet new technologies could take a sufficient quantity of their ashes and create something extraordinary, something rare and beautiful, something utterly unique, and such things had a way of being particularly desirable in the circles he frequented.

In this case his agent had just certified delivery on the remains of one Sir Winston Churchill, fresh from his cemetery repose at Bladon in Oxfordshire. The material, mostly just ash but still laden with carbon, would be soon be subjected to the immense pressures and temperatures required to create a certified diamond, and Sir Winston would become the latest glittering acquisition in the Duke’s collection. A company called “LifeGem” had been creating diamonds this way for years, mostly run of the mill ring stones made from the remains of passed “loved ones.” But the Duke, and a select group of

like-minded men and women of means, had grander tastes.

He thought, for a moment. This man Thomas was good, very good indeed. Four Five Commando is it? Well enough. He may just be the man I need for this little adventure. Rumors had been floating about for some time that Maitland was up to no good again. It was said he had an exceptional find to present at the next meeting...the final meeting in just a few days time. There weren't many left, he knew. A pity that this would be their final meeting.

We shall see, he thought. Perhaps I just might steal a bit of Maitland's thunder with this if LifeGem can roll it over in time, yes?

He chided himself for not thinking the whole plan through carefully. A little foresight and he might have had something more in keeping with his chosen path. Being fond of themes, perhaps a nice stone created from the remains of another famous duke might compliment this one—say, the Duke of Wellington? For that matter, his nemesis Napoleon Bonaparte might be a worthy compliment. Yes, those two stones side by side would make an awesome display, would they not? Particularly if everything works out as I imagine.

He seemed pleased with that thought, and opened a drawer, slipping the file inside and pushing it closed again until the security latch clicked tight. Now onto more pressing matters. This business in the news of late, British flagged tanker struck amidships by a missile in the Straits of Hormuz, Royal Navy frigate attacked by the Russians in the Black Sea and another Fairchild tanker sent to the bottom there. What was this about now? It was sounding rather ominous. He tapped his desk, thinking on the matter.

Fairchild & Company, he thought. Yes, I was told to look out for that one in the latter days. It was a small outfit that had been making runs out of the Gulf into Milford Haven. He had the file open now, reviewing the company profile...Assets of a reported seventeen billion, most of that in fleet tonnage and estates in Aberdeen and on the Isle of Man. What was this note due now at month's end? Bank of London, \$200 million in US denominated dollars. How gauche. He preferred his accounting in British pounds, particularly for any company serving the interests of the Crown. But as this was primarily an oil company, and oil was exclusively traded in dollars, or had been until very recently, he excused the transgression.

He flipped the page, glancing at the company's last reported balance sheet, with a particular interest in cash flows. He noted that there had been

four entries over the last month, each one attributed to deliveries received at Milford Haven, where the company berthed its fleet tankers. The revenues had been diverted out to cover the last three months operating expenses, licensing, insurance, payrolls, and then there was this last entry labeled ‘Special Projects,’ that aroused some interest.

It was a \$200 million credit line Bank of London was calling in at month’s end. What with the chaos on the markets of late, Barclays sniffing up the skirts of Goldman before it collapsed, Halifax, a big British housing lender damn near buggered, Northern Rock gone, Bradford & Bingley nationalized, he could see why. Credit was tighter than ever throughout the world. But this was a rather extravagant expense to slip in under an opaque heading like ‘Special Projects.’ Could Fairchild be involved in *the* special project, the same project he had been favoring and arranging for some time now? Was she a key holder too?

He flipped the page, noting the biography of one Elena Fairchild, the company owner and CEO. Well named, he thought, struck by the mature beauty of the woman. Decent pedigree, he concluded, with ancestors fighting in the Crusades. Family tree connected to the Landkey Fairchilds of North Devon...Coal and iron merchants owning a fleet of small vessels, which plied to Wales and Sussex. My, how the acorn never seems to fall far from the tree, he mused. A bit of spark in the blood line. They rigged out several of their ships to fight with Drake and against the Spanish Armada. Decent of them.

“Well, Miss Fairchild...” he said aloud, noting she remained unwed with some interest. She might make for an interesting companion on his little journey, then again, she might be nothing more than an encumbrance. It didn’t matter. She was half a world away, and the world was going to hell. He knew it, and a handful of other very wealthy and well connected men and women knew it too, and the days were running down. There wasn’t much sand left in the hourglass. This war was going to spin out of hand and make a grand end of things, and that was very inconvenient—unless you were very well prepared; unless you had a plan.

He had carefully positioned all his assets in recent months, making sure that his exposure to the black hole in the markets that was eating Goldman Sachs this morning could not touch him in any way, not that it mattered any longer. His mind had been focused on one thing only, a singular project... yes...how to find a place of quiet and serenity where he could live out his life

in peace and exercise the considerable wealth and power he possessed at the same time—unmolested by current regulations and constraints, or the wild annoyances of the modern financial system.

Now he had just the ticket—as did a very few others. They were men like Maitland; women like Lady Pomroy, and perhaps even promising newcomers like this Elena Fairchild. She would have to pass muster, of course, and the scrutiny of the committee, but it might be arranged at the next meeting. It might. Then again, perhaps she is already a key holder as well. No one really knew the names and identities of every person privileged to hold a key. A pity to leave a woman like that one behind. Perhaps he could make inquiries.

“I see your cash flow is running a bit thin, Miss Fairchild. Seems to me you’ve got most of your quarterly profit burning in the Straits of Hormuz or lying on the bottom of the Black Sea.”

Yes...*Princess Royal* was your largest tanker, and you were probably counting on her to make good with the Bank of London. Pity. Let’s hope you make it through the Bosphorus with your last two ships. And what’s this bit here...*Argos Fire*, a converted *Daring* class destroyer purchased some years ago for refit. How very interesting.

He thought on this large sum columned off to ‘Special Projects,’ his curiosity getting the better of him. He’d have a word with Jameson over that the Bank and see what they knew about it. Under the circumstances, and given the rather thin reserves this lady seems to have in hand at the moment, the company is looking just a tad vulnerable now, isn’t it? He sighed, realizing his old instincts for an easy kill and quick acquisition were misplaced here. It didn’t matter any longer. He had other ‘arrangements’ now, and if this Fairchild was a key holder then she would have other arrangements as well, and not be bandying about in the Black Sea worried about oil.

With that in mind he wondered if he should consider taking a man like this Thomas fellow along with him for the utilization of his special talents. He might prove very useful indeed. He decided to make him an offer, and was confident all would be well, reaching for his intercom to buzz the secretary.

“Yes sir?”

“Calendar clear for the day?” he asked.

“Nothing the remainder of the afternoon, sir.”

“Good. Ring Mister Thomas Tell them I should like to meet with him

again in the morning. Shall we say six AM?”

“Very good, sir.”

That should be sufficient, he thought. A man like Thomas could be much more useful than Fairchild. She’d have to be looked after, fawned over, and might end up being a nuisance more than anything else. He had come round to thinking of his plan as something more like a safari than a pleasure cruise. In that circumstance, Thomas was the much better fit.

Then he looked at his calendar for the next week. It’s a pity he was going to have to disappoint so many people. Some were coming to seek venture capital, others to make business proposals, merger offers, lucrative expansion deals. He left all the appointments in place, though if all went well he would not be here to ever worry about them again. He would be somewhere else entirely if all went as planned.

That thought brought all the excitement of the chase back again, the eagerness and anticipation of the great journey—if it worked. That was the kicker. It had to work. He decided to give this Professor Dorland another call to see about it. After all, he bankrolled a goodly amount to indulge the man’s extravagant ideas. But if he was on to something...if it actually possible...

Even as he reached for intercom to have his secretary arrange a secure line the telephone on his desk rang—Line 1. That raised an eyebrow, and a flash of concern as he reached for the receiver.

“Yes,” he said quietly, wondering what this was all about.

“Good afternoon, sir. I am sorry to report we may have an anomaly.”

“I see. You may have an anomaly?”

“We believe so, sir. The variation readings are very high. Would you care to look at the data?”

“Yes, of course. Please have a file on my desk within the hour.”

My, my, he thought. An anomaly! This was interesting. Was someone else planning something? Could it be Maitland? The lady Pomroy? Whatever it was, he had to get a handle on it at once.

Chapter 17

It had been forty-eight hours since the disastrous eruption of the Demon imposed its will on the seas around Hokkaido. In that time the remnant of the Red Banner Pacific fleet had withdrawn into the Sea of Okhotsk as the wounded CVBG *Washington* retired on Guam. Even as the battle erupted in the Black Sea between units of Fairchild Inc. and the Russian Black Sea Fleet, Captain Tanner's stricken carrier had effected a loose rendezvous with CVBG *Nimitz* in the region north of Marianas. Additional support was close at hand with CVBG *Eisenhower*, which had moved up the coast of Malaysia and through the Sulu Sea to head east for Guam.

The US was now consolidating its naval power for the next phase of its planned operations. Intelligence had been unable to ascertain the fate of the core of the Russian fleet. Satellite photography was impossible due to the enormous and expanding plume of ashfall from the volcano, and submarine contact was hit and miss on sonar due to the continuing seismic turmoil caused by the eruption. Now both sides were quietly prowling the undersea environment with subs, listening on passive sonar as they crept through the deep murky waters. Behind it all the constant rumble of the volcano growled from subterranean depths with an ominous undertone.

Naval planners on the American side deemed further operations by the Russian fleet would be impossible unless the flotilla sortied into the Sea of Japan where it would be vulnerable to land based air power from the main island of Honshu. For this reason they elected to withdraw south and consolidate to confront the real threat in the ongoing operations being mounted by China against Taiwan.

Rod Leyman, White House Chief of Staff, was meeting again with defense analyst Lt. Commander William Reed, Air Force General Henry Lane, and the newly appointed five star Navy Admiral William Ghortney. A tough and experienced naval professional, Ghortney had pinned on his gold wings long ago as a naval aviator, and the stripes on his cuff were well earned with well over 5000 error free flying hours and 1200 safe carrier landings under his belt. He had served in executive capacities on six fleet carriers, including both the *Nimitz* and *Eisenhower*, both now prowling like angry sharks in the waters north of Guam. It was his combat experience in

operations against Iraq and service involving other maritime security roles that made him the ideal man for the job now facing the Navy. But the Admiral had some hard questions to ask that day.

“Who the hell sent that flash traffic to Tanner? That’s what I want to know. We had *Nimitz* out there on his right flank and that order prodded him to act unsupported. Damn sloppy in my judgment.”

“It didn’t come from this office,” said Leyman. “We paint the broad strokes here, but I have no idea what flash traffic even is.”

“You’re telling me the order did not originate from the White House Situation Room? Well it sure as hell didn’t come from the Joint Chiefs. I was in a meeting with the entire group not three hours ago and we heard nothing of this flash order that sent Tanner into action.”

“If I may, sir...” An adjutant stepped forward at the Admiral’s elbow and handed him a file.

Ghortney flipped the cover open and looked it over, a single raised eyebrow registering surprise as he read. He finished and set the file on the table, covering it with his stripe festooned jacket cuff. Then he looked Leyman square in the eye.

“I was just handed a message trace file on that order, and it appears to be classified above top secret. That makes it an SCI file, so I am not at liberty to discuss it further unless everyone in this room has the necessary clearance.”

SCI files were those reserved for Sensitive Compartmentalized Information. In the labyrinth of security protocols it amounted to a “need to know” designation on the file, with access strictly limited to a select group of individuals. That alone was a surprise to Ghortney, for his designation as five star Fleet Admiral placed him at the top of the chain of command now for all naval matters. That any message should be sensitive enough to bypass his inbox before an order was issued made for some very uncomfortable feelings in the gut, particularly around a table like this, where decisions were about to be made that would affect the outcome of this rapidly developing conflict and the world that would be left when it was over. Ghortney wasn’t happy about the situation.

“I’m going to be frank here and say that if I sit down to a card table for a good hand of poker, I damn well want to see every card the dealer hands me. Now, I wasn’t born yesterday and I know there are segments of this government that are buried so deep you’d need an undertaker to show you the door, but this doesn’t work for me. I don’t care if you tattoo these orders with

code words from Aardvark to UMBRA. This one here was coded Watchstander-1G, for what it's worth. If I'm appointed theater commander, I want all tactical orders routed to me, and I call the shots. Clear?"

"I wish I knew what you were talking about, Admiral."

Reed cleared his throat and intervened. "Excuse me, Mister Leyman. What the Admiral is saying is that this order was not cleared through his desk because of a security classification issue. It was most likely designated SI, that would be Special Intelligence, and the sources and methods that developed the information are highly classified, as well as the heads that information is disseminated through.

"If I'm in command then this head better be on that list," Ghortney said pointedly. "Anybody wants to start pushing naval carrier battlegroups around on a map, then I want to know about it and approve—*that's* what I'm saying."

Leyman seemed surprised. "You mean to say these orders were withheld? You never saw or approved them?"

"Correct."

Now it was Leyman's turn to sit with that discomfort. Yes, the US Government was a deeply furrowed maze of convoluted byways, where information flowed through secret plumbing from wells of power that he could not even fathom. There was NSA, CIA, black projects originating in organizations like DARPA, and virtually every branch of the military. Even NASA held secrets that few were privy too—things seen in orbit, things found on the moon and Mars, things too secret to ever contemplate open discussion. Now here was the Admiral in charge filing a complaint in the White House Situation Room and claiming key intelligence had been denied him and battle orders were issued without his knowledge or consent. It was a most uncomfortable situation.

"I understand," Leyman began. "Well I can look into this, Admiral Ghortney, and I can also tell you that we were as much in the dark about this as you were. What is this classification you spoke of?"

"Watchstander-1G. God only knows what it's supposed to mean, but I'm issuing standing orders that no commander under my authority is to act on any order that does not originate from FLEETCOM-1—that's me, gentlemen—a new designation for the command I now hold. I don't want to sound arrogant, or even selfish, but that's the way I play the game. The congress handed me this fifth star for a reason. I know the Executive Branch is fond of

reminding us that the buck stops on that desk in the Oval Office, but unless the President wants to set up shop and start issuing fleet deployment and combat orders, I'd prefer to do the job myself."

"You've got it," said Leyman. "I can't say I've heard anything of this Watchstander thing, but I can find out what happened here and see that it doesn't happen again. General Lane, have you any light to shed on this?"

"I'm afraid not. If that attack order was deemed to be above the Admiral's desk then they sure as hell wouldn't send it to me."

"Then we are agreed that no one in this room knew that this message, this flash traffic as you call it, was even sent." Leyman scratched his head. This was the White House Situation Room!

"That appears to be the case," said Ghortney. "And to put it bluntly, that stops now."

"Your pardon, sir," said Reed. "That may require some rather high lever intervention. Anything coded SI-GAMMA-UMBRA would take an Executive Order to inhibit or restrict dissemination. In fact, and no offense here Mister Leyman, the President may get a daily intelligence briefing, but there are lists out there that will not even have his name on it, and that's just the fact of the matter."

"I see..." Leyman looked concerned. "Well if that's what it takes—an Executive Order—then I'll raise the matter with the President. In the meantime, before I take this to the old man himself, can you paint me a picture of what we're going to do about this situation in the Pacific? I understand your position entirely, Admiral Ghortney. If we stand you up in front of the tiller then the ship is yours. I'll tell you right now that I'll do everything possible to see your decisions are final."

"Much obliged," said Ghortney. "As to our intentions at this point, I can brief you on that right now. General Lane here has his assets in theater ready to go now. The two Missiles North Korea tried to lob at Guam were successfully intercepted and he has a number of strategic assets now in place for deep strike missions. It's time we begin offensive operations. General Lane?"

"Sir, I have Bones, Bats and Buffs in theater now, and I can put missiles and heavy metal wherever you need it."

"Bones and Bats?" Leyman looked at Reed.

"That will be B-1B *Lancers*, B-2 *Spirit* stealth bombers, and our older B-52s, Mister Leyman."

“Buffs? Where do you guys come up with this stuff?”

“It stands for Big Ugly Fat Fellow, sir. A term of endearment among the air corps.

“Correct,” said Lane. “We’ve cued up that X-51C *WaveRider* strike Mission and it’s ready to go. The first thing we have to do is take out their ability to access space and prevent any further attempt to hit our satellites.”

“You’re talking about hitting the Chinese?” Leyman wanted to know what he had to take to the President.

“That’s right, the Chinese...But the Russians are on my short list now as well. We may have to hit their primary Cosmodromes and other key launch sites if we want to do this right.”

“You’re talking about a strategic attack on Russian soil?”

“With conventional bombers and ordnance. No nukes.”

“Yes, but will the Russians see these bombers coming? Might they interpret this as a nuclear attack?”

“Sir, if we wanted to launch a surprise nuclear attack we wouldn’t start with the bomber leg of the triad. We’d lead with ICBMs and sea launched missiles. So yes, they might be able to detect the incoming strike package, even if we use the B-2s, but we think they would correctly interpret the attack as conventional.”

“Well I’m glad you’re confident about that, General, because it’s making me just a little bit nervous when we start sending strategic bombers over enemy airspace. Is there any way we can limit our operations to the areas presently involved in the conflict?”

“You mean Taiwan and the North Pacific? STRATCOM is the wrong tool for that job, sir. We’re here for deep strike missions. Admiral Ghortney?” Lane wanted support.

“I agree with General Lane,” the Admiral put in quickly. “We have two carrier battlegroups mustered now, and CVBG *Washington* will be able to hand off its viable assets to either one to strengthen those groups. These are the tools, to use the general’s word, that we’ll use to beat the Chinese over the head with a hammer to settle this Taiwan business. The Strike Warfare Commanders and working with the Air Tasking Orders for Taiwan now. There was no way I was going to send the *Eisenhower* in to the South China Sea on its own after we saw what happened to Tanner on Big George. This time we will group our naval assets and use them in close coordination with one another. The Chinese have demonstrated some interesting and formidable

capabilities. If we're going to settle this matter, we'll need everything we have in theater."

"What about the Russian fleet?" Leyman was looking at his latest briefing on the matter.

"We think they're down for the count—nothing we need concern ourselves with in the short run, except for the boomers. Those are the SLBM subs capable of launching missiles at the US from off shore. Thus far this business hasn't escalated to an all out war at sea, but that's where it's headed. If this thing winds up any tighter, they'll be after our boomers, and we'll be after theirs, and I mean all over the globe."

"The President is hoping we can limit this to the Pacific—to Taiwan and the Chinese."

"Those hopes have already gone up in smoke, Mister Leyman." Ghortney was not one to mince words. "The Russian 58th Army crossed the border into Kazakhstan this morning. They're already operating to seize the oil fields in that region, and with the Persian Gulf up in arms, that matters. There's also been an incident in the Black Sea involving British ships, not to mention that sucker punch in the Gulf of Mexico when they took a pot shot at that oil platform."

"*Thunder Horse*? Yes, that one hurt us."

"At least we got the damn sub, so they paid for that attack. The point I'm making is that the gloves are coming off. The Chinese have already gone after our satellites. The Russians and their proxies like Iran have hit strategic energy infrastructure that we rely on wherever they can find it. This is no longer a gentleman's war. It's time we get serious and let them know what they're up against. It's time we pushed back—and hard."

"Very well...." Leyman looked from Ghortney to Lane. "Just what do you propose we do?"

"Hardkill SEAD will begin the operation," said Ghortney. "We'll use the Tomahawk Land Attack Cruise Missile and other similar assets off both surface and subsurface naval units, and from aircraft as well."

"Seed?"

Ghortney spelled it for Leyman. "Suppression of Enemy Air Defense," he explained. "We hit their known SAM sites and radars. That clears the airspace for the second wave that General Lane will be sending."

"My bombers are ready," Lane said quickly. "We lead with the B-2 strike and take out their satellite launching facilities. The B-1s can then be tasked

against the airfields they are now using to support operations against Taiwan. We can pound them with more cruise missiles, smart bombs, and take those fields down in 24 hours. Then Admiral Ghortney might have something further to say about things.”

Ghortney nodded. “The next task would be establishing air superiority over Taiwan. CVBG *Washington* is down for the count at the moment, but I’ve got *Nimitz* and *Eisenhower* ready to move west, and we’ll hold Tanner’s remaining assets in the *Washington* group as a reserve until Third fleet reinforces us. CVBG *Bush* is already heading for Pearl Harbor. That will give us sufficient naval air power to restore order in the skies over Taiwan, and once we do that, the Chinese will think twice about the troops and equipment they’re loading on their amphibious shipping. We need to move quickly, and hit hard if they begin cross channel operations.”

Reed cleared his throat. “Excuse me, Admiral, but what about the DF-21s?”

“What about them?”

“The Chinese know their trump card is the ballistic missile. Look how they went to it right at the outset when they tangled with the Japanese. You move those carriers west and you might be looking at DF-21’s trying to make a clam chowder out of your operational zone.”

Reed had put his finger on the strategic crux of the matter. The aircraft carrier had reigned supreme in naval strategy since it proved itself in the Second World War. Now, for the first time, the threat of ballistic missiles was posing a grave challenge to carrier dominance. Just as the capabilities of carrier launched planes had ushered in the demise of the battleship, now ballistic missiles threatened to dethrone the carrier.”

“Well, Mister Reed,” Ghortney put it as straight as he could. “We’ll just have to see about that, wont we. We’ll just have to pound those missile sites to dust as well.”

Chapter 18

“The KA-226 is reporting in now, sir,” said Rodenko. “We have good long range radar returns on the American battlegroups to the south. It appears that they are bringing up another large flotilla.”

“Show me.” Karpov leaned heavily on the rim of the radar panel as Rodenko pointed out the contacts.

“I’ll have the data transferred to the tactical board, sir. This looks like yet another carrier task force—at least ten capital ships, and communications has intercepted ship-to-ship radio traffic. Nikolin believes Admiral Halsey is commanding.”

“That would agree with Fedorov’s books,” said Karpov.

“Yes, well I’m reading 34 additional ships in this group. Add those to the units we are already tracking and we are now facing no less than 60 enemy warships of various types.”

“Nine carriers, four battleships and three heavy cruisers,” said Karpov matter of factly. “That is if the historical data is accurate. The rest are light cruisers and destroyers.”

“We have 62 SSMs, sir.” Rodenko’s eyes conveyed the obvious admonition. “That is not enough conventional weaponry to effectively oppose a force of this size. And those carriers will likely have hundreds of aircraft available.”

“Correct.” Karpov was pacing now, thinking and considering his situation. It was shaping up very much like those last frantic moments off the coast of Newfoundland when the ship was faced with multiple enemy task groups. The weapons tally was no more favorable then, and he had determined that stronger measures were necessary. Why was he hesitating now?

“How long before those ships might threaten us with another air strike?”

“The Sprague group has been loitering about a hundred kilometers due east of Shikotan Island, Captain. They could launch now, but radar returns show only modest combat air patrols over that group. I believe they are waiting for the Halsey group, which should reach strike position in about ninety minutes if we proceed on our present course and speed. If we were to hold in place, make that three hours.”

Karpov's eyes narrowed. "Helm, port fifteen. Mister Nikolin, signal the flotilla to match our movements. We will circle in place."

"Aye, sir."

The order seemed to ease the tension a bit on the bridge, and Rodenko was relieved that the Captain seemed to want to buy himself a little more time to consider the situation. Karpov appeared ill at ease, however, as if the weight of the decision was heavy on him now.

"They are not making the mistake Captain Tanner did in 2021," said Karpov.

"Sir?"

"Tanner tried to take us on single handedly. The Americans had another carrier approaching, the *Nimitz*, named for the Admiral commanding their fleet in this timeframe. Tanner came in alone and he paid for it, just as this Sprague group would have paid a high price if they pressed that last attack against us."

"But they called that attack off and consolidated," said Rodenko. "Now they present us with a much stronger force."

Karpov was pacing. "Get hold of *Orlan* and *Golovko*," he said to Nikolin again. "Ask Yeltsin and Ryakhin if they can join me for a conference in thirty minutes aboard *Kirov*." Then he turned to sonar. "Mister Tasarov—keep a sharp ear. I want the KA-40 up on ASW patrol and coordinating with *Golovko*. No surprises please."

"Aye, sir. Our immediate zone of operations is clear and I am monitoring the situation closely."

"Good man... Rodenko, you have the bridge."

Karpov stepped toward the aft hatch, his eye catching the red emergency lighting and manual lock switch as he did so, and a thrum of anxiety rose in his stomach. The memory of that moment when he had opened the hatch and saw the dull gleam of that light on the barrel of an assault rifle pointed at his chest returned to him. The stalwart figure of Sergeant Troyak standing in the hatch opening... the cold, emotionless eyes of the Siberian Marine, the feel of his hand like iron on his own when Troyak took his missile key... The humiliation that followed seared him again as he recalled what happened. The image of Orlov's face as he looked at him, a quiet sneer of disgust in his eyes, and the last words the Chief spoke to him... "*Consequences, Karpov. Consequences...*" And all the while the sound of *Kirov's* deck guns cracked in the air like a snapping whip, salvo after salvo. Then the sight of that distant

mushroom cloud blossoming up on the horizon, and with it the realization of what he had done.

Karpov lowered his head, stepping quickly through the hatch, his face clouded and troubled.

“Captain off the bridge!”

He was down the ladder and heading aft, his footsteps leading him on past the officer’s mess, where another memory clawed at him. Orlov...He remembered how the big Chief had deliberately spilled coffee on his table, and his surprise in seeing him there as he left the officer’s mess. It was the last time he had spoken to Orlov, and his hand moved involuntarily to his side where the Chief had buried a fist in his gut.

Hot anger colored the Captain’s cheeks as he walked, quickly turning right to reach his quarters. He closed the door with a hard shove, taking off his Captain’s hat and wiping the damp sheen of perspiration from his forehead. Without thinking he went to a cabinet and took out a bottle of Vodka and a shot glass, sitting down at his desk with a hard thump as he hit the chair.

A dejected cold feeling surrounded him. He took a sip and then tipped the shot quickly down, breathing hard with the fire of the liquor on his throat. The taste of the Vodka triggered yet another memory of that drink he had with Admiral Volsky in the brig. He had been sullen and disrespectful, calling the Admiral an old man to his face and prompting him to fist the table top in anger. He could hear Volsky’s anger, well justified...

“*You are talking to the Admiral of the Northern Fleet!*”

Karpov’s own voice sounded thin and strident in return, and laden with resignation.

“*Admiral of the fleet? What fleet is this you presume to command now, comrade? We are one ship, lost at sea, and lost in eternity. God only knows where we are now, but I can assure you, the fleet is long gone, and there is no one back home in Severomorsk waiting for us to return either. It’s all gone, Volsky. Gone! Understand that and you have your fat fist around the heart of it. If you want to understand what I did you need only open your hand and look at it. All we had left was this ship, Admiral, and no one else seemed to have backbone enough to defend it. If I had not taken command it is very likely that we would all be at the bottom of the sea now—have you considered that?*”

Yes, he was considering it even now as he poured a second shot. It was all

gone—Severomorsk and the Northern Fleet; Vladivostok and the Pacific Fleet—all gone. He was the new fleet commander, the proud remnant of all that was probably left of Russian Navy in the Pacific. That same logic sat like ice in his stomach. If the old life was gone then this was all he had—all any of them had—these three ships and the men he commanded. They could change the entire history of the world if they wished. They were the most powerful men on the earth at this moment. He had said as much to Volsky that day in the Brig. *“I had my hand on the throat of time itself and I let it slip from my grasp. Don’t you understand what we could have done with this ship?”*

Now he stared at Fedorov’s well worn book on his desktop. Fedorov, pure hearted Fedorov. There was a man with a conscience, eh? Karpov recalled the glassy look in Fedorov’s eyes as he stared at the burning wreck they had made of the battleship *Yamato*, and realized what he had done, and he remembered what he had said to him in consolation... *“It will get easier.”*

The echo of Fedorov’s response was still fresh in his mind... *“I’m not sure I want it to,”* the young Captain told him, and Karpov knew what he meant. It never really does get easier, he knew, not for a man with any shred of feeling in his heart.

Now Fedorov was out looking for Orlov, lost in the past even as he was. But he had one thing with him that Karpov found missing, that last thing at the bottom of Pandora’s jar. Fedorov had hope. He knew that Volsky and Dobrynin were feverishly working out his plan with the *Anatoly Alexandrov* to try and bring him home again.

That’s why I feel the way I do now, thought Karpov. There’s no *hope*, no one is looking for us. In fact, they probably have no idea what even happened to us. Who knows whether or not that letter I sent ever got through to Volsky?

Yet the more he thought of Fedorov, the more he wondered. He was supposed to get back to the year 1942. If he made it, and carried out his mission, that should all be over by now. If Dobrynin had somehow managed to rescue him, Fedorov would be safely home, back in the year 2021. Would the war still be raging there, or did he find a way to put an end to it?

Karpov shook his head, unwilling to believe that Orlov could have done anything to cause the war. He saw how it unfolded like a fan, how it was meant to be, in spite of what they read in that newspaper and the respite they won when he stayed Samsonov’s hand in the Combat Information Center and

spared the American submarine *Key West*. Now he imagined Fedorov returning to the same bleak world of ash and cinder that they had seen on every shore they visited. He imagined the *Anatoly Alexandrov* sitting there in the Caspian Sea, fifteen kilometers off shore, a solitary island of metal, men, and hope. They would have put out patrols with anything they had available. They would have sent men to the naval base at Kaspiysk. What did they find there if they ever made it back? Was the world safe and sound, or just another lump of coal?

Something told him Fedorov was in for a real surprise, because no matter what Orlov did, or failed to do, he was not the last of the Mohicans any longer. No. That honor would fall to Captain Vladimir Karpov.

I wanted this, he thought. I dreamed of a situation like this, where I could take hold of fate itself by the throat and choke it to death if I chose to. And now I have that in my power once again! Rodenko is correct. The math becomes the brutal reality of the matter. Sixty enemy ships...Sixty two missiles. We put eight missiles and two torpedoes into *Yamato*...

Yet now I could win this battle with just one or two punches—a few missiles with warheads that could take out Halsey's entire fleet. I would use another MOS-III, a second *Starfire* to put bookends on this whole charade, just as I did before. That is the sound tactical decision now—why am I hesitating?

The voice of Dr. Zolkin played out in his mind now, speaking last as they huddled in the sick bay trying to decide what to do when the ship appeared in the Tyrrhenian Sea. *"You have all been discussing what we might do, what we are capable of doing, and yes, what the consequences may be in the end, but speak now to what we should do..."* The implication of some moral element in the decision was obvious. *"Yes, we can smash our way through these ships, and blacken Malta or Gibraltar if we so decide, but should we? Simply to secure our own lives and fate? How many will die if we attempt this?"*

How many will die?

The Second World War was finally over, but the world had not seen the fire of Atomic weapons again...until Vladimir Karpov appeared to remind them of just what he had done once before. My God, he thought, thinking of the report Nikolin gave him a few minutes earlier. He had monitored the American radio calls and determined that the missiles they fired had struck a carrier—the *Wasp*, the very same ship I sunk in the North Atlantic! They

built another one, and probably named it in honor of the first. Fate and time put the damn ship in front of me again and, lo and behold, what did I do? Now here I am ready to annihilate Halsey and all the rest of them, just as they are planning the same fate for me. We can crush them like insects... *"But should we? Simply to secure our own lives and fate? How many will die if we attempt this?"*

Even as he asked the question he knew the answer. He could hear it in the echo of his own pledge to Volsky before he was given a second chance by the Admiral... *"I swear to you—here and now... I know what I did, and why, and that is over now. I know I deserve nothing but your contempt, but give me this chance and I will not fail you again—ever."*

The Captain caught a glimpse of himself in his shaving mirror, sitting there on the desk. He saw the pain and confusion on his own face, and knew he was far from decided on this matter. A second chance.... *"If there is any shred of honor left in you, Karpov, I will give you this one chance to find it again."* Volsky had given him that. He treated him with respect—treated him like a man, and Karpov swelled with pride at the recollection of the Admiral's praise when they finally made it through the storm and sailed home again. The eyes of every man on the bridge were on him when he belayed the order to fire on Key West, and he was every man on the ship at that moment—all of them.

A second chance. Time was handing it all to him once again. History doesn't repeat itself, but it echoes...yes, and a haunting sound it is to sit and listen to it all again. What will it be, another missile, another MOS-III, another mushroom cloud on the angry sea? It had taken the eruption of hell itself to get him to this place—a place few men could ever stand—at the very edge of a second chance to do what he *should* do, to be a real man, and not a mindless shark.

Then his own words to Zolkin returned, biting at him, a clawing reminder that grew in the cold logic of war where the equation 'kill or be killed' was the solitary factor, and the synapse and nerve set the reflex that would make that difference and decide the issue for one side or another. He had given it all to the good doctor when the shrill alarm sounded to break off their discussion...*"Listen, Zolkin,"* he said quickly, a finger pointing to the scrambling sound of booted feet on the decks above them. *"Hear that? This is no longer a question of what we should do, but what we must do. It is either that, or we go to the bottom of the sea like so many before us."*

Volsky had said much the same thing to him once as he tried to sort this whole impossible situation out. *“Did we do all this?”* The Admiral waved his arm at unseen shores as he spoke. *“No. We did not. We only made it possible for them to do it—all the other generals and admirals and prime ministers and presidents. We showed them what power was, and they wanted it for themselves as badly as you wanted it, Karpov. So now we see the result. In truth, I cannot blame you any more than I blame myself, and all we have before us now is simply a matter of survival.”*

Yes, we showed them what power was, and that was exactly what he wanted to do again. He had it all worked out in his mind, the missile, the mushroom cloud, the ultimatum that would follow like the dark rain of radioactive seawater. They were still cruising within sight of the Demon Volcano that had sent him here, and he could erupt as well, a Demon in his own right, and spew the wrath and fire of hell at his enemy to bring them under his heel in one swift act of retribution. But he would give them fair warning.

Can I reach an agreement of some kind here with these men? Can I make an arrangement? If not, I can show them what real power is. It would be as easy and flipping a switch.

But should I?

Part VII

The Mission

*“But first whom shall we send
In search of this new world, whom shall we find
Sufficient? Who shall tempt, with wand'ring feet
The dark unbottomed infinite abyss
And through the palpable obscure find out
His uncouth way, or spread his aery flight
Upborne with indefatigable wings?”*

— John Milton, *Paradise Lost*

Chapter 19

It was a dull gray morning that day, all too common on the Caspian Sea, but as Captain Shlyupkin stepped onto the weather deck he wished the clouds were thicker. His ship, Caspian tanker *Kulibekov*, was one of four fat vessels in a long line heading south for Baku. Behind him came the *Komintern*, followed by *Ubelikov* and *Amerika*, each laden with war supplies bound for ports along the Caspian coast where the hard pressed 58th Army was struggling to hold back the German advance. There had been fighting at Kizlyar just a few days ago when German recon units tried to take the place in a surprise attack. The NKVD units had held the line there, but the 16th Panzer division had managed to cut the roads and rails leading north to the Volga, and the only way to get supplies through was by sea.

