KIROV SAGA



Men Of War

Military Fiction





Book IV in the Kirov Series by:

John Schettler

Kirov Saga
Men Of War

By

John Schettler

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"*The death of God left the angels in a strange position.*"

— Donald Barthelme

Kirov Saga ~ Men Of War

By John Schettler

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Prologue

On December 30, 1980 the Baltiysky Naval Shipyard in Leningrad was a very busy place. It was the day the first of a new fearsome naval surface action combatant, the nuclear guided missile battlecruiser *Kirov* was slated to be commissioned into the Soviet Navy, the first of four planned ships in this class. It would be some time before the Western analysts and intelligence experts who watched from a distance would really take the measure of this awesome new ship. In its early months in the Baltic NATO planners had taken to calling it BALCOM-1 for "Baltic Combatant 1." Once they got a look at the ship they hoped it would be the last they would ever see of this class, but Soviet Russia would not oblige.

Bristling with vertical launch missile ports, SAMs, and deck guns, the ship promised to upset the balance of power in the Northern Seas and, for the Royal Navy, there had not been a ship this feared and respected since the launching of the German *Bismarck* class battleships in the Second World War. One man who watched the reports saw the satellite and high altitude U-2 photos was Captain Peter Yates, British Naval Intelligence. The rumors of the ship had already set analysts into worry mode since it first hit the Soviet naval designer's drawing boards in the mid 1970s. Yates had been one of the privileged few to see the drawings and early photographs of the ship in the naval yards. Something about the scale and design of the ship immediately set off a thrum of anxiety. *Kirov* would be over 827 feet long with a generous beam of 94 feet and displace 28,000 tons fully loaded. While half the weight of a respectable World War II class battleship, she would have the power to confront and sink an entire fleet.

A young man in 1980, Yates was recruited into a dark program hidden deep within the wandering the hallways of the Naval Board at Whitehall. He would not even learn what it was for some years, and then one day he would be escorted into a windowless room handed a sheaf of files with photography and transcripts and told he was to see the British Royal Navy Admiral Of The Fleet immediately after he had reviewed the material. Captain Peter Yates, whose surname meant 'dweller by the gate,' or the gatekeeper, was about to receive a promotion and become Commodore Yates. He would be admitted to a very select group of men known only as the Watch, and told he would

have more than his fair share of long years to stand if he accepted the post, and be privy to intelligence matters with the highest possible clearance. He accepted, and was soon surprised to learn that his post would relate directly to the photographs he had studied before the meeting. His watch would be on that very ship, *Kirov*, and he would need to know its movements, whereabouts and status at all times.

On December 30, 1980, he also got his first look at the dark history of this vessel. There before him were photographs, gun camera footage, and other video related to a top-secret event known only as the "*Geronimo* incident" dating from World War II. To his great surprise that December the ship he saw cruising quietly into the Baltic Sea was the image and likeness of the ship he had seen in those secret files! The phantom that had haunted the opera of British intelligence for the last forty years had finally taken shape in the real world, built by the hands of men.

Yates did not know then that this was not the ship that confronted the Royal Navy in the North Seas in 1941, and again in the Mediterranean of 1942. There were subtle differences, but it's lines and specifications were so close that the first *Kirov* became the most watched ship of its era, with a British submarine assigned to dog its movements for each and every second of its brief ten-year active service life.

When the ship finally suffered a reactor accident in 1990 during a Mediterranean cruise, and was taken off the active-duty list, Yates released a sigh of relief. Now the ship would at least be kept in one place for a time where British Intelligence could keep a watchful eye. There it sat, rusting away in the cold Arctic North while Yates watched the three others of its class suffered similar fates. They were all given new names and one by one they fell out of active service.

Admiral Lazarev sat in the Bay below Russian Naval Pacific Fleet Headquarters at Fokino near Vladivostok, and *Admiral Nakhimov* sat in Severodinsk. The last of the four, battlecruiser *Pyotr Velikiy,* or *Peter the Great,* remained in active service into the year 2015 when it was also retired. The dread battlecruisers were finally off the world stage and no longer a threat until the year 2018 when the new Russia resurrected its promise to refit and reactivate all four of these formidable ships by the year 2020. They made the deadline, but produced only one such ship, built from the bones of all the others that had come before it. And to honor the original class they gave that ship back its old name and called it *Kirov*.

In that year, forty-four years after its original design took shape and form, the new updated battlecruiser *Kirov* returned to the northern seas, making a brief training cruise in the year 2020 and then taking a proud place at the head of the Soviet Northern Fleet as its new flagship. By that time, Commodore Yates was now Admiral Yates, a man of sixty-four years, yet young for his age with just a touch of gray at each Temple and the tall sturdy frame with sharp dark eyes that seemed to notice everything when he entered a room. Yates was now the senior officer in charge of the group known as the Watch, one of many such men and women scattered throughout the world in key positions still keeping a vigilant eye on world events.

2020 had been a jarring year. *Kirov* was back. That was the great worry once again. Now that the ship had returned to active duty service with new electronics, engines, and deadly new weapons, *Kirov* once again posed a grave threat to the sea lanes Western navies and their vast fleets of commerce ships depended on. But it was not what *Kirov* might do to a present-day ship in the year 2021 that so bedeviled the Watch this time. It was what the ship might do to the navies of an earlier time, for now this shadowy group was convinced that this second rebirth of the dread battlecruiser was indeed the ship their founders had come to call *Geronimo*.

Yates knew that, one day, on some mission, perhaps a routine cruise for training or simply to show the flag at distant ports of the world, this ship would simply vanish. What it would do to the history of the world after that moment would make all the difference between survival and the utter destruction of the entire human race. So just like it's older brother before it, the ship could never sail outside the purview of the Royal Navy. A submarine was assigned to intercept and shadow the Russian battlecruiser at every moment, and a special emergency communications device was installed on that sub that would immediately signal level one critical alert should the sub ever lose contact with the ship. The Royal Navy, and the men of the Watch, wanted to know the exact moment in time that the ship was first displaced to a distant era where now legendary figures like Admiral John Tovey and men like Alan Turing of Bletchley Park had first grappled with the deep mystery of the ship's sudden appearance in the middle of World War II. Now, at long last, they were to have their answer.

On a late summer night in July the telephone was ringing in a lonesome and largely unknown office of Royal Navy Headquarters at the Maritime Warfare Centre, Whale Island, Portsmouth. This was the old Coastal

Command Headquarters that was eventually expanded to take over joint operations for air/naval operations for the United Kingdom and related NATO affairs. Home to a staff of 1600 men and women, the main buildings were simple four story offices with long rows of windows and little architectural appeal, but when something really dicey went down, the deep underground secure bunkers were in operation to coordinate events, as they soon were that day when the alert first came in.

Admiral Yates was in his office, working up fleet assignments for the new *Queen Elizabeth* battlegroup assembling for deployment. He would have two of the newer Type 45 destroyers in *Daring* and *Dragon*, the first of the new Type 26 Global Combat Frigates, *Defiance*, and two more older Type 23s in *Lancaster* and *Somerset*. The new *Astute* class fleet submarine *Anson*, the fifth in the series, would serve in escort to her majesty, Britain's newest and largest fleet carrier.

But that night another sub in the same class, the *Ambush*, was living up to its name as it silently stalked the Russian battlecruiser *Kirov* north of Jan Mayen. Commissioned in 2015, *Ambush* was a superbly stealthy boat with a hull coating of nearly 40,000 acoustic tiles. She also had a deadly sting in her six 533mm torpedo tubes firing the *Spearfish* heavyweight torpedo, a 21 inch diameter killing fish indeed with a 300kg warhead. Her *Tomahawk* cruise missiles were another long range threat out to 1240 miles, and accurate to within two meters. At 30 knots submerged, *Ambush* was capable of running with the fast Russian battlecruiser when necessary, and her real underwater speed was still a highly classified secret. With a 25 year supply of nuclear fuel, and advanced air and water purification systems, the sub could technically circumnavigate the entire globe without ever once surfacing. Her only limitation was a 90 day supply of food.

Ambush had been following a small task group centered on *Kirov*, picking them up as they left Severomorsk and drifting quietly as they passed in a stately line. The old *Oscar* class submarine *Orel* led the procession, followed by the aging cruiser *Slava* towing a large targeting barge, and then came the bane of the West, the mighty *Kirov* out for live fire exercises with the ship's holds bulging with missile reloads. The formation was in no particular hurry, making a sedate 10 knots until the *Slava* veered off with her targeting barge and increased to 15 knots. The sub listened to the whole scene, her sensitive sonar tracking the movement of each ship until the *Slava* was some 30 kilometers south of *Kirov* and the now submerged submarine *Orel*, which

hovered nearby. Weather reports indicated a strong front was moving in rapidly from the north, and it looked as though the Russians wanted to complete their exercise before the sea conditions made operations impractical.

Then it happened.

The whole boat shuddered with a thrumming vibration as if a massive kettle drum had been struck a mighty blow beneath the sea. The sonar operator ripped his headset off in spite of the noise spike inhibitor, staring blankly at his CO. No one on the boat knew it at that moment, but a strange loop in time had just completed one full cycle.

The first time it had happened there had been no Admiral Yates on the watch, and in fact, no "Watch" mounted at all. The group did not exist when the *Orel* incident first sent *Kirov* careening through time to 1941. Yet actions taken by the ship and crew changed history, and in the year 2000 a Great War broke out on that altered timeline and devastated the world. *Kirov* never saw it. Rod-25 snatched the ship away from the icy waters of the North Atlantic and sent it home to the year 2021…Only home was no longer there!

Twelve days later an unknowing Chief Dobrynin and Rod-25 worked their magic again and sent *Kirov* back to 1942, only this time she had moved in space while in the future, and was now in the Med. Actions taken by the ship and crew again altered history and caused the war to be delayed in that newly altered timeline, but it happened in the year 2021. When Rod-25 sent the ship forward again off the Island of St. Helena, *Kirov* once more found the world a desolate and blighted place.

The third shift into the past to 1942 gave the ship one last chance to change that fate. After so many tries Time now seemed to know its own future, and cleverly tipped off the principle officers on the ship by delivering a newspaper to them with a warning before they made that last return trip to late 1942. The war would start in 2021, it told them. Get busy. *Kirov's* actions in the Pacific of 1942 had been enough to win but a brief respite to that fatal deadline, a matter of a few weeks delay, and not enough to prevent it from occurring. Because the ship had left one thing, one man of great importance behind—Chief Gennadi Orlov—a Man of War. It was something Orlov would do, or fail to do, that would make all the difference where the two roads of time now diverged in a yellow wood of infinity, and led to a future that only a privileged few now knew.

When *Kirov* reappeared and made its way home to Vladivostok it was

living in the alternate history that the ship and crew had created, and on that timeline a Watch had been waiting for long decades, ever vigilant. In late July, 2021 of that altered history, *Kirov* vanished…right on schedule. *Orel* blew up again, just as before on the original timeline, and a story a thousand pages long was written in the new history. This time Admiral Yates was standing his Watch.

A telephone rang in Royal Naval Headquarters—a very special telephone. It flashed signals to the deep underground operations bunker near Portsmouth, to a solitary office in Plymouth, and its shrill alarm was relayed to locations, and individuals all over the globe, all men and women of the Watch. It was just one single word repeating in sets of three until a button was pushed on the receiving end to indicate secure reception of the message: *Geronimo, Geronimo, Geronimo.…*

It had finally happened. The ship they had been waiting for since the 1940s, watching since 1980, had finally pulled its disappearing act and was gone, and it was now anyone's guess where and when it might return. The Watch did not have long to wait. *Kirov* was gone for all of a long, breathless month, and then was suddenly spotted in the Pacific by an American submarine. *Key West* was supposed to have been killed that day, but lived on due to a moment of restraint that bought the world a few brief weeks of restless peace.

* * *

Vladivostok on the Sea of Japan was thousands of miles away when *Kirov* finally turned her bow north from the paradise island where they had made one final stop. There was only one loose end that they could not account for as they sailed for home, though Anton Fedorov spent many long hours trying. What had happened to Chief Gennadi Orlov? Where did he go? What effect, if any, did he have on the history that Fedorov could now spend long quiet years re-reading, re-learning, much to his delight? His curiosity and diligence would become a saving grace for the world, though he did not yet know that as he stood on the weather deck when the ship first turned for Vladivostok harbor. *Kirov* was coming home, but it would not be the last time the ship would see the fire of war.

Karpov had stayed his hand at the last moment, and the curious American submarine, *Key West* had lived to return to its home port in Guam, its captain

happily smoking a fresh Cuban cigar on the conning tower. Yet the reprieve that single moment of sanity and restraint Karpov gave to the world was to be short lived. Events in the Pacific were building up like tall storm clouds on the horizon, their flanks darkening with rain, tops crowned with the lightning of the threat of war.

In a strange twist of events, the ship they left broken and stranded on the shallow coral reefs of the Torres Straits would sire a brave young son to pose a new challenge to the world. *Kirishima* would return, but it would not be the old battleship this time, nor the stern presence of a man like Sanji Iwabuchi. No, this time it was a sleek guided missile destroyer, *Kongo* class, built for the Japanese Maritime Self Defense Force in the late 1990s. In an odd echo of the history they had just lived, *Kirov* would soon come to hear the name of ship that had hunted them, pursuing them through the long nights as they struggled to find safe waters in a sea of war. *DDG Kirishima* was now fated to have a major part to play in the war that was still looming.

Men no longer stood the watch from a high pagoda tower on this new ship. Instead they huddled below decks their eyes fixed on the glowing screens of their advanced *Aegis* Fire Control System. The big 14 inch guns of its distant ancestor had been forsaken for deadly new *Harpoon* missiles. The AA guns that once bristled from the superstructure of the old ship were now SM-2MR Block IV radar homing SAMs. Yet one thing remained the same, the destroyer was a ship of war pledged to bring her wrath and fire to any who might threaten or oppose the interests of her nation on the high seas. The forms and shapes of the ships had changed, and new men sailed within the hard metal frames plying the waters of the misnamed Pacific, but the deadly game they played with one another was still the same.

Escort Squadron 6 was a part of Flotilla 2 assigned to the Sasebo Naval District, and tonight DDG *Kirishima* led a group of three warships as they prowled the dark waters near the disputed Senkaku Islands, called the Diaoyutai by rival China. English sailors of old had called them the Pinnacles, deserted specks in the sea that seemed to hold little interest before lucrative oil and gas fields had been discovered on the seabed beneath them in the 21st century. Now the largest of the tiny group, once called the “Island of Peace” would become a terrible new flashpoint for war. History had a way of spoiling human expectations with its cold ironic smirk.

Peace was far away that night, a will-o the-wisp notion that had been laid aside in the service of more immediate interests. The 21st century was

starving for energy. China has risen like a great fire breathing dragon, and her hot breath now needed fuel to stoke those flames. Japan too, was hungry again, and the same search for oil and natural resources that had sent her to war in the 1940s now saw her slowly set aside the pledge of non-belligerence written into her constitution at the end of that last great conflict. It was a new world, but some things never changed.

Just as fate brought the name *Kirishima* back from the dead that night, she was also to start a new, cruel dance for the men who had served, and fought and endured aboard another proud ship of war, the battlecruiser *Kirov*. For that ship also seemed to return from the dead when the *Kirov* suddenly radioed home to Vladivostok, and reserved a berth in the Golden Horn Harbor for her weary crew….All but one.

As it turned out, fate was not so kind to the man who had shirked his duty in a wild leap of violent self-interest. Yes, Gennadi Orlov found a new life when he jumped from the KA-226 that day, yet it was not the life he had imagined. Time, fate, and the British Special Intelligence Service had other plans for him. And Fate had plans for Fedorov, and Karpov, and Volsky too, their names written in some bizarre ledger in the Book of Time, right next to the names of men like Alan Turing and Admiral John Tovey, and many others you are now about to meet. For this, dear reader, is that strange tale, and it began, quite unexpectedly, with a couple of frustrated U-Boat commanders, the first one in the western approaches to the Straits of Gibraltar on a dark night in September, 1942.

Part I

Orlov

“In this, our age of infamy, Man's choice is but to be a tyrant,
traitor, prisoner:
No other choice has he.”

—Aleksandr Pushkin

Chapter 1

Orlov knew exactly what he had to do, and how to go about it. His long years in the dangerous Russian underground before he joined the navy would now serve him very well, for he knew when to speak, and when to keep his mouth shut tight, and how to mix with every sort from beggar to brigand, and blend inconspicuously into the riff-raff of the world. But he also had more than his fair share of foibles and bad habits, urges that he was all too eager to fulfill now that he found himself a wolf at large in a world of sheep.

That was how he thought of himself, a big and terrible wolf that had fallen from the sky like a demigod, pulled out of the sea by unknowing fishermen. He landed in Cartagena, where he soon worked his way into the commercial district, ferreting out one bar and whorehouse after another. There was always a need for a good drink and some idle chat with a bar fellow when he could find one who spoke Russian. Money was never a problem, as he could simply take from any unsuspecting drifter he encountered, filling his pockets with ready cash. The fishermen had tried to warn him to be cautious, but they did so in Spanish, a language he found incomprehensible. Instead he got on with gestures, his natural aggressive nature, and a goodly amount of sheer nerve.

A big man, brawny and well muscled, there were few who ever wanted to cross him in the bars where he drank and reveled in his newfound freedom. Occasionally he would meet other Eastern Europeans there, Poles, Hungarians, Lithuanians, and some even spoke his mother tongue, Russian. This was not unusual, for neutral Spain had attracted more than its fair share of wandering souls in the region, men tired of the war, or running from it, lost men of the world that no one would miss or give a second thought to.

One night Orlov met another man who spoke Russian, Ivan Petrovich Rybakov, who worked the coal room on a steamer that had called in the port that morning. The two got on immediately, trading talk of women and wine, drinking together and eventually getting drunk enough to irritate the bar keep, who called the authorities to see if he could have the boisterous men removed.

Two men from the local Guardia Civil showed up some time later, and

got a little too pushy with a man accustomed to always doing the pushing himself. The guards were armed with batons, and knew how to use them, but Orlov was in no mood to be prodded an poked by a couple of scrawny Spaniards with an attitude, and he let them know as much, albeit in Russian. The guards heard enough to realize they had trouble on their hands, but they foolishly thought their uniforms, batons, and the insignia on their caps would decide the matter.

They were very wrong.

Orlov exploded, taking one man's baton away from him and quickly breaking his nose with it. When the other guard joined the fray he ended up with a broken arm, and within minutes the big Chief had laid out both guards stone cold on the smelly sallow straw of the bar room floor.

Rybakov's eyes widened when he saw how easily Orlov had put the men down, but realized that this was going to cause a lot of trouble, and fairly quickly. Several other patrons had already slipped out the door, and the bar keep was already on the phone again, his face ashen when he saw the fracas and watched Orlov break a chair over one guard's back to fell the man.

"Come on, my friend," Rybakov hissed. "Let's get out of here while we can. I know a place!"

Orlov put his boot into a prone guard's belly, picked up his beer to finish it off, and then put his big arm around Rybakov and shuffled out into the darkened streets of Cartagena. He had planned on finding a good whorehouse that night, but his new found friend convinced him that would be most unwise.

"Come with me, comrade," he whispered. "We need to get off the streets for a while. You handled those two mice easily enough, but there are a lot more where they came from."

"Bother me and they'll get the same treatment," Orlov slurred.

"I believe it, my friend, but not tonight. The Guardia Civil will soon be searching every other bar and whorehouse in the port district, but I have just the perfect place we can go. No one will find us there."

Rybakov lead the way down a dark alley and out along the wharf to where an old rusting steamer was tied off on a long wooden pier. The two men slipped aboard, two shadows, laughing as they went, and the Guardia Civil would not find them that night. They worked their way into the guts of the ship, a tramp steamer out of Cadiz that was pressed into some very risky service at times. Now it was on a voyage from Barcelona, stopping in

Valencia and Cartagena to pick up cargo, and bound for Ceuta on the Algerian coast near Gibraltar, before heading for Cadiz on the Atlantic coast.

"We are leaving in the morning, but don't you worry. Come with us! The captain will sign you on. They can use a good strong man like you shoveling coal, and I will show you around Ceuta tomorrow. You want a whore that will fuck your eyes out? I know just the place, my friend."

Ships like this would hire on vagrant crewmen for such missions, with little asked and little said. So Orlov signed on as raw bulk muscle, and they put his big arms and shoulders to good use in the fire room, shoveling coal to feed the old steam engine. There were five men there, two other Eastern Europeans like himself, and his new found comrade in crime, Ivan Petrovich Rybakov. They were all disaffected souls caught up in the dredging nets of the Second World War. It was no easy life, but it was one way Orlov could finally get out of the city without having to make an equally hazardous journey overland.

He had thought about heading east to Russia, but the prospect of traveling through occupied France and then most of Europe now under German control was not encouraging. Perhaps he could loiter in Algeria for a while, jumping ship in this port Rybakov was talking about and truly sampling the wares in the local brothels there. Thankfully his ship, *Duero* would make the day's journey without incident.

Ironically, Orlov was soon cruising south along the Spanish coast through the very same waters that *Kirov* had navigated just a few months earlier. Yet his old ship, and the life he once had there, were now long gone, lost in the mist of time. While he wasted away the days in Cartagena, *Kirov* had fought its battle in the Med, negotiated safe passage to St. Helena, and then vanished into the fire of the Pacific. The ship was already forsaken the world of 1942, and the war that Orlov now found himself struggling to avoid.

One day, he knew he would have to get serious about his situation and start using the incredible knowledge of days to come to better his lot in life. Yet Orlov was content, for the moment, to drink, and fuck his way along the Spanish coast, and forget the old life he once knew completely. One day soon I will start remembering, he thought, and asking questions. Yes, he would start to remember what the days ahead would hold, and soon, very soon, he would be a wealthy and powerful man.

He was not an educated man—not like Fedorov, who could call up statistics and names from memory as he lectured everyone else on the

ship….*Kirov,* the most powerful ship in the world. It had come to the war by accident, or so Orlov believed, and they had raised hell wherever they went. He wondered what had happened to the ship, or if pug faced Nikolin had ever heard the message he tapped out in Morse one night after breaking into a telegraph station while drunk in Cartagena. *Nikolin, Nikolin, Nikolin…you lose.*

It was his last, plaintive good-bye to the life he once knew. Yes, they were all a bunch of losers in his mind now. Let them all go to hell. They could have their ship and its private war, he had something else, and it was going to make him the most powerful man in the world. Yes, Orlov was not educated, but he wasn't stupid either. He knew that he could never learn the things Fedorov had in his head, the dates, times, and dimensions of the world ahead. But *Kirov's* library had a lot of very useful information in it, and Orlov was smart enough to download a good bit of it into the computer built right in to his flight jacket, which he still wore.

The touch screen devices of the early 21st century had revolutionized the world of computing, and ushered in what came to be called the "era of personal computing in the post-PC world." Everyone had cell phones, touch pads and they carried them virtually everywhere they went. Their only liability was the short battery life, which forced them to always be plugged in and recharged on a regular basis. Then an enterprising man came up with a new idea, that we no longer needed fingers to poke at glass screens to do our computing, we could go one step further and simply use our voices.

Computers soon became part of common clothing and other personal items like eyewear and jewelry. Orlov had a clever system where the flexible and highly durable circuitry was built right into the lining of his flight jacket within a watertight Polyflex container, and the outer fabric was laced with solar sensitive filaments that would charge the computer any time he stood in sunlight. Orlov's military model was particularly durable, designed for the rigors of combat. There was a microphone in his collar, allowing him to speak commands to the voice recognition software, and earbuds would let him listen to results. So he went to the ship's library and he downloaded "The Portable Wikipedia" into his jacket memory so he could use the info to his advantage and become wealthy. All he had to do was whisper a question now, and then listen to the answer spoken to him by Svetlana, the voice of Russia's Wiki, and he would have all the knowledge Fedorov spent years stuffing into his head. Yes, Orlov was a very clever man, or so he believed.

He thought that the next night as well after he had satisfied himself in Ceuta, though with funds running low he had to haggle over the price and nearly caused another ruckus. He eventually returned to the harbor, planning to jump ship later that night after a brief rest. Instead he fell into a deep, dreamless, self-satisfied stupor and slept the night away. Rybakov let him languish in a hammock until almost ten, and by that time the ship was well out to sea again. Orlov was going to end up paying much more than he thought for that last night in the brothels of Spanish Morocco…much more…

* * *

U-118 was out on her third wartime patrol that night, and the pickings looked good. She had completed her training three months earlier than the history might record it in Fedorov's books, where she wasn't due to start her first patrols until 19 Sep, 1942. This third patrol would have happened in late January of 1943, but it was happening now, just another odd shifting of the fault lines of history after *Kirov* had passed through the region.

Kapitan Werner Czygan, had little luck on his first two patrols, mostly in the Atlantic operating with Wolfpacks *Wotan* and *Westwall*. He had returned to Lorient empty handed and disheartened, with nothing to show for his efforts but a damaged bow when a plane had spotted him on the surface near dusk one evening and put a depth charge right off his starboard side.

That had been a close call, he knew, but it angered him more than anything else, and now he was even more determined to get some kills to his name and remove some tonnage from the allied shipping rolls. The problem was his torpedoes, or so he thought. They just did not seem to be running true, and he had more than his fair share of surface runners in the mix.

One night in Lorient he had a long discussion about it with his first officer, Oberleutnant Herbert Brammer, and it resulted in a change of tactics that was to prove as fateful as it was successful.

"Face it, Werner," Herbert said over his beer. "There aren't many boats in our class these days, and we get little respect. They assign us to the wolf packs because we're big and fat and can carry all those supplies in the mine racks. We have no business being out in the middle of the Atlantic anyway. We should be inshore, looking for shipping traffic around Gibraltar. This boat was built for mining operations."

"You're probably right," Herbert, "but we go where they send us." The

Kapitan knew what his First Officer was trying to tell him. He was commander of a big Type XB boat, one of only eight ever built, and commissioned in 1938. They were designed and laid down as ocean-going submersibles, all of 2700 tons when fully loaded, though as Brammer had sadly pointed out, most of that extra weight too often went to cargo and supplies. The boat carried up to 15 torpedoes, yet in a very odd design with only two torpedo tubes, both on the stern.

"It's hard enough to hit anything when you can face it full on and fire from the bow," said the Captain. "Every time we see anything worth sinking our teeth into we have to turn our backside to them first and fart at them. And we haven't hit a goddamned thing in sixty days."

"I tell you that's not what they built these boats for, Kapitan. And you know it as well as I do. What do you think we have all those mine racks on board for? That's our real job, laying mines in enemy ship lanes. They put those torpedo tubes on our ass so we could fire at anything they send out to chase us. You want to fight like a cat, and stalk and pounce on your enemy like the others, but this boat is not up to the task. No. We must fight like a spider. We lay our web of little mines and then we wait to see who comes along and gets hit. There's a nice big 105 millimeter gun on the deck, and if a steamer runs afoul of our handiwork, we can also surface and give them a little more with the deck gun. But not in the Atlantic! You don't drop mines out there in the middle of nowhere. We need to get down to the Straits of Gibraltar and lay our eggs in the western approaches. That's where the ship traffic is, and that's where you get your kills and tonnage."

The Captain took a good long swig of his beer, brushing the foam from his upper lip when he finished. "Right again, Brammer. I'm going to make a special request for our next patrol. I want those damn cargo containers off the mine racks and a full load of mines this time. Then we'll do exactly what you suggest, my friend. Let's drink on it!" He raised his mug and the two men threw back some good dark ale, sealing a pact that was to have the most dramatic consequences imaginable, though neither man would ever know or realize what they had just done.

Time, life and the subtle contours and convoluted twists of history would take care of the rest. The Captain with the impossible last name, Czygan, was going to have more success with his mine laying tactic than many other U-boat commanders in Lorient that night, too proud to stoop to such devices as they fancied themselves members of Hitler's undersea elite, the silent wolves

of the sea.

Czygan took *U-118* south on the 25th of August, 1942 excited to spot the long fast lines of battleships and cruisers from Admiral Tovey's Home Fleet sailing north for Scapa Flