

Kirov Saga



Season 3, Vol 2 in the Kirov Series

NEMESIS

An Alternate History of WWII by:

John Schettler



Kirov Saga:
Nemesis

By

John Schettler

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Author's Note:

Dear Readers,

So Fedorov survived the hour that was so long in coming, a bit bewildered, but still his old self, with all his memories intact. Now he sits there aboard the ship, knowing everything you know, and what may soon happen. Join him as he struggles to forestall events that will rip the tattered fabric of time even further, doing damage that not even Professor Dorland could ever hope to repair.

And another man has survived, twice! Karpov has been Fedorov's nemesis from the very first, yet now that threat is redoubled. You will soon see what the Siberian has planned, and it promises to take us all along that darkened pathway, through mayhem and madness.

Beginnings are delicate times, for people, plants, and even stories. In many ways, the events that brought us to Doppelganger are a new beginning to this long tale, and so I must water that ground and till the soil a bit at the outset here, to see what might grow. There will be a quiet echo in this new beginning, a little sense of déjà vu, but then this new story takes on a life of its own that will be much different. As always, the principle characters that are the Prime Movers in all of this will take us forward.

And then there is this war, with 1941 now wearing away, and the Germans coming to a most important decision point in the course of these events. I will be showing you all of that as well, and before this volume ends, we will be in the thick of things on the Eastern Front.

Again, many thanks for your loyalty to this story, and your continued support. When Admiral Volsky addressed the crew in that last P.A. announcement before the final shift, I was speaking through him to all of you. "We stand now aboard the finest ship on this earth, and you are the finest crew to ever stand a watch at sea, as god is my witness. And so I thank you—for your courage... for your perseverance... for your steadfast loyalty... for Kirov..."

- John Schettler

Part I

Devil's Bargain

“A brave man is a man who dares to look the Devil in the face and tell him he’s a Devil.”

— James A. Garfield

Chapter 1

Karpov eased into the chair, feeling the plush cushion belying the hard bargain he had come here to strike. He thought how strange it was that the iron forging nations and empires was so often hammered here in the midst of all this splendor and refinement. He looked at the gold rivets detailing the furniture, the well lacquered table, the perfect sterling silverware, the well styled samovar there. The carpet was thick beneath his feet, a measure of respect he had gained now that the fate of Soviet Russia might lie within his compass rose. He took one last look, admiring the high arched ceiling and crystal chandelier with a smile.

The reception had been even grander than before, a full honor guard, the Moscow Band, all diplomatic protocols reserved for proper heads of state. Yet he was under no illusions in spite of the gilded surroundings he found himself in. This was another kind of war here, he thought, and I am here to win.

“The General Secretary of the Soviet State of Russia!”

The tall door opened, easily three times the height of the man that now walked through it into the room, and Karpov stood as he entered, one hand holding his leather gloves, which he had correctly removed for the handshake that the two men would now exchange. So it begins, he thought, with an open hand to show that no weapon is held, a willingness to find tryst with reason and common interest, a gesture of good intentions.

Kirov strode up, wearing the same grey suit and trousers as Karpov had remembered him before. His smile was warm and genuine, but the eyes... yes, the eyes seemed deeper set in his round face, the hair just a little unkempt, the cheeks just a little more taut.

“Vladimir,” said Kirov, “bold enough to use his guest’s first name as the two men shook hands. “It has been too long since I welcomed you here. Forgive me, but as you might deduce, I have been somewhat busy in the last few months.”

“No doubt,” said Karpov. “Uninvited guests for dinner can be most unsettling.”

“Particularly when they ride in on tanks and dive bombers,” said Kirov, gesturing to the chair as the two men seated themselves at the table. “May I offer you tea?”

“Thank you,” said Karpov, watching the slow, deliberate pour, and noting that there was just the slightest tremor in the other man’s hand now. Kirov nodded agreeably, and the two men raised the cups to drink, no toast spoken, as such would never be offered with tea. This was just the opening, he knew, the vodka comes later, assuming we can reach an understanding here, assuming I get everything I came here for, and one thing in particular. This will be very interesting.

“You are wondering when we plan to open the offensive on the upper Volga.” Kirov wasted no time getting the talks started.

“The thought had crossed my mind,” said Karpov. “My Guards have already secured a bridgehead north of Ufa, and I have fifteen divisions there now.”

“Excellent,” said Kirov. “Just as you promised. And the volunteers you sent me were also very timely, but quite frankly, we need more. Our counterattacks have been ill timed, and largely unsuccessful.”

“Tanks,” said Karpov. “You must have several tank corps positioned behind the intended point of breakthrough, armored chariots to race through the gaps and raise hell beyond. Otherwise the advance is limited to the speed of your ground troops.”

“A lesson I have now learned well enough,” said Kirov. “Yet building those tanks takes time. I thank you for your preparations on the upper Volga. Unfortunately, I must tell you we have no immediate plans to attack there any time soon.”

“Oh?” Karpov raised an eyebrow. “And why not?” he asked, though he knew the answer to his question well enough. Tyrenkov had briefed him very well before this meeting, and he knew that the situation in the south was now very grave. The Germans had taken Kiev and were massing again to continue that offensive. If they broke out, and Karpov knew they would, then the entire line of the Dnieper would be compromised.

“Trouble in the south,” said Kirov matter of factly. “They have a strong group in the Dnieper Bend between Dnepropetrovsk and Zaporozhe. Beyond that, Volkov’s little offensive over the Volga has required attention. It was necessary to move the 51st Reserve Army there to contain that attack. Now

we plan to take Kamyshin and tidy things up.”

“We needed that army in the north,” said Karpov. “There is no way we can mass sufficient force to break Volkov’s 1st Army defense line without it.”

“Unfortunately, the danger is on the Dnieper now, and I must focus all my attention there. My generals have told me it is too early to plan this big attack against Volkov, and now I must listen to them. In truth, I should have dealt with that bastard in 1940, before the Germans massed to attack.”

“We weren’t ready,” said Karpov. “There was that squabble over Omsk, and those foolish Zeppelin raids Volkov mounted. I nearly had him by the cheek, Kirov. I was that close to catching that old rat, but he managed to slip away.”

“I’m told you took heavy casualties.”

“He took worse,” said Karpov quickly. “And if he dares another little foray like that, he’ll get the same treatment again. “My airship building program is advancing nicely. I’ll be adding another T-Class ship this month, and we have two more under construction. But that is one thing I have come to ask of you today. Can you spare your northern airship fleet? There is little activity there, and I could put those ships to very good use.”

“Considering your commitment on the upper Volga,” said Kirov, “I will cut the orders today. You can have both the Riga, and the Narva.”

“Excellent.”

“Yet I have a few requests myself,” said Kirov. “Don’t be discouraged over this cancelled offensive. Your men can still play a most important role there now.”

“In what way? We cannot attack alone. We simply have no armor to speak of, and artillery is very thin.” Karpov was running down his list of hardware now, things he hoped to secure from these negotiations, which seemed headed the right direction, in spite of the disappointment of having to cancel the upper Volga offensive.

Kirov took a long sip of tea. “I want you to extend your frontage from the river to Artemyevsk.”

“What? You mean to hold a defensive line?”

“Correct. I need to pull out the 50th Army as well, and if your men can take over their positions...”

“I see,” said Karpov. “The situation in the south is worse than you let on.”

“At the moment we are holding, but that may change. That German SS Korps has given us fits. It has led the assault from the very beginning, and those troops are damn near impossible to stop. I’ve thrown one army after another onto the line, and they cut right through like a buzz saw through bad wood.”

“So now you want to throw the 50th Army into the lumber mill,” said Karpov, trying to feign disapproval. Then he adopted a well rehearsed pose, nodding his head, for Tyrenkov had told him of the orders cut to 50th Army to make ready to move by rail, and he knew this four days ago.

“Then there will be no offensive on the upper Volga for some time,” he said feigning dejection. “That is not unless I conduct it with Siberian troops. I would willingly do so, but as I have said—we need tanks and artillery badly, and air support.”

“Suppose I promised you all three in abundance,” said Kirov, pressing on to his next agenda item. “We are planning the formation of several new shock armies. Zhukov has convinced me that we must build up strong reserves, and if we ever do plan to take the offensive, we will need good shock troops to lead the way. Yet at the moment, all my reserve divisions are being pulled into the front, from Smolensk to the Sea of Azov. But if you have the manpower, good fighting men and officers, then I can equip them. How does First Siberian Shock Army sound?” There was a glint in Kirov’s eye, as this was the principle thing he needed from Karpov now. He was already raising divisions as fast as he could, but he needed to prepare some stronger reserve force to plan for his winter offensive. So he quickly explained.

“We won’t be able to attack until winter,” he said. “When the snows come, we can get over the frozen rivers better, and we know how to fight in the cold. Yes, General Winter is coming to our side soon, but he needs men, Karpov. He needs the hard fighting Siberians! So this is what I propose. You send me the volunteers. We can marshal them at Perm, Kazan, or even Gorky. I’ll give them rifles, machineguns, mortars, artillery, transport—hell, I’ll even give them skis. I want to build five Shock Armies, and they will put you right in the heart of our winter offensive.”

“Where?” said Karpov, thinking.

“That we cannot yet say,” said Kirov. “Who knows where the front will be when the time comes to commit these armies?”

“You plan to use them against Volkov?”

“Against the Germans as well. They will form our joint strategic reserve.”

“Under my command?” Karpov inclined his head, and Kirov knew this was the real sticking point.

“I thought you were a navy man,” he began. “Yes, you’ve managed to hold Volkov at bay on the Ob River line, and I have no doubt that if you were to command the force I envision building, that you would crush him there. But that is far from Moscow, Admiral.” The use of the title deliberately underscored Karpov’s naval background. “To be forthright, I was considering Konev. He’s fought well in the Caucasus, a veteran field commander.”

Karpov was clearly not happy to hear this, and now the look on his face was not rehearsed. “You want to raise five new armies, and with Siberian troops, and give them to Konev? Kolchak will go ballistic.”

“Kolchak?” Kirov restrained a laugh. “You and I both know he isn’t going to end up running things in Siberia. Frankly, I’m surprised you’ve kept him around for so long.”

Now Karpov took a moment to consider. He had only just given Tyrenkov orders to plan the removal of Kolchak. Could Kirov’s intelligence teams have picked that up so soon? He most certainly had men in Siberia—probably right there where I set my headquarters at Ilanskiy. They were undoubtedly reporting back on the progress of my restoration of that railway inn, but how much did Kirov really know?

“What you say is correct,” he began slowly. “Kolchak is an idiot, and a nuisance.”

“That is an understatement. The man is a Capitalist masquerading as a patriot. He had the temerity to declare himself Supreme Ruler of all Russia! He’s turned nationalized farms and factories back over to their private owners, abolished trade unions, disbanded Soviet Cadres, re-instituted laws guaranteeing private property. The man is more than a nuisance. That little display he put on in Yekaterinburg should be enough to see him hanged—25,000 killed and tortured under his anti-Bolshevik edicts. Now he’s worried about the Japanese, while Germany devours half the nation! They are all alike, Kolchak, Kornilov, Denekin, Wrangel, and Volkov. They are all traitors to their own homeland, and to the Revolution.”

“Yes,” said Karpov, “Kolchak is worried about the Japanese. He was a

hero during the Russo-Japanese war, but any fool can read a map and realize they have no further ambitions in Siberia. No. They will strike south, as you well know.” He gave Kirov a knowing glance, as he had suspected for some time that the Soviet leader had learned more of the history of this war than he ever let on.

“Of course they will strike south, yet not for many months. By that time I would expect you will have taken care of the Kolchak matter, and that will allow you to take full control of all Siberian war resources—all the divisions Kolchak is wasting in the Trans-Baikal region. You’ll know what to do with them. If you cannot wait for our support on the upper Volga, then you can move troops from that front to your Ob River line. Be a general there, if you wish.”

“But hand over troops to build five armies for Konev and stay out of things—is that it? This is what you asked this meeting for?”

Now Kirov set his tea aside, folding his arms. He looked Karpov squarely in the eye, and spoke. “Yes,” he said with no hesitation. “And I’ll be frank and say one more thing, Karpov. You’re a bit of a devil from my perspective. I would have outmaneuvered Kolchak soon, were it not for bigger fish to fry in Volkov. Then you come on the scene, from nowhere, and we both know that isn’t too far from the truth. You come on the scene, and suddenly all of Western Siberia is up in arms in a way Kolchak could have never engineered. You’re a sly devil too, working quietly behind the scenes and posing as an Admiral with your little airship fleet. But what you really want is power on the ground, which is why the thought of sending me the troops to build five shock armies, and then giving them to Konev, is so disagreeable to you now. Yet it is either that or you can continue raising these Cossack and Tartar cavalry regiments, and we both know how far they will get you in this war.”

The man’s honesty stung for a moment, and Karpov restrained the urge to hit back, for this wasn’t the time or place to square off with Sergei Kirov.

“You are making this a condition for the arms support I’m asking for?”

“That’s the bargain,” said Kirov. “You send me the manpower, and I’ll equip these men and build five shock armies for our winter offensive—our offensive, Karpov. You will be right here at the planning table with me.”

Karpov pursed his lips, hesitating, yet knowing this was exactly the time to put one last twist on these negotiations. “Very well,” he said. “I will agree to this, but with one caveat. There is something I want from you beyond a

couple of airships and the promise of tanks and artillery. First off, let's make sure those promises are well kept. For every tank and artillery piece you build for these new shock armies, I get one to equip my own divisions—tit for tat."

"Agreed," said Kirov, without hesitation.

"And then I want one more thing."

"Name it."

"My ship."

There was a long silence as Kirov slowly reached for a cube of sugar, pouring himself another cup of tea. "Your ship?" he said, raising an eyebrow. "And here I thought you'd be happy with a pair of new airships."

"Not quite. As you have said, I'm a navy man at heart, just like Kolchak, and I want my ship. You know what I'm talking about."

"What makes you think I have any control over that ship?"

"Because if you asked Admiral Volsky or Fedorov to come home to papa, they would," said Karpov. "You know damn well they would."

"I would hope as much," said Kirov. "Yet I'm afraid I have some bad news for you. The ship vanished. It was reported missing six weeks ago, and hasn't been seen since."

"It's back," said Karpov. "It's in the Norwegian Sea."

"Your intelligence chief told you that? I've had no report on that from Berzin, and he's very good."

"Berzin doesn't know a thimble full of what I know," said Karpov. "So let me be as frank and direct with you here as you were a moment ago." Karpov leaned forward, knowing this was the time to deliver the coup de grace.

"Yes," he said, "I came out of nowhere, and I'm a bit of a devil at heart. I know this to be true, but better to rule in hell than to serve in heaven, or so the old saw goes. And yes, that ship is back, because it had to come, just as it did before."

"Before? You mean when it appeared last June?"

Karpov realized he had slipped here, for he did not want to reveal the real truth to Kirov, that the ship had originally appeared in July of 1941, just days ago.

"My intelligence is very good, Mister General Secretary. Trust me, the ship is back, and it's in the Norwegian Sea, but it may not be there for long. I want you to order it to Murmansk, and as soon as possible."

“Order it there?”

“I can tell you what channel to use to get through, if you don’t already know, and you can use all that sugar in your tea to convince them they need to come see you in Murmansk, just like before. But I am the rightful Captain of that damn ship, and I want it back. Give me that, and I’ll send you all the men you need. You can build five shock armies, and yes, you can give them to Konev. And you’ll get my full and complete support for the duration of this war. That’s your little deal with the devil now. You give me my ship, I’ll give you the manpower you need—real fighting men. It’s either that or you can continue to raise raw recruits from the peasant farmers, and see how well they like dancing with Hitler’s SS.”

Chapter 2

“Why in the world would you need that ship?” Kirov shifted in the chair, squaring off to Karpov. “The last time I consulted a map, Siberia had no viable ports.”

“For the moment.”

That gave the General Secretary pause. “Vladivostok? You are thinking to try and take back that port from the Japanese?”

“You and I both know that will have to be done,” said Karpov. “Why bandy words about it here? Of course I want it back, and with that ship I’ll have the power to take it.”

“The Japanese have at least five divisions in Primorskiy Province. I’m told that ship has some marvelous weapons—rockets that are very powerful, but it can’t win a land battle like that. Surely you must know this.”

“It can, and it will. A moment ago you were telling me how I could put the troops Kolchak has in the Trans-Baikal to good use. Taking Vladivostok is a good choice. If I do this it will make the position of their Kwantung Army untenable. For that matter, we should take back Port Arthur as well.”

“We? You are expecting Soviet support for these operations?”

“Of course, just as you are expecting Siberian support for the building of these new armies. Face it, Kirov. I don’t know what you saw when you went up those stairs at Ilanskiy, but at least you had the good sense to know what to do about it. Once this war is over, and that is a matter of just a few more years, then Russia must be re-united as one state. There can be no Orenburg Federation, and no Free Siberian State either. There must be only one nation. Correct? Otherwise we will not survive the challenges that come after this war. History does not end in 1945, even if this war may end that year.”

Now Kirov realized that there was another dimension to this man that he must never forget. Yes, he was a devil, just as he had said to the man’s face, but he was also from another time, a future time, and the knowledge of all that might happen in the decades ahead was a very powerful thing. Now he indulged a moment of weakness that he had tried to resist before, even with a man as amiable as Admiral Volsky there to confer with him.

“You spoke of that future time when we first met. Tell me more,” he said quietly, his tone suddenly very serious.

Karpov saw his moment had come, and knew he needed to take every advantage of it. “Long years of enmity fall between Russia and the West—yes, your nice loyal allies, with all their talk of cooperation, Lend-Lease trucks, and a second front against Germany. After this war ends, a chill falls on Europe, and the frost line runs right through the heart of a divided Germany. They called it the Cold War, because we seldom ever fired a shot in anger at one another, but it was war nonetheless. It was waged with politics, covert operations, spies, economic oppression, and a long, guarded watch was set on all our borders.”

“The British did this?”

“They were just the devil’s adjutant. No. It was the United States that became our real nemesis. Great Britain was just their cute little shadow puppet after the war. They never survived as an empire after 1945. They lose India, and most every other outpost of note, forsaking all colonies East of Suez, as they called it. But they didn’t even hold Suez for very much longer, or any of their hard won territories in the Middle East. Oh, their oil companies continued on, but there was no longer any real power beyond the exchange of oil for pounds sterling. That was what Great Britain became. In my time their vaunted Royal Navy, unrivaled at the start of this war, was reduced to no more than twenty active ships. But the Americans? That is a completely different story.”

“They become our enemy?”

“Our chief opponent on the world stage, until their meddling and grinding finally wore us down. The Soviet Union, as we called it, collapsed, and formally dissolved in December of 1991, fifty years from now. After that, the entire state disintegrated into not three, but fifteen separate nations. We lose all the Baltic States, Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, and Belarus. We lose all of the Ukraine, and the Crimea with it, and everything Volkov now controls disintegrates into a patchwork of six or seven separate states. We manage to hold a little slice of the Caucasus, for the oil, of course, and the heartland of Russia itself, and all of Siberia, remain united. Yes, Kirov, Siberia remains loyal. And the nation I will soon lead even had all of Primorskiy Province under its control, and a nice deep water port at Vladivostok. It wasn’t until another man named Vladimir decided to do something about this sad state of

affairs, that we began to get back on our feet, but that took us nearly twenty years.

“I... I had no idea...”

“Of course not. You went up those stairs at Ilanskiy from 1908, and they took you to this war, did they not? You saw enough of a disaster underway here—the gulags, concentration camps that killed millions, and forced millions more into slave labor. Hitler gets busy with that soon as well. He has a particular dislike of the Jews, and starts rounding them up and literally gassing them, and burning the bodies in brick ovens.”

“This I have seen,” said Kirov, his face drawn and hard now. “And just a little more... Once I went up the stairs twice, and I think I may have reached your time. Things were very different, particularly the rail yard. There were books on a shelf near the window, and I saw it was about the history of the war, this war! So I took them, and hastened back down those stairs. It was a very eerie feeling, to think I had reached some far off future, and I never went back again.”

“Then you know what the Nazis have planned,” said Karpov. Few knew about it in the beginning, but by the end of the war they called it the Holocaust, Hitler’s ‘Final Solution’ gone awry. And realize that is exactly what he will do here if he wins this war. But we can stop him, Mister General Secretary. We can stop him. In fact, we will be the two men most directly responsible for doing that. You have seen the history. Yes? So you know that the British and Americans will liberate France and the Low Countries, and knock Italy out of the war as well, but the rest is our task. Germany fields about 330 divisions in this war, and at any given time, eighty percent of them are fighting us, here on Russian soil, until we eventually grind them under our heel and drive all the way to Berlin. We beat the Americans there, but just barely. After that, the ‘Iron Curtain’ falls and divides Europe for the next 50 years... Until we fall...”

The silence in the room was broken only by the slow ticking of a great Grandfather clock that stood imposingly on one wall of the stateroom. Its steady tick-tock marked out the moments, and Kirov suddenly realized that far more was at stake now than the resolution of this war. That clock would strike out the hours, year after year, and here was a man who had knowledge of all that might happen, a window on the decades that would transpire long after he, himself, was dead.

“In truth, I have been so beset with the immediate crisis of this war that I have given little thought to things like this.”

“That is understandable,” said Karpov. “You are a time traveler too, Kirov, only you come to this moment from the past. A choice you made in that past has served to shape the world we now stand in, the moment you killed Stalin. It was a wise choice, for otherwise he would have done the same to you.”

Kirov nodded gravely, a look of anxiety on his face now as he remembered that moment when his finger clenched the cold trigger of that pistol, and changed all future history.

“I told you how I came to that decision at our first meeting,” he said. “Though I had no idea things would turn out this way. My part, I controlled easily enough. But Ivan Volkov was quite a surprise. He was never mentioned in any of the material I found on my forays up those stairs at Ilanskiy. Yes. You know I have read the history of this war, but it only takes us so far before it becomes useless. Things are happening now that never occurred. I should have all the Caucasus, and all of the Orenburg Federation under my belt when I face the Germans.”

“And all of Siberia,” said Karpov. “And yet it was still a nightmare when the Germans came, and four bloody years of fighting that have only just begun.”

“If we can survive,” said Kirov. “We are fighting hard, in fact even doing a little better than we once did, according to what I have read. We’ve been stubborn in the north, but the Germans are raising hell in the south. If we lose there, and they get through to link up with Volkov’s troops, then we lose the oil. Yes, I can build tanks, but soon the factories will run out of fuel for the machines, and what will those tanks run on?”

“Don’t worry about that,” said Karpov. “I told you I am presently sitting on massive reserves of oil in Siberia. But it will take some effort to get at it. I know exactly where it is, at Perm, Emba, in the Western Urals, and in the Far East on Sakhalin Island and Kamchatka. You see why we will need to run the Japanese out of those territories soon? So don’t worry about oil, my friend, I can get you all you need. But first I want that ship—my ship—so I can deal with the Japanese Navy. I would have done all this earlier, but for the stupid interference of Volsky and Fedorov. They are the reason Japan now sits on the Golden Horn Harbor, and I intend to reverse that, but I need my ship. Do

we have a bargain?”

For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul, thought Kirov? Here I sit, dickering with the Devil. Everything he says sounds so reasonable, for even the Devil can cite scripture for his purpose. Yes, I have read Shakespeare along with all the great Russian writers. He had a good deal to say about this man ... a villain with a smiling cheek. A goodly apple rotten at the heart...

Yet what if all he says about our future is true? Do my allies here turn on me as he describes? Will that reoccur this time around, or can I forge a different understanding with the West, as Volsky hopes?

“Something tells me it isn’t just the Japanese Navy you are worried about, Karpov,” he said, voicing his inner concern. “It’s the American Navy too.”

“It is any navy that would set itself in opposition to the rightful interests of Russia,” said Karpov flatly. “You think I do this for personal aggrandizement? I am not so foolish, or even so selfish. No. I act in the interest of the nation I swore to serve—the nation you have been struggling to re-unite, after it broke like bad china. Well, you have heard what I said about the future. If you think three separate states is difficult now, try fifteen after 1991. I know you cannot know whether this is all true, because you haven’t seen it. Yet I give you my word that what I have told you actually took place. You could even ask your newfound friend—Fedorov. He will tell you the same.”

“And you think we can prevent that? How? Buy facing down the American Navy in the Pacific? You forget that I was a young man when that incident occurred in the Tsushima Straits that re-ignited the old Russo-Japanese war. I saw that history unfold in slow motion. At one point I thought I might go east and fight the Japanese myself, but the Revolution, and then the sudden appearance of this man Volkov, compelled me to stay in St. Petersburg and fight for the Bolshevik movement. Things did not turn out so well the last time you had that ship there in the Pacific, did they?”

“You can thank Volsky for that. That man is a traitor to his own nation. Do you know he came for me with another warship? Yes. He managed to find a way to bring one of our most deadly fighting ships back to get after me—a submarine. He thought he was going to slink up on me and stab me in the back!” Karpov’s anger got the better of him now, and he restrained himself,

reaching for his cup, and sipping the cold tea.

Kirov perceived that flash of anger, and the darkness behind it, and he knew the danger he would court if he did what this man asked of him now. "I'm told that ship has certain weapons," he said in a hushed tone. "Weapons far more powerful than the rockets you have used on other ships. We spoke of this before."

Karpov thought for a moment, realizing Kirov must have learned this from Admiral Volsky. How much did he know? Is he aware of the fact that I used those weapons? Kirov knew of a mysterious 'incident' in 1908 that served as a trigger point for renewed war with Japan, but he could not know I used a nuclear warhead on the Americans, because that happened August 8th of this very year, a week from now.... Unless Volsky told him...

"Yes," he said, "the ship can do more than many realize. It has power to decide any engagement decisively in our favor. You have probably read of what the Americans did at Hiroshima and Nagasaki. This is why I know I can prevail in the Pacific, but I do not even have to consider the use of these weapons. I can beat the Japanese Navy by simply using the conventional weapons that ship will now possess. I have been rash in the past, Kirov. I'm sure Volsky told you as much, and I will be the first to admit that. Yet everything I ever did was for Russia. Now I see things differently. I know the measured use of power can achieve the best results. Yet I also know that unless you are willing to use the power you have, then you can achieve nothing. So give me back my ship, and I will give you all our eastern provinces in return, and the oil the Japanese now unknowingly sit on at Sakhalin Island and Kamchatka. I will give you back the only port on the Pacific Russia ever had, and, if need be, I could even sail to the Black Sea and help you keep the Crimea and Sevastopol."

"The Black Sea? That would mean you would have to pass the Bosphorus and Dardanelles. The Germans control that, or at least they think they do, though it is still nominally under Turkish authority. How would you get through?"

"The Germans control the Straits of Gibraltar, do they not? Yet that ship sailed right on through. I can do the same and become a terror in the Black Sea that will freeze Hitler's blood. You have Novorossiysk now. Yes? You want to hold it? I can make that happen. I can save Sevastopol and the Crimea, and your entire Black Sea Fleet, which would be lost as soon as

those ports fall. You would have to surrender those ships, and all while listening to Ivan Volkov laughing at you from Orenburg. Then he'll come for Volgograd..."

"Damn that man," said Kirov, thinking. Yes, there was so much Karpov could do. His armies could fight for me, and I'll need every man he can send me. He says he has the oil I'll need, and how can I doubt it? It is clear that I won't get much from Maykop before the Germans get there. And yes, I'll lose all of the Crimea, and possibly the whole of the lower Volga as well. I may even lose this war....

Yet the warning whispered to him by Admiral Volsky when they met at Murmansk was still in his mind. He had been discussing all of this with the Admiral and Fedorov...

"The British are hanging on by their fingernails," he had said to Volsky. "If they go, then we are surely next. Then the whole world comes under the shadow of Nazi Germany."

Volsky was clear and direct in his reply, and Kirov could see it in his eyes. "That cannot be permitted to happen. Mister General Secretary, this has been an hour of many revelations. We sit here discussing the impossible fates we have both suffered, and now this news of Karpov chills my blood if this is, indeed, the man we lost. He is a man of great ambition, and could prove a grave danger. Now, however, I think that Russia's only chance at survival is in a speedy alliance with Great Britain and the United States... but without their support, and the supplies and equipment that flowed to us through this very port, we may not have survived the onslaught Germany unleashed upon us. At this moment, all is in play. These years are the most dangerous of the entire war. Unless you get sound footing, the Germans could stampede all the way to Moscow, and now, with this Orenburg Federation and Volkov at your back, you have no refuge in the east as Stalin had when hard pressed."

Yet that is what Karpov now promises me, that refuge in the east. He would send me men, oil, and also provide land and resources, a safe haven for the factories I may soon have to move out of harm's way. I've already lost Minsk and Kiev, and all their industry. What to do here? I feel like the man with an angel on one shoulder and the Devil on the other. Which one should I listen to?

Chapter 3

Karpov could see the hesitation in Kirov's eyes, undoubtedly born of the poison Volsky poured into his ear. He doesn't really trust me, he knew, but he also knows he's in bed with Siberia, one way or the other. Yes. He knows he must work with me, because I have one more thing, one more card to play here, and now is the time.

"Very well," said Karpov. "Damn Volkov to hell. You have called me the Devil, Mister General Secretary, but I may turn out to be an Archangel instead. Volkov, however, has already proven his ilk. He's a traitor, openly allied with the real Devil on this earth now, Adolf Hitler, but that we can also change, and it may only take a single machinegun squad to do so...." He smiled, seeing the confusion on Kirov's face.

"I don't understand."

"Yes you do," said Karpov quickly. "Ilanskiy."

It was all he had to say, that one word, that one little hamlet in the middle of nowhere, that lonesome little railway inn. Ilanskiy. It sat there, the wood of that newly built stairway being smoothed and softened by the sandpaper of his engineers even as they spoke. Ilanskiy, the key to the entire problem of Orenburg, and the demise of Ivan Volkov with one simple excursion up those stairs.

"Before Volsky and Fedorov hatched that little plan to borrow an airship and try to demolish that place," Karpov began, "I took a little trip up those stairs myself. In fact, I got home again, and I saw the misery our nation was again to suffer at the hands of the Americans. Those weapons you are worried about? Well they finally turned them on our homeland. I saw the fire and destruction with my own eyes, just as you saw what Stalin would do when you went up those stairs from 1908. You could not live with that, could you? And I cannot live with what I saw either."

"You speak of the war in your time now?"

"Yes, the war that is at the end of that long feud between Russia and the West. Oh, the Chinese get in on the affair as well. In fact, that's where it started—in the Pacific, a squabble over oil rights beneath an insignificant

speck of rock. The Japanese wanted it on one side, backed by the Americans, and the Chinese wanted it on the other side, backed by us. Push comes to shove, and the rockets eventually take wing, only this time they all have warheads on them that make those used by the Americans at Hiroshima and Nagasaki look puny by comparison. In our day, Kirov, we have rockets that can fly from here all the way to the heartland of America, and they have the same—thousands of them. They can carry not one, but as many as ten of those warheads, and that is just one side of the strategic triangle of death each nation builds. The bombers have them, and the submarines...”

“Madness,” said Kirov, trying to visualize the terror at the heart of what Karpov was telling him now.

“Yes, it was madness. The Americans are working on them even now, in a secret program based in their southwest deserts. The British and Germans are working on them, and I have no doubt you are working on them as well. Let me tell you, there is no end to that madness, except what I saw when I went up those stairs.”

“Volsky and Fedorov have been trying to prevent that,” said Kirov. “They believe they can rewrite the history that follows this war, and make peace with the West.”

“They are sorely mistaken,” said Karpov. “Stalin was probably not the man to get things off on the right foot when this war ended, but let me tell you something you can read about in those books you might have hidden away somewhere. It was called the Atlantic Charter—a secret meeting between Churchill and Roosevelt that took place this very week, just a few days from now. I learned of that from one of Fedorov’s books myself, and thought I might attend. In fact, this meeting may still be planned, and I am willing to bet you will not receive an invitation. It starts there, Kirov, right there. Think about it! Volsky has been very chummy with the Royal Navy of late. Do you think they may now know where that ship really came from—that Churchill might know it as well? So what do you suppose he will be off to talk with Roosevelt about?”

Kirov nodded, realizing that this was most likely true. Surely the British knew the truth about that ship, and they would probably tell the Americans.

“And what was Volsky doing with that ship? Was he fighting for Mother Russia, or Great Britain?” Karpov pressed his advantage, knowing he had to resolve this issue once and for all with Kirov. “Did he propose to save the

Crimea for you, or give you back all our far eastern provinces? Of course not. Volsky is too spineless to do any of that. He equivocates, along with Fedorov, always worrying about the history, instead of having the balls to get out there and shape that history himself, just as you did when you pulled that trigger and spared the world the wrath of Josef Stalin."

In this, Karpov's words found fertile ground, for Kirov was a man of action, and not afraid to take strong measures to further his aims, and those of the Soviet State.

"So Volsky and Fedorov will not be rewriting anything," Karpov went on. "They don't have what it takes. They don't see what I have seen, the sad end of the Soviet Union, and the twenty years I lived through after it fell, until Vladimir Putin started piecing the broken china back together. Then, when they couldn't hem and haw and talk us out of what was rightfully ours, the economic sanctions came, and after that, they began sending their Armored Cavalry regiments back to Europe. And one thing led to another—tick tock, just like the pendulum on that grandfather clock there. Face reality, that is all I do each day. The United States thought they could enforce their Pax Americana on the whole world after this war, and they largely did so, until the oil wars started. That's what the next one is all about. In many ways it is what this one is about. Why do you think Hitler is so strong in the south this time. He needs the oil, and when he gets it, he'll use it to destroy you, and the Soviet State you built as well. That's the bargain that Devil offers you."

"True enough," said Kirov, a sullen and dejected tone to his voice now.

"Of course it's true, and Ivan Volkov is the real reason the Germans will get what they come for. They nearly got all the way to Baku, as you well know, and that was without any Orenburg Federation in the mix. This time, they will take everything. Volkov thinks he can strike his own bargain with the Devil, but he is sorely mistaken. Once Hitler gets what he wants, he will finish us first, and then deal with Volkov after the war. You know this, Kirov. It's what you have feared all along. And what plan did Volsky and Fedorov offer you to cure that? To sail about with the Royal Navy and make friends with Churchill? That took no real effort. Britain befriends you now because it must. Its own survival is at stake, but after the war, they run with America, and you get left out in the cold. They are planning that first meeting right now—their little Atlantic Charter, and neither of us are invited."

"Atlantic Charter?" said Kirov. "Yes, I am aware of this."

“Good. I know about your Red Archive, Mister General Secretary. My man Tyrenkov is also very good. Read up, and if you want any more evidence of the future they have planned, I can provide it. I have a little Red Archive of my own, and one thing more—I have Ilanskiy.”

Kirov looked at him for some time. “So that is what you mean when you said you could settle things with a single machinegun squad.”

“Exactly. You see, I took another trip up those stairs. In fact, I sent Tyrenkov up on a little reconnaissance mission recently.”

“But I thought that railway inn was demolished,” said Kirov.

“Don’t be coy, Kirov. You know damn well I’ve been rebuilding it, and it is now as good as new.”

“Then you’ve already tested it? You sent your intelligence Chief up those stairs?”

“Not from here. Not from 1941. There are other things I need to tell you, and one of them may be the very reason I am still alive. That airship out there can take me more places than you might imagine. But let’s make a long story short. You already know that I was in 1908 at one time—a most decisive year. You knew that when you had the boldness and strength to eliminate Stalin before he got rooted. Yes, you plucked out that weed in good time, and in spite of the long civil war, things might have been much worse if Stalin had lived. It was Volkov that unhinged all your plans. He was the one man who was able to effectively oppose you, particularly after he took over the White Movement. Volkov! Well we can get rid of him easily enough, and we won’t have to use a hundred rifle divisions to do so. A single machinegun squad can do the job, and we can change everything—I can change it. I have that power.”

Karpov let his fist rattle the teacups on the table for good emphasis, shaking the nicely styled samovar and the gleaming sterling silverware. Kirov sat, arms folded, realizing that this man did indeed have power far beyond that which he had already pledged. As if he had read the General Secretary’s mind, Karpov said exactly that.

“So you see, I have much more to offer you than five shock armies, and the oil you need to run this war. I have Ilanskiy, and yes, I can send Tyrenkov back up those stairs and put an end to Volkov before he ever stumbles on that railway inn. We’ve seen him, Kirov.” Karpov leaned forward now, lowering his voice. “Yes, we’ve seen him just as he gets off the damn train, right there

in the rail yard with a few of his men, looking for Fedorov in 2021! Do you realize what I can do now, what I can really offer you? Now stack up everything Volsky has done for you. Oh I hear he ran a German raider out of the Kara Sea—big of him. Then he sailed off to fight for the Royal Navy in the Mediterranean.”

“Can you really do this?” asked Kirov.

“It would take careful planning, but yes, it can be done.”

“But what would happen here? What would happen to all the time when I fought with Volkov, struggled with him in the revolution, and then faced him down on the Volga for damn near thirty years?”

“Poof!” Karpov pinched his fingers, opening them as he spoke. “That all goes away. In fact, you may never even remember that any of it ever happened after I finish my little mission. Everything would change, because I would be introducing a major variation in the history, setting things right, and eliminating Ivan Volkov before he stabs us all in the back.”

“My god,” Kirov breathed. “I always knew Ilanskiy was a dangerous place, a card in your hand that could possibly trump everything else. Yet, with the onset of the war, and everything I have been dealing with, I have had no time to consider this fully. Would it work Karpov? Would it really do what you say, and rewrite all the history from 1908 until now?”

“There is only one way to know for sure. You are the one man on this earth who understands the power I now have,” said Karpov. “Yes, you know what I can do, because you have already done it once yourself when you killed Stalin. So now I can kill Volkov, for the both of us, and for Russia. Who knows what that will do? I have thought about it for a very long time, realizing that, in making a change of this magnitude, everything here would change as well. It is frightful, a ghastly power that makes those warheads we spoke of earlier seem feeble, but yet it is already within my grasp. So do not think I want this ship solely for the power it brings me. It is a very useful tool, but I don’t need it to change this world as long as I control Ilanskiy. I suppose I could even settle affairs with the Japanese on that back stairway if I thought about it long enough. It goes both directions, Sergei—to the future and also to the past. Yes, you called me Vladimir, and now I return that liberty, and extend my hand to you again, as a brother, as a soldier for Mother Russia, and as your friend and ally.”

“Yet could you not eliminate me the very same way?” asked Kirov.

“Suppose everything you say is true. Suppose we do this thing. I say we, because given what you have just told me, Ilanskiy is now more important to the future of Russia than Moscow. We could lose Moscow, Leningrad, all the rest, but if Hitler were to ever know what we know now.”

“And there is one man alive who could tell it to him—Ivan Volkov. Could I eliminate you? Certainly, just as you could order in your Red Guard at this very moment and shoot me where I sit. But you will not do so, will you. No. Because you hear in my words the real truth, and possibly for the very first time. You know that together we can do anything, as long as we trust one another. Kill me, and Tyrenkov takes my place. I have no doubt that he’s already thought about that. If not him, then another. Yet I have no desire to eliminate you—quite the contrary. I see you as the hope of our nation now. Just as you rescued us from the ravages of Stalin, you will be the one to take us through this war, and with me at your side.”

So very much was on the table now, thought Kirov. “Suppose you do this—eliminate Volkov. What if some other man from the White Movement simply takes his place?”

“This sort of speculation is useless,” Karpov waved his hand. Yes, we would have to plan for these possibilities, and then work things out accordingly.”

“Yet you tell me everything could change—that I might not even remember this time, this very meeting. What then?”

“We can only know by doing,” said Karpov with an air of finality. Yet I can promise you I will not launch this mission heedlessly. You and I must have a good long talk about it later. For now, we have a few other details to iron out.”

“Well...” said Kirov with a smile. “We have come a very long way since you asked me for those two airships.”

“A long way indeed, but it is a journey that is only just beginning for us. So now you know the last of what I offer you—Ilanskiy. Yet having seen the world I came from, I have no desire to ever return there. I want to stay here, finish this business, and then see if I can help shape those crucial years after this damn war.... So I want my ship. It can give us a lot of clout in the Pacific, or anywhere else we choose. Without it we may never get Vladivostok back until late 1945. If we open that port sooner, it could be very valuable. But I need that ship. Will you give it to me? In exchange you get

your five shock armies, all the oil you need, all the resources, a haven for your factories. Then you and I plan how and when we deal with Volkov. After that, when we see what the world actually looks like without that demon alive, then we shape that world together.”

It was a dazzling offer, more than Kirov had ever hoped to gain in this meeting. There was only one last reservation in his mind, and he spoke it now, looking closely at Karpov, as if trying to discern whether he had considered the real consequences of what he was now proposing.

“What if we do this—eliminate Volkov—and things change so radically that we don’t survive? What if something happens that ends up eliminating us both from this reality?”

Karpov smiled. “And what if the Germans bomb Moscow tonight and we are both killed?” he said glibly. “Yes, anything could happen, even today. No man’s future is ever certain, or really promised by God, the Devil, or time itself. You take each day given to you, and act. You knew what you were doing when you killed Stalin. You knew the magnitude of that change, and yet you had the courage to proceed. Find that courage again now.”

“You are the Devil, Karpov,” said Kirov. “You are the only man I have ever met who would be willing to do battle with the almighty—with God above!”

“Only if I thought I could win,” said Karpov with a smile. “So what will it be. Do we have a bargain?”

Kirov thought, then nodded his head solemnly. “I believe we have an understanding,” he said. “What was that radio call band you said you could give to me? Would it be the same as the one Volsky told me to use?”

“Then you will agree? You will give me back my ship?”

“Will your Admiral Volsky cooperate? I want no bloodshed. You have said they betrayed you, but they are brothers in arms. How do you propose to assume command if they should oppose you?”

“Leave that to me.”

Kirov took a long sip of cold tea, thinking.

“And what about those wonder weapons aboard? I’m told you used them rather wantonly.”

“I have learned a few things since I arrived here,” said Karpov. “Having power is one thing. Knowing how and when to use it is another.”

“Precisely,” said Kirov. “Very well, Karpov. You can have your ship

back, but remember one thing—it was built by our nation, and it fights for our cause—understood?”

“You have my word on that. And as to how I can secure the vessel, I suggest you order it back to Murmansk. I can tell you exactly how to send the message. It will need to use an exact protocol, and it must end with a specific code word that I will give you. I can format the message for you myself. They will decode it and know what it means. I will handle everything else. And now, since I think we have finished here, shall we get rid of this tea and find a good bottle of vodka?”

Kirov smiled.

Part II

The Mole

*“Does the Eagle know what is in the pit Or wilt thou go ask the Mole? Can
Wisdom be put in a silver rod, / Or Love in a golden bowl?”*

— William Blake

Chapter 4

The situation has finally come to a place where I might get a handle on it, thought Fedorov as he settled into the chair in the briefing room aboard Kirov. There, across the table from him, sat the Captain, his eyes serious, still somewhat irritated, and impatience obvious on his face.

“Well Fedorov?” said Karpov. “What is this about? How is it you knew the man at the other end of that radio call? A British Admiral? And why on earth would the man wish to speak with you in this situation? There is something very suspicious about this, so out with it. What dirty business are you wrapped up in here?”

“I know it may appear very odd. How would a junior officer in the Russian Navy be associated with a fleet commander in the Royal Navy?”

“More than odd, Fedorov. But you forget that I reviewed the personnel records of all officers when I came aboard to assume this post. Yours is very interesting. It seems you spent a good deal of time in London last year during your annual leave. Care to explain?”

“It’s not what you think,” said Fedorov quickly. “No, I am not working for the British, an agent of sorts. There is no cloak and dagger here. If you will listen to me, I can explain everything, but some of the things I will tell you may sound... impossible.”

“Like scrapped ships rising from the dead, Fedorov?”

“Yes sir.”

How to begin, thought Fedorov? How to reveal the full magnitude of all I have gone through without sounding like a raving lunatic here? Karpov is on a hair trigger now. Things could tip one way or another very quickly. There isn’t really enough evidence to support anything I would assert about what has really happened to the ship. Should I wait? But yet, the Captain’s suspicions are up now, as he has just made very clear. I had to take that risk to prevent him from firing on those cruisers. Thank God for Nikolin. That call coming in from the Invincible saved the hour, but now I sit at the edge of a precipice here, and things could slide away very easily. I must be careful, but eventually the truth will out. Yet there is so little time.

“Captain sir...” he began. “I can explain everything that has happened to the ship, and in fact, I can tell you things that may yet happen here.” That was the only way forward, he knew. Tell the Captain what his investigation will eventually turn up. It would sound incredulous in the beginning, but he would eventually be vindicated.

“The survey being conducted by the submersible will discover no sign of wreckage. Slava will not be found.”

“Another prediction? You sound very confident of that, Fedorov. This was where the ship was last on station, and I fully expect this is where we will find it. And when I do find it, then your British friends out there will have to answer for it. Now stop playing around here. How is it you know this British Admiral?”

“I have met the man personally, sir.”

“Indeed? Well I took the liberty of looking him up, Lieutenant. The only place you could have met him would be in one of your damn history books! There is no Admiral John Tovey in the active Royal Navy officer data files. The only reference I could find was to an officer of that name who served during the Second World War.”

“Correct,” said Fedorov flatly. “Tovey was in command of the British Home Fleet until June of 1943.”

“Yes... the man who sunk the Bismarck.” Karpov had a pad device in hand and he eyed a file he had called up, a wry smile on his face. I see he was even awarded the order of Suvorov, First Class, for arranging all those convoys to Murmansk.”

“Yes sir, that is also correct.”

“Well...” Karpov switched off his device, setting it aside on the desk. “Since we both know I was not speaking to the dead some hours ago, suppose you tell me what you were really up to, Fedorov. There is no HMS Invincible in the Royal Navy active ship registry either. I checked that as well.”

“Correct again,” said Fedorov. Then he took a deep breath. “Captain... What I am about to tell you now will sound like a mad fairy tale. You will assume I am deluded, or even still suffering the effects of that injury I sustained, but you will be wrong in both instances. I can prove, categorically, that everything I will say now is true. Will you listen to me with an open mind? The safety of this ship depends on it, and far more than that, sir.”

Karpov inclined his head, eyes narrowing as he regarded his young

Lieutenant. "I will indulge you for the next fifteen minutes. Then I have to get back to the ship's business. Very well—tell me this impossible truth."

"Sir... The incident with the Orel was an accident, just as Admiral Volsky suspected in the beginning. I know you believe that we were attacked by the British, but you must consider all the other evidence before you can come to that conclusion."

"All the other evidence?"

"Yes sir. The lack of any wreckage of either Orel or Slava is most telling. If they were attacked, there would be clear evidence of that—flotsam, all over the sea."

"Unless they were completely vaporized."

"Then where is the mushroom cloud? We would have seen a vast spray dome erupting from the ocean, and we should still detect the radiation. Yes, the sea was very odd there for a while, but clearly there was no evidence of a massive detonation. It seemed that way in the beginning. There was that thunderous sound, but then things settled down much too quickly."

"Which leads me to suspect this was a torpedo attack by a stealthy British submarine," said Karpov quickly. "Perhaps it used a low yield warhead. You know we have them."

"I can understand why you would think this, sir. But that did not happen. Even so, and assuming it did, we should easily detect the wreckage of both ships. Yet you will not find a thing, not the slightest trace of either vessel."

"We shall see, Fedorov. This investigation is only just beginning. I don't know who that man was on the radio, though he was a fool to pose as Admiral John Tovey. Someone is playing games here, and I intend to find out who and why."

"Yet there is other evidence you should not overlook, Captain. The documentaries Nikolin has been listening to non-stop on the radio are a strong clue, and the presence of two County Class cruisers, which we both clearly saw on that video feed, is even stronger evidence. They would seem to point the story in an impossible direction if they were taken at face value, and assumed to be true. Clearly those ships could not be at sea, and we should be able to pick up any number of radio broadcasts with current news on the short wave—yet each and every station Nikolin tunes in has the same material. Why sir? Have you considered that?"

"Part of this same little deception NATO seems to be running here. That

is what I believe.”

“Every station sir? Nikolin has even picked up broadcasts of Radio Moscow. He’s heard their interval signal: ‘Wide is my Motherland,’ clear as a bell. Yet we cannot even raise Moscow or Severomorsk on our secured military comm-link channels. We have no satellite links, I have no Loran-C link from the Met station on Jan Mayen. In fact, we seem to have no connection at all to the time and place we were in before that accident.”

“All true, Fedorov, yet all explained easily enough if this was an attack. The satellites may be gone, and Moscow and Severomorsk with them. A surprise attack—this is what I think has happened.”

“Then why not us, Captain? Why are we left unharmed? Are you suggesting the British and Americans have run out of missiles, and have nothing left for Kirov? Instead they decide to try and confuse us with a pair of old ships and a man posing as an Admiral from the Second World War? It makes no sense. Well, I have another explanation, and it will seem to make no sense to you as well, but each and every scrap of evidence you uncover from this moment forward will prove it to be true.”

Karpov looked at his watch. “Ten minutes Fedorov. Let me hear your impossible story, and then I should get the real news from the submersible.”

“Very well sir. Nothing we have seen or heard could be happening in our own time, in the year 2021. Even the phase of the moon is different now. I checked it today. We currently have a waxing gibbous moon, and it will rise just before 16:00. Yet it should be a morning crescent, rising five hours later, at about 21:00. That is a very strange anomaly. Yet everything we have seen, and everything you will see from this moment on, would make perfect sense if it were happening in another time.”

“Another time?”

“Yes sir. I entered that moon condition data in to my computer and back checked for possible dates. I found a match in the year 1941, and on this very day, the first of August. The news broadcasts, those two ships, and the man on the radio all date from that same year. Nikolin tells me the radio broadcasts are even time stamped to that date. This is why there are no satellites, and no Loran-C link to the Met. The news we are hearing is, indeed, the current news broadcast from that time.”

Karpov listened, as any Russian would when he began to hear good Vranjo. He raised his eyebrows, playing his part, nodded his head, and when

Fedorov finished, he just smiled.

“That’s very good, Fedorov.” He laughed softly. “Throwing in that bit about the moon was very clever. A nice touch, but I don’t think I’ll be wasting my time to verify that, or to listen to any more of this rubbish. You love your history books too much. Or maybe it was that knock on the head you took. Yet don’t sit there and insult me with the notion that you now believe we are sailing about in 1941. This meeting is a complete waste of time.”

“I told you this would sound impossible, yet mark my words, it will be proven true. You can send a helicopter to Jan Mayen with Troyak and the Marines, and see for yourself. The Met station is gone. The entire facility is missing, even the airstrip. Yet it was not attacked. There will be no evidence of blast damage whatsoever, and all you will find there will be a couple Norwegians at an old, makeshift weather outpost. One will be named Ernst Ullring. If Troyak searches the Norwegians he will discover an identity card. They will also have a dog. I can show you what that facility looks like from the ship’s data files, sir. I have a bookmark to panoramic interior video files of the whole place. Yet if you send a helo there, you will find nothing. The entire facility will be gone, because it was not yet built in 1941.”

“Good idea, Fedorov. I will take you up on this little bet, and have Orlov send a helicopter. And when he reports the station is completely destroyed, as I fully expect, then you will get your nose out of the history books and back in the here and now. This is an emergency situation, and I need officers with clear heads.”

“I understand, sir. I would never suggest any of this if I did not believe it to be true.”

“Then you are certifying yourself as insane? You agree this is impossible, and yet you tell me this is what you believe? I’m supposed to assume this ship is now in the middle of WWII? Nonsense! Look, if you want to be relieved, I’ll get Petrov back, and make him a senior Lieutenant at that station in the bargain.” Karpov planted a finger firmly on the table to underscore his threat as real and imminent.

There came a quiet knock on the door, and he turned his head. “Come.”

The door opened and Nikolin appeared, coming to the rescue again at a most opportune time. “Excuse me sir, but you instructed me to report any communications received on command link channels. We have a message sir, from Moscow!”

“Moscow? At last!”

“Yes sir. It came in on long wave, unscrambled, and it was addressed to Admiral Volsky.” Nikolin handed him the message, and Karpov read it silently, thinking. It was a stream of code, yet he knew what it meant, for it was clearly delineated in a secret alpha-numeric protocol used for Russian military commands: MDZHB 92 038 MIRKA 56 89 33 44 SIMVOLIKA 13 68 63 68 ODKORA 34 24 43 13 NIKOLAI. One word immediately caught his eye, MIRKA. He had been briefed before they left Severomorsk, and this was the code word that had been assigned to identify Volsky for this mission, and by extension, Kirov itself.

“Very well,” he said with a nod of his head. “Unscrambled you say? That is very odd.”

“Yes sir. It was down on 15.62 kHz, the normal Russian Navy Longwave frequency. I monitor that on a routine basis. The protocol is correct.”

“So much for your stupid little theory, Fedorov. Nikolin, have you consulted the code reference book on this yet?”

“As far as I could, sir. The first letter set is just a prefix to set my key. The next word, MIRKA, is our identity code, indicating the intended recipient. The destination is SIMVOLIKA, and that decodes as Severomorsk. It is followed by a timing word indicating the order is to be carried out immediately. Yet I cannot decode the last word, sir, NIKOLAI. That is the message authentication code, and only command level officers will have access to that.”

“Of course,” said Karpov. “And if it is correct, as I believe it will be, then we have just been ordered to proceed directly to Severomorsk. I suppose such a message could be spoofed if this is part of the NATO PSYOP I now believe is underway here. Yet I can easily determine that when I retrieve the secure envelope from the safe, and check that authentication code. There is no way they could know that, as it was only assigned the day we left port. So enough of this nonsense. You can either report to your station now Fedorov, or stand relieved. The choice is yours, but if you persist in this business, I will make that choice for you.”

The Captain stood up, straightening his cap, and was out the door. “Come along, Mister Nikolin. Let’s get to the bottom of this.”

*

Fedorov had no choice but to follow, trailing slightly behind the Captain who had Nikolin in tow as he made his way back to the bridge. There, in the flag plot room, there was a safe with a plain Manila envelope. It would contain a single coded word, and if that word matched the final word in the message they had received, it would confirm the order was coming directly from Russian Military High Command.

Karpov wasted no time getting to that safe, as Fedorov settled sullenly into his chair. Perhaps he had gone about this the wrong way, he thought. Perhaps he should have tried to work with Admiral Volsky first, to secure his support before he tried to convince Karpov what had happened. Yet what was this strange message? He had not expected anything of the sort, and when Karpov entered the Flag Plot room, and closed the door, he leaned over towards Nikolin, glad that Orlov was not on the bridge at that moment.

“Nikolin... Was that really on the Russian Navy frequency?”

The other man nodded.

“From Moscow? And was it formatted correctly?”

Again, Nikolin nodded in the affirmative, and this only deepened the mystery for Fedorov. What was happening here? He knew that they had told the Soviets to use that frequency for routine communications with the ship. Volsky had Nikolin huddle with the Soviets as to protocols and message formats. They even left a code book with them, which assigned a different prefix key each day, which in turn determined the meaning of the other code words used, except the final word. That had not been disclosed, and had never been used, and the fact that it was transmitted here was very strange. How could the message incorporate the signals code key from the secure safe here aboard the ship? It had to be some kind of error, he thought. No one could know that code word, except perhaps Volsky or Karpov...

What was going on here?

Chapter 5

My first attempt produced predictable results, thought Fedorov, but at least I achieved one thing, the helo mission to Jan Mayen was vital in our first attempt to understand what happened to us, and Karpov launched it with Orlov and Troyak as I suggested. Yet I have a long way to go here, and need some allies.

Another thing suddenly occurred to him—they had a very short lease here. Chief Dobrynin was soon going to conduct that reactor maintenance procedure and Rod-25 might send them off again... Or would it? That shift occurred during a nuclear event, that first madness unleashed upon the world by Karpov. Yet would that happen now? We aren't going to run the Denmark Strait pursued by the British as before. The first of August was a quiet day, as I recall it. We had already visited Jan Mayen, encountered that British destroyer, and then turned south off the coast of Greenland. Tomorrow we would face the first air strike by Wake-Walker's Force P, but that isn't happening now at all. That order to return home changed everything. Yet what could it be? Who could have sent it? Could it be coming from Sergei Kirov? How could it contain the proper authentication code?

Karpov was certainly acting as if it was authentic. He watched him go to the flag plot room again, seeing him draw out the command key that he always kept in a chain about his neck. It was the very same key he had used with such devastating consequences when he authorized the use of special warheads. What was it going to unlock this time?

The Captain emerged, a smug look on his face, though he ignored Fedorov and simply went about his business, ordering the submersible back to the ship, taking the crew Chief's report, and then ordering Orlov to take the KA-226 out to have a quick look at Jan Mayen with a few Marines.

"It's probably a waste of good aviation fuel, but see if the facility there is still operational," he said quietly, as if not wishing anyone else to hear the order, though Fedorov overheard the remark. Then Karpov went down to the sick bay to confer with Admiral Volsky, and Fedorov's shift ended before he returned.

I need to find out what is happening here, he thought. Thank god those British cruisers turned about earlier. At least we don't have the ship on a hair trigger and at action stations, yet this situation is far from resolved.

With that thought, he started for sick bay himself the moment his shift ended that afternoon. He would pay his respects to the Admiral, and see if he could again forge the grand alliance with Volsky and Zolkin that had prevailed to save the ship from Karpov once before. He knocked on the door, hoping the Admiral was awake, and was not disappointed.

"Come in, Mister Fedorov," said Zolkin when he had poked his head through the hatch. "I hope you have no further problems?"

"With my head? No Doctor. I'm fine. I was just wondering how the Admiral was doing. I've come to pay my respects."

"He is quite well, right in the next room resting if you would care to say hello. I think he'll be back on his feet in no time."

"I'm very glad to hear that," said Fedorov as they entered, and when the Admiral saw him, he smiled.

"Ah, Mister Fedorov, it seems that the two of us have more in common than we thought. Here I am on the same medication the Doctor prescribed for you."

"It was nothing serious," said Zolkin. "Just a little case of BPV, Benign Positional Vertigo. Yes, I've given the good Admiral a little dose of that anti-nausea medicine, and he should be fine soon."

"I hope you are well again soon," said Fedorov. "But Admiral... May I discuss something with you?"

"Certainly," said Volsky. "I hope things are well on the bridge. Is Karpov riding you again? He was very curt during that incident. The man has a short fuse."

"I'll be fine, sir, but I was wondering about that message we received. I know it is not my place to know, but was it authentic? Have we been summoned home to Severomorsk?"

"Curious, Fedorov? I suppose the other officers are as well. Yes, the message was authenticated. But what was this other radio call we received? What was this business about an Admiral Tovey? Karpov was in here earlier saying you seemed quite irrational. Suppose you tell me about it."

Fedorov hesitated briefly, unsure of the ice he was walking on, but he proceeded on good faith, knowing Volsky to be a reasonable man. "I asked

Nikolin to put out an all ships respond signal on command channel 272," he began. "He did that this morning, and we got the response I expected."

"From a British Admiral?"

"Yes sir."

"Karpov says there is no such person in the active officer registry for the Royal Navy. That ship that was mentioned was also non-existent."

"That is correct, in one respect, sir, in our day."

"In our day? What other day are we at liberty to be in, Mister Fedorov? That aside, I find this radio message very unusual. Nikolin says it came in on 272, but that is an encrypted channel. The caller would have to possess the proper equipment, so this is a bit of a frog in the borscht. Who really made that call? The Captain believes it was the British, possibly with a radio set filched by their MI-6 agents. He's a bit worked up about this, and very suspicious, particularly of you. What did you say to put him in such a mood?"