That made Captain Shlyupkin just a little more uncomfortable that morning, and he found his eyes searching the clouds overhead for signs of enemy planes. A little fog would do us a world of good now, he thought. Where is it when you need it? Thus far there had been no losses in the

Caspian due to air attack, but something about the morning, the silence on the sea, the stillness in the air all conspired to whisper warning to him. There was a hush on the world, a quiet that could not last. Something was going to happen. He could feel it.

Shlyupkin had good reason to feel ill at ease. If this was now the only supply route south, the Germans would certainly know about it. And this was the first major convoy mounted since the rail line had been shut down. The Germans could have eyes on that coastline at this very moment. The flotilla was moving in towards the west coast now, bound for their first port of call at Kaspiysk just south of Makhachkala.

“Ruyazin...Smirnov! Get up on the main mast and into that crow’s nest. I want you up with binoculars looking for enemy planes. And sound that bell the moment you see anything. Right now!”

Smirnov was first up the ladder, Ruyazin following halfheartedly behind him. They settled into their watch like a couple of chicks in the nest, and it was not long before the bell rang that morning.

The Captain turned quickly. “Where?” he shouted, but his watch standers were not pointing at the sky, but ahead, off the bow of the ship where the mist rode lightly on the still waters of the sea. Smirnov was pointing a long arm forward, and the Captain turned, raising his field glasses to see what he was indicating.

At that moment the bell rang again, more urgent, a strident peal in the still morning air, and this time Captain Shlyupkin did not have to wonder what was coming. He could hear it, the muffled sound of aircraft engines, getting louder with each passing second. “Man the guns, All ahead full!” He shouted orders to the bridge and saw his crewmen scrambling to get the tarps off the two machine guns, his only defense.

Then he looked forward again, thinking he could finally make something out there, a formless shape on the sea. What was he seeing? They were well south, approaching the naval base at Kaspiysk. It might be trawler or other lighter out to meet us, he thought. And he hoped they had a few good more guns to join the fight that he knew would soon be underway. No... whatever it was, it was massive, like nothing he had ever seen before.

The growl of the planes was louder now, and he looked to see the dark shapes sharpen overhead as they came. Stukas! God help us, Stukas! How did they get this close?

They were flying out of makeshift bases east of Mozdok on the Terek

River. The Germans had leap-frogged them closer to the front for just this purpose, so they could sink their 500kg bombs into the vulnerable tanker traffic heading south and cut the last supply route to the 58th Army. Shlyupkin saw their broad wings tip over and they started to dive. The scream of their engines sent a chill up his spine, and he heard the distant bells on the other ships ringing out the alarm, the sound of machine gun fire rattling the still morning air.

Then the first bombs began to fall with an awful wail.

* * *

“Get a move on. All you men must be down on the lower deck!”

Dobrynin shouted at the last of Bukin’s Marines as they trundled along the roof of the *Anatoly Alexandrov*, laden with arms and satchels. The vast bulk of the Mi-26 overshadowed them, its long rotary props drooping towards the roof deck in sweeping arcs.

The Chief was justifiably worried as the operation moved towards the last hurried stages of preparation to the launch hour. He had signaled Admiral Volsky two hours ago that the reactors were now fully operational and running safely, with Rod-25 mounted and ready to go. He immediately received the go ahead to launch his mission, and it was now well underway. The thing that worried him was the odd time delay that was sometimes noted between the conclusion of the maintenance procedure on *Kirov*, and the onset of the effects that resulted in time displacement. What if nothing happened? What if the magic wand that had sent them careening into the past would no longer work?

Dobrynin stood on the deck until the Marines were safely down the ladder and scrambling into the hovercraft below. There they would man the other equipment that had been crowded about the facility. A pair of Project 1206 Kalmar assault class hovercraft were moored close to port side of the floating power plant. Each one carried a single PT-76 light amphibious tank, and a contingent of 60 Marines. A third and larger “Aist” Class hovercraft, hull number 609, was moored to the starboard side. It’s carrying capacity was greater, up to 80 tons, and so it held more APCs. One was a ZSU 23-4 *Shilka* quad Anti Aircraft gun, and it was joined by two BTR-50 amphibious APCs. There was room left over for another 60 Marines and their supplies and equipment, bringing the land assault contingent to 180 men, all commanded

by the newly promoted Lieutenant of Marines, Arseny Bukin. The three hovercraft would be collectively commanded by Captain Oleg Malkin of the 242nd division of amphibious ships, Caspian Flotilla.

What in the world are we doing, thought Dobrynin? He was a long way from his familiar old post aboard *Kirov*. As he stared at the big Mi-26 he wondered about the other two radiation safe containers aboard. Would they really work just like Rod-25? The whole plan was so characteristically Russian that it almost amused him. Why couldn't they just use one rod installed at the Primorskiy Engineering Center to send the other one back, he had asked Admiral Volsky. Then they would not have to fly all the way from the Caspian to Vladivostok and the Pacific coast again.

"Two reasons," Volsky had answered. "First, we don't know how far back these other two rods will shift something, assuming they even work. Second, we have three ships there—two with nuclear propulsion units, *Kirov* and *Orlan*. Our plan was to get them all lined up, install one rod in the two nuclear powered ships with the *Admiral Golovko* sandwiched between them. Then we will try to run the maintenance procedure simultaneously and see what happens."

"See what happens?"

"Yes, Dobrynin, I know it sounds crazy, but we could think of nothing more to do. One voice here suggested we hold these last two rods in reserve. Their obvious power would give us some amazing potential. But I refused. We must do everything possible to bring *Kirov* and the other ships home again. Their presence there is too much of an offense to the history. But you need not worry about that. your mission is to find Fedorov first, and hopefully Orlov as well. But make sure that helicopter gets safely on its way."

"I understand, sir." Yet Dobrynin did *not* really understand. This was the most insane exercise he had ever been involved in, and the thought that Volsky was relying on him as overall mission commander was heavy on him now.

"I'm not trained for combat operations," he had argued when the Admiral first handed him the assignment.

"Don't worry about that, Chief. Leave that to Bukin and his Marines. Captain Malkin has also been fully briefed. Yes, he found the situation unbelievable, as we all did at first, but he is a good officer. He will command the amphibious units and see to the defense of the *Anatoly Alexandrov*. You

just do what you do best. Organize the mission, see to all the equipment and supplies, operate the reactors. We have even taken the precaution of mounting engines on the *Anatoly Alexandrov*, just in case you should need to move the platform for some reason or another. They are mounted aft, and will give you no more than 10 or 12 knots, but it would be enough in an emergency.”

“I will do my very best, sir.”

“I know you will, Dobrynin. Signal me the instant you return...And I hope to God we are all still here to greet you.”

That thought was a sobering one, and it underscored just what was at stake with this mission. It was no longer the fate of a few officers and men, or even the three ships they were foolishly trying to bring home. Something much more was on the table now, for they all knew well what the world could look like if they failed. They had seen it with their own eyes in the devastation of one port of call after another. Now they had come to tempt the dark unbottomed infinite abyss of time and fate itself.

Dobrynin sighed heavily, shook his head as he stared at the Mi-26, and then headed for the ladder down. By the time he made his way to the main operations center on the facility a young *mishman* rushed over with news from the radio room. The worry on his face was obvious.

“Sir, we just received a call from Kaspiysk Naval Base. They say they have radar returns on airborne contacts to our south”

“NATO planes?”

“We don’t know, sir. They are coming in very low, and quite slow, so they may be helicopters. Kaspiysk is activating the 847th Coastal Missile Artillery detachment.”

The young man’s worry was infectious. The war was now at their doorstep, but Dobrynin knew one thing about command that was an absolute necessity—a steady hand. The long years of patience and precision care in the operation of delicate and dangerous naval reactors would now stand him in good stead.

“Very well, *mishman*, return to your post.” His voice was calm and reassuring. He walked slowly to the operations center and gave the order to conclude the maintenance routine. He looked at his watch. They had dipped Rod-25 into the neutron flux over an hour ago. It was already being slowly withdrawn from the reactor core, but it would take another ten minutes for full extraction. If NATO was coming for them now he might not even get the

mission underway, but he would have to leave that with the defensive units Volsky had provided. His job was to get Rod-25 in and out of the nuclear borscht, and hope for the best. Yet now he had need for haste.

“Increase rod withdrawal speed,” he said. “Use the number three rating.”

“Aye, sir. Increasing withdrawal rate to three.”

“Keep a sharp eye on those flux readings...” Dobrynin walked slowly to a chair and sat down, closing his eyes. He was listening to the music of the core. The score was different here, the harmonics and rhythm slightly varied from the music *Kirov* would sing to him, but the song remained the same. He could hear the subtle harmonies in the vibration of the system, and then he smiled. Yes...there it was...It was the same odd meter, the same rhythm and beat, He could hear Rod-25 conducting its nuclear chorus, and he knew the procedure would be a success, and very soon now.

“Sir!” The *mishman* was back again, his voice strained and urgent. “Kaspiysk says we are under attack! They are engaging with missile defense batteries!”

“Good for them,” said Dobrynin, slowly opening his eyes. “Let them do their work. We have already done ours.”

* * *

Lieutenant Ryan was not happy about his chances just now. They left one X-3 back at Baku as a reserve, as he had explained it. But he knew the real reason was that he did not want to risk losing all three helos and stranding the Argonauts there. Now his worse misgivings had come to pass. They had been spotted as they came in low from the south. The Russians were not sleeping as he hoped. His co-pilot Tom Wicks had just informed him the Russians had located his X-3s on radar.

“They’ll be painting us red in another few seconds,” he said.

“Bad manners, those Russians,” said Ryan. “Here we are just flyin’ in fast and low, and they get all miffed about it.” They were thirty kilometers out before they were seen. Yet they could not bring weapons to bear on the target ahead until they hit the 8 kilometer mark. Ryan had counted on speed and stealth to let him get in close to get the job done. The Russian radar system, code named *Gravestone*” was just too good.

“What do you figure they’ll be shootin’ at us,” asked Wicks?

“Missiles me boyo! Big fat missiles—probably S-300s, and maybe

worse.”

“Not a whole lot worse out there than that mean fire stick,” said Wicks, but he was wrong. There was a whole lot worse, and the X-3s were about to meet it.

“Well you just get the jammers fired and be ready on ECM and chaff. That’s all we have between us and an early grave.”

The 847th Coastal Defense battery was firing the new Russian *Triumf* missile system, a vertically launched missile using the deadly 9M96E medium range SAM.

“There’s our target on radar,” he said. The two X-3s were riding very low now, right on the water, the churning wash of their rotors leaving a long mark on the sea as they came.

“Right, and I think they’ve still got us on radar as well. I have missile lock!”

“Evasive maneuvers and quick on those countermeasures!” Ryan pulled his X-3 up sharply as Wicks fired everything he had, the chaff littering the sky above them before Ryan dipped down low again. The first S-400 bought the ticket and they saw it streak high overhead and right through the chaff cloud like an angry shark attacking a school of fish.

“Damn!” Wicks shouted. “Did you see how fast that monster was? If they fire a few more of those, we’re toast for sure, Ryan.”

But the Lieutenant was so focused on his flying that he could not respond. He looked at his radar to check the position of his target...the signal was gone! The target should be clearly visible now on the horizon, but peering out the forward screen all he could see was a strange haze, like the shimmer of a mirage in a desert.

“What’s up Tommy? Where’s my target?”

Now it was Wicks turn to gape at the screen. “They must be jamming us,” he said quickly.

“Jamming us? Well the damn thing should be right in front of us by now, big as a beached whale!”

“Missile!” They saw a second SAM streaking up, then tipping over in a vicious high speed dive as it acquired a target. The two helos split apart, both firing chaff and blasting away with ECM countermeasures, but this time the missile was not fooled. It locked mercilessly on to the other X-3 and blew it to hell, striking the bird dead on and coming right in through the pilots cabin.

“This is madness,” said Ryan. “God bless you Wilson,” he said of the

other pilot, and the sight of the fireball that had taken down the helo was enough to make him reconsider this ill planned mission. “We’re out of here, Tommy. Leave a string of hot flares and chaff behind us, and if you have any favors left with the old man upstairs, now is the time to call them in. Whatever we were after has run for cover. That had to be a damn submarine. It’s gone!”

It was no submarine, but Lieutenant Ryan was correct about one thing. The *Anatoly Alexandrov* was gone. Rod-25 had sang its song to infinity, and the big floating power plant had suddenly vanished.

For Ryan, his only thought now was to save his helo and the lives of all aboard before the Russians fired another missile at them. He streaked away, so low that his landing carriage was actually skimming the sea, his hand steady on the stick and a quiet Irish song and prayer playing in his head. “Guard us now, Lord. We could use a little of that luck of the Irish. And if this be the end of our journey, may we be half an hour in Heaven before the Devil knows we’re dead.”

The sudden disappearance of the *Anatoly Alexandrov* must have distracted the Russians at Kaspiysk. Or perhaps Ryan’s invocation was heard and answered, but no other missiles came for them that morning. The men at Kaspiysk had not been briefed as to the true nature of Dobrynin’s mission, and now they came to believe the enemy helicopters had gotten off a missile of their own and sunk the power plant. But they were wrong. Rod-25 had worked its magic again, and *Anatoly Alexandrov* vanished into the misty fog of time.

The mission was on.

Chapter 20

When it happened, Bukin was on the bridge of the big hovercraft with Captain Malkin, number 609, moored off the port side of *Anatoly Alexandrov*. He was watching the battle unfold as the coastal defense battery began firing S-400 missiles. Something was attacking, coming in low from the south, and he saw that Captain Malkin was immediately engaging his short range SAM system as a last ditch defense. He quickly ordered a squad of Marines up to the roof of the facility with hand held 9K338 *Igla* missiles. The name meant “needle” and the needles were sharp. NATO called the infrared seeking missile the SA-24 *Grinch*, but by any name it was a very capable infantry operated SAM system. If NATO was coming for them, they would greet them rudely with a sky full of needles.

Yet something about the moment seemed odd to him, the light breeze that had been blowing from the east suddenly halted and there came a breathless stillness. He heard a low pitched sound, descending even lower as if drawn into an unfathomable abyss until it was sucked beneath the range of human hearing to become a thrumming vibration, felt but not heard. The light seemed to waver around him, as if the day were fluttering in doubt.

Off in the distance he thought he saw the oncoming attack, two aircraft very low on the sea and firing flares and chaff. A shore based missile found one and ignited it in an angry fireball, the other seemed to dance wildly in the sky for a moment...and then dipped away low, obscured by mist on the sea. Perhaps it, too, was struck by fragments from that explosion and went down. What was NATO thinking by sending in a few helicopters like this? They had no chance to get through a battery of S-400s.

Then he heard a strange sound, high up, and growl of engines that were obviously aircraft, but very unfamiliar. In a split second he realized the attack must still be underway. He looked up to see the dark shapes falling like crows from the sky to attack...ships! A long column of what looked to be commercial cargo vessels sat in the dull gray light of the morning where the sea had once been completely empty. Could they have emerged from an unseen bank of fog in the distance? What were they doing there? These were restricted waters and Admiral Volsky assured him that no other traffic would be in the vicinity.

“Malkin—look there!” He pointed out the surface contacts.

Captain Malkin was equally surprised. A veteran in the Caspian flotilla, he had been charged with the command of the last remaining hovercraft for some years. It had mostly been a dull job of maintenance at the edge of the listless sea, with no more than one or two real live exercises per year. When he got news that he had been selected by Admiral Volsky to lead a special ops mission he swelled with pride. Then he heard the briefing and could not believe his ears. *Vranyo* was *vranyo*, a nice habitual stretching of the truth between Russians that was always part of the daily interchange of life. But Bukin seemed deadly serious.

“Yes, I know it seems madness,” he had told him, “but if this mission is successful you will see with your own eyes. I know,” he nodded confidently, “I was on *Kirov*.”

Now the madness was all around him, on the sea, in the sky above, and the natural shock of suddenly finding himself in completely different circumstances imposed a momentary paralysis as he gaped at the scene. Dark black aircraft were screaming down from the sky like birds of prey. What kind of planes were these? No...this was not NATO at all. This was what Bukin had warned him about. This was the Great Patriotic War!

His shock and surprise soon gave way to the rush of adrenaline that imminent battle produced. He could hear the distant, urgent peal of ships’ bells ringing out the alarm, and the sound of machine gun fire. Bright tracer rounds scored the sky as the cargo vessels put up their pathetic air defense. Then he saw a tall geyser of water and heard the booming explosion of a bomb as the first plane swooped low and began climbing again. It was a very near miss.

“Come on, Malkin! They’ll be after us next. Engage the bastards, Those must be German planes out there!”

Thankfully the squad of Marines on the roof had the same idea. A second bomb hit one of the cargo vessels with an enormous explosion. Then, seconds later, Bukin saw thin streaks lace through the slate gray sky as the needles sprang up after the diving planes. One, then three, then five missiles fired. He heard a loud whistling scream from above and ducked reflexively as another bomb fell very near the *Anatoly Alexandrov* sending a wash of seawater up high enough to wet the props of the big Mi-26 on the roof deck.

Malkin had finally shaken off the shock of the sudden transition and was rapidly engaging with the quad 9K32 *Strela* (arrow) missile defense battery

on the 609 craft. It quickly put four arrows up to join the needles, and soon the sky was alight with flaming explosions as one missile after another found targets overhead and ignited them. The Germans got two hits on a single ship, but the missiles had thinned their ranks considerably and given them pause. The remaining planes were wheeling away to the west, heading for the perceived safety of the shoreline.

Bukin smiled, clasping Malkin on his shoulder. “Welcome to World War Two!” he shouted over the noise of the battle. “We got here just in time to kick the Germans in the ass! Those were Stukas!”

* * *

Fedorov was out on the weather deck with Troyak and Zykov when he heard the first bells ring. Thus far the journey south had been uneventful. The *Amerika* was last out of port, sailing to rendezvous with three other ships out of Astrakhan and bringing up the rear in a line of four commercial vessels. He could barely see the lead ship, and had wondered about the names of the other vessels in the line, worried about their prospects on this voyage.

When he inquired in the radio room he learned the bad news. The flotilla leader was Caspian tanker *Kulibekov*. Next came the *Komitern*, followed by *Ubelikov* and *Amerika*. He had made a point of studying the situation in the Caspian before they launched the mission. All these ships had been sunk by German air strikes! *Kulibekov* survived until November of 1942, but the other three, including their own ship *Amerika*, would go down in late October. He had double checked the dates of the attacks. The last two ships in the line would die together on October 26th. *Komitern* would be hit on the 30th and *Kulibekov* the following month. That was weeks away.

Then came the sound of aircraft overhead, the warning bells, the chatter of the machine guns. He stood calmly on deck by a gunwale, watching the skies and confident that this attack would fail—until the first bomb struck *Ubelikov* just ahead of them.

“My God!” he exclaimed. “It’s happening early. It’s happening now! If the rest of the history holds true, we’re next to be hit. We had better look to our lives, Troyak.”

Troyak was looking at something else. He pointed, a big grin on his face. “Have a look there,” he beamed. “Those are hand held *Igla* missiles!”

Fedorov looked to see the thin streaks of the missile tails threading the

sky. They were coming from a point on the horizon ahead where he could dimly see the dark squat shape of something glowing with a wavering sheen like a mirage. “It’s *Anatoly Alexandrov*! They’re early! They’re here!”

They watched as a salvo of four more missiles went up, and Troyak said they were the arrow system off one of the hovercraft. The sight of the missiles in the sky filled them with renewed courage. It had been a long, hard journey from Vladivostok. All along the way the prospect that they would be marooned here indefinitely was very real, and each man sat with that, wondering if Stalin’s Russia would be their new home for the remainder of their lives.

“It worked!” Fedorov shouted over the sound of the growing battle. “Rod-25 did it again...Only they’re here early, or perhaps we’re late. I suppose there was no way we could really coordinate a mission like this. But one thing remains consistent—Rod-25—and those missiles are a welcome sight!”

“We could have saved ourselves that long train ride, Fedorov. Why didn’t we just go with the *Alexandrov*?”

“True, but we did not know that back then, Sergeant. All we knew was that we had a good chance of shifting back from the Primorskiy center reactor. We hoped our plan with the *Alexandrov* would work, but we could not be sure. Besides...” Fedorov paused, as if deep in thought now. “I think we needed to take that journey—that we were somehow *meant* to take it. That business on the stairwell at Ilanskiy was very important.”

Even as he said that Fedorov revisited his feeling that the encounter with Mironov at Ilanskiy was fated. Things had played out in a haphazard way. Yes, Troyak was correct to point that out. We could just as easily be sitting over there aboard *Anatoly Alexandrov* now, and would not have had to trek over a thousand miles to make this rendezvous. But then I would not have found that rift in time on the stairwell at Ilanskiy. I would not have met with Mironov, with Sergei Mironovich Kostrikov—Kirov!

Troyak was listening, still smiling, and already mounting his ear buds to use the radio set woven into the fabric of his service jacket. “Shall we give them a call to let them know we are here?”

Fedorov considered that, then looked around for any sign of a small boat or life raft. He spied a weathered dinghy on the aft deck and pointed. “We’ll need that,” he said quickly. “I don’t think it would be wise if the hovercraft come steaming up to these ships. We’ll get off in that boat and head out to sea. They can pick us up there, without so many eyes to bulge.”

“Very well, sir. Troyak nodded at Zykov, who immediately set off to secure the boat. A boatswain protested, but quickly silenced himself when Fedorov and Troyak came striding up. Fedorov decided to cover their tracks a bit.

“This is far too dangerous,” he said to the boatswain. “Did you see those German planes? Did you see the Katyushas hit them? Amazing! We’re going ashore now, so get out of the way.”

The man gave way, unwilling to challenge a colonel in the NKVD, but as they got the dinghy up on the winch and began lowering it, a few sailors whistled at them in rebuke.

“Looks like the rats are leaving the ship,” one man said. “Afraid of the Germans, eh?”

Troyak gave the man a hard look, but Fedorov waved him on and the three men slowly climbed down to the dinghy where it now bobbed in the water next to the steamer.

“Good riddance!” they heard another sailor yell at them from above. “Go back to the other NKVD bastards where you belong.”

Fedorov shook his head, eager to get underway. There was no motor on the launch, so they were going to have to row. Troyak pushed off, inwardly angry when he heard the sailors on the *Amerika* jeering at them, but he swallowed his pride and ignored them. There was no way they could explain their situation or make the men understand what they were doing. He knew Fedorov’s plan was for the best.

They rowed hard, and Fedorov saw that the Germans got two hits on *Ubelikov*. That ship was burning hard, and listing to starboard where obvious flooding threatened to capsize the vessel and sink it. They could hear the faint cries of alarm and calls for help as they rowed, and Fedorov was torn by the urge to go back and render assistance.

You must not, he told himself, swallowing hard. You must stay the course and make a rendezvous with the detachment on *Anatoly Alexandrov*. A man’s fate is a man’s fate. And that ship was supposed to be hit. You can’t try to save the entire world from death and pain. Keep pulling those oars.

He could hear Troyak speaking through his collar microphone now on a secure coded channel. “Wild Geese to Mother Lode—come in. Wild Geese to Mother Lode—come in.”

“Wild Geese, this is Mother Load, Lieutenant Bukin here. We have a locator beacon signal on you in the middle of the Caspian Sea! What is your

situation—Over?”

“Lieutenant Bukin? You mean to say you now outrank me, Arseny? This is Troyak here. We were on one of those ships, last in the line, but put off in a lighter. We’re heading east into the Caspian to stay out of sight. Fedorov doesn’t want to show the locals any more than we have to.”

“Understood, Sergeant. Hey, you gave me the slip back in Vladivostok! Good to hear your voice again. We’ll be a few minutes getting one of the hovercraft operational. Is Orlov with you as well?”

“We haven’t even made landfall to look for him yet. You’re early, but it was good to see those *Ilgas* go up. We’ll keep rowing east. I’m leaving my signal locator beacon on and you can track us easily.”

“Hold on. We’re coming. Bukin out.”

Troyak shook his head. “Lieutenant Bukin, is it? He was a Corporal last time I saw him, and jumped right over my head. Now he’ll have a good laugh over the fact that he ranks me.”

Fedorov gave him a grin. “If it is any consolation, Sergeant, I can promote you to Captain at once, for outstanding performance in the field.”

“Oh, no you don’t,” said Troyak. “Did I ever tell you the story of my father’s hunting dog, Private Litchko? He was a wonderful dog—flushed out quarry like no other. We had a hunting lodge in Kamchatka, and my father would let visitors use the dog when they came out for hunting trips. One year an old friend of my father’s came back to the lodge and asked about the dog. What, my father said to him? You mean Private Litchko? Yes, that was the best dog we ever hunted with, this man told my father. Well I’m sorry to disappoint you, my father said in turn, but that dog was so good we promoted him to Captain Litchko, and now all he does is sit around and bark.”

Fedorov laughed, understanding exactly what Troyak meant. “I have the distinct feeling that Bukin is going to enjoy barking for a while. He’s probably still upset because we left him behind in the reactor room at Vladivostok.”

“He’ll get over it,” said Troyak, and then he put his back into the rowing, sending the lighter surging ahead. It was nearly an hour later when they saw the squat shape of the hovercraft approaching and heard the roar of its two big turbine engines mounted on the aft section of the craft. Fedorov’s plan was to get to the *Anatoly Alexandrov* and then gather all the officers together to decide how to proceed. He turned to Troyak as they watched the hovercraft approaching.

“Can we try locating Orlov yet through his jacket beacon?”

“We can try,” said Troyak, “but our chances will be better closer to the west coast. Were over twenty kilometers away here. His passive range for IFF pickup is five kilometers. If he turns on his transceiver and broadcasts, we could see him out here, but otherwise we’ll have to get ashore.”

“Admiral Volsky said he would provide us with ample resources,” said Fedorov.

“A full reinforced company of naval Marines,” said Troyak with a satisfied look on his gruff features. He looked like a bulldog that had just eaten a pork chop. “They’ll even have AFVs on the hovercraft, and we won’t have to worry about the German planes any longer either. There will be plenty of missiles for air defense.”

“Our own little invasion force,” Fedorov shrugged. “The only question I have is whether or not we should contemplate using it. The less the Soviet forces of this day see of us, the better.”

“Why, sir? We just tell them we were sent as reinforcements. How will they know otherwise?”

He squinted at the distant horizon to the west. Orlov was out there somewhere, so close, yet so far. Where was he, and how could he get to him without writing a whole new chapter in the military history of this war? It wasn’t going to be as easy as he had hoped.

Chapter 21

Fedorov could not believe what he was hearing. “The ship has displaced in time again? To 1945?”

“Not just *Kirov*,” said Dobrynin. “This time three ships have vanished. At least that is what Admiral Volsky has told me. Karpov sent a letter to that same storage locker and it turned up in 2021!”

“Amazing. Then the eruption of that volcano was so violent that it must

have opened another time rift. Yet this time the ship did not have Rod-25 installed. How will they get back?"

"Take a look at the big fat Mi-26 on the roof," Dobrynin pointed. "There's more going on here than you realize. They found two more control rods that were produced in the same lot as Rod-25. We have them right here on that helo and the plan is to fly them all the way to the Pacific coast for *Kirov* and the other ships."

"But you said Karpov appeared in 1945. It's October of 1942 now. They'll have to wait out the entire duration of the war!"

"Exactly," said Dobrynin. "Don't give me those big eyes, Mister Fedorov. I didn't come up with this plan, I was just briefed by the Admiral and told to manage this part of the operation to rescue you and Orlov."

Fedorov gave a heavy sigh. "Well a lot of good that will do us now. Here I was worrying about the fate of a single man, and now I learn that there's an entire naval flotilla at large in the Pacific of 1945! Orlov may yet be important, and yes, we must rescue him if possible, but Karpov appears nearly three years later and this will trump everything we do here. I hope to God he keeps a good head on his shoulders and doesn't start another war! Does he know we're sending the Mi-26? No..." Fedorov answered his own question. "How could he possibly know? There would be no way to communicate this to him."

"The plan is to get the Mi-26 to the coast, possibly out on Sakhalin in an isolated location where they can wait for *Kirov* to appear. Then they'll try to contact Karpov via radio."

"If they make it there," said Fedorov, a frustrated look on his face. "If they manage to survive somewhere until 1945, and if they know exactly when the ships appear, and if Karpov picks up their radio call. Good heavens! What a stack of teacups! A thousand things could happen to them over the next few years. The Japanese controlled all of South Sakhalin Island during the war. Their 88th division was posted there. How many men are you sending on the Mi-26?"

"Just four. All the rest of that space is being used for fuel and supplies to get the helo there. It's a very long way to the Pacific coast from here."

"Indeed..." Fedorov shook his head. "We just spent the last week getting here by road and rail."

Two more control rods had been found! Would they work as Rod-25 had? Dobrynin explained the plan to him, but the longer he listened, the more

he began to feel it was doomed to failure. The team would have to remain safely undetected for almost three years. Then, on the day *Kirov* and the other ships were supposed to appear, they would have to make contact with Karpov as soon as possible. But the Captain would not be expecting their call. In fact..."

"The plan has failed," he said darkly.

"What do you mean," Dobrynin complained. "We haven't even launched the operation yet."

"You say Karpov managed to get a note to the Naval Logistics Center? That took time. He would have probably sent helicopters with a small Marine contingent to infiltrate Vladivostok and get to the locker just as Troyak and I did. That took time. If your Mi-26 makes it to the Pacific coast and is there and ready to contact the ships upon arrival, then they obviously failed to do so. Karpov would have taken at least a full day to mount this operation and let Volsky know what happened to him—possibly longer. No further message was received? There was nothing stating he received the control rods and was going to use them to try and return home? No, that wouldn't be possible yet."

Dobrynin scratched his head. "Not as of 09:40 hours on the day we launched our operation to arrive here."

"What day was that?"

"October 5th, 2021."

"What was happening with the war?"

"Things were not going well. The American's sent planes off one of their carrier groups and Karpov fought an engagement. The Chinese have also attacked Taiwan with a heavy salvo of ballistic missiles and aircraft. There was an incident in the Persian Gulf and now Iran and Israel are at each other's throats. We even lost a submarine in the Gulf of Mexico. I was informed that Moscow was going to initiate operations here the day I left."

"Here?"

"At Kashagan and Tengiz oil fields in the North Caspian. There was also a scrap in the Black Sea, but I was too busy here to attend to the reports. I will say one thing. We were under attack at the very time we shifted."

"Under attack? Here in the Caspian?"

"NATO aircraft were approaching from the south. Just a small pinprick, a couple helicopters, but they were heading right for our operations and the coastal defense missile batteries at Kaspiysk engaged them. That was the last news I received. Now we are here."

“So Karpov was displaced by that volcanic eruption. Astounding! What day was that?

“October 2nd. It took us another couple of days to pull things together here.”

“Yes, and Rod-25 is very meticulous now. It’s October 5, 1942—the same day you launched the operation in 2021.”

Fedorov sat down, thinking hard now. What could they do? Karpov sent that message, which meant that, during the interval he loitered within helicopter range of Vladivostok, he must have received no communication from the Mi-26. The plan must have failed. If it were to succeed then that long tenuous line from here to the Pacific—from here to 1945—had to remain perfectly intact. Something went wrong. If Karpov was contacted by the helo team then why would he not mention that in his note?

Then it struck him, with thunderclap surprise—Volsky could not dream up the Mi-26 plan until Karpov sends his letter! Of course! Otherwise the Admiral would have no idea where *Kirov* and the others shifted. So Karpov appears in a kind of limbo, a brief slice of eternity where the future is uncertain. When he first appeared Volsky had no knowledge of his presence in the past, but the instant Karpov’s team delivered that letter and closed the locker at the Naval Logistics building a new time line was possible! That single act of transmitting information to the future has already worked a change in the line of events. Volsky got the letter and here we are on the *Anatoly Alexandrov* trying to sort this whole mess out.

His mind ran on, feverishly trying to work through the convoluted loops of time and causality. So it isn’t possible for us to successfully contact Karpov the moment he arrives, he thought, because that all depends on his decision to send that letter. We can go there with the Mi-26, but somehow the effect of that operation will have to occur *after* Karpov arrives in 1945. Even if everything went perfectly with the Mi-26 and they remained safely undetected until *Kirov* appears, Karpov could not possibly hear or respond to our radio calls until after he sent his letter. How long was that interval, that slice of uncertainty in time? What was Karpov doing during those hours? Now he found himself laboring to recall the history of those last days of the war, history that they had already dramatically altered with their sorties into the past.

“Dobrynin...Did that letter say when Karpov arrived. Did it give an exact date?”

“August of 1945.”

“No day?”

“That is all I was told, Mister Fedorov.”

“Damn! We need to know the exact date.”

“What do you mean? We have three years to wait for *Kirov* to show up again. What is the problem?”

“The problem is this: we know Karpov arrives in August, but on what day? We can’t order the team to just start broadcasting radio calls on August first round the clock. They’ll be detected for sure. Then there’s Karpov. That’s another potential problem.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’m not sure what he will do if he decides there is no way he can ever get back to 2021. If he thinks his bridges are burned, and there is no other life for them but the one they have there in 1945, then he might do something radical. He’ll have the power to make a dramatic intervention if he chooses to do so. The only problem is that he may overreach himself. The United States Navy was enormous at that stage of the war, and they would all be concentrating at Sagami Bay off Tokyo for the surrender ceremony...”

“What’s wrong?” Dobrynin saw the look of surprise in Fedorov’s eyes like newly kindled fire. Then he seemed to lapse into fear.

“My God,” said Fedorov. “The temptation will be overwhelming. Karpov will be sitting there with three ships, nuclear warheads, and the power to unleash hell if he so chooses. The entire Allied fleet will be concentrated in one place at Sagami Bay!”

“You are thinking he might try something as he did in the North Atlantic?”

“God help us if he does, but yes, Karpov is now the prime lever on all the history from that moment forward. There’s no telling what he might do!”

“Unless the Americans have something to say about it,” said Dobrynin.”

“That’s what I’m afraid of,” said Fedorov. “Things could get completely out of hand, and then what? We have no way of ever knowing unless we get home to find out.”

“You want me to dip the rod back into the soup? We’ll be somewhere else in no time.”

