

Kirov Saga



Book 29 in the Kirov Series

Stormtide Rising!



An Alternate History of WWII by:

John Schettler

Kirov Saga:
Stormtide Rising

By

John Schettler

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Author's Note:

Dear Readers,

After the shock and surprise of finding that *Takami* was not the only warship from 2021 to challenge Karpov's reign of terror, *Kirov* narrowly averts disaster. Once again, Karpov resorts to the last extreme to repel the dangerous attack by stealth jets that his helicopters have been unable to see and track. The string of glide bombs unleashed by Admiral Kita's F-35's seemed, at first, to be much less of a threat than the fast moving missiles *Kirov* might fling at its enemies, yet they prove to be very accurate, capable of delivering a saturation attack that simply puts too many weapons on target for the ship to defend itself. As Karpov himself grimly admits, something always gets through.

His resort to the use of one of his three precious nuclear warheads to blast one wave of the glide bomb attack out of the sky, was still barely enough to save the ship. Friedrich Nietzsche wrote that: "*One must still have chaos in oneself to give birth to a dancing star.*" Karpov, though sobered and wizened by his experience, still has that chaos within, which is why he does not hesitate to manifest it in the world about him. He unleashed his star, and saved the ship, and yet his final resort to speed and endurance remains unspoken testimony to the danger he now perceives, not only to the ship and crew, but to the soaring artifice of his ambitions; his lofty position as head of the Free Siberian State, and his aspirations to restore Russia's lost territories, seized by Japan so long ago after his failed sortie to 1908. He has unfinished business there, as we shall see at the end of this volume.

In the meantime Ivan Gromyko has taken *Kazan* north to go carrier hunting, though he risks detection in a dangerous environment where his enemies can launch helicopters from nearly every ship in their task force, each one capable of finding and killing his sub.

We will return briefly to naval matters at the outset of this volume, to the admirals on every side as they assess their current situation, Tovey, Karpov, Kita, and Raeder. But Adolf Hitler also makes a number of appearances here that will have a dramatic effect on the course of events, both at sea and in *Operation Phoenix*. Regarding that, our hero Anton Fedorov, has been quietly at work behind the scenes, leaking information to German intelligence

that has a most dramatic effect.

As Admiral Raeder sees the very existence of his surface fleet now at stake, he gets a new and most unexpected mission, a last dance for his warriors at sea to prove their worth. Then we return to the Tunisian Front where Erwin Rommel will also strive to regain lost glory with *Operation Sturmflut* , (Stormtide.) There he jousts with a most capable opponent in George Patton, and the outcome weighs heavily on the career tracks of both men.

Vladimir Karpov is not the only man with chaos in his soul, and the will to unleash the full measure of every weapon at his command. The Führer makes a most surprising attack in this volume, and then we return to Heinz Guderian's invasion of Iraq. It will lead him inevitably to the heart of that country, the sprawling, steamy city of Baghdad, which he must take to have any hope of continuing on to the south. Reluctant to fight that battle of attrition, he has no choice, and a detailed presentation of that struggle sits at the heart of this volume.

The action at Baghdad was simulated at company level on a scale of 125 meters per hex. To do so I had to obtain a map of the city as it was in the 1940s, and I will post a number of battle maps for all that action here on the web site. (But be advised that they can be spoilers for that action. I note which map depicts the events within the narrative to make for safer viewing at the appropriate time). For the fighting in Tunisia, I've just placed a general reference map online so you can find the towns mentioned and get to know the geography that so influenced that battle.

As *Stormtide Rising* concludes, I again reserve the last segments for Karpov, *Kirov* and the situation in the Pacific as both sides take a hard look at what may lie in store for them, and make a startling decision. Enjoy!

- John Schettler

Part I

The Last Dance

*“ So the darkness shall be the light,
And the stillness the dancing.”*

— T.S. Eliot

Chapter 1

Admiral Tovey sat at his desk in his office at Scapa Flow, a weariness on him that he had felt for some time. He had even resorted to time off ashore, taking leave in the Scottish highlands, but the harsh winter had put an end to that. He had never seen such cold, deep bone chilling cold in the north, and the ice was advancing faster than ever before.

That heavy winter had settled over Russia, freezing that front to a near standstill, a winter worse than that of 1941 where the Germans had suffered so badly in the smoldering ruin of Moscow. The lack of high tempo operations had given some respite to the supply situation for the Russians. Their factories continued to operate in the bitter conditions, but they were still in desperate need of any support they could get.

Tovey sighed, signing the orders drafted on his desk that morning, and in so doing he did not then realize that he was about to set in motion a chain of events that might take the head of his opposite number in the German Navy—Admiral Raeder—and have far reaching consequences for operations in the Med, the fate of Rommel and Kesselring in Tunisia, and the lifeline Britain relied on for oil from the Middle East. Big things have small beginnings, Pushpoints that can seldom be seen where they lurked in the haystack of time. His signature on that order was one of them.

* * *

After the disastrous and heavy losses sustained by Convoy PQ-17, the Allies had been forced to suspend arctic convoys to Murmansk. The new German naval base at Nordstern remained a dangerous barb in the flank of any operation teed up for the Norwegian Sea or Arctic region. So it was with some hesitation that Tovey finally approved the order to begin a new series of convoys bound for Murmansk, and the first two were already on their way, Convoys JW-51A and JW-51B. They were carrying 202 tanks, over 2,000 other vehicles, 87 fighters, 33 bombers, 11,500 short tons of fuel, 12,650 short tons of aviation fuel and just over 54,000 short tons of general supplies and ammunition. With the winter closing in, they had but a brief window of opportunity to reach Murmansk, for even that port was experiencing

increasing difficulties with ice.

King George V and the cruiser *Jamaica* were the heart of the heavy Cover Force for Convoy JW-51A on December 15, of 1942. (*Berwick* would have gone in Fedorov's history, but that ship had been sunk in this telling of events). Six other destroyers formed the Close Cover, and they would be opposed by only three German U-Boats. Tovey was encouraged when that convoy slipped through the thin German U-boat screen undetected, and in the thick arctic weather and polar night, it was never spotted by the Luftwaffe patrols.

The second convoy was therefore ordered out immediately, sailing from Loch Ewe on the 22nd of December. This time the Heavy Cover Force was to be handled by the battleship *Anson*, with cruiser *Cumberland* and five destroyers, with a further cruiser force of *Jamaica* and *Sheffield*, and six more destroyers in immediate escort. As fate would have it, the convoy ran afoul of gale force winds just after Christmas of 1942, and was scattered. In the operations undertaken to locate the stragglers and reassemble for the run to Murmansk, the German U-354 spotted the merchant ships, and raised the alarm.

Eager to get back into the good graces of the Führer after the stunning loss of the fleet flagship *Hindenburg* in the Med, Admiral Raeder immediately ordered *Operation Regenbogen*, or Rainbow, hoping to find a pot of gold. He had the older pocket battleship *Deutschland* up north near the cape, (which had not been renamed *Lutzow* in this history), and the heavy cruiser *Admiral Hipper* was also there. Both ships were ordered out to look for the British convoy, escorted by six destroyers under Vice Admiral Oskar Kummetz.

They would find their quarry in that murky Arctic night, and a confused and scattered action resulted which saw all the British heavy forces too far off to intervene. The two German raiders thought they would make a quick end of things, but the gallant defense put up by those six escorting destroyers kept them at bay. The *Hipper* took damage, though the Germans sunk the minesweeper *Bramble* and Destroyer *Achates*, and battered the escort leader *Onslow* with five hits, one of which seriously wounded her Captain Sherbrooke.

Yet none of the 14 merchantmen were sunk, and when the British cruiser force arrived on the scene, the wary Admiral Kummetz, having orders not to risk his heavy ships, quickly retired. As sea battles went, it was a small affair,

with gallantry on the British side, particularly from Captain Sherbrooke. Yet it was to have far reaching consequences, for Hitler had been informed about it, and he had been waiting on the outcome, eager for news of the raid.

Admiral Raeder had refused to directly contact the German ships to gain their report, as the standing order was for radio silence until they reached safe waters. This twelve hour delay saw Hitler become increasingly irate and impatient for news, and when he finally learned that the British had reported the safe arrival of the convoy, he was outraged. To make matters worse, when the report from the German side finally came in, Hitler learned that his fleet had lost the destroyer *Eckholdt* .

In a comedy of errors, the German destroyer saw a ship they believed to be the *Admiral Hipper*, and moved to form up with her—but it was the British cruiser *Sheffield* , which blasted the *Eckholdt* so badly that the destroyer broke in two.

“Look!” Hitler shouted, throwing the report at Admiral Raeder, whom he had summoned to account for the debacle. “Our Kapitanen cannot even tell the difference between our ships and the enemy! This is the same blatant incompetence that undoubtedly led to the loss of the *Hindenburg* . Why do I invest all these resources, countless hours, steel and sweat, to build you this naval facility at Nordstern? What has the surface fleet ever done of note in this war? All you have done is waste fuel, ammunition, and resources. You could not hold the Canary Islands or prevent the Allied landings at Casablanca. You could not even keep the Straits of Gibraltar closed! I should immediately decommission all these useless ships, and turn the entire navy over to Dönitz and his U-boats. They are the only ships sinking enemy tonnage these days.”

Admiral Raeder endured the insults, saying nothing back, for he knew it would only prompt Hitler to continue with a litany of further complaints and accusations. He also knew that the very existence of his surface fleet had been in grave jeopardy ever since the loss of the *Hindenburg* , a moral blow that was heavier than any other he had sustained in the war, even worse than the sinking of the *Graz Zeppelin* and *Gneisenau* .

He said nothing of the fact that five British battleships had been sunk, with another lying wrecked at anchor in Alexandria. That was yesterday in Hitler’s mind, and he took many of those sinkings for granted, saying they were nothing more than obsolete ships from the last war, except for the *Prince of Wales*.

Hindenburg's loss had imposed a quiet timidity on the entire German Surface fleet, and the ignominious fate of the *Tirpitz* in its last big engagement with PQ-17, losing propulsion and towed from the scene by the *Scharnhorst*, was an embarrassment Raeder had spent long months trying to live down. Only the strange sortie made by Captain Heinrich aboard *Kaiser Wilhelm* had given him one sweet moment of victory. The prize it delivered had delighted Hitler, a prize more dangerous than anyone first realized for a good many months after that incident.

Enduring the storm tide of Hitler's tirade, Raeder waited like a stolid seawall, biding his time. When the other man had finished, Raeder said one thing: "My Führer, in war there will always be losses, and any engagement like this can produce them. This was but a single old destroyer, and it was the weather and darkness that really saved that convoy, not the British fleet. The Kriegsmarine has fought gallantly in every engagement, even in the face of these new enemy weapons. And there is one thing you should not forget in all of this—we have put a weapon of great power into your hands...."

Hitler had been standing with his back to Raeder, but now he slowly turned. "Yes Raeder, that little surprise delivered by the *Kaiser Wilhelm* will count for something. I will grant you that much. Yet you have been busy in the shipyards, or so Goring tells me all too often, but to what end?"

Goring... He had been a thorn in Raeder's side for years, jealous of the fuel and resources that the navy was consuming, and becoming more and more of a problem as his Luftwaffe sustained heavier losses. The two men had recently quarreled over orders issued to the navy by Goring on the revised supply protocols for Tunisia. Raeder had intervened, rescinding those orders and telling Goring to mind his own business, but the Air Marshall had taken the quarrel to Hitler. As always, he again complained that Raeder was also undertaking unauthorized ship conversions, using the lion's share of steel and oil, and presented a host of other complaints.

"We are completing the new series of fast ocean going destroyers to escort our new fleet carriers," the Admiral explained.

"Did I not tell you to cease production on the *Oldenburg*?" Hitler eyed him reproachfully.

"That order was obeyed. I gave orders to halt the buildout of that ship as a *Hindenburg* class battleship, but there was that beautiful hull, just sitting there, and it would have been a waste to simply scrap it at that time. Do you know what the Japanese have been doing in the Pacific? They are taking all

their unfinished battlecruiser hulls, and even cruiser hulls, and they are converting them to aircraft carriers. They know that is the real future where surface fleets are concerned—carriers, not these lumbering battleships that you complain about. So I ordered *Oldenburg* to be converted the same way. It cost us very little to build out that hull as an aircraft carrier, and in just a very few months, it will be recommissioned as the *Brandenburg*. What better way to celebrate this new operation you have launched, led by that very same division?”

“You have built me another aircraft carrier?” Hitler shook his head. “Now I will have to persuade Goring to build you enough planes to use on the damn thing. What have the others done? They sit around in the harbors, just like all the battleships, because if they do go to sea, all it will take is one of these new rocket weapons to destroy them. My new Zeppelins have done more than all your carriers combined!”

“That will soon change,” said Raeder. “You will see. Goring and I will put aside our many differences long enough to see to the successful outcome of Operation Merkur. I have *Prinz Heinrich* and the *Goeben* at Toulon. I have the *Kaiser Wilhelm*, and also one more ship—the *Bismarck*. It has completed repairs and is now ready for operations again, if you will permit me to use it.”

Hitler gave him a narrow eyed look. “The *Bismarck*? I never thought that ship would sail again. Will it do anything more than its brother ship *Tirpitz*?” There was an edge of sarcasm in Hitler’s tone.

“My Führer, *Tirpitz* has not sailed since the engagement with PQ-17, but it is now fully operational again. Its very existence there at Nordstern is a great psychological weapon. It forces the British to keep many of their newer battleships in Scapa Flow, when they might otherwise be in the Med supporting the Allied effort at strangling Kesselring’s armies in Tunisia. In fact, Allied intelligence undoubtedly knows *Bismarck* is ready for operations. They have tried to bomb it three times, but scored no hits. Now it is time to make that threat real again, and Operation Merkur is the perfect opportunity.”

Hitler nodded. “Very well, Raeder. After all, why should I moan and groan over the loss of a single destroyer? I will give you just a little more time to prove your worth, and that of the fleet. First, you must do as you now promise, and work with Goring to support our attack on Crete. Yet after that, I have one more task for you to undertake, and then let us see how well your ships can really fight.”

That got Raeder's attention, for he wondered what the Führer could have in mind, and asked as much.

"The Russians," said Hitler flatly. "The damnable Soviet Black Sea Fleet. It was driven from Sevastopol when we took the Crimea, but fled to Novorossiysk, and Ivan Volkov has been unable to take that place. In fact, Goring has already led the way for me on this new operation. Did you hear about the successful raid he launched on that enemy port? We have new weapons as well, Admiral. I have not been idle since the enemy first unleashed these naval rockets upon us. Perhaps you still see them as the main reason for your many setbacks at sea. Well, I can tell you that we have them now—radio controlled glide bombs, and rocket powered cruise missiles. That was what Goring tested for me in that attack, our new V-1 *Sturmkrähe*. Yes, the Storm Crows will soon do much more."

"Admirable," said Raeder. "But what is it you want concerning the Black Sea Fleet?"

"The six U-boats we have there are insufficient. I will tell you the same thing I told Halder before I threw him out of OKW. The Russian Black Sea Fleet still sits there on the coast and prevents us from shipping any of Volkov's oil to Rumania as planned. It also guards the Taman Strait at Kerch, and the Army wants to cross there in conjunction with Operation Edelweiss to clear the last Soviet resistance in the Kuban sector. So after Crete, you will take all our remaining ships in the Med through the Aegean, and into the Black Sea. I have already obtained permission from the Turks. They see what we are doing with Operation Phoenix, and now they are quite amenable. So that is your major objective after Crete. The Russian Black Sea Fleet must be destroyed!"

This came as a real surprise to Raeder, something completely unexpected. "You want me to engage the Soviet fleet?"

"I see your hearing has not been effected, in spite of all the big guns you have fired to no good end in the Atlantic. Yes, destroy the Black Sea Fleet. You have it exactly."

"But my Führer... The Soviet fleet has a battleship, five cruisers, eighteen destroyers and over forty submarines, not to mention eighty more motor torpedo boats."

"Are you telling me you cannot do this? Because if you are, then after Crete, you can tender your resignation and I will mothball the entire fleet for the duration of this war."

It was no idle threat, and Raeder knew it. Goring had so poisoned Hitler's mind that his mood was very dark concerning the outlook for the navy. Most of the fleet was still in the north. He had only those few ships in the Med, two large raiders, three destroyers, and the two carriers. But he also had the *Normandie*, now *Friedrich de Gross*. He had been contemplating a daring attempt to send them all into the Western Med, raiding any Allied convoy they encountered along the way before attempting to break out into the Atlantic. Now Hitler was asking him to make the dangerous transit of the Bosphorus and enter that Soviet lake! He could see disaster looming in this request, but the tone in Hitler's voice showed him to be deadly serious. There was no other course he could set.

"My Führer," he said grimly. "If you order this, I will do all in my power to do as you ask. Realize that this will expose the small flotilla I have available to grave risk of air attack, and we will need the full cooperation of the Luftwaffe to have any chance of success."

"I have already spoken to Goring. He has four of our new Zeppelins at Odessa, and I will send them additional munitions of the sort I have already mentioned. He has naval strike bombers, *Stukas* at Sevastopol, good fighters, and there are already the six U-boats there to lend a hand. Dönitz has agreed that they can all go under your command. I will also transfer a number of E-boats by rail to Odessa, and they can help you with the enemy torpedo boats. Surely the *Bismarck* is a match for anything the enemy has there. We have already sunk the one battleship they had at Novorossiysk, along with a cruiser and two destroyers. Your fleet should be more than capable of handling the rest."

"The surface ships, yes, I would agree. It's those enemy submarines I worry about."

"Half of them are probably not even sea worthy," said Hitler.

"All the same, torpedoes sink ships," Raeder cautioned. "Even twenty enemy submarines will present a grave risk. What I will need is more destroyers. If I could take some of the French destroyers along, that would help, and perhaps the Italians could contribute something from their Aegean Fleet."

"I will speak to Mussolini today," said Hitler.

And he did.

When Raeder left that meeting, grateful to still be in command, he realized that everything rested on the outcome of this mission. It will either

prove the merits of my surface fleet, confirm my newfound belief in the carriers, or end it, he thought, unable to shake the feeling that this was to be his last dance.

Chapter 2

Kirov ran due south, with three hungry hounds at her back. They had identified the three Japanese destroyers, *Kirishima*, *Kongo*, *Atago* , though the latter had stopped at the location of *Takami*'s burning hulk to begin rescue operations. For the time being, Karpov had no immediate plan other than to move south at good speed and see what the enemy would do. At this point, he did not know all the cards in his enemy's hand, how many ships were really out there, how many planes. They had taken one enemy ship down, surprising it with *Kazan*'s own inherent stealth and the deadly effectiveness of those lethal Zircon missiles. *Takami* was dead, but now Hercules was suddenly fighting a Hydra with many more heads.

* * *

Admiral Kita sent up his Merlin helos and Osprey aircraft to bring back the surviving crew members off *Takami* . He was pleased to learn that most got safely off the ship into the water, though the missile strike itself had killed 23 crewmen below decks. So all the bridge officers had survived, and he wanted Captain Harada on *Kaga* as soon as possible.

It would be over four hours before all his remaining F-35s would be prepped and refueled for operations. He would have Seahawk support from the three ships in his destroyer screen in half an hour, and that was his first order of business. No one really knew where the Russian sub was now, which made him edgy. He inwardly chided himself for not ordering those destroyer Captains to make their helos ready for ASW operations, as he never perceived any threat from the men of this era. Instead, both *Takami* and *Kongo* had sent out their birds for simple maritime surveillance. That gave them the longest endurance, and they did the job of locating the Russian battlecruiser. Unfortunately, they had no idea *Kazan* was in the game, and that blind spot had cost them a ship, and 23 lives.

Now the Admiral considered his options as the ship's chronometer rolled through 14:00. He had three hounds up front, and they were now running at 30 knots. A Russian helo was up at 16,000 feet, staying well outside SM-2 range, and keeping an eye on his ships. It was now approximately 230

nautical miles from *Kaga* , and he reasoned that the mother ship, *Kirov* , was probably somewhere south of that position. How far south? He had six planes loading out with the JSOW package, and that would give them a 290 mile strike radius. If *Kirov* was able to get outside that radius, then he would be forced to close the range considerably before he launched another strike.

“How we doing on fuel?” he said to Captain Jenzu.

“We’re burning a lot running full out like this, but we can do it for another 3 days and four hours. If we slow down that endurance will extend dramatically. As for those destroyers out there, they’ll have shorter legs, less than three days fuel if they run at 30 knots as they are now.

“The problem is, this Russian ship is rated for 32 knots, and they don’t have a fuel issue with those nuclear reactors.”

“You believe they broke off to run out our leash?”

“Sure seems that way. At this point, even our fighters may not be able to get to them. We’ll have to maintain speed like this just to stay in the hunt, but we may not be gaining any range on them if they’re running at 32 knots. In fact, we could be falling behind. For that matter, they could have turned, and so we can’t even compute a possible intercept course until we locate them again. We just got caught flat footed. We had helos on the destroyers ready for maritime surveillance, and when that sub turned up, the air crews started to load them out for ASW. So there we sat, with a big window where all we had was that single bird up off *Kongo* . Once it had to return to the ship, we lost its radar assist and *Kirov* slipped away.”

“Sir, *Akagi* has two planes fully loaded out with the GBU/53, and they have a 450 nautical mile strike radius.”

“Hold them for the moment, but let’s get a fighter up to see if we can find that ship. Send it south, and if that damn Russian helo is still up there, tell them to shoot it down.”

“Aye sir, that’s a given.”

Twenty minutes later that fighter was well on its way, and vectoring in on the easily spotted radar signal of Turkey 1. It wasn’t long before the sophisticated AN/ASQ-239 Barracuda sensor suite on the F-35 also got wind of the skunk they were after. They made contact at 14:18, and two minutes later that was refined to the assurance that they had again relocated *Kirov* .

“Got him!” Captain Jenzu reported. “Recon 1 has him at 236 nautical miles, south by southwest. Our present heading is pretty good for an intercept, but I recommend we come five points to port.”

“Make it so. Do we have target course and speed?”

“Not yet. We’ll get that as our bird gets closer. See what a good sensor suite and elevation does for your day?”

“Right,” said Kita. “Now we go after that Russian helo.”

The pawn game was as interesting and important as anything else in chess. That single fighter was carrying four AIM 120-D missiles that could reach out 75 nautical miles, and the Russians had a problem.

Turkey 1 had been quite brazen in activating its primary search radar, for that was its purpose. The Kopio-A, or “Lance” radar system it employed would give good medium range coverage out to 135 nautical miles at the maximum altitude of the helo, which was about 16,000 feet. But it was having great difficulty seeing the F-35’s. In fact, it had allowed two of the three strike groups to fly right through that coverage sphere completely undetected, and at that moment, it did not see the fighter bearing down on it either. That shortfall was compounded by the fact that the *Kongo* was aggressively jamming, and the Russians found their equipment was having difficulty in that environment. When it came to the actual electronics, the West still enjoyed a clear edge.

Turkey 1 had been up a good long while, pegged the position of the three Japanese destroyers, and now it was turning for home, beginning a slow descent. At 14:32, Recon-1 sent the Brevity code “Fox Three” home to *Kaga* to indicate he was engaging, and went after that Turkey with 2 missiles. The Russian radar saw those Amrams, but it could still not locate the plane that fired them! The Russian helo pilot nonetheless knew he was now in real hot water. He switched off his Lance radar system, activated offensive ECM and dove for the deck, wanting to get as low as possible before those missiles came looking for him.

The AIM-120 was a fire and forget weapon, very fast at Mach 4, and it used inertial guidance and terminal active radar to find its prey. *Kirov* was over 80 nautical miles away when they saw them on Rodenko’s screens, arcing up to an extreme altitude over 90,000 feet. They would then fall like meteors toward their target. Adjusting for the 60 plus kilometer range, and the agility of that helo as the pilot desperately maneuvered to avoid the missiles at the last minute, the 95% kill probability fell to a little under 60% by the time the missiles got close. The pilot evaded the first missile, but the second had locked on and would not be fooled.

Admiral Kita had cooked his Turkey.

The KA-40 exploded in a yellow orange fireball, and plucked out one of *Kirov's* long range eyes. Throughout the whole of that engagement, the F-35 was never seen, lending weight to the claims that stealth kills more than anything else in a modern air-sea engagement. If you can't see something, you simply cannot take any active defensive measures against it. Evasive maneuvers, chaff, and jamming were about all you had, and they would only give you a slim margin on defense.

The result of that attack, however, was significant, and when Karpov got the news, he knew that in spite of his 100 nautical mile lead on his closest pursuers, the danger the enemy presented remained very real.

* * *

"Damn!" he swore. "They took out our KA-40. Why can't we see their fighters?" He looked at Rodenko, but the Lieutenant simply shrugged.

"That F-35 is stealthy. It's what really gives it the edge over a good Fourth Generation fighter. Too bad we don't have the *Admiral Kuznetsov* around."

Yes, thought Karpov. You fight a carrier with another carrier at sea, or with a submarine. That was what he had to do now. Without further hesitation, he had Nikolin send out a coded message to Gromyko on *Kazan*. First he congratulated him on his initial kill, for getting *Takami* was a real help. Then he asked him to backtrack north and look for the enemy carriers, but soon learned that Gromyko had already done this when he was updated with the sub's present course and speed.

Kazan had moved north, running very deep and sprinting at 35 knots. With the enemy coming south, he waited for the range to close, and at 19:00 he decided to slow down and get up above the layer to deploy his towed sonar array. It would trail down below the layer into the deep sound channel, and Chernov would have the best chance of hearing the enemy carriers. What he heard instead surprised him, and it was almost right on top of them.

* * *

"Con—Sonar. Surface contact! Fast revolutions, and very close. I make it no more than 12 nautical miles, south by southwest.... Heading 217 and running fast, over 30 knots from the sound of it."

Gromyko came over to have a look, thinking. “Read it for me Chernov. Stop beating around the bush.” He smiled.

“Yes sir. I’ve got it now. DDE *Takao* . That’s one of their new *Ashai* Class Destroyers optimized for ASW.” He gave Gromyko a worrisome look.

“Do you think they have us?”

“I doubt it, sir. Not at that speed. But they may get wind of us soon at this range. I’d be real cautious here.”

That was going to force Gromyko’s hand. He was carrier hunting, and as yet they had no contacts of that type. Carriers seldom travel in isolation, and he reasoned that this was probably a screening escort. He was getting close.

Now he was going to have to decide what to do with this destroyer. To attack it might entail considerable risk. He was right behind that ship, right in its wake, which was a good place to be if they were listening for him. He could put missiles on it and, just to give himself that option, he turned to Belanov and gave the order.

“Come shallow to 130 feet and slow to 12 knots. Ready one Zircon and two Onyx missiles for firing.”

He was planning a repeat performance of the attack that had taken out *Takami* . The boat slid up through the opaline sea, stealth of another kind as it slowly ran shallow. Twelve knots would keep him nice and quiet at that depth, just below cavitation threshold, and he ran for fifteen minutes, letting Chernov listen for any sign that they may have been spotted. For all he knew, that escort destroyer might have helos up this very minute. This was very risky, but he had been emboldened by the successful strike on *Takami* .

This time, he was trying to sneak into the theater with half a ticket stub. He had only ordered three missiles, instead of the six that he had used to take out *Takami* , and now he thought twice about that. Happenstance could further reduce the odds of a successful hit.

“Belanov,” he said to his sturdy XO. “The Zircon failed to acquire numerous times in close range combat, did it not?”

“Yes sir. It didn’t make the dog leg turn correctly if I recall the results I read from early trials.”

Gromyko clenched his jaw at that. The Zircon was programmed to always fire off axis, actually moving away from the target before it made a dogleg turn to acquire it with its active homing radars. This missile had tremendous range and speed, and if the target was too close, it could easily overshoot. Even if it had been told where to find its enemy, it often failed to acquire or

turn as expected. The missile would then go soaring up over 44,000 feet, racing away into the heavens at over 4000 knots.

Too damn close, thought Gromyko. This new missile was touchy. They had been lucky that the barrage he sent at *Takami* had all turned and tracked true. But what if they failed to do so here? It was simply too fast, and now he knew it needed room to acquire. 12 nautical miles just wasn't enough, or so he began to reason. As for the Onyx, it was tried and true, a sea skimmer that the 'Surface Dogs' called the Moskit II with their variant. It would go right for the enemy ship, at about 1450 knots, skimming low at just 30 feet, which would reduce its target profile and aspect.

The Japanese destroyer might see it at 9 miles out and start jamming as it started to fire its missile defenses, though this ship was not carrying the Standard Missile 2 that had proved so effective against the Russian missiles thus far. Instead it was carrying 32 RIM-162B ESSM evolved Sea Sparrow missiles, quad-packed in the Mk-41 VLS modules. It was a weapon that had originally been designed as an air launched missile, now evolved to fight at sea and defeat these fast moving hypersonic Russian missiles like the Zircon. The Sparrows could accelerate to Mach 4, and had very good maneuverability, with perhaps a 90% chance of scoring a kill. The speed of the Russian missiles and their small radar returns, probably lowered those odds to 70%, but two missiles were usually sent after each SSM.

To be or not to be.... Now he had to decide whether or not to engage. He could just as easily continue looking for those carriers. Thus far, Chernov had heard no sign of a sonobuoy being deployed, which would be common for a helo up there hunting for him. Yet if he engaged here, and he did not get a hit early on, he would be facing the prospect of attack by ASW helos off the *Takao*, and possibly off the carrier he was looking for as well. It had to be close by.... Somewhere.

"Secure from missile combat and belay that order to run shallow. Hold present depth and all ahead flank."

"Aye sir, depth currently 420 and all ahead flank."

He ran on his current heading for about 30 minutes, pleased with the stillness of the situation. It seemed to him that the enemy had not acquired him, so at 20:00 he made a turn to come to 235, on roughly the same heading as *Takao*. Chernov reported his contact was now very old, and its position report no longer reliable, but Gromyko had a good idea where the destroyer was. He liked his position when he was in the ship's wake, but knew his

torpedoes would never catch it if he fired from there. Instead he sprinted west, then turned southwest on 235, putting him in a position to get a decent firing angle on the destroyer if he got a firm location again. He was faster than the other ship, and would slowly close on it over time. In the meantime, he would pause every 15 minutes to let Chernov listen, and freshen up his contact on *Takao* . Then he would increase to flank again, and sprint.

Lather, rinse, repeat.

Ivan Gromyko was a very patient man.

Chapter 3

Admiral Kita soon realized that he could not continue operations against *Kirov* in the short run. They had recovered the first 100 men rescued from *Takami*, but he still had that operation underway, another 100 crewmen in the water out there, which was one more mission out and back for his helos and Ospreys. While one side of him wanted to strike while the iron was hot, another voice raised caution.

What sunk the *Takami*? It had to be that Russian sub, because nothing *Kirov* fired touched the ship. Now here he was, his entire TF racing in pursuit of the Russian battlecruiser, and cavitating like a pack of wailing banshees.

“Captain Jenzu,” he said. “I think we ought to slow things down here.”

“Sir?”

“With *Kazan* out there, that sub is likely to pick up our position easily enough, and all we have in close is *Takao*, with one helo up on ASW watch. It’s pretty thin. If we run after the battlecruiser, we could be ambushed again, and losing *Takami* was difficult enough. Send orders to the forward screen. They are to come about and move north. The fleet will conclude search and rescue operations. You may plot the intercept course. I want my destroyer screen back.”

“Aye sir. It does seem a little lonesome out here. What about *Omi*?”

“That’s another issue. We know where *Kazan* was when it fired on *Takami*, but look at this farthest on circle now. That damn sub could be up north, and what if it runs across *Omi*? We’re too spread out now. I want to regroup. Then we’ll convene a meeting with Harada and see what he and that hot little Samurai of his think now.”

“You mean Lt. Commander Fukada?”

“That’s the one. That was damn imaginative—his little sortie to knock out the Panama Canal and then ease on over to destroy all the American shipyards, but neither one is going to happen. This entire situation continues to drive me completely insane, but I’m just running on training and reflex here now.”

“That goes for the rest of us, sir.”

Kita settled into the Captain’s chair, his privilege when on the bridge. “If the old IJN really is out there, this Karpov fellow is heading into deep dark

waters. He's apparently already stuck his nose in the beehive at Truk. Now he seems to be running southwest towards Rabaul. There's a lot of Japanese power down there, and I think we need to tap into that. I want Harada and Fukada in my wardroom as soon as the ship's physician releases them."

"Aye sir, I'll send down the word."

* * *

"Con—Sonar. I think we have a course change on that destroyer."

It was Chernov, listening as best he could on the passive hull array. "Can we slow for a better reading?"

"Very well," said Gromyko. "Mister Belanov, come to 5 knots and creep."

"Aye sir, securing from high speed sprint, and the boat will creep on present heading at 5 knots. We remain just over the layer."

"Good enough."

A few minutes later, Chernov had refined his contact on the *Takao*, but still had no other contacts. "I was right sir," he said. "*Takao* has turned on a new heading of 270, and reduced speed to 28 knots. The range is now 23 nautical miles."

"Interesting," said Gromyko. "The boat will come to 270."

"Aye sir, coming around to 270."

"Keep listening Chernov...."

He did.

At 22:14 the hull array sonar detected a new contact, just after Gromyko stopped after a sprint of nearly 1 hour. He wanted Chernov to refresh his fix on *Takao*, but what he got instead was a hot new contact, almost dead ahead, but at a range of 37 nautical miles.

"What about *Takao*?"

"Still listening, sir, but nothing yet."

Gromyko did not like the sound of that. Chernov should have that bastard, and they should be very close. The nearest bear in the water was at 272, the range now refined to 36 nautical miles, speed 20.

But *Takao* was gone.

"What's happening, Chernov?" This was a question the Captain needed answered quickly.

"Sir," said Chernov. "Assuming they were on the same bearing as before, they would now be masked by the Mokil Atoll—right in the shadow, sir. It's

the only way they could drop into oblivion like that.”

“Very well.” The Captain pulled Belanov aside. “What do you make of this latest contact?”

“Could be anything,” said Belanov.

“Yet it’s running at 270, just like *Takao* . I think it may be what I’ve been looking for.”

“That enemy carrier?”

“Something launched those fighters at *Kirov* . It wasn’t *Takao* . I make that ship to be an escort picket.”

“Latest message from *Kirov* indicates the three destroyers that were shadowing them turned on a new heading and broke off.”

“What heading?” Gromyko scratched the back of his neck.

“The last we had was 352, then they lost them. They went dark.”

The Matador nodded knowingly, his eye playing over the chart. “Momma Bear has called home her cubs,” he said with a thin grin. That course would bring them right up here, right across our present heading, and that of that new contact out there.”

“Sure sounds like we have something here.”

“That it does. Mister Belanov—go wake the Admiral.”

Nothing firmed up on the sonar, so Gromyko made another 15 minute sprint before slowing to creep speed again, just 5 knots. Then his day got a little more complicated.

“Con—Sonar. I have two new contacts both on identical headings. The leading contact is bearing 290, range 36 nautical miles. The shadow is trailing it here,” he pointed to his screen, “about 15 nautical miles behind.”

This wasn’t adding up. Neither contact could have been the Momma Bear Gromyko was gunning for a half hour earlier. They were just too far north, so they had to be something new. But what?

“This is a lot of traffic for a big empty ocean like this,” said Admiral Volsky. “You say you had a destroyer bearing southwest, a second contact due west, and now two more, north by northwest? I agree that they may be trying to make a rendezvous, but you are now possibly running into many overlapping sonar spheres. I am told this boat is very stealthy, but how good is our enemy?”

“Sir,” said Chernov. “There’s a lot of mixed surface cavitation off on 270. I think *Takao* and the other contact are still out there, and these new bears are latecomers to the den.”

“Thank you, Mister Chernov.”

Gromyko looked at the Admiral. “The question is whether to attack or not? We don’t have a firm reading on either of these two new contacts. For all we know, they could be IJN traffic from this era. Nor do we know whether or not any of those other ships have gotten a whiff of us yet. I think Chernov is correct, the main body is off on 270, but we would be putting ordnance on a blind target if I attack these other two, and giving away our position at the same time.”

“Agreed,” said Volsky. “Save your missiles, Mister Gromyko. See to the safety of the boat first. This is going to be a very long war, and at the moment, I do not even see a reading for *Kirov* on that screen. Where has our Mister Karpov gone?”

Gromyko had just found a very important target. The lead contact was the helicopter destroyer *Kurama*, and it was being followed by fat *Omi*, the fleet replenishment ship. They were, indeed, the last two bear cubs heading for Admiral Kita’s den, but Gromyko did not know that yet. All he could fire at was an assumption, and that had not been good enough for Volsky.

As for *Kirov*, when the three foxes in pursuit broke off, Karpov was elated. He ordered the ship to alter course, then went EMCON, hoping there were not already more stealth fighters inbound on his position. Round one of this strange new duel at sea was over, but the long grueling hunt for *Kirov* by a newly emboldened Imperial Japanese Navy was only just beginning.

* * *

Admiral Raeder stepped onto the bridge of the *Prinz Heinrich*, watching the ships ahead of him ease out of the harbor through heavy night fog. He still had grave misgivings about this undertaking, and he could feel that in his elevated pulse as the fleet departed. It was not that he felt his men and ships were unequal to the task ahead. No. He had every confidence in them.

He would lead the task force aboard *Prinz Heinrich*, this time rigged out as a full fighting carrier, laden with 27 *Stukas* and 13 Me-109s. The *Goeben* under Falkenrath would bring another 12 planes to sea, giving him 52 aircraft at his disposal when he was far from land based air power. For battle at sea, he knew he would be unmatched. He was taking the best he had left in the Med, the *Bismarck* under Lindemann, the *Kaiser Wilhelm* under its able Kapitan Werner Heinrich, and the fearsome French built heavy battleship

Normandie , now fully crewed by survivors from the *Hindenburg* , and renamed *Friedrich de Gross*. He gave that ship to Kapitan Helmuth Brinkmann, who trained the new crew for these last two months in the waters off Toulon.

To escort all these ships, he needed destroyers, and he had three of the new German built SPK *Beowulf* class ships, *Odin*, *Agir* and *Thor* . They were fast at 38 knots, each with 12 dual purpose 4.7-inch guns, and six torpedoes. To these he would add as many of the French destroyers as could be spared from the supply run duties to Tunisia—only three. Yet he selected the best they had, the *Fantasque* class ships, again renamed and fully re-crewed by sailors sent from Germany. It had been necessary to completely de-crew the remains of the French Navy and send all those experienced sailors home. Now any ships that could be kept serviceable were being crewed by sailors from Germany and Italy, and others impressed from the Balkans. The three French ships were renamed for ships listed in his building program that would now most likely never be realized. They would be dubbed *Hildir*, *Sigrun*, and *Mist* .

Two battleships, the carriers, a fast battlecruiser, and six destroyers, thought Raeder. I could use six more destroyers, but they cannot be spared. Yet the Italians have promised me support from their fleet. I will pick up *Maestrale*, *Alpino* and *Ascari* when we enter the Tyrrhenian Sea. There will also be three superb fast light cruisers, *Regolo*, *Mario* and *Silla* . This is a fleet that can confidently meet any other at sea, well balanced, very fast, with far ranging strike power in the carriers, and the murderous fire of those heavy guns up close.

The mist rolled over the flight deck of the carrier now, and the air smelled cool and clean. They were hoping to move unnoticed, but even if they were seen, a cover story had been circulated in humdrum signals traffic meant to be snooped by Allied ears. It would indicate that plans were in the offing to relocate certain ships from Toulon to the Italian ports of Genoa, La Spezia and Livorno, so as to make them more secure against Allied bomber attacks.

The Allies had occupied the strategic islands of Mallorca and Menorca for exactly this reason, replacing Malta with these superb bases for air operations that could be projected into the waters off the Algerian coast and also the Ligurian Sea. Britain was also sending bombers to the vicinity of Barcelona, which was only 212 miles from Toulon. It seemed that no stone would be left unturned in this war.

The fact that Spain was now an Allied occupied state presented the Allies with many places to build up aerodromes for their bombers. England was still a much better place for Bomber Command, but some units had been sent down to Spain to support operations there.

I warned Goring that Toulon would soon come under increasing air attack, thought Raeder. This move would have been inevitable in time, but it does cede control of the Central Med to the enemy. Up until now, with the fleet at Toulon. The Allies would not contemplate trying to risk the Sicilian Narrows. Now that might change. Goring says he can keep that channel closed with his Luftwaffe, but I will file that away with many of his other broken promises. The Reichsmarschall has enough to deal with keeping Kesselring supplied, let alone this new operation dreamed up against Crete.

I told them we should have taken Crete in 1941. They did not listen, so now we fight that battle anyway. I do suppose it is necessary. Hitler has launched this amazingly ambitious *Operation Phoenix*, and his life line for that depends on keeping the Allies from interdicting the Bosphorus. That is only 475 miles from Crete. He is also striving to clear the Kuban this winter—for the oil, of course. And he frets that the Allies will use Crete to bomb our main oil facilities at Ploiesti, only 660 air miles from that island.

Has anyone told him that the British can still strike the Bosphorus from Alexandria, not to mention Palestine and Syria? Perhaps he has it in mind to conquer all of that in *Operation Phoenix* as well, but I think not. No, he is really reaching this time, all the way to Baba Gurgur, Baghdad, even Abadan on the Persian Gulf. Will our troops ever get there?

Admiral Raeder ran all this through his mind. His first objective would be the surprise attack on another outpost showing signs of buildup for RAF units, the Island of Crete. Operation Merkur had been delayed to allow time for the troops withdrawn from Algeria to refit. It was now rescheduled for Mid-February, and that was his first stop on the journey east. His fleet would transit the Ligurian Sea, above the long finger of Corsica for a stop at Livorno in keeping with their deception plan. There they would take on more Italian sailors, and pick up those three destroyers. They would then leave at dusk the next day for a high-speed 12 hour run down the Italian coast through the Tyrrhenian Sea to the Straits of Messina—about 430 nautical miles in all. That would put them in the Ionian Sea after dawn, and it would be one more high speed daylight run to the invasion support zone off Crete.

If all went according to plan, they would arrive on the 20th of February as

scheduled, those big guns waiting to blast the British defenders on the northwest corner of the island. Hopefully, Cunningham and his Med-Force ships would not realize what was happening until it was too late to interfere.

Let them try, thought Raeder. What do they have left at Alexandria? They have the *Nelson* , and the *Valiant* , and I can outrun and outgun them both. No. I do not think I need to worry about Cunningham. We will make our planned stop, punish the British on Crete, then turn north into the Aegean Sea. It is a brilliant and audacious plan. I will enter the Dardanelles a day later. All the arrangements have been made with the Turks. One more day to transit the narrow Bosphorus, and the world will read my name in every paper on this earth.

The Russians will certainly know why I am coming, won't they? Yet there will not be anything they can do to escape their fate. There is no place they can run. Once in the Black Sea I will join Rosenberg's little squadron of U-boats which will already be deployed in a defensive arc when I transit the straits. We will have lavish support there, ports at Varna, Constanta, Odessa, and the excellent forward base at Sevastopol, which is under 200 nautical miles from the main base of the Black Sea Fleet at Novorossiysk.

The Führer has promised me those four Zeppelins with our new special munitions, and I will see what that is all about. Goring has promised me bomber support and long range patrols against the numerous enemy submarines. On paper, their fleet looks quite substantial, but I will destroy it easily, and finally regain the respect and honor which I am due. I will show the Führer what a combined arms fleet can do at sea, and set the template for operations I have been planning in the West. So very much is riding on this now, not only my personal fate, but that of the entire surface fleet.

Failure is simply not an option.

Part II

Sturmflut

“ Time and Tide wait for no man.”

— Geoffrey Chaucer

Chapter 4

Rommel's retreat after the battle of Bir el Khamsa had been inevitable, or so he now believed. He had broken through British lines, sweeping south and east through the lonesome bir as he moved to reach Mersa Matruh on the coast. He had chased General Richard O'Connor's Western Desert Force all the way from El Agheila after his final crushing blow to the hapless Italians at Beda Fomm. The time and tide of his fortune was running high.

Yet it was not to be. His able desert scout Lazlo Almasy, was out on the extreme southern flank of his turning maneuver when he reported an enemy force emerging from the south. First believed to be no more than a reconnaissance, it soon coalesced into a strong mechanized attack, lightning swift, and completely unstoppable. The enemy was said to have a brigade of heavy armor, the likes of which the world had never seen. The German Pak 50mm AT guns simply bounced right off the monster tanks, so massive that the German infantry deployed on defense literally could not believe what they were seeing.

Rommel could not know it at that moment, but he was under attack by warriors from a far flung future, in equipment so advanced that his forces would have no chance of ever defeating it. Even the superb 88mm flak gun, a weapon which he had used to savage British armor up until that point, was completely ineffective against these new enemy tanks. At point blank range it might penetrate between 100 and 120mm of armor, and it was striking a target with protection that could resist over ten times that in RHA Armor equivalent. When Rommel saw that, with his own eyes, he knew that his only recourse was a swift and hasty retreat to save his panzers from almost certain destruction.

Even after that shattering setback, he persisted after being heavily reinforced and resupplied, and set his mind on taking the vital port of Tobruk. In that action, he had come so close to success that at one point, General Montgomery had taken up a rifle himself and was firing at German troops near the harbor. Then, troops had arrived that threatened to push shut the gate he had broken down to gain entry to the British fortress, and his vaunted Hermann Goring Brigade had been forced to withdraw. His deep southern flank was again being threatened by that unstoppable heavy British armor. By

now he had determined that it was a small force, perhaps one of a kind, a prototype unit being tested in this cauldron of war. He fell back, took up a line of defense near Gazala, and there he sat, impudent, bruised, sulking behind entrenched positions screened by wire, mines, and covered by all the artillery he could command.

The swift moving battles that had characterized his campaign had now returned to the morass of the first world war. Finally his enemy sought to push him west, and his last stubborn defense at Gazala was eventually broken again by that heavy armor threatening his deep southern flank. Back he went, all the way to Agheila, leaving most of the Italian infantry to defend the highlands of Cyrenaica and fall back on Benghazi. Again he set his men to digging their trenches. He was pushed out of Agheila, fell back to Mersa Brega, where Hitler had ordered him to stand to the very last, though his every instinct was to move west again, and get as far from those terrible enemy tanks as he could.

In that battle, he finally saw one up close. It had struck a mine, disabling its massive steel tracks, and for some reason, the British had chosen to gut it with explosives and leave it on the field, something they had never done before. In all his many actions against that brigade, only one of those tanks had been killed in the past, by a deadly *Stuka* pilot that had put his bomb right on target. This second death was a suicide, which seemed very strange to him. There it was, looming in the smoke of its own death, and Rommel just stood there, hands clasped behind his back, looking at the behemoth with a mixture of dread and awe. There it sat, the bane of the Desert Fox, seeming to mock him, even in the throes of its own death.

There was the demon that had stopped him from taking Egypt and reaching the Suez Canal as he had promised his Führer. There was the nightmare that had haunted him over hundreds of miles of empty desert, a nemesis so powerful that if his enemy had such a beast, he knew there would soon be no chance for Germany in this war.

But he never saw those tanks again. When O'Connor sought to break out through his defense at Mersa Brega, the attack was not led by the heavy brigade, but by the old clattering Matilda IIs and new American Grants. By comparison, they seemed like small toys, and he could not understand why the British had refused to use the hammer they had in hand. He had ordered his engineers to recover that last fallen beast, dragging its metal carcass back to Sirte, and then Tripoli for shipment to Toulon. He remembered one last

night before he sent it on its way, just standing there, seeing the dull moonlight play over its rugged contours. The main gun had been spiked with a grenade or some other explosive, but it was still longer than any of his heavy artillery pieces, and more deadly.

He stopped O'Connor at Mersa Brega, the first time he had fought since Bir el Khamsa without being forced to yield the ground to save his army. He stopped the British, right in their tracks. Then, at his leisure, and still wary of his open flank to the south, he slowly withdrew to the Buerat line near Sirte. He did so more for logistical reasons than anything else, much to the chagrin of the Italians. All he would do is hand the enemy the empty desert, but he would shorten his supply line by hundreds of miles, while lengthening theirs. It was the same logic he used to justify his withdrawal from Buerat to Tarhuna, where he now stood on this cold night in February, looking up at the merciless steady fire of the stars.

He wondered where his nemesis had gone, until he got news that the brigade had withdrawn to Tobruk. Then came the unaccountable report of a massive explosion at that harbor, and he never saw the enemy that had defeated him again. After some months reorganizing and re-equipping, O'Connor finally came at his Tarhuna line. Rommel's counterattack had been swift and bold, a complete success. And instead of trying to drive all the way north to the coast as he might have in the past, he simply smiled, held his lean panzer divisions by the reins, and consolidated his position while the British staggered back from the heavy blow he had delivered.

It was another stubborn victory in his mind, and a reaffirmation that he could still fight, still win, and was not inevitably doomed to defeat here after all. Yet now the presence of two other Allied armies in Algeria to the west would complicate all his plans. He had already dispatched his 10th Panzer Division, and all the Hermann Goring troops. Now Kesselring wanted another panzer division to help bolster that front, where the aristocratic von Arnim was clearly overmatched.

If they think they are going to pick my army apart like this, and leave me sitting here defending Tripoli while von Arnim delights the Führer with his counterpunches, then they are sorely mistaken. There was a new army in the field there now, a new force—the Americans. From all accounts their troops were as arrogant as they were inexperienced, a slovenly raw green force that was succeeding only because von Arnim was so badly outnumbered.

So I will propose something else, he thought. If they want my veterans at

their beck and call, then I will lead them. It will be my hand that delivers this attack on the Americans, and I will shatter them completely, teaching this impudent General Patton a lesson he will never forget.

At the meeting with Kesselring, he proposed he send not one panzer division west, but two, and that he would go with them. He believed he could fall back to Mareth, the best defensive position in North Africa, and hold there easily while he took his best troops west to deal with the Americans. It was the same decision the Germans had made in the old history, only this time they would be stronger when they came. It would be his last chance for glory here, perhaps his last dance in the desert. But he would restore his honor, reclaim the laurels of victory, and show the Führer that he was completely deserving of the Field Marshal's baton that had been bestowed upon him.

Rommel was going to fight.

Somehow Kesselring had worked a miracle in persuading both Mussolini and Hitler to permit him to do what he was now about to undertake. With Tripoli no longer being visited by the supply ships, Kesselring argued that it made better logistical sense to focus the entire supply effort on Tunis and Bizerte, and allow Rommel to move to Mareth. When the Italians whined about the loss of their only colony in Africa, Kesselring's proposal that Mussolini be promised Tunisia in compensation was accepted by Hitler. The one key word that had been the sugar in Kesselring's tea had been "attack."

Hitler's mind was now entirely focused on the offensives he already had ordered into the Middle East. His Operation Phoenix was proceeding according to plan, with his fast moving Brandenburgers already on the Euphrates river and driving towards Haditha, the junction of the two vital pipelines that fed the British position in Egypt. Heinz Guderian and Hans Hube had taken Palmyra and they were now reorganizing to drive east to join this vanguard as Hitler ordered more elite troops into the campaign.

The 22nd Luftland Division had made the long journey from Tunisia to Toulon, and then went by rail to Italy and Greece with the rest of Student's 7th Fliegerkorps to prepare for Operation Merkur, but now it was to be diverted to support the Brandenburgers. Everywhere the dazzling prospects of the German army on attack were now the apple of the Führer's eye. So when Kesselring presented the plan to move Rommel's panzers west into Tunisia, to attack the Americans and destroy them, to then swing north behind Montgomery and completely unhinge the Allied effort in Algeria,

Hitler smiled and gave his approval.

The one condition he made was that Tripoli be held as a fortress city as long as humanly possible. As Tripolitania was the last Italian controlled province in North Africa, Rommel suggested they hold it. He would commit no German troops there, preferring to send them to Mareth where they would hold the line there indefinitely, or so he believed. Mussolini had been promising to send more troops to Tunisia, so let him make good on that and send them to Tripoli instead.

As he moved west, the British 8th Army at his back was not the force that had been flush with victory led by General Montgomery, but a twice chastened army that had just suffered a severe check on the Tarhuna line. O'Connor needed time to reorganize, haul fresh supplies and munitions up to the front, replace the many tanks that had been lost in that last battle with the Desert Fox. It would be weeks, perhaps even a long month before he would declare himself ready to again take to the offensive, and in that interval, he would see more and more of his armored force siphoned off to the campaign in Syria. Britain was now again fighting a two front war in the Middle East, and O'Connor knew that it might be some time before his losses, particularly to the armor, could be made good.

Rommel knew this, added his voice to Kesselring's, and the weight of those two Field Marshals carried the day. The lion that had been stalking him all across North Africa, O'Connor's 8th Army, would be sleeping in its den. And while the cat was away... He smiled to think his battle for Libya was finally over, and good riddance, or so he thought.

My bold promises to the Führer vanished at Bir el Khamsa, along with my dream of crossing the Nile. Now comes the battle for Tunisia, but I intend to go much farther if possible, deep into Algeria.

As he moved up the coast into Tunisia, Rommel's spirits were buoyed by the green, verdant plenty of this new land. There were orchards, plantations, stands of trees that became forests as they rolled up the slopes of distant hills. He knew that in the south, the Chott country was every bit as barren and hostile as the terrain he had fought over in Libya, but along the central mountains and coast, Tunisia was a paradise compared to the Libyan desert. Here there was fresh water in natural wells virtually everywhere. The troops would be well fed, but a new challenge would present itself that they seldom had to deal with in Libya—rain. February was the wet season, and where there was dryness and dust in the warmer months, there would be mud now

with the rain.

He would not let that stop him, riding up Highway 15 from Gabes and heading west with the 501st Schwerepanzer Battalion and his heavy artillery right behind him. Von Bismarck's 21st Panzer Division was already heading west on another route. It had moved up the lush coast highway to Sfax, then turned west on the long road that would take it through the pass at Faid to Sbeitla and Kasserine, where an Italian garrison, the Superga Mountain Division, had been guarding supplies being delivered by rail from Tunis.

The Americans were already probing at their positions. A recon operation had been mounted by Blade Force towards Thelepte, where the Luftwaffe had an important airfield. They had, in fact, been the first US troops to cross the Tunisian border near Bou Chebka, about 30 kilometers southwest of Kasserine Pass. Farther north, on the same road they had used, the fighting then underway was happening in and around the key German supply center at Tebessa. When it was clear that the Americans were driving for that town, Kesselring had managed to get most of Weber's 334th Infantry Division there by rail—this while von Arnim fell back from the rail line that ran between Tebessa, through Ain Beida, and all the way to Constantine.

The British 43rd Wessex Division had finally cleared that city, and was now setting its engineers to the damaged bridges to open the roads for movement. That would be a very difficult job, and it was seen that many spans would have to be rebuilt in their entirety after the German demolitions. Rommel read Kesselring's status report, smiling.

Montgomery was stuck on the coast, all bunched up in the difficult mountain country, while this American General Patton had his army strung out from Constantine to Tebessa. From all accounts, there were two American mobile divisions with armor. This Patton was trying to maintain contact with Montgomery as he continued to push farther south and east—to hold and take at the same time. It was time to show him what this war was all about.

Ernst Hell's 15th Infantry Division was now in good positions on the coast, their line anchored at Philippeville by the 327th Infantry, so von Arnim had moved all of the Hermann Goring Division south to reinforce 10th Panzer. Those two divisions were now consolidating some 40 to 50 kilometers southwest of Souk Ahras, well supplied from the depot there, and covered by German fighters at that key airfield. That would be the right cross. Rommel was now hastening to bring up the rest of his mobile divisions, and

they would be the left hook.

Even as 21st Panzer's lead elements were reaching Faid Pass on the 3rd of February, Rommel was doubling down on his promise to Kesselring. He was bringing not two, but all three of his crack panzer divisions west on Highway 15 from Gabes. Randow's 15th Panzer was in the lead, moving towards Ghafsa, and behind him came Funck's 7th Panzers, the Ghost Division that Rommel loved so dearly. General George Patton was about to be on the receiving end of an attack that was much stronger than it had been in the old history—not three divisions, but *five*, and all of them panzers.

Yet Patton also had more in hand than the US fielded in the old history. Along with all of Ward's 1st Armored, he had CCA of Harmon's 2nd, and the other half of that division was now moving up to the front. This would double the number of American tanks on the field, balancing the odds.

The Americans seemed very intent on getting their hands on Tebessa, where the 334th was still putting up a stubborn defense. They had already pushed out patrols well north of that city, their lead elements approaching the Tunisian border at Charpinville. Rommel did not really want them crossing there, for that would cut the rail line to Tebessa from Tunis, about 30 kilometers east of Charpinville.

Just how far was this Patton intending to go? Did he really think he could advance so impudently into Tunisia like this? Did he perceive the two iron fists that were now clenching to strike him?

Chapter 5

On the late afternoon of February 4th, 1st Battalion of the 30th RCT, 3rd Infantry, climbed up the ragged slopes of a high hill that overlooked the terrain ahead, aghast to see what looked like an entire division of German troops assembling on the far side of the valley floor. The Lieutenant got on the radio and kicked it up to his Regiment, which then passed it on to Division. It would be another three hours, near the gloaming of sunset, before the reports would come to Bradley and Patton, where they had set up their HQ at the big airfield at Les Bains along the main road and rail line between Tebessa and Constantine.

“Hold on George,” said Bradley. “Have you read those recon reports from 33rd Fighter Group? This new information coming in from Anderson’s 3rd Infantry is singing the same tune. I don’t like it. We had reports of columns in the high country moving south three days ago. The Germans could be up to something here.”

“Souk Ahras,” said Patton. “That’s their big supply hub up there—that and Gulema. They’ve got forward airfields at both, and good rail connections all the way back to Tunis. If we get to Gulema, then their whole position on the coast is flanked.”

“Well, I ought to remind you that’s where you were supposed to be heading. Ike just found out how far south you’ve pushed, and he’s hopping mad.”

“Tell him something, Brad. Say it’s just a reconnaissance in force.”

“George, you and I both know that just isn’t true, and once he gets a map update, Eisenhower will know it too. I think we’d better slow things down.”

“Look,” said Patton. “They’ve just screened the approaches to Souk Ahras, that’s all. I’ll keep 3rd and 9th pushing that direction. They can hold the line.”

“But what if that’s a Panzer division in the latest report from Anderson? These other reports of a division on the road from Sfax give me the willies. If you want my opinion, I’d say Rommel’s heading our way, and with bad intent.”

“Rommel....” Patton gave Bradley a narrow eyed smile. “The old Desert

Fox himself, chased all the way into Tunisia by O'Connor's 8th Army. Now you think he wants to pick a fight with me?"

"It sure looks that way, George." Bradley's eyes held a warning that he hoped Patton would heed.

"Alright, alright. Get on the phone to General Eddy and the 9th. Tell him that instead of sending the 60th RCT up towards Mesoula as I advised him this morning, he can hold that regiment in reserve and screen Ain Beida. Now I just moved Harmon's 2nd Armored through Meskiana, but if it will make you feel better, I'll hold them where they are for the moment until we get a better idea what the Germans are up to."

"What about Ward's division? You've got CCB way off north of 2nd Armored, while CCA is down here in the fight for Tebessa."

"I was going to send Oliver and CCB on to Charpinville on the border. That flanks this whole defense at Tebessa. If they hang on there any longer, Oliver can swing down and kick them right in the ass. I plan on pushing hard for Tebessa—all night if we have to. Once the Huns find out Oliver has Charpinville, they'll pull out lickety-split. Hell, Blade Force reported they had a platoon up near Le Kouf an hour ago. If the Germans don't make a run for it, I'll have them in the bag by morning."

"Well I hope that's the case. Ike didn't want you down here until we had cleared Constantine and moved on to Gulema."

"So I'm here early," Patton smiled. "I'll take the damn place tomorrow, Brad. Then you can call him and ask him if he wants me to give it back to the Germans."

It was vintage Patton, headstrong, confident, and brash. One day someone would make a movie about that man....

* * *

That night the head of 15th Panzer Division reached Sbeitla, 30 kilometers east of Kasserine. That single platoon from the 82nd Recon sent a shock through General Weber of the 334th Infantry Division. When he learned the Americans were about to cut him off, he did exactly what Patton said he would, and packed up shop. He gave up Tebessa and then moved northwest toward the border, intending to use his division to screen and defend that airfield at Le Kouf. Rommel wasn't happy about that, and he telephoned von Arnim and asked him to order that division to stay put.

“It’s too late,” said von Arnim. “The Luftwaffe gave up that field at Tebessa three days ago, but they want to hold on at Le Kouf. Weber did what was necessary. Furthermore, you are late. I have both my divisions formed up and ready. We can go right back to Ain Beida on the main road to Constantine.”