"I simply asked him to consider all the evidence, sir. Things are very strange here. I was certain of what I saw when we got the video feed on those two ships—County Class cruisers, yet they should not be at sea."

"Yes, we were going through that on the bridge when I had my little vertigo spell. Karpov tells me this radio call asked to speak with you. Is that so? I find that very odd, wouldn't you say?"

"I told the Captain I was familiar with the British officer when he identified himself, but he did not believe me."

"Yes, he says you told him you met this man personally? Frankly, Mister Fedorov, that seemed odd. The Captain has even questioned your loyalty. He seems convinced some kind of deliberate deception is underway here, and even suggested you might be involved in this. Anything to say on that?"

"As I told the Captain, sir. No, I am not involved in any kind of espionage here. I can explain everything, though it will sound somewhat fantastic."

"Yes... Karpov also tells me you were trying to convince him the time had changed." He gave Fedorov a quizzical look. "Something about the moon? Well go ahead then, tell me."

Fedorov saw how Zolkin eased into his chair, arms folded, quietly observing. I must be very careful here, he thought. Karpov has obviously tilled the ground and told the Admiral I was spouting nonsense. From the look on Zolkin's face, I can see he's watching me, probably trying to assess

my mental condition. I can't be dismissed here as crazy. I need to find a way through this. But how? Stay with incontrovertible facts. It's the only play I have now. I came here at this time for a reason.

"Admiral sir," he began. "I find the evidence we have uncovered thus far in our investigation most disturbing. The presence of those ships, that radio call, the lack of any wreckage or flotsam from either Orel or Slava—this is most unusual, sir."

"Agreed," said Volsky. "It is somewhat of a mystery, and I have been discussing it with the Doctor here as well. Those were obviously British ships. Who knows, perhaps Karpov was right, and they still had a few old cruisers mothballed. I know you say all the ships in that class were scrapped, but let us admit the possibility that they reactivated something... or that your identification of those ships may have been in error."

"I was very certain of what I saw, Admiral."

"Yes, and I thought they were a good match to the images you showed me in your book, but let us admit this possibility. As to that radio call, the good thing there is that those ships turned about. It appears the British have no hostile intentions here, though Karpov isn't quite convinced of that yet. As to the lack of wreckage, I got the report from the submersible. Nothing was found."

"And nothing will be found sir. I told the Captain as much."

"Well nothing was found yet, Mister Fedorov, but the water here can be very deep, and the submersible was not down there long. This is still an unanswered question in my mind."

"But sir... What about the sun and moon data?" Fedorov shared his objection, stating the exact moon conditions they should expect now. "That data is not open to speculation, sir. It is fixed, and can be accurately predicted for any date, time, or location on earth. Believe me, I'm the ship's navigator. If anyone has his head on the position of the sun and moon, it would be me, sir. This was why Karpov was so upset with the shift replacements at navigation when I fell ill. They were using the expected sun and moon positions to try and plot manually, but the moon wasn't there! It wasn't rising at the correct time, and the phase was wrong as well. We should have moonrise at 21:00 this evening for August 1, 2021. I can show you the data right from the computer. Yet look sir—look out there this very moment!"

Fedorov had chosen this time to make his visit for a very specific reason. He looked at his watch, noting the time was perfect now, and pointed to the porthole window that gave a view off to the east. There, peeking up from the grey horizon, was a fat waxing moon, just as Fedorov had asserted it would be, but for another date and time, and impossible date and time, and now he knew he had his moment.

“You may think I am irrational, as Karpov clearly does, but the sun and moon do not lie, sir, nor do I when I see this evidence with my own eyes. This is moonrise, and it is now only 16:00. In a moment, you will see this is a waxing gibbous moon. It should be a morning crescent. I noted this discrepancy the night before I returned to my station, when I knew I was going to have to plot manually. As soon as that fog lifted I went out to look for the moon, but it was wrong, sir. I check this every day. That moon should not be rising now, Admiral, any more than those two cruisers we saw should have been at sea.”

Volsky was quiet for a moment, slowly scratching his grey eyebrow, and looking briefly at Zolkin. “You are certain of your data on this, Mister Fedorov?”

“Absolutely. And when I saw this anomaly, I decided to check the ship’s chronometer. Then I reverse calculated dates where this moon condition would be valid for our location. Unless the computer is completely wrong sir, it gives a match for this date, August 1, but the year returned was 1941. There was another close match, with a waxing gibbous moonrise at 16:07 in the year 1998, two more minutes from now. Yet August 1, 1941 produces an exact match for our present position. And sir... That is the date time stamped on all those radio broadcasts Nikolin has been monitoring. That is a date and time when two County Class cruisers could be at sea, and also a date and time when a man named Admiral John Tovey was in command of the British home fleet.”

“Karpov said you were going on about the moon being off kilter,” said Zolkin. “He thought it was your head off kilter again. Is this what you told him?”

“Yes Doctor, I shared this same information, but he wouldn’t listen. Then that message came in and he went off to see about it. Yet there it is, sir. The moon is up, plain to see, and yet every almanac you consult, and my own navigation equipment, will tell you it should not rise until 21:00. Is the earth

off kilter? That is one possible explanation, though hardly likely. The other is that something more profound has happened to us when we experienced all those strange effects. The time is wrong, sir—wrong as that moon out there. We are not where we should be, and this is from your ship’s chief navigator, plain and direct.”

Volsky looked from the moon outside to his chief physician. “Dmitri?” he said. “What is going on here?”

“Something is certainly off,” said Zolkin, “but I will not say it is our navigator here. He is correct. The sun and moon do not tell lies. And yet... we just received a properly formatted recall order from Moscow, if Karpov is to be believed. It was authenticated with the proper final code word retrieved from the ship’s command safe. If this is so, it would seem that message could not have been sent in any year but the one we were sailing in, 2021. This is quite a puzzle, Leonid. We have more of a mystery here than the accident with Orel and the fact that Slava is still missing.”

“Slava isn’t missing, sir,” said Fedorov, “It’s probably still out there towing those targeting barges in 2021, but we’ve gone missing sir. That is what all the other evidence points to, we’re not where we belong—not in our own time.”

“Yet that recall order would seem to suggest otherwise, Fedorov. And you must admit that, for us to believe the tale that moon is telling us now... Well it would be quite a leap, quite fantastic.”

“I just wanted to share all the facts with you sir, for your consideration. This moon is wrong,” he pointed. “I don’t know who is out there on the other end of that recall message, but if the moon is not lying to me now, then we cannot be where we thought we were. Something is very, very wrong. May I ask you to listen very carefully to Chief Orlov’s report when the helo returns from the recon operation on Jan Mayen? That will be another important piece of this puzzle.”

“Yes, Karpov said he was going to have a look. He thinks the facility was destroyed. In fact, the one scenario that might make any sense would be his take on this matter—that this was an attack, in spite of the fact that we have found no wreckage, and that the other anomalies are a deliberate deception. That remained a possibility in my mind... until this moon business. Now I’m wondering if my head is still spinning here!”

“The facility will not be found there sir. It was not destroyed, but I believe

Orlov will simply report that nothing was even there.”

“And why would you say this?”

“Because if that moon is correct, it was not even built yet. I told the Captain this as well.”

“I see... And you are seeing this as more evidence the time is wrong. Well, we will get Orlov’s report within the hour. I must say that you do not sound irrational, as Karpov suggested, am I right, Dmitri?”

“Yes Admiral, Mister Fedorov seems to be his old self, very logical, very observant, and yet certainly a man who has long been fascinated with his history books. Sometimes we see things we might wish to see, Mister Fedorov. Motivation defines perception in more ways than people realize. The case you present here is very well considered, except for one thing—that recall message from Moscow, properly formatted, and with the correct authentication code. I don’t think anyone in 1941 would know that code. It was known only to the Admiral here, and to Karpov when he verified it. Yes?”

That set Fedorov’s mind thinking.... Yes indeed. If there was anyone alive in 1941 who might know that code, who would it be? Clearly Volsky would have known it, and yes... only one other man on this earth... If he still was on this earth...

My god, could this be so?

Chapter 6

Volsky sat for some time staring at that moon rising off the port side of the ship, his mind beset with everything that had happened. He looked at Zolkin, a bewildered expression on his face.

“He’s right,” he said at last. “Look at that moon out there. Dmitri, how in the world can we explain that?”

“Is it true what Fedorov says?” asked Zolkin. “Is the position of the moon that predictable?”

“It’s like a finely tuned clock,” said Volsky. “Yes, they can tell you, within milliseconds, when the moon will rise a hundred years from now on this day, and predict it’s exact phase. That young man has a head on his shoulders, but now I am beginning to doubt the one on mine! My friend, that moon out there is cold hard reality. It is not subject to speculation or opinion. It is telling us exactly what day and year this is, and our young Navigator was industrious enough to get the data in the palm of his hand, and intrepid enough to bring it here to my attention. The only question I have now is, whether or not I am still sane. That was a very strange event.... Very strange. And now here we are, out of synch with the sun and moon itself. Can this be so, Dmitri? Can we be in another time?”

“Is there any other way to account for that moon out there?”

“Only what Fedorov suggested, if the entire world were off kilter, some aberration in the spin or orbit of the planet, then we might see the moon rise early like this. But wouldn’t there be many other effects if something that drastic had happened? And why should the phase of the moon change? Fedorov says we should be looking at a morning crescent.”

“Isn’t it more likely that he has made a plotting error for our present position. After all, he was rather disoriented, and I had to see him three times to get that sorted out. And Karpov was riding him rather hard, or so I was told when Nikolin came by earlier. Perhaps he made an error.”

“That is the only thing that might make sense, but he is very good at his job, Doctor. His manual plots were always spot on. No... as much as I would like to hope that this is a simple miscalculation, something is telling me that if

I get on the computer and look up the moonrise data for this place and time, I will see that there should be no moon out there at this hour. If Fedorov is correct, then those two old ships we saw on the video feed....” The Admiral lapsed into silence, remembering that radio message Fedorov had urged him to send.

“He’s different.”

“Fedorov?” Zolkin leaned in a little closer.

“Yes...” said Volsky. “He’s the same, yet not the same. I sense a restrained energy in the man, something I have only seen in officers who have served through many hours at sea. There’s a confidence beneath that young face that belies his age. That message he asked me to send was another thing. Something about that word he repeated seemed to strike me when he said it—Geronimo.”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s as if I had heard that before, knew it meant something—something very important. I meant to ask him about it, but we got off on this moon business. Dmitri, something is going on here, and Fedorov knows more about it than he has said just yet. I’m an old man, and I can see through a brick wall if I sit calmly and stare at it long enough. Well, I’ve been looking at this one since they brought me in here, and it bothers me. Something has happened to us, yet I do not yet know what it is. Then comes this coded message, authenticated by the special final code word we put into the ship’s vault the day we sailed. That had to be sent in the year 2021, yet Fedorov is telling me that moon cannot be there if that is where we still are. The only problem I have now is understanding how these two contradictory facts can co-exist!”

“Give it time, Leonid. Rest another day here. We are on our way home. In a few days we’ll see the Kola inlet, and slip into the bay. Then you will know where we are well enough, and you may mark your calendar accordingly. Patience is a virtue here, and we need only wait a few more days. It is just a matter of time.”

Chief Dobrynin was working late that night, which was not unusual, but

he was surprised to get a visit from Fedorov at this hour.

"Excuse me, Chief. May I bother you a moment?"

"Mister Fedorov, certainly, what can I do for you?"

"I was wondering how the reactors have been since that incident the other day. Any problems?"

"What, did the Admiral send you down here to check on things?"

"No, he's still resting in sick bay—recovering nicely. I hope he'll be back on his feet soon."

"Good. Well, there have been no problems here. Oh, there was a little flux in the core during that accident, but things settled down soon after. There's nothing to worry about."

"How is reactor maintenance?"

"What about it?"

"Did you need to run any maintenance procedures when you were checking the equipment out after the accident?"

"No, just standard diagnostics. I ran the rod maintenance inspection cycle on the 28th, and won't schedule another until late next week. Other than that, the system seems in good working order."

"Rod maintenance," said Fedorov, getting to the real reason he came here now. "You say you ran that on the 28th?"

"Finished it just a few hours before the accident."

"How does it work, Chief, if you don't mind my asking?"

"Not very complicated. We've a pair of twelve rod reactors here, twenty-four in all. Every twelve days I retract one rod, while using a replacement, so I can inspect for fatigue, cracks or other wear effects. The rods have been in fairly good shape."

"That replacement rod... is it the only one you use?"

"Well, we have two aboard, but only one is mounted for system maintenance at any given time. I call it Rod-25. The other is stowed, and only used in an emergency."

"I see... Rod-25. What day will you be scheduling this next inspection. I've been curious about this—you know me."

"Yes, always with your nose in some book or another, Fedorov. But I thought history was your forte, not engineering. Well, if you're curious, come round on the 8th. That's the next scheduled inspection cycle."

"Chief... why every twelve days? Is there a reason for that?"

“Not really. Just my habit.”

“Would it harm the reactors if it happened later, or even not at all?”

“No, I don’t suppose it would do any harm, unless one of the other rods was deteriorating, which is why we have a look every so often. It takes 288 days to run through all 24 rods if I pull one every twelve days. I used to do it bi-weekly, but I shave two days off when we’re at sea. Again, just a habit. More often than not I can tell if anything is wrong long before we have any real problem.”

“You listen to it, don’t you Chief.”

“As a matter of fact, I do exactly that. I can hear every little mutter and twinge of this system, and know it like my own mother’s voice. I know when it’s happy, and when it is upset with me because of something I’ve done, or failed to do. Everything has a sound, Fedorov, a special vibration. You only need to listen.”

Fedorov smiled. “Have you ever heard something that might be called deep sound? Ultrasound? Something you feel more than hear, or so I’ve been told.”

“Can’t say as I have, though I’ve heard stories about it. Taiga tales from Siberia.”

Fedorov nodded. “Chief... If you do hear anything odd, anything at all, would you let me know? I’m a regular bridge officer, and I can get the Admiral’s ear for you if you hear anything out of the ordinary.”

“Something worrying you now?”

“Better safe than sorry, Chief. Let’s just say that I believe everything you just said to me here. So if you do hear anything amiss, I’d want to know about it.

“Good enough, Fedorov. I’ll keep you posted.”

“Thank you, Chief. So, you have no plans to use Rod-25 until the 8th? We should be back in Severomorsk by then. Maybe I will come by and watch this procedure one time—that is if you don’t have any objection.”

“Not at all, Fedorov. You can watch the whole thing. I start just after morning mess.”

“Thanks again, Chief. Sorry to take your time. Have a good evening.”

Karpov sat at the officer's dining table. Alone as always, until Orlov huffed in, still in his leather flight jacket, his nose and cheeks red from the cold. He saw the Captain, and tramped over to his table with a half-hearted salute.

"The helo is secure on the fantail and I have my report," he said gruffly.

"Good. Go ahead and fill your plate, the roast is very good tonight. And try the bread—fresh baked by Lenkov."

Orlov was only too eager to comply, and was soon at the table, a big spoon in hand, and a fist full of dark rye bread. He had a good portion of potatoes, beets and carrots alongside his meat, and a satisfied grin on his face.

"Well?" said Karpov, sopping up some gravy with his bread and reaching for his wine, a pleasure reserved only for command level officers. "Was I right? The facility is destroyed, correct?"

"Orlov took a breath, scratching his chin. "It was very unusual, Captain. We overflew the entire Island, and yet I could see nothing much there at all."

"How bad was it?"

"That's just it, sir. Very odd. When we got on the ground, right where the meteorological station should have been, there was absolutely nothing there. Yet no sign of any attack—no wreckage, no debris, no radiation count. The rocks were sitting there undisturbed, and while there isn't much flora on that island, what was there looked normal and healthy. Lots of sea birds about too. But no buildings. Damn, there wasn't even an airstrip, and I've landed on that island more than once, but the airstrip was gone."

"Destroyed?"

"No.... It just wasn't there. It's as if nothing was ever built there. Then, on the way out, we spotted a dog and got down to have a look. There was an old lean-to structure, made of charred wood beams, and a couple Norwegians. They did have some equipment there for measuring atmospheric pressure, and a rain meter. There was a very old radio set too."

"What about the big Loran-C antenna?"

"No sign of it, and we couldn't make any sense of what these Norwegians were saying to us. Troyak searched them, and we found this."

He reached into his jacket pocket and produced an identity card, old and frayed, plain paper stock, with no lamination, bar coding, hologram or

embedded chip. It looked like it had simply been prepared with an old typewriter, and then stamped in red ink at one corner for validation. Karpov squinted at it, noting the name, his face registering a mix of surprise and suspicion. Now Fedorov's plaintive appeal returned to him, clear in his mind.

The Met station is gone. The entire facility is missing, even the airstrip. Yet it was not attacked. There will be no evidence of blast damage whatsoever, and all you will find there will be a couple Norwegians at an old, makeshift weather outpost. One will be named Ernst Ullring. If Troyak searches the Norwegians he will discover an identity card. They will also have a dog...

How in the world could Fedorov know this? It was just as he had predicted, yet Karpov's reaction soon shifted quickly from this initial surprise to increasing suspicion.

"I'll tell you what's odd here, Orlov—Fedorov. He gets that knock on the head and it's as if he's not even the same man any longer. He had the temerity to speak out of place like that, and even question me on the bridge in front of the Admiral. This strange radio call we supposedly got from the British reining in those two ships... well the man asked for Fedorov. Can you believe that? Fedorov even claimed he knew who it was. Then, when I indulged his request for a briefing conference with me, he suggested this little excursion to Jan Mayen, and lo and behold, you find exactly what he predicts, right down to those two Norwegians and their dog. He even named this man."

The Captain tapped the identity card, as much annoyed as he was surprised. "So whatever is going on here, Fedorov is mixed up in it somehow—a nice little mole on the ship, scurrying about below decks and hiding behind those history books of his. That's what I'm coming to believe. What do you think?"

"I don't know what he told you, but the little prick has certainly had too much to eat lately. I would have taken care of him on the bridge if it weren't for Volsky. The Admiral doesn't like my way with the men, so I waited. But yes, I think I'll go have a little chat with Fedorov about all this." He took another chunk of meat, with plenty of gravy, and chewed for a long time.

"What does Volsky think?" he said at last.

"He's still down in sick bay with Zolkin. No doubt the two of them have been rattling the vodka glasses. Frankly, I'm glad he's out of the way for the

moment. You know damn well that, when we get home, there will be one hell of an investigation. Suchkov will go ballistic! I'm amazed we haven't heard from him by now. This radio silence from command is very irregular."

"Maybe he sent that coded message," Orlov suggested.

"Most likely." Karpov took another sip, finishing his glass of red wine. "The Admiral will have a lot of explaining to do at Severomorsk, and we have very few answers. Everything we do only seems to deepen the mystery, and this Fedorov business is most disturbing. Could he be an undercover Zampolit?"

"Zampolit? We haven't had those little rats aboard since it all fell apart in 1991. Commissars... I'd like to choke the breath out of every last one of them." He wasn't sure why he said that, but it was something he felt very strongly at that moment. A Zampolit was a special officer that would sail with every ship during the Soviet era, the modern day equivalent of the political Commissar, but they had gone the way of the old Soviet Union, fading away after 1991.

"Well he knows too damn much, Orlov. He told me this man's name—Ernst Ullring! And he's the one who suggested the Admiral send out that radio signal. What was it he said? Geronimo, that was it. What in god's name was that all about? It was some kind of code word. Yes... It's Fedorov, I tell you. He's a mole! He's got something in his pocket in regards to all this. And to catch a little mouse, you need a good cat. That's where you come in Orlov. Get hold of Fedorov's tail and see what you can find out. And tell him to mind his mouth while you're at it. Keep a close eye on him, Chief. Something smells here, and I want to find out what he's really up to."

Part III

Conspiracy

“Better for real things to be uncontrollable, better for one's life to be undecipherable and intellectually impenetrable than to attempt to make casual sense of what is unknown with a fantasy that is mad. Better, I thought, that the events of these past three days should remain incomprehensible to me forever...”

— Philip Roth: Operation Shylock

Chapter 7

Karpov was back aboard *Tunguska*, excited about the prospects before him now. He had come to Moscow to seek a deal that would secure his place in Russian history, secure the nation itself in this time of grave crisis, and he got everything he desired. He looked out his stateroom viewport, taking in the sprawl of Moscow below, the gleam of the river running through the city, the tall palaces, cathedrals, and the golden dome of the Kremlin. There was the beating heart of the Soviet Union, he thought, the center of power here for decades to come. Yet, as he looked down on the city, he had the sense that he was bigger than it all, a demigod drifting here in the skies in his airship, above it all, superior.

Then thoughts of the matter at hand returned to him, and he turned to Tyrenkov, his voice level and serious.

"The message was sent," he said. "And I am willing to bet that the ship will now be heading for Murmansk—Severomorsk, to be precise, though the harbor there was not developed at this time."

"My people there tell me that has changed," said Tyrenkov. "They've built a new quay, and storage facilities for provisions. A small workers settlement has been cleared out and converted to crews quarters, and the whole area has been cordoned off with security. I have a man inside, reporting weekly."

"Good, but we will soon have a close look at this new harbor ourselves. I've given Bogrov instructions to plot our course to Murmansk."

"I see..." Tyrenkov considered that. "Then you mean to take the ship?"

"Take it back," said Karpov quickly. "It was rightfully mine. Volsky was just a mother hen assigned to this mission, yet all he wanted to do was sit on the eggs. Well, I had to break a few to make the omelet I had in mind, but there were simply too many cooks in the kitchen. Now... We must consider how to go about this. We have a full security company aboard, do we not?"

"Yes sir, 120 good men of the Siberian Guard."

"That should be sufficient."

Tyrenkov raised an eyebrow at that. "You intend to board by force? That

could get very... uncomfortable.”

“Perhaps, but we must plan this very carefully. First off, we need to ascertain who is in command there.”

“I don’t understand, sir. You believe something may have happened to Admiral Volsky?”

“Listen carefully, Tyrenkov. What I tell you now may sound very... confusing, but consider it well. This may not be the same ship that was here earlier.”

“Not the same ship? What do you mean, Admiral?”

“We’ve discussed this before—the first arrival of the ship on July 28th. I was facing a most unusual circumstance at that time, and a very dangerous one. You see, I was aboard that ship, as its rightful Captain when it first came here. Yet there I was in Siberia as well. That’s quite a thorny problem, yes? I was wondering what might happen to me, and quite frankly, not without a good measure of dread. Time was going to have to make a choice, or so I came to believe. Which man would remain here on July 28th—the man I was when the ship first arrived, or the man before you now. Well, that time has passed, and the choice has apparently been made. I cannot tell you what happened a few days earlier, but I wasn’t sleeping comfortably in my stateroom. It was a very harrowing experience, but I survived.”

“I am glad for that, sir,” said Tyrenkov. “Then you believe the other man is dead? The other Karpov?”

“Of course. How could there be two of us alive here at the same time. I have no way of knowing yet, but something must have happened to him. He may have simply vanished. After our first little jaunt through time, we returned to our own era and sailed to Vladivostok. It was there that we discovered men were missing—crew members gone. Some were men we had lost in combat, yet, when that bastard Volkov stuck his nose in it, he determined that there was no record any of those men were ever born—no service records, birth certificates, personal history—nothing. It was as if they simply vanished. This is what I believe has happened to my earlier self. I’m a good ripe apple now, why would Time want a green one in her barrel? She chose me, Tyrenkov, and in doing so she chose very wisely. That other man was headstrong, untempered steel. He was all potential, yet I was tried by the fire of battle many times, and always prevailed. I was in a position to really matter here, while he stood in Volsky’s shadow. So when you think about it, it

is no surprise that I survived. Yes, I mourn the loss of my younger self, but I remain, and that is all that matters.”

“So that leaves Volsky and Fedorov in command there.”

“Volsky,” said Karpov. “Fedorov was just a Navigator when we arrived. Oh, he is very clever. His knowledge of the history we found ourselves in proved very useful, along with a little library of books he kept, but he knew nothing of real war. When the fighting started, Volsky had no choice but to come to me.”

Karpov was stretching the facts a bit, omitting the story of his failed bid to control the ship, and how he had pleaded with Volsky to let him support Fedorov as his Starpom. “Who knows, there may be another man there that we know nothing of—another Captain standing in my old shoes. We will have to wait and see, but for the moment, Volsky and Fedorov will be more than enough to worry about. Volsky can be a stubborn old ox, but the men love him, and will follow his lead. As for Fedorov, green as he was back then, he can be very resourceful. We should not underestimate him when we take the ship.”

“As to that, sir, how do you propose we proceed? Surely you don’t want to use the Siberian Guards to storm the quay and make a forced boarding.”

“I will if I must, but no, we must consider that now. There is another man aboard Kirov, not an officer, but one who weighed heavily in the balance there—a Sergeant Troyak, the man commanding Kirov’s security contingent.”

“A large force?” Tyrenkov questioned, sizing up the threat.

“Only twenty Marines, but these are no ordinary fighting men. In our day we called them the Black Death. The force dates back to 1705, and they have a long history of valor in battle, in this war as well. Their motto has been well earned: Where We Are, There is Victory! Well... This man Troyak, he’s a formidable presence, and the men under him are very, very good. They have weapons that will magnify their fighting power many times over. Frankly, I think if we attempted to take the ship by force, we would fail. They are that good.”

“Then what will we do?” asked Tyrenkov, wanting to know Karpov’s intentions clearly, for he would be the man required to execute the plan, whatever it might be.

“We will not fight the bear,” said Karpov. “But we will give him honey,

yes? I think we must arrange a nice little reception at Severomorsk, which is why I want to get up there as soon as possible. I'll want a band on the quay, full diplomatic protocols, a grand welcome and a banquet of the best food and wine we can find—and some good vodka.”

“You intend to simply invite the commanding officers ashore?”

“How else to get them off that ship, and in a place where we might have more control? Can you arrange everything?”

“Of course, sir. But yes, we should get there as soon as possible.”

“Good, because I have some mail to deliver to Admiral Volsky.” Karpov reached into his jacket pocket and produced a small envelope. “Here is a letter from Sergei Kirov himself. It formally asks him to relinquish control of the ship to me.”

“You believe Volsky will do that?”

“We shall see... There are a number of considerations here, which we must now discuss. First off, we do not yet know what their situational awareness is. When we first arrived here, there was a period of considerable disorientation, as you might expect. We began to perceive anomalies, news broadcasts, contact with obsolete ships. Then we mounted a recon operation to Jan Mayen, and the situation got even more mysterious. It took some time, and much haggling, but we eventually began to realize what had really happened to us. Believe me, that was no small hurdle to leap over. The thought the ship had actually moved in time was quite daunting—impossible, yet there we were. We do not yet know whether they have sorted this all out yet, but if I know Fedorov, he will be trying to convince the Admiral that the ship has moved in time, and the evidence will all begin to mount in favor of that argument. Whether they know this already is the key question. The message protocol, and the code words I used in sending it, will serve to reinforce the perception that all is normal, in spite of any anomalies they have uncovered.”

“What do you mean, sir?”

“I was Captain of that ship, Tyrenkov. Whenever we set sail on any mission of importance, there is a secure envelop carried aboard the ship, with a code word generated only moments before it is delivered, so it is completely secret, with no possibility that this word could be known by anyone else. In fact, the senior officers only learn this word when they receive a coded message from naval headquarters. Such a message must

follow an exact protocol, and contain words used for that day in our naval code. I have access to all of that information, and so I was able to format a message Sergei Kirov sent to that ship this afternoon.”

“And that special code sir?”

“I took the liberty of ascertaining what it was when I was aboard Kirov. Volsky was disabled, and I had to take command. So I naturally used my command key to open the ship’s safe and learn the authentication code. This word must be the final word used in any message.”

“I understand, sir.”

“Good... Then you will also understand that when Volsky gets that message, it will seem as though it has been sent from our own naval headquarters in 2021. The fact that it concludes with the correct authentication code will be very strong evidence supporting that conclusion. So they will have a bit of a mystery on their hands, depending on how much evidence they have uncovered about this time—1941. Right now, if they have followed the orders I sent in that message, they should be steaming for Severomorsk, under radio silence. When they get there, things could get a little more complicated.”

“How so?”

“First off, the Germans have the North Cape of Norway, do they not?”

“Yes sir, they have troops at Petsamo and Kirkenes, and airfields there. There is also a garrison at Tromso, and they have a destroyer flotilla there.”

“Petsamo... That will be Pechenga in our day, about a hundred kilometers east of Severomorsk. The Germans... This could get very interesting. The first time we arrived, it was the British Royal Navy that got too curious about us. They naturally assumed we were some unknown German raider. This time the shoe will be on the other foot. When the ship approaches Tromso, there is a chance they might encounter those German destroyers, or aircraft from these bases up there. That will start things off, if I am not mistaken. Have the Germans been aggressive up there?”

“They’ve been mounting regular air-sea patrols, sparring with trawlers and Soviet subs.”

“Interesting... Do you know, the British were planning an attack on those airfields this very month. I wonder if that will happen? In any case, when the ship gets up north, things could get difficult. If they determine what has really happened to them, then the authenticity of that recall order could be called

into question. If necessary, we may have to take other measures.”

“Other measures sir?”

“Well, if they get spooked, and decide to play it cautious, they may not sail blithely into the inlet at Kola Bay. Our little reception could be all for naught. In that instance, if the mountain won’t go to Mohammed...”

“You mean to take Tunguska out there and attempt a rendezvous?”

“I see no other option. If Volsky won’t come home, we’ll have to go to him and try and persuade him to let me board. This option will be very dangerous. While we may be able to beat off attacks from the aircraft of this day, Kirov is another matter entirely. One missile from that ship could rip Tunguska apart, so we will be very vulnerable.”

“Then what is your plan, Admiral?”

“If it comes to this, I’ll have to use my wits. Remember, I have knowledge of all modern day naval operations procedures and protocols from our time. I can be a voice of reason, and a tether to certainty in a sea of chaos. This is what I am counting on. They will be confused, struggling to come to grips with what has happened to them. I must put the icing on the cake they will have in the oven there, but to do so, I’ll need to get aboard that ship. To that end, I borrowed a Soviet Naval Ensign, and we’ll mount that to show the colors of the Soviet fleet. If nothing else, it may make them hesitate to take any rash action against us. Then, when I get on the radio with Volsky, I will find a way to talk myself aboard.”

“And once you are there?”

Karpov smiled. “Then I find a way to eat that cake, Tyrenkov. In this I’ll have to use all the guile and intelligence at my disposal, but I’ll want some good men to come aboard with me. Is Grilikov with us?”

“Aye sir, he’s with the Siberian Guard.”

“Excellent. This Sergeant Troyak I mentioned earlier... Well if there is any man on this earth who might match him, it would be Grilikov. I’ll want him with me, and at least three other men. You pick them, but I want the very best we have—and I’ll want you there as well, Tyrenkov—your brains, Grilikov’s brawn. Together, and under my leadership, we must find a way to prevail. But one way or another, I’m going to take command of that ship.”

“But sir, you said earlier that those Marines aboard—the Black Death—could hold off our entire guards company.”

“They might... But once I get aboard I’ll have the element of surprise.

That counts for a great deal.”

“And the ship’s crew? How many are they?”

“Over 700 men.”

“And men who love this Admiral Volsky,” said Tyrenkov. “Suppose they don’t want to go along with your plan, and these Marines back them? Yes, Grilikov is very tough, but we’ll be too few to control that ship by force.”

“Don’t worry about that,” said Karpov. “I’ve been thinking about this a good long while, as you may have guessed. I have a plan, Tyrenkov. Trust me, I have a plan.”

Chapter 8

Tasarov heard them long before Rodenko had them on his radar screens. The sound of fast screws churning the sea was unmistakable, though there was a strangeness about the signal. It was not like the things he was accustomed to hearing, not the slow sedate progression of an oil tanker or cargo ship. There was a frenetic energy in the sound, and he knew at once that this was a small flotilla of ships, and not a single contact.

“Con, Sonar. Multiple surface contacts bearing 060. High speed screw noise. Processing range... I make it just over 100 kilometers, but I’ll need more time for a better reading and target motion analysis.”

“High speed?” Karpov was at his sonar man’s side at once. “Missile Patrol boats out of Norway?”

“Possibly sir, but this sounds like something a little bigger.”

“Nansen class frigates? What would they be doing so far north?”

After lingering for three days near the last reported position of the cruiser *Slava*, Kirov had been ordered home, and was now off the northern cape of Norway. It was only a day’s sailing from Jan Mayen at 20 knots, and the grey dawn found the bridge crew bleary eyed, yet eager for home, wanting to put the confusion of all that had happened well behind them.

Yet as they approached the North Cape, Karpov felt a rising sense of anxiety, knowing that there would be very many questions once they made port at Severomorsk, and the investigation would likely put every senior officer on the ship under a magnifying glass. He had been thinking over everything that had happened, making notes, rehearsing his testimony in his mind, well prepared to defend himself. He knew his own assessment of their situation would differ from that of Admiral Volsky, and still believed he had acted appropriately in assessing the threat. Yet going up against a fleet Admiral on his home turf was not a comfortable prospect. He had to be cautious here, and consider just how far he could push the blame for the loss of *Slava* and *Orel* onto Volsky’s side of the line.

They had maintained radio silence, and he had the ship come to a level three permanent alert status, though nothing was seen or heard in the sea

and skies, until Tasarov's sudden report.

"I don't think this is Nansen class," said Tasarov. "I listened to those ships many times, and this is very different. Whatever it is, sir, its coming fast. And now there is another signal sir... Well north, but I'm getting distinct screw noise—multiple ships."

Two surface action groups, one north, one south, and both suddenly darkening the morning with their unexpected appearance, like a well laid trap being sprung. Karpov was taking no chances. The fact that they had not received the normal naval air cover for this return leg was bothersome enough. Uninvited guests for breakfast was something else entirely.

"The ship will come to level two alert," said Karpov. "Mister Tasarov, get me accurate bearing, speed, and range on these contacts, and feed your data directly to Samsonov."

*

There were four ships out that day, the 6th DD Flotilla out of Tromso comprised of the Karl Galster, Hermann Schoemann, Friedrich Eckoldt, and Richard Beitzen. They had moved to Tromso from Narvik a day earlier, then set out in the grey twilight of the endless arctic day intent on finding and harassing any enemy shipping they might encounter.

Z20, the Karl Galster, was the flotilla leader that day, a new 1936 class ship under Kapitan Theodor Bechtolsheim. The ship was fast at 36 knots, with five gun turrets mounting a single 5-inch barrel, 60 mines, and a pair of 21 inch torpedoes. The other three ships were older 1934 class vessels, equally fast and with identical armament. There had been intelligence that the British were planning an attack on the airfields at Kirkenes and Petsamo, where flights of Stukas and Messerschmitts were supporting the attack of the 2nd Mountain Division against Soviet positions east of Murmansk. Two U-Boats, U-81 and U-652, were also operating off the Kola Coast, where the latter had narrowly missed the Russian Patrol Ship Musson in an attack the previous day.

Bechtolsheim had heard the British also had cruisers to the north, near Bear Island, which was presently about 550 miles north of Kirov's present position. Tromso was due south, an equal distance, and so the Kapitan was

thinking to get up towards Bear Island and see what he might find.

“The British are out here,” he said to his first officer. “ I can smell them. When will that Do-18 be up from Tromso?”

“Any time now,” said Werner, a starchy young officer, eager and bright, yet very proper, just as the aristocratic Bechtolsheim preferred.

Ten minutes later, Werner was proved correct when they spotted the German naval seaplane, coming in low in salutation. The unwieldy flying boats were serving as good patrol scouts, trying to live down the ignominious fate of being the very first plane that the British shot down on the 26th of September, 1939. Riddled with machinegun fire by a pair of Blackburn Skuas off the Ark Royal, the seaplane landed on the water, only to be ignominiously engaged by the British destroyer Somali, and sunk. Thus the plane had the dubious distinction of being shot down and sunk on the same day, and this one was to suffer an equally grim fate as it wagged its wings and continued on north, looking for the same British cruisers that Bechtolsheim was hunting that morning, as bold and dangerous as that might be.

*

Rodenko had the plane on his Fregat system, seeing the range diminishing as it approached.

“Single contact, low and slow. Elevation falling beneath 300 meters.”

“Trying to get down on the deck,” said Karpov, seeing this development as part and parcel with the scenario he was building in his mind. The prospect of an attack was a looming threat in his thoughts, and now his anxiety over the imminent investigation waiting for them at home redoubled. What if I have to take action, he thought? Volsky is still in sick bay, and this is all on my watch now. If I make a mistake here...

Clearly Karpov was not yet the man he might soon become. His instinct for survival had prickled up, but his mind was now on how he could act without exposing himself to any rebuke or accusation of wrongdoing when the ship made port. Long years of devious maneuvering in the corporate world of Gazprom had served him well. When facing risk, always make certain you cover your actions, and be prepared to set up another man for any failure—shift the blame, find a safe mouse hole, and wait out the

controversy while working behind the scenes to quietly undermine any potential threat.

He had already set Orlov loose on Fedorov, filling his head with the suspicion that had been growing there. The Navigator was not scheduled for duty until the noon bell today, and Petrov was in his place. He passed a quick moment, wondering where Orlov was, as the Chief was below decks making his morning rounds. So there was no one else on the bridge to consult now, and he was Captain of the ship in Volsky's absence. What should he do?

"Mister Rodenko," he said. "Karpov was heading for the main hatch. "I must inform the Admiral of our present situation. If that aircraft comes within 50 kilometers, put the ship on Air Alert One. I will be no more than ten minutes away. You have the bridge."

The Siberian Karpov would have never left his post on the bridge of the world's premier surface action ship, not with unknown and potentially hostile contacts on two sides, apparently converging, and an aircraft up on what looked to be an intercept course. Yet Karpov was serving himself first that morning, and the fate of his ship and the nation it served were waiting in a long line behind the anxiety that now drove him to sick bay. There he would seek out higher authority, recommend his desired course of action, and obtain the Admiral's approval before he took any combat action here. If anything happened, the blame would not be his.

*

The northern end of the threat Karpov perceived that morning was Force K under Vice Admiral Philip Vian, lurking quietly north of Bear Island after investigating Russian and Norwegian settlements on the much bigger land mass of Svalbard further north.

Vian had the cruisers *Aurora* and *Nigeria*, and destroyers *Punjabi* and *Tartar*, and they had set out on July 27 from Scapa Flow for this long range reconnaissance mission to the icy north. They had reached Spitzbergen on the 31st of July, and Vian intended to scout Bear Island before heading south again to join up with Force-P under Wake-Walker. The planned attack on Kirkenes had been tabled when the Dervish Convoy operation was teed up, but now this sudden order for a recall to Scapa Flow on 1 August was most

unexpected.

“What do you make of this sudden rush home sir?” His executive officer Arlen Holmes was standing on the weather deck with him aboard the Crown Colony class light cruiser Nigeria, where Vian had set his flag.

“Not much to say about it. Home Fleet has other business for us, which is all I can read in that order.”

“The Dervish Convoy?”

“Most likely. Wake-Walker was ready to head north three days ago. In fact, he should be up near Jan Mayen by now, unless the party has been called off for some reason. We’ve heard nothing since that recall order, and we’re to light foot it home as soon as possible. Orders are to avoid any engagement with the enemy, which seems odd, wouldn’t you say?”

“Very odd, sir.”

“Well, get that shore party over to have a look for that Jerry weather team. We move in three hours, or sooner if the Marines can get their business done. Force K will be the last sheep home, I should think. Something must be in the wind, Mister Holmes. Otherwise why would Home Fleet be herding cats into Scapa Flow like this?”

“My money is on another German operation, sir.”

“A raider? Most of their fleet is down in French Ports. RAF is certainly happy about that. Word is they dropped a nice 500 pounder on the Hindenburg. Good icing on the cake after Tovey got the Graf Zeppelin.”

“Right sir. A pity we lost Rodney like that.”

“Just her time I suppose,” said Vian with an air of resignation. “But you may be right, Mister Holmes. The Germans still have those pocket battleships up here, and those new fast demons they’ve built, Rhineland and Westfalen. One of those would give this ship a run for its money. It would be our twelve six-inchers against their six 11 inch guns.”

“Dash and jab for us,” said Holmes.

“Yes, and haymakers for the other fellow. Well, if the Germans have something teeing up, then this order makes perfect sense. I suppose we’ll soon find out what this young lady beneath our feet can really do.”

Nigeria was a new ship, laid down in 1938 just before the war, 10,400 tons full load, with twelve 6-inch guns on four triple turrets and another eight 4 inchers on four twin mounts. Six 21 inch torpedoes finished off her main armament, and she also had three quad 2-inch pom-pom AA guns for air

defense to compliment those four inch batteries. A second light cruiser, the Aurora, was at her side, more lightly armed with only six main guns, and only half the displacement of Nigeria, which was a ship that approached a true heavy cruiser in size and weight.

The previous month, Nigeria had been involved in a most auspicious mission, intercepting the German weather ship Lauenburg along with destroyer Tartar. The Germans decided to scuttle their ship, but a boarding party off the Tartar was able to recover precious ENIGMA code books before the ship went down. The find had helped Alan Turing and his team at Bletchley Park immensely, as they were working to read the German code.

They were off Bear Island to investigate, and eliminate, a reported German weather station, and a contingent of Marines was preparing to go ashore. He was also assessing possible refueling locations for the Murmansk convoy routes, and the island looked to be a good candidate. They would find their weather station that morning, making short work of it, and then pulling off a few Norwegian nationals wanting a ride to better climes. It was what they would encounter soon after that would make this a day Philip Vian would long remember, and it would start with that odd sighting in the southern sky, just after the noon bell.

Chapter 9

*“**There** you are, Fedorov.” Orlov’s voice was gruff and unfriendly. “I’ve been looking all over the damn ship for you.”*

Fedorov looked over his shoulder in the officer’s mess, seeing Orlov and dreading the encounter that was obviously now upon him. Yet he steeled himself, setting down his tea and greeting the man, as he would anyone.

“Good morning, Chief. Did you need me for something?”

Orlov pulled out a chair, and plopped himself down opposite Fedorov, leaning a big elbow on the table. “Dobrynin says you were snooping around down in engineering. What have you been up to, Fedorov?”

“Up to? Nothing, Chief. I was just asking Dobrynin how the reactors were doing after what happened and all.”

“Oh? So now you’re an engineer too? I thought you were the Captain—at least that’s the way you’ve been acting around here. What’s with that big mouth on you now? Karpov isn’t too happy with your little theater on the bridge. Something come loose in that head of yours when you took that fall?”

“I know what I saw, Chief, that’s all. So I spoke my mind. You don’t have to believe me, but no, this is not theater. The situation is very serious.”

“Yes it is...” Now Orlov leaned across the table staring at Fedorov in the way he would often intimidate the crew. “You run your mouth on the bridge like that again and I’ll make your life miserable for the next three months. Understand? And what was that crap you told the Admiral to send on the radio? What was that, Fedorov? Some kind of code word? Are you a stinking little Zampolit or something? Karpov thinks so, and maybe I think so too.”

“Zampolit? I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Don’t play stupid with me. You’re a conniving little shit, always hiding behind your books and spouting off facts and figures like you were some kind of academy instructor. Well the Captain doesn’t need your opinions on the bridge, and I’m also tired of listening to you. When you take your damn station, mind your goddamned business, and leave the ship to the senior officers, or I’ll run your nose into that bowl of oatmeal.”

Fedorov took a deep breath. He knew this was coming, as he had seen it a hundred times before on the ship. Orlov would brood and bother a man until he had him well cowed, and then he'd start getting physical, a push on the shoulder, the hard poke of a finger on the chest, a cuff on the side of the head. The men took it, as Orlov was Chief of Operations, with authority to make or break crew shift assignments, and he could make a man miserable for months on end if he decided to do so.

But Fedorov was not the same man he had been when the ship first arrived. He had been through too much, seen agony and fire, and the anguish of the world twisted into this impossible new shape, with much of the blame for it to be laid right at the feet of this man across the dining room table. He knew what Orlov had done, and what he might soon do again, siding with Karpov in an attempt to take the ship from Volsky, though he hoped that would not happen this time. Beyond that, it was Orlov's surly nature and his inherent discontent that had seen him jump ship, jump from that helicopter in the Med, which set in motion a chain of events that had led Fedorov to that railway inn at Ilanskiy, and everything that followed.

He had thought about this many times, blaming himself first, but also realizing that he would have never found himself at that rail depot if not for Orlov's shenanigans. Then there was that incident in Siberia, the Devil's Teardrop, and all it led to. That had been a stroke of fortune, possibly the only thing that had prevented the Germans, and Rommel, from running the British out of Egypt earlier this year. Yet the implications of Brigadier Kinlan's presence here in this world were still too staggering for him to contemplate, and he had no way of knowing whether this apparent saving grace for the British would lead to something incomprehensibly dark in the years ahead. The real war here was only just beginning...

So here was Orlov, a key lever on all these events, and yet completely oblivious of his part in it all. Even the Orlov he had known before Kirov made that last shift seemed blithely unaware of all he had set in motion, and all the consequences that now lay piled at his feet. He was still dawdling about as always, happy to be reinstated as Operations Chief, still pushy with the men, though many no longer would take his guff. And Fedorov decided the man he was now could not take it either. So he leaned right across the table to meet Orlov eye to eye, and spoke his mind here, even as he had on the bridge.

“Listen Orlov, you lord it over the matocs and mishman below decks, because they’ll take it, and there isn’t much they can do about it. Yes? But I’m a Senior Lieutenant in the regular bridge rotation—lead Navigator. I’m an officer, understand? With me its Russian naval regulations and command protocols that do the pushing, not those big arms of yours. So don’t throw your line about making my life miserable in the water here, because I’m not biting. I was well within my rights to speak up on the bridge. Any officer there could do the same. As for this business about my being a Zampolit, you know damn well that’s nonsense. There’s more going on here than you realize just now, but mark my words, you will understand it all soon enough. In the meantime, don’t get any ideas about running your tough guy routine on me, because I can do something about it, and I will.”

Orlov was momentarily stunned, for he had not expected any such resolve from Fedorov, and he was genuinely surprised. Yet soon the flare of anger rose in him, as he realized that this Lieutenant had just told him, in effect, to mind his own business or go to hell. His face registered his displeasure, the anger evident in his dark eyes.

“You little shit,” he said darkly. “What are you going to do if I decide to stick my fist in your mouth Fedorov, run to Volsky? You want to go see the Doctor again? I can send you there.”

“Try it, and I’ll bring formal charges for unlawfully assaulting a fellow officer. You have no cause to lay your hands on me, or any other member of this crew, for that matter. People turn their heads at the things you do on this ship, because you get the work done, but believe me, the crew doesn’t like the treatment you dish out, and they don’t like you either, Orlov. As for that message I asked the Admiral to send, it was just a simple command protocol used in the Royal Navy. Yes, I read about it in one of my goddamned books. That’s who we were dealing with out there, and you could see what Karpov was working up to as well as I could. He thinks this was a deliberate attack on us, but he’s wrong. Once the missiles fly you can’t call them back. The Captain thinks we’re at war, and he wants to join right in. The Admiral was disabled, and so I felt it was my duty to speak. Use your head sometime, instead of those fists. What if Karpov had fired on those British cruisers?”

He let that hang there, and he could see how the implications finally registered on Orlov’s face, behind the red anger he was barely managing to contain. Then his eyes narrowed, and he folded his arms, leaning back, sizing

up Fedorov in a new light, as though he were someone he had never even met.

“Karpov was right about you,” he said. “You aren’t the same, Fedorov. I’ll tell you what’s odd here, he said to me—Fedorov. He gets that knock on the head and it’s as if he’s not even the same man any longer. And now I see what he means. That business about you being a Zampolit may not be too far off the mark, whether you deny it or not. You know damn well that you would never run your mouth like this with me before, unless you had cover. I guess you think the Admiral will give you that, First Lieutenant.” He leaned heavily on that, the derision obvious in his tone.

“Well I’m an officer in the Russian Navy too, Fedorov—Captain of the third rank. You see that third stripe here on my jacket cuff? See that nice big star on my collar? Ever hear of insubordination? I can make a charge like that stick real easy. So suppose I call your bluff and do something about all this—something you won’t like at all?”

“Then do it!” Fedorov actually raised his voice now. “And when you’re done, make sure you have plenty of time set aside to write up your report, because you are going to have to account for any action you take here, chapter and verse, we all are. Karpov thinks we’re heading home to a board of inquiry now. If that is so, then I’ll have to write my testimony up for the Inspector General, just like he will... Just like you will, Chief of the Boat.”

Orlov gave him a well practiced sneer, but Fedorov knew the worst was over now. He had surprised the Chief by having the backbone to stand his ground, and like all bullies, Orlov could sense real resolve when he saw it, and so he thought twice about carrying out his threat, and Fedorov knew that.

“Big Mister Fedorov,” said Orlov, shaking his head. “Well you are much more than you used to be, and that’s clear enough. Karpov thinks you’re a little rat. He thinks some kind of conspiracy is underfoot here, and maybe he’s right. Who knows, maybe you are a stinking Zampolit after all. We may soon find that out. And if you are, I’ll visit you again one day... count on that. In the meantime, I’ll be keeping a very hard eye on you, Fedorov. I’ll be shadowing every footstep you take. Understand? You don’t pull any shit here on my watch, cause if you do, you won’t have those two stripes on your cuff for very long. I’ll make certain of that. Yes, I write reports too. But you know what we used to do with little rats like you on the street? Put them on report?”

No, my friend. Going to run to Volsky? Little snitches like you come to a real bad end."

Now the Chief just smiled, a glaring gloat of a smile as he slowly stood up, deliberately knocking Fedorov's tea cup and soiling the white linen tablecloth, and Fedorov's jacket cuff as well.

"Oh my," he said with a grin. "How clumsy of me. You going to write that in your testimony Fedorov? Looks like I soiled your jacket cuff—by accident of course. You going to lift another Captain's coat like you did the other morning when you showed up on the bridge? Who's coat was that, anyway?" He gave Fedorov a long look, and then started away. "See you around, Mister Senior Lieutenant."

Fedorov took a deep breath, sopping up the spilled tea with his linen napkin. That was inevitable, he thought. Orlov didn't have the guts to do what he was threatening, so he swatted the teacup instead. That line I gave him about writing up his report gave the man pause. Yet what he doesn't realize is that there will be no report, no inquiry, no Inspector General, at least not yet. None of them realize that yet, but one day I will have to sit down and have another long talk with the Chief. One day he will have to know what he did on this ship, and after... They all will.

We're heading home, he thought. By now we'll be up rounding the North Cape if we kept on at 20 knots, and I did not hear the ship change speeds at all last night. The North Cape... The Germans are there. They'll have planes up, possibly even U-Boats or destroyers on patrol as well. Things are coming to a head, and very soon. How should I handle this?

I could go to Volsky right now, and lay it all out for him. I could tell him what we may soon be facing. Would he believe me, or would I sound crazy again? Zolkin was watching me very closely the last time I was there. It was clear that he was still trying to assess my mental condition after that fall I took. So I need to be careful here, yet time is running out. I have to find some way to convince the Admiral that what I am saying is true. The moon should have been evidence enough. That single fact cements our position in time here, and with no uncertainty. Did Volsky believe me? The Admiral is no fool. He'll be thinking about what I said. I'm sure of it.

If I go now, and tell him what I think will soon happen when we round the cape, then events may soon make the strongest possible case for me. The Germans are there, and if they find us, then they will attack, I have no doubt

about that. Then Karpov will get what he's been wanting all along, but he may be quite surprised when no missiles come our way, and we get a flight of Stuka dive bombers instead! Then he'll get his little war, the war now, the war later. It's all the same. Once he was instrumental in trying to prevent what we know is going to happen in 2021. He stayed his hand, and with a submarine threat, and that took something in the man that may still be there. He hasn't fallen into the delusion that he can single handedly dominate the world yet—as long as he has this ship...

But he's acting Captain now, and so I'll have to be cautious with him, and play things by the book. Yes, he may soon get his war, but it will be much more of a fight than he realizes, for us, and for the Germans too. Better the Germans than the Royal Navy if it comes to that. It's what we decided, to stand with Britain. So if we do run into trouble today, and Karpov opens fire, then we're at least likely to find ourselves on the correct side in this war. After all, Britain is allied with the Soviet Union, but at the moment, they have no idea of what has really happened here.

Now thoughts of home came to him, Severomorsk, Murmansk, what would be happening there? He flipped through the pages of his history books in his mind. The Germans will have a couple divisions up north, pushing at the Soviet defensive Perimeter, and trying to take Murmansk.

I wish I could just look it all up in my books, he thought, but things have changed. From what I've been able to determine, this is the same world I was in before—an altered state of reality. Nikolin told me he heard something about fighting on the Volga on the radio last night. That has to be Volkov, because the Germans were nowhere near the Volga at this time in the war. Things in my Naval Chronology will likely be all mixed up, but it was odd how some aspects of the history rang true.

He thought of his analogy of the broken mirror now, as he had explained it to the Admiral once. The overall image may be cracked and distorted, but in places, that mirror reflected just as it always had, and things were very much the same. Could this be a little unblemished piece of that looking glass? Even if the history here had changed, might he find out that some things hold for this time? He had been reading about this period the previous night in his quarters, wondering. The British had two submarines up here operating out of Murmansk, Tigris and Trident. On the 11th of August, according to his chronology, they operated in the Svaerholt inlet of the North Cape. The

Soviets had several submarines there as well. We are very near that area, and if Tasarov hears something, Karpov could go off like a firecracker. Suppose he sinks a British sub?

One worry piled on another now, and he could feel that rising pulse of adrenaline. Action on the North Cape was the least of his worries, but it would be very dangerous. Karpov would see every contact as hostile. He might even fire on a Soviet Sub. Beyond all that, what about Severomorsk? It wouldn't be the same, and the Admiral would know that soon enough.

The Admiral...

He wanted to get to Volsky one last time before events began to get out of hand. Yet, even as he stood up, the alarm sounded and he could hear Rodenko's voice announcing a level two alert. It was beginning...

Part IV

Trial of Fire

*“Some say the world will end in fire,
Some say in ice.
From what I've tasted of desire
I hold with those who favor fire.
But if it had to perish twice,
I think I know enough of hate
To say that for destruction ice
Is also great
And would suffice.”*

— Robert Frost: Fire and Ice

Chapter 10

Fedorov was up and out into the passage aft and looking for any ladder down, bound for sick bay with a hurried urgency. All around him, men were also rushing to man their level two battle stations, some donning protective gear, others grouping into damage control teams, most headed for some post serving one of the ship's weapons or radars. So his haste was unnoticed, seeming part of this well practiced drill, and he made it to sick bay in a few minutes, yet was so driven that he burst in through the half open hatch without knocking. There, to his great surprise, stood the Captain, turning his head with a frown when he saw who it was.

Fedorov caught his breath, seeing the Admiral sitting up on the cot, a breakfast tray still on his lap, and Doctor *Zolkin* dutifully on a chair at his desk, arms folded, head inclined as though the men were in the midst of some important discussion.

"Mister *Fedorov*," said *Zolkin*. "I've seen entirely too much of you in recent days. Don't tell me you've taken ill again."

"Excuse me... I didn't mean to barge in like this..."

"Well that is exactly what you did," said *Karpov*. "Try a few knuckles on the hatch next time, or perhaps on your head, Lieutenant."

"What did you need, Mister *Fedorov*?" The Admiral gave him an expectant look. "It appears you are in some hurry."

"This is a command level conference, *Fedorov*," said *Karpov*. "Whatever it is can wait. Shouldn't you be at your action station?"

"I'm sorry sir, of course." *Fedorov* started to back out, frustrated at his bad luck, but Admiral *Volsky* stopped him.

"Stand where you are, Mister *Fedorov*. I wish to speak with you as well."

"Admiral?" *Karpov* gave *Volsky* a disapproving look.

"Bear with me, Captain. It seems the two of you have had some kind of falling out."

"Nothing of the kind," said *Karpov*. "The Lieutenant here simply gets in the middle of my business with alarming regularity since that accident, and he's been spouting a raft of nonsense ever since."

“Well I would like to invite him to this conference.”

“Sir?” Karpov’s displeasure was obvious. “What could he possibly contribute here? This is business for the senior officers.”

“Well, the last time I looked at his file, our Navigator here was listed as a First Lieutenant. Yes? And not everything he has come forward with in these last few days has been nonsense, Captain. Now... I can hear that level two alarm clearly enough, so we’ll be brief here. You say you ordered Rodenko to elevate the ship’s readiness state?”

“Yes sir. We have contacts to both north and south, and now an aircraft at the hundred kilometer mark, low and slow.”

“The surface contacts are on radar?”

“No Admiral. Tasarov reported screw noise of an undetermined nature. He was able to ascertain bearing and is processing for speed and accurate range now. I should know more when I return to the bridge, but these were high speed screw rotations, this seems too unlikely a scenario in this region. I suspect a well laid trap has been sprung here.”

“A trap? Then you assume these contacts are hostile?”

“I must do so, sir, particularly given our present circumstances. We’ve lost two thirds of our task force, and still do not know why, and we’ve received an emergency recall order from Moscow, and are now steaming under wartime protocols, under radio silence. Any contact is therefore to be regarded as hostile until we determine otherwise. High speed screw noise is a clear and obvious threat. You don’t get that from tram steamers and trawlers. These must be NATO combat vessels.”

“Yet we had nothing in our briefing indicating they would be here,” said Volsky. “Naval intelligence scoured our route for the outward leg of this deployment, as always, and the seas were clear.”

“Well that has obviously changed. I expect the southern contact has come up from Tromso. They know we’re here, sir, and they have to know what happened to Slava. They were most likely responsible!”

“That has not been determined, Mister Karpov, but I agree that the alert was correctly ordered. Alright... As to what’s been going on between the two of you...” Volsky paused, his eyes concerned, and he gave Doctor Zolkin a quiet glance. “Captain, did the Lieutenant here come to you with concerns about our present situation?”

“He did, and his conclusion was a load of utter nonsense about radio

shows, weather stations, and Norwegians with dogs. He's clearly deluded, sir. Perhaps Zolkin should make room and he can transfer here permanently." He gave Fedorov a disparaging glance.

"Yet was it not Mister Fedorov who suggested you mount that recon operation to Jan Mayen?"

"That was an obvious next step in our investigation. I intended to do so immediately after recovering the submersible."

"Well, you were just telling me what Orlov discovered there. Go on, Captain. Finish your report."

Again the sideward's look at Fedorov, dismissive, frustrated. "No facilities were found on the island sir. I believe they were destroyed."

"Destroyed? Orlov reported this?"

"Not exactly. He simply indicated they were not there."

"What would be there, Fedorov?"

"Sir, the MET station. Five or six buildings at Olonkin, including the new Loran-C Antenna. That operates just like our old CHAKYA Seagull radio navigation antenna systems at around 100 KHz. Most similar systems were discontinued with the advent of GPS, but this one was still active, and when we lost satellite links I immediately looked for that signal."

"But you did not find it."

"No sir. This is why I recommended the recon operation to Jan Mayen to investigate."

"As any astute officer would." Volsky gave the Captain a look that seemed to buttress Fedorov in his eyes, but Karpov said nothing. "So Orlov found nothing on Jan Mayen? No facilities at all?" He looked at the Captain now.

"A small weather station manned by two men," said Karpov, "just as Fedorov predicted."

"Predicted?"