“Not without Orlov. I didn’t come all this way to leave him stranded here... I need to think...” Fedorov began pacing, head down as he stared at his feet, hand rubbing his brow. He had to sort this out and come up with

some reasonable plan here, but what should they do? First, find Orlov. The journey had taken them far longer than he hoped, and they were late. Orlov reached Kizlyar on the first of October, but every report he had heard as they drew near the Caspian region indicated the Germans were very near that place and it was now the front line in the war to control the oil. Hitler was hell bent on getting to Baku. The oil wars start here and they will continue for the next eighty years.

Orlov might still be there at Kizlyar, or somewhere south of that location. They had to get within five kilometers of him if his service jacket was switched off. That might make for a long and difficult search now. What they needed was a helicopter....And they had one, sitting right on top of the *Anatoly Alexandrov*.

“We’ll have to use the Mi-26,” he decided.

“What? They’re supposed to take off for the Pacific coast as soon as possible. Volsky beat that into my head before I left.”

“That may be so, but we need the helicopter to look for Orlov first. Trying to put men ashore to search for him on land will be too risky.”

“But we have no fuel for that,” Dobrynin objected

“I understand the situation,” said Fedorov, “but we need Orlov. We can’t leave without him so we’ll have to find the fuel, one way or another.”

“Are you ordering me to commit the Mi-26 to this operation, Mister Fedorov?”

Fedorov looked at the Chief, respecting him greatly. “I will take full responsibility, Dobrynin. The decision is mine. You’ve done everything Volsky asked of you, but I want to get Troyak and Zykov on that helo and do a night search below 3000 meters. It’s the only way we can locate Orlov’s jacket signal. We had hoped to be at Kizlyar before he got there, but we’re late. There’s no other way now. We leave tonight.”

“Well what am I supposed to do while you go off looking for Orlov? I was supposed to rescue *you*, Fedorov!”

“And you have. Your mission will be the same, Chief. Just hold the fort and protect the *Anatoly Alexandrov* at all costs until we get back. In the meantime, we can save on fuel if we offload excess storage on the helo and fly lighter. We can always load it back again when we return.”

“If you return. What do I do if we lose your signal locator?”

“We’ll be fine. It will be dark. Troyak will be with me, and I’ll take some Marines.”

“Plenty of those around.”

“Exactly. We’ll sweep the area around Kizlyar first, then work south over the Terek and along the roads to Makhachkala. It’s just a couple hundred miles in all. We should be able to pick up his signal very quickly.”

“Then what?”

“We’ll have to see. If Troyak thinks we can get him, we’ll land. If the situation is more difficult, we’ll return here and go in with more force. The quicker we do this, the better. I’d prefer to keep things very quiet.”

“Well that big monster on the roof makes a good deal of noise, Fedorov.”

“Yes, but the road hugs the coast and runs right near the shore in many places. We can be two or three kilometers off the coast and flying low enough so we still can pick up that signal. It will work. I’m sure of it.”

“Very well,” Dobrynin could see that the young officer had made up his mind. “You rank me by several levels, Fedorov. I have my orders from Volsky, but your decision will supersede that here in the field. Just remember one thing—every minute we waste flying around here is one minute less for the long journey east. You say it’s just a couple hundred miles? We may wish we had those miles once the Mi-26 heads east to look for *Kirov*. You wanted to know why Karpov didn’t hear anything? Perhaps this is why. Perhaps the Mi-26 never has the fuel to get to the coast.”

Fedorov shrugged. He knew that Dobrynin was correct, and perhaps he was being foolish here, but some inner hunch still warned him not to leave Orlov behind.

I’ve got to find him, one way or another. And then I’ve got to find a way to get to Karpov three years hence, because if I don’t, I think I know exactly what he will do with those three ships. And God help the world if I’m right.

Part VIII

Twilight

“The pale stars were sliding into their places. The whispering of the leaves was almost hushed. All about them it was still and shadowy and sweet. It was that wonderful moment when, for lack of a visible horizon, the not yet darkened world seems infinitely greater—a moment when anything can happen..”

— Olivia Howard Dunbar

Chapter 22

Tech Sergeant Jason Banks watched the big planes roll out of the hangers onto the tarmac at Anderson AFB, pleased that his morning's labors were done and the torch would now be passed to the pilots in the planes. The strike had been postponed when the sirens signaled air alert some days ago. The island base personnel had quickly moved to air defense shelters and the newly deployed THAAD missile system was engaging targets unseen in the skies above. This time it was North Korea pressed into useful service as an attack dog by Beijing, launching Musudan missiles more as another warning to the Americans to stay out of the deepening fight over Taiwan than anything else.

THAAD got the first missile aimed at the island, fired to test exactly what altitude the US might make a successful interception. The second missile barely got off its launch pad before being lazed by a secret weapon the US had moved into Kadena for just this purpose. Then another debate ensued over what to do about the situation, and it was one the Air Force General Lane eventually won. The US was moving at the speed of a democracy, which was lethargic at times, and the situation had not yet worsened enough to compel them to act in a more urgent manner. Two long days later Lane obtained permission to finally get a retaliatory strike package airborne with the B-2s, and Jason Banks was back in business.

The six B-2s were an awesome sight together like this, the broad swept wings of black, saw tooth tail, and porpoise hump noses making them look surreal at certain angles, like ships from another world. His men were finished with their loading and maintenance, and the torch he had handed off was the X-51C, a hypersonic stealthy cruise missile dubbed the *WaveRider*, scheduled for delivery that morning to three very special sites on the Chinese mainland. If China wanted to take out American satellites, the response would be to prevent them from ever launching satellites of their own.

The first targets on the list that morning were the satellite launch centers at Taiyuan and Jiuquan, and the Guangde rocket launch site west of Shanghai, respectively known as Base 25 and Base 603. These targets were within 500 kilometers of the coast and could be struck by B-2s over the South or East China Seas. Three B-2s would be assigned to each target and Banks

watched them take off, glad a little payback was heading east while the base still intact.

Someone took a pot shot at us, he thought, but THAAD was good enough to knock whatever they sent our way down. Now we return the favor. Those bad boys will be up in ten minutes, and this is probably the last any human eyes will see of them until they return. The *Spirits of Missouri, California, South Carolina, Washington* and *Texas* were already up, *Spirit of Kansas*, his home state, was the last in the line, the one new plane that had joined the B-2 wing to replace the bomber by that very same name that had been lost on this airfield in a takeoff crash in 2008.

It was a \$1.4 billion dollar mishap that day, not including the “classified material” the *Spirit of Kansas* had been carrying that also went up in smoke when the big plane came down. The official “findings” on that crash attributed it to three improperly calibrated pressure transducers that resulted in faulty data sent to the flight control computer. The plane went into a stall on takeoff, its wing dipped and hooked the ground, and that was that.

Don’t crash again, baby, he whispered as the *Kansas-II* began to put on power. He stood and watched the running lights wink as the plane taxied. Three minutes later the roar of the engines told the tale. The “Bats” were all airborne now, their bellies full of high tech death and destruction. After achieving altitude, the formation would cruise north over Rota and Tinian in the Marianas where they would then turn northeast and head for Kadena AFB on Okinawa to meet some very special friends.

The US was taking no chances with its precious B-2s. They would soon be joined by the 94th Expeditionary Fighter Squadron flying F-22 *Raptors* in escort for the sortie into the East China Sea. Six fighters would be up that morning to join the party, and Flight Lieutenant William Hitchcock was in one of them. With a vintage name like that his mates had naturally taken to calling him “Wild Bill” and he lived up to the handle well enough as a daring and highly skilled pilot.

Hitchcock was still trying to shake that nagging cough that was just part of the job insofar as the F-22 was concerned. The pilot’s oxygen system has been buggy throughout the life cycle of the aircraft, but no matter what they did to try and correct the problem, the well known “Raptor cough” persisted, resulting from breathing high concentrations of oxygen enriched air while accelerating through multi-G force maneuvers. When you could fly higher and faster than most anything in the sky, there were a few tradeoffs that you

just lived within the service. Wild Bill had no regrets.

An hour later he was up at altitude and waiting for his charge. Perhaps the most capable fighter in the world, the unique radar scattering shape of the plane combined with the radar absorbing materials used in its construction made it extremely stealthy. Finding it in the sky on radar would be much like trying to track a pea flying at several thousand miles per hour. The APG-77 radar system was also very stingy with the energy it used, activating to find potential threats without also revealing the position of the *Raptor*. At the same time its ALR-94 radar warning sensors could silently detect other radar-using targets at very long range. It was the same basic calculus of air combat—see the enemy first and kill the enemy before he sees you.

Radio silence was also a part of the job like this, but Wild Bill didn't mind. He enjoyed the quiet solitude of soaring at 40,000 feet through the early hours of dawn. The bombers were below them, lumbering along under the careful watch of the *Raptors*. An E-3 Sentry was also up that morning for long range radar coverage in case the Chinese had any surprises in store for the package. Hitchcock didn't expect any trouble, particularly this far out from the Chinese mainland, but as chance would have it, trouble was on its way. His data link from the E-3 soon indicated a number of airborne contacts inbound and they were ordered to engage.

The *Raptors* began to accelerate rapidly, streaking away from the subsonic B-2s as they went into supercruise mode, their radars searching the skies ahead. It looked like quite a reception committee, and the only thing that Hitchcock could think of at that moment was how in hell the enemy had managed to locate them.

The truth of the matter was that the Chinese had *not* located them. They were simply flying a mission of their own, targeted at Taiwan again with two squadrons of J-12 fighters led by a squadron of their premier stealth strike fighters, the formidable J-20. There were eighteen planes in all, and they were intending to strike an airfield near Taipei as a follow on to the highly successful ballistic missile strikes of the previous days. To the *Raptor* pilots it looked like someone had given away the game and they assumed the B-2s had been targeted for interception. But the Chinese hadn't seen a thing that morning. It was all happenstance that was about to become an lightning fast air duel between the best fighters each side possessed.

The odds appeared very steep to Wild Bill at first blush. He was tracking eighteen enemy fighters, and the *Raptors* of the 94th were outnumbered three

to one. No strangers to combat, the 94th was one of the oldest active squadrons in the US Air Force. Their legacy dated back to 1917 when they first flew SPADs in the First World War. Over the years they had flown P-38s in WWII over North Africa and Italy, and eventually moved on through the evolving chain of fighter designs to the F-15A *Eagles* before being upgraded to the deadly *Raptors*. Now they were about to prove their worth and throw their hat in the ring, as true to their squadron insignia.

With high value strike assets close at hand, the *Raptors* needed to get at the enemy quickly, and the talons they would use were the latest air-to-air missile the US had deployed to date, the AIM-120D. Each plane carried four of these longer range missiles in the central internal weapons bay, along with two shorter range AIM-9M/X Sidewinders in smaller internal bays to either side. They would fire immediately, while the action still remained well beyond visual range, and see if they could thin the enemy ranks.

The fighters surged ahead, their central bays opening for only one brief second to fire, and then they peeled off on a new vector, ready to fire again. The Chinese never saw them coming, and it was not until the first three J-20s detected the AAMRAMs coming in for them that the jig was finally up. All three died before they could do anything about it, but the word was out and the other planes were breaking formation, jettisoning external fuel tanks to go stealthy, and sweeping away in all directions. They scattered into the azure blue sky climbing as their afterburning turbofans burned with yellow, hot fire.

The Chinese tactic when surprised was to get high, using their incredible service ceiling of over 65,000 feet to gain advantage. Two J-20s were climbing, but the *Raptors* were already up there watching like supersonic birds of prey, and their second salvo was in the air before the first of the J-20s even got a fleeting ghost of a radar lock on them. The pilot knew he had been targeted, but he still managed to get off two PL-12 missiles in reprisal. Then he died a flaming death along with three more comrades in the older J-12s.

Hitchcock was warned of the incoming missiles by his ALR-94 radar. The Chinese Missiles were climbing up for him, aiming at a point in the sky they calculated the *Raptor* might be in a few seconds time, but Hitchcock made sure his plane wasn't there. The *Raptor* was capable of some very extreme supermaneuvers, with thrust vectoring and attitude control well beyond normal aerodynamic limits of most aircraft. The PL-12s would not find him that day. With four of the six J-20s down and no situational awareness of

where the enemy was, the rest of the J-12s wanted no part of the action. They were trained as fighter bomber pilots, with very limited air-to-air combat training, so they turned and broke for the coast at high speed.

The last J-20 was stubborn that day. The plane was close enough to see Hitchcock's *Raptor* visually and thought it would tip its nose up and get off a missile shot. Wild Bill would have nothing of that. He executed a Herbst maneuver decelerating rapidly as he increased his angle of attack to a stall, utilized his thrust vectoring engines to maintain control, coned over to a new flight direction that pointed his nose right at the enemy plane. Then he poured on the power. The Chinese pilot could not maintain his lock, and in that brief interval Hitchcock fired a *Sidewinder* that went hissing out after the enemy.

Wild Bill was two for two, and the B-2s slipped quietly through the contrail torn skies en route to their launch position. Then their bellies opened to send the X-51Cs roaring to the attack, accelerating through Mach 4 and beyond Mach 6 in a matter of minutes. The *WaveRiders* were on their way.

Three bombers fired six missiles that would take out the satellite control center a few miles southeast of Ningwu, the telemetry station north of Wuhai, the technical center where long lines of men sat in pale blue uniforms and caps as they attended to their monitors, and finally the launch pad facilities themselves. The second triad would target the launch control headquarters at Taiyuan Satellite Launch Center. In each group, one plane was held in reserve, leaving four missiles available for any target of opportunity.

The strike went off without a hitch, with all four missiles from the lead bombers finding their targets. This left the two reserve planes free to penetrate a little further and go for the Xichang Satellite Launch Center, or Base 27. The *Raptors* hung around long enough to be certain there were no further threats to the big bombers, even after the B-2s had crossed into Chinese airspace. They remained undetected until they delivered their high tech package and turned for home. When they were done, the People's Republic of China had lost, its ability to put a satellite in orbit in one fell stroke.

They were not happy about it.

Within hours orders went out on a very secure channel to a submarine that had been hovering silently off the West coast of the United States. The message they would deliver by return mail would have dramatic implications and tip the world just one step closer to the mayhem and destruction of all out nuclear war.

* * *

Robert passed a restless night in the *Quantum Sleeper*, and spent all the next day haggling with his broker to see if he could salvage anything from the collapse of Goldman the previous day. By sunset he had given up his mind returning again to that list he had been working on. The news had been bad, and something told him it was going to get worse very soon. The TV kept on with the latest updates on the missile strikes against the Chinese mainland. The more he listened, the more he felt the compelling urge to lay in some supplies before the store shelves were stripped completely bare. Finally he started to move, and he was heading down the stairs when it happened.

The lights winked in their recessed overhead spot wells, and then went out. The ongoing babble of the TV where he had been watching the breaking news went silent. The screen was suddenly phosphor TV black. He reached for his iPad, realizing the Internet was down as well. Ten seconds passed...a minute... It was the strangest feeling in the world—no power. No lights, camera, action. No TV and radio. No Internet.

Food and Gasoline....That was the ticket now. That and the hundred items list he had started working on last night, the ones to disappear first from store shelves in a time of grave national crisis. He went to the window and looked out to see if he could see any signs of other folks in the neighborhood with electricity, but all was dark and quiet in the early morn.

He had been through power failures before, but something about this one, coming as it did on the heels of that morning news feed, gave him the shivers. He decided to send an email to his buddy Aaron. If the cell system was still up he might get it. He'd make it short, just a quick text message: WTF?

But the message never got through because his phone was dead. That was odd, he thought. I charged the damn thing just last night in the *Quantum Sleeper*. I still have near 100% battery now.

The minutes passed and the sweat on his brow was challenging that stay fresh feeling he was supposed to have all day from his shower. Liz was already yapping at him to call PG&E and see how long it would be before they had the power up. His cell phone was wacky, so he reached for the land line, surprised to find that it was also dead.

Power down, phones dead, Internet gone, no TV. The advertizing had finally stopped. In effect, the entire substance of his life was now toggled

OFF. He couldn't even play his Yamaha keyboard for musical distraction because he upgraded last year and this model didn't run on batteries.

Holy Freakin' Dodge!

Robert grabbed his car keys and was out the front door in a flash. "Be back soon!" he yelled to Liz, seeing she was using the power failure to abandon the morning laundry and head out to the swimming pool to lounge about.

Yet lounging about was the last thing on Robert's mind just then. His worries about his stock in Goldman had vanished; his fretting over the mortgage and credit cards was up in smoke. Now all he cared about was getting to an ATM and pulling out as much cash as he possibly could get his hands on. But the power was down...If this was more than a local outage then how would the ATMs work? If he went in to see a teller how would they call up his account info? How would they even cash a check?

Something told him that the banks were going to be closed anyway. So, as he slipped into the front seat of his Lexus he had already changed his mind and determined to head for the nearest supermarket for food. They had ATMs there too. Yes...Food and water was top of the list now. That was the smart play. Food and water would keep the *Quantum Sleeper* functioning as a safe bedroom bunker, and they could go easy on the battery and stretch it out as long as possible—stretch that 8 hour emergency battery life into eight days if they just powered on for an hour a day.

There was no way he could think beyond that. Eight days without electricity was more desolation and denial than he had ever experienced in his life, because he lived in that lucky 50% of the planet that was plugged into the grid. It had taken humanity millions of years to reach that dubious statistic, when 50% of earth's population had achieved access to electricity in the year 2005 and Robert was going to find out just how the other half of the planet was living in short order.

He put the key into the ignition went to start his mid-sized sedan—great mileage, always reliable; bought for nothing down and low easy payments after a song and dance at the bank.

Nothing happened. It was dead.

WTF?

* * *

The meeting in the White House Situation Room was ready to adjourn.

Leyman had the recommendation of both Admiral Ghortney and General Lane—follow up the successful B-2 strikes with the B-1s and then move in the carriers to restore order over Taiwan. They would take the fight to the enemy now.

At that moment there was a soft buzz at the secure door and Leyman turned to give the Marine guard the nod. The door whisked open and a White House staffer rushed in, leaning close and whispering in Leyman's ear. His expression darkened immediately, and he dismissed the aide with a grave nod. When the room was secure again he turned to the others and folded his hands on the table.

"Well gentlemen, it appears the Admiral is correct about that Boomer hunt. A few minutes ago there was a missile launch off the West coast. Your people will have this information by now, Admiral, but to make a long story short, there's been a detonation..."

He let that hang there for a moment, his eyes looking from Ghortney, to Lane, to Reed. Then he qualified his statement with the word no one wanted to utter in that room, but one that was in the back of each man's mind.

"It was a nuclear detonation, and apparently the whole west coast is as dead as a doornail."

"What?" Lane was practically out of his chair. "How many warheads? How many cities did they hit?"

"They didn't hit any cities," Leyman explained. "It was a single warhead. The detonation was well up in the atmosphere over Nevada, and everything from Seattle to San Diego went dark."

"A single warhead," said Reed looking at Lane with an 'I told ya so' in his eyes. "A goddamned EMP strike."

"That appears to be the case," Leyman went on. "The whole power grid is down. Hoover Dam is off line, Glen Canyon, a number of others. The grid is down and the blackout extends as far east as the Rockies in places. I've got to see the President at once, and this puts us at DEFCON 1, does it not?"

"Cocked Pistol," said Lane reciting the code name for the highest condition of strategic alert. "Maximum readiness with an expectation that nuclear war is imminent."

"That's what I thought," said Leyman. "Well if you'll excuse me gentlemen, we'll have to continue this briefing after I bring in the President. If we are now holding that cocked pistol it will be his finger on the trigger, and damn soon unless we make some other arrangements with the Russians

and Chinese.”

He stood up, buttoning his suit coat in a gesture that somehow seemed out of place. It was a small habitual civility; well practiced decorum, yet outside the secure underground bunker the world was about to go ballistic.

“Arrangements?” Ghortney gave Lane a look of chagrin.

“That’s what we do in the civilian branch, Admiral. We make arrangements. Hold tight, gentlemen. The President is on his way here now.”

* * *

Controlled chaos was the order of the day on the streets of the City—barely controlled chaos. Every traffic light in the city was dead, but that didn’t really matter because every car was dead! The traffic was backed up for miles on the tortuous bends of the Bay Area freeways. People had no idea what had happened for the most part, as there were no radios functioning either, and so their first reaction was to reach into their pockets for a cell phone, but they were all dead as well. Within minutes thousands were out of their cars, basically exchanging versions of the very same story. They were just driving along when the car seemed to lose all power. There were scores of accidents, hundreds of hoods up with well intentioned men peering into the engine compartment of their vehicles, but not one was going to be started again anytime soon.

As the minutes became an hour people just started off on foot, amazed and stunned by what had happened. There were throngs crossing the Golden Gate and Bay bridges on foot, and bike riders were suddenly kings of the highway—until people started yanking riders out of their seats to get at the bikes. In and around the major airports there were massive fires from wrecked planes burning uncontrolled when airlines in mid-takeoff or landing approaches suddenly lost all power and came crashing to earth. All across the Western United States planes were falling from the sky.

No aliens in orbiting ships were responsible for the falling skies, it was just a couple of well placed missiles with EMP warheads. The pulse they created cascaded down through the upper atmosphere, a massive sizzle of voltage faster than any circuit breaker or surge protector could react. Virtually every unshielded electronic device, and the entire power grid from Colorado to the Pacific coast, was toasted in just one split second.

It would take long months, more like years to restore the area to what it

was just a few seconds before the detonations. But the world didn't have months or years to do the required work. It had nine days, and of this was the twilight of Day Five.

Chapter 23

Karpov had his verdict, the consensus of the three Captains after a brief face to face meeting aboard *Kirov* in the officer's mess hall. It had been a long discussion, but the urgency of time forced them to a hasty decision. Yeltzin had advised caution, suggesting the flotilla should disengage and head east into the Pacific to better assess the situation and buy more time for a final decision. Yet Karpov argued that would simply postpone the inevitable. They would have to confront the proverbial 'powers that be' at one time or another. Better now than later.

Captain Ryakhin, younger, less experienced, seemed to gravitate to Karpov's point of view. He had been heartened by their earlier interventions, seeing how easily they could handle the ships of this era and bolstered by the decision to assist the Russian invasion of the Kuriles with naval gunfire support. A dedicated officer, he strongly suggested that they should fight on behalf of Soviet Russia, their homeland, even if it was not the Russia they had come from.

"We are Stalin's wayward sons," he said. "He may have been a brutal father, but the Russia we left behind was molded in his hands." Ryakhin was also feeling just a little guilt over the live fire incident that had downed the American reconnaissance flight. This mishap had forced the action and seemed to stir up quite a reaction in response. Ryakhin apologized to Karpov, stating he would enforce better discipline in the future.

In the end it was decided that they would make one last attempt to negotiate with the Americans and, if they refused or pressed any further attack on the flotilla, they would meet that hostility with equal force.

"And I will be the judge of what 'equal force' means," said Karpov. "It will be my intention to defend the fleet with conventional weapons, and this may mean offensive operations on our part as well. Yet I have been through all this before. We have limited missile inventories, and when the missiles are gone, we become little more than fast cruisers in a sea of trouble. They will harry us and hound us until they catch us one day, and then it will come down to deck guns. We may win some of those battles, but then again we may get hurt as well. You have seen the damage to this ship when we returned to

Vladivostok. Let that be a stern reminder.”

“The odds are very steep, Karpov,” said Yeltzin. “Do you really want to engage the Americans now? Now, when their entire navy is concentrated within a few hundred kilometers of our present position?”

“Now or never,” Karpov returned. “If they attack us with what appears to be overwhelming force I will issue you a coded signal—*Hellfire*. This will convey my decision to utilize a tactical nuclear warhead, though I do not take it lightly. I intend to give the American Admirals the opportunity to avoid conflict. We shall see if they are wise enough to do so, but I will not back down here. That said, I will be the sole authority on use of nuclear weapons. Neither of you are to mount tactical warheads on missiles unless I give such an order—understood?”

“Let us hope things do not come to that,” said Yeltsin. “But we will support you, Captain.”

“Of course you will,” Karpov smiled, then he was suddenly serious again. “There is one thing more,” he began, his eyes shifting as though he were trying to locate something on the desk. “Should it come down to nuclear weapons, I must tell you that our experience leads me to believe that our position in this timeframe could be affected by a detonation.”

“What do you mean?” Yeltsin leaned closer. “Affected in what manner?”

“It is impossible to say. We have already seen how a massive release of explosive energy sent us here. A nuclear detonation, close enough, could send us somewhere...else...”

“This happened to you in the Atlantic?”

“It did, but we later attributed it to the use of that control rod. Now I am not so sure.”

“Then perhaps this might also be a way for us to get back to our own time again,” Yeltsin hit on the obvious point of opportunity.

“That thought occurred to me,” said Karpov. “We might kill two bears with one shot. If we do have to teach the Americans a lesson, and it changes the history in our favor, that will be one thing. If it also sends us home, so much the better.”

“And if it puts two thousand men in an early grave?” Another voice intruded from the shadow of the half open door, and Doctor Zolkin entered, a hard look on his face. “What then, Karpov?”

“You were not invited to this conference, Doctor.”

“Sorry to crash the party gentlemen, but I invited myself. I am a Captain

of the Second Rank.”

“You are not in the primary command structure of the ship,” Karpov snapped at him. “That rank is merely a courtesy, Zolkin. You know it as well as I do.”

“Courtesy or not, I am here and you have heard what I just said. You think you can just fire off your weapons and slaughter these men without consequences?”

“Not without consequences.” Karpov stood up now. “I am well aware of the consequences, more so than any man in this room.”

“And what does your conscience say about that?” Zolkin looked him square in the eye, defiant.

“That is my concern!”

“No, Captain. It is *our* concern, yours, mine, the good Captains here, and also the concern of every man on this ship. If you fire off another warhead, then all history changes.”

“That is the point under discussion, Doctor. Yes, all history changes, and hopefully for the better. You want what we just lived through all over again? You would prefer the cold war, the collapse of the Soviet Union? The oil wars, and then the final battle for our very survival in 2021? Yes, we could change all that. We have the power.”

“How many warheads do you have, Karpov? Suppose you destroy the American fleet here. You think they will leave it at that? No! Fedorov says your first little act of valor ended up changing the history and there was no Pearl Harbor. Well, you’ll give them that right here, won’t you? Use a nuclear warhead here and all you will do is poke a stick in the belly of the bear, the most powerful nation on this earth at the moment. They will build three new ships for every one you destroy, and another thing. They have the bomb as well. You say you will fight for Russia? What if they drop one on Moscow?”

“We don’t know if they’ve developed atomic weapons yet. You said yourself, the history has changed. If they had the bomb, then why didn’t they use it on the Japanese?”

“Who can say? But I am willing to bet they *do* have it—are you going to start World War Three here?”

“I’m not starting anything. If you were eavesdropping long enough at that door then you heard that. Yes?”

“What I heard was a man determined to take his second chance and get it

right this time. You are so very clever, Karpov. You think your first bomb just missed the mark, that's all. Now if you just fling another it will hit the target this time. Am I correct? Well listen here—all of you—those are *men* out there—human beings.” He pointed at the wall, to sailors unseen over the far horizon, in their ships of steel, men of war, but men nonetheless. “They are flesh and blood, not shadows. Each one you kill also casts a long shadow of death on every generation yet to come. You do not just sink their ships, you kill fathers, and you kill their sons and daughters, and their grand children, all in one throw. You will have their blood and the blood of all their unborn descendents on your hands. For what? Stalin? Mother Russia?”

Zolkin waved his hand in frustration. “Alright...I’ve said what I came here to say.” He gave them a long hard look. “Now I’m going back to sick bay to wait for the men to start lining up at my door.”

He turned and stepped through the half open door, his footsteps echoing on the deck plating as he went.

Karpov sat down again, folding his hands, his face drawn but a determined look in his eye.

“The doctor is somewhat dramatic,” he began. “Yet what he fails to realize is that in war the enemy makes choices too. They may give us no other option if they will not listen to reason here.”

“Unless we turn east,” Yeltsin put in one last time. “The Pacific Ocean is a very big place.”

Karpov looked at him, but said nothing more. The meeting ended, faces hardened with the realization that they could indeed commence the Third World War within the next few hours if things went ill.

Thirty minutes later Karpov was on the bridge. “Mister Nikolin. I want you to broadcast on an open channel to the Americans. Tell them I want to speak with Admiral Halsey. Tell them I am offering to negotiate the situation and reach a peaceful resolution...to avoid any further bloodshed here.”

“Aye, sir.” Nikolin began sending his message in English, and Karpov wished he had taken the time to learn the language. Then again, he thought, perhaps we can teach the world to speak Russian here. That is the voice I will speak in now, and let them hear it well.

* * *

Aboard Battleship *Missouri* Admiral Halsey was sitting in the ward room

office, reading the fleet manifest and thinking. They had lost *Wasp*—again—and Ziggy Sprague's TF 38.3 was now light a good number of aircraft, but he still had teeth. There were over 200 planes left in Sprague's task force, and he was bringing 350 more on *Yorktown*, *Shangri-La*, *Bon Homme Richard* and two light escort carriers. He also had two more superb fast battleships with *Missouri* and *Iowa*, a fist full of heavy cruisers, and over twenty destroyers to throw in with Ziggy's group.

Someone just called our bet and so we'll go double or nothing, he thought. Whoever they are, we'll show them who the hell they're messing with—rockets or no rockets. The British Admiral Fraser had warned him not to concentrate his ships too tightly, though that seemed to fly in the face of good naval tactics. He had used a sledgehammer approach to bludgeon the Japanese to their knees with one swift, powerful blow after another. The war was finally over, and all it will take is just one more swing of that hammer to let everyone concerned know who's in charge here.

"Admiral, sir..." A midshipman was knocking lightly at the door, saluting as he entered.

"What is it Mister Wilkes?"

"Sir, you asked to be informed of any unusual message traffic. We're receiving a radio transmission from the Russians up north."

"What's this all about?"

"I think you'd better hear it for yourself, sir. It's been repeating for the last ten minutes now. They're asking for you by name, sir."

Halsey took that in. So history was calling his name again. It was not a surprise. They know who they're up against here now and they probably want to jaw bone about it.

"Very well, Mister Wilkes. I'll take this directly in the radio room. Walk with me."

It wasn't a very long walk, down one corridor and up two ladders to the small compartment behind the main bridge, the flag radio room. Halsey listened, hearing the obvious Slavic accent in the English transmission. Fraser was correct. It sure sounded like these were, indeed, Russians.

"They're broadcasting this in the clear like that?"

"Yes, sir," said the radio man. "The whole fleet can hear it."

Halsey thought about that a moment, then folded his arms. "Then let them hear this." He reached for the microphone on the desk and thumbed the send switch.

“Now hear this. Attention on all decks. This is Fleet Admiral Halsey speaking to our Russian friends up north, and you had better listen up. You have fired on our aircraft, downed planes, refused to yield or heave to for boarding, and further engaged vessels of the United States Navy in active combat. I am bringing sixty warships up there to see about it, and I can double up on that bet any time it suits me. Now you will do exactly what I order here. Allies or not, you will heave to and be boarded by United States Marines. Your ships will be taken in tow, and held until such time as negotiations are concluded with the Soviet government over this matter. Is that understood?”

He waited, the eyes of the two radio men on him now, his arms folded over his broad chest. A long minute later the voice came back, in the same heavily accented English.”

“I am speaking on behalf of Acting Fleet Commander Vladimir Karpov, Russian Federal Navy. While we have no direct affiliation with the Soviet government, we nonetheless will look to their interests and endeavors. They have not sanctioned or approved our actions in defense of our ships, nor are they even aware of our presence here. That said, I will tell you that we will not heave to as ordered, nor will our ships be boarded, towed, or interned in any way. Furthermore, the Soviet government has no say in the determination of our fate, though the inverse may well be true. And the same goes for you.”

“What the hell is this guy talking about?” Halsey said aloud, clearly annoyed. “A bit long winded, isn’t he? Well let me make it clearer.” Halsey thumbed the radio send and spoke again.

“You will heave to and be boarded or I will sink you. Over.”

“You may try to do so, Admiral, but I will give you fair warning here. We have weapons unlike any you have ever seen. I am capable of destroying your entire fleet. Understood? Please do not force me to take actions that you and the men you command will dearly regret. I will offer to negotiate with you in person, or with fleet officers of command level rank, to resolve the situation without bloodshed, but if attacked I will defend my fleet and destroy yours in the process, and that is not a bluff or brag.”

Halsey shook his head. “Now you listen here, you son-of-a-bitch.” His cheeks betrayed his obvious anger. “You’ll meet with me on a cold day in hell. You will do exactly as I ordered in my first transmission, and that immediately. Signal your surrender now and this will end amicably. Otherwise you can go to hell, and I’ll be happy to send you there myself,

personally.”

“You are making a mistake, Admiral Halsey. Very well, before things get out of hand I invite you to look to your starboard bow in ten minutes time. Karpov out.”

“Look to my starboard bow? What’s this idiot talking about?”

Halsey handed the microphone to the nearest radio man. “Issue the following fleet order and have it sent through flag and lantern as well. Don’t use the 24 MC circuit, just send it in the goddamned clear! Attention all ships, all carriers...” He looked out the porthole noting a pendant flying stiffly in the breeze to determine the wind direction.

“The fleet will come to three, four, zero degrees north and ready for battle. All carrier commanders...Let’s get turned into the wind.”

He turned and stormed out, heading for the bridge.

Chapter 24

They saw something on the Sugar Charlie (SC-2) Radar on the *Missouri*, but the pip was moving so fast on the screen that the radar attendant thought it was a glitch. It was there, then gone, but it was off the starboard bow of the ship, and so anything seen was reported.

“Flag; Sugar Charley One. Reporting bogie, north by northwest, bearing true, single plane, pip wavering.”

The officer of the deck took the handset to acknowledge.

“Sugar Charley One; Flag. Single bogie aye, aye. Watchstander G1, confirm sighting. Over.” The OOD wanted eyes on the contact to both confirm and identify it if possible, and he was not disappointed.

“Flag; Watchstander G1. Bogie in sight, bearing zero-one-two, range twenty, incredible speed! Designate bogie one.”

“Watchstander G1; Flag; bogie one bearing zero-one-two, range twenty and very fast, aye, aye.”

Halsey was listening closely, arms folded, eyes scanning the horizon to the northwest. Something was out there, and he reached for a pair of binoculars to have a closer look when the sky was suddenly lit up like an exploding sun. The flash was so bright that Halsey was fortunate he wasn't focusing on the bogie with binoculars yet, and had his back to the view port, or he would have been blinded. As it was, every man on the bridge shirked and instinctively shielded their eyes. Seconds later there came a strong vibration and the entire ship shuddered as a hard wind struck it from the north. Then they heard it, the awful ripping explosion and deep angry thunder that followed.