“Not yet,” said Rommel. “It takes time to get my divisions up from Gabes. I’ll need another day, and just be thankful I’m coming, General. Otherwise you would be right back in the stew. Has Montgomery taken Philippeville?”

“Not yet. He’ll try again tomorrow. We gave the British a little ground on the road to Constantine, but the line is in a much better position now. Kesselring is watching that sector for me.”

“Good enough. What about the road to Gulema?”

“The 756th Regiment of Weber’s division was detached to watch that sector. The Americans have been probing the passes east of Constantine, but there is no serious threat. I sent KG Hauer south through Clairfontaine. There’s a good hill there, and he says there’s a lot of armor south of that position. They’ve pushed a column all the way to the Tunisian border at Charpinville.”

“Alright, our battleship will be along shortly.” He was referring to von Bismarck’s 21st Panzer Division. “I will be there tomorrow with the rest of the fleet. Then we’ll talk again and decide how to coordinate things. And by the way... I’ve brought the Tiger battalion with me. That should be a nice surprise for the Americans.”

For once, the other side was going to experience the dismay of tank shock.

* * *

Terry Allen’s 1st Infantry spent the morning clearing out Tebessa, quite literally. They rooted out the last of the Germans, and then quickly looked for any bar or restaurant they could find to source out their wergild, alcohol in any guise. There had been many complaints about the division, but thus far, Patton had given them a long leash because he loved Allen’s guts and fighting spirit.

Once he had his prize, Patton seemed to have no intention of stopping. He told Allen to set up his HQ in Tebessa, and then moved Robinette’s CCA of

1st Armored right on through the town on the road to Kasserine, in a triumphant parade. The locals hooted at the arrival of the big American Shermans, easily switching sides in this campaign, and seeing the American troops as much better sources of looting, for their units seemed plush with supplies and other excess material.

Blade Force had been down near Thelepte in a scrap with the Italian Superga Division for the last two days, and they were asking for some help. So Patton sent 2/6th Armored Infantry Battalion, with a company of M5's and some tank destroyers down that road to lend a hand. He was also finally bringing up the 34th Infantry Division under General Ryder. They had moved well south and east of Batna, and were now coming up on a road that would take them down to Ghafsa. As Allen's infantry cleared the town and pushed on north in the wake of the retreating Germans, Patton ordered Ward to roll on for Kasserine Pass. Then he got into a jeep and headed for Tebessa himself, tired of the accommodations at the airfield. Along the way, he pulled out a cigar, letting the aromatic smoke trail away behind him, a satisfied grin on his face as he went.

General Bradley had again cautioned him, still worried about the concentration of German armor north of Eddy's 9th Infantry. So to mollify him, Patton told Harmon to sit tight for the second straight day. This way he could also say that the bold movements he had ordered with Old Ironsides were nothing more than reconnaissance operations. After all, it was only a single combat command. The rest of Harmon's division would not arrive for several days. He had to make amends with Eisenhower one day, but for now, he was feeling that saddle leather under him, still an old cavalryman at heart.

* * *

That same day, the recon battalion of 21st Panzer Division came up from Kasserine and scouted the road through the pass towards Tebessa. It reached the village of Chekir before it suddenly took small arms and mortar fire from well concealed enemy positions. They had run up on the Ranger battalion under Colonel Darby, which had scouted that area, operating well north of Blade Force. The Germans decided to flush out their enemy, and swept off the road with their armored cars and halftracks, moving into the attack. The rest of the division wasn't far behind them, and within that hour, II Battalion, 125th Panzergrenadiers, came up in support. A flight of American P-40s

swooped low for moral support, their machineguns strafing the road near the town.

When the Germans started also ranging in artillery from a battalion of mobile guns, Darby and his men had had enough. He knew he was up against much more than a recon force here. There was power on that road, and he could see dust in the air being kicked up in the pass to the southeast. So he got on the radio to Robinette, knowing that CCA was on this very same road and heading for his position.

Meanwhile, the 501st *Schwerepanzer* Battalion had been out in front with Rommel on the road to Ghafsa, which was almost a hundred kilometers south of Kasserine. They reached a defile at El Guettar, and rumbled on through. Just where the highway was about to meet the rail line that branched off to the phosphate mines and other destinations south, they ran into the head of the US 34th Infantry Division in a long column of march. General Ryder had been ordered to Ghafsa, but he had not sent out much in the way of recon. What happened next would give the American infantry a real taste of tank shock, to be sure.

The three companies of Tigers deployed abreast, one on the road flanked by two others on either side. Then they began a charge, like heavy cavalry thundering into the American column, those murderous long 88mm guns blasting away as they came. William Blake could have been writing about this very attack if he had been there to see it when he penned those now famous lines of poetry: *Tiger, tiger, burning bright, In the forests of the night, What immortal hand or eye Could frame thy fearful symmetry?*

3rd Battalion, 135th RCT was about to find out.

Seven trucks, some fully loaded with infantry, were blown to pieces as the Tigers started to fire at long range. Then they thundered on, and within ten minutes, they had completely overrun and destroyed A-Company of that battalion. Most of the US AT guns were still being towed, so it was just the infantry, leaping from burning trucks, still lucky to find themselves alive, and running for any cover they could find. A few Bazooka teams bravely tried to get into position to fire, and the troopers raked the heavy tanks with machineguns, but to no avail. One team took aim and put a bazooka round right onto one of the Tigers, but they might have been throwing mud balls. When nothing happened, they threw the bazooka down, turned tail, and ran like hell.

The 60mm rocket in the bazooka was supposed to be able to penetrate

between 90 and 100mm of armor at a 90 degree angle, but in actual practice it rarely achieved that performance. As late as the Korean War, it was even found to be ineffective against the enemy T-34s. It wasn't until later in the war, when the US developed the "Super Bazooka," that the weapon really came into its own against tanks. That could penetrate 280mm of armor, more than enough to kill most anything it could hit out to 300 meters. But the 34th Division had no M20 Super Bazookas at hand, nor would they for at least 18 months.

The alarm raised, the remaining two battalions of the 135th RCT began to deploy out of road column and moved to either flank. They finally brought up their AT gun support, a company with nine 37mm guns that they also found to be completely useless against those German Tigers. The US infantry watched, aghast, as one gun put round after round on an advancing enemy tank, not impeding its advance in the least. Then it stopped, the infantry cheering with the thought that they had finally knocked it out. Seconds later, they saw that big armored turret turn slowly, and fire blazed from the muzzle of that long 88. The AT gunners simply turned and ran, the infantry following them soon after.

The encounter there that would come to be known as the battle of Sidi Bou Baker had not started well for the Americans. The whole of A-Company was lost, and elsewhere, Colonel Darby had also lost fully half his battalion by the time he beat a hasty retreat south into heavily wooded country, hoping to save the rest of his Rangers with stealth, where force of arms had failed. He reached a platoon of armored engineers from Blade Force, warning the sergeant there that the Germans might be right on his heels. They got on their radio and sent the word back to Colonel Semms, and as it happened, that task force Patton had sent down towards Thelepte came rattling up the road to the junction at Bou Chebka.

"I understand you fellas are having an argument with the Italians?" said the Lieutenant.

"What of it?" said the tough looking Sergeant. "We can hold 'em. But our Rangers say there's Germans right up that road. You better go have a look."

The Lieutenant gave him a nod, then turned his column onto the smaller road north, which soon ran into those heavy woods. When he finally emerged, getting up round a spur from the hills to the south east, he saw the Germans massed near that hamlet where Colonel Darby had fought his battle and lost. At that same time, the rest of Robinette's CCA came down the road

to Kasserine and began to hit the town from that direction. It was as if the Americans had planned the ambush, and now the Lieutenant eagerly began to shake his column into some order for battle, and moved to join that attack on the flank.

The battle for Kasserine Pass had finally begun.

* * *

Bradley found Patton at his headquarters in Tebessa, coming down from 1st Infantry's lines to the north. "George," he said, with a tone in his voice that said 'I told you so.' "Both 3rd and 9th Infantry report a heavy attack underway up north. Von Arnim is throwing everything he has at them—two panzer divisions."

"Well you're just in time, Brad, because Rommel has finally made his appearance on the road to Kasserine. Robinette ran right into his 21st Panzer Division there. And Ryder down south says he's also got a fight on his hands north of Ghafsa."

"Ghafsa?" Bradley rushed over to the map table. "The Germans must have brought in another unit through the pass at El Guettar. George, this is damn serious. That makes four German Panzer Divisions, and now getting over that border into Tunisia isn't the issue any longer. This is a major counteroffensive, and here we are strung out all the way from Ryder's division to as far north as Ain Fakroun."

"I've already spoken with Montgomery," said Patton. "He says he can easily watch the passes near Constantine so we can reclaim Macon's 7th Regiment for 3rd Division. I've already given him orders to support the front line north of Ain Beida."

"I hope it will be enough," said Bradley. "The reports I picked up on the way down here didn't sound too encouraging. Thank God you left 2nd Armored where it was. At least we have something in hand to hit them back. What about Oliver with CCB?"

"He's just crossed the border at Charpinville, and I'm sending him right on down to Thala."

"What? You're going into Tunisia with that unit? Talk about sticking your head in the lion's mouth. What'll they do at Thala? By the time they get there the Germans might be here!"

"Now don't get your feathers ruffled so easily," said Patton. "This army

has a lot of fight in it. I've seen to that personally. While Monty was 'dumping' for the last thirty days, I've had our boys drilling every day. We've fought the Germans earlier south of Oran and gave a good account of ourselves."

"But that was only two divisions," said Bradley. "And you know damn well that they were just trying to fight a delaying action while they pulled out those paratroopers. God only knows where they'll end up. This time we've got four divisions heading our way, and this is no spoiling attack."

"Then we'll fight them," said Patton sharply. "If I stop Rommel here, he's finished. Understand? Now that's exactly what I intend to do. Once Oliver gets to Thala, he'll be in a good position to flank that German attack through the pass at Kasserine. We'll have them bottled up."

"What about Ryder? He's all on his own down there."

"Well, he's got his whole goddamned division, and he ought to be able to hold. If things get bad I can use Allen's reserve to hold Bou Chebka and then send Blade Force down there to lend him a hand."

"Then you'll be able to use 2nd Armored to backstop the 3rd and 9th Divisions." Bradley pointed at the map.

"I'm not going to backstop anything. I've got a perfectly good road that will take Harmon's Division right on up to Souk Ahras."

"You're going to attack?"

"The best defense is a good offense," said Patton. "Napoleon proved that time and time again. Look, this is a classic German pincer attack. They've pulled this crap in Russia since 1941, but I've been reading Rommel's book. If he thinks he's going to push through my lines here and link up with that northern pincer under von Arnim, he's flat out wrong. You'll see."

"Well the Germans have practically cut that road. I was just up there. They've got a kampfguppe right here, at Soufia."

"Then get orders to Harmon to clear them out." Patton gave Bradley a look that said he meant business.

Chapter 6

5-FEB-1943

Having detached its recon battalion, Hermann Goring Panzer Division wasn't quite up to full strength that day, but you could not tell that to the American infantry that faced and fled from its wrath. The road from Souk Ahras wound its way through the highlands, with one spur following the rail line south through Clairfontaine to Tebessa, and a second branching west through the village of El Beida, to Sedrata, and then down past Medkour and Raba to the broad lowland plain where the *Amis* waited. The division came barreling right down either side of that road, which was right at the seam between the US 9th and 3rd Infantry Divisions.

II Battalion of the HG Panzer Regiment smashed into 3/47th RCT and sent all three companies of that battalion into a headlong retreat. The "Old Reliables" of the 9th were anything but that in the face of those tanks. Troops abandoned mortars and heavy MGs in the field, some even throwing away their rifles as they fled south before they ran into a scowling Lt. Colonel George E. Pickett, directly related to the famous general that fought for the Confederacy in the Civil War. He was standing there with a drawn pistol held high over his head, and he meant to use it on any man that failed to obey his orders to stand and rally.

Pickett collared a squad Sergeant, sent him to round up two others, and then found a Lieutenant trying to desperately start his jeep to retreat south. He told the man, in no uncertain terms, that if his jeep moved one foot, he would shoot him dead on the spot. "Now see that 50 on the back of that mother? You get on that gun and hold right where you are!"

"But sir," said the hapless Lieutenant. "They're coming with heavy armor. What good will that do?"

"Aim low. Hit their goddamn tracks! Take the head off of any smart ass tank commander that opens his hatch. You may get killed, but at least you'll die fighting like a man. It's either that or you can die right now as a coward, and good riddance."

It was exactly the sort of talk Patton would have leveled at the man, and the Lieutenant stiffened his backbone, and settled in behind that machinegun.

Slowly, Pickett rallied that battalion, and then took heart when he learned that the entire 7th Regiment of the 3rd Infantry Division under Colonel Macon had just come up on his left.

The road the Germans were on led south to Ain Beida, a prominent settlement along the rail line from Constantine to Tebessa. That's where General Eddy had planted his HQ flag for the 9th Infantry, and when he learned the Germans were no more than 12 kilometers to the north, he called Major General Anderson of the 3rd Infantry and asked 'The Rock of the Marne' for some help. That division had been engaged with a part of the Hermann Goring Division on Eddy's left, coming down from Constantine after being relieved by the British.

"Look," said Anderson. "I've got my entire 7th RCT on the road heading your way right now, and with three engineer battalions. Hold on. We'll get there. But if this thing is as big as everyone seems to think, we may have to get on the phone to Montgomery soon."

"Patton won't like that," said Eddy.

"Then let him come over here and hold this goddamn line! We need armor here and it's all well east and south of us now. The Germans pulled a fast one on us. They want that road back to cut us off from the Brits, and Monty ought to hear about it."

He did hear about it, just as he was bringing up 10th Armored Division through the newly constructed bridges at Constantine. He had his engineers working for days to open a route through that city. His 43rd Wessex Division had followed the Germans north and east, where the fighting was now around Gastonville. 10th Armored was taken out of Army reserve and ordered to move through Constantine and turn north behind the 43rd. General Anderson decided to be the one to gently suggest to Monty that he might want to hold that division where it was. The American line had been hit hard, buckled, even collapsed along one or two battalion fronts, but for the most part it was still holding in that sector.

The real danger was in the center of von Arnim's main attack, where his 10th Panzer Division had sent its infantry against Eddy's Division, then swept its Panzer Regiment around its flank, heading for La Meskiana on that road between General Eddy's HQ at Ain Beida, and Tebessa. Harmon's CCA had been lingering near Meskiana, but Patton had ordered him to push it towards Clairfontaine to reach the main road north to Souk Ahras. It was that "perfectly good road" that the fiery American leader wanted to use to pull a

Napoleon on the Germans, but it had not been overlooked by his enemy.

Von Arnim had sent one battalion of tanks there, just south of the mountain town of Damous. The rest of his panzers had pushed 9th Infantry south and west, and their lead elements were now also about 15 kilometers from Harmon's HQ at Meskiana.

"Patton wants me to go where? To Souk Ahras?" Harmon could not believe the orders he had just received. "Well does he know the Germans are coming here?"

Harmon was a big man, broad shouldered, stout of heart, and with a voice so gruff that it could take the paint off the side of a house. His division, old Hell on Wheels, had been the reserve formation for the American mobile forces, while Ward had divided his 1st Armored into two strong combat commands to make the push for Tebessa. Now he would be forced to divide his own command, for Patton wanted him to attack to the north while he clearly had to arrange some defense to the south at Meskiana. That would be easy if he had his whole division up, but at present, he only had CCA.

Thankfully, Harmon was up to the task. He had been the man tapped by Eisenhower himself in the real history to go and backstop General Fredendall, the acting commander of II Corps, and even relieve him if necessary. He had found Fredendall in a drunken stupor, hidden away in an underground headquarters up an isolated ravine, some 80 miles behind the front. There he had been drawling orders over the field phone and radio, trying to run the battle from a map, not once visiting the actual front to see what Eddy or Anderson were contending with.

In this history, Harmon was going to be the man to rescue Fredendall's Corps again, which had nominal command of both the 3rd and 9th Infantry Divisions. And yes, Fredendall was nowhere to be found at the front. He had established his HQ at Ain Malila, 75 Kilometers from the nearest unit he theoretically commanded, and on the road north to Constantine from Batna. That was, after all, where Fredendall thought he was to take his two infantry divisions, before Patton changed the plan and ordered them to move east and south, along the road to Tebessa.

Fredendall was perturbed at that, for now he had to move his HQ, but three days after the order, he had not yet accomplished that small task. His staff had suggested Ain Fakrou, a town now about 40 kilometers from the front line of action, but Fredendall didn't think it had facilities he could use, even though it was right on the main rail line from Constantine.

“There’s no air field there,” Fredendall had complained.

“But sir, there isn’t one here either,” said his G2.

“Well we’ve got a good rail line here.”

“Yes sir, and there’s a rail line at Ain Fakrour too.”

“Aw hell,” said Fredendall in his southern drawl. “Patton went through there, and those damn tanks of his probably tore those tracks up real good. Nuthin’s comin’ down that line for at least two weeks. We ought’a stay right where we are.”

So Fredendall didn’t move, both his divisions were now under heavy enemy pressure, and 2nd Armored was the only reserve that might have a chance at saving the situation.

Up on that road to Souk Ahras, elements of Harmon’s CCA ran right into that German tank battalion. Brigadier Gaffey was the man leading the attack, and he had three companies of Shermans totaling some 39 tanks, and two more companies of M5 Stuarts all backed up by two batteries of 75mm guns mounted on halftracks, the American T30 HMC. Not sure what he was up against, he sent his armor in until it was hotly engaged by the combined arms of KG Huder, (190th Pz Battalion), with 18 PzKfw IVF2’s, 12 Marders, three of the new 88mm Nashorns, and two Tigers. This force also had two platoons of motorcycle infantry, which had been acting as its recon element.

Damous was in a mountain pass on the rail line between Souk Ahras and Tebessa. The Germans opened fire, the five 88mm guns on those Nashorns and Tigers doing immediate harm. The hard crack of the gun, and its high velocity, raised the hackles of the men in the lead Shermans, which were hit and easily penetrated. Three were knocked out almost immediately, and when the men in those M5s saw what had happened to them, they quickly lost their ardor for the fight.

“Damn!” said one driver. “Did you see what those kraut guns did to the lead platoon? If one of those hits us, it’ll go right through one side and out the other.”

“Tigers,” said the tank commander. “You just use our pop gun on that infantry, but get us into good defilade. Maybe they won’t see us.”

The Germans did see them, but it was a IV-F2 that put an end to that tank as the driver tried to maneuver into a nearby gulley to get hull down. The Germans had a slight elevation advantage, so they were actually depressing their gun barrels to hit the American tanks on the turrets. Huder didn’t like that American artillery, so he called for support from a nearby artillery unit,

and would get fires from eleven 105mm guns in reprisal.

When Patton learned about the blocking position on the road he wanted north, he acted without a second thought. Major General Oliver's CCB of 1st Armored had pushed through Charpinville to the east and had been sparring with elements of the German 334th. He reasoned that fight could wait, and the German infantry did not pose any immediate threat to his flank. He got on the radio to Oliver.

"Bug?" He said, calling Oliver by the name he often went by. "George Patton. Be sure you leave something to cover the road to Bou Khadra, but otherwise, I want you to pull out of that business at Charpinville and take your whole combat command back west to Grid 4C. Gaffey's there with a group from 2nd Armored and he's got a fight on his hands. You'll be the cavalry arriving to settle it. Now move fast, and hit 'em hard. This will mean everything."

Then even though it galled him to do so, Patton got on the phone to Montgomery. "Monty? Look we've got a bit of a situation here. The Krauts are hitting us pretty hard. So far we've identified five Panzer divisions, two up north hitting Fredendall's Corps, and three more coming up through Kasserine and Thelepte. Now I think they're trying to pinch my whole outfit off and isolate us from communications with your army. Well, I'm not going to stand for that. What's your situation on the coast."

"Rather thick," said Montgomery. "They've two divisions dug in on very good ground, and it's been tooth and nail. I've just moved up 10th Armored from Army Reserve. I was hoping to send it up behind 43rd Wessex, but the 133rd Motor Brigade was sent in earlier to probe through the passes toward Gulema. I don't need to remind you that was where your infantry should be."

"Right..." said Patton, not wanting to get into a tiff here, as he was coming with hat in hand and needed Montgomery's support. "Look Monty, II Corps is getting hit hard, but they're fighting. They're holding. Now this is the main event down here. If you swing 10th Armored down you could clip the Hermann Goring Panzer Division right on the flank. I'm building a strong armored force further east at grid C4. I want to go to Souk Ahras and bag this entire northern pincer. Once we kick the Germans in the ass, you'd be free to roll right on up to Gulema. Hell, you could even go right up to Bone on the coast. That'll put the fear of the lord into those two Jerry divisions you're up against. So what do you say? Are you up for a fight here? Come on down and have a go at the big fellas. If we stop this attack, the Germans are finished."

They'll have to pull back into Tunisia."

Monty was looking at his map. It was an audacious plan, but one much better suited to a mobile division like 10th Armored than commitment to the fight on the coast. He might break through there, but then again, he might find the Germans remain a stubborn foe, and would not have it said that he was stuck like a bug in a rug along that coastline. "Very well, Patton. I'll issue the order, but mind you... 10th Armored will remain under British control."

The division Monty was sending was very strong, with two large armored brigades, the 8th and 24th, each with a mix of Churchills, Valentines and some Crusader IIIs. Both tank brigades had a single battalion of infantry attached, and there was the 133rd Infantry Brigade, already engaged near Ain Regada with the German 756th Mountain Regiment. The armor would take the road through Ain Fakrou, which would bring it down behind the US 3rd Infantry.

The key element in this battle was that the American infantry was fighting more than running. It was not like the rout Rommel and von Arnim had inflicted on the Americans in the real history. The GI's had landed at Casablanca, and then fought their way all the way through Morocco and Algeria to reach this position. They were still not the resilient force that they would be later in the war, but they had been toughening up, and Patton had been instrumental in imposing strict discipline, in spite of Fredendall's slovenly displays.

Even as Patton and Montgomery were planning their counterattack, Fredendall was sleeping in his bunk, his edgy staff officers eyeing him with some chagrin from time to time. So it wasn't Fredendall that was holding that vital flank, but Eddy and Anderson. When Patton then put in a call to Fredendall's HQ, learning first where it was, and then hearing that the General had to be wakened, he went through the roof. He found General Bradley and a small section of fast jeeps and told him to go up to Ain Beida and take over command of II Corps. Fredendall's staff was to go there directly as well, and the old General himself was ordered to report to Eisenhower.

About 4pm that day, the German attack began to falter. Tank losses were not heavy, but the Germans had attacked over the valley floor, crossing two wadis in the process, and now fuel and ammunition were becoming a problem. Two of the panzer battalions were down to 30%, a minimum

reserve, and so Fisher was reluctantly forced to pause. In doing so, he ordered II Battalion, 104th Panzergrenadiers, to Damous Pass to reinforce Huber's defense. He had lost four of his 18 IV-F2's, a pair of Marder III's and one Nashorn, but inflicted far worse harm on Gaffey's CCA.

This move by Patton, though not yet the successful breakthrough and envelopment he wanted, had already done much to unhinge von Arnim's entire operation, and some of it was pure happenstance. A Lieutenant in 3rd Company of the 81st Recon Battalion in Oliver's CCB had been scouting well north of Charpinville when the order came to withdraw to Damous Pass.

"Well hell," he said, squinting at a map. "It looks like the General wants to go right up the main road to Souk Ahras. This road we're on now will take us right on up there—about 20 klicks. If we backtrack, it's at least that far to get to Damous, and then another 18 klicks to Souk Ahras from there."

"But Lieutenant. Everyone else will be on that other main road. We'll be out here all on our own."

"Look around, Sergeant. See anyone else out here but us? We're recon. This is the shit we're supposed to be doing. The Brass might want to know if this damn road is passable."

And that was that. The company started up that road and when it reached the village of Taoura it stopped for a rest. A Luftwaffe fighter taking off from the airfield at Souk Ahras spotted them, and raised the alarm—American light mechanized forces on the road, just nine kilometers from Korps HQ at Souk Ahras.

Von Arnim went ballistic. He got on the phone to Fischer, a man already a week into an all new life, for he had avoided that mine that killed him in the old history on the 1st of Feb near Mareth. He had to quickly detach half his recon battalion and a company of tanks from the defense he had been building up at the pass. His entire drive south had come to a complete halt, and the division was now in a defensive posture.

The first elements of Bug Oliver's CCB from 1st Armored were beginning to arrive near Damous, and late in the day that much needed reserve would form up just below the pass.

Part III

Swan Song

“ One who cannot dance must not blame the song.”

— **Matshona Dhliwayo**

Chapter 7

That evening the British 24th Armored Brigade began to arrive in a perfectly neat column behind the extreme left flank of the U.S. 3rd Infantry. The first thing they did was begin setting up their guns, and then an enterprising Colonel of the Artillery made a simple mistake. The rest of the division would take time to follow and assemble, and Monty had planned on a morning attack. But the Colonel took map reference points from the Americans and thought he might start registering his artillery. A Lieutenant in 1/I Panzergrenadier of the Herman Goring division was leaning on his halftrack, taking a moment to enjoy a smoke when the registration fires started.

“The British!” he said with some alarm to a nearby Sergeant. “Those are not American guns. I’d know the sound of a 25-Pounder anywhere. It’s the British. Get to the Captain and inform him of this. He’s likely to hear it just as I did, but let’s make no mistake.”

This astute officer had just provided battlefield intelligence in a way that could not have been obtained by other means. The bad weather that day, and the fact that the British had arrived well after sunset, meant that they might not have been detected until the following morning. But now General Conrath was soon informed that the enemy had brought in fresh reinforcements on his right flank, and he didn’t like it. He got on the phone to von Arnim at Souk Ahras, and the two men discussed the situation.

“What is there?” asked von Arnim.

“We won’t know that until morning,” said Conrath, but they have already started registering their artillery. The men up front tell me it’s 25-Pounders—the British.”

“They have also pulled out of the Charpinville sector and Huder sees a lot of force building up below the pass at Damous.”

“That is a new strong buildup on both flanks,” said Conrath. “Could they be planning a pincer operation?”

Von Arnim resisted the urge to dismiss that out of hand, believing it beneath the capabilities of their enemy. He was very close to his objective at Ain Beida, cutting the Americans off from the British, but now it seems that Montgomery had decided to act, not by positioning additional forces on

defense, but apparently by planning a counterattack, which seemed to be coordinated with that buildup to the left of 10th Panzer at Damous. Patton and Montgomery... they were as different as night and day, but could they pull something like this off? And where was Rommel?

From all reports, 21st Panzer Division flowed through the pass at Kasserine largely unopposed, but now they were locked in a head butting duel with an American armored force. Then there was a report concerning an engagement at Sidi Bou Baker. 15th Panzer Division had run into an American infantry division there, which delayed Rommel's move north through Feriana and Thelepte. Now the Luftwaffe reported it was seeing what looked to be a division sized formation coming up from the south at Tozeur, and this could only be the damnable French.

That has to be the Constantine Division, thought von Arnim. We believed it had retired south for good, intending to stay out of the fighting, but it seems the Allies have been courting new friends. The French... Well, we have their country, their navy, and to hell with the rest of them here. Yet now Rommel will have to look over his shoulder. These two incidents will give him all the excuses he needs if this operation fails. But what should I do?

"Conrath," he said. "You're the man on the scene. What do you advise in your sector?"

"I think we should be cautious here. I have a mind to strengthen my right flank, but to do so I will have to suspend the drive on Ain Beida until we see what we have in front of us. I must say, the *Amis* have not been the pushovers we thought they would be. And frankly, I smell Patton in this. Montgomery would have never planned such a counterattack."

"Fisher tells me he needs fuel and ammo," said von Arnim. "Very well. We will suspend for one day. Make any defensive arrangements you deem sufficient. I will speak with you again in the morning."

When that morning came on the 6th of February, the entire complexion of the battle would change. The unexpected French threat to Ghasfa from the south, von Arnim's need to adopt a defensive posture, Rommel being paired down to an attack with two divisions instead of all three, had all shifted the balance of the battle. Then one further development presented itself. Rommel was soon going to be looking over his shoulder in more than one direction. O'Connor's British 8th Army had been consolidating at Ben Guerdane for some time, and now he was opening an offensive against the Mareth Line....

* * *

Rommel was pacing outside his field tent, a mix of frustration and anxiety. His grand vision of sweeping around the flank of the *Amis* with three Panzer divisions abreast was not going to happen. The sudden appearance of 34th Infantry Division in that meeting engagement on the road to Ghafsa had forced him to commit the whole of his 15th Panzer Division to drive it back. After inflicting that severe check, which nearly did become a rout, General Ryder managed to get his division deployed in a semi-circle and was trying to hold his own. Rommel could have completely smashed that position if he had committed von Funck's 7th Panzer Division, but instead he sent it right up the road towards Feriana and Thelepte. That afternoon, he came up from Ghafsa to speak with General Randow.

"We've hurt them pretty bad, and stopped them cold," said Randow."

"Good," said Rommel, "but now we have another matter to resolve—the French. They appear to have found some backbone and joined the Allies. The Constantine Division is advancing on Ghafsa from the south. I need to get up north and flank Tebessa, and I'll be taking the Tiger Battalion with me, but I will leave the Korps artillery here with you. Make good use of it against that American infantry. As for the French, I'd like you to assemble a strong Kampfgruppe from your division as well. Retain enough here to keep that American infantry division edgy, but you need not over exert yourself. Send that KG south to cover Ghafsa."

"Very well. I can send the recon battalion, a good tank battalion and some Panzergrenadiers."

"That will do. Keep me informed if anything changes here." Then Rommel was off in his command vehicle, racing up the road to Feriana, his mood already souring as he went. There had been a log jam at Dernalia and Bou Chebka where Blade Force had fought a very stubborn defense. They were eventually forced out of that position by 7th Panzer, and fell back to the high ground that shielded Tebessa from the south, where Patton had tapped General Allen's shoulder and told him to send a full RCT to lend a hand.

This terrain is maddening, thought Rommel. No sooner do we fight our way through one tortuous mountain pass, when we are faced with another. This high country south of Tebessa sits there like a great stone wall, and if they are smart, they will get infantry dug in on those heights. Von Bismarck has made progress through Kasserine, and he is now 10 kilometers beyond

the pass. But this terrain... The Americans just keep falling back from one ridge line to another. It's no place for armor, and I had to leave both my infantry divisions at Mareth to backstop the Italians.

There's another problem. O'Connor is stirring to life again. He's already moving up two infantry divisions against the Italian lines at Medinine. Those defenses should hold for a while. I placed the three Italian motorized infantry divisions on the line at Medinine. If O'Connor breaks through, then I have my two infantry divisions on the Mareth Line. They'll hold. My men are dug in deep. but for how long? Two weeks? Three? That doesn't matter. This will be decided here in a matter of days.

* * *

Patton stood beneath the high stone arch abutting from an old stone wall in Tebessa. It was an ancient Roman artifice, one of many in the 'city of a thousand gates,' as Tebessa was called.

"Gaius Egrilianus built that," he said, hands on his hips, his famous Ivory handled pistols close at hand. He had always worn one on each hip—ever since that foray into Mexico with General Pershing to get after that bandit Pancho Villa in May of 1914. Patton got into a close firefight during that action, armed with only one pistol, which he had to reload three times in that action. He ended up hitting Pancho's number two commander, collecting his spurs as a souvenir, and after that encounter he always wore that second pistol for backup.

"He was Prefect of the 14th Roman Legion," said Patton, "and he was born in this very same town. Went off to find his fate and joined the Roman Army to make something of himself. When he returned home, he built this triumphal arch and then marched his whole goddamned legion through it in celebration. And here I am, standing on that same hallowed ground." He smiled.

"Old Magister Solomon incorporated this arch into the city wall there a couple hundred years later. His field works are all over this region, a real master of the art of fortification. He fought with the great General Belisarius here in Africa," Patton nodded at Bradley still seated in the nearby jeep. "And I fought here with them...."

"George, that's a wonderful history lesson, but the Germans are about to take that ridge and ruin all of Solomon's work if we don't do something

about it. We've got *this* war to fight."

"Well I'm your man for that, Brad. But it never hurts to remember you're standing on the shoulders of other brave men who fought here before you. Alright. Let's get moving. Take us on up to the artillery."

Patton had ordered General Allen to send every battery of artillery he could spare, and now he had a full three battalions from 1st Infantry Division, and three more battalions from the armored forces. He planned to meet the German attack with a hailstorm of lead.

"Brad, after we look over the guns I want you to get up to Ain Beida. I ordered Fredendall's Corps staff there this morning, and I want you to pull things together."

"What about Fredendall?"

"I sent him to Oran."

"You relieved him right in the middle of a fight like this?"

"Well, he wasn't even *in* the goddamned fight! The man was holed up in a rabbit hole over 75 kilometers behind the front! Look, this is just temporary. I'll send someone up to take over there for you tomorrow. In the meantime, do what you can to keep II Corps from folding until I can coordinate this thing with Montgomery."

"It was a miracle you got him to chip in on our side of the fence."

"A little diplomacy at the right time never hurts," said Patton. "Now let's see if he can fight."

"They say he did a damn good job stopping the Japanese at Singapore."

"Yes, the 'Rock of the East.'" The only problem was that he gave the place to the enemy two weeks later and skedaddled over to Java. Now he's claiming the mantle of 'Rock of the West' as well for taking back Gibraltar."

"Well the British need their heroes too, don't they?"

An hour later the guns began firing, answering preliminary fires from the Germans. Massed artillery is one of the most fearsome displays on any battlefield. Ever since the first war, it had been the bane of infantry holding any defensive position, and was even worse for those having to attack under enemy defensive bombardment. The dark earth sprayed up with every impact, wet with the rain and laced with steel shrapnel. The earth itself shuddered with the impact of the rounds, and Patton stood with the gun crews, his riding crop in one hand, urging them on.

"Come on!" he shouted over the din of the guns. "Pour it on. Give it to the bastards!"

The Germans would see the first waves of their Panzergrenadiers grounded by that artillery, but the tanks lumbered on, a few stricken and overturned on the main road, and one lighter Leopard recon tank literally blown into the air by a heavy round.

Allen's infantry had spent all morning climbing the heights of Hill 1545. By evening they were dug in there, with a fine view of the valley to the south, the road emerging from light woods and climbing the ridge shielding Tebessa. On and behind that ridge, Patton had lined up six more battalions of infantry, and at least three full battalions of tanks, backed by all that artillery. Now they were listening to it fire, and waiting for the inevitable response from the German guns. They knew they were on a hill the enemy would simply have to take if they wanted to use that road.

When Rommel came calling he would be taking the cream of his veteran Panzer Divisions and trying to use them as a battering ram against that wall. It was not the battle he expected, not the swirling duel of maneuver where he certainly hoped to best his enemy, but the ground had dictated the time and place of the fight, and his enemy had chosen the ground.

Something began prickling within his military mind by way of objection to what he was now obstinately doing here. His plan was to throw 21st Panzer against the lower ridge to the north of the main road, and use his old warhorse, the 7th Panzer, to push up the main road to Tebessa, right beneath the brow of Hill 1545. He could abandon the battle of attrition and still swing west around this high country, ignoring his objective and nominating another in its place. He could drive instead far off Khelencheld, which was 80 kilometers east of Batna, the major American supply portal feeding Patton. At Khelencheld, he would be 45 kilometers south of Ain Beida, which was von Arnim's main objective.

You do not have to fight here, he said to himself—not for Tebessa. The indirect approach is always best; the unexpected. Strike at their lines of communications, sever those road and rail connections! Yet if I do this, I could only take the 7th Panzer Division with me. Von Bismarck's entire division would have to adopt a defensive posture here, and Randow's troops are all tied up down south watching two divisions for me. Could I do this with only one division? That is not a question I would have ever asked myself in Libya—at least not in the beginning. I raced across all of Cyrenaica in a matter of days, and nearly all the way to the wire on the Egyptian border.

The sound of that artillery duel throbbed in his head like the onset of a

migraine. His mood darkened with each pulsing report, and his military mind stubbornly answered the question he had been speculating over the last few minutes.

It's no good trying to swing around to the left. If I had all of Randow's 15th Panzer Division, I might contemplate such a move, but it is just not possible with Funck's Division alone. It would be a mad dash into nowhere. I would have nothing to support it, and if this General Patton stands his ground, which I think he will, then I would have no recourse other than withdrawal. Unless.... Could von Arnim get to Ain Beida as planned? If so, the 7th could swing around Tebessa, and then turn north to link up. What was happening with von Arnim?

That was going to decide everything.

Yet now that stiff necked von Arnim tells me that Montgomery is sticking his nose in things. He says the Americans and British are planning a pincer attack aimed at cutting off his entire Korps. Ridiculous! I'm told he has paused his offensive pending further developments. Does he plan to renew it? I knew that weak-kneed aristocrat had no real stomach for a fight. He should have been at Ain Beida yesterday!

He shrugged, raising an eyebrow. And I should have been in Tebessa by now, he thought. That night, a hard rain began to fall, and Rommel huddled inside his command vehicle, feeling very despondent. He was tired of the cold now, which was hard on his body. His health had been in decline for some time, a factor which OKW attributed to his setbacks in Libya... until they finally saw the tank he had been facing in those battles.

Chapter 8

They stared at it with a mix of awe, respect, and sheer fright. The Challenger II recovered from the battlefield near Mersa Brega had been examined by technicians for many weeks now, but it was finally time for Hitler and the senior officers of OKW to visit the Henschel plant in Kessel where Hitler was to view a new prototype of the Tiger, but first he was taken to a secure area to view the captured tank. Its long 120mm gun was bowed from the spiking demolition, the interior completely destroyed, but even in death, it was a dour spectacle.

“This is the tank that stopped Rommel’s Panzers in Libya,” said the technician. We estimate its weight at approximately 62 tons, and heavier when fully combat loaded. Its main body is 3.5 meters in width, and 8.3 meters in length. This makes it a little bigger in all categories than our current Tiger and Lion series panzers. Yet size is not everything. We deduce its virtue can be attributed to two things, the exceptional design of the armor, and that monster of a gun, fully 120 mm. It is also reputed to be very fast for its size, which has everything to do with the engine and suspension.”

Hitler walked slowly up to the beast, hands clasped behind his back, then he reached out and touched the armored turret. Keitel actually shirked when he did so, as if the tank might suddenly reanimate and become the snarling nemesis that the men in the field had described in so many reports.

“What is exceptional about the armor? How thick?”

“My Führer, it is not merely the thickness, but the actual material from which this armor is made that is so baffling. This side of the tank is intact, but to convince ourselves of the veracity of the battle reports, we conducted fire tests against the armor on the other side. It stopped every weapon, every round that we fired at it. There was absolutely no penetration.”

“So Rommel was not belly aching about his fate in Libya after all,” said Keitel. Hitler looked at him over his shoulder, not appreciating the remark, and Keitel shrunk into silence.

“What is it made of?” asked Hitler.

“We are not entirely certain, but from our initial testing, it appears to be a mix of layered ceramic tiles.”

“What? You are telling me this is armored by material used in my

teacups?”

“Not exactly. These are highly refined ceramics. Their compressive strength, shear strength, and tensile strength have been greatly enhanced. Each one may be a composite including other materials. We have already detected diamond in this armor, the hardest substance on earth. Then each tile is encased in a metal frame which we are presently analyzing. It is then bonded to another backing plate that includes some very elastic layers which allow this material to absorb shock from a high velocity weapon. The tiles can be damaged, but even so, this framework and bonding keeps them in place, and they still retain a great deal of stopping power against shaped charges. As for kinetic energy penetrators, the rounds simply shattered on impact.”

Hitler nodded in a sullen silence. “And the gun?”

“It is a 120mm rifled barrel, and its rounds completely penetrated any tank that faced it. We also estimate its range to be well beyond 3000 meters, and it was reportedly very accurate at that range.”

Now the Führer turned to regard the man for the first time, for his eyes had never left the tank from the moment he saw it. “I assume you have something to show me in the next room that will answer this?”

“We do, my Führer.” The technician extended his arm, leading the way. Hitler was about to view the first fully functioning production model for the newest Tiger tank, soon to be dubbed the *Königstiger*, or Royal Tiger. The party moved slowly past the broken Challenger II, and through a large metal door.

“This is the series one model of this new design, now in competition with the Lion-90. As you can see, it is every bit as impressive in size as this new British tank, in fact, it is heavier at over 68 tons, and wider. The British design is just a little longer, and with a better gun.”

“What is that?” Hitler pointed to the main armament on the new tank.

“At the moment, we have mounted it with our best version of the 88mm gun. The new Lions will use a 90mm gun.”

“But I am told the Russians are building tanks with 122mm main guns. If they can do this, and the British, then we will do the same. Put a bigger gun on this tank. Now... What about the armor? I don’t suppose you are using diamond studded teacups?”

That got a ripple of laughter, which died out quickly. Then the Technician explained that the Tiger II would have armor in the range of 100mm made of

welded maraging steel, known to produce superior strength and toughness. But Hitler simply raised a hand, stopping the man. "Can our existing weapons penetrate this armor?"

"Yes, that is possible. Our 88s can penetrate just over 150mm at 2000 meters."

"Well what good is this tank then?" Hitler gave him a wide eyed look. "Unless you can armor it to resist the enemy's weapons, it will be nothing more than a waste of good steel. Improve the armor! Put a larger gun on it, and that goes for the new Lions as well. Rommel told me he would be in Cairo by now if not for that new British tank, and finally seeing it, I fully believe him. You must do better than this. Make it stronger! Improve the main gun. I want panzers that can master any opponent encountered on the battlefield."

He gave the Technician a level stare. "And do this quickly," he said, turning and striding off with his officers in tow.

* * *

Montgomery was up early that morning, eager for news from 10th Armored. He had learned that O'Connor was back in the game, teeing up an offensive in the south. Now, as he considered the situation, he was forced to accept the fact that Patton was on to something. The real battle wasn't with his position on the coast. The terrain was too constricted. He couldn't use his armor in anything other than penny packet fashion. The infantry was slogging its way forward, but if the enemy flank could be turned in the south, this line would be forced to retreat.

At 10:00 he got on the phone to Eisenhower telling him what he and Patton had worked out. "It's a gamble, but I'll raise that bet," he said. "I have it in mind to send my 6th Armored south right on the heels of the 10th. This fight on the coast is for the infantry, and I've enough tank support organic to those divisions as it stands. Patton wants Souk Ahras, and I rather tend to agree with him."

That shocked Eisenhower for a moment, but with his two senior field commanders in actual agreement on something, and in the very process of carrying that plan out, he gladly gave the move his blessing.

"Oh by the way," Monty finished. "I'm sure you're aware that O'Connor's back in it. Don't worry Ike, we'll handle things."

Eisenhower gave that a wan smile, knowing that Monty was seeing this whole situation as the British Armies riding to the rescue of the Americans, but he said nothing.

O'Connor was definitely a factor now. Though his armored force was still not replenished after the battle at Tarhuna, he still had strong tank brigades at his disposal, and very good infantry divisions that were going to be more than a match for the Italians. He then consolidated his remaining tanks to flesh out 1st Armored Division, sending most of the 7th Armored Brigade units back to Benghazi for shipment to Haifa. They were needed more in Syria than they were here in Tunisia. He would retain 22nd Armored Brigade, and along with 1st Armored and the strong 23rd Armored Brigade, he would have more than enough to support his infantry.

That morning, he decided to throw his hardest punch right in the center of the enemy line, at Medinine. There he committed the remaining tanks of 1st Armored, and the 44th Home County Division, supported by lavish artillery bombardments. Right behind that attack, he brought up the tough 51st Highland Division, with 23rd Armored ready to make the exploitation upon breakthrough. He gave scant attention to the two Italian divisions on the flank of that attack, knowing that if he broke the center, they would have no choice other than to abandon their prepared positions and retreat.

The Pistoia was the division on the line at the point of that attack, and by the time Monty was having his chat with Eisenhower, it was already falling back. General Falugi did all he could, but faced with 200 British tanks backed by waves of infantry, his men simply could not stand. The Italians would answer mainly with their artillery, but it would not be enough, and their AT guns were inadequate, their own tanks far to the rear as a last ditch reserve behind the Germans.

In truth, Rommel had placed the Italian infantry there simply as a trip wire and delaying force, knowing it would not hold long against the 8th Army on its own. He had designed a layered defense in the south, with the first line at Medinine, the main central line along the wadi at Mareth, and a final line at Gabes. He reasoned that a clock would be ticking the minute O'Connor engaged the first line, and now he might have ten days to two weeks before that front would be critical.

He hadn't counted on the Pistoia Division retiring completely to Mareth instead of trying to fight a defensive withdraw aimed at delaying the British advance. This was the same division that had thrown itself at the 8th Army in

an attempt to unhinged Monty's planned offensive against Mareth. It failed to do so in that history, and it would do no better in this one. The loss of that centermost division in the line did exactly what O'Connor knew it would, and compelled the other two on the flanks to withdraw as well.

There was, however, some advantage to this. The hasty withdrawal of the Italians would now add their strength to the main line at Mareth. O'Connor would not be able to trap those troops or force their surrender before they could escape. He surveyed the scene, realizing that he had a good battering ram right behind his main attack with the 51st Highland Division, and a solid hammer with 23rd Armored Brigade. He had every confidence that he would eventually break through.

* * *

Mid-day on the 7th of February, Patton had another call to make, this time to General Truscott, who was acting Corps commander for the two Armored divisions.

"Lucian? Look, I know I've been stepping all over your toes in this thing, but it's just the old horse cavalry officer in me." Patton's domineering presence had reduced Truscott to a rubber stamp for his orders, and he knew the man was better than that. He apologized, then floated a proposal.

"I sent Bradley to roust Fredendall out of bed and kick his ass back to Oran. The man is no good. Brad was going to try and pull II Corps staff together at grid point G7, but I need him here. I was wondering if I can interest you in a new job, considering I've had my fingers in your pie all week. Do you think you could get out there and take over II Corps for the duration of this fight? If you want the Armored Corps back when we've finished, it's still yours."

"Alright," said Truscott. "You owe me one, General."

"Lucian, you're a good man."

"Well sir, it isn't often that a three star General taps you on the shoulder at the ball. These are good troops here I've been dancing with. Ward's a little shaky, but Robinette and Oliver can get the job done. Harmon is as solid as granite. You can rely on him."

"And that I will. I'd like to keep 2nd Armored down here, but When this thing settles down I'm going to send you Ward's whole division. That will flesh out II Corps, and I'll create a Provisional Corps with the 1st, 34th and

2nd Armored. Fair enough?”

“Fair enough, General.”

Patton wanted Truscott to know that he valued him and saw him as essential to the future of the American war effort, which he was. Lucian Truscott would go on to become perhaps the toughest and finest US field commander of the war.

“Bradley says the line has stiffened up,” said Patton. “The Germans were forced to go defensive when Monty showed up. That’s another rabbit I managed to pull out of my hat, and it’s a miracle that man moved so quickly. I didn’t think we’d see him until next Tuesday. Now... Any word on the rest of Harmon’s outfit?”

“They arrived last night, sir, loaded for bear with all new tanks.”

“Magnificent! Can you put them on the road through Les Baines to Tebessa right away? The Huns are at the door down here, and Robinette’s boys have been fighting all week. I need a big steel shod boot to kick that door shut again.”

“You’ve got it, General. I’ll get word to Harmon on this for you, and tell him where he can find his CCR. Then I’ll leave for G7 right away.”

“Fair enough. I *do* owe you one for this. I know I can be a real pain in the ass at times, but you’ve done your job and done it well. Now go put some fire in the belly at II Corps. I want those two infantry divisions ready to attack in support of Monty’s move up there. As for Ryder. He plunked himself down in a defensive laager, well to the south, but I think he’s got Jerry worried about his flank. That’s at least good for something. Word is that a good chunk of 15th Panzer is still facing him down, which means I don’t have to kill those sons-of-bitches here.”

Truscott couldn’t see it, but he knew Patton was probably grinning ear to ear with that. Patton would find that CCR before Harmon even got word, and he had it moving exactly where he wanted it that same hour. He had been moving all the pieces on the board that he could get his hands on, amazed that he had managed to talk Montgomery into coming down to lend a hand.

Now he was at Tebessa to fight the gallant stand against Rommel’s two tough Panzer divisions. He had the ground, and he had reserves, and for that he was grateful. The sheer size of a US Heavy Armored Division was daunting. It had six tank battalions with 270 tanks organic to those units, and some 30 more scattered in other division elements and HQs. The two American Armored Divisions had started the campaign with 600 tanks, and a

good 500 still remained active, with others in the shops or wrecked on the field of battle.

Harmon's CCB had 300 of those, and Patton was marching it to his fortress wall to relieve the battered CCA of Ward's 1st Armored. His other two Combat Commands were slowly bulling their way through the pass at Damous, forcing Fischer to pull more and more troops back to that sector. The daring plan Patton had conceived would have never dawned in the mind of lesser Generals. It was risky. He had mixed commands from both divisions instead of fighting them together as a whole, though this was largely forced on him by circumstances.

It had been his ability to go to Montgomery, hat in hand, that really made the difference, and to his credit, Monty had risen to the occasion in a way that Patton had never thought possible for the man. The swift and deliberate deployment of 10th Armored south from Constantine had changed everything. It had forced von Arnim's attack to completely halt, giving Patton, Bradley and now Truscott time to pull together the two sagging US infantry divisions in II Corps.

This day, when von Arnim looked at his latest situation map, things looked very bleak. He picked up the telephone to call Kesselring, convinced that this offensive was now over.

Chapter 9

The storm had reached its high tide, and the weather was changing. Off on the distant horizon, von Arnim could see new clouds forming dark ridges in the sky.

This should not be happening, he thought. This army should not be able to stop us here. I should have deployed my two divisions closer together, and formed one strong thrust. If I had an infantry division, I would not have had to cover such a broad front. Yet even so, I was pushing the *Amis* back just as I expected. Then Montgomery shows up—those damnable British.

“The situation has changed,” he explained to Kesselring. “I do not think I can occupy the ground I’ve already won in this offensive any longer. There is simply too much pressure on my flanks.”

“You know what Rommel will say.”

“Let him say anything he wants. He had the Lion’s share of the Panzers, quite literally, and most of the Tigers as well. Has he taken Tebessa yet? I think not. The fact remains that if I stay where I am, it is the same situation I faced earlier—two divisions trying to hold a 25 to 30 kilometer front, and now I am facing two British and three American division sized units.”

“Two British?”

“Montgomery has reinforced his attack with 10th Armored.”

“Interesting,” said Kesselring. “I didn’t think the man could move that quickly. He was tenacious on defense in Libya, but we haven’t seen how he conducts an offensive yet. Well, let me have a look at the latest situation map, and I’ll have a chat with Rommel tonight. Yet if things are as you say, then I think *Sturmflut* is over, a brief Spring rain instead of what Rommel had in mind. He won’t like it, and frankly, I think he will be recalled home to Germany after this. O’Connor took Tripoli from the Italian garrison he left there, and Mussolini is screaming that he again sacrificed those divisions like lambs to the slaughter.

O’Connor had indeed accomplished that, but with his 4th Indian and 1st South African Infantry Divisions, with a little tank support from the 7th Armored units he was sending back to Benghazi. With one hand he had closed the long arduous and often dramatic campaign in Libya, while with the other fist he was now knocking hard on the gateway to Tunisia.

“Albert,” said von Arnim. “I think we are finished here. It is only a matter of time now if we do not get at least two more divisions over here.”

“Perhaps. I am not prepared to say anything of the kind to Hitler yet, but I think we must put aside this will-o-the-wisp Spring Wind idea, and revert to a stubborn defense. Start looking over the maps of the terrain behind you. We will need to hold Gulema and Souk Ahras for as long as possible. I will also have to order the infantry on the coast back as far as Bone. Don’t worry, Tunis is still a long way off, and I think we will still have a good deal of fight in us.”

“I’ll still be operating with only four divisions,” said von Arnim. “It won’t be easy.”

“Given the fact that O’Connor has taken Medinine and is forming up to attack Mareth, I think Rommel will have to return there very soon. But I don’t think he will need three Panzer divisions. I’ll see about getting one of his units transferred to your command.”

“That would help,” said von Arnim, the tone of dejection evident in his voice. “This should not have happened. We should have kicked the *Amis* all the way back to Algiers, just as Rommel boasted.”

“We should have done many things that never happened in this war,” said Kesselring, “and we are doing many things that never *should* have happened. There are some things I think you should know, von Arnim. We will speak again on this at another time....”

Kesselring sounded somewhat cryptic with that, but von Arnim would never imagine just how strange that conversation would be one day, and what it would portend.

* * *

Smiling Al’s call to Rommel at mid-day on the 8th was just more bad news for the old desert warrior. O’Connor had smashed the Italians at Medinine in a single attack, the French Constantine Division was putting pressure south of Ghafsa, forcing Randow to send two more tank companies south to stabilize that sector. The American 34th Division stubbornly refused to retreat, and now it was merely being watched by the rest of 15th Panzer and parts of the Superga Mountain Division.

Then he broke the news of his discussion with von Arnim. “He does not think he can continue, or even hold the ground he’s taken thus far.”

“I warned you about this,” said Rommel. “He hasn’t the temperament for this sort of action.”

“It’s Montgomery,” Kesselring explained. “He’s sent a very strong armored group to that flank, and there is another one flanking 10th Panzer at Damous. I have ordered him to begin a fighting withdrawal.”

“Well then what am I wasting my time here battering my way through these mountain passes?” Rommel was more than annoyed. “I told you that von Arnim would not be aggressive enough. He cannot take the calculated risk!”

“To be fair,” said Kesselring, “you both fought with two divisions in your main offensive, and we have not yet taken either of our first two primary objectives—Ain Beida for von Arnim, and Tebessa for you.”

“The appearance of that American infantry division northwest of Ghafsa changed everything,” said Rommel. “I could not use 15th Panzer in the envelopment maneuver I planned, and it required both of the other two divisions together to break this stone wall south of Tebessa. The terrain here is maddening—nothing like the deserts of Libya. These ridges and ravines make natural defensive positions, and frankly, we underestimated the Americans here.”

“Then I think we must revert to the defense for the time being,” said Kesselring. “This General Patton was more audacious than anyone expected. Now that Montgomery has sent most of his armor against von Arnim, we must rethink our strategy here. Trying to hold an extended front from the coast to Ghafsa will simply not do. So I am ordering the 327th and 15th Infantry to fall back on Bone today. In the short run, we’ll hold there, at Gulema, Souk Ahras, and I think we’ll need Le Kef.”

“Hitler will be enraged,” said Rommel. “We made him a lot of promises with *Sturmflut*.”

“The plan was sound,” said Kesselring, but yes, one must not blame the song when he cannot dance. We should have done better with this, but it is all water under the bridge now. Let me handle Hitler. We will say that, given the shift of the British Armor south, it became necessary to combine the Panzer divisions rather than using them in two separate commands.”

“I argued that all along,” said Rommel dejectedly. “If I had those two extra divisions, I would show you how they should be used. I will show you how to dance.”

“I must remind you that you were the senior officer in the field for

Sturmflut , and yet von Arnim says he received no directives or orders from you whatsoever. One cannot have it both ways, Herr Rommel. If you wish to command, you must do so. And yet, I cannot help but agree with you. We should have beaten these Americans, of that I have little doubt. This time it was Patton who took that calculated risk by attacking at Damous, but he could not have done so without support from Montgomery. It was O'Connor's offensive in the south, and Montgomery, that really changed the big strategic picture here, though I suppose this General Patton will want his share of the laurels."

Rommel was silent for some time, his mood darkening, a quiet inner rage consuming him. "What now, Herr Field Marshal?"

"You must first make sure the Mareth line is secure. *Sturmflut* is over. Now we transition to the broader plan, as we discussed with the *Frühlingwind* operation. We must first discover the enemy's real intentions. Was Patton meant to push this far south and move for the coast at Sfax and Sousse? If so, we must plan accordingly. As they come forward, we must be very skillful on the dance floor. Otherwise, this may be our Swan Song."

* * *

What had first been conceived in Rommel's mind as a bold gamble, staking everything on one throw of the dice, had now been called a Swan Song. When Kesselring had approved his plan, he said that he felt like an old cavalry horse that had again heard the bugle call of battle. All of this can be found in his diaries and letters to Lucie. Then they suddenly stopped. There he was, huddled in his armored command vehicle, listening to the rain and the jangle of field phones, his mind beset by the demons of despair that had harangued him ever since Bir El Khamsa.

Outside, the rain fell on the cold metal hulks of the 501st Tiger Battalion. One company had been sent forward to support the afternoon attack, but the other two sat, as Rommel sat, cold, silent, sullen. They were unrealized victory, glory ungrasped, power harnessed and held in check, like great war elephants waiting for battle that might never come.

News came that 10th Panzer was already beginning its withdrawal, mustering north of the Damous pass, where the Americans had finally forced their way through. Conrath followed suit, withdrawing back through Medkour along the river and road to Souk Ahras. This meant that the battle in

the north had already been decided. Von Arnim was not going to attack any longer, and so anything he did here now was pointless—nothing more than a waste of lives, equipment, fuel and ammunition.

In the old history, this clearly manic flip from the fervor of battle to the deep despair he felt now had prompted him to be the first to call off the offensive. Kesselring had spent some time trying to bolster his morale and urged him to continue, but it was Rommel who had lost his will to fight. That was not so in this history. His will to fight was as hard and keen as ever, but now he saw everyone around him, Kesselring, von Arnim, the Luftwaffe, the Italians, as part of a grand conspiracy to undermine his plan.

Yet, as he stared at the map, the unfeeling assessment of his cool military mind could now clearly see the futility of trying to continue here. This Patton is a man to be reckoned with, he thought. He fought this stubborn delaying action here, nibbled at my flank with 34th Infantry and the French. Then he was the one who risked everything on one single throw of the dice. He was the old warhorse that heard the call of the bugles....

They will probably say I won the battle of Kasserine. Yes, they certainly must say this. As for the Battle for Tebessa, I will see that they call it a draw. Patton.... I underestimated him, but I will not do so ever again. So what to do here? What do we really need? We must keep Ghafsa, for Highway 15 runs directly from there to Gabes on the coast. For the time being, that job goes to Randow's 15th Panzer Division.

He fingered the map, squinting. This place here looks like a good choke point—El Guettar. As for Thelepte, it is too exposed, but now the terrain around Kasserine Pass becomes *my* castle wall for a time. Superga goes to Thelepte, a lamb tied to a stake there as bait for General Patton. He laid on the ropes well here—fought from the corner. If he comes for Thelepte, then I will see if he knows how to fight in the center of the ring. That would be a very good place to counterattack, but I think he may have other ideas.

Rommel's own grand vision was gone, of sweeping through the shattered Americans and enveloping Montgomery on the coast. Yet even now, through the anger, resentment and gloom that clouded his mind, he was seeing smaller victories; places where he could fight and hurt his enemy. Everyone expected a quick knockout in the early rounds, he thought. This will be a very long fight.

So I will tease him at Thelepte, fight him at Kasserine again, and I must certainly hold Sbeitla as a supply hub. It has good roads leading everywhere.

After that, the next line of defense will be El Guettar, the passes at Maknassy, and Faïd. Yet I cannot simply fight my own private war here. There is a lot of open ground to the north of Kasserine. That is where this Patton wanted to go in the beginning—through Charpinville and the broad valley north of Thala—a good place for an armored duel. The rail runs from there all the way to Tunis, and they will need that.

Von Arnim certainly can't hold that ground with two mobile divisions. Once again, the lack of infantry here is appalling. I shall probably have to send the 334th Division further north to make contact with the Aristocrat. Eventually von Bismarck must go there and help fill that enormous gap in the center. Kesselring is correct—time to dance. They may think they have stopped me, but I am not finished here yet.

I have already let my Führer down—broken too many promises. The doctors have been after me to rest, and how I feel the need. He stared out the view slit at the silent hulks of those Tigers, grim and grey in the rain. Then he closed his eyes....

That same hour he issued orders to suspend offensive operations against Tebessa, and prepare for a rapid redeployment to the east and south. A barrage of artillery would cover the withdrawal, and Kesselring made sure that his Luftwaffe units were up in force to swoop on any Allied advance.

Part IV

Victoria Park

*“ Nothing is so painful to the human mind
as a great and sudden change.”*

— **Marry Shelley**, *Frankenstein*

Chapter 10

Operation Phoenix was proceeding exactly according to plan. As German intelligence had estimated, the British did not have sufficient reserves in that theater to prevent the more than significant incursion made by Guderian's fast moving troops. The Brandenburg Division, strengthened to five fast motorized infantry regiments, was simply outstanding in its performance. They would have made Rommel himself proud, for in four days they had moved all the way across Syria to the Iraqi border, a distance of some 300 miles, taking Aleppo, Ar Raqqa and Dier-ez-Zour in the process.