"He told me this was what we would find, and in this, he was correct. Yet I find that evidence of only one thing, Admiral. Whatever is going on here, Fedorov is complicit. He even named one of the men we would discover there, and Orlov found this." He reached into his pocket, like an attorney producing exhibit one for a judge. It was the worn and typewritten identity card that Fedorov had told him to look for.

"That card was taken from one of the Norwegians on that island, and

Fedorov named the man before the mission was even launched! He's clearly involved in this somehow, Admiral. We need to get to the bottom of this here and now." His eyes hardened on Fedorov, the suspicion obvious.

"Fedorov? You were aware of this?"

"I was, sir."

"Then explain yourself please. Is the Captain correct? His inference is obvious. Are you involved in something that needs further explanation here?"

"Undoubtedly," said Karpov. "Don't forget that radio message he forced us on the bridge, Admiral. What was that business about, Fedorov? Some kind of signal or code flashed to the British? I find it alarming that they would contact us like that, and ask to speak with you as if you were one of their own. You even admit you were associated with the man who made that call. You heard him, Admiral."

"Yes, yes, an Admiral Tovey... But there is no such Admiral presently serving with the Royal Navy, and I assume you verified this yourself, Captain."

"I did sir. So that stands only as further evidence of deception and duplicity here, and it is clear now that Fedorov is involved—and not on our side of the equation."

"That's a very serious charge, Captain," said Zolkin,

"Yes it is, Doctor. And this is a very serious matter. While we are here chatting about it, we have hostile contacts on every side, and an aircraft bearing down on us at low elevation. I came here for only one reason. To obtain the Admiral's permission to go weapons free in the event I deemed it necessary to defend the ship. Now it seems we are investigating Fedorov here, and so be it. His behavior in recent days has been more than disturbing. It is more than that knock on the head you had trouble curing. It now borders on sedition, and I intend to have him answer for it." He underscored that remark with an obvious tone of restrained anger.

"I questioned Nikolin further, and learned that Fedorov asked him to send an all ships respond message on our 272 coded channel. Coded or not, it was a brash thing for a Navigator to be ordering. Now Orlov tells me he's been nosing about the ship, Admiral. He was down in engineering yesterday. What business does a navigator have there? When the Chief questioned him about it, he was insubordinate, just as he was with me. How long are you going to tolerate this?"

“Just a moment here, Mister Karpov. You are trying and convicting this young man, and that would be something only a naval board of inquiry should do.”

“I will insist on this the moment we reach Severomorsk,” said Karpov tersely.

“Very well... Captain, that is within your rights, but, at the moment, I would like to hear from Mister Fedorov. That is unless you feel anything you say now may be held against you, Lieutenant. The Captain has raised a serious charge here, and if you wish to request a legal advocate before speaking further, that is your right as well.”

“No sir,” said Fedorov. “I will need no legal defense. I understand what the Captain believes, but I have denied any wrongdoing here, both to him, and to you sir.”

“Then how is it you knew this man on Jan Mayen?” said Karpov accusingly. “Was he your contact there? Is this why you wanted that mission mounted? Out with it, Fedorov. Perhaps these men were saboteurs, Admiral. They may have been responsible for the destruction of those facilities on the island.”

“Destruction?” Fedorov was not prepared to allow the Captain to continue down this corridor. “Orlov reported that no visible damage was found—no sign of any attack, or any demolition as you now suggest.”

“Oh? I wasn’t aware that Orlov reported to you, Lieutenant. That said, what you say is correct. There was no evidence of an attack found. What I find most damning here is how you knew that would be the case. Admiral?” Karpov looked at Volsky now, wanting him to pursue the matter further.

Volsky took a deep breath, looking at Fedorov. “Your earlier explanation to me was quite... unusual, Mister Fedorov—except for one thing, and it has been bothering me like that bad molar I’ve been nursing along for so many years. Captain, did the Lieutenant here come to you with information about the present condition of the moon?”

“What? Yes, he spouted off something about it, along with all the rest of his fairy tales. Sir, quite frankly, his behavior has been so bizarre that I should have had him permanently relieved long ago.”

“Did you understand what he told you—about the moon being off its normal phase and time?”

“Frankly, sir, with you disabled here and the ship’s business so pressing,

I had no time to go about gazing at the moon and stars. Clearly Fedorov was seeing stars here, probably from that knock on the head, or so I first believed. Now it seems we have something more to deal with, and he has not yet answered for it.”

“Well, Mister Fedorov came to me with this same information,” said Volsky. “In fact, he made a point to come to me right at moonrise, and I watched it come up right out that window there.” He pointed. “The Lieutenant knows his sun and moon, as any Navigator would, and he insisted it should not be there. So after he left, I took it upon myself to look up the same information he must have relied on. Sun and moon data is obtainable in our computer database, for every date and time, and for any geographic position on this earth. So here is the real issue we must now discuss—Mister Fedorov was correct. This was no fairy tale he was spinning out. The moon was wrong yesterday, and it is also wrong today. Our present position has us in the UTC plus one time zone, and I took the liberty of obtaining our exact coordinates with a brief call to Mister Petrov on the bridge this morning—just to double check. The sun was up ten minutes early this morning. I set my alarm to wake up and see it with my own eyes. It rose at precisely 01:39, but it wasn’t supposed to be there until 01:49. As for the moon, it was supposed to be lording it over the skies up here, risen all day, a nice morning crescent phase according to the data. I called in three men and had them go look for it, but it is not there...”

“Admiral, we all know visibility up here is hit and miss. It was probably lost in cloud cover.”

“No sir,” said Fedorov, seeing his moment now. “It was clear all night, and remains clear now. I walk the deck before breakfast whenever I’m on the noon shift, and the moon is down. I can tell you, and with no uncertainty, that this is wrong. I can point to the place in the sky where we should see it at this very moment, but there is no moon, and this can mean only one thing...”

The silence was distended, a long interval where each man seemed to be waiting for another to speak. Then Fedorov said it, knowing he was opening himself to an attack upon his sanity by a Captain who now seemed very eager to skewer him as a traitorous agent, surreptitiously working for the enemy.

Yet the truth will out, he thought, and I must speak it. “Sir, if the moon is wrong, then the time is wrong with it. I can only conclude that this is not the time and day we believe it is. This is not the second morning of August,

2021.”

As much as he was accustomed to the date and time changing with every plunge of Rod-25 into the ship’s reactors, Fedorov knew it was still a heady thing to say to these men now. Karpov just blinked, obviously unhappy to hear Fedorov spin out the same yarn as he had before, only this time things were different. This time Volsky was sitting there presenting the evidence, a bemused expression on his face.

“Yes,” said the Admiral. “And Mister Fedorov tells me that he can back check the physical observation data to obtain the date corresponding to these conditions. Correct?”

“Yes sir. If I am correct, we can verify my calculation at a little after 18:30 this evening. The moon will rise some time after that, depending on our position at that time, even though it should be there now, and up all day. And at that time, I predict we will see a waxing gibbous moon, just as it was yesterday.”

“And if our calendar is wrong, then what day do you calculate for these sun and moon conditions?”

“The second day of August, in the year 1941.”

Another moment of silence, and then the inevitable scorn from Karpov. “Preposterous,” he said, spitting out the word. “A clever way to dodge what is really going on here, Fedorov—your complicity in some kind of elaborate deception being staged by our enemies. 1941? This is the same slop you dumped on my plate earlier, and I have no appetite for it.”

Yet the silence from both Volsky and Zolkin was very telling. It was abundantly clear, and slowly dawned on Karpov, that both men were seeing this sun and moon business as weighing very heavily.

“1941,” said Volsky. “Just like all the radio broadcasts Nikolin has been monitoring. Yes, they all claim that is today’s date.”

“That can be staged easily enough,” said Karpov.

“Every station? Iceland, London, he’s even pulled in broadcasts from the United States, and they are all in agreement with Fedorov’s conclusion. Yes, it is an impossible conclusion, I know this very well. You have every right to be dismissive of such a claim, Captain. Yet, as I concluded here with Doctor Zolkin, the sun and moon do not lie, even if you believe Fedorov is duplicitous here. I, for one, cannot conclude that he is some kind of agent or spy working with our enemies to undermine us. He has done nothing more

than to use his eyes, his training, and common sense to come to this conclusion, as astounding as it may seem. That said, I have a quiet suspicion of my own, Mister Fedorov. Something tells me that you may know more about what is happening here than you have already said. Whatever it is, for your sake, and the sake of this ship and crew, I want to hear it. Right now.”

Into the fire, thought Fedorov, and he took a deep breath.

Chapter 11

At that moment, another alarm sounded for Air Alert One. The contact Rodenko had been tracking had obviously persisted in its approach, and Karpov's eyes flashed as he looked up, almost as if he was trying to peer through the ceiling to the bridge above.

"That will be that air contact approaching 50 kilometers. I ordered Rodenko to sound the alert in that event."

Volsky took a heavy breath. "Very well, then I suggest you get to the bridge, Captain. I authorize you to take any action you deem necessary to protect the ship, but consider well. We are already headed for what may be a very stern rebuke and investigation at Severomorsk. If this is a civilian aircraft..." He did not have to elaborate on that, and Karpov nodded.

"Sir, I believe we may still have time to get the KA-226 up for a look. It's fast enough to get out there, but I would need it to launch immediately. May I use the intercom?"

"Do so. Identify that contact by any means possible."

The Captain reached quickly for the handset, and Fedorov passed a brief moment, recalling how he had seen the exterior cable running to that unit cut above the outer hatch when Karpov had tried to seal the Admiral in and take the ship. It was a most unnerving feeling to know this man before him had that darkness within him, yet, at the moment, the Captain did not yet believe the assertion that the ship was not in its proper time. He was much more dangerous after he accepted that fact, and now the urgency of the moment had him fully focused on this threat to the ship. He knew what was coming next. What would inevitably happen when Karpov reached the bridge?

"Helo deck, helo deck. This is an emergency launch order! Get the KA-226 up at once, and proceed to identify incoming airborne contact. This is the Captain."

"Helo deck. Aye sir, acknowledged. KA-226 is on ready alert and launching now."

Back on the fantail, the man at the other end of that intercom was rotating a finger in the air, and the props of the sleep KA-226 began to turn, the

engine revving up quickly for a fast launch and climb.

"Let me know the moment you learn anything," said Volsky

Karpov set the handset back in its cradle, adjusting the fit of his officer's cap with a firm hand. "Very good sir. If you'll excuse me. I'm needed on the bridge." With a nod from the Admiral he was out the hatch and gone, his footsteps fast and hard, echoing in the corridor as he went.

The Admiral glanced at Doctor Zolkin, but then regarded Fedorov with a steady, considering look. "Alright... Let me hear it. What more have you to say, Mister Fedorov?"

Into the fire... The ship was most likely minutes from making its first intervention in this new time loop. Yet how to explain this to the Admiral without sounding like a complete lunatic, or worse. The eyes of Zolkin were on him, watching, waiting, yet he saw no judgment there, at least not yet.

"Sir," he began heavily. "As you correctly concluded, the sun and moon do not lie, nor can I as it comes to this moment. Yet what I am about to say now will sound... somewhat fantastic, certainly unbelievable, as this whole situation may seem to you now—but it does not seem that way to me, because I have lived it all through once before."

"I don't understand," said Volsky. "Lived it all through?"

Zolkin inclined his head and spoke now. "Do you mean to say that you are experiencing these events as though they had happened once before? Do you have a sensation of déjà vu?"

"I would like to say that was the whole of it," said Fedorov. "A simple mental state of disorientation or memory disturbance would be a most welcome diagnosis for me, Doctor, but I cannot agree that is what is happening. What I am saying to you now is that these events have already happened once—the live fire exercises, the accident with Orel, the strange effects in the sea and sky, and Slava missing afterwards. I have lived through them all, though now, with that odd recall order we received, things are playing out differently."

"You mean to say you actually believe this?" said Volsky.

"I do, sir, as crazy as that makes me sound. But I assure you—this is not a mental condition, not an incidence of déjà vu, and it has nothing whatsoever to do with that fall I took."

"That has yet to be determined, Mister Fedorov," said Zolkin. "You could have more of an injury than we believed. Effects of concussion can be

very subtle, and not immediately apparent. Have you experienced any headache?”

“No sir, I am fine.”

“Yes? Well, memory dysfunction, amnesia, and situational confusion can all result from a good knock on the head. Have you experienced any other symptoms—trouble sleeping, problems with speech, ringing in the ears, any further dizziness?”

“No sir. This is not about my physical or mental condition, as much as you might wish to believe that. It is about the incontrovertible fact that our sun and moon data is simply not correct, and the inevitable conclusion we must draw if that is so. I know this to be true, because it did, indeed, happen once before, and all of this is a recurrence of those events. The story is a long one, but if you will hear me out, I will try to explain.”

Zolkin did not seem entirely open to this now, preferring to believe there was some underlying medical condition behind what Fedorov was saying, but Volsky decided the matter, raising a hand quietly. “Go on, Mister Fedorov. Explain yourself.”

“Sir... This ship has displaced in time. The radio transmissions Nikolin has been receiving are not a psychological deception staged by NATO, as Karpov would wish to believe, they are, in actual fact, the current news broadcasts for this day and time—August 2, 1941. There was an accident aboard Orel, and we believed that one of her special warheads was mounted incorrectly during a drill, and detonated. At least this is what we decided must have happened. That detonation had an effect on space and time, and we were displaced to the past.”

“You are telling us the entire ship just went through a time warp?” Zolkin’s heavy brows raised to underscore his disbelief. “Blown 80 years into the past? Have you been reading science fiction along with your history? How could something like this have happened?”

“The detonation, that was part of it,” said Fedorov. “Our propulsion system, particularly a certain control rod used by Chief Dobrynin in a routine maintenance procedure, was also involved. It has... unusual properties. We did not determine this for some time, and not until we had caused a good deal of damage to things here. The Captain has just gone off to the bridge. Well, when we were here last, that encounter we had the other day with those British cruisers did not play out so well. We were

investigating the MET station at Jan Mayen, and had contacts to our south. As it turned out, the contact was a British naval task force under Admiral Wake-Walker. They launched a plane to investigate us, and you allowed it to overfly the ship, sir. Now we have a similar incident here, but I do not think Captain Karpov will be so gracious. That airborne contact is most likely a German reconnaissance plane out of Tromsø, and if it is 50 kilometers out, it should reach us in about 15 minutes.”

“A German plane...” Volsky nodded. “You mean to say this is an aircraft from the Second World War? Still in service?”

“Yes sir. That is where we are now, in 1941. It might be a Henschel-126, but it is most likely a Dornier-18, or possibly a bigger Focke-Wulf 200 Condor. The former is a seaplane, sir, a flying boat, and I think this more likely. They would use their Condors for much longer range sorties, and the Dornier would patrol in close like this.”

“I see... Anything more?”

That sounded as though the verdict was near in Volsky’s mind, and Fedorov knew he had not convinced these men of anything other than the fact that he might be deluded by his own love of history. How could he get through to them with the truth?

“Sir... There will be no investigation at Severomorsk, because the base has only just been established there. The MET station is missing on Jan Mayen, because it has not yet been built. I know this because it happened once before, and I lived through it. We all did. Why I’m the only man aboard who seems to remember anything, I cannot say, but I do remember. The encounter with the British became more serious when we ran into one of their destroyers off Jan Mayen. An engagement was unavoidable, and that started a lengthy pursuit by the British task force. We elected to transit the Denmark strait, and they naturally assumed we were a German raider and acted accordingly.”

“There was no recall order to Severomorsk?”

“No sir. Once we completed the investigation of Jan Mayen, enough evidence had accumulated to convince us of what had happened. The plane that overflew us was a Fairy Fulmar, and I was able to identify it when it did so. Yet only one such plane still existed in our day, and in a British museum. In like manner, the encounter with that British destroyer was most convincing, along with the HD video feeds we collected of Wake-Walker’s

task force. I could clearly identify the aircraft carriers Furious and Victorious, just as I was able to identify those two County class cruisers here.”

“Fedorov...” said Zolkin with a sigh. “Why is it that no one else has any memories of these events? The Admiral here certainly has no recollection of anything you are saying, nor do I. Have you thought about that?”

“I don’t know... But I do remember, Doctor. I remember everything we did when this first happened to us.”

“Then this is why you were in engineering?” asked Volsky. “You wanted to see if Dobrynin was using this control rod you spoke of?”

“Yes sir. He runs a rod inspection procedure every 12 days, and he had completed this just before the accident on Orel. The spare control rod inserted at that time, Rod-25, was somehow catalyzed by the detonation, and together they caused this ship to move in time. We did not know this at first. Chief Dobrynin detected some odd flux in his reactors, but that was all. Then, twelve days after we appeared here, he ran the maintenance procedure again, and we moved.”

“Moved?”

“In time, sir. We shifted again, but unfortunately, the damage was done by then. This incident where you suffered vertigo occurred somewhat later in that go round, and the Captain had full control of the ship. When he realized what had happened to us, he saw this as an opportunity to attempt to alter our future history, and he intervened, taking a very hard line against the British.”

“In what way?”

“He attacked them, sir. The Royal Navy is very efficient, and believing we were a German raider, they began to muster their considerable resources to intercept us. Karpov would have none of that. He engaged any ship that presented a possible threat, but he had a deeper motive.”

“What do you mean?”

“Sir... As this was the first time these events occurred, the history we found ourselves in was completely intact. Churchill was at sea, bound for the meeting with Roosevelt at Argentia Bay. The Atlantic Charter resulted from that meeting, and Karpov believed that was the founding document that NATO was eventually built upon. He seemed determined to intervene, for Russia’s sake, as he argued it, and when threatened by increasingly

substantial forces deployed by both the Americans and British, he resorted to extreme measures—a special warhead.”

“You say he used a nuclear weapon?”

“Yes sir—against the Americans this time. They were relieving the British garrison on Iceland, transferring men and aircraft there on one of their carriers, which Karpov attacked and sunk, over my objection. He would not listen to me, sir, and had me relieved. The Americans reacted predictably, mustering a strong task force to come after us, and this he destroyed with a special warhead. That detonation occurred on the twelfth day, the same day Chief Dobrynin ran his scheduled maintenance procedure. Just as it happened with Orel, the ship was again displaced in time.”

“Where to this time Fedorov?” asked Zolkin. “World War One? Let me guess, you’ve been doing a little reading on that war too.” The Doctor was having a very hard time swallowing any of this, and Fedorov could see that he was beginning to sound like a blathering idiot here, a man so caught up with his love of history that he was projecting it on the cold reality of these events.

“I know what this sounds like, Doctor, but it is exactly what happened. It is a very long story, but we eventually found ourselves in June of 1940, where we remained until mid year, 1941. It was May, and then something happened to the ship again, and we shifted. We could not determine where we were, and the ship and crew were in danger, so we decided to try and use the control rod procedure one last time to see if we could avoid complications. The next thing I know, I was on the bridge, here on the ship as always, only I was startled to find something had changed.”

“What was that? “ Volsky was still listening, extending his young Navigator every benefit of the doubt, as troubled as he was to hear and see Fedorov in this state of mind.

“Well sir, we lost men in the course of all that time, and one of them was Chief Orlov. When I saw him on the bridge, I was quite surprised. But the appearance of the Captain was the real shock. He wasn’t supposed to be aboard at that time.”

“And that is when you fell ill,” said Zolkin. “Understandable, Mister Fedorov.”

“I’m still not sure how this happened, Doctor, but the fact remains that I can remember everything that occurred. And now it has all started again—

only that recall order has changed things this time. Thankfully, we've avoided that first engagement with the British, and I think we can thank Admiral Tovey for that. He was our staunch ally in that last year while we were here."

"Admiral Tovey," said Zolkin with a nod. "This is the commander of the British Home fleet in 1941."

"Correct. We were steaming with him in May of 1941. In fact, there was a battle underway, when the ship displaced again, and..."

Fedorov stopped himself, looking from Zolkin to the Admiral, and realizing that he was sounding like a deluded fool.

"I knew this would be difficult," he said. "I know it sounds completely insane. You will not believe me—until things start again here. Those surface contacts to our south are most likely the 6th Destroyer Flotilla out of Tromsø. If they do intercept us, the truth of what I am saying to you now will become evident. I could have waited for that, kept my silence, but I could see that my effort to control the situation by other means was doing nothing but arousing suspicion on the Captain's part. But everything I have told you is true, and it will be proven true if we do go to Severomorsk, because the world we are sailing in now has been changed by the things we did. This you will soon see for yourself, and then this madman you now believe is standing before you, and needing a long rest, will be vindicated."

Silence. Volsky's expression was almost one of a father listening to his own son explain some transgression, wanting to listen and forgive, but hearing too much to overlook.

"Mister Fedorov," he said at last. "That's quite a tale you have told here, and yes, it sounds completely unbelievable, just like this sun and moon question. Leaving aside the issue of truth or fallacy for the moment, may I suggest two things to you here? First off, this business about the use of nuclear warheads... That can only be ordered by me, Mister Fedorov, not the Captain, and the default setting on our fail safe protocol requires two command keys. The second thing I would like you to think about is that recall order we have received from Moscow, correctly formatted as it should be if it were sent in our own time, 2021, and utilizing the correct final authentication code as well. Assuming everything you have said is true, and we are now sailing about in WWII, are you telling me the men of this day and time would be able to send us such a message?"

“No sir, but one man alive in this world now would—Captain Karpov. I have not yet told you everything...”

Chapter 12

“Karpov?” Volsky set his tea cup down and folded his arms. “You are suggesting that the Captain somehow arranged for that message to be sent to us? That he may have sent it himself?”

“Yes sir... but no... not the man here with us now.”

If they thought I was mad before, thought Fedorov, then they will be certain of it if I reveal what I truly think has happened here. I have already said enough, and in truth, I’m not really certain about that recall order. Stay in the here and now. Reveal things that bear on this moment, and the days ahead. If I try to tell them everything, it will be like pouring more tea into Volsky’s cup than it can hold, and more than he could ever hope to drink. Easy now. Take things slowly.

“Concerning the Captain,” he began. “I was shocked to see him here because in the course of our experience in the past, he was separated from the ship. In fact, we believed he was lost in action, until I discovered otherwise.”

“Tell me,” said Volsky, still trying to give his Navigator a fair hearing, though Fedorov could see that Doctor Zolkin was becoming a little restless. Then the sound of a harsh warning claxon sounded, and Fedorov started, though he expected what he now heard.

“Missile warning,” he said. “It’s begun...”

The sound of the Klinok medium range air defense system was unmistakable. Fedorov had heard them launch, seen them streak away to find and destroy their enemies, counting each one with the knowledge that every kill they recorded was a blight upon the integrity of the history, and a potential hammer blow to the future they had all come from. They fought by reflex at first, a reflex for survival, to protect the ship and crew from harm. Yet now, with all he had seen and done, Fedorov had the sinking feeling that they had elevated themselves above the fate of countless millions, the unborn souls waiting to take their place in the world, and their selfishness could be blamed for all the harm they had caused.

Somewhere out there, he pictured that unsuspecting German flight crew

in his mind. They would see it coming, wondering what it was. Would they be clueless as the British were before, or did they still know of the terrible foe that lurked in these northern seas? Were their memories erased with this second coming, or did they know what they would be seeing?

Then a thought came to him that spoke of the answer—Tovey! I sent out a code word he had devised for this ship—Geronimo—and he responded. I used a message format that we all agreed upon at the Alexandria conference. Tovey had to know. He still remembered. If that is so, then perhaps this memory loss was like that heavy fog that had enveloped the ship. Perhaps the more he revealed, the greater the likelihood that he might jog something loose here in the Admiral's mind.

"The Captain is a most efficient man," said Fedorov. "That missile will end the immediate threat, but in exchange the Germans lose an aircraft this morning, and more men die. These are the first to die at his hands this go around, but they will not be the last. When Karpov realizes what he has just fired at, and surely killed, he will become a very dangerous man. He will see his position here, at this pivotal time in history, as a godsend. He will argue that we must use the ship, and the power we have, to alter the course of events in a way that favors our homeland, and he will determine that he, personally, must be the man to control that destiny. He will stop at nothing, sir. In fact, he attempted to seize control of this ship while you were disabled with this vertigo incident."

"What? Karpov? You are speaking of mutiny?"

"He did, sir, but it failed when I came here to sick bay and discovered what he had done. He locked the hatch from the outside, sealing the two of you here, and he cut the intercom cable. During that interval, and with the ship in battle, he was able to enable one of our special warheads, the number ten missile on the MOS-III system. That was the warhead that destroyed the American task force, and with it everything began to change. You were able to regain control of the ship, Admiral, thanks to Sergeant Troyak and the Marines, who sided with you. And this was not the first time Karpov took direct action against other officers on this ship."

Now Fedorov looked at Doctor Zolkin. "At one point, he attempted to..." He stopped himself, thinking it might not be good to tell Zolkin that Karpov might shoot him! Then he realized that, from the look on Zolkin's face, the Doctor was coming to a conviction that he must be seriously disturbed. He

was taking Fedorov's hesitation as confusion and further disorientation.

"Easy now, Mister Fedorov," said Zolkin. "Yes, things have been very trying these last few days. We've all felt it, the loss of both Orel and Slava was a hard blow. Here now... Suppose I get you something to help it all sit a little easier in your gut—just a mild sedative."

"I don't need medication, Doctor."

Now Volsky pinched the bridge of his nose, looking weary. "Well this has been quite a lot for breakfast," he said. "Mister Fedorov, would you excuse us now? You are not scheduled to take your post until the noon shift, yes? In that case, I exempt you from duty at your battle station. If you have not yet eaten, please do so. But otherwise, take Doctor Zolkin's advice and go rest in your cabin. I will discuss what you have told us with the Doctor here, and we will consider the situation. Hopefully, I can get myself up to the bridge and see what is going on there for myself."

"But sir... There is more. The situation is very grave. I checked my research, and there could be a submarine threat soon, not only from German U-boats, but also from our own subs patrolling off the North Cape—Soviet vessels."

"Well enough, Fedorov," said Zolkin. "We stand warned."

"Karpov has a kind of phobia where submarines are concerned, sir. He may do something that could complicate matters here."

"I understand," said Volsky. "For now, let me consider what you have said. Dismissed, Mister Fedorov. Rest in your quarters. This is an order."

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When Fedorov had left them, reluctantly, Zolkin looked at his old friend and took a long breath. "A troubled young man," he said slowly. The sun and moon business was enough of a mystery for us to solve, but clearly Fedorov is suffering more than I realized. I'm sorry, Leonid. I should have taken the matter of his injury more seriously. I'll call on him later in his quarters with some medication that may help the situation."

"You believe he is deluded?"

"It's obvious what is going on with him now," said Zolkin. "Yes, the quiet young man who was always lost in his history books has now become

something more.”

“Yet he sounds so rational, so convinced of what he is saying.” The Admiral scratched his head.

“That is what is troublesome for me,” said Zolkin. “When one becomes too convinced of his delusion, it can lead to psychosis. Perhaps it was the shock of losing Orel and Slava. It affected us all, as I tried to explain. In this case, however, Fedorov’s attempt to put things in order has brought him into conflict with Karpov, not to mention Orlov. Those were some very strong accusations the Captain leveled here—enough to rattle any young officer. Karpov is a formidable figure, particularly when he has put the Chief onto someone, as he clearly has here with Fedorov.”

“Then you believe our young Navigator has dreamed up this story as a way of trying to defend himself from the Captain?”

“It certainly seems that way, Leonid. He’s projecting his fascination for the history on this situation. When we lost satellite links, and his Loran-C signal went down, it was like someone cutting the links to reality for him. So he tries to navigate by the stars, and suddenly says the sun and moon are wrong. These are the things he relies upon for a sense of certainty, and suddenly they were gone. Yes, it has been quite a mystery as to how and why this has happened, and what has also happened to Slava, and men will react differently in such stressful situations. Throw in that head injury, and Fedorov retreats in his mind to the one thing that is a certainty, the integrity of his history books, where events are fixed, as though riveted in stone. Suddenly he sees Karpov as a threat to that history, which is really just a mask for his fear over what may be really happening here—another war, one possibly much worse than the one he spends all his time reading about. His reaction naturally runs afoul of the Captain, and so he creates this story of how Karpov has conspired with the Chief to seize control of the ship.”

“It was quite a tale,” said Volsky.

“It certainly was, but the good news is that your prescription for Fedorov is just what he needs now—food, rest, time away from the stress of the bridge, and from Karpov. I’ll keep a very close eye on him, and make sure Orlov minds his own business and leaves the young man alone. One of the cooks was in here earlier and reported the Chief was with Fedorov in the officer’s mess. It seems there was an incident there, nothing serious, but Orlov could have only heightened Fedorov’s sense of vulnerability.”

“I see...” Volsky was listening intently to what the Doctor was saying, thinking and considering.

“Notice how he kept most of this to himself until Karpov came out with his accusation here?” Zolkin continued. “Now we get this story placing the Captain in the center of a conspiracy to seize control of events. As we have just heard, Karpov is a man of action, and in many ways he may represent that threat of war that Fedorov seems to be reacting to here. Look what Fedorov tells us—that it was Karpov who seized control of the ship and then set loose the nukes! I think Fedorov fears that if Karpov has his way in the interpretation of these events, we get war, and that is what is really frightening him. And who foils this attempted mutiny? Fedorov himself, armed with the foreknowledge of everything Karpov will do—armed with certainty in the face of this intense uncertainty we have been facing. Understand? The mind is a fickle thing under stress, Leonid, and particularly when it gets knocked about with a good bump on the head. Hence we get this fantastic tale Fedorov spun out. You see? He claims to know what happened as a way of bringing a kind of certainty to the situation. This déjà vu he claims to be experiencing is just a kind of defense mechanism.”

“I see...” Volsky was obviously troubled. “Well my friend, we still have a great many unanswered questions here, and the Captain just took a shot at one of them! I won’t get to the bottom of all this sitting here with this breakfast tray on my lap. I think I feel well enough to get myself to the bridge.”

“Are you certain, Leonid? We don’t need you taking another fall on a ladder or stairway now.”

“Don’t worry, my sea legs are back. I will be fine. But I need to get up there and see what is going on. Obviously we did not get any good news from the KA-226. Karpov has not reported, so he may be otherwise occupied. If he fired, then the sun and moon aside, this ship may now be at war. My place is on the bridge.”

Volsky set the breakfast tray aside, and the Doctor fetched his officer’s coat and cap as he made ready to leave.

“I must say, Leonid, I’ve been more than tempted to dig into the back of my medicine cabinet and find that bottle of Vodka.”

“Let me know if you do,” Volsky smiled. “Because at 18:30 this evening, I have a suspicion that we will indeed find our missing moon. That and the

recall order sit as two opposing arguments here—like fire and ice. A poet once wondered which way the world would end, with fire or ice, and now I find myself wondering the same thing. I hope, when we do get home, the damn base is still there, and then someone can please explain to me why the moon is off its well appointed rounds.”

Zolkin just looked at him, shaking his head.

“And one more thing, Dmitri,” said Volsky. “Did you know that when this business started, Fedorov suggested we send out a message on a very specific channel. I assumed he knew the British command link frequencies, and it seemed logical to try and diffuse the situation if we could, so I had Nikolin send out that signal. Lo and behold, we get a call from a man claiming to be an Admiral Tovey, right out of Fedorov’s history books, and the man he claims we were steaming with in battle just a few months ago. Yes, Fedorov may have quite an imagination, and he certainly loves his history, but who does this British Admiral ask to speak with when he contacts us? Well, I’m told he was kind enough to ask for me, the commanding officer aboard this ship. But that failing, Karpov tells me he wanted to speak with Mister Fedorov...” He waited, adjusting the buttons on his coat.

“Now then... Why in the world would an Admiral in the Royal Navy want to speak with our Lieutenant and Senior Navigator, this I wonder? Karpov wondered about it too, and it certainly led him to one conclusion about Fedorov—that he was a spy, or a double agent working for the British. So tell me, Dmitri, which tall tale am I to believe here? I may just find my answer on the bridge. If Karpov is correct, yes, do keep an eye on Mister Fedorov for me. But if Fedorov is correct... Then find that bottle of Vodka, will you? I think I’m going to need it.”

Part V

Coming Home

“The stranger who comes home does not make himself at home but makes home itself strange.”

— ***Rainer Maria Rilke***

Chapter 13

A pair of German U-Boats were out hunting that morning, U-451 under Lt. Cdr Hoffmann, and U-566 under Kapitan Dietrich Borchert. They had left the German occupied harbor at Kirkenes the previous day, cruising up past Vardo on the icy cape, and well out into the Barents Sea. Their intention was to turn southeast the following day, working their way down along the Kola Coast north of Murmansk, towards the entrance to the White Sea, where supplies for that important Arctic Bastion would often come in by boat from Arkhangelsk. Yet that morning, Kapitan Borchert received a most unexpected message in the hand of his Executive Officer Hans Karpf.

“Change of plans,” said Karpf with a smile. “It looks like we may have bigger fish to fry out west.”

“West?”

“Yes sir. One of our seaplanes out of Tromso was out looking for those British cruisers snooping around up north. It appears they found something more.”

“Well don’t be coy, Number One, what was it?”

“That isn’t clear, at least not from this message.” He handed the signal to the Kapitan, waiting while he read it. The number two Watch Officer, Otto Westphalen was suddenly curious, fetching a map to see where they might be headed. Of the three men, he would end up being the most successful, eventually logging six kills and one additional hit when he moved on to U-968, for 32,415 tons, most of these very late in the war. Kapitan Borchert would have to wait another six months before he would get his first kill with this boat, and then four more months before he would get his last, along with an Iron Cross, 1st Class. But none of this would matter now, as that history had faded to grey with the coming of the very ship these men were now about to encounter.

“Trouble,” said the Kapitan. “The plane went down and now they want us to take position north of Tanafjord to wait for something.”

“What kind of trouble?”

“Who knows, but if we lost a seaplane, then it might be a carrier. Or

possibly those cruisers we were warned about. Very well, come about to 300 and let's get up there. U-451 has been ordered to accompany us."

"A carrier, Herr Kapitan?" said Otto Westphalen. "That would make a nice trophy, and Iron Crosses for all of us if we get lucky."

If wishes were horses, thought Borchert. A British carrier would not steam alone, and they often cruised in pairs, with plenty of destroyers along, and fast cruisers. They would have to get very lucky, he thought, but then more news came in a second signal later that day. '6th DD Flotilla reports one large enemy warship, now estimated 30 kilometers north of Mehman and approaching your intended position.'

"A large enemy warship," said Borchert, "and apparently alone from the sound of this. Very strange."

"It could be one of those cruisers we were looking for, sir. Most likely out on an offensive sweep before heading home. "

"Most likely..." He looked at his watch, thinking. "We'll dive in ten minutes. Signal Hoffmann on U-451 to do the same. Let's be ready and load the bow tubes now."

This Type VII-C boat had four tubes forward, and one more aft, with fourteen torpedoes in all, along with 26 mines and a nice 88mm deck gun. Yet even as they stooped over the map, noting the position beneath the wan overhead light, another man was listening to them quietly marking their slow progress across the bow of a most unwelcome guest in these frigid northern seas.

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Admiral Volsky had a lot to think about that morning, and soon the least of his worries would be the mental state of his Senior Navigator. When he got to the bridge, announced by Rodenko, the Captain was huddling with Samsonov.

"Admiral," he said, looking somewhat surprised. "We did not expect you."

"Missile fire has a way of motivating even me, Captain. What did we just kill?" There was no question in his mind that the missile found its target. The only question was how bad the damage was, and whether or not it had

escalated the delicate situation they now found themselves in.

"The aircraft was approached by the KA-226 and we obtained long range video," said Karpov. "Have a look, Admiral. It was clearly a military aircraft, a seaplane of some type, but it was not a simple reconnaissance plane. When the KA-226 made a closer approach, it received machinegun fire."

"From that?" Volsky was squinting at the video on the overhead display. "What is that tail marking?"

"We believe it was a German plane."

"German? And you killed it?"

"Sir, it fired on our helicopter, and when I got that report I initiated hostilities. The aircraft was downed, and I have moved the KA-226 south to have a look at that surface contact. We should have a report in minutes."

"I understand what you have done Captain, but that could have been a warning shot. Was our helicopter hit?"

"No sir, I was not about to let that happen."

"Yes? Well let us hope we did not just start a major international incident here."

"If that is the case, we did not start it, Admiral. They did, and I finished it. There is a complete record of events on log. I took the liberty of protecting myself, and the ship and crew, by recording this event. If you review the file, you will see that I acted appropriately, and in accord with all international protocols. I had Nikolin warn that plane off, and when they refused to alter course, I locked on targeting radars, and issued a further warning. There was no response, other than machine gun fire directed at our helicopter, and so sixty seconds later I gave the order to fire the Klinok system. The target was successfully engaged and the threat removed."

Volsky listened with a heavy heart. It all sounded so sanitary and proper. A leads on to B, and B leads on to C, a reflexive action that might now spark a major incident, just one more thing they would have to account for when they reached Severomorsk. He shook his head. "Did it occur to you that this could be interpreted as a reprisal for what happened to Slava and Orel?"

"If that is so, then let them be warned," said Karpov flatly. "The Russian Navy will not tolerate this nonsense any longer. We still get nothing but that garbage on all radio stations. They must have a ship out here somewhere, or possibly a submarine, flooding every channel with those signals."

“Well,” said Volsky, “It is clear your tolerance and patience in our present situation has worn thin, and perhaps understandably so. But do not assume your wishes define the present policy of the Russian Navy, Mister Karpov.”

As if in answer to Karpov’s assertion, Tasarov shifted in his chair and put one hand to his headset. “Con... contact, bearing 110 southwest... confidence high.”

“A submarine?” Karpov was quickly at his side.

“Surface contact, sir. Make that two contacts, very similar. Slow and quiet. I think they were on the other side of the cape and have only now emerged. Rodenko should have them on radar soon.”

“Nothing yet,” said Rodenko, his eyes heavy on the screens of the Fregat system. Tasarov kept listening, then nodded his head.

“I read this as an undersea contact now, he said. Two submarines. I think these are diesel boats, sir, but they are quite noisy.”

“They must have just submerged when they saw us on radar after rounding the cape.”

“They can’t have anything better than our Fregat system,” said Rodenko. “Any reading on range, Tasarov?”

“Processing... Processing... Reading now... I make it roughly 35 kilometers, sir. I don’t think they could have picked us up.”

“Norwegian submarines, Tasarov?” asked Volsky. “Do we have signatures on these contacts?”

“No sir. I get enough to classify them as diesel boats, but no signature match.”

“Admiral,” said Karpov, “there must be a combined NATO operation underway here. What would a German marked aircraft be doing this far north? That plane had to be part of some unified force.”

“Yet we received no notifications prior to our departure, or any time since,” said Volsky.

“Sir,” said Nikolin. “The KA-226 is now in long visual range of those surface contacts to our south.”

Volsky took a deep breath. “Yes, and we just shot down a NATO recon plane, or so the Captain now believes. Did it occur to you that if those ships are part of this combined force you mention, that our helicopter is now in grave jeopardy. Surely they will learn we just fired a missile.”

“Then let them take the lesson well,” said Karpov, and the Admiral gave him a sour look, striding to the Captain’s chair and sitting down.

“Mister Nikolin, contact our helo and tell them to maintain range. I repeat, do not close on that surface contact. If they can obtain long range video footage, get it on that overhead display for me as soon as possible. Mister Karpov, let us now see if these are indeed Nansen class Frigates, as you suggested earlier. In the meantime, please order a KA-40 to rig for undersea combat, and report when ready.”

“Aye sir,” said Karpov, eager to see the Admiral getting into fighting trim. With Fedorov gone, there was no further nonsense on the bridge, and they could prosecute these contacts properly, as they should have long ago. Yet the thought that two enemy submarines had just submerged ahead of them was somewhat unnerving for him, and he had his eye on Tasarov now, as he continued to track the contact. He went quickly to the intercom to relay the order to the helo bay, then returned to Tasarov.

“Anything more?”

“Processing speed now sir,” said Tasarov. “Very slow. I make it no more than 7 knots.”

“They are creeping along like a pair of old brown bears on the tundra,” said Karpov. “Designate that contact group Brown Bear 1, and let me know the instant you hear anything more.”

“Aye sir.”

“Video feed arriving from KA-226,” said Nikolin, and all eyes were now on the overhead display.

“Four ships,” said Karpov. “There’s your high speed screw noise, Admiral. Four corvettes, from the look of this.”

“But they are clearly not Nansen class,” said Volsky. “Do I see two single deck guns forward there? And two stacks? This is a very old ship from the look of it. Look at the hull design.”

The Nansen class Norwegian frigate was a sleek, modern ship, with a unitary hull shaped for stealth, and a distinctive octagonal conning tower well forward for its sensor suite. The ship had one single gun turret forward, but otherwise presented clean lines, with decks virtually empty of anything that might catch and return a radar signal.

“Are they emitting?” Volsky looked at Rodenko now.

“Nothing, sir. They continue to run dark and silent at 28 knots.”

“Well they clearly don’t belong to Norway. That plane was German, do we have a match there?”

“There is no German ship I know of with two turrets forward like that sir,” said Rodenko. “If Fedorov were here, I’d bet he could ID those ships.”

“Yes,” said Karpov with obvious disdain. “from his fantasy land history books. Well, whatever they are, Admiral, we must consider them a threat.”

“What is our present speed?” asked Volsky.

“Ahead two thirds,” Karpov’s reply was crisp.

“Increase to 28 knots, and come right ten degrees to port.”

“Helm answering. Ten degrees to port an twenty-eight knots, Aye sir.”

“Why are we turning?” asked Karpov.

“I want to see if those contacts react,” said Volsky. “By increasing to 28 knots, we hold the range on the surface group to our south. And since it is not a good idea to rush in on a pair of brown bears, I divert off axis to see what those submarines might do.” The Admiral looked up again at the video feed, thinking.

“Mister Nikolin... Kindly make a P.A. announcement and summon Mister Fedorov to the bridge.”

Karpov was not happy to hear that, and he gave Volsky a dark look. “Fedorov again, sir?” He stepped closer, lowering his voice. “May I ask just what exactly he had to say down there?”

“Later, Captain. I’m calling Mister Rodenko’s bet here to see if our resident historian can help us identify those surface contacts. As for our discussion, I expect you to treat Fedorov like a bridge officer, and put aside your misgivings for the moment. Yes, Doctor Zolkin believes he is having some difficulty, but no need to aggravate his condition with unproven accusations, and by all means, leave the man alone. I understand Orlov has recently paid him a visit. None of that, Captain. Not with the officers, particularly a Senior Lieutenant. He will be here on ship’s business, and I expect you to treat him in a professional manner.”

“And if he starts spouting more nonsense, sir? What good will such input do us now? This is a serious situation. We have two submarines off our bow, and four surface contacts behind us.”

“Yes, and a plane went into the sea this morning as well,” said Volsky. “We cannot a-identify any of these contacts, Mister Karpov, and that is somewhat bothersome, is it not? We have signatures on virtually every ship

and class we would be likely to encounter up here, collected over many years. Yet nothing matches our database.”

“They are running emissions silent, sir.”

“Yet our own systems should be returning some recognizable signature. Tasarov there can count the screws on a trawler off Kola Bay and tell you the hull number, yet he has nothing on these submarines at all? That is very strange. And they are noisy diesel boats, and therefore not something new. This whole situation remains very odd. What were they doing on the surface?”

“KA-40 reports launch ready sir,” said Nikolin.

“Good. Send that launch order down, and direct them to Brown Bear 1. Let’s see how they like a sonobuoy right on top of them.”

Chapter 14

Doctor Zolkin passed some time alone after the Admiral left, half way thinking about really finding that bottle of Vodka. The stress in their present situation was obvious, and the line at his door had been longer day by day. If it was getting to men like Fedorov, a man who had always been quiet and reliable, then the lower ranks must be feeling it as well.

Thinking of Fedorov, he started sorting through his medicine cabinet to look for a proper sedative. There, sitting on a lower shelf, was a typical splint and restraining bandage that he might use on a wounded arm, and he was surprised to see it bore a small blood stain.

I must be slipping, he thought. How could I leave an old bandage lying about in a cabinet like this? It should have been sent down for laundering.

He reached for it, intending to take it out and toss it into the laundry bin, but the moment he touched it he felt a twinge in his shoulder. A sudden stab of pain that prompted him to reach for the spot with his other hand. The thought that he was getting older crossed his mind, and he knew the aches and odd pains were all a part of that. But, as he stared at that bandage, he passed a moment of confused uncertainty. What was it doing there, in the locked medicine cabinet? That was a place he kept things of importance. For him to so haphazardly discard an old bloodied bandage there was most unusual.

“Getting sloppy, Dmitri,” he said aloud to himself. Yet, with the bandage in hand now, he could not bring himself to cast it into the laundry bin for cleaning and sterilization, though he could not say why. Instead he found himself trying to remember how he might have used it. He could not recall any instance of an injury to a crewman in recent months requiring that kind of sling and bandage. There had been no broken arms for a long while, and his memory for things like that was very good. Something about that bandage, and the place where it was found, was very disturbing. But why? He shook his head, setting the bandage down on his desk instead of the laundry bin.

I’m fretting over nothing, he thought. This business with Fedorov has

preoccupied my mind, particularly after that incredible story he came out with here. Volsky took it very well, but I don't think he realized just how disturbed his Navigator might be. He was exhibiting classic signs of both paranoia, and what looked to be the onset of a mild psychosis. Yet the young man's intellect is so strong that he stood there sounding completely reasonable the entire time, in spite of the absurd things he was saying. I was very remiss in not taking more care and concern with him. Yes, I'm getting sloppy, and I suppose I'm not immune to the stress here either.

He stared at the bandage, and wanted to dismiss the incident as nothing more than that, an odd lapse where he must have simply set that soiled bandage aside quickly while attending to something else. But that shelf... That was where he kept special things, his photo box, the medals he had earned over his years in the service, old letters from his wife. There was that bandage, sitting there like a badge of honor with all those other mementos. As much as he wanted to simply dismiss the find as a careless nothing, something deep within him lodged a quiet protest, and whispered to him.

It wanted to remember...

*

Kapitan Dietrich Borchert was a very confused man that day. They had been creeping along the ragged coast of the North Cape off Bervelag, approaching his intended waiting point at the entrance to Tanaffjord, when suddenly they heard the sound of active sonar search pings. It was unlike anything he had heard before, but clearly something was looking for him.

He was through the hatch just forward of the periscope, passing through the radio room to the next compartment, where he saw his sound detection operator sitting there with an astonished look on his face. He had adjusted the fit of his small headphones so they would not blare directly into his ears, and his hands were still on the small metal wheel, which he turned this way and that to rotate the sound detection gear mounted on the brow of the U-Boat. The Such-Gerät system was a simple device based on the hydrophone concept, and shaped like the letter T, with a sensitive microphone at each end of the top cross stroke, wired to each earphone of his headset.

"What's that, Gerd? Something sneak up on us?"

The other man's astonished look told the Kapitan that he had been completely surprised by the sound. "I don't know, sir. I heard nothing before this!"

"Well don't tell me a Russian destroyer just dropped out of thin air up there! What do you mean you heard nothing? You should have detected the threat long before they got this close. That sounds like they are right on top of us!"

The Kapitan's supposition was not too far removed from the truth, but on this occasion it was not a destroyer dropping out of the sky, but a sonobuoy deployed by the KA-40 hovering nearby. Tasarov had guided the helo to the general location of the contact, and now the search began.

They could hear the sharp pings right through the hull, and their eyes instinctively looked upward to the potential threat, though Gerd Hansen was completely discombobulated. He still had no sign of any enemy ship, and now he realized what must have happened.

"They must have been sitting there, just drifting with their engines off, waiting for us like a spider!" It was the only explanation he could offer, and the Kapitan nodded, looking quickly over his shoulder and shouting an order back through the hatch.

"All stop! The boat will hover and run silent!" Two could play this game.

He was back through the hatch to the control room, where only the light from phosphorescent dials and the compass, and a single lamp above the chart table, illuminated the scene. The order had been quickly passed back to the greasy confines of the engine room, and now U-566 drifted like a dark, sleek fish in the sea, its long sharply pointed prow cutting silently through the water.

Borchert scratched his beard, customary for any veteran of the Unterseeboot fleet, as razors were never allowed aboard. One never knew what a man might do with one in the highly stressful, confined quarters of the U-boat.

"Come right full rudder, fifteen degrees." He decided to make a slow turn, using only the remaining forward momentum of the boat to maneuver. They were going to lose depth, but a quick look at the charts told him he had a little time to spare. Whatever was up there searching for him had not yet found enough information to begin an attack, or so he believed. Otherwise, they would turn over their engines and rush in for a depth charge run. But

what could be up there? According to German intelligence, the Soviets had 15 submarines, 8 destroyers, 7 patrol ships, and a host of trawlers in their Northern Fleet. This was most likely a destroyer, lying in wait for them. Perhaps they had been spotted on the surface by a German aircraft before they submerged. This was all he could determine, though he was very wrong.

*

“What are they doing, Tasarov?” Admiral Volsky turned to his sonar man, waiting.

“Engine noise on one boat has stopped... The other boat is still running slow at about 5 knots... very near the surface.”

“You are certain this is not a Norwegian submarine?”

“Clearly not Ufa class,” said Tasarov. “I have all six of those boats well profiled, and I get no match. Not even close, sir, and that is all they have. It isn’t a German boat either. I thought it might be a German Type 212, but the reading doesn’t match that profile. That boat is extremely quiet, but these contacts are noisy as hell. And it certainly isn’t one of ours, sir. I’d have IFF data if that were the case.”

“What about the Americans or British?” said Karpov, somewhat anxious now.

“There are no diesel boats active in either fleet,” said Tasarov.

“But yet something is clearly there, not ours, not theirs, but obviously not friendly either,” said Karpov, the tension apparent on his face. “Admiral, they have to know we are out here, and now they clearly know we are aware of their presence, and actively hunting them. If they have a fix on our position and put torpedoes in the water...”

At that moment, Fedorov came through the hatch, saluting when he saw Admiral Volsky in the Captain’s chair. He had been in his quarters as ordered, feeling very dejected, and very foolish. It was clear to him that neither Volsky nor Zolkin had believed a word he had said, and he realized how stupid he had to sound coming out with the truth like that—the impossible truth. Yet he was determined to persist, at every opportunity, knowing that the truth was out there this very moment, as the ship sailed in the dangerous waters off the North Cape. So when the call came summoning

him to the bridge, he took heart, realizing they must have run into something that would have them all baffled if they remained in their mindset of 2021.

Yet the prospect of coming into conflict with Karpov again gave him pause. He had revealed the Captain's plot to take over the ship, and how it all played out, and he now realized this might seem like a deliberate attempt on his part to strike back at Karpov for the accusation he had made. It looked bad.

"Mister Fedorov," said Volsky. "I trust you had a little break, but it seems we need you here after all. Kindly take a look at that video footage freeze frame on the overhead display. Can you identify those ships?"

Karpov found it distasteful that Fedorov would be summoned to be the final arbiter on this question. Why should his word matter, or count for anything more than that of the other officers here, himself first and foremost? He watched, disdainfully, as Fedorov took a long look, then folded his arms when he saw the Navigator go to his station and produce a tablet device. Fedorov spent a moment poking at it with a finger, his eyes lifting to the screen overhead, and then settling on something.

"Two single gun turrets forward... Nikolin, can you zoom on the aft section of that lead ship. Good... Three turrets aft. Now scroll up please. Let's see if we can pick up the ensign... Right there. Can you enhance that?"

Nikolin fiddled with the resolution and applied some filters, switching the shade and hue of the image and adjusting contrast. There it was, strikingly clear at this resolution, though it could not be seen in the zoomed out frame. The image was unmistakable, a prominent central swastika over a black and white cross on a red field, and the cross of iron in the top inner corner.

"The war ensign of the Kriegsmarine," said Fedorov. "That lead ship is a Type 1936 destroyer. There are no visible hull markings, but it is most likely the Karl Galster, Zerstoror 20, the last of the Mohicans for that class. All of the other five were lost at Narvik in 1940. As to the other three ships, I believe the second in the line is slightly older, in the 1934 class, but this one has a readable hull number—the Richard Beitzen. My guess is that the others are a variant on this class, all from the 6th German Destroyer Flotilla, operating out of Tromsø.

The silence on the bridge was thick and heavy. Karpov wanted to eviscerate the man for this inevitable foray into the fantasy of his history, but he found himself staring at the image on the screen, unable to dismiss it so

easily.

“Impossible,” he said at last. “You realize that a ship can fly any ensign it chooses, Admiral. That flag proves nothing other than the fact that some Captain out there is a throwback to an earlier time, just like our Navigator.”

Fedorov walked resolutely up to the Captain and held out his pad device. “I’ve called up the image of the Karl Galster from my database,” he said. “You may make the identification yourself, sir.”

Karpov wanted to bat the device half way across the bridge, but he remembered Volsky’s admonition, and restrained himself. “Give it to the Admiral,” he said coldly. “Let him humor you further, Fedorov. I’ve lost patience with this obsession of yours with the last war.”

“Yes, do give it here,” said Volsky, flashing a glance at Karpov by way of reminding him to maintain proper decorum. After studying the image for a moment, the Admiral nodded his head. “That conning section is virtually identical to the image the KA-226 obtained. Yes, two guns forward, three aft, with one rotated forward, just as it is in this schematic on your pad. You are saying this ship was the last surviving member of its class?”

“Well, it survived the war, sir, at least in the history I know. But it was scrapped in 1956. You can read the note there at the bottom.”

“Scrapped in 1956...” Volsky’s eyes darkened on the overhead display. “Are those submarines doing anything, Mister Tasarov?”

“The second boat has gone silent, sir. I believe they are both just drifting now, but we have positive location fix from the active pings on the sonobuoy.”

“Submarines?” said Fedorov.

“Two contacts to the southeast,” said Volsky, “And they are somewhat of a mystery. We have no profile matches, but Mister Tasarov insists they are diesel boats, and very noisy.”

“Just a moment.” Fedorov went to his station, producing a book, as Karpov rolled his eyes.

“We should be aggressively prosecuting those contacts, not discussing them,” he said to Volsky. “Why do you continue to invite his nonsense?” He waved dismissively at Fedorov as he returned with his naval chronology.

“This history may not be reliable any longer,” said Fedorov, “but then again, it just might still hold true. I have a reference here to two German U-Boats operating in these waters, U-451 and U-566, both Type VII-C diesel

boats, very common.”

“Sir,” said Karpov, ever more frustrated. “Those subs could be targeting us even now.”

“Not at this range,” said Fedorov, “that is if I am correct in this assumption. The German G7a torpedo could only range out between 5000 and 12,000 meters, depending on the running speed setting.”

“Yes?” said Karpov. “Well those are not German U-Boats, Lieutenant, nor do we have a flotilla of ships shadowing us that were all scrapped decades ago. Why do you persist in this? We’ve been more than lenient in tolerating your nonsense, and this is no time for—”

“That will be quite enough, Captain,” said Volsky. “I asked Mister Fedorov to attempt an identification of these ships, and he has given his report. Yes, it seems most unlikely, particularly if that lead ship there on the screen was indeed scrapped. One replica flying a German War Ensign I might accept. But four? As to those submarine contacts, it is clear they do not wish to be located. Yet we should have profiles on them if they are local to this region, unless they are Chinese.”

“No sir,” said Tasarov. “I checked all those profiles and there is no match.”

“It will not be any vessel from our day, sir,” said Fedorov, “and I have already told you why. May I suggest we simply increase speed to evade and give them a wide berth? We will find the answer to all these questions at Severomorsk. At 30 knots we can be there in under five hours.”

Chapter 15

They were coming home...

Kapitan Borchert on U-566 would listen to the searching pings in the sea above him for another fifteen minutes, and then the silence returned. When he mustered the courage to restart his engines and rise to periscope depth, he saw nothing but the empty seas all about him, as if the whole scenario had been a figment of his imagination. So he resolved to wait for the arrival of the 6th DD Flotilla, as they were supposedly shadowing the enemy cruiser, and coming his way.

Kirov increased speed and diverted further to the northeast, passing the undersea contact position by a comfortable 35 kilometers, and continuing on towards the inlet to Kola Bay. The sight of the familiar land forms rising ahead was welcome to them all, though Karpov steamed on the bridge, a sullen anger kept bundled beneath his cap.

The waters around them suddenly seemed very busy, and Tasarov had yet another undersea contact, again unidentified, also trailing in their wake near the shadowing German destroyers. There was still activity to their north, where that contact seemed to hold in place for a time, before continuing further south. Amazingly, Fedorov was able to come up with yet another interpretation of these events, intensely focused on his history books as he was finally given permission to resume his normal station at Navigation, much to Karpov's chagrin.

"At this time there would have been one more German U-boat operating to the east, U-652. It sank Russian dispatch vessel, PS-70, the Kapitan Voronin, at 19:00 on the 6th of August. The activity up north is in the same region as the probable position of Force K under Vice Admiral Vian. He was refueling with the tanker Oligarch before proceeding south again. There was also a pair of British submarines here this month, Tigris and Trident," he told the Admiral. "Tigris was supposed to arrive at Polyarny to assist the Russians with patrols up here, and would later operate out of Murmansk."

"What? The British, offering to lend us a helping hand?" said Volsky. "You are reading these things from your history books?"

“From a log of activity in the Arctic region for this month, sir.”

“And that may as well be a log of activity in Never Never Land,” came Karpov’s inevitable response. “Your grasp of the history is laudable, Fedorov, but an annoyance. It has nothing to do with our present situation, in spite of these unknown contacts you insist on painting with this brush. Admiral, I have attempted to abide by your wishes, and remained calm in the face of this nonsense, but enough is enough.”

“I thank you for your forbearance, Captain. In another few hours we will have our answers, and sort this entire mess out.” He gave Fedorov a look, and a nod of his head, angling it toward the Navigation station, a clear sign that the Admiral wished him to resume his post.

But I’ve said my piece, thought Fedorov. I’ve told them what may actually be going on all around us, chapter and verse, even though these events may not play out as in the history I have quoted. But time is on my side now, and its steady march brings us ever closer to a reality that not even Karpov will be able to dismiss with his foul attitude and willful nature. Then the real game begins.

Before they would reach the inlet, one more contact was reported by Rodenko, very near the island of Ostrov Kil’din, just northeast of the bay. With the KA-40 still up on overwatch, the Admiral had it shift forward to have a look while they recovered the KA-226.

“Overwatch one to Mother. We are approaching the contact and will feed video imagery from our present altitude.”

“Mister Nikolin,” said Volsky. “Have them hail that ship and see if we can get a quick identification that will not require any further research by Fedorov here.” As he said that there was just a touch of frustration in his voice, impatient with the world that would simply not make sense any longer. All around him was the familiar sea and sky, the waters of the North Cape being a long time operations zone for the fleet, and yet, the sense of strangeness in the air around them here was palpable now, and very disturbing.

The ship they were observing was a small converted merchant vessel, an old fishing trawler being used as a patrol ship, now designated SKR-12, the Tuman. The ship’s name meant ‘Mist,’ and it was destined to have a storied fate when it would be surprised by three of the destroyers that had been slowly following in Kirov’s wake, and sunk in a gallant but futile ten minute

gun battle. Tuman's two 45mm guns were no match for the German destroyers, which would fire off 270 5-inch rounds to riddle the Soviet scout ship and sink her, with heavy loss of life.

Coming at a time when the Germans were making their initial effort to take Murmansk by land, the sinking of the Tuman was quickly rolled into the stories that began to circulate at the beleaguered port, as a way of bolstering the courage of the defenders. The men of the Tuman fought like hellcats, they said, to the last man, and last round before they were sunk. They gave the Germans everything they had.