As the brightness faded Halsey squinted off his starboard bow to see an enormous explosion mushrooming up to the northwest. It looked as though the sea itself was on fire, and being sucked up into the sky as the mushroom towered up and up, billowing out at the top in a roiling yellow orange fireball.

“Brace for high seas!” a voice shouted, and then he saw the water coming at the fleet in a great wave, perhaps eighty feet high. Amazed at the sight, he saw a distant destroyer in the outer screen lifted by the wave and tossed about like a toy. As it rolled on through the formation all he could think of was that

terrible hurricane they had faced a few months ago, but soon he saw the bigger and heavier ships were riding out the heavy swell intact, and he could feel the ocean lift *Missouri*, see her bow find air in the wild sea spray as the big battleship crested the wave, and then Mighty Mo settled back into the water, rolling slightly but sea keeping well.

Look to your starboard bow in ten minutes time... Halsey saw the evil white halo above the explosion in the sky, as though a demon from hell had been crowned with white fire. He had told the Russians to go to hell, and now they had served up a slice of the real estate for him to survey at his leisure. It was the most awesome thing he had ever seen.

He had heard the rumors from the 1941 incident in the North Atlantic—that the Germans possessed a terrible weapon based on atomic power. He didn't understand it. Splitting something like an atom seemed an impossible thing to do, but he had been briefed in recent months on the existence and deployment of similar weapons now in the US arsenal, and they were very close at hand.

Halsey turned to Captain Stuart S. Murray, an old misplaced submariner who had been serving at the Annapolis Naval Academy since 1943 and was taken out of mothballs to be given a prime command on the battleship in May of that year.

"What in God's name do you make of that?" The searing light was finally dim enough to be viewed without discomfort, but the big, amiable Captain, dubbed "Sunshine" by his peers, seemed dumbfounded.

"Get a message off to Admiral Nimitz," said Halsey. "Tell him we have just witnessed what appears to be a large explosion—belay that—tell him the Russians have the goddamned bomb, and they've just detonated one after warning me to look out for it ten minutes ago. That ought to make his day, because it sure as hell just spoiled mine."

* * *

When the news reached Admiral Fraser he was with Chester Nimitz on Guam, preparing to board a plane to rejoin his Task Force 37 in the Sea of Japan. Now he was certain of what would happen if the Americans attacked. He had not been present in the North Atlantic when that first bomb went off, but Admiral of the Fleet, John Tovey had seen it with his own eyes along with his Chief of Staff, Daddy Brind. He remembered all too well what Brind

had told him about it.

“Vast and threatening,” he called it. “Threatening in a way that you simply cannot describe—and that was well after the detonation by the time we got within sight of it. I would hate to see one actually go off. Seeing one in a lifetime was more than enough.”

In 1942 when Fraser had advanced to second in command of Home Fleet, Admiral Tovey took him into his confidence on a very delicate matter after the incident in the Mediterranean, one concerning the true nature of the ship *Rodney* and *Nelson* had tangled with, and what had really happened after Gibraltar, a story that few men alive had ever heard. Fraser was now one of an elite inner circle known simply as “The Watch” and his code signal was Watchstander G3, number three in the overall chain of command within the group that stretched back to Tovey. Ahead of him in those shadowed ranks were only two men: Admiral Tovey himself and the eccentric but brilliant Alan Turing. He was amazed that Turing would be privy to matters where Churchill was not informed, but Tovey convinced him that bringing the Prime Minister in, and the government, would be no easy task.

Ever since the *Geronimo* raider had disappeared off the Island of St. Helena, the Watch had come to believe it reappeared in the Pacific soon after, a matter of days in fact, and that was a clear impossibility that had led to the startling conclusion that the ship was not from their time. Beyond that, its weapons were simply too advanced. The Watch had been set on every active sea lane of the world to look out for this ship, and now it had returned, two years later in 1945, back with the bomb.

Where was it going in those intervening years? How did it manage to evade detection? These were questions the Watchstanders had toiled with for long years. Turing was of the opinion that the ship was continually moving in time, perhaps marooned, perhaps under deliberate control. Either way, its continued reappearance was deeply troubling and Fraser had just had a long conversation with Admiral Nimitz about it. Try as he might, he could not persuade the Americans to belay the planned attack being assembled at that very moment by Admiral Halsey.

“The ship is dangerous,” he had argued. “It is unlike any warship afloat, with weapons that can do grave harm in an instant. You could be sacrificing a good part of your Pacific Fleet if your lock horns with this ship and it decides to use the same weaponry it just demonstrated. I strongly advise we parley with this Russian Captain, just as our Admiral John Tovey did. We had four

battleships at risk and ready to engage, the core of the entire Home Fleet but —”

“But what did it get you?” Nimitz said quietly. “They reneged on their pledge and slipped away.”

“Yes, but they went to fight the Japanese! Your invasion at Guadalcanal succeeded largely because of their intervention. Yamamoto had another full carrier division heading your way, and this ship stopped it single handedly—at least this is what we have surmised after a couple years good intelligence work.”

“Hard to believe,” said Nimitz. “But the Russians didn’t use anything like that weapon on the Japanese. Hell, if they had the bomb back in 1941, then why didn’t they use it on the Germans?”

“We don’t know...” Fraser could not reveal the whole truth, not even to Nimitz. “But they didn’t need to. The ship beat the *Yamato* to a near hulk, and that was with its conventional naval rocketry alone. You can’t beat this ship in anything like a fair fight, Admiral. It will require overwhelming force, and my great fear is that if we concentrate to attack, they will answer with what we just saw—an atomic bomb, just as they did in the North Atlantic when we closed in for the kill.

“So now we’ll have to deal with it on our terms. You British were entirely too accommodating. Is this thing Russian, Admiral? We’ve had the Russian Ambassador on the hot seat for hours and he swears on his first born son that the Soviet government knows nothing whatsoever about this ship.”

“He may be telling the truth, Admiral. That was, in fact, what the commander of that ship asserted when he met with Admiral Tovey.”

“Well how in the world is that possible?” Nimitz sounded irritated now. “They design and build the damn thing, and now you’re telling me they claim to know nothing about it? Sorry, Admiral, but I just can’t buy that line. I think Uncle Joe is blowing smoke in our face, and I put that lightly. I’ve also been advised that President Truman has authorized us to respond in kind if the Russians do actually deploy an atomic weapon in combat against us. We’re drawing a proverbial line in the sand here. The feeling back in Washington is that the Russians have to be reigned in, and quickly. Patton is itching to go after them in Europe right now. They may have the bomb, but they can’t have very many.”

“But don’t you see, Admiral. They’re trying to warn us off. They offered to negotiate. Why not take them up on it? If you attack now they will escalate

with more atomic weapons. I'm sure of it."

"Then that's exactly what they'll get in return."

"But this is insane! How many bombs do you have?"

"That's not the question we need to ask now, Admiral Fraser. The question is how many do *they* have."

"Well, if they can expend one to make of demonstration like this what does that tell you? Our intelligence believes they may have many of these weapons, and that creates a whole new calculus here. It isn't simply a matter of ships and planes, Admiral, though if you do attack this ship be prepared to lose very many of both in that effort."

Nimitz took a deep breath. "Admiral Fraser. We just won the Second World War. Now the Russians seem intent on starting another one. So be it. We have the force to win this one too, and atomic weapons in theater if they escalate. I will tell you now that I have been authorized to use them."

The silence between the two men was thick now. What more could Fraser say? Revealing the true nature of this ship would seem incredulous. Negotiation bought time for the Watch to get more valuable information. Where exactly did the ship come from? Why was it here? What did its officers and crew really want?

But to Nimitz this was just a ship—one of hundreds that had gone to the bottom of the sea in the last four years. It was just a ship with the bomb, and that was all the more believable now because he had planes with the bomb, out there in the Pacific somewhere on one of those tiny islands. One last attack would settle the matter, or so the American point of view was evident now.

The Yanks had been the senior service from the moment they first entered the war on Britain's side. They were like a well muscled work-horse in the beginning, and one that needed to be broken to the plow harness if they were ever going to get the job done. Thankfully the more seasoned and experience British officers had been there in the beginning. In time, however, the dash and fighting ability of Men like Patton, the dogged perseverance of Omar Bradley, Hodges and so many others, had made all the difference in the war. England could not have prevailed without the United States at her side. Montgomery could not have won without Patton and the others.

"Well then..." Fraser cleared his throat. "Where do you want me with Task Force 37?" He folded his arms, resigned.

"Swing up north of Hokkaido, Admiral Fraser, and cut the bastards off

from Vladivostok. Make sure nothing comes out to reinforce this Captain Karpov. We'll handle the rest."

"Very well. Admiral Nimitz, you know me to be a well seasoned officer of the line. If you won't take my advice on not picking this fight, then allow me to suggest how you might win it. The Royal Navy has faced down this ship twice before, and here is how you must deploy..."

* * *

Fraser's primer was well reasoned, and Nimitz listened intently. All carriers should move to the rear in a widely dispersed formation. Aircraft must launch and assemble only to begin the operation. Thereafter they must disperse and come in from all compass headings on the target, and at layered altitudes. Sub flights were to break formation and scatter to make individual attacks the instant they were fired upon by aerial rocketry. It would be every man to himself from that point on. Coordinated air strikes were useless, but if the fleet air arm could keep consistent and constant pressure on the enemy, it was hoped some planes would penetrate the fearsome anti-aircraft defense and score hits.

While this air operation was underway, the carriers must be well screened by light cruisers and destroyers. Heavy cruisers and fast battleships were to break formation and deploy at intervals of five to ten kilometers presenting a wall of steel to the enemy. This would put the big ships within supporting range of one another, but not grouped to a point where more than one could be sunk by an atomic weapon. Upon contact with the enemy, they were then to close at high speed on widely spaced headings, get into gun range, and fight on a ship by ship basis, individually. Any destroyers that could be spared from carrier screening duty could serve as hounds to make torpedo runs at the enemy if possible. Every submarine available should be vectored in to attack.

The overwhelming force now available could not be used as a sledgehammer as it had been against the Japanese. Instead it must come at the enemy like a vast wave of steel, a tsunami of warships deployed on a widely dispersed front in a high speed charge. This way, even if the enemy used one of their terror weapons, they could only affect a part of the wave, blow one small gap in the line. If a ship went down, a reserve of fast cruisers would be held to fill the gap in the line, and the attack would roll on.

Nimitz listened, head cocked to one side, thinking these were some fairly outlandish naval tactics. He had two heavy fists with Halsey and Sprague, and two more behind them. Everything he had learned about war fighting relied on speed, concentration and firepower.

“Yes,” said Fraser. “That’s all well and good, but concentrate at your own peril. We learned that in the North Atlantic. Remember the *Mississippi* and the cruisers that went down with her. And as for your carriers, remember the *Wasp*—both of them. We also learned that your Captains are going to have to be prepared to take their lumps if you close with this monster, but close you must. If we can get three to five decent capital ships in gun range of this Russian flotilla, we should be able to hurt them badly. But getting there’s the rub.”

“We’ll get there, Admiral Fraser,” said Nimitz. “We’ll get there if I have to order ever man jack afloat out there to paddle in on a life raft with rifles. We’ve got good men at the tillers now, hard, experienced naval war fighters who won’t flinch. They’ll get the job done.”

“If they don’t concentrate.” Admiral Fraser put a hard finger on the table between them to emphasize his point. “Remember, Admiral, attack in force, but the entire formation must be widely dispersed. Do that and we can sink these ships, I’m sure of it. Yet if it comes down to the bomb, you might at least tell them it’s coming at them first. Perhaps that would stay their hand and put some sense into this mess.”

“Telegraph our punch? I suppose I could do that, but let me assure you that we’ll use that as a final measure, and I won’t take the decision lightly.”

“I’m sure of that, but I must tell you one thing more that neither one of us really cares to hear at this point in the war. Men are going to die here, and perhaps very many will not be going home on your Operation Magic Carpet. I’m sorry for that—sorry for the whole damn bloody business we’ve been about these last years.”

“The Japanese are sorry too,” said Nimitz coolly. “The Russians will be sorry right along with them—” He looked at his watch. “I make it another three hours before the operation begins. The Russians have been circling in place and I’ve held Halsey and Sprague on a tight leash. It’s time to release the hounds.”

“God be with us,” Fraser sighed. “Yet if we can get this ship, history will thank us for it. More could be riding on this battle than either you or I can see right now.”

Day 6

*“ I saw more than a thousand of those angels, that fell from
Heaven like rain, above the gates, who cried angrily: ‘Who is
this, that, without death goes through the kingdom of the dead?’
And my wise Master made a sign to them, of wishing to speak in
private. Then they furlled their great disdain, and said: ‘Come on,
alone, and let him go, who enters this kingdom with such
audacity. Let him return, alone, on his foolish road: see if he can:
and you, remain, who have escorted him, through so dark a
land.’”*

Dante Alighieri, The Inferno - Canto VIII

Part IX

The Black Hole

“Black holes are the seductive dragons of the universe, outwardly quiescent yet violent at the heart, uncanny, hostile, primeval, emitting a negative radiance that draws all toward them, gobbling up all who come too close. Once having entered the tumultuous orbit of a black hole, nothing can break away from its passionate but fatal embrace. Though cons of teasing play may be granted the doomed, ultimately play turns to prey and all are sucked haplessly—brilliantly aglow, true, but oh so briefly so—into the fire-breathing maw of oblivion.”

—Robert Coover

Chapter 25

“**Any** response, Nikolin?” Karpov was hovering over the communications station, an anxious uncertainty in his eyes.

“No, sir. There has been no reply to our last message.”

“Send it one more time. Tell them this is the last warning they will receive. They either grant my request for negotiation and make those arrangements to my satisfaction, or we will settle the matter in battle at sea.”

“Very well, sir. Sending now.”

Karpov paced as he waited, his footfalls seeming loud in the silence of the bridge. The tension was evident there, though the bridge crews were alert and confident at their posts. They had seen Karpov in combat before, and came to respect and admire his ability. Yet there was no way to bury the obvious emotion they felt as the prospect of another big fight loomed ahead of them. The Captain had just made a tremendous show of force. Ten minutes after his conversation with the American Admiral he had fired a MOS-III, programming it to make a run to a point some twenty kilometers northwest of the Halsey task force. The weapon it carried was only a 15 kiloton warhead, but that was nearly the size of the bomb the Americans dropped at Hiroshima, at least in one iteration of this history, the world still chronicled in Fedorov’s old books. It would detonate over a hundred kilometers to the south at a designated point, well over their horizon.

Minutes later, however, they could see the evil mushroom cloud, rising ever higher in the distance from beyond the deceptively placid curve of the earth, and it put well deserved fear into the gut of every man who looked at it. Would the Captain use another if the Americans did not back down? Nikolin’s voice had just the hint of a plea in it as he broadcast in English. There was only silence in return.

“They don’t answer, sir,” he said dejectedly. “I’ve sent the message three times now.”

Karpov seemed angry. “What is wrong with them? Don’t they see what we’re capable of?”

“Perhaps the detonation affected their communications.” Rodenko was at the Captain’s side now, arms folded, considering the situation.

“Mister Nikolin?”

“Possible, but not likely, sir. They don’t have advanced electronics, and in many ways their systems would be much less vulnerable to EMP effects.”

“I agree,” said Rodenko. “That was a very low altitude airburst. There was no significant EMP burst in any case.”

“Then they are deliberately maintaining radio silence,” Karpov concluded. “Which means they could be planning something—some surprise attack.”

“They won’t be able to surprise us, sir. We have helicopters up and we’ll see any launch operation from their carriers.”

“How soon will they be reporting in?”

“Any minute now, Captain.”

Tasarov shifted uncomfortably in his chair, his brow furrowed, and obvious concentration on his face. Karpov caught the movement out of the corner of his eye, a wary look on his face. He had seen that look before, and knew that Tasarov was processing something, a hidden signal return picked up on the ship’s sonar. He waited, watching his sonar man intently until Tasarov looked in his direction.

“Con, sonar. Undersea contact, possible submarine, confidence high. I think this is a diesel electric boat, sir. Bearing 240 degrees, range approximate at 18,000 meters; speed six knots and closing on our position.”

“Someone is creeping up on us,” said Karpov looking at Rodenko. “That doesn’t sound very friendly. Do we have another KA-40 ready for launch?”

“Yes sir, the second helo is on ready alert.”

“Launch immediately. Overfly the contact and refine its position with sonobuoys. They may think they can sneak up on us like this, but we’ll soon show them otherwise.”

* * *

USS *Archer-Fish* was the unhappy recipient of Karpov’s attention that day. The boat had been out on its seventh and final war time patrol, assigned to provide life guard services for B-29 crews should any be lost in the last days over Japan. For Commander Joseph, Francis Enright, it was lackluster duty compared to the old glory days earlier in the year when he had stuck one of the largest feathers any submarine commander could ever earn in his cap discovering a formation of five ships, a carrier with four escorts.

After a heady race to get ahead of the Japanese flotilla and achieve firing

position, *Archer-Fish* dealt a spread of six torpedoes from her forward tubes and, quite amazingly, scored six hits on the target. He would soon get credit for the sinking of *Shinano*, the world's largest aircraft carrier at the time. Originally laid down as the third *Yamato* Class hull, work was stopped on the battleship and she was wisely converted to an aircraft carrier. Now Enright was slated to receive a Presidential Citation for his effort, and the kill filled the crew with pride and enthusiasm for battle.

Their next patrol had not been so glorious. Enright found himself in a small three boat wolfpack dubbed "Joes Jugheads" in the South China Sea. In one brief engagement the boat believed they hit and sank a Japanese submarine, though the kill would later be stricken as unconfirmed. Finally, on her last patrol, the war ended as the boat was cruising just off the southernmost tip of Hokkaido, Cape Erimo Saki. The jubilation on the announcement was well earned, but short-lived as well. *Archer-Fish* was heading for Tokyo Bay to join the planned surrender ceremony when she received orders to make an abrupt about face and head north.

There was a gaggle of loose subs around Hokkaido at the time. Two others were nearby to join the unusual operation, the *Atule* under Commander John Maurer and the old *Gato*, first boat in her class, under Lt. Commander Richard Farell. Together they had accounted for a few Japanese coastal corvettes and a sub chaser in the waters off Hokkaido as the war ended, but now they were to join Enright and the esteemed *Archer-Fish* in a new wolfpack heading north to look for Russians! It was a most unusual order, which had a good number of jaws wagging in the crew compartments as the boat turned north.

Enright wasn't happy about the duty. He had been all set to lay eyes on Tokyo Bay, and now here he was, still sweltering in the boat with his fluky air conditioning. So much for the grease monkeys. They were supposed to fix the damn thing but whatever they did only made things worse. He had made a point of delicately mentioning that in his log: "*The air conditioning alteration decreased rather than increased the habitability of the ship.*" It wouldn't matter much if they could make a steady surface approach, but for some reason the orders had emphasized that they were to proceed submerged, surfacing only to make scheduled radar checks, and to look for three Russian ships.

He swiped his brow with a handkerchief, looking over at Lt. Commander L.G. Bernard near the periscope. The protocol was to make periscope depth

and check radar returns at thirty minute intervals. Then they would submerge deeper, alter heading, and proceed toward any contacts. They had been creeping up the east coast of Hokkaido and were now about 20 miles northeast of Shikotan Island. The long gray profiles of the southern Kuriles were evident in the distance when they surfaced.

“Still reading that interference on the APR?” Enright checked with Bernard on some unusual readings they had during the last radar sweep.

“It’s not on the same band width and pulse as any Jap radar,” said Bernard. “Suddenly stopped about five minutes ago. Now we’re getting pings. Sounds like something is up there nosing around.”

“Sonar has no screw noise close in, just that dull rumble at long range we took to be our target contact.”

“There was also that Typhoon warning. We bumped into something a couple hours ago, but there was no apparent damage. That said, the storm might be stirring things up enough to move a lot of debris our way.”

“I wouldn’t worry about the storm way up here. I heard it might delay the ceremony in Tokyo bay, which is fine by me. I wanted to be there for that—then we got this duty.”

“Well if the Japs have surrendered why are they still jamming?”

“Get a clue, Lieutenant Commander. We aren’t up here looking for Japs anymore. It’s the Russians this time out.”

“Yeah? Well that doesn’t make much sense either. That said, sonar has hold of something, sir. They just can’t read it through this interference. Suppose we get up and look for *Gato*. They were due for surface radar sweep about now.”

Enright looked at his watch, nodding. “Alright,” he said with a shrug. “Fire two smoke bombs and surface. Maybe the Radar will help sort this mess out.”

The boat was up in a few minutes and the radar man had three pips on his scope soon after. One was identified as the *Gato* on the IFF, the other two were both unknown—one airborne and coming in from the north, a second surface contact that was lost soon after it was first reported.

Enright climbed up the ladder to have a look with binoculars, but what he saw was unlike any aircraft he had ever laid eyes on. It moved slow, almost seemed to hover stationary at times, then moved again in the distance. What in god’s name was that?

Enright wasn’t sticking around in his rapidly dissipating smoke screen to

find out anything more. He had a contact bearing and ordered a quick dive to set a new course with *Gato* to the northeast. A brief VHF call had confirmed that *Atule* was also in the vicinity, due west of *Gato*'s position.

"Something is up there alright," he said to Bernard. "Strangest thing I ever saw. Well...now we have three bad boys out here in a good position to sweep north. So that's just what we'll do." It was a mistake he would live to regret, but orders were orders, and he ordered a five point turn and ahead full.

Torpedo man Don Sweeney was on the *Atule* stowing some personal effects in his duffel bag when the alarm sounded. He had been looking over his certificates, and thinking of home back in Illinois. One was his "Sacred Order Of The Golden Dragon," which he picked up last month on the 8th of July when the boat crossed the 180th Meridian in to Japanese home waters. Everybody got one, but to the folks back home it might seem a pretty big deal. He could display it with the Asiatic-Pacific WWII Victory Medal that he would get as soon as they made port again. He'd frame those two with the boat's insignia patch of the torpedo toting fish, and it would make a real nice keepsake—or so he had been telling virtually everyone on the boat the last three days.

"Look Sweeney," said his mate Paul Dunn. "Stow that crap and let's get forward. Can't you hear that alarm?"

The two men rushed to their post, surprised to find the duty crews already loading the forward tubes as though combat was imminent.

"Hey, what's going on?" asked Sweeney. "We run into something?"

"Who knows, Sweeney. Just lend a hand and help run that 21 incher up to the kill tube. They got something on radar and we've got a job to do, Kapish?"

"Well, hell," Sweeney protested. "Isn't the war over? You'd think the Japs would know they were beat by now."

"These ain't Japs. Didn't you hear? It's Russian ships we're after now, or maybe they're after us. It's the same both ways. Run that fish up!"

* * *

"**Con** contact confirmed by KA-40 with visual sighting and hard location on sonobuoy. Three submarines. Designating Alpha One, Two and Three." The ship was at action stations and Tasarov was coordinating the effort with *Admiral Golovko* and the helos via live data link.

Karpov seemed edgy, pacing, his attention still torn between Nikolin where he was broadcasting his message to the Americans and the ongoing developments at the sonar station. Now it was not just a single contact, but three. The silence from the Americans was damning, at least in his mind. If this was their only response, to attempt a stealthy submarine attack after the massive demonstration of his firepower, then the Americans were more foolish than he could imagine. He would let them know he was well aware of their little ploy, and in no uncertain terms.

“Tasarov...Select one of the enemy contacts and order the KA-40 to put a torpedo on it. This has gone on long enough. If they will not listen to reason, then we’ll speak to them in another language.”

The language was the APR-hydrojet acoustic homing torpedo dropped by the KA-40. It fell swiftly into the water, listened to locate its contacts and then responded to Tasarov’s random selection of one target—the *Atule*. It was soon moving at 80 kilometers per hour, with a kill probability of over 90% that did not disappoint.

Weeks later a young Japanese boy named Kanji Akiro would be wading in the surf on the northern coast of Hokkaido Island when he saw something bright orange floating in the water. The tide brought it nearer, and he reached to grasp it before the sea could claim it again, peering at the curious image of a yellow dragon on an orange background surrounded by what appeared to be braided rope. The markings were strange and unfamiliar to him, and barely readable on the sodden paper.

It was a certificate assuring membership the “Sacred Order Of The Golden Dragon,” and if Kenji Akiro could have read the English he would have seen it belonged to Donald M. Sweeney. The duffel bag it had been hastily stuffed into when the last battle stations alert was sounded for the *Atule* would be floating in on the surf in another five minutes.

Atule’s war was over, but the next war was just getting started. Word of the sub’s sinking passed from Enright’s watch on the *Archer-Fish* and right up the chain of command through HQ Submarine Squadron Ten, Commander Submarine Force, Pacific, and from there on to Commander In Chief, Pacific Fleet, Chester Nimitz.

The Admiral shook his head, clearly distressed, and simmering with obvious anger. The Russians had just crossed a line in his mind and there was no going back now. If the attack on *Wasp* was not reason enough for reprisal, this deliberate sinking of a US sub on a recon mission was the last straw. His

message to his fighting front line Admiral Halsey was brief and to the point.
“Get up there and sink the bastards—and do it now.”

Chapter 26

Haselden listened intently, hearing the odd thumping from the dark edge of the night and passing that uncomfortable moment between sound and sense when you hear something, try to locate and identify it, and cannot do so. The others could hear it as well, a deep thumping that seemed to grow louder with each passing second. Their eyes seemed to search this way and that as they listened. What was it?

They had been discouraged to find that the truck column passed through Makhachkala, thinking it would not stop, but then their hopes were bolstered. The column began to slow, and come to a halt. “Bloody hell,” said Haselden. “We’ve come much farther south than I had hoped, we’re near the harbor!”

“Who would have thought they would just keep on like this,” said Sutherland. “Now what? It’s nearly dawn and the place will be crawling with Russian military. There was supposed to be a big operation underway here to jimmy the oil rigs and move all the equipment to Kazakhstan, at least according to our briefing.”

The land here formed a great isthmus that served as a breakwater for the harbor. They were very near the base of that isthmus close to the coast where the road passed the railway station and oil loading depot.

“Things may get dicey,” said Haselden. “We may have to get off quick and try to melt away and get to some cover before the others discover they’ve lost three soldiers. We’ll work out what to do next once we know what we’re looking at.”

Haselden peered out the back tarp and saw obvious signs of war here. Some of the buildings had been bombed and burned, and one industrial district had been razed by the Russians themselves to destroy equipment and remove drilling rigs.

All he could think of was the mission, and what they had to do to get this man Orlov and try to save their own hides in the process. At long last the column came down to the edge of the city, very near the water. They could smell the tang of the Caspian Sea, the brine on the quay and hear the occasional sound of a bell on small fishing boats out early for the morning catch.

“Shouldn’t be any trouble finding a boat here,” said Haselden.

“Maybe so,” said Sutherland, but getting it north and over the Caspian to Fort Shevchenko again will be a tall order, Jock, particularly if the Russians have anything to say about it.”

“Hush up, I think they’re slowing down to stop here. Get the lead out of your legs, boys. This is where we get off. There’s a warehouse off the right side of the road. Make for that and be quick about it!”

The three men eased the tarp open, Haselden leading the way as they slipped out. One quick jump and he was down off the truck on the road, and he stood there until the other two men joined him before they made for the warehouse. In the dull pre-dawn hours the city seemed softly asleep, the wide bay quiet and still, with only two boats out that Haselden could see.

They reached the warehouse and slipped in through a half open door, finding plenty of old crates and barrels to conceal them from curious eyes. Haselden picked a location where they could still keep an eye on the trucks, hoping he was correct in his hunch that the column was finally stopping here. Where else could they be going?

He was not disappointed. The squeal of brakes offended the morning calm, and the trucks stopped, shutting off their engines one by one. Haselden was sizing up the situation, studying the buildings all around them now. Then, to his chagrin, he saw that the gate of the fortress opened and out came a troop of NKVD, each man wearing a grey overcoat and black Ushanka. They approached the trucks, the leader soon speaking with the colonel commanding the column, and then the women and children, and the man they had been sent to bring safely home to Great Britain, were all herded away.

“Blast!” he hissed in the dark. “They’ve taken the whole bloody lot into that fortress there. It looks like a detention facility.”

Sutherland strained to have a look, shaking his head. “Fat chance getting inside that,” he thumbed dejectedly. “We’ve come all this way to try and break into a prison?”

“Hush, up Davey,” Haselden warned. “We’ll think of something. There’s a couple ways we could play this now. These uniforms and hats we’ve got will see us off well enough with that sort. Maybe we could slip in somehow.”

“Right, and maybe we can’t. Suppose one of those buggers gets a close look at us, or starts asking questions.”

“Then we may end up getting inside another way.”

“Another way? How do you figure it? Is there some kind of secret passage on your map?”

“No secret passages, Davey. But if they do find us out, then where do you think they’d put us, eh? Right there in that hell hole of a prison.”

Sutherland looked at him, annoyed. “You can’t be serious.”

“Can you think of any easier way in? You want to try and storm that gate with a couple pistols and the Stens?”

Sutherland looked to Sergeant Terry for support, amazed at Haselden’s proposal now. “You’re really figuring to get us inside as...as prisoners? Then what? You plan to just excuse yourself and ask if you could please be let out with this Orlov we’re after? ”

“Don’t talk nonsense. If we do get inside there might be a way to make contact with this man.”

“You speak Russian now, do ya? Open your mouth in there and they’ll hear you speaking the King’s English and think they have a nice little spy on their hands.”

“Queen’s English now,” said Haselden. “Shame about old King George going the way he did. But yes, Lieutenant. Remember, we’re allies and such. Why, we might even ditch these uniforms now and just go tromping up to that gate in our khakis.”

“And introduce ourselves?”

Sergeant Terry was smiling now as Sutherland played the good devil’s advocate. Here they were trying to figure a way to get thrown into prison, and then once inside they’d have to figure a way back out.

“Suppose we did just up and say hello at the gate. What would they make of us? We could fuss about like visiting officers for the lend lease program like we did at Fort Shevchenko and see what happens. We ask to see their commandant and they’ll eventually find someone who can communicate with us. One way or another, we have to get inside that prison.”

“We came all this way to get thrown in the hole?” Sutherland made one last attempt at arguing the matter.

“If it was good enough for the likes of a man like Admiral Fraser, then it’s good enough for our lot.”

“Admiral Fraser? What’s he got to do with anything?” Sutherland was now aware of the fact that Fraser had served in this region with thirty Royal Navy sailors in 1920 when they were all taken by the Bolsheviks and thrown into prison in Baku. It was long months and cruel days before they were eventually released.

The sound came before Haselden had a chance to explain, that distant

thumping that seemed so odd to them all, and impossible to place. It was getting louder and louder, coming from above them, and Haselden leaned around a crate to have a look outside, eyes puckered against the slate grey of the pre-dawn sky. Low clouds obscured everything above them but there was obviously an aircraft of some sorts up there, coming in over the bay. He had deduced that much, but it was unlike any plane he had ever heard before. He thought he saw a massive dark shadow deepen the gray to black at one point, and something swirling in the sky. What in God's name was up there?

* * *

“There it is!” Zykov gave Troyak the thumbs up. “I’ve got his signal! They’re down there on that road, and it looks like they’re heading right into the city.

At last, thought Fedorov with great relief. They had spent a good long while, consuming precious fuel while they searched all the way from Kizlyar and south along the road. There was no sign of Orlov’s signal, but what they had seen there was cause for some alarm. Troyak thought he spied a column of trucks and armored vehicles, and Fedorov took a closer look with night vision binoculars. The powerful opticals revealed more than he expected.

“My God!” he said quickly. Those are Germans! It’s an armored column. I was even able to make out insignias on some of the vehicles, mostly trucks and light APCs, but a few tanks as well. What in the world are they doing here?”

Something had changed, he thought quickly. The Germans got as far as Ishcherskaya east of Mozdok on the Terek when elements of 3rd Panzer Division made a daring cross river assault there. But they only held the bridgehead for a few days in the history Fedorov had studied before the mission. Apparently that was not the case any longer. The column was well south of the Terek and moving swiftly on through the grey morning. The history had changed! Now the Germans had outflanked the defense at Grozny, and it looked like this column was pressing on to the Caspian coast and Makhachkala.

Suddenly Zykov thought he had a brief IFF return well south, near that city, but it vanished. They turned in that direction, somewhat leery of overflying the city itself. Even at night the sound of the Mi-26 would certainly arouse curiosity and draw unwanted attention if they flew low

enough to pick up Orlov's jacket signal if it was in passive mode. Fedorov ordered the pilot to move off shore and hovered about three kilometers off the coast before deciding to ease around south of the city. Then Zykov suddenly had a signal, and Fedorov's heart leapt. They found him!

They were soon pouring over maps, noting the position and trying to hone down the exact location. "It looks to be right near the coast on the bay," said Fedorov. "Right on the wharfs...could they be moving him to a ship? Let's get lower. I need to see the surrounding area."

"A ship would be good," said Troyak. "Easy to find once it leaves port and easy to take him there. If we get much lower we'll wake up the locals," he warned.

"It can't be helped. Pilot, see if you can get down under this cloud deck so I can have a look at the city."

The pilot nodded and the helo descended, the signal strengthening as it did so. As they lost altitude they were soon beneath the low clouds. His mind returned to the urgency of the moment, eyes scanning the ground below. There was a column of trucks on the road near the harbor quays and he was surprised by how different the area seemed now. Fedorov had been to Makhachkala before, but this wasn't 2021, it was 1942. They were looking at a squat, yet well built structure that looked like an old prison there and now he suddenly realized what had happened.

"Take us up, and quickly. Get us back under cloud cover!" He realized they could not linger there, an enormous hovering helicopter beating the skies with its massive props.

Troyak gave him a questioning look. "What do we do, Colonel?"

"See that structure there? I'm willing to bet the signal is coming from that location. That's looks to be a detention camp or prison. I could see guards and barbed wire on the walls. Orlov is there! But we can't very well just land here with a single squad. We've already drawn the attention of those guards. Let's get higher."

"What then?"

Fedorov's mind was working quickly. They brought only a single squad. There would be guards, perhaps a full battalion of NKVD here. This was a prison, and access would be very restricted. He would need more resources if they were to consider taking the place to rescue Orlov, and the longer they lingered here with the helicopter...

No, he could not risk the Mi-26. If anything happened to it then there

would be no way to attempt the delivery of those remaining two control rods to Karpov. He knew what he had to do.

“Can you activate his jacket from here?”

“I believe so.”

“Then get it to broadcast its IFF location beacon signal. You say that will range out to 50 kilometers and we should be able to pick him up again easily. But at the moment, we need to get this big fat helicopter out of here. Head for the *Anatoly Alexandrov*. We’ll need more resources.”