To put that into perspective, it was equivalent to Rommel's breathtaking opening advance in Operation Sonnenblume when he moved from the vicinity of Mersa Brega across the whole of Cyrenaica to Tobruk, also 300 miles. Yet the distance achieved by Operation *Sturmflut* over the same time period, though it involved much more combat, was only a penetration of the Allied lines no deeper than 50 miles.

Now all five regiments of the division were east of the Euphrates and piling into the hastily assembled defensive front composed of 10th and 5th Indian Infantry Divisions. This was the most substantial resistance the division had encountered to date. They easily chased the Free French Division from Ar Raqqa, though to the credit of those troops, they fought a hold and run delaying action for nearly 200 miles as they retreated south. Now that division was finished as a cohesive fighting unit, and the Germans were simply bypassing the shattered remnants of the force, sweeping forward to get at the more organized British Indian front.

5th Indian Division under Briggs had come down from Northern Iraq on the road from Mosul and just crossed over into Syria, about 20 kilometers north of Ar Ramadi on the Euphrates. General Blaxland's 10th Indian Division was astride the river itself, with 25th Indian Brigade on the western bank blocking the main road south, and 21st Brigade on the east bank, where it had crossed near Al Ashara to try and shore up the flagging Free French Division. Between there and the lines of 5th Indian, there was only the scattered remnant of the French Division, and the desert. The rest of that division had been sent west to try and protect the T2 Pumping station, well facility and airfield.

The Germans move with speed and precision, rolling up to a position in their trucks, sending in fast moving teams on motorcycles to probe the strength of the defense, and only deploying if necessary. When they did deploy for combat, it was a thing of beauty. The hardened veterans leapt from the trucks in their new desert camo uniforms. Within minutes the infantry were getting observers and MG teams forward, establishing their mortar positions, and putting down harassing fire on the enemy. They moved fast, hit hard, and the infantry were relentless as they advanced on any semblance of an enemy defensive front. They would select one spot, saturate it with fire, and the ground teams made fast rushes. The MG 42s were pouring out suppressive fire, and it seemed that within minutes, these dangerously skilled men had closed to firefight range with their enemy.

They had never been stopped.

Now Beckermann had aligned all five regiments abreast, and he was going to throw the full weight of his division on the enemy line. Three battalions of Brigadier Langran's 9th Indian Brigade, 5th Division, were shattered that hour. Beckerman could only do this because Hitler had taken yet another crack unit, the 22nd Luftland Division, and sent it into Northern Syria to Ar Raqqa. From there it had moved overland to Dier-es-Zour to relieve the Brandenburgers and put pressure on the main road south.

Meanwhile, further west, the 5th British Infantry Division under General Miles had been pushed right out of Palmyra by 3rd and 4th Panzer Divisions, and the 4th moved on east towards the T2 Pump Station. Guderian had 3rd Panzer right behind it, and now he was slowly extricating his 10th Motorized Division from its defensive duties, and rolling it east. He could do this as OKW fed one light Mountain Division after another down through Aleppo to Homs by rail.

Soon Kruger's Corps swelled to include 78th Sturm Division on the coast near Tartus, 6th Mountain from the fortress of Masyaf to Homs, a newly arrived 104th Jaeger Division near Homs itself, the Prinz Eugen SS Mountain Division east of that city, and finally Kübler's old 1st Mountain right astride the pipeline to T4, moved there to relieve 10th Motorized.

It was in that sector that the Indian 31st Armored and the newly arrived 46th British Infantry under General Freeman, had finally stabilized Wavell's line—but it was Alexander's line now. The weary old Wavell was already on a plane to Baghdad to make a brief meeting with Auchinleck on the defense of Iraq, and then he would fly down to the Persian Gulf enroute to his new

posting as the Viceroy of India. The Middle East was Alexander's problem now, and it was getting more and more serious with each passing day.

Churchill himself, fresh from the Casablanca conference, hung on at Alexandria fretting over the situation and sticking his thumb in everyone's pie. Yet his presence there would also get deep end reserves moving out of the UK and heading for Cape Town, intending to try and reach the key British oil facilities near Basra before the Germans did. As was the case on every front where his armies were now engaged, Churchill knew he needed to send enough to not only stop his enemy, but to then muster the strength to throw him back.

But Heinz Guderian had no intention of stopping until he had achieved what he was sent here to do. He had seen his dismissal from the eastern front as an insult to his career, and now he applied his considerable ability to the task at hand. Here it was no longer the endless white frozen steppes of Russia, but instead the sun dappled desert, terrain that was absolutely ideal for the kind of fast moving battle he was now fighting. His only concern was the ever lengthening supply line behind him, and the inevitable need to cover the front as he extended east.

To this end, and just ten days into his operation, Guderian reported that all initial objectives were in hand on the 18th of January, and requested the release of his designated theater reserve, the 12th Infantry Korps under General Walther Gräßner. Consisting of three divisions, (31st, 34th and 45 Infantry), it would provide him all the forces necessary to hold the ground he had already seized, allowing Hube to continue to push his Panzer Korps into Iraq. Yet it would be a long time before he saw any of those troops, and then only a third of what he hoped to receive. The 31st and 34th Divisions would instead be sent to Syria to defend against an increasing British buildup there, and he would only receive the 45th.

* * *

It was Wavell's plan, but now it was Alexander's battle to fight. He was no stranger to war, starting with a platoon in the Irish Guards during the Great war, and working his way up to Company command just in time for the lovely meeting that came to be known as the Battle of the Somme. He later fought at 3rd Ypres and Cambrai, and in this war he was on the last British Destroyer to leave at Dunkirk. Between the wars he studied at the Imperial Defense College, where both Montgomery and Alan Brooke were his

instructors, both unimpressed by the man. Yet Alexander would find ways of impressing them in time, and this was his first good chance in this war.

Wavell had arranged to bring the 46th Infantry up on the rail line from Damascus. One line ran up the long central valley through the big aerodrome at Rayak to Homs, but he was using the secondary line that ran northeast of the city, and almost directly towards the T4 Pumping Station. That spur also served the mines near Jebel Lebtar, and was eventually intended to link up at Palmyra as well as T4.

The 46th was a “Mixed” division, with two infantry brigades, the 138th under Brigadier Harding, and the 139th under Brigadier Vickers. It also had the 137th Armored Brigade under Brigadier Peto, with about 160 tanks, mostly American Shermans. Now the wild card that Wavell was so gratified to find in his hand was finally coming up, the unexpected 25th Armored Brigade under Brigadier Maxwell, this unit with mostly Churchills. Those two brigades, along with what was left in the 31st Indian Armored, were going to give Alexander nearly 400 tanks to launch his counteroffensive, a surprise the Germans certainly did not expect.

For sheer numbers, it was an armored force almost twice that of the two Panzer Divisions committed to this theater. All these units had been meant for O’Connor’s 8th Army, which was now going without a lot of tank replacements as it pushed for Mareth, but it was taking time to assemble this force and get things “teed up.”

Monty would have seen that situation as perfectly satisfactory. He never moved on offense until he was good and ready, a most deliberate and methodical man. The change of command also imposed some confusion, but Alexander was quick to gather the reins in hand and settled in well.

Surveying the field, he was now content that there was no direct threat to central and southern Syria, particularly Damascus, and all of Palestine remained secure. “Jerry doesn’t seem interested in Suez any longer,” he said at his first staff meeting. “He’s run off through Palmyra toward the Euphrates. That won’t do well for the pipeline to Tripoli, and now our forces there must do everything possible to save the Haifa line. Any reports?” He looked at Brigadier Kingstone, who had flown in for the meeting to brief the new commander.

“At the moment, sir, the action seems to be focused around T2, mid-way between Palmyra and the river. But it’s only another 40 klicks to T1, and that is just 18 klicks due north of the H1 station.”

“What about the Indian Divisions?”

“Blaxland has moved his HQ for 10th Indian to Abu Kamal on the river. He’s posted a Brigade at T2, and then my people are covering this flank along the wadi here.” Kingstone traced the position on the map with his weathered brown finger.

“Prospects?”

“Well sir, we’ve no tanks, and only a few AEC-III’s left in the entire force. Jerry is hitting us with a Panzer Division now, and the Brandenburgers move like lightning. We can’t hold where we are. In fact, we’ll be lucky to cover the H1 station and get back to Hadithah.”

“And east of the Euphrates?”

“General Briggs with 5th Indian tried to push across the border and link up with us, but that Brandenburg Division has been too much for them. Jerry’s got between Briggs and Blaxland now, and he’s pushing the last of the French troops south along the river. We’ve had to blow the bridge at Ar Ramadi. It doesn’t look good, sir, and they haven’t even brought up their whole Panzer force from Palmyra yet.”

“I shall make it my business to see that they don’t soon enough, “ said Alexander. “I’m teeing off a big push to take back T4 and Palmyra—Operation Buckthorne. That should do the trick.” He showed Kingstone the forces he was now assembling, and asked him to return and put as much fire into the defense on the Euphrates as he could.

His plan was to re-commit 31st Armored Brigade, posted on the road between T4 and Homs, with orders to strike directly for the Pumping Station. 46th Infantry, assembled around Wadi Ramdah to the southeast, would drive up the secondary road to T4, and the 25th Armored Brigade would attempt to envelop that position on the right. Oddly enough, it would aim for a town called Ain el Beida, the same name given to von Arnim’s opening objective for Operation *Sturmflut* near the Tunisian/Algerian border. At the same time, he wanted General Miles and his 56th London Infantry Division to move north towards Palmyra again, forcing the Germans to defend that front.

25th Armored was taking some time to get in position, and only two of its three battalions had arrived by the 20th of January, yet Alexander was keen to get started. He ordered the attack to begin that day, hoping to compel the Germans to turn and fight a hard battle with him on this flank, and therefore ease the pressure in the Euphrates sector.

The Indian Armored Division had only 38 American Shermans left, and

another 24 M3 light tanks, the Honeys, as the British called them. They ran right into the 7th SS PzJag Battalion, which had 12 Pz IIIJ's, six Pz-IVE infantry support tanks and six Marder II's. Kübler also had his PzJag battalion there with two dozen Marders and four 88s. That made for a very difficult attack for the Indian Armored, though the 46th was making a little better progress on their right. The Germans held their ground, seeing the high silhouette of the bulky Shermans as easy targets, and they found their Panzers could deal with them easily enough. Firing back, the enemy was getting a few of their lighter skinned Marders, but it was coming down to a question of which side was better skilled in this sort of armored duel, and the Germans had far more experience and training.

Beyond that, some heavy mortars and a Nebelwerfer Battalion had been sent over by the 78th Sturm Division, and added to the artillery from Prinz Eugen and the Korps group, the Indian troops soon found their lines saturated with heavy defensive fire. The dry earth heaved up with the impact of the rounds, and the Shermans trundled through the dust, into the craters. And up the other side to present a nice fat target for those 88s.

31st Indian Armored Division had really only attacked in brigade strength, and it wasn't going anywhere—but neither was 10th Motorized. Guderian was at Palmyra, taking a brief moment to view the old Roman ruins and temples. He had heard the opening of Alexander's offensive as a dull roar in the air that morning, but had no reports other than that from the engagement with the Indian Division. Then General Kübler himself came in, the leathery warrior who had fought so much of the war against the British, his men veterans of the first Action in Syria, the fighting in Libya, Canary Islands, Morocco, and Algeria.

"Syria again," he said, meeting Heinz Guderian for the first time. "Well, I'm sorry to say they have brought up a good deal of armor. That's a mixed British Infantry Division down there, with a full armored brigade attached, at least 150 panzers. They hit us hard, but the men are holding. We faced much the same in Libya under Rommel, but these are American tanks."

"What do you think of them?" asked Guderian.

"Not much. They're big, and with a decent 75mm gun, but they light up easily when hit, and are prone to fires. More bark than bite, that one, but we have only Marders, with little armor on them, so I suppose it's a fair fight." Kübler smiled, listening to the closer report of MG fire and small mortars.

"That's that British Division Hube kicked out of this place a few days

ago,” said Guderian. “They seem to want it back, so it looks like I’ll have to hold Schmidt’s Motorized Division here. I’ll send you his recon battalion for a local reserve. Let me finish up here and then we’ll see what your situation needs tomorrow.”

That afternoon, Schmidt deployed his entire division again, the men leaving their trucks on the road through Palmyra. Veterans all, they pushed south aggressively, and Miles found his push to retake Palmyra nothing more than a spoiling operation in short order. Yet that was exactly what Alexander wanted from him, and there was now one less German Division heading east towards the Euphrates.

Chapter 11

On the morning of the 21st, 1 Kommando, Brandenburg Special Forces, were the first German unit to reach the Iraqi border, about 10 kilometers due east of Ar Ramadi, at a small village north of Abu Kamal. There wasn't much to be seen, not even a wire fence of any kind. The wind blew listlessly through the sandy scrubland, and the scouting unit reported the area completely clear of the enemy.

The Germans were flanking Blaxland's 10th Indian HQ at Abu Kamal, the position Kingstone had traced with his finger for Alexander. But they were all north and east of the river, and there were no bridges for another 40 kilometers east at Rawah. The two Indian Divisions had been isolated from one another, and neither one was sitting on firm defensive positions.

By the time Kingstone returned, flying in to the airfield at T1, he could see that the situation was 'far from satisfactory.' He stormed into Blaxland's HQ at Abu Kamal and laid into him.

"They've gotten round your right east of the Euphrates! The French are finished. Now there's no way you'll hold onto to T2 as it stands, not with a single brigade there against the bloody 3rd Panzer Division. We simply can't sit here any longer. This is a fast moving battle of maneuver, and you've got to keep in step. Jerry's is through the front door, across the living room and he's already getting at the jewelry in the bedroom dresser!"

"But we'll lose T1 next if I move now," Blaxland complained.

"We don't *need* T1. The German army is already strung out the whole length of that bloody pipeline. It's useless! H1 is another matter. That's where we need to be, and with some semblance of concentration. You can't throw things off willy-nilly in penny packet fashion. You need to pull your division together and move to cover H1. And you need to do that now, sir."

It wasn't exactly proper for a Brigadier to dress down the commander of a full division like that. In truth, Kingstone had real seniority over Blaxland, and the latter was really just a Colonel posted as 'General Officer Commanding' the 10th Indian Division. Being a blunt and very direct man, Kingstone had made his point the only way he could.

With that, the battle for the upper Euphrates was over. The river would now bend due east towards Iraq, and the vital pipeline junction near

Hadithah. That was where the Brandenburgs were going, and that was where the British Indian defenders would have to be soon if they were to have any chance of stopping them.

Briggs and his 5th Indian Division withdrew at noon, heading for Rawah, the last bridge on the Euphrates before it flowed into a wide area of marshland that was completely impassible north of Hadithah. Blaxland destroyed the small wooden bridge at Abu Kamal that morning and pulled out, leaving a few AA guns to cover the wreckage. He resolved to move his HQ to the T1 Station, but an hour after he got there, he looked out to see a column of trucks approaching the airfield, wondering who it was.

He was settling in to brew a 'cuppa,' when an adjutant came running in from one of that staff trucks, eyes wide.

"Sir! It's the Germans! The Brandenburg Division!"

Yes, there were no bridges over the Euphrates east of Abu Kamal, but Bekermann's Brandenburg Division had brought both rafts and bridging equipment.... Speed, concentration on objective, shock. The lessons of war for Lieutenant General Blaxland did not have to be taught to him by Brigadier Kingstone that day. He learned now in the best way possible, by experience.

The teacup jittering in his hand, he bucked up when two companies of AA units came in from the west. "Gentlemen," he said. "Fire at those chaps out there on the airfield. See if you can drive them off."

30th Light AA had six 20mm Polstern AA guns in tow, and they set them up near the pump station house, soon firing streaks of tracer rounds at the distant enemy on the field. Further west, it looked like a big dust storm was starting to blow in—it was—Brigadier Kingstone was arriving with Kingforce and everything left of the 10th Indian Division that would move. That, more than the AA fire, had discouraged 12th Battalion, IV Brandenburgs, from storming into that pump house and slapping the teacup from Blaxland's hand. As it was, the Colonel sat himself down, watching his six flak guns firing and as he slowly sipped his tea.

The Germans showed no further interest in the airfield or the pumping station, withdrawing east, and Blaxland passed a moment of satisfaction thinking his Johnny on the Spot orders had saved the day. But an hour later, when the adjutant reported that armored cars from Brigadier Kingstone had radioed to say they were approaching, Blaxland practically choked on his tea. He was up, out the door and headed for a truck, ordering the remnants of his division to H1 immediately.

The burly, red-faced Brigadier Kingstone was a foe he had no intention of facing again. He would cover H1, but it would soon not matter. The Germans were now only 8 kilometers from cutting that pipeline to Haifa, thereby completely stopping the flow of oil in the steel veins beneath those restless sands. Any oil that came to the Middle East now, would have to come by sea.

As for the 5th Indian, when its scouts finally reached the Bridge at Rawah, they found it held against them by German troops. The swift moving Brandenburgers had won the race, and they already had a full regiment over the river there and heading on to Hadithah. With his division scattered all over the desert of Al Jazirah, General Briggs radioed to say he would have to find another road and could not reach Hadithah any time soon. Instead, he moved due east, intending to at least place his division astride the road from the river at Haditha to Kirkuk... and Baba Gurgur.

Word was sent on ahead to the Ban Dahir and Al Asad airfields with the warning that there were now no friendly forces between them and the advancing Germans. Five squadrons would have to abandon the fields, flying west into Iraq. The battle for Eastern Syria had been lost. The Germans had already crossed the Euphrates in two places, building up strength and sending battalion columns flying east along the main road, just south of the river. Soon word was sent to General Sir Mosley Mayne in Baghdad that he had better soon look to the defense of that city.

* * *

Guderian reacted coolly to the news of the British attack towards T4. Needing most of 10th Motorized to stop the 56th London's attack towards Palmyra, he put together a Kampfgruppe composed of the division recon battalion, the pioneers, and a battery of four 88's with some mobile 20mm flak guns. Then he asked General Westhoven of 3rd Panzer to send two of his Panzer Battalions back from T3. It seemed the armor would not be needed where he was going.

The first went south to challenge the 25th Armored Brigade: 14 VH-55 Lions with the 75mm main gun, 16 PzKfw IVF1's and another 16 Leopard recon tanks. They came up on the North Irish Horse and attacked immediately, supported by infantry from both the 10th Motorized and II Battalion, 99th GIBERGS. The crack of the guns was hot on both sides, but the Churchills proved to be tougher than the American Shermans. Five were knocked out in

the duel, but the British unit maintained good cohesion, and it was soon to be supported by waves of additional tanks from the 51st and 142nd RTRs.

The second battalion went directly to T4, where the persistent pressure of the 46th Division had slowly forced back the more lightly armed mountain troops. That battle would rage in and around the valuable pumping station all afternoon, with Guderian feeding in additional reserves he had held back from 3rd Panzer. He looked at his watch, shaking his head.

“In another two hours they will realize this is useless. Beckerman has Hadithah!”

* * *

In spite of its short term tactical success, Alexander was much disheartened when he got the latest report from Kingstone. T1 had been held, along with H1, but the German could not be prevented from bypassing both pump stations and simply cutting the line at Hadithah.

“Well gentlemen,” he said. “The blood is no longer flowing in those steel veins out there. It now matters very little whether we take back the T4 station, or even Palmyra. Jerry will be re-routing his lines of communication along the Euphrates now, and there doesn’t seem to be anything we can do about it. Now the real show will be in Iraq. It’s up to the Auck now, and Mosley Mayne. Yet we must still do all in our power here to keep the pressure on, and force the enemy to heavily garrison his lines in this sector. I can tell you all one thing. He’s not going to Damascus, and certainly not on down to Suez—not on my watch.”

The question now was what to do about Iraq? It was presently defended by only two backwaters divisions, General Mayne’s 21st Indian Corps, which in this history was composed of the 6th and 8th Indian Infantry Divisions. The former was at Baghdad, the latter in the south near Abadan and Bashah. Forewarned of the disaster on the Euphrates, General Mayne was now rushing 8th Infantry north to Baghdad by rail, while the remnants of both 5th and 10th Indian Divisions, so soundly beaten by the Brandenburgers, found ways to retreat back into Iraq.

10th Indian had to fall back to the south, through the open desert to try and reach Karbala and Hillah, where they would finally arrive on January 24th, tired, bedraggled, and out of fuel. In this move, Glubb Pasha and his Arab Legion was instrumental in pathfinding the best ground for the vehicles,

and a chastened and simmering Brigadier Kingstone also took what was left of his detachment along with Blaxland's division.

5th Indian had been unable to reach Hadithah from the north when the Germans took the bridge at Rawa, so they followed a thin track that took them above the massive marshland lake of Tharthar, eventually reaching Tikrit north of Baghdad, in a position to block any immediate German advance on Kirkuk. It was then that the British learned that Northern Iraq was far from secure as well.

"Ivan Volkov," said Alexander as he continued his meeting with Generals Wilson and Quinan. "As you know, he controls this whole area around Baku, the province of Azerbaijan. Hitler has a big push on in the Kuban trying to clear out the last Soviet resistance there. Our agents in place in Northern Iran have been trying to scout into Armenia and Georgia to see what's up, but they've uncovered what looks to be a buildup of some concern. Now Bletchley Park confirms it with signals intercepts. Orenburg is assembling their 2nd Turkomen Army under a General Buzul, and it has already moved into Northern Iran from Baku."

"Turkomen Army?" said General Maitland Wilson, known as "Jumbo." A veteran of the Boer War and Passchendaele in the First War, he had commanded forces in Egypt under Wavell for a time, helped organize and direct Operation Scimitar and was now Deputy Commander, Middle East, under Alexander.

"Here's the list," said Alexander, reading from his notes. "It looks to be no more than a small Corps, just two divisions. The first we're calling the K Division, 1st Turkomen, composed of three Brigades, the Karakum Guards, Khiva and Kranitau Rifles. 2nd Turkomen Division has three more brigades, the Tulu Rifles, Shakaman Horse, and Belek Rifles. There's a Dervish Cavalry Brigade serving as division troops."

"Armor?"

"None to speak of. These are light horse and mountain troops for the most part, but they will pose a direct threat to Kirkuk and Baba Gurgur, and very soon. We shall have to send 5th Indian back there at once."

"They're worn out," said General Quinan, British 10th Army Commander in Palestine and Syria.

"Well, they'll have to be fleshed out with recruits from Kurdish levees. It's all we can do for the moment. Yet if we do move them to Kirkuk, I should think one of Sir Mosley's divisions will have to move north to Tikrit

as a blocking force. The Germans are worn out too, gentlemen. They've run about 300 miles in three weeks, and they now seem to be pausing at Haditha to collect themselves and bring up fuel. That gives us a window of time to get our own house in order, and we'd better be quick about it. Now.... I've spoken with Auchinlek, and we're both in agreement that General Mayne's troops, even with the 5th and 10th Indian Divisions back, are simply not adequate. First off, he has no armor to speak of, and we know that at least one full panzer division has already reached the T1 Pump Station behind the Brandenburgers."

"Isn't 7th Armored Brigade due in at Alexandria from Benghazi?" Jumbo Wilson was shuffling through some reports on his clipboard.

"True enough," said Alexander. "I was thinking to bring it up here and join the fight, but under the circumstances, we're a long way from either Kirkuk or Basra. So 7th Armored will stay right on the boats, transit the Suez, and continue on through the Red Sea, Gulf of Aden and into the Persian Gulf. It will join 9 Armored Brigade down near Basra, where it's been posted to watch over the oil facilities."

"Will there be any difficulties getting troops and equipment into the Gulf?" Wilson was looking to their lines of communications.

"Somerville says he can sortie with his carrier force from Madagascar to cover things, as he has been for convoys these last months. Old *Ark Royal* is on the watch there now. Tovey says it's the best damn aircraft carrier, pound for pound, in the whole world, and the Japanese have made no move to challenge him since they took Ceylon.

"Good," said Wilson. "That will give us something to start with in Iraq. But it may take a little more. The Germans already have three divisions on the central Euphrates bend, 3rd Panzer, their 22nd Luftland, and the Brandenburg Division. The latter certainly made short work of the Indian divisions."

"We might do better with the Indian Infantry if we fight for Baghdad. Do you think Jerry wants it?" asked Quinan.

"I don't see how he can contemplate a move either north or south without first controlling Baghdad," said Alexander. "It sits right astride his lines of communication in either event. Yes, he'll have to take it."

"Then we fight for the city, where the infantry might better acquit itself." Quinan folded his arms, as if settling on that premise as a given.

"At present," said Alexander, "Jerry is regrouping at Hadithah, about 120

miles from Baghdad. If he goes south for Basra from Baghdad, he's looking at another 300 mile jaunt. It would be half that distance up to Kirkuk."

"Basra may be a far reach for them," said Wilson, "and I don't think they can do both at the same time. Surely they can't think those Turkomen divisions will do the job for them, not against British Indian troops."

"Agreed," said Alexander. "Yet that may be their plan. Remember, this 22nd Luftland Division of theirs is air mobile. We've had air superiority thus far, but things are... scattered since the setback on the Euphrates. The squadrons had had to fly off to airfields in Iraq on short notice, and a lot of service crews and supply troops got left in their dust. Some of the planes hopped to Habbaniyah, but we won't have that for very much longer. As to Northern Iraq, there's always the added possibility that the Germans could bring in more troops through Turkey. Be aware that the rail line runs all the way through Mosul to Baghdad, so we can't leave any stone unturned."

"Can we get anything more from India?" asked Wilson

"I've put that very question to Wavell. He's settling in over there as Viceroy, and General Slim says the Japanese have not been aggressive of late. He willing to send over the heart of his command, British 2nd Infantry Division."

"Here, here," said Wilson, slapping the table. "Top notch." He had commanded that very division in 1940.

"Gentlemen," said Alexander. "If we can pair the 2nd Infantry up with 7th and 9th Armored Brigades, by God, I think we've got a hammer for Iraq. To top it off, Wavell says he thinks he can get us the 7th Indian Division as well." He smiled. "We'll have a decent army to fight with over there in short order, but I don't think Sir Mosley can manage it all. I need a good man, and as General Quinan here has a firm grip on 10th Army, General Wilson, it's all yours. You are now the official commander of Paliforce. The Auk will handle administrative matters, but you're our man in the field."

That was a most wise decision, for while Quinan was a stickler for detail, methodical, and almost laborious in the planning he would make for each and every unit under his command, that style would be ill suited for the battle that was soon to be fought in Iraq, one of maneuver, bold thrusts, and imaginative calculated risks. Guderian was already a master of this craft. The question now was whether Jumbo Wilson could measure that man, and bring him to heel.

As Wilson nodded in acceptance of his new command, he knew he had no

intention of fighting such a battle against Guderian, unless he was given no other choice. As if reading his mind, Alexander asked him how he planned to operate.

“Well now,” said Wilson. “I’m going to get everything I can to Baghdad and fight them tooth and nail for that city. I’m going to make them pay for every house and street—a nice little battle of attrition, I should think.”

Alexander smiled.

Chapter 12

1-FEB-1943

Some say it was a proverbial ‘accident waiting to happen,’ and no matter how the cards of fate are shuffled, some things were meant to be. That was to be the case in this history, only the event that some would later call the ‘Stairway to Heaven’ would instead take place a month early, on the night of February 3rd. As it was in the real history, the tragedy was masked in secrecy, hidden from the public for many years after, and subject to cover stories and accounts that varied dramatically from one another.

The East End of London had been hit particularly hard over the years by German bombers. Some families still scratching out a living there could honestly say they had been bombed out of their homes at least three times. During the Blitz, millions of young children were evacuated to safer climes in the country, but many families hung on in London, picking their way through the rubble each day, and ‘tidying up’ as best they could.

The bombing had not been anywhere near as bad in 1943, as the German Luftwaffe was simply too busy elsewhere. But at times, particularly in reprisal for RAF raids on a big German city, Hitler would order a stronger raid into London. The trigger for the event this time was an RAF raid on Berlin to kick off the month of February. In reprisal, the German bombers came for London two days later, and the wail of the air raid sirens droned over the city.

Out in Victoria Park, a quiet little secret was setting up for a test against the very action that was expected that day. It was called a “Z-Battery,” which was a rack of up to 36 new 76mm anti-aircraft rockets. They weren’t very accurate, which was why they were fired as a barrage to have a better chance of hitting something. That day, the drone of enemy bombers was going to send them growling into the grey London sky, with an effect that few ever anticipated.

Peter Waller knew something was up when the radio went quiet, a sure sign of trouble whenever it happened. His job was to get over to the family “Bundle Shop,” which was the nearest little storage place that had been set aside for families to stow away their bundles of bedding. He would fetch the

bundle for Liz and the girls, and then get over to the nearest Tube Station to stake out a good spot on the platform below. The others would find him there, and the family could camp out in complete safety. The Tubes had evolved to mini-underground cities in places. Some had little kitchens, hospitals, sanitary facilities, even a library for folks to find something to take their minds off the rumble of the bombs falling over head.

These underground warrens were so safe, that something of inestimable value had been crated away in one for a time, the Elgin Marbles, including the Selene Horse, which hid a secret so dark that no one then alive could hope to comprehend it. By this time, those precious artifacts had all been moved to an even safer place, or so it was believed. They had been secreted away in the guts of the battleship *Rodney*, for shipment to New York, but the warship never got there....

The sirens wailed, stores, restaurants and pubs began to empty, and soon streams of people were heading for the Tube. It was a common drill, and in spite of the danger, the crowds were very civil, quite orderly, and queued up to use the stairway down into the dark safe underworld beneath the city. Women and children would always get priority, for men were still gentlemen in those days, no matter what their station in life. The Tube close by Victoria Park could hold up to 5000 souls, most everyone living close enough to be using it for shelter that day.

Then it happened. Well down the stairway, an elderly lady had hold of her granddaughter's hand, and the little girl stumbled on the stairway, not half a flight from the bottom. The grandmother stooped to her rescue, and then she fell, sending two other women into the people ahead, who also fell. A knot formed in the middle of the stairwell, and then the first sound of the bombs falling could be heard above.

There came the sound of a hissing roar, so loud that it reverberated down the long stairwell and echoed in the hollow chambers of the Tube. It was a sound that no was accustomed to ever hearing, and so it caused a noticeable push of anxiety—not a panic, but just enough of a jostling push to put unwanted pressure on that knot at the bottom of the stairs. Then, in a matter of seconds, the stairway to heaven became the stairway to hell. The push sent people down, rippling all along the stairway, and the bodies were soon piled one on top of another, with people screaming, being crushed on the stairs, unable to breathe. Some curled into fetal balls and held on, others were pressed against the walls.

300 would suffer serious injury, and of those, 173 would die, with 60 of them being the smallest and most fragile of the lot—the children. The ‘Disaster at Bethnal Green Tube Station’ had again become the single greatest wartime civilian loss of the war in the UK, eclipsing the death of 107 people when the Germans hit the Wilkinson's Lemonade Factory in North Shields during a raid in 1941. It was the first, and lesser, of two tragedies that would befall that sector of the city that week, merely a harbinger of what was to come. When it was over, the men, tears streaking their faces, would spend half the morning carrying up the bodies and loading them on to lorries. They never forgot the ghastly purple faces of the dead, smothered and starved of air by the crush before they died.

That night, crews came and washed everything down to cleanse the place of any evidence of the disaster. The papers were forbidden to run the story for two days, and when they finally did print, the name of the station itself, and any mention of the strange sounds of the rockets firing, were ruthlessly censored. The word ‘panic’ was stricken from any accounting of the incident.

Thankfully, Peter Waller would find his family safe in the cellar of a nearby café, where they had fled when the hiss and roar of those rockets caused the palpable stir on those stairs. In her wisdom, Liz had pulled the children to safety there rather than trying the crush on the stairs to the Tube. He wandered up Old Ford Road that night, close by Victoria Park to have a smoke. It was late, and very dark and foggy, and he must have slipped right through a security line, for he suddenly heard voices.

“That was nuthin’ this morning,” came the voice of a man. “That was just a recon of sorts. We’d best be ready when those big fat Zeppelins come calling. Some even say tonight’s the night, so get them rockets sorted out and reloaded.”

“But Sergeant,” came another voice. “Them Zeppelins fly way too high for this lot to get up after them. It’s work for the big Ack, Ack guns, isn’t it?”

“Well you bloody well don’t think they’ll just float over a few bloody Zeppelins, do ya Cobber? They’ll be bombers too, just like this morning, so step lively when you hear the sirens. No more muckin’ about!”

Realizing he had most likely wandered into a secure area, Peter Waller put out his cigarette, crushing it under foot, and then made a hasty retreat. Something is up after all, he thought. Something’s got the Ack, Ack boys all rattled tonight. He would soon learn what it was. The sirens were winding up yet again.

* * *

Hitler had hoped that the attack could be made on February 1st, and that had been pre-empted by the unexpected bombing of Berlin. Enraged, he ordered an immediate reprisal, but the Luftwaffe urged him to allow time to make a preliminary run over the target area, and test enemy defenses.

“We must determine the depth and strength of their anti-aircraft defenses, and also determine their response time by fighters.”

“You told me our Zeppelins can fly higher than their planes. What is the bother?”

“True, my Führer, but if we wish to deliver our ordnance on target as planned, we must fly lower. Besides, London is under heavy cloud cover and fog tonight.”

“All the better. That will serve to mask the approach of our Zeppelins. We will have the element of surprise, which you propose we throw to the wind so you can test the enemy’s defenses. No! The attack will be made tonight. *Fafnir* will be the sole ship assigned, and the other bombers will make diversionary strikes as we have planned.”

Hitler, as always, would have his way.

The great silver mass of *Fafnir* was up high that night; so high that no observer on the ground could have ever hope to see the airship, or hear the drone of its powerful engines. It had flown to Bremerhaven the previous day, under a signals deception cover story that high altitude reconnaissance would be conducted over the North Sea the following day. Bletchley Park picked it up and passed the intelligence along to both the RAF and Admiralty Commands.

Encouraged by his dramatic glide bomb raid on the Russian fleet the previous month, Hitler had summoned his great sky dragon home for an important mission. He had something, to deliver that day, a very special attack. He would set *Fafnir* loose upon his enemies, and show them that no Spitfire could ever again protect the British capital from certain destruction. *Fafnir* would strike a single blow, and it would send chills right on through the mandarins of Whitehall for ever after.

To further deceive the enemy, three groups of medium bombers would take off from bases in France, hopefully to give the British Radar operators something to chew on. They would vector on targets well south of the

Thames, while *Fafnir* would make its way to the heart of the city, hopefully unseen, and undetected, from the northeast. Even if it was seen, the British Vickers Model 1931 gun only had an effective firing range of 5,000 meters. The QF 3-inch gun would max out at 7,200 meters, and the QF 3.7 had a ceiling of 9,000 meters. *Fafnir* would be up at 15,000 meters, and not even a QF 5.25 could touch it there.

The Germans were deploying a few old tricks, and one new one that day. *Fafnir* would let loose a raft of 1000 kg parachute Mines, the Luftmine B. Released at high altitude, they would free fall until the desired altitude for detonation was reached, when they would deploy a parachute, slowing the descent to about 40 miles per hour. Inside, a clock would tick off the seconds, calculating the altitude and detonating the mine half a minute later. The air burst was much more destructive than a ground bomb, and could take out an entire street on detonation, with a shock wave that could extend a full mile in radius.

Yet they were just cover for the real attack that night. *Fafnir* was carrying something else, a jealously guarded secret, the Gift of the Magi. It had been found by Kapitan Heinrich aboard the *Kaiser Wilhelm* in the deep south Atlantic, almost a year to the day earlier, in February of 1942. It had come home safely to Toulon, moved by rail to Germany, and was soon being studied by the very best minds in Germany.

It was not long before they realized what they had. The two long needle-nosed rockets delivered by Kapitan Heinrich had been analyzed and studied ever since. Their design would do much to influence and advance German rocketry, thought to be well behind the skills of the Allies. Naval rockets had been Admiral Raeder's bane for years....

Yet these rockets, though they were found aboard a derelict ship, were not thought to be the same class weapon that had been used with such terrible effect against the German surface navy. They were, in fact, a kind of long range ballistic missile, and with a most unusual warhead. The German scientists studied it extensively, determining what it was, but could never be certain of what it might *do* without actually detonating the weapon. Yet they were unwilling to expend one of the missiles to do so, not really understanding yet how to properly aim it and ensure it would strike its intended target. So instead, they kept the rocket safe and sound for further study, and a planned single flight test over the Baltic—but they removed the warhead.

It was now aboard *Fafnir* the Great, about to write a new and terrible line into this history as it soon followed those parachute mines down through the grey mist, aiming right for the heart of London. St Paul's Cathedral had been the aiming point, and a trial flight the previous day during the air raid that caused that crush in the Tube had told the Germans precisely when to turn, what heading to set on approach. So they knew when to release, calculating the glide fall as closely as possible, but even so, the overcast sky made this attack a haphazard affair.

Yet Hitler had ordered it, and that night, *Fafnir* would deliver the bomb. It would careen down, on an approach angle of about 45 degrees. The release point was well above Chelmsford, and the bomb would glide some 30 miles to the intended target from that location, passing over Landbourne End, Newbury Park and Stratford. Yet it would fall short of the city center by some 2.5 miles, which was very fortunate. The Museum of London, the Tower, London Bridge, National Theater, Shakespeare's Globe, the Royal Opera House, Somerset House, Big Ben, and the Palace at Westminster would all be spared.

Victoria Park and its strange collection of Z-Batteries would *not* be spared. Those rockets were again whooshing into the sky, in a fruitless search for this single bomb after being stirred to arms by the fall of those parachute mines. One hit the rail line near Old Bethnal Green Road; another fell on Weaver's Fields. A third fell on Queen Mary's University, rattling the iconic clock tower there.

And then the bomb delivered by *Fafnir* fell, right over Victoria Park where Peter Waller had just stomped out that cigarette and was making his way home.

He would never get there.

It was a tiny warhead by design, the American W25, which had originally been developed by the Los Alamos Scientific laboratory as an air defense weapon to be used against squadrons of enemy bombers. It was so small and light, just 210 pounds, that it was designed to be mounted on an air launched missile carried by a fighter. That made it an idea candidate for the little experiment that was to be conducted in the South Atlantic by the *Norton Sound*, testing the effects of a high altitude nuclear detonation. It was just large enough to produce data, but not big enough to produce widespread undesirable effects.

It was only a tenth the size of the bomb the Americans would deliver to

Hiroshima in one history, which was 15 kilotons. The bomb *Fafnir* delivered was only 1.7 kilotons, but it was enough to test the weapon and determine its effects. The radius of the fireball when it ignited was just 250 feet, detonating a little over 300 feet from the ground. At that altitude, it delivered an air blast of 20psi to a diameter of about 1,100 feet. Had it struck in a built up area, it would have been enough to severely damage even strong concrete buildings, but in this case, it served to merely flatten and completely destroy those Z-batteries that had been firing so fitfully.

The thermal radiation extended out 2,500 feet, spanning the whole length and width of Victoria Park, burning every tree, and delivering third degree burns to anyone exposed. Beyond that, the air blast was still as strong as 5psi, three quarters of a mile from the center, which was enough to devastate most residential dwellings. The destruction extended as far as Cassland and Wick Roads to the north of the park, and everything between Old Ford Road and the rail lines near Malmesbury road to the south. Through that entire zone, anyone who survived the blast would receive 500 rems of radiation, with a fatality rate between 50% and 90%.

That night, anyone who took the chance again when the sirens first sounded, and made it into the Tube at Bethnal Green, was alive and safe. Because of the disaster earlier, many tried to look for other shelter, and remained in the blast zone. So it was that the errant stumble of a little girl on the steps would lead to the death of so many more, who otherwise might have been safely tucked away in the underground Tube that night.

In modern days, as many as 23,000 might have been killed by that blast, and another 81,500 injured, but London was not so heavily populated in 1943, and the years of bombing had seen many move out of the city. As it was, another 1,217 would die that night, with over 2000 more injured.

The disaster at Bethnal Green quickly gave up its dark laurels as the single worst loss of civilian life in the UK during the war. In one fell stroke, *Fafnir* had trumped all other attacks, and then some. *The bomb worked!* The world it fell into would now never be the same, and fear would stalk the land in every quarter.

In spite of every effort to hide the effects of the attack from the general public, and the world, information would leak out as to what had happened. Thousands had seen the fireball ignite, all over London, a small second sunrise. Their murmured, fearful whispers spoke of a terrible new German bomb that could come completely unseen in the night, and consume entire

neighborhoods. It was but a shadow of what this weapon would eventually grow to be, where the US and Russia would compete with one another to test larger and larger weapons yields, hammering at the increasingly fragile meridians of time.

While not so great in actual raw damage, the attack drained the blood from faces all throughout Whitehall, the Admiralty, and every nerve and command center of the British government. What had fallen on them? How was it delivered? How many such weapons did the enemy have? When would the next bomb fall? London was never the same after *Fafnir's* visit, and hearing the news of the attack in far off North Africa, Churchill made a grim and hasty flight over the Dark Continent, hopping from one small British held airfield to the next until he again reached Gibraltar. From there he flew on to Lisbon before boarding a bomber for the final leg home, his thoughts beset with a legion of angry demons.

Part V

Steel Veins

“ Let me tell you something that we Israelis have against Moses. He took us 40 years through the desert in order to bring us to the one spot in the Middle East that has no oil.”

— Golda Meir

Chapter 13

Iraq had been a nominal British Protectorate since order was restored in 1941. At that time, the focus of a little rebellion by Rashid-Ali had been at the British airfield at Habbaniyah. In that action, Fedorov, Troyak, and the Russian Marines along with Argonauts provided by the Fairchild group, had served to rescue the beleaguered outpost until Brigadier Kingstone could arrive with Kingcol, a light armored and infantry force that had formed the nucleus of the unit he still commanded.

Once secured, Iraq settled down to the typical squabbling among various tribes. Britain sent four Indian Infantry Divisions, and plans were being laid to also secure Iran, though they were never put into motion when the first German incursion into Syria occurred. Now, with this new incursion, Great Britain was regretting that it did not see to the military question concerning Iran.

“The Iranian Army is substantial,” said Auchinlek, arriving late to the strategy session underway in Damascus with Alexander. Technically, all of what was once called Mesopotamia and Persia was Auchinlek’s watch, while Alexander held down Libya, Egypt Palestine and Syria. “On paper they approach 200,000 men, with light artillery and even tanks.”

“They have armor?” Alexander was surprised to hear this. “Certainly nothing modern enough to bother us.”

“They made a purchase of about 50 French FT-17’s, some with the 37mm gun, others with only Machineguns. And they also bought another 50 Panzer 38’s from the Germans, with whom they have become quite cozy now. When we lost Turkey, we also lost the good will of Iran, and they’ve been mobilizing.”

“Are you suggesting they might attempt a military intervention to support the Germans?”

“We can’t dismiss the possibility. This is why it is imperative that we get our 2nd Infantry Division to Basra immediately, and frankly, we should seriously consider securing Abadan. To hell with Iranian neutrality. Those facilities are very valuable to the Crown, and the Iranians could turn off the

tap on a whim.”

“Agreed,” said Alexander, “but if we do this, won’t that simply invite their interference all along the border?”

“It might,” said Auchinlek. “And in the short run we shall have to rely on our Levy Battalions to screen that frontier. The bulk of the Iranian military will be down south near Abadan, but they’ll have divisions at Ahwaz, Dezful, and Kermanshah.”

“A bit of a mess,” said Jumbo Wilson. “The Levy Battalions can buy us some time, but I think it will take British regulars to settle the matter. A lot will be riding on the back of Grover’s 2nd Division, and if it’s tied up down south, then we’ll have to hold Baghdad as best we can with the Indian Divisions.”

“It’s going to be a difficult situation for some time,” said Alexander. “I agree that 2nd Infantry should act quickly to take Abadan, come what may. If the Iranians come over the border, we may lose Al-Amarah, and possibly even Al-Kut in the short run, but we’ll get them back later. The only thing we have to really protect between Basra and Baghdad are the main road and rail links.”

“What about the north?” asked Wilson.

“It will have to hold on. I think it likely that Jerry will get into Mosul very soon. So Kirkuk will have to stand as a fortress city with 5th Indian and the Kurdish Levies.”

“Thank God for the Levies,” said Wilson. “I hope they fight.”

The British had raised ten Kurdish, 22 Assyrian, five Arab, and ten other tribal levies of battalion size in the last two years, and they were now mostly deployed in outlying cities, and along the border with Iran.

“So it’s decided,” said Auchinlek. “We put our house in order in the south first, secure Abadan, and defeat any Iranian forces in the region. Then 2nd Infantry moves to Baghdad with all the armor, and by that time, Wavell says he’ll have 7th Indian Division landing at Umm Qasar to look after Basra.”

Auchinlek was a superb military mind, and excellent tactician and real master of the operational art. He was quite possibly the best field General the British had, Montgomery’s equal in every respect. Yet now he found himself in a largely administrative role as overall commander in Persia, Iraq, and the Gulf. While Wilson was a steady hand, the Auk might have been a real match for Guderian on the ground, and better there than behind a desk in Basra.

Alexander agreed that their plan was the best approach. “Now then,” he

said. "What is Jerry going to do about it?"

That was the question of the hour.

* * *

Guderian had taken ten full days to get supplies down the Euphrates, which was now the main link back to forward depots on the Turkish Frontier. Now he met with his three division commanders, Beckermann, Schneider with 4th Panzer, and General Fredrich Muller with the 22nd Luftland. He had come forward to Hadithah to personally lead the invasion of Iraq, sending the whole of 3rd panzer back through Palmyra with Hans Hube to check the offensive Alexander had pushed as far as the T4 Pumping station.

"So far, so good," said Guderian. "We have taken every planned objective on schedule, and now control all of Anbar province. We've had time to refit and resupply, but we have also given that time to the enemy. They undoubtedly regrouped those two Indian divisions near Baghdad, and this brings us to the decision we must make concerning that city."

"We'll have to take it," said Beckermann. "It can in no way be anything like the fight we had at Volgograd, so I say we simply storm the place with my entire division."

"Assuming we do so, we then have the choice of turning either north or south. I have asked for infantry support, and General Kubler is adjusting his lines to free up Volker's 78th Sturm Division on the coast of Lebanon. That division will move by rail and it should be in Mosul in another day."

"Hauptmann Barenthin is already there," said Muller. "They flew in this morning and took the place without a single shot. It was completely ungarrisoned."

"Excellent, then Volker's troops will have no problems."

Beyond that, the Turkomen Korps has made the long and difficult trek through northern Iran and they are now approaching Kirkuk. If those forces can secure Kirkuk and Baba Gurgur, then we stay on schedule, because no matter what you think, Herr Beckermann, city fighting in Baghdad could take us time."

"My division is available to assist," said Schneider.

"I am thinking to have you move north of Baghdad, here." Guderian pointed at the map. "This will cut the Baghdad rail, and prevent the British from sending anything north quickly. Take Al Taji, then divide your division

into two strong Kampfgruppen. The first can move south and attack Baghdad from the north. The second can be dispatched up central Iraq through Samara and Tikrit, with the aim of establishing contact with the 78th Sturm Division, and opening that rail line to Mosul for our use. They will be a much more reliable LOC than our present lines back up the Euphrates, and this is essential.”

“Then we aim to secure Baghdad and Northern Iraq first,” said Beckermann. “I agree.”

“Correct,” said Guderian. Once we have that rail line operational, and Baghdad secure, then we make that city our main supply hub. The Luftwaffe can concentrate everything there, and then your division, Herr Muller, will not be tied down on LOC duties as it is now. The falloff Baghdad and opening of that rail line to Mosul concluded Phase II of Operation Phoenix. Phase III then becomes the invasion of central and southern Iran, with the ultimate objective being the key oil refineries and facilities at Basra and Abadan. At that point, and pending the situation in the air, we may be able to move some of your troops by air, Muller—a nice little surprise.”

“What about the Iranians?” asked Muller.

“They aren’t much to speak of,” said Guderian. “On paper their army looks enormous, but I would estimate their typical brigade might have less real combat power than a single German battalion. Nonetheless, they can be useful by crossing the border, and pestering the British in the south to delay the advance of their reinforcements north to Baghdad. To that end, I want Reinhardt to use his Kommando Battalions to interdict the rail lines in the south.

“My pleasure,” said Reinhardt, his black hair slicked back tight on his squarish head. A handsome man, with a dimpled chin and prominent nose under dark brows, his blue eyes looked over the map, tracing the rail lines.”

“Can we expect any further reinforcements.”

“10th Motorized is being relieved even now by the 31st Infantry Division in Syria. I’ve been trying to get it east all along, but the British put in a very dogged spoiling attack at the T4 station. That situation is stabilizing, and so now we finally get Schmidt’s division. It should arrive in three days on the road from Palmyra. I would love to have Westhoven’s 3rd Panzer, but I’m afraid it must stay where it is. The British brought up a good deal of armor, but Westhoven had a lot of Lions, and he’s stopped them.” He folded the map, satisfied with these dispositions.

“We may need that division soon.”

“In time,” said Guderian. Then he took a deep breath, looking over the capable men under his command. “Soldiers of the Reich,” he said. “If we succeed here, we deliver a prize of greater value than Moscow was in 1941—of greater value than Volgograd in 1942! We deliver the largest known oil reserves in the world to the Führer, and at the same time, we take them from the enemy. The stakes could not be higher. This campaign is far more significant than anything Rommel did in Libya. We have a chance here to completely unhinge the enemy’s strategic supply situation, and immeasurably improve our own. Fight accordingly. We move out at dawn.”

15 FEB, 1943

It was Gruber again, out in front of the Brandenburgers as always when the division kicked off a new operation. He was the first unit down the main road to Habbaniyah airfield, his three companies on line of march, but they were forced to deploy almost immediately. The 5th British Essex Battalion was right there at the airfield, dug in behind wire and fencing that was its only protection. On his right, between the airfield and the broad marshy lake of Al Habbaniyah, he could see the streams of dust being thrown up by 1/I Brandenburg Battalion, racing to engage another enemy force protecting that corridor.

Beckermann expected the British to put up a fight there, and he had planned to send Gruber’s Recon Battalion, and the entire 1st Regiment of the Brandenburgers to plow right on through. At the same time, he would order Konen’s 2nd Regiment to pass north of the Euphrates in a wide enveloping maneuver, the sort of which had so unsettled the Indian divisions earlier. They simply could not react quickly enough to run with the fast moving hit and move tactics of the Brandenburgers, soon finding themselves bypassed, cut off, and in full retreat. Konen moved quickly, and he already had his artillery battalion set up well north of the airfield, the first ranging salvos starting to fall there.

The Second Battle for Habbaniyah was now underway, only this time there would be no helicopters with mini-guns, no Argonauts in Talos assault suits and the Black Death led by the intrepid Sergeant Troyak. This time it was men of equal caliber, perhaps not as well armed or possessed of that modern technology, but arguably among the finest fighting infantry in the

world.

That same hour, Volkov's troops came down from the high mountain passes east of Kirkuk and surrounded a Kurdish Levy posted on the road north of the city. At the same time, the Iranian Army crossed the border at three locations, two divisions moving from the Kermanshah Sector, another from Khorramabad, and two others near Al Amarah. For them it was nothing more than a land grab, territories promised to them by the Reich if they would agree to support the German invasion. They were also promised handsome payment for their oil, which would be wrenched from the greedy hands of the British Petroleum Company, and made theirs to sell as they pleased.

In the south, there was fighting on the lower Tigris at a refinery on that river between Abadan and Basra. The Iranian 1st Division was moving up from Abadan toward the prize facilities just northwest of Basra, but they were going to meet more than they bargained for. The British 9th Armored moved from Basra north of the river, then swung over and came down on the Iranians like a hammer. 6th Infantry Brigade was right behind it, and the British intended to smash this enemy force and push right on to Abadan.

Up country, Brigadier Kingstone had replenished from stores and hidden ammo caches on the border with Arabia, and he was leading Kingforce up through Karbala to Alexandria. Behind him, stretched out in a long column for over 40 miles, were the last two battalions of the Free French, followed by the 10th Indian Division. They had all been forced to move south of the mass of Lake Razzazah, and so now they would be approaching Baghdad from the south, a much welcome reinforcement.

At Habbaniyah, the British were forced to quickly abandon the field, seven Maryland bombers and a few Spitfires blasted by that German artillery. Only four Spits got out, speeding away to Rasheed airfield, where the RAF had converted the old racecourse east of the city to a landing field. Flanked to the north, the 19th Indian Brigade fell back towards Fallujah, demolishing any bridge after they crossed. Their mission had been to force a delay upon the enemy, and now they fell back to the main line of resistance behind Fallujah.

As this was going on, Glubb Pasha had led his Arab Legion over a narrow isthmus between Habbaniyah Lake and the marshlands to the south. The Brandenburg Kommandos had come down along the northern edge of that lake, and this put the two sides into direct confrontation, a wild scene where

the Arabs, most mounted on horses, were charging wildly over the scrubby desert, shooting from the hip with rifles and flashing their long cruel scimitars. They were met by the elite Kommandos in desert Cammo, crouching low and firing with submachine guns from the wadis and other depressions where they went to ground. It had the air of a wild west Indian attack, with the German Kommando company outnumbered three to one.

That did not last long, for other battalions of Brandenburgers were racing up on trucks, scout cars in the van with machineguns barking out a warning. Gruber's armored cars came up, and that took the fire out of Glubb's Arabs. That wild action around Fallujah concluded the day, largely a preliminary sounding out of the battle to come. The Brandenburgers had flowed down the road from Ramadi like a steel river, and met the berm thrown up by the 8th British Indian Division under General Russel.

The General had his division deployed in a wide arc northwest of Baghdad, with Brigadier Ford's 19th Brigade at Fallujah, Brigadier Purves 21st Brigade on their right along a canal flowing to the Tigris to the east, and Brigadier Jenkins had his 17th Brigade way off to the north of Baghdad at Al Taji, the city Schneider's 4th Panzer was tasked with taking.

That division was only now arriving in the wake of the Brandenburgers, the halftracks, trucks and tanks rolling past Habbaniyah airfield, north of the river. At the same time, Brigadier Kingstone's column was arriving at the edge of the main Baghdad airport right at dusk. His AEC-III armored cars were a welcome sight to the infantry of 6th Indian Division posted there. He wanted to get up to see Jumbo Wilson that night at the British Embassy in the heart of the city. Behind him the weary 10th Indian followed in column of march, but as all these forces converged on Baghdad, the defensive prospects for the city seemed much brighter.

Chapter 14

“Joe ... Good to see you, but you’re looking a little worn from the road.” Jumbo Wilson stood to shake hands with Kingstone, knowing him well.

“Worn isn’t half a word for it,” said Kingstone. “General, I hope you’re ready for a fight here. Jerry ran circles around us on the Euphrates. I’ve never seen troops move like that. Damn good motorized infantry, and we’ll need to keep our wits about us.”

“Our infantry will do better here at Baghdad,” said Wilson. “Not that you didn’t pull your load. They caught us napping, and we paid for it. Now it’s time to get back on our feet.”

“What’s the situation up north?” Kingstone had heard no news at all. In fact, he didn’t even know if Briggs and 5th Indian had safely arrived in Iraq.

“5th Indian made it to Kirkuk, and they’re digging in for the long haul. Jerry brought in another infantry division on the main rail from Mosul—they’ve got that place now. And they’re pushing patrols over to Arbil as well. I ordered the Levy battalion there to move to Kirkuk.”

“Briggs did his damndest to link up with us earlier, but Jerry got right between us. As for Blaxland... You might want to keep a firm rein on that one. Word is that he was sitting down to tea at the T1 Station when Jerry came for the airfield.”

“I see...” Wilson said nothing more. He could see that Kingstone was a bit agitated, and certainly worn out from two weeks fighting and 300 miles on the road. The Brigadier had more he wanted to say.

“General, you can’t try to hold a cohesive front with this lot. They’ll pick one spot on the line and punch right through. Then they go like bats out of hell on the other side. An don’t count on them hitting you from this side of the Tigris. They’ll look for a good crossing point and try to flank the city from the north. This isn’t just any division we’re up against here. It’s the bloody Brandenburgers, and we’ve identified at least five separate motorized regiments in this lot.”

“Five regiments?”

“That’s a fact. So they can hit your line with full division strength and still have two regiments to get round either flank. General, if they do get

through your lines, you mustn't waste a moment getting the men back here—to the city. We can make them pay for their lodging if they fight us here. And another thing—they'll fight night and day; right round the clock, and by God, they want to win. So you can't spread out along an extended front. That's just an invitation to disaster with this bunch at our throats. Concentrate your brigades on key objectives. If it means we fight out of the corner, so be it. Better there than in the center of the ring. This bunch hits harder than Max Schmeling, so look to your ribs when he closes to attack."

"We're set up well if they hit us from the west," said Wilson.

"A little too far from the city for my comfort," said Kingstone. "I was at the airport just now, and the Germans will certainly want that bang away so they can fly in fresh ammo and supplies. Then they'll want the rail line open to Mosul. After that, then the real fighting starts here."

"Logical," said Wilson, tamping down his pipe. "Well, when Blaxland comes up, we'll have three divisions here. At the moment, 2nd British Infantry is getting after Abadan, and they may take it in another day or two."

"The second?"

"My old outfit," said Wilson with a smile. "Damn good troops."

"That's a step in the right direction," said Kingstone. "I thought they were with Slim in Burma."

"They were, but that front has quieted down and Wavell suggested that the stakes here were a little higher than holding the border against Tojo over there. So we've got the 2nd Infantry, and 7th Indian Division right after it. That will wrap things up down south, and then they can come forward to settle this business. They'll have 7th and 9th Armored Brigades with them when they come."

"Armor? Bloody marvelous!" Kingstone smiled for what seemed like the first time in the last month, the lines of his face deepening as he grinned.

"Forgive my manners, General," said Wilson. "Would you care for a brandy?"

"No sir, another time. I'll want to be getting back to the Brigade. We're coming in right at the aerodrome. Where do you want me?"

Wilson looked at his map. "Well now, you've a fast outfit there. Why don't you bring your boys on into the city and cross the Tigris to the Barracks site. If Jerry does what you suggest, you'll be in a good spot there to parry any thrust from the northeast."

"Very good sir, but if it's all the same to you, I'd prefer to take the

column around the city. My lads have had little more than a mouthful of desert for the last two weeks, and marching them by the bars and brothels will be a tad rough on morale.”

“Well enough, Joe. Get some rest, will you? You deserve it.”

“I’ll rest a good deal easier once we get that armor up. Oh... One thing more. There were two battalions of French Foreign Legion with our column. I left them in Karbala.” Kingstone saluted and was on his way.

18 FEB, 1943

The two Turkomen divisions hit the ridgeline defenses north and west of Kirkuk that morning. They had been informed that the German 78th Sturm Division was approaching the city from the west, which was the trigger for this assault. It was meant to pull in as much of the defense as possible, and it was a classic “Russian Style” infantry assault, the rifle battalions swarming forward as a mass and trying to overwhelm the more isolated battalion outposts on the ridge.

As dogged as the Turkomen infantry was, the 5th Division held its ground. They had spent the last two days digging trench lines, sewing mines and wire, and registering the three battalions of division artillery, and they made the enemy pay for climbing that rocky slope. In two places, it came to fighting right at the trench lines, hand to hand, with the Turkomen fighters brandishing curved swords, and the Indian infantry mounting countercharges with fixed bayonets. Here and there, clusters of regular British infantry that had been salted into the division stood unmoved, their Vickers MGs exacting a heavy toll. By mid-day the enemy attack had faltered, and the battalions were falling back down the slope, still harassed by artillery fire. Discouraged and badly beaten, the Turkomen Divisions decided to wait for the Germans, and there would be no further fighting for that long ridge aside from desultory artillery exchanges.

Near Baghdad, General Schneider took his 4th Panzer Division as a whole and threw it at the city of Taji, about 16 kilometers north of the capitol. It had been defended by a brigade of the 6th Indian Division, but they could not hold in the face of that attack. The crack Panzergrenadiers dismounted, fanning out into the town, their halftracks and mobile flak guns behind them in support. Two full battalions of panzers were committed, and that was simply too much.

Brigadier received permission from Wilson to withdraw, but as II Brandenburg Regiment was already between Taji and Baghdad, they had no recourse but to cross the Tigris River near Hammamiyat, and then move south on the east bank, where they would eventually come to Brigadier Kingstone's lines. When he saw the lorried infantry coming through, the last trucks carrying the wounded and dead recovered from the fight, he shook his head.