In truth, when the old trawler sighted the three German destroyers, it reported the contact to Northern Fleet and then made smoke. But this did not deter the Germans, who were eager for prey, and quickly closed to within about five nautical miles before opening fire. Some of the first hits quickly killed the ship's commander, Sub-Lieutenant Shestakov, and the Commissar on board. They also damaged the aft 45mm gun, and so the Tuman had very little to shoot with during the brief engagement. At one point the ship's flag was shot from the mast, but the senior radio operator, Bilinov, and a wounded sailor, Semenov, struggled bravely to raise the colors yet again.

Soon Russian shore batteries responded to Tuman's calls, and began to range in fire on the German destroyers. Planes were launched from the airfield at Murmansk, and came diving in to attack, eventually driving off the German ships, which sustained minor damage from these attacks. Rescue boats were dispatched, and eventually pulled 37 of 52 men out of the water, and Tuman sank in to the cold seas, and the enfolding mist of history soon after.

The story of Tuman's gallant stand was cemented in the lore of the Northern Fleet when the survivors were greeted by the workers of Murmansk harbor, heartily welcomed home. They cheered the men on the quay, and some days later, Admiral Golovko then ordered all ships leaving Kola Bay to dip their flags and sound their horns in tribute when they passed the point of the engagement off Kildin Island. In fact, seawater was collected from the location and embedded in the giant statue known as 'Alyosha,' a stone statue standing 23 feet tall, of a soldier in his winter greatcoat, rifle in hand. It was erected in 1974 as a dedication to the Defenders of the Arctic during the Great Patriotic War.

Alyosha stands to this day, 500 tons of stone facing the 'Valley of Glory,'

on the Lista River defense line that protected the city in the face of a fierce German attack by the troops of Gebirgskorps Norwegen, the German Alpine Korps under Generaloberst Eduard Dietl. It became the second tallest statue in Russia, exceeded only by a similar monument erected in Volgograd to commemorate that pivotal battle.

The naval ritual commemorating the small engagement continued through the decades, even to the year 2021, and Kirov had also sounded her horn when the ship left Severomorsk on the outward leg of her deployment for those fateful live fire exercises. So it was a great surprise when the radio man aboard the KA-40 hailed the ship and got back a signal from the small contact, identifying itself as SKR-12.

Nikolin turned to the Admiral, somewhat surprised. “Sir... The KA-40 reports the contact identifies itself as SKR-12, Patrol Ship Tuman, under Sub-Lieutenant Shestakov!”

“Shestakov?” Volsky knew the name. In fact, he had even made the P.A. announcement when Kirov was about to sound off as they passed the location of Tuman’s sinking some days ago. “What is going on here? Are our boys getting in on this NATO deception you suggest, Mister Karpov? The Tuman? That name was retired long ago.” He looked at Fedorov now, a strange light in his eye, but Fedorov said nothing, preferring that the reality of their situation speak for him now.

“Nikolin,” said Volsky. “Recall our helicopter, and while you are at it, ask the Sub-Lieutenant if he would care to rendezvous with us. Tell him this is the heavy cruiser Kirov, returning to Severomorsk. And since we are breaking radio silence here under my orders, inform Command at Severomorsk of our imminent arrival as well.”

Nikolin sent the message, and now they began to study the video feed being sent by the KA-40, the image of a small commercial steamer evident. Rodenko tracked the location of the ship easily, and twenty minutes later, they slowed as they began their approach in a light rolling fog that had begun to form. Soon they saw a small shadow ahead, and Volsky got up from his chair, walking slowly to the forward viewports. There, as if it had formed from the Arctic mist that it was named after, was a small trawler flying the flag of the Russian Navy. Volsky decided to play his part, even before he knew what he would soon discover there.

“Mister Nikolin... Sound our horn.”

The long single blast soon followed, a precaution against collision, but Volsky passed a silent moment within, realizing that it was as if they had paid their respects yet again to the fabled ship Tuman, greeting a phantom from their own past, haunted by the gallant crew that had been spoken of so long in the Northern Fleet. They were, and the ghosts aboard would soon become men of real flesh and blood, when Admiral Volsky determined to take a launch over to see for himself what this ship really was.

“Mister Karpov, you have the bridge, but hopefully you will not find it necessary to fire at anything. Mister Fedorov, will you please accompany me? We will now settle this matter, once and for all.”

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It was hard to say which man was more astonished, the young Sub-Lieutenant Shestakov when he first set eyes on the looming presence of the battlecruiser Kirov as it emerged from a low cloud, or the wizened Admiral when he set eyes on the lowly trawler, and came alongside to board with Fedorov, Troyak, and two Marines.

The men there instinctively saluted, knowing an officer when they saw one, and seeing the broad stripes on Volsky's cuff, the big star on his shoulder insignia. The very presence of the man himself spoke of authority, massively underscored by a ship that was bigger than anything else in the fleet. The Kirov class heavy cruiser that they might know from the Baltic Fleet was no more than 9,500 tons full load, and the modern battlecruiser was three times that, approaching 30,000 tons, and over 60 meters longer.

The stolid aspect of Sergeant Troyak completed the picture. Here was power, the like of which the Lieutenant had seldom seen, and it gave him heart to think that in spite of the beating the Army was taking, the Navy was standing tall, and holding firm.

Volsky looked the men over, noting their uniforms, all clearly military, but not modern Russian Navy issue. Who were these men, particularly that squat fellow next to the Lieutenant with the red star on his cap? He decided to find out.

“And you, sir?” he said, looking the man over.

“Commissar,” the man said quickly, though he gave no name, and Volsky

smiled, thinking he was jesting. There had not been a Commissar in the service for over 25 years. Shestakov and his Commissar, seemed quite surprised to be receiving a navy Admiral, particularly one they had never heard of. Yet there was no doubting the authenticity of that massive ship out there, or the man before them.

“Greetings,” said Volsky. “Forgive our sudden appearance, but we have had little communication from Fleet Command, and you are the first friendly vessel flying that ensign we have seen since Moscow ordered us home. How are things at Severomorsk?”

“Not good, Admiral,” said Shestakov. “We are evacuating the 325th Rifle Regiment from its position west of the Litsa River, and it happens tonight. That is why we are out here, ready to report any enemy movements, and now that I see your ship, I am greatly relieved.”

This was not anything Volsky had expected to hear. “You are evacuating troops? Our troops?”

“Yes sir, the men of the 14th Rifle Division that we landed along the Kola Coast last month. They’ve held their beachhead for weeks now, holding up the enemy advance, but tonight we pull them out.”

“For weeks you say?” Volsky looked over his shoulder at Fedorov, as none of this sounded plausible to him at all. “And just who is advancing?”

“Sir? The Germans, of course. They brought up yet another Mountain Division, or so we have heard from men coming back from the front.”

“The Germans...” Here they were again. He had listened to Fedorov tell him he was living in the past, though he had not really embraced that impossible notion. He allowed his Navigator to shed light on the contacts they had encountered, both on and beneath the sea, though all the while, he held Doctor Zolkin’s comments to himself. Fedorov was seeing the Germans in his war books everywhere about them, which was troubling to Volsky when he thought about what Zolkin had said. Yet now, here was this man telling him the German Army was out there advancing on Murmansk!

“Troops of Dietl’s Mountain Korps,” said Fedorov. “Don’t worry, they’ll be stopped. That regiment is from the 14th Rifle Division. The 52nd will come up in support.”

“The 52nd...” Volsky had a strange look on his face, like a man coming home and finding someone else had moved into his house. “May I see your logs, Sub-Lieutenant?”

“Certainly sir.”

“You will find everything in order,” said the Commissar. “I’ve seen to that.”

“No doubt,” said Volsky, taking the logbook in hand when it was brought to him and flipping through the pages briefly. He was simply interested in the dates, and when his eye fell on the entry for this day, he felt a sudden surge of adrenalin. It read: ‘August 2, 1941 – On patrol West of Kildin Island. No Contacts to report by Mid-Day.’

“I see you will be tempted to amend your log, but do not report our meeting here, Lieutenant.” Something whispered to Volsky now, behind that pulse of adrenalin, a warning.

“I understand sir,” said Shestakov, looking quickly at the Commissar. “You are here to cover the evacuation operation? That is good! I was told to look out for German destroyers, and they have been nipping at us with U-boats up here as well. We lost the survey ship Meridian in the Polar Sea off Teriberka last month, and one of their damn Stukas got the destroyer Stremitleny, right in Kola Bay! Those bastards will learn we have more fight in us than they believe. If I ever do run into them, we’ll let them know!” He nodded his head, a determined look on his face.

The Admiral’s head was spinning now. German destroyers and U-boats, some that he had seen right on the ship’s HD video, ships that were dead and long gone for decades. And here was this man talking about Rifle Divisions and Germans attacking, just as he knew had happened in the Great Patriotic War, and his log books set the same date that Fedorov asserted, the same date being broadcast on every radio signal they could pick up.

What had happened? Was Fedorov’s entire story true? Was this man standing before him the same Shestakov he would salute so often, this ship the same brave Tuman rolling in the mist about them now? My God, my God, he thought. It’s World War Two! It is really happening, just as Fedorov claimed! Yet even as he thought this, one last objection forced itself upon his mind—the message from Moscow, with the correct authentication code. It now remained the only thing he could grasp, a last dangling rope of sanity in the enveloping mist of chaos.

“Thank you, Lieutenant,” he said, amazed at his outer calm, a long practiced mask he could wear in the face of adversity and confusion. “We will be leaving now, and yes, you must keep our presence here secret. No log

entry.”

“Aye sir, I understand. Tonight is the night. Good luck, Admiral, and long live Sergei Kirov!” Shestakov saluted, along with his dark eyed Commissar, and he was not talking about the ship, Fedorov knew, but the man. He had not yet told Admiral Volsky any of that, how the world he once knew was now fractured in a hundred pieces, and how their homeland might never be the same, no matter what any of them decided or did after this.

You can never go home, thought Fedorov, and now he truly knew the meaning of that phrase. Five minutes later they were into the Admiral’s launch and returning to the ship, the mist over the waters folding over them as they went. He passed a moment of sadness, realizing that the man he had just spoken with might be killed in just a few days, for those German destroyers were out there, and time might be jealous enough to force the appointment with death that waited for the Tuman on the 9th of August, 1941. But we are here now, he thought, and that might never happen.

The realization that Tuman might be spared, and that no ship in the fleet would ever pay tribute as it passed Kildin Island in all the years ahead, suddenly brought a strange, nostalgic feeling. Yet he thought that would be a small price to pay for the life of Sub-Lieutenant Shestakov and his Commissar, and all the men soon fated to die with them.

Part VI

Impossible

“And the vagueness of his alarm added to its terrors; when once you have taken the Impossible into your calculations, its possibilities become practically limitless.”

— **Saki**, *The Chronicles of Clovis*

Chapter 16

The Admiral was quiet as they reached the ship, and when they boarded, his hand on the ladder rail seemed as if it were grasping at reality, trying to hold on to something that assured him things were as they once were, the ship itself. How could any of this have happened? How could this possibly be true? The Bosun's pipe seemed hollow as he came aboard, his feet on the decks of 2021 again, though now he felt as though he were on an island, lost in a sea of time. He waited until Troyak saluted and led the Marines aft to the helo bay, and then turned to Fedorov.

"Walk with me, Mister Fedorov. I think you and I must talk for a while." They started along the outer deck, heading forward, past the tall central superstructure, rising up like a metal castle. Volsky looked up, seeing the Fregat radar making its never ending circuit, scanning the world about them with electronic eyes. Yet it had not been able to see the truth of what had happened to them. Only this one man beside him had the courage to speak that aloud, and seem a fool in doing so.

"Fedorov, if I had not seen that Lieutenant and his Commissar with my own eyes..."

"I know, sir. I felt the same way when I first set eyes on the video feed we took of Wake-Walker's task force, and saw that Fairy Fulmar overfly the ship. I knew it was impossible, as my eyes were showing me things that could simply not be here. In the end, seeing was believing. I hesitated to speak, thinking I might wait until your eyes showed you the impossible first, but I knew the situation here at the beginning would be particularly dangerous. The Captain was going to interpret things very differently. In fact, it may still be difficult to convince him this has really happened to us, but I am very relieved to know that you might finally believe me now."

"Zolkin was beginning to think you had a more serious problem than we first realized."

"That is understandable. My story must have sounded completely insane, but I thank you for listening to me as you did. I counted on you, Admiral, as it was your wisdom and restraint that was able to hold Karpov in check."

Volsky nodded. "Yet one thing still bothers me," he said. "That recall order. It was properly formatted, and how could anyone here know that, or the authentication code? That is still the one thing that gives me pause."

"I'm not certain, sir, but I have a theory. I was trying to explain earlier, then the missile warning distracted us."

"You were suggesting Karpov was behind this somehow?"

"It was the only thing I could think of. Only you or the Captain could have known that authentication code."

"Yes, I was aware of it," said Volsky, "but I do not think the Captain knew what it was until we received that message and opened the safe to obtain the envelope."

"Not this Captain," said Fedorov darkly, prompting Volsky to stop for a moment and turn to him.

"What exactly do you mean?"

"Sir... this will be hard to explain, but just days ago, the ship was well south of here in the North Atlantic. It was May then, of 1941, though that seems like yesterday to me now. But don't you understand sir? The ship was there, along with the entire crew, or most of them. We lost men through all the trials we experienced, but you were there, Admiral. You were still in command. We shifted, deliberately as I tried to explain."

"By using that reactor maintenance procedure?"

"Yes sir... And then I was here. But there was another Admiral Volsky at my side earlier, and you knew all of this, everything I know. Why I remember it now, while you and everyone else seem oblivious, I do not know."

"I see... but how does this explain that message?"

"Well sir, there was one man who was not aboard when we made that final shift—the Captain. I never got the chance to explain what happened to him."

"Tell me now."

Fedorov steeled himself, but these things had to be said. "In the course of events, we eventually reached our own time again. There we found that the situation in 2021 had deteriorated, and war was imminent. You gave Karpov command of the ship, and Kirov sortied from Vladivostok. That was where we were headed after those live fire exercises, and we eventually got there, though that is another tale. Karpov took the ship out himself."

"You were aboard?"

“No sir. I had another mission, which I’ll explain later. Yet on that sortie, something happened to the ship again, and it was displaced to the past, only this time it went even farther back, all the way to 1908.”

Now he told the Admiral the long, tortuous winding tale that led them all to that dire moment off Iki Island. He told him of Orlov, and how they conceived a mission to retrieve him by using the control rod at the Primorskiy Engineering Center, though he said nothing of what had happened to him at Ilanskiy. Then he told him of the Anatoly Alexandrov, and how he had been able to locate the ship’s position in 1908. The story of the mission with Gromyko and Kazan that was launched to try and bring Kirov home was a long one, and Volsky just kept shaking his head, as though he simply could not hold everything that was being told to him.

“My God... All of that happened? You experienced it first hand?”

“I did sir, and I wish you could remember it all with me.”

“So this is what you were trying to tell me about Karpov... Trying to take the ship was unbelievable in itself, but this?”

“I know sir. It was all very difficult to live through. After that mission we attempted to try and get home again, to 2021. But Rod-25 seemed to be losing its potency, or perhaps there was simply too much mass to get us all the way home. We ended up here again, only it was June of 1940, a little over a year ago, and here we stayed, this time allied with the Royal Navy, until last May.”

“Allied with the British,” said Volsky. “Imagine that.”

“You made that choice, sir, and I think it was a wise one.”

“Then this is how you came to know that British Admiral Tovey? He was the historical Tovey, not a namesake from our time?”

“Correct sir. That message I urged you to send was one I knew he might immediately understand. Geronimo was a code word he devised to indicate we had appeared again.”

“And this explains why a British Admiral might wish to speak with a Lieutenant in the Russian Navy.” Volsky smiled.

“Actually... I was a Captain by then. You promoted me sir. In fact, I was still wearing my jacket with those stripes when I arrived here... appeared here, however it happened.”

“Yes... That was odd. We thought you had simply grabbed the wrong coat the other day when all this started and you fell ill. But yesterday the head

man in the ship's laundry wanted to know who's jacket that was. He said he had already laundered Karpov's. Too much was happening, and I gave it no mind, telling him to just store it away. I assumed it was Karpov's, a spare, or perhaps Orlov's. He's a Captain of the third rank, even though we always call him Chief."

Volsky was silent for a moment, everything Fedorov was saying weighing heavily on him now. "I still cannot believe Karpov and Orlov would do these things. They certainly complicated matters."

"I'm afraid so, sir, and more than you realize."

"Here I am thinking to make port at Severomorsk in a another hour or two. Yet the thought that Josef Stalin might get his hands on this ship gives me second thoughts now."

"In that regard," said Fedorov, taking a long breath, "things may have changed here. In the course of all these events, all these engagements we fought, things changed... It wasn't just Karpov or Orlov's doing, it was all of us, and I am as much to blame as anyone else. Every shot we fired into the history we were sailing through altered this reality, and the world is different now—at least it was last May. I was wondering if those changes still held with this second coming of Kirov to the past. You see sir, this ship came here directly from 2021, but we were already here, the ship, and so I wondered if this event, our first arrival here on July 28th, might ever occur. It seems it has."

"Then what happened to the ship you were on last May?"

"I don't know... That is the scary part of all of this. It may be out there, somewhere, then again it may be lost in that grey fog of infinity. Who can say. One thing I do know, is that another man was out there when this happened, Vladimir Karpov. He was separated from the ship off Iki Island, and we believed he was dead. We even conducted a memorial service before we attempted to get home again. Well, when the ship did move forward, it apparently dragged Karpov along too. I can only assume he went overboard during that engagement, and he was pulled forward along with us. I eventually discovered he was in Siberia."

"Siberia? How in the world did he get there?"

"I don't know, but he did, and he was able to use his knowledge of future events to get himself into a position of considerable power. We feared what might happen to the ship as we approached July 28th, the time the ship

vanished due to that accident with Orel. I have seen what happened to us, but Karpov was exposed to that fate as well. It may be that he did not survive, but that recall order with the correct authentication code gave me pause. He might have obtained that code at any time he was on the ship, and he would be the only other person here in this time that might know that code.”

“Astounding,” said Volsky. “Yet the Captain is right up there on the bridge, Fedorov!”

“Yes, he is, and I have been trying to understand just what happened here. It all depends on what really happened to the ship in May of this year. I’m here, and with my memory of all these events intact. The fact that neither you, nor anyone else aboard, can remember what happened to us is most disturbing. We experienced many odd effects as we approached what I came to call Paradox Hour. Some of those effects involved memory lapses. After we disappeared in May, members of the crew also began to go missing—Tasarov, Orlov, and a man named Kamenski that had come aboard in the course of our operations. At one point I had completely forgotten Tasarov even existed! But strangely, Nikolin remembered him, and that eventually jogged my memory, which soon recovered. Your memory was also affected, until it slowly recovered. I was hoping that was the case here, and that you were still the man I left back in May, but that remains to be seen. Does any of this trigger any recollection?”

“No, I’m afraid not,” said Volsky. “It is incredulous—the most amazing story I have ever heard—yet I cannot recall any of the things you are describing. But Mister Fedorov... If I follow you here, are you suggesting that that recall order may have been sent by Karpov—the man who was in Siberia?”

“That is a possibility. He could have formatted that message before July 28th.”

“Yet how can he be there and here on this very ship?”

“I do not think that is possible, Admiral. Frankly, I think he must have suffered a fate similar to what we endured on the ship. Why I was spared, I cannot say, but I think it was not without great cost.”

“In what way?”

“Well sir, here I am, and with the recollection of all these events intact. In fact, I firmly believe I am the Fedorov from the ship I left in May, and not the young officer I was when you set out from Severomorsk for those live fire

exercises.”

“Then what happened to that man?” asked Volsky, clearly confused by all of this.

“I don’t know, sir, but I believed it would be impossible for two versions of the ship and crew to co-exist—or for there to be two versions of me or any other man. That was the danger I thought we were facing. I believed that, unless we found a way to get out of this time before July 28th, we could face a grim fate, and perhaps we have. Finding myself here, I realize now that I may also be responsible for my own death—the death of that other man, who was completely innocent. And I have grieved the loss of everyone I knew aboard that other ship, brothers all, as if they had all died, just as I have grieved the death of my own self, the man I was before any of this happened.”

Volsky nodded, a grave expression on his face. “Mister Fedorov,” he said quietly, “you are a most remarkable young man. For you to appear here, remembering these things, must have been very trying. I can see now what you have been attempting to do, the way you have slowly tried to control how these events played out. Thank you for coming to me, and trying to get me to understand what has happened to us. It is all more than I think I can hold at one time, and I hope I don’t have another dizzy spell that sends me to Doctor Zolkin.”

“That makes two of us, sir. Your understanding and leadership now is essential. It is not just our fate at stake here. Karpov has said this was a very serious situation, and he was correct, though things are far more serious than he could imagine. It is August 2, 1941. Tonight the Northern Fleet will attempt the evacuation of the 325th Rifle Regiment by sea, and the German assault on Murmansk will be pressed forward to the boiling point over the next days and weeks.”

“Yet they failed, Fedorov. You said something about a second Rifle Division that we will bring up from reserve... the 52nd?”

“Yes, that is so, and as much as the history seems to ring true to what it once was, this is an altered reality here now sir. The history is not the same. You worried a moment ago about Josef Stalin, but if this is the same world I left in May, Stalin is dead.”

“Dead?”

“Yes sir, killed in 1908 by assassination. We learned this in the course of our stay here, after we shifted forward from 1908.”

“That is very serious indeed! Stalin dead? Then who leads the Soviet Union in his place?”

“The man the Sub-Lieutenant wished long life as we left the Tuman, sir, Sergei Kirov. He wasn’t saluting our ship, but the man it was named after, and in May he was alive and well, leading the Soviet State, though it would no longer be fair to call it the Soviet Union. Things we did in 1908 have caused a tremendous change in the history we now find ourselves in. Our nation did not survive the revolution intact. The Reds and the Whites continued to struggle with one another, and Russia fragmented into three separate regions, One is the Soviet State led by Sergei Kirov. He controls most of European Russia as we knew it, or at least he once did. By now the Germans are at his throat, and they have already probably overrun a third of the country. Everything east of Omsk, all of Siberia, is a separate state as well, and it is presently being led by Kolchak, if you recall him, and another man was also prominently involved there, Vladimir Karpov.”

“The same man who is presently Captain of this ship?”

“If he survived, though I do not believe that is possible. Only that recall order makes me suspicious, as I’ve explained. But there is also one more state, controlling all of the Caucasus, territory east of the Volga, and all of the central Eurasian states like Kazakhstan. There was another man involved in all of these events that I have not yet spoken of. His name is Ivan Volkov...”

Chapter 17

Volsky's head was too full to fully focus on what Fedorov was trying to tell him now. This other man, Volkov, had been a Captain in Russian Naval Intelligence, from 2021. The ship had returned from this wild nightmare, and only to face the Inspector General and a possible Board of Inquiry at Vladivostok. Yet Fedorov explained he had another mission, slipping out of the city on the Trans-Siberian rail, only after another amazing journey to the past by using the same control rod that had caused the ship to displace, only this time in the nuclear reactor test bed at the Primorskiy Engineering Center.

Fedorov could see that it was all too much for the Admiral to take at one time. "I will explain it all in detail later," he said. "But suffice it to say, that this man, Ivan Volkov is that same Captain we met at Vladivostok."

Volsky rubbed the brow of his forehead. "This story is like an onion! You just keep peeling away one layer after another."

"It has been a very long journey, sir," said Fedorov.

"Well, now I must go up and see if I can explain some of this to the Captain."

"I will be happy to come with you, sir."

"No, Mister Fedorov, I think it best if I see the Captain alone."

*

The message came at a little after 17:00 that evening, and Volsky had been with Karpov alone in the briefing room for the last hour and a half. It was now 18:30, and the moon Fedorov had predicted was slowly rising through the mist. The message was short and direct, handed to the Admiral by Nikolin just before he started his meeting. It read simply: 'Admiral Golovko, Commander Northern Fleet, invites you to dock at Pier 7, and requests the presence of Admiral Volsky and his party at No. 1 Staraya Vaenga, 20:00, at which time he will present an important communication

from Moscow.'

Volsky had been meeting with Captain Karpov in the briefing room when it came, undertaking the difficult task of trying to explain the impossible truth he had finally come to embrace himself. He had chosen this moment deliberately, as Fedorov had, and had pushed a pad device with Fedorov's sun and moon data displayed predicting what the two men would soon see out the port side window, the testimony of the moon itself, which he hoped would weigh heavily.

Volsky said nothing to Karpov of what Fedorov had revealed concerning his loyalty, and the things he had done when given command of the ship. He simply went over all the evidence they had uncovered, the lack of any visible wreckage from either Orel or Slava, the loss of satellite and GPS links, the endless radio broadcasts, the silence from Severomorsk, all the video feeds, which he again compared to imagery provided by Fedorov, the missing facilities on Jan Mayen, and then he related the incredible story of his brief meeting with Sub-Lieutenant Shestakov aboard the Tuman.

"Yes, this is yet one more inconceivable thing, but I saw this man with my own eyes, shook his hand, read his ship's log, and saw there the entry for this very day." He related what they had learned about events on land, and the planned evacuation of the 325th Rifle Regiment that night.

Karpov was astonished, first to think that the Admiral had swallowed Fedorov's entire story whole, and now had a belly full of borscht that would surely make him a very sick man, just like Fedorov, or so he believed. And yet, here was the Admiral of the Northern Fleet, with over 40 years in the service, speaking to him earnestly and with all seriousness, and asking him to believe the impossible.

"Everything we have discovered since that accident makes absolutely no sense if we stand in the year 2021, but if the date in that logbook I read was correct, then all these things fit the picture. There it is, right before our noses, and now I invite you to look out there at that moon, and review the data for yourself. It is correct for this date, time, and location, and yet, that should be a morning crescent, and it should not be up until 20:32."

"But the recall order," said Karpov, voicing the same last objection Volsky had clung to himself.

"Yes, the order," said Volsky. "I plan on getting to the bottom of that this evening. I gave orders to enter Kola bay a half hour ago." Now he handed

Karpov the message he had received from Nikolin just before the meeting, watching quietly as the Captain read.

“Admiral Golovko?” Karpov knew the name well, for he had once applied for a captaincy aboard the new frigate by that name, until he was accepted as Captain of Kirov, much to his delight.

“In light of everything else we have just gone over, I will not be surprised to learn he is, indeed, Arseniy Golovko, who was Commander of the Red Banner Northern Fleet from 1940 to 1946. Could all of this be staged? Possibly. But why? Would our own people now wish to put us through some strange psychological test here?”

“I might believe that easier than anything else you have told me,” said Karpov.

“Yes? Well I will soon see for myself. The port and city will also give testimony. I think we should get to a weather deck and have a good look as we enter the harbor, but I have ordered all non-essential personnel below decks. No need to start the rumor mill. You and I both know this place like the back of our hands. Let us see what we find.” He stood up, and the two men made their way to the bridge, where Rodenko was in command as Senior Watch Officer, slowly taking the ship in.

“Any difficulties?” asked Volsky as they were announced on the bridge.

“This fog has visibility down to 100 meters, and none of the navigation buoys are out where they should be,” said Rodenko. “But the helmsman knows the channel well. We just skirted Salniy Island, and should be ready to dock in fifteen minutes.”

“Very good. Take us in. Then the ship will come about to 360 and hover well out in the bay. We will not come alongside the quay. The Captain and I will be out on the weather deck.”

Once there, Karpov scanned the way ahead with an anxious look. He had thought he would be coming home, and now a yawning hole opened in his gut, filled only with all these impossibilities that had beset them these many days. Clearly Severomorsk was still here. There was no sign of attack, but the place seemed completely different, empty as that hole in his soul, a forlorn and forsaken harbor at the edge of the world. There had been 100,000 people living in this region when they left it just a few days ago. Even through the fog, they should see the tall, squat apartment buildings crowding one another in bleak rows, and see the city lights softly glowing behind the mist. But it

was so still and quiet now.

“Strange how dark it seems. Could there be a power outage?”

Karpov realized the very question betrayed his inner mind, for he was still reaching for things to explain the strangeness away, account for it in some way, make sense of the lunacy that had started when they lost Orel. It was here that they thought to come for all their final answers, and yet with each passing minute, all they found were more questions. It was as if the surety and safety of home had betrayed them, and now conspired with all these other odd events to torment them.

Then they heard the plaintive call of a fog horn, and he looked to see another ship approaching, a perplexed look on his face when he saw it.

“What in God’s name is that?” he exclaimed.

“Looks like a small frigate or destroyer,” said Volsky. “Take a close look as we pass.”

Karpov shook his head. The vessel had a small conning section forward and a single exposed deck gun there, with no armored turret, and designed to be manned by a deck crew. As it passed they saw three stacks, each angled back slightly off vertical. There the crew of the ship gaped at them from the gunwales, awed by the imposing size of this sudden new arrival. Karpov clearly saw what looked to be long sets of torpedo tubes amidships and behind the third funnel, and there were three more open breach deck guns on the aft section of the ship. Fedorov would have told them what they were looking at, the destroyer Valerian Kuibyshev, which had served bravely in these waters since the outbreak of hostilities, but Volsky had asked his Navigator to wait below decks while he briefed the Captain. Volsky squinted, taking note of the hull number as the ship passed, and made a mental note to query Fedorov later.

“Well I’ve seen a few old rust buckets docked here over the years, but never a ship like that,” said Volsky. “What do you make of it?”

Karpov was silent, his eyes and face dark and serious. He seemed lost in the turmoil of his inner thoughts, struggling to come to grips with what he was seeing, and failing to see, as the ship slowly approached the harbor. Instead of the familiar modern port and facilities he expected, the place was all too bleak and empty. Only the distant shadowy outlines of the piers could be seen, but he knew that he should now be seeing the lights of the city. The Fleet Headquarters complex was on that very street mentioned in the

message Volsky had received, and he should be able to make out the high communications tower, its red and green lights winking in the grey evening, which was a twilight zone of confusion for him now.

"I invite you to join me," said Volsky. "Care to come ashore?"

"Sir..." Karpov hesitated. "I think I would like to think about all this for a while, here aboard the ship, if you don't mind."

"Very well." Even as Volsky said that, the muted sound of a military band struck up an anthem, and they turned to look.

"It seems we have a welcoming committee," said Volsky. "Very strange."

"That isn't half a word for all this," said Karpov. "If any of what you have told me is true, then how did they know we were even here? How did they format and code that recall order? What is this all about?"

"I hope to have my final answer on that by the time I return," said Volsky, straightening his cap as he turned to leave. "Kindly have the Watch Officer send down to the helo bay and have Troyak meet me at the launch with a small Marine escort."

"Aye sir," said Karpov, saluting as the Admiral went through the hatch to the citadel.

"Mister Rodenko," said Volsky, "no one is to leave the ship, and the crew is to remain below decks. Understood? I should return within three hours unless you hear from me otherwise." Now he lowered his voice. "I will be taking Mister Fedorov with me, and a few Marines, but we should not be long. Something tells me we will be out to sea again in a few hours."

"Very well sir. Good to be home, in any case."

Volsky gave him a look, but said nothing. The 2nd Watch called out his departure: "Admiral off the bridge!"

Yes, he thought grimly, Admiral off his rocker as well! Let me go and see what's really going on here.

*

Karpov stood alone on the weather deck for some time, his careful eye picking out one discrepancy after another in the landscape around them. He should be seeing the glow from lamp posts near the piers, the tall looming presence of the heroes monument, Alyosha, that was the centerpiece of so

many Navy Day celebrations. He had stood beneath its shadow so many times, in ceremonies of remembrance, hearing the same old song:

*'Always ready, Severomorsk
Protect the country in hour of need,
And from the sea, safely cover the town.
We remember...
Heavy now is our time,
But another time will come!
Look forward now, home country,
At our valiant Northern Fleet.'*

Yes, heavy now... so heavy... If Volsky's crazy story was true, then this is the time they remember in that song, he thought, and I am from that other time they longed for. If this is 1941, the nation is at the edge of oblivion, as I stand here now, feeling the very same way.

Something about this spot seemed to chill him, and it was not the cold evening air. He had a feeling of grave danger, a rising sense of anxiety, an inner turmoil that left him feeling lost and very alone. This was the very spot where he once would stand on this ship for the last time, in the year 1908. It was the place where he would fire his service pistol in frustrated rage at a distant enemy, and then slowly raise the weapon to take his own life. Though he knew nothing of that, he seemed to feel it in some vague, indefinable way, a darkness, a quiet terror here on the weather deck off the bridge.

The fog still veiled the scene, but he knew where to look, and it was soon obvious to him that things were missing, different, and the entire harbor and surrounding area seemed entirely undeveloped. There should be many more vessels here. Where was the fleet? The harbor should be a busy steel jungle, with lowering cranes, trucks coming and going at the quays, slate grey warships huddled next to the piers. but there was nothing. Where was the fleet? Where was Severomorsk? Where was home?

He knew this place so well, the winter storms, summer rains, the swaying birch trees and alders, the smell of wild cranberries growing in the hills. The monuments, and schools, the restaurants and hotels—all gone. He did see a few low buildings in the direction where the Naval Headquarters complex

was supposed to be, and he could smell smoke on the cool night, hear the sound of someone cutting wood, faint and far off. A dog howled on the darkened hills surrounding the harbor, its mournful call seeming to sum up all he felt at that moment.

It was gone—all of it—simply gone! Yet, like Orlov's report from Jan Mayen, there was no sign whatsoever of destruction or attack. The city was simply not there!

Now what, he thought, his heart beating faster as the realization of what he was seeing finally struck home? It wasn't Fedorov with his damnable history books this time. It wasn't video on the monitors, reports from Orlov, or the untimely rising of a fat moon off the port side of the ship. This time it was the evidence brought to him by his own eyes, the stark reality all around him that he knew was wrong. And as he stood there, peering through his field glasses in a vain attempt to see things that were no longer there, a voice spoke within him, dark and threatening, laden with consequence.

What now?

There was no naval inquiry waiting for them. He would have no one to make his carefully worded reports to here. There was no court of appeal. Here he stood, an outcast from the world and life he knew, and now he realized why he could not bring himself to leave the ship at this moment. It was the only vestige of the world and life he once knew, the last remnant of the time he was born to. If Volsky and Fedorov were correct—if that ship they found back there was really the Tuman, and the log book held true, then this was the night of August 2, 1941.

Slowly, through the flutter of adrenaline and anxiety within his chest, behind the rising pulse that kept him on edge, another thought suddenly emerged from some dark corner of his mind. It is 1941, and here I am, standing aboard the most powerful fighting vessel in the world.

And I am its Captain....

Chapter 18

Another trip into insanity, thought Volsky as he entered the launch. What will I find there this time? He watched while the men secured the line, and the boat eased away from the long grey hull of Kirov. Sergeant Troyak and Zykov were with them and a third Marine named Gretchko. The hoist lines retracted, and the men above saluted as they pointed the bow of the launch shoreward, and Troyak fed power to the motor.

The Admiral had seen a mix of both anxiety and awe in the deck crews they left behind. The fog and low clouds was still obscuring much, but some of the men could tell that things were not what they should be here, and he thought long and hard of how he could explain all of this incredible story to the crew. For that matter, he thought he had better say something to the Marines.

“You men,” he said quietly. “You may soon note that the harbor is somewhat different. There is an explanation for this, though I will not have time to share it all with you now. I will have Mister Fedorov go over it all with you later. For the moment, just bear with the situation. It will all be made clear later.

“How did the Captain take the news?” asked Fedorov in a low voice, understandably curious as he and Volsky settled into the cabin.

“I’m not sure,” said Volsky. “He was very quiet. I invited him to join us but he declined. I suppose this is more than enough to get any man thinking. We all lose everything we had left behind to find ourselves standing here, Fedorov. That is a hard stone to swallow. I was just considering how to reveal this to the men, but first we must see what Moscow wants, and solve the mystery of this recall order.”

“We have been here once before,” said Fedorov.

“Here? You mean in this time?”

“Yes sir. You decided to meet with Sergei Kirov, and so we sailed here and he traveled from Moscow to greet us. We actually met further south in Murmansk. Severomorsk is not what it was when we left it, as I’m sure you can see, but most of what is here was built for us after that meeting. There

are quarters here for our crew to take land leave, and supplies for the ship, mostly food and clothing. Kirov was very gracious and accommodating when we met with him.”

“Volsky shook his head. “Sergei Kirov... There is a man worth fighting for. I wonder what the nation is like without Stalin? So do you believe he is behind this recall order?”

“Possibly,” said Fedorov. “You said your message from Admiral Golovko indicated he had an important communication from Moscow. They knew we were here, sir, operating with the British, and so they must have known we vanished in the middle of that engagement we were fighting in May. Somehow, they must have gotten wind of the ship’s reappearance, though I can’t yet figure how.”

“That is the least of our worries,” said Volsky.

As they approached the quay, they now saw the military band assembled, and they struck up the Russian national anthem as the launch docked. There was an honor guard waiting, smart and precise in dress uniforms, and a short man approached in a well decorated officer’s jacket and a dark Admiral’s cap. For their part, Volsky and Fedorov were also in their dress uniforms, instead of the normal leather service jackets.

“You have met this man before,” Fedorov said quickly. “But don’t worry, we did not spend much time with him earlier. Yet it would be good to play as though he was well met again.”

“Of course,” said Volsky, feeling very strange. It was as if another version of himself had been at large in the world, saying and doing things, commanding his ship, and it was most disconcerting. “I hope I measure up to myself,” he said.

“Don’t worry sir. You will do fine. Admiral Golovko is aware of us, in some respects. He was told you are heading up a secret project involving the ship, though I’m afraid he wasn’t that impressed when he saw we had no large gun turrets.”

Volsky smiled. “Yes, we’re a bit of a wolf in sheep’s clothing, though one look at the ship would certainly give any man of this era pause.”

Yes sir. We later operated in these waters, the Kara Sea, to chase off a small German surface group, and Admiral Golovko was most appreciative. That was before Germany initiated hostilities, but we taught them a lesson, sir.”

“Then they know of the ship as well?”

“Yes sir. We have openly engaged German ships, and you will not be surprised to therefore know that we sank several vessels. One was a very famous ship, the German aircraft carrier Graf Zeppelin.”

“I have heard of this ship,” said Volsky. “Yet it was never fully operational. Yes? We sunk it?”

“In this time it was operational,” said Fedorov, “and yes, it was necessary to sink it in the final engagement we fought in the Atlantic.”

Volsky took a long breath. “I see I have much to consider here. You and I will have to have another along chat after this, and you can give me the details of things I have already done! How very strange this feels.”

“For me as well, sir,” said Fedorov. “It was here that I first discovered what had happened to the Captain. I found a photo of him in some reading material provided by Sergei Kirov. It was quite a shock. I wonder what happened to him on the 28th of July?”

“Might he be inside Karpov’s head? The man on our ship? You are here, and with all these memories intact.”

“If that happened, Karpov certainly doesn’t seem like he remembers anything.” Yet Volsky’s suggestion gave Fedorov a pause.

“Well,” said Volsky, “time to greet the Admiral. I will do my best to play the part, Fedorov, but realize I have no recollection of any of this, and so I feel like an actor on stage who has failed to memorize his lines.”

“Don’t worry, sir. I’ll chime in if things get difficult.”

They exited the cabin as the boat reached a long pier, still under construction, and Gretchko tied off the line, a strange, anxious look on his face. The men called him the cat, because of his greenish eyes, and also because that was the name Doctor Zolkin had given to his pet, the official ship’s mascot.

“Well, I see the real estate has gone downhill since we left,” said Volsky, trying to lighten the moment. Stand easy men. Wait for us here on the boat, and do not be too curious. If we are very long, we will send for you, particularly if the food is good.” He gave the Sergeant a wink, and climbed slowly out of the launch.

Fedorov could see that there had been a lot of new construction at the base since he was last here, and he felt it very odd that the site chosen was the same location where the Naval Headquarters Facility would one day stand in his time. They made their way past a small submarine berth, where in 2021 a vintage WWII era submarine was docked as a permanent war museum ship, the K-21. Volsky noted the memorial was missing.

“Oh, it’s probably here sir, operating right now in these waters under Captain Nikolai Lunin.” A Hero of the Soviet Union, Lunin would get a shot at the Tirpitz during the illfated PQ-17 convoy battle, and go on to make Admiral. His boat, the K-21, was the only one of its class to survive the war, and the memorial had been a familiar sight to them both as they came and went from the modern headquarters facility.

As they approached the buildings now, Volsky could not help but think of the office and desk that would be there in 80 years time, and he even summoned up a recollection of the photo of his wife that sat on a credenza, another loss he had suffered in swallowing this incredible pill. Would they ever get back to their own time? Fedorov said they had managed that on his journeys, so he took heart.

They were accompanied by the honor guard, and Admiral Golovko, who made small talk with Volsky while they talked about the progress of the new base. The expanded quarters they were now building would be very near those for the 8th Naval Brigade in Modern times. Once seated in a warm conference room, they were served hot black tea, Russian Caravan, from a well styled samovar, with small cakes, lemon, and jam.

“I thank you for coming, Admiral,” said Golovko, his eyes bright beneath two dark brows.

“A pleasure to be home,” said Volsky. “But tell me, Admiral. That recall order we received... was it sent by you?”

“No sir, it must have come from Moscow.”

Volsky looked at Fedorov, as they slowly eliminated one possibility in solving the mystery, and now Fedorov’s theory that Karpov may have formatted the message before July 28th remained the only real answer for them.

“Well now,” said Golovko, “as I stated in my earlier signal, I have been asked to present you with a messenger, sent to me directly from Moscow. He

was sent here by the General Secretary himself, or so I was told.”

Golovko nodded to an aide, who went to a door on the far wall and ushered in a tall man in a long, black overcoat, with silver buttons and a dark military cap. They all stood to receive the man, and Golovko gestured to his own place at the table.

“Gentlemen,” he said quickly. “I have a rifle regiment to evacuate tonight, and I must be on my way. So I offer my chair to this man in my place. May I introduce a representative lately arrived from Moscow, and sent directly from the Kremlin, and the General Secretary himself.”

“Tyrenkov,” said the man, extending a handshake to the Admiral.

Volsky shook his hand, feeling it very cold, but firm. Something about the man was vaguely unsettling, his dark, penetrating eyes, seeming too intense as they greeted one another. Admiral Golovko doffed his cap and left, and now the three men settled at the table again, and were left alone.

“So you are the mysterious messenger from Moscow,” said Volsky. “We received their recall order, and here we are. But this message... It was in a format that very few would be privy to, and used specific code words that might only be known to officers aboard my ship.”

“Correct,” said Tyrenkov, blunt and to the point.

“Well sir,” said Volsky. “I find that somewhat strange. Any explanation?”

“None,” said Tyrenkov. “This man here—who is he please?”

“Ah,” said Volsky. “Forgive me. This is Lieutenant Anton Fedorov, my Senior Navigator.”

The man gave Fedorov a studied glance, a careful appraisal, measuring, considering, but saying nothing. “Your Captain did not join you?”

“He had matters to attend to on the ship,” said Volsky.

“I see. And as to your ship and crew,” said Tyrenkov. “I trust they are well?”

“As well as one might expect, given the circumstances,” said Volsky.

“You have been out of communication for over two months. Was there some difficulty to report?”

Tyrenkov’s questions seemed to be more than they were on the surface, at least to Fedorov. He realized that this man may have been well aware of the ship’s presence here, and for some time. If he was sent by Sergei Kirov, then he would certainly know a good deal, and Moscow had to know that they had

also been reported missing the previous May. Was he merely trying to fill in that gap, or was there some darker agenda? He had to think quickly, knowing that Volsky might stumble here, and inadvertently reveal something that would best be kept secret.

"There was an accident," said Volsky.

His heart beating faster, Fedorov gave the Admiral's foot a firm nudge under the table, and he cleared his throat. "If I may, sir. You asked me to remind you of standing order 21."

"Order 21?" said Volsky.

"Yes sir, concerning operational security protocols. We are not permitted to disclose details of present or past operations, unless specifically directed to do so by you, and then only after properly vetting the recipient of that intelligence."

"Ah yes," said Volsky, quick enough to realize Fedorov was intervening here to try and control what information they might disclose to this man, and he was very deft, his old humor coming immediately to the rescue. "Forgive me, Mister Tyrenkov, I give so many orders these days, that I have had to number them to keep track at times. Yet now I, myself, forget which order goes with which number. Of course, Mister Fedorov, you are very correct."

He turned to Tyrenkov now. "Meaning no disrespect, I have determined that operational secrecy is paramount at the moment, and can therefore only report details of our recent activities directly to the General Secretary. I am told you bear a message from him. May I see it please?" Two could be blunt and direct, thought Volsky, instinctively feeling a need for caution here, and glad that Fedorov had given him a nudge to make certain he listened to that hunch.

Tyrenkov showed no emotion, cool and calculating, his dark eyes motionless, yet intense, like some bird of prey fixated upon its intended target.

"I do not carry this message," he said quietly. "It will be delivered shortly. Admiral, Lieutenant, if you will kindly excuse me for a moment, I will see to the matter now."

"Very well," said Volsky. "The tea is still warm, and the lemon cakes are quite good."

Tyrenkov smiled, standing slowly and then walking quickly to the door. He was not gone long, and a few minutes later the door opened again. In

walked three men, each holding a submachine gun, the handpicked guard of the Siberian Security Service. Tyrenkov followed them, and a fifth man came after, the collar of his heavy grey overcoat pulled up, the bill of his cap low on his forehead, obscuring his face as he entered.

The others parted to make way for the man, who walked slowly toward the table as Volsky and Fedorov stood to receive him. Then the man reached up, removed his cap, and Volsky's eyes widened when he finally saw who it was.

"Captain?" he said, and he was standing too far from Fedorov to be kicked on the foot again. "What are you doing here?"

It was the second time Fedorov's mind would reel with disbelief and shock, though he struggled to contain his emotion and mask his reaction. It was yet one more impossible thing, rising from the whirlwind of chaos that had defined his life these last days. It was danger, an air of menace so palpable that it seemed a strange dark aura surrounded the man, and he realized that this meeting had been arranged all along—by this man, peril in a dark trench coat the like of which they could not yet measure.

It was Karpov.

He was standing there in a long dark trench coat, just like the other man, and now he saw that his face had a small gauze patch applied to the cheek, masking some minor injury.

"Let me guess," said the Captain. "You believed I was dead. No, that isn't likely, because you see I have made quite a time of things here since I was pulled out of the sea like a half dead fish. Yet that was why you came for me in the first place. Yes? You wanted to put an end to me, and by God, you were willing to kill the entire ship and crew to do that, weren't you, old man."

He looked at them, his eyes cold and hard, and now Fedorov noticed the drawn cheeks, shadows under the eyes, and the weathering of years on Karpov's forehead. Power had a way of extracting a price from any man who tried to master it. He knew instinctively that this was not the Captain they had left on the bridge, and that opening salvo by Karpov had certainly proved that. In that wild moment, Fedorov wondered what Karpov knew about them, and he saw now that the first man, Tyrenkov, had been sent in merely to try and ascertain one thing—were they the same Fedorov and Volsky that Karpov had struggled with, or were they newly arrived here, unknowing,

innocent of the many crimes he might lay at their feet, and here in this world only a very few days?

That was all he was trying to discern, he thought, and when I intervened with Order 21, Tyrenkov knew he could do nothing more than report this to Karpov. This was a trap. It was all carefully arranged. My hunch was correct, for Karpov was the only man who could have possibly formatted that recall order, but how could he have survived the paradox that took the entire ship and crew? They are all gone, save one. Time devoured them all, sparing only my own wretched soul, and this man, the nemesis of everything we have been trying to accomplish in our long alliance with Admiral Tovey.

“And Fedorov,” said Karpov with a wry grin. “I thought you were a Captain. What happened here, Admiral? Has your right hand man disappointed you?”

Volsky gave Fedorov a wide eyed look, speechless.

Part VII

Day of Reckoning

*“Methinks King Richard and myself should meet
With no less terror than the elements
Of fire and water, when their thundering shock
At meeting tears the cloudy cheeks of heaven”*

— **William Shakespeare:** *Richard II, Act II, Scene 3*

Chapter 19

Karpov slowly reached into his jacket and produced an envelope, which he handed solemnly to Admiral Volsky. "Your message from Moscow," he said. "Direct from the General Secretary."

Volsky took it, and yet left it on the table, still perplexed by everything. "What? We've just received another signal? Why didn't you simply radio Troyak on the launch. And what has happened to you?" he said. "Your face..."

"The scars of war," said Karpov. "One cannot gain a victory without also suffering a defeat. This one was regrettable, and it could have been avoided altogether if you had come to your senses and seen the world through my eyes."

"What do you mean?" said Volsky. "What are you saying about dead fish? What are you doing here in that uniform, and how were you injured? I left you just a brief hour ago on the ship. And what do you mean calling Fedorov a Captain? You have been railing that Fedorov here was talking crazy, but now you are the one spouting nonsense. Explain yourself, Captain, and watch your mouth while you're at it. Who are you calling an old man?"

Karpov heard only one thing in what Volsky had just said. "You left me an hour ago? You mean to say..." Now it was his turn to be dumbstruck with the shock of what may have happened, yet he recovered quickly. In fact, Fedorov's hunch was correct, and he had used Tyrenkov to screen these men to try and ascertain their true identities. Was this Volsky and Fedorov who had harried him in 1908, hunting him down in an attack submarine and intervening at the worst possible moment to disrupt all his well crafted plans? Or would these men be fresh off the proverbial boat, oblivious to all of that, and unaware of everything that had happened after that first coming of Kirov to these waters.

"Did you hear that?" Karpov looked at Tyrenkov now, astonished.

"Well I did invite you to join us here," said Volsky, "but you declined. It seems you have changed your mind, and your uniform along with it! What is going on here, Captain? And you men," Volsky waved at the three guards.

“Kindly take those weapons elsewhere.”

Karpov narrowed his eyes, studying the Admiral for a moment, and coming to some inner conclusion. He passed a moment, looking suspiciously from the Admiral to Fedorov, as if trying to read them and determine who they really were. Then he snapped his fingers, and the three guards saluted crisply and withdrew to the room behind the door.

“There now,” said Karpov. “One big happy family again.” He looked around the room. “You may have noticed that Severomorsk is not what it was when we left it,” he said, taking the assumption that Volsky’s confusion was genuine. “No doubt you have more than a few questions concerning that.”

“Quite an understatement,” said Volsky. “Everything we have seen since that accident with Orel has raised one mystery after another. It was here we thought to find our answers, particularly since the recall order we received was properly formatted and coded. But my god, yes, this is not the world we left just days ago.

Karpov said nothing, thinking, considering, trying to assess, even as Tyrenkov had, whether Volsky was being genuine or duplicitous here. He had goaded them both, with statements obviously referencing events they had lived out together, but the men seemed oblivious.

For his part, the Admiral had come to an almost immediate conclusion that something utterly fantastic may have happened. If he took everything Fedorov told him as true, then clearly this man could only be the Karpov from that long sad tale, and not the man he stood with on the weather deck off the bridge an hour ago. Beyond the gauze on the man’s cheek, there were subtle physical differences that he immediately noticed. The thought that he was an imposter briefly crossed his mind, a body double of some kind? He quickly discarded that, for he could see no way it could have been arranged.

Yet Fedorov’s story was even more fantastic! The man’s strange uniform, and those dour looking guardsmen, all reinforced that impossible notion. This was the man from Siberia Fedorov had told him about, the man who vanished in 1908, pulled forward with the ship, and the man who then wormed his way into the power structure of the Free Siberian State. It was all too much for him to imagine, but, behind the confusion and shock, another part of his brain screamed of danger here, just as it had with Fedorov when he first set eyes on Karpov. He instinctively perceived that this meeting had been carefully arranged, and that this man was here for a reason much more

sinister than the delivery of an envelope from Moscow.

Now Karpov looked at Fedorov. "Done chasing Orlov about, Fedorov?" He goaded him one last time, looking for a reaction.

"Sir? I told Orlov that I would not tolerate his bullying, and I was within my rights to do so. That is all. I was just trying to present and interpret the evidence we uncovered, nothing more."

Karpov nodded slowly.

"That quicksilver mind of yours," he said. "Admittedly, you were correct in the beginning, and after my fall from grace you had the good nature to extend me a second chance, but after that, you went sadly astray. Was it you who convinced the Admiral that consorting with our enemies was the only way to insure the future of our nation?" He was still testing, probing, making statements that only his old nemesis might comprehend.

Fedorov knew just how perilous this moment was. Volsky had led the way, also perceiving the danger, and reflexively taking a line that would convince Karpov he knew nothing of events before this. The fact that was actually so made the Admiral's response seem quite authentic. Yet now he would have to act out his part in that play, become the man he was when the ship first arrived, the man he sent to oblivion when he appeared here after that last shift. He had to think quickly, and there would be no margin for error.

"I'm sorry sir. I have told you before, I am part of no conspiracy. I merely tried to identify those contacts to the best of my ability. Yes, it seemed impossible that they would be British ships. But how does that suddenly become a betrayal of our mission when I simply use my knowledge of the history to try and understand what is happening to us? I showed you the reference material. You could see for yourself those ships were a direct match for the video feed we received from the KA-226. If I have done wrong in coming forward with this assessment, then let the Admiral here discipline me. After all, he is our commanding officer."

He thought he did that very well, putting himself in the mindset of the days they had just lived, and hoping he could also convince Karpov that he knew nothing of what had happened, nothing of the long tale he had tried to relate to Admiral Volsky.

Karpov took a long breath. "What do you think, Tyrenkov?"

"Hard to say."

"I'm not convinced... Fedorov, tell me what day and year you think this

is. Clearly the condition of this harbor and the almost complete absence of the city must be quite shocking. Yes?”

“Certainly! It’s just as I was trying to tell you before, and trying to tell the Admiral here. The sun and moon data is wrong, and for me that was not something I could dismiss. So I suggested we investigate the facilities at Jan Mayen, but you heard the report on that. They are gone, and now the same thing seems to have happened here. Everything has changed, impossibly so, but if our eyes do not lie to us now, then this is not 2021. I believe we are in another year, and my sun and moon data suggests it is 1941. How that happened escapes me, and this is what we hoped to learn in coming home again.”

“But all we get here are more questions,” said Volsky, quickly reinforcing Fedorov’s performance. “And the least of those is how I suddenly find you here, out of uniform, apparently injured. What happened to you, Captain? How did you come by this message from Moscow?”

Karpov thought. If these men were as they seemed, oblivious of all that had happened, they would react exactly this way to see him here. Then it is true, he thought. I was on that ship when it appeared here—but as the man I was before all this started! And that man also survived the paradox. We both survived! There are two of us!

He wanted, more than ever now, to conclude this business and get aboard that ship. But he might need this man, Volsky, for he had seen all too well how the men would follow him, and how that unflagging loyalty would be his undoing. If Volsky was harmed, the crew could simply refuse to follow his lead, just as they did off Oki island in that last desperate engagement. He had to find a way to prevent that, and to win the crew over to his side, just as they voted to stay with him once before, until these two men came hounding his shadow, and ruined everything he had planned.

So Karpov decided to take the cards Volsky and Fedorov were playing here at face value, and play in kind.

“Admiral, you came here for answers, and I’m afraid that it may not be easy for you to hear them. I was summoned shortly after you left. The message was delayed, but when I arrived, I was handed that envelope and told to give it to you. As for this,” he gestured to the gauze on his face. “A little fall in the rush to get over here. It’s just a scratch. I think you had better read that now.”

Volsky gave him an puzzled look, and his reaction was so sincere that Karpov was slowly coming to believe his assessment was correct. These men knew nothing, he thought, and in many ways that would make them so much easier to manage now.

“Seeing this harbor was... quite a shock,” said Karpov. “I finally realize that Fedorov’s story must be true, no matter how fantastic it may sound. Apparently we are not the only ones who have come to this realization, and that message will prove it.”

“Yes,” said Volsky, a look of real confusion on his face. “The world has gone crazy, and me along with it!”

It was very convincing, and Karpov looked at Tyrenkov, looking for the signal they had arranged to indicate he perceived duplicity here. Yet Tyrenkov remained calm and silent, and so now it was time for the closing act in this little drama.

“Admiral, you are understandably confused and shocked by what you have now discovered—that your Navigator here was correct, and this is not the port you sailed from for those live fire exercises. I looked at that message, and found it quite surprising, but I could reach only one conclusion. Suffice it to say that Moscow—the government here in this time, is aware of our predicament, and they have apparently come to a decision. It is right there in that envelope you were asking for. Why don’t you open it?”

Volsky looked at the envelope, frowning. “Very well,” he said. “Let me see if this will help make any sense of this nightmare.” He slowly opened the envelope, and as he did so Karpov thought he might smooth the way.

“Your guess was correct, Admiral. That accident with Orel somehow caused the ship to move in time. It’s the only explanation. We are lost in time. It is 1941, just like Fedorov claimed. Only this world is more than a little different than the one in Fedorov’s history books. I learned that on the way over as I was briefed. I cannot tell you why just yet, but one thing I learned is that Josef Stalin died in 1908. He no longer rules the Soviet Union.”

Volsky’s thumb working under the flap of the envelope stopped in another well played moment of surprise. Fedorov had told him this, but he knew he had to pretend he was hearing it now for the very first time. “Stalin died in 1908? What are you talking about?”

“Yes, quite shocking, but it happened, at least in this world, and in his place another man you will be familiar with in our history took control of the

Bolshevik movement, Sergei Kirov, the man our ship is named for.”

“You were told this on the way over here from the ship? Admiral Golovko said nothing of this to me.”

“His mind was elsewhere,” said Karpov quickly. “But this is true, Admiral—all true. We are here in 1941, and Sergei Kirov is presently the General Secretary of the Soviet State. As I said, Moscow knows we are here, which is why they formatted that recall order to bring us home. Sergei Kirov sends you that message, and a formal request. Why don’t you have a look at it now.”

Fedorov’s heart quickened as Volsky slowly opened the envelope. Of course, he knew who this man really was, but could not let on that he was aware of the Siberian Karpov’s existence. The Admiral was making a masterful play here, and he had to follow suit. It was now clear to him why Karpov was chosen as the messenger, for he must have struck some accord with Sergei Kirov concerning the ship. He realized how desperate the situation was now, and how the General Secretary would be reaching for any support he could find in the face of the terrible onslaught of the German army. The support and alliance of the Free Siberian State was essential. Without it the Soviet State could simply not survive. Siberia provided resources, endless terrain to fall back upon, a place to relocate industry and factories, and tough, hardened manpower.

Karpov must have offered all that to Kirov, and to get one thing—the ship that bore his name. Now he was pretending he was the Captain they had argued with just hours ago on the ship, perhaps as a way of facilitating what he now feared was happening here. He knew what was coming in that message from Moscow, and yet the sadness of the moment, and a feeling they had been betrayed by the General Secretary, lay heavily upon him.

Volsky read the message quietly. “I see...” he said at last. “I am being asked to relinquish command of my ship to you, Captain. Do you realize how preposterous that sounds? First I’m asked to believe my entire ship has slipped in time to the year 1941. Now I’m supposed to believe that Sergei Kirov is in charge, knew about all this, and for some reason, he’s decided to relieve me of command. Preposterous! How can I comply with such a request?”

“How can you comply?” Karpov knew Volsky would not go easily, and so he applied a little more pressure now. “Well let me explain that to you, one

preposterous thing after another. The world around you is exactly as it seems, a backward, struggling nation beset with war from a bygone era. Russia is struggling for its very existence now, and Moscow needs all the support it can get.”