“And then what, sir?”

“Then we take that prison, find Orlov, and go home.”

Troyak took one last glance at the prison and the surrounding area now before they were swallowed by the cloud deck again. “Very well,” he said confidently.

“You think we can take the place and hold it for a while?”

“Certainly, sir.”

“But Troyak...From the looks of that column we saw back there the Germans could be here soon. There doesn’t seem to be any organized defense here. Something has changed in the history. They weren’t suppose to get this far south.”

“Well, sir. We can do something about that if you wish. I can stop that column.”

“You can stop it?”

“We have a full company of Marines on the *Anatoly Alexandrov*, and then some.”

“So we have,” said Fedorov thinking. Intervention would be risky, even rash, but then it occurred to him that they might set right whatever had gone wrong and save Makhachkala and the precious oil beyond at Baku. If the Germans were to take it who knows what the consequences might be.

He was torn for a time, reluctant to do anything to cause yet more alterations in the history, but at the same time he was looking at an invading army overrunning his homeland down there. The memory of Orlov’s note came to him now...

“Fedorov, are you reading this? Are you listening? I know you must have spent many long nights in your search. Well here I am! Yes, Gennadi Orlov, the Chief, the one who bruised your cheek that day in the officer’s mess... I always did have a Bolshevik heart. It’s not that I am not afraid to die. I worked my ass off in the service because I love my people, my country, my

Motherland. I want to tell my comrades in arms that I have never known cowardice or panic. I left you all to find a life here on my own, and one I never could have before. I do not know what may have happened to you and the ship and crew I once served. My dying wish is that you destroy our enemies once and for all. Be heroes, be valiant men of war so that history will remember you as defenders of the Rodina. Should you ever find this, and learn my fate, I hope that you, courageous Russian sailors, will avenge my death."

"Sergeant Troyak," he said slowly. "You will lead the assault."

"My pleasure, sir!" Troyak's smile lifted a good bit of weight from Fedorov's soul. They were going to war.

Chapter 27

Admiral Fraser sat in the wardroom aboard *Duke of York*, thinking. His eye fell on the long sword and gilded scabbard, which he always kept close with his sea chest and other personal effects. It was a very special gift, and one he always wore on special occasions and ceremonial events. He had intended to wear it for the surrender ceremony in Tokyo Bay aboard *Missouri*, but all that was on hold now. The war was not yet over. He could not yet put away the sword for good.

As he looked at it, the memories returned, the adventure of it all, and the hardship. Back then he was only Commander Fraser, but newly promoted and so very proud, a young man of thirty one-years. They had just backed down the Germans in the First World War, on land and by sea, and he had been part of the Royal Navy supervision of the internment of the German Fleet. It was a heady time, with England rising to meet any challenge in the world, and prevailing. So it was that he volunteered for the first cherry assignment to come along, a stint with the White Russian Caspian Fleet to see if he could help get their ships in fighting order.

Fraser led a small group of Royal Navy Sailors on a long trek from the Dardanelles, across the Black Sea to Batumi where they took to a train heading east for the Caspian. He was beginning to feel just a little bit like T. E. Lawrence, the daring British officer who had raised such a ruckus in the Middle East during the war. It was all to be a grand adventure, but it didn't turn out that way. The train was ambushed and the engineer refused to go any farther, which forced Fraser to literally back-track and return to Batumi. The only ship they could find was bound for Izmir far to the west on the coast of Turkey, but he gave it a go.

From there they took another train through Turkey this time bound for Baghdad, but once they arrive there no further transport could be found beyond a few horses and camels. So Lawrence of Arabia it was, he thought, and pressed on overland by horse, camel and foot. He and his party crossed Persia with a small Gurkha escort and eventually arrived at their destination, a small run down hovel with a single pier on the Caspian Sea called Enzeli.

The ships they were to inspect and refit were thick with rust and of no real military use, so Fraser determined to get himself north to Baku where he

hoped to find the bulk of the White Russian Caspian Fleet. What he found instead was a few miserable floating hulks, rusting away without any regular maintenance. Yet with typical British pluck and a can-do spirit, Commander Fraser set himself to the task of refitting the small fleet...Until the Bolsheviks arrived.

The Reds did not take kindly to outside interference in their revolution, particularly those aiding the Whites. Fraser's whole contingent was captured, stripped and bound on the quays while their clothing was searched, and then re-dressed only to be thrown into prison. The facilities were hardly accommodating, lice infested, unfurnished cells with bare earth floors. By day a wan light filtered through the metal grid on the ceiling, their only source of light and fresh air. Water was restricted to a single running tap for thirty minutes each day. There was no latrine, nor bedding of any kind, and the harsh conditions and poor nutrition with little more than watery soup, rice, and black bread laced with straw to eat soon undermined the men's health and morale.

Worse than that were the atrocious psychological abuse they were subjected to, marched out and forced to watch executions, disembowelments of condemned prisoners, particularly the women. On one occasion the Armenian warden in charge ordered the summary execution of nearly ninety locals, who were shot with rifles then slowly finished off with pistols while the British were forced to watch. Whole families were condemned and died in this manner, though sometimes young children were left alive to wander aimlessly about the prison halls crying for their lost parents for days on end before they disappeared.

Commissars questioned the British, inquiring into their politics, religion or other beliefs, and many were told they would soon suffer the same fate as those they had seen die. As it turned out, it was all a gruesome bluff intended to heighten the stress and suffering of the men, and so it was no surprise to Fraser when the first man to die, Seaman Marsh, was found to have slit his own wrists with a piece of glass. The Bolsheviks fought over the clothing, then left the body to rot in the two small sixteen by sixteen foot cells where all the men were quartered together. It stayed there for four days, raising a horrid stench before the guards finally removed it. Four others died this way.

Commander Fraser and all his men were presumed dead, but when they learned one of their men was to be released as an interpreter to aid prisoner exchange with the Georgian army to the south they hatched a daring plot to

get word home to England. If the man's word was not good enough, he swallowed a locket with a picture of Fraser's mother within as proof he was alive.

Great Britain was not called that without reason, particularly as she rose into her imperial prime after her victory in the First World War. The Crown's displeasure with the plight of their sailors soon led to their release. They had been marooned two long years in what came to be known as the "Black Hole of Baku." Twelve of the thirty men survived, Fraser among them.

In a strange twist of fate the ship that greeted them when they were returned to Batumi by train was HMS *Iron Duke*, the same name as that of a certain Royal Navy frigate that had fought Russians of another generation in the Black Sea of 2021. In that year, economics had temporarily trumped politics. Britain's interest in the Caspian was purely for the oil that remained there. In fact, the offices of the British Petroleum Corporation in Baku were just a few short blocks away from the old prison site where Fraser and his men had suffered so much. And at that very moment, the black berets of the Fairchild's Argonauts waited there for the return of Lieutenant Ryan's last X-3 helicopter and a ride back to the *Argos Fire*.

But that was another world, and one that Admiral Fraser would never see or know. This world seemed more than enough for any man to manage.

Fraser had revisited the nightmare on many a dark and lonesome night in later years. Then came the war and he saw himself rise to positions of increasing responsibility. Few men would know it to see him in his Admiral's cap and dress whites, but behind that pleasant and smiling face was a steely resolve born of those long nights in the Black Hole of Baku, listening to the moaning sobs of his men as they suffered there. As for the sword, the focal point that had triggered this avalanche of bitter memories in the Admiral's mind, it was the last gift of the men who survived, given to Fraser when they all were returned safely home. He kept it close ever thereafter.

The Russians, he thought. Churchill was correct about them, wasn't he? Our alliance made us strange bedfellows with Hitler and Tojo in the mix. Now that we've beaten them, we wake up and stare at one another wondering how in the world we'll ever get on together. What are they up to now with this bloody damn ship and its weapons from hell? If Tovey and Turing have it right...If this ship is from another time, then we may reap the whirlwind if we let it loose on the seas of our world again. What was going to happen if they threw the combined might of the allied fleets against it? This time there

would be no parley. This time it was war.

He gazed out the port hole and saw *King George V* steaming proudly off his starboard side. We've tangled with this monster once before, you and I, he thought. Perhaps Tovey should have made an end of it long ago when he had the chance. I'd think my odds were good for a victory with this battlegroup alone against that ship—man to man, steel against steel, and the rockets be damned.

Even as he thought that he remembered the bomb and imagined one going off right in the heart of his task group, rending his ships apart with unimaginable power. He had advised Admiral Nimitz to give the Russians fair warning: if they wanted to play that card, we could deal them the same death and destruction as well. Perhaps that would sober them up a bit and prevent the worst here.

Even as he thought that he knew what he would do in this Karpov's shoes. He's going to look out and see a wave of fire and steel coming at him, and he'll do everything in his power to save his ship and crew... Everything...

* * *

It was into the darkness of a similar prison that Orlov found himself walking now, though he knew nothing of the horrific legacy of the detention camps in this region, nor did he care. He had learned that the commissar in charge was the man he had been hunting, which was the only reason he permitted these little men to take him on the long truck ride south to Baku in the first place. They would bring him right to the man he wanted, and then he would kill him. It was all very simple in his mind, though he did not expect what happened that night as the truck column slowed and the engines turned off one by one.

He had been listening to something, a familiar noise in the background behind the grumble of the trucks on the road. Now, in the relative silence when the trucks stopped, he heard a sound that shocked him alert, a steady, deep thumping. He immediately looked up, knowing the sound was coming from the skies above. The NKVD Sergeant in his truck was watching him closely, and when he saw Orlov looking up at the unseen sky beyond the tarp of the truck, he leaned out the back and scanned the grey shelf of low clouds overhead.

Then Orlov felt his inner service jacket vibrate quietly, a sensation only he could perceive, like a cell phone that had been set to quiet mode. In an instant he knew what had happened. Someone had paged his service jacket! Now the meaning of the sound overhead was starkly apparent to him. It was a helicopter! His heart beat faster with the realization. *Kirov*...somehow they had found him! They were searching for him, but how was it possible? He was deep in the interior of Central Asia at the edge of an inland sea. Could they have tracked him here by tuning in to his service jacket? That much seemed obvious, yet none of the KA-40s could possibly reach this distance unless the ship was in the Black Sea! He was astounded, but he knew what he was hearing.

When he last left the ship it was approaching Spain, bound for Gibraltar. Could they have reversed course to head east again and enter the Black Sea? Then he remembered the night he had drunk half a bottle of vodka and tapped out that message in Morse code to Nikolin. My God, he thought! They must have picked it up! They're trying to find me!

Now he had to decide what to do about it.

He could activate his jacket from the collar pip and broadcast his exact location if he wished. Then again, he could also take it and throw it in the nearest fire. The more he considered his situation the more the idea of rejoining the ship and crew appealed to him. The track he was on now led to a sure and perilous cliff. This place was obviously a prison of sorts. He would certainly be searched, issued new prison clothing, and then he would be stuck here until he got close enough to Molla to choke the breath out of the man. After that he was a probably a dead man if he couldn't find his way out of the place. He would at least have the satisfaction of killing Molla, but for that he would forfeit the life of privilege and power he imagined he might have in years to come.

Now, however, with *Kirov* in the mix again he might just have his cake and eat it too! Life aboard *Kirov* did not seem all that bad in such cold harsh light. All he would have to put up with is petty disciplinary measures for jumping ship and going AWOL. No one would know he killed the pilot of the KA-226.

Then he remembered that pulse pounding jump from the helo when he saw the S-300s coming up for him. They were trying to kill me! They did not want to take the risk of leaving me at large. That was surely Karpov. This must be Fedorov, he realized now. He's the only one prissy enough to fuss

and bother over his history. He was probably afraid I would do something here and spoil the show.

A sullen anger returned to him and, as he brooded over it, he was paying no attention to the Sergeant from his truck when the man yammered at him to get a move on and head for the prison entrance with the others.

“You hear me, you big oaf! Get moving!”

Orlov felt a hard shove on his shoulder and he turned, glaring at the Sergeant, vast and threatening. “Touch me again and I will kill you,” he said clearly, and the Sergeant’s bravado seemed to melt under Orlov’s menacing stare. Then Orlov turned and headed for the gate.

Let Fedorov try to find me in here, he thought. What will they do, land a helicopter in the courtyard and send in a few Marines? This place looks like a fortress. Troyak had a twenty man Marine contingent aboard, but they would not be nearly enough to get inside this prison and control it long enough to conduct a search, particularly since I won’t have my jacket for very much longer.

He thought about that, recalling Svetlana’s whispers in his earbuds, words that could make him the most powerful man alive in this pitiful situation. He would be the man who knew tomorrow. That knowledge would certainly make him rich. Yes, they will take the jacket, and it will likely go to the Commissar, given its unusual quality and workmanship. In fact, I’m counting on that. It will make the man very curious. It will get me very close. I will kill him, and then I will call Fedorov and see what we can do.

The sound of the helicopter receded now, high overhead, and he knew they had gained altitude to avoid being seen. They know where I am, he thought. Well enough. I have work to do here before they come for me, if they dare.

Part X

Fallen Angels

*“New war provok'd; our better part remains
To work, in close design, by fraud or guile
What force effected not: that he no less
At length from us may find, who overcomes
By force hath overcome but half his foe...
Peace is despair'd,
For who can think submission?
War then, war
Open or understood, must be resolv'd.*

— John Milton, Paradise Lost

Chapter 28

The American submarines dove to 150 feet and hovered silently in the deep, unaware that *Kirov's* sophisticated sonar was still listening. A diesel-electric boat can be very quiet, but not by the standards of modern sonar systems, and the men that operated them. Tasarov had listened intently to the movement of the subs, giving Karpov easy course and speed guidelines to avoid contact. For his part, Karpov was no longer concerned about the undersea threat. *Admiral Golovko* was a superb ASW frigate on his starboard flank, and *Orlan* was steaming off the port quarter. Each had a helicopter in the air to keep a close watch on potential threats. He was confident that nothing would get close enough to cause any harm, particularly given the short range of torpedoes of this era.

Now his Fregat mind swept south, like a watchful radar, trying to ascertain what the Americans were up to. His KA-226 had them under surveillance, a little over 150 kilometers to the south, just beyond the surface range of the ship's systems. The contacts were piling up and he was representing the situation on the optical Plexiglas screen, which was now cluttered with contact points. His battle in 2021 had been against a single US carrier and a handful of escorting ships. Now he was facing a real armada, upwards of 60 discrete contacts reported, and more massing to the south.

Rodenko seemed very edgy about it, watching the threat grow beyond the far horizon with obvious worry. The Captain's demonstration had produced nothing more than silence from the enemy. Thus far the American fleet had not attempted to close, but Karpov had stubbornly remained in place, cruising in a wide circle as he sized up the situation.

The Captain could see Rodenko's restrained concern, and he stepped to his side. "Well? What is it Rodenko? Why the long face?"

His new *Starpom* shrugged, and he spoke in a low voice so the other bridge crew would not hear. "Steep odds this time, Captain. That's a very big force out there."

Karpov folded his arms, saying nothing for a time. Then he turned to Rodenko and confided in him. "I'll admit this silence is somewhat unnerving. I would have expected at least some response to the message we sent."

“I’m afraid we will have their response soon enough,” said Rodenko. “Those fleets will move on us soon. You can count on it.”

“You think they would dare attack us again after what I just showed them?”

“I do, sir. I think we have only stiffened their resolve. Why else would they refuse to answer our radio calls for negotiation?”

Karpov considered that. Then asked another question that Rodenko did not expect. “What would you do, Rodenko? How would you handle the situation if you were the Americans?”

Rodenko raised his eyebrows, surprised Karpov would solicit his opinion this way. “Well, sir. I think I would have no other option than a single massed attack, on a very wide front, widely dispersed. They know that if they attempt to concentrate we can inflict heavy damage, so they will have to disperse.

“And how would you react to such a tactic?”

“Get further east. Given the present position of their battlegroups to the south, I would want to be able to access the Pacific if necessary. The KA-226 is getting returns from the west as well, beyond Hokkaido in the Sea of Japan. I think we will soon learn there are forces moving up behind us there.”

“Access the Pacific?”

“To be on their right flank, sir. The disadvantage of a dispersed line formation is that we can maneuver to its flank, leaving the bulk of the line too far away to effectively close the range when we attempt to break through. We just can’t sit here and sail in circles. They have enough ships to form a pretty good net if they sweep north suddenly. Remaining in the center of the line like this is dangerous.”

“Yes, but they will regret trying to pull these fish in. We have three fast sharks here, Rodenko, with teeth sharp enough to bite through that net if they get so bold.”

“Agreed, sir, but if we move east we have other options. We retain the advantage of maneuver, and our speed and endurance come into play as well. We also move away from their forces to the southwest, thinning the odds somewhat. It’s a big ocean out there. If we have to fight, we can move, hit, move, like a skillful boxer.”

“And the Americans will try to get us on the ropes,” Karpov pointed to the Plexiglas screen now. “They will try to force us back on the Kuriles and into the Sea of Okhotsk.”

“I believe so, sir, at least if we stay here.”

They did not have time to continue the discussion. The KA-226 radar feeds were now indicating a significant change. “Sir, AEW One reports new movement from the Halsey Group, now steaming north at 25 knots.”

Rodenko gave Karpov a knowing look. “It’s begun. They are coming. I have little doubt we’ll see movement from the Sprague group within ten minutes as well.”

“Radar, how many discrete contacts on that new heading?”

“I’m reading eighteen surface contacts, extended on a wide front now, sir. Three contacts are leading that group some fifteen kilometers ahead.”

“Those will be radar pickets,” Karpov decided. “Begin jamming on all bandwidths we identified earlier. Isolate any new radar signals we can detect and begin jamming those as well.”

“Aye, sir.”

Rodenko had been correct. The American ships were advancing north, closing the range, and soon the ship began to get direct surface returns at extreme range, with additional contacts advancing on the left of the Halsey group. Ziggy Sprague was on the move as well.

“Yet the numbers we’re seeing in this maneuver do not represent the whole surface fleet to the south. Perhaps they are forming an advanced screen.” Karpov studied his Tactical board with the positions of every contact glowing softly. “They must be holding something back, at least a third of their force.”

“The carriers, sir,” Rodenko suggested. “They would not want to advance with those ships.”

“Yes, and they most likely left a screen of smaller destroyer class units with them. That means the ships we are seeing in this advance would be their heavier class units, perhaps accompanied by more destroyers and radar pickets. “

“They’re trying to get in close so they can then make a rush at us for a gun battle,” Rodenko pointed at the screen, gesturing with his finger.

“Of course, Mister Rodenko, they have no *Moskit-IIs*. And I believe the reason why their carriers have not launched yet is because they wish to try and coordinate the air attack with a surface engagement. If they can find us with their surface ships first, then those units can vector in their air groups.”

Rodenko nodded his agreement, and Karpov considered the situation, stroking his chin as he looked at the tactical board. They had been cruising at

fifteen knots, and now the Captain turned to the comm station.

“Mister Nikolin. Signal the flotilla to assume a heading 90 degrees due east and increase to 30 knots. *Orlan* will lead, with *Admiral Golovko* off the starboard side.” The Captain looked at Rodenko, and winked at him. “Let’s get some breathing room.”

“Sir, aye,” said Rodenko, and he repeated the order to the helmsman.

Karpov was still thinking. The carriers must be the contacts hovering beyond their surface radar range. At the moment they were still the real threat in his mind. Old and slow as these aircraft were, a massed air strike by hundreds of planes could be very difficult to handle. But I still have S-400’s, he thought. I can hit them even as they launch as long as the KA-226 can remain aloft in an AEW role. They will have no idea we can fire at such range, and it could deliver a nasty shock as they form up over their carriers, and before they disperse as Rodenko suggests.

The light of battle was in his eyes now, and he knew it would not be long before it was kindled in the fiery tails of his missiles. They remain silent in the face of my demonstration of overwhelming power. Very well, two can play that game. Let us see how long it is before they are calling *me* on the radio.

He turned to Rodenko again, and saw he was watching him, a curious look on his face. “Mister Rodenko,” he said. “Bring the ship to battle stations and signal same to the fleet.”

“Battle stations. Aye, sir. Signaling now.” Then another thought occurred to him and he approached the Captain with a question. “Sir, what about those two radar pickets in close?”

Sprague’s group still had two ships very near the Russians. They had been shadowing at a range of fifteen kilometers for some time, yet had never attempted to come any closer.

“Time to lose our shadow,” said Karpov. “We’ll give our young Captain on *Admiral Golovko* a taste of battle. He could use the experience. Tell Ryakhin I want him to put one P-800 *Oniks* on each of those shadowing ships.”

Known as the *Yakhont* on the export markets, the missile was a fast supersonic sea skimmer much like the original *Moskit*. Karpov knew his order was provocative, another jab at the raging bull to the south, but he could not allow those ships to stay within visual range. He ordered Nikolin to warn them off and, when they saw no compliance, the signal to fire was sent

over to *Admiral Golovko*.

The battle was finally joined.

* * *

Sprague was out on the weather deck watching the air crews spotting the *Helldivers* on the flight deck below. Movement at last, he thought. The word had come down from on high just minutes ago, and flashed to all fleet Task Groups in theater. The massive naval juggernaut was turning north; not just a few radar pickets this time, or a single strike wave off a few carriers. No, this time they were going in force to say hello to Uncle Joe up north and put the Russians in their place.

He had seen the massive detonation hours ago on the far horizon to the northeast. The evil looking mushroom cloud had loomed up in the distance, towering higher by the minute, and it took hours for the upper level winds to shear off its top and blow the colossal war cloud into a pallid smear over the sea. Whatever had caused it had been massive, an explosion far greater than anything he had ever seen in his life. He had heard the rumors of another event in the north Atlantic, though he was not there to see it firsthand. This war is going to end just like it started, he thought. We lost the *Wasp* in '41, and then it was said some kind of massive bomb sent *Mississippi* and TF 16 to their doom. Now we lose the *Wasp* again, and look what's on my horizon—another bomb.

There was a dull echo to it all, a hollow ring that spoke of impending doom. No matter, he thought. We're going up to see about it. I've got the fast cruisers and destroyers out in front, four light cruisers with the eight destroyers in Desron 62. Halsey has even better ships in his front scrimmage line—five cruisers, three of them heavy, and Desron 50. Behind them come the real heavy hitters. I'm sending *South Dakota* and *North Carolina*, Halsey has *Missouri* and *Iowa*. Let any one of them get in range of these Russian ships and you can call it a day. All it will take is one battleship to get in close.

We've been through tough situations before. The Japanese threw four battleships led by *Yamato* at me off Samar, along with eight cruisers and eleven destroyers, and all I had was a hand full of destroyer escorts with 5 inch pop guns to protect the jeep carriers. But we held the enemy at bay, and licked them in the end. That's exactly what we'll do now, he thought. We're going to ram an iron fist into the Russians and end this war once and for all.

He looked at his watch. They were ordered to spot strike groups and be ready for takeoff by 16:00 hours. He had been ready for the last ten minutes. With *Wasp* gone and casualties from the first sortie up north he was light on aircraft, but 180 of his original force of 260 planes were still crammed onto the decks of his three remaining carriers. Halsey had another 350. Let them have a look at over 500 planes darkening their skies when the order comes in. Even as he thought this he also knew the Brits were coming as well. Admiral Fraser was taking TF.37 around the north cape of Hokkaido, watching the far left flank in case the Russians had anything left in Vladivostok. He had four more carriers, 27 surface ships, including two more good battleships, and another 260 strike planes.

Any way he added it up, it spelled a swift and overwhelming victory, but it was a new world now. That distant cloud on the horizon loomed over the sea with a threat of utter extinction at its root. The world went absolutely crazy these last years, he thought. My God...Look what we did to Tokyo when Curtis Lemay let the bombers loose. The world went insane, and now we've really got the means to end it all if it comes to another general war.

So the Russians have the bomb... I'm told we've got one too. That was top secret. The men out on Tinian tending the airfields didn't even know about it, but Nimitz had sent the word through on a secure channel. They throw another one our way and we're going to repay them in spades. That was the terrible logic of war. Here we were ready for champagne, celebration, and a long ride home. Now this. The crews were working smartly, the planes armed and spotted. All we need now is the go sign, then God help the Russians, because we'll send them straight to hell.

It was then that the midshipman rushed in with a message. John Mulholland was under attack. He had been shadowing the Russians with his two radar pickets, *Benner* and *Sutherland*. Something came at them out of nowhere, like a couple lone kamikazes that had managed to slip through to dive on the ships for a kill. Sprague was on the radio immediately to ascertain his situation.

"Both ships hit," came the voice, harried and urgent. *"Bad fires amidships and Sutherland is dead in the water. Radar is all whacky. Can't read a thing now, and there's no way we can close or keep up with the bogies. They have just turned on a new heading. They're running east at high speed now."*

"Good enough, Commander. See to your men and withdraw south. We'll

take it from here.” Sprague had a look of real anger on his face now.

He turned to Captain William Sinton by the plotting table. “They just sucker punched John Mulholland,” he said hotly. “I’ve had about all I’m going to take from those bastards. “What’s the closest destroyer on the inner screen?”

“That would be *McKee* there off our starboard bow.”

“Signal *McKee* to come along side. I’m going for a little ride.”

“Sir? You’re transferring the flag?”

“Correct, Captain. Admiral Ballentine is still replenishing his carriers south near Tokyo Bay. We need speed, fire and steel on the front line now, so he was kind enough to send me a little present in compensation for *Wasp*, the battleship *Wisconsin*. I was considering transferring to the *Showboat*, but *Wisky* is a good bit faster, and that’s just what we need now to run these brigands down.”

The “*Showboat*” was the nickname for the most decorated battleship in the fleet, with 15 battle stars awarded to BB *North Carolina* thus far in the war. Yet at a top speed of 26 knots she was slower than the newer *Wisconsin*, an *Iowa* class ship that could run at 30 knots. They called her “*Wisky*” and spelled it exactly that way, without the letter H. Sprague heard what Mulholland said about the Russians running east, and thought that extra speed would soon matter a great deal. *Wisconsin* would give him that, and plenty of fire and steel along with her two sister ships, *Missouri* and *Iowa*.

“Big-T is yours, Bill. Your decks are spotted and the boys are ready to go. I’m going up there personally, and we’ll give it to Stalin, right on the chin.”

“Very well, sir. Good hunting.” Sinton snapped off a crisp salute.

Another voice whispered from within as Sprague was piped off the bridge, more sobering, and steeped in the wisdom this long war had instilled in him. It left off the bravado and thirst for revenge and settled on the heart of the matter, because any way he looked at it now he knew men were going to die here today.... God help us all, it whispered to him, God help us all.

Chapter 29

Oberleutnant Ernst Wellman, commander of Panzergrenadier Schützen-Regiment 3 looked the man over as he slowly pulled on his gloves. “You say the Russians have collapsed?” He was speaking to a broad shouldered Cossack, Lieutenant Koban of the 1st troop of the 82nd Cossack Squadron.

Russian Cossacks fighting for the German Army, thought Wellman, and they have been damn useful. This particular unit had been formed from prisoners swept up in the lightning advance toward Stalingrad, months ago at Millerovo. The Germans had taken some 18,000 prisoners, and were trying to find a way to herd them to holding areas behind the front line. An enterprising officer who spoke Russian knew that many were not happy over their fate in the Russian Army, and were very receptive to the Germans when they came. He hit on the idea of rounding up stray horses and mounting them to form a makeshift escort for the rest of the prisoners. As amazing as that sounded, it worked. The dissident Cossacks were only too glad to switch sides and join the German advance, and now several units had been formed to serve as security and reconnaissance troops in the wide ranging steppes of the Caucasus. They were familiar with the land, could infiltrate Russian lines easily with their language skills, and brought back valuable intelligence.

“I’ve had patrols out all night on horseback,” said Koban. “The NKVD have thrown up a few roadblocks as a delaying force. They are falling back on Makhachkala. Take that and the road to Baku is yours.”

“How strong is the enemy ahead of us?”

“Battalion strength at best, Oberleutnant. If you move quickly with your armored cars, you can be in the city by nightfall.”

Wellman looked at the man, his fair hair wild with the wind, field coat sodden with the recent rain, face reddened by the sting of the cold after long hours in the saddle. These Cossacks had been with them when they made the cross-river assault at Ishcherskaya, and fought bravely, side by side with his Panzergrenadiers. They had proved themselves reliable a hundred times over.

“Very well,” he said. “I’ll push on all morning and we’ll see if we can break through. The Russians are still fighting hard for Grozny, but here we have them flanked. Westhoven had given me permission to move the entire regiment up—Liebenstein’s Panzers in support. I’ll lead with my column,

and you, Lieutenant Koban, you will show us the way.”

* * *

“**Bukin** is going on the Mi-26 mission,” said Fedorov. “So I’m assigning you overall command of the rescue mission here.”

“Very well, sir.” Troyak folded his brawny arms, ready and willing.

“Now that we know where Orlov is, what do you advise?”

“A small team will be no good,” said Troyak. “We’ll have to take the place and hold it to conduct a search and get Orlov safely out.” He had a map of the city and spread it out on a work table. “The problem is the Germans. They have been pushing down this road where we saw that column. They could reach the harbor soon, unless we stop them.”

“Can you stop them?”

“I believe we could, sir. We have lots of equipment here, even hand-held anti-tank and anti-aircraft weapons, not to mention the two tanks and APCs.”

“Where would you land our main force?”

“Here, sir, right at the harbor. We can use this wide beach area on the isthmus. It puts us very near the facility where Orlov is, and all we would have to do is close these roads leading to the port district. I’ll send up blocking forces and we’ll stop the Germans in their tracks.”

It seemed as good a plan as any. They had the force at hand for the job, and they were Russians. He worried that the sudden appearance of hovercraft, and modern Naval Marines would be unsettling, but what could be more disturbing than the war the Germans pushed south on them like an oncoming wall of fire.

“It may be that the local defense forces would see us as reinforcements in a desperate hour,” said Fedorov. “After all, we’re Russian troops, just as you said, Troyak. All we have to do is say we were sent from Baku with the best new equipment available to stop the Germans.”

“And that is just what we will do, sir. There’s no trouble out there we can’t handle,” Troyak said confidently.

“I suppose you are correct, but if we were to just go with the helo, how would you operate with the Mi-26, Troyak? Could it be protected?” That was the key factor now. They could not afford to have the helicopter damaged or lost, and the fuel issue remained another problem.

“We would just land on the tip of this sharp isthmus here,” said Troyak

pointing at the map. Then we take the company in for a lightning fast assault, leaving one squad with the helo. It should be safe there.” The Sergeant could see that Fedorov was very worried about the helicopter.

“Which plan is best, to go in with force or try the lightning swift rescue with the helicopter?”

“You can never have too much combat power at hand for any mission,” said Troyak. If the Germans do come in force, we will want our assets ashore and ready to oppose them. If we go with the helo, we can take up to 90 men, only half the force, and no APCs. In that case we’ll need to rely on speed. I would suggest an amphibious assault with the entire force. We have tanks and APCs that will be very useful.”

“Yes, but we can’t leave anything behind here, Troyak. All the equipment must be safely withdrawn—and all our men. If any man falls, he must be brought out safely. We can leave no man behind.”

“Sir, we *never* leave a man behind. Rest assured.”

“Very well...prepare your mission. I want the option to use those hovercraft and the heavy assets they can carry. We must be in a position to attack in a matter of hours. I’ll square things with Bukin on the command change.”

“It won’t bother him, sir. He still thinks I’m his Gunnery Sergeant.”

* * *

The Mi-26 was soon squatting on the deck of *Anatoly Alexandrov* again, the Marines finishing up the loading of their equipment as evening folded the land with gray. Dobrynin had scoured the ship for any further reserve they could find, and the big helo had her tanks topped off for the long haul. He thought they would want to leave for the Pacific coast immediately, but Fedorov had pulled him aside earlier to tell him of the sudden change of plans.

“You’re taking the Mi-26 south again?”

“Not if I can avoid it, but I want the helo available in case we run into any problems. It can’t be helped, Chief.” Fedorov explained.

“But the Admiral said this mission east was very urgent, Fedorov. It’s a very long way. Why delay?”

“You act like the mission is running late, but remember, it’s 1942 here, and we have nearly three years before we need to be on the Pacific coast.”

“Mister Fedorov, we have two Kalmar assault class hovercraft here, each one carrying a PT-76 amphibious tank, and a contingent of 60 Marines. And over there we have an even bigger “Aist” Class hovercraft, with three more APCs and more Marines. You will have an assault contingent of 180 men! Why can’t they get the job done? Why do you still need the helicopter?”

Fedorov could see Dobrynin was worried about everything, and the stress of planning the mission lay heavily on him. “I want the helo in reserve until the outcome here is decided. I know you are worried about Bukin’s mission, but we’ll get it all done—this mission and the job out east,” he reassured him. “I’ll also have to leave some force with you here to protect the *Anatoly Alexandrov*. We cannot afford to lose this ship and its reactors. Otherwise none of the control rods will be worth anything at all. Leave things to me.”

He did not confide his remaining concerns—a deep inner worry over those two control rods. He had no idea whether they would even work, and he had been thinking about the situation for some time.

Suppose we conclude this mission safely, he thought. Suppose we then use Rod-25 here and all goes as we expect. We end up in the year 2021, and then what? Then we will know whether that helicopter out there ever really makes it to the Pacific coast and manages to contact *Kirov*. It will all be history by the time we get home. And what if I learn the mission failed—for lack of fuel because I had to stubbornly insist on using the Mi-26 to find Orlov. Keeping it here is just going to tempt me to use it again. The mobility it provides is very desirable...But if I’m the reason it fails to reach Karpov, what then? What does Karpov do here, marooned in the past with three of the most powerful ships in the world?

He struggled with that, wondering what would happen if push came to shove and another battle started in the Pacific with the Americans. The situation will be too tempting for Karpov, and he has the power to change everything now. Even if we do reach him, and supposing these two new rods work as we hope, where will it send *Kirov* and the other ships this time? The Admiral just assumes that they will all be brought home to the year 2021, but that is by no means certain. They could go anywhere, even further back into the past!

He ran into that same dead end in his thinking again. There was just no way to know. All they could do was stumble about like blind men in the dark. They had no comprehension of the forces they were playing with now, and no way to really control these time displacements.

Then there was that incident on the back stairs of Ilanskiy. What really happened there, he wondered? Was there a rift in time that I walked through, or was it something about me that caused that displacement? Troyak went down those stairs and nothing happened to him. But Mironov came up them and moved from 1908 to 1942! It was maddening.