"You can move right through our lines," he told Brigadier Jenkins of the 17th Indian Brigade. "Set your men up as a second echelon, and you can stand as a tactical reserve. I think they'll hit us here soon enough." He expected an immediate attack from the north, but it did not come that day. The Germans seemed to be collecting themselves, and husbanding supplies. They were already 185 Kilometers from their depot at Hadithah, and 450 kilometers from Dier-ez-Zour. Their main depot up north on the Turkish border above Ar Raqqa was now a full 680 kilometers away. These were the kinds of lengthy supply lines Rommel had to deal with in Libya, and now Guderian had a much better appreciation of that man.

At present, his situation was not bad. There were a few battalions down to 30% to 45% supply, and he decided to rest them at Fallujah and await the next deliveries. He was also waiting on 10th Motorized, which was only now beginning to arrive on the road to Fallujah. On the 18th, he had tested the enemy defenses west of Baghdad by putting in a strong attack at Abu Ghraib. Defended by elements of the 8th Indian Division, the Punjab Battalions fought well, yielding some ground but doing so in good order, and rallying when they reached the dugout lines of the British 5th Queen's Own Rifles. It was a well prepared position, and the Germans were stopped near dusk, when Guderian called for a pause to discuss options.

"They are going to fight us here," he said. "Thus far we've identified two full Indian Divisions, one west and one north of the city.

"My men had no difficulty in Taji," said Schneider. "We ground our way right through them."

"That is what this may take," said Guderian. "My every instinct here is to avoid a lengthy battle of attrition, but now I think I must revise my last order to you. With Taji in hand, I now want you to assemble your entire division, but east of the Tigris. You will attack over this ground here." He pointed to the place where Kingstone had been forming his lines since the previous day. "If you can get in the back door, I will keep them very busy on this side with

four of the five Brandenburg Regiments. The last, under Konrad, I will send north in place of that KG I spoke of earlier. They will make contact with the 78th Sturm Division, and clear the rail line to Mosul. It may be five days before we can get trains down from the depots there, so we must plan accordingly in terms of our supplies. We will probe the enemy, conduct active patrolling, but otherwise rest until the morning of the 20th. Then we make a coordinated attack from two sides.”

That rail line to Mosul was the key for Guderian. He simply had to get it open and get rolling stock moving on it at the earliest possible moment. Without it, he would have but two or three days hard fighting in terms of ammunition. Food was not an issue, nor fresh water, all things Rommel had to plan for. It was ammunition he needed most, and fuel wherever he could find it.

So what do I have on my hands here, he thought? Will this be another Volgograd on the Tigris? This is an enormous city, with a lot of concrete buildings that can serve as good strong points for the enemy. It is a warren of narrow streets, alleyways and souks. House to house fighting here could be very difficult, but that is what the Brandenburgers do best. There is no better force for this sort of fight in the world. As soon as Schmidt gets here with 10th Motorized, I will throw his two regiments right at the airfield. Then, the following day, the Brandenburgers go in full force.

The Battle of Baghdad.... That is undoubtedly what they will call it. I wonder what the historians will say about it in decades to come. Were we foolish to think we could breeze into Iraq like this and take the whole place by storm with a handful of divisions? If these attacks bog down, I may have no other option but to wait for that rail line to open, and then see about getting in more troops through Mosul. As for Kirkuk... Babab Gurgur.... That is up to Volker's 78th Sturm Division, and his attack should be in position shortly.

* * *

There were not many Sturm Divisions in the German Army, but the 78th was one of the better ones. Created with a division structure flush with heavy weapons, it had a lavish assortment of 10cm and 12cm mortars, a battalion of heavier Nebelwerfers, and a strong Panzerjager attachment with Marder III's and four 88's. The infantry battalions were beefed up to 36 assault squads,

with a lot of machineguns and smaller mortars. Some of these squads had been specially trained in demolitions and wire breaching for assaults against enemy strong points, hence the name "Storm Division." Three battalions of regular artillery completed the picture.

2nd Suffolk Battalion had been posted on the road at the canal bridge near Hsar Ahmad. On the morning of the 20th, it suddenly came under a fearful barrage from all those guns, mortars and the whooshing roar of the Nebelwerfers. Only two of the three division regiments were present, the third still moving south along the Baghdad rail and fighting to clear out Levy Battalions Wilson had posted in Bayji and Tikrit. Konrad's Lehr Regiment of the Brandenburgers had pushed north and driven another out of Samarra, and now they had worked as far north as Tikrit to link up with that Sturm Regiment.

The Turkomen Divisions, having rested two days, now put in another strong attack at the ridgeline northeast of Kirkuk, and the battle for that city was on. The blow delivered to 2nd Suffolk was withering. The men were pinned down, shrapnel flying everywhere, and casualties from the bombardment mounting. When the Storm troops came in, the fighting was fierce, but this was an assault force tailor made to attack a prepared position like this. 2nd Suffolk would lose nearly a third of its men, eventually forced back from the canal and yielding the bridge at Hsar Ahmad.

As before, the ridgeline position was held against the Turkomen divisions, but the hammer blow delivered by 78th Sturm did not arguer well. That unit could beat down one line position after another, slowly undermining Brigadier Reid's 29th Brigade defense in the south along the main road. General Briggs found the land lines still open to Wilson's HQ at the British Embassy in Baghdad, and he put in a call with one salient question on his mind.

"When can we expect relief up here?"

"I'm sorry, Briggo," said Wilson, thinking Briggs had the one nickname that put his own to shame. "Jerry is here in force, both north and west of the city. We still hold Baqubah with a few levy battalions, but otherwise, there's nothing between me and you."

"I see..." Unlike Colonel Blaxland in temporary command of the 10th Indian, Briggs was a seasoned and well experienced officer. He had fought in East Africa and the Western Desert with Indian divisions, and the 5th was well leavened with veteran soldiers from those campaigns.

“What’s your situation?” asked Wilson.

“Well, we’re holding out, but I have to give the enemy the north end of the ridge to form a tighter line around Kirkuk. I reckon I’ve got some 30,000 Turkomen infantry on my north and east perimeter. But Jerry came up and hit us hard out near the southwest refinery. It looks like a couple regiments of good infantry there. Jumbo, I’ve as stiff an upper lip as any man you know, but this is just a matter of time up here, and I can’t say the refineries and well sites will come through this fight without a good deal of damage.”

“I understand....” Wilson considered. “Are you surrounded?”

“Not yet. The road through Taza Khormatu is still open, and the mountain track above it as well.”

“The road to Baqubah?”

“Yes sir.” Briggs let his silence ask the only remaining question. Then he spoke. “General, we’re prepared to hold on here, come what may. We’ve supply for at least another week—maybe longer.”

“Briggo,” said Wilson back. “If you did try that road, might you get through to Baqubah?”

“Well sir, we’d have to move quickly—tonight—and take to our wheels. But we’d be giving them Baba Gurgur, sir. That will make for one hell of a headline for Hitler.”

“That it will,” said Wilson. “But it’s this simple: we can’t relieve you, nor will you likely hold out for that week you have in the storeroom. You’re outnumbered three to one. Yes, they have the Father of all Fires, and all that oil that flows from it in the steel veins of the Empire, and they can bloody well choke on it. You are to place demolition charges in all the key facilities presently under your control, and then do your damndest to fight your way out of there. I’m not prepared to sacrifice the 5th British Indian Division for that bloody oil. If you can win through, that’s all the better for us down here. Then you can come with us when we finally get up a good head of steam to retake Kirkuk.”

“Are you sure you want me to demolish the two refineries?” asked Briggs. “Won’t we need them when we come back this way?”

“We might,” said Wilson, “but I don’t think Fritz will leave them intact in that event, will he?”

“Very well, sir, I have my orders, and I will carry them out. You can tell those levies in Baqubah that we’re coming.”

“Good,” said Wilson. “It looks like they’ll have the well heads and all the

pipelines to Tripoli and Haifa. I'm not sure what Hitler thinks he can do with them, but for the time being we have to show him we don't need them."

In spite of General Wilson's bravado, Britain and her Allies did need those facilities, and they needed the oil that was flowing in those steel veins. Without it, all they had left to fuel their fires in the Middle East were the southern well sites at Basra and Abadan, which they had just secured from the Iranians. If they were to fall, then Britain would have to rely on oil shipments from the United States, which was the world's greatest producer at that time. Yet it was thousands of miles away, and would have to sail over U-boat infested waters to reach British ports. As for Saudi Arabia, and the vast reserves beneath the Empty Quarter and Persian Gulf, the first commercial well had only been drilled in March of 1938, and those resources still remained largely unmeasured and undeveloped....

Chapter 15

In 1941 The British had advanced on Baghdad over the very same route as Guderian's troops. It had been a brash and audacious move, for the force they had was no more than a Regiment, facing a full Iraqi Division in Baghdad. Yet they prevailed, toppled the incipient rebellion of Rashid Ali and his Golden Square of four Iraqi Army Colonels, and restored British rule in Iraq. Ali had fled to Germany, where he stewed in exile, publicly denouncing the British. One of his Colonels, Colonel Salah ad-Dinn as-Sabbagh, summarized their defeat by lashing out at the British saying: "There is no more murderous wolf for the Arab and no deadlier foe of Islam than Britain.... The Arabs have no future unless the British Empire comes to an end."

Now, with the collapse of British forces in northern Iraq, it seemed as though the Colonel's hopes could be salvaged. To Help organize Arab resistance against the British, the Germans flew both Rashid Ali and the colonel to Kirkuk, where Ali formally announced a new Iraqi Arab government forming under the protection of Nazi Germany.

The news of the abandonment of Kirkuk and Baba Gurgur enraged Churchill, but eventually Alanbrooke, Chief of the Imperial General Staff, finally convinced him that General Wilson had acted prudently, taking an enormous risk to try and save troops that Britain could ill afford to lose in a siege of Kirkuk that could have only one ending.

"They were outnumbered three to one," he explained. "So you can either trade the Germans Kirkuk today for the 5th Indian Division, or they will take both by next Tuesday and you'll be standing there empty handed. Wilson did what was right and expedient in the situation, and I would have done the same."

"Well how in blazes will we ever get it back?" Churchill railed.

"All in good time," said Alanbrooke. "2nd Division has finished up in Southern Iraq. Your consolation for the loss of Kirkuk is Abadan. We've got the whole thing, lock, stock and oil barrel. Now General Gordon can take his men north to Baghdad, and the 7th Indian Division has landed at Umm Qsar to take over garrison duty and security patrols for Basra and Abadan. Yes, we've lost Kirkuk, but with the Germans already sitting on Haditha, those

pipelines are useless to us now. Any oil we get from Iraq will have to go by sea, through the Persian Gulf and up the Red Sea to Suez. There will be a temporary shortfall, but Somerville is already arranging tanker support at Cape Town, and planning the convoy schedules.”

“What about the Japanese?” Churchill fretted. “They’re still sitting on Ceylon, with aircraft slowly building up week by week.”

“My dear Winston, it’s over 1,500 miles from Colombo to those shipping lanes along the Arabian coast, and Somerville has assured Admiral Tovey that we will remain masters of the Arabian Sea. The Japanese have no serious naval threat in that region. All they have done since taking Ceylon is ferry in food, supplies, and comfort women for their soldiers there. Frankly, I think they’ve overreached themselves. The Americans have been going at them with hammer and tongs, and there’s been no incursion of enemy carriers into the Indian Ocean since their initial invasion.”

“Let us hope that remains the case,” said Churchill glumly. “Somerville didn’t come off very well the last time he faced the Imperial Japanese Navy.”

“True, but we weren’t prepared. We’ve never fought an action like that, where the carriers became the principle striking force. The Royal Navy has always relied on our battleships, and there were three in that action, but they were nothing but a distraction and nuisance to Somerville. Carriers, Winston. Admiral Tovey and I had a good long chat about them last week. He’s sent our very best to Somerville, the *Ark Royal* and *Victorious*. Along with *Indomitable*, Somerville has a very strong force there now. Carriers are the order of the day. The battleship is history.”

“Well at least I can agree on that point,” said Churchill. “It may interest you to know that I’ve been conspiring with Admiral Fraser on some very clever projects along those lines. And I’ve wrangled the planes to make a real difference as well—the American F6F Hellcat. A bit of a bawdy name, but I’m told the plane is very capable. It was tailor made for carrier operations, and with it, our ships can carry many more planes than before. The next time the Japanese come calling, they’ll get a real surprise if Somerville is on his game.”

“There,” said Alanbrooke, “that’s the spirit. You have it exactly. Now then—I think we can safely say that our lines of communications through the Arabian Sea are secure for the moment. Iraq is now our primary concern. Alright, we’ve lost Kirkuk, but we still hold Baghdad, and the Germans really can’t do anything more unless they take it. First off, it’s both a political and

logistical necessity that they control that city. This Rashid Ali can crow all he wants from his new would be throne in Kirkuk, but as long as we control Baghdad, Iraq is ours. The Germans can't move south to threaten Basra and Abadan without first clearing their lines of communications by taking Baghdad."

"So it must be held," said Churchill. "I agree completely."

"Yes, and now that 5th Indian Division has been saved by Wilson, we've a fighting chance there. This General Guderian is no slouch. Alexander's counterattack from Homs was a good spoiling attack, and it forced the Germans to leave one of their two Panzer divisions behind. Now, however, the Germans have brought in more infantry. We've identified three new divisions, the 31st, 34th and 45th Infantry Divisions. They're putting them on the line opposite General Quinan, and the latest report indicates Guderian has now pulled that panzer division out and sent it east. This means the Germans will have their full mobile corps available for the Baghdad offensive, which is undoubtedly what they planned all along."

"Damn," said Churchill. "Just when I'm consoled with the carriers and sea lanes thing, you go and pour salt into my tea. Can Wilson hold out?"

"He'll have four Indian divisions, and the 2nd British Infantry is arriving in just a few days."

"Will that be enough?"

"It might," said Alanbrooke. "But just to be on the safe side, we could send another good British Infantry Division in, and more armor, if we can find it."

"My good man," said Churchill. "Infantry divisions do not grow on trees! Most everything we have here in the Kingdom is still training up, and it would be two months to get a division from here to Basra."

"Not quite..." said Alanbrooke. "You're forgetting the 18th Infantry at Perth."

"What? You mean the troops Montgomery evacuated from Java? Well pinch me, I have forgotten about that division. Didn't it go to Burma?"

"It was scheduled, but Slim has the situation in hand, and the Japanese show no signs of any further offensives into India. So the 18th Remained at Perth, and it's been fleshed out with Aussie volunteers, and brought up to snuff in terms of the Artillery and other equipment. It's right there, Winston, and was training up for the counterattack on Ceylon. Given the circumstances, oil is more valuable to the empire now than rubber. Wouldn't

you agree?”

“Precisely,” said Churchill, a light of battle blooming in his eyes.

“It’s 5,600 nautical miles from Perth to Iraq by sea; less than half the distance from Liverpool to the same destination. That’s just three weeks at sea to move the 18th Division, as opposed to six weeks or longer to send anything from here.”

“Splendid!” Churchill immediately approved the plan, even though it meant that the attack on Ceylon would have to be postponed. And so the British would pull yet one more rabbit out of their hat, and hopefully enough to foil the German plans to seize Baghdad and storm into southern Iraq.

“Thus far they’ve had it all their way with this dirty business,” said Churchill. “We thought we’d settled affairs in Iraq and Syria two years ago, but now you see what Turkey’s infidelity has cost us.”

Which brings us to another matter,” said Alanbrooke. “Alexander believes we have to take the gloves off concerning Turkey, and put the RAF onto those rail lines sustaining this new German foray into the Middle East.”

“Do you agree?”

“It would be very risky,” said Alanbrooke. “Thus far Turkey has been consorting with the Germans, but they’ve maintained a cautious stance in all these affairs. They’ve permitted the Germans to transit their territory, including the Bosphorus and Dardanelles, and this new German push into the Kuban region is likely to keep them quite on edge for some time. The thing is this. Turkey really want’s nothing to do with Germany. We showed them the folly of that alliance in the First War, and by god, I think they remember it. Yet as long as Germany remains a viable force in the region, particularly with support from Orenburg now, the Turks have had no choice but to cooperate. We should have invaded Iran long ago and put that threat to rest. It would have made our wedding proposal to the Turks much more appealing. As it stands, they don’t see that we’ve any dowry to speak of, and so they’ve given us the cold shoulder. Unless we can show them that we can fight and win in the Middle East, they’ll have no good reason to throw in with us.”

“Apparently Operation Scimitar wasn’t enough,” said Churchill.

“It might have been, but Hitler had a strong force poised on the Turkish frontier, and just 120 miles from Istanbul. We cleared the Vichy French out of Syria, but never really finished the job after Scimitar. We let Jerry keep those mountain divisions in Northern Syria and the Turks could not help but notice.”

“It was all we could do at the time,” said Churchill. “And we were fortunate that we had our guests at hand to even do what we did with Scimitar.”

Those ‘Guests’ were the men and machines that had come out of the deep desert in Egypt, from a future Churchill and Brooke could scarcely imagine now. Yet now they were gone. Only the barest kernel of the force remained, hidden away on the Isle of Man in the Irish Sea, where British engineers had been learning all they could about the amazing Challenger II. While Hitler had the broken carcass of one such vehicle, the British still had a few fully functioning tanks, and Lieutenant Reeves, now made a Colonel by the British Army, was right there to explain how everything worked. It was leading to a whole new way of thinking where the design and production of British tanks was concerned, and it would soon have a dramatic impact on the war when a new British challenger appeared to counter the alarming advances in German tank design.

“We’ve stopped Rommel,” said Alanbrooke, “but the Turks know we’ve still not beaten the Germans. It may be months or longer if we can beat them in Tunisia, and even if we do, that does nothing to make the Turks more secure. Given the razor’s edge they’re sitting on now, I would have to come down against direct RAF attacks on Turkish soil. It could be the last straw for them, and send them right into Germany’s camp if we bomb. They have 50 divisions, and a million men under arms. Yes, they aren’t up to snuff compared to our forces, and they’ve no armor to speak of, but we have enough to contend with as things stand.”

“Agreed,” said Churchill. “Yes, we must be very cautious. I’ve barked at the Turks for allowing the Germans to use those rail lines, but biting them is quite another matter. There will be no bombing of targets on Turkish soil. As for the rail lines in Syria and Iraq, they are all fair game. We can achieve the same result there without forcing Turkey to make a very difficult choice that we’d all regret. The problem seems to be that the RAF is also stretched thin. Sir Arthur Harris still holds to his strategy of big raids over Germany and general area bombing. That won’t do in Syria and Iraq.”

“Yes,” said Brooke. “We need precision bombing, and it’s not something our Wellingtons do with any real effectiveness. It’s work for fighter bombers. They have to get after the locomotives, rail depots and receiving stations, yet Coningham has his forces split between O’Connor on the one side, and now this new affair in Syria. That has left very little to send to Iraq. Thankfully,

the Luftwaffe is in no better shape. They've managed to deploy three fighter squadrons, and a few squadrons of *Stukas* and other aircraft, but it's been a wash. Neither side has air superiority over Iraq now, and unless we can find the planes, that's the way it will stay. The Germans hit Baghdad last week, thinking to take it by storm, but we held. Now they've paused to clear the main rail line north to Mosul. That's their lifeline. Kirkuk gives them fuel and such for local operations. Hitler can brag all he wants about it, but the rail line to Mosul is the real jugular. If we can cut that, we can foul their entire operation."

"Aside from finding more fighter-bombers," said Churchill, "what could we possibly do? Wilson is holding out, but he certainly can't go on the offensive."

"No, that would be a direct attack in any case, even if he could take the fight to the other fellow now. This has to be work for special forces. That raid we mounted on Habbaniyah and Palmyra was rather stunning during Operation Scimitar. Those fancy helicopters might come in very handy now."

"Shall I go to Fairchild and enlist her support? They did a bang up job with that raid at St. Nazaire."

"True, but I think we can do the job well enough ourselves. I was thinking more of Browning's Boys, and the SAS."

"General Browning?"

"We have two Airborne Brigades in the Med, and a good number of Commando units as well. We might consider raids into Northern Syria and Iraq, all with the aim of disrupting and sabotaging the enemy rail lines. They've done the same against us. Old Glubb Pasha has had his Arab Legion out after the Brandenburg Commandos. So we have to get thinking along those same lines."

"Do whatever is necessary," said Churchill, determined. "I don't have to tell you that I now view this theater as the most crucial battlefield of our war effort. It trumps anything we are planning for Tunisia, though I'm gratified from the news we've had from there. Iraq must not fall. The Germans have taken half the country as it stands! We simply must hold on to the rest, and then build up the strength there to push them back again. This is bigger than Ceylon; bigger than Burma, which is why I did not hesitate to take troops allocated to those theaters for deployment to Iraq. Now I think we may have to do whatever is necessary to gain the upper hand in the Middle East. If it means we gut the British 8th Army and order General O'Connor to stand on

defense there, so be it.”

“He’s just kicked off his attack on the Mareth Line,” said Alanbrooke. “Surely you don’t want me to call that off.”

“Hasn’t it already had the effect we counted on? Hasn’t it forced Rommel to look over his shoulder and call off his own offensive? I say we let O’Connor get himself to a favorable position with this attack, but then I think we should move more armor back to Syria. He can get it there faster than we can ship it from the Kingdom. It follows the same logic you presented concerning the 18th Division at Perth. Do get those troops moving at once, and then tell General O’Connor that we need more from him, and make it stick. I know we’re robbing Peter to pay Paul, but we’ve no other choice.”

There came a knock on the door, and a Staff Officer came in with a message, handing it off to Alanbrooke, who read it with one raised eyebrow. “Well,” he shrugged, “we’ve another fine mess on our hands. Bletchley Park was correct. The Germans sortied with their Mediterranean Squadron last night. It was seen in the Tyrrhenian Sea this morning.”

“What’s it doing there?” Churchill set down his teacup, obviously concerned.

“Hut Four picked up signals that it was bound for Italian ports. The Germans think Toulon is too vulnerable. Yet one analyst thinks that’s just rubbish, our Mister Turing.”

“He’s a better explanation?”

“Yes sir. Turing thinks the Germans are going to hit Crete, and to my mind that is the most likely reason for this deployment. That would explain why all those German transport planes went to Athens—not for Syria as we first thought, but for Crete.”

“Damn,” said Churchill. “And it could not come at a worse time. We both know the garrison on Crete isn’t strong enough to last a week if the Germans attack there in earnest.”

“I’ve been meaning to send more troops,” said Alanbrooke, “but after the Aussies and New Zealanders went home, all we could find was the Carpathian Brigade. It’s posted up near Maleme, but You’re correct—Crete is a lost cause. We really aren’t ready to begin full scale bombing operations into the Balkans, and we’ve just ruled out staging raids on Turkey. Besides, we can still hit Ploesti when we’re ready, and do so from Alexandria, Beirut, or fields near Jerusalem. Crete has been hanging out there like an untucked shirt. We can’t really defend it, unless Cunningham keeps a squadron at sea

round the clock.”

“Then you don’t advise reinforcing it?”

“I do not. In fact, I would advise the garrison to make plans to withdraw. Crete is useful as a place to stage fighters and interdict surrounding sea lanes, but if it is attacked, we simply haven’t the wherewithal to hold onto it. Cunningham should be advised to plan for a rescue operation, nothing more.”

“But what about the *Bismarck*? This is a chance to get that ship, just like Tovey did in the *Hindenburg* .”

“Cunningham has *Nelson* and *Warspite* . Neither one can make much over 20 knots, and *Bismarck* runs ten knots faster. The French battleship is with it—the *Normandie* .”

“I see,” said Churchill, his mood darkening. “Now’s the time I wish we had those carriers in hand we spoke of earlier. We’ll have more soon enough. But for now, send that order to Cunningham as you advise. It will be yet another feather in Hitler’s cap, and one we’ll just have to pluck out again later this year—god willing.”

Part VI

Quicksilver

“ The Spirits survey the heavens and the earth and all the harmonious motions of the universe see the heavenly bodies set in revolving whorls, which, whorl within whorl, combine to form the Spinning, on the Spindle of Necessity; and the Goddess holds the spindle on her knee, and spins the thread which the Fates wind, unwind and cut...”

— Plato

Chapter 16

The thread of fate the Goddess unwound that day came like quicksilver lightning from the sky. Operation Merkur began with speed, the headlong dash of those heavy German ships through the Straits of Messina and east towards Crete. Then the dark pre-dawn skies carried the drone of hundreds of planes, a flock of crows come to claim Britain's last island outpost in the Med.

Churchill and Brooke were correct. There was no way the island could be adequately defended. Britain was already struggling to scrape up troops wherever they could find them. Crete had served as a forward RAF base, a thorn in the sides of Italian shipping that dared get too close, and a watch on the Aegean Sea, but little else. Churchill had stubbornly held onto it, thinking it would one day be a springboard for the invasion of Greece, but that was not likely anytime soon.

The German Operation Phoenix had upset so many plans and timetables, cut so many threads of fate, that everything was now being focused there. General Quinan now had five divisions and two Armored Brigades in Syria, and Jumbo Wilson was seeing his force building up to five Indian and two British regular divisions in Iraq, along with two Armored Brigades there as well. Even that was not deemed enough, and General Richard O'Connor would soon find out. Wavell had come to him earlier to pick his pocket, but it had not been practical at the time. Now, however, with the Syrian-Iraq theater deemed the most vital of the war, all the stops were being pulled.

O'Connor would soon be asked to send the whole of his 1st Armored Division, and one more British infantry division back to Alexandria. The armor would make the long overland march by road to the railhead at Tobruk, the Infantry would go to Benghazi for shipment by sea. There would be no further reinforcement planned for his 8th Army, and he was told to be as 'obnoxious as possible' concerning the harassment of the German defenses at Mareth, but he would have to do with much less than he had hoped.

O'Connor asked if he could send the 4th Indian Division, but the request, or rather the order, from Whitehall was very specific. He had already committed the 44th Home County and 51st Highland to battle, but the 50th was not yet heavily involved. Disheartened and upset, he had no choice but to

order it to the rear, and he would then bring up the 4th Indian Division in its place. Receiving the order to disengage his 1st Armored Division was the hardest blow.

Half his 7th Armored Division had already been sent east, the 7th Armored Brigade, as it was now being called, but it was quickly shipped off to Basra. That left him with the infantry tanks of 2nd Armored Brigade, and the 22nd and 23rd Armored Brigades. He would have to give up two of the three, so he reluctantly sent the 22nd, which was the last of 7th Armored Division, mostly medium and light tanks, and then he sent the rest of 1st Armored Division as ordered. That division had but one armored brigade left, so in effect, he was simply taking the last of the 7th to reinforce the 1st, and sending one good armored division east as ordered. It would be reorganized into 1st and 2nd Armored Brigades, with the 7th Motorized Brigade being the infantry element.

This would mean that his offensives would be mostly infantry assaults, though he stubbornly held on to his 23rd Armored Brigade, a large formation with over 400 tanks. He would be sending at least that many east in the newly formed 1st Armored Division, so now he would be fighting with only one mailed fist, and also losing a good infantry division. He resolved that he could still keep strong pressure on the Mareth Front, and even still threaten a breakthrough. He had already taken Medinine and battered the Italian defenders there.

His push for Mareth itself was still strong with the 51st Highland, 44th Home County and 23rd Armored Brigade, which was all the frontage would allow for. Yet there was nothing behind it until 4th Indian came up, and he would have no means of exploiting any success. All he could do was remain a nuisance for Rommel, and force his opponent to keep good infantry divisions on the line. He compensated in the short run by sending up his army troops—two battalions of armored cars, two more of Royal Engineers, and a rifle battalion. 4th Indian Division was already arriving, and he gave orders to hasten it forward even as he sent the 50th Northumberland back. He also still had the 1st South African Division, but it was largely scattered, a brigade at Benghazi, another at Mersa Brega, and the last at Tripoli. It would also mean that he could not make a flanking move to the left of the highland country as planned. There was nothing to do but keep battering at the front door.

So the British 8th Army would not make the glorious and decisive breakthrough that Montgomery had achieved at Mareth, and this would also

have an effect on the western front in Algeria and Tunisia. Churchill's insistence on making Iraq and Syria his main war effort now would see 12 divisions there, and these two additional reinforcements being sent by O'Connor. That left his 8th Army with only four effective divisions, which was all Monty had on the other side in Algeria and Tunisia. This was going to mean that the American Army's role would be much more essential, and thus far, Patton had worked his magic to harden those troops into a credible fighting force.

The American divisions were still cumbersome, particularly the two big heavy armored divisions, and some of the infantry battalions were still raw, but they were learning very quickly. The victory in holding on to Tebessa was significant, though that took the best infantry division of the lot, Terry Allen's 1st. When Monty joined the party, it had forced von Arnim to first consolidate, and then withdraw, leaving Rommel with no other choice but to do the same. The Germans were now on the defense all along the western Tunisian border, but it still remained to be seen whether the Allies could mount a decisive offensive there.

Now, in mid-February, the weather was still much of a factor in those operations. The heavy rains were turning the silty dust and sand to slurry, and the mud was always a problem. After a good long fight against the German Operation *Sturmflut*, the Americans also had to consolidate, lick their wounds, and replenish. The weather was imposing this on Patton and Montgomery as much as anything else, though they resolved to push as far forward as practical, gaining the most favorable positions they could.

Montgomery continued to press his 3rd and 43rd Divisions along the coast, and was approaching the port of Bone. In the center, flanking that city, he pressed his 6th and 10th Armored Divisions towards Souk Ahras as planned. This move displaced the US 3rd infantry further south, and now Patton was looking over the map to plot his next move. His only problem was the sad fact that he had run out of "good roads."

"Damnit Brad, you invite someone to dinner and they stay all night. Now Monty is pushing for Souk Ahras, and he's already astride the road I was going to use. Anderson's 3rd Infantry is out of a job. If they can't go north up that road, there's nothing but mountain country north and east of their position."

"George, the same can be said of the entire 1st Armored Division. Looks like you've talked yourself into playing second fiddle."

“Not on your life,” said Patton. “I’ve already pushed Eddy’s 9th Infantry through Charpinville and on up to Sidi Amour. That opens onto a valley heading due east. Hell, I could press on to Thala, and all the way to Bou Aziz. Look, we can pick up Highway 4 there, and it goes all the way to Tunis. Either that or we could swing north for Le Kef and Souk al Arba, right around Monty’s flank. There’s a damn good airfield there that I would love to get my hands on.”

“True, but don’t forget Rommel. We stopped him, but he’s still down near Kasserine. Air recon shows the Germans are still holding the passes screening both Thelepte and Kasserine. They’re still dangerous down there, and I wouldn’t go sticking my nose out until we know more about Rommel’s intentions.”

“Well enough, Brad, but just the same, I’m going to do a little recon here and there to see what might develop. We’ve been sitting on this ridge for too long. I want Terry Allen’s 26th RCT and Blade Force to push out to the next ridge. We’ll occupy that and see if Rommel still wants to pick a fight. In the meantime, Allen can swing the other two regiments up to Thala and have a look around. We can flank Kasserine Pass on that road.”

“Well if you know that, then Rommel knows it too.”

“Of course,” said Patton. “Now let’s see what he wants to do about it. That’s how you play the game, Brad. You don’t win by sitting on the scrimmage line and pounding out two or three yards at a time like Montgomery. You’ve got to throw the damn football sometimes, and have a good receiver out there to catch it. I’m ordering both armored divisions to get moving. Don’t worry, I can push out one combat command and hold CCB from each division in reserve. Fair enough?”

“Well don’t you think we ought to discuss this with Eisenhower. After all, he’s the boss out here.”

“Sure, sure. You go ahead and arrange a meeting. But by the time you do, I’ll have Thala, and a halfway decent road to Bou Aziz and Highway 4.” Patton smiled, cocksure and confident, as always. That was going to move the Americans in a direction that would soon set up a most remarkable plan, but it would not dawn in the mind of George Patton. In the meantime, the Germans had a lot on their minds that night as well.

* * *

What was Rommel going to do? That was the question of the hour. Von Arnim had pulled both his divisions into a tight defense of the passes leading to Souk Ahras. Montgomery would not get through easily, and the mountainous country he was in would not permit him to flank the positions the Germans had staked out. For him, it was going to be the running game, that grueling battle of attrition, both there, and on the coast. Yet Souk Ahras was an important objective, as it was right astride the rail, which first ran south from Bone before turning east to Bizerte and Tunis. If it were taken, the troops defending Bone would have to rely on the coastal road for further supplies.

Patton seemed to be probing his way forward into a void. The Germans had given up a good deal of ground, with the 334th Infantry screening the far end of that long central valley the American General was so keen to explore. Further south, Von Bismarck's 21st Panzer Division still held the pass closed at Kasserine, but also had to send a number of smaller KG's north to watch roads from Thala that lead into Sibiba and Rohia. 7th Panzer held at Thelepte, covering the two good airfields in that area for the Luftwaffe. Randow's 15th Panzer was still holding a wide front in the far south, with one KG facing off the French Constantine Division southwest of Ghafsa, and another watching the American 34th Infantry Division.

The rain continued, dampening Rommel's spirits as much as anything else. He realized that his command was now well dissipated, static, and waiting on defense. Gone were the three factors he had lived by through most of his successful campaigns: speed, concentration of force, and shock. It was as if his Yang had suddenly flipped to Yin, and his mind was equally beset with the dark side, his thoughts sullen and bitter.

How long can I sit here this way, he asked himself? O'Connor has already taken Medinine, and now he is attacking the Mareth line. I am told he hits my infantry with armor, then pulls out. He switches out one division for another, hammering at the gate.

That was a very apt description of what O'Connor had been forced to do by those orders from Whitehall. At this point, Rommel was not aware of how grave the British viewed the situation in Iraq, willing to pull forces from Burma, Australia, and now O'Connor's 8th Army to build up strength in Iraq—willing to sacrifice Crete and withdraw there instead of the strongly contested battle that Churchill would have preferred. As far as Rommel was concerned, his last chance for glory was now slowly slipping from his grasp.

In a fit of despair, the weary German General drove to Thelepte to board a plane bound for Tunis to see Kesselring, and when he arrived, he told him he wanted to fly home to Germany.

Kesselring was surprised at first, but he inwardly thought this would be best, and he said as much. “Your health has been in decline for some time now. It has been two long years here in some of the most forbidding terrain on the planet. Even a Field Marshal must take rest. Do not worry about your situation here. Nehring will take temporary command, and I will make sure the Italians don’t get their hands on anything.”

After the loss of Tripoli, the Italians had been pressing Kesselring to remove Rommel and replace him with an Italian General. Kesselring paid them lip service, but never seriously contemplated such a move. General Nehring had recovered from a wound he had received in a bombing attack, and was still ready for service. In the real history, he had openly voiced opposition to holding Tunisia at all, which saw him quickly branded as a defeatist and denounced by Goebbels. That had not happened here, as Nehring had time to recover from his wounds in Germany, and when he got word that Kesselring had asked for him, he was more than happy to go back to North Africa.

Rommel had worked with him, knew he was a stubborn and skillful defender, but questioned his dash on offense. “You will have a pair of cagey defenders on your hands,” he told Kesselring. “You may have to use the lash if you are to get them to pull your wagon on offense.”

“That is what I have you for,” said Kesselring, trying to build up Rommel’s spirits. “Yes, the Italians hate you, and will undoubtedly be glad to see you gone. Yet you have performed brilliantly here, under the most rigorous possible conditions, always short on supply, and facing heavy odds. Be proud of what you accomplished. The Army you leave behind loves you, and they will remember you as well. Go home, take your much needed rest, spend time with your dear wife, and when you are ready, we will be here, as will the army.”

“Will you?” said Rommel darkly. “Montgomery is pushing on Bone and Souk Ahras.”

“We’ve given him everything he’s taken thus far. Don’t worry about him. This American General Patton, he’s the one to watch. I’ll have Nehring keep him in check. We’ll fight the defensive battle while you rest. Let me share a little secret with you—there are still two divisions in France earmarked for

Tunisia.”

“What, a pair of second rate infantry units?”

“Quite the contrary. One is Hans Hube’s old outfit—the 16th Panzer Division. It is in Marseilles this very moment, and I have only to obtain permission to begin shipping it over. The other division is infantry, the 337th. True, it is not a first tier division, but given the terrain advantage we have here, it will do nicely.”

“Why didn’t you tell me of this earlier?” said Rommel, somewhat exasperated. “One more panzer division would have made all the difference in Operation *Sturmflut* .”

“I could not get permission earlier, and in fact, I am not even sure if I can get permission now. Hitler is heady with his new Winter offensives, particularly this business with Guderian in Syria and Iraq. He was disappointed that our operation had to be called off, but I have used this to good advantage. I told him that the frontage was simply too great, and the lack of infantry forced us to use two of the five panzer divisions in defensive roles. Then I suggested that things would have been very different if Hube’s old division were here, instead of minding the docks at Marseilles.”

“What did he say to that?”

“He told me he would consider it, and he has already released the 337th Infantry. Who knows, if we are lucky, we may get 16th Panzer Division in the same bargain.”

Rommel would get that division in time, but not in the way he imagined and hoped. “I’ll put in a good word for you when I make my report,” he said. “It will be humiliating to have to explain away yet one more failure here, but I am responsible, and so I should take the blame.”

“Do not be so hard on yourself,” said Kesselring. “In fact, I think Hitler has come to a new understanding of your trials here—at least that is what he said to me. He also spoke of a new tank that he wanted you to see. I don’t know what that’s about, but if it means we get more of the Big Cats down here, all the better.”

Two days later, Rommel would board a plane for Germany, feeling a strong sense of nostalgia to be leaving North Africa, and having the premonition that he would never return. Yet something deep within him knew his war was not yet over. He could see, far off in his mind, another battlefield, though he did not yet know where that might be. What did Germany do with its worn out war horses, he wondered? Particularly when

they are Field Marshals....

As for Operation Merkur, the message received by Alanbrooke was just the first concerning Crete. Even as Rommel flew home, the elite German paratroopers of Student's 1st Fallschirmjaeger Division were leaping from the JU-52s over the northwestern segment of the island. It was now theirs to practice the art of offense that Rommel expounded. They would strike by surprise, with speed, and shock, concentrating as much force as possible on their chosen objectives the first day.

Kurt Student, and all his soldiers, had learned a very great deal in Operation Condor, and now they would put it to very good use.

Chapter 17

The lessons of Arrecife, Fuerteventura, and Gran Canaria were now going to pay the Germans good dividends. This battle for Crete would not be anything like the disaster it was in the old history. The Germans had learned that they could not land directly on objectives that were strongly held by the enemy. In the few instances where that had happened on Gran Canaria, particularly near the airfield they wanted, casualties had been very high. The units had been scattered, heavier weapons often out of reach of the ground troops. But Kurt Student had reacted quickly, ordering subsequent drops to be made on ground clear of the enemy, so his men could coalesce again as fighting units, under familiar officers.

This was the model that would be followed on Crete. Instead of landing directly on Maleme to try and take the airfield by storm, the battalions of 1st Falschirmjaeger Regiment, landed on ground some five to seven kilometers to the south. Further west, in the deep horseshoe Bay near Kissamos, the seaborne landing of the 5th Mountain Division would soon be underway. This time, the formidable presence of Admiral Raeder's Mediterranean Fleet would not see the British cruisers lance through to the convoy and send so many troops to their doom.

Kissamos was 18 kilometers from the airfield at Maleme, some 10 miles. That morning, the pathfinders of the 7th Pioneer battalion would land there to secure the beach sites, set up beacons and guide the assault boats in. All the while, the first men on the ground could hear the deep booming rumble of heavy guns, and those close enough to the coast could look out and see the angry orange-yellow blast of *Bismarck's* 15-inch guns. The big German ships were shelling Allied positions around Chania and Suda Bay, defended by the 6th Greek Regiment, and the British Naval Mobile Defense Organization, which included 1st Battalion of the Royal Welsh Fusiliers.

All the attacks were to be concentrated on the northwest coast of the island. 1st Falschirmjaeger Regiment was assigned to the Maleme sector, the 2nd Regiment would land east of Suda Bay and drive along the coast towards Suda and Chania, the Sturm Regiment under Meindel would land around Rethymnon to secure that small port and airfield, and finally, the 3rd Falschirmjaeger Regiment would land southwest of Heraklion to get that port

and airfield. They were the farthest east on the island, about 70 Kilometers from Rethymnon over a winding, difficult highland road. It was expected that the British might try to land reinforcements there, or on the small ports along the southern coast, and they were to prevent that enemy buildup if at all possible.

Yet the defenders on the Island were much weaker in many ways that they were in 1941. Freyberg's 2nd New Zealand Division was entirely missing, along with all the Australian troops. There were still six Greek Regiments, a full brigade of British regulars, and one prominent addition that was new to this history—the 3rd Polish Carpathian Brigade. It had fought in North Africa, becoming a tough and reliable force, and it had been one of the few reserves available to send to Crete, which seemed a forsaken outpost given all the many hot spots on every front.

The British had a contingency plan to quickly reinforce Crete by sending a commando group dubbed “Layforce” and the 1st and 2nd Parachute Regiments—Browning's Boys, as they were called after their distinguished leader Sir Frederick Arthur Montague “Boy” Browning. The plan was to quickly land these units at the RAF controlled airfields, or along the southern coast, and then have them hump it north to join the fight, with Heraklion a major planned objective.

Yet the discussion, and decision, reached by Churchill and Alanbrooke would change those plans. Those airborne troops, if sent at all, would only be tasked with facilitating the speedy withdrawal of other units in the field. It also seemed that everyone was trying to get their hands on Browning's Boys at the same time. Wavell had wanted them immediately when the Germans launched Operation Phoenix. Montgomery had laid out plans for them to drop behind the port of Bone, which he was now approaching after a long delay, and now they were figured into the rescue operation for Crete.

So this was not your grandfather's Operation Mercury. Germans battalions, landing far from their objectives, would soon reform and begin their advance on the ground as largely intact units. They had naval gun support, just enough air support to tussle with the RAF and achieve parity over the island, and they had 5th Mountain Division landing intact over the first two or three days of the operation, with no real attempt by the Royal Navy to intervene. That is what the presence of the *Bismarck*, *Friedrich de Gross*, *Prinz Heinrich*, *Kaiser Wilhelm* and the *Goeben* did for the operation, it gave the Germans control of the sea north of the island from day one.

Yet it is said that no plan survives first contact with the enemy, and that was to be the case near Maleme. First off, Major General Heidrich and his headquarters staff landing west of Kissamos found that the British had posted a small garrison there near an air strip they had been working on, and it had been bolstered with sandbagged positions. He had to send in his HQ company, and then ordered the 7th Pioneer Pathfinder Battalion to attack those positions, which meant that several of the beaches would not be cleared and marked at dawn.

Then, when 1st Battalion of the 1st Fallschirmjaeger Regiment landed in an area well south of Maleme, they were again surprised to find a Carpathian motorcycle company posted in the small hamlet of Voukolies. That would hold up the entire battalion as they deployed to surround and clear that town, and this would leave only two battalions left to make the initial attack towards Maleme, instead of the full regiment as planned. As they advanced, they soon encountered a solid defensive line put up by the 3rd Carpathian Brigade. The fight for Maleme, though not so bloody at the outset, soon promised to be very difficult.

At Rethymnon, the Sturm Regiment landed much closer to the town, which was held only by local Military Police Companies and the 2nd Argyll & Sutherland Highland Battalion. The problem there was that the port and airfield were widely separated, about 10 kilometers apart. The Germans seemed to make good progress against the port, but two Greek Regiments were sitting on either side of the airfield.

The Allied side was not without equal problems, and chief among them was the order sent through Alexander's HQ by Alanbrooke that every effort was to be made to withdraw units safely to ports on the south coast of the island to be taken off by the Royal Navy. The Greeks didn't like those orders, and a few feisty Majors said they would flat out refuse to carry them out. As an example of the chaos this caused, Major Serhos of the 5th Greek Regiment obeyed the order and started his men marching south over Hill B near Rethymnon. Major Tryfon's 4th Regiment, also at that same airfield, did nothing, staying put in their positions and deciding to fight when the first German units made contact.

A similar situation played out near Chania, with Captain Wolner's 2nd Greek Regiment obeying the order and heading for the hills to the south, while Colonel Gregorio's 6th Greek Regiment decided to simply sit and do nothing until runners could make contact with the British at Chania and sort

the matter out. When the runner reached the city, he was surprised to see the British had no problems carrying out their orders.

The Welsh Fusiliers were already in column of march, abandoning Chania and heading south. Supplies that could not be carried were being burned or thrown into the sea at the harbor. Stevedores finished with that sad task were looking to quickly follow that infantry, and all of this was happening under the whine of *Stukas* coming in at dawn to bomb the whole area. Fires started by the naval bombardment of the harbor burned in the warehouses and dock yard, and a pall of heavy smoke hung over the entire scene. Chaos was not half a word for what was happening. Even the Greek King in exile, George II, found his entourage strafed by German planes as the 2nd Royal Engineers from Suda Bay tried to hustle him to safety. He had stubbornly refused to leave the Island after the Germans took the mainland, but now he had no recourse.

As soon as the British regulars marched off, the dock workers from Palestine and other Arab countries quickly followed them. Only the fixed shore batteries, and all the AA gun crews would bravely man their weapons, hoping to fend off the German air attacks on the long column now heading south.

Shame played a part in what was happening. Those two Greek regiments that did withdraw as ordered soon met the scornful rebuke of the local citizenry as they marched into the highlands. There, men were gathering in bands, armed with whatever they could find, a pistol, and old shotgun or hunting rifle, and planning to mount a guerilla style defense. With both their honor and manhood impugned, many of the Greek regulars were so ashamed that they simply broke from their march column and joined the guerillas. Down on the coast, Colonel Gregorio's 6th Greek saw the British march off, was utterly outraged, and then simply ordered his men to attack the German companies advancing on Suda Bay.

But one force held its ground, intending to fight to the last—Brigadier Kopanski's Carpathians at Maleme. He had held the line against the first German assaults, and now he was pulling in his companies to form a tighter perimeter. The Polish artillery fired incessantly, churning up the fields and forcing the German paras to go to ground. At the moment, they could only answer with small mortars and one battery of four 75mm guns.

East of this fight, the 7th Pioneers had finally overwhelmed the enemy detachment near Kissamos, and now the 5th Mountain Division was able to

land its recon and pioneer battalions, and 1st Battalion of the 85th Regiment. They were all on the road heading east towards Maleme Airfield, a much needed reinforcement. In the old history, without those seaborne landings, the Germans had to fight for Hill 107 and Maleme Airfield at great cost so they could land fresh troops to move west to Chania. This time the original plan was on track, and Ringel's mountain troops were on the way.

By the end of that day, the German paras were already starting to run low on supplies and ammo, resting exhausted companies and sending in fresh men from the rear. They were waiting for the Luftwaffe to make a scheduled air drop the morning of the 21st, and took heart as they watched the Luftwaffe swoop and dive on the enemy strong points. The RAF had been ordered back to Alexandria, the planes abandoning Kastelli, Butterfield, and all the main fields near the key towns. A few planes still operated from Timbakion in the south to cover the relief convoy that was scheduled to arrive after dark on the 22nd. As for Raeder's task force, it was moving east, bound for the Aegean, its work accomplished in successfully covering the landing of 5th Mountain Division.

Late on the 21st of February, the first columns began to arrive along the south coast. The next day, British would evacuate the 2nd Royal Leicester Battalion, 2nd Black Watch, 2nd Yorcs & Lancs, KRRC Rangers, Welsh Fusiliers, 2nd Royal Engineer Battalion, and 2nd Argyll & Sutherland Highlanders. It was a full Brigade, and would be most welcome at Alexandria, where General Alexander could put it to good use on his Syrian Front. All the stevedores and dock workers that had followed them were routed further west on the coast to Ay Roumelis, and some went very resentfully when a British Sergeant bawled at them to move on, saying the main road was for British regulars only.

What was left of the 2nd Greek Regiment reached Sougia, some of the men openly weeping to realize the last free Greek soil was being lost, and they had not fought for it in any way. Their officers tried to buck them up by saying they must survive to join the Allied armies and fight on for Greece, but what they had seen of their allies, mainly their backsides as they retreated south, left them with little hope. That was the only Greek Regiment that got off the island, all the others fighting, or melting into the countryside to join what would become a long simmering guerilla war against the Germans.

The night of the 21st, two British Submarines slipped in close to the harbor at Chania, and they took on several AA gun crews that had been

bravely holding their posts. The shore batteries were being spiked, but most of those men knew there would be no ship or submarine coming for them. They sat glumly near their demolished guns, some smoking cigarettes while they could, and contemplating the rest of the war as prisoners.

Shame was not reserved for the Greeks in their dilemma as to whether to fight or withdraw. When the British Ack Ack gunners saw Colonel Gregorio's 6th Greek Regiment still doggedly trying to hold the line down near the seaplane base on Suda Bay, some looked for rifles to go and join them. They had fired at the German planes until their ammo ran out, then destroyed their Bofors guns to deny the enemy their use. Most simply could not just sit there as long as the Greeks kept fighting.

On the Afternoon of the 22nd of February, General Brooke called on Churchill to give him the news. "Well," he said with a shrug. "Jerry's got Crete—at least the main cities and ports. The 3rd Carpathians are still fighting for Maleme, and we still hold Chania, but it's only a matter of time now—perhaps another day or two."

Churchill was standing facing the warm hearth in his private chambers, his hands folded behind his back. "The relief convoy? He said quietly.

"It pulled off most all of the British regulars, but only one Greek regiment made it to the southern coast, and that was just battalion strength when it did."

"The King?"

"He's Safely aboard a submarine and bound for Alexandria."

A moment of silence passed, and Alanbrooke knew Churchill was battling his inner demons over the decision. He waited respectfully for a moment more, then tried to put things in more positive terms.

"Alexander now had another good provisional brigade to lend a hand in Syria. And Boy Browning's two Regiments can now safely be assigned to Iraq." But Churchill's mind was elsewhere.

"Brookie..." he began, "we let them down." It was as if he hadn't heard a thing Alanbrooke had said. "We let them down and they won't forget this. God only knows if they'll ever forgive us. I want everything done for the King, and I'll get a letter off today with assurances that the British Empire will not rest until every last inch of Greek soil is finally liberated from German occupation."

"I understand, sir," said Brooke.

"Now," said Churchill. "What about the *Bismarck* and *Friedrich de*

Grosse?”

“Oh, they moved east into the Aegean. I can’t imagine that they would attempt to make a sortie against Palestine. If they do, we’ve enough air power there to make them pay for that indiscretion.”

“They aren’t going to shell Beirut,” said Churchill knowingly. “I’ve spoken with Bletchley Park again this morning. Those ships are headed for the Black Sea.”

“What? Up through the Bosphorus?”

“Indeed. BP thinks they want to pick a fight with the Russian Black Sea Fleet. Hitler seems keen on getting rid of it. He fiddled about with that Zeppelin raid on Novorossiysk a while back. This appears to be his *coup de grace*.”

“Well,” said Brooke. “A pity we didn’t get this earlier. We could have submarines waiting for them south of those narrows. And I daresay that’s what we’ll have to do if they ever get the notion of returning to the Med. In the meantime, I’ll take this as good news, Mister Prime Minister. What was left of the German Navy in the Med is now nicely bottled up in the Black Sea. All we have to do is make sure we keep the cork in the bottle.”

He smiled, but Churchill didn’t see him, and said nothing more.

Chapter 18

Operation Merkur would be a resounding success, and when Hitler got the news he was elated. All of the new offensives he had reinstated were going right according to plan. He was again filled with that heady adrenalin born of victory. With Crete taken, he would soon move in second line infantry to garrison the place, and turn it over to Goring for the movement of flak batteries and Luftwaffe personnel to work the airfields. He now had a good outer wall protecting the Aegean Sea, with his troops on both Crete and Cyprus, and small detachments on a few of the other Greek islands.

So the Führer was in high spirits when Rommel came to see him at OKW, saluting grimly, trying to force a smile, but averting his eyes with a sense that he had let the Führer down.

“Ah, Herr Rommel, my Field Marshal has finally come home.”

“It is good to be here,” said Rommel, “though I wish I could have come to you with better news concerning Operation *Sturmflut*. It was—”

Hitler knew a litany of excuses and complaints would soon follow, but that was not the conversation he wanted to have today with Rommel, so he cut him off at the pass.

“No need to explain,” said Hitler. “I have finally seen what you were up against, and frankly, I cannot believe that you prevailed so brilliantly given the odds and equipment the enemy had to put against you. Those heavy British tanks were most impressive. How many do you believe they had there in North Africa? Was it a full brigade as you reported earlier?”

Somewhat surprised by this sudden tack in the conversation, Rommel now recalled what Kesselring had told him. “I believe so—a strong mechanized force, but—”

“Well, I can assure you that I now fully understand your situation. You tried to tell me all of this before, but seeing that captured enemy panzer you sent me finally made things clear to me. Herr Rommel, I must apologize to you for not supporting you. I should have sent you much more in the way of armor and supplies. Yet, having seen that new enemy tank, I think you would have still had the same hardships and difficulties you experienced. This is something that we must answer with solid German engineering. The British have a leg up on us, but we can and will respond. Come with me. Let me

show you exactly what I am talking about..."

Rommel would soon see his first *Königstiger*, the prototype shipped to OKW HQ so Hitler could seek advice from others on how best to modify the tank. He was particularly interested in Rommel's opinion, and seeing the largest main battle tank built by Germany in the war, he could not help but be impressed.

"This is but a prototype," said Hitler. "As you can see, the main gun is inadequate, and so I have ordered it up-gunned to 120mm. The armor is not yet as strong as I wish, and the engineers are looking hard at the unique design used by that British monster. They tell me it is a composite of tiles, metal backing and other odd materials. Most unusual. I have ordered changes, and the engineers are working on them even now. Please, take your time and inspect this vehicle. If there is anything your trained eye spots that I may have overlooked, simply make a list and I will send it directly to the engineers."

"When might we see one of these in the field?" asked Rommel.

"I am optimistic that we can begin real production very soon, perhaps six months. This version is the Tiger II. I am also scheduled to see the newest Lion designs, so we will have a nice little competition. Oh, yes... Did I mention that Guderian has finally reached Baghdad? There is a man you could work with, Rommel. He's run from the Turkish border all the way to Baghdad in a little over a month. It reminds me of the early days in Libya, when you were chasing the British to the Egyptian border. I have no doubt that you would have reached the Nile easily enough, were it not for that new enemy tank. That was the real problem in North Africa, and we must never allow the enemy such an advantage again."

"My Führer, I am relieved and much gratified that you finally see this, but I am still sorry I let you down."

"Nonsense, nonsense. If you had a beast like this at your command, you would have certainly beaten the British at their own game. We were late, that is all. This will be corrected. There will be more—new Panzerjagers with even heavier armor, new planes to support them, and deadly new weapons for our bombers. I have seen the results of a number of tests, and things are looking up! Last week, I delivered a nice little surprise to London. We have a new bomb—very powerful—and I am told it uses uranium at its core to create the explosion. It was only a prototype again, a small warhead to test the feasibility of such a weapon, but the results were very good. Now..."

Imagine yourself at your new command, with tanks like these, and a weapon that can smite the enemy armor concentrations and utterly destroy them! This is what lies ahead, Rommel. So do not look so glum.”

“My Führer, I have every hope to continue serving you.”

“Good. Take your rest, and then I will have new operations for you to oversee. Much will happen in the months ahead—you will see.”

“On that note,” said Rommel. “I was told there may be another panzer division for Tunisia. That would come in very handy there. If I did not have to use a full division to cover my southern flank near Ghafsa, I would have —”

“Yes, yes, all that is over,” said Hitler with a wave of his hand. “We must look to the future now. This business in Iraq is a major new front, and we certainly caught the British by surprise. I want you to look over the reports, see if you have any recommendations—when you have time, of course. First, go and see your family. Then, when you have rested, report to me again. I have big plans for my Field Marshall. This Winter offensive was very well timed.”

“In Russia?” asked Rommel.

“No, everything is frozen solid in Russia, and be glad you are not there if you think the desert was a harsh environment. Nothing has moved there for months, but the spring thaw must come one day, and we will soon look north to Leningrad. By that time, most of the Panzer divisions assigned to that operation will have been rebuilt. It was only this necessity that prevented me from sending you more in North Africa. I hope you understand.” Rommel nodded.

“The real winter surprise was in the Middle East, and this will matter a great deal, you will see. Once I get Baghdad and push on to Basra, I will have choked the life blood out of the British position in the Middle East. Then you and I will meet to discuss how best to proceed. I will want your thoughts on all of that, so do make time to read those reports sent by General Guderian. At last he shows me what he is capable of. In Russia he had the same complaints as you—new enemy tanks, inadequate supplies and fuel, impossible weather conditions. Now I think I have finally put the right man in the right place at the perfect time.” Hitler smiled. “Perhaps you will join him soon, and with tanks like this one at your command. Imagine that, Herr Rommel.”

The dark light was kindled in the Führer’s eyes, but for his champion, far

away in Iraq, the cold light of reality was now in Guderian's eyes as he considered what was now before him.

* * *

Baghdad, thought Guderian as he looked at the distant city, silhouetted by the red ball of the setting sun on the 22nd of February. Six weeks and here we are. There's the city, the minarets rising above the domes of those ancient mosques, the smoke from the souks and bazaars. It sits there like Moscow, the heart of this country, with a river winding its way through the middle of the city, just like the Russian capital. This time, I hope we do not have to burn the place down to take it.

Back in '41, it was the bone numbing cold and snow. Here it will be just the opposite. It is pleasant now, with temperatures reaching no more than 70 degrees Fahrenheit, but that will change in a few months. I am told that by late August, the mercury will be pushing 120 degrees here in this desert. It is only this mighty river that allows this place to exist. It comes all the way from the Turkish frontier, just as I have, but now this river is nothing more than an obstacle.

I have my Brandenburgers here on the west side of the Tigris. That's where my first objectives are, the airport at Al Muthana, and of course the main rail yards. We've finally cleared the rail lines north to Mosul. The old Berlin to Baghdad railway is finally ours again, and as long as I can keep rolling stock moving, we'll get adequate supply, and perhaps even reinforcements. So the Brandenburg Division will fight to clear this side of the river, and secure those two key objectives. Schmidt's 10th Motorized will fight with them, and that will give me seven regiments here, considering that I will have all five regiments of the Brandenburg Division.

Now that Kirkuk is ours, Hitler must be dancing about OKW and in a fine mood. Good. I hope it lasts a while. But something tells me this fight here is going to be more difficult than anything we have yet attempted in this operation. Out along the Euphrates, we used our speed and superior motorization to simply run rings around those British Indian Divisions. One made it back here, in the south near the airport. The other went to Kirkuk, until the odds there looked too grim, and now it is undoubtedly retreating south to come here as well. From all reports, there are two others, the 8th and 6th Indian Divisions. So this may become a difficult fight.

I've taken the time to resupply, and get that rail line open. Now I have Schneider's 4th Panzer Division east of the Tigris after he crossed at Al Taji. Tomorrow Westhoven returns with Hans Hube and all of 3rd Panzer Division. He stopped that spoiling attack the British launched at Palmyra, and thankfully, Hitler keeps producing the ground units he promised me, so that front can be held by the troops from 12th Infantry Korps.

There was some trouble up north after the British abandoned Kirkuk. It seems that Volkov's Turkomen divisions thought they were going to rule the roost there at Baba Gurgur, but I had specific orders from Hitler himself that those oil fields were to be occupied by German troops. Volkov's rabble got pushy, until Oberst Barenthin showed up with his Sturm Regiment of Fallschirmjagers. That settled the matter. The regiments of the 78th Sturm Division have come south on a parallel track to the retreating enemy units, and that will even the score here.

It will leave some 30,000 Turkomen infantry up there near Kirkuk by all accounts, but none of them want to tangle with Barenthin. I'll get another infantry regiment for Kirkuk, and the Turkomen troops can serve as garrisons elsewhere in the region, and keep an eye on the Kurds. Lord knows, I don't want any of that rabble down here stumbling about my operations. As far as Volkov's contingent is concerned, their war here is over. Let them sit about and smoke their hashish.

Alright, the engineers have shored up the Hasan Bridge south of Al Taji. When Westhoven arrives tomorrow, he can use that bridge and join Schneider east of the river. Then I'll want both divisions to strike from the north and aim right for the heart of the city. This place is a warren of political and military objectives. We'll need to take the Royal Mausoleum and other palaces, all the rail yards and workshops, the key government ministry buildings, parliament, the major banks, and of course, the key bridges, if we can get them intact. There are also embassies from Belgium, Spain, Syria, Lebanon, Iran, Britain, the United States, and even China. Those of belligerent countries will have to be taken, searched, and closed.

I might swing around the city from the north, and see what prospects that might offer. There are a series of canals there, and a long berm the British call the "bund." Those will be real obstacles for the panzer divisions, so I may need those regiments of the 78th to fight their way across and get me little bridgeheads for the mobile forces to cross the canals unmolested. After that, we take the fight to the city, and it will undoubtedly be house to house in

places.