“You mean they want this ship—for the war?”

“What else? They have no Northern Fleet to speak of here. Fedorov could tell you that. But with Kirov, all that changes. Now they have real power here, and they want someone willing to use it on their behalf. I’m sorry sir, but I told them you would refuse. Was I wrong in that? Perhaps, but you know it is true. They asked me if I would fight for Mother Russia here, and I said yes. That’s the whole of it, and now that message relieves you of command. I am now the lawful commander of that battlecruiser. In fact, I always was. You were merely an interloper when you came aboard for those live fire exercises, and believe me, it was never pleasant to stand in your shadow. But none of that matters now. You will comply and relinquish command to me, and I hope you will do so willingly, for the good of the nation you are sworn to serve. Or do you wear that uniform for self-aggrandizement?”

“Relinquish command? Don’t be a fool! Moscow knew we were here? That’s ridiculous! How would they know such a thing? Relinquish command? To these men of this time? They would not have the slightest knowledge of how that ship operates. There is technology there that will not be developed for decades. You do not hand an infant a revolver and expect him to know what it is capable of doing.”

“They will not command the ship, Admiral,” said Karpov coldly. “I will. I know only too well how to use such a weapon.”

“You say Moscow was aware of our predicament? Then they had to learn of our presence here somehow, yes?” The Admiral looked at Fedorov now. “How would that be possible?” Now a look of sudden realization glimmered in the Admiral’s eyes. “Your history books, Fedorov! That’s how they learned what happened to us! Now I see what is really going on here. Fedorov?”

Volsky had started up this stairway, and now he wanted Fedorov to come along. He quickly surmised the Admiral’s ploy, and moved to reinforce him.

“That must be it, Admiral. The moment we arrived here, in the past, we became part of this history. Yes. That’s how they knew about us. What if they

found out how we shifted here, sir. Clearly none of this could have been arranged before we left Severomorsk for those live fire exercises. They could not know what happened to us until after the accident occurred.”

Karpov saw an opening here, and he also followed suit, knowing he had a trump card in that envelope. “Yes,” he said. “They knew. You were history the moment you arrived here, and they found a way to get a message through—to this time.” That was a lie, of course, but it served Karpov’s purpose perfectly. He knew there was one last stumbling block they had to get over—the recall order. He had formatted that message himself, knowing the authentication code as Fedorov had suspected, but how to explain this away to convince the Admiral?

“I’m sorry, Admiral, but they managed to get a message through, and that explains the recall order. This is what I was told.”

“You mean to secure the ship?” said Volsky. “To try and get us home? Is that what this is all about?”

“Correct, but Moscow presently has business for your ship. At the moment, the Soviet State needs it’s services. You should know why, Fedorov. You know the history. And we all know that Russia’s future is bleak. Knowing we are here, they want to try and change that. Apparently Suchkov, or someone else there, has no faith that you could accomplish that, Admiral. So they have chosen me. Sergei Kirov has agreed, and that order is final.”

“He has no authority over me!”

Karpov smiled. “I should not have to argue that the present government is one and the same with the nation you served in 2021—a different form of government, perhaps, but still the law of the land here. That letter is the will of the Soviet State, for yes, your coming was long anticipated. You have it exactly right, Fedorov.” He smiled looking Fedorov’s way.

“You are here, are you not?” Karpov continued. “And the ship is here with you, sitting right out there in Kola Bay for Admiral Golovko to gawk at, let alone anyone else with eyes to see. So your presence here has indeed become part of the history of this time. Then do not be surprised to learn that other men in 2021 might have known this was going to happen. I will leave it at that for you to ponder, and you may read that letter again, for here you are, and here you will stay. We may never reach our own time again. In that instance, the authority of the nation is now vested in the hands of Sergei Kirov, and you will see there his true signature. So either you will comply

with that order willingly, for the good of the nation, or I will have to take other measures to secure your cooperation, and they may not be so warm and pleasant as I have been in this little conversation.”

Chapter 20

“Just a moment,” said Volsky. “You think you can just walk in here, wave an envelope before my nose, and sail off with the flagship of the Northern Fleet? I wish to see the General Secretary!” Volsky knew all along that this was their only chance. Fedorov had told him they had met Sergei Kirov here, and that meeting was very harmonious. He was the only real authority now, and the only man they could appeal to. Could he hold the ship long enough for that appeal?

Karpov smiled. “Well at least you’ve finally accepted the reality of where you are now. So you must also accept your fate here, Admiral. I’m afraid the General Secretary is somewhat preoccupied at the moment. You see, the Germans have overrun most of the Ukraine, and in the north they are hammering at Smolensk! I suppose you could get him on the radio, though it would only be a voice on the other end, no more evidence than the document before you. I assure you, that signature is authentic. So now you get to make your final decision as Commander of the Northern Fleet. Will you relinquish command voluntarily, or make this difficult? The outcome will be the same either way, though I hope nobody gets killed if we have to force the issue.”

Volsky gave Fedorov an exasperated look. What could he do here? They couldn’t bolt for the door and make a run for the launch through the muddy streets. The presence of those security men told him they would not get thirty feet. No. He had to take another angle.

“So much for the nice warm welcome we received as we landed,” he said, inwardly angry at himself now for not taking more precautions. Yet who could have foreseen that a dead ringer for his own Captain would stride in here with such a demand?

“The men on that ship know me well,” he said. “I would dare say they love me, and I would hate to think what they might do should they learn I have come to harm, and at the hands of my own countrymen. That loyalty was well earned.”

“Yes, I will grant you that you have the affection and loyalty of the men, but let’s face it, Admiral, your time has passed. You can’t measure what is

happening here now, not even with all the history books Fedorov can pile on your desk. Events are running on. Japan will be entering the war in due course, and you have no idea what has been going on in the far east—largely because of your own foolish meddling.” That was a slip, but Karpov decided it would be one last test of the Admiral.

“My meddling? I left this port not but five days ago! Everything that has happened to us was an accident! What are you talking about?”

“Never mind,” said Karpov, for Volsky’s response seemed convincing. “I realize this must seem very hard. Yes, the world has gone crazy.” He gestured to the world beyond, the town that was barely there, once a small settlement called Vayenga, now a slowly growing naval base and airfield, but not the bustling modern city it was in 2021.

“This is a nightmare,” said Volsky. “I simply must be dreaming, and hopefully I will wake up on the couch in my office here and sigh with relief.”

“No Admiral, I’m afraid this is all too real. Very well, enough of this. I have full authorization from the existing government of our nation to proceed here, and a substantial security force is present and now assigned to my command to enforce that order, should it be necessary. I would hope to avoid that, and you can see that this happens smoothly. If it is any comfort to you, I will assure you the men will be respected and treated well. Yes, I know you worry about them. But now I must see to my new command.”

Karpov turned to Tyrenkov, who had been watching silently, looking for any clue or sign that these men were other than they seemed—unknowing flies caught in Karpov’s well spun web. He gestured, taking his Intelligence Chief aside for a private moment out of earshot of the others.

“Notice anything?”

“No sir, they seem harmless enough. You clearly surprised them appearing here, but they seem to have accepted that you just came over from the ship. You were clever to play along.”

“Yes, I was. Then we will proceed. What about the launch?”

“There are three Marines there, and we have 120 men. I foresee no difficulties.”

“Three Marines? That will be Sergeant Troyak... Be cautious, this is a most capable man. In fact, I will need him when we sail.”

“What do we do with these two, sir?”

Karpov considered. “Volsky is useless. Let him sit here and stir the

borscht with Admiral Golovko.”

“But what if he does make an appeal to Sergei Kirov?”

“ We have men here, yes?”

“Of course, sir.”

“Good. Then they can see that he stays out of mischief. Besides, once I get aboard the ship, Volsky can moan and groan all he wishes. The ship will be mine, and that will be that. As for Fedorov... He is quite clever, and he has a head full of very useful information, not to mention the fact that he knows his job at navigation very well. I will take him with me on the ship, where I can keep a close eye on him. What I want to do now is see to this little revelation concerning their Captain.”

“You believe he is... another version of your own self?”

“Well, there is clearly another version of Volsky sitting there. He knows nothing of what has happened earlier. Fedorov seems clueless as well. I’m convinced of that. And the prospect of meeting myself sounds particularly interesting—but I will not do this on the ship. Send a boat over and make a request that the Captain join us ashore. I have plans for him.”

Indeed, thought Tyrenkov, Karpov had plans within plans... and now there would be two of them! He nodded, and rendered a salute, starting for the door. Karpov walked back to the tea table where Volsky was slumped dejectedly in his chair.

“Don’t look so glum, Admiral. See the opportunity before you. Now that you are relieved, I think it best that you remain here with Admiral Golovko. After all, the two of you are both experienced fleet commanders, and he will have his hands full in the months ahead. In fact, the Germans are about to make their bid to take this place, are they not, Fedorov? As for you, I will need you at your post on the ship.”

Fedorov said nothing, realizing that silence was his only friend here. There was no way he could prevent what was happening, but a sudden thought occurred to him, and he hoped he could find a few minutes alone with Admiral Volsky before these events ran their course. Thankfully, Karpov was very eager to claim his prize.

“Admiral,” he said. “I will soon board the ship to take formal command. Should we have any difficulty, I will contact you by radio, and I will expect you would have the good sense to save lives and facilitate the transition. The last thing we need now is bloodshed between brothers.”

“You are certainly not my brother, Karpov. How can you do this?”

“Orders are orders, Admiral. It is that simple. And I suppose you are correct. You and I are men of a different stripe. That is why I was chosen to lead now. Well then... I hope the tea is still warm. Enjoy the lemon cakes, and don’t get any silly ideas about leaving. I have twenty men outside, and a hundred more surrounding the pier.” Karpov said nothing more, and strode off in Tyrenkov’s wake.

When they had gone, Fedorov finally spoke. “I’m sorry sir, this is truly shocking. We should have taken precautions, or at least come with our service jackets. They had communications inlays. These dress uniforms look nice and official, but they are not very functional.”

“God help us now, Fedorov. Who was that man? Was it Karpov from the ship as I was pretending, or was that the man from Siberia you told me about?”

“I don’t think he was the man you left on Kirov. He looks like Karpov, but also different—that wound was suspicious, and more. His eyes...”

“Yes, the resemblance was amazing, but those eyes...” Volsky shook his head with a shudder. “How can I allow this ship to be taken like this? The weaponry and technology aboard are unheard of in this time.”

“Yes sir, we discussed all this the first time around, and you came to the hard decision that we should destroy the ship rather than allow it to be taken. Yet, from my experience, our presence here will make its mark, no matter who commands Kirov. Yes, Karpov is dangerous, but there is blood on the hands of every man who has Captained that ship, including me.”

“That may be so, but this man disturbs me. He would rattle off a list of the ship’s weaponry like they were old friends.”

“We have all made their acquaintance sir. On our last engagement it was your avowed aim to destroy the entire German battle fleet! Yes, we started with caution, but way leads on to way, and soon the missiles fly. As to who I think this man is, it is too complicated for me to explain how, but I think that was the Siberian Karpov. He may have survived! And now we must look to our own survival. This situation is very dangerous. You were quite correct to pose as if you had no knowledge of anything I told you. You must hold to that, though there may be a few awkward moments. You must be very cautious. Look... I have a plan.”

“A plan?”

“Here sir, take this.” Fedorov reached into his pocket and pulled out the key he had found on Kamenski’s nightstand, pressing it into the Admiral’s hand.

“What is this?”

“I cannot explain, sir, but it is very important. Now listen carefully. It is very likely that the British will have two submarines operating up here, the Trident and Tigris. If not those exact boats, then there will be some other, and you must find a way to get to one. You must use it to get back to the Royal Navy, and Admiral Tovey. Give him that key. Understand? This is essential. You must not lose it, by any means. Keep it on your person at all times, and you must get it safely to Tovey. Do you think you can do this, sir?”

Volsky nodded, though he was still very perplexed.

“Good sir. That is your mission, given to you by a once Captain and now Senior Lieutenant!” He smiled. “As for me, it was a stroke of luck that Karpov wishes to take me aboard the ship. I must continue to pose as you did, appearing to know nothing of the events that brought that man before us. Yes sir, believe it or not, that was the Captain, not some look alike sent here from our own time to check in on us. One day I will try to explain. For my part, I will see to the safety of the ship and crew, you can trust me on that.”

Volsky smiled, seeing the fervor and sincerity in Fedorov’s eyes, and realizing this young man had fought many battles before this. Yet now the odds were doubled down.

“Fedorov... If this man goes aboard, will there be two Karpovs on the ship? My God, I simply cannot believe this is happening. How will the crew take to such a thing?”

“I’ll have to see what Karpov has planned... both of them I suppose. Trust me, sir. I’ll be alright. I can help explain things to the crew if this happens—make them understand.”

The Admiral took heart, staring at the object Fedorov had pressed into his hand.

“Keep it safe, sir.”

“Rely on me, Mister Fedorov. This particular jacket has a nifty secret pocket that will do nicely.” He gave Fedorov a wink, wondering what this was all about, but determined to do his part, already thinking how he would make contact with the British submarines here. Knowing or not, he was still Admiral Volsky, a most experienced and resourceful man.

And knowing or not, the Admiral was now a Keyholder.

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Karpov's plan was unfolding nicely. Thus far he had managed to get within a hair's breadth of his objective, and as he stood near a small unfinished building at the edge of the harbor, he thought how this area would one day be the wide berthing quay for the Ivan Rogov Amphibious ships of the 121st Brigade, yet now the land was bare and empty. He wondered if it would ever be the same, Severomorsk, the home of so many fighting ships over the decades. But now his mind was fixed on only one, as he looked at the shadowy form of Kirov out in Kola Bay. There it was, the most powerful ship in the world, its tall battlements rising like a fortress through the low hanging mist, where he could dimly see the Fregat radar system spinning in its endless round.

He was here with Tunguska, and also the Narva and Riga had come north, as Sergei Kirov had agreed to turn those airships over to Karpov to augment his fleet. They were all close by, hovering low over a large inland lake just three miles to the southeast of the place where he stood, protected from the searching rays of the Fregat by a high green hill.

Soon I will once again be back in my rightful post as Captain of that ship, and I suppose I had best make myself an Admiral now. We will head east, taking the northern route through the Arctic Sea before it closes, and I will be just where I need to be when the Japanese get restless in a few months time. The three airships will be a nice escort along the way, and I have a few other irons in the fire when we get out east.

I paid a high price for this ship, turning the divisions I built and hardened into fighting men over to Kirov and Konev. One day I will return to the land to rightfully claim those legions as my own again, but in truth, I have always been a navy man. As for the airship fleet, I have plans for that as well. There will be Oko panel radar sets that I can take from stores on Kirov and mount on my ships to replace those old Topaz radars I rigged out. I will have situational awareness in the air that will be most useful. And for that matter, we have hand held missiles aboard that would augment my airship defenses considerably.

This thought excited him. I can train and place a missile team on the upper gun platform mounted on the brow of my ships. Can you imagine the look on Volkov's face when he sees the missiles launch, nice little needles, the a hand held SAMs used by the Marines? They also have anti tank missiles! Even an RPG-30 could blow one of Volkov's airships to hell. They can range out only about 200 meters, but it would make a nasty surprise in a close quarters gun duel. And I think Troyak has a few other little goodies in his larders, Kornet ATGMs that can range out 5000 meters with a HEAT round. The EM variant uses laser targeting and even has a wonderful thermobaric warhead that can get out 10,000 meters. Talk about a bag buster! I could blow one of Volkov's ships out of the sky before he even set eyes on me...

But no, not me. My days as Admiral of the zeppelin fleet are now over, but I have a perfect candidate in mind for that post. As to Troyak, he could still be a problem. I'll need to get to him early and win over his support. With him on my side, and Orlov, the crew will fall into line easily enough, and I'll have my own security contingent aboard this time, and Grilikov. He smiled.

He looked at his watch, a heady sense of anticipation filling his mind. By now Tyrenkov would have visited Troyak with that request to take the launch back to the ship and fetch the Captain. If all goes well, I will soon be the first man in the history of this earth to meet my very own self! I can only imagine what that will be like, for both of us. It is still unbelievable to think that he is out there at this very moment, the Devil's Adjutant, waiting to take his place at my side. The shock will be much greater for him. I have this foreknowledge of his existence, while my sudden appearance will be a complete shock to him. For me, the notion of movement in time is now old hat, while he is probably out there struggling to understand what could have possibly happened to the ship, and to Severomorsk.

Yes, this will be a most difficult homecoming for the Captain, but I dare say I know him quite well, and he will soon move in his mind from the incredulity of his situation to the opportunities it now presents. He smiled inwardly at that, remembering how he had felt when he first realized the impossible truth.

It was like the floor falling away beneath my feet for a time, he thought, but then I quickly adapted. Then came all the hemming and hawing with Volsky and Fedorov over what to do next. That was obvious to me, but I'll admit, I was a bit rash, and more than headstrong in the beginning. If I had it

to do over, I might do things differently—and I do have that second chance, right now!

At this moment, Britain was Russia's ally, and that alliance will be necessary if we are to survive this war. So I can't take my hard line against Great Britain and America, not yet. We'll need them both if we are ever to defeat the Axis powers—and now we will defeat them, Volkov be damned. He'll be the very first on my list, unless the Japanese start things early.

He took a long breath, seeing it all in his mind now, and knowing exactly what he was going to do. But first things first. Time to meet the man who made me possible, my younger twin brother of sorts. Time to meet the Devil's Adjutant.

Chapter 21

Troyak and Zykov were still amazed at the state of things here, unable to believe their eyes when they finally docked. Everything around them was obviously different. The shape of the hills, the land forms were all familiar, but where was the fleet? They were docked right where the main pier should be, and it was nothing like they had left it just days ago. None of them had been privy to any of the evidence bandied about by the senior officers. Seeing the Tuman had been enough of a surprise, and they were still trying to figure out what was going on with that ship. Now this! What had happened here? The Admiral had cautioned them that they might be in for another surprise.

“My God,” said Zykov when Volsky and Fedorov left for the meeting. “What has happened to this place?”

Troyak had a look on his gruff face that belied concern, but he could make no sense of things either. “Everything must be out to sea,” he suggested.

“Yes? You mean like that old rust bucket we saw chugging by on the way in? Well did they take the whole goddamned city with them? The Admiral says to bear with the situation, but who could expect to see this?”

“I wonder if they can see it from the ship?” said Gretchko.

“Only if they have your cat’s eyes,” said Zykov. “That fog has spared them all this little surprise. What do you think has happened, Sergeant? Something is clearly amiss, and there’s some kind of operation going on out west. Hear that?” He paused, listening, and they could hear the muffled sound of artillery in the distance, faint and far away, though unmistakable to them all.

“Is it war, Sergeant? Is that what the Admiral meant earlier? The men have been saying something killed Slava, and now I think they are right! Look at this place!”

Troyak looked around, taking a deep breath. “I don’t know,” he said, his hand just a little tighter on the automatic weapon he carried.

“Stand easy, the Admiral tells us. Fedorov will explain everything to us later. Well, that I would like to hear.” Zykov shook his head, clearly shocked

by the scene around them. “I wonder if he finally botched his navigation charts and this is the wrong inlet? Maybe he took us into Port Vladimir by mistake?”

They all knew it wasn't Port Vladimir, a tiny outpost up near the entrance to Ura Bay, the next inlet to the west. No, it wasn't Port Vladimir, nor was it Guba Ara, the still bay further west. But it wasn't Severomorsk either, at least not the place they all knew so well, and nobody wanted to say anything more. They just sat there listening to the sound of a distant battle to the west, and not knowing they were hearing the far off tide of World War Two slowly rising, even here in this isolated northern outpost at the top of the earth.

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Tyrenkov went down to the launch, walking slowly but deliberately along the quay, and alone. As he came up on the boat he noted how different it appeared compared to any other small boat that might be tied up here in the harbor. The sight of the massive battlecruiser riding out in the bay soon commanded his attention. So this is the apple in Karpov's eye, he thought, the mighty Kirov. This was the ship that met and defeated all comers, a ship capable of standing against entire fleets of this day. Karpov's interest in it is obvious, but finding that the Captain was his own self was certainly shocking. How could that be?

Karpov lectured me time and again on how he could not reach certain moments in time were he to use the stairway at Ilanskiy. It would be impossible for him to go to any time or place where he already existed, or so he argued. Apparently he was wrong, for if this Captain is indeed his own self, things here are about to get very interesting, and very perilous. One such man in the world is enough, but two? I shall have to see this man first, and make my own assessment.

“Sergeant?” he called, seeing the dour faced Troyak waiting on the back of the boat, and noting the dangerous looking rifle he was holding, discretely lowered, but still a threatening presence.

“What is it?” Troyak was looking the man over, noting his long, dark trench coat and military cap, of a style and cut that he was not familiar with.

“Admiral Volsky is still in his meeting, yet I have been sent to request the

presence of your Captain immediately. Can you bring him ashore?"

"Very well, we will cast off and should return in twenty minutes."

"Thank you, Sergeant. I will wait for you here, and then escort the Captain to the meeting place."

Troyak nodded to Zykov, who was listening from the cabin, and Gretchko untied the line as he started the engine. Tyrenkov watched the boat turn about, hoping there would be no difficulties here. He was not disappointed, for it was not long before he heard the sound of the motor again, returning through the low lying mist.

There he was, thought Tyrenkov, watching closely to see a fourth man in the launch. How very strange.... In form and build the man looked very similar, and as the boat docked, he caught a glimpse of his face, a little younger looking, not so grim in aspect, and unscarred. Yet there was no denying the uncanny resemblance. He could be an identical twin, he thought, how extraordinary! He shook off his amazement, and extended a hand as the man climbed from the launch.

"Captain?" he said, more a question than a greeting.

"Vladimir Karpov," the man said in response, and he noted that even his voice was identical in tone and timbre.

"Yes sir, I am Tyrenkov, special adjutant for the discussions now underway. If you will kindly accompany me, I will take you to the meeting."

"Looks like we don't get dinner after all," said Zykov with a grin, thinking that might be their only consolation here.

"Dinner?" Tyrenkov looked over his shoulder. "Oh yes, they will be serving food shortly. I will come and show you the way when the meeting is concluded. You are, of course, all invited."

That seemed to brighten Zykov's expression, and the two men started down the long, muddy street, illuminated by a single lamppost.

As they walked, Tyrenkov noted how the Captain seemed to gawk at the landscape about them, clearly surprised. "Has there been fighting here?" he asked, aghast at the condition of the harbor. "Were we hit?"

"Fighting?" said Tyrenkov. "That's all out west, but the Germans are pushing hard now. How much do you know, Captain, about what has happened to you and your ship? Have you been briefed at all?"

"Briefed? Who could listen to such an explanation and not think himself insane."

“Understandable.”

“And yet,” said Karpov, “seeing this gives me pause... You will also tell me what the Admiral asserted? This is 1941?”

“I’m afraid so, quietly slipping toward the third of August.”

“Yes, and watched by a moon that should not be in the sky, at least according to our Navigator. That I might have dismissed as an oversight, or misreading of the data, but not this...” He looked around, clearly disheartened.

“Captain... I’m afraid there will be one more surprise this evening. There is someone here who wishes to speak with you in private.” They now came up to the unfinished building that Karpov had been waiting in, and Tyrenkov knocked firmly on the door.

“Come...”

“I have another matter to attend to,” said Tyrenkov. “This hour is yours.”

Karpov did not know what to make of that, but he stepped up to the door, and opened it. The room was wreathed in shadow, and he edged inside, wondering what this was all about, his instincts prickling up, and speaking of danger here.

Across the long unfinished room, the moonlight shone through the beams of an open ceiling, and some of the low fog and mist had found their way inside, seeming like cold grey smoke in the room. At the far end, he could see a shadowy figure, walking slowly towards him with measured steps.

The Siberian walked toward his visitor, his heart beating faster as he took each of those steps, each footfall echoed by three or four beats. Then he stopped, as though he had struck something, and seemed to shudder. The pain!

Instinctively, he stepped back, and the awful sensation abated. He looked, seeing the man across the room in a leather service jacket, and sheep’s wool cap, the garb he always wore when on his shift. My coat and cap, he thought, for there I am. The man took another two steps forward, and again the pain began, something deep within him, as though the very molecules of his being were shaken by a withering vibration.

“Stop there!” he said, “Take a step back please...”

The Captain heard that voice, and was shot through with surprise. It sounded like his own voice, though strangely different, like hearing yourself

on a recording and thinking your voice sounded odd.

"You are the ship's Captain?" said the figure across the room, still wreathed in mist and shadow.

"Captain of the First Rank, Vladimir Karpov."

The Siberian smiled, seeing how his visitor had pointed that little detail out, even as he might. "Well Captain, I am your long lost brother."

Karpov was silent for a moment. "I don't understand. I have no brothers."

"Of course you don't. You are an only child, and your parents were more than glad to see you off to the university. And you have seldom been home since. Well, how do you like this homecoming? Hardly a place we can call home anymore, is it?"

The Captain wondered how this man could know that.... "Sir, may I ask who you are? And where is Admiral Volsky?"

"Never mind him. You and I have business to discuss."

The man eased himself forward, feeling the pain begin yet again, and then he edged sideward's instead, intending to move into the moonlight streaming through the open beam ceiling. As he did so, he heard the sharp intake of breath from the other man, but he said nothing, giving him the moment, letting him gape at him.

"Good lord... How is this... Who are you?"

"I am Vladimir Karpov, Captain of the First Rank, or at least I once was. Now some men call me Admiral, and soon they will call me Mister Secretary, General Secretary of the Free Siberian State. We bear a striking resemblance, do we not? Except for this little scar on my cheek. I was careless once, but no longer."

"Amazing," said Karpov. "Resemblance? You can call me insane, but I might go so far as to say we were identical twins!"

"That we are."

"But that isn't possible," said Karpov.

"No, it shouldn't be, or so I thought. But here we are. Don't come any closer, please. It is a bit of a shock for us both, and you will be even more surprised to learn what I must tell you now.... Yes, you are Vladimir Karpov, and that is my name as well, not because of any coincidence, but due to something far stranger. I know you had a very rough time on the ship trying to discern what has happened to you after Orel blew up. So did I."

“What do you mean?”

“I mean I found it very difficult when that annoying little Navigator of ours started quoting me chapters from his history books.”

“Fedorov? Yes, he can be quite the pest. You know the man? You know of what happened with Orel?”

“Of course I do.”

“But how? We had no communication with Severomorsk, and now I see why. The place is gone, just as I suspected! Then we finally received that coded message.”

“Yes. I sent that. Rather clever of me, wasn’t it?”

“You sent it?” Karpov was still shaken by the uncanny resemblance of this man, and the sound of his voice, yet he was not certain who he was.

“Yes, I sent it.”

“Not possible. It used an authentication code that I only just learned when the message was received, and we opened the ship’s safe.”

“Yes? Well I opened the ship’s safe a good long while ago, and so the word, Nikolai, was well known to me.”

“What do you mean? You were aboard the ship before we left? I would certainly have known that.”

“Yes, I was aboard, and you did know about it.... How to say this without triggering that reflexive dismissal you will likely give. I was you, Karpov. In fact I am you. We are one and the same, and if you listen carefully, I will explain that statement. You have seen how clearly different this place is—Severomorsk. As annoying as he can be, our Mister Fedorov was correct. We are no longer in our own time. That accident aboard Orel had a good deal to do with it, but there was more. What happened was this—the ship moved, Captain, not much in space, but in time. So all the things Fedorov told you are true, and this is, indeed, the year 1941. Hear that? It’s the goddamned German army on the Litsa River line, trying to get through. But we’ll stop them. This place is so desolate now because everyone has moved out west to fight the Germans, and also because I made arrangements to see the harbor was clear for our little visit.”

Karpov was shaking his head. “This doesn’t make any sense!”

“No, it doesn’t, but it is true. Now, as to who I really am... the ship must have slipped through some hole in time, and then here it was, in the middle of WWII. It did this and it did that, and then it slipped again. I’ll make a very

long story short. Eventually that ship out there found its way to the year 1940, a little over a year ago, and it has been here ever since, until it slipped again, vanishing last May.”

“This is crazy! You are speaking of this as if it has already happened.”

“Because it has. You lived through it all—or rather I did, and I found it very awkward to find myself entering 1941 with the thought of what might happen come July 28th, the day we first slipped, and found ourselves here—the day you would arrive here again. You see, in the course of these events I had a rather bad disagreement with Admiral Volsky. I was separated from the ship, but I made the best of my situation. The knowledge I had of the future gave me quite an edge, and I became a man of some importance in Siberia. Yes... there I was... there you were, and July 28th looked like a bad storm on the horizon. What would happen, I wondered? Would I survive, or would it be you? It never occurred to me that we might both survive that day, but that should be abundantly clear to us at this moment.”

The Captain took off his cap. Leaning forward and squinting at the man, but as he did so, he could also feel a sudden stab of pain. He stepped back, shaken, astounded, bewildered, and yet there he was. He was staring at his own self, as clear as the image he might see in any mirror, but it was a darker self, more weathered, and bore the scars of things this man was trying to describe, impossible things, the insanity of this moment high on that list. They would each feel the weight of what they now knew, even if they would never really quite understand it, or how it could happen.

But they could feel it. The Captain could feel the truth in what the other man was saying now, just as he could feel the pain if he edged too close to the man. It was true. There he was, Vladimir Karpov, Captain, Admiral, call him what you will. A rose was a rose, by any other name, and here was the black rose of his own being, its thorny stem bringing it to this dark bloom, over many months and years of pain and struggle.

“No closer...” said the Siberian, torn between his desire to see the Captain more clearly, and the pain it provoked. “You feel it too, don’t you. Yes, that terrible pain, as though the universe simply cannot abide the mistake it has made here. I would embrace you, brother, but let us be cautious here and not test God’s patience. We can come no closer, but accept now what I am telling you. We are one and the same. You are my brother, and I am yours, your own self, and it is now 1941. I will spare you the

journey I had to take to get where you see me standing now, but together we will rewrite that unfortunate history, and become something more than either of us could ever be on our own. So welcome home, Vladimir, I have so much to tell you. We have much to plan and do here together, and it will begin with that ship out there.”

He smiled, and it was as if the Captain could read the man’s inner thoughts. He looked at the scar on his face, and some deep inner memory returned to him, upwelling from a darkness within him that seemed unfathomable. He saw himself on the weather deck off the bridge, a pistol in his hand, and the sea all around him erupting with flame and fire, a roiling sea battle underway, and then the memory vanished.

Yes, welcome home, my brother, thought the Siberian, and perhaps my nemesis as well, from the pain I feel in being this close to you. Yet he forced himself to smile through that pain, and saw the Captain smiling as well.

“Understand?” said the Siberian.

And the Captain understood.

Part VIII

The Second Chance

“Then Jonah prayed to the Lord his God from the belly of the fish, saying, ‘I called out to the Lord, out of my distress, and he answered me; out of the belly of Sheol I cried, and you heard my voice. For you cast me into the deep, into the heart of the seas, and the flood surrounded me; all your waves and your billows passed over me. Then I said, ‘I am driven away from your sight; yet I shall again look upon your holy temple.’ The waters closed in over me to take my life; the deep surrounded me; weeds were wrapped about my head ...”

— Jonah, 2:1-10

Chapter 22

The carefully laid trap had closed. The Siberian now had Volsky, and Fedorov under his thumb, and far easier than he thought things might have gone. Now this unexpected dividend, a duplicate self! He could not begin to fathom the arcane mysteries of time that had led to this, though he still felt that it was his own importance that made him irreplaceable in this milieu, so much so, that time was forced to double down on the wager he had made as he approached the fearsome possibilities inherent in Paradox Hour.

Yet he had survived, they had both survived, and now it was time to embrace his brother self, and weave him into the tapestry of plans he had been creating these last months. The object of his desire was now tantalizingly close. He had only to attend to a few details before he stood once again on the bridge of Kirov.

“Brother,” he said, the moonlight gleaming in his dark eyes. “Now we must plan. I came here for the ship, but finding you was more than any man could have hoped for, the greatest shock and surprise of any lifetime. Now we must decide how we move forward.

“You came for the ship? My ship?” said the Captain.

“Our ship,” the Siberian said quickly. “Yes, we are its rightful Captain, and you will be pleased to know that we will no longer have to stand in Volsky’s shadow. The time is August of 1941, this you must know and believe, but things have changed. Our nation was torn apart by a long simmering civil war that never ended in this version of the history, because Stalin died as a young man, and now Sergei Kirov rules in his place.”

“Kirov? But he was assassinated.”

“Yes, by Stalin. Well, apparently he got to Stalin first.”

“You are certain of this?”

“Of course, I was with him in Moscow only yesterday, arranging this little welcome for Volsky. As this ship serves the interests of our nation, in any time, Sergei Kirov has given me full authority to take it under my command, and soon I will board to take my place on the bridge. The problem is, I cannot have you there with me, as much as I might wish to do so.”

“What? You came here to take the ship, and now you think to leave me stranded here along with Volsky?”

“No, brother. Hear me out. Can you imagine the reaction of the crew now should the two of us stride aboard? Consider that for a moment. You have been battling this situation around with Volsky and Fedorov for days now, looking at videos, investigating that desolate island to look for the weather station, yet the crew is completely clueless. You have seen Severomorsk first hand here, and had the shock of encountering your own doppelganger, a refugee in time, come home at last. All of this must have been very trying, but by now it has removed any doubt of what has happened to the ship, and where we truly are. But the crew? They are not ready. Right now it is only whispers and rumors, but few have really seen anything. Yes, they know something very strange is going on, but cannot grasp the real truth yet. They must be weaned from their old lives, and brought slowly into the realization of what has happened.”

“Of course,” said the Captain.

“Then you also understand that to see us both now, side by side on the ship, would be too much of a shock at the beginning, just as it is also a physical shock to us both when we draw near one another. Most inconvenient, but I suppose Mother Time has her rules. We must be a terrible affront to her dignity, and the pain we feel when near one another is the result. So here is what I propose... But first let me tell you what I have been doing these last few years, and how I came to be here.”

He told the story, summing up the early sorties in time, but omitting the tale of his failed attempts to take the ship earlier. He merely stated that in the course of these events he became separated from the ship, and had to fare for himself. Explaining the presence of Ivan Volkov was going to be difficult, so he merely painted him as another figure rising from the skewed history to fill the vacuum Stalin’s death created. He said nothing of Ilanskiy, or who Volkov really was, inwardly making the excuse that it was all too complex to get into now, though he knew he was lying to his own self, and in more ways than one.

“So I took over the Air Corps in Siberia, and command of the western front opposite Orenburg and Volkov’s forces. He is our mortal enemy, brother, and I have already fought many battles against that man, on land and in the sky. Our last engagement was costly, though the price he paid was

much higher. It was my intention to finish what we started, continue to build my airship fleet, and bring Volkov to his knees. Yes, his fleet greatly outnumbers us now, but with my skill in battle, I have held the balance, and kept Volkov in check. The General Secretary has now given me two more airships, and with weapons and radars from the lockers aboard Kirov, my fleet will now be stronger than ever!”

He shared his plan for transferring Oko panels and light hand held missiles to his airships, to make them invincible in battle with Volkov’s fleet. “You see?”

“That is why you came for the ship, to get this technology edge?”

“In part, but think, brother.... What happens come December in the far east?”

“Japan,” said the Captain.

“Correct. We faced them before, and they were our most determined and formidable foe. I cannot get into it all now, but the ship had already sustained damage and we were slowly running out of air defense missiles. The Japanese have six fleet carriers, and thousands of planes. And do you know what they also have? Vladivostok!”

“What? That never happened in the history.”

“It has this time. It was an unfortunate incident back in 1908, a disaster largely precipitated by Volsky’s meddling, and our young Navigator.”

“Fedorov? What could they have done to cause the loss of Vladivostok?”

“One day I will explain it all to you in detail, but we have little time now. The Japanese have Vladivostok, and more. They now control all of Sakhalin Island, portions of Kamchatka, all of Primorskiy Province, and even have troops within a hundred kilometers of Lake Baikal!”

“My God,” said the Captain.

“Yes,” the Siberian said quickly. “That all happened well before the war, but now Japan is about to become a belligerent in this conflict, and who knows what else they have their eyes on. We’ve lost our only port in the far east, and I am going to redress that wrong, but to do so I need the ship. Now that I have discovered you exist, I desperately need you as well.”

“Then let us board together. The men will come around.”

“That they will, but what about my airship fleet? I need a firm hand and a skilled battle tactician to take my place as Admiral of the Siberian Air Corps.”

“And you want me to do this? I know nothing of airships, or how they fight.”

“Nor did I a short while ago, but I discovered that commanding an airship was very much like being a Captain of a ship at sea, only you move in three dimensions instead of only two. I took to it like a duck to water, as you will.”

“Then why not continue on in that role, and I will take the ship east, if that is your plan. That seems the proper way to do this, as you have invested so much in securing your position in Siberia. Don’t you belong there?”

“True, but I think it best if I take Kirov at the outset. You see, I know everything that has happened. I can use the time as we sail east to slowly brief the men, and bring them to the fighting crew they were for me before. We arrived, fought in the Atlantic and the Mediterranean, and then sailed on to the Pacific in the most dangerous fighting ship on this earth. I have sunk American carriers and battleships, smashed the great Japanese flagship Yamato, and so much more. Now I plan to finish the job—or rather begin that task again. We will finish it together. I know what you can do, brother, and you must know it as well. We have taken on all comers, and beaten them all—even the American 7th Fleet in 2021.”

“What? You fought there too?”

“I will tell you how and why one day. But suffice it to say that I am well seasoned by all of these battles at sea. While you have great potential, you have yet to see your first real combat. On the other hand I am kinetic, proven, a veteran, and with full situational awareness of what is happening here. Therefore I must take command of our principle asset now, and you will take command of the Siberian Air Corps in my place.”

“You take the goddamned ship and I get command of a fleet of obsolete Zeppelins?” The Captain was clearly unhappy.

“Come now, consider this well. These are not obsolete aircraft. Do you know I had the temerity to overfly Germany, and I actually bombed Berlin with my flagship, Tunguska, a truly marvelous ship. There are things it can do that will amaze you. I took down six of Volkov’s airships, and now, with radars and missiles from Kirov, Tunguska will be the largest and most powerful airship on earth! Think, brother. Consider just what I have told you here. There is so very much more to learn before you will be fully effective. You must gain experience and knowledge, get your feet rooted firmly in this

era, and together we will plan the fate of all the decades yet to come. Yet now, for the moment, you must take the role of the Devil's Adjutant here. Surely you can see that. At times it will be necessary for us to switch places, and you will command the ship, while I attend to business in Siberia. We will share command. I promise you this."

The Captain considered, realizing how crazy it was to even be having this conversation with himself. But the Siberian was correct. There was simply too much he did not yet know about this situation, and that ignorance could be very costly. He nodded slowly, realizing that he was now hearing the advice and appeal of his own self, a more experienced and seasoned self, and he would be foolish to let his pride interfere with sound judgment now.

"So instead of standing in Volsky's shadow, you now ask me to stand in yours... Very well," he said. "What you say makes some sense. I have too much to learn just now, but I will hold you to the promise that we will one day stand together as one, as equals aboard Kirov, and soon."

"You have my word on that," said the Siberian. "I need you, brother. I need your intelligence, your will, your sound tactical skills in battle, for you have all those in great abundance. What man on earth has ever had such an opportunity as that which lies before us at this moment? Not Caesar, nor Alexander, nor Napoleon had the advantage we now possess—a second self! Together we are invincible, in this world or any other. Yes?"

"Of course," said the Captain, his eyes gleaming.

"Excellent," said the Siberian. "So here is what I propose. I will board the ship, and I have three airships close at hand. You will board Tunguska, and accompany me as we sail east. You will be our forward eyes and ears, scouting the way, reporting on sea and ice conditions, and more. Later, when we reach the Pacific, we will plan how to deal with the Japanese together, only this time they will be the ones that get the rude awakening of a surprise attack. You will see! Together, we will rewrite the entire history of the Pacific War, and restore Russia's lost territories, and her position of power and authority there."

"Yet the Japanese will be very tough," said the Captain. "You said this yourself. They will fight to the last man."

"True, but they cannot measure us. We will defeat them."

"Fedorov could tell you all about them," said the Captain, the barest hint of exasperation in his voice.

“Yes, we can use him for a while, but he could be a problem later. As to Volsky, I will leave him here, and he can keep Admiral Golovko company at tea.”

The Captain smiled. “Good riddance,” he said. “And don’t take any guff from Fedorov either. He was arguing with me on the damn bridge, and right in front of the Admiral!”

“Oh, I know that all too well. He is a real nuisance, but I’ll keep him under my thumb.”

“The temerity of that man,” said the Captain. “Why, he convinced the Admiral to send out a coded message to the Royal Navy. A man named Tovey replied, claiming to be Admiral of the British fleet, wishing to speak with Volsky or Fedorov.”

“Tell me more.” The Siberian seemed very keen to hear about this. “A coded message? What was it?”

“You will have to ask Nikolin... I assumed it was something Fedorov got from one of his books. He’s very clever, as we both know. I’ll admit that he figured all this out long before anyone else. At first I thought he was crazy, suffering from a good knock on the head, but then I began to suspect something more was going on. He seemed to be thick as thieves with the British, claiming he had personally met the Admiral who signaled us. I found out this man Tovey was a historical figure, so I thought this was nothing more than Fedorov’s obsession with the history, a delusion. But there was a flaw in this little story. Tovey claimed to be on a ship that doesn’t exist, the HMS Invincible.”

“Yes,” said the Siberian. “It does exist, and I know why he wanted to speak to Volsky or Fedorov, but I’ll explain that later.”

The Captain shook his head. “Well that request seemed very odd to me, and I was beginning to suspect our Navigator was a double agent, so I took the matter to Volsky myself. Of course, that was useless. Leave the man alone, he tells me. All he has done here is use his eyes and training to become the great pain in the ass he was on the bridge. I should have relieved him, or had him thrown in the brig the moment he opened his little mouth.”

The Siberian was silent, deeply pondering. “Fedorov claimed to have personally met Admiral Tovey? How very odd. Are you certain you cannot remember what this message was?” he asked the Captain.

“Let me think. Ah, yes, I remember now. We were on the bridge,

analyzing video feed on a pair of old British ships. Fedorov was trying to prove they were from World War II. He was correct, as I see now, but who could believe that? Then he begged the Admiral to send out a message... Let me think... Geronimo. Yes, that was it. Home Flag respond... then something about a fleet signals protocol one. He said it was a command level channel for Royal Navy operations, something he got from his books, or so I assumed. But lo and behold, the British came back on the radio, and it was this Admiral Tovey!"

The Siberian only heard one word in everything the Captain was saying, Geronimo, and it sounded alarm bells that prickled up his spine, a red heat at the back of his neck.

"Fedorov used that word—Geronimo? You are certain of this?"

"Just as I told you."

"And he used it before you received this message?"

"Correct. He urged the Admiral to send that code, and Volsky went along. Can you believe that? It could have meant anything. It could have been a signal to attack, and I was very suspicious of him after that."

"Well, well, well... The Siberian's eyes narrowed with thought. "He did not get that from any of his books, brother. It is something that would only be known to someone living in this era... Unless..."

The Siberian's mind was running through every possibility now. Clearly this man before him was unknowing, an innocent untried version of his own self, who was only just beginning to come to terms with this incredible story. If that were so, then every member of the crew should be equally oblivious. So how could Fedorov have known that code word? Could it be that the events of the 28th also physically changed the contents of his history books? Is that where he learned of it? Could he have discovered evidence of the first coming right there in his own little library? That would be very odd, but also very important if it actually happened. I must grill the man about it, and find out what occurred.

"Something wrong?" asked the Captain.

"Just an oddity," said the Siberian, one of those dangling threads in the tapestry that seems ill considered. I will think about this, and get to the bottom of it. In the meantime, I had Tyrenkov go fetch Troyak and the Marines from the launch, and feed them well. Now it's time to board the ship. I wish you could be at my side, brother, but you can see this is for the best, at

least until the crew is brought over the line.”

“Then where will I go?”

“With Tyrenkov, to the airships. Board Tunguska and tell the Air Commandant to make ready to depart. Remember, you are the supreme authority aboard that ship. The man’s name is Bogrov, competent, a good airship Captain, but he is not a fighting soul. Take the three ships up to the Kara Sea, and hover there to wait for us. We will join you soon.”

“Very well, but just one thing,” said the Captain. “You look... different. What if they realize...”

“Ah yes, the scar. Don’t worry, I’ve considered every detail of this operation.” He reached into his pocket and produced the gauze he had worn when speaking with Volsky and Fedorov. “I will wear this for a few days. The roads are muddy here, and I will just tell Rodenko I slipped and fell—cut my cheek on a piece of scrap metal. After a few days, that should explain the scar.”

“What about Zolkin?” said the Captain. “He’ll want to doctor you up when he sees that.”

“Oh. Don’t worry about him. Yes, he can be a real pest as well, more than you realize. But forewarned is forearmed, and I know everything he is capable of doing, because I’ve already lived through it all. This is the second time around, brother, at least for me. I’ll admit that I made a few mistakes the first time, but that is understandable given the pressure we were under. But not this time. No. Everything will be well planned, and God help anyone who tries to stand in my way... In our way.”

The Captain noted that little stumble, but said nothing more.

Chapter 23

Fedorov found himself escorted to an old fishing trawler by three armed guards, and soon Tyrenkov appeared, looming like a ghostly spirit in the mist. Something about the silence that surrounded the man was most disconcerting. His eyes always seemed to be studying you, and behind them was a keen mind, thinking, analyzing, considering.

“Where is Sergeant Troyak and the Marines?” asked Fedorov.

“Finishing dinner. I trust you were well served.”

“I had little appetite,” said Fedorov.

“You are understandably upset to see your Admiral relieved of command. But this is war. It has happened many times before.”

Fedorov could feel the other man’s eyes on him, noting his reactions, and looking for any signs that might be cause for alarm. It was clear this man was still suspicious, so he knew he had to be very careful here.

“The Admiral was a fair man,” he said glumly. “He would listen to me, unlike Karpov. What happened to the Captain? How was he injured?”

“A little fall on the way over. Just a scratch. A medic applied medicine, and there was no bleeding to speak of.”

“He seemed so... different. He was saying things that made no sense.” Fedorov kept going over the encounter with Karpov in his mind, rooting out anything that would have been confusing to his older, unknowing self. He had to appear to still be that man, and had no doubt that Tyrenkov was looking for any clue now that he might not be the man he seemed.

“I am told you are quite the historian,” said Tyrenkov.

“Yes, I know this history well.”

“Then surely you can see the wisdom in this order. The Soviet Union is in real jeopardy now. The history you may know has changed considerably. The death of Stalin changed a good deal more than you realize. Your Captain seems a most determined man. You would do well to help him in any way you can.”

“Who are these other men?” asked Fedorov.

“They will be joining the Captain aboard, and a few more, just in case your crew is not easily convinced. We cannot take any chances that this ship goes astray. Surely you can understand that. I’m told you were the first to realized what had happened to your ship. Now you must help convince the remainder of your officers and crew. Those who cooperate can serve us well. Those who do not...”

Fedorov knew a warning when he heard one, and said nothing more. A moment later a group of security men, all in dark black uniforms appeared, one particularly large and threatening—Grilikov.

*“**Very** well, Admiral,” said Karpov. “This matter is now concluded. There is only one little detail we need to tie off before I leave you.”*

“This is outrageous, Karpov. How can you be complicit in this? Don’t you realize how dangerous it is should that ship fall into the wrong hands here in this time?”

“Indeed I do, but it has now fallen into the right hands, Admiral. You would not know how to do what is necessary here. I know you only too well. So now we have only one little detail to conclude this business. I must request you surrender your key.”

The Admiral’s heart skipped a beat when he heard that, his fist tightening on the key Fedorov had given him in his pocket. How did Karpov know? Did he have the room bugged? Were men watching and listening when Fedorov gave the object to him?

“Yes Admiral, your command key. Oh, I suppose I could easily order Martinov to reset the command key setting from its standard default requiring two key insertions, but I will need your key in any case. Surely you understand why.”

Volsky did not know whether to be relieved or even more anxious now. Clearly Karpov was referring to the command key for special warhead activation on the ship, and not the key Fedorov had given him. He reluctantly reached for the chain around his neck, and took it off, realizing there was no recourse now. Better that there be two keys aboard than only one. This way there was a chance that the fail safe requiring two key insertions might

remain in place.

“Be very careful now, Karpov. I hope you have no thoughts about ever using the weapons this key enables.”

“Of course not,” said Karpov. “This is a mere formality, Admiral. The key belongs aboard the ship, and I will assign it to my Starpom. I was considering Rodenko. Do you agree?”

Karpov had no intention of passing the key to anyone, but he was merely mincing words here, to smooth this transition.

“Rodenko is a good officer,” said Volsky. “Or Zolkin.” The Admiral made the suggestion, hoping that, if Zolkin got the key, he might prevent a disaster, though he knew that Karpov would probably not go along with this suggestion.

“Zolkin? He’s not in the normal chain of command.”

“That is true, but he is a man of conscience, a man of sound reason. You would do well to listen to him. As for me, I have every intention of contacting this Sergei Kirov as you suggested earlier. Why he would request the removal of a sitting Admiral is beyond me. You say this was done by our own people in the future, yet I am very suspicious, Karpov. I hope the ship will remain here in Kola Bay for some time. Yes?”

“I’m afraid not. We have urgent business elsewhere. As for your appeal to Sergei Kirov, you may try, but I’m afraid this has all been decided. Farewell, Admiral. Time to make a little edit or two in this sad history. Fedorov won’t like it, but someone has to clean up this mess, and it might as well be me.”

“Don’t bully him, Karpov,” said Volsky, making one final appeal. “You know he was right all along. Listen to him. He’s a good officer too.”

“Yes... He was...” Karpov said nothing more, and strode off, his footsteps hard on the bare wood floor, a mocking echo in the room as he went.

When he reached the Admiral’s launch, he found it guarded only by his own men, as he had ordered. Troyak and the other two Marines would be brought over on a trawler, along with another section of his own security detail. As Tyrenkov had explained to Fedorov, he would assure that he could now hold the ship he was taking, knowing the difficulties he had experienced in the past. The addition of his security men would require some adjustments, but they could accommodate that many men, and he would have Orlov handle

the settling in.

Orlov! He finally realized he would be over there as well! The bastard is probably sweetening up his coffee and hovering over Samsonov, as he always does on the bridge. Yes, big, tough Orlov. He likes to throw his muscle around, and even had the temerity to strike me, a Captain! Yet he will be as clueless as Volsky and Fedorov were. He won't remember anything. So I suppose I will give him a pardon for that fist in my belly. But I must keep an eye on Orlov too. Wait until he sees Grilikov! Yes, the two of them will make a wonderful little duet. I can have Grilikov work with Orlov to settle the ship's affairs, and the crew will give me no trouble this time, I'm sure of it.

The journey over was a heady one for Karpov. As they drew near, the massive hulk of the ship loomed in the mist, and Karpov breathed deeply, as if taking in the power that had now been delivered to his grasp. At last, he thought. I am coming home. I will now control the most powerful vessel on this earth, with the only working nuclear warheads for at least the next several years. I must use that power very judiciously.

The two man receiving crew was waiting, and they lowered the winch to have the launch lifted aboard. Karpov directed his men on how it should be secured, and when it was finally raised up, he smiled, realizing he was now aboard Kirov, at long last, home again. His plan had worked flawlessly. There had been no bloodshed, and Volsky swallowed his little ruse like a bad Sardine.

Beyond this obvious windfall, he had the added benefit of having met his very own self! He could see that the Captain was also reluctant to leave the ship. Yes, he would seem like a fish out of water for a good long while, but he will adjust, just as I have. I will send Tyrenkov along with him to board Tunguska and brief him more fully. Now this will be very interesting. I must convince the crew here that I am him, and he must convince Bogrov and the men aboard Tunguska that he is me!

Hopefully there will be no problems, but I've ordered Tyrenkov to take command of the air squadron should the Captain do anything rash. It's almost as if I have a little brother now, just as I called him that when we met. He is very capable—lord knows, he is me! But yet at this moment he is still green and untried. I must bring him along slowly, which is why I've said nothing of the things Tunguska can really do, and nothing of what I've discovered at Ilanskiy.

Yet think of it, think of it! I now control the only three ways anyone can move in time! I have Kirov, Tunguska, and Ilanskiy, the master of all fate and time here on this earth. I have power beyond the imagining of men like Sergei Kirov and Adolf Hitler. Yes, the Führer may have his panzer divisions, but we will soon smash them, along with his whole reeking Third Reich. And when this is all over, what will I build here? What will I make of the new Russia I liberate from Hitler's steely grasp? And what will I do about Volkov?

In the short run, it comes down to Orenburg and the Japanese, two enemies on either side of the territory I now control. Kolchak will be dead within the week, or so Tyrenkov has assured me. This means I must meet with all the Siberian Generals in the Far East Command and select a new leader there—answerable to me, of course.

"Officers on board," called the Bosun as he stepped out of the launch, taking a short ladder down.

"Captain on deck!" The man saluted, waiting with an expectant upward glance as though he expected the Admiral to follow. Karpov saw him hesitate, and spoke.

"Admiral Volsky has gone on an important mission to Moscow. Command of the ship now falls to me."

"Yes sir," said the Bosun.

"We are also taking aboard a company of men from the garrison here. Direct them to the aft deck when they arrive. There will be several trawlers."

"Very good, sir."

"Has Mister Fedorov returned?"

"No sir, we thought he would arrive with you."

"I will wait here then. He should be on the next boat."

The man nodded, but it was clear he seemed uneasy. Karpov thought it might be the gauze on his face, which he had re-applied to cover his scar. "Don't worry about this," he said, gesturing to the bandage. "I fell in the yard and scratched my cheek."

"It's not that, sir. It's the harbor. We can't see much in this fog, but what we can see looks... very different. Admiral Volsky ordered the crew below decks, and it's plain to see why. Where is the city, sir? Has something happened here? Is it war like the men say?"

"I will explain everything to the crew in due course," said Karpov, grateful for the fog. Even Mother Nature had been a willing member of his

conspiracy.

He saw the first trawler coming, and soon saw Tyrenkov standing tall on the forward deck. The Bosun and his mate lowered a ladder down, and the men started to climb, first Tyrenkov, followed by Fedorov and then a line of dark clad soldiers. Twenty came in on this first boat, and Karpov took Tyrenkov aside, giving him some final orders.

“We’ve done it, Tyrenkov! I wish there were time for me to give you a little tour, but this is the ship that brought me here, and if there was ever a moment of doubt in your mind when I told you my sad tale, feeling the power beneath your feet now should put that to rest.”

“Sir,” said Tyrenkov. “I never doubted you.”

“Of course not,” said Karpov. “As to my little brother... Get him safely aboard Tunguska, and brief him well along the way. I want no slip-ups, so you will have to be at his side at all times in the beginning. Report to me daily on the channel I have given you. Take the airships up to the Kara Sea and wait for us there. We will not be long.”

“This may be somewhat delicate at the outset,” said Tyrenkov. “What if our people were to see the two of you together?”

“That will not happen for some time, and before it does, I’ll brief the men well, starting with this security contingent. I called the Captain my brother, and that angle might play for a while. After all, nobody knew much about me at all, and they certainly didn’t know I had a twin brother. He smiled. “As for now, only you know the real truth, Tyrenkov. I’m relying on you to be my right hand until my little brother is up to speed. Treat him with the same respect you would give to me, but let me know if there is any difficulty. I’m taking half the company. I’ll leave you 60 men for Tunguska. Take good care of that airship!”

“Rely on me, sir.”

“Excellent. A wonderful night, yes? Now then, let me go collar Mister Fedorov and get to the bridge. I’ve been away a very long time, since 1908, in fact.” He smiled again, turning to go look for his charge.

“Come along, Fedorov. To the bridge! And don’t you open your mouth and say a single word of what happened ashore, or I’ll relieve you and throw you in the brig. Understand? As for Volsky, I know you were fond of him, but don’t fret. He’ll get along fine with Admiral Golovko, and I’ll check in to see to his wellbeing from time to time.

They made their way up, and the familiar sight of the ship and crew, the passages and ladders, were all a balm to Karpov. The quiet hum of the ship's equipment was a soothing sound to him. He was finally back in his own element again, done with makeshift field phones he would have to crank up to call Bogrov on Tunguska, and done with shouting through voice tubes. He was back in the digital world again, the world of electronic marvels, solid state micro circuitry, the radars, sonars, and in control of real weapons again. No more cumbersome unguided RS-82 rockets as his only techno wonder for Volkov. Now he had real power, absolute power, and by god or the devil, he was going to put it to good use.

Chapter 24

When they reached the bridge, Rodenko announced him, giving him a searching look, greatly surprised, particularly when he saw the massive hulk of Grilikov following the Captain and Fedorov through the hatch. Who were these men in their strange dark uniforms. Even the Captain was oddly dressed. “Are you alright sir?”

“Of course, Rodenko. I just slipped and cut my cheek, that’s all. My uniform was soiled, and I needed a change of clothes. Our hosts were quite accommodating. Now then, the Admiral was called to Moscow on urgent business. I have been appointed commander of the ship, and will make a formal announcement to the crew shortly.”

Rodenko hesitated briefly, thinking, and then spoke. “Very well, sir. Will the Admiral be rejoining us here soon?”

“I’m afraid not. There is no knowing how long he will be occupied in Moscow. We’re taking the ship to Vladivostok as originally planned after the live fire exercises. Make ready to get the ship underway.”

“Aye sir. Then we are returning to the Norwegian Sea to complete the exercises? What about Slava and Orel?”

“Don’t clutter you mind with that. I will give you a full briefing in the morning. Mister Fedorov will plot a course to the Kara Sea. There we will make a rendezvous prior to our mission to Vladivostok. Everything will be clear to you after our morning briefing.”

He looked around, seeing the other men looking at him, and noting the uncertainty and surprise in their eyes. They were clearly anxious, and still more than a little confused. Lessons from the battle off Iki Island whispered to him now, and he knew he was going to have to rely on these men, and gain their loyalty and cooperation. So he spoke up, moving from man to man now.

“Nikolin, I will be meeting with you in the morning as well, to go over some message protocols. We will be in regular contact with home based stations.”

“Very good, sir.”

“Mister Samsonov, I trust the ships weapons are in good working

order?” He passed a moment there, remembering how it was Samsonov at the very end, the last straw when he stood and refused to obey his commands any longer. He could never allow that to happen again.

“Aye sir, but we’re still quite heavy with those reloads. Martinov has been working them into the magazine, but it’s very tight.”

“Excellent. Run me out a one page report on the current inventory—all systems please, right down to the deck guns.”

“Aye sir. We’ve only fired that one missile from the Klinok system, full load on everything else.”

“Excellent, but run the report anyway. And will you join me at my table for breakfast in the officer’s dining room?”

“Me sir? Certainly sir. And thank you sir.”

“Don’t thank me until you see what the chef puts out tomorrow!” He tapped the man’s brawny shoulder. “In fact, I’ll want the entire bridge crew present at 06:00 for the morning briefing. I’ll conduct it at breakfast. Rodenko, where is Mister Orlov?”

“He’s below decks, sir. Seeing that the crew stays put, as the Admiral ordered.”

“I see. Well then... I think I had better let the crew know something, and save them all a few bruises. Oh... one more thing. This man here is Sergeant Grilikov. He’s aboard with a special security contingent we’ve taken on for this mission. The fewer questions asked of these men, the better. It is a matter of state secrecy, as I’m sure you will understand. Tomorrow morning you will all learn more.”