If it was a rift, a tear in the fabric of time caused by the Tunguska event, then it clearly allowed displacement between those two points on the continuum. June 30, 1908 was hotwired and linked to August of 1942. It was a gap of thirty-four years. What if I went back up those stairs from this point in time? Would it take me forward, perhaps by another interval of time equal to thirty-four years? Would I end up in 1976? Again, there was no way to know, so this was all useless speculation. The only thing he could control for the moment was this mission, and so he shook himself from his reverie as Troyak came up, saluting.

“Sir, the men are ready.”

“Very well, Sergeant. Let’s get moving.”

Troyak looked over the gunwale of the main deck to the pilot in the hovercraft below and rotated his hand overhead to signal engine startup. There was a high pitch whine, then a lower growl as the big engines started. With tremendous noise.

Fedorov had briefed the men, telling them what was at stake. “I know that we may be opposed, but do not harm the Russians if it can be avoided. If it is possible to take prisoners and hold them while we find Orlov, all the better. But the mission must not fail. No man can be left behind. Not one piece of equipment either.” He left that out there, and each man considered what he might have to do now, facing their own countrymen in a potential conflict here, as well as the Germans.

“I just hope my Great Grandfather isn’t here,” Corporal Subakin jibed, and the other men laughed.

They were on their way.

* * *

Orlov heard the footsteps in the hall, and smiled inwardly. At last, he thought. The Commissar was finally here. Once inside the prison they had taken his overcoat, cap and service jacket, just as he expected, and they were hanging on the coat rack in the corner, objects of curiosity or evidence to be

fodder for the interrogation that was coming next. Orlov was suddenly reminded of that first session with Loban under the Rock of Gibraltar. He wondered if this Molla would get curious and meet Svetlana the way Loban had?

The door opened and a man stepped in, medium build, and dressed in a plain NKVD uniform with side pistol holstered and two thin leather straps crossed on his chest. Right over the place where the man's heart was missing, thought Orlov. Yet as nondescript as his dress was, the man's face and eyes were quite revealing. He was much younger than Orlov had expected him to be, and there was a cold, arrogant air about him, the character of a young man who had come into too much authority and power before he had lived enough to know how to use it. His eyes seemed to squint as he looked Orlov over, narrowed slits with obsidian ice behind them.

The Commissar walked to his desk, his footfalls loud on the old wood floor, but he did not sit down. He stood, regarding Orlov with those cold black eyes, one hand on his left hip. Then he calmly drew his pistol, raising it to the level of his cheek to take aim square at Orlov's head.

"Name," Molla's voice was flat and terse, edged with impatience.

"Orlov."

"Where did you get that uniform?"

Orlov looked at him, a glow of defiance on his cheeks as he sized up the situation. He needed to get the man closer to him.

"I took it from a dead man. He had little use for it, and I thought it would get me to my destination a little easier."

"Dead man? You killed this man?"

"Of course," Orlov returned quickly. "I don't think he would have given me his uniform otherwise."

"You killed an NKVD Officer?" Molla's voice was loaded with recrimination now, the slits of his eyes more pronounced.

"Yes, I killed him. He insisted on taking me to Novorossiysk, and I did not wish to go there."

Molla's hand never wavered as he held the pistol, and now he slowly moved his finger tight on the trigger. It was a Nagant M1895, an old, reliable revolver dating back to the days of the last Tsar. Orlov could clearly see the bullet laden cylinder, and knew a round was chambered and ready to fire with one squeeze of Molla's finger, but he was heedless of the danger. All he could think of was getting Molla closer.

“They say you claimed to have orders for me?”

“That was a lie.”

“Of course it was. No one gives me orders here, except perhaps Beria, and he is not around at the moment.”

“Lucky for us both,” said Orlov with a shrug.

Molla sensed something in the man, a strange kinship that was evident in his devil may care attitude. He was holding a pistol on the man, and yet he did not think the frank and direct answers he was receiving were born of fear. Most men would be clearly intimidated, eyes averted, with that pathetic pleading look as they struggled to find a way to prove their innocence. But not this man. No. He's unlike any man we've hauled in for a good long while now. This one is a fallen angel, just like me, dark seraphim, bound for hell and determined to start the fires now while he lives. It's as if he thought he was invulnerable!

“This NKVD man was wearing that jacket?” Molla nodded to Orlov's service jacket now.

“No, that was mine. All I took was the overcoat and hat.”

“It was yours you say? I have never seen anything quite like it.”

“That was what Loban said at Gibraltar.” Orlov baited his line, wondering if the Commissar would nibble.

“Loban? You were at Gibraltar?”

“How do you think the NKVD got hold of me in the first place? They had me under that stinking Rock of theirs and Loban sent me on a little cruise.”

“I see...” Molla obviously knew who Loban was, which was exactly what Orlov was hoping. “You said the NKVD man wanted to take you to Novorossiysk?”

“I suppose he wanted to turn me over to the military there. I'm a deserter.”

“A deserter?”

“Navy. That's where I got that service jacket.”

“You were an officer?”

“Chief of the boat.”

“Of course you know what we do with deserters. Yes? But a few more questions before I kill you. Or perhaps I should leave you for the Germans, coward. Loban sent nothing more?”

“Oh, he sent a good deal more, but I had no use for it. I've come a long way and I left the attaché behind.”

“I see...” The commissar slowly lowered his pistol, resting his arm at his side, and sat on the edge of his desk, just a little closer to Orlov now. “Just where did you think you were going, Orlov? What were you doing at Kizlyar? Are you a German sympathizer? A Spy? Were you trying to get through our lines to get to those pigs?”

“Of course not,” said Orlov hotly. “I’m Russian! I was looking for the pigs on *this* side of the wire, men who roust women and children out of their homes and truck them off to places like this in the night. Men like *you*, Commissar.”

Molla stood up very quickly, his hand tight on the revolver again. He had killed a hundred men for far less cause than this man just gave him; interrogated thousands more with seared and severed flesh. He was brash, young, and full of himself, and now he had a strong sense that the man he had before him was of the same dark order, a demon of a man who could kill without remorse, without conscience. These were the most dangerous men in the world, he thought. I could use a man like this...if I could control him. Then his righteous anger flared, as he realized just what the man had said to him. Bound for hell or not, we still keep order.

“You stinking piece of shit!” Molla swore at Orlov now. “Tell me... Which eye should I put the first bullet through?” He raised his pistol again, pointing it right at Orlov’s forehead.

“Tell *me*,” Orlov said darkly, looking him square in those icy black eyes. “How long can you breathe when I get both hands around your neck?”

Chapter 30

The Duke sat at his desk, hands folded, a light in his eyes that signaled determination. He regarded the man before him favorably, good deportment, of seeming sound character, adequately trained and possessed of skills that would be most useful. Now down to the matter at hand.

“Mister Thomas, good of you to come so quickly.”

“My pleasure, your Grace.”

“Indeed. Well, I have a matter to put before you, the long term assignment I mentioned to you at our last meeting. By the way, your delivery was certified and accepted for processing and completion by tomorrow. I’m very pleased.”

“Thank you, your Grace.”

“Now then. I’m going to be taking a little trip. I suppose I should say a rather long trip, and I would like to ask you to accompany me. Your role would be to insure my safety, and secure certain effects I plan of transporting with me. You will also act as my agent in all ways—my right hand man, as it were. Might you be interested in such a position?”

“Sir... I’m honored to even be considered.”

“Excellent. But I must tell you, Mister Thomas, that this would be for a very extended period of time. There would be no termination date. You would have to consider the assignment indefinite. Given those circumstances the compensation would be commensurate.”

“Thank you, sir. I deeply appreciate your consideration and I would be most interested.”

“The situation would also find us incommunicado for the duration of the assignment. Should you have any pressing matters that would require your personal attention...”

The Duke’s raised an eyebrow, something Thomas had seen him do on a number of occasions when his mind had reached an absolute conclusion on something. He was telling him that there was no alternative. The position would require his full commitment. Lord, he thought. A full time position with the Elvington estate! Right hand man to his Grace, Duke Roger Ames! He was quick to clear the field of any potential obstacle to such an appointment.

“I am entirely at your disposal, sir.”

“Good then. We’ll be leaving very soon. Shall we say forty-eight hours? I have made all the arrangements, however, if you have to settle any personal affairs, please do so. I’m afraid I can’t be more specific as to the nature of the assignment, or the duration at the moment. It will all be apparent to you in good time.”

“I shall look forward to it, sir. And thank you for your gracious consideration.”

“Well enough. You’ll be given information on where to meet me. I shall provide for all your needs in regards to clothing. The secretary will ask you for sizing, but if there are any personal effects you cannot be without, a small attaché would be suitable. Thank you, Mister Thomas. We shall meet again in a few days time.”

Thomas lowered his head in a polite bow and withdrew. The Duke watched him go, smiling quietly. If you only knew what I’ve just given you, he thought. Compensation indeed! The world we know will not last another week. It’s been a marvelous experiment, a grand play, but now I’m afraid there is trouble in heaven that cannot be resolved. Time for the Angels to make their leap to freedom, and you, my Dear Mister Thomas, have just been given something few men on this earth will have here in days to come—your life.

He slipped his hand into his pocket, fingering the object there where he was fond of keeping it. I shall have to find a more secure way to keep it handy, he thought. A nice chain, simple, yet durable should fill the bill. The cool touch of metal was very reassuring, and he took the object in his pocket out and held it up to the light, smiling at the expert craftsmanship of the key. It looked like a small black iron skeleton key, the outer metal weathered nicely to simulate age, yet he knew the inside was a smoothly machined chamber that housed something very special, something he would now rely on for his very life.

The anomaly he learned of earlier had been very curious. He looked over the data very carefully, and it was certainly suspicious, so much so that he flew to London immediately to see it firsthand. The Duke was a trustee of the British Museum, and had made lavish donations over time. He was fond of the place, and would often spend long hours just wandering the halls and delighting to the exhibits. There he could lose himself for a time, forgetting the mundane modernity of the world outside and dwelling in better times in

his mind. Better times.

So it was that he received a most unusual call about one of the especial exhibits—the Eglin Marbles—and he went to see about it directly. Doubting Thomas that he was, he did not believe the first reports made to him. He wanted to see the anomaly himself, and thoughts of the excursion now returned to him.

“Are you certain it has not been altered in recent years?” he asked the curator.

“Absolutely certain, sir. The piece has been here, in this very display case, for years now, completely undisturbed.”

“And was there any record of the damage, any sense of how it happened? No sir—at least not officially. There would have been an insurance claim, of course, and we could locate nothing of the sort. What we do know is that it happened in 1941, during the time the marbles were being transported for protection. As you may know, many were moved into the tube—but not all, sir. This one here was transported to the United States for a time, aboard HMS *Rodney*, to be precise.”

“HMS *Rodney*? Isn’t that a battleship?”

“It was, sir. She was built in the interwar years and served ably throughout the conflict. Had a few very choice engagements, she did, sir.”

“Do go on, Chelmsley. I’m assuming this has something to do with this damage.”

“It does indeed, sir. The old girl found herself in more than one good scrap at sea, but there were two battles of particular note. One was in May of 1941, which is when we believe this damage occurred. If you recall, sir, that was when John Tovey was running down the *Bismarck*. Old *Rodney* was scheduled for overhaul and was actually supposed to be en-route to the US. She had a contingent of war-weary passengers aboard, a goodly sum in gold bullion from the treasury, and some very significant segments of the Elgin Marbles, this piece in particular. They were all being transported for safekeeping, sir, but the Germans got into it and the *Bismarck* sortie was most inconvenient. Admiral Tovey had to pull *Rodney* into the chase, not that she was built for such work. She might make 21 to 23 knots on a good day, but her boilers were rather dodgy at the time. It was a miracle that Dalrymple-Hamilton—that was her captain at the time, sir—was able to steer her right into the thick of things and catch that German ship.”

“You say this ship had it out with *Bismarck*?”

“That she did, sir, before Admiral John Tovey came up with *King George V* and settled the matter. A battle at sea can be a rather rousing affair, sir. *Rodney* was *Nelson* Class, and she had big 16 inch guns all laid out in three turrets on the foredeck.” Chelmsley extended his arms in a wide circle to illustrate the girth of the guns, smiling.

“The guns were so powerful that they damn near shook *Rodney* to pieces. Most of the damage she sustained in that battle was self inflicted. That and the rough seas at the time gave her cargo holds a bit of a good hard shake, sir. We think the damage occurred there when one of the crates shifted and burst open. We have it on report, sir. The piece was re-fitted, it seems, and must have been done by someone aboard. Unbelievable as it may sound, sir, they just tamped in a little mortar and put the chipped section back.”

“It was not noticed?”

“It may have been, sir, but we’ve no way of knowing that now. All we know is that no fuss was made about it, and no insurance claim ever filed. But...well there it is, sir.” Chelmsley pointed at the display where the Selene Horse sat in special circumstances for a rare cleaning and inspection prior to the planned relocation to a deep underground vault.

“The damage was noticed again on this very inspection, sir. We might not have even seen it except for all this war news prompting the relocation.”

The piece was a select sculpture of the famous Elgin Marbles, segments of the Parthenon that had been transported to England by Thomas Bruce, the 7th Earl of Elgin from 1801 to 1812. Some called him a savior for bringing such sublime art to the shores of the Kingdom, others called him a vandal and pillager, the famous poet Byron among them. In any case, the marbles were here, and the Duke had always been very fond of them.

“Curst be the hour when from their isle they roved,” said the Duke, quoting Lord Byron’s poetry. “But at least they’re here, and largely in one piece. God only knows what might have happened to them otherwise.”

“Precisely, sir.”

The Duke looked at the sculpture, still admiring the piece, perhaps the most striking of the entire Elgin collection. It’s eyes still bulged with the veins on its neck and face, the labor of a long night pulling the chariot of Selene, the Goddess of the Moon, through the heavens. It was sublime. Well, brigand or not, the Centaurs now battle the Lapith warriors here in Room 18 of the British Museum. It’s a pity their struggle ends here, once and for all time. They’ve survived centuries of strife and turmoil, but now there may be

no vault deep enough for what is coming next.

“And the second engagement?”

“Sir?”

“You say this battleship had two battles of particular note.”

“Ah...Yes, sir. The second was a rather cloudy incident in the Med. She was with HMS *Nelson*, her sister ship during a big relief operation bound for Malta. Something happened, I’m not exactly sure what, but it sent both battleships and the whole escorting force racing back to Gibraltar, leaving their charge early. It was most unusual, but I’m told the ship encountered something very mysterious in that campaign, and both *Rodney* and *Nelson* sustained damage that the Royal Navy was keen to cover up.”

“I see...Well, war is war. Secrets are secrets, and the two are often bedfellows. Very good, mister Chelmsley. That piece there is the damaged segment?”

“It is, sir. I’ve left it aside, but of course it’s the horse’s head itself you’ve come to see. If you would be so kind as to put on these gloves should you wish to inspect it more closely...”

“Of course. That will be all now, Mister Chelmsley.”

“I shall be right outside should you need me, sir.”

The Duke waited until the man left him alone, then slowly pulled on the white museum gloves as he regarded the small chipped segment that had been set aside. He leaned forward, noting the curious depression in the stone, and was truly amazed at what he saw. Could it be, he thought?

He reached into his pocket, removing a small object and looking furtively about him to make certain there were no surveillance cameras. Chelmsley had assured him complete privacy for this special viewing, but he remained a naturally cautious man.

The key sat in the palm of his gloved hand, starkly contrasted against the satin white. He reached out to steady the chipped segment as he placed the key into the depression in the stone, amazed to see it was an absolutely perfect fit! The key was now nestled snugly in the chipped segment and he realized that a similar object must have been embedded there at one time. My Lord! A key! In the Elgin Marbles...

And not just any key.

The unique shape and coded teeth of this key made it unlike any other. He was one of the very few privileged to hold one, though it was now clear to him that someone else had deliberately placed another in this very sculpture

—embedded within the Selene Horse! Was it there when this segment was chipped off—perhaps during the sea engagement Chelmsley described? Astounding if it was. Who could have placed it there, ages and ages ago when the sculpture was first given life in Classical Greece? And more, who might have taken it if it was discovered in the hold of HMS *Rodney* in May of 1941? His mind was full of questions, and a light of excitement was in them.

We aren't the first, he realized now.

There were others...

He reached for the key, putting it safely back in the special inner pocket of his jacket and reminding himself to be sure to get that chain so he could wear it around his neck beneath his clothing in the future. He must never be without it again.

That thought shook him from his reverie and his mind now ran down particulars of the arrangements. Everything seemed in order now. He had not overlooked anything of any importance. The Duke was a very careful man.

Now he was increasingly confident that all would work as planned. The tuning had been very precise, or so he was led to believe. The location was now secure, all the riff raff and commoners seen off to their dull, unwitting lives. It would be a fine morning for the trip, and everything was ready. He would take the drive up through Newcastle tomorrow and do a last bit of sightseeing. Then it would be up and over the causeway beneath the Snook along the narrow neck of Holy Isle to Lindisfarne castle. He would be sure to keep his appointment by arriving a full day early.

Ah, if they really knew what it was all about, he thought. The whinstone on Beblowe Crag hides more than anyone could possibly imagine. Good hard rock, whinstone, which is why it has survived the tides of both time and sea for so very long, not to mention the considerable turmoil and bother of politics through the ages. A pity that it will not survive any longer.

They had but three days left...all the Angels were ready to leap from this heaven on earth into worlds of newfound freedom. How would it be? Lucifer fell for nine days, he thought—nine days falling into hell. That will certainly not be the case for me, not for his Grace Sir Roger Ames, the Duke of Elvington. I'm off to keep a special appointment with yet another Duke! Let the other Angels and Demons fall where they may.

Part XI

Breakout

*“This late dissention grown betwixt the peers
Burns under feigned ashes of forged love
And will at last break out into a flame.”*

— William Shakespeare

Chapter 31

Battleships are awesome things, thought Halsey. He was riding one now, and staring off the starboard side of the bridge at its twin sister. *Missouri* and *Iowa* were works of sublime engineering, steel shaped in long, graceful lines, yet with stark edges and raw power that was evident in every angle and curve of the ship.

Speak softly and carry a big stick, thought Halsey. That's exactly what he had in hand now. 'The Big Stick,' battleship *Iowa*, was winking at him as it executed a 10 point turn to starboard, signaling by lantern. Her long, swept bow cut through the rising sea leaving a frothy white spray to wash the foredeck where the big "61" was painted in clear block numerals.

The two ships had steamed north together, but now, in keeping with the new plan of attack proposed by the British Admiral Fraser, they were spreading out in a wide line of advance. *Iowa* was peeling off to starboard to take a position at least ten kilometers to the northeast. Halsey's ship, 'Mighty Mo' held steady on. Together the two big battleships would be the center of the line with their massive 16 inch guns. Heavy cruisers would flank them at ten kilometer intervals. *Boston* and *St. Paul* were on the far right, speedy ships at 33 knots but with nine 8 inch guns and twelve 5 inchers to go with them.

A third ship in this same class was to the left, the *Chicago*, and further out were the light cruisers San Diego and Flint, with no less than sixteen 5 inch guns. A destroyer from Desron 50 filled the gap between each of the larger ships, and all together Halsey was moving a line of steel north that stretched nearly a hundred kilometers long. As *Iowa* pulled away he saw the much smaller destroyer *Gatling* move up to take her place, slowly shifting east to take up her position in the gap.

It was unlike anything Halsey would have ever ordered, this long line of widely spaced ships. A task force should be tightly grouped, with smaller ships screening the principle units and the supporting umbrellas of flack from the entire group providing the air defense. Not so here. Each ship would be on its own, within visual range of vessels to either side but at very wide intervals. Fraser's argument for the formation had seemed ludicrous at first, until Halsey saw that mushroom cloud off his starboard bow as promised by

the Russians. Now they would position their assets so that if the enemy threw another at them, they could take out no more than one or two ships in the line. It was a cold calculus, but it just might work. There were enough ships to snag the enemy in a steel dragnet, and once contact was made, the sighting ship would radio its position, course and speed to all the others, then the line would coil to that spot like a whip, and they would lash the Russians to death on the cruel seas of the north.

So it was planned.

Halsey's group was only part of the line. Further west Ziggy Sprague had forsaken his post on Big T and was leading in more heavy ships on the battleship *Wisconsin*. He had the smaller *North Carolina* and *South Dakota* to either side, no less formidable, and a pair of light cruisers on either flank.

My, my, thought Halsey. This whip is knotted with steel. We're sweeping north with no less than five battleships, and once we find these bastards we'll give the word to the carriers and send 500 planes up to join the show. Bomb or no bomb, the Russians had bitten off more than they could chew this time, and he was looking forward to sinking the big teeth of Mighty Mo into the enemy, to end this thing, once and for all.

Hopefully the weather would cooperate and give them clear skies for good hunting. A pair of tropical storms had bedeviled the fleet the last few weeks. Tropical Storm Frances had just dissipated 150 miles due east of Tokyo, but now a second storm named Grace was making a beeline right for Tokyo Bay. Luckily the fleet's advanced search line had already moved well north, because Halsey still had bad memories of the big storm last December that laid up a number of good ships and men in the hospital. Typhoon Cobra had sunk three destroyers, ripped the bow off a cruiser and damaged carriers and even battleships when it caught the fleet at sea.

They were calling it "Halsey's Typhoon" now. The weather men had reported its location to him so he could try and avoid the storm, but they were dead wrong. He ended up sailing Third Fleet right into the maw of 145mph winds. They had lost a hundred planes, and worse, 790 men in the incident, and Mother Nature had hurt the fleet in a way the Japanese were now powerless to do.

They probably thought it was another of their "Divine Winds," he thought. Not this time. Wind estimates on this Tropical Storm Grace were no more than 70mph and the barometer was reading only 985 at its low point. That would kick up the seas behind them, but they were already clear of the

storm. He had ordered the carriers to move a little farther north as well to avoid difficulties, and hoped all would be well.

The fleet was as strong as ever. The word had been passed that Halsey was going north, gloves off, and ready for anything. He was taking nearly sixty ships with him, and behind them there were sixty more with Admirals Spruance, Ballentine and others. The US Navy was the biggest typhoon in the sea now, and the storm was blowing north.

* * *

Aboard Kirov they saw it coming on the radar feeds, a long line of contacts spreading out on a wide front and heading north. Karpov studied the tactical board for some time with Rodenko, ready to transmit his battle orders to the other ships in his small flotilla. A picket line of thirty four ships was forming up, spaced at intervals of 5 to ten kilometers. The line stretched nearly 200 kilometers, with the western end sweeping off the coast of the Kuriles and extending east into the Pacific.

“They came to this idea in the Atlantic as we approached Newfoundland,” said Karpov. “And this was the same tactic the British thought to employ in the western approaches to Gibraltar.” He could clearly recall Fedorov’s assessment of the situation in the last briefing with Admiral Volsky in the Med.

“After what happened to the Americans Admiral Tovey will also be wary of concentrating his force in any one central task force. For this reason I believe he will not enter the Straits of Gibraltar tonight, even if he does get there first. No, sir. He will wait for us in the western approaches, and he will disperse whatever force he has in a web there, which we will have to penetrate. Then, once we commit ourselves to a breakout heading, he will make one mad dash and engage us with everything he has—all his ships and every plane they can put into the air. His dilemma is how to close the range on us as quickly as possible so the fourteen inch guns on his battleships can have a chance at getting some hits. And it would only take one hit from a shell of that caliber to decisively shift the battle in his favor.”

Then he heard his own voice answering: *“If they disperse their forces as Fedorov suggests, then we must pick one point in the line for our breakthrough, preferably at one of the extreme flanks. We will attack this point in his defense and neutralize it quickly. We do not have enough missiles*

left to engage all the battleships decisively at one time in this option. But we can hit one very hard, and then simply run through the gap at high speed.”

The Admiral had his doubts about the tactic. He could still hear Volsky’s heavy voice; see his finger wagging in his mind’s eye: *“What if this Admiral Tovey places his battleships close enough to one another for supporting fire? These big guns have a long range, correct Fedorov?”*

“They do sir. With good light for sighting we can expect fire from as far away as 28,000 meters, even 32,000.”

“So even if we do saturate and neutralize one of these big ships the others may very well still have the range on us. This is not a very satisfactory situation, Karpov.”

Not a very satisfactory situation...It was Volsky’s typical way of discarding the most direct and obvious option in battle. The Admiral had always been cautious at sea, he thought. My advice to Admiral Volsky back then was to send out the P-900s and put one on each of the big battleships with pinpoint precision. Then make the offer to parley. The enemy would see all four of their best ships hit and afire. Even if they were not wounded badly by the single missile, it would still be a strong psychological blow.

Volsky’s conclusion echoed in his mind now as he considered that the enemy was setting up the same kind of battle they had faced at Gibraltar...

“Well here we are at the eleventh hour, gentlemen. I have heard your analysis, and yet there is one other weapon we have not discussed that we might try using here.”

“Sir? I thought you did not wish to consider our nuclear option.”

“Oh, I considered it, Mister Karpov, and I have discarded it. The weapon I am thinking of now is intelligence. We have looked at two options here. The first has considerable risk. We make a run at this man, give him a shove as we go and hope to slip by him in the dark. It might work if our luck holds out. Now you suggest that we punch this man in the face first, and then threaten him with further harm if he does not stand aside. Yes, it is a strong tactic. Something our old friend Orlov might do. But I will propose another solution. Suppose we talk to this man before we punch him in the nose, eh? I think he might be more inclined to hear us.”

“Negotiate first? Before we’ve shown him what we can do to him if he persists?”

“Exactly. Mister Karpov, I believe he has already seen what we are capable of—weeks ago in the North Atlantic. He already knows we can hurt

him before he even catches a glimpse of us. Yes, he knows how dangerous we are. He knows we can hurt him severely, and yet here he comes. That is a different sort of bravery, is it not."

Negotiate first. Well I have tried that option as well, Admiral, Karpov spoke inwardly to Volsky, missing him strangely, and wishing he was here now. When Volsky was present the full weight of the decision to fight and inflict grievous harm on the enemy was not Karpov's alone. He could advise, lay out tactics and strategy, and execute as a skilled fighting officer that he was. But the moral weight of the action rested with Volsky.

This time the Admiral was not here. He was decades away, fighting his own war with the Americans, and Karpov wondered if he was even still alive. He sent me out as his strong knight, he thought, He gave me the Red Banner Pacific Fleet, and here is all that remains of it, still fighting the Americans.

Negotiate first—and look where that got me. Halsey is still out there, every bit as determined as the British Admiral was, and here he comes.

"We're going to have a real fight on our hands, Rodenko," he said in a low voice. "They are throwing out this skirmish line with the intent of locating us. Our jammers have fogged over their radar screens and they will need to make visual contact now."

"That they will, sir," said Rodenko.

"I expect that they will have planes up soon as well."

Something in Karpov's voice seemed hollow and empty now, a weariness, a resignation. Rodenko was watching the Captain closely, seeing how his eyes shifted back and forth over the tactical board, noting one position or another, his mind engaged, calculating, yet a kind of mechanical reflex to it all. It was as if he was a machine, a computer engaged in the cold operations of war. Yet behind his eyes Rodenko knew there was also a man, and one who had suffered and endured much emotional turmoil. Karpov seemed wasted and spent now, and very tired. The adrenaline began when the fleet engaged Captain Tanner...so long ago it seemed now, but only days ago in real time. The Captain had not had much sleep, and from time to time he could perceive the odor of vodka on his breath. There is only so much a man can take.

He wondered what he would do if something happened to Karpov. How should he carry on the fight? What if it came down to that same desperate moment that had prompted Karpov to use nuclear weapons? Would he have the guts to do the same?

“Well I am not going to sit here and wait for the planes to show up like a bad weather front on our radar screens, Rodenko. The instant I see them forming over those carriers, I’m going to attack. If one of those ships spots us before that, I’ll blow it out of the water.”

“Aye, sir,” Rodenko said quickly, yet he could feel and hear the edge in Karpov’s voice. Everyone on the bridge could feel it too.

Rodenko glanced at the ship’s chronometer. It was only a matter of time before the Americans got close enough to spot them. Then the planes would come—perhaps more planes than they had missiles. There would be carnage in the skies for a wild hour...Then something would get through.

“Sir, Captain Yeltsin on *Orlan* requests battle orders.”

Karpov looked at Nikolin, a sallow expression on his face.

“Tell him I am going to hit the Americans here,” he was still looking at the tactical board as he pointed. “On their right flank.” Tell him that we will begin the action ourselves, and assign him his targets. I have moved the KA-226 to a position to allow us to better identify what we are shooting at. I’m going to punch a hole in their line right here, and sink whatever I have to in order to do so. Signal *Admiral Golovko* that they should keep their helos aloft on active ASW watch. Go to active sonar. I want no surprises.”

“Very well, sir.”

Rodenko was watching the long range radar returns now, noting the refresh of the screen as the system updated at intervals. Then he experienced a thrum of anxiety, for he saw what looked like a definite concentration of smaller contact returns to the south. His radar man saw it as well and turned to report, but Rodenko raised a hand, silencing him. He would deliver the bad news himself.

“Captain, I believe I have long range returns on air units forming to the south.”

He saw Karpov’s eyes shift quickly to him from the tactical board. The Captain licked his lips, as though he were very thirsty, needing water and sustenance. His right hand strayed to his brow, and he rubbed a spot above his eyebrow. There was no clasping of his hands behind his back this time. His chin was not elevated and his eyes seemed dark and smoldering, not bright and alive as Rodenko had often seen him in combat. There was no instruction to begin a log entry to commence the action, with all the drama Rodenko remembered when they had engaged the battleship *Yamato*. Karpov had the look of a man who was about to fight his last great battle, confident

but wary and burdened by a strange feeling of presentiment, like Napoleon at Waterloo. There was just a moment's hesitation, and then he spoke, his voice low, yet firm.

"Mister Samsonov. P-400s. Long range barrage in two batteries of eight. We are going to spoil their party."

"Aye, sir. Keying targets and ready to fire."

"How many will that leave us?"

"Sixteen on the P-400s, sir."

"Sixteen? Oh yes... We fired half the entire inventory against the Americans in 2021. We'll use the remainder now in 1945, and hit them before they have the slightest inkling of any danger. Perhaps we can pluck this weed out by the root this time, before it flowers."

A last whisper of recollection came to Karpov now. It was Volsky speaking to Doctor Zolkin just after he had laid out his plan of attack against the British.

"I told you this man was one of the best tactical officers in the fleet, Doctor."

"Yes," said Zolkin. "He has the bravery of being out of range. It's very comfortable—but just a little a bit devious at the same time."

Yes, just a little bit devious, thought Karpov. What else should one expect from a Fallen Angel?

Chapter 32

The line swept north for two long hours, covering just over 50 nautical miles in that time. Halsey had three radar pickets out in front of the main skirmish line, but they were having fits with their radars. So the orders went out to man every weather deck and crow's nest with eyes, and it was down to binoculars again, and the hope of a clear horizon.

Destroyer escort *Fox* was out in front, making 30 knots as she raced north. The seas had been heavy behind them, driven by the gales of a budding typhoon to the south, but now the wave sets were lower, swells evening out, skies clearing ahead. Named for a gallant Marine Lieutenant, the *Myles C. Fox*, DD-829, was a latecomer to the war, a *Gearing* class boat that had been fitted out with the latest radars for picket duty. She arrived in mid-August just after hostilities had ceased.

Commander John S. Fahy was at the helm, a bit rattled over the fact that none of his radar equipment was in working order. He had come over from USS *Gillespie*, DD-609, where he saw action in the Solomons and Peleliu campaigns, so he was no stranger to combat. The screens were clouded over, and he quickly deduced the enemy must be jamming them.

"They're close, Pem," he said to his XO Pemberton Southard. "I can feel it. Double up on the lookouts. I can smell a good fight coming, and soon."

"Aye, sir." Southard was a competent man who was just a little disappointed that the ship was late to the action in the Pacific. The Japanese had surrendered when they were off Wake Island, and he boasted it was because they knew the *Myles C. Fox* was coming. He didn't quite know what to make of the rumor that they were up here looking for Russians now, and that broiling mushroom cloud northwest of their position that morning was an ominous and disheartening thing to watch. All the men on the bridge were tense and alert. They could sense trouble coming too.

Ensign Pine was the first to make a report. "Look to starboard, sir. Lookouts report a contrail."

Commander Fahy had his binoculars up just in time to see it. Something descending from a bank of clouds and diving for the sea. It was coming right for the ship and he immediately gave the order hard left and ahead full for an evasive turn. The ship had plenty of boiler power in reserve for the sudden

burst of additional speed, but the missile could not be fooled by such a rudimentary maneuver. It bored in and struck the destroyer flush on the forward deck behind the number one gun mount, setting her afire with a shuddering impact.

Fires broke out in the passageway around number two upper handling room, in the forward officer's room, the anchor windless room, and on the number one gun mount itself. The Forward Repair Officer and half of initial repair party on the scene were killed or wounded by secondary explosions. Fahy was on the handset immediately ordering additional damage control crews forward. There they found a ruptured fire main and began to rig out new hoses from fireplugs on the main deck to fight the flames.

The enemy was close, alright. Commander Fahy had the presence of mind to sight down the line of approach of the missile and send off a good estimate of the ship's bearing relative to his own position. The contrail had also been sighted by a second destroyer picket, *Chevalier*, and together the two ships began to triangulate. Ten minutes later they thought they had a good idea where the enemy was. It wasn't enough to send a "ship sighted" message, but Fahy insisted the information be passed on to Halsey on the *Missouri*.

It cost them seven dead and thirty-two injured, and *Fox* was forced to fall off the line and retire after her first salt drenched smell of gunpowder, but Halsey had what he wanted. He knew where the enemy was and he was pouring on the speed. The word went out on the wireless to all ships in the line, and soon they were altering course to intercept based on a presumption that the enemy was still headed east.

They were correct.

* * *

The last of the *Helldivers* were spotted and ready for takeoff on the Big T, with something under its modified fuselage that looked very strange. Aviation Ordnanceman Julian Lowry was still scratching his head over the device, a fat 1700 pound bomb with wings! It had a big round nose that was crammed with gizmos, or so he had heard, though he never got a look inside.

"This thing like those Jap missiles?"

"Hell no," said Boatswain's Mate Rod Madison. "They stick some dumb ass in theirs and fly them like Kamikazes. Not like ours," he pointed. "That sucker has its own radar."

"What do you know about it, Boats?"

“We were working the decks in the lower munitions hold when they brought the damn thing in. I heard the briefing. It’s got radar in there, I tell you. That’s why they call it a bat.”