I have in hand perhaps the best and most experienced street fighters in all of Germany—the Brandenburgers. Fresh troops for the Lehr Regiment came in by rail on the first train from Mosul yesterday, and now that regiment has four good battalions. Most of these men cut their teeth in Volgograd, and this can be no worse. I'm told the British can be stubborn and tenacious on defense when they dig in their heels. We shall soon see.

What about the 22nd Luftland Division? There being no apparent threat to Dier-ez Zour and Haditha, I'll leave the 47th and 65th Regiments there, and bring the 16th Luftland Regiment forward for a reserve infantry force. Lastly, there is one more arrival promised me this week on the next train from Mosul, and most timely. The good news I've sent Hitler has prompted him to cherry pick yet another fine unit from the Russian front. I will get the 901 Lehr Motorized Regiment, men I fought with in my drive for Serpukhov in 1941. As an independent unit, I can see why it caught Hitler's eye. Oberst Georg Scholze still has that outfit, with good grenadier battalions under Kurt, Kübler and Schumer, a Panzerjager battalion under Hauptmann Klein, and my friend Alfred Muller with the Sturmgeschütz-Kompanie. I know them all. That will come in good time, and be most useful here.

Guderian looked at his watch, feeling the warmth rising with the early dawn. 1st Brandenburg Regiment will push right into Kazimiyah and try to get me my next bridge. That leads to the Faisal Mausoleum down where the river makes that sharp bend, and it covers the Al Safina Ferry site on the other side of the river. Once we have that, then we have two good crossing points, the bridge and the ferry sites.

Further south, I will send in 2nd Brandenburg Regiment along the main rail line. They'll need to take the Spinning & Weaving factory, then push on through the palm gardens to Al Tayfiah Ferry. 3rd Regiment will be on their right, south of the gardens, and they must root the enemy out of the grain silos and factory buildings there. As for 10th Motorized, they drive though the outlying town of Al Mansur, take and threaten to take those royal palaces. That will put them in a good position to flank that airfield.

It begins now....

NOTE: Maps of all Guderian's operations are available at Writingshop.ws on the pages dedicated to Stormtide Rising.

Part VII

Baghdad

“ Thence we travelled to Baghdad, the Abode of Peace and Capital of Islam. Here there are bridges like that at Hilla, on which the people promenade night and day, both men and women. The town has eleven cathedral mosques, eight on the right bank and three on the left, together with very many other mosques and madrasas, only the latter are all in ruins. The baths at Baghdad are numerous and excellently constructed, most of them being painted with pitch, which has the appearance of black marble. This pitch is brought from a spring between Kufa and Basra, from which it flows continually. It gathers at the sides of the spring clay and is shoveled up and brought to Baghdad....”

— Ibn Battuta of Tangiers

Chapter 19

22 FEB, 1943

The pitch that gushed forth from the “spring” between Kufa and Basra was oil, and somehow the artisans of the 12th Century found a way to use it as a pigment to create that ‘Black Marble’ finish that now lined the baths of Baghdad. Oil had been at the root and stem of Iraq’s importance for decades, ever since Otto von Bismarck pushed hard to see the construction of the Berlin to Baghdad railway. Oil was becoming the life blood of modern industrial economies, and therefore, the life blood of war.

Von Bismarck also saw the rail line as a way to connect Germany with its colonies in Africa, and German engineers like Wilhelm von Pressel were retained by the Turks to help construct the lines within Turkey—the very same railroads that Germany had spent a long year refurbishing to make Operation Phoenix possible. The threat this rail line posed was now quite apparent to the British. It was a steel line bisecting her empire, threatening to bring the Germans between Egypt, Palestine, and the Crown Jewel colony of India.

This is partly the reason why the British fought so hard to neutralize the Ottoman Turks in Syria and Arabia in WWI, and to curtail German access to the oil of ‘Mesopotamia’ and the Persian Gulf. The fabled ‘Lawrence of Arabia’ made attacks on these steel rail lines his calling card in the Great War, becoming a champion of the Arab thirst for independence after it concluded.

Victorious in WWI, Britain cemented these restrictions into the Treaty of Versailles, rescinding German ownership of the Berlin to Baghdad Railway. The Kingdom gained exclusive rights to oil development in Mesopotamia and southern Persia for its Anglo-Persian Company, and the British Army extended the rail line from Baghdad all the way to Basra.

The Sykes-Picot Agreement signed after WWI then saw the victorious Allied powers slicing up the Middle East and giving territories away as protectorates as if they were pieces of cake. Britain would gain control of Palestine, all the way to the River Jordan, and of all Southern Iraq. France took control of Northern Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and even portions of Southern

Turkey. Russia's shadow fell over Istanbul, the Turkish Straits, and Armenia. The borders drawn in the sand, long straight lines to define all these new states, would cut right across ethnic and cultural enclaves, and sow the seeds of dissention and strife in this region for decades to come.

It was the beginning of a long romance and marriage the West would have with the oil of the Middle East, and this was not the first time armies would struggle in the sands for control of that vital resource. That battle was still being fought in 2021, in a far off future that only a very few 'interlopers' could perceive in 1943. Oil was the reason Brigadier Kinlan had been sent to Egypt in 2020, and therefore the reason his brigade endured the impossible circumstance of being blasted into the past to make a most significant contribution to Britain's survival in 1942.

Oil was the reason the British endured the torturing heat and privation of the Syrian Desert, obtaining rights to build their pipelines under the sand to reach the Mediterranean coast. It was the reason the Arabs were denied their independence for so long, and it remained the smoldering source of conflict in the region for the next century. The oil of Baba Gugur and other key sites would fuel the engines of war yet again in WWII, and it was the reason that Heinz Guderian was now standing in the smoky dim shadow of the city founded by Abu Ja'far Abdallah ibn Muhammad al-Mansur, the 2nd Abbasid Caliph.

Al-Mansur had called the place 'Madinat al-Salam,' the Round City, which became the core of old 'Baghdad' when it was later renamed. The name meant "God's Gift," and others called it the "City of Peace." That was a commodity that would soon run short in Baghdad, from this day and forward through the decades to the 21st Century. Guderian gave the order to begin the attack two hours before sunrise on the 22nd of February.

(See battle maps 1 and 2)

1st Brandenburg Regiment met the most stubborn defense that morning. The road they were on was constricted by a deep marsh on the right, and crossed by a canal leading to a water pump station on the river. This created a bottle neck no more than 500 meters wide, and into that narrow passage went all three battalions abreast. That might be the frontage for a single battalion on attack, and it made for too many bodies in too open an area, so the companies ended up moving forward in waves. Behind them Konrad's entire

Lehr Regiment was forming up, meant to exploit into the Kazimiyah district, a more heavily built up area to the east.

When the attack slowed to a crawl, quite literally, with the rifle squads on their bellies in the open ground, the Germans then sought to flank the position with 2nd Regiment attacking south of that marsh. They would swarm into the smaller suburb of Al Haditha, named after the town Guderian had taken nearly two weeks earlier at the junction of the Tripoli / Haifa pipelines. This position was guarded by troops of the 1/10 Baluch Rifles in a large walled factory with looms and weaving equipment. They fought hard for four hours, the bullets snapping against those white stone walls and ricocheting off the looms at close quarters. Then the Germans brought up their PzJager battalion, a special unit attached to this regiment that had 12 Panthers and an equal number of Marder III's.

The long barreled 75mm guns on the Panthers blasted away at the factory buildings, which was simply too much for the Indian rifle squads to endure. That site was right on the main road, and when it fell, it would open the way into the hamlet of Zidan, with its lush palm lined gardens and date trees. 7th Battalion had already been fighting its way through this area, opposed by the men of 3/15 Punjab Rifles. Behind it, just south of the main road below Zidan, was yet another factory processing grain, and 4/8th Punjab had thrown up walls of grain bags and fortified the whole site. The tall concrete silo brought back bitter memories of Volgograd for some of the veteran German infantry who had fought there.

The Germans wasted no time bringing up engineers, assault pioneers attached to Obersturmführer Duren's regiment, and he watched through his field glasses as his troops made a classic attack on that silo. By noon, both the Spinning & Weaving Factory and the Grain Factory had been taken, save one building on the south side of the complex where a company of 4/8th Punjab still held out. Yet the British were not about to give up that easily. The 6th Indian Division, defending in all these areas, had a battalion of Royal Engineers, and they were sent in to try and retake the grain silos. They got over the wall on the eastern side of the complex, then three companies attacked, supported by artillery.

It was a gallant attack, the Royal Engineers pressing forward, Bren guns spitting fire at the soldiers of the 9th Brandenburg Battalion. They reached the silo, set charges against one wall to blow a hole, and then stormed in. For the next hour, they had the silo back again, their fire so hot that two German

companies had to retire west of the outer wall for cover, where they immediately began regrouping for a counterattack. It was what Guderian had feared, a heavily built up area, with good concrete and stone buildings, and it would be back and forth for hours to reduce that strongpoint.

With 8th Battalion in reserve, the Germans sent it forward, fresh troops to press an attack against the southern wall of the Grain Factory. At the same time, they moved up more of their own Pioneers, with six panzerfaust teams ready to blast away at the silo. The Royals held the position, braving heavy fire, but events were transpiring east of the Tigris that would soon make a mockery of their gallantry.

(See Battle Map 4)

4th Panzer Division was on the move, pushing over a narrow watercourse that arced around the outlying city settlement of Adhamiya. It was there that 17th Indian Brigade under Brigadier Jenkins of the 8th Division held the line, but they were about to endure the wrath of a full German Panzer Division on attack, something that was quite outside their wartime experience.

The Germans, mounted in halftracks, were organized into three heavy kampfgруппes. Closest to the Tigris, KG Rosenfeld had two battalions of Panzergrenadiers, backed by the Panzerjager company and 2nd Battalion of the 35th Panzer Regiment. They quickly pushed the enemy off their sandbagged positions on the watercourse, forcing them to retire to the outskirts of Adhamiya.

Further east KG Schafer, structured along the same lines as Rosenfeld, came forcefully up a secondary road, and followed a north-south canal the led them to a hole in the enemy lines. Schafer sent his panzers on through, dismounting infantry to try and widen the breach. They had help on their left from a battalion of the 78th Sturm Division, which had finally come down from Kirkuk in time for the attack.

The built up area of Adhamiya was relatively thin, no more than 400 meters, and once beyond it, a secondary road ran south through open fields and local cultivation that washed up against the thicker settlement of the Al Zamiyah District. That district harbored several key objectives. It was accessed by the Kazimiyah Bridge to the west, (called the Aa'mah bridge in 2021), and the Royal Mausoleum of King Faisal was nested further south

behind the prominent domed mosque of Immam Al Azam, two schools, and a hospital. There was also an important fuel depot in the district, which is why 8th Indian commander General Russel had placed a second line of defense on the northern fringe of Al Zamiyah. On the far right, the whole district was protected by two elevated 'bunds' above flooded, marshy canal zones. They roughly followed the lines of what was once the old city wall in ancient times, and now they stood as lines of defense in this new war.

The importance of this sector could not be underestimated, for if it was overrun, it would mean the Germans would already be cutting off General Thompson's 6th Indian Division on the western side of the Tigris, still stubbornly defending Kazimiyah. The vital bridge that bore that same name was the one link that connected the two divisions, and it had to be held. With Jenkins' 17th Indian Brigade embroiled in the fight for Adhamiya, its lines penetrated by KG Schafer, and with Brigadier Ford's 19th Indian Brigade fighting off a heavy attack over the canal and bund line to the east, the fate of the Al Zamiyah District now rested with that second line of defense, the 21st Indian Regiment under Brigadier Purves.

The German halftracks had already come barreling up that secondary road, racing across the open fields, and smashing right into a company of 3/15 Punjab, which shattered and began a hasty retreat. It fell back to artillery that had been brought too far forward, and soon the German machineguns were raking those batteries, sending gun crews scrambling for cover. The other companies of that battalion were shifted west to try and seal the breach, but it was riflemen against armored Panzergrenadiers and tanks.

The one battalion of British regulars in this brigade, 5th Queen's Own Rifles, had been posted along the shores of the vital Kazimiyah bridge and nearby ferry sites. They had not expected to be threatened from the rear, and now the men were looking nervously over their shoulders, hearing the growing sounds of battle behind them.

"Look to your front!" growled Color Sergeant Kemp, though even he could not help but turn his head and cast a wary glance to the east. The mid-day sun gleamed off the golden dome of the Mosque of Imam Al Azam, and they could hear the rising and falling call to prayer from the onion capped spires of the 'minarets,' a word derived from the Arabic word for a lighthouse. Yet these tall towers would not call out to distant ships at sea, but to the sea of the faithful, surrounding the mosque on every side. They were thought to be 'gates joining heaven and earth,' which is why their tall thin

spires strained upwards to the sky, much like the towers of Western Cathedrals.

Sergeant Kemp and his men would not be answering the call to prayer that day, but the Lieutenant soon came with an order for the battalion to form ranks and prepare to move east. It was no more than 1,500 meters to the fighting, and the battalion soon formed up its companies on the eastern edge of the Al Zamiyah District.

“Company.... Fix Bayonets!”

The rattle of the steel bayonets was heard all along the line, and many a private took heart in that. It was a throwback to an earlier time, when the rifle and bayonet would form the heart of any infantry attack. Yet now the enemy was coming in armored beasts that could not be pierced or harmed by those gleaming metal barbs. In this war, the bayonet was mostly a psychological weapon, and the order had the desired effect on the men, bolstering their courage for battle.

“Battalion! Advance!”

Three companies had formed in a long line, and they now swept forward towards the breakthrough on that secondary road. The last was held in reserve near the British “Sport Club” building a few hundred meters to the south. Thrown into the breach, that battalion would take very heavy casualties over the next hours, but they would also hold that line, and slow the German advance.

About four kilometers to the east, there were two natural defense lines that jutted at a 30° angle like a pair of open scissors. The roughly followed the lines of marshy watercourses and canals, the outermost called the ‘Army Canal,’ which was backed by an elevated Bund. At one point, there was a small settlement known as the “Arab Hikmat,” a seething souk on the outskirts of the city. It was now entirely overrun by the troops of the German 78th Sturm Division, supported by KG Kufner of the 4th Panzer Division. That was the enveloping pincer of this attack, finding that settlement to be the one gap in the canal line that might be exploited by armored vehicles.

The Sturm Regiments had done their job, clearing the souk and sending the Arabs scattering wildly in all directions. They secured a small bridge over the canal, and Kufner’s recon companies started across, one racing down the road through a gap in the lines to come right at Brigadier Ford’s HQ of the 19th Indian Brigade. The General and his staff retreated quickly down the road, and that made it clear to him that things were not going well. What was

happening to his men on the outer bund? Then he looked over his shoulder and saw a sight that brought a broad smile to his leathery features—British tanks!

Kingstone had been the first man to greet them. His Kingforce had turned over the positions now occupied by the 8th Indian Division, and moved well south and east along the lower reaches of the Army Canal. They had been watching the long column of General Briggs' 5th Indian Division arriving on the road to Baqubah, very happy to see this much needed reinforcement. When the tanks of the 9th Armored Brigade came clattering up along the inner bund road, Kingstone repeated his exclamation, beaming ear to ear—"bloody marvelous!"

The light tanks of the 3rd Hussars swept by in a dusty column, soon followed by 34 Shermans of the Warwickshire Yeomanry. It was not a brigade padded and heavily reinforced as with those in O'Connor's 8th Army. While his massive 23rd Armored Brigade had 300 tanks, this one would field about 90, with a dozen AEC-III armored cars and a score of light armored carriers. It also had a full battalion of lorried infantry, the 11th Kings Royal Rifles, with four companies. Those men came up to man gaps in the inner bund line where Brigadier Ford had retreated, and the first two tank battalions charged up the road towards that breach to attack KG Schafer. They arrived just in time to save Sergeant Kemp and the 5th Queen's Own Rifles from being overrun near the Sports Club.

The Shermans quickly blasted several halftracks, sending the rest of the 1/I 33 Panzergrenadier Company reeling back, until two panzer companies attached to this kampfguppe came up to give challenge. Between them, they had 28 Pz-IVF2's and a sharp firefight ensued. The Germans found the lighter M5's easy pickings for the long barreled 75s on those F2's. The Shermans had tougher armor, but it could still be easily penetrated by those guns. It would come down to experience, where the Germans possessed a decisive edge, with men who had fought off hordes of T-34s in Russia the previous year. To them, this was no great challenge, and the British would soon learn lessons the Russians had taken over many long months of fighting.

Chapter 20

When word reached Jumbo Wilson at the British Embassy, he looked at the breakthrough by KG Schafer with some alarm. "This puts 24th Indian Brigade in the Kazimiyah District west of the Tigris in a bad way," he said. "If we can't stop that attack, and I mean throw it back completely, then Le Flemming's entire brigade will be cut off, and useless to us for all intents and purposes. I think we should order those troops back over the bridge. They will strongly reinforce the Al Zamiyah District, and then I think we can stop these brigands. For that matter, Barker's 27th Indian Brigade is getting squeezed against the river bend near the Tayfiyah Ferry. Let's get that unit back as well. The ferry site doesn't matter, as long as we hold the east bank landings. Order the 27th to fall back towards the main rail yards."

"Very good, sir," said the staff officer. "And what about the Kazimiyah Bridge?"

"If it can be safely wired for demolition in the midst of all this hubbub, then do so. We should have had charges placed on all these bridges long ago. See to it."

Those orders would soon put a stop to the fighting at the Grain Factory, and the stubborn bottleneck that had held back the 1st Brandenburg Regiment all day would soon be uncorked. Guderian was so bothered by the lack of success there, that he had given orders to Konrad to begin taking his Lehr Regiment around the marshy ground to instead follow the main road and rail lines where 2nd Brandenburg was attacking through the Spinning and Weaving Factory. That order would bring a strong surge of German troops to the Gardens and Grain Factory, just when those orders from Wilson to withdraw would come in the middle of that difficult fight.

24th Brigade was able to disengage and fall back to the Kazimiyah bridge, their scattered companies falling into line and waiting to cross behind a thin rearguard. They would be giving up the bottleneck, the Al Kazam Mosque, Post Office, and Hospital, where a few companies still held forth as part of the rear guard.

Further south, the German assault on the Grain Factory had just pushed the Royal Engineers out of that silo again. The British were doggedly organizing 'for another go,' when the orders finally came to withdraw with

the 27th Indian Brigade and cover the main rail yards. Only 16 of an original 27 squads were left in the battalion, with many walking wounded among the living.

The sun was low and the shadow of evening now crept over the city, the long day finally coming to a close. Under cover of darkness, the Germans would move forward to occupy all of the Kazimiyah District west of the Tigris. But the real crisis point was still the breakthrough by KG Schafer towards Al Zamiyah. The defense of the outlying neighborhood of Adhamiya was completely compromised, the last solid British battalion, the Royal Fusiliers, finally abandoning their well sandbagged positions and falling back.

Kingforce, on the lower Army Canal, was getting confused reports of the action, and the Brigadier was given reason for concern. The breakthrough at the Arab Hikmat had roughed up Ford's 19th Indian Brigade, which had been unable to stop the Germans from crossing the canal and bund line, though they were still holding on the inner bund. If that attack pushed due south, it would have the effect of slowly compromising Kingstone's own positions on the outer bund-canal line. He got on the radio to Wilson to see what was up.

"Good news," he reported. "5th Indian Division is coming through our lines right now. Briggo is taking them up the rail line towards the city center."

"And in the nick of time," said Wilson. "Do the men look like they still have any fight in them?"

"Well, they've had a long march, and may need a good night's rest, but they'll fight," said Kingstone. "I'm worried about Ford's Brigade near the Arab Hikmat. The Germans did us a favor and finally cleared that rat's nest out, but that attack will compromise my positions on the outer bund."

"It may," said Wilson, "but I want you to hold there tonight. You know how the Germans shuffle about after dark. I don't want them thinking they can swing south. Keep a good eye out for me, will you Joe?"

"Right-O," said Kingstone. "Nothing gets round my flank that I won't know about, and if necessary, I'll send out the armored cars to patrol tonight."

"That would be wise. Where is Glubb Pasha? He's a good man in a situation like this."

"God only knows," said Kingstone. "The last I heard, he was west of the Tigris."

“Well, if he can be found, you might want his Dusky Maidens to have a look about tonight.”

“I’ll see what I can do, sir.”

So Kingstone would stay right where he was. But he did put out a radio call in code that only Glubb would hear and understand. He was indeed west of the Tigris, down near Al Haj Kadhm, where the river made a sharp hairpin bend. The rail line ran down around that bend, before continuing south to eventually reach Basra. Since the 10th Indian Division had pulled itself in tight to defend the Royal Palaces, Glubb’s little Arab Legion was the only force watching the rail line now. He had been mixing about with the local Arabs, using his amazing knowledge of the language and culture to see if he could drum up some support from the local tribes, and possibly fill out his ranks a bit.

In many ways, Glubb Pasha was even more skilled as an ambassador to the Arabs than Lawrence of Arabia had been. He could hear every subtlety in the language dialects, and one look at an Arab’s headdress, the way he might wear and tie off his waist sash, his every mannerism, were like an open book to him. He could speak back to the Arabs in that very same dialect, knowing it intimately, and thus made quick and easy friendships, gaining many followers.

Kingstone had tweeted to him that night, obviously wanting him to report, though his men had detected no German movement towards that river bend. Glubb’s men were the only thing stopping the enemy from simply heading south, but he instinctively realized that the Germans could not do that while Baghdad was still in British hands. So he asked the locals to send men to places he knew well if the Huns came that way, and then he took his detachment east, following the road along the river that would eventually take him to one of the real great prizes in this battle—the Al Dayrah Oil Center, which would later come to be called the Dora Refinery.

This facility had really taken root after the war, but now it was a depot and oil storage area, with some small refining capacity. Oil previously refined near Basra was railed up to this depot, and stored in growing tank farms there to serve the needs of the city, and the military. It was a prize that would put good, usable fuel into the hands of Heinz Guderian for his drive south if he won this battle, and Glubb Pasha saw it as the most important objective of the fight.

That’s where he was taking his Arab Legion, and considering that

Kingstone seemed to be asking for his support, he resolved to go find the man and see if he could turn things around. He wanted to convince Kingstone that he should be looking to the defense of those valuable oil stores, but he would not find him that night.

*23 FEB, 1943
(Map 3)*

As the darkness thickened, the evacuation of the Kazimiyah District was completed, with 24th Brigade coming over the bridge in good order and taking up positions in the Al Zamiyah District. The Germans kept up a desultory shelling of the bridge area, which was just enough to prevent the Royal Engineers from getting any real work done to try and set charges. Further south, two companies of the 27th Brigade under Brigadier Alan Barker got pinned against the river near the Al Tayfiyah Ferry, but otherwise, that force retired to take up a new defensive line screening the main rail yards. It was to be their last night of relative calm.

That rail yard was one of Guderian's main objectives on this side of the river. He wanted it to keep his clearing and control of the Baghdad rail line moving along, to gain the workshops, engineering bays and fuel sites there, both for oil and coal. For this attack, he had moved Konrad's Lehr Regiment through the lines of 2nd Brandenburg Regiment, and that night they would rest and prepare for a renewed assault at dawn.

So we are now masters of the west bank as far south as that rail yard, thought Guderian, pleased with the day's work. Except for the delay imposed on the 1st Regiment at the bottleneck, his troops had fought hard and well to clear the two factory sites and garden area, finally reaching the river. Now he knew that he had cut the 6th Indian Division in two, with part of it east of the river in the north retiring over that bridge, and the rest defending the rail yard.

KG Schafer's breakthrough at Adhamiya was the key moment east of the river, he thought. Now that Hans Hube has finally come up with Westhoven's 3rd Panzer Division, that attack can really gain momentum tomorrow. But the British surprised us a bit there when they brought up armor. We had no reports of enemy tanks up until now, and that changes things. I must determine what these units are, but I cannot imagine that they will stop Hube here, not with two good panzer divisions under his command. He'll be like a charioteer, with two strong steeds pulling him to battle. I expect good results

at Al Zamiyah tomorrow, and hopefully we can clear that district quickly.

So both attacks on the 23rd will converge on one area. I want Konrad to focus his efforts north of the rail yards and drive right for the Royal Ferry site and main bridge. I want Hube to ride his chariot due south, cutting off Al Zamiyah, and he is to aim for the Royal Palace, one of many in this city, or so it seems. Perhaps this plan can bag a good chunk of the Indian troops in Al Zamiyah. We shall see how nimble they are today.

Guderian would spend the night in the Spinning & Weaving Factory, consulting with General Beckermann of the Brandenburg Division and laying out what he wanted from him the following morning.

“The Lehr Regiment will do the work tomorrow,” he said. “Swing them north of the rail yard and go for the bridge. Send Duren’s 3rd Regiment right into the yards as a holding force to keep the enemy in play there. I want those yards cleared by tomorrow night. You can bring down Langen’s 4th Regiment to follow the Lehr Regiment.”

“What about the north?” asked Beckermann. “Will you want me to mount a river crossing operation there?”

“No. Secure the west bank of the Kazimiyah Bridge, hold the ferry sites and get a few assault boats there, but otherwise, you can rest your 1st and 2nd Regiments in the morning. I may have work for them in the afternoon.”

“Then Hube will clear Al Zamiyah?”

“He’s got both panzer divisions now. I think he’ll force the British to give us that whole district by noon. It will either be that, or we bag all those forces and cut them off.”

“That will mean we’ll have to hold them there, and plan to reduce that pocket. It will take some steam out of our engine.”

“We’ll see,” said Guderian. “Just focus on getting me that rail yard tomorrow.”

General Beckermann nodded, his dark hair catching the lamp light. When he concentrated his division like this, it had never failed to produce the desired results. But he much preferred to be out in open country, running his regiments in a fast moving battle of maneuver. He still had memories of Volgograd. The Russians still have pockets of resistance in that damn city, he thought. Let us hope Baghdad does not become that for us here. Hube should attack tonight....

* * *

He did.

Hans Hube could read a battlefield as good as any man alive, and what he saw when he arrived at Adhamiya was an enemy defense that had been battered and pushed back, a tank fight that he had to win, and a good fresh division to use for just that purpose. Tempted to rest his men after the march from Al Taji, he circulated among some of the battalion officers, assessing their readiness.

“We’re ready, General,” one man said. “Time for a good night action. We’ll have them on the run before the sun comes up.”

It was not exactly what Guderian had planned, hoping to have both Konrad and Hube jump off at dawn, but Hube had every confidence that he could break through.

That is the beauty of the concept of *Schwerpunkt*, he thought. I can attack on a narrow front, and use mass and shock to break through only one segment of the enemy line. And that is exactly what I will order my men to do.

When 3rd Panzer Division completed its river crossing at Al Taji, it quickly organized for an attack as Guderian had ordered. But Hube had advanced the timetable by six hours, hoping to catch the British napping, as he said to his staffers. It was just Brigadier Purves’ bad luck that the main attack would come right into the lines of his 21st Indian Brigade northeast of Al Zamiyah. His men had a long hard day, and they were posted where KG Schafer had already broken through, fighting without rest for the last eight hours. Soon he and his men were in a whirlwind of trouble. (*Map 4*)

3rd Panzer was up to strength, and it came in hard, with four battalions of infantry supported by two panzer battalions. The first wave of the attack fell on edge of the town, the fire from the tanks setting wood frame structures aflame and sending up a pall of grey smoke. The fat gibbous moon was still up, slowly falling towards the horizon where it would not set until twenty minutes after sunrise. In that hour, the sun and moon would hang on both horizons, as if the heavenly Gods themselves were eager to survey the outcome of the battle.

Purves’ men were driven into the lines of 24th Indian Brigade, which had crossed the bridge the previous evening and was resting near the main road. Finding this line of strong reserves behind them the officers soon rallied the brigade, urging them to hold.

That was a mistake.

What the British needed now was battlefield awareness, and the pre-dawn darkness and thickening smoke was clouding Purves' judgement. He should have moved to his right, attempting to block the point of Hube's *Schwerpunkt*, but he stubbornly held his ground. If Hube's grenadiers could push another 1500 meters, they would reach the river, bagging both the 24th and 21st Indian Brigades. There would be no way out of Al Zamiyah if the British wanted to hold it, save a single ferry at Al Safina that would be under German fire from across the river from two angles.

There were now only 17 of 24 Shermans left in the Royal Wiltshire Yeomanry, and those that remained were down to only two or three shells each. The Warwickshire Yeomanry still had 31 Shermans, and more than half their ammo, so they put in a counterattack, catching a company of light tanks in the 1st Battalion, 6th Pz Regiment. A hump had formed just a few hundred meters to the east, where the infantry of the 11th Kings Royal Rifles had stopped the attack by the 195th Sturm Regiment, but now Hube's attack was threatening to cut them off as well. Thankfully, an astute Lieutenant surmised the danger, and he blew hard on his whistle, calling on his men to fall back out of the trap.

Then word finally reached 6th Indian commander at his headquarters in the Royal Mausoleum of King Faisal. General Thompson looked pale when he got the news—the Germans were breaking through towards the Sports Club, and if they took it, they would cut the road from the Kazimiyah Bridge.

"Bloody hell!" he exclaimed when he finally found his voice. "Then it's no good here, and Old King Faisal will have to get some cruder company. We need to move east, and that quickly! Get orders to the 24th Brigade at once, and get ready to move the division headquarters..." He looked over his map. "Here, the Royal Palace. We might hold out there for a while."

"But sir, what about all the supplies bunkered here?"

"Damn it man, leave them! We can't burn them, not here in the mausoleum, and we haven't the time to load them up on trucks. Now get moving." That didn't sit well with the Lieutenant, and after he had passed on those orders, he went into one of the storerooms and took a good long piss on a big sack of flour. Let the Germans try and eat that, he thought with an evil grin.

Thompson posted two Assyrian Levies in the mosques, reasoning that they were their holy places, so let them defend them. British troops had made a point of not going into them, even though the tall minarets would have been

excellent observation posts. Then he was off to the Royal Palace, about three kilometers on the road leading east and south. He had instinctively seen what Hube was planning, but the orders to withdraw would not reach every company that night, and many would still be on the line when the sun rose.

As 24th Brigade moved east, it would reach the Sports Club in twenty minutes, where an enterprising Colonel Pack would throw the men right at the advancing Germans. He could not yet see them, but he could hear the sharp bursts of their machineguns, and there was no question as to where they were. He practically horse whipped the men of 2/6 Rajputana Rifles, urging them on.

“Come on, you laggards! It’s time we stopped these bastards. Get after them!”

It looked as though this sudden reinforcement at the point of attack might turn the balance, but as the sun began to paint the horizon red with a bloody dawn, the sound of artillery fire resounded from the west.

Konrad was starting his attack on the rail yard.

Chapter 21

(Map 3)

Brigadier Alan R. Barker had the 27th Indian Brigade in a tight line from the Tigris in the north, to the banks of a tributary that flowed south of the town of Shalchiya, the small Khir River. His problem that morning lay in Guderian's order to Beckermann—*tell Konrad to focus all his energy on the north end of the line, and go for the main bridge and Royal Ferry site*. That was exactly what Konrad did.

Barker's HQ post was too close to the front, and the wolves were suddenly through his line and at his doorstep. His HQ section, and a battery of artillery, had to make a breakneck retreat towards the Locomotive Bay, which was one of the most sturdy buildings on that end of the rail yard. Yet his entire line was under pressure, the Germans continuing with the same relentless fervor they had displayed the previous day.

The Bloody Brandenburgers, he thought grimly. Our Gurkhas might match them, but they're all at the southern end of the line. Fritz must have already smashed right through the Baluch Rifles, and that turns the flank of my whole position. So I've got to pivot. I've got to fold back my lines like a swinging gate. But if I do that, the Germans can run for the main bridge!

He reached for a telephone, ringing up Jumbo Wilson at the Embassy to apprise him of the situation. "Look here," he began haltingly. "Fritz is getting around my right, and if I fold my line back that way. I'll expose the river bridge to attack. We need support, and bloody well now!"

Wilson looked over his situation map, seeing that the lead battalions of the 5th Indian Division's 29th Brigade had come up through the heart of the city, bound for the barracks where they thought they were to be fed and rested. But there would be no rest for the weary that morning, and no breakfast either.

"Alright," said Jumbo. "I've got Reid's 29th Brigade close at hand. I'll send them over the main bridge to cover that sector. See if you can extend your line and make contact with them."

Brigadier Alan Barker was no slouch. He had been with the Indian Army since the first war, fought in the Anglo-Afghan war, and slowly rose in the

ranks until they gave him the 27th Brigade. He was known throughout India as “Tochi Barker,” and much respected by the men he commanded. He would later go on to distinguish himself in the fighting in Italy, but for now he had a real whirlwind on his hands.

He had only just reached the Locomotive Bay when he was aghast to see what looked like a full battalion of German troops forming up to attack the place. He was reluctant to give it up, but he knew it could not be held with the small platoon sized HQ staff he had at hand, and by extension, he knew that his brigade had been shattered by this ferocious and very heavy attack being put in by the Lehr Regiment.

Barker had no choice but to withdraw deeper into the rail yard, crossing the thick lines of the heavy steel railed tracks, past the fueling depot and workshops. Along the way, he came upon the remnants of a company from 4/8 Punjab Rifles, ordering them to hold the fuel bunker as long as possible. The help he had asked for had finally come, filing over the main bridge, called Jsar al Qitar at this time, and renamed the Alsarafiyah Bridge in 2021. Now, at a crucial moment, he could see the lines of the 29th Brigade moving forward from the bridgehead they had established on the west bank, and taking up blocking positions astride the main road.

Two more battalions of the Punjab Rifles advanced, catching a company of the Lehr Regiment that had broken through, well ahead of the rest of its regiment. The Royal Engineers that had fought so stubbornly for the Grain Factory found themselves cut off as they withdrew, but now they attacked to try and reach friendly lines, and soldiers of 2/9th Gurkhas joined in from the other side, hoping to open a hole and save their comrades.

Barker went out, watching the artillery firing from their new post near the central supply depot. He surveyed the left flank, mostly manned by Lt. Colonel Selby’s 28th Indian Brigade, which had a high proportion of solid Gurkha battalions in its ranks. That line was holding, from the town of Shalchiya, down to the Khir River that flowed on to the outskirts of the Airport Settlement and formed the southwest boundary of Al Muthana Field. He heard a battery of 25 Pounders firing from the edge of the airfield, and realized the Germans must be probing at that tributary for weak points. There would be no reserve for that sector if anything got through.

In fact, even with the timely arrival of Briggs’ 5th Indian Division from Kirkuk, the British were still stretched to their limit to hold the line and stop up gaps and breakthroughs. When General Briggs came up from the back of

his division column, he learned that Wilson had already taken the two leading brigades and put them into action. Reid's 21st Brigade had crossed to support Barker and cover the main bridge and Royal Ferry, and Langran's 9th Brigade had been sent way off on the right flank to fill a gap between Ford's 19th Brigade and the lines of Kingforce on the outer Bund and Army Canal line.

That left the General with only Finlay's 10th Brigade, and one of his battalions had already been sent in to help halt the advance of KG Kufner, which had come through the Arab Hikmat and was threatening to flank the inner bund along another line of marshy ground. So Briggs had but two of Finlay's battalions in hand, the solid 2nd British Highland Light, and 4/10 Baluch Rifles. Where would the next crisis point come?

Then word came from Kingstone that he had just greeted the 7th Armored Brigade, the cavalry riding to the rescue in the heat of this hard fought day. It had finished up in the south, boarded trains in Basra, and then moved by rail up to a point south of the city before offloading the tanks and vehicles for ground movement. The brigade had 32 M5 "Honeys," 33 of the newer Shermans, and 24 older M3 Grants. That evening they would be approaching the city center after stopping at a fuel depot near the Al Jisir Bridge to top off. That gave Wilson and Briggs a little heart, though Jumbo wondered if the Germans would continue the fighting after dark.

They're relentless, he thought. That Brandenburg division has the strength of two of my Indian divisions combined, and then some. But this attack from the north has me worried. 9th Armored Brigade has been expended. I'll need to pull them off the line to fuel up and replenish ammo. Thank God for the 7th. I can put that unit in before dawn, and see if we can hold. They tried to pinch off everything we had at Al Zamiyah today, and almost succeeded. I've got six brigades committed in the north, and our lines are thickening up. What I need now is news from Basra. He rang up General Grover to see what was going on.

"Well," said Grover, "we've only just come up, but the rail was cut, so we've had to detrain south of the city."

"Who cut that bloody line?" asked Wilson.

"Arabs say that German Commandos infiltrated last night. There wasn't much damage, but it would be six hours work to re-lay a section of that track, so I just told my boys that we'd hoof it from here. We'll assemble just south of the Rashid Airfield." That was the other big airfield, southeast of the city,

and it would become very important now, as the Germans were already throwing artillery onto the main Al Muthana field west of the Tigris.

“Well how soon will you get here?”

“I’m afraid I can’t move out tonight. We’re still offloading the trucks and heavy equipment. It will be another 24 hours, maybe less.”

“Good enough,” said Wilson. “We’ll need you, and it’s good to know you’re at hand. What about the 7th Indian?”

“They’ve got to hold out at Basra and Abadan. I think it best we leave them there. In another four or five days, the 18th Division ships in from Perth.”

“We may need them here as well,” said Wilson. “It’s been thick.”

“I understand, sir. We’re coming.”

But what else does Fritz have in the bag to throw at us, Wilson wondered?

* * *

Guderian was looking at the same question. Thus far, he had two good days of fighting, though his plan for day two had been foiled. Hube jumped the gun, he thought, but he achieved good results in spite of that enthusiasm. We did not expect they would have tanks here, but it seems they had something down south that came up last night. No matter, my panzers will still do the job. The attack by Konrad’s Lehr Regiment was outstanding. They nearly reached the main bridge, and I think they’ll get there in the morning. We’ve cleared Kazimiyah, taken that bridge, but they pulled out of the Al Zamiyah District before our pincers could close. 1st Brandenburg will cross at the bridge there tonight and mop up Al Zamiyah.

Tomorrow a good deal rests on Hube’s shoulders. His divisions will just have to grind their way into the city. If I had one more infantry division to cover their sector, I’d send both panzer divisions east and south in another wide envelopment. But I will probably stand with ten other officers bemoaning the lack of good infantry these days. The 78th Sturm Division has given us good support, but they can only cover so much ground. The British certainly do not lack for infantry. Even these Indian divisions fight surprisingly well. Those troops down near the rail yard, the men with those long flashing knives, have held their ground against every attack put in against them. That was another surprise.

Yes, they fought hard today. But tomorrow we should clear that rail yard and be looking at the airport. As for 10th Motorized down south, their

progress has been slow. The British are fighting Schmidt hard there to keep those two royal palaces. Perhaps I deployed that division too far south. He might do better if I sent him up against the airport. That could force the enemy to give up the palaces if they want to defend that end of the field. Yes. I'll have him move tonight.

We've shown that we can push them, but they're getting a lot of support up from the south. I didn't think they would fight so tenaciously for this city. I had hoped to get here quicker, run rings around this place, and get them to withdraw like we did on the Euphrates. Well, they aren't stupid. They know the value of holding this city, and they are putting all their chips in on this number. It will be as I feared. Baghdad will be my Moscow in the desert, and if I cannot go around it, then I must simply fight my way through it, as much as I would wish to do otherwise.

I will still have the 901st Lehr Regiment, perhaps in another day as they come down on the Mosul Rail. Then I must see if there is any more fruit on the tree with a call to OKW. But I must take Baghdad first. Give Hitler this city, and he will be much more inclined to give me another division to garrison it. If I lose this fight and fail to push them out, then I think this Operation Phoenix stops here, and I will get no further support. So everything depends on this—everything.

That evening, a combined *kampfgruppe* from elements of both panzer divisions smashed their way into the British Sports Club building, which was now a burning wreck. Reinhardt's Company of Kommandos worked its way south through the snout of Al Zamiyah and slipped over the high stone walls around the Royal Mausoleum. He was soon standing on the tomb of old King Faisal.

24 FEB, 1943
(Map 5)

The next morning, the Lehr Regiment renewed its assault towards the main bridge and Royal Ferry site. They broke through south of the bridge, exploiting in both direction to a depth of about 750 meters, but the British 2nd Suffolk Battalion remained cool under fire, the Sergeants moving their platoons back into a good defensive arc just 250 meters from the Royal Ferry terminal. Brigadier Reid had set himself up in the Ginning Mill just a couple hundred meters from the east end of the bridge, and he ordered the position

reinforced with Assyrian Levy troops. He also had a small SAS company under Lieutenant More, and he sent them across to set up a defensive position at the west end of the bridge.

His battalion of 25-Pounders boomed away at the Germans in that breakthrough zone, hoping to add to the chaos as their fast moving companies rushed into the breach. That attack had actually broken through the lines of Reid's troops, and it forced his Punjab battalion to fall back south towards the Brick Kilns in the rail yard. For all intents and purposes, they were now part of Brigadier Barker's 27th Brigade. He had asked for them the previous day, and now they were his to command from a tactical perspective.

Just east of Al Muthana Air Field, there came the sound of firefighting in the Airport Settlement. Hauptmans Feller and Schultz had taken their two Kommando units along the winding west bank of the Khir, and they found a small foot bridge leading into that settlement. Two companies of the 3rd Brandenburg Regiment had followed them, crossing behind them to fan out through the hovels and shacks, scattering the local Arabs like a flock of crows.

At the same time, Schmidt had moved his 20th Motorized regiment north to that sector as Guderian ordered the previous night, and now they had two battalions ready to support that attack. The defense there was part of the 10th Indian Division, under the man that Joe Kingstone had brow beaten on the Euphrates for his inept and sluggish deployments.

Alan Bruce Blaxland had been given the job of defending Al Muthana Airfield, and the two Royal Palaces three kilometers to the south. He was headquartered in the King's Western Palace, sitting behind a gorgeous polished mahogany desk in a large marble tiled room, with luxurious thick woven rugs—quite comfortable.

Thus far the Germans had seemed to want to evict him from his plush appointments, so he had placed the whole of 21st Indian Brigade right on top of an elevated railway embankment that ran east of the palace grounds, the men lying prone in a good defensive position for a rifleman. He had his 20th Brigade watching the two good bridges over the Khir, but mostly centered on the second palace, that of the Crown Prince, a smaller estate about a kilometer north of the King's Palace. Well-watered by the Khir, both estates were surrounded by verdant gardens, and the grounds were meticulously manicured, with well-trimmed hedges and pruned shrubbery.

His last Brigade, the 25th under Brigadier Edward Arderne, was the one

that mattered now, because Schmidt was shifting his division north, though Blaxland did not surmise this from his sumptuous post. Arderne had moved his HQ company into the Airport Hotel, about two kilometers from the Airfield Settlement, across the broad open flats of the tarmacs and runways.

A career officer, Arderne was with the King's African Rifles at Arusha, Tanganyika, before the war, where he spent a good deal of his time indulging in a favorite hobby, big game hunting. He found himself in the Western Desert with O'Connor when the war broke out, gave a good account of himself at Tobruk, and won the DSO and a hefty promotion to his present position. He was a good officer, and so when he heard the sound of his own 25-pounders firing at the far end of the airfield, he got up from his breakfast table, got into a staff car, and sped off to see what was happening.

Soon he saw streams of Arabs fleeing across the broad expanse of the airfield, and knew exactly what that meant. He got there just in time to assess the situation, and order his companies to tighten up their lines and concentrate in the settlement, where it was now house to house fighting—or rather hovel to hovel. Standing with his field glasses, he was astute enough to pick out the two different uniforms of the attacking enemy troops, so he got on the radio to Blaxland.

"I think Jerry moved last night," he said. "He seems to be throwing his left shoulder at the airport settlement. It looks like there's men from that 10th Motorized Division here."

"Well, have you covered the position?" asked Blaxland.

"Yes sir, I've pulled in two of my three battalions. The 5th Maharatta is still on the railway embankment."

"Very well. Keep me informed."

That was all Blaxland had to say, and then he went back to his own breakfast of two poached eggs, biscuits with marmalade, and a stout cup of tea.

"Anything of interest, sir?" asked his adjutant, a Lieutenant Fitch.

"Oh, that was just Arderne running about on the airfield. Nothing to get bothered over. Any more activity on our front?"

"None to speak of, sir."

"Good. Looks like they don't want any part of us. I was Johnny on the spot when I spied that good railway embankment. They won't get in here, that's for sure."

It certainly was. General Schmidt was somewhere else.

Part VIII

Bridges to Nowhere

“ Happy roads is bunk. Weary roads is right. Get you nowhere fast. That's where I've got—nowhere. Where everyone lands in the end...”

— **Eugene O'Neill:** *Long Day's Journey Into Night*

Chapter 22

Joe Kingstone was restless. For the last two days he, and all of Kingforce, had been sitting on the Nadim Pasha Bund, a long elevated embankment overlooking the Army Canal that flanked the whole city for miles. His men had three days well deserved rest, but it was more down time than he had had in the last two months, and he suddenly needed to be doing something. So he rang up Jumbo Wilson, a question in mind.

“There’s nobody here,” he said. “All I’ve got in front of me is the open desert, for miles on end, completely empty. All the fighting is on my left, where that German infantry crossed the canal and cleared out that Arab rat’s nest upstream from here. If Jerry gets through there, he’ll be behind me.”

“Getting nervous, Joe?” asked Wilson.

“Not on your life, sir. But it just seems a waste to let my men sit here like this. We’ve had a decent interval to fatten up. I want to do something—get back in this fight.”

“You *are* doing something,” said Wilson. “You’re watching my right flank.”

“Well, they’ve pushed their way down the bund as far as my Warwickshires. Why don’t I kick them back?”

“Go right ahead, but do keep an eye on that canal line. You never know when the Germans might move your way. You told me this yourself, and I’m taking it as good advice.”

“Well sir, it’s just this... Why don’t we move? This flank is wide open. They’ve nothing out beyond the bund at all. I could peel my boys off this fly infested canal, swing up north and turn the tables on them.”

“But you’d have the canal on your left the whole way up,” said Wilson. “It took them a full day to get over that, and with three engineer companies assisting. They could just fold that infantry division back, cover the most likely crossing points, and there you’d be, out in your desert, but with Jerry behind the canal this time, and on that nice elevated bund. I shouldn’t have to remind you that there are two full panzer divisions up there. Spook them, and they could send something your way you might not like. No. I don’t want to tickle their flank over there. It could only provoke what I’ve just described. I’d much rather you sit on that embankment and watch my flank. 2nd Infantry will be up tomorrow. Then we’ll talk again. Until then, stand where

you are. That's an order."

"Alright then," said Kingstone. "I'll get back to swatting the flies off my teacup. Tomorrow then. I'll let you know when General Grover's lads show up." He hung up the phone, unhappy, a little red in the face, and then muttered his way out to the nearest scout car. He was going up to the Warwickshire Battalion to order them to attack.

* * *

The 24th of February was *de Großerschub*, the 'big push' by Guderian. He had met with his division officers the previous night, assembling them in the burned out Grain Factory to show them what was in store for them if they did not make a dramatic breakthrough soon.

"This place changed hands three times in two hours," he said somberly. Their Royal Engineers lost half a battalion here, and they held off our Brandenburgers for six hours. That city out there may have fifty more places like this, and I don't want to fight those battles. We must concentrate, hit key spots on their line, and then give them *de Großerschub*. Konrad, your regiment leads the way again in the morning. I want you to hit them very close to the river. See how this road follows the west bank. That is your road to victory. Break through, and then move like quicksilver!"

The Lehr Regiment did not disappoint. They went right through a company of 3/5 Punjab, and drove it against the river. Then one company after another, many on fast moving motorcycles, raced through the narrow gap, barely a hundred meters wide, the machineguns on their side cars blazing away as they went. A company of Gurkhas had been sent up to shore that area up, and they held like a rock, the Subedars shouting orders at the men over the din of battle until they were hoarse. But the Lehr Regiment flowed around them like water. They were racing down that river road towards the large built up Sulaymaniyah District. On their right they passed another of those potential Grain Factories Guderian had warned them about, a series of heavy brick kilns that were used to fabricate building materials. On their left was the river. Ahead of them, there was nothing but the road and the looming edge of that city.

Brigadier Alan Barker had seen his 27th Indian Brigade decimated in these three days of heavy fighting. By his count, he now had no more than seven of 14 companies still reasonably intact and fighting on the line. His

actual casualties were not that high, but those other seven companies had been shattered, some overrun and captured, others broken and straggling back through the rail yard in groups of two or three men, many wounded, all disheartened and dead tired.

He could still see Lt. Colonel Selby's 28th Brigade deployed in a wide arc to his left, largely intact, and he knew it could no longer stay where it was. So he got on the radio at once.

"Selby, this is Barker. We're being overrun. We just can't hold any longer. Your people are about to be cut off. You've got to move, and get back towards the aerodrome at once! Understand? You've got to move right now."

"Alright," said Selby. "I'll give the order, but where are my guns?"

"I took the liberty of commandeering them, and I'll get them back for you. Now move!"

The Colonel could hear the edge of panic in Barker's voice, a man he knew to be a steady hand. So he moved with purpose, collaring a nearby Sergeant and telling him to find the bugler. It wasn't often that he would resort to this method of command, but it was a signal and sound that would be heard by all at one time, and the message would travel much faster than radio calls to all his separate battalions.

The sound of that call resonated over the chatter of guns and boom of artillery, and when they heard it, the men of 2/9 Gurkhas knew exactly what to do. The Subedar shouted an order, and the entire battalion leveled their rifles at the enemy line. At the next command, they volley fired three times, then, in precise movements, the companies began peeling off the line and retiring in perfect order.

Brigadier Barker told his men to set fire to the rail yard storehouse, then he rushed out and told the artillery gunners to cease fire, limber up their guns, and get south to the airfield as fast as they could. Barker had precipitated a general retreat that would yield the whole of the railyard, store houses, engineering bay, workshops and brick kilns, all unfought.... But it would save an even worse disaster if those men had tried to stand their ground. The Lehr Regiment would have certainly gotten behind them, and even though Barker managed to get his two remaining companies of 2/1 Punjab over near the edge of the river to try and block the enemy advance, the outcome there was still very doubtful.

That retreat would put an end to all the fighting in the Airfield Settlement, and it was fortunate that Brigadier Arderne had forsaken his

breakfast and driven out to the edge of the airfield. He could hear that same bugle call, and then soon saw and heard what was happening, the three sharp volleys of rifle fire, the rising dust, vehicles looming in the haze, the sound of officers shouting orders.

“Bloody hell,” he said aloud. “The whole line is breaking. We’ve got to get back to the airfield bund. Lieutenant!”

“Sir!”

“Order the men to fall back—fifty paces, turn and volley, then quick foot it back to the bund!”

“Very good, sir. But we’ve only got the Jats and Sikh Battalions here. The Maharatta is still on the other side of the Khir holding that railway embankment.”

“Don’t worry about them, I’ll take care of that personally. Just get the other battalions back to the airfield bund—on the double!”

The retreat was now rippling down the line, passing from Barker’s 27th, to Selby’s 28th, and now Ardenne’s 25th, which was one of Blaxland’s 10th Indian Division brigades. The acting division commander was still in the Royal Palace having his tea, with all quiet on his front. He was admiring the thick tapestry on the walls, and looking at the portraits of sheiks in their ornate Arab headdress.

Lieutenant Fitch, his Adjutant, was standing by the lace curtained window, listening to the rumble of battle to the north, the lines on his forehead deepening with what he perceived as a growing sound of chaos. He looked over his shoulder, seeing that Blaxland had set down his teacup and was slowly pulling out a cigar, for he always enjoyed an early smoke.

“Sir,” Fitch said tentatively. “It sounds like there’s a good deal of commotion up north—at the airfield.”

“The airfield? That’s Ardenne’s watch. Has he reported anything?”

“No sir. Just that business about the airfield settlement. Might there be a row underway there?”

“Well man, has he said anything about it?”

“No sir, we’ve had no reports for the last hour. Should I ring him up at the hotel?”

“If you wish.”

Fitch rang up the hotel, learning that Brigadier Ardenne had gone forward to see about that fighting near the settlement. “I’m sure he’s got it all sorted out,” said the staffer at the hotel.

“Well, have you heard from him directly?”

“In point of fact, we haven’t, but we expect him back shortly.”

“Very well.... Have him call Division HQ and report. And use the land lines. We don’t want Jerry listening in on the radio.”

As Lieutenant Fitch walked slowly back through the long marbled hall of the palace, and into the stateroom where Blaxland held forth, wave after wave of British Indian Infantry was falling back to his north. He couldn’t see it, nor had he any clear report about it, but he could feel it, a slowly rising tension that hung on the late morning air, thickening with each passing minute to something that was almost palpable.

Blaxland was lost in his coils of grey white smoke, plopped on a soft easy chair, his feet up, looking over the quartermaster’s report. “Seems like a little too much ammunition expenditure yesterday,” he said. “There’s only so much bunkered here at the palace. See that the quartermaster is a bit more stingy today, will you Fitch?”

“Of course, sir.” Fitch was standing, hands clasped behind his back, a nervousness pursing his lips, and a sheen of sweat on his brow.

“A good deal of smoke and dust up near Arderne, sir,” he prodded. “Care to have a look?”

“Whatever for?” Blaxland seemed uninterested.

The telephone rang, and Fitch visibly jerked with the alarm. He walked quickly to the table near the long well cushioned chairs, and picked up the receiver. “Division, Lieutenant Fitch here.” There was an edge of expectancy in his tone.

It was Eddie Arderne. After ordering his men back to the airfield bund, he sped off across the field to the nearest hangar, where he could use a land line to telephone division HQ. Fitch handed the phone to Blaxland.

“Sir!” he said, his voice still laden with the emotion of the hour. “We’ve had to pull back from the Airfield Settlement. There’s been a general withdrawal to the north. 6th Indian is on our right, and there’s a good deal of fighting up that way.”

“Well are your lines well set?”

“Yes sir. We got back in good order.”

“Good,” said Blaxland. “That Airfield Settlement wasn’t worth anything. You’re better off on the bund. Dig in there and protect that airfield. Call me if there’s anything more pressing. And Arderne.... Settle down, will you? You’ve been running about all morning. There’s a good gentlemen.”

Blaxland hung up the telephone, looking at Lieutenant Fitch. "Arderne's on the Airfield Bund. Mark it up on the morning map, will you?"

"Yes sir. Anything more? Shall I inform General Wilson?"

"No, don't bother. 25th Brigade hasn't moved but half a kilometer. You can include it in the mid-day update."

* * *

Hans Hube came down from the forward depot to Adhamiya to see what was happening. There he met with both Schneider and Westhoven to assess the situation.

"They were quick to withdraw," said Schneider. "They knew trouble when they saw it. Now they've pulled back through the southern fringes of Al Zamiyah, and across this ground here, Najib Basha." He pointed a finger to the spot on the map, a lightly wooded area north of yet another palace, home to some privileged Sheik or royal heir. The institute of Fine Arts was in that same complex, and 400 meters to the right was an open field known as the Scout Yard, where the British would put the young scouts through their paces.

"That narrows the front to no more than two kilometers because of that line of marshes to the east," said Westhoven. "Everything they had here is compressed into that zone. It will be very thick, and slow going."

Hube rubbed his chin. "Do we have enough infantry to hold that and screen it off?"

"We've got the first Brandenburg Regiment over here close to the Tigris. Then the rest of the front would have to be covered by the 78th Sturm Division. Half of their men are on the other side of this marshy zone. They've been trying to turn the enemy right flank for the last two days, and they've made some progress."

"Perhaps we should move that direction," said Hube. "I don't like the idea of grinding our way through that narrow two kilometer front."

"If we can take that palace, we might get the bridge," said Schneider. "That would give us a good link to the rest of the Brandenburg Division on the other side of the river. They took the rail yard this morning."

"Well can you take it? The day is wearing thin. The sun will be down soon, and if we move, then we do so tonight."

"Move where, sir?"

“Along this road that passes near that Arab settlement.”

“What about the canals,” asked Westhoven. “They aren’t more than ten feet wide, but they do slow us down.”

“My KG Kufner is over there already,” said Schneider. “He’s got the pioneers, and they must have laid pontoons to get as far as they have.”

“That looks like the better move to me,” said Hube. “I see only two problems. The first is this long outer canal line here. They have to have that guarded, so swinging through the Arab Settlement gives us good ground, but we’d eventually have to breach that canal line when we turn for the city. If we follow KG Kufner, then we’re inside that area bounded by the canal, and somewhat bottled up.”

“They can’t hurt us,” said Westhoven, “not with infantry.”

“This city is better defended by the marshland and canals than anything else,” said Hube. “Alright—a compromise. Schneider, see if you can take that palace tonight. We’ll screen the front with the 78th. Westhoven, you take your division around that inner marsh line and join KG Kufner. I want you in position to attack tomorrow morning. Get down here and cut the rail line. What is that building there astride the tracks?”

Westhoven leaned in, squinting at the map.

“The slaughterhouse,” he said.

“Take it,” said Hube.

Chapter 23

(Map 5)

What happened next on the southwest front where Blaxland was sitting down to dinner in the Royal Palace was a combination of many factors. Darkness had fallen, the lazy sun well set, the amber sky tinged with grey as a few low clouds formed on the horizon. Brigadier Arderne had ‘settled down’ on that airfield bund, an embankment that protected the field on its western front from any possible flooding of the Khir river. The 3rd Brandenburg Regiment had cleared the Airfield Settlement, getting over the elevated rail line that passed through to face off against Arderne’s troops on that bund. Arderne’s line extended south over a kilometer, but he had left his AT battery on a bridge over the Khir, right at the northern end of MacGregor’s 20th Indian Brigade.

MacGregor had 3/11 Sikh Rifles close by, though as far as they were concerned, the AT guns belonged to Arderne. Now, with the evening deepening to velvet and grey, it would come down to battlefield sense and initiative.

General Schmidt of the 10th Motorized could see that the 3rd Brandenburgers had the situation in the Airfield Settlement well in hand. There was no point in committing his division there as he had planned. The British withdrawal to the bund line had changed all that. So acting on his own initiative again, he pulled his men out and swung them south to move over the northern end of that elevated railway embankment that Blaxland was so pleased he had seen fit to occupy. MacGregor had put no men on it, preferring to hold behind the River Khir on the grounds of the Palace of the Crown Prince. So when the Germans approached the bridge, they found it largely unguarded.

“There’s just a few small caliber AT guns,” said a Corporal after scouting the position.

When Arderne had given the order to fall back to the bund, he made it a point to personally radio 1/5 Maharatta, the troops that had been on that railway embankment, and he ordered them to move back across the Khir over that little road bridge, and then take up new positions at the southernmost segment of the bund. “Leave the AT Battery at the bridge,” he finished,

thinking it would do better there than anywhere else. He assumed that MacGregor's men would look after them, but they weren't his guns, so he left them alone—nor did he back them up with any of his own infantry. These were the sort of mishaps that happened all too often along the boundaries between formations, and the Germans sensed this, knowing they had found a border zone, one of those grey areas on the battlefield that might be easily exploited.

As darkness fell, Schmidt ordered his men to quietly form up behind the elevated railway embankment west of the river. They now had orders to push on over that embankment and take the bridge. He was planning to see if he could throw his whole division in there, and getting that bridge intact would save time, as he would not need the engineers to build a pontoon further upstream.

The soldiers of Oberst Bayer's 20th Motorized Regiment soon had that bridge, making a surprise attack that quickly stormed that little AT battery. Then he ran his entire regiment over the river Khir, assisted by his pioneer battalion. He could see opportunity in the darkness, and he seized the moment with typical German initiative. It was risky, because with the bulk of his troops east of the Khir, there was nothing to stop Blaxland from swinging up his 20th and 21st Brigades and cutting Schmidt off—nothing but two Brandenburg Kommando companies, Schmidt's PzJager battalion, and Blaxland's own lethargy. This attack was the first crack in the dam that would unhinge the entire British defense west of the Tigris.

* * *

At the same time, Konrad's Lehr Regiment continued to push right up the west bank of the Tigris as ordered, and Alan Barker's shattered 27th Indian Brigade could not stop them. The disruption of his battalions, the heavy casualties he had sustained, the darkness and exhaustion all played their part, and the Germans were overrunning what remained of his troops by midnight.

The big objectives along that river bank were the three main bridges over the Tigris. In the north was the Ghazi Bridge, which would cross and take you right into the Government Ministry building complex on the east bank. About one kilometer down river was the Faisal Bridge, which would lead into the financial district and a series of big hotels on the east bank. Between those two bridges, the British Embassy sat on the west bank, where Wilson's

had his HQ for the whole British operation. While he could hear the fighting that had taken place in the rail yard and aerodrome that day, he was not yet aware of the gravity of that situation, and did not know how serious Konrad's breakthrough had been. When Barker's 27th collapsed, there had been no time to find a telephone and ring up Wilson.