Karpov looked around, noting the men’s reactions and looking for any sign of trouble that he might need to tamp down early, particularly from Fedorov. For the moment, all seemed well. So he took a deep breath, slowly removing his leather gloves and taking in the bridge, a chorus of different emotions running through him now. These men had seen everything he had done, his darkest self, and in the end they had all betrayed him. The memory of how they stood, one by one, like rows of terra cotta warriors, frozen in their stony condemnation, was still a haunting reminder of how fickle they might be. Their service was not unconditional, he knew, their loyalty not something that he could buy, or beat into them with men like Orlov and Grilikov. That was the hardest lesson he had learned, and he would not make the same mistake twice. He could not afford to.

Now he had what came to few men, a second chance to live the most challenging time of his life over again, and see it to a favorable outcome. He could not spoil that chance, or squander the tremendous opportunity that was now beneath his feet. These were good men here, capable men, brave men all. He knew that now, yet he also knew that they had not yet been forged in the fires of combat, and the months ahead would bring many hard moments. Not one of them knew yet what they had lost when sailing home this day, and not one knew what might be gained in its place. This would be their last night of innocence.

Tomorrow they die, he thought, at least to their old selves, the men they were when this ship sailed into the Kola Bay. We shall see what I can make of them now, and what they become when they learn the truth. There is much they cannot know, the whole long, sad tale. I must prune that tree and give them only what they need to know to come to grips with this new reality, and the long sea route through the Arctic channel will be the time for them to all learn what has happened. For now...

He eyed the Captain's chair, walking over slowly to place his hand on the seat, an old habit, for he always checked to see that it was cold before he took his place there, with no remnant of another man's warmth. It was pleasantly cool to the touch, and he smiled, knowing that he would never have to stand in Volsky's shadow again, or wait to take his place in that chair. Then he sat down, savoring the moment as he might savor a sip of the finest wine or brandy, a smile on his face. Slowly, he reached for the overhead intercom handset, and thumbed the switch.

"This is the Captain," he said in a strong and clear voice. It was not the Admiral speaking now, nor the Viceroy of the Western Oblasts of Free Siberia, but the Captain, and no man ever exulted more in a seeming demotion than Karpov did at that moment.

He had gone into the tumult of the sea, falling deeper into ruin than most men ever could, and he was devoured by the beast of his own ambition. Long days he languished in the belly of that beast, a misery of his own making, just as Jonah had when swallowed by the behemoth. Yet he was spewed from the belly of the beast, and found new life, also a life of his own making, and even in the face of utter annihilation, he had survived and overcome the battle with fate itself.

Now here he was in the temple again, the holy bridge of the battlecruiser

Kirov. It was his temple, and he was its grand high priest, this he knew, and no one would ever take that from him again.

He smiled.

It was a very hard night for Fedorov. He plotted the course to the Kara Sea, and the ship departed, the sound of distant artillery fire still the muffled edge of uncertainty in the gray of the Arctic night. It was the same route they had taken after their first meeting there at Murmansk with Sergei Kirov. Then they had gone out at Admiral Golovko's behest to chase away an impudent German raiding party, dueling with the pocket battleship Admiral Sheer. Where were they going this time? What did Karpov mean to do?

They were going east, that much he knew, to Vladivostok. That could only mean one thing. The Japanese controlled that port. None of the men knew it, but Karpov certainly did, and the course he now set for the ship was sure to bring them into conflict again with Imperial Japan. Was the Captain still set on setting right the mistakes he made in the past? Was he holding some grand vision of restoring Russia as a Pacific power, and rolling back the encroachment of the Japanese Empire?

The days ahead would be very dangerous. Japan was now preparing to enter the war, and at the height of its naval and military power. They would sweep all before them, raging across the South Pacific with one victory after another. Within six months the empire would expand until it reached the stubborn shores of Guadalcanal. It was there the U.S. Navy would draw the line, and then the real war would begin for Japan.

Yet something told him Karpov had other plans for His Imperial Highness in Tokyo, for Tojo, and Yamamoto, all the men who inherited the power forged by the great naval victories of Admiral Togo. What was he planning. Certainly Kirov was a formidable power at Sea. They had come unseen out of the Timor Sea, and right into the midst of a major Japanese offensive operation in the Coral Sea, and virtually wrecked the entire left pincer of that force.

Yet even with the magazines burgeoning with missile reloads, the Japanese Navy was no foe to underestimate. They had six fleet carriers that

could carry over 60 aircraft each, and four more light carriers. There were eleven battleships, including the ship he had personally fought, Yamato, and her sister ship Musashi would soon join the fleet as well. Their naval aviation Corps was second to none, with over 1500 well trained pilots. And they would fight, relentlessly, with a determination and endurance that was rarely seen in any fighting force of the world.

How could Karpov hope to challenge such a powerful navy, even with the technical superiority Kirov possessed? Was he counting on the one weapon that had finally seared and destroyed Japan's will to continue the war, the nuclear fire of an atomic bomb? What nightmare was he planning to unleash upon this unsuspecting world? How could he, now a lowly ship's Navigator, prevent what he saw looming to the east?

I have to get control of this ship again, he thought darkly. We did it twice before, and perhaps we can do it yet again. Yet now, his chief ally and support was gone with the removal of Admiral Volsky from the equation. The thought Volsky was out there was one small comfort to him. If he could get that Key to Admiral Tovey...

He could not think on that now, his mind frantically running down his options here. Karpov had come aboard with a strong contingent of security men, all clad in those sable black uniforms with dark fur caps. And their leader, this Sergeant Grilikov, was a sight to behold, well over six feet tall, solid muscle, a neck thicker than his own thigh, and a foul temper to make that brawn very troublesome. If Orlov was bad, this Grilikov was worse by far!

I've no allies here yet, he thought grimly, though I know the men who would eventually stand up and resist Karpov's megalomania. Doctor Zolkin might hear me, if I can convince him of what has happened. Yet now he suspects I'm borderline psychotic! It was all I could do to convince the Admiral, and what could Zolkin do in this situation? He stood up to Karpov before, a moral counterpoint to the Captain's ambition, and yet look what Karpov did on the bridge at the end...

Nikolin was sympathetic. He had been a part of the subtle conspiracy that had led to the Captain's fall. It was he who discovered that order from Volsky, and secretly spread the word to the other bridge officers. Rodenko is reliable, and clear headed. I might find an ally there. And then there is Sergeant Troyak and his Marines.

He passed a moment thinking about that. Troyak was essential in their effort to foil Karpov's first attempt to take the ship. Now Karpov had done the very same thing, and apparently succeeded, in a strange echo of their first coming to these troubled waters. If there was any man aboard who might stand against this Grilikov, it would be Troyak, and the modern Day Black Death he commanded was a lethal force, though they would be outnumbered on the ship three to one by Karpov's security men. What to do here? He realized that he was in the early stages of planning a mutiny against perhaps the most dangerous man in the world. Would it eventually come to that, and end up in a desperate gun battle right here on the ship between the Black Death and the sable coated storm troopers protecting Karpov?

At the moment my situation is still very precarious, he thought. Note how Karpov tested and taunted us in Severomorsk when he first appeared. Everything he said was perfectly comprehensible to me. Thank God Volsky reacted as he did. If Karpov ever learns that I really know everything that has taken place.... He shuddered to think what might happen, and to realize that his own life was dangerously at stake now if he set himself on this path.

Yet he could see no choice. He knew what was coming in the days ahead, and if he did not find a way to stop Karpov, God only knew what might happen when he reaches the Pacific with this ship.

Where to start?

Nikolin. Begin slowly. Nikolin is going to be privy to all signals traffic to and from the ship. I can use him to find out what Karpov might be planning. I may even be able to convince him to send out another coded message to Tovey. I don't know what the British could do in this situation, but they do have assets in the Pacific, at least they will until December when the Japanese attack.

Strange how, in this world, the effects of our first coming have been completely washed away. Oddly, that is because none of it would have happened yet. We're just a few days past that arrival, and already this history has changed again. There will be no run through the Denmark Strait, no duel with the Royal Navy, no atomic fire in the North Atlantic. The only remnant of any of that is the queer persistence of those two file boxes, and the lingering memories in my own head, along with the same recollections that Admiral Tovey was struggling to recall. The real damage that has twisted this world happened back in 1908. My careless whisper, and Karpov's ambition,

was the undoing of everything. I could lay some of that blame at Orlov's feet, but what does that matter?

The situation seemed hopeless now, and then he remembered Gromyko. I wonder what happened to Kazan, he thought? We vanished right in the middle of that engagement with the Germans. Kazan had gone out on point to try and protect Rodney. Was it still here? I could use another of our coded protocols to see if I could contact Gromyko, yes, I mustn't forget about Kazan.

He turned all of this over and over in his head, far from sleep, and yet very weary with the stress of these last three days. I finally convince the Admiral, and now he's gone. Who knows whether Volsky will get away as I hope, and deliver that key to Admiral Tovey. Who knows what those keys even mean in all of this? In the meantime, here I am, a secret knowing spy aboard Karpov's ship of nightmares, and a good chunk of the fate of this world, and the outcome of this war, is now sitting squarely in my lap. It's down to me now, and time I atoned for all the damage I've done here—even if it kills me. Am I ready to die for what has to be done here? Would my death even matter if I don't first succeed?

It was going to be a very long night, and the moon that was once his only comfort and anchor to tell him where they were, was now a cold and mocking presence in the clear arctic skies.

Part IX

Onslaught

“War must be, while we defend our lives against a destroyer who would

devour all; but I do not love the bright sword for its sharpness, nor the arrow for its swiftness, nor the warrior for his glory. I love only that which they defend.”

— ***J.R.R. Tolkien: The Two Towers***

Chapter 25

Operation Typhoon was conceived on the 1st of August, even as Karpov and Sergei Kirov struck their fateful bargain in the Kremlin, and the Siberian raced north to Murmansk, arriving late the following day to spring his trap. In doing so, the Germans were considering the next phase of operations beyond Barbarossa, which would be deemed complete once certain final objectives were secured. Army Group Center was still preoccupied with the taking of Smolensk and the opening of the main highway and rail line to Moscow, a battle that had cost the Wehrmacht two long and valuable months. Now, with Typhoon conceived as a bold thrust on two fronts, Smolensk still remained in Soviet hands, and it remained to be seen whether they could make it the bulwark of defense that had so unhinged the German advance earlier.

Soviet losses had not been as bad as in the history Fedorov might quote, but they were still staggering. All of Belorussia, and half of the Ukraine, had been devoured by the juggernaut of the advancing German Army. Losses to infantry, the stolid, slow moving line holders, were particularly severe, though with foreknowledge of how the Germans would advance and fight, Sergei Kirov had ordered most of his precious mechanized formations held in reserve.

Barbarossa had three primary objectives, the large industrial centers of Minsk in the center, Kiev in the middle south, and control of the southern bank of the Dnieper all the way to the Black Sea. Notably absent from that list was any drive planned for Army Group North, aimed at Leningrad. That formation was largely infantry now, tasked with occupying the line of the Dvina River, and securing a few bridgeheads there in the event future operations in that sector were contemplated. The movement of Manstein's 56th Panzer Korps to the Smolensk attack left the Army Group toothless, with little offensive power, and so it simply took up strong defensive positions.

So in the north, the Russians still held the line of the Dvina River from Riga to Vitsyebesk, until the Germans pushed them out of the latter on August 5th. Near Leningrad, the Finns and a few German divisions had pushed over

the border, driving south, but they met a wall of solidly fortified positions as they approached the city, and it was soon clear that they would not break through. Leningrad would therefore not endure the dreadful thousand day siege, encircled on every side, and instead would become an arsenal of both troops and equipment that could be sent south. It was the one bright spot in development insofar as STAVKA was concerned. Kirov was grateful to have at least one front, and the major industrial center of Leningrad, secure. But the threat mounting in the center, and particularly in the south, was still very serious.

Launching May 15th, all these initial objectives outlined for Operation Barbarossa were attained by mid-July, and now planners spread the battle maps for phase two of the invasion, the final objectives of the massive storm of men and arms Hitler had thrown at Russia. New objectives were tapped by the planners at OKW, aimed at securing Smolensk, and the industrial cities of Kirov and Bryansk. Army Group Center would do the real work here, with two strong Panzer Armies, and the 4th, and 9th Armies comprised of mostly infantry formations. Once these objectives were encircled and reduced, the issue of whether or not to mount a bold drive on Moscow would then be discussed.

Hitler first thought it would be unnecessary, believing that the Soviet Union had to be defeated by destroying its economic and industrial capacity. Give me their coal mines and factories, he said, and what will they do? How could they continue to prosecute the war? The notion that the Russians would literally dismantle their factories and move them a thousand miles east to the Siberian Ural district had never entered the Fuhrer's brain, and so when the issue of an attack aimed at Moscow was first raised by Army Chief Walther von Brauchitsch, Hitler had batted it aside with a derisive remark: "Only ossified brains could think of such an idea." He had wagged a finger at the wizened German General, explaining that he needed to learn the economics of war.

The oil and resources were not in Moscow, but in the Ukraine, in the Donets Basin and Donbass regions, and in the Caucasus. This is where Hitler wished to concentrate his major effort, ordering his new favored General Manstein to cross the Dnieper and quickly seize the Crimea to prepare the way for the planned invasion of the Caucasus.

It would take a lengthy and somewhat contentious discussion by Halder

and Manstein before Hitler moderated this view, as Halder argued that operations in the South would not be impeded by any plan to take Moscow, should this be contemplated. In a meeting with Manstein, still Hitler's confidant and advisor, the two men laid out the options for Hitler, voicing their opposing views.

"We are well on schedule in the South," said Halder. "Forces there should cross at Dnepropetrovsk in a matter of days." In fact, the increased German effort in the south had them well ahead of the offensive pace set in Fedorov's history books. There the Germans had taken the city on the 17th of August, but did not consolidate their river crossing operations in the area until the 25th of that month. Kleist did not break out at Cherkassy until mid September, and Kiev itself had held out until the 17th of that month.

Yet now, in these altered states, the Germans controlled the entire southern bank of the Dnieper, from Kiev to the big river bend at Dnepropetrovsk, and they did so by late July. Elements of two Soviet Armies still held the north bank, but they had been driven out of Kiev in mid-July, and Guderian's powerful 2nd Panzer Group was preparing to renew its offensive after the infantry mopped up resistance in the city, and the engineers went to work on the bridges. Where would it go? This was the big question on the table now.

"Guderian will break out easily enough," said Halder. "If they couldn't stop us in the street fighting of Kiev, then what little they have left will be overrun as soon as 2nd Panzergruppe crosses the river in force. Do you disagree, Herr General?"

"No, this is the likely outcome. Guderian will break out as you say, but now we must decide where to send him. There are two options. The first is north, bypassing the fortified city of Bryansk and aiming at Orel. He'll be followed by Kleist with 1st Panzer Group. In my opinion, this force should turn east and become the left pincer for the planned envelopment of Kharkov. This will free up the SS Panzer Korps to move to the right, and force a crossing of the Don somewhere near the Izyum bend." Manstein tapped the location on the map. "About here, my Führer."

Hitler leaned over the table, nodding, but saying nothing. Izyum was a little over 100 kilometers southeast of Kharkov, where the Donets twisted around some wooded high ground.

"Then you do not intend to push into the Donets Basin?" Halder had

believed this would be Manstein's strongest argument. The big bend of the Donets was a major mining center for ore, coal, and other resources, with many mills, smelting factories, and foundries. It was a plum in the Fuhrer's eye, and suited his idea of fighting economic warfare perfectly.

"Not immediately," said Manstein. "Yes, that is a direct route to Rostov from Dnepropetrovsk, but we must not forget Kharkov—a major industrial center and enemy supply hub. If the SS drive directly into the Donets Basin, they will be doing exactly what the enemy expects. The Russians are dug in there, with forces they have been moving up from Rostov and the Caucasus. For that matter, the terrain is in their favor, very rugged and unsuited to swift mobile operations. It would be a battle of attrition, and work for infantry, not the elite motorized SS formation. So I propose to take that Korps over the Donets somewhere between Kharkov and Izyum, and then drive through Kupyansk. This way, when we turn east, the river is on our right flank, and it will be very difficult for the enemy to mount any threat from that direction. The SS will, in effect, be enveloping the entire Donets Basin, cutting it off from Soviet forces in the Don sector. They will be between those two rivers, shielded by both in any movement to the east. Such a maneuver will also cut off all the Soviet forces still fighting in the Kuban."

"And Kharkov?" Halder pointed. "If the SS turn east after crossing the Donets, then there is no right pincer for that operation."

"The Russians will not know that for some time. When the SS force their crossing, it will be perceived as part of a major operation to envelop Kharkov—which is why I need Kleist on the left. If he simply follows Guderian, then there is no threat to Kharkov, and it will sit there until we mass enough infantry to reduce it, which could take some time, particularly if we do not envelop the city and cut road and rail connections bringing in reinforcements. The only question I have for you, General Halder, is whether 2nd Panzergruppe is strong enough to reach Orel as you might plan?"

Halder thought for some time, his dark eyes intense on the map. "Hoth," he said, speaking of the commander of the German 3rd Panzergruppe. "I will send Hoth to reinforce that thrust. Once these forces reach Orel, they will be in the perfect position to envelop any enemy defense at Bryansk, and to pose a direct threat to Moscow."

"Moscow?" Hitler spoke for the first time, looking from one man to the other, and as Halder had spoken the word, Manstein remained silent.

“This issue was bound to come up in these deliberations,” said Halder. “I am aware of your remarks to General von Brauchitsch, my Führer, but do not be so hard on me. Moscow is the center of the entire Soviet political and military apparatus. It is the single most important communications hub in Russia. Everything goes through that city, unless it is coming from the eastern front. We have been dancing about the matter, afraid to suggest what will soon be the inevitable conclusion—that we must take Moscow if we are to eventually win this war. Otherwise what are we doing with this plan to drive on Smolensk? It has but one obvious purpose—to threaten Moscow.”

Hitler raised an eyebrow, but said nothing. The reality on the ground was speaking to him now, for Halder’s argument was plain to see. Most of Army Group Center was committed to the attack against those three city objectives now, Smolensk in the north, guarding the road to Moscow, Bryansk in the south, and the city named for his adversary, Kirov, between the two. Halder tapped the map at Smolensk first.

“I believe the enemy will muster every division they can to try and stop us here, just as they will when we break through and advance on Kirov and Bryansk. When they lose all three, and after we have Kharkov in the south, the Soviets will be running out of places to hide. They will have no recourse, other than to fall back on Litebsk, Voronezh and the Don. That is when the real question of whether to strike Moscow must be answered. Once we have Guderian at Orel, then we must choose, either to drive north through Tula and advance on Moscow to end this war, or to turn east to Voronezh and Litebsk, preferably the former, and then drive for the Volga and push for a linkup with Volkov.”

“He will certainly be happy to hear that you haven’t forgotten him,” said Hitler.

“Indeed, my Führer. A linkup with Orenburg has always been a major objective for winning this war. That must be achieved either in the Caucasus, or to the east—on the Volga. I do not think we can expect that he will come to us. Therefore we must conceive operations aimed at breaking through to him. So in the north we now throw a storm of steel against the strongest remnant of the existing Red Army, between Smolensk and Bryansk. Once those objectives are secured, we can transition to Operation Typhoon. If Moscow is selected as the final objective of this operation, then Guderian continues north. But if we wish to prosecute the war in the south, then that force forms

the northern pincer for a new operation. Let us call it Southern Wind for lack of anything better at the moment. In this instance, Guderian's mobile group becomes a sword that will cleave the entire Soviet Union in two. So if Moscow is forsaken, then we must go east to the Volga. There is no other way."

"What about the Caucasus?" said Hitler, as if Halder had forgotten the principle object of his planning for so many months. "What about the oil?"

"General von Manstein will shortly deliver the Crimea as a first step in that direction," Halder replied. "It was my understanding that the SS Korps he argued for so ably, was there precisely for the purpose of taking Rostov. Now, it seems he has other ideas." On that note, Halder folded his hands behind his back, waiting.

Manstein knew a curtain call when he heard one, and he cleared his throat. "My Führer, once I have crossed the Donets as I described earlier, then Steiner's SS Korps will be in the perfect position to turn east or to cross the Don at any time of our choosing. This will pocket all the enemy forces in the Kuban. Then we simply clench our fist and the Kuban is yours—and the oil with it. This is the purpose of my thinking. And let us not forget Volgograd either. Sergei Kirov has held Volkov at bay there for over fifteen years. He will not want to give him that city now, and so I expect it to be heavily reinforced. This is another argument that begs us to leave Moscow in our wake and turn east. Halder's northern pincer will be well to the north after Guderian takes Orel and I will be in the south. The two forces could then easily converge on Voronezh."

Hitler took a deep breath. "First things first, gentlemen," he said at last. "General Halder, you may order Guderian to Orel as planned, and I agree that Hoth's 3rd Panzer Group should reinforce this attack. General von Manstein. Cross the Donets as you please, and be sure that you have handed me Kharkov before you turn east. Clear? Then, with that city in hand, I will look at the situation again and we will continue this discussion. In the meantime, dinner is waiting, and I am famished!"

It would not be as easy as the generals made it sound to suit the Führer's

mood. Manstein would order Steiner over the Donets, and he would cross it as easily as he had bulled his way across the Dnieper at the bend of that mighty river. The crossing was made right where Manstein's baton had fallen on the map, between Izyum and Balakleya. Then Hitler's proviso would come in to effect—the necessity of securing and delivering Kharkov prior to mounting any major drive to the east as Manstein desired. To this end, he directed Steiner to push north, while the tough units of Grossdeutschland and the Brandenburg Division moved to encircle Kharkov from the east. In this they were well supported by the Wiking SS Division, feeling the opposition here to be much easier than they had encountered in Syria.

“At least the Russians haven't got tanks like the British we fought there, the men would say. This work is easy!”

But that was all about to change.

Chapter 26

Kirov was pacing in the Kremlin very late that day, as the cold winter snows settled over Moscow. News from the front was most discouraging, and his intelligence chief, *Berzin*, stood there, hat in hand, a dejected look on his face. He was the bearer of bad news that night, and much sooner than any had expected.

“They pushed through the Isthmus of Perekop,” he said solemnly, referring to the narrow gateway to the Crimea. “The siege of Sevastopol will follow soon, and two months ahead of schedule.”

“I still have hope that we can hold the Crimea a good long while,” said *Kirov*. “It took the Germans all of eight months to take Sevastopol, at least according to the material. So maybe we will hold out there.”

“It was never our plan to hold there for very long,” said *Berzin*. “Yet if it falls, the Black Sea fleet is out of business. We have no friendly port left except Novorossiysk in the Caucasus, and if we lose Sevastopol, that will be their next objective.”

“Will the Germans attempt a crossing at Kerch? Are they planning to attack the Taman Peninsula?”

“We’ve observed a buildup of artillery in that direction, but the main drive is south towards Sevastopol. Frankly, I don’t think the Germans have adequate shipping in the Black Sea yet for a crossing at Kerch, and *Volkov* has been too cautious to venture out from his ports on the Georgian coast. They will also need Sevastopol to supply any troops they plan to move across. The other harbors are simply too small.”

“Then what will they do?”

“Take the port, of course, yet they are not using all of their 17th Army. Most of those troops have moved to the Donets Basin defense line for the attack on Rostov, if that is what they are planning next.”

“You mean to say you do not know? My intelligence Chief is remiss tonight. Too much vodka at dinner?”

Berzin smiled, for *Kirov* knew he never drank before a briefing, wanting to be clear headed and sharp at all times when vital strategy might be

discussed there in the Red Archives. The wan light illuminated his wide forehead, beneath the brush like flat top hair, his thick neck and rough features giving him a tough, formidable aspect. And now those chiseled features were drawn and grim, the seriousness of the situation weighing heavily on him as well.

“We’ve detected no signals or any firm orders for the 17th Army,” he said, “but I think it is likely that they will move as I suggest. The SS have not moved south as we expected. They used that group to force a crossing of the Donets, east of Kharkov.”

“An envelopment operation?”

“Perhaps, but no real threat has built up to the south, or west on the other side of the city. They moved up a few infantry divisions, but they are digging in.”

“Then the SS will attempt to link up with that penetration Volkov has forced over the Volga north of Volgograd.”

“A possibility. Either that, or this is a planned envelopment of Kharkov as it now seems. But a good portion of that Corps is now pushing north and slightly east.”

“Can we stop them?”

“We’ve sent everything we could find there to try—reserves from the Trans-Caucasus District, the Southern Front, and STAVKA Reserve. All our plans for an offensive on the Upper Volga are on hold now.”

“Karpov was not too happy to hear that,” said Kirov with a wag of his finger. “He was eager for that offensive to begin, but agreed to hold the line so we could pull troops out for deployment elsewhere.”

“Yes, well that makes three armies we’ve taken off the Volkov Front now. Any further offensive there is out of the question this year, except at Maykop in the south. That’s the only good news I can bring you today. We’ve got the oil fields, and hopefully we’ll have the city before nightfall.”

“At last,” said Kirov, “though we’re too late. By the time we get trucks down there to haul the oil, the Germans may be hammering at the Rostov Gate. The only good that will do us now is to possibly convince the Kuban tribes to join with us. We could raise a good number of divisions there.”

“Possibly,” said Berzin, “Yet if Rostov falls, that will cut off all our forces in the Kuban, and all those new recruits along with them. That’s twenty-eight rifle divisions, four cavalry divisions, and ten independent

brigades. The ten divisions defending at Rostov with the newly reconstituted 9th Army will also be in that cauldron, and if we don't act quickly, you can add all our troops on the Elista front as well—another ten divisions there.”

“Over fifty divisions...” Kirov pinched the bridge of his nose. “Can we get them out?”

“We’ve taken Salsk, and cleared the rail lines for exactly this option. If Rostov Falls, the Kuban front will have to withdraw over the Manych, and it will be a difficult crossing. There is one bridge and one fordable area we could use, and after that, two more rivers to cross if they are to get to the bridge over the Don at Tsimlyanskaya. That is presently the headquarters location for the Trans-Caucasus Front.”

“It sounds impossible,” said Kirov, shaking his head again. “It’s that damnable SS Corps. They’ve been unstoppable, and these were divisions that were not supposed to have reached full strength this early in the war.”

“Clearly the material is no longer reliable,” said Berzin, referring to the secret cache of documents Kirov had hidden there on the future course of history. “And to make matters worse, Volkov has reinforced his Volga bridgehead again. He’s bringing up reserves from Kazakhstan.

“You told me those troops was still at Astrakhan a week ago!” said Kirov, obviously upset by this news.

“They moved,” said Berzin. “He was very sly this time. We had good men watching all the rail depots to report on any movements, but nothing went by rail. He moved his men over secondary roads, well south of those depots, right through the wasteland.”

“That cost him a lot of fuel.”

“He has far more than he will ever need,” said Berzin, stating the obvious. “Now we think he may be planning to relieve the 4th Army south of the city. Then he could swing those troops up to reinforce his bridgehead north of the city and possibly renew that attack.”

“What have we done to counter?”

“There isn’t much we can send now,” said Berzin. “Everything has been pulled into the fight for Smolensk, Kirov, and Bryansk. Zhukov sent all the troops we pulled from the upper Volga, but they don’t have the strength to mount a strong counterattack to try and cut that salient off. A single rifle division and four brigades that went by rail just reached Frolovo north of the Don. They encountered Volkov’s Armored Cavalry there as they detrained.”

“They’ve penetrated that far?”

“I’m afraid so, sir. It’s clear what their next move will be. That SS Korps can mount a thrust towards the Don, and Volkov will attempt to cross again and meet them when he reinforces that sector.”

“We stopped him once,” said Kirov, a harried look on his face. “We’ll stop him again.”

“Unfortunately, we pulled so many divisions off to face the Germans, that stopping him this time will not be easy, if it will even be possible at all. We’ve already sent all three divisions of the Volga Rifle Corps from the city. If the Germans do turn east now, we could soon be looking at a double encirclement, and the entire Volga Front in the bag with the Kuban Front, there are twenty divisions in the immediate vicinity of the city itself.”

“And that is where they will stand and fight,” said Kirov. “We do not give up Volgograd, by god. We’ve held Volkov off for fifteen years there, and he’s not getting his grubby hands on it now either.”

“Unfortunately,” said Berzin, “the Germans may soon have something to say about that. For the moment, our strategy of fighting for the major cities seems to be working as planned. Their Wiking Division has moved north of the Donets, and now it has turned west to threaten Kharkov.

“It’s clear what they are planning,” said Kirov. “They do not want to leave Kharkov in our hands if they turn east to try to link up with Volkov’s Don crossing operation. So we must hold that city as long as possible. How many divisions do we have there?”

“Twelve.”

“And here we thought the main threat would be in the south, through Rostov.”

“That may still happen,” said Berzin. “Yet at the moment, the threat of this wider envelopment could cut off our entire southern front—the Kuban, Trans-Caucasus, and the Volga fronts will all be trapped in a vast encirclement—seventy-five divisions.”

“If they stand their ground and fight?”

“That has not worked out so well for troops we can no longer supply. They will be limited to stocks on hand, and when the ammunition and fuel run out...”

“How long?” said Kirov. “Could they hold out until spring?”

“I doubt it.”

“The German 6th Army held out for months when they were encircled,” Kirov protested. “You’ve read the material.”

“Yes, I’ve read it many times, but that isn’t happening now. It’s our troops that will be cut off defending Volgograd, with Volkov on one side and the damn Germans on the other. We could hope our boys would do as well, but most encirclements occurring in 1941 were disasters, which is why we tried so hard to avoid them. If this happens, we’ll lose all those troops and equipment, half a million men, and then we’ll have to find another half million to rebuild a new defensive line in the south.”

“We can’t do that yet,” said Kirov, an exasperated look on his face. “It’s all we can do now to keep enough troops on the line in the north between Smolensk and Bryansk.”

“Karpov kept his word and sent us the troops we needed,” said Berzin, “That army he sent, the 24th, has stopped the German push to bypass Smolensk to the south. They were breaking through to the Kirov line, and those men saved the day.

“That is because they have been fighting Volkov for the last six months between Omsk and the Ob river line. That was Karpov’s personal little army. Once things got heated up here, Volkov’s operations against Siberia evaporated. He’s moved everything against us so he could force that crossing north of Volgograd!”

“The Siberians are fighting well,” said Berzin. “They blunted that attempt to break through to our Kirov defense line, but now their major thrust has shifted further east, with Guderian’s group.” He was referring to the recent attack aimed at a big salient the German 2nd Panzergruppe had pushed east of Bryansk as it attempted a wide envelopment of that city. Now that attack was approaching Orel, flowing into a massive hole in the center of the front that now stretched all the way to Tula to the north. The Germans had been pushing out patrols, yet found little opposition as they approached Orel. The situation was quickly leading to yet another encirclement of the major industrial centers at Bryansk and the city named for Kirov to the north.

“We can’t close that gap for some time,” said Berzin. “We have three Armies forming behind Ryazan, but they won’t be ready to move for several weeks.”

“Well what more do they need, printed invitation cards? Send orders that they are to prepare for transit at once, and get rolling stock up there. In the

meantime, we'll just have to hold the cities as long as possible. They are well fortified."

"The material clearly showed us what happened to the troops trying to hold Bryansk," said Berzin. "It's happening again, sir. All the road and rail connections to that city have nearly been cut. We have 15 divisions there, and have even press-ganged bridging units and railroad workers into the defense. The Germans are about to close that trap."

"Then send the Airborne Corps."

"From here? That was our fire brigade, sir. The only air mobile trained force we have."

"Yes? Well this is the fire."

"But we have no rolling stock available to get them there."

"Then they go by plane. That's what they damn well trained for, isn't it. Drop them here." Kirov pointed to an area northeast of Bryansk. "They will dig in and stop that envelopment. If we can keep one or two roads open, the city might hold."

"As you wish, sir, but we will most likely find they simply join the cauldron the Germans have formed around this whole area. If not for the 24th Siberian Army, they would also add the city of Kirov to that cache."

"Damn," said Kirov. "The Germans would love to announce they've taken the biggest city in the nation bearing my name, but that isn't what worries me now. It's the threat to Moscow this all represents, and it is shaping up much sooner than we thought."

"We're still holding near Smolensk, sir," Berzin offered, one more small bit of good news on this very gloomy morning."

"Yes," said Kirov. "We are holding near Smolensk, and thank God that Karpov's boys stopped the Germans push south of the city, or they would have gone all the way to Vyazma! That is only 200 kilometers from the outer defense of this very city—Moscow! And do you know what I have here to hold the capital? Beyond the militia divisions on the outer defensive ring, we have virtually nothing—three to five divisions at the most. We need the Siberians. Are more troops coming?"

Kirov had sent Karpov a secret message three weeks earlier, telling him he was in desperate need of reinforcements, and asking if there were any troops that could be sent to participate in the defense of the capital. Karpov responded by pledging his personal army, the fighting 24th, and another

reserve army, already forming at Perm. Kirov had fleshed out the units, equipped them with new uniforms, weapons, and even skis, and designated them the First Siberian Shock Army under Konev, as the two men had agreed.

“I wanted to hold those troops back until we could form up more reserves for the Winter Offensive. Yet the situation has deteriorated so quickly that we will have no choice but to commit them now. Moscow must be defended, and to the last man if need be. What does Zhukov think we should do?”

“You can ask him yourself,” said Berzin. “He’s waiting outside in the conference room.”

Kirov needed another opinion, and Zhukov was waiting outside precisely because they knew his advice and performance had been sound, at least according to the material. Kirov had been quietly advancing the careers of men who had been proven winners, even though the circumstances of their lives were all somewhat different now. He believed in basic character, and was betting they would all again rise to the occasion here and help win this war.

Chief among these men was Georgy Zhukov, a peasant son of a peasant farmer, who once thought he might learn the fur trading business as a young man in Moscow. In the Great War he had proven himself an able warrior in the Cavalry, twice receiving the Cross of Saint George, Imperial Russia’s equivalent of a Purple Heart, awarded for rankers exhibiting “undaunted courage,” and often suffering wounds for their effort. Zhukov got his wound along with the two crosses, and was then sent east after the war to try and check the advance of Imperial Japanese forces. He won a brief victory in Mongolia at Khalkhin Gol, but the Soviet Army was too preoccupied with trying to also control Orenburg and Siberia, and the troops were soon pulled out leaving the problem of the Japanese to the Siberians.

But Zhukov gained much valuable combat experience in the brief battle, learning how to use tanks effectively, husband reserves, coordinate flanking maneuvers, make effective river crossings, and providing much valuable feedback on the performance of the tanks themselves, all of which was used in the design of the very successful T-34. Now he stood there when Kirov and Berzin entered the conference room, his cap tucked under one arm, short cut hair close on his otherwise balding head, yet in his prime at the age of 45. His prominent chin was well dimpled, and his dark eyes had an inner strength that spoke of the qualities that were harbored within the man.

“General Zhukov,” said Kirov, warmly shaking the other man’s hand. “It seems that every time we meet, it is to discuss some new disaster on the front lines. I have just been listening to a lengthy report from Berzin here, and we both agree that the situation is now very grave.”

Chapter 27

“That makes three of us,” said Zhukov. “The German intentions have been clear since they took Dnepropetrovsk, which is when we should have taken stronger action. Then the main thrust split, first towards Kharkov, and now this new buildup on the Donets Basin defenses, which I have expected all along. A drive for Rostov is brewing eventually, or perhaps a move east farther north, along the Don. The Crimea cannot hold out indefinitely. Once Sevastopol falls, then their entire 17th Army can be moved against our Donets Basin defensive line. They can simply garrison the Crimea with Rumanian troops.”

“Can we hold that line now?”

“For the time being.”

“How long?”

“Long enough to get the armies in the Kuban Front out, and north of the Donets, if that is what you contemplate.”

“Then you believe we should pull out? They should not stand and fight?”

“A gallant stand would buy us time and hold space, but if they are cut off, those forces would have to rely almost exclusively on Volgograd, Donetsk, and Rostov for supply and munitions. Lose those and those armies die. Can we replace all those veteran divisions if that should happen? They’ve been fighting in the Kuban for over six months. Yes, it will be a bitter pill to swallow should we order them to give Volkov back everything they took from him, but it is either that or we will soon be trying to fill those empty boots with new recruits, men who will not have even half the experience of those troops. So yes, I say pull them out, and be quick about it, just as I said the same when the Germans attempted to encircle Kiev and the lower Dnieper.”

“Yet this means we will lose the Donets basin—all that coal and mineral mining.”

“We’ll hold that for a good long while yet, but an eventual withdrawal may be unavoidable.”

Kirov took a deep breath. “And then they take Rostov, and all of the Kuban, including the oil at Maykop. After that, they will have another route

to Volgograd south of the Don, Yes?”

“Indications are that the Germans have moved all their mechanized forces north of the Donets. They look to be planning a drive east to link up with Volkov’s bridgehead north of Volgograd. If they do advance south of the Donets, it will be with this 17th Army, not the panzers, and not for many months. They’ll have to breach the Donets line, take Rostov, occupy the Kuban and then get over the Manych. That could take a good long while.”

“It will be a difficult retreat for us for that very same reason.”

“Yes, we’ll lose twenty or thirty percent in the withdrawal, but seventy percent is better than nothing. It’s clear what the Germans are planning now. They want all the lower Volga—including Volgograd itself.”

“Why should they push so far east? Aren’t they simply planning to link up with Volkov in the Caucasus.”

“Of course,” said Zhukov, but they will not do that through the Crimea. They don’t have enough shipping to cross at Kerch. So they will have to take Rostov first, and when they do, soon they will have the oil we were after for so long at Maykop. But they will not stop there. They’ll want a firm military presence in the Caucasus, all the way to Baku, and they’ll want the lower Volga. Volgograd is a major industrial hub.”

“What is happening now on the lower Donets? You do not think this is a planned encirclement of Kharkov?”

“Of course, and then they will continue pushing east. As for Bryansk, that is another matter. That they must take, as it sits right astride all the rail lines up to Moscow. As long as we hold the salient at Smolensk, they can’t use that road. This is why they are fighting so hard to encircle Bryansk and Kirov. Taking those industrial centers from us will hurt production a good deal.”

“We just sent the 24th Siberian Army,” said Kirov. “Karpov kept his word, and they will stop the northern envelopment of those cities. It moved through Moscow just last week.”

“I saw the trains,” said Zhukov, and that simple statement held more meaning than it seemed. It had been customary for all divisions transiting through Moscow to conduct a ceremonial parade in Red Square, with select units marching in review before the Kremlin, but not any longer. Now the trains simply hastened on through, with little fanfare. The emergencies at the front were the only concern.

“I’ll get you more,” said Kirov. “Somehow... We still have the Siberian

1st Shock Army forming for a possible counterattack.”

“In light of the present situation,” said Zhukov, “I suggest we do not plan any major local counteroffensives, except at carefully chosen points to blunt enemy initiative. We just do not yet have the strength to attack in force. This single Siberian Army is most welcome, but I would use it to defend Moscow, not to counterattack.”

“Agreed,” said Kirov sullenly. “But will we keep Volgograd, and the Kuban?”

“Not if the Germans do break through and drive all the way to the Don. Then you can add the whole South Volga Front to the cauldron that will form, and I give them two months, three at best.”

“But you said they could be supplied from Volgograd itself.”

“If you can keep the factories running there under the artillery Volkov is sending over every day.”

“Yet we must hold that city,” said Kirov. “We’ve fought for it too long to give it to Volkov. As to the Kuban, what do you suggest we do now?”

“Get those troops out, and do it fast.”

“Retreat? But Berzin tells me we only just secured Maykop! And we’ll take Armavir soon.”

“Just in time to lose it again,” said Zhukov, not mincing words. “And good riddance. What do we need that for? Yes, it sits astride the rail lines coming up from Baku to Belorchensk, but you have already cut that line at Kuganinsk.”

“If Volkov builds up at Armavir, then he can mount an offensive to try and flank our position at Maykop. That place shields Krasnodar, which in turn shields Novorossiysk. Once the dominoes start falling, they are not easy to stop, General. I have a mind to hold as much ground as possible. We’ve already lost half the country!”

“I understand your wish to do so, but my advice is that we must pull those troops out. I’ll use them to hold off any breakthrough on our Donets line and save Rostov, at least for this year. Volkov has very little offensive punch in the Kuban. We can fall back on the Donets and Manych, and hold those lines far easier than we can with the troops where they are now. This will free up valuable divisions for use elsewhere. Then we should muster new armies at Moscow and hold them in reserve, beginning with this first Siberian Shock Army under Konev. Don’t worry, we’ll hold Moscow.”

“But they have pushed out beyond Orel! They have reconnaissance units approaching Tula!”

“Good for them. Unfortunately I can do nothing about that axis for the moment. Yes. It will encircle Bryansk, but we know where it will go next, here. We can’t stop it near Orel, so why try? Stand here with your Siberians, or perhaps at Tula, and let the Germans come. Build up reserves behind Moscow. If we attack, we must do so in real strength, in the winter as we planned. The commitment of a single army is not sufficient. It will take three armies to make any headway, and guarantee success. Five would even be better. Give me those Armies, and then we will talk again. For now. Save the three that are already there in the Kuban, because believe me, if we lose them, we will miss them. For that matter, save the troops at Roslaval and Bryansk before the trap closes there. I could use those troops as well.”

After a long silence Sergei Kirov gave a solemn nod of his head, thinking. “Thank you General. Your advice is sobering, to say the least. I must think on this, and I will inform you of my decision soon.”

*

***All** along the front the Red Army was hanging on against the German onslaught, ordered to entrench in every major city and hold those key centers as long as possible. They had already made the Germans pay dearly for Minsk and Kiev, and now they would fight for Smolensk, Kirov, and Bryansk. As the German lines advanced, they flowed around these breakwater defensive bastions to envelop them, which created several salients on either side of those cities, and also at Roslaval, where the 13th Army retreating from Mogilev had dug in deep and was still holding out. Kharkov was encircled in the South, and the German 9th Army was closing around Bryansk like a steel vise.*

Further east, the Panzers were still rolling with Guderian, bypassing that city and heading for Orel and possibly Tula if they could get authorization from Hitler to proceed, and the fuel and supplies to get them there. The Schwerpunkt of the German advance had become a victim of its own success, its momentum slowly dissipating as it pushed north, sometimes into thin air. The 24th Motorized Korps of Panzergruppe 2 under Geyer von

Schweppenbourg had led the way, with 3rd and 4th Panzer Divisions, and 10th Motorized Division following behind. The drive north after breaking out at Kiev had been a halcyon affair, with the Russians in full retreat, and only small pockets of resistance to mop up along the way. The Soviets were so thoroughly shattered that they would not be able to reform a cohesive line for weeks, falling back towards Kursk to the north and east.

Panzergruppe 2 rolled on, hindered more by supply shortages, the bad roads, and slowly worsening ground than anything else. As they pushed north the supply lines extended further and further, and the long columns of trucks trying to keep the combat elements moving began to encounter the first harbinger of what was to come. The Russians called it the Raputista, the time of no roads, when rains heralded the coming of autumn and the end of dry ground for months on end. Eventually General Winter would arrive, blanketing everything with an icy frost, but, until the ground froze, it became a morass of viscous mud that was almost impassable. Vehicles would find themselves axel deep in minutes, and trying to use tractors to tow them often resulted in damage to radiators, oil pans and gear boxes.

For now, the ground was good enough to continue the offensive, which had the general aim of bypassing and enveloping the major industrial center of Bryansk. Also a major rail hub, as long as they held that city, the Germans would not have the use of a good rail line to sustain further operations towards Moscow. There was also one good rail line from Orel, heading south through L'gov and eventually reaching the German logistical center established at Kiev. But the Russian retreat had chosen that rail line to reorganize the defense, and it would soon be necessary to push them off in order to make any use of it. Once secured, the long process of conversion from the Russian wide gauge to the narrower European gauge could then take weeks before it could serve any useful purpose as a supply conduit.

In those precious weeks, the Russians had a sliver of time to organize the defense of Moscow and try to unhinge Operation Typhoon. To do so, Sergei Kirov was calling in the markers he had placed on the table when he bargained with Karpov on the 1st of August. He needed veteran troops, men who would stand and fight, and above all, he needed some means of stopping the devastating German mobile divisions. He needed the Siberians, and he needed heroes, and soon he would have them both well in hand.

It had not been all gloom and disaster, in spite of the terrible losses of

men, material and territory that the Soviets had suffered since May. There had been moments of great bravery and heroism, and units fought, some dying to a man, to hold vital ground while their comrades retreated all around them. The fighting had been hard and bitter; the price of faulty deployment, or the inexperience of a young commander, very high at times. More than anything, the Russians needed an effective mobile element to match the German Panzer Divisions.

They had started the war with full divisions, mostly equipped with obsolete T-26 tanks, and these had been arranged into large, unwieldy Mechanized Corps. Their size created sloth in deployment and maneuver, particularly because many of the tanks had no radios, and communications problems created a kind of mechanized chaos when the corps would attempt to move. The shattering German advance since May had eventually engaged and largely destroyed these early war formations, and the Russians had been replacing them with smaller Armored Brigades, many under construction for some time, as Kirov had the advantage of knowing what would go wrong.

Many generals resisted his planned remodeling of the Soviet Armored Corps, but one man, General Pavel Rotmistrov, had made convincing arguments for change. The brigades Kirov was building were mixed formations, with a battalion of T-60 or the newer T-70 light tanks, and then a medium battalion of 24 to 36 new T-34s, buttressed by ten of the heavier KV-1 Tanks. Rotmistrov pointed out the flaw in this unit grouping, based on real time practical experience.

“In one respect, it is good the Germans have destroyed most of our older tank divisions, as hard as that is to say. Now we can use the new tanks to build proper formations. But do not mix in the light and heavy tanks with our T-34s.”

“Why not?” Kirov had asked. “The Germans use a similar model. They have their lighter tanks mixed with medium and heavy types.”

“They are the Germans, and the cohesiveness of their mobile operations is unmatched. We have seen our own mobile tactics fall considerably short. Yes, our light tanks are as fast as the new T-34s on the roads, but their narrower tracks make them poor off road performers. Most of the time we find ourselves operating in the open country, and the T-34s do very well there, quickly leaving the lighter tanks behind when they advance. As for the KV-1s they are too slow to keep up under any conditions. And too heavy for

many of the old bridges, which are often so badly damaged after they cross that nothing else can use them!”

“Then what do you suggest?”

“Group all our T-34s together in one battalion. Put the light tanks with the KV-1 in a separate battalion. And by all means, let the light tanks cross the bridges first. Then follow the KV-1s with engineers to repair the damage. The new T-34s are our armored fist. Let them maneuver cross country and strike the enemy columns on the flank. Those tanks are superb in this role, if they are well led. Then, use the T-60s and T-70s for rapid movement on the roads, backed up by infantry and any KV-1 tanks assigned. The light tanks fight better in towns and villages too, where they can maneuver easily in the urban setting, and provide good fire support for infantry. This is how we must fight.”

Part X

Typhoon

“The wise man in the storm prays to God, not for safety from danger, but deliverance from fear.”

—Ralph Waldo Emerson

Chapter 28

It was very good advice, and Sergei Kirov gave orders that, as far as possible, this new brigade structure should be followed in the Armored corps rebuilding program, and it should be hastened in every possible way. “On that matter, how is the Mechanized Corps conversion going?”

“We are making good progress,” said Berzin. “As Rotmistrov warned us, our original structure for those corps was faulty. Most were destroyed, either because they were so unwieldy they could not maneuver, or because their tanks were woefully inadequate.”

“It was both,” said Kirov. “That and the lack of radio communications throughout the corps structure, but we have corrected that, have we not?”

“Yes, all the new Corps formations will have a much better command and control system,” said Berzin. “We have adopted the organization Rotmistrov recommended—lighter tank brigades and motorize rifle units to replace the old mech and armored divisions. Yet we haven’t enough new tanks to provide these corps with three full brigades as in the material. So what we are doing is building up a stronger Motor Rifle Division from the motorized regiment, and further augmenting this with the addition of an Engineer Regiment, and a fast motorcycle cavalry regiment. In time, as we get more of the new tanks, we can add the missing third tank brigade.”

“How soon will they be ready?”

“The conversions are well underway. We should have new units ready in a matter of weeks.”

“Excellent,” said Kirov. “The Germans won’t be expecting us to adapt so quickly. You see, Berzin, the material is still a valuable aid to our war planning. We learn from it what eventually worked. Now it simply becomes a matter of building the tanks. These new Corps must not be rushed in piecemeal. Remember how they were used in new Tank Armies in the material.” He held out a finger to emphasize his point.

“We have three new Corps forming in the field at Lipetsk,” said Berzin, “well to the east of Orel, the 17th, 20th and 21st Tank Corps. That is the new designation. We will no longer call these formations Mechanized Corps.

Those three will comprise our first new Tank Army. The rest are in various stages of readiness, and they will be added to STAVKA reserve. We can fold them into additional Tank Armies as those headquarters become operational.”

“And the icing on the cake will be the Siberians,” said Kirov.

Berzin looked up from the map, surprised. “You are moving 1st Shock Army now?”

“As soon as we can free up enough rolling stock. The Germans are going to make a drive on Tula. We know that, and everything in the field points to Guderian making the very same move he did in the material. They may get there, but the material indicates they will not be in good shape by the time they arrive. I want to be ready to counterattack.”

“Yet the roads are still passable,” said Berzin. “Remember, this isn’t October as it was in the material. The Germans are a full month ahead of schedule.”

“So we must fight for time,” said Kirov. “We must delay them until the Raputista takes hold, and dig in deep. Then, when the ground freezes, I’ll want those new Tank Corps ready with the Siberians. Their movement now is just a precaution. They are too far east, and I wish to get them closer to Moscow.”

“And away from Karpov’s control,” said Berzin with a grin.

“Karpov? He has only one thing on his mind now—getting that ship under his boots.”

“Was it wise to give him such a weapon?” asked Berzin.

“Perhaps not, but it bought us a good deal in return. And the added benefit is we don’t have Karpov in our hair concerning these land operations. He whined on and on about that offensive on the upper Volga. Now things have quieted down. So yes, the Siberian 1st is to head west for Moscow.”

“In case the Germans break through at Tula,” said Berzin, wary of the threat. “Yes, we must not become complacent, or too overconfident. There is still a lot of fight in the Germans. They remain very dangerous.”

The rapid advance of the German 2nd Panzer Group now threatened to

overrun Orel and seize the valuable depot stores there. The line had burst open further south, and the Germans were doing some broken field running with their swift moving panzer divisions. There was no cohesive Soviet defense, and the few units retreating up the road from the south passed quickly through Orel in the late summer night, the frightened citizenry watching from their windows.

The night was then strangely quiet, the calm before the storm, but by morning the fear lay upon the city like a funeral shroud. People were on the streets, loading any vehicle that would run, any truck or cart that had not already been commandeered by the retreating army to move its weary, wounded soldiers. As the last rearguard rushed through the main streets in a bustle of clatter and dust, women wept to see them go, for they knew any semblance of life as they once knew it was retreating with them, hastening up the long thin road to Tula. By noon the panic had set in, with the rolling sound of distant artillery fire heralding the coming typhoon of steel.

An NKVD section arrived in three trucks from the north, and a young, red cheeked officer vainly tried to stop the flow of people and machines out of the city. New to his job, he berated the retreat, brandishing his service pistol, though he did not use it. And when the people saw he would not kill them, or force them into militias as had happened in so many other cities, they hastened north, carrying all they could hold.

The Germans came soon after, a column of mechanized troops in the vanguard of the 4th Panzer Division. Soon they would get a lesson of their own. It was a heady time, for it seemed the road to Tula was wide open, and that was the road to Moscow, at least insofar as Heinz Guderian was concerned. Yet the Russians were still not beaten, and a new defense was already being planned south of Tula.

Reading the material on the war carefully, Sergei Kirov had deployed a hastily formed blocking force on the road to Tula, the 1st Special Guards Rifle Corps, built with the foreknowledge he possessed. It had been formed, as it was in the older history, around the hard core of the 6th Guard Rifle Division. To these veteran troops, two Airborne Brigades were taken from the fields near Moscow, the 10th and 201st. The 4th and 11th Tank Brigades arrived by rail, and with them came the 36th Motorcycle Regiment, the 132nd Border Guards Regiment, and the student battalion from the Tula Artillery Military School. An older cavalry division, the 41st had also been reforming

near Tula, and it was added to this corps as a light reaction force.

The engagement that would soon follow would show the way forward. Possessed with a foreknowledge of what the Germans might do, and even with information that identified key players in that drama, Kirov also knew how they might be stopped. “The 1st Special Rifle Corps,” he said to Berzin. “You read the material. Those were the boys who delayed Guderian, and we will send the same force to do the job again.”

“You mean to say you have assembled the very same units?”

“More or less, and in this case more means I have assigned new T-34s to those two armored Brigades, the 4th and 11th. Some of our best tankers emerged from those units, and now they get their trial by fire. I also have a Guards Rifle Division to support them.”

“Are we committing the new tank brigades too soon?”

“It will do us no good to commit them after we lose the capital,” said Kirov with an exasperated look.

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Slowly, in suffering one hard defeat after another, the Red Army was being taken to a deadly school of tactics and strategy by the Germans, and some of the men fighting for Sergei Kirov were going to become very good students.

One such man had come down the road from Tula, handpicked by Sergei Kirov himself, who had seen his fate and fortune in the books he had secreted in the Red Archives. His name was Mikhail Katukov, and he had the newly reconstituted 4th Tank Brigade out in front on the road to Orel, with two battalions restructured along the lines Rotmistrov had suggested, freshly fitted out with the new T-34 tanks that would form the backbone of Soviet Armored operations for the remainder of the war.

His two battalion commanders, Gusev and Burda, were both well experienced men, and Lt. Dimitry Lavrinenko’s platoon was soon tasked with holding the road at Voin, about 20 kilometers from Orel on the road to Tula. After a grueling battle to envelop Bryansk, the Germans had sent their 4th Panzer Division up that road, intending to sweep through Orel and continue a wide envelopment up to Tula, which would threaten Moscow from the south

and east. But they were about to meet a most enterprising young man, with other ideas about how their campaign should go.

In May of 1938, as a young man of 24 years, Dimitry Lavrinenko graduated with honors from the Ukyanovsk Tank Academy. Born a Kuban Cossack in a small village near Krasnodar, he had been a numbers man before the war, a teacher, statistician and cashier. Soon he found himself in the deadly calculus of war, far from home in the north where he fought in the long retreat from the border, until his unit was pulled off the line to be refitted with the new T-34 tank.

The Lieutenant had always been a stalwart defender, adopting a habit of holding his positions to the last possible moment, and personally assuring that all other tanks in his unit safely withdrew before he ever pulled out. Bravery came naturally to him. Even his home town when translated meant 'fearless,' and when he fought, it was with a single minded skill that could not admit fear to the equation of battle if he were to succeed. It was his platoon of four tanks that reached the village first, and Lavrinenko quickly sized up the situation, spying a farm near a wooded area just east of the town. He was lucky to have some paratroopers along, men who had landed at a small airfield just a few hours earlier. The orders had been cut, the alarm sounded, and they had leapt onto planes to fly south and land as close to Orel as possible. Arriving just as the 4th Tank Brigade was moving to take up their defensive positions, many leapt atop the T-34s riding down the road to Voin.

"Get your men into those woods, and set up a skirmish line," said Lavrinenko. "I'll hold my tanks at the farm, and we'll lie in ambush. The rest of the battalion is on that low ridge." He wanted to lay a trap for the German panzers as they moved through those woods, baited by the paratroopers, who were ordered to delay and then fall back to the village.

Lavrinenko's tank platoon of four T-34s was holding at that insignificant farm astride the road, just as it emerged from the woods, where the early harvest still lay in great piles of hay. It would provide him the perfect cover for his tanks, he thought, and maneuvered between the high mounds of hay, jumping out of his tank to shovel more onto to his tank for camouflage. The trap was set, and now they waited for the mice to come, only these mice were cold steel rats with very sharp teeth.

He was about to get a real test of what his T-34s could do, for coming down that road, sweeping through the woodland after the scattering

paratroopers, was a column from the 4th Panzer Division, Guderian's spearhead as the Germans drove up from Orel.

"Let them come, boys," he said in a hushed voice. "They'll run right past our line of fire. Mark your targets and fire on my command."

The other tanks in his platoon knew that was always protocol with Lavrinenko. Nobody took a shot until his tank opened the engagement, and a breathless minute later he did exactly that.

He did not know it at that moment, oblivious of the hours and days that might lie ahead for his men, but the unit he had joined was going to have a storied future. Off to his right, another platoon was hidden in the woods under Captain Konstantin Mihaylovich Samohin. Behind that, a third platoon, the only other armor that had arrived, was waiting with 1st Sergeant Ivan Timfeyevich. They were soon to face the wrath of 36 German tanks rolling with the I/35th Panzer Regiment, and the fate of the nation, at least on that road to Moscow, was presently in their hands.

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The battle at Mtsensk was sharp and deadly. The units of the 201st Airborne Brigade that had been assigned to support the 1st Special Rifle Corps had dispersed along a narrow front of light woods screening the town from the south and west. Into those same woods went the lead elements of the 35th Panzer Regiment of 4th Panzer Division, its lead battalion still fielding mostly Panzer III tanks with the 50mm gun. It had been more than enough to deal with the older Soviet tanks they had faced earlier, the T-37, T-38, and T-40 all becoming easy prey.

The Germans had been accustomed to encountering these vehicles, and were able to open up on them at ranges approaching 1000 meters, usually making short work of them. Being light amphibious scout tanks, the Russian armor had nothing that could harm the Panzer IIIs, with little more than 12.7mm machine guns for main armament. The newer T-60 fared a little better with a 20mm cannon and armor approaching 26mm, but it was still a light tank in every respect, and posed no real threat to the Panzer IIIs, which had more than twice the firepower with its 50mm gun, and armor up to 70mm.

But all that was about to change.

The Airborne screen was the 3rd Battalion of the 201st “Kirov” Airborne Brigade, commanded by Lt Colonel Kovalev. They had managed to get air lifted into a small airfield about 8 kilometers north of Orel before the Germans overran the place. Now they fell back, in seeming disarray, but in actuality they were operating under pre-planned orders, hoping to lure the German tanks after them to the farms just outside the town, where Lavrinenko waited with his comrades in something quite different.

The new T-34 was just beginning to arrive at designated units along the front. Most were held in reserve areas, where the remnants of the old Mech Corps had been consolidating and converting to the new structure discussed by Kirov and Berzin. Yet there were a few assigned to independent brigades, and two of them were now sitting astride the path of the German advance, the 4th and 11th. They had been cleverly hidden in and behind farm houses, large bales of hay, and harvest silos, with numerous dummy tank positions also erected to try and fool the Stuka pilots that swept down during every major German advance. Other tanks lay concealed in the nearby woodland, and now their carefully laid ambush was sprung.

The crack of the 76mm gun on the new Soviet tanks was sharp and harsh on the cool morning air, and the Germans, with equal cool, quickly spotted the muzzle flashes in the distance, over a full kilometer away. These were not T-60s, and formation leader Colonel Heinrich Eberbach first thought they must be well concealed KV-1 tanks, with a decent 76mm gun. His ‘Vorausabteilung’ was the advanced detachment leading the way to Mtsensk on the main road, and it consisted of 36 tanks, a pair of 88s, a small gun detachment from the artillery regiment, a platoon of motorcycle infantry and 1st company from Pioneer Battalion 79.