Madison was correct. They were looking at one of the world’s first “Smart Bombs,” named the ASM-N-2 BAT, (Mark 9). It was an amazing development by RCA, Western Electric and other talented engineering firms, deployed and tested for the first time in April of 1945 off Borneo where it sunk a couple Japanese merchant ships and damaged the escort ship *Aguni* from a firing range of 20 nautical miles. The first true “fire and forget” anti-ship weapon, over 3500 were built and deployed on numerous aircraft from bombers to seaplanes to the versatile *Helldivers*. The \$700 million investment in the weapon was exceeded only by the Manhattan project. Clearly the Americans had seen what these rockets and radar guided weapons could do, and they were hot to deploy their own.

It had been a long time in development, with numerous models by various names designed before this model achieved success. The problem of how to guide a special weapon to the target was a daunting one first tackled by the Germans with their Fritz X, a glide bomb that was actually radio controlled and guided by a crewman in the bomber it was dropped from. The US wanted to use a bomb with its own radar instead, though one group argued it could easily be defeated by jamming and suggested a wacky, yet novel approach. They fixed a lens in the nose of the bomb that would project an image of the target ship onto a white screen. There, tucked away inside the nose of the bomb, they placed a pigeon trained to peck at the image, which generated signals from the sensitive wired screen that would serve to reorient the bombs air foils to correct the missile’s flight path! Needless to say, the radar advocates won the day.

“They say the Russians have guided rockets,” said Lowrey. “Spooked some of the pilots pretty bad last time up.”

“Yeah? Well take a good look, Lowrey. We’ve got the damn things too.”

“Did you see that big Russian bomb this morning?”

“Yeah, I saw it. We’ve got one too.”

“How you know all this, Boats?”

“You think they got something we don’t have yet? Get a clue, Lowrey. We had to ship the Russkies trucks and planes for years. If they have it, then we’ve got it too.”

The plane was loaded and on the flight line now, and the lucky man in the

cockpit that day was Rod Bains. Signalman Bill Tomko was handling the flags as the engine revved up, and he was ready to wave the plane off when someone pointed at the sky. He craned his neck to have a look, first seeing the thick flights of *Hellcats* overhead as they formed up for the big strike run up north. Then he saw what Lowrey and the Boatswain's mate were jaw-boning about, thin white streaks in the sky, coming in so fast he could hardly believe what he was seeing. The rockets ripped into the dense formations overhead with booming explosions. He saw three planes go up with the first fireball, their flaming remnants falling from the sky like wounded angels.

The Russians had pigeons too.

"Holy crap! Will you look at that! Where are they coming from?"

The skies overhead were soon a wild melee of wheeling aircraft and more missiles came streaking in from the north, eight in all. The signalmen gaped at the scene, their unbelieving eyes transfixed as the rockets exploded, one by one. There was something wrong about it, something unfair, like a boxing match where the two fighters were standing face to face with the referee and one man snapped a sharp jab at the other fellow before the bell even rang. The formations overhead were broken up and wheeling in all directions now, like angry bees.

Once the shock and amazement abated there was also palpable anger on the flight deck. Lowrey shook a fist at Bains, as if to urge him to go get some well deserved revenge. Bill Tomko was fired up and he snapped his flags back up pointing the way forward to the nose of the ship.

"Come on Bat Man, go get the sons-of-bitches, will ya?" With a snap of his arm the *Helldiver* was on its way, the Bat Bomb cradled under its fuselage and off to war.

Then the flying fish came in, and everything was chaos again. Someone pointed off the port side of the ship. "Hey, look out! More of them rockets coming in fast!"

Gunner's mate Benny Benson barely got a look at them, three flying fish skimming low over the sea in the distance, leaving frothy white tails behind them as they raced in. Two veered off and he got a good side view for a second as they sped towards the light carrier *Monterey*, the third was headed right for Big T, and it came in with a roar and wallop unlike anything he had ever heard. A brilliant orange fireball lit up the port side of the ship, and the missile blasted through the thin side armor, plunging inside to the maintenance bays. It was lucky that all the planes were mostly in the air. The

Bat Man was the last off the deck, his *Helldiver* laboring up with its heavy load.

Bains looked over his shoulder, saw *Ticonderoga* burning, and set his jaw tight, then wagged his wings in farewell, a signal that set the everyone on the flight deck cheering him on. At least twenty angels had fallen from the sky when the lightning fast rockets caught them in their tightly packed formations. Now all bets were off. The rest of the strike package was dispersing like a flight of scattering birds, flying off in all directions and altitudes as they had been told in the pre-flight briefing. The rockets would not find them huddled together again, and soon they were all heading north.

* * *

Karpov was after the carriers first. He had pegged their positions with the long range AEW radars on the KA-226. Samsonov fired a salvo of eight P-400 missiles at each carrier group, hoping to catch the air formations early and hurt them. The eight missiles that had shaken up the Sprague's group took down over twenty planes, and he had similar results against the Halsey group carriers. But the allies were getting cagy now. They immediately began dispersing their carriers at high speed, making each one an individual target instead of steaming them in a centralized task force. Each had an escort of two destroyers, particularly after three P-900s found *Ticonderoga* and *Monterey*, the latter hit badly by two missiles.

The blow changed all future history, at least in one respect, in a way that Karpov would never know. The General Quarters Officer of the Deck on *Monterey* was Gerald R. Ford, later to become the Vice President in Richard Nixon's administration, and eventually the 38th President of the United States. He was once fated to be the longest lived president in US history, reaching the age of 93 years and 165 days, but all that was changed in a hot flash of fire and smoke from a *Sizzler*. The General Quarters OOD didn't make it off *Monterey* alive.

It was shaping up to be a battle of attrition at first. The salvos against the carrier groups had expended all but one of *Kirov*'s P-900s. Only the number ten missile remained, and it was mounted with a 'special warhead.' *Kirov* still had seventeen *Moskit-IIs* nine MOS-III *Starfires*, and that last remaining P-900. The other ships in the flotilla could contribute another thirty missiles. The only question he had now was whether they could sufficiently disable the American combat power with limited conventional weapons, or whether they

would be forced to resort to stronger measures.

As the action proceeded Karpov finally began to take the full measure of his foe. The Americans were not going to back down. They were going to persist with this attack with everything they had at their disposal, just as the British had. Wouldn't I do the same, he thought? Shouldn't I do the same now? I'm letting the ghosts of Volsky and Fedorov convict me here, and Zolkin was no help either. This is war now—yes, a war of my own making, but war nonetheless.

He turned that over in his mind, and made an inner resolution. If he could not retain sufficient combat power to insure future operations, he was a good as dead, the ship sunk, and this whole thing over. Before he would let that happen he would show the Americans that his massive shot across the bow was no bluff. Yet given the deployment he was now facing he realized they might easily punch through the American battle line with conventional weapons and head out into the Pacific.

They were not going to negotiate. His fantasy of sitting at the table with MacArthur and Nimitz and Halsey was now an insubstantial folly. These were men of war, and their answer to his challenge had been to turn the full might of their navy to engage him. Volsky was correct, at least on one point. Why would they negotiate after the casualties they will sustain in this engagement?

He shook his head inwardly, realizing that, for all their power, his flotilla was still a small player on the board, a dangerous renegade knight, but one that could not force a checkmate on its own. He had two choices now. One was to return home to Vladivostok, and hope it could shelter him from the wrath of the allied navies. The Soviets had nothing to speak of for a Pacific Fleet at this time, he realized, but they had strong land forces. If the Americans wanted to get pushy they would have to try to put ground troops on Soviet soil.

Then his mind ran down a long corridor of thought, recalling the folded bureaucracy that had greeted them in Vladivostok of 2021. Volsky won't be there. It will be Stalin's Russia, and if I thought Inspector General Kapustin and his lap dog Volkov were a nuisance, Stalin's NKVD will be many times worse. Sail for home at your own peril. You will end up having to flee from the Golden Horn harbor yet again, this time a pariah to your own country, and not the proud warrior who led the fleet out in 2021.

Yet what else could they do? Rodenko has advised him to get some

breathing room and run out into the Pacific. Perhaps he could find a way to talk sense into the Americans later. Now he felt what Lucifer must have felt after his challenge failed at the gates of heaven. He would be an outcast if they ran east, wandering the seas, forever hunted, pursued the world over. It all seemed so simple hours and days ago, with the American fleets set to gather at Tokyo Bay. He thought he could make that one decisive intervention and change everything, but now he realized that this world would not submit to his will without a fight. It was not so simple any longer.

“Mister Rodenko, we will have to select a point in the enemy line and blow a hole. Then we’ll make our best speed and punch through.”

“KA-226 can feed us the data now, sir, and the Fregat will have line of sight contact any minute.”

“Good. Signal *Admiral Golovko*. Tell Captain Ryakhin he is to prepare a salvo of six missiles, two sets of three, and I want him to engage with the first set on this ship here.” He pointed to the tactical board. “Can you feed him the location data?”

“Yes, sir. Nikolin has been reading ship to ship chatter. That is a heavy cruiser.”

Karpov had fingered the *St Paul*.

Chapter 33

She was everything a good heavy cruiser should be, fast, reasonably well protected and with decent punch in her nine 8 inch guns. The lavish addition of twelve 5 inch guns, forty-eight 40mm Bofors and twenty-four 20mm Oerlikon cannons gave her considerable air defense capability for her role in screening the fast carrier task forces that won the war in the Pacific. Seventeen ships were built in her class, but only seven saw service in the war. *St Paul* was one of them, slipping into the action in those final days when Halsey's carriers made their last raids on Honshu and Hokkaido. The ship also got in close and bombarded industrial targets on the Japanese mainland on two occasions, and had the distinction of firing the final salvo in this role from any capital ship in the war.

The enemy never laid a finger on her throughout this brief action, but *St. Paul's* fate was about to change. Something was coming at her that all her lavish anti-aircraft guns could not forestall. There was nothing but scrambled eggs on the radars that day, and the lookouts barely saw the missiles coming. *Admiral Golovko* had fired three *Oniks/Yakhont* sea skimmers on Karpov's order, and they came in at Mach 2.6, striking the ship at ten second intervals with three hard punches that set her ablaze from stern to bow. And like so many foes Karpov had engaged, the ship and crew never saw the enemy that had crippled her in one swift blow.

Halsey got the word just as he was consulting with staff on the battle bridge of the *Missouri* to lock in their best location for the enemy based on information relayed by the radar pickets. *Iowa*, some ten kilometers on his starboard side, had already turned on a new heading to intercept, and he was bringing Mighty Mo around fifteen points to starboard, churning up the seas at 30 knots.

"Where in hell did the Russians get these damn rocket weapons?" The ship's Captain, Stuart S. Murray was still trying to get his mind around the situation. "You would think we might have known something about it."

"Apparently we did," said Halsey. "Or at least the British did. That mushroom cloud we saw this morning was the same thing they used to sink *Mississippi* in TF-16, and that was before we were even in the war. Admiral Fraser says the Brits slugged it out with these Russians more than once—a

renegade ship from all we can deduce now. There was only one before. Now we have three according to the picket reports. They think there's at least three enemy ships out there now. No one knows where they came from or what they're about. Even the Soviet government claims they have no knowledge of these ships, but yet there they are, demons at sea, and they just hit *St. Paul* hard. She never got off a single round."

Admiral Fraser's words returned to haunt him now, biting harder with the news coming in about *St. Paul*... "*The fact is, Admiral, this is no ordinary ship. As I said earlier, it's fast, it has advanced weaponry—naval rocketry in fact—and it can strike from a great distance, even beyond the range of those big sixteen inch guns out there. It looks like a battleship if you ever lay eyes on the damn thing, as I did one black night. There wasn't a gun on it bigger than a QF five incher, but it could pound a ship like Yamato to near scrap.*"

"Well, Sunshine," Halsey said to the Captain, using his nickname to put the matter on more personal terms. "We're about to see just how good the *Iowa* class battlewagons really are. I think the enemy is trying to break out into the Pacific. They can see what we're doing and they're trying to punch a hole in our line right there—right where they hit *St. Paul*. So I think that's exactly where they are heading, and we are too. The good news is that we're now in a good position to intercept. The bad news is that those rockets may be heading our way soon when this Karpov realizes that. I want damage control and repair crews doubled on both *Iowa* and *Missouri*. Lay out extra fire hoses. Take men from any watch you need to fill out the ranks. If those charts we've just plotted are accurate and the enemy is where we think he is, then we could be in visual range within the hour."

"Still good light for a couple hours," said Murray.

"We'll need it. Pass the word. The gunners can't rely on radar. I've got lookouts up on every weather deck and mast I could find—even up on the radar mounts themselves. We'll have to do this the old fashioned way. Somehow they've managed to black out and foul up every radar set on the ship."

"This just doesn't add up, Admiral. How could the Russians be so far ahead of us? They couldn't even produce the trucks they needed early in the war. How could they build ships that can do this, and then have the gall to stand there and deny any knowledge of them?"

"A lot of guff," said Halsey. "Well I plan to have a real close look at these ships, personally. See that the *Missouri* is trimmed for action."

“Aye, aye, sir.” Murray was only too happy to comply, then he looked over his shoulder.” Suppose they throw another big one our way, Bull. Then what?”

Halsey’s eyes were dark fire beneath those bristling grey brows. He gave the Captain a long look. “We’ll coordinate our attack with the air wing,” he said. “Bastards tried to sucker punch us there too, but we’ve got most everyone up now and they’re heading our way. *Cowpens* got hit, but the fleet carriers came through alright. Plenty of deck space there for further operations, though I’m ordering the flattops to move further south.”

Murray noted that Halsey had not answered his question, but said nothing more.

* * *

A thousand miles away other men were working to answer that question. North Field on the Island of Tinian was a very busy place that day. The big silver B-29s of the Twentieth Air Force were being rolled out of their hard stands and rigged for battle. The Americans had taken the strategic island a little over a year ago, in July of 1944, and it meant the big superfortress bombers now had a place to roost in range of the Japanese homeland. North Field was originally Ushi Point, a Japanese runway for recon planes until 1500 Seabees showed up and expanded the operation in a vast quilt of new runways, tarmacs, and hard stations to house the planes.

To do the work they moved thousands of tons of coral and earth to complete what soon became the largest airfield in the world at that time, occupying the entire northern end of the island as if it had been branded into the ground there. It was now home to 265 B-29 bombers, which busied themselves in pounding Iwo Jima, Okinawa and then blackening the major cities of Japan in the last months of the war. The bombers were all set to continue with Operation Olympic, the planned invasion of Japan, but the Emperor came to his senses and capitulated just days ago.

But it wasn’t over. Word was that Halsey was still fighting out there, though few knew the details of what was happening. All they knew was what they were told. Tonight all leave was cancelled, and every man was to be in their quarters. Units in and around Runway A on the big airfield were rounded up and literally locked in Quonset huts, watched over by MPs and dour faced Master Chiefs. Something was up.

“What gives JS? What do you make of this? Why they have us all locked up in here?” A couple of Seabees were chewing the fat over the incident, wishing they would be out in time for chow and hoping there was something special on the menu to celebrate the war’s end. Something was on the menu, alright, but no one seemed to know what was going on. It had been a long time since any of them had seen any sign of the Japanese.

The last JS had seen of them was during an air raid seven months ago. They had three big towers set up, positioned at intervals from one side of the island to another. He was out on the airfield finishing up some grading operations when the sirens sounded, one tower warning another and passing the alert all across the island. Then he saw them, a couple Jap Zeros tipping their wings in the sun and diving in for a strafing run. He had never dug a hole so fast in his life, bare hands scraping at the rough hard packed earth he had just smoothed out with grey coral the last hour, trying to find some way to get low.

The *Zero* flashed right down the field, its machine guns rattling as it came, and JS saw the lines of shells chew into the earthen runway bed. They went right by him, to either side, a couple rounds within just a foot of his position. Then the planes were gone, and the blue fighters were after them. It was the last surprise raid the Japanese ever got away with on that island, and JS was proud of telling all his kids that story after the war, all nine of them. Yes, Johnny got busy after he came home from the war, and he told his pups that they all had come within a foot or two of not being born if that Jap pilot had aimed just a little better.

“You know as much as I do,” he said. “But if you want my money I’ll say it has to do with those new planes that came in for the 509th.”

Something more than fresh food was on the menu that day. JS had it right. A couple very special planes from the 509th Composite Air Group had been rolled out, and then moved to a secret hanger. A couple days ago one was renamed the *Enola Gay*. He had a look at it one morning and, the first thing he noticed was that there were no gun turrets, and the bomb bays looked all wrong, but otherwise it looked much like all the other planes in the 6th Bombardment Group, with that big Circled R on the tail. All last month they had been loading big fat “pumpkin bombs” into the plane for runs over Japan. He had no idea that they were ballistically identical to another bomb, and that the *Enola Gay* was preparing for a very special mission.

They renamed the plane the other day, which was another tip-off that

something was up. JS had seen Alan Karl doing the new paint job, though it ticked off commander Robert Lewis to no end when he laid eyes on it. You don't go messing with the nose art on someone's plane! JS was Navy, a Seabee, but even he knew that much.

There was a special bomb loading pit that the Seabees had to build for the 509th. No one knew why, but no one cared either. They just got the job done and went about business as usual.

Johnny knew nothing more about it, but he would soon find out. That night the whole base was going to come alive like a swarm of bees, just as if it was another war day, with a big mission to fly. A couple hundred B-29s would take to the air and head north. One of them would be that very special plane, surrounded by so many similar targets that it would be a real crap shoot to get lucky and hit that plane. Odds were that *Enola Gay* would get through to the target and deliver her bomb...A very special bomb.

This was how they planned it.

* * *

BB-61, *Iowa* was now point man in the looming battle, her sleek prow cutting through the sea as she sped northeast. Captain Charles Wellborn had the scent and was hot for battle. The enemy had hit the cruiser *St. Paul* to his north, and though dead in the water, they had been able to report "three ships sighted, SSW our position, estimate speed thirty." *Iowa* was just as fast, and on a good angle to intercept now. There was going to be a battle within the hour.

"The Big Stick" was ready—all nine of them, 50 caliber 16 inch guns among the best in the world. First of her class, Secretary of the navy Frank Knox called the *Iowa* "the greatest ship ever launched by the American nation." That was true until *Missouri*, *Wisconsin* and *New Jersey* were launched as well, but as senior ship in the class, *Iowa* enjoyed a special status.

Iowa had stood a watch in the Atlantic, daring the German battleship *Tirpitz* to make a showing that never came. Then she was moved to the Pacific to run with men like Spruance, Halsey and Lee. In all that time the only damage she sustained were a pair of hits from Japanese shore batteries that she easily shrugged off. One seaman had a small cut on his face, but no other man aboard was injured.

The crew had been elated with the news of Japan's defeat, and they celebrated with a big feast the day Halsey made the announcement. 2500 mouths to feed took some doing, but on that day the kitchens aboard *Iowa* served up 240 gallons of cream of tomato soup, 240 pounds of saltine crackers, 2,849 pounds of roast Young Tom Turkey, 18 pounds of cranberry sauce, 6 pounds of sage dressing, 1,500 pounds of whipped mashed potatoes, 480 pounds of buttered peas, 4,500 hot Parker House Rolls, 20 gallons of ripe olives, 20 gallons of sweet pickles, 1,200 pounds of sweet cherries served up in the pies, and then a special treat: 2,800 packs of cigarettes along with 2,800 packs of candy. Ice cream followed—200 gallons of it, and to wash it all down the ship served up 640 gallons of lemonade. They were going into battle well fed and content, with a confidence born of long months at sea and a feeling of invincibility.

Now the ship was racing towards the biggest fight of its brief career, her long, graceful bow cutting the seas at 33 knots. Her turbines were pushing 52,000 tons of steel at that speed, an amazing feat that no other battleship could match. Considering her speed, tremendous firepower and considerable protection, many considered the ships of this class to be the best ever designed and deployed in the world. She almost got her chance to prove that against *Yamato* in the Philippines campaign, but now she would face the ship that beat that behemoth, and her enemy was not alone. Word was that there was a small flotilla of fast Russian ships out there, and coming fast. One was a battlecruiser, the others cruiser and destroyer class ships, or so the last signals from *St. Paul* had described them.

Iowa would not be alone either. To the north the heavy cruiser *Boston* was hastening south to this same intercept point, her 8 inch guns ready for action. Destroyer Ingersoll was also nearby, but ordered to render assistance to *St. Paul*. The high main mast of *Iowa* would see enemy first. Bert Cook of Waterloo, Iowa would be the first man to see the Russians—three of them, just as the pickets had called it. But they weren't ships, just odd glowing lights in the sky.

Then the missiles came.

* * *

The Russian flotilla had raced east to pass very near the stricken *St. Paul*. Karpov watched the ship closely, *Kirov's* deck guns trained and ready should

it show any signs of life. They passed without incident, the flaming cruiser slowly listing from a big gaping wound in her side where one of the *Oniks* missiles had blow through her six inch armor. There were two more ships racing to cut them off, one big contact to the south, and a second smaller ship to the north.

“Shall I order *Golovko* to fire that second set of *Oniks* now, sir?” Rodenko was at Karpov’s side.

“Tell them to target the other cruiser to the north, just as before.”

“Aye, sir. But that will be the last of their P-800s. They still have another eight P-900s if needed.”

“I’m aware of the missile count, Mister Rodenko. It is more than adequate. *Golovko* is to engage that cruiser class unit and then maintain her ASW watch. *Orlan* will hold fire and concentrate entirely on air defense. As for that bigger contact to the south, I think it will be an American battleship.” He looked Rodenko in the eye. “Fair is fair, Rodenko. That’s work for *Kirov*.”

Part XII

War In Heaven

“Now war arose in heaven, Michael and his angels fighting against the Dragon. And the Dragon and his angels fought back, but he was defeated and there was no longer any place for them in heaven. And the great Dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent, who is called the devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world – he was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him.”

— Book of Revelation: 12: 7-9

Chapter 34

Iowa was still wearing her war paint that day, the only ship in her class to have a camouflage dazzle paint scheme. Its lines were smoother and employed more curves, but their intent was the same. To throw off estimation of her size and speed when viewed by human eyes from a great distance.

After his duel with *Yamato*, Karpov was in no great hurry to get a close look at the American battleship. He had argued endlessly that the one great advantage *Kirov* possessed at sea in any surface action was range. The ship could fight like an aircraft carrier, striking at ranges up to 370 kilometers with her P-900s. But there was only one left in inventory now after his long range attack against the distant American carriers. It had paid off with four ships hit, *Monterey* and *Ticonderoga* in the Sprague group, *Cowpens* and *Shangri-La* in the Halsey group. Of these, only *Cowpens* was damaged badly enough to be put completely out of action, taking two missile hits that affected her speed and hydraulics. *Monterey* was also limping badly after two hard knocks, but the rest of the fast fleet carriers were still alive and well, controlling the damage and edging a little further south to avoid harm. The Captain had no more missiles to expend on them—not with the American battleships bearing down on him now.

The need to penetrate the American line was going to mean the action would necessarily close to short range at the moment of breakthrough. Karpov wanted to hurt his adversary well before it came to that. He elected to open the battle with the real workhorse of his SSM suite, the deadly *Moskit-II*. The ship left Vladivostok with her standard loadout of twenty missiles. Three had been fired thus far, leaving him seventeen, and he would begin the engagement against *Iowa* with a salvo of three.

The problem with the missile soon became evident. They had gone to sea with the intention of fighting modern ships. None of the missiles had been re-programmed for plunging fire that had proved so deadly against WWII ships. The *Moskit-IIs* were therefore coming in as fast sea skimmers, and their accuracy actually worked against them, putting them square on the side armor belt of one of the best protected ships in the world.

That said, the shock of a supersonic fire bomb with an armor penetrating warhead traveling at Mach 2.6 on impact was considerable. The missiles

would meet over 12 inches of hardened steel that was designed to defeat a warhead of over 2000 pounds. The *Moskits* carried nearly a thousand pounds, but they hit with a thunderous impact as substantial reserves of rocket fuel ignited to add fire and hell to the explosion.

The big ship rocked with the blow, broiling fire cascading up above the gunwales and into the main deck. Three hard body shots came in at ten second intervals and combined to start a huge fire amidships. Alarms were jangling all over the ship. Damage control parties were scrambling to the port side of the battleship, dragging fire hoses to get streams of water flowing on the inferno. The fires were so close to a 5 inch gun battery that one of its twin barrels actually began to melt and droop in the hot fuel driven flames, which reached red heat temperatures approaching 1800 degrees at the height of the fire.

Yet fire consumes fuel rapidly, and within minutes the worst was over and the hundreds of trained damage control teams were slowly getting the upper hand. From a distance *Iowa* appeared to be a flaming wreck after one good shot, but there was soon more smoke than fire and, as the stiffening wind blew the pall astern, what was left was a blackened and buckled armor plate that was still intact. Two of the three missiles were defeated, the third struck more toward the long swept bow and a little high where it scudded across the deck in a billowing explosion forward of the number one turret, but the damage was soon controlled and in non-vital areas.

Thank God for armor, thought Captain Wellborn. We rolled with the punches, like a fighter on the ropes taking it in the gut. There was nothing wrong with those Big Sticks out front now, he reasoned, looking at the massive turrets. If only I had a target! Then he realized the rockets had betrayed the exact bearing of the firing ship. The long smoky contrails pointed out the way. All he had to do was sight down that axis and he would find his enemy in time, but at what range? The horizon was nearly twenty miles away now, the sun lowering as the time passed through 18:00 hours. Sunset was 20:56, plenty of daylight left in these high latitudes. If they kept coming he should see them soon, silhouetted against the gloaming sky.

Yet *Iowa* could fire much farther than that horizon. Her guns could lob their massive 2700 pound shells out twenty-four miles. Wellborn was not going to wait for the enemy to come at him again without answering. He ordered his number one turret to fire. They had no firing solution, no target in sight, just a bearing, but the big guns blasted away anyway. *Iowa* was

clearing her throat, and the sheer concussion blew out the last of the flames on her forward deck.

The sound of the massive guns going off set the ship's crew to cheering, which is exactly what Wellborn wanted. You don't lay on the ropes and just take it. You throw punches back, whether you can reach the other fellow or not. In a hot minute some 8100 pounds of metal would plow into the ocean out there. They would see those rounds and know we're still here and ready to fight.

* * *

They did see them. Rodenko called a warning and *Kirov* tracked the incoming shells on radar as if they were missiles. Amazingly, they came arcing up from the distant curve of the earth and then descended, on a perfect line to their present heading and just a couple thousand meters ahead of the *Orlan*. The blind haymaker *Iowa* threw back at them had very nearly grazed their chin. *Orlan*, out in front, was much closer, and they had a good look at the tall water spouts rising as the big shells plummeted into the sea.

"Rodenko—I thought we were jamming their fire control radars." Karpov's complaint was an obvious one. The shot had been far closer than it should have been.

"We are, sir. There is no way they can read our position on Radar through the clutter we're hitting them with."

In an instant Karpov realized what had happened. "Helm, come left fifteen degrees," he said quickly. "They're firing down our missile wakes. We'll need to assume a new heading after every salvo. Samsonov, set up three more *Moskit-IIs*. I want the KA-226 to get me optical images on that ship. I want to see what our missiles did to them in that first salvo."

Rodenko was nervously watching at the Fregat system, which was still receiving data from their AEW helicopter. He saw what looked like a signal cloud or weather front to the south, then realized what it was. "Conn, Radar." He began reflexively, the years at that station honing his reflexes as he reported. "Large airborne contact cloud bearing 190 degrees and approaching at 400kph."

"Range?"

"Ka-226 has the leading edge at 200 kilometers. Fregat should have them in about five minutes. From there it will be another twenty minutes or so

before they reach our present position.”

The Captain’s eyes shifted back and forth, hand on his chin. They had sixteen P-400s left. The rest of their SAM defense rested with the *Klinok* medium range system, which could not yet engage. The *Orlan* was the real bulwark of the fleet air defense. That ship still had 152 lightning fast SAMs ready for action.

“Nikolin, signal Captain Yeltsin to match our new heading and go to air alert one. We’re going to need them soon.”

How many planes were coming, he wondered? The contact cloud as Rodenko described it was very dense, yet widely dispersed. In spite of his preemptive strike against the American carriers, they got a significant strike wave in the air, and anything that gets through our defense umbrella will arrive right in the heat of my action against this battleship.

His plan was simple. They might fire a hundred rounds at me to get just a single hit. That was what Fedorov told him. Our ammunition is limited, but we hit them every time we fire. He had twenty-four more SSMs on *Kirov*, yet he knew each and every one was going to hit and hurt his enemy. Against a smaller ship they were awesome lances, perfect for blasting the lighter armored cruisers and destroyers to hell. Against the big battleship they were hard punches indeed, but not fatal blows. Look at the punishment we put on the *Yamato*, and we still could not sink that ship. I can’t waste my valuable missiles on this ship’s heavy armor...

“Samsonov, we can still program the *Moskit-IIs* for popup maneuver, can we not?”

“Yes, sir. That is a simple toggle selection.”

“Key all three for popup and hold. I suspect our first salvo hit their side armor. We need to be more precise in our targeting.”

A second salvo from *Iowa* came in again, very wide now that they had turned on the new heading. This time there were nine rounds falling. Karpov smiled, knowing he had been correct. There was nothing wrong with their jamming. The American Captain was simply firing blind. It was all bluster and no skill, just like the Italians; just like Iwabuchi on *Kirishima* when he was chasing us in the dark.

“Activate forward deck guns,” said Karpov.

“Sir, aye. Guns ready.”

“Begin firing. Sets of 16 rounds. We’ll show them what precision naval gunnery can really do.”

It was time to dance and jab.

* * *

The first shells landed just shy of the bow, surprising everyone on the *Iowa*'s bridge. They fell in pairs, obviously from typical twin gun mounts, and from the size of the water plumes Wellborn knew they must be no more than 5 inches.

"Who the hell is shooting at us?" he bawled, thinking one of the destroyers had come on the scene and misidentified his ship as the enemy. But there were no reports of any ships sighted on any quarter. They seemed completely alone on the sea, and the skies above were clear as well. It was as if the shells were dropping from heaven.

"Watchmen, any contacts?"

"Sir, weather deck. My watch is clear—"

"Belay that! Main mast reports ship sighted, bearing 340!"

Wellborn couldn't see anything, and the next rounds came in with a dull thud and jarring explosion. The ship had been hit by a small caliber round. A twin Bofors mount was ablaze on the port side, and more rounds were falling astride the long raked bow.

"Navigator, range to horizon—quick! Helm. Starboard ten."

The Captain saw an explosion forward again, right on the number one turret. The smoke cleared and he took heart. They had 500mm of armor there, all of 19.7 inches. The turret shrugged off the small caliber rounds like nothing had happened. There passed a tense moment, with Wellborn half looking over his shoulder as he waited on his navigator.

"Sir I calculate horizon from main mast at 19.5 miles."

It was not possible, the Captain thought. He could still see nothing on the horizon, but the top of *Iowa*'s main mast was 150 feet above the water. Add that to the height of any distant contact and you could peg the range to horizon.

"Give it to me in yards, damn it!"

"Sir, aye, sir. Range to horizon...three, four, three, two, zero."

The Captain was close by the view ports now, binoculars up, and focused intently on the far horizon, then he thought he saw a slight blemish on the clean edge of the sea.

"Gunnery officer. All batteries to bear on target at three-five-zero degrees.

Make your range 33,000 yards and commence firing.”

Another explosion told him they had been hit yet again by a small caliber round. He knew he had this one brief moment. The fleeting moment of first contact where a general calculation of the range to horizon would give him the range. He knew optical sighting crews were working the problem now as well, but the Big Stick would get something in the air while they were still calculating. That ship could turn away at any minute and they would lose both bearing and range.

Then the big guns blasted away, the deafening sound ripping the air with fire and concussion so great that it flattened the waves out a hundred yards from the ship and literally sheared away the rising water splash of two more enemy rounds. White smoke rolled out behind the fire as Wellborn looked north, squinting to see if he could still see the enemy contact. Those were naval guns, he thought, smiling inwardly. They had come to rely so much on radar that it was going to be one hell of a crash refresher course for the optical sighting crews. Get it right, boys, he thought. Get it right.

* * *

Karpov grinned as he watched the overhead HD screen receive the long range camera feed from the KA-226. He could see his deck guns straddle the distant ship, then quickly score a hit.

“They’re probably wondering what hit them,” he said to Rodenko. “Just a little slap in the face for their insolence before I ram a couple more missiles down their smoke stacks, eh?”

But where were the raging fires he expected to see? He knew all three missiles from his initial salvo had hit the target. Why wasn’t this ship burning like *Yamato*? Then his eye caught a bright flash, and he looked to see the distant ship seemed to explode—but it did *not* explode. He was seeing *Iowa*’s massive main batteries firing in return.

“Rodenko! What’s the range?”

“33,200 meters, sir.”

“Have we slipped over the horizon?” The Captain was reaching for his binoculars—yes, he could see the bright flash on the edge of the sea.

“Helm port fifteen! Signal all units to match our new heading.”

“Sir, port fifteen and my rudder is four-zero degrees.”

He watched the ship turn smartly, heard Nikolin relaying the turn order to

both Yeltzin and Ryakhin. The *Orlan* followed his lead at once, but *Admiral Golovko* off his starboard side was still on the old heading when they heard the scream and whoosh of heavy rounds coming in. The enormous geysers fell well short of *Kirov*, but between *Orlan* and the frigate—three, then three more, then—

There was a flash and explosion and Karpov's eyes widened in shock when he saw what had happened. He raised his binoculars to the angry knot of smoke and fire ahead, then they heard the sound of loud secondary explosions going off, a massive detonation that sent jets of flame and debris shoot up from the rolling red-black fireball where *Admiral Golovko* had once been.

"My God..."

Rodenko was looking at the overhead screen, as were most of the bridge crew now. The frigate had been blown in two sections, its sharp bow now wildly tilted upwards through the billowing smoke, then falling rapidly to the sea. The center of the ship was gone and the aft quarter was capsized and already sinking. They saw men leap from the gunwale, then a wall of flames immolated them and the entire scene was wreathed in smoke and flame. Seconds later they heard more muted explosions, felt the jolting concussion, and Karpov knew that the ship was continuing to explode beneath the sea as it sank. *Admiral Golovko* was gone, and 200 men were scuppered into the sea with her, the lines of life and fate ending for them in that brief, wild moment of explosive violence.

Karpov slowly lowered his field glasses. *All it will take is one hit from a gun of that size...* Fedorov's voice echoed its warning in his mind. It was nothing more than happenstance, he knew on one level. They slipped over the horizon ever so briefly, and the battleship must have spotted *Kirov's* tall main mast and superstructure. There is no way they would have seen the frigate at this range. They fired blindly, just shooting down the line of our bearing and aiming for the horizon. They were firing at us, and they missed... Then all these thoughts were swept away by a hot anger.