Working late that night as always, the General was in his British Embassy building office when he heard a dull rumble and what sounded like vehicles in the distance. Wondering what it was, he sent a runner out to have a look, and the man came back in white faced shock.

"General sir! It's the Germans—motorcycle troops, lorried infantry and armored cars coming right down the river road! They're already crossing the Ghazi Bridge!"

"Good god," Wilson breathed. Barker had been so enmeshed in trying to hold his brigade together that he had not reported the danger to Wilson. "Wake the entire staff. Grab everything, papers, maps, code books and boxes. Yank out the phone lines and let's get moving! We'll cross at the Faisal Bridge."

The Embassy also had a boat launch for an emergency like this, but Wilson preferred to take his chances in a fast moving truck. Things were slipping everywhere. In the north, the Germans under KG Rosenfeld had fought their way to the outskirts of the palace Hube wanted, and now the two breakthroughs by Konrad and Schmidt were going to cause a real problem. The only man with the authority to correct it was beating a hasty retreat from the embassy.

The dual breakthroughs west of the river were now threatening to completely encircle all the British forces still deployed in defense of the al Muthana Aerodrome. The loss of the Ghazi Bridge meant that the Germans could put forces on the east bank of the Tigris, right into the heart of the main city, and several kilometers behind all the British and Indian troops fighting on that side of the river. To make matters worse, no one knew what was happening. Even Wilson was only reacting to his own private disaster, though he certainly knew the danger the army was in now. He needed a steady and ready reserve, and the first man he tried to contact with a radio in the back of his staff lorry, was General Grover of the 2nd British Infantry Division.

John Malcom Lawrence Grover was a steady man indeed, veteran of the first war where he was wounded three times. Promoted to command 2nd Division, he had made his fortune, in military terms, in Burma, particularly at

the Battle for Kohima in 1944. But that hour had not yet come. Now these circumstances saw him leading his men up the road into Baghdad.

“For God sakes, John, where are you? The Germans have run me right out of the embassy, and they’ve got the Ghazi Bridge!”

“The head of my column has just passed the US Embassy. We’re only about five klick south of you. Hold on, Jumbo.”

“Well come up the road on the east bank of the Tigris. All I’ve got on the Faisal Bridge is a company of S.A.S. boys and some Ack Ack guns. I’m making for map grid 44.3. You can reach me there.”

That was the Sinbad Hotel on the east bank of the river, about 600 meters from the Faisal Bridge. Wilson was at his wits end when he got there, desperately trying to get his HQ reset, and establish communications with his division commanders. Then he got a small break when Brigadier Anstice of 7th Armored telephoned the hotel.

“General, I was just motoring up to my brigade when I heard you on the radio. My men pushed on north, but I can get them back here if need be.”

“Where are they now?” asked Wilson.

“Up on one of the gaps in that inner marsh line. Just above the slaughterhouse. There some ruckus north of there near Grid 93.”

That was 3rd Panzer Division, now pushing into a small hamlet called Kharistan against Langran’s 9th Indian Brigade. The ‘rukus’ had been reported, but the officer charged with that duty found the lines dead to the British Embassy, so no one knew what was really happening there. Now Wilson was going to make a most important choice. Should he leave the 7th Armored Brigade where it was, or did the urgency of his own situation trump what he might imagine in Grid 93? It did, and he told Anstice to get his tanks to the river as fast as he could, and to head for the Ghazi Bridge. They got there just as 1st and 2nd companies of I Battalion, Lehr Regiment, had completed their crossing to secure the east end of the bridge.

The tanks rolled up, along with a company of infantry, and they were soon firing hotly at the German troops, forcing them to get into any building they could reach for cover. That timely arrival would stop the southern pincer threatening to penetrate into the city center, but it would improve Westhoven’s prospects in his envelopment near Kharistan. Wilson had a good deal more to do, and dawn, with Grover’s 2nd Infantry Division, could not come soon enough.

* * *

When Guderian heard the news, he was elated.

“Excellent!” he exclaimed. “Schmidt used his head tonight, and that will make a good difference. The 901st Lehr has arrived, has it not?”

“Yes sir, it is pulling into the rail yard now.”

“Then send orders to Scholze. He’s to follow Konrad with all speed.”

Feed a fire, Guderian knew. Now he would double his bet on the west bank thrust with both his elite Lehr Regiments. The news that Konrad had already taken the Ghazi bridge by storm was particularly encouraging. Guderian moved through the rail yard that night, assessing the damage to the tracks and inspecting the small fuel bunker. There was still good fuel there. The retreat of the previous day had been so abrupt that the British had no time to blow it all up. Then he learned what Hube had ordered, discovering that his 3rd Panzer Division had made that enveloping movement around the inner marsh line.

We have a real chance here, he thought. If Hube gets around that flank, he’s in a perfect position to link up with a thrust over the Ghazi Bridge, assuming we can hold that bridgehead. I must urge him to push hard.

Joe Kingstone would soon have more to do than he expected.

25 FEB, 1943

In the early pre-dawn hours, the telephone rang at the King’s Royal Palace in the south. Lieutenant Fitch had heard the rumble of battle to the north, and sure enough, it was MacGregor of the 20th Indian Brigade.

“Jerry’s got the bridge over the Khir!” he reported with some urgency.

“What?” said Fitch. “You mean he’s gone right through Arderne?”

“He’s not even there,” said MacGregor. “His men pulled out yesterday; probably to see about that business at the Airfield settlement. Then Fritz hit the damn bridge an hour later.”

“Well why in bloody hell did you wait this long to report? It’s nearly 04:00.”

“I only just got word from the Sikhs! The thing is this. The Germans have pushed a lot of companies over that bridge. I think they moved on east to the Cotton Ginnery.”

That was a heavily built up industrial sector, just south of an elevated road

that separated it from the aerodrome. It was bounded on the left by the town of Al Hartiyah, and on the right by impassable marshy ground, a perfect strongpoint for a defense. If the Germans could get there first, Blaxland's two southernmost brigades would be cut off from Arderne on the Airfield bund, and there would be nothing to stop the Germans from going further east.

"This doesn't sound good," said Lieutenant Fitch. "We need that Cotton Ginnery. Can you fold back your lines. No—on second thought, you'd better get the rest of your brigade off that railway embankment and up to the Ginnery. I'll wake Colonel Blaxland and tell him what's happened at once."

Blaxland wasn't happy to be awakened, sitting up, bleary eyed and running a hand through his thinning hair. "What is it, Fitch? The sun isn't even up."

"Sir, I've just heard from MacGregor. He says the Germans are over the bridge on the Khir and heading for the Cotton Ginnery. I've told him he'd better see about it."

"What? Over the bridge? Has Arderne called?"

"Not yet."

"Well, see what he's up to."

"I rang the Airport Hotel twice, but the staffer says he's not there—they sent a man out in a car to look for him."

There came the distant boom of artillery, 25-Pounders, firing with increasing fervor. "What's that artillery," asked Blaxland. "Is that Arderne, or MacGregor?"

"I think it must be MacGregor's guns sir. He must be firing at the Germans near the Khir River Bridge."

"Well, I can't imagine how they got over the railway embankment like that. I'll certainly have to speak with Arderne about it. He was running about like a chicken with his head cut off yesterday. I won't tolerate that sort."

"Sir, shouldn't we notify General Wilson about this? What if the Germans get to the Ginnery before MacGregor can stop them?"

"Yes, put in that call as well. But the thing is this: I've orders to keep these palaces safe and sound, and watch the River Khir. Arderne is behind this nonsense."

"But there's no one to our left now," said Fitch. "The Germans pulled out yesterday, and now we bloody well know where they went, don't we, sir. Shouldn't we send a battalion or two up north? We've enough here to watch this flank. We could send them by the bridge behind the palace and along the Hamawi Road. They could get to the Washash Camp by that route, a good

blocking position if the Germans do get to the Ginnery first.”

“Compose yourself, Fitch. You mustn’t let your imagination run wild. You’re starting to sound like Arderne. All we know at this point is that MacGregor says the Germans have taken the bridge over the Khir. Go make those calls and report back. I suppose I’d better get dressed and see about some tea. It may be a busy day.”

That was to be an understatement of the highest order. Blaxland was not a lazy man by nature. He worked very hard when he set his mind to something, but lacked the initiative to do what Fitch was suggesting here. His division had been posted to Baghdad, then they went out on that long sortie to the Euphrates that ended quite badly. He was only too glad to get back to the city, and Brigadier Kingstone had ruffled his feathers on that little adventure, upbraiding him for scattering his brigades about. He still simmered with some resentment over that, but in keeping with what Kingstone had said, he had placed his brigades on the objectives he was to hold, and there he sat. The choice of the luxurious Palace of Zuhur for his headquarters was not one that would easily see him want to move, unless directly ordered by Wilson to do so.

Nearly four kilometers to the north, at the airfield hangars, Arderne was pleased that he now had his full brigade in position on the bund. But he looked out to the southwest, seeing rising dust there with the dawn, and also hearing MacGregor’s guns. He rang up Division HQ just as Fitch was about to make his first call.

“Where are you?” asked Fitch.

“At the airfield hangars. My brigade is in good order on the bund.”

“Well you left that railway embankment and the Khir Bridge uncovered yesterday. Blaxland is working up to a fit about it.”

“What? I left a battery of 2-Pounder Portees and nine 37’s covering that bridge. And it was not but a hundred meters from MacGregor’s infantry. What’s the problem?”

“Jerry’s taken it! *That’s* the bloody problem. They ran right by MacGregor, and Blaxland won’t budge an inch. I’m calling Wilson next to see if I can get the General to order him to move.”

“My God... This is serious. What if they get to the Cotton Ginnery?”

“Exactly! Is there anything you can do?”

“5th Maharatta is down on the lower end of the bund. I’ll send them to the Ginnery immediately.”

That battalion got the order five minutes later, and began to move, but it soon ran right into the recon companies of Schmidt's division, and a meeting engagement ensued. Arderne also called his field gunners on the radio and told them to turn about to deploy south. He would have them try and support the Maharatta infantry. Yes, it was Arderne who had done the running about the previous day, defending the Airfield Settlement, getting his brigade safely back to the bund, and coordinating smartly with Colonel Selby's 28th Brigade on his right. Now he was the only one to actually order troops to try and stop the Germans at the Ginnery.

They would not be enough.

Chapter 24

The Al Muthana Airfield had two long strips running parallel to one another, a little over 2 kilometers in length. Brigadier Selby had placed his men at the far end of those strips, their lines extending from the airfield bund on his left, to a small cotton factory in the center, and then to the outskirts of Sulaymaniyah. It was there, in that desperate hour, that Barker's 27th Brigade was meeting its final agonizing end.

The seven companies Barker still had in hand were in no way enough to stop the heavily reinforced Lehr Regiment. Two more companies were pinned against the river when they tried to block that road, and annihilated. The remaining five were scattered through the wooden hovels of the settlement, disorganized, out of contact with Barker's HQ, and effectively paralyzed as fighting units. The Germans opened the breach near the river, poured through and they were quickly spreading through the Jufayar and Al Karkh neighborhoods as they swept to seize the Ghazi Bridge.

It was only that timely call by Anstice that brought his 7th Armored Brigade back to the bridge just in time to stop the Germans from establishing a solid bridgehead there. The British tankers were too much for the two companies that had already pushed across the bridge. They were slowly driven back, and then forced to retreat back over the span as the Shermans fired both main guns and machineguns in their wake. That had stopped a dangerous penetration into the main city on the east bank, but the Germans were still masters of the west bank, now as far south as the Faisal Bridge, where two companies were organizing to attack the emplaced AA units guarding the west end of that bridge.

Now Brigadier Selby of the 28th Indian Brigade realized the extreme danger he was in. His brigade had been solid on the left of Barker's, and well joined with Arderne's 25th on the Airfield Bund, but now the Germans were in the settlements well east of his position, effectively behind him and threatening to cut his men off completely. They had to get back, and Selby was close enough to Arderne to find him that hour.

"We've got to get back!"

"What? Over that field?"

"There's nothing else we can do. Barker's brigade has completely

collapsed on my right. If we stay here, we'll all be making a good long visit to a German P.O.W. camp soon. Are you with me?"

That would precipitate the second general withdrawal, both men acting on their own initiative, out of contact with their respective Division HQs. Arderne belonged to Blaxland, and there was no time to dicker with him at that moment. Selby belonged to General Thompson and the 6th Indian Division, but Thompson was on the east bank of the river. So the Brigadiers were on their own.

There ensued what could only be called a "mad rush." The companies volley fired as before, then broke off behind a thin delaying screen, and began that long mad dash across the airfield, running for all they were worth. The Germans were firing artillery and mortars, and the field soon became a killing ground, with men hit and falling as they ran. Many shed their packs and even weapons as they fled, a human wave of lost souls, all jumbled together on the run. It would be a miracle if the officers could sort them out and rally them at the far end of the field, but most would make it there, breathless and bedraggled.

There was good defensible ground on the southern end of the field, an elevated road, a grove of palms and gardens, the Airport Hotel, Customs House and other facility buildings. Trumpets blared and the officers blew a shrill chorus on the whistles, desperately trying to call in the men of their companies.

Selby's men had it a little better, retreating right down the road and rail line that ran parallel to the field. He was able to get several companies in order and anchor his new line in a sturdy museum building on his right, on the road to the Faisal Bridge, which was just under a kilometer to the east. Yet that flank was still hanging in the air, and there were already Germans moving through the AL Karkh district, effectively compromising that line.

Arderne's men finally reached the elevated road south of the field, which became a natural rallying point. It was the same road that he had tried to block with 1/5 Maharatta, which had run right into elements of Schmidt's 41st Motorized Regiment. The Germans of the 20th Regiment of that same division had flooded into the industrial zone, taking the Cotton Ginnery, and now Arderne's men could only just cling to the northern fringes of those buildings. His position soon looked like a big letter V, tipped to the right on its side. One side was on that elevated road, the other along the edge of the Ginnery buildings, and behind them there was a thick marsh that would cover

his left flank and prevent any envelopment from that direction.

Yet Arderne was astute enough to know he could not stay where he was for very long. If Selby were to be pushed out of the Airport Hotel and Customs House, Arderne's entire brigade would be trapped, the same marsh that now protected him becoming a fatal obstacle to any further retreat. So he sought only to reorder his companies, knowing he would have to move again very soon. Now he collared the nearest radio section, and finally called Division HQ.

"I've got my whole Brigade back over the field, but the Germans have the Ginnery, and my position is rather precarious."

It was Blaxland on the other end of the line this time, and he was clearly not happy. "Damn it man! You were posted on the River Khir. What in blazes gave you the notion to pull your men out like that and cross that airfield?"

"But sir, if I hadn't moved to support Selby's 28th, the Germans would have pushed right through the Airfield Settlement and overrun the whole field hours ago."

"Well that was Selby's problem—not yours! Now you've pulled the cork out of the bottle and that's why the Germans have that Ginnery. You'll answer for this, Arderne. Mark my words. Now I'll have to move MacGregor back, and by God, we might end up losing the Palace of the Crown Prince in all this business. Now where exactly are you?"

Arderne knew he could not argue the matter over the radio. He gave Blaxland his current grid coordinates, and then tried to appraise him of the general situation. "From what I can piece together, Barker's 27th has been completely overrun near the river. Selby's 28th is on my right, and his flank is on the Faisal Road. But the Germans are there as well! It looks like they might get right around Selby's flank."

"Damn annoying," said Blaxland, his poached egg sitting cold by uneaten toast.

"Sir," said Arderne. "I'll need to move again soon. We're in a bit of a pickle here. Where would you want my men?"

Blaxland looked over his map. "Get to the Washash Camp, if you can do so. And this time hold that flank!"

"But I don't think Selby can cover the Faisal Bridge, or for that matter, the Al Jisir Bridge either. If the Germans take them, then we'll have no way to get back over the river."

That's your bloody problem, Arderne. We aren't supposed to get back over the river. I've no orders to that effect. We're to hold the bloody palaces! Now get your brigade to the Washash Camp, and you'd better damn well hold it!"

There were men who threw themselves into the thick of things in this war, and there were those that found places to hide, and ways to blame others when things went wrong. Blaxland hung up the phone, shaking his head and determined to convene a Court-Martial for Arderne when this was all over. He would, in fact, later go on to become the Chairman of the Indian National Army Courts-Martial in New Delhi, and become the bane of many a man like Arderne. With that, he finally ordered MacGregor to extend his lines east of the Al Hartiyah settlement just north of the two palaces, determined to cover and defend them as best he could. If Arderne couldn't follow orders, Blaxland bloody well could.

* * *

Far to the northwest, Westhoven's envelopment attack was breaking through the seam between Langran's 9th Indian Brigade, and Kingforce. Jumbo Wilson's warning to Kingstone had come true. While there was no cause and effect in play here, Kingstone had pushed on that flank when he ordered his Warwickshire battalion to get after the 78th Division. Now he got back a storm of mechanized panzer troops, backed up by a good many tanks.

KG Kufner and a part of Westhoven's Division were storming into the small hamlet of Kharisan, and the Warwickshire Battalion was only half a kilometer to the right. Now Kingstone could see the dark, squat shapes of tanks lumbering his way, and he cursed under his breath. He could see that Langran's men were already in retreat, falling back through the marshy ground through the few good gaps and reforming just north of the Slaughterhouse on the main rail line to Basra. Kingstone knew his position on the outer bund would soon be compromised, and he called Wilson's HQ on the radio to confer, but could not reach the General. Wilson was too busy trying to get set up at the Hotel Sinbad, so Kingstone had to act on his own.

It's no good here, he thought, and to hell with these bloody flies. "Staff Sergeant!"

"Sir!"

"Get word to all the battalions out on the Bund. We're moving out.

They're to fall back to the Kayam Quarter. Map Grid 46 by 89.5. There's good ground there for defense. We'll cover the East Barracks and Rail Station with this move. Smartly now."

* * *

Arderne held on until dusk on the 25th to pull out of his sticky situation under cover of dark. Schmidt was only too glad to let him go, because the Brandenburg 3rd Regiment was only now crossing the airfield under cover of that same cloak of darkness, and 4th Regiment was mopping up the last of Barker's 27th Brigade. Poor Barker's guns were overrun on the field, long ago abandoned by the gunners. The last of his men were holed up in the hovels of Sulaymaniyah, and he, himself had fled to the Isolation Hospital just north of the airfield, where he was soon found by elements of the Lehr Regiment. When Arderne got to the Washash Camp, he found the Germans trying to infiltrate there with a company from their recon battalion, and promptly set his men on them. He would get his brigade into that camp, and then he was determined to follow his latest order from Blaxland, and hold it.

Selby saw what he was doing, and needed no further encouragement to fall back on his right. Most of his men got back, though one company got trapped in the Museum and would be lost. He did not have enough men to extend his line all the way east to the river, so that flank would still be hanging in the air, where only a few companies of railyard workers and supply service troops were milling about.

In effect, Blaxland's whole 10th Indian Division, plus Selby's Brigade from the 6th Indian, were now cut off in the south. Behind them, the wide sweep of the Tigris turned west in a big hairpin loop and the river was very wide there, with no more bridges. The Germans had the west end of all the main bridges entering central Baghdad, and even managed to get two more companies across the southernmost Al Jisir Bridge.

There, the 4th Brigade of the British 2nd Infantry Division was finally arriving under McLennan. They would reach the bridge just in time to stop the Germans, where they immediately organized a counterattack with two battalions backed by the armored cars of the recon battalion. So the Germans would hold the west end of all those bridges, but they could not exploit to the east bank over any of them.

Yet the day had seen dramatic developments that delivered the whole

railyard area and Al Muthana Airfield into German hands. They had seized the British Embassy, sending Wilson packing, and the Abwehr was already there, rifling through the place to scrutinize anything of potential value they could find. They also had the radio station, and the parliament building complex, a key political objective. There they hoped to invite Rashid Ali back to begin setting up a new Iraqi government in opposition to the British he hated so deeply. He was already on a plane, bound for the newly captured airfield.

As for the remaining British troops west of the Tigris, if the Germans continued to press Arderne and Selby the following day, the only way those brigades could reach safe ground now would be at a few ferry sites on the big hairpin bend of the river. Blaxland could pull out MacGregor and his last brigade at the Royal Palace under Finlay if he wished. They could still move along the rail line south around that big hairpin, where they would eventually follow in the footsteps of Glubb Pasha.

All the rest of Wilson's army was still deployed in an arc defending central Baghdad, bounded by the Tigris on the left, and the inner bund and marsh line on the right. Westhoven's maneuver had attempted to flank that line, and now he was only 600 meters from the slaughterhouse he had been told to take, facing off against Langran's 9th Brigade of 5th Indian Division. Now Guderian would meet with Hube to assess their prospects for the following day. (*Battle Map 6*)

"We might reach that slaughterhouse tonight if I continue to attack," said Hube. But the men need some rest, and it will take more time to get supplies down there, over all those little canals."

"But it was a good move," said Guderian. "It forced them to abandon the outer bund line. We've cut off the last of their men west of the river, and for all intents and purposes, we've got the rest of their army penned up in central Baghdad. The only question now is whether or not we can kill it."

"That won't be easy," said Hube, "and it will take time. It's taken these four days of hard fighting just to clear out most of the west bank."

"True," said Guderian, but now we have the rail yards and airfield, and I can move supply into both places. I was hoping to get over one of the river bridges, but they got up a fresh infantry division last night, this time British regulars. We've taken all the crossing points on this side of the river, but thus far they have been bridges to nowhere. We haven't been able to get a strong force into the central city on any of them. They've found reserves just when

they needed them most.

“What else do they have coming?” asked Hube.

“The Luftwaffe says there doesn’t seem to be anything more heading north from Basra, but it would be good if we cut that rail line soon. What are your prospects with Westhoven’s division?”

“That whole flank will not be easily turned. There’s a lot of marshland, with only a few places where the armor can get through, and those will be easily defended. Then there’s another bigger canal system to the south, screening off the rail line to Basra. That one will need pontoon bridging, and we’ve used a lot of what we had to get over the little canals. What we really need now is another couple infantry divisions.”

Guderian smiled. “There was still one more division assigned to 12th Infantry Korps, but it has not made the transit through Turkey yet. So the only infantry we might pull in would be a regiment of the 22nd Luftland.”

“You know what Manstein would say—this isn’t a fight for Panzer Divisions. Pull them out and wait for the infantry.”

“Yes,” said Guderian. “He might say that, which is exactly what he did at Volgograd. But Hitler is waiting too, for news of the outcome of this battle, and I don’t think he wants to hear that we’ve pulled your Panzer divisions out to wait for infantry we may never see.”

Hube nodded. They had bested their enemy at every battle these last four days, but what had they won but bridges to nowhere. The airfield would be useful now, unless the British kept it under their guns. They seemed determined to hold the city, and now they had the equivalent of four infantry divisions, one freshly arrived, and two armored brigades. “They’ll dig in tonight,” he said.

Guderian shrugged, and rubbed his brow.

Part IX

Sea Change

*“ So hope for a great sea change
On the far side of revenge.
Believe that further shore is reachable from here.
Believe in miracles
And cures and healing wells.”*

— **Seamus Heaney**

Chapter 25

“Blaxland? What’s your situation?”

It was Jumbo Wilson, wanting to know what in the world was happening west of the Tigris. He had five brigades over there the previous day. Now he would learn he had four.

“Sir, I’m still sitting firm on my objectives. Both palaces are secure, but it’s been very confused to the north. I’m afraid one of my Brigadiers got a little too rambunctious. He moved from his assigned positions without proper orders, and went running off to defend the airfield. But Jerry’s taken that in any case, so it was all for naught. It caused a good bit of disruption down here.”

Wilson had been at the Sinbad Hotel, but it was right on the east bank of the river, and easily hit by German guns. So he had moved inland to a sturdy concrete building that served as the Iraqi Police College. He found no students in session, the place abandoned, the police themselves all shedding their uniforms and slipping away into the night.

“Where are your lines?” Wilson asked.

“I’ve got Finlay with me here, MacGregor’s to the north, and his lines reach east, just below the Cotton Ginnery. I’ve posted Arderne at the Washash Camp. It was his shenanigans that shook things up down here, I’m sorry to say. I’ve told the man to hold that camp and stay put.”

“Well I’m not sure that’s a very good idea,” said Wilson. “The thing is this—the Germans have control of the whole west bank, all the way down to the Parliament buildings and even beyond. So you see, there’s no road that you can use to come our way now. All the bridges are closed. If you’ve got men at Washash Camp, then the only way they’ll get to safe ground is over the two ferry sites, and that could be risky. Can you pull them in closer to the palaces?”

“I suppose I might. It’s where I had that brigade from the start, watching the River Khir.”

“Alright, then here’s the plan. I want you to pull those men in, Arderne and MacGregor—Selby too. I’m attaching his brigade to your division. There’s a ferry just east of the palaces, and if the service troops can get across that way, all the better, but it looks like you’ll have to foot it round the river

bend now.”

“Round the bend?” said Blaxland. “You mean give up the palaces?”

“Of course, we don’t need them now, do we? The only thing of any real value on that side of the Tigris was the airfield, and frankly, if your man Arderne took it upon himself to try and save it, I rather tend to think he did the right thing. We lost Barker’s entire brigade yesterday trying to hold it. He’s gone, and I don’t want that to happen to you. So I want you to fold back your lines, get round the bend, and take up positions you can hold in case the Germans think about trying to turn that flank. Understand?”

“Where, exactly?” Blaxland wasn’t comfortable with uncertainties.

“Well, you might start by covering the rail line through 42-81.” That was the Al Mahdi station, down at the deepest point in the river bend. “Keep Jerry out of there, and by all means, don’t let them get anywhere near 46-83.” That was the Dayrah Oil bunkering and refinery where Glubb Pasha had gone. “That last one has to be held at all cost.”

“You realize that whole area is wide open,” said Blaxland. “It’s open all the way to the Euphrates. There’s no way I could possibly cover that if they want to get round my flank.”

“Look—we’ve more help on the way. In the meantime, take the whole lot, and then you need to cover that flank as best you can. Move tonight, under cover of darkness. I’m counting on you, Blaxland. See to it.”

The Colonel, acting commander of the 10th Indian, set down the receiver with a raised eyebrow. Fold back the line? Get the service troops to the ferry sites? Give up the palaces and get round the river bend to Al Mahdi? Cover the entire bleeding left flank of the city, and with four brigades? This was much more than he ever expected when he thought to report to Wilson that night. Much more indeed.

“Lieutenant Fitch!” he said angrily, and Fitch came rushing in from the next room. “This is most irregular. See to my shipping chest, and then gather up personal effects and all the paperwork. We’re moving.”

“Tonight sir?”

“Yes, tonight. Wilson’s had too much gin I suppose. He wants the whole lot down south with our right at the nose of the river bend and the rest hanging off into nowhere. Damn irregular. No dinner tonight, I’m afraid. We’ll have to get out orders to all the brigadiers—and oh yes, include Selby in that. He’s been attached to our division. Have them all make for the palaces, and then we’ll lead the way tonight. Ridiculous, but there it is.

Orders from Jumbo Wilson.”

He shook his head.

Arderne had settled into the Washash Camp, ejected a company of German recon troops that had gotten there first, and now he had his men improving the sandbagged defenses when a radio call came in from Fitch.

“You’re to move tonight,” said Fitch. “Grid 40-84.5, and Selby is to follow you.”

“Selby?”

“He’s been attached. Move out as quietly as you can, and come quickly. It’s going to be a busy night.”

Arderne looked at his map for those grid coordinates, seeing it was the Palace complex. “Well someone is finally gotten some sense into his head.”

“I’d button your lip, if I were you, Arderne. Blaxland isn’t happy, and he’ll throw eggs at anyone he can find to take the blame, if you know what I mean.”

“Alright. We’re moving. Eddie out.”

When the headquarters was packed and loaded on a truck, Colonel Blaxland looked about the palace one last time. “Damn shame we have to give this up to the Krauts,” he said to Fitch.

“Well sir,” said Fitch, “It’s probably better we didn’t make them fight for it. The whole palace might have been smashed.”

Blaxland nodded. “I suppose there’s some wisdom in that. Things have changed rather suddenly, and it’s most disconcerting. It’s put all my dispositions to rout, but orders are orders. Let’s get moving.”

Arderne marched his men in a good column to find the railway, and they took that road over the lower bridge on the Khir, through the lush palace grounds, and on south. Selby retreated in good order and he was right behind him. MacGregor held his lines as a rear guard until 04:00, then slowly began to fall back before dawn. No one was going to hurry him. He had two Gurkha battalions in his brigade. Blaxland found the tiny hamlet of Al Mahdi too decrepit for his liking, and so he set himself up in the small rail station buildings a few hundred meters north up the line.

26 FEB, 1943

In the pre-dawn hours KG Rosenfeld of the 4th Panzer Division finally took the Royal Palace in the north, up near the ferry and railway bridge. It

had been very hard fighting that day, with heavy casualties on both sides. A company of the Kumoan Rifles had been reduced to just two squads. 3rd Company of 2/6 Rajputana had only one squad remaining, another in 1/5 Maharatta Light had four of nine.

The entire 2nd Suffolk Battalion, British Regulars, had to hasten over to the Government Center where it was found that many squads of German Commandos had slipped over the river in rubber rafts that night, infiltrating into the Defense Ministry building, and Mayor's Offices. The Tommies spent the night hunting them down, killing many, and the rest fled back across the river. Now this relatively fresh battalion was brought up to the beleaguered palace area, and those battered Indian companies took up watch on the river.

As for Westhoven's 3rd Panzer Division, (*Battle Map 6*) Hube rested it that night. They were assembled just north of the Kayam Quarter, which was right where Brigadier Kingstone had taken Kingforce. His men were digging in on a stony hill just north of the town, and he had his armored cars out further east, prowling about the scattered brick kilns and watching gaps in the marshes that might be used by enemy vehicles.

Westhoven would have two choices in the morning. One would be to go right at Kingforce, trusting to the weight of his division. But he knew the enemy had just brought up a fresh infantry division, and did not know what might lie in reserve.

Behind that settlement, there was an important rail junction where the line came down from Baqubah and joined the Basra Baghdad line. If Westhoven could take that, no supplies could come by rail into central Baghdad. So it was on his mind.

His second choice would be to continue to move southeast around the marshland, and then figure how to bridge that large canal. He would be down there on his own if he did that. The 78th Sturm could not extend its lines any further south to maintain contact with him. Hube knew this, which is why he had made that remark about needing a couple good infantry divisions.

Things were coming to a point where some strategic decision had to be made on the part of the Germans. They had won their tactical battles, but strategic victory had eluded them in spite of that. Guderian had instincts for battle that were as good as any General in the field, and he could sense the campaign had reached a high water mark here. The British had decided to fight for this city, come what may. He did not have enough divisions to effectively encircle it, nor could he bypass it and just continue south.

While we were running through Syria, and down the Euphrates, our battle of maneuver made us invincible, he thought. Yet I knew the moment I laid eyes on this city that all that was over. The campaign transitioned to a battle of attrition here, a city-fight that I wanted nothing to do with, but one I simply could not avoid.

So what now? Do I persist here? They're pulling the last of their troops out down south, and that makes me master of the west bank of the Tigris. Yet there they sit, behind their berms and bunds and canal lines, on good defensive ground, a city that is nearly nine miles long on the east banks of the river. And then there's another big airfield where they've husbanded their fighters to harass us by day. It would be foolish to send Westhoven down there unsupported.

What to do with the Brandenburgers? Assaults across those bridges would be very costly, and not likely to succeed. This river is now a major obstacle, very wide in places, and I have only so many assault boats. There is one good objective in the south—the oil bunkering—but I would have to send the Brandenburg Division around that big bend in the river to get after it. That is undoubtedly why the British pulled out in the south—to screen that bend and prevent any envelopment from that direction. If I tell Beckerman to do this, he will surely get there, but then what? I can sit on the oil, if the British don't set it all on fire first. Even if I do take it, there's the damn river again, and no bridge anywhere on that lower segment.

The thought of the oil burning stuck in his mind for some reason, and now he remembered Moscow, the terrible conflagration ignited in the southwest quadrant of the city. The more he thought about that, the more something dark and sinister emerged from his unconscious to surround his reasoning mind with the vapors of heedless abandon and wanton destruction.

Fire....

This is a city of water, the river, canals, and marshes are everywhere. Yet those closely packed city districts have many wooden buildings.... He thought about that, but Guderian was a man of principle. He knew the Luftwaffe had already dropped incendiary bombs on London long ago, and that the Allies certainly had these weapons as well. They are weapons of terror more than anything else, he knew. And they are directed more at civilians, with the aim of causing so much misery that it will spill over and have an effect on the military.

No. We did not start the fires in Moscow, nor will I start them here in

Baghdad. There must be a limit to the measure of violence in this war. The British chose to stand here, knowing that they would invite my panzers into that city, so they bear half the burden for any harm that comes to the civilian population. Thus far, the damage west of the Tigris has not been significant, but this central city is very dense, and the fighting may be intense if I persist here.

He decided.

There will be no incendiary bombing. Westhoven is in position, and his division is even reinforced with the addition of KG Kufner from 4th Panzer. The largest gap in the marshland in that sector is the Kayam Quarter. So I will order him to attack there in force, and take the East Rail Station. That cuts the rail line to the south and prevents them from getting in new supplies. That area is defended by British regulars. Let us see how much fight they have in them.

In the south, I will order Schmidt to take his entire 10th Motorized Division and pursue the British forces retreating there. Duren's 3rd Brandenburg and the Lehr Regiment will clear the ground south to the river, and then follow Schmidt.

In the pre-dawn hour, Westhoven bridged a small canal and threw a strong Kampfgruppe across to strike at the easternmost section of Kayam. If he could get through, there was a swathe of open ground, some 700 by 300 meters, and it might allow his panzers to flank the main settlement.

It was just the luck of Brigadier Kingstone that Kayam was the place he had chosen to defend when he pulled off the outer bund. Wilson had called him to confirm it was a good decision, but now he would reap the whirlwind. A company of the Wiltshire Yeoman was watching a gap in the marshland and it was the first to be hit. The dull growl of motorized equipment left no doubt as to what was happening. German troops were also moving up to the base of the stony hill on the north edge of the town, but there was no concerted attack there yet.

"The bastards are trying to flank me, by God," he said. "Turn the guns on them!"

As if in answer, the German artillery began to fall along his lines before his gunners could even get into action. He couldn't see the German tanks yet, but he could hear them, the metallic clanking of the treads, the deep rumble of the engines. Then the telltale sound of MG-42's buzzed through the cool morning air, and he knew he was in the fight of his life. He rang up Wilson to

inform him.

“I hope you’ve got something to backstop my lines,” he said. “It’s a bloody Panzer division over here.”

“Grover is already up with his 2nd Division,” said Wilson. “He’s already posted men on your right and rear at the east barracks. I think he’ll have a battalion or two in reserve.”

“Well I hope they brought their 6-Pounders. What about tanks? Where’s our armor?”

“I’ve posted them to watch the bridge crossings, at least the 7th Brigade, but I’ll see about finding infantry for that and get you some help. Hold on Joe. We can’t let them through.”

“Right sir. We’ll hold.”

Chapter 26

The German attack on that flank was put in by KG Hansen, with two companies of tanks, armored cars and a full Panzergrenadier battalion. It was then strongly reinforced by two battalions of the 238th Sturm, 78th Division. Against this, Kingstone's armored cars were not enough to hold. They backed off, guns firing, across that open ground Westhoven was after. Behind them there were marshy pools interspersed within the settlement, and Brigadier Hawking of Grover's 5th Brigade had sent 7th Worcestershire Battalion to occupy those gaps.

So Kingstone ordered his armored cars, along with the Blues and Royals cavalry recon units, to fall back on that position. He knew that would compromise his position on the northern fringe of the Kayam Quarter, and after seeing the cavalry falling back in good order, he began pulling his infantry off the line. This compressed his position, as there was limited ground in those gaps between the marshes, but it also strengthened it considerably. The enemy could now only attack those gaps, and he could hold them with a good tactical reserve behind each one. Panzers or no panzers, he remained cool under fire and determined to hold that rail station, which was now no more than 500 meters to his rear.

While this was going on, in the north Schneider continued to press his attack all day against the northern palace grounds near the ferry and rail bridge. The Germans had KG Rosenfeld, and a strong KG from 1st Brandenburg, and they fought their way through the palace grounds, taking the Fine Arts building, which had already been stripped of any valuable artwork long ago. When they had pushed to within 250 meters of the bridge, two companies on the west bank joined the attack and charged across. They hit a company of the Queen's Cameron, and intense fighting ensued, with the Germans putting their panzerfaust teams to good use, blasting away at the sandbagged MG positions at the far end of the bridge.

There were heavy casualties on both sides, but the Brandenburgers prevailed, pushing the British back 100 meters to the Ginning Mill that overlooked the Ferry landing. Brigadier Reid of the 29th Brigade, 5th Indian, immediately ordered a counterattack, turning his guns on the landing. Behind that mill was the Al Karkh hospital, which was already crowded with the

wounded and dying from two days bitter fighting for that palace sector. Reid managed to grab platoons here and there from a number of intermixed companies, and threw together a force to make that attack. All the while, British guns continued firing on the ground north of the bridge near the river, where the Germans had been pushing hard to reach that bridge.

Reid's attack succeeded in driving the Germans off the landing, back to the approaches to the bridge, but they had two more fresh companies on the west bank, and a counterattack was already in the works. This sector was undoubtedly the most intense of the whole campaign, with Rosenfeld and Schaefer keeping up constant pressure. The Germans wanted that bridge to link to all their forces on the west bank, and both Briggs and Thompson knew they had to hold to prevent that.

The Germans would retake the ferry landing near dusk, but Reid had nothing left to throw at them but artillery. Now his battered companies were barely clinging to the Ginning Mill, and at the Al Karkh Hospital, they were breaking out windows, and the walking wounded were taking positions there. There was one battalion of the 9th Armored a little over a kilometer to the northwest, and Reid called up Brigadier Currie and told him he needed help.

"Alright," said Currie, "We'll have to give a little ground here to tidy up the line, but I'll send what I can." A veteran of the Desert war, Currie had fought in O'Connor's Operation Supercharge, and he was a gritty warrior, with good experience. He had 18 M3 Grants and six light Mark VIC's in the Royal Wiltshires, and he got them moving to the bridge. Those heavy tanks, well gunned, were not expected, and they were enough to again eject the German companies from that ferry landing, with casualties mounting.

It was just as Guderian had feared. Attacking across those bridges was the last thing he wanted to do, and now he felt as though he had his arms around a great bear. There the British sat, behind their rivers, canals and marshes, and he could feel the prospect of victory here slipping from his grasp with each passing hour. His enemy had managed to find a reserve to parry each thrust, and now Westhoven radioed Hube to say that the enemy had a very strong position in the Kayam quarter, and the marshland pools were major obstacles.

"I sent Hansen in, and I still have afresh Kampfgruppe, but the situation here looks fruitless. We pushed them, but they brought up several more battalions to back up their line. Do you want me to persist with this?"

"Can you get around the flank with that second KG?"

“We’ve scouted it. There’s a big network of smaller canals forward of the main one—and another elevated bund behind that. It extends all the way south to that airfield; over six kilometers. That’s as far as we went. The British are still flying from that field too, and it’s defended. Unfortunately, given those canal obstacles, it just can’t be overrun with a quick movement in that direction.”

“Very well,” said Hube. “I’ll inform General Guderian. Stay where you are and rest your men tonight. I’ll get a supply column headed your way.”

That was bad news that Guderian didn’t need that hour, for he had just been informed by the Luftwaffe that they had seen and attacked yet another division that was moving north by rail from Basra. That was a hard night for the General, for he knew in his bones that he could not take this city—not with the forces he now commanded.

I have the equivalent of five divisions here, he thought, but the enemy will have six, the river, and the city providing him the best defensive ground he will probably see anywhere in this whole damn country. Given this situation, I have no recourse but to inform OKW that I cannot proceed south; not without more support, particularly infantry to relieve my mobile divisions and allow me to re-establish a fast moving mechanized force while the infantry holds here at Baghdad. That was, of course, nothing that Hitler wanted to hear.

* * *

“What is wrong with my Generals?” he shouted. “Guderian is doing the same thing as he did in Russia. He achieved remarkable results in Operation Typhoon at the beginning, but when it comes down to taking the really difficult objectives, then we hear the excuses. We have already sent him five infantry divisions!”

“Yes,” said Keitel, “but only three regular infantry. The others are all mountain divisions, with only two regiments each, and all but one are holding the line in Syria. Guderian only has the 78th Sturm Division at Baghdad, and then his three mobile divisions. The enemy has six divisions entrenched in that city, and he simply cannot hold the line there while attempting to proceed south.”

“Then why doesn’t he take it? Destroy those enemy divisions!”

“My Führer, that is more easily said than done under these circumstances.

Look what we had to do at Volgograd? At one point we committed twelve good German Divisions there, including the Brandenburgers, and three SS divisions. City fighting drains the life from a good mobile division in a matter of days. Manstein certainly knew that, which is why he pulled those divisions out and replaced them with infantry. Guderian could do the same. We have only to find him the necessary troops. According to the schedule General Zeitzler set up, there is still another infantry division you have assigned to Operation Phoenix that remains uncommitted—the 45th.”

“What? Not yet committed? Why not?”

“The rail system is functional, but becoming burdened. We are now trying to supply eleven divisions in Syria and Iraq. It is simply a matter of logistics, and that division is scheduled to move soon.”

“Advance the schedule. It must be sent immediately.” Hitler’s eyes played over the map. “Given that Crete has been secured, what about Student’s troops? See what can be done there. I want no more excuses. Tell General Zeitzler that he is to find whatever is necessary to permit Guderian’s panzers to move south. He may choose whatever units he deems appropriate.”

“Any units? Even those assigned to the Leningrad Operation?”

“Have you read the weather reports from the Russian Front? It is 40 below zero! We won’t get that operation mounted until at least May at this rate. Now is the time to finish the job in Iraq. So yes, Zeitzler may take anything he wishes.”

* * *

The 45th Infantry had been part of the Austrian Army, subsumed into the Wehrmacht when Germany occupied that state. It had gained good fighting experience in Operation Barbarossa, and was now under Generalleutnant Fritz Kühlwein with three good regiments. Its arrival, a week later, would make a great deal of difference, as its fresh battalions could take up positions to relieve KG Rosenfeld and Schafer, and also on the west bank where two full regiments of Brandenburgers had been simply watching the west end of the bridges and patrolling the riverbank. It was going to allow Guderian to concentrate the Brandenburg division and move it down around the river bend with 10th Motorized. At the same time, Hube could now have the full establishments of both 3rd and 4th Panzer Divisions on the east bank free to maneuver. A meeting was called the night of the 27th to discuss options.

“I’m told we will soon have the 45th Infantry Division,” said Guderian. “In that event, do you feel we can press a double envelopment of this city?”

“Prospects look better in the south than they do in the east,” said Hube. “I would have to move my panzers another twenty to thirty kilometers south to find ground suitable for an advance. But there are no bridges over the Tigris down there. The closest bridge is 50 kilometers to the southeast as we approach As Suwayrah.”

“Could you get there?”

“If I could use both divisions, yes, that should not be a problem.”

“Alright. General Beckermann, what about the south?”

“I can push now with what I have in hand. They have four brigades there, with their line anchored on the nose of the river bend. But if I send 10th Motorized down towards the Euphrates, they will have to extend their front in that direction. Then, when the rest of my Brandenburgers come down from the west bank sector, we will break through.”

“Then this would effectively surround the city,” said Guderian, “though we don’t know what they might do in response to these moves. I still like this better than trying to grind our way forward, block after block, through the whole nine mile length of that city. I do not think we could succeed that way at all. We must find a way to turn this into a battle of maneuver again. This means that we may not want to completely close the door behind them. What I want is to precipitate their withdrawal. That is the key.”

“But they have been very stubborn,” said Hube. “What if they just sit, even under the threat of envelopment?”

“Then we will have no choice but to complete that envelopment, and I will tell Hitler that I have the entire British Army in Iraq trapped in Baghdad. In that event, if I can get at least one more division, then I could build a mobile force strong enough to send south. It’s the only plan I see that has any hope of bearing fruit.”

“So how do we proceed?” asked Beckermann.

“You say that you can press them in the south right now—then do so. They have another division coming up, and if you gain ground there it may affect its deployment. Zeitzler has also informed me that he will try and find more for us, perhaps some of Student’s troops from Crete, or a few other ad hoc detachments. All the better. Has the 16th Regiment arrived from the 22nd Luftland Division?”

“Yes sir, it came up tonight.”

“Then assign it to the Royal Palace area so you can free up as much of your own division as possible. Hube will not be able to move until the 45th Division arrives, so once again, my Brandenburgers lead the way.”

“We will not disappoint you,” said Beckermann.

Colonel Blaxland was soon in for more than the discomfort of being ejected from his palace HQ. He had demonstrated that he could sit with the best of them, but if Beckermann’s plan worked, he would soon have to learn how to dance.

* * *

Heinrich Himmler was a very efficient man. As head of the SS, he had produced and fielded some of the finest combat divisions in the war. Steiner’s vaunted SS Korps had been the flashing sword of Germany in the south, devastating on attack, insurmountable on defense. And Himmler had been building up many more units for service in the far flung fronts of the war. He had come to deliver his latest report to Hitler at OKW, requesting a private meeting to update him on the SS contribution to Operation Downfall, the upcoming attack on Leningrad.

“My Führer,” he began, “as you know, my 7th SS Prinz Eugen Division is already in the field in support of Operation Phoenix. I can now report that several more units are mustering in the Divina River line sector for Operation Downfall.”

“Show me,” said Hitler, leaning over the map.

“To begin, a second Mountain Division, the 6th SS, has been placed here, southwest of Riga in the Telgaya concentration sector. There I have also placed the SS Polizei Division, 8th SS Florian Geyr Cavalry, and two new infantry divisions, the 1st Lettische, and 1st Estonian. The SS KG Nord Brigade rounds out this formation, now designated the SS Motorized Korps. It will be accompanied by the 3rd SS Panzer Korps, the real heart of this new army.”

“An entire Army?”

“Yes, my Führer, an army. While it may not be as powerful as Steiner’s Korps, it will nonetheless prove most useful—of that I have no doubt. This new Panzer Korps has leaner division structures, but they will serve as fast, powerful units to exploit breakthroughs and gain ground. There are four more divisions, the best being my new SS Nord Panzer Division. Then I have

assembled three more Panzergrenadier divisions—Langemarck, Nederland, and Wallonien. These are troops I have been recruiting from all the occupied countries, volunteers to a man, just like the unit I raised in France.”

“Excellent. You have done very well, Himmler. If these men have half the fight in them that Steiner’s men have, these new divisions will serve me very well.”

“That is not all,” said Himmler with a smile. “Another Brigade has been raised for the Reichsführer Panzergrenadiers already serving with Steiner. It is even stronger, with all the new equipment we have been building—the Reichsführer Sturm Brigade. This will raise that unit to the status of a full division. But the best I have saved for last. I have also been building a strong new SS Panzer Korps in the West—three new SS Panzer Divisions, and a strong Panzergrenadier Division as well, the 17th SS Panzergrenadier Division Götz von Berlichingen.”

“An entire new Korps?”

“Yes, my Führer.” Himmler smiled. “I have designated these units 9th SS Hohenstaufen Division, 10th SS Frundsberg Division, and a very special unit, one that was first suggested to me by my associate, Artur Axmann, our leader of the Hitler Youth Organization. We have strong young men there, he said. Why not build a division? So this is exactly what we are hoping to do. It will be called the 12th SS Hitlerjugend Division. It will be seeded with a cadre provided by one of our finest divisions, the 1st SS Leibstandarte. They will impart the training, and harden the character of these young men, and I have every hope that this division will become one of the finest in all the SS. Would you approve of this division formation?”

“Of course! This is an excellent idea, Himmler. You and Axmann are to be commended. I give you full authority to see that this new Panzer Korps gets the finest equipment available. This is most encouraging. At a time when my Generals go about moaning that they cannot even find a single infantry division to fulfill their objectives in the field, making one excuse for their failures after another, you come to me with real fire in your belly, and a steel fist. We could not prevail without you. Well done! The Leningrad operation is still several months off, so use that time well to get ready.” Hitler loved good news, particularly news of this kind, more divisions to provide grist for his ever churning mill of war.

“Thank you, My Führer,” said Himmler, very gratified. Then he lowered his voice, leaning a bit closer as if to confide something of great importance.

“There is something else I wished to discuss with you, not concerning these new troops, but more to the objectives of this war. The Abwehr has been diligent, but my own intelligence service has come upon information that you will find most disturbing.”

What he would say next would bring the stiff breeze of a sea change to the entire war, and send Hitler’s tossing bark off to stormy waters, to the far side of revenge.

Chapter 27

Hitler gave Himmler a quizzical look, the lines of his brow deepening. “What information?” He waited while Himmler reached into his brief to produce yet another map.

“My Führer,” it has been evident to me for some time that your vision for the Third Reich’s future depends on securing the resources and the Lebensraum our people will need. We have already secured many of the territories mandated for occupation in *Generalplan Ost* —all except the Caucasus.”

“Manstein will see to that region in due course,” said Hitler.

“Of course,” said Himmler, “but I do not have to remind you that more than half of that area is presently occupied by the armies of Ivan Volkov’s Orenburg Federation. If you will note on this document, his troops are now holding some most desirable objectives, principally, the key oil and gas centers of that entire region. Look here—Maykop, and here at Grozny, and of course the big development at Baku. But note these other areas I have marked in red. They are all areas where my SS intelligence service has learned that Volkov is planning significant new oil and gas development. Note this area near Stavropol, and this big area here at Astrakhan. We knew there were prospects there, for Volkov has been quite busy in those areas with his Oil Brigades.”

“That is all good oil that will soon be coming to the Reich when Manstein completes his operations in the Kuban.”

“Perhaps,” said Himmler, coating the remark with a patina of uncertainty. “Now look here...” He pointed to the Caspian sea. “Note the areas I have colored in amber. Those are also potential new oil fields of great value, extending throughout the whole of the Caspian Sea. This one here is perhaps

the biggest, Kashagan, and very close by, this field I have colored grey at Tengiz is already being developed by Ivan Volkov. That is not all. There are potential fields at Aral, all through this region, and all through eastern Turkmenistan and southeast Uzbekistan.”

“Astounding,” said Hitler. “How did you determine this?”

“This document came to me through an agent that will be known only as ‘Fedorov.’”

“A Russian? How can such information be trusted?”

“That is merely a code name,” said Himmler, though in fact, it was a name that was now well known to the Allied cause, that of Captain Fedorov himself, of the battlecruiser *Kirov*. His astute mind saw that the fracturing of the Soviet Union could be the most fatal contamination to the time line of all. Ivan Volkov presented the most difficult problem for his own plan, conspiring with Admiral Volsky, Director Kamenski, and now even Vladimir Karpov, to try and cleanse the meridian of all outside influences. To do so, he had to deal with Ivan Volkov, and so he came up with another of his great schemes, to feed information to the Germans concerning Volkov and his obvious objectives for this war, and begin to paint the Orenburg Federation in shades of deepening grey. The document Himmler was now showing the Führer had come directly from Fedorov, a detailed map of all the oil and gas development viable through the year 2021 in all the territories Volkov now controlled.

“I ask you to consider this map in another light,” said Himmler darkly. “Please note that all these oil regions are presently occupied by Volkov’s Orenburg Federation—even Maykop, the principle objective of Manstein’s Kuban operation.”

“He will yield it when our troops arrive,” said Hitler firmly.

“Perhaps,” Himmler said again. “Yet look at it, my Führer. Compare it in size to all these other regions Volkov now controls. It is but a minor field according to this information, a bone he throws us while he gets all the meat! These others near Stavropol and certainly Astrakhan are orders of magnitude bigger. And all these untapped resources in the Caspian Basin are many times bigger than those presently being drilled at Baku.”

“Then you are saying that this information was developed by Volkov himself—these are prospects he has already assayed?”

“It appears so,” said Himmler. “I note that we recently seized Baba Gurgur, where Guderian only had one regiment of Fallschirmjagers to guard

those facilities. I also note that Volkov has posted two large divisions there as well. What is the whole aim of your Operation Phoenix? It has been a dramatic success—cutting both the pipelines through Syria, seizing Kirkuk, and now the British have scrambled to save the last of the developed fields in that region at Basra, and they have even seized the Iranian fields at Abadan.”

“Oil, my Führer. Resources! This is what the Japanese Army struck south to obtain in the Dutch East Indies. This is why we strive to defeat the Soviet threat, and why you have sent Guderian into Iraq, and now send Manstein into the Caucasus. And look who sits on all those resources—Ivan Volkov! My Führer, I do not have the same faith as you might have concerning that man’s fealty to the Reich. It seems to me that he has cleverly manipulated our alliance to further his own designs. Look what happened at Volgograd. Our troop needs in the south for Edelweiss forced Manstein to turn that whole operation over to Volkov’s Armies! The only German troops now east of the Don are a few heavy artillery siege guns.”

Hitler nodded, a deepening shadow growing in his mind as Himmler spoke. He had often considered the outcome of the war, and what part the Orenburg Federation would play in that. Initially he had considered Volkov his puppet, keeping pressure on the Soviets along the Volga, and tying down many divisions there. But now, as his eyes played over the map, he saw so much more in the aims and intentions of Ivan Volkov.

“That man will control all the oil,” said Hitler. “All we will have under our direct control will be these new fields we are securing with Operation Phoenix.”

“And I note that even those may be contested by Volkov,” said Himmler. “The Abwehr has turned up information that Volkov is now sending operatives to Iran. He already controls Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Armenia. Now he has an army in northern Iran, ostensibly to assist our Operation Phoenix, but mainly to keep troops very close to Baba Gurgur. I have no doubt that he will soon reinforce those troops, and Guderian has little to spare to garrison any of Northern Iraq. All his forces are tied up in this siege of Baghdad.”

“Yes,” said Hitler. “That is very true. In fact, I just ordered another division to be sent to him, so that he can move south towards Basra.”

“Well, my Führer, I can now report, and with good authority from our operatives inside Iran, that Volkov is assembling more forces here, along the Iranian border with his province of Turkmenistan. He is also actively

courting the favor of the Iranian regime, and seeking to extend the agreement he has to transit Iranian territory with military units. Why, may I ask, has there been no successful operation mounted by Orenburg against the Soviet defenses on the upper Volga? Why has Volkov insisted on taking over the Volgograd operation? Why does he keep forces breathing down Barenthin's neck at Baba Gurgur? Why is he mustering armies on the Iranian border? Where could they be going? Surely not to Tehran. They must certainly be meant for Abadan and Basra. Oh yes, he would say he is doing this to assist us, but look at all the oil and gas development he has planned on this map!"

"Orenburg will control everything!" Hitler said, coming to a whole new assessment of Volkov's war aims.

"Yes," said Himmler. "We have already flung entire armies at the Soviets, and all to eliminate troops that have been at war with Volkov for decades. We do the heavy lifting, my Führer. We drive all the way to Volgograd. Who has it now? And it may be that we drive all the way to Basra only to find Ivan Volkov smiling at us as he sits on all those oil and gas reserves with a strong new army. This is why we have seen no campaigns against the Soviets in the north. Volkov pays us lip service, he promises to send us oil, but where is it? Just a little more, he tells us. You must eliminate the Soviets in the Kuban. Then he will be free to ship us oil through Rostov. But will he? First he must have the Kuban back. But we have seen virtually nothing come our way from all these vast operations he has within his Federation. We still rely on fast diminishing reserves at Ploesti, and even those may soon be subject to Allied bombing attacks. You were wise to seize Crete as you just did. But look at this map, my Führer. Look who will be sitting on all the world's key supplies of oil and gas when this war ends—Ivan Volkov. Then he calls the tune. It will be his hand operating the pipelines. Unless we eject him from Baba Gurgur completely, nothing may ever flow to benefit of the Reich."

Hitler seemed aghast. Himmler was seeding and watering a deepening suspicion that was already within him concerning Volkov and his Orenburg Federation.

"He begs us for planes to pursue objectives against the Siberians," said Himmler. "And now I learn that you have sent Raeder and some of our finest ships into the Black sea to get rid of the Soviet Black Sea fleet—all part of Operation Edelweiss, which will really only serve Volkov's ends. Do you honestly think he will simply turn over Maykop, Grozny and Baku after we defeat the Soviets there? We say we eliminate the Soviet fleet to insure oil

shipment over the Black Sea. But Volkov will control all the ports on the coast of Georgia. He can therefore choose to send us whatever he wishes, controlling the flow, or denying it as he sees fit. He can, in effect, choke the life breath out of the Wehrmacht, and simply by denying us oil.”

“He would not dare!” said Hitler.

“You may think this, but what a man can do, he might do. This I have learned all too well. Pipelines are being laid by Volkov even now—from Baku to Astrakhan, and from Astrakhan to Orenburg. I note that there are *no* projects underway from Baku through Azerbaijan and Georgia to the Black Sea Coast. He serves his own interests first. Do not think of Volkov as a vassal of the Third Reich. In the end, my Führer, after we have toppled Sergei Kirov and broken the Red Army, Volkov will remain unfought, and in control of all these vast resources.”

“That will not be permitted,” said Hitler forcefully. “Does he think I am a fool? When this war ends, I will make my demands of Orenburg, and Volkov will either comply, or face the wrath of my armies.”

“Oh, he may play quite the diplomatic game at that point,” said Himmler. “He will say he needs time, for the pipelines to be built that he now ignores. He will say the fields remain undeveloped, and seek money and technical support from the Reich to build them out, all under his watch, and with his troops guarding all the key oil centers. He will equivocate, delay, and all the while he will use that oil to build up stockpiles, as he is already doing now, and build up new armies.”

“There is a limit to my patience,” said Hitler. “If he does this, it will mean war.”

“Most certainly,” said Himmler. “Then, if we do strike, what will he do? He will *destroy* the fields, all the facilities we get close to will be demolished. You see, my Führer, he who controls a thing, can destroy it at his whim. Imagine that, the fields at Maykop burning, and at Grozny and Baku. Look at that map. He doesn’t even need them for his own forces. He has this extensive field developed just south of his capital at Orenburg. And if we push through towards Astrakhan, he could destroy those fields as well. War with Volkov could be very dangerous. In this event, it will be years before we see any of that oil, and the Reich is already thirsty now.”

“Then we must secure as many of these fields as possible before he ever gets the chance to do what you say. Perhaps I was far too stingy with Operation Phoenix. OKW tells me that no more than twelve divisions can be

supported over the Berlin to Baghdad Rail, but we support far more over that decrepit rail system in Russia, and we had to convert the gauge of all those rail lines to use them with our rolling stock. The Todt Organizations will be mustered again in force and sent to Turkey. I will promise them that we will pay for everything, the complete refurbishment of their rail system. If we can do this in Russia, then we can do it in Turkey. And I will see that Guderian gets everything he needs, for we simply *must* get to Basra and take that oil as well. As for Baba Gurgur, I will find a division to go there this very week! Volkov will not cast his shadow over the things my troops have fought so hard for. That oil goes to the Reich!”

“Yes,” said Himmler. “In this light, Volkov’s loyalty to the Reich can no longer be taken for granted. He must be seen as a great strategic rival, out for his own aims, which are quite evident from this map. In fact, what if Volkov were to wait for us to tidy up the south for him in the Kuban, and then simply switch sides—*before* we have defeated the Soviets this year? That would immediately free up seven Soviet armies now deployed on the Volga Front, and also set all of Volkov’s forces against us. Then we would have to continue the war all along his entire frontier, a vast new front that we never planned for.”

Hitler nodded, as if finally seeing the menace Volkov represented on his far flank. He had been so obsessed with the fighting in Russia that he could see nothing else. When Operation Phoenix dawned in his mind, it was as if he was finally coming to a new clarity of thinking about this entire war. Most of his army was fighting Sergei Kirov, and he had starved Rommel, seeing the Allies take back all of Libya, and now Morocco and Algeria as well. If they won the battle for Tunisia, then they would be masters of all North Africa.

Yet here he was, meting out a dozen divisions to Kesselring in Tunisia, including all Rommel’s forces, and then committing another dozen more to Operation Phoenix. Yet he had now sent 17th and 11th Armies, and several independent Korps, to prosecute Operation Edelweiss—24 divisions, as much as all the forces he had deployed against the Allies in the West! Manstein was going to kill 50 Soviet divisions in the Kuban if he prevailed, only to bring the Reich a little closer to oil that Volkov now controlled. Tunisia was now the only thing preventing the Allies from striking at Italy or Southern Europe once they regained control of the Med. Operation Phoenix was the only real chance he had at securing the vital oil he needed, and here was Guderian, coming like a beggar for more troops, just like Rommel was forced to do.

Himmler was correct. All this must change.