The KV-1 had been encountered before, and the Germans had learned to respect it, finding it invulnerable to most every tank gun they had. Only the dread 88s could hope to knock one out at range, and in after action reports, German inspectors had found knocked out KV-1s that had sustained thirty to forty hits from lighter 37mm and 50mm guns, and still fought on before the 88s finished them off. Thankfully, these tanks were always deployed in small numbers and the Germans were not overly concerned. They were also slow and cumbersome, which made them easy to outflank. The German Panzer IIIs swept around them like jackals hunting a bison, and usually prevailed. Their

superior numbers would usually decide the day.

That day, Eberbach had a mix of both Panzer III-Js and a few Panzer IV infantry support tanks. The first crack of the guns had been reported correctly, for it was three KV-1 tanks under Sergeant Antonov that had opened the battle on the German flank, firing from the woods. A halftrack was hit and exploded, the shock of the attack riveting the German tankers as they quickly wheeled right off the road to engage. The KV-1s had always been tough when encountered, but they were too often accompanied only by lighter tanks. That was not the case this time. Lavrinenko's platoon at the farm was near Antonov, and his four T-34s soon joined the action. Then the entire tree line opened up, as the rest of the Soviet brigade under battalion commanders Gusev and Burda began to attack.

Chapter 29

The Germans suddenly realized that the Airborne troops had only been deployed to hold and lure them on. Now the main threat was revealed, and they quickly lost several Panzer IIIs to drive home the lesson. Eberbach stopped before a small stone bridge, squinting through field glasses at the woods astride the road ahead. Something told him there was trouble ahead, an instinct that prickled up from time to time, and he had learned to heed its warning.

A veteran on the First World War, he had been wounded by a French bullet that took his nose, and the surgeons had decided to fashion a new one for him made of rubber. His food never tasted the same after that, but that rubber nose still served him well in other ways. It was never cold in the wind, and at times like this, it still had the scent of battle. Yet he needed to know more.

“What is the problem?” he asked a Sergeant.

“The lead squadron chased some light infantry out of those woods, but they ran into a couple enemy tanks—KV-1s from the sound of the guns.”

Eberbach looked around. “That stream will make a quick flanking maneuver more difficult. Better bring up the 88s.”

“That had always been the German trump card against the tough Russian heavy tanks. The KV-II was even more of a behemoth, though they seldom encountered them. Eberbach had heard rumors that the British had a new tank as well, something that the 88s could not even stop, which gave him a real shudder. But thus far, no such beast had shown up in the Russian camp, and so he played out his trump, hoping to make a quick end of things here.

The 88s came up, along with a pair of 10.5cm artillery pieces, which could also knock out the heavier Russian tanks if they got a good hit. The game was slowly escalating, up through higher caliber guns to counter ever thickening armor. Eberbach noted a small wooded ridge on his flank, as the gunners got into position and began firing at the KV-1s. The 105s disabled one heavy tank, and another was put out of action by the 88s, along with two T-60s that had come on the scene. Then the enemy suddenly sprung into

action, maneuvering to attack the German guns, and, as Eberbach watched the speedy Russian tanks sprint to get into a better firing position, he knew he was not dealing with the same awkward tank divisions his men had beaten time and time again. But what were they? The swept out from another wooded area to the north, rolling swiftly and easily over the sodden ground, and they were not T-60s. Two stopped and he saw the turrets turn to engage his 88s, while the crews were struggling to turn the big guns to face this new threat. With a sinking feeling he knew these had to be the new enemy T-34s, yet they were seldom seen in such numbers, maneuvering rapidly to flank the 88s. They were Germany's premier anti-tank weapon, yet cumbersome to move and deploy, and basically a stationary target once in action.

Eberbach cringed when the first 88 was struck by a direct hit, the heavy gun mount literally lifted off the ground. To his great surprise, the Russians were firing from well beyond a thousand meters, and the second gun was also lost within minutes. He ran to a platoon of Mark IVs on the road leading to the bridge. "Move! Get after those damn tanks!"

On the other side of that action, Dmitri Lavrinenko watched from his hidden position within a tall bale of hay at the edge of the farm. Samohin's platoon maneuvered as planned, and he got those guns, but here came the German tanks.

"Track left," he said to his gunner. "Make your range 1.2.... Fire!" He was pleased to see a hit with the very first round, and soon after, the other three tanks in his platoon opened up

"Left five degrees, range 1000... Fire!"

In a matter of minutes he had scored two kills, and now he decided to move, ordering his driver to back out of their concealed position. He gave a similar order over his radio headset, grateful that his tanks finally had radios. The platoon executed a quick turn, put on speed following Dmitri's tank, and sprinted to their next planned firing position, a low rise that covered a road.

In this tiny little duel, a relatively small island action in the raging sea of war on every side, the Germans would make the acquaintance of Lavrinenko and his comrades in their new T-34s, and lose ten tanks in thirty minutes time. Six were completely destroyed, with four others badly damaged, but hauled off for repairs. The two 88s that had successfully engaged were also taken out, along with one of the two 105mm guns, and several half tracks and

prime movers. It would cost the enemy at least 9 tanks to achieve that result, the three KV-1s, four T-60s and two of the new T-34s, but nothing like that had happened before—an enemy tank force that could not only match, but completely stop a well equipped German mechanized *kampfgruppe*, inflicting as much damage as it had received.

While a sharp check, it was not really a devastating loss, and the Germans had managed to inflict equal harm on the enemy before nightfall. Yet they took a hard lesson—their foe was learning how to fight them, and now the enemy had a formidable new tank in the T-34 that made new tactics like those employed by Lavrinenko and Samohin possible. Like the KV-1, it was able to engage the Panzer IIIs at long range, and forced the German tankers to close to 500 meters to have any chance of a kill, and then only if they could somehow flank the Russian tanks. That soon proved a difficult task, for the wide tracks of the T-34 gave it excellent open field maneuverability, and good speed.

After the action, Guderian was told the enemy had a tank that was better than anything in the entire Panzergruppe, which was humbling to realize. It was a psychological check more than a hard physical loss, for in these altered states, it was still only August, and Guderian's force was far more robust than it had been when this battle was fought in Fedorov's history. The battle had one further aftershock when it was reported by Guderian to OKW. It cemented more than ever the need for rapid upgrades to the primary German armor, for now a most important decision was about to be made, one that would decide the entire future course of the war.

Firstly, Guderian had ordered Eberbach north simply as a reconnaissance in force, and more to scout the condition of the road than anything else. Taking Mtsensk was simply an adjunct to that aim. Yet, after being stopped outside the town, Eberbach called for support from the rest of the division, and more troops were sent to settle the matter. When they got there, they found that the Russian tankers had been reinforced with the arrival of the 6th Guards Rifle Division, and a real battle was now on the menu.

That night Eberbach consulted his map, seeing that a shallow river wended its way through the Mtsensk, meandering on east of the town for many miles. He advocated a more coordinated attack, and Division commander Langemann agreed.

“We got a good bloody nose this morning,” he said. “What was the problem?”

“T-34s, and a good number this time. We got six or eight, but I think they have a full battalion here. The rest were the same old fare, but they did have KV-1s as well.”

“You lost two 88s?”

“Those damn T-34s,” said Eberbach. “They move very quickly, and we can’t hurt them with our 50cm guns unless we get in close. But it was how they moved that startled me—very precise—a well planned ambush. Someone out there knows what he is doing.”

“They had to have learned something by now,” said Langermann. “Very well, tomorrow we bring up the Panzergrenadiers.”

The following morning KG Seiden came up with two battalions of 12th Panzergrenadier Regiment. They quickly joined Eberbach for a second attack up the main road, and were successful in pushing through Voin, Gorolevo and the small hamlet of Svoda. The enemy para units were falling back towards hill 879 west of Mtsensk, stopping in orchards to deploy briefly, then retreating again in a well coordinated withdrawal. Eberbach was on that side of the action, with a company of engineers and the 4th Motorcycle Battalion. But his tanks had pushed on up the road to Mtsensk, and soon were in another sharp duel with the 4th and 11th Tank Brigades as they entered the town.

Katukov had fallen back there to regroup that night, summoning Bonder’s 11th Tank Brigade, which was in local reserve at the northern fringe of the town. Now in the closer quarters urban engagement, things were a little different. Eberbach’s Panzer IIIs proved more maneuverable, and the shorter range duels had evened the odds. The Germans were able to maneuver through the narrow streets and get good positions for side shots on the Russian tanks, most of which were still the familiar T-60s in Bonder’s group.

In the meantime, KG Dorn had come up last, with two more battalions from the 33rd Panzergrenadier Regiment. These were quickly sent east in an attempt to envelop the town, but they soon ran into the 10th Para Brigade dug in on the northern side of the river. In little time, the entire division was engaged, with Eberbach slowly fighting his way into the town.

Katukov’s 4th Tank Brigade losses were not that severe, with 5 T-34, a KV-1 and three T-60s destroyed. But his supplies were dwindling, and that

night Eberbach mounted a daring raid on the depots for Bondar's 11th Brigade, destroying much needed ammunition in a brief, midnight sortie that the Russians never saw coming. With the 5th Guards now taking over the defense of the town, Katukov took his brigade up the road to Tula to regroup at Chern. It was a prescient move, for the following morning Guderian's 3rd Panzer Division began arriving from Orel.

Seeing that the fighting ahead would completely block movement on the main road that day, KG Wellmann of the 3rd Panzer moved north instead, until they found a serviceable bridge near hill 670, at a small hamlet called Tarkunovka. There they crossed to scout out the possibility of sweeping the entire division up around the battle at Mtsensk, intending to envelop it from the north and rejoin the main road to Tula at the same time. The movement would take them well beyond the action, and the place Wellmann was fingering on his map was called Chern.

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The fighting continued for a third day at Mtsensk, as the Germans were forced to clear the town block by block, and with heavy casualties. I/35th Panzer battalion in Eberbach's group had suffered the most. It had started the three day battle with 46 medium tanks, which included a company of 10 PzKfw-IVDs that had joined his KG. By the end of the third day it had only 19 of 36 Panzer IIIs, and 7 of 10 IV-Ds remaining—over 40% casualties in the vital medium tank category. Only three light tanks were lost, but the total tank loss in the battalion 20, a cold number to report when Eberbach met with Guderian.

"What about II Battalion," asked Guderian, obviously concerned.

"They weren't involved in the street fighting tonight, and so losses there were relatively light—only five tanks, but four of them Panzer IIIs. The enemy armor is withdrawing, and I think we gave as good as we got, but this was a hard fight."

"And at the end of a very long road," said Guderian. He could see the fatigue in Eberbach now, the lines on his face, soiled uniform and crumpled hat all adding to the impression of a man who had been simply worn down. And for the first time, Guderian thought he saw the glimmer of fear in the

other man's eyes. That would be the real enemy, he knew—fear. Up until now his tankers had reigned supreme, but now they had finally met their nemesis, and then some.

Eberbach continued. “KG Seiden was in the town, and is now very low on supply. KG Dorn had a better time of it on the right. They pushed over the river and are poised to take this high ground in the morning. It overlooks the road north of the town, and I think the Russians know we have them now. Yet this was supposed to be a simple reconnaissance!”

“3rd Panzer is coming up from Orel,” said Guderian, hoping to put some spirit back into Eberbach, but he could see the man would do better with some good food and rest. “Don’t push things in the morning. Let’s see how stubborn they want to be when they see 3rd Panzer on their right flank. Then I think they will give us this place.”

“Yes? Well it would be nice if OKW gave us some new tanks. If it goes like this every time we run into those T-34s...”

“I will plead your case soon enough,” said Guderian. “Halder wants to see me at OKW and I leave tonight. 3rd Panzer will move in front now. Rest your boys and see if you can get any of those lost tanks running again. There’s been a lot of talk about new tanks for us soon, though I haven’t seen even one. We shall see if Halder knows anything.”

Eberbach would eventually get six of those 20 disabled tanks running again, but his regiment had suffered a hard blow. He did not know it yet, but the action he had led was the opening round of what would soon transform into the last big push by the German Army to try and win the war in 1941—Operation Typhoon.

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On the morning of the fourth day, it was out of the frying pan and into the fire to Katukov’s intrepid tankers. They had spent the short night in Chern, repairing tank treads and other light damage, scrounging for fuel and ammunition, and taking stock of what was left of the mobile force. Dmitri Lavrinenko had started on his astonishing run of tank kills, getting six of those twenty German panzers, and his comrade Konstantin Samohin had five kills.

Lavrinenko was standing beside his T-34, looking like Napoleon in his long grey trench coat, hat and earmuffs askew, and one hand tucked inside the flap of his coat to keep it warm in the chilly dawn.

“A good fight for a change,” he said.

“Yet here we are,” said Samohin, “still heading north, and they’ll take Mtsensk this morning. Bondar’s group got the worst of it.”

“Raftopoulo came in with his second battalion this morning. Chemelki didn’t make it with the first...”

“They fought well, but they’re still clattering around in those old BT-7s.” said Lavrinenko. “This one here,” he thumbed his T-34, “this is the way to build a good tank. Did you see those Panzers go up? One damn shot was all it took! Give us enough of these, and we’ll win this war, and I’ll get a hundred enemy tanks to prove it.”

“I’ll get a hundred too,” said Samohin. “Let us see who gets there first.”

They would each get their chance again that day, as Katukov had been ordered to hold Chern to try and delay any further enemy advance on Tula until the defense could be organized there. Too slow to foot it the 20 kilometers north on the main road, the 6th Guards Division, and what was left of the two para brigades, withdrew east of Mtsensk toward higher ground near Hill 873 and the village of Bobriki. They had learned a new Soviet Rifle Corps of three new divisions had arrived to the south of that position, facing the German 267th Infantry was positioned to screen the road back to Orel.

The “incident” at Mtsensk would soon take on far more gravity than it seemed. The movement of 3rd Panzer Division around the town had started a flow of men and machines north on the road to Tula, and so the supply columns would have to follow, and as it so often happened in war, one thing would lead to another. The brief battle took on a certain momentum in Guderian’s mind as well as he thought about the road ahead, for that was obviously where those enemy units had come from—Tula, an important enemy arms manufacturing center. Soon this action would figure prominently in the discussion being held at OKW, and Guderian would take key thoughts to that meeting when he hastened south in a plane to attend.

The first was that the enemy tanks were now better than anything he had, and they were learning how to use them. The second was that Tula should be taken, and quickly, before the already deteriorating weather conditions made the roads impassable.

Chapter 30

After Orel was secured, the planners at OKW met with Hitler to determine the next move. Halder was full of energy that day, for he had not spent the long hours on the road, fighting from one hamlet and village to another, and slowly seeing the gradual deterioration of the men and machines. His great worry had been lack of fuel, but thus far, supplies had held up well enough. Now the taking of Orel marked the decision point for the question on whether or not to drive on Moscow. Guderian called it the most important decision OKW would have to make in the war, and Halder appeared with a heavy briefcase containing plans for his new operation, well prepared to argue that Moscow should be taken before the roads became impossible. At the same time, Manstein countered by suggesting Guderian should instead turn east to form the northern pincer of a major operation aimed at Voronezh.

With Hitler unable to decide himself, Guderian was ordered to give his mind on the matter, and deliver a firsthand assessment from the field. After a long flight back to Germany, he gave them an earful, sobering in every respect, telling them that the supply situation was far more tenuous than OKW might believe, and that the condition of vehicles, tanks and prime movers was deteriorating rapidly due to the wear and tear of 10 days continuous heavy fighting.

“There was an incident at Mtsensk that I found very disturbing,” he said. “4th Panzer Division was ordered to push up the road north of Orel, and they ran into some very tough units. The Russians have deployed a new tank. Thus far we have had our way with their older mechanized corps, and they have largely been destroyed or withdrawn from the battlefield by now. The enemy has been holding on with Rifle Divisions, but no longer. These new Russian tanks were superior to all our Panzer III designs, and even better than our Panzer IV.”

“We have seen the report,” said Halder.

“Yes? Well that was not the whole story. I had a close look at one of these

new Russian tanks, and it is very impressive—good sloped frontal armor, a gun that outclasses anything on our tanks, and wide treads for excellent traction and cross country performance. That capability was never in the Russian Armored Corps before, and now they are learning how to maneuver. From all reports, the tactics they adopted were just as worrisome as the tanks they used.”

“Do not be overly concerned, General, we have known about this formation of these new enemy tank brigades for some time.”

Guderian frowned. “Then you might have given us fair warning!”

“We were not sure just how soon the Russians would field these units,” said Halder, “but don’t worry, Ivan Volkov sent us the plans for this tank nine months ago. We know all about it.”

“Nine months?” Guderian was very surprised to hear this.

“Correct,” said Halder dryly, “and we have not been merely sitting on our thumbs since then, General. Damlier Benz developed a new prototype vehicle from the information we obtained.”

“Very much like this new enemy tank,” said Hitler. “I found it acceptable, but I was convinced otherwise.”

“We also decided to use our own design methods in a competing version, and Maschinenfabrik Augsburg-Nürnberg produced a prototype that seemed more promising.”

“The Damlier–Benz version looked too much like this new Russian tank you are worried about,” said Hitler, “and the issue of friendly fire was raised. The plans are there on the table. You can have a look for yourself. Note the forward deployment of the gun turret. I was convinced that might also cause difficulties when traversing a steep slope.”

“So the turret was moved further back in the MAN design,” said Halder. “It also has wider tracks for better ground pressure, a larger fuel tank for the diesel engines to deliver better range, and excellent twin torsion bar suspension. Here is the schematic.” He shifted a document under the overhanging light, and Guderian nodded.

“We are calling this one the Panzerkampfwagen VK-30, the Leopard, the first of the Big Cats. That tank is 35 tons, about ten tons heavier than our best Mark IV tanks. It will have 60mm frontal armor, but note the slope. That will increase resistance to penetration considerably. I am told it is the equivalent of 90mm in vertically mounted armor. Your Panzer divisions will soon be

supported by this new design, which is still being modified and improved. At the Fuhrer's request, the next version will have even better protection, up to 80mm sloped armor, with stopping power equivalent to 120mm of vertical armor. We will call that one the Panther, about 45 tons in total weight. They are coming, Herr General. The first brigades are already on the prowl, so you must be patient."

"Yes, yes, they are coming, but they will not be with me on the road to Tula!"

"I beg to differ," said Halder. "The first will arrive in a special heavy brigade formations as medium scout tanks."

"A 35 ton tank for reconnaissance?" Guderian looked up, quite surprised.

"Yes," said Halder, "it is fast enough to do the job. But wait until you see what follows it." Halder reached for a leather brief on the table, opening it to reveal another set of plans. "Here we have yet another new design. We call it the Löwe, a real Lion, though this one is just the beginning—the Panzerkampfwagen VK-55L. That number designates its weight—55 tons."

Guderian was stunned. "That is twice the weight of our Mark IVs!"

"True, and this is only the Leichter Löwe, the lightest version of this design. Even heavier versions are in the works, one at 76 tons, and a third at 90 tons. Once you see them, I do not believe you will have any further concerns."

"That is most encouraging," said Guderian, "assuming we get the fuel and supplies to keep those Lions hunting. And has it occurred to you that there probably isn't a bridge between my position and Moscow that can take that kind of weight? Such a heavy vehicle will tear the roads to pieces. Is this the tank I was asked about earlier?"

"Correct," said Halder. "We have been working night and day. Krupp had the plans on the drawing board long ago, but development went into overdrive last February when Rommel ran into trouble in North Africa. Our first brigades are only now ready for field deployment. Therefore, the 101st Heavy Panzer Brigade has been assigned to spearhead the second wave behind your Panzergruppe, under Hoth. His 3rd Panzergruppe is coming up now, and it will strongly support your advance."

With no time for long development cycles, the Germans had moved heaven and earth to bring this tank into production ready status. It would

have 100mm sloped frontal armor and twice the side armor of a Mark IV at 60mm, with a stronger suspension to carry it in good balance. The turret was also well protected, with 80mm of armor up front and 60mm on the sides, and it housed a new weapon, the 7.5cm KwK-L/70, which would also be used on the Mark V Panther, and become one of the best guns in its class during the entire war. It could penetrate almost 90mm of armor at a very long range of 2000 meters, and up close, its maximum penetration was 138mm.

The heavier versions Halder had hinted at were now being designated the VK-76L, and the VK-90L respectively, with those numbers standing for the designed weight of the tank. They would be super heavy tanks by any measure, designed on all new chassis, though for now, only this preliminary 55L model was ready for combat trials. In effect, it was a design equivalent to yet another model under development, the Tiger.

Best of all, it was coming on the scene almost a full year early, as the real ‘tank shock’ for the Germans had not come here, but much earlier in the deserts of North Africa, when Brigadier Kinlan’s heavy tanks had completely stopped Rommel’s advance on Egypt. German engineers had been busy ever since, and though nothing they would design would ever match the Challenger II, the Big Cats would come prowling much sooner than they otherwise might have, and it would make a great difference on the Russian Front. The Leopard and Lion would now join two other models that were already in limited production, with names that would become famous in the history Fedorov knew, the Panther and Tiger.

General Guderian had been consulted, along with Rommel, on just what was to be desired to improve the panzer force, and he was very pleased to hear of this development, though still only cautiously optimistic.

“Very well,” he said, “with Hoth behind us, I believe we can proceed, with or without these new tanks.” He was more concerned about time and the conditions of the roads than anything else now, and this thought dominated his mind as he finished his report. “The troops will not be well prepared for foul weather, let alone winter temperatures if we delay any further. And the roads will only deteriorate if we get more rain, which will surely come. Whatever we do, it must be done immediately, or you will find those nice new heavy tanks stuck in three feet of mud.”

“Then you advocate a strong drive on Moscow now?” said Halder, pushing the matter to a head.

“At the very least,” said Guderian, “we must take Tula as a preliminary move. There is a decent road from Orel to Tula, and a rail line as well. If I turn east, I have nothing but open terrain and very few good roads taking me to Voronezh. At the moment we are still fighting to clear Orel and the lines of communication from there to Tula will be essential if we are to keep our forces supplied. Every effort must be made to convert that rail line for use before winter. That failing, I will need the airfields at Tula for possible supply by the Luftwaffe. Assuming, however, the order is given to turn east instead, I would still advocate the capture of Tula at the earliest possible opportunity. It is an important arms production center for the Russians, and a major rail hub like Orel. We must take it before we turn east, or the Russians will use it to build up behind our backs.”

That was just what Halder wanted to hear, and he used it to flog his horse over the finish line. “Both von Bock and Kesselring agree,” he said quickly. “They were bold enough to get in a plane and overfly Moscow last week, and von Bock reports the Russians are erecting several concentric defense lines around the capital. He insists we must take it now, and before the winter sets in.

Hitler had been listening closely, silent for some time, but then slowly nodded. “You are now ordered to take Tula,” he said, his eye firmly on Guderian. “In the south, the SS Panzer Korps will assemble for an operation to be described by General Manstein. We will use Steiner’s force to push east, but at Tula your troops will simply be too far north to support this movement. I have therefore decided that we can pursue both plans simultaneously.”

“On divergent courses?” asked Guderian.

“We have more than adequate means,” said Hitler. “Your task is now to first take Tula, and then consolidate with Hoth for a major offensive towards Moscow.”

“And what about Bryansk?”

“That city is nearly cut off,” said Halder. “Army Group Center will continue its kesselschlacht operations against the salients at Smolensk, Bryansk and finally Kirov, unless the Russians come to their senses and give it to us first.”

“That will take a lot of infantry,” said Guderian. “The two divisions I have are already on my right flank, and I will need to secure the flank with

my mobile divisions if I drive north. May I remind you that my entire 47th Panzer Korps is forming the northern pincer for the planned operation against Kursk, so it will not be available. And remember, I never received the 46th Panzer Korps.”

That unit had originally been comprised of the SS Reich Division, Grossdeutschland and the 10th Panzer Division, but it had been parceled out before Barbarossa began. Manstein had the two elite divisions operating in his newly established SS Korps, the dark nemesis of the Russians in the south. And 10th Panzer Division had been sent to North Africa, one small consolation for Rommel, who was still mourning the loss of both Grossdeutschland and the Herman Goering Division that had served him so well.

Hitler gave Manstein a dismissive wave of his hand. “With Hoth behind you, there should be sufficient forces available. As to the proposal put forward by General Manstein,” the Führer turned slowly, his eyes seeking the General at the other end of the table. “Is Kharkov secured?” That had been the precondition Hitler had imposed on Manstein prior to authorizing the drive east.

“The city is encircled,” said Manstein. “We estimate ten to twelve enemy divisions are trapped in that pocket. It may be a week or more before we can reduce it, but the city will fall in due course.”

“Then if Steiner moves east, what is your plan?”

“I will take Valuki first, my Führer, as the rail lines running into the Donbass pass through that city. Once secured, Steiner will drive due east to Rossosh, about 110 kilometers. That cuts the rail line into Millerovo, which supports a good part of the Southern and Trans-Caucasus Fronts. From there we drive along the southern bank of the Don, through Boguchar, Veshenskaya, and eventually Serafimovich, which is the stated objective of Volkov’s present offensive.”

“Very well,” said Hitler. “You will be pleased to learn that two new formations will be added to the northern fringe of your planned movement. Halder?”

“The first is the newly formed Hermann Goering Division,” said Halder. “It was with Rommel, but as he has little prospects for further offensive action at the moment, we recalled that unit and began to refit it three months ago. It will have a battalion of our new VK-55L panzers, and the Leopards as

well. Better yet, is the arrival of the 102nd Schwerepanzer Brigade, with another 48 Lions. This should be a good field test!”

Hitler smiled. “General Manstein, I authorize this operation to proceed at your discretion.”

“I will need the infantry currently investing Kharkov,” said Manstein, “as any move east will create a long exposed flank to our north. That is why we need the river as a shield. There are good defensive positions all along the south bank of the Don, and a little infantry can go a long way.”

“If the Russians are stubborn at Kharkov?” Halder probed to see what Manstein was thinking.

“There are Rumanian troops that could do the job in the short run,” said Manstein. “Then they can be bolstered by our infantry as it becomes available.”

“Well enough,” said Hitler. “It is time we got some work out of those Rumanian divisions. Halder, see that the necessary diplomatic overtures are made.” The Führer smiled. “It seems you both will get your way in this decision,” he said, and all seemed settled for the moment.

The otherwise insignificant encounter at Mtsensk had a much greater effect on the German planning than it should have had, a kind of Pushpoint, as Professor Dorland might describe it. No one present at the table realized how fateful that decision was. Instead of using Guderian’s group as the northern pincer for a vast operation that would be aimed at encircling Voronezh, coordinating with Steiner’s SS in the south, the Germans were now dividing their forces and sending them off in two separate directions. And the long flank Manstein would create as he moved south of the Don would become the launching point for many Soviet counteroffensives in the months and years to come.

In effect, the Germans were trying to complete Operation Typhoon, while at the same time teeing up objectives that were only assigned much later in the war, during the Operation Blue offensive in 1942. Their desire to make a quick end of the Soviets, hopefully before winter, was driving much of this thinking, and like all divided effort, it would lead to many hard and difficult times.

Part XI

Counterattack

“In war as in life, it is often necessary when some cherished scheme has failed, to take up the best alternative open, and if so, it is folly not to work for it with all your might.”

—Winston Churchill

Chapter 31

The fighting at Mtsensk had only proved to be a temporary check on Guderian's advance. 4th Panzer was quickly reinforced by 3rd Panzer, and the Germans simply bulled their way into the town, opening the vital road to Tula. Lavrinenko's daring ambush could not stop the whole of the advancing tide of Panzergruppe 2, and the 1st Special Rifle Corps fell back to the east, struggling to regroup. 4th and 11th Tank Brigades had taken about 30% casualties, but the Guards Rifle Division suffered the most, its infantry fighting stubbornly for the town, and taking nearly 50% casualties. The second division promised to this corps, the 5th Guards, had arrived too late to take part in the fighting.

At Chern, the leading elements of the 3rd Panzer Division had rejoined the main road, and now KG Munzel, with the bulk of the division's panzers, advanced on the town. Rodenhauser's battalion was in the lead, and he ran right into Mikhail Katukov's 4th Panzer Brigade, and Dmitri Lavrinenko. A sharp duel ensued, with the Russians breaking formation and falling back in seeming disarray toward the town. As Rodenhauser pursued, however, he ran right into another well planned counterattack by Lavrinenko and Samohin. An hour later he was forced to withdraw, having lost an astonishing 11 Panzer IIIs from his compliment of 36 tanks.

It was no different than the losses Katukov had inflicted on Eberbach, only this time the Russian tankers did not have the support of the two Para Brigades, nor the stolid 6th Guards Rifle Division. Behind Munzel's leading detachment, the whole of 3rd Panzer Division was coming rapidly on the scene. And to make matters worse, the 4th Panzer Division was regrouping at Mtsensk and already sending Eberbach back up the road to Chern from that direction. It was soon clear that the brief duel at the village could only be a delaying action, for 3rd Panzer Division was not going to be stopped there that day, as it was led by a most enterprising man with a storied future.

His name was Otto Walther Model, and he had already taken one Knight's Cross in this campaign for his dashing advance across the Dnieper, and the breakneck drive to bypass Bryansk that had carried the division here.

It was no surprise that his division would be in the vanguard of this bold rush north, for Model prized speed and maneuver above all else when it came to mechanized warfare. A brilliant and dynamic leader, he improvised new tactics to suit each occasion, creating small Kampfgruppen for specific tasks and always hitting hard and fast in anything he did.

The 3rd Panzer Division was one of the first divisions formed in the rebirth of the German military after WWI. They were known throughout the army as the Bears from Berlin, and their tanks carried the distinctive insignia to that effect. A veteran unit, they had raged through Poland and France during the blitzkrieg of 1940, and fought well in the battle and subsequent breakout at Kiev.

Yet the long four months of fighting had taken its toll, and the division was at about 70% of its nominal strength, with some of the tanks having run over 3000 kilometers in the last 90 days. Despite that, morale was still high, and the division had yet to suffer any real setback as a result of enemy action. But now they were about to get another baptism by fire against Lavrinenko, who fired what might be considered the first warning shots of the action that was soon to follow.

Munzel's losses, while seemingly small in the general scheme of things, still reinforced one salient fact in the minds of the Germans—The Russians were learning how to fight. While the Germans had fought to clear Mtsensk and advance on Chern, another unexpected shock was building like a bad storm to the north. The troops sent by Vladimir Karpov, the first of Konev's new reserves, had been leaping off the trains flowing into Tula and assembling south of the city.

Formed three months early due to the timely bargain struck with Karpov, the 1st Siberian Shock Army was a large and well equipped formation, even stronger than it had been in Fedorov's history books. Kirov had assigned it three Soviet Rifle and two Cavalry divisions. To these, Karpov sent men who were formerly sailors and service personnel in the old Russian Pacific Fleet, long since folded into infantry units, and they were enough to establish seven brigades. Five of these had received training as special ski troops, though the snows of winter would not fall for many more weeks. Karpov also sent three of his best rifle divisions, the Siberian Guards in the 18th, 32nd and 93rd Rifle Divisions. Two Artillery Regiments, a Rocket Regiment, AT Regiment and a pair of light tank battalions with T-60s finished off this impressive

formation.

With the road open to Tula, Sergei Kirov could no longer afford to hold the 1st Siberian Shock Army in reserve. Against the advice of General Zhukov, he sent the hardened Siberian troops to Tula, telling them to hold that place as long as possible. By the time they arrived, Katukov's brief challenge at Chern had run its course, serving to simply delay the Germans a few hours. Without adequate infantry, and with only one small rocket artillery company left in support, the 4th Tank Brigade wisely withdrew that afternoon.

Now in the vanguard, Model's 3rd Panzer pushed on up the road to Tula, clearing the towns of Chernyavka and Skuratovo without incident. The Panzergrenadiers of KG Wellmann were on the left, using a secondary road through those towns, and the main advance was still with KG Munzel and his tanks on the main road. Both columns would meet at the important road and rail hub of Gorbachevo, and it was there that the fighting began again.

Wellmann's 1st battalion had the halftracks, and it came up on a good sized infantry force in the process of digging into defensive positions. He had encountered the 26th Rifle Division, which was part of a reserve force that had been moving up from Yevremov to help cover the empty front east of the road to Tula. Also an outfit from the far east, the Corps had been part of the old Red Banner Army that had been cooperating with the Siberians in 1938 to discourage further advances by the Japanese Kwantung Army. As the storm clouds of war approached, the Soviets moved the troops to the upper Volga until it was clear no offensive could be mounted there. So now they had come west, an independent Corps deploying south of Plavsk, and commanded by Kuzma Podlas. They had heard the rumors that their old comrades from the far east were coming, the Siberians, and so the troops were eager and confident that day.

Wellmann threw his two battalions of grenadiers at the regiment nearest to the town, while distracting a second force to the north with a demonstration by his Pioneer company. He was confident as well, for right behind him was an equal force in KG Westhoven, and he knew Munzel's tanks would appear soon, where the main road slipped around the town about two kilometers off to the east.

He was not disappointed, for Oberst Gruner's recon battalion was right at the head of Munzel's column, and warned of the enemy ahead. They came

in fast and hard, the troops mounted in the vehicles, and all guns blazing. He had 10 light armored cars, supported by three SdKfz 6/2 self propelled 3.2cm guns, and three more 4.7cm PaK auf 35Rs. They swept right through an enemy motorcycle recon battalion that had only just arrived on the scene itself, and a wild gunfight ensued.

Behind Gruner, Lt. Rhun's III Panzer Battalion appeared, and joined the assault on the hapless motorcyclists. The rest of Munzel's panzers swung off the road to the east, and soon ran into the third rifle regiment in the division. Model came forward to the recently cleared town of Chernyavka to see what was going on, arriving just as Westhoven's Kampfgruppe was moving through. He flagged the officer down wanting to know what was happening.

"Wellmann's got hold of a Russian division up ahead, Gruner and Munzel have both gone forward to see about it. Probably another blocking force, sir."

"Any tanks with them this time?" asked Model.

"No sir. I've been on the radio with Wellmann for the last ten minutes, and he says it's just infantry."

"Excellent. Clear them out quickly. Langermann's 4th Panzer has two KGs on the main road, and he's jealous that we're out on point now. I don't want to get hung up in a fight like he had at Mtsensk."

"Don't worry sir," said Westhoven, a dark haired, trim officer, who would one day rise to command this very same division after Model advanced.

It was Eberbach coming up that road, intent on redeeming his honor after the setback at Mtsensk. Seeing that 3rd Panzer was now hotly engaged at Gorbachevo, he swung east off the road into open ground, thinking to bypass and take the lead again, just as Model had done earlier while he was engaged. Yet as the afternoon sun began to cast an eerie orange glow on the smoke of the battle, he ran into more Russian infantry than he expected, all of the 22nd and 21st Rifle Divisions, who had heard the fighting and hastily rushed to the scene. Kuzma Podlas was eager that day as well, and he soon launched a full counterattack with all three of his divisions.

But he was a little too eager...

He sent his rifle battalions forward in a mad rush, the harsh cry of their charge now familiar to the Germans. On they came, right into the teeth of the withering MG-34 fire from the hardened German Panzergrenadiers, and

right into the massed advance of all of Eberbach's remaining tanks. The panzers swept right through the infantry, overrunning one company after another, breaking the regiments up and sending them reeling back.

Model's troops were methodically clearing Gorbachevo, but it was Eberbach, his blood up and back in the fight, that really broke through on the right. By nightfall he had pushed all the way to Hill 896, where the Russians had posted a battalion of artillery, about six kilometers east of the town. As darkness fell, Kuzma Podlas was frantically trying to find out what had happened to his three divisions. His corps had run right into two full panzer divisions massed on a very narrow front as they deployed from road column of march. Their concentrated power had shattered his corps in just four hours... and nary a T-34 was ever seen.

Scattered reports of the action had finally reached Konev at his headquarters in Tula, not more than sixty kilometers to the northeast. "So," he said to his chief of staff, a man named Kozlov. "Podlas deployed too far forward!"

"It appears so, sir. He'll be lucky to get even half of his men back if these reports are accurate. The Germans have two panzer divisions up now, side by side."

"Yes? Well they are about to run into the cream of Karpov's Siberians. Is the Guard Corps deployed as ordered?"

"They reached Plavsk this afternoon, right astride the main road to Tula. Shall I send orders to advance?"

"No... Leave them right where they are. We will let the Germans teach Podlas a little lesson, and they will come to our guardsmen soon enough. Where is the idiot?"

"Podlas? He's established his headquarters at Ulyanovka."

"Tell him to get anything he can salvage well east of the main road. I will send him 8th and 9th independent Rifle Brigades from the Army reserve. He can hold along the river and watch us fight tomorrow, and hopefully things will be a little different. Fritz will be tired, if nothing else, after chasing Podlas out of Gorbachevo today. His forward units will be low on ammunition, and his men will be mopping up all night down there."

"Let's hope they're good and tired, sir."

"Yes... What is 5th Army doing on our right?"

"They've just come down from Kaluga to try and stop the envelopment of

Bryansk. The German 10th Motorized Division is operating on their front."

"A single division?"

"That is the only unit identified thus far. It pushed as far as Belev, where they appear to be organizing a forward supply depot. After that they've just been chasing NKVD battalions."

"Does Lelyushenko plan to attack?"

"He's still moving up, but his orders are to push as far south as he can."

"Then he will be a welcome arrival on our right if he has any guts. In the meantime. Get the rest of the Army moving tonight. Nobody sits on his thumbs or starts digging in to defensive positions. This army will attack!"

"Very good sir," said Koslov, watching the light gleam off Konev's balding head.

"Now we see how these Siberians fight," Konev said coolly.

"Their 24th Army stopped the Germans in front of Kirov," said Koslov. "Now we will stop them here."

"I certainly hope so," said Konev, "because all we have behind us is a single tank corps, and it is still forming up at the rail stations near Kashira. After that, we have nothing between this place and Moscow but the militias digging on the river at Serpukhov. Sergei Kirov is counting on us, and we must not let him down. Notify the NKVD security detachment. We move forward to Fominka tonight, and we attack tomorrow."

The following day it was again a detachment of KG Wellmann of the 3rd Panzer Division that found itself on point along the road to Tula. They had pushed right through the Russian lines the previous night, nearly overrunning an artillery position that fled when they saw the soldiers approaching were Germans.

Division had a Storch up to see what was up ahead, though low grey clouds frustrated the reconnaissance. They did manage to spot what looked to be a single rifle division west of Plavsk, but saw nothing in that town, where the Siberian Guards were lying low after a long night's rest. Wellmann's other battalion was still assisting Ruhn's panzers of Munzel's regiment about three kilometers behind, so the enterprising Lieutenant decided to reconnoiter up the road. At that moment, they were the spearhead of Operation Typhoon. Though none of the men really thought about things that way. To them this was just what they were doing after a meager breakfast of stale biscuits, moldy cheese, and coffee so thin it could barely

claim the name.

Morale was high, even though supply stocks were at only 50% levels. So it was that II/3 Panzergrenadier battalion rolled off in the lorries that morning, the men huddled in the trucks with their rifles at the ready. They had gone about five kilometers when they ran into a recon battalion that was coming down the road from Plavsk for the very same reason, only these men looked nothing like the typical rifle division rabble the division had cut through the previous day.

Wellmann attacked, seeing it was just a motorcycle unit, undoubtedly much more lightly armed than his own battalion. He was just two kilometers south of the town when the action opened, and little did he know that the sound of those German machineguns was perking up the ears of 30,000 hardened veterans of Karpov's Siberian Guards.

About five kilometers to the southeast, and not to be beaten to Tula by Model's boys, Eberbach had cobbled together a mixed *kampfgruppe* with one of his tank battalions, the 4th Division Recon Battalion, and one of KG Dorn's infantry battalions. This regimental sized force had stormed Hill 896 the previous evening, and now they continued north, chasing the tracks of the artillery that had fled north in the rout of 26th Rifle Corps. They found them right outside the small village of Ulyanovka, where General Kuzma Podlas had spent a sleepless night trying to organize what was left of his troops.

Even as those attacks went in, a special *Kampfgruppe* that had been attached to Schweppenburg's Corps was moving well to the west, probing into the open country between the two panzer divisions and the lines of the 10th Motorized Division, about 20 kilometers off. It was comprised of two units from the unique 1st Cavalry Division, the 1st Motorcycle Battalion, and the Lehr Recon Battalion that had been attached to that division. To these, Schweppenburg had added the 45th Pioneer Battalion, and topped the formation off with a little clout in 1/53 Werfer Battalion.

The *kampfgruppe* had been screening the left of the main thrust up the road, while also trying to make contact with 10th Motorized, which had been reporting growing signs of enemy activity all along its very extended front. The division commander, Generalleutnant Fredrich von Loeper, was a dour faced man who had followed his orders to the letter with the onset of these operations. He was to push up to Belev, secure the town, organize a forward depot there, and then screen the area south of Kaluga, which was exactly

what he was doing when the whole of Lelyushenko's 5th Army began to advance on his position.

The General had reported growing signs of enemy activity, but his reports went unheeded in the whirlwind advance that was then underway with the rest of the Korps. Had Heinz Guderian been there, he might have had a more sympathetic ear, but the Panzergruppe Commander was still on a plane returning to the front when these events occurred.

It was the ad hoc cavalry detachment, specifically the motorcycle battalion that had moved up to high ground near Hill 935, that finally confirmed von Loeper's growing suspicions. Scaling the hill, the Leutnant was stunned to look out in the grey dawn and see a large grouping of enemy troops on the move, to his north, including infantry formations, mounted units and finally the telltale movement of armor. He was on the radio at once, first to von Loeper with the news.

"Herr Generalleutnant, I have a lot of enemy movement to my front, about eight to ten kilometers out. Where is your right flank?"

"So someone else is finally listening to me! I have a battalion five klicks southeast of Kykovka. Where are you?"

"We passed through Ivanovka, and took hill 935 this morning. Now we see what is happening!"

"Yes? Well that means there's a nice fat hole between my flank and your kampfguppe. I'll try raising Schweppenburg again, but he won't want his breakfast disturbed."

"It's either that or the Russians come for his eggs and sausages," said the Leutnant, and it was a statement that would not be too far from the truth. Generalleutnant von Loeper was about to earn his Knight's Cross...

Chapter 32

That same morning, Munzel's main force mopped up a pocket of Russian infantry, while Westhoven's KG of 3rd Pz found an isolated regiment that had retreated the wrong direction and was now cut off. They took it upon themselves to force the resignation of the enemy, and that action brought them about five kilometers west of the main road.

Generalleutnant von Loeper finally managed to get Schweppenburg on the radio, and told him all he had learned. "They will push a wedge right between my division and your position along the road," he said. "I believe I should move my troops east and try to make contact with the Lehr reconnaissance force."

"What about the depot at Belev?" said Schweppenburg.

"I could leave a couple battalions there, but they would only be cut off. Given the situation we're facing, I think that unwise. If we stabilize this flank, then we visit Belev at a more fortuitous time."

"Very well, Generalleutnant. Move your division towards the KG Lehr at Ivanovka. We will see what develops on the road ahead. If we can take Plavsk by storm, that would put my division in a good position to flank any enemy move south against you at Ivanovka."

"If wishes were horses," said von Loeper. "If they had a full rifle corps at Gorbachevo, then they will likely have troops at Plavsk as well. Be careful, general. Model should be warned."

It was very good advice, but Model would not be having lunch in Plavsk that day as Schweppenburg hoped. 1st Siberian Shock Army came storming into the vanguard of the 24th Panzer Korps like an unstoppable red tide. KG Wellmann's II/3 PzGren took the initial attack by elements of 18th and 32nd Siberian Guards, and was soon in a desperate battle with infantry on every side. The enemy tank threat was not present, but the overwhelming pressure from the Siberian infantry compelled the Germans to fall back and take up defensive positions as casualties mounted. Prittman's engineer company was hit by the 91st Siberian Guards, and was soon in danger of being completely overrun. Wellmann made a desperate call on the radio, ordering his second

battalion up in support, and then he plugged a gap on his left flank with his Panzer Jaeger company, a group of eight self propelled 45mm guns.

Further west, where KG Westhoven had been mopping up that isolated Russian rifle regiment, now no more than a battalion in strength, it was suddenly faced with a wave of fresh troops from the 329th Rifle Division of 17th Rifle Corps. This attack was far larger than anyone could have expected, the advancing corps of three divisions extending some ten kilometers west, where the motorcycle Battalion of the Lehr Group was hit by two regiments of the 344th Rifle Division.

The Germans had hit Podlas single corps the previous day with the full weight of two panzer divisions, and made short work of that force at Gorbachevo. Now they were facing two more fresh rifle corps, with the Siberian Guards hitting the Schwerpunkt right on the nose, while the 17th Corps was pushing to flank the German advance from the northwest. Beyond that point, von Loeper had wisely moved his 10th Motorized division east that morning, but he was still twenty kilometers or more from the Lehr Battalion Recon Group near Ivanovka.

Suddenly on defense against what Model came to call another ‘cannon fodder infantry attack,’ the General gave orders that his troops should adopt a hedgehog strongpoint strategy instead of trying to maintain a continuous front.

“All units will stand and fight where they are,” he said. “I will not pay for the same ground twice! Where is Munzel?”

“He is forming up on the road,” said a Major.

“Well, tell him to get moving!”

That was going to be easier said than done that morning, for Munzel’s panzers had fought hard the previous day, and his units had been taking on supply before continuing up the road. Rhun’s detachment was in the best shape, with 50% supplies on hand. While Rodenhauser and von Heyden were both down to 10%. He moved Rhun into tactical reserve behind the village of Molochnyy on the main road, which was all he could do for the moment.

For his part, Eberbach’s visit with Kuzma Podlas at Ulyanovka was suddenly interrupted by the onrushing arrival of two regiments of the tough 32nd Siberian Guards. Podlas was relieved to finally get help, which gave him just the time he needed to get his last two battalions of artillery to the rear, where they quickly set up and began to pour out supporting fire.

Unlike Model, Eberbach ordered an immediate counterattack towards the village, calling in a battalion of KG Dorn's Panzergrenadiers to support his tanks, and radioing back for his second panzer battalion to hasten to the scene. It was then that he got some bad news.

"Hold on, enemy tanks hit Dorn's pioneer company well south of your position. That is very near the Corps artillery park!"

As if on cue, Mikhail Katukov had chosen that moment to make a bold thrust at the main road to Tula. After withdrawing from his brief engagement at Chern, he had not moved north to join the Siberians, which is why there had been no reports of enemy tanks in these attacks. Instead he move due east, regrouping at a small village called Lugovka, and now, hearing the Siberians were attacking, he took his tanks north looking for trouble.

What he found was 3rd Company, 79th Pioneers, attached to KG Dorn, and screening not only the Korps artillery park, but most all of the guns for 4th Panzer Division as well! Eberbach cursed when he heard the news, for now he would not be able to fight with his full *kampfgruppe*. He had no choice but to order his second battalion to move south to confront the new threat. KG Seiden was also holding that flank, though further north, and he was ordered to send one of his two battalions in support. The troops were already engaged with remnants of the men Kuzma Podlas had scraped together the previous night, and now it had to fight its way out to get back south.

The Division Commander, General der Panzertruppen Langermann, was fortunately in a good position to see what was happening from his post on Hill 925 astride the main road. He quickly ordered the division flak units to move to that flank and lend any support they could give.

By mid-day the situation was clear. This was no spoiling attack or blocking force. The Germans had been hit by six fresh rifle divisions, and Katukov's 4th Tank Brigade. Model chafed at the bit to resolve the situation so he could continue his advance, but this time the task was beyond even his considerable skills. He soon found his entire division arrayed as small islands of steel in a Red Sea of confusion. It was a sobering call to Guderian that day when the General finally got off the plane at Orel.

"We have hit a brick wall south of Tula," he said. "These are fresh troops, a new army, and they fight like wildcats. My men have been in active defense all morning, and still they come. We are holding out, but many of our

positions have been swamped by these incessant attacks.”

“Tanks?” asked Guderian.

“Not many,” said Model, “but they do not even need them. I must be facing at least five strong rifle divisions, and they have good artillery support. Under the circumstances, any further advance is impossible, and I will need help—the sooner the better.”

“Very well,” said Guderian. “Hold on. I will see what I can do as soon as possible.”

To this end, he called up his 29th Motorized Division, which had finally been relieved by infantry near Bryansk, and was moving to Orel. It would be a most welcome reinforcement, but would still be some time getting to the scene of the action. In the meantime Generalleutnant von Loeper’s 10th Motorized Division had reached Ivanovka by dusk, and was fanning out in a wide defensive arc. Without that timely move, the situation on the main road would have been far more grievous, because soon after they arrived, the division was hit by a massed cavalry charge on its right flank.

The Russians had put in their 4th Cavalry Corps there, five brigades of mounted riflemen, some of them the vaunted Cossacks and Tartars that had recently chased down Ivan Volkov’s 22nd Air Mobile battalions in that daring but disastrous second raid on Ilanskiy. These troops were supported by the only other armor available, two light tanks units with mainly T-60s. If von Loeper’s men had not been there to take the brunt of that attack, these swift horsemen would have swept right down to Chernyavka where Model’s headquarters had been established. It was now clear what the Soviets were attempting to do, and Guderian’s entire XXIV Panzer Corps was now facing attacks on every side.

Like Langermann, Model was forced to throw everything he had into the defense, including his division flak units. He looked over his shoulder, when a column came up, but was disappointed to see it was only rail repair battalions.

“Soon I will have to find rifles for those men,” he said, and he ordered them to dig in north of Chernyavka to form a makeshift defense for his headquarters.

29th Motorized got the word to move north, and the men leapt to their trucks, but not even this new division would be enough to stop the attack. Its arrival would stabilize the situation, bringing relief to the weary

Panzer Grenadiers, some units down to 10 % supply. The situation looked more favorable—until the Soviets suddenly attacked with fresh armor.

Sergei Kirov was determined to stop the Germans at Tula, and now he ordered one of his refitting tank corps into action, even though it was still reorganizing one of its two scheduled tank brigades. Reforming far to the east and receiving all new tanks, the 3rd Tank Corps was really a heavy division sized formation comprised of a single tank brigade, and motorized rifle troops. The 5th Brigade had 54 new T-34s, 12 KV-1 and another 12 of the massive KV-2 heavy assault tanks. Following their improvised Corps structure, the Motor Rifle troops had been built up to a full strength division, the 84th, with three full motor rifle regiments, along with the corps motorcycle cavalry regiment. Its second tank brigade had not yet formed, and the engineer battalion was still on the trains, but Kirov ordered an immediate attack. As at Mtsensk, the shock of encountering a full brigade of new tanks in a single massed formation was considerable. With all his remaining divisions still trying to clear pockets of Soviet resistance astride the road from Orel to Tula, Guderian called Hoth.

“I’m told you have all the new tanks, Hoth. Don’t be stingy! I need them south of Tula. Can you send me anything?”

After learning what had happened, and seeing that his own troops were encountering much less opposition well to the west, Hoth was more than willing to lend support. “Seventh Panzer has been refitting since early August, and it received some of the newer tanks. I have much less opposition on my front, so you can have the entire division. For that matter, you can have Schwerepanzerbrigaden 101, as well. They are much closer to your operation than my main line of advance. I will cut the orders immediately.”

And so it was that one thing led to another, like two opposing sides throwing logs on a fire, which would soon grow bigger and bigger until it burned as one of the fiercest battles yet fought in the campaign to date. Known as ‘The Action South of Tula,’ it would be the first real test on the new German Panzer designs, and a rich hunting ground for one other man with a fated future, a simple Sergeant who had joined the Wehrmacht in Czechoslovakia, because he had been too bored with his old job in an auto factory there.

His name was Kurt Knispel.

*

Schwerepanzerbrigaden 101 was very close, and the Germans had a man there that would also make a name for himself as a deadly armored charioteer. Knispel served with 12th Panzer Division for a time, as a loader in a Mark IV tank, until his commanding officer recommended him for training on the new tanks starting to arrive at the receiving stations. Some said he wanted to simply get the man out of his regiment, for Knispel was a freewheeling Sergeant with a chip on his shoulder when it came to senior officers, which he saw as busybodies always sticking their noses into things they knew nothing about.

He had come up through the ranks in the armored units, and had shown enough promise to be recommended for training on the new Löwe-55, and soon found himself settling into Germany's premier new armored fighting unit.

A short, rough hewn young man of just twenty years, Knispel had a thick head of hair, and heavy brows that joined above his nose, prompting the men to call him 'the werewolf.' Soon they would see it as the Lion's mane, and his unkempt beard, long sideburns, and the non-regulation tattoo on his neck, gave him a wild look, though he could clean up and sport the uniform as well as anyone else if he chose to. More often than not, he would eschew the formality of regulations and dress haphazardly, sometimes not even wearing a shirt, his coat open, the grease of his own tank on his hands and forearms.

Yet he was very popular with his fellow soldiers, amiable and quick to smile, who saw him as a kind of maverick, though some never understood how he could get away with all the things he did. Once he had even put his hands on an officer, when he came across the man badly mistreating a few Soviet POWs. The Leutnant had thought to amuse himself by urinating on the captured Russians, which infuriated Knispel. He took hold of the man's jersey, practically lifting him off the ground, and told him that if he ever saw him do such a thing again, he would personally do the very same thing to him!

With twelve kills under his belt, and an uncanny knack for sighting and positioning his tank in action, Knispel was elated when they gave him one of

the new Löwe-55s.

“Look at that monster!” he said, beaming ear to ear. “Fifty-five tons, 100mm armor, and a brand new high velocity 75mm gun!”

“It will be slow, Kurt,” said Lt. Hellman, who also came to the unit from the old 12th Panzer. “You won’t be able to run about like you could with that Mark IV. I’m told it will barely give us 40 to 45KPH, and we may be road bound when the rains come.”

“We shall see,” said Knispel, and he would soon begin putting the new tank through its paces, becoming quite good at his trade. In fact, he would end the war with more confirmed kills to his credit than any man in history, all of 168, with scores more that were unconfirmed, or kills he simply shunted off to the credit of a fellow soldier. He never kept count, and cared little for the iron crosses and gold badges that he would soon earn. The only thing that mattered to him was winning, and the other men he fought with. Tenacious in combat, just as Lavrinenko was on the other side, Kurt Knispel would never leave a comrade still fighting on the field of battle.

He was the best of the best, exceeding the record of other highly accomplished and more polished combat veterans like Otto Carious and Michael Whittmann, but he had three years to log his kills. But out there, beyond the low rolling hills to the north was a man who would get his 52 tanks in a matter of a few months, before an errant fragment of a mortar round ended his meteoric rise—Dmitri Lavrinenko. As the 101st Heavy Panzer Brigade was now hastily moving up to rescue Model, the two men would soon meet, each the perfect nemesis and foil for the other.

Chapter 33

Disaster had a way of striking when you least needed or expected it. The front line had become a tortuous affair, bent like a badly twisted girder of steel as the Germans had rammed home their offensive operations. Several large salients had formed where the Soviets stubbornly held their ground. In the north, one such salient was centered on and around the vital city of Smolensk. Sergei Kirov knew that the defense there had all but derailed the German advance on Moscow from that direction, and so he hoped the same thing would happen now, pouring the divisions of his 20th and 29th Armies into the defense. The Germans eventually pushed into the city with the hardened infantry of the 4th Army, and now they were mounting a determined pincer operation aimed at trapping all the Russian troops that had assembled to defend that place, about 18 divisions in all.

The 41st Panzer Korps of Hoepner's 4th Panzergruppe was on one side, and a Korps that had been detached from Hoth earlier, including Knispel's old outfit, 12th Panzer Division, joined the other pincer. The Germans took aim at the town of Safonovo, about 90 kilometers up the road from Smolensk to Vyazma, and Moscow beyond. After nearly a week of hard fighting, the mobile units managed to punch through and envelop the armies still defending near Smolensk. Fearing they would eventually lose all those divisions, STAVKA gave the order to attempt a breakout, which was always a dangerous operation.

Men who had been stolidly defending from well improved positions now had to effect a tactical withdrawal under heavy enemy pressure, but by the time the movement started, it was already too late. The German vise of steel had already closed around the Smolensk Army Group, and as the main rifle divisions pulled off the line, the German infantry fell on the rear guard detachments with a vengeance.

To make matters worse, once through at Safonovo, the right pincer still had sufficient strength to drive up the road towards Vyazma. It was there that the 'Kirov Defense Line' ended in the north, right astride the road to Moscow. Beyond that point there was nothing of any consequence, a vast gap

of 150 kilometers to Rzhev where the 22nd Army was still forming in reserve. Desperate to stop the Germans at Vyazma, and fill that gap. STAVKA ordered the 22nd south at once, and come as you are party for units that were still fitting out and training new raw recruits.

The road net from Rzhev to Vyazma did not favor that move, and it would be three days before those troops might reach the point of greatest threat. In the meantime, STAVKA looked into its reserves and scraped up five rifle divisions, putting them on the trains from their marshalling stations in the east and rushing them through the late summer night to pull into Vyazma just as the Germans were closing in on the outskirts of that town. The 234th Rifle Division of the Moscow Militia had also come down the road from the capital, and now it screened the arrival of these fresh troops, who literally leapt from the rail cars with little more than a rifle slung over their shoulder, and rushed through the town towards the growing sounds of battle.

So it was that just as he was finding some encouragement in the stunning blow that had been delivered by the 1st Siberian Shock Army, Sergei Kirov now received the news of the wild situation developing to the west of the city, on the road to Smolensk. The Germans were coming at them from more than one direction.

"The Smolensk Group was too late in moving," said Berzin dejectedly. "Now they will have to try and fight their way out of that cauldron. And if we do not now abandon that salient at Roslaval, they will soon find themselves in the same situation. That is another 15 divisions in the remnants of 13th and 11th Armies. If they are cut off, then there will be nothing to defend the city of Kirov itself. There are little more than irregular militias and artillery now manning the fortifications there. Everything else is in that salient."

"Can we save them without a disaster like the Smolensk Group?"

"If we move quickly," said Berzin. "I consulted Zhukov, and he thinks good rear guards can hold just long enough to save the main rifle divisions. In this instance, the road is still open, and no German mechanized units are operating in that sector."

"Is there any threat the Germans might cut that road?"

"Not at the moment," said Berzin. "And you can again thank Karpov for that. The reserve army he sent from Perm is holding like a stone wall west of Spas-Demensk."

"The fighting 24th Siberian," said Kirov. "Yes, Karpov wasn't bragging

when he said he had good, battle hardened men.”

“Agreed,” said Berzin. “You may have paid a high price in turning over that ship, but it has already returned good dividends. In this situation, with the 24th Army shielding the withdrawal, Zhukov thinks this operation can be conducted fairly smoothly.”

“Then we must get them out now,” said Kirov. “Now, while the main road is still open. Yes, we’ll lose the factory at Roslaval, but we pulled out most of the machinery last week, and it is already relocating. Order 13th Army to fall back on the Kirov line, and man the defenses of that city. And what about the 34th Army?”

“It is at Volokamsk,” said Berzin, “still assembling and fitting out its rifle divisions.” That was a reserve marshalling area about 100 kilometers north west of Moscow.

“Well they must be ready to move as soon as possible,” said Kirov. “With the troops we pull out of Roslaval, the 22nd coming down from Rzhev, and the 34th from Volokamsk, that will give us enough to hold the line. Yes?”

“I certainly hope so,” said Berzin, “but the 22nd and 34th were being held for our winter counterattack. You’ve already committed the 1st Siberian Shock Army. Zhukov will want to know what he is to plan that offensive with now.”

“It can’t be helped,” said Kirov. “We need to hold them as far west of Moscow as possible.”

“Zhukov thinks we should let them come east and then hit them on their northern flank.”

“A good plan,” said Kirov, but the Raputista is only now beginning. The roads are still fairly passable, which means the Germans still have reasonable mobility. If those Panzer formations encircling the Smolensk Group get infantry support, and then turn east before we establish this new defense line...”

“I understand, sir,” said Berzin, a sober, harried look on his face. “And what about Bryansk? There is only one road open to that city now, the road to Kirov.”

“Then we must keep it open.”

“The Germans in Guderian’s group are well east of Kirov Now. They are approaching Sukhininsk, and the last rail line open to Kirov runs through that town.”

“Then we must hold there as well,” Kirov folded his arms. “What about the rest of the Siberian forces Karpov promised?”

“Still forming,” said Berzin. “2nd Shock Army won’t be ready for some time, and again, that was slated for the winter counterattack.”

“Assuming we survive that long,” said Kirov, and for the first time both men began to realize that the situation could easily spiral out of control, just as it had when the Smolensk Group had tried to withdraw.

There was a long silence before Kirov spoke again. “I think we also need to plan for the possible evacuation of Moscow. Should it be necessary, a little planning now could save much trouble and grief later. But keep this very quiet. The last thing we need now is a rumor mill and subsequent panic.”

“I understand, sir,” said Berzin. “I’ll put my best staffers on it.”

Kirov ran his hand through his hair, more to chase the nagging headache he was fighting off than anything else. “Now what about the south?” he asked.

“Another disaster,” said Berzin. “The Germans assembled a strong battlegroup at Pokrovka, and it broke through north of Belgorod. On the other side, south of that city, the SS have pushed all the way to Valuki. We have only one rifle division left to block the way north to Stary Oskol. That and a couple armored trains operating on that rail line.”

“They won’t come north,” said Kirov. “They are heading east. They are heading for the Don. So now we know why Volkov was so bold with this push over the Volga towards Serafimovich.”

“This is what Zhukov warned us about, sir,” said Berzin. “The SS are only 100 kilometers west of Rossosh now, and after that the Don...”

“There is no good crossing point in that area,” said Kirov, “except perhaps at Boguchar.”

“Zhukov does not even think they will plan such a crossing. He thinks they will drive along the southern bank of the Don and use it to defend their flank as they come further east to reach Volkov’s area of operations. It’s a long way to go, but we have little left to stop them.”

“This wasn’t supposed to happen yet!” Kirov’s frustration was hard to contain. “They weren’t supposed to drive on the Volga until 1942! Well, I don’t think they’ll get there this year. They are running out of time. We may not have rifle divisions to throw at them, but we will soon have the rain. There are very few good roads in that region.”

“So it’s come to that?” said Berzin. “We rely on the rain? What about all those troops still in the Kuban? We have all of 25 divisions between Armavir and Maykop.”

“I’m not ready to concede that to Volkov yet. He’d like nothing more than to see us pull out there after six months hard fighting for that damn oil.”

“The fields were dynamited,” Berzin reminded him. “The rigs were destroyed, and wells were set on fire before we pushed them out. It will take us months before we’ll ever get a drop of oil from Maykop. You must realize that sir, because Volkov certainly knows as much, and we don’t have that time.”

“Damn it Starik!” Kirov used Berzin’s old Party name, ‘Starik,’ the ‘Old Man,’ a handle from his days in Lenin’s handpicked guard. He never used that name with him, always preferring to call him Grishin from his time in the Spanish Civil War. Berzin could not help but notice that, and he knew that the General Secretary was under a great deal of stress now.

“We have 15 divisions at Maykop,” he said cautiously. “Five could hold there if need be, and that would free up ten for other purposes.”

Kirov hesitated. “If we give them back Maykop, then what about Krasnodar? What about Tuapse and Novorossiysk? The Germans are already hammering at Sevastopol. If we lose those ports we lose the entire Black Sea Fleet! What about the Southern Front reserves near Morozovsk?” Kirov began pacing now.

“Two rifle divisions and five independent brigades,” said Berzin. “Everything else went to Valuki to try and stop the SS, and that was like throwing wood on a fire.”

“Then we’ll stop them at Boguchar,” said Kirov.

It was a wish more than an order, and both men knew it at that moment. Kirov walked away from the planning table in the Red Archive room, noting the books he had so carefully collected in his sorties up the stairway at Ilanskiy scattered about on the desks. They had dog eared the pages, looking for anything that could help them determine what best to do, but now this new history playing out on the battlefields was pushing their resources to the limits.

He went to the window, seeing the city dimly lit outside, the Kremlin dark as a precaution against German bombing. A light rain was falling, stippling the eaves of the overhanging roof with its slight pattering. Yes, he thought,

give me rain. Give me rain and mud, and snow enough to bury the whole world. Give me winter before they get here, by God. That is now our only hope.

He turned to Berzin again, his jaw set. "Cancel the attack on Armavir and begin a phased withdrawal from Maykop," he said, conceding to the inevitable. "Fall back through Belorchensk and Kropotkin, but establish a good defensive front on the Kuban River, and by all means, protect those ports. The river line should be easy to hold, and it will allow us to strip off five to seven divisions to form a new provisional army. Get those troops to the rail lines and move sufficient rolling stock south so we can pull them out. And by all means, save the artillery. Who's commanding there?"

"Konstantin Golubev is near Armavir, and Kostenko is at Kerch. You can take your pick."

"Have Golubev organize the Kuban defense line. Let Kostenko put that new provisional army together."

"The Germans are breaking through on his front," said Berzin, one more bit of bad news that he had saved for last. "They already have Fedosiya. He's asked for permission to cross the straits and hold at Taman. There's already four divisions digging in there on the peninsula."

"Leave them there. Tell Kostenko he can join them with anything he can get safely out of Kerch. He can set up his new headquarters at Krasnodar and sort out the troops withdrawing from Maykop."

"Very good, sir." Berzin was glad that the General Secretary was still open to reason, for he knew that Zhukov's warning about the troops in the Kuban was well taken. It would only be a matter of time before they would have to concede that this adventure into the Caucasus was a dismal failure. It was once all territory held by the Orenburg Federation, prized real estate with every road leading south to the oil fields of Baku. They had come for that oil, and achieved a kind of pyrrhic victory at Maykop, but they both knew the offensive to the south could no longer be sustained.

Berzin knew how hard the loss would be for Kirov to take, but his was the voice of cold hard reality, the intelligence master of the Army, and the only other man privileged to meet with him there in the Red Archives. Someone had to tell the truth, and so he never sugar coated anything with Kirov, giving it to him as plainly as possible, in spite of the General Secretary's growing frustration and anxiety.

“Who would have thought the Germans would drive on the Volga this early?” said Kirov again, with a shake of his head.

“Clearly the material has its limitations as a guide to these events,” said Berzin. “After all... I am still alive, am I not?” He smiled, for he had read the date of his own death there in the material, July 29, 1938, executed by Stalin on charges of anti Soviet activity during the early purges. In effect, he owed his life to the man standing there in the room with him now, and so he would give him that life, an able lieutenant at Kirov’s side throughout the war.

Kirov nodded, understanding. “So let us drink to that,” he said, listening...

The rain... The rain falling hard enough now that Kirov could hear it on the roof, a good steady downfall to wet the streets of Moscow, and sodden the fields for miles in every direction.

“Is that everything?” he asked.

“For the moment,” said Berzin.

Part XII

All Our Tomorrows

*“Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow,
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day,
To the last syllable of recorded time;
And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
The way to dusty death.”*

— Macbeth (Act 5, Scene 5)

Chapter 34

“We’ve had no word from the ship since that last communication,” said Tovey. “Strange that Admiral Volsky would not respond.”

“He may not be the man you knew here,” said Wellings, the man they now knew to be Professor Dorland. He had darkened the meeting with his predictions of imminent doom, confirming all the fears Elena Fairchild had carried, and worse.

“A time loop?” said Tovey. “Can you explain that again?”

“The ship has arrived a second time,” said Dorland, “but instead of tangling with the Royal Navy and becoming your headache, it seems to have taken another course.”

“To Murmansk,” said Tovey. “We’ve a pair of submarines up there, and our Commander Bone has reported in, saying the word round the place is that a large warship put into Kola Bay, but left soon after. It certainly isn’t ours, and the Russians don’t have anything up there that would fit that description. So I can only assume this is Admiral Volsky’s ship. Yet not the one we sailed with you say? How very odd.”

“Quite so,” said Dorland. “In fact this was only a theory, now confirmed if this is what occurred. It will be the first instance of a time loop ever taking place, at least that I know of, and so we are all on shaky ground here. The outcome depends on how stable the ship’s position is in time.”

“Explain that,” said Elena, very curious about all of this.

“Well,” said Dorland, “the trouble started when the ship slipped to a position in time prior to its first arrival. That is very dangerous, for anyone or anything moving in time. It creates the possibility of Paradox, as I’ve explained. Mother Time is a very meticulous host, and she doesn’t take lightly to anyone barging into her living room who is already there. Usually she looks after things by simply forbidding anything to move to a point on the continuum where it already exists. Yet not even time is infallible. If, for any reason, this ship slips again, to a time prior to its first appearance, then the entire loop could replay a third time. Think of it like an old phonograph record that meets a scratch and keeps repeating one segment of the song.

Time has literally skipped a beat in these events. If this occurs again, and continues to loop in the same way, then time becomes stuck here, and the future cannot be defined. You see, all our tomorrows depend on the outcome of today, just as this moment rests atop a stack of those old records, and one that stretches back all through history. Go to the past, and you land on one of those records. Do something there to scratch it, break it, and you do so at your own peril.”

“For the whole bloody stack could come tumbling down,” said Tovey. “I think I understand what you are saying, Professor.”

“Well what in the world do we do about this?” said Elena.

“I’m afraid this situation is very complex now,” said Dorland. “We’ve faced thorny interventions before, but never anything like this. In all our previous missions, we were able to get to a point in time where it only took a little nudge to correct the aberration. Once that was something as simple as an errant stumble in the desert, then it took something more to correct variations. If you will indulge me, Admiral, I can tell you that in May of 1941, your sole aim at sea was to find and sink one German ship, the battleship Bismarck, at least in the history I knew.”

“That was just one weed in the garden,” said Tovey. “We had quite a bit more to deal with last May. The whole bloody German fleet was out to sea, and it was only the intervention of Admiral Volsky, and your able services, Miss Fairchild, that allowed us to pull through. I was holding my own against the Hindenburg and Bismarck when we fought, but we were very lucky. Admiral Volsky got to that German aircraft carrier, and that made a great deal of difference in the outcome of that engagement.”

“I suppose it did,” said Dorland, “yet none of it was ever supposed to happen. I mentioned the Bismarck because we discovered it had survived its maiden voyage, which has some very unforeseen effects in our day. So we endeavored to reverse that, successfully, which is how I devised this persona of Lieutenant Commander Wellings. I hope the real man will forgive me. In any case, we set things right, but this situation is something quite more. The Hindenburg should not even exist, nor this ship we’re standing on now. How I put those genies back in the bottle escapes me. This entire meridian is so skewed from the history I once knew, that I cannot see how it could possibly be made whole again. There are only two possibilities in my mind. The first is somehow finding a way to resolve this intervention by Kirov.

“Resolve it?” Tovey raised an eyebrow. “How so?”

“We would have to get back to a time before the Heisenberg Wave was generated in 1908. That is what has re-written all this history, and produced an altered state here. That is what created this ship, Admiral, HMS Invincible.”

“I see... And could we do such a thing?”

“I suppose it could be attempted. We might work out something with the Meridian team—an intervention of sorts, but I would need a lot more information about what actually happened to find the Push Points.”

“Push Points?”

“Events that serve as triggers to set other events in motion.”

“Ah, like the Germans having a go at Poland, which was the straw that broke the camel’s back and got us all off to war.”

“That’s one kind, a major Push Point that sets other dominoes falling. But they are not always that transparent and obvious. A Push Point can be something quite innocuous, a minor, humdrum happening that ends up having consequences no one could foresee. This sort can be very difficult to identify, and unless we do so, no intervention can really succeed. We have to know what the real Push Points were.”

“And what about these keys?” asked Tovey. “Do they have something to do with all this?”

“It would seem so,” said Elena. “One brought me and my ship here at a most opportune time.”

“Yes,” said Dorland, “the keys. That is another part of the puzzle that we must figure out. What do these keys have to do with all of this?”

“I’ve a man who is quite good with puzzles,” said Tovey. “Our Mister Alan Turing.”

Dorland smiled. “Yes, the father of the computers we used to send me here! Well, I’d welcome any help we can get, Admiral. Yet it would seem that our first move would be to try and round all these keys up. It’s clear they correspond to rifts in time, perhaps naturally occurring rifts, though we do not know this yet. Who knows how they occurred? In any case, if these keys were manufactured in the future, then they must bear on all of this somehow, which is why I was so set on retrieving the key aboard Rodney. We’ll just have to look for it somewhere else now. I’ve told you where I think the rift it is associated with exists, Saint Michael’s Cave, Gibraltar.”

“Yes,” said Tovey, and the Germans have the Rock now. Damn inconvenient. Well, how do you propose we proceed?”

“Look for the key somewhere else, of course,” said Dorland. “It would have to be retrieved before it met its fate on the Rodney. We know it was embedded in the Selene Horse, and the whereabouts of that artifact is very easy to chart. I’ll put my team on this, and we’ll see what we can work out.”

“I believe that key is essential to this whole business,” said Elena. “In fact, I think the key I was given was merely meant to enable my appearance here, with Argos Fire, for the sole purpose of retrieving that key.”

“Perhaps so,” said the Professor, “though I would certainly like to know who set that mission up.”

Now Elena pointed, right at Admiral Tovey. “He did, or so I’m led to believe by the note I found in the box I retrieved from Delphi.”

Paul nodded, thinking. “I can see by the look on your face, Admiral, that you remain oblivious of any involvement. But I must tell you that this could have been accomplished by some other version of yourself, on some other Meridian. In fact, I believe it was the John Tovey from the Meridian I came from. Who knows what he eventually learned about all of this, or how he learned it. But apparently you came to know a good deal more than you know now.”

“Apparently,” said Tovey with a shrug. “Well it would be nice if that other fellow—my doppelganger—well it would be nice if he would be so kind as to drop me a line and fill me in.” He folded his arms.

Dorland smiled. “I once tried the very same thing...” He stopped, his eyes registering the surprise of some sudden realization. “Yes... Information. But I’m not sure if it would even be possible at this point...” He seemed to be talking to himself.

“What do you mean?” asked Elena.

Paul took a deep breath. “The second option, assuming we cannot resolve Kirov’s intervention here, would be to try and to prevent its first coming altogether. That ship would have to be prevented from ever arriving here in the past. The only way that could be done, would be in our time, the year 2021. That time still exists, because at the moment, the Heisenberg Wave is stuck here. The ship is the Prime Mover, and the men aboard it. As long as these Primes remain at large in the past, Time cannot resolve how the decades following their interventions play out. And so, when I leave you

shortly, as I must, I will be returning to the year 2021, the Meridian that Kirov originally came from. In fact, that is the only future anyone here can reliably reach now—the time when we look over our shoulder and there was no Hindenburg in the history of WWII, and no HMS Invincible. There is no way anyone could reach a future arising from these events, because Kirov is still here, and nothing has been resolved. That future cannot be written until this does resolve, and if it fails to do so, that future may never be written at all. This is the danger.”

“I don’t understand,” said Tovey. “You say you can leave us now and safely reach your own time in the future again, but no future can arise from these events?”

“Correct. Not until this intervention by Kirov comes to some resolution. As to my future, and yours Miss Fairchild, as you came from the same Meridian I did, think of it all like a sand castle built well up near the high tide line on a beach. That ship appeared here once before, and those file boxes in your archives are the tracks on the beach it left as it passed, down near the encroaching waves. Now the tide is coming in. A new Heisenberg Wave is being generated by this second coming, and it is wiping those tracks clean. As it moves forward, it rewrites all this history, second by second, minute by minute, hour by hour to the days and years and decades yet to come.

“Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow,” said Tovey, “Creeps in this petty pace from day to day, To the last syllable of recorded time...”

“Yes,” said Dorland. “It is doing so with this agonizing, creeping slowness now, with every tick of that clock. But if this resolves, then that Heisenberg Wave really gets moving. It becomes a tsunami, and cascades forward in an instant to change everything at once. It will wipe that future I’m returning to away as well. Who knows... I might never develop my theory of time travel, or build the Meridian project that allows me to be here with you at this moment. Everything is at stake now, not just a future that might arise from this time, but all our tomorrows. Understand?”

“So,” said Elena, “if this world survives in its present altered state, then our future must be sacrificed. And if we do find some way to resolve the damage caused by the coming of this ship, then it is Admiral Tovey’s world—this meridian, that is sacrificed. It seems we cannot prevent catastrophic change no matter what we do. At least it will happen slowly, second by

second, as you say.”

“At the moment, that seems to be the case.” Yet Dorland had a warning in his eyes. “The Heisenberg Wave from 1908 has struck Paradox, and split in two. This is that overlapping time of great disturbance where the two waves interfere with each other behind the Paradox—Chaos Time. Eventually they will reform into one forward moving wave, and the outcome of events taking place now, particularly those involving Prime Movers, will determine the work of that new, unified wave. Yes, it may be moving with that creeping slowness now, for the ship is still here, as you and your ship are still here, Miss Fairchild. But that may not always be the case—this slow progression of change. Things could slip, and very suddenly, like an earthquake.”

“How so?” asked Elena, the fear in her eyes obvious.

“The persistence of this altered state is very tentative. It arose because of events that occurred in 1908, but events that led to that intervention have their origins here, in the 1940s—but not on this meridian. All that evidence discovered in those file boxes dated to 1942... Well, none of that is likely to happen now, at least not on this altered meridian, which figures to become the new Prime Meridian if these events progress. Who knows how this retelling of that time will play out? In fact, I would think the viability of those reports you filed is in jeopardy now. They should not be able to persist when events here reach the time they purport to describe. They began with the first coming of the ship, but now those events are being revised, re-written, and that process may soon alter or eliminate a key event or lever.”

“What would that do?” asked Elena.

“What would it do? It would produce sudden, catastrophic change, that’s what it would do. The ship went south after it first appeared here, yet this time it has turned north. That has already avoided the initial point of divergence that began to alter the history, and so events arising from that intervention are now in jeopardy—this whole altered state is very fragile, completely exposed to the possibility of a radical transformation.”

Tovey scratched his head. “You mean to say things in this world could change? I might wake up tomorrow and find myself on another ship—not this one, which you claim was never supposed to have been built?”

“That’s about the size of it. You see, it isn’t simply those future times that are in jeopardy. During Chaos Time anything could happen. We could be

laboring here to effect a favorable outcome, and then all of a sudden...”

“We could wake up and find Herr Hitler has already won the damn war,” said Tovey.

Paul nodded his head, accepting the Admiral’s example as a real possibility. “I’ll give you a more concrete example. You tell me Sergei Kirov now rules over the Soviet State. Well it is certain that a chain of events preceded his rise to power, and they started with the coming of that ship, and its movement into the Atlantic. That isn’t happening this time. And now, moment by moment that chain of causality is being weathered and rusted away. Should that process reach some key event, it’s like a link breaking, and you get an obvious result. Understand?”

“You mean that the events that led to Kirov’s survival and subsequent rise to power are now being re-written,” said Elena. “But hasn’t that chain already been fatally compromised? The ship isn’t heading into the Atlantic. That first point of divergence, as you call it, has changed.”

“True,” said Dorland, “but if the Push Point lies elsewhere, say in 1942, then the Heisenberg Wave has not yet reached it, so things stand as they are until that happens.”

Now I see the problem,” said Elena. “Captain Fedorov told me how that happened. In fact, he claimed he was directly responsible, a careless whisper, as he described it, just like one of your Push Points. If the history that led him to that moment changes...”

“Exactly,” said Dorland. “Then that moment loses its foundation in the line of causality. Think about it. Sergei Kirov is standing on quicksand now, and if he goes, then everything he did and built in this world goes with him. He’s a Prime Mover by every definition of the term. And the thing about these changes is that no one knows anything has happened—except Primes protected in a safe nexus. Oh, they might have inklings and inner whispers that something isn’t what it should be. People get these hunches, intuitions, intimations of something that they cannot quite clarify in their minds.”

“Damn if that isn’t the case with me,” said Tovey. “I’ve had these dogging recollections of the events depicted in those file boxes, yet the memories are never really clear. It’s as if I was right on the cusp of seeing it all, but then it slips away.”

“Precisely,” said Dorland. “You have already suffered through one of these great changes, Admiral Tovey. I call them radical transformations, but

timequake might be a bit more colorful. Your part in the chain of causality that led to these altered states was probably not fully formed when it happened, which is why you struggle to remember. Well, what I am telling you now is that we could get another change like this, all of the sudden, and the outcome is completely unpredictable.”

“Damn,” said Tovey. “We could set the table for six and then find twelve at the door. We could sit here making all these plans only to have them undermined by one of these bloody timequakes.”

“You have it exactly,” said Dorland with a frown.

Chapter 35

“But what if we could do what you have suggested?” said Elena. “What if we could prevent that ship from ever coming back—eliminate first cause in the chain of all these events?”

“That would be quite difficult.”

“Yes, but you appeared here, and that would seem impossible. The very difficult should be much easier to accomplish. Why not use your time machine, or whatever it is, to simply get to the days before Kirov departs Severomorsk and prevent it from leaving harbor?”

“I would love to lend a hand in that, but I cannot.”

“Why?” Elena folded her arms.

“Because I cannot travel to a time when I already exist. I’m already there, and doing something else on July 28th when that ship vanished. Trying to visit a time when I already exist would cause a Paradox that I would not survive. Understand?”

“Karpov did,” said Elena.

“That was an anomaly, a mistake, an aberration. It arose only because of the dual Heisenberg Waves created when the wave from 1908 encountered the Paradox. I could explain it all again, but trust me, this is a very rare and unusual occurrence. No. If Kirov is ever prevented from arriving here, only men living in the days and hours before its departure could effect that outcome. And, as they have no way of knowing what is going to happen...”

He thought for a moment. “There is one possibility... The Admiral’s remark about that other John Tovey dropping him a line put my mind on it. It was something I tried during my Bismarck intervention. When we deemed it too perilous to physically go back to try and alter events, we tried something else first.”

“What was that?”

“We sent information—right to the Admiralty using a clever ploy. I dug up a lexicon of code handles used by undercover operatives in WWII, and I used one to sign off on a radio transmission we beamed to 1941, right over London so the Admiralty could pick it up.” He smiled, quite pleased with his

trick.

"I was trying to persuade you to get up steam and get moving, Admiral Tovey. So we sent a message through to alert you Bismarck was on the move, but it didn't work. Lütjens was apparently a free radical, and he made a decision that changed things again. There's nothing ever certain in all of this. It isn't always cause and effect. We learned that the hard way, and so I decided I had to intervene personally, as this Lieutenant Commander Wellings, and get aboard Rodney to get a firmer hand on the tiller."

"Information..." Elena had a strange look on her face now. "Yes! That was what we received. Information! Someone else tried your little trick, Mister Dorland. Someone from the future, or so we came to believe."

Now she related the story she had once told Gordon, of how the Watch had received radio transmissions, signals in the long, lonesome nights at sea. They were predictions at first, designed to establish the credibility of the sender.

"We learned of the 9-11 event before it happened, and we were sent closing tickers on the stock market for a future day that panned out exactly as the signal predicted."

"I see..." Paul was suddenly very interested in this. "What else came through?"

"A warning," said Elena, her eyes flashing with realization. "Yes! It was a warning from the future—beware a ship, beware Kirov. That was what we were established for, to stand a watch for the coming of that ship in any time after this one. You started all this, Admiral Tovey—the Watch."

"So I'm told," said Tovey. "And yes, I read my own hand on that in those file boxes. The Watch..."

"Well those signals were trying to warn us about that ship," said Elena. "Don't you see? We received them before Kirov left for those live fire exercises. Someone was trying to do what you just suggested. They were trying to send a warning through to the Watch!"

"My, my," said Tovey. "This is getting darker and darker with each passing moment. I recall you revealing all this during that meeting with Captain Fedorov before we ran the Straits of Gibraltar. Yet so much was going on that I've had no time to bother with messages from the future. Day to day signals traffic has kept me quite busy."

"I understand," said Elena. "But Professor Dorland here should know

all of this. Those messages had to be coming from the future, because the predictions they made all happened. Only someone from the future could have known that. Then we just get this one final message, the warning. Why couldn't they be more specific? They could have spelled everything out, chapter and verse."

"Unless they were desperate in that hour," said Paul in a solemn tone. "Remember what I said about the danger all of this poses to that future—to all possible futures—and how things can change. If they sent such a message, then they were opening the time continuum to do so. That means they were in a safe nexus, but if it was artificially created, as we create a nexus with our own Arch facility, then it depends on the viability of that technology. If that future time was suddenly threatened, they could have just gasped out that one last warning before the danger overcame them. I'm going back to my future shortly, and believe me, it will be no picnic there. We were right at the edge of the Third World War! I have no idea how much longer we may be able to operate."

"Seeing this one first hand," said Tovey, "I can only imagine that the next one would be a desperate affair indeed."

"Believe me, I'm not looking forward to that future," said Paul, "but it's the only place where I can take any meaningful action—by getting to some moment in the past where I can find a Push Point, or a lever on these events, and attempt an intervention. Yet, as I've tried to explain in more than one way, my future is on very shaky ground."

"Well," said Elena. "Trying to stop this by preventing first cause sounds like the only real solution, wouldn't you agree?"

"Yes, but I can't use my technology to do anything in that hour."

"You can't go there, nor anyone from your team."

"Nor can you go there with your ship, assuming that box might be able to move you forward again."

"So this is why you thought we might be able to send information through instead?"

"That was my thought," said Dorland. "If we could get a warning through—perhaps to men or woman of your group—the Watch as you call it—then they might take action."

"Sounds logical," said Elena. "The Watch has already received such a warning, as I've explained. It was just not clear enough to us to act on the

threat. Whatever we send, it needs to be clear and specific... But how might we do this?"

"I might be able to help in that," said Paul. "After all, I managed to send a message through to 1941. Any ideas on what I could try?"

"An order," said Tovey. "I assume there's a Royal Navy in that time, Professor Dorland?"

"Yes, I can't say that Britannia rules the waves as they have in earlier generations, but there is a small, and fairly professional Royal Navy."

"Then perhaps we could send an order through to the navy. All they would have to do is try and prevent this accident—the first cause that sent the Russian ship here. Yes?"

"I suppose that could help," said Dorland. "If nothing more, it might stop this time loop and allow things to resolve."

"What would happen?" asked Elena. "Assuming we did that, and the Royal Navy was able to somehow prevent that accident. What would happen to the Russian ship if it were still here?"

The Professor inclined his head, thinking. "An interesting question. I might discuss this with Maeve when I get back—she's our head of Outcomes and Consequences—a very good mind for things like this. You might ask your own resident puzzle solver, Admiral. Why not pose the question to Alan Turing? For my part, I am thinking that the elimination of first cause would be very significant. You see, that accident is a perfect example of how a Push Point works, just happenstance, yet it had catastrophic consequences. We could try this, in fact I think we must. Yet my own attempt to sink the Bismarck this way failed. I suppose it all comes down to what the people on the receiving end do when they get our message. That isn't easy to control. It would be so much better if we could intervene more directly—personally, as I did aboard Rodney, yet no one from our team could go."

"But what about men from this era?" asked Elena. "They don't exist in 2021. They could go there with no ill effects. Correct?"

"I suppose so, but who to send?"

"We have some very good people for little cloak and dagger missions like that," said Tovey.

"Then the next question arises," said Dorland. "How would we get them there? I can return to my own time, only because my people have a quantum link to my pattern signature here to move me back where I belong."

“I know a way,” said Elena. “We’ve been discussing it all along—these time rifts. We know they exist, opening portals to the past. But I know of one that goes both ways—Ilanskiy.”

Tovey raised an eyebrow, for he had heard about all of that in an earlier meeting. Miss Fairchild related the story to Dorland, telling him everything she had learned from the Russian Captain Fedorov.

“Another rift,” said Dorland. “And this one seems very stable. Where is this place?”

“Siberia,” said Elena. “A small hamlet east of Kansk.”

“Is that friendly territory? Could we send these men Tovey suggests there?”

Elena looked at Tovey now, wondering.

“Technically Siberia is a Free and independent state,” said the Admiral, “though it seems they now have ties to Soviet Russia. At least they are now openly at war with Volkov’s Orenburg Federation. It’s said that the enemy of my enemy is my friend. I suppose they might be considered fledgling allies in our cause, yet Britain has no formal accord signed with the Siberians.”

“And don’t forget the Doppelganger,” said Dorland. “This man Karpov... From all I have heard about him, he does not seem all that cooperative.”

“Captain Fedorov and Admiral Volsky seemed to think he was very dangerous,” said Tovey.

“Does he know about this rift at Ilanskiy?”

“Quite possibly,” said Tovey. “In fact, Sergei Kirov must also know about it. Fedorov told me he certainly used that stairway, because it connected these years to his own time, 1908. The Captain believed Kirov used those stairs to come here, and the world he saw was so unpalatable that he decided to do something about it.”

“Stalin!” said Dorland. “So now I finally see the connection between the coming of the ship and the death of Stalin. What a devious pathway it took, and remember the example I gave earlier. It may not be all that difficult to disrupt that chain of events. Why, with an open time rift like that, someone could even do it unintentionally. These rifts are dangerous. I can see why operatives in the future were trying to secure them, and what these keys may be all about.”

“But I don’t think they knew anything about this one,” said Elena darkly.

Paul considered that. The messages were coming to the watch from the future stretching beyond his day, the meridian he came from. They could not be coming from any future arising from this altered meridian, because this time loop has been preventing any clear outcome. What if Miss Fairchild was correct? What if they knew of these other time rifts, but knew nothing of Ilanskiy? They apparently went to great lengths to find and secure the other rifts—under lock and key. Yet if one existed that they had not uncovered... He saw now how their plans could all be thwarted, simply because the existence of that unseen rift was allowing major contamination to the continuum.

“They had their finger in the dike,” he said, “and at more than one place. You say you knew of at least one more key, in addition to the one that was lost on Rodney. Might it relate to this rift at Ilanskiy?”

“No. I don’t think so. As far as I know, neither British intelligence, nor the Watch, knew anything about that rift at Ilanskiy either.”

“Very strange,” said Dorland. “And yet it’s been sitting there all this time. We know it goes all the way back to 1908!”

“The time of yet another first cause,” said Elena, “Tunguska. I believe exotic material from that detonation may be able to disturb, even rupture, the flow of time, just as I told you earlier. In fact, that is how I believe my ship appeared here. A key that led to a box, that then brought me and Argos Fire here to this place. And apparently the whole affair was well considered—planned.”

“There I go again,” said Tovey. “You’ll say I was behind it all.”

“Well Admiral, I’ve been listening very carefully to Professor Dorland here,” said Elena. This bit about sending information through time really struck home. You see, that is what the Watch received, and it is what I received that sent me on this journey—information. It came to me as an order, just as you suggested, on a special red telephone aboard my ship. Information! Someone was aware of this whole adventure, and trying to get me involved.”

“The keys,” said Dorland. “We simply must solve that part of this puzzle. We must get hold of all those other keys, because if they do secure these time rifts, they also do the inverse and allow access to them. We could move heaven and earth to try and prevent Kirov from ever displacing here, only to find those open rifts in time still allow a contamination to undo all our work.”

“Agreed,” said Elena. “So how do we proceed?”

“You hold one key, correct? And you say you know of another Keyholder.”

“I know one exists, but not his identity. Nor do I know what that key might open.”

“Most likely the location of another time rift. We simply must discover that, but first things first. We need to get our hands on the one other key we know of, now at the bottom of the Atlantic.”

“Along with all the King’s business,” said Tovey. “Churchill was quite upset about that.”

“Undoubtedly, but the loss of the key is our only concern. I think I know how to find it again, and I’ll make that my little project. As for this rift at Ilanskiy, that seems to be the odd man out in all this. That site will have to be secured as well.”

“No small task,” said Tovey. “It seems Ivan Volkov and this Vladimir Karpov have been tussling for control of the place. Captain Fedorov mounted a raid to try and destroy the entrance, and then those two have been back and forth over it ever since.”

“But there it is,” said Dorland, “and we’ll have to deal with it somehow. We need these keys, all of them, and this won’t be easy getting our hands on them. These rifts in time must be secured. One is completely unknown, another apparently exists in a location controlled by the Germans, and the third is controlled by a very dangerous man, a man who should not even exist now, just like this ship—a Doppelganger.”

Chapter 36

Doctor Zolkin could not take his mind off that bandage, or even his eyes. From time to time he found himself staring at his medicine cabinet, and he was bothered by the nagging feeling that something about that bandage was important, though he could not think what it was. He spent three hours, going through all his personnel patient records, and looking through his diagnostic computer files for some trace or clue as to when he might have used that bandage. He was very meticulous in keeping his records, because the quartermaster was also very meticulous in allocating the ship's budgets for medical supplies. One day I'll have to buy that man a good bottle of vodka, he thought, and loosen up his purse.

Yet his search had been fruitless, until just before noon, even as the ship slipped away from all visible land that day, now lost in the Barents Sea, heading for the Kara Strait at the southern tip of the long barrier island of Novaya Zemlya. He had been troubled by things he heard among members of the crew these last few days, and the line at his door seemed a bit longer. Strangely, he found the men often presented some minor complaint, which was really nothing that should have sent them to the infirmary, until he realized that what they really wanted to do was simply talk with him.

The Doctor heard a great deal in those little chats, things about the strangeness of coming home, and the veil of secrecy that seemed to surround the operations of the ship now. He heard about the newcomers, some kind of security force that had come aboard, quartered well aft in the reserve cargo area, and kept segregated from the rest of the crew. Some of the men complained that they had to give up an extra blanket from their laundry allotment to accommodate these men, who were sometimes seen, moving in groups of three or five in their long dark overcoats, like shadows.

He heard of one man in particular, a burly Sergeant named Grilikov who was now making the rounds with Orlov, and the crew seemed more than unhappy about that development. Soon he learned why, when a man came in with a ripe shiner on one eye, and when Zolkin started to lecture him about fighting, the other sailor interrupted him.

“It wasn’t me, sir. It was that big Sergeant. He said I was too slow with the fire hose drill.”

“Big Sergeant? You mean Troyak did this?”

“No sir... It was Grilikov.”

Zolkin heard more in that than he liked, shaking his head, and he also heard things about the Captain as well. Like everyone else on the ship, the absence of Admiral Volsky was keenly felt, particularly by Zolkin, for he was a long time friend of the Admiral. He had heard the announcement on the P.A. by the Captain, yet he felt it odd that Leonid would leave so abruptly like this, without the slightest whisper of his intentions. Yes, the Admiral of the Northern Fleet often knew many more things that he would share with other officers, but he always shared most of them with Zolkin—but not this. Moscow had summoned the Admiral for a very important meeting, or so the Captain’s announcement explained. In the meantime, the ship was heading for Vladivostok as previously planned.

Zolkin also found that strange. They had not docked at Severomorsk, by the Admiral’s order, and he knew Leonid well enough to realize that he had some good reason for that. Volsky went ashore, and did not return. Instead came these shadows, led by some big brute of a man named Grilikov, and the unrest in the crew was a palpable thing now.

Yet the Doctor had been in the service a good long while. He knew that things happened that required secrecy, and the incident with Orel and Slava was more than enough to have the ship’s commanding officer summarily called to account in Moscow the moment they made port, even if he was a Fleet Admiral. That was probably it, he thought. The Naval inspectorate most likely sent these men aboard, and Leonid was being called on the thick red carpet. He silently wished his friend well, and attended to his business as always... but that nagging thought about the bandage kept bothering him. When he encountered that odd glitch in his computer files, the feeling he had when he first touched that bandage redoubled.

He was plowing through his records on the medical log computer, and suddenly came across a very strange entry. It was a file that would not open—password protected—yet he could not remember ever securing that data, or think of any reason why he should. Curious, he began typing in the most typical password he would use to lock a file, his cat’s name, Gretchk0, with the last character being a cypher zero instead of the normal letter, but it

failed. Then he tried something stronger, passwords he would only ever use for very sensitive matters, and one of them finally opened the file.

In places he could see that some of the data remained badly garbled, as if the encryption algorithm had failed to decode properly. Yet in other locations he could clearly read snippets of the file data, and he was very surprised by what he saw there—in fact quite shocked! He soon realized that this was a list of names, all members of the crew, along with all their digital personnel records. Why would he find it necessary to secure that information? It gave him a very troubling feeling as he scanned the document, for at the end of each man's file he found diagnostic notes he had apparently typed in the closing comments box. As he read them, he realized that they were autopsy notes! Several men were designated KIA, and three files really got his attention—Markov: MIA; Voloshin: Apparent Suicide; and the last one completely befuddled him. It was a bizarre report he had apparently written about a man he knew quite well from the ship's galley, a man named Lenkov. What in god's name was this all about?

He leaned back in his chair, somewhat shaken by the discovery, and now the odd feelings he had about that soiled bandage prickled up again, more insistent, and with a sense of urgency that actually sent his pulse racing. Of all the members of the crew who might be troubled by recent events, there was one man who should be at the top of his list—Fedorov. For some reason, Zolkin wanted to speak with him again. In fact, he almost felt compelled to do so, though he thought that was more his own guilt in having neglected the man, overlooking the seriousness of the injury he might have sustained.

Yes, he thought, I must go and check on Mister Fedorov to see if he is still wrestling with this strange interpretation of these recent events. His condition had begun to show signs of mild psychosis, so he made a mental note to check on the officer's rotation schedule and see when he might be in his quarters. Better yet, he thought. I will look for him in the officer's dining room tonight, and make a point of sitting with him to make a quiet assessment before I do anything more formal.

Even as he thought that, he realized there was more in his intention than he openly admitted to himself. The contents of that encrypted file had shaken him, and somehow for some reason that he could not divine, he felt compelled to talk to Fedorov about it...

But the Senior Lieutenant was not in the dining hall that evening, and he

soon found out why.

*

Zykov was lounging in the helo bay as always. He had finished his weapons cleaning ritual, and completed the readiness check on the KA-40 that had been up earlier that day, as all the Marines pulled double duty on the ship, and performed service maintenance on the helicopters they would so often have to use. Now he was lounging, his work for the day complete, and a copy of a girly magazine more than enough to keep his attention while he waited for the chow bell to ring. He was a Corporal, which put him one leg up on all the other men, who were all privates, and so he thought it just a privilege of rank that he might steal these little moments of distraction from the day's work rotation.

The other men were all up on deck with Troyak finishing the damage control drill, but his squad had already scored high marks, and so it was exempted. The four men under his immediate supervision had already gone to the mess hall to wait in line, leaving Zykov alone with his magazine, and a smile.

Then he heard hard footfalls at the far end of the bay, looking over his shoulder and thinking the Sergeant was back early with the other two squads. Instead, he was surprised to see Orlov leading in a group of the newcomers, and one was the big mountain of a man they called Grilikov.

"Up off your ass, Zykov," said the Chief. "Where's the Sergeant?"

Zykov stood, as he would for any officer, though he had no great respect for Orlov. "He's up on the helo deck running a drill."

"Oh? Then what are you doing here?" Orlov spied the magazine, grinning. "Thinking to flog the stick, Corporal? You can start with mine!" The other men with him chuckled at that, all those strangers that had come aboard in their long overcoats, the shadows, as the crew called them.

"Give me that, you idiot!" Orlov went to snatch the magazine away, but Zykov pulled it back.

"Hands off, Chief. This is personal property, but you can have it when I've finished."

Orlov frowned. "I think I'll have it now, Corporal..."

The bigger man stepped very close now, the man they called Grilikov, looming over Zykov like a stony shadow. But the Marines were not just any men aboard the ship, not regular members of the crew. They were a special detachment, combat trained, and under the supervision of Sergeant Troyak. They were not even on Orlov's work rotation lists, and so Zykov was not accustomed to taking orders from Orlov, and he was not the sort to be easily intimidated either, a Marine of the elite unit the service called the Black Death.

He smiled, looking up at Grilikov, then at Orlov. "Find something else to play with Chief, this is the Marine section." He reminded Orlov he was off the ranch here, and stood his ground, slipping the magazine behind his back with one hand, the other on his hip, with a smug look on his face.

Grilikov move so fast Zykov never saw the blow coming. The big man simply swatted him across the face, and hard enough to nearly knock the Corporal down, though he staggered and regained his balance, a hot anger suddenly in his eyes. Orlov grinned at him spitefully.

"Smart mouth, Zykov. See what you get for that? You want more of it? Now give me that damn magazine!"

At that moment there was a commotion on the aft stairway to the helo deck, and Zykov looked to see the Marines were all coming back down from their drill. They were talking amiably, teasing one another, and then they suddenly saw the scene at the other end of the bay, near the lockers where Zykov had been sitting.

Orlov quietly cursed their untimely arrival, gritting his teeth, but with three security men with him, and Grilikov, he was more emboldened than he might otherwise be. After all, he was Chief of the damn boat. Yes? This was a disciplinary matter now.

The Other Marines saw the scene, and instinctively sized up that something was wrong. They had heard about these new security men aboard, and some of the other crew members had complained to them about them, but this was the first they saw of them.

The Chief looked over his shoulder at them, for he had come here for some other reason, to see about getting into the weapons lockers as Karpov had instructed him earlier. The magazine in Zykov's hand was not the one he needed to be attending to now, and he realized that, so he thought twice.

"Alright, Zykov," he said, raising one hand as if to call Grilikov off. "I'm

here for the real magazine anyway, not that girly rag you need to keep yourself happy. Keep the damn thing. But I'll need keys to the lockers. You're a big tough Corporal. You should know where they are."

At that moment one last man came down the stairway, and as he landed on the lower deck, the other Marines parted to make way for him—Troyak, a billed cap pulled low on his forehead, his sleeves rolled up, and a five o'clock shadow on his chin that gave him an even rougher hewn aspect than normal.

Silence...

The Marines just stood there, eyes moving from the group at the far end of the bay and then to the Sergeant. Troyak took one look at the scene, and he could immediately sense something was wrong here. He knew Zykov very well, saw the look on his face, saw Grilikov, and he knew a man ready for a fight when he saw one. Then he slowly walked across the bay, his footfalls deliberate and purposeful, hard thumps on the deck, and the beginnings of a frown starting to appear on his face. Orlov... He never liked the man.

Troyak stepped up to the group, eyeing the three men in their dark overcoats with a scowl, and then giving Grilikov a long look. "What is going on here, Chief?"

"Nothing much," said Orlov. "Zykov was just telling me about his girly magazine. Really, Sergeant, you should keep your hens in line down here. He was lounging about like this was a pleasure cruise."

"Fuck you, Orlov!" said Zykov, and the eyes of the Marines at the other end of the bay glimmered with that.

"Fuck me? No thanks, Corporal. You can stick it to your magazine."

Troyak gave Zykov a look, seeing the red weal on his face, noting Grilikov's stance, clearly at the ready, a very threatening presence, and feeling the tension as thick as steel. He knew what had happened here, and was angry with what Zykov had just said to a senior officer. Yet he was even more perturbed with Orlov, and the scene he had clearly engineered here. So he slowly stepped up to the Chief, looking him square in the eye.

"Sir," he said his voice like gravel. "Discipline of the Marine contingent is the responsibility of the Sergeant Major." He was so close to the Chief that Orlov instinctively took a step back. Troyak was, in fact, the Sergeant Major, and he was letting the Chief know that he would not tolerate his usual brash and strong armed methods where his men were concerned.

Even as he said that, Orlov had the strange feeling that this had happened

once before, those words, low and firm, the Sergeant's stony presence in front of him, the odd prickling of *Déjà vu* he felt seemed chilling...

Now Grilikov turned slowly, looking at Troyak with an unfriendly face. Kandemir Troyak was a Siberian Eskimo from the Chukchi Peninsula, a short, broad shouldered man, very stocky, yet all muscle. But Grilikov was over six feet tall, a wall of flesh and bone when he stood close, massively threatening.

Troyak simply ignored the man, keeping his eyes on Orlov, unmoving, silent, the scowl on his face enough to frighten a rabid bulldog. Orlov knew he was the one man on the ship that had never been under his thumb, something he quietly resented, and now, with Grilikov and three other security men behind him, he felt just a little bolder, just a little more brash, just a little more his own ornery self.

"Forget that," he said to Troyak. "You can paddle his ass all you want after I'm done here. I came down to get access to the weapons lockers. The Captain wants a full inventory."

"The Marine lockers?"

"What else, Troyak, I don't want to go through your underwear cabinet." He grinned, looking over his shoulder at the three security men.

Troyak put his hands on his hips, and Zykov's eyes widened. He had seen the Sergeant do that many times before, and he knew what it meant. Nobody got into Troyak's business down here, nobody.... It was an unspoken rule of the ship, and Orlov's very presence in the Marine section of the helo bay was a transgression, an offense, and the Corporal knew Troyak was not going to tolerate it.

"Sir," said Troyak again, his voice hard and steady. "The Marines conduct all muster of arms in these lockers, and account for any inventory on hand."

"Yes? Well I conduct the inventory today, Sergeant. I assume you have the keys?"

Silence.... A silence so thick and impenetrable that no one dared speak or even move. Troyak was looking right at Orlov, ignoring every other man on the scene, and Zykov finally rubbed his cheek, scratching a way an itch from the blow he had taken.

"Well?" Orlov gave Troyak a disparaging look, but the Sergeant just bored into him with those dark eyes. Then he spoke, his voice carrying a tone

that meant real business now, and every one of the Marines heard it, for they had heard it so many times before.

“Did the Chief of Operations hear what the Sergeant Major just said?” It was a stark challenge, and only something that could have come out of Troyak’s mouth. Zykov had told the Chief to fuck off in a fit of anger, though he knew he would likely hear about that soon enough. But with that one cold, unflinching statement, Troyak had just told Orlov to fuck off yet again, only he did so formally, in language every man there understood, and the statement was an escalation that took the tension in the room to a whole new level.

Now Grilikov turned, squaring off to Troyak, looming over him, a full head taller. His thick arms hung heavily at his side, and the light from the open hangar door above gleamed balefully on his forehead. His presence radiated sheer menace, and now the three security men behind Orlov also stepped up, one man slowly moving a hand inside his trench coat.

Troyak had been ignoring the man, for he knew the only person with any authority there was Orlov, but he did not take lightly to any other man standing to in his presence, and he knew a clear threat of violence when he saw one, his eye unfailingly picking up the movement of the security man’s hand inside his coat. The other Marines instinctively moved forward, slowly approaching the scene, their unfriendly eyes on the men in those coats.

The Sergeant Major heard them, and he simply moved one arm, his hand extending two fingers, a gesture he might have made in the silence of a combat scenario. The Marines froze in place, stopping where they were. Then Troyak slowly turned, finally acknowledging the looming closeness of Grilikov, a nemesis the like of which he had never seen. But this was his turf. In this bay, and with these Marines, he was the final arbiter of truth or falsity, and no man would overshadow him, overrule him, or ever violate that. He looked up at Grilikov, Black Death in his eyes, in the stony cut of his shoulders, in the granite rock of his chin. The two men stared at one another, one an immovable object, the other an irresistible force, and no good was ever going to come from their meeting.

“Chief of the Boat,” said Troyak darkly. “Who is this man? He is standing too close to the Sergeant Major, and he will now take one step back.”

Zykov took a deep breath, and swallowed hard.

The Saga Continues...

Kirov Saga: Winter Storm

Harried by the Captain's suspicion, Fedorov desperately tries to find allies on the ship, and gets a most unusual visit from Doctor Zolkin that gives him a faint glimmer of hope. Kirov is bound for the Pacific, with tensions slowly rising on the ship itself as the crew is briefed to gird themselves for war. But the fighting may already be starting, simmering in the helo bay when two immutable opposing forces stolidly stand their ground, refusing to back down.

The action soon moves east, and bigger battles loom when the ship and crew find themselves on the eve of a most fateful day as Japan prepares to enter the war. But Karpov has plans for the Japanese Navy, and he soon sets the ship on a collision course that threatens to ignite the fires of the Pacific war in a massive conflagration.

On the Russian Front, Sergei Kirov struggles to hold the line at the gates to Moscow when the Big Cats arrive on the scene of Guderian's bold thrust at Tula. The action soon brings two storied tank killers face to face in the desperate fighting, where the battlefield becomes the scene of a very personal duel.

Meanwhile, Admiral Volsky has secretly made contact with the Commander of a British submarine, hoping to convince the man that he must leave his arctic patrol and sail for a rendezvous with Admiral Tovey. But the waters off the North Cape are dangerous, and the journey will be far more perilous than he realizes. As he labors to deliver his charge in the key Fedorov has entrusted to him, Professor Dorland returns to his Meridian Team in 2021 to try and plan the recovery of the key lost on HMS Rodney, but he soon makes a most alarming discovery.

The action continues on both land and sea, as 1941 draws to a close and the most fateful year of the war begins in the storms of the cold winter.

DORLAND's TIME GLOSSARY – Terminology

ABSOLUTE CERTIANTY – A condition brought about by willful determination that serves to limit variation in the continuum, creating a kind of tunnel in the time Meridian that restricts outcomes to an absolute resolution.

ALTERED STATE – A new prime meridian that has been recreated or radically altered to incorporate consequences and changes due to variations in the original meridian. See also: Prime Meridian

ATTENUATION – A property of an incomplete Time shift, where the traveler manifests across a range of several milliseconds, slightly out of synch or phase with his correct manifestation point.

BACKWASH – The reflection of Heisenberg Waves that propagate backward in time after encountering Paradox. Backwash can create Backward Causality, and literally alter past events.

BACKWARD CAUSALITY – A quantum event where entangled particles in the present or future serve to alter the quantum state of particles in the past, leading to the alteration of events in the past because of something that happens in the present and future, usually a Paradox event. See Also: Quantum Entanglement

CHAOS ZONE – A kind of time moiré when dual Heisenberg Wave sets overlap on the other side of Paradox Time. Chaos Zones can be very unstable and create unexpected or odd effects. See also: Dual Heisenberg Wave.

CLARITY – Clear or good understanding of a temporal locus, pattern, event, Outcome or Consequence.

CO-LOCATION – The presence of an object or person transported back through time to any point or Meridian on the continuum where that object existed. This is expressly forbidden by Time, and therefore generally thought to be impossible. In like manner, no person can ever shift in Time to a point where they co-locate with themselves, which will create a Paradox if attempted. *EXCEPTION: See Dual Heisenberg Wave and Doppelganger*

CONSEQUENCE – An undesired result achieved by a temporal Transformation – Usually referring to the negative. (i.e.) Sometimes certain Consequences must be accepted in order to achieve a desired Outcome.

CONVOLUTION – The relative difficulty or complexity of a given temporal event or condition.

DEEP NEXUS – Sometimes called a “Void” – A crucial, significant Nexus Point where radical alteration of the time line is possible. A Deep Nexus has a universal effect on all moments in Time until resolved, and can therefore be a portal into any potential Meridian passing through the Nexus.

DENSITY – A relative term describing factor counts in temporal events. The more density, the more difficult it is to discern possible outcomes on a meridian, and plan intervention.

DOPPELGANGER – “Double Walker.” A duplicate of a person or object arising as a result of a Dual Heisenberg Wave during Paradox Time. Doppelgangers are rare and unique duplications of information in the time continuum. They can only arise when one information set, object, or person, is protected in a Nexus Point, or protected by some other force, during Paradox Time, particularly if the second duplicate information set, object or person is associated with an Imperative or First Cause event that must occur.

DUAL HEISENBERG WAVE – A Heisenberg Wave that has separated into

two wave sets after encountering Paradox Time on the continuum. Such conditions give rise to a Chaos Zone in the hours and days immediately following Paradox Time, and can also lead to many strange effects, like Déjà vu, Jamais vu, Presque vu, alterations in physical matter, memory loss, and the creation of a Doppelganger.

ELASTICITY – *The tendency of Time to resist alteration and reassume its original shape.*

FACTOR – *An element contributing to convolution in temporal events.*

FINALITY – *A catastrophic Grand Imperative (like the Cuthulu asteroid strike that led to the eradication of the dinosaurs and other life.) See Also: Grand Finality and Imperative.*

FIRST CAUSE – *A crucial event in a chain of causality that initiates all following events. A first cause is often associated with a Time Loop, and it becomes more and more imperative the longer the looping occurs without proper resolution.*

FREE RADICAL – *A dangerous, erratic variable in the course of temporal events – usually only existing within a Deep Nexus.*

GOLEM – *A special search program written by Kelly Ramer and distributed to hundreds of thousands of computer users via the Internet. Golems are able to search and report on information on the net, and can perceive data on every Meridian during a time of Deep Nexus through the phenomenon known as “Resonance.” Golems are arranged in to modules, and one notable module responsible for fetching crucial variations was designated “Golem 7.”*

GORDIAN KNOT – *A series of time loops that cannot be untangled, even by using the annihilating power associated with Paradox. Such a knot can occur*

when objects or persons are protected from the effects of Paradox by one means or another. The presence or existence of a Doppelganger is a warning that a Gordian Knot is starting to form from a Time Loop influenced by Paradox.

GRAND FINALITY – The inevitable end or result of a Radical Transformation to the time continuum. Such an occurrence can permanently rupture the meridians of time, creating infinite Time Loops that can never resolve. In effect, time becomes hopelessly tangled into a Gordian Knot, and this can lead to the annihilation of the future, as events cannot progress beyond the point of the knotted or looped time. Grand Finalities differ from natural finalities in that they are the result of willful action, and not acts of nature.

GREAT VOID – An interminable shadow or Penumbra cast by a Grand Imperative. It can also refer to the void in time created by a Grand Finality.

HAZE – Obscurity in the understanding of a temporal situation.

HEISENBERG WAVE – The transforming effect of an intervention in time, which propagates forward along the continuum to radically alter all subsequent events. All major variations in time, including Paradox, result in the creation of a Heisenberg Wave, like a stone thrown into a still pool. See also: Time Tsunami.

IMPERATIVE – An event in Time which must happen – Usually a natural event, but not always, as in the case of a First Cause. A Grand Imperative is a natural event of special significance. Some Grand Imperatives can become a Finality.

INEVITABILITY – A progression of events that is inexorable and unalterable.

INITIATOR – A person directly responsible for a new Time Meridian (Like Mohammed, or Christ). A Prime Mover of great significance.

LEVER – A secondary contributor to movement in a series of events.

MERIDIAN – An established line of temporal events on the continuum. A possible line of causality. See also: Prime Meridian

NEXUS POINT – A point of connection, intersection or branching of one or more possible Meridians in the Time continuum.

NODE – A specific point on a Time Meridian.

OUTCOME – A desired result achieved by a temporal Transformation – Usually referring to the positive.

P-WAVE – A “predictive” or “precursor” Heisenberg Wave that acts as a harbinger of changes to come, but does not introduce major changes to any meridian. P-Waves resonate across all possible meridians, and can therefore be detected as possible variations in the Resonance around a series of events. Minor effects may accompany P-Waves, which are often perceived as a sense of emotional dread.

PARADOX – Time’s way of correcting errors in the Time continuum. Paradox arises when an insoluble conflict occurs in the continuum, and time attempts to avoid or correct that problem. It is therefore a real force, and quite dangerous. It kills or erases people and objects from the Time Meridian when unaccountable complications arise from their actions. A Paradox is NOT simply a thorny problem; it is a real effect and the force of annihilation—a kind of “Anti-Time.” See also: Heisenberg Wave, and Time Loop.

PARADOX HOUR – The moment when an object or person in the past reaches the moment of their first arrival at a point on the continuum, their

birth, or moment of first cause. The annihilating force of Paradox attempts to resolve potential conflicts by removing them from the continuum or any contact with Paradox Hour.

PARADOX TIME – The time prior to, and during, a Paradox event. Odd effects of Paradox Time can begin occurring, hours, days, weeks or even months before the actual Paradox event, as a result of the subtle generation of P-Waves in the Heisenberg field.

PENUMBRA – The shadow of influence on future events cast by an Imperative, often impenetrable or a great obstacle, to time travelers.

POINT OF DIVERGENCE – The point of initial vitiation in any previously established time meridian.

POINT OF ORIGIN – The temporal locus where a person or object becomes a Prime Mover.

PRIME MERIDIAN – The initial or first meridian of time, and the one that all other potential meridians must return to after a variation. Heisenberg Waves created by variations serve to rejoin potential altered meridians back into one new prime, which could then be a Altered State.

PRIME MOVER – A primary causative lever or agent for an event – usually a person but sometimes an object.

PUSH POINT – A moment of insignificance that gives rise to a key event on a Time Meridian. Often associated with a Prime Mover.

QUANTUM ENTANGLEMENT – A relationship between two quantum particles where the state or condition of one causes the other related particle to also alter its state, location, spin or other condition—instantaneously. Quantum Entanglement can lead to Backward Causality and other strange

time effects, as the two entangled particles need not be in the same spacetime.

QUANTUM KARMA – *The influence of causality on a Time Meridian. Each moment on the Meridian affects the next with a kind of momentum, and certain Prime Movers accumulate an aura of Quantum Karma around them that also has profound effects on the configuration of future moments in Time.*

RADICAL TRANSFORMATION – *A catastrophic alteration of the Temporal Condition that can lead to a Grand Finality.*

RESONANCE – *Information available in the intersection of a Nexus Point, where many alternate Meridians “resonate” data concerning the possible outcome of events. This data can be picked up by the Meridian Team Golem software, registering as potential variations in the history in conflict with data stored in the Touchstone Database.*

TEMPORAL CONDITION – *The matrix, pattern or state of affairs in a given time period.*

TIME LOOP – *A replay of events that occurs as a result of a Paradox event. Movement to any point on the continuum prior to one’s first appearance in the past is dangerous, as the arrow of time slowly brings that person or object forward on the continuum to approach the point of its first entry. The prohibition against Co-Location creates a Paradox, and associated Paradox Time when the object or person arriving from the past encounters the moment of their first arrival, or moment of First Cause. Time loops can result in a Gordian Knot if not properly resolved, which can lead to Grand Finality.*

TIME TSUNAMI – *A series of Heisenberg Waves generated by a Grand Paradox and initiating changes and transformations so profound that they create a Finality.*

TOUCHSTONE DATABASE – The history of all known recorded events as established in a protected RAM bank by the Meridian Project Team at the outset of their project. This data is thought to define events native to the Prime Meridian, prior to the first opening of the continuum on the team's initial time mission. This data is often used as a reference to indicate a variation in time has occurred when the Golem search modules fetch resonance information that conflicts with that in the database.

TRANSFORMATION – Any change in a Time Meridian that alters a future Temporal Condition.

TRANSFORMER – A person who causes a Transformation.

VANISHING POINT – The exact moment in Time when an object is removed and transported elsewhere in the continuum.

VARIATION – A subtle change in a Time Meridian that does not significantly alter Temporal Conditions.

WEIGHT OF OPINION - The culmination and likely outcome of future events as a result of a potential transformation, as perceived and reported by the Golem search cloud.

WILLFUL EVENT – Events resulting from decisions or actions taken by human beings

ZOMBIE – The walking dead. A person, fated to die, but whose life has been spared due to a willful intervention in a Time Meridian. Paradox will allow the elimination of a Zombie by restoring the moment of his natural death to the continuum.

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