"Sons of bitches," he hissed.

Rodenko was watching the Captain closely, the shock and concern evident in his eyes.

"Sons of *bitches*! Samsonov! *Moskit-IIs*, salvo of three. Key on that contact and fire."

"Sir, *aye*! Salvo firing on target."

In that one brief instant the battle had taken a dramatic turn. Karpov had thought he would face down and intimidate the entire US Pacific Fleet. He thought he would show them what real power was when he fired one precious tactical warhead to frighten these little men—but these were not little men. They had just come through four long years of violent struggle at sea in the greatest naval war in human history. In all that time they had lost one battleship, the *Mississippi* sunk by Karpov himself in another fit of rage, along with the two carriers he had killed, swatting the *Wasp* at both ends of the long, terrible war. Then the Japanese had sunk ten carriers, eight cruisers, ninety destroyers, and still they fought on. He remembered Fedorov talking about the war. On any given weekend they would lose more men than the entire ten year American war in Iraq. US Marines would claw their way ashore on isolated rocks in the sea and blast the stalwart enemy from cliff and cave in a grueling campaign of utter attrition. Thousands would die for tiny islands, and still they came.

Now here they come for us, he thought grimly. Now we feel the hard hand of war at our throat. Halsey is out there somewhere, gritty, determined, leading his battleships forward in this hot pursuit, and we have yet to even face their air wing!

The missiles were firing, a swift lancing return, measure for measure, an eye for an eye. He was going to sink this ship, and kill every last man aboard in reprisal. And after he was done with that he would burn the rest of the American fleet in the raging fire of his anger.

Chapter 35

They saw the explosion, the bridge crew jubilant when it rippled up and bloomed on the horizon. The Big Stick had just struck their enemy a hard blow. Then they saw the same telltale streak of a rocket bearing down on them, and this time the ship opened up with every AA gun on the port side. The sky was now marked with white puffs of exploding rounds, everything from the rapid firing 20mm cannons up to the quick firing five inch guns, but the missiles were simply too fast to be aimed at. It would be sheer luck if anything scored a hit.

The first missile struck the number one battery, streaking in at sea level before it suddenly popped up and then nosed down onto the ship. It blasted through the outer bomb deck, a thinner barrier that was designed to trigger falling bombs and detonate them in the space between that outer deck and the heavier armor deck below. Beyond that there was a third splinter deck, and so the missile had to penetrate all of 7.5 inches of steel to get at the vital innards of the ship.

It struck at an angle and blasted through all three protective decks, then hit something far more substantial, the barbette of gun turret number one, which was 17.3 inches of steel at its thickest point. The searing wash of flame engulfed the turret in anger, but it was not breached. Fifteen men inside had been felled by the concussion, but relief crews were coming up from below to rescue the wounded, remove the dead, and fight on.

They had to flood the number one magazine for that gun, but there were three more still high and dry, and plenty of powder bags stretched out on the racks four decks below the gun itself. The huge shells were still rotating into the lifts on the projectile handling floor, and hoisted up into the rammers. Like an enormous clock, the turret skipped a beat or two as the crews recovered from the shock and replacements were sent in, then the workings of the turret continued, and the guns struck twelve with another thunderous roar.

Two more missiles came at them. One popped up and then plunged down on the deck just behind the aft main battery. If the big guns had not been rotated away they would have been struck there, but as it was the missile penetrated the deck and bored into the galley and crew's mess section on the

second deck. The Hot Parker Rolls were going to be a little overdone if they were ever served there again.

The third missile struck amidships, blasting into the superstructure where a special cabin had been set up for FDR when the Iowa transported the President to the Tehran Conference earlier in the war. The explosion damaged a twin 5 inch gun battery, and sent a hail of fiery shrapnel up toward the battle bridge. The armored conning tower where Wellborn captained the ship was protected by thick 17.5 inch armor, and it shrugged off the punch with no significant damage. The fire soon spread from FDR's cabin to the officer's Wardroom, but crews were rushing to the scene to put the flames down.

Iowa had taken six hard hits, but for all the smoke, fire and concussion, she was not seriously hurt. The primary virtue of a battleship, her ability to take punishment and remain in the fight, was now paramount. With each passing minute the range was decreasing, her crews working the optics, the guns plotting a solution to lob more massive shells at the enemy.

The Russians had turned, skirting the far horizon out of visual range, but Wellborn knew they would see them again soon. If they wanted to break out into the deep blue they would have to continue an easterly heading. He estimated they had probably made a ten or fifteen point turn, and he was correct.

"Gunnery Officer! Adjust your fire five degrees to starboard and set your range steady at 34,000 yards. Aim for that column of smoke."

He knew they had just scored a lucky hit, and didn't think they would get another any time soon, but they would keep a rain of hot steel heading the enemy's way nonetheless.

"Sir, we have visual sighting on our air wing. Aircraft off the port rear quarter!"

The Captain looked to see the skies slowly darkening with tiny specks. They were not in any discernable formation. Some were low on the water, others at altitude, and scattered all over the sky. They had been riding *Iowa's* radio direction signal to arrive unerringly at the scene of the battle just as things were heating up. And then he gaped at the sky to the north, seeing it scored by a series of lighting fast contrails that raced out at impossible speeds. The enemy was firing rockets at the incoming planes—rockets with eyes so good that they swerved and struck dead on when they hit, and soon the sky above the ship was blooming with hot fireballs and angry black fists

of smoke.

“Radio signal, Captain. It’s Admiral Halsey!”

Wellborn took the handset and toggled the overhead speaker. “Welcome Admiral, take off the gloves and get busy. The enemy is just beyond that column of smoke on your horizon. We put sixteen inches of steel on them with our third salvo.”

“Good job, Chuck. Give ‘em hell. We’ve just seen your main mast on the horizon so we’re about thirty minutes out, but on a good intercept angle. We’ve got your back! Mighty Mo is coming at 33 knots and Sprague is swinging up behind them with Whisky. Together the three of us are going to pound these guys to rubble.”

The Bull was charging to the scene aboard battleship *Missouri*, mad as hell when he saw the enemy rockets firing at the planes overhead. The entire scene was now becoming another wild display of controlled chaos at sea. The big ships surged forward, sharp bows frothing the waves, huge guns firing amid the drone of hundreds of aircraft coming in above them.

“Order the flack gunners to cease fire,” Wellborn shouted over the noise. “We can’t hit those damn rockets and we might take down our own boys up there.”

He watched as the first planes passed his position, making for the distant column of black smoke on the horizon as the enemy rockets clawed into the sky to look for them. Get the bastards, he urged the flyboys on. But look out for my big guns.

The Big Stick fired again.

* * *

Karpov watched *Orlan* firing, the missiles accelerating to the incredible speed of Mach 15, five times faster than a bullet fired from a good rifle. The planes in the sky were like slow flying target drones to them, and *Orlan*’s amazing fire control computers were sending them out with pinpoint accuracy, one missile, one kill. Three, then five, then nine angels fell in the wild sky, yet on they came, blue *Hellicats*, and *Helldivers*, well named, for it seemed they were plunging over the edge of perdition as the missiles exploded, taking one plane after another.

“Stand ready on *Klinok* system,” he ordered. “We’ll add our fire to that of *Orlan* soon.”

The cold weight of *Admiral Golovko's* tragic loss was now settling into his stomach like a heavy stone. They lost their best ASW ship, two hundred men, and all the weapons remaining that now had to be wiped from his mental inventory. He had assigned a place for each of the eight remaining P-900s on the frigate, but now they would never be fired. And her special warhead was gone as well, an even bigger loss, he thought. The ship's helicopters could be recovered easily enough, but that was another matter that he put far from his mind.

The crew also seemed different now. Each time they saw the crack of fire light up the horizon, then heard the deep rolling thunder of the American battleship firing, there was a long minute of tense anxiety on the bridge. Karpov saw one crewman looking up at the ceiling of the citadel, as if he thought a 16 inch shell might come blasting through the armored roof at any moment like Hayashi's plane hit the aft citadel when they fought the Japanese. It was not the battleship he was worried about now, but the flights of aircraft massing above it.

The American planes had cut the range in half in the last ten minutes and were now inside thirty kilometers, ripe fruit for the flotilla's potent missile defenses. *Orlan* led the way with her superb 9M96E missiles, designed for direct "hit to kill" impact. Their high speed maneuverability was attributed to canards and thrusters, which allowed them to achieve extremely high G turns with precision throughout the engagement envelope. In effect, it was a highly maneuverable shaped charge that would strike and detonate with a tight fragmentation pattern that was ripping the American planes to pieces, one by one.

Yet each missile fired was one less available in the magazines. *Orlan* started the battle with 180 SAMs, and she had already fired 46 missiles, each and every one finding a target, though three had homed on planes that had already been hit.

Rodenko reported that the SAM defense was exacting a terrible toll, but the Americans were still pressing doggedly forward. "This group must be off Halsey's carriers," he said to the Captain, pointing at the tactical board. "That second group there at the fifty kilometer mark must be coming from the Sprague group."

"How many?"

"Signal tally has about 160 discrete contacts there, sir. The Halsey group we're engaging now is much bigger, well over 250 aircraft. *Orlan* started

with 152 SAMS after fending off Ziggy Sprague's first attack, and we have 100 missiles in the *Klinok* system. Even if we score hits with every missile that will still leave over 150 aircraft that will get through the SAM envelope for our close in systems to contend with. The Halsey air group must have vectored in on a signal from that battleship." He pointed at the tactical board where the symbol for the *Iowa* was drawn by the computer.

Karpov had a distant look in his eyes now, lips tight, the tension evident on his jaw line. "I cannot allow over a hundred aircraft to get that close," he said with a low and dangerous tone of voice.

The Captain turned and walked away, Rodenko looking after him, concerned. He saw Karpov leaning over Samsonov's combat station, his hand reaching into his service jacket. Then he heard the order.

"Mister Samsonov, Activate P-900 system—Number ten missile."

"Sir, aye, number ten missile... Sir, that weapon is mounted with a special warhead." The big CIC Chief looked at the Captain for confirmation.

"Correct, Samsonov. Ready the missile for firing on our primary target." Karpov had produced his missile key and was now leaning over the launch station, staring at the clear fiberglass key hole covers. There were two, side by side, but he had long ago ordered Martinov to reset the system to fire on insertion of a single command level key. This time there would be no countervailing order from Volsky. This time his word was final. And this time Sergeant Troyak would not appear at the eleventh hour and snatch away his key.

Who knows where the Sergeant is now, he wondered? Who knows where Volsky is, alive or dead, or Fedorov? This is all that matters.

"You're going to use a tactical warhead?" Rodenko was at the Captain's side now, his voice low and tense.

"You can see the situation as clearly as I, Rodenko." Karpov said quickly. "Those planes are coming in right over that battleship and heading our way. We may get many of them, even most of them, but how many will get through? And how many SAMs will we be left with after that? If we expend all our missiles we're done for. It's time for decisive action."

"But sir..."

"But what, Rodenko? Did you think we were just playing with fire here? This is war! I'm going to destroy that battleship, and kill everything above it out to a radius of five kilometers. Then our SAMs will handle the remainder if they dare us."

The Captain flipped the fiberglass cover open, inserting his missile key. “Don’t worry Rodenko. I’m not asking you to concur with my decision. The responsibility is mine. It is either us or them at the moment, and I, for one, do not wish to see this ship blown up like *Admiral Golovko*.” He turned the key firmly, and saw the board confirm a successful arming of the warhead in the silo.

“Sir, “ said Samsonov. “Missile active and keyed for firing. My board reads ready.”

“Just one second Mister Samsonov, if you please. Nikolin. Signal Yeltsin on *Orlan*. Tell them to cease firing immediately. I don’t want a hungry SAM to find our P-900.”

They waited, the tension on the bridge ratcheting up as the seconds went by. All eyes were on Karpov now, and then Nikolin reported. “*Orlan* responding, sir. All weapons are secured and ready. Awaiting new orders.”

“A good man, Yeltsin,” said Karpov. “Send the coded signal *Hellfire*. Tell them to standby and rig for NBC. Signal all helicopters as well. *Kirov* will come to readiness level 1A.”

An alarm sounded, warning the ship to prepare for an NBC event and don any protective gear as appropriate. Karpov stood up, looking from one man to the next, seeing their eyes on him, remembering those same eyes when he had desperately stayed Samsonov’s hand and spared the destruction of the submarine *Key West*. There had been forgiveness in those eyes back then, and a feeling of personal redemption, a return to sanity and heart, a whisper of hope in that one single act.

Now he was about to throw that all away, burn it, remand it to the deepest level of hell. We thought we could stop the war, he thought darkly. What we failed to realize is that we were the war, and as long as the root and stem of that weed still grows in our hearts, no place is safe from the ravaging fire. There was even war in heaven...

He stepped to Samsonov’s side, and reached down, slowly pushing his hand from the firing toggle on the P-900 system, in an act of supreme irony. This time it was not to stay his hand. No... It will be *my* hand on the button, not his, he thought. I am responsible, the Dark Angel of perdition, and death is in my hand.

He pressed his thumb hard on the toggle, and the warning claxon bawled. His eye strayed to the forward deck where the P-900 ejected from the red open hatch, its nose declined downward and the rocket motor fired. It looked

just like any of the other missiles they had fired, yellow fire in its wake with white hot smoke behind it as the *Sizzler* climbed to its cruising elevation and bent away to the south. Hell was on its way.

* * *

Captain Wellborn was still looking through his binoculars when the XO pointed out the contrail. “Here comes another one, sir; dancing like a drunk sailor on the deck.”

The P-900 had reached altitude for a brief subsonic cruise, and now descended to low level as it approached the ship, swinging this way and that in a series of maneuvers designed to defeat fast computer controlled gun systems.

“Just one this time,” said Wellborn, watching it come. “All hands, brace for impact!”

It was the last thing he said.

The meal the crew had eaten that day was also their last, cream of tomato soup, saltine crackers, roast Young Tom Turkey, cranberry sauce, sage dressing, whipped mashed potatoes, buttered peas, hot Parker House Rolls, ripe olives, sweet pickles, sweeter cherries served up in the pies...The missile suddenly popped up as one trigger happy gunner on a 20mm gun took a shot, hoping to get lucky.

Then it went off.

Chapter 36

Captain Murray on the *Missouri* had been looking north through his binoculars at the distant shadow of *Iowa* on the horizon. It was the last thing he saw. The brilliant white light was searing, many times the brightness and heat of the sun, and “Sunshine” Murray was instantly blind.

Halsey felt the flash as much as he saw it out of the corner of his eye, immediately knowing what had happened. Any man who sees a nuclear weapon detonate once will never forget the experience if he lives through it. The Russians had fired off one bomb earlier that morning, and now the evening was ushered in with a second sun on the horizon. They’ve hit us again, he thought. My God, they’ve hit Chuck Wellborn on the *Iowa*.

Now the words of Admiral Fraser came back to haunt him from that first meeting they had together on the *Missouri*... “Admiral, suppose I told you that your *Desron 7* had nothing whatsoever to do with the outcome of that incident in the North Atlantic. There was no heroic sacrifice by your gallant destroyers as reported in your newspapers. Suppose I told you that the ship you believed was a German raider was nothing of the sort, and that it wasn’t sunk that day—the day your *Mississippi* went down. Suppose I told you that you lost that ship, and the others in *TF.16*, when it was hit by a weapon of unimaginable power, enough TNT to take out an entire fleet if it was concentrated like that, or to obliterate an entire city. I think you know what I may mean when I describe a weapon like this. You Americans have been working on them; so have we.”

The blinding light was gone in a flash, and next came the shock wave, the awful racing wind, and the low roar in the distance, like the bellow of an evil dragon. It was much worse than before, and *Missouri* was far closer than the warning ship fired that morning. Two suns in the morning, thought Halsey; two suns at day’s end. He turned to see the mushroom rising where the battleship *Iowa* had once been stalwartly firing her main guns at a distant, unseen enemy. The Big Stick was gone, broken, hidden by a rising hollow column of seething water, its walls some 300 feet thick. The temperature there at ground zero reached as high as 7,200 degrees Fahrenheit in the first second of the detonation. Half a mile away it was as hot as 3,200 degrees, but only for an instant. Initially the sea was boiled away to vapor, but as the

detonation quickly cooled it swelled up into a massive spray dome that was soon wreathed by a thick mist that came to be known as a “Wilson Cloud.” This slowly lifted to reveal the darkened hulk of the once proud battleship, no more than a battered shadow on the sea now.

Then the ocean itself rolled out with the onrushing wave, leaving a circle of frothy white foam behind it as it went. The shock produced a huge swell in the sea, and Halsey could feel Mighty Mo rise up, though she weathered the high tide easily, surging down again until her bow cut into the sea. There had been over a hundred planes in the air nearby when the detonation occurred, the flights just reaching *Iowa*’s position. Every one of them within a kilometer of the ship was incinerated. Flights as far as five kilometers out were swept away in the raging wind as though batted from the sky, lashed with the terrible blast wave. Farther out the aircraft wheeled and swooped, a few barely managing to recover and avoid being swept into the sea. Between the missiles and the bomb, 165 airmen lost their lives in those searing minutes.

Some ten miles behind them the second wave of pilots raised their gloved hands, shielding their eyes from the flash and light, and some felt the heat even that far away, but they survived. Now the titanic mushroom cloud loomed before them, and they were forced to veer left and right to avoid it, just as Tanner’s flights had veered to avoid the wrath of the Demon volcano. Another Demon was at work that day, but on they came. None knew of the radiation burning through their bodies, and not one would care if they did. They saw the Big Stick die its agonizing death and, as the shock abated, the hot fire of anger burned within them now. There were a hundred planes from the Halsey group still in the air, and the Sprague’s strike wing was only now starting to reach the scene.

One pilot in the Sprague group was Rod Bains, bringing up the rear of the group, the big ASM-N-2 BAT bomb anchored to his fuselage. He had seen the missiles hit the carriers, watched *Ticonderoga* burning as he climbed to join his mates above. Now he remembered Lowrey shaking his fist at him as he revved up his engines for takeoff. Go get ‘em. Go give them hell.

He opened the throttle up, hastening on and following the radio direction calls being sent by Ziggy Sprague’s radio man on the *Wisconsin*. They had all seen it. No one could have missed it, the mushroom cloud was thousands of feet high already, and still boiling the sea up into the evening sky. Yet all around him the planes kept on, and he caught one pilot’s eye, giving him the

thumbs up as they sped forward—*Hellcats, Helldivers, Avengers* all.

* * *

“The ship is gone, sir,” said Rodenko. “Target destroyed.”

Karpov was staring at the mushroom cloud, his mind beset with images of what it must have been like. They didn’t suffer, he said to himself. It would have been too quick. One minute they were there, and the next minute they would be gone. Yet perhaps this will shake the Americans at last, and they will see what they are up against... Yes, look what they are up against, a raving lunatic with a single minded bent for destruction, Vladimir Karpov, Commander of the Red Banner Pacific Fleet. Did you really think you could rule these men, bend them to your will, make them kowtow to your demands? What was it all for, vengeance for *Admiral Golovko*, reprisal for the long years of enmity the West imposed upon Russia? You thought you would settle accounts, and look at it now. Look!

“Are you alright, Captain? What are your orders, sir?”

He turned slowly to look at Rodenko, his eyes sallow and empty, as was his soul. There was a God shaped hole in the man, thought Rodenko, but no God could fill it.

“Con, Radar. Enemy aircraft now at twenty kilometers and closing at 400 kph.” The watch stander’s voice was strident in the tense air and the warning finally roused Karpov from his dark reverie. There was no time to scourge himself for what he had done. There would be time enough for that later. The ship was still in danger. Yet he moved listlessly, stepping back, away from the distant mushroom cloud darkening the horizon, feeling strangely light headed.

“Captain?”

* * *

Yeltsin would not have believed it if he had not seen it with his own eyes. They had just come left in a hard fifteen point turn when the detonation occurred. Karpov’s earlier demonstration had sent a missile over a hundred kilometers south before it ignited. It was well over the horizon and they did not see the detonation, but this time they were very close. It was the first time he, or any of his bridge crew, had witnessed such a thing. They knew they carried the weapons in the belly of the ship’s magazines, but had never seen

what they could really do when fired in anger. Everyone gaped at the horizon, awe struck.

Yet when it was over he was amazed to see that a second wave of aircraft was still coming in from that same heading, the planes sweeping around the tall mushroom cloud as it cauliflowered up into the gloaming sky. And further out to the west there came another large group. Karpov had ordered him to cease fire so the P-900 carrying the tactical weapon would arrive safely on target. What was he planning now? Was he going to swat these remaining planes from the sky with another tactical airburst, or were they to resume conventional SAM defense?

He steadied himself, shaking the horror of the moment from his mind and ordered his radio man to contact *Kirov* for further instructions. There was no initial response but the hail continued, sounding more and more plaintive with each repetition... "*Orlan to Kirov. Come in, Kirov. Requesting battle orders. Over. Orlan to Kirov. Please respond. Over. Where are you, Kirov? Please come in. Orlan to Kirov. Where are you?...*"

Frustrated and knowing the enemy planes were just minutes away, Yeltsin stepped out of the enclosed armored citadel of the bridge and onto the weather deck, binoculars in hand. They had been steaming about two kilometers in front of the big battlecruiser, but when he scanned the sea in his wake, there was no sign of the ship. *Kirov* was gone! What had happened?

Yes, they had felt the harsh wind from the explosion, the shock wave and swell from the sea, but even his much smaller ship rode it out easily, and there were no enemy planes in close. Could *Kirov* have suffered the same fate as *Admiral Golovko*, struck by a late fired round from the stricken American battleship? No, there was no sign of an explosion aft, and *Kirov* was a very big ship. If there had been an incident, or even an accident aboard the ship itself, he would have seen something. Yet what was that strange glow on the sea? He would not have time to investigate further.

The hard seconds ticked away, and now it struck him that *Orlan* was alone, and soon to be faced by a massive air attack. Time was running out. He rushed back into the bridge.

"Air alert one! Resume SAM defense! Ready all close in defense systems!"

The klaxon howled out the alert, and within seconds the first sleek SAMs were ejecting again from the ship's forward deck, streaking wildly into the sky to seek and destroy the American planes. The roar of the missiles

continued, one after another, the skies streaked by ribbons of smoke as they sped away on hot white tails. Then he heard the low, distant drone of many engines, saw the blue specks in the sky drawing ever nearer amid the roiling explosion from his lethal SAMs

They were coming—*Hellcats*, *Helldivers*, *Avengers* all—and one man named Bains with a big fat Bat Bomb under his fuselage was feeling very lucky that day. He saw something on the sea ahead of him, squinting as the light gleamed on its odd angles and lines. The sky around him was a chaos of fire and smoke. Planes were being hit and going down in flames.

Hell, he thought. I've got the range right now, and he pulled hard on the bomb release. The Bat Bomb was on its way, one solitary rocket fired against the scores of sleek weapons being fired by *Orlan*.

* * *

“Forgive me, Admiral. I know you are a very busy man these days, and I hate to impose on your time.” Kamenski settled into a chair, cradling the thick volume under his arm.

“That time may be running out,” said Volsky. “As you can see, the accommodations here are not nearly so plush as our offices above ground. I’m afraid Moscow continues to dig itself into a hole insofar as these hostilities are concerned. So we dig too.”

“Is it really that bad?”

Volsky gave the old man a long look. “I have seen it, Mister Kamenski; seen it with my own eyes. The past was not able to hold us long, it seemed. We kept bouncing back and forth from some distant future, well after the war was fought, and then into the hell of that last war again—out of the frying pan, into the fire. In those strange intervals we learned the war was to begin here in the Pacific, and so it has, in spite of our effort to prevent it. Perhaps it is not so easy to change time and fate after all. We have also seen what was left of the world after this current little disagreement was fought, and there was very little to speak of.”

“I understand,” said Kamenski. “As much as any man could, I suppose. Can we do anything more?”

“I have asked myself that a thousand times, but it is very frustrating. I still have Marines at the Naval Logistics Building, you know. Perhaps, I thought, we will get another letter.”

“I see...Then you are still hoping Fedorov will appear from the ether and pronounce that all is well.”

“Of course! But that’s a fool’s wish now, isn’t it? We never knew how to control things—these odd time displacements. I’m still not sure how we ever managed to get home. Suppose Fedorov completes his mission, and he returns, but not until the year 2022, or 2025. This possibility crossed my mind. It would mean we wait here in suspense, if we can dig a hole deep enough to survive what I know is coming next. Well, we don’t have two or three years to wait. I would be willing to bet that we may not have more than a few days left now before things get out of hand. And what would I do, I asked myself, if these were the last three days in the world we know? What would you do, Mister Kamenski?”

“Me? Why, I think I would take a little trip. In fact, that’s exactly what I am planning to do. If you could remove yourself from your duties here I would ask you to come with me.”

Volsky smiled, then the warmth fled from his eyes and he seemed to stare vacantly ahead. “Mister Kamenski, I don’t think there is any place we can go to hide from what is coming.”

“Don’t be so gloomy, Admiral. One must have faith.” He was fingering something with his left hand in his pocket as he spoke. The other still clung to a thick book beneath his arm.

Yes, he thought, a little trip. He really wished the Admiral could come with him. He was already guilty enough with the thought of stealing away on his own, but something had to be done, and it was clear to him that the Admiral, and all the other men in their nice pressed military uniforms, seemed powerless to change the fate they were shaping with their very own hands. It was as if they thought the war was something that was going to happen to them, something that was coming like a bad storm, as the Admiral seemed to believe...something inevitable. In the end they will realize that it was all their doing. *They* were the war. That was the hard truth they hid from behind those gold stripes and gilded caps, and all the decorations on their chest. He sighed, feeling the weight of the key in his pocket now. It seemed such a small and insignificant thing, but the doors it could open...

“Well Admiral, we may not have to wait all that time for Fedorov to appear. In all our plans and discussions it occurred to me that the end of those operations would soon be apparent to us here.”

“What do you mean?”

“Our plan...Fedorov’s plan, the whole business with Orlov and these control rods and the helicopter. It still astounds me when I think that this was all we could consider doing with the power we had in hand when Kapustin turned up those other two rods.”

“We still don’t know if they will even work. The one rod was proven—Rod-25—the others have yet to meet the test. Dobrynin only just launched his mission.”

“Oh, but they *have* met the test,” Kamenski said quickly. “That is if they were ever put to use. You see, I shared this with the Inspector General, but never took the time to share it with you, Admiral. We were so busy, but when things settled down I decided to check up on the history.” Now he shifted the volume from under his arm and placed it on the Admiral’s desk.

Volsky looked at it, squinting to see the text on the spine. “The Chronology of the Naval War at Sea. Fedorov’s book?”

“Not the same he owned, but the same volume. A very curious book, Admiral. I was doing some reading in the period relating to late 1945, just as the war ended. You see, it occurred to me that if your Marines and Engineers did actually manage to get those control rods to the Pacific, and contact your missing ships, then we might soon know about it.”

“How is that?”

“It would be right there in that book, Admiral. It would all be history by now.”

“You mean to say you think the book would... would change?”

“Precisely. And I would not say as much if I had not already experienced that very thing happening before. It does change. I’ve already seen it happen several times.”

“Your book changed? This is what Fedorov told me as well. How is it possible.”

“I really don’t know. All I *do* know is that the information I read on the closing days of the war, and what happened in the Kuriles, is not the same now—not as it was just a few days ago when I last consulted this book.”

“You are certain of this?”

“As certain as this old man can be. Yes, I know you will think I may have simply forgotten what I read days ago. This is all very subjective. But I assure you, the history has changed. When you see what I have discovered you will realize that as well.”

“Then you know what happened? You know the fate of Karpov and

Kirov?”

“See for yourself, Admiral.” He opened the book, sliding the big volume so the Admiral could read it more easily. “Turn the page, please. Yes...right there in the right hand column. See for yourself...”

To be continued...

Author's Note:

Dear Readers,

I come now to the last volume planned for the *Kirov Series*, and I thank you all for staying with the story, making it what it has become with your interest and continued support. If you had not raised *Kirov* up on your shoulders, I might not have ever written the books that followed it. You have given me countless hours of delight and satisfaction as I do the one thing I have most loved—my writing.

Now, as I work on the final volume, laboring in the Devil's Garden, I invite you to sound off and speak your mind on the story. If there was anything that you did not understand or some question you want answered, some loose end tied off, just drop me an email. Anywhere you would love to see the story go? Any stone you think has been left unturned or unexplained? If so, throw your two cents in the hat and let me know what it is, and I'll make sure every question gets an answer in the final volume, *Devil's Garden*.

With deep appreciation,
john@writingshop.ws

The Saga Continues...

Kirov Saga: Devil's Garden ~ Nine Days Falling-Vol. III

The stunning conclusion to the *Kirov* saga continues the action, both past and present, as the prelude to the Great War moves into its final days. The last remnant of the Red Banner Pacific Fleet has fought its duel with Halsey in the Pacific, resorting to nuclear weapons in the last extreme—but what has happened to *Kirov* and *Orlan*?

Now the many story threads involving Fairchild Inc. and the desperate missions to find Orlov launched by both Haselden and Fedorov all converge in the vortex of time and fate on the shores of the Caspian Sea. Fedorov and Troyak lead an amphibious assault at Makhachkala, right into the teeth of the German advance. Meanwhile, Admiral Volsky and Kamenski read the chronology of events to peek at the outcome and discover the verdict of history. Can it still be changed?

Turn the page with Admiral Volsky and learn the fate of Orlov, Fedorov, Karpov and the world itself. Follow the strange and enigmatic figure of Sir Roger Ames, Duke of Elvington as he reveals a plot, and a plan, older than history itself on the windswept shores of Lindisfarne Castle.

Coming this fall from the Writing Shop Press!

OTHER BOOKS BY JOHN SCHETTLER

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 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.

Kirov Saga: Men Of War

Kirov returns home to a changed world in the year 2021, and as the Russian Naval Inspectorate probes the mystery of the ship's disappearance, Anton Fedorov begins to unravel yet another dilemma—the secret of Rod 25. The world is again steering a dangerous course toward the great war that blackened the shores of a distant future glimpsed by the officers and crew. Fedorov has come to believe that time is waiting on the resolution of one crucial unresolved element from their journey to the past—the fate of Gennadi Orlov.

Join Admiral Leonid Volsky, Captain Vladimir Karpov, and Anton Fedorov as they sleuth the mystery of Orlov's fate and launch a mission to the past to find him before the world explodes in the terror and fury of a great air and naval conflict in the Pacific. It is a war that will span the globe from

the Gulf of Mexico to the Middle East and through the oil rich heart of Central Asia to the wide Pacific, but somehow one man's life holds the key to its prevention. Yet other men are aware of Orlov's identity as a crewman from the dread raider they came to call *Geronimo*, and they too set their minds on finding him first...in 1942! Men of war from the future and past now join in the hunt while the military forces of Russia, China, and the West maneuver to the great chessboard of impending conflict.

Kirov Saga: *Nine Days Falling, Vol. I*

As Fedorov launches his daring mission to the past to rescue Orlov, Volsky does not know where or how to find the team, or even if they have safely made the dangerous transition to the 1940s....But other men know, from the dark corners of Whitehall to the KGB. And other men also continue to stalk Orlov in that distant era, led by Captain John Haselden and the men of 30 Commando. The long journey west is fraught with danger for Fedorov's team when they encounter something bewildering and truly astounding, an incident that leads them deeper into the mystery of Rod-25.

Meanwhile, *Kirov* has put to sea and now forms the heart of a powerful battlegroup commanded by Captain Vladimir Karpov. He is soon confronted by the swift deployment of the American Carrier Strike Group Five out of Yokosuka Japan in a tense standoff at sea that threatens to explode into violence at any moment. The fuse of conflict is lit across the globe, for the dread war has finally begun when the Chinese make good on their threat to secure their long wayward son—Taiwan. From the pulsing bitstream of the Internet, the deep void of outer space, the oil soaked waters of the Persian Gulf and Black Sea, to the riveting naval combat in the Pacific, the world descends in nine grueling days, swept up in the maelstrom and chaos of war.

This is the story of that deadly war to end all wars, and the desperate missions from the future and past to find the one man who can prevent it from ever happening, Gennadi Orlov. Can the mystery of Rod-25 and Orlov be solved before the ICBMs are finally launched?

Kirov Saga: *Fallen Angels ~ Nine Days Falling-Vol. II*

The war continues on both land and sea as China invades Taiwan and North Korea joins to launch a devastating attack. Yet *Kirov* and the heart of the Red Banner Pacific Fleet has vanished, blown into the past by the massive wrath of the Demon Volcano. There Captain Karpov finds himself at

the dying edge of the last great war, yet his own inner demons now wage war with his conscience as he contemplates another decisive intervention.

After secretly assisting the Soviet invasion of the Kuriles and engaging a small US scouting force in the region, Karpov has drawn the attention of Admiral Halsey's powerful 3rd Fleet. Now Halsey sends one of the toughest fighting Admirals of the war north to investigate, the hero of the Battle off Samar, Ziggy Sprague, and fast and furious sea battles are the order of the day.

Meanwhile tensions rise in the Black Sea as the Russian mission to rescue Fedorov and Orlov has now been expanded to include a way to try and deliver new control rods to *Kirov* from the same batch and lot as the mysterious Rod-25. Will they work? Yet Admiral Volsky learns that the Russian Black Sea Fleet has engaged well escorted units of a British oil conveyor, Fairchild Inc., and the fires of war soon endanger his mission.

All efforts are now focused on a narrow stretch of coastline on the Caspian Sea, where men of war from the future and past are locked in a desperate struggle to decide the outcome of history itself. Naval combat, both future and past, combine with action and intrigue as Volsky's mission is launched and the mystery of Rod-25 and Fedorov's strange experience on the Trans-Siberian Rail is finally revealed. Can they stop the nuclear holocaust of the Third World War in 2021 or will it begin off the coast of Japan in 1945?

The Meridian Series – *Time Travel Adventure!*

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. The team is led to the Jordanian desert during WWI and the exploits of the fabled Lawrence of Arabia.

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.

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 that guards an ancient secret hidden for centuries.

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.”

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 Byrne, 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!

“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*

The Writing Shop Press

The Writing Shop is a confederation of writers, poets, and artists who are delighted to take advantage of the wonders of digital printing technology to offer their creative work to others.

Have you written a book that you simply must see through to printer’s ink?

Please visit us at **www.writingshop.ws** and learn about our services for new authors. Both print and eBook publication available.

“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.”

—Nathaniel 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! If any of you have questions, thoughts or observations please feel free to email me at john@writingshop.ws. I answer every email I receive.

John Schettler

For more information visit:

<http://www.writingshop.ws> or <http://www.dharma6.com>