“My Führer, it was your plan to destroy the Soviet Armies in the Kuban, and thus free up all the troops Manstein now commits to Operation Edelweiss for use against the Soviets, or in the West. Yet I think that will never come to pass. I think that once we take the Kuban, all those troops will have to simply sit there, facing off along the demarcation line between Volkov’s Armies in the Caucasus, and our Armeegruppe South. There they must sit, for the duration of the war, useless to us for further operations. Why? Because Volkov presently has 1st Kazakh Army here, on the line of the River Salsk. He has his 3rd Army here, headquartered at Stavropol, obviously to control all these potential new oil fields. Then he has his Army of the Kuban at Maykop, and another army in Georgia controlling all the Black Sea Ports. Do you think he has any intention of withdrawing all those troops after Edelweiss?”

“Of course not,” said Hitler, the realization so striking to him now that he could not believe he had not seen it all before. “This map makes that quite clear.”

“Yes,” said Himmler. “And he has three armies near Volgograd, and another forming at Guryev, now moving to Astrakhan. He is building up, my Führer. He has no intention of abandoning any of this territory, or demilitarizing it once we link up after Operation Edelweiss.”

“He did so along the lower Don.”

“But there is no oil there,” Himmler quickly pointed out. “In fact, it would be my guess that once the Kuban is cleared, he will seek to negotiate with us for control of that entire province, ostensibly so that he can extend his pipelines to Rostov, and so forth. All that will take time, and he can delay such operations as long as he wishes. Frankly, I do not think we will ever see a drop of his oil. Why would he wish to strengthen us? And once the fields at Ploesti run dry, Volkov will be sitting there, ready for war with us, and knowing we may not have the oil to prosecute another war after we exhaust ourselves destroying the one great enemy that has bedeviled him for decades—Sergei Kirov.”

“He doesn’t have the weapons to face us,” said Hitler; “the tanks and artillery...”

“Oh? Who will get all the Soviet factories that have relocated to Siberia? He made an accord with Vladimir Karpov once before. What is to stop him from doing so again? And if he were to join Sergei Kirov this year—what

then? He can trade his oil to the Soviets for tanks and artillery, even as he dangles it before us for our servitude to his war aims now.”

That struck Hitler like a thunderbolt. Volkov! That scheming bastard has been planning this all along, but now he will soon see the price of his duplicity. My revenge will be swift, and final.

He stood up straight, taking a deep breath, a new light of discovery and fiery determination in his eyes. “Herr Himmler,” he said with a grave tone in his voice. “You have brought me much more than all these new SS divisions today. So very much more....”

Part X

Harbinger

*“ It has seen marching armies, bomb blasted villages
And the destruction that wasteth at noonday.
Now, unsullied from its tireless journey,
It comes to us,
Messenger of the morning,
Harbinger of a new day.”*

— Clinton Lee Scott

Chapter 28

Events in Russia in late January and early February were very limited. The weather remained brutally cold in the north and central latitudes, but less so in the south. Hitler decided that Operation Edelweiss would proceed, for he had to eliminate the Kuban pocket and become master of that province, and he had every intention of denying it to Volkov, or using it as a bargaining chip in the tense negotiations that would soon transpire.

The Soviet Army managed one big push south of Orel towards Bryansk, which sent Hermann Balck's 11th Panzer into the breach, and also prompted Hitler to rescind his long standing order that nothing staged for Operation Downfall against Leningrad would be touched. He ordered 1st and 8th Panzer Divisions to move by rail to the threatened sector, followed by four more infantry divisions. It was months yet until the scheduled start date for Operation Downfall, weather permitting, so he told himself there was plenty of time to reclaim those units down the road. That was what Himmler's revelation of all these new SS formations had done, many building out much earlier than in Fedorov's history. Hitler was now less stingy in response to a crisis on the field, doing more than simply ordering the defending troops to stand and fight to the last man.

As for Fedorov, his clever ploy to feed German intelligence that map of all the oil and gas operations that would become so significant in the region had a most dramatic effect. Hitler had just sent seven fresh divisions and three more brigades to stop the Bryansk operation, a force that was bigger than everything he had sent to Rommel over two years' time. He did this on a moment's notice, realizing at the same time how little support he had given to the war effort against the recalcitrant British Empire.

Yet now he had seen Guderian complete a dramatic thrust that delivered all of Northern Syria and Iraq to his control in a matter of weeks. Then, just as it seemed that Operation Phoenix had transitioned into a static and unwinnable battle for Baghdad, Himmler's revelations had produced a decided sea change in the Führer's thinking. He was going to smash the British, sending anything that was necessary to do so. He was going to get the oil he had so long coveted for the Reich, and he was not going to see Ivan Volkov shoulder his way into further control over that most strategic of all

resources. If he could produce seven division to stop the Soviet attack at Bryansk, then he could do the same to ensure his victory in Iraq.

A message was sent to Guderian to make plans to renew his offensive south at the first opportunity. "45th Infantry Division now enroute, one of several reinforcements to be assigned to your command. Given your need to focus on Iraq, it therefore remains impractical that you should also be burdened with the administration of forces in Syria. It has therefore been decided to appoint an overall Theater Commander to administer the needs of both armies, and you will retain full command of the Army of Iraq. It is also anticipated that an offensive will be renewed against Southern Syria and Palestine, and as you cannot manage both, the new Theater Commander will take full charge of all operations in Syria, effective March 10, 1943."

That commander was to be Field Marshal Erwin Rommel, who was informed of Hitler's offer and decision not ten days after his return from Tunisia. The will to intervene dramatically in the Middle East was now finally there. If Rommel could not get to Egypt through Libya, then let him try through Syria and Palestine. It was now just a question of logistics, and Hitler set his new Wizard at OKW, General Zeitzler, to the problem at once.

"I have calculated the carrying capacity of the Baghdad-Berlin Rail at present at about 15 trains per day, with an average of about 480 tons of all types of supply per train. That yields a delivery at the major railheads in Syria and Iraq of about 7200 tons. Depending on division type, units in heavy fighting on the offensive can consume from 800 to 1200 tons per day. Units conducting a sustained advance consume between 600 and 800 tons per day. Those on active defense or siege operations, as we have at Baghdad, will need up to 600 tons per day.

So you can see that this supply delivery capacity permits no more than six divisions on active offensive operations on any given day. Nine can conduct sustained advance with limited fighting. Twelve might be involved in active defense or siege, including mop up operations."

"We put up to 1000 rail crews into Russia during Operation Barbarossa," said Hitler, "and in just twenty days we completed major rail gauge conversions that permitted us to use ten separate rail lines to support those operations. I want an effort like this to improve carrying capacity of all the rail lines through Turkey. See to it. I want those supply delivery figures increased by no less than 50% by April 1st, and doubled by May. Understand? Spare no effort, not in manpower, rolling stock, or locomotive

engines. The weather is so severe that spring may be very late this year in Russia. So this theater now becomes my major interest.”

“That is accepted, but the limitations of the current railway line remain in place until this effort is mounted, which will begin immediately. At present, there are five divisions in Iraq, with one enroute, and six divisions in Syria, with one more assigned but not yet in theater—the 104th Jager Division. That makes 14 Divisions in total for the Armies of the Middle East under Herr Rommel. I also note that the 901st Lehr Regiment was also sent to Guderian, and Student’s 1st Fallschirmjaeger is now being moved off Crete for deployment to either front. For the time being, this is the maximum we can support over the Berlin to Baghdad rail, even if we can increase to perhaps 18 trains per day.”

“Make every effort to do so. I will order all the rolling stock transferred from Russia, It is just sitting there, as the rail lines are frozen over. So it will not be a question of any shortfall in that area.”

“I also note that all the mobile divisions are with Guderian,” said Zeitzler, “where our best prospects for renewed offensive operations will now lie. The troops assigned to Syria under Herr Rommel are all infantry divisions, and four of the seven will be mountain or Jager Divisions, with only two infantry regiments each. This force is not suited for any sustained offensive into Southern Syria or Palestine. It will require at least two panzer divisions, and optimally, three. At present, unless further troops are sent from the Russian Front, I identify only the 16th Panzer Division in the West as being available.”

“Don’t worry, Zeitzler. There are more things in the works than you may yet know. Himmler has already delivered a new SS Korps to support Operation Downfall, and a second is building in the West. This is why I rescinded the order that none of the troops along the Dvina were to be touched. So yes, 16th Panzer goes to Rommel in Syria, and at the earliest opportunity.”

“I should note that Kesselring has also asked for that division,” said Zeitzler.

“He will have to wait.”

“Anything more?” Zeitzler waited patiently.

“I told Steiner to send the 5thSS Wiking Division to help kick off the Edelweiss Offensive. It has done so, precipitating the initial breakthrough, but now the heavy allotment of infantry divisions in that front can continue

without it. That division has already fought in Syria. It was part of the initial incursion there, which in hindsight, should have been much better supported. Given that it is already familiar with the terrain there, I am ordering it detached from Steiner's Korps, and it will also be made available to General Rommel. That should allow offensive operations to begin against Southern Syria, with the seizure of Damascus being the first major objective. Your goal is to therefore improve the rail line to support the divisions already scheduled for this theater, and these two new mobile divisions as well."

"Very well," said Zeitzler. "I will make it my top priority."

"Good. You are a general that knows his business, and produces results instead of reasons why things cannot be done. We will double that rail capacity, even if it means we convert that line from a single rail to double tracks all the way from Istanbul to the Syrian border. As of yet, there has been no concerted effort on the part of the Allies to interdict that line through Turkey, so we must take ever advantage of this time, and move as much material and supply forward as possible. You have 90 days. After that we will have to begin reassigning rolling stock and rail crews to Operation Downfall, now tentatively scheduled for May."

"And what about Kesselring in Tunisia?"

"I have already authorized a new infantry division shipping out from Toulon, the 337th. Unfortunately, there will be no more panzer divisions made available to that front. He already has five, and I do not see why that force cannot be adequately concentrated to achieve a dramatic result. Of course, I am told it is all for lack of infantry. If need be I will find another division to put that excuse to rest, and I am telling Kesselring that he is to plan a new offensive for the Spring as well. We will not give up Tunisia as we have lost all of Libya and Algeria. No. We will fight, and you, General Zeitzler, will make certain we have the means to do so."

"I will do my very best," said Zeitzler. "I do note that, unlike the Turkish rail line, the supply route to Tunis and Bizerte is subject to Allied interdiction, both from the air, and by sea. The transfer of Raeder's capital ships to the Black Sea greatly enhances Operation Edelweiss, but weakens the defense of those sea lanes to Tunisia by an equal measure. I do not think we can rely too strongly on the Italian Navy. We might be able to move one more mountain division to Tunisia, perhaps the 5th from the successful Crete Operation. Otherwise, I believe that the Tunisian front is already maxed out in terms of our capacity to supply the forces assigned, and if the Allies

increase their interdiction effort, we may soon see shortfalls there. This is not something that can be cured by assigning rolling stock and rail crews. It needs considerably more—shipping that can be defended by naval forces, and a much stronger commitment by the Luftwaffe. Neither seems likely in the short run.”

“Then Kesselring must make do with what he has,” said Hitler. “These Generals keep asking for more troops, and more supply deliveries. First they must deliver on their promises! General Guderian has certainly redeemed himself with Operation Phoenix. I am hoping that Rommel will do the same, so make that theater your top priority. Look for a third panzer Division for Rommel.”

Ordering transfers and moving units would be done easily enough. Even if there were more divisions in theater than the carrying capacity of the rail line, not all of them would be used for active operations at one time. This would allow the shipment of infantry divisions, which could then occupy static portions of the line to allow the mobile divisions to conduct offensive operations. This was Guderian’s hope , and it would soon be realized.

In Syria, Kubler’s Mountain Korps would be reinforced to now include 1st, 2nd, 3rd, and 6th Mountain Divisions, and the Prinz Eugen 7th SS. The 12th Infantry Korps would retain the 31st and 34th Infantry in Syria, but send its 45 Infantry Division to Guderian in Iraq. By mid-March, Rommel would get the 3rd Panzer Korps HQ, with 16th Panzer From Marseilles, and the tough 5th SS Wiking Division from Steiner’s Korps, and perhaps one more division to be identified later, though he did not yet know this.

This heavy reinforcement allowed Guderian to move all the 22nd Luftland to Iraq, and then Student’s 1st Fallschirmjagers. The last division for Iraq would be the 104th Jaegers. This was all beyond the present capacity of the rail lines supporting these divisions, but Hitler’s decision to increase rail carrying capacity was actually also something that could be easily achieved, as he had already boasted to Zeitzler. After the Anglo-Soviet occupation of Iran in 1941 in the old history, the US and Britain took a rail system through Iran delivering only 200 tons per day to Russia, and increased it to a daily high of 7,520 tons by 1944. The Turkish rail system was far more developed after a year of work by the Todt Organization Battalions, so if such an effort were made to increase it further, that would soon become big trouble for Churchill and Alanbrooke.

Now Hitler turned to Zeitzler, with another pressing issue on his mind.

“Herr General.... I want you to prepare a complete report on the current field army strength of the Orenburg Federation—numbers of divisions, typical strength and fighting quality, current deployments. Include any intelligence on weekly troop movements and make it part of my regular briefing. Furthermore, I want Student’s troops from Crete airlifted to Baba Gurgur and Kirkuk immediately. I will speak with Goring about the necessary air transport.”

Zeitzler could hear more in these requests than it seemed on the surface. “Are you concerned about possible hostilities with the Orenburg Federation?” He was very direct with this question, but that was his nature.

“That possibility has always existed,” said Hitler. “Would-be friends become enemies at the drop of a hat these days. Look what Franco did in Spain, and now the French. I have no doubt that the Italians are getting nervous now as well. Thus far, Ivan Volkov has been our ‘Ally’ because it suits his own aims to do so. This operation in the Kuban is a perfect example. We commit 24 good German divisions to do the job that he could not accomplish, and when we are finished, what will be our reward? The promise of oil? And how long before the first shipments begin to make any difference? It may be that we have to make some hard and practical decisions concerning resources that are needed by the Reich—critical resources that are now largely controlled by Orenburg. To that end, I want you to be prepared. No unit is to be transferred out of the Kuban after the successful conclusion of Operation Edelweiss—not unless I specifically order it. Understand?

“Of course, my Führer.”

“Furthermore, German troops are not to cede any ground taken in the Kuban to the control of Volkov’s troops. They are to maintain a well manned front, and there is to be no intermixing of Volkov’s units with our own. Any units of the Orenburg Federation currently behind our lines must move to their side of the demarcation line. I am also issuing a directive today, that Maykop is to be taken by German forces, and held, with no access permitted by troops or engineers from Orenburg. I will send our own oil brigades. I paid for the Kuban dearly, and for Iraq. I gave Sergei Kirov back Voronezh, which was taken at great cost by Model. It will be German arms, and German blood that secures the oil we need for future operations. I am no longer willing to wait on Volkov’s good intentions and well-spoken promises.”

The seed that Himmler had planted had now begun to grow into a dark, coiling vine in Hitler’s mind, and the only fruit it might bear would be more

misery and war.

“One more thing,” said Hitler, pointing to a spot on the map that had been the center of his desires the previous year. “Remove the siege guns presently east of the Don and send them to Rostov. Then I want you to readjust our lines. Pull back these divisions here to the line of the River Chir.” He was pointing to the bitterly contested ground near Golubinskaya, that had been fought for in Manstein’s counterattack to stop Operation Uranus.”

“My Führer, is that wise?” Zeitzler finally found his voice. “If we pull back to the Chir, that means yielding the vital crossing at Kalach.”

“It is no longer vital,” said Hitler. “It is only a bridge.”

“But it is the primary bridge linking our forces to those of the Orenburg Federation east of the Don. And this move would also compromise the rail bridge at Nizhne Chirskaya. That bridge was to receive oil shipments from Orenburg as soon as Volgograd is cleared.”

“Don’t make me laugh, Zeitzler. We both know that will not happen any time soon. By the time it does, I will have secured other sources of oil.”

“Yet such a withdrawal will expose their flank and force them to find troops to watch that whole segment of the Don if they wish to hold as far north as the Aqueduct above Volgograd.”

“Precisely,” said Hitler coldly. “Once again, German troops will no longer shoulder the burden for Orenburg. Have I not made myself clear on this point? I wanted Volgograd, but now I can think of no sound military reason why it was necessary to take that city. It was only to strike a blow at Sergei Kirov to weaken his morale, and this we have already done. So now I throw it like a bone to Ivan Volkov, and let him chew on it. But German troops will no longer secure his left flank. You may notify the local commander of the 4th Orenburg Army 48 hours before this move takes place. Military Police are also to take up posts along the whole line of the Don, from the River Chir all the way to Rostov. I will send the Italians to watch the lower Don. I want all these dispositions completed within one week. That is all.”

That was quite enough. It seemed a small matter at the time, a mere inconvenience for Volkov’s forces near Volgograd, but it was to be a harbinger of something much greater yet to come.

Chapter 29

It was immediately evident that the Germans were planning a double envelopment of Baghdad, and Jumbo Wilson now sat with the prospect of having 90% of the entire British Army and Commonwealth forces in Iraq trapped there. He could see that if the Germans made a concerted effort in the southwest, Blaxland's four Brigades would certainly not be enough to stop them. The attack east of the Tigris on his far right had been stopped by Kingstone at the Kayam Quarter, but for how long? He called Kingstone, Grover, and a few other division commanders to discuss their prospects.

"A fine mess we've gotten ourselves into," he began. "It's taken every division we have just to keep them out of the main city districts. We lost the Al Muthana aerodrome, and it's only a matter of time before they make a move on the Al Rashid field. The question is, should we hold here? In another two or three days, they might have the whole army in the bag."

"That would be like a cat in a bag," said Grover. "We can fight, and we can hold."

"Possibly," said Wilson, "but for how long? If they cut the rail lines south there will be no further supplies coming in. We've got stores to hold two weeks, but after that things will get difficult. I don't want this to become the largest surrender of British-Commonwealth forces in this war."

"If they do surround us, we could still fight our way out."

"I have no doubt, but if it comes to that choice, then why not move now, while we still have the roads and rail lines open to the south? The pay dirt here in Iraq is all down south—Basra, and now Abadan. I've also just received information that the Orenburg Federation has negotiated further transit rights through Iran. They're moving another large force through Tehran, and from there they can come south to Ahwaz."

"The oil," said Grover. "It's all about the bloody oil."

"Yes, the Iranians have big Fields at Ahwaz, and we might want to get there first and add that to what we've already taken at Abadan. But that means we have to give up Baghdad and move south. Opinions?"

"It'll be dangerous," said Kingstone. "We'll have to move smartly, and fight a good delaying action. The Germans are masters of that sort of mobile battle. It's this fight here that they don't like—a city fight. That said, I see

your point about encirclement. It may be that a cat on the run would have a better chance than one in a bag.”

“General Grover?”

“We’ll have to be nimble. I’ve had men down repairing cuts to the line as it stands. If we do this, we should start immediately. But what about Whitehall? Have they weighed in on this question?”

“I’ve a message here that instructs me to make the defense of the oil concerns in Southern Iraq my key priority. How I go about that was left to me. We thought we could stop the Germans by holding here, and we certainly did, yet I’m just not sure that we can hold out. I’d prefer to take my chances on the run.”

“What about the oil bunkering?” asked Kingstone.

“We’ll load as much of the refined oil as practical, the rest burns.”

There were no objections, and so it was that Wilson decided to move that very night, gathering all his transport and rolling stock to get the wounded, and his supplies, loaded first. Then he set up a schedule for the withdrawal.

“General Grover, I want your division to watch the right flank, and you go along with him, Joe.” He looked at Kingstone.

“What about the left,” said Kingstone. “Blaxland is over there now, and he’ll make a mess of things. Mark my words.”

“I’m going move both the 7th and 9th Armored Brigades out first. They have good mobility, and they’ll be sent to backstop Blaxland’s brigades. Then the rest of the infantry falls back through the city to the rail loading points. We’ll get as much as we can onto the trains, the rest go overland by truck. We’ve enough lorries to make a good go of it.”

“What about the Levies at Baqubah?”

“I’m afraid they can’t be helped,” said Wilson. “The Germans have already cut off the road and rail connections south. They’ll just have to hold on as best they can.”

“Alright,” said Kingstone. “It’s as good a plan as any, except for those Levies, but we’ll have to step lively, and keep moving. The Germans will be right on our heels like a pack of hungry hounds, and they’ll harry us at every chance. We’ll need to stop and fight in the cities along the route, and Alexandria, and east from there to the Tigris, presents us with a relatively narrow front for a good delaying action. After that, we can fight rearguard actions at Al Hillah and Diwaniyah along the main route south along the Euphrates, and at Al Kut and Al Amarah on the route east of the Tigris, but

I'm still worried about Blaxland."

"To that end we've still got the 18th Infantry Division," said Wilson. "I'll pull it off the trains at Al Hillah, and then send that rolling stock on to Baghdad for us to use. Blaxland will follow the Euphrates south through Alexandria to Al Hillah, where he'll find Beckwith-Smith's 18th Division there in good positions to hold the line."

"Good enough," said Kingstone. "Thank God that division was available."

"Indeed," said Wilson. "I went to Auk with this plan, and he's approved it, so we're good to go. If I had heard strong objections here from you tonight, I would have reconsidered, but it seems this is for the best. Joe, where is Glubb Pasha?"

"He's at the Oil Bunkerage."

"Well see if he can move south tonight and watch the crossing points along the Euphrates. Alright gentlemen, let's get busy. I'll get the armor moving immediately."

It was now to be run and gun, as Wilson sought to save the army, and get to some defensible line in the south. That night the sound of lorries was heavy in the city, a long dull rumble. Service troops worked for hours on end, loading everything of value they could. Artillery was given high priority, and all the ammunition. Most of the two Armored brigades moved south, but those M3 tanks of the Royal Wiltshires near the ferry landing had a difficult time getting back. Currie told them to hold at the Barracks, and he sped off south with the rest of his brigade.

A small rearguard held on in the north, the 5th Essex and 3/15 Punjab of the 21st Brigade. Most everything else in Central Baghdad got moving south, but troops still had to watch the east bank near all the bridges. All of Grover's 2nd Infantry took the road that ran along the east bank of the Tigris, down past Rashid Airfield. That move strung out the division as a good flank guard, and they could also board a train on the rail line to Kut. Kingstone left his infantry where they were on defense against any continued thrust by the Germans, but he sent his armored cars down towards the small air strip at Salman Pak to screen that area.

The movement of both Armored Brigades behind Blaxland gave the indolent Colonel heart. The tanks and infantry lined up behind his defense lines, and Currie found him that night to brief him on what was happening. "The whole lot is headed south," he said, "and you're the rear guard for this

flank. Don't worry, my tanks will be right behind you."

Soon they could hear the drone of the lorries, long columns making their way down to find the roads leading south. The trains were mustering there to take the guns and other heavy equipment south. The withdrawal was protected and screened by the same marshes, canals and other water obstacles that had made the city such a difficult place to attack, and Wilson was confident that he would get his army safely south. The question was where should he go? How far? Was there a place where he might turn and make a stand?

* * *

General Heinz Guderian could hear those columns moving in the cool night, and he smiled. The British were retreating! The dual envelopment he had clearly threatened had put a hard question to them, and this was how they answered it. Westhoven called from 3rd Panzer HQ and told him there was also a lot of movement heading south beyond Rashid Airfield.

"They're pulling out," said Guderian. I've got similar reports from General Beckermann west of the river."

"Do you want me to try and stop them?"

"Stop them? Whatever for? No Westhoven, now we get our battle of maneuver back again. This thing here at Baghdad could have gone another two or three weeks, even with the new troops I've been promised. This retreat is exactly what I was hoping for. You can send recon elements out towards Salman Pak, but otherwise stay put. I've told Schmidt to bridge the Euphrates, and he'll be all night and most of tomorrow doing that. When that is complete, he'll take 10th Motorized down the west bank of the Euphrates and clear Karbala. Beckermann will move down the east bank, so they won't be able to blow all the bridges as they move south. Fuel up, and get ready to move on my command."

As far as Guderian was concerned, the Battle of Baghdad was over, and good riddance. He would take it as a pyrrhic victory, and now he could set his sights on what he really intended, the long drive south to Basra.

There were still many things on the General's mind. First off, 45th Division was delayed when Student's troops were given priority after arriving at Istanbul to cross the straits and board trains for Mosul. There was a reason for that. He had been called by Barenthin at Kirkuk, and learned that

the situation there was becoming somewhat tense.

Barenthin had a single regiment sitting on all the key facilities at Baba Gurgur and in Kirkuk itself, but he reported the two Turkomen Divisions were now taking up positions in a wide semicircle, and moving up close to his lines. Ivan Volkov had been informed of the subtle, and not so subtle changes in the interaction of German forces with his own, and he was not happy about it. Tensions were slowly rising in areas where his troops were operating close to the Germans, and so he ordered that certain objectives were to be closely screened.

The local Turkomen commander did not yet have the gumption to actually order his men to confront the tough German paratroopers at Kirkuk, but he was clearly making a show of force, deploying his battalions to surround that area on three sides, wise enough to leave a route of retreat open for the Germans.

But Barenthin wasn't going anywhere. He had been told that General Student and the entire 1st Fallschirmjaeger Division were already on the way, but oddly, there was no direct rail connection from the railhead at Mosul to Kirkuk. With the Crete operation winding down, Goring had flown the paratroopers back to Athens, but he needed to use those transports to fly in garrison troops to replace them. So the division went by rail to Mosul, then south along the Tigris to a point about 120 kilometers east of Kirkuk. From there they would move overland using reserve trucks pooled there by the rail crews that had been working on the line.

Guderian also was still waiting for the other two regiments of the 22nd Luftland to come in from the Euphrates, an area that was now to be designated as part of Rommel's new command. A detachment from the 164th Light was moved there to replace the 22nd, as reinforcements scheduled for Rommel's Army of Syria began to flow in through Aleppo. Rommel was not even due to arrive for another week. He would reach Istanbul about the same time 16th Panzer arrived from the West, with 5th SS Wiking Division right on its heels.

The log jam was slowly breaking up. Things were beginning to move and become more fluid. Guderian had a lot of business right there in Baghdad, his troops, largely from the 78th Sturm Division, advancing into the city the following morning to take over ground abandoned by the British. KG Rosenfeld and Schafer were ordered east by Hube to rejoin the entire division and prepare for the drive south.

There were questions about the facilitation of a new Iraqi government he had to see to, as Rashid Ali was arriving to declare himself the new Pasha. The Embassies of Britain, China and the United States had to be searched, the whole city swept for stay behinders, supplies and fuel had to be salvaged wherever possible. So a sudden violent pursuit was out of the question for the next few days. He would give his troops some rest after the long battle, which had raged since the 22nd. On the last Day of February, he rode triumphantly into Baghdad, and when the news reached Berlin, Hitler was elated.

The Führer saw the sudden improvement on that front as the direct result of his determination to make it a priority. It was a much needed victory for him, after suffering a string of half measures, withdrawals, failed offensives and lost territory in North Africa. His spirits were high, and his mind was now obsessed with the tremendous economic and military windfalls that his Operation Phoenix had made possible. He might have reaped this bounty much earlier, but Brigadier Kinlan had stopped him in Syria. That shining knight in impenetrable armor was no longer there to joust for King and Country. It was a whole new war now, and the changes it would cause to the overall course of events were still unseen, even by men like Anton Fedorov.

In England, Churchill and Alanbrooke received the news with great distress. The Prime Minister would later say that the fall of Baghdad eclipsed even the loss of Ceylon in his mind for strategic significance.

“How is it possible,” he railed. “Auchinlek had five divisions to hold that city; over 100,000 troops. Montgomery stopped the Japanese at Singapore with far less.”

“First off it wasn’t Auchinlek in charge on the ground. It was Wilson,” said Alanbrooke. “It’s true that Wilson had 15 Brigades, and the two armored brigades as well compared to 10 brigades defending Singapore, but Monty was facing only three Japanese divisions, while Wilson was facing two good German Panzer divisions, the Brandenburg Division, and other forces totaling at least 16 brigades.”

“Even odds,” said Churchill.

“You might see it that way, but these were some of the best troops in the German Army, while a lot of those Indian divisions, the 5th excepted, had languished in Persia with little training, poor equipment, and understrength formations. The 6th and 8th Indian Divisions were garrison units, and rated as even second tier units for defense. Wilson had little in the way of offensive potential until Grover finally arrived with 2nd Division, and the armor came

up. By then, Guderian had pushed us out of west Baghdad, and was threatening a double envelopment. Wilson made the correct decision. If he had stayed where he was, in ten days to two weeks we might be discussing the loss of the entire army.”

“But we simply must hold on there in Iraq,” said Churchill. “It cannot be lost, any more than we could afford to lose Egypt when Rommel was after us. We defeated him, and so we must also stop this General Guderian. Where can we find more troops?”

Chapter 30

That was a very good question.

“We have other assets close at hand,” said Alanbrooke. “Don’t forget the two divisions in Abyssinia. The 11th East Africa Division is formed up, pulling troops from Kenya, Uganda, Tanganyika and Rhodesia. Fluffy Fowkes has it there now, and he’s been training the men well from all reports. Then we still have the forces we used for the occupation of Madagascar last year. The two good British Brigades returned to 5th Division in Syria, but there’s still our 29th Independent Brigade, the South African 7th Motorized Brigade, and the Rhodesian 27th Infantry Brigade there as a garrison.”

“We might make good use of the 29th Independent.”

“My thinking exactly. The other two can stand as a garrison well enough. Now then, after that, we have more troops being organized by General Giffard in Africa. He’s used units of the Royal West African Frontier Force and teed up two divisions for service in Burma, or the planned counterattack at Ceylon.”

“Ceylon can wait,” said Churchill glumly. “We’ve lost the rubber plantations, but losing the oil rigs is out of the question, and the Germans have already occupied Baba Gurgur.”

“Well, we’ve taken Abadan from Persia in compensation.”

“Which we should have done long ago,” said Churchill. “The Persians have been flirting with the Germans ever since Turkey became a wayward bride. Now they’ll throw in with them completely.”

“It couldn’t be helped,” said Alanbrooke. “Don’t worry, they’ve little to contribute militarily, though they did cross the border into Iraq and they’ve occupied Amara after we took Abadan and Ahwaz. We did have plans to go all the way to Tehran, but that operation had to be shelved when the Germans pulled Operation Phoenix out of their hat—that’s what it’s being called.”

“Well named,” said Churchill. “They took an old plan that we foiled with our own Operation Scimitar, then gave it to an old General that had gone into semi-retirement after falling out of favor with Hitler. Well it seems there was a good deal of mileage left in that warhorse after all.”

“Indeed,” said Alanbrooke. “I agree that under these circumstances, our

attack on Ceylon will have to be postponed.”

“These two new divisions Giffard has organized,” asked Churchill, “will they be any good?”

“Decent fighting men,” said Alanbrooke. “But they’ll have no transport—not even for artillery or any of the heavy equipment. They were both to be organized using porter squads to carry everything—jungle warfare has little use for trucks. That may be good for Burma, but they’ll have limited offensive capability if sent to Iraq, unless we can motorize them.”

“We’ll have to do so. Trucks we have in abundance, but it’s a long voyage by sea to get them there. What else can we find—good experienced troops?” Churchill was pacing.

“The 70th Division is still with Slim in Burma. It’s perhaps the most experienced division there.”

“We’ve already stolen away his 2nd Division. No, I think we’ll have to leave the 70th where it is.”

“Then there’s the Canadians,” said Alanbrooke. “1st Division under Guy Simonds is training up for the Med. The 2nd and 3rd Divisions are just sitting about here in the Kingdom on garrison duties, and training for the eventual invasion of France, whenever that might happen.”

“That’s the ticket,” said Churchill. “How good are they?”

“Now that we’ve re-equipped them, they’re up to snuff, and I think they have good fighting men there as well. But again, even if we did send one, it would be six weeks getting there.”

“Which brings us back to our friends in Australia and New Zealand,” said Churchill. “Prime Minister Curtin was very adamant that his Aussies return home, but he can’t honestly think the Japanese are about to land at Sydney any time soon. Those are well hardened soldiers, and what are they doing over there now watching the home front? MacArthur has landed on New Caledonia, and Halsey has troops in the French New Hebrides. The Americans are getting a good head of steam up, and that should have eased the concerns of our friends down under. I must make an appeal to Curtin for at least one division again. There’s too much at stake.”

“For that matter,” said Alanbrooke, “what about the Americans? They have troops just sitting about in Australia as well.”

“What? Rob MacArthur? He’s been moaning about being short changed all these months. No, I don’t think we can count on help from the Americans, at least not for troops in this matter. The Commonwealth will have to do the

job. Alright. I think we'll have to take the best of our own forces in Africa, even if some of those units aren't fully equipped. See to that, will you General Brooke?"

"Of course, sir. The 11th East African would be at the top of my list there."

"Good. Then, if I can't get my hands on anything down under, we'll have to send the Canadians. But all these infantry divisions... will they be enough?"

"Put enough on the line and they can be very tough," said Alanbrooke. "As for any offensive aimed at kicking the Germans out, that's another matter."

"Yes," said Churchill, "what we need is more armor."

"Everyone wants more armor," said Alanbrooke. "Alexander has been hankering for more, and so we've had to gut the 8th Army and take it from O'Connor. I have no doubt that Monty will soon put in a similar request. Here in the Kingdom we still have the 9th, 11th, and 42nd Armored Divisions, and Hobart's Funnies in the 79th. They're all in the cupboard for future operations against France."

"That's a long way off, in spite of what General Marshall and the Americans are proposing with this Sledgehammer nonsense. We'll have to win through in Tunisia first to even contemplate any further offensives in the Med, let alone against France. So tell me about these other divisions."

"Of the lot, the Black Bull is the best—the 11th under General Burrows. It's built out with two good armored brigades, and with our best new tanks. Then there's the 9th Armored Division. It only has one armored brigade in it, but we've added a support group, and an infantry brigade. The 42nd Division has two armored brigades, but no infantry aside from a small support group."

"I think we'll have to hold on to the 11th, but might we put together something by mixing the other two? We can call it the Provisional Armored Division, or anything else that suits your fancy."

"Yes sir, neither one is doing us any good here at the moment, so I suppose we might pick and choose from the litter to build something new, and there you have it, your Provisional Armored Division for Iraq. Send it on its way with one of the Canadian Divisions, and the situation in Iraq will look a good deal better, I can assure you."

"Let me see what I can get out of Curtin."

On that matter, the Curtin would remain closed, and Australia continued

to insist it needed its only real fighting divisions to serve at home, training up new divisions that were all in the works. But Churchill would have more luck with New Zealand. The 2nd New Zealand Division was a veteran unit that had fought in the Western Desert before being withdrawn. In Fedorov's history, it never was recalled home, continuing to fight in Tunisia and the Italian Campaign, one of the best Commonwealth divisions of the war. Something in the history of these events would now continue to pull that division into the orbit of the Kingdom, and Prime Minister Peter Fraser, attuned to the gravity of the situation in Iraq, said he would be willing to release his 2nd Division again if it was needed.

It certainly was.

All these deliberations showed just how resilient the British Empire and Commonwealth truly was. Within just a few months, forces had been found to reinforce 10th Army in Syria, and build out an all new Paliforce Army in Iraq and Persia. By taking units from India, Burma, East and South Africa, and now New Zealand, Churchill had the makings of an entire new Army.

It was decided that the Provisional Armored Division would be created and sent from the Kingdom as soon as possible, but in the short run, 2nd New Zealand Infantry Division was much closer and soon to be welcomed again. The 11th East Africa Division was also scheduled for deployment to Iraq, and it would be the first to arrive, along with the independent 29th British Brigade from Madagascar. Churchill was then prepared to send both the new African divisions if necessary, though he preferred to keep them on track for Burma. Yet he instinctively realized that the gravity of the war had shifted dramatically, and much might be won or lost in Iraq that could not be gained or lost anywhere else. As far as he was concerned, even the campaign in Tunisia would take a secondary role now, until Iraq was deemed secure.

Bletchley Park revealed that the Germans seemed to be of the same mind, and that an old nemesis, once thought vanquished, would soon return to the field. So Churchill was absolutely convinced that the entire war effort must make Iraq its number one priority.

"Rommel again!" he said. "We thought he was finally beaten in Tunisia. The Italians were calling for his head and he was sent home. But now we see that Herr Hitler was only huddling with his Desert fox, and all the while finding him a new desert. He's been appointed the commander of all German forces in Syria!"

"A serious matter," said Alanbrooke. "We thought Rommel was

thoroughly knackered, and that they were giving that man a much needed rest, but there's no rest for any of us in this war. Hitler has doubled down on this whole affair."

"He has indeed," said Churchill. "This is what the loss of Turkey precipitated. That was a very heavy blow. So we'll pull all the stops and play to win there at all costs. Yet I'm thinking that Jumbo Wilson may be overburdened there in Iraq."

"He's a good man," said Alanbrooke. "I've already told you that I second his every decision concerning Baghdad."

"It's not that," said Churchill. "It's just that he'll be juggling a good many divisions soon, and perhaps more than he can manage."

"Auk is there," said Alanbrooke.

"Yes, but he's been administering things on the higher level. I'm told he's quite good with operational matters."

"One of our best," said Alanbrooke.

"Then let's use him. Tell him I want him to roll up his sleeves and take charge of the ground operations more closely. He can coordinate with Wilson, but I want Auchinleck to get into the thick of things."

"All right sir, that may be wise. After all, this thing is much bigger than it initially seemed. Bletchley Park thinks all these German operations are part and parcel together. They see Operation Phoenix and the big push now underway in the Kuban as closely related. But I've read the latest reports very carefully. There may be a silver lining in some of these storm clouds."

"Pray tell," said Churchill.

"BP says Hitler has issued some unusual directives of late, and they all have to do with the interface of German units with those of the Orenburg Federation. He's sent his Italian contingent in the east to man the line of the Don, posted military police on all the bridges, pulled his troops out of the Volga sector, and now we're told that there's been some tension between the Turkomen Divisions Volkov sent through Northern Persia to Iraq, and the German troops garrisoning Baba Gurgur. Jerry pulled all those crack paratroopers off Crete and replaced them with a mountain division. Now they're on the way to Kirkuk."

Churchill's eyes narrowed. "Interesting," he said slowly. "Most interesting. Might there be cracks in the wall Volkov and Hitler have been building together?"

"It would seem so," said Alanbrooke.

“That would be marvelous!” Churchill smiled for the first time in the whole discussion—for the first time since he left the Casablanca Conference with FDR. Since that time, he had been shunned by the Turks, then visited Palestine in the midst of that sudden new threat developing to undertake the sad duty of moving Wavell along to India before flying home to the UK. “Yes,” he said, “that would be blinding good news if those two ever came to blows. If there’s anything we can do to encourage that, we ought to be about it. Just when things look like they’re all going to pot, your enemy gets a mind to make a first class mistake. Let’s hope they get into a nice kerfuffle together. Brilliant—just brilliant!”

* * *

The army that Rommel was to inherit had been built as a holding force, composed mostly of light mountain troops. Now it was being reinforced with two line infantry divisions, a strong 16th Panzer Division which had been provided with all new tanks. Then the vaunted 5th SS Wiking Division under Otto Gille would arrive from the South Front in Russia, eager to dry out and warm up in Syria again. It was one of the heroes that had stopped Operation Uranus, Steiner’s old division, and he hated to see it go. This unit was still structured as a fast heavy Motorized Division, with the Nordland, Germania and Westland Regiments. It also included a Panzer regiment with 121 more tanks, as it had not been replenished after fighting in the opening rounds of Operation Edelweiss. That brought Rommel’s AFV total to 292, so before he flew to Aleppo, he made a special request..

He knew that any number of independent Panzer Brigades had been sent to the East Front, and wanted to get his hands on one. When he learned that one had been rebuilding in France, he asked for it as a personal favor, and Hitler granted his request. It was really restructuring as a heavy Panzergrenadier Brigade, the 101st, but it would add another 45 of the new Panther tanks to Rommel’s force, with a Schwere Company of 15 new VK-90 Lion Kings. They were prototype models, a little gift from the Führer to his favorite General. With good grenadiers included, this brigade would add a good deal of punch to any attack. All these units would gather under the newly designated III Panzer Korps, and including odd Marders and older tanks scattered among the Korps formations, Rommel would enter his new command in Syria with just over 375 tanks.

So while Jumbo Wilson struggled to administer his safe withdrawal from Baghdad, and Guderian cleared that city, the force that would finally make the German Army in Syria an offensive threat was being loaded onto the long steel rail lines and was heading south from Istanbul. They would arrive and take up positions near the T4 Pumping station and Palmyra, and a week later, on the 15th of March, Field Marshall Rommel would arrive at Aleppo. He had little time to rest after leaving Tunisia only three weeks earlier, convincing his personal physician that he was fit and ready for duty.

As soon as he reached his new HQ at Homs, his eyes played over the lists of units included in his new command, and the numbers and types making up those 375 tanks. The old desert warrior knew just what he would do with them.

Part XI

Turncoat

“Some men, like wine, are inherently turncoats—first a friend, and then an enemy.”

— Henry Fielding

Chapter 31

In Orenburg, Ivan Volkov was watching the progress of Operation Phoenix very closely. He had not been informed by the Germans about it, and the dramatic advances achieved by Guderian were quite startling in February. At the same time, the Germans were massing troops just south of Rostov for Operation Edelweiss. He knew it was coming, and welcomed it in many respects, but it also made him somewhat edgy.

Shaking hands with the Germans on the Volga was one thing, he thought. There was no oil there, but now these new campaigns seem entirely aimed at the oil rich centers of the Middle East... and my holdings in the Caucasus.

He also could not fail to notice the changes that had recently been introduced on the battlefield, his astute mind keenly aware of the subtle message they were sending. Six months earlier, when German troops had linked up with his forces and the battle for Volgograd was being fought, he had been very pleased with the outcomes. The Germans drove back the stubborn Soviet defenders, and both sides cooperated, particularly north of the city at the Rynok Bridge, where he committed one of his Guards Divisions to make the assault.

As German troops concentrated on the city fight, he gladly offered to send elements of his 2nd Kazakh Army, and 5th Orenburg Army to man quiet sectors of the line. His new 'Ally' was doing what his own armies had failed to accomplish over decades of bitterly contested fighting with Sergei Kirov's Army of the Volga. As that river extended north, it also stood as the demarcation line between the Orenburg Federation, and Soviet Russia.

As circumstances came about, the Commander of Armeegruppe Sud, Eric Manstein, had little use for the city of Volgograd itself. He saw it as a liability, extending his troops into a difficult city fight that his panzers were ill suited for. General Zhukov helped that thinking along when he launched his Operations Uranus and Saturn against Manstein's lines of communications to Volgograd, prompting him to withdraw Steiner's elite SS Korps to parry those attacks. After that, the Germans committed twelve infantry divisions to slowly reduce the Soviet defenses in the city, and then quietly turned the whole affair over to Volkov. Those divisions were needed elsewhere, and one entire Army, the 11th under Hansen, was instead sent

south into the Kuban to join 17th Army for Operation Edelweiss.

Volkov was elated to gain complete control of the Volgograd sector, his forces now taking over all the ground between the Volga and Don. Then came the subtle message, when German troops that had been covering the west bank of the Don were pulled back to the Chir, which forced the local Orenburg Army Commander to quickly shift assets to cover the Don bridges. What was Hitler doing, or was this another expedient ordered by Manstein?

Volkov soon learned that it had been a direct order from Hitler himself, and noted how shortly thereafter, the Germans moved Italian troops all along the line of the Don, many soon crossing to the south bank to cover the rail line between Salsk and Kotelnikovo. That route was used by Hansen's 11th Army on its march to the Kuban, so Volkov thought little of it... Until the Italians showed up. He quickly summoned the German Ambassador, formally requesting a meeting with the German Foreign Minister, Joachim von Ribbentrop. He had engineered the tense German-Soviet Pact in 1939 and 40, before Operation Barbarossa made an end of that, and he was also the man who had negotiated Orenburg's Pact with the Reich.

"Mister Foreign Minister," said Volkov. "It has been a long time since we met face to face, and perhaps that is best between two parties with similar minds and aims. The need to discuss matters is always a sly indication of hidden discord, so forgive me if I come right to the point. I wonder if you can explain the recent troop movements made by your southern group of forces along the Don? I make specific note of the presence of Italian troops south of that river, in territory liberated by the forces of Orenburg."

"General Secretary, having made inquiries before my arrival here, it would seem that this is nothing more than a screening force for the lines of communication used by our 11th Army. As you must know, those troops deployed across the Manych River at Proteletarsk and established their headquarters in Salsk, relieving your 1st Kazakh Army of the burden of further deployment and combat against Soviet troops in the Kuban."

"Well enough," said Volkov. "Yet my army was more than willing to continue its campaign in the Kuban—until your 11th Army Commander made a specific request that our troops withdraw."

"I was informed that our operational styles being so different in a campaign of this nature, the 11th Army request was merely meant to ensure maximum efficiency in the campaign ahead."

"You are suggesting our troops have become a nuisance—a hindrance to

your own operations?”

“That is put in terms a little more abrasive than I would have devised,” said Ribbentrop.

“Ah, yes,” said Volkov. “All Ambassadors and Foreign Ministers are gifted at birth with honeyed tongues. I am just a little more forthright. I have subsequently learned that the Yegorluk River has now become a sort of demarcation line for this Kuban operation, with your forces operating west of that river, and ours to the east.”

“Correct,” said Ribbentrop. “I was told the river formed a convenient line. In such operations, all Armies and Korps level formations routinely adjudicate such operational boundaries. There is nothing more to it.”

“I see... Mister Ribbentrop, perhaps we should now discuss the division of territory within the Kuban Region at the conclusion of this campaign. Considering our long investment of men and material in the Caucasus, it would seem appropriate that the forces of Orenburg would assume control of the Kuban District after this campaign, with the line of the Don River again forming a convenient demarcation boundary. Are you in agreement with this proposal?”

At that, Ribbentrop hesitated briefly, something that Volkov did not fail to perceive. His request was clearly a matter that had made the Foreign Minister somewhat uncomfortable. “Mister General Secretary,” he began. “You may also be aware of a recent Führer Directive stating that all territories liberated by German forces would henceforward be considered German occupied zones.”

“Are you telling me that Germany now wishes to assume control of the Kuban District indefinitely? I would have thought this matter would have followed the template set down in the Volgograd campaign. While Orenburg welcomed and appreciated German military cooperation and support, we were equally gratified to see that Germany acknowledged our longstanding claim upon that city and district, and that also applies to the Kuban. My forces had operational control of that district until 1940, when the Soviets launched their offensive into the Caucasus, which took them deep into our territory—*our* territory, Mister Foreign Minister. We stopped them, but have not yet mustered sufficient strength there to roll them back. Then, when our forces linked up, we again welcomed German military support as before. But I am afraid I must insist that I expect all German forces to withdraw from the Kuban at the conclusion of these operations, and control of that district to

return to our jurisdiction.”

“Is this a formal request?” asked Ribbentrop.

“It is.”

“Then I will take it to Berlin for consideration.”

“Please do so.”

Ribbentrop nodded. “Yet considering the contradiction with the Führer’s recent directive, I cannot promise anything to you here and now regarding an agreement.”

“You should not have to. The territorial rights concerning this district are clear, and there is a long historical precedent. The Kuban belongs to the Orenburg Federation. Sergei Kirov occupied it illegally with his surprise offensive, and now we will be most glad to see his brigands rounded up and sent to the prison camps we are preparing out on the Kalmyk Steppe. That will be something else your military will not have to worry about, and then you will have all those divisions available for deployment elsewhere. We are also prepared to cede control of Rostov to your forces, it being largely north of the Don. I’m sure the Führer will be eager to make good use of those 24 divisions for his upcoming offensive in the north.”

“Military deployments are not my responsibility,” said Ribbentrop. “I suppose all this will be a matter for the Führer to decide. If he wishes to waive control of the Kuban in this instance, so be it, and I will inform you directly.”

“And if he does not wish to issue such a waiver?” Volkov gave Ribbentrop a hard look.

“Then I would ask you to consider your overall interests in this war, and the value of the support you now have where German arms are busy settling matters that have been unresolved by your own forces for the last twenty years....”

The veiled insult behind Ribbentrop’s words was clearly heard, though Volkov maintained a cold, emotionless front. “I remind you, Mister Foreign Minister, that German troops are about their business at the invitation of this government. Concerning the Kuban, we are not inclined to compromise. It has been, and will remain, the sovereign territory of Orenburg. I also note that we recently offered you military support, at some cost, by sending troops all the way from Baku through Persia to assist with the campaign in Iraq. Yet there, it seems our troops are also now viewed as a nuisance. I just received a report that German paratroops have occupied Baba Gurgur and Kirkuk. That

was also territory that Orenburg was ready to administer. After all, we have long decades of experience in oil well development, and have promised Germany to supply all her war needs in that category once clear shipping lines and lanes can be secured.”

Ribbentrop smiled. “That is, I suppose, the heart of the matter where the Kuban is concerned. Germany is prepared to commit its Todt Organizations to restore the pipeline from Maykop to Rostov, rebuild the rail lines, clear the Black Sea ports, eliminate the Soviet Black Sea Fleet, and open sea lanes to Odessa and other ports. Again, we are most efficient when retaining full control of territories where such operations are undertaken.” Ribbentrop poured out his words like a man quietly pouring a glass of wine for an important guest, but Volkov clearly smelled the poison. If the Germans wished to restore the pipeline from Maykop’s burgeoning wells, they would have to occupy that zone as well, which was now firmly in Volkov’s hands, some 40 kilometers behind the Soviet front to the west.

“Then you are suggesting German occupation of the Kuban would be temporary—until such time as these infrastructure projects are completed?”

“That may be the case, but Berlin would have to confirm.”

“Mister Foreign Secretary.... Let me be clear. That *must* be the case. We build pipelines and railroads easily enough. As your operation aims solely to benefit Germany, by opening avenues for Orenburg to ship much needed oil and gas to the Reich, such small territorial squabbles should not enter into this picture. Surely you can agree on that.”

“I may, indeed, believe that to be suitable. But I am not Adolf Hitler. I must tell you, with equal clarity, that the Führer is in the habit of seeing his directives carried out to the letter, and his decisions are the final word on such matters, and not subject to negotiation.”

“I see... Well, you may tell the Führer that the General Secretary of the Orenburg Federation also makes decisions and issues directives and orders, and he has just done so concerning the disposition of the Kuban District, which will be returned to the control of Orenburg immediately following the conclusion of hostilities with the Soviet forces currently operating there illegally. Allies should not be outlaws—if they wish to remain Allies.”

Volkov smiled, upping the ante considerably by taking this hard line with Ribbentrop. He waited now to see what the Foreign Minister would say next.

“Mister General Secretary. Would it please you to see all German forces withdraw immediately? In that instance, your own armies would be free to

continue prosecuting their unsuccessful campaign against the Soviets in the Kuban. Considering it has been three years since the Soviet incursion, during which time not one drop of oil has arrived from Orenburg, Germany thought to settle the matter. If we are prevented from doing so effectively, it would mean even further delays in your promised oil shipments, which would, I may point out, mean that Orenburg is in default concerning the agreement to supply the Reich. If Allies wish to remain Allies, they might also look to fulfilling their promises and agreements.”

Volkov continued to smile. “I will look forward to discussing this further after you have consulted with Berlin. Thank you for coming all this way. I know you are a very busy man, and the plane to Rostov will be leaving shortly. Good day, Mister Foreign Minister.”

Ribbentrop stood, quietly collecting his briefcase and was soon politely escorted out. He was on that plane an hour later, a 750 mile flight to Rostov, where he would meet directly with Eric Manstein and inform him of what had been discussed before returning to Berlin.

“Under the circumstances,” he would tell Manstein a day later, “it would be wise to set aside additional strong reserves for commitment to the Kuban region if needed there. I do not have to tell you what Berlin’s answer will be. The Führer’s directive already decided the matter when it was first issued. In fact, it was this very question that Hitler was addressing with that directive.”

“I hope you did not tell that to Volkov,” said Manstein.

“Of course not, but that man is not stupid. He raised the stakes with me, implying that the continuance of the alliance itself was on the table if he was not ceded control of the Kuban.”

“That may not be too much of a price to pay for Orenburg’s continued cooperation,” said Manstein. “After all, they are tying down six to eight Soviet Armies, above and beyond those in the Kuban.”

“Volkov may have only wished to see what my reaction would be,” said Ribbentrop, “and I was firm.”

Manstein nodded, his mind already thinking about what more he could send to the Kuban. Diplomats, he thought. They are always a complication where military matters are concerned. Just when I get a few Panzer divisions set aside as a reserve, they will now all be shunted off to the Caucasus. And I have little doubt that Ivan Volkov is already looking over his troop rosters as well. Once I commit my reserves there, who knows if I will ever get them back?

Manstein was not wrong in that, for that very same day Volkov sent a message to the Commander of his 2nd and 7th Armies, telling him that he was to make reserve formations—particularly mechanized and armored units, available for transfer to the Kuban at a moment's notice. His last question to Ribbentrop had been a deliberate test, and when he got back tit for tat instead of a polite deferral of the matter to Berlin, he realized that Ribbentrop already knew what Hitler's response was going to be concerning the Kuban. The Germans had no plans to withdraw, and now the deployment of those paratroop units to Baba Gurgur was seen in an all new light.

The Führer is getting thirsty for oil, he thought, and here I am facing a war with three enemies! Thus far I've managed to delay shipments as a lure to get the Germans to clear away the Soviet armies opposing me on the south front. Yet it seems I will just be replacing one uninvited guest with another after the Kuban campaign. That same day he summoned his Ambassador to Siberia. The man did not have to travel far, for he had already been expelled by the Siberians and he was right there in Orenburg.

"Make a request for a formal meeting with the Siberians," he said. "A secret request—be very discreet. I will have a draft proposal in your hands by tomorrow."

So the Germans want Baba Gurgur, he thought. And now I think they want Maykop as well. If I let them into the Kuban, who knows how far they will go? If push comes to shove there, they could go all the way to Baku. My forces would be no match for them. We could hold for six months, but if they have the means to reinforce this Operation Edelweiss, we would certainly lose Baku. That was where the historical Operation Edelweiss wanted to go, and for me, that foresight is most informative. Forewarned is forearmed. I must find the troops to muster a new army for the Caucasus, but at the moment, all my regular forces are tied down along the Volga—and so are many armies deployed there by Sergei Kirov.

My, what a change would be worked if he had all those armies free to deploy elsewhere—if I had all those armies free myself. Then I think I could wipe that quiet grin off Ribbentrop's face, for I would have the means to concentrate my forces on any one point and prevail. Then it would be the Germans who go scraping for troops to try and hold the line. Could I really mend fences with Sergei Kirov—after all these decades of opposition, and all the bitterness and blood spilled in this long civil war? And what about Vladimir Karpov and his damn Free Siberian State? Trying to approach the

Soviets now might not yield results. They would demand that I immediately rescind my pact with Hitler and commit all my forces against the Germans. The situation has clearly not come to that yet.

But the Siberians.... I need tanks, artillery, planes, and there is only so much I can do with the factories of Orenburg. Even with my generous assistance, our armor development program has a long way to go. I just don't have the industrial capacity of the Soviets. But Sergei Kirov moved all his factories to Siberia. He's all nice and cozy with Karpov—troops for tanks and artillery. That's been their bread and butter together. Sergei Kirov and I may not be able to bury the hatchet, but I might still reach an accord with the Siberians, and they could give me the weapons I need in exchange for peace with me, and my pledge of support once my armies refit with new equipment. Those negotiations would not be easy, but it is worth exploring them.

One should not ever wish to fight a two front war, he thought. While he saw his current position as a member of the Axis as very advantageous, he also knew the long term history of this war. He had done everything possible to further Germany's war effort, but he knew that if they prevailed he would have a most dangerous neighbor on his doorstep, and one he could never hope to defeat alone. One day he would need Siberia as a friend, and it would be better if that happened before Soviet Russia was destroyed—better sooner than later.

Enemies become friends when it suits them, and friends can become enemies at the drop of a hat....

Chapter 32

Operation Edelweiss would be swift and violent, not the grinding fight that many on Manstein's staff had predicted. The Soviet formations had been on their own for many long months, receiving no new munitions or equipment from the motherland. This would make the divisions somewhat brittle, as they would be receiving few manpower replacements, and ammunition was rationed.

On March 1st The German infantry of Fetter-Pico's 54th Korps took Krasnoye 50 kilometers south of Rostov on the main road to Krasnodar. The 17th Panzer Division was waiting in the second wave to exploit any gains, a time honored German assault tactic. Hansen's 11th Army was east of this town, and it threw the mountain divisions of its 44th Gibergs Korps against the line. Ott's 52nd Infantry Korps took Belaya Glina that same day and continued to push for the vital road and rail junction city of Tikhoretsk.

This attack kept the Yegorluk River on its shoulder, which was the demarcation line the Germans had negotiated with the forces of Orenburg. Yet lines on a map are seldom secure, even when they ran along natural barriers like the winding course of a river. It was necessary to post the 3rd Motorized Division there, which had interrupted its conversion to 3rd Panzergrenadier Division to make this deployment.

On March 2, the Germans pushed back the Soviet 12th Army, which had only three rifle divisions and a number of ad hoc brigades. They then invested Port Katon, taking it by that evening as the Soviets reestablished their line 20 kilometers to the south. Yet it was 37th Army in the center that had taken the worst of the German attack. Three of its rifle divisions had been battered, the 146th reduced to 50% its normal establishment. The Army HQ was forced to withdraw south from Pavlovskaya to Beysug, and if those weakened rifle divisions gave way, it would compromise 12th Army's positions on the coast.

It was therefore decided to abandon the long peninsula jutting west to the port of Yelsk and beyond in the interest of shortening the overall front by taking up new positions on the River Chelbas. That thin water obstacle ran from the heavy coastal lake and marshland region east to Tikhoretsk, and this withdrawal would shorten the defensive front by at least 40 kilometers.

The Chelbas River line held until the 5th of March, when the Germans were able to close up on it and begin hammering at it with their infantry divisions. 37th Army saw its 385th Rifle Division cut off and surrounded, and on its right, the 56th Army was involved in a tough fight for the city of Tikhoretsk, where the 80th Fortress Division was bravely holding off attacks by German mountain troops. 18th Panzer had crossed the Don at Rostov two days earlier, and now it entered the battle for the city, until the Germans had the place completely surrounded. It was captured by nightfall, and the Soviets could feel their defense was slowly being eroded away. They were the lost souls that Sergei Kirov had stubbornly left in place the previous year, but the sand was running thin in the hourglass of fate where Kirov's Soviet Armies of the Kuban were concerned.

The withdrawals, however, had helped by compressing the front from an original 180 kilometers to about 120, so losses were offset and the actual concentration of units on the defensive front remained about the same. Yet one by one, the front line rifle divisions were wearing out. The 385th was killed in that small pocket where it was trapped. The 146th and 253rd were so disrupted, that they could not respond to Army level commands. 37th Army was, in fact, disintegrating, which left 12th Army on the coast, and 56th Army shouldering its withdrawal on the mighty Kuban River. As they continued to retreat, they would be abandoning the immobile fortress Divisions and gun forts along the major crossing points of that river—defenses that had kept Volkov's troops at bay for years. The Germans pushed their 44th Korps down to the river north of those fortifications, and Volkov's forces were on the south bank of the river, though they made no move to try and cross to attack. They were content to watch the Germans reduce the forts.

On the night of March 7th, Headquarters of the 1st Kazakh Army at Elista issued orders to move its artillery brigade forward to Khar Buluk so as to be in range of the front it had established with five rifle divisions east of Zimovinki. At the same time it sent its Turkomen Rifle Division from a reserve position along the Manych River to approach the Yegorluk River demarcation line near Novo Egoriyk where it soon encountered a German motorized battalion watching the river line.

Further southwest along that line, the Timur Rifle Division of 3rd Kazakh Army had advanced from Komunar to Mekleta near that same river, and it again met with another German motorized infantry battalion. Moving in the pre-dawn darkness, shots were fired on both sides until they finally realized

that they were supposed 'Allies' and calmed down. There were two more incidents that night, where the Samar Rifle Division and the Amir Guards met with German Sturmgeschütz assault gun battalions that had been posted to watch the flank of 11th Army.

Why these orders had been given to probe forward towards the demarcation line remained a mystery, but the encounters did little to improve tensions along the border. German intelligence would discover that troops in Orenburg were marshaling at the rail yards, and Abwehr spies would soon learn the destination of those trains.

They were moving south, over the wide dark empty steppes of Kazakhstan to the Volgograd District. On the morning of the 8th of March, the 3rd Mech division of Orenburg regulars boarded trains in Astrakhan, along with a brigade of tanks. They took the new rail line that had been built through Elista, and moved all day and night on to Voroshilovsk, called Stavropol by the men from Orenburg. These troop movements were observed by German fighters up on recon operations over that sector, and subsequently reported to OKW.

The Soviet lines now extended from the Kuban near the town of Dinskaya up through the larger settlement of Timashevskaya and on towards the coast, there it thinned out considerably. Reserve 'Divisions' of the Caspian Militia were sent to help fill gaps, but they were mostly the size of a brigade, and not very reliable. The normal tactic of trading space for time could not apply here much longer, for the Soviet controlled area was being slowly compressed towards the Kuban. It was then decided that that substantial water barrier would do much more than those militias to keep the German storm tide at bay, and orders went out at noon that the line was to be withdrawn to the south bank of the Kuban.

There were only three bridges over that river, at Krasnodar, then 45 kilometers further west near Slavyansk, and at Temryuk near the Black Sea on the Taman Peninsula. 12th Army made for the latter bridge, the remnant of 37th Army for the centermost bridge, and 56th Army fell back into an arc of defense just north of Krasnodar. A thin screen of cavalry deployed as rear guards to cover the general withdrawal, which would take nearly two days to complete.

On the 9th, the German mountain troops of 44th Korps began storming the gum positions and forts from Kropotkin to Labinsk on the Kuban, well east of Krasnodar. "The Kuban" was effectively under German control, and

now the battle of the Taman Peninsula would begin, the last stand of Soviet forces in the Caucasus.

All this time, there was no attempt whatsoever on the part of Orenburg forces to attack the Soviet positions, where the line stretched from the Kuban south to the port of Tuapse on the coast of the Black Sea. Instead, all those divisions received orders to remain in place, and continue to improve their defensive positions.

That night, an order was received from Manstein that read simply “Der Mensch.” It was directed to the headquarters of General Walter ‘Papa’ Hörnlein, commander of the elite Grossdeutschland Division. It was a prearranged signal that the division should begin moving to the rail depots near Kharkov, and it would soon be no mystery as to where the powerful unit was going. As if in answer, trains continued to roll from Astrakhan, bringing more mechanized units to Stavropol. From there, some would move south by road towards Maykop, while others remained near that strategic railhead, the tanks and vehicles moving to concealed positions in the heavy woodland to the west of the city.

On March 10th, the infantry of the German 52nd and 54th Korps began to take up positions around the arc of defense north of Krasnodar, harassed all the while by Soviet artillery that had been placed safely south of the city. It would not impede them. This was just another Russian city, one of a hundred that had already been smashed and reduced to rubble, and there were the men who had fought at Volgograd, now experts in the deadly art of street fighting.

Far to the west, cruising in the wine dark sea, Admiral Raeder was leading his heavy Flotilla towards the Kerch Straits, while soldiers of two German infantry division boarded transports at both Maripol and Kerch. Soon the big German battleships began to fire their heavy 15-inch shells at the port town of Taman, just opposite Kerch on those straits. Even as they did so, the last surface units of the Soviet Black Sea Fleet were getting up steam and planning to make their final sortie of the war. The battle was about to begin its final cathartic stage.

On the 11th of March the 336th Infantry Division made a surprise landing on the north shore of the Taman Peninsula, about 10 kilometers west of the mouth of the Kuban River. It was accompanied by a small battalion scale airborne drop staged by KG Kolnbrau south of the bridge over the river. At the same time, while *Friedrich De Gross* pounded the most likely landing site at Taman, the 198th Infantry Division boarded ships and Siebel Ferries at

Kerch, but moved north into the Sea of Azov instead of attempting a direct landing over the Kerch Strait.

The Russians had two very good NKVD divisions in that area, the 19th and 21st, and they converged on the landing site, launching an immediate counterattack against the 336th. It caught the Germans still trying to reform after the landing, driving the outlying battalions back towards the shore. The other division was chasing those German paratroopers, scattering them into the countryside, their submachineguns cutting the stillness in the fields and farms where the landing had occurred.

Relief came when planes off the two German carriers began swarming overhead, the *Stukas* beginning to bomb the lines of 19th NKVD to give the German troops some much needed close air support. With the 198th Division landing further east, the two German divisions were able to organize a coordinated counterattack by mid-day. Then word came to Raeder of the approach of a flotilla of Russian surface ships out of Novorossiysk. His operation had finally flushed out his real quarry, the Black Sea Fleet.

The Soviet flotilla was composed of heavy cruisers *Molotov* and *Voroshilov*, both fast *Kirov* Class cruisers at 36 knots, and with three triple 7.1 inch turrets. They were accompanied by two older light cruisers, the *Krasny Krym* (Red Crimea) and *Krasny Kavkaz* (Red Caucasus), slower at 29 knots and with fifteen 5.1-inch guns. Destroyer leader *Kharkov*, a speedy 40 knot ship with five 5.1-inch guns and eight 533mm torpedoes was in the van leading destroyers *Bodry* (Brisk), *Boiky* (Bold), and *Soobrazitel'ny* (Shrewd). This fleet had no chance against Raeder's force, but it had bravely sortied to try and interdict the Kerch Strait, unaware that the Germans had chosen not to attempt a landing there.

The flotilla was spotted by German Zeppelins just after it worked up steam, and though two glide bomb attacks were made, the ships were simply too fast and maneuverable and both were clean misses. But Raeder had been forewarned, and now Hans Rudel and his cohorts off the carriers went out hunting again. The German ace, who achieved his fame in the real war with his incredible precision bombing of Russian tanks, found even these speedy ships easy prey. Rudel dove on the *Molotov*, the Jericho trumpets, his 'sirens of death,' wailing in his wake. He again scored an immediate hit to open hostilities. His 250kg Bomb penetrated the aft deck of the cruiser, destroying part of the steam plant and damaging the propulsion shaft. *Molotov* broke off to port, making a wide circle and wallowing at only 12 knots, which made

her an easy target for the rest of the German squadron. She would take one more hit, and be raked by shrapnel from a near miss.

Out to challenge the enemy fleet, the three fast French destroyers, now renamed *Hildr*, *Sigrun*, and *Mist*, were every bit as fleet footed as the Soviet DDs. They were the forward screen for Raeder, accompanied by three more German built destroyers, all SPK *Beowulf* class ships, *Odin*, *Agir* and *Thor*. But by the time they approached the enemy flotilla, they saw three long columns of black smoke marking hits scored by *Stukas* off the Prinz Heinrich. *Krasny Krym* and *Krasny Kavkaz* were also hit and burning when the two groups of destroyers met in a swirling naval duel that lasted twenty minutes. Both sides surged in, guns firing, and fans of torpedoes scored the sea in all directions.

DD *Hildr* ran afoul of four of those lances, evading all but the last as it sped off on a high speed turn. That hit would be enough to gut that ship, and the Russian sailors cheered to have their first kill in the battle. All the while, the 5.1-inch guns cracked away, with hits on both sides adding fire and smoke to the chaos of that battle. Of the Soviet cruisers, only *Voroshilov* managed to break away from that action, intent on reaching the Kerch Strait. But fifteen minutes later, the dark silhouettes of the three German capital ships loomed ominously on the horizon, and five minutes later those steely shadows erupted with the bright flame of heavy naval gunfire.

The sea began to erupt all around the brave cruiser, her Captain finally realizing that his mission was doomed to fail. Thinking to try and save his ship and crew, he ordered a quick turn to run for the coast, but the *Bismarck* would lay down a perfect pattern from the two forward turrets, and one of those 15-inch shells would strike the Russian cruiser dead amidships.

A terrific explosion resulted, as the shell had penetrated to magazine #3. The Captain had hoped to run down the coast, but now, his ship burning, and shipping water from several breaches below the waterline, he aimed his bow right for the shore. Ten minutes later the ship scudded onto the rocky coast, wallowed to one side, and men began leaping from the gunwales. It would later be found by German *Stukas* and hit two more times, but *Bismarck* and Kapitan Lindemann would claim that kill.

Closer in towards the big German ships, the six Italian vessels had been held in reserve. When one spotted a torpedo wake, the fast light cruisers, *Regolo*, *Mario* and *Silla* began a frenetic hunt for enemy submarines. Destroyers *Maestrale*, *Alpino* and *Ascari* were rushing about, dropping anti-

submarine mines, but the ships ended up mostly churning up seawater. Nothing more was seen of enemy subs, for of the 41 that were still in the Soviet order of battle, only twenty were serviceable, and fueled for possible action. Twelve others had been caught in the harbor at Novorossiysk days ago, and hit by German bombs. So most of the serviceable boats had been moved south to Tuapse.

They had been prowling off the Georgian coast, some scoring hits on supply ships moving ammunition and food stores from Orenburg controlled ports of Batumi and Sukhumi on up to Sochi near the front lines just beyond Tuapse. Of these twenty boats, three were prowling south of the Kerch Strait, and it was one of these that took a pot shot at the *Kaiser Wilhelm*, which easily avoided that torpedo. Four others were screening Novorossiysk, six were at Tuapse, and four more were off the Georgian coast.

Two hours after the fracas started, the Russians would see all their cruisers sunk, and of those four destroyers, only destroyer leader *Kharkov* would escape and run south for the safety of the harbor. The last sortie of the Soviet Black Sea Fleet was a disheartening disaster, and Admiral Raeder would soon report that he had destroyed it as an effective naval threat. His destroyers and U-Boats would now begin hunting down the Russian subs, the Germans hovering off Tuapse like hungry sharks to look for Russian boats. As for his heavy ships, Raeder would take the fleet back to Sevastopol later that day, and then send a message directly to OKW. It read simply: "*We are masters of the Black Sea.*"

Chapter 33

“An interesting development,” said Tyrenkov as he made ready to deliver his daily intelligence report to Karpov. He was not briefing the Siberian, but his ‘younger’ self, who had settled into his position as acting General Secretary of the Free Siberian State quite nicely in the last year. The doppelganger had taken control of the airship fleet, and all ground force operations as well, and Tyrenkov was amazed at how quickly he worked into the same level of devious skill as his elder self.

He had capably reinforced and held the Ob River line, eventually forcing Volkov’s troops to abandon that offensive and fall back to Omsk. He had supervised the buildout of two more *Tunguska* Class airships, the *Baikal* and *Siberian*. He had conducted a timely and effective operation against the Japanese pushing south beneath Lake Baikal, clearing the rail line north of the old Manchurian border, and securing Chita. Now, as he was busy assigning new divisions to his 4th Army in the west, Tyrenkov came with most unusual news.

“What is it?” Karpov asked nonchalantly, his eyes playing over the troop manifests he had been reviewing.

“We’ve received a request for a high level meeting with the former Ambassador from Orenburg.”

“You mean the man we chased out of Irkutsk a year ago, old Doctorov?”

“One and the same. Yet the message was passed through several dark contacts before it eventually was vetted by my people as being authentic.”

“What does it say?”

“Just that—a meeting is requested with a high level diplomatic contact of the Free Siberian State. Permission is asked to transit Siberian airspace to deliver the Ambassador to a location to be specified by us—assuming that we will agree to such a meeting.”

Karpov looked up, his eyes narrowed beneath the dark wool Ushanka that he always wore. The winter had been particularly severe this year, with bitterly cold temperatures literally freezing most military operations, and persisting through February and now into March.

“There will be no overflight of Siberian territory,” he said. “This request could be nothing more than a ruse for a good reconnaissance mission.

However, this does sound somewhat interesting, so set up the meeting near Omsk. That's right on the old frontier. What do you make of this, Tyrenkov?"

"Most unusual, sir. It could be an attempt at defection, but I find it hard to believe that anyone would try to pull something like that. The message indicated that this was an official request sanctioned by the Government of Orenburg. If it's legitimate, then it would seem that someone wants to discuss something, and they want it kept very quiet."

"Might this man be a rogue diplomat? Anything could be written in such a message. How would we know whether or not it was truly sanctioned by Orenburg?"

"I suppose we could find that out in the meeting, or at least get a better assessment than we can by making assumptions here."

"Agreed," said Karpov. "So let's see what this man has to say. You will make the initial contact at a small village east of Omsk. I'll be listening, of course, but you can ask the questions—and get the answers we need."

"Very good, sir. I'll arrange security."

"Excellent. I'll be with the 17th Siberian Rifles for just a little more manpower if we need it. That division was scheduled for transfer to the front near Omsk this week."

That meeting was held on the 1st of March, just as Operation Edelweiss was kicking off into the Kuban, and Tyrenkov arranged it in the cellar of a meat packing house, the most unlikely place he could find. His agents were all wearing white butcher's aprons and cold storage gloves and hats to blend in, and they were everywhere. The Ambassador's plane was given clearance to land on Siberian territory, and driven to the facility to be literally "kept on ice" until the following morning. Then, when the worker shift arrived, one among them was Tyrenkov, all dressed out in similar working man's garb.

"I have had cold receptions in the past," said Doctorov, an elderly man, short, with thin grey hair and a visible paunch beneath his heavy overcoat. "Yet never have I had one like this!"

"Sit," said Tyrenkov, gesturing to a small table where two chairs and a tea set were laid out by a samovar. "Surely you did not expect a greeting at one of the palaces. After all, there are no formal diplomatic relations between our two countries, and you were expelled over a year ago."

"I am well aware of that," said Doctorov, eyeing that hot samovar of tea. A fire was burning in an old rusty barrel across the room, and he wished the

table was sitting closer to those warming flames. His breath was frosty cold, and a chill shook his frame.

“Please,” said Tyrenkov, sitting down at the plain wooden table. “Help yourself. A little civility cannot hurt. But do explain. What is so important that it needed this level of secrecy and security?”

Doctorov poured his tea, his hands still quivering a bit with the cold. “Forgive me,” he said. “I passed a most uncomfortable night. And for a man of my years, I get all too many of those these days. I was told to arrange this meeting by the General Secretary of the Orenburg Federation—yes, by Volkov himself. I bear a document for review and consideration by your government, and assuming any interest evolves from such a review, it will ask for the restoration of diplomatic relations, and reissuance of credentials to me as Ambassador, as things were before our unfortunate disagreements.”

“Disagreements?” said Tyrenkov with a half smile. “Yes, I suppose you could call it that. Omsk has changed hands three times, though it will not do so again after we retake it soon. Casualties on both sides along the River Ob must have amounted to at least seventy thousand. Yes, I would say we have had our disagreements.”

Saying nothing, Doctorov grunted as he reached to open his brief, extracting a plain folder harboring the document he had referenced. “You will note this document is bearing the seal of the office of the General Secretariat of the Federation of Orenburg, and the signature is authentic, of that I can assure you. I witnessed it myself.” He extended it to Tyrenkov, who sat, motionless, arms folded over his butcher’s apron, complete with typical stains to add authenticity. Eventually Doctorov placed the folder on the table.

“I am empowered to discuss the contents of this document, if you so desire, but if you are not inclined to either accept it, or review it here, I was told to wait 48 hours before departing—though I hope you might arrange for quarters that are just a little more comfortable in that interval.”

Tyrenkov leaned back, head inclined, his eyes like blue ice beneath his dark hair. “Now what would a document signed by the General Secretary have to say?” he said. “Is it another threat? Another demand? That is all that has come our way in the last year, though we note that not one of those threats was ever realized, nor did we accede to any demands made of us, as you must certainly know. What makes this one any different?”

“You have it all wrong,” said Doctorov. “No demands are made here, nor do I come here to make threats. Your brief perusal of that document will

make this immediately clear.”

Tyrenkov reached slowly and took up the folder. “I should take this and throw it in that barrel fire across the room,” he said coldly. “After that, I should have you dragged upstairs to the butchery and cut into small pieces to feed the pigs. Do not think you have the benefit of any diplomatic cloak here. You, and everyone else who is a part of your Orenburg Federation, are considered enemies of the Free Siberian State.”

“Of course, of course,” said Doctorov. “Yet things change, Mister Tyrenkov. Things change. If my horrid death in the manner you describe would satisfy you, at least let me finish this cup of tea before you sharpen your knives. Within that folder you will find a sincere overture for peace. You may roll it up, place it between the teeth of my severed head, and send it back to Ivan Volkov if you wish, and then our little war will carry on. If, however, you might see the possibility of some positive direction in our relations, then give that document careful consideration.”

“I forgot just how good you are at calling another man’s bluff,” said Tyrenkov, but he had no further questions, nor did he make any further threat concerning the wellbeing of the would be Ambassador. He took the folder and stood up. “A truck will be waiting outside the packing facility. My men will provide you with the appropriate garb, and then you will be taken to a safe house where you may take some rest. After all, we are not barbarians here, even if I have to sound like one from time to time. You will be brought here, as if employed, at six AM tomorrow morning on that same truck. If there is any interest in the content of this folder, you will be informed at that time. Good day, Mister Doctorov.”

Meeting later with Karpov at another safe house, Tyrenkov discussed the unexpected overture from Orenburg.

“My,” said Karpov. “This was the last thing I ever expected out of Volkov. There must be something behind it. Do you think those unusual troop movements you reported could be spooking our old nemesis?”

“We may have underestimated those reports,” said Tyrenkov. “Just to be thorough, I looked over the latest, and there seems to be something afoot. The Germans ordered the Grossdeutschland Division into the Kuban three days ago. It is now north of Kropotkin on the big bend in the river Kuban. That is one of their most elite formations, and most powerful.”

“Has it been committed to combat?”

“Not yet, but it seems that it sent an equally powerful message to Volkov.

He has been shipping in all the reserve divisions and mechanized elements of his 3rd Army—from Astrakhan to the lower Kuban. And what is more, several divisions of his 7th Army have also been given orders to move by rail south, and now we know they are not going to stop at Volgograd. The 7th Mech, an armored brigade, and cavalry regiment moved on through Astrakhan.”

“Something is clearly going on,” said Karpov. “Your thoughts on this, Tyrenkov?”

“Control of the Kuban. Hitler’s latest directive stated that Germany would henceforth retain control of all territories liberated by its own troops. They have just liberated the Kuban, and now the fighting there has reached Krasnodar and beyond. The two panzer divisions they committed have crossed the river to the west of the city, and there have been landings on the Taman Peninsula from the Crimea, and from Maripol. The Soviets tried to interfere with their Black Sea Fleet, but it was largely destroyed by Raeder’s task force. The Germans now control the Black Sea and Sea of Azov.”

“And Volkov is getting nervous,” said Karpov. “He wanted the Kuban back, and now Hitler won’t give it to him. Most interesting. And here we get this little peace overture as day follows night in that man’s mind.”

“Should we entertain it any further?” asked Tyrenkov.

Karpov thought about that, and decided they should. “They propose a cease fire and demilitarization of our mutual borders,” he said. “They offer cooperation on the shipment of oil and other needed resources to Siberian territory, and make the startling suggestion that our two nations should cooperate in the development of military arms.”

“He needs tanks,” said Tyrenkov. “His own designs have not been successful, except the T-44. Yet he has not been able to ramp up production on that tank. And his air force continues to languish. There has not even been any further airship production on their side for the last six months.”

“They still have the edge on us in numbers, even with *Baikal* and *Siberian* added to the fleet,” said Karpov.

“Strange that he should come to us this way,” said Tyrenkov. “Over 70 percent of his total armed forces are deployed against Sergei Kirov.”

“Tyrenkov, do you think he may be making a similar proposal to the Soviets?” Karpov shifted in his chair.

“Thus far, my network has not picked anything of that nature up. But considering the trouble they went to in order to keep this meeting secret, that

is not surprising. We're watching key Soviet officials who might typically respond to such a proposal. If they make any unusual movements, it may tip us off."

"The secrecy doesn't surprise me," said Karpov. "They certainly would not want the Germans to know about this little proposal, and they took a great risk in even going this far with it here. If Hitler learns about this, Volkov may have the devil to pay—and quite literally."

"What should we do, sir? Shall I open further discussion with Doctorov, or send the man home?"

Karpov smiled. Then he gave Tyrenkov a respectful look. "Tyrenkov... Thank you for coming to me with this."

"Sir? Who else would I take this to?"

"My brother. You could have gone directly to him for any discussion or decision on this matter, but instead you came to me. Perhaps that was more convenient, as my brother is out to sea, but it is nonetheless appreciated. In fact, I am grateful for the respect you have always shown me, and your flawless efficiency. Have you also informed my brother of this?"

"No sir. You are acting head of the Free Siberian State. If your elder self needed to be informed, it was my assumption that you would make this decision yourself."

Karpov took a deep breath, feeling very gratified. "I think we'll have a further chat with Doctorov—only here. Our theater with the meat packing dungeon has had its effect. Bring him here, Tyrenkov. Let's get to the bottom of this. Then I will take it to my brother and see that he is properly informed."

* * *

The Siberian would eventually learn of the proposal, or rather he would have what he felt to be an inner hunch confirmed when Nikolin received a coded message about it later on. It was something that he could feel in his bones, some sea change in the winds of war that promised either terrible disaster, or a great windfall for his cause in arms. It was as if he instinctively could feel, and know, all the things his brother self was privy too, even though he was separated from him by thousands of miles. That strange connection would continue to deepen over time, but for now, he experienced it as an inner muse, a subtle feeling emerging from his unconscious mind, a

hunch.

Something was happening, and his thinking about the war, and all their aims here was also caught up in the same inner shift of that wind. As he often did when considering such things, he would eventually seek out the one man that had been a consistent sounding board for him—Anton Fedorov.

Part XII

Quantum Karma

“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.”

— Dr. Paul Dorland, PhD – *On a Theory of Time*

Chapter 34

“Con —Sonar—Sonobuoy in the water! I have active pinging.”

Gromyko reacted immediately. “Come right 15 degrees, 20 degree down bubble. Make your speed 12 knots. Make your depth 1200. We’re going deep.”

Kazan had been sprinting again at 35 knots, still looking for those carriers. Gromyko had been tempted to turn and try and close the range on the contacts behind him, naturally curious as to what they might be. Instead he decided to sprint one more time, giving Chernov another chance to listen fifteen minutes later. He refreshed his reading on that destroyer, still edgy about it, but not inclined to go to an active missile attack until he knew where the carriers were.

But he would not be satisfied that day. Admiral Kita had made a course and speed change an hour earlier, and was now over 30 nautical miles away. *Kurama* and *Omi* had also turned, the entire force thinking to rendezvous near the sinking site of *Takami*. Then came the sonobuoy, and Gromyko took *Kazan* deep, slowing to 5 knots, and then hovering in the dark cold stillness of the sea, very near the bottom.

Kita had been very wary, knowing that the Russian sub was out there somewhere. He had no contacts, but decided to act as though he did. He sent a message to *Takao* to have her helo drop three sonobuoys, and make them active. To any sub driver in the business, that was a strong and clear signal that he had been made. So Gromyko did the logical thing, going deep, hovering, becoming nothing and nowhere in the sea.

Kita’s move was a bluff, but it worked. Those three sonobuoys pinged away for an hour, and all the while *Kaga* and *Akagi* were steaming at 24 knots, opening the range to nearly 55 nautical miles as they slipped away, *Takao* still following as a screening unit. Kita’s task force would reach the rescue site, his Marines looking over some flotsam to see if anything vital might be recoverable.

After that long hour, Gromyko decided to creep away to the east, moving at a stealthy 5 knots for the next 30 minutes. The sound of the sonobuoys continued to diminish and fade, and finally Chernov looked at the Captain and spoke.

“Sir... I don’t think they have us. If they did, there would have been some response to this move. Those buoys are still back near our previous position. I think they were fishing, sir.”

Gromyko smiled. Perhaps they never did have us, he thought. Someone out there is very cagey. He knew I was out here, and perhaps they picked up a whisper of my trail on one of the high speed sprints. So he popped off those sonobuoys to make it seem as though they were prosecuting a contact. Very clever. I think my quarry has given me the slip this time.

“What was the last course and speed we had on that destroyer?”

“220 at 24 knots.”

Gromyko looked at his chart. Then he glanced up at Belanov. “Karpov reported the three destroyers chasing him broke off hours ago and turned northeast. Our last reading on this one had it running southwest. I think they’re making a rendezvous.”

“Where, sir?” Belanov stepped over to the chart table.

“Here,” Gromyko pointed. “Right where we sunk *Takami* .”

“A good assumption,” said Belanov.

“Yes, Momma Bear has called home all her cubs. So what are we looking at here? That means there are at least four destroyers, and we also had those two other contacts trailing behind that we never investigated.”

“What do you figure them to be, the carriers?”

“Possibly, but now I’m thinking the carriers must have been off on 240 when we went deep, and I think we were very close. Then they played their bluff, and I knuckled under. Considering things now, what else would we typically see in a task force of this size, particularly one this far from Japanese home waters?” Gromyko was reasoning the situation out, his long years of experience at sea informing him where his sensors had failed to do the job.

“Replenishment,” said Belanov.

“Exactly. I think those last two contacts were most likely a replenishment ship, and possibly one more destroyer in escort. So let’s fill out the dance card here. Karpov reported he was attacked by strike planes, and from his last message, they got in close enough to deliver a glide bomb attack. What do you make of that?”

“Quite surprising. Japanese carriers are usually packing helos.”

“Right, but not this time. Strike range on glide bomb ordnance is around 45 miles. If they got planes in that close to *Kirov* , then they had to be F-35’s.

But from what I know, the Japanese didn't have very many of those, and the few they did have active were down on Okinawa at Naha or Kadena. So how do we get a task force like this way out here, and with F-35's?"

"How do we get them here in 1943, sir?" Belanov brought them back to the moment, and Gromyko nodded.

"That nice little control rod Kamenski gave us accounts for our presence here—but the Japanese?"

"We'll never figure that one out, sir. They're here, and that's all that matters. So what's our play?"

"Let's figure this from the other fellow's side of the fence," said Gromyko. "Somehow they shifted here, and right into the middle of our little conference with Fedorov and Karpov—uninvited guests. They obviously rendezvoused with *Takami*, another ship that appeared here under mysterious circumstances, and I don't think any of them had control rods from Kamenski."

"Very strange," said Belanov. "*Takami* has been here for a good long while. This wasn't the first time they tangled with Karpov."

"Right," said Gromyko. "Well, they called in some reinforcements."

"Called them in? You figure they have some way of communicating with the future?"

"I was speaking metaphorically. But considering that, wouldn't these events become ... history? Wouldn't the men and women in the future this time line gives rise to eventually know about what happened with *Kirov* and *Takami*?"

"That's a lot of speculation, sir." Belanov did not have the mental hiking shoes to wander down that path. "It's a bit eerie to think they're reading us like a book in 2021 and then sending back reinforcements to deal with us—with Karpov. I don't suppose they would have known about *Kazan*."

"They do now," said Gromyko.

"Alright, but how did they get here, sir?"

"We got here. Perhaps they developed some means to follow us. Who knows? Then again, their presence here could be an accident. *Kirov's* initial shift happened because of that detonation aboard *Orel*. We also know that Karpov and some of his flotilla shifted when that Demon volcano erupted."

"Trying to sort through all the cards in the deck, Mister Gromyko?" Admiral Volsky had been resting, but feeling the boat move, he now returned to the bridge, approaching the two men where they huddled near the charts.

“Yes sir,” said the Captain. “Just trying to think things through. We were wondering how this welcoming committee got here. The way we figure it, they have at least one carrier, and with F-35’s. Throw in four or five destroyers and a replenishment ship, and this is one nice fat task force, way out here east of Ponape. That’s damn strange, sir. So we were wondering how they got here, and whether it was a willful shift, or an accident.”

“Could be a little of both,” said Volsky. “Mister Fedorov told me that he thinks *Takami* first appeared in the Sunda Strait, very near where that big volcano erupted.”

“That never happened in any history book I’ve read,” said Gromyko.

“A lot of things never happened, and *Kirov* is to blame for that—no, let me tell it truly—I am to blame. From the moment I gave the order to shoot down that first plane, we’ve had our paw in the beehive here. For a while, the honey was sweet, but our meddling has caused all these things to happen that never were—ships prowling the seas here that never were supposed to exist, and all this history skewed beyond recognition. I’ve already lived and vanished on one meridian—and died on another, if you can believe that. Yes, all those memories are right up here.” He pointed to his head.

“And the oddest thing about it all is that I have another Admiral Volsky in there too, behind all the others. He was just minding his own business at Severomorsk, when all of the sudden he wakes up here, aboard *Kazan* , and with a head full of all these insane memories. Frankly, there are times I still pinch myself, thinking he will wake up again, sleeping quietly in his office at Severomorsk, and with all this nothing more than a bad dream.”

“Well, this bad dream fires torpedoes.” Gromyko smiled. “On that note, our quarry seems to have given us the slip. We think they have eased off to the southwest to rendezvous near the rescue site for *Takami* . But they know we’re out here, sir. How should we proceed?”

“Any position update from Karpov?”

“Yes sir. He’s broken off and is heading south towards Rabaul.”

“That is a big Japanese naval-air base, is it not?”

“Yes sir, their main base supporting operations in the Solomons.”

Volsky shook his head. “Now what would that man be doing down there? Something tells me he hasn’t quite given up with his little crusade here.”

The others nodded. “Sir,” said Gromyko. “There’s one thing more. During that strike against *Kirov* , Chernov heard something that is more than a little disturbing.”

“What?”

“We think Karpov popped off a nuke.”

Volsky pinched the bridge of his nose. “Again?” he sighed. “Why in the world would he do something like that?”

“We got the after action report indicating two separate strike waves made an attack on his position. It simply read ‘Wave one extinguished—missile defense defeats wave two.’”

“Extinguished?”

“Yes sir, and now Chernov says he thinks a special warhead was used. It was a glide bomb attack, sir, and by F-35’s. We were just trying to figure out how the Japanese got their hands on those planes, and why they were here.”

“Yes,” said Volsky, “more uninvited guests. It is obvious that they got them from the Americans. As to why and how they got here, that will remain our little mystery, and one they are probably still trying to solve as well.”

“Then you believe their presence here is an accident—not intentional, like our mission?”

“Intentional? I suppose only they would know the answer to that question.” Volsky inclined his head. “Thinking that would open some very dark doors, would it not? If they came here willfully, then that means they, like we, have discovered the means to move mass through time. That alone is cause for grave concern. It also means they came here intending to kill *Kirov*, as I do not think they would know about your boat.”

“Unless they read about us,” said Gromyko.

“What do you mean?”

“Well sir, we’re out here re-writing all this history. This would be recorded and known to those in the future.”

“Interesting.... Darkly interesting, Mister Gromyko. Yes, we are still re-writing history here, even as we try to erase all evidence of our own tracks, as per our little agreement with Karpov. I don’t think we can answer all these questions just yet, but I do think we ought to head south to find *Kirov*, and make sure Karpov hasn’t got a pen in his hand as he approaches this base at Rabaul to do any more writing in his personal history book.”

“Very well, sir.” Gromyko looked to Belanov. “Bring us around to 180, and make your depth 430, just above the layer, speed 24 knots.”

That was how they left the scene of that little engagement. Gromyko would never know just how close he was to his quarry, and what he might have risked and done there if he had decided to engage those last two

contacts.

“Just to be on the safe side,” said Volsky. “I think I had better send a message to Karpov myself.”

“Very good, sir. Belanov will show you the way.”

* * *

“Signal on the secure channel, sir. It’s from Admiral Volsky.” Nikolin looked over his shoulder.

“Send it to my ready room. Mister Fedorov? Care to join me?”

The two men withdrew, with the hatch closed behind them. Karpov sat down at his desk, swiveling a pad device and tapping in the code to bring up the decrypted message”

“Ah,” he said. “Someone is getting curious. It asks me to confirm or deny use of special warheads. Very interesting.”

“Chernov,” said Fedorov. “He’s got ears like Tasarov. I don’t think that detonation went unnoticed. The blast wave would have hit the ocean surface very hard, even from the altitude where you detonated that warhead.”

“Indeed,” said Karpov. He was already tapping out his response. “I suppose I should inform his lordship, as a curtesy—not a response to any order he may have intended with that message.”

“Yes, your highness,” said Fedorov. “Who’s playing it high and mighty now?”

“Alright, Fedorov. I’ll admit I can be haughty at times.”

“To say the least.”

“It isn’t that,” said Karpov. “It’s about boundaries. Volsky should realize that he doesn’t rank me here—not any longer. That time is long past. So I’ll confirm on his request, and indicate it was a necessary expedient to save the ship. He can believe what he chooses in that. But *Kazan* has turned and they are now heading south. The good Admiral wants to know where we are going.”

“Well.... Where are we going? We broke off from that action some time ago.”

“I’m taking us south, away from that damn Japanese task force. It isn’t the destroyers I worry about, but those F-35’s are a nuisance.”

“That’s an understatement,” said Fedorov.

“Well, we’ve broken off, and I don’t think they know where we are, but

that engagement was most unwelcome, and it cost us.”

“Yes, missiles, a KA-40, and one of three special warheads. That was a heavy price to pay.”

“It might have been much steeper,” said Karpov. “We would have gone the way of *Takami*, and getting that damn ship was our only consolation. If not for the carrier, I would have stood and fought those destroyers, and beaten them too.”

“That would have taken a lot of SSMS” said Fedorov. “We decided that *Takami* wasn’t worth the missiles.”

“Only after they had expended all their SSMS,” Karpov corrected. “Between those three destroyers, they had 24 to throw at us. I would have swatted each and every one down. They just move too slow, and make easy quarry for our SAMs. But their SM-2 is very good. It even has a chance against our MOS-III. My problem is that I need every missile we have to remain a viable threat here.”

“A threat? I thought we were trying to extricate ourselves from this whole scenario.”

“Yes, yes, but what about Volkov? And now what about all these damn modern Japanese ships that appear so suddenly like this? What the hell is going on, Fedorov?”

“I’ve told you what I think on that. The fabric of spacetime has been so damaged that things are slipping through, particularly when there is any active detonation event, like that Nuke you fired.”

“We did not detect any more interlopers after that,” said Karpov.

“That’s a relief,” said Fedorov. “The thing is this, Admiral. These detonations don’t have to occur here. They can happen at any point in time from this day forward. Think of all the nuclear testing that went on here in the Pacific after the war. Each one may have put a crack in time, and things can slip through. And what’s happening in 2021? My bet is that a lot of nukes are starting to fly, and that means trouble.”

Chapter 35

“You mean you believe things might still be coming through?” Karpov found that prospect very riveting. “Here? To World War II?”

Thus far, this is where most of the shifts have brought things,” said Fedorov. “You got further back, to 1908, when you used a nuke here. And just now, you saw what happened to the ship when you fired off this one. We phased.”

“Yes,” said Karpov. “I saw you vanish right before my eyes, and then reappear. *You* phased, Fedorov.”

“Somewhat frightening to think about.”

“And you believe the ship phased with you? Why was I the steady observer. Did you notice anything?”

“It all happened so fast,” said Fedorov, “in the blink of an eye. But a word to the wise. We phased, and if the ship had been closer to that detonation, who knows where we might have shifted.”

“But I have removed Rod-25 and placed it in a rad-safe container,” said Karpov.

“We don’t know if that is enough of a safety measure,” said Fedorov. “Hell, we don’t even know how the exotic materials in that control rod work their magic. The rad safe container may help, but it might not be fool proof.”

“Interesting,” said Karpov. “Yes, the ship got back to 1908 alright, and that set up a good deal of misery that I’ve been trying to redress ever since. I would have solved it then and there, if not for your little crusade.”

“Yes, yes, we’ve been over that. Well let me tell you something I’ve done recently in the here and now—a little secret project I’ve been busy with.”

“Go on,” said Karpov. “You know how I love hearing about your little schemes.”

“I seeded German intelligence with information concerning all the oil reserves Orenburg is sitting on now. It’s clear that Volkov has been using his knowledge of field locations to position his forces with the aim of controlling those resources. Many may not be developed now, but they will in the future.”

“Yes, he’s already busy at Kashagan and the Tengiz fields,” said Karpov. “That man has sunk more tech dollars into improving his oil extraction

methods than he has into building decent tanks and planes. I suppose he thinks his friends in Germany will supply all those other needs, while he provides the oil the Reich needs to keep running this war.”

“That is what I thought,” said Fedorov with a smile. “So I did a little whispering.”

“What do you mean?”

“I sent German intelligence a map of all present and future oil developments that would be under Orenburg’s control.”

“Ah... Then you thought to drive a wedge into that alliance?”

“Exactly. It may have already had an effect. I’ve had Nikolin picking up signals traffic, and we’ve been decoding German high level directives to field armies and such. I send it all to Turing at Bletchley park too. In any case, there have been some interesting developments of late—troop movements, redeployments. Hitler moved several Italian Korps into position along the Don and closed off all those crossing points. He’s also given orders for German troops to retain control of Baba Gurgur, and he’s sent another parachute division there to make sure that happens. The Turkomen divisions were getting pushy. In fact, we intercepted a direct order from Orenburg to their commander. He was to encircle and secure those oil fields, but Hitler has raised the ante. He had but one regiment there, now he’ll have four.”

“Interesting,” said Karpov. “I’m sure my Tyrenkov had all of this as well, but I haven’t spoken with him lately with all this business we’ve been about.”

“There’s more,” said Fedorov. “Orenburg has ordered a new Army from Kazakhstan to move to the vicinity of Maykop. Hitler gave his troops conducting their Edelweiss Operation direct orders that German troops were to occupy and secure those fields.”

“I see where this is going,” said Karpov. “Very clever, Mister Fedorov; worthy of my own conniving genius.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment. I thought that if we could break that alliance, it would go a long way towards restoring the balance on the East Front. If the Germans do come to blows with Volkov, then we get a war in the east very similar to the one from our own history—with the full resources of all Russia united against Germany.”

“Not necessarily,” said Karpov. “That would mean that Volkov and I would have to reach an accord, and that Sergei Kirov and Volkov would also have to mend fences. I’m not sure either one will happen. Right now I’ve had my brother building airships and raising troops to reopen the front at

Omsk. It's all part of my Plan 7, which I was very much enjoying now that I control all of Kamchatka and half of Sakhalin Island. In the Spring, I had another big operation planned for the drive on Vladivostok. Alas, if we do what we must, I'll miss all that."

There came a knock on the door, and it was Nikolin, bearing a recent message transcript. He handed it off to Karpov with a salute, and was back to his post, but he wished he could have stayed there in that room to hear what would now be discussed by Fedorov and Karpov. On the way back to his post, he would lean in over his friend Tasarov.

"Listening to whale songs, or rock and roll?" he asked.

"What?" said Tasarov, removing his headphones. "I'm listening for any sign of those Japanese ships."

"Well I just heard something pretty dramatic. There may be a peace proposal being floated between Siberia and Orenburg. Can you imagine that?" He gave his friend a wink, and was off to his post. Nikolin always knew everything, privy to every message and secret of the ship in his position as chief of communications and encryption. But sometimes he knew too much....

* * *

"Well, Fedorov, your little scheme seems to have worked! Volkov actually sent old Doctorov to a secret meeting with my brother and Tyrenkov near Omsk. I don't have all the details yet, but it appears that the Ambassador was bearing an olive branch."

"From Volkov?"

"A document signed by his own hand."

"That is news," said Fedorov, "very good news indeed."

"Assuming I treat with that criminal."

"What? Don't you see what an opportunity this would be? You were just talking about it a moment ago. If Volkov turns, then the entire momentum of the war in the east turns with him. He's a free radical, and one with terrible power to influence the outcome of these events."

"Assuming he lives to participate in any of these events," said Karpov darkly. "Assuming he lives at all..."

That got Fedorov's attention. "Now what is that supposed to mean?" he asked.

“Things have changed here,” said Karpov, “just as they changed in the Western Desert when you ran into that Brigade from 2021. We may have to take a different view of things now that these damnable modern Japanese ships have appeared. If we stay here, I think I would have to withdraw to the north soon to support the renewal of operations on Sakhalin. That is very near Japanese home waters, and so we’ll probably have to face that enemy task force again soon. Combat is always risky, as we’ve just seen. Suppose we get hit, or even sunk?”

“Losing your nerve, Karpov?”

“No, quite the contrary. I’m just listening to my head. It tells me that we have some hard days ahead. This new Japanese task force could cause a great deal of trouble. Imagine what they could do if they aren’t eliminated? They could stop the momentum the Americans are building up in the New Hebrides, I’ll guarantee that much. Those F-35’s would make short work of a few *Essex* Class carriers, and never even be seen while they do so. The Americans will be cruising along, and then their carriers will simply begin exploding right under their fat asses.” Karpov smiled. “Oh, how I’d love to see the look on Halsey’s face when that happens.”

“Considering that he almost ran you off the map in 1945,” said Fedorov. “No offense intended.”

“None taken, Fedorov. I get your point.”

Now Karpov lapsed into silence for a moment, thinking. “Fedorov,” he began. “Suppose we’re going at this all the wrong way. All these contaminations we’re trying to cleanse from the time line seem to be multiplying. We set our minds on getting *Takami*, and now we’ve a whole new enemy task force out there to deal with.”

“Yes,” said Fedorov. “Don’t remind me.”

“Well this isn’t going to be as easy as we first thought.”

“I never thought it would be easy.”

“True, but you thought it would be possible, otherwise why commit to this course of action in the first place?”

“I suppose you’re right.”

“Well,” said Karpov, “things have changed. The presence of that new Japanese task force may present us with an insurmountable problem.”

“You really don’t think we can beat them?”

Karpov narrowed his eyes. “Like I said, I’m just reasoning this all out. I’m a realist, Fedorov. You saw what it took to fend off that surprise F-35

attack. We had helos up, and the damn planes flew right through their radar coverage. If we engage again, this ship will do harm, I can assure you that, but we may have to take our lumps to do so. We could survive one hit, and possibly two, depending on where the weapon struck us. But tangling with that task force here and now is going to be very dangerous. *Kazan* has a better chance than a surface ship like *Kirov*. He has both stealth and speed at his command, not to mention the missiles and torpedoes. If we continue this fight, we'll have to rely a good deal on Gromyko."

"How would you proceed?"

Karpov thought for a moment. "I would picket *Kazan*, well north of my position, and then I'd bark like a dog until they get a fix on me. They'll come for me, and to do that, they would have to run right over Gromyko. That's when he throws everything he has at them, and I mean everything. If he can't take them out with his missiles, then he should also strongly consider resorting to a special warhead."

"What? didn't you hear what I just said about the fragility of the continuum?"

"Yes, I heard all of that, but if you want the job done concerning this new threat, you have to be ready to use a hammer."

"Well, you might just end up smashing your own thumb," said Fedorov. "I'd be very cautious about throwing another nuke here."

"Agreed," said Karpov. "Your scheme to drive a wedge between Hitler and Volkov was very clever, but there may be another way. We could roll the dice again."

"What do you mean?"

"What I mean is this—beating that Japanese task force isn't going to be easy, and if we do, our missile inventory is going to be very thin when we're done. *Kirov* has 33 SSMs left under that front deck. And we've only 24 S-400's remaining. After that, we're down to the medium range enhanced Klinok system. They aren't nearly as effective as the *Triumf*, and their range maxes out right around the typical release point for another of those damn glide bomb attacks. That means that they can penetrate our radar coverage, and probably get to their release point safely if I don't have the range of the *Triumf* to deal with them first. If I get another sixty bombs inbound, we're finished. The Klinok system can't handle that kind of saturation attack. Oh, we'll get many of them, and it will be a grand fight when they get in close and the Gatling guns and Kashtans go after them, but I'm telling you right

now—we're going to take hits. We stand a very good chance of losing the ship. That eradicates *us* from the time line, eh? But it may leave the Japanese ships here to raise more hell. *Kazan* has only so many missiles. Gromyko won't get them all."

Karpov was finally telling it like he saw it, and now Fedorov had another angle on why he had instinctively resorted to the use of a special warhead. As powerful as *Kirov* was, it was not invulnerable any longer. A carrier with good strike planes was still top dog, and it wasn't likely that *Kirov* would ever get close enough to the flattop to use its missiles."

"Yet you beat Tanner and that American Carrier task force," said Fedorov.

"Yes, but I had fighters off the *Admiral Kuznetsov* , five other ships, and strong support from our land based bombers, not to mention three good missile boats under the sea, including *Kazan* . That's how I beat Tanner, and I also had that massive eruption cloud to force him to divert his strike waves."

It was clear to Fedorov that Karpov was now telling him they could just as easily lose the next fight with the Japanese. If that happened, that task force would remain here in 1943, and how long would it be before they began to intervene in the battles now underway?

"You told me we were going about this the wrong way," he said. "But you haven't explained that."

Karpov opened his desk drawer, and pulled out a Japanese fan, opening it. "Something I picked up in Vladivostok," he said. "I actually had it with me on *Tunguska* , and had it shipped aboard here with my sea chest—just a little souvenir from that time."

"What time?"

"1908." Karpov smiled. "Look at this another way, Fedorov." He touched the base of his open fan. "Here is that time—1908. We both know that it all started there, with the Tunguska event. Then all these segments of the fan are the future that event gave rise to. Look how they fan out in all directions. We're on one of them, this particular Meridian, and probably right about here." He fingered a mid-point on one of the fan segments. "And way out here at the top edge, let's say that is 2021. See how the trouble fans out, getting wider and more pronounced as the change initiated in 1908 migrates forward in time?"

"Yes," said Fedorov. "A very good analogy."

"Well were here in the middle of this fan and trying to fold it closed

again, so we can get rid of the Japanese, and Volkov, and everything else we discussed. Just as we swat one interloper, and kill *Takami*, we find all these new uninvited guests, and now they're out to kill *us!*"

"Not very promising," said Fedorov.

"Agreed. Face it, Fedorov, even if we do get lucky and kill those other Japanese ships, we've still commissioned many more on either side of this war. My intel service tells me that the Japanese are building out new hybrid carrier designs as fast as they can. This war is off on its own tangent now, and if we survive our next engagement, I doubt we'll have much left to change these other things."

"Yes..." said Fedorov. "We'd have to sink them all."

"What? Did you think we could just go hunting and sink all the aberrant new ships that set sail because of our meddling? Then what about the history? There was no battle of Midway here. Moscow burned. The Germans are in Baghdad! No, too much has changed. After that, there's Ivan Volkov, the Orenburg Federation, and everything happening elsewhere in this war. We can't do what we thought we could—what we agreed to in our little tryst. Yes, you thought it was possible, but I'm telling you now that it isn't. I knew that from the very first, but I agreed to go along with you and Volsky because I didn't want to make an enemy of Gromyko. He was sent here by Kamenski to kill this ship, if you recall, but the Director wasn't going to solve the problem that way either. It just isn't possible now with this new flotilla of Japanese ships out there... But we have another solution, and I think you know what it is."

Chapter 36

Fedorov lowered his head. He had felt this himself, realized the staggering odds stacked against them, but he had been willing to try. What else was there to do but try? Yet now Karpov was finally leveling with him and saying that their whole mission and plan was clearly not going to work.

“So you’re saying all of this is for naught,” he said. “It’s all just an exercise in futility.”

“Yes, it is.... From this point in time.”

That subtle pause when Karpov spoke was filled with an enormous amount of unspoken information.

“You mean....”

“Yes,” said Karpov. “I mean that we cannot succeed with our plan here—not in 1943. It will be nothing more than an exercise in futility, as you say, and it will also likely lead to the death of this ship and crew. But look here.” He tapped the lower base of the fan, the point from which each colorful segment originated, all fanning out into the future.

“The source of all our torment is here—in 1908. I realized this the moment I found myself there after I sunk those American battleships in 1945. I shifted back, but not *Orlan*, and that will always be on my conscience—yes, I still have a soul, in spite of what you may think of me.”

“You’re suggesting we go back again—to 1908?”

“That is the source, the real point of origin—the point of divergence in time that changed everything that came after. Isn’t that correct? I knew this the moment I found myself there, and I set about using the power I had to try and set things right. I would have succeeded there too—until *Kazan* appeared on the scene. You and Volsky thought you were doing the world and time a great favor by coming back after me, but you had it all wrong, Fedorov. I was the one chance you had at fixing this damn mess, and I’m telling you now that it simply cannot be done here in 1943. You knew that yourself when you went back on that mission to get after Sergei Kirov.”

“But you ordered me to abort that mission.”

“Yes, and you disobeyed. Now don’t tell me it was because I took that shot at your helo. You know damn well that was just a thin cover for what you really wanted to do. You knew it then, and you know it now—1908 is the

key. It's the only place where we can find a lever strong enough to move the whole world. 1908, Fedorov. That's where we have to go if we are to have any chance at setting things right. And there you were, sucked back there again under some very mysterious circumstances, because Mother Time knows that's the only place she could drop you to have any chance at putting all the broken china back together. When it came right down to it, you lost your nerve. You couldn't kill Sergei Kirov and stop him from killing Stalin with that very same bullet. You thought we could fix things here, and you decided to come back, roll up your sleeve, and get busy. Well, here's another little secret that you may already know. I never thought we could put things back the way they once were. Never. What's done is done. All we could do was work to shape the new world that was coming, but now I see even that is self-serving crap."

"Honesty cuts like a knife at times," said Fedorov. "You're right—I did lose my nerve. But so did you when you called off my mission."

"No, that was just pure selfishness on my part," said Karpov. "I'm not ashamed to say it. I made the same choice that Lucifer did. I simply decided it was better to rule in hell than to serve in heaven. I was quite comfortable after fighting my way to the top of the heap in the Free Siberian State. Yes, I was quite comfortable here on my battlecruiser, and with the power to bring Yamamoto and Tojo to their knees, until *Takami* showed up, and now we get all her friends. But I never thought, for one minute, that I was crusading to restore the time line as it once was. That can't be done from here. I'm telling you that it can only be done from 1908. That said, I simply decided I would prefer to live out my life here. Selfish, certainly. I'm a narcissistic bastard, but I was going to be a very content bastard here in the 1940s, and I was going to rule the roost. Now, however, it seems that someone has crashed my party. It isn't going to be fun here from this point forward. *Kazan* came gunning for me, but I managed to get that situation under control. Now we've got the Japanese to worry about."

"Not feeling so glib and confident?" asked Fedorov.

"Let's just say that death is in the cards now, rude and untimely death. Who wants that? Certainly not me. I only narrowly averted it during that last engagement. I'd prefer not to have to refight that battle, not unless I can even the odds using *Kazan* as I've said earlier. Face it, we're wasting our time here, quite literally. 1908, *Fedorov*! We've got to go back there if we want to do this thing—all of us."

Fedorov was silent for some time. He knew that everything Karpov had just said was true. They couldn't change things from here, and they were fools to ever think they could. If they had the balls to try here, then they would have to see reason and do exactly what Karpov was suggesting. They would have to go back to the source—to 1908.

He looked up, seeing the coldness, unrelenting, in Karpov's eyes, but he could do nothing else but agree. "Alright," he said. "You're correct. The key lever point is 1908. We both know that, but each time we entertained a decisive intervention there, we lost our nerve. Yet that is why you persisted in rebuilding that back stairway at Ilanskiy, isn't it? You knew all along that you always had one last resort—a way to get back to 1908 and settle affairs there."

"True again," said Karpov.

"How would we get back there? Are you suggesting we go to Ilanskiy and use those stairs; kill Sergei Kirov like we planned before?"

"That would be a start," said Karpov. "And from there, we will have at least a sporting chance of getting Ivan Volkov out of the equation as well. Nukes or no nukes, we weren't going to do that here."

"I wouldn't be so sure about that," said Fedorov. "You're probably correct to say that we might not be able to eliminate Volkov from here. The idea about using a nuclear threat was ill-conceived. A good sniper would be the way to go."

"I've already put Tyrenkov on that assignment."

"What? You took out a contract on Volkov?"

"Why not? We need him gone, and if my people can get to him, all the better. Don't put much faith in his sudden peace overture. That man is a skunk, through and through. He'll use us while he can, and then just as easily stab us in the back if he gets the chance. But even if we could assassinate him here, it won't eliminate his Orenburg Federation. Someone else will just be waiting in the wings to take power there. So the only way to eliminate that contamination would be to nip it in the bud—or rather pull the weed before it can really take root and spread."

"You mean in 1908?"

"Correct. Do we play the real game, where we have every chance of winning, or do we stick it out here in 1943 with all these half measures, taking our chances against those stealth jets, and God only knows what else. You said yourself that the continuum is fragile, and I've already seen what's

been happening in 2021. The nukes *are* flying. I've seen them with my own eyes. So what else might get blasted into the past. We already know that this war seems to act like a net for all those fish. I wonder why?"

"Probably because there were so many nexus points and crossing lines of fate here," said Fedorov. "That's the way that American physics professor would put things. This war was one crucial moment of potential change after another. On any given day, decisions are made, engagements fought, and they could all send the entire history off on a new direction. Look what's just happened with the German return to a strategy in the Middle East. We had Kinlan's Brigade here to stop them the first time with Operation Scimitar, but he's gone—another incident where something broke through to this time frame from the future. Kinlan got here thanks to one of our nukes aimed at Sultan Apache, and he probably died when we took another shot at the modern day port of Tobruk. So yes, we could see more of this sort of fallout, with every nuke that gets thrown in 2021 having the potential to send something our way."

"Could there be some method to that madness?" asked Karpov. "After all, with every contamination here, things get more and more skewed in this history. This situation here is a perfect example. Unless we find a way to stop them, the Japanese now have an Ace in the hole against the Americans, and this time it's a war winner. 1943 was a tipping point. If they do get to those *Essex* Class fleet carriers, the US will see its war aims set back a full year here. All these changes may have yet one more effect—not only on this present time, but also on the outcome of the war, and the entire future built after that. Now I'll tell you another of my dark thoughts. That could be exactly what time intends."

That statement felt like a cold finger on the back of Fedorov's neck. It had a sinister, chilling implication about it, and he looked at Karpov, wanting to hear what he thought. "Explain," he said.

"She intends to so warp this present, that the future that built this ship cannot take shape. When we first came here, we had that future as some justification for our existence. You said it yourself, Fedorov, knock down some key pillar here and this ship never gets built. The reason for our existence is eliminated, which opens a very dark black hole beneath us no matter where we sail. You talk about Paradox? How can we persist here if Mother Time arranges it so that *Kirov* was never even built?"

"I'm not sure," said Fedorov. "Kamenski might have something to say

about it.”

“Kamenski? He was dead set on killing this ship himself! That’s why he sent Gromyko and *Kazan* back here. Alright, we changed that agenda, and put bigger fish in the frying pan. Now we realize that can’t be accomplished here. But in 1908, all things are possible. From there, we reign supreme.”

“You mean to reinstate the mission to kill Sergei Kirov?”

“One of them has to die, Fedorov, either the man, or the ship that was named after him. And that’s just for starters. We go back, and we collar Volkov as well, and that puts the entire Orenburg Federation in the bag. And if I take this ship back, as before, I can assure that the Japanese never occupy our territory”

“I see,” said Fedorov. “The odds are thickening up here, and you want to go back to a time when you’re invulnerable again.”

“It does make sense, Fedorov. Wouldn’t you agree? We go there, do all these things, and then there’s only one thing left to do in our plan—removing ourselves from the time line.”

“And what do you propose?” asked Fedorov. “You plan on scuttling the ship—*Kazan* too if we can get that boat back there with us somehow?”

“That would be an option, but we could also try one other thing—we could just go home.”

“To 2021?”

“Where else? That’s the war we belong in, my friend—not this one.”

“Assuming we tried all this, how do we get *Kirov* back there again?”

“Rod-25.”

“How do you know that would work? It could send us anywhere, forward, back a few years as it happened once before. If we end up in 1940, for example, then we get the whole Paradox scenario again.”

“Time has already played that game,” said Karpov. “No, I don’t think she’ll want to play it again. Now I’ll say something that has been ripening in my own mind for some time. We aren’t just anybody here Fedorov. We matter—and a very great deal. Here we sit, discussing the prospect of changing all the history since 1908, and we could do it! That’s what makes us special. When you and I decide something, say we’re going to do something, it’s no idle boast. We’re important, and therefore the things that we intend have weight—they have power. Our will has real and tangible power.”

“I intended to go back and kill Sergei Kirov,” said Fedorov. “Look how that turned out.”

“Do you know why?” Karpov folded his arms. “Because I intended that you should *not* kill him. I didn’t agree, and I’m not just anybody. But together, if we reach one mind on this, then I don’t think anything will stop us. Throw in Admiral Volsky on our side of this and the power of our intention gets even stronger. That’s what I believe. If we decide this, then we throw our own fates to the wind. We plunge that control rod into our little slice of infinity within the ship’s reactor core, and Time has to make a choice. Where does she send us—back to 1940 so she gets another massive paradox to sort through? I don’t think so. No, I think she’ll see that we get exactly where we intend to go—and that goes for *Kazan* as well. You and I stand here aboard *Kirov*, and we’ll get back to 1908. Volsky stands aboard *Kazan*, and Gromyko with his mandate from Kamenski, and something tells me they will get back too. Why would Time want us anywhere else—anywhere but the one place where we can really deal with this madness?”

“Astounding,” said Fedorov. “I’m starting to think you may have something here. It all accords with Dorland’s Time theory. I’ve read that book over and over since we got caught up in this web. Do you know what the very first entry in his time glossary is? Absolute Certainty. It’s a condition brought about by willful determination—not just by anyone, but by people who matter—Prime Movers, according to Dorland. That’s what you’re saying about us when you say we matter, that our will has pull and power. We’re Prime Movers, the both of us—Volsky too, and possibly even Gromyko, since he’s been cooked into the same borscht here with all the rest of us. The concept of Absolute Certainty serves to restrict or limit possible variations in the outcome of things—it serves to mitigate unintended consequences, and force events into accord with the will of the Prime Mover.”

“Just what I was suggesting,” said Karpov. “I should read this book!”

“Yes,” said Fedorov. “We’ve already seen a good number of things in it happen here. We’ve faced Paradox, saw the real effect of a Dual Heisenberg Wave that gave rise to your brother—a living Doppelganger. We’ve moved from one Nexus Point and Meridian to another, each with its own outcomes and consequences. We’ve seen the real manifestation of a time loop, and one that could even repeat again if we aren’t careful. Hell, I’ve listened to Elena Fairchild talking about a Grand Finality when things become so convoluted that they are insoluble, and no clear future can arise. Now here we are, two Prime Movers, talking about going back to the Point of Origin, the point of first divergence in 1908. Damnit Karpov. You’re right!”

Karpov smiled.

“Yes,” Fedorov continued. “There’s another concept that Dorland talks about in that book. He calls it ‘Quantum Karma.’ The notion of one’s karma is an old metaphysical concept from the eastern traditions. The things a person does in one state of existence have an effect in deciding their future fate. Dorland says that there’s a physical analogue for that—and on a quantum level. He suggests that Prime Movers can accumulate an aura of Quantum Karma around them that also has profound effects on the configuration of future moments in Time. Think of it like the way a ship’s hull concentrates the magnetic field of the earth. In this war, they introduced degaussing techniques to reduce that and lower the risk that a ship might set off a magnetic mine. We still routinely degauss ships in normal maintenance cycles. Well, what Dorland says is that Prime Movers collect quantum karma, and while it may not set off mines, it does have a profound effect on the outcome of events—particularly when their own volition is involved in those outcomes.”

“Where there’s a will, there’s a way.” Karpov put all Fedorov’s logic into one simple phrase.

“Exactly,” Fedorov smiled.

“Well then, is there a will, Fedorov? Are we of one mind on this? If so, then we need to bring in Volsky and Gromyko, and all put our hands on the haft of the same sword.”

“I don’t see any other way,” said Fedorov. “It’s clear that we can’t do what we originally intended here, but in 1908, our will has terrible and all changing power to work its way on the world and future time.”

“And we’ll get there,” said Karpov. “Mark my words, if we all set our minds on the same course together, we’ll get there.”

He got up, walked to the bar and reached for a bottle of Vodka. “Let’s drink on it,” which was something Russians enjoyed morning, noon or night. He poured out two shot glasses, extending one to Fedorov.

“To 1908,” he said with a new light in his eyes.

“To 1908,” said Fedorov, “and all that must be done....”

The Saga Continues...

Kirov Series: Volume 30
Ironfall

Fedorov and Karpov arrange a meeting with Volsky and Gromyko to discuss their new plan to target the Prime Meridian of fate and time in 1908, but the Japanese fleet has other ideas, and the ships must soon fight for their survival against warriors from both the present and future time.

The war continues in 1943, with Guderian driving south towards Basra and Erwin Rommel unleashing a classic envelopment attack towards Damascus. As the German 11th and 17th Armies slowly grind down the last of Soviet resistance in the Taman Peninsula, tensions reach a breaking point when they meet Volkov's forces dug in west of Maykop. The Führer has ordered his legions to take and occupy that place, and Ivan Volkov chooses to stand his ground. The war in the east now threatens to spiral out of control, with new fighting erupting on every frontier in the deeply fractured hinterland of Mother Russia.

Meanwhile, Elena Fairchild finally learns the fate of the men she sent into the hidden passage beneath St. Michael's Cave, and also makes a surprising discovery that will give her the means to find and retrieve the key that was lost on the Battleship *Rodney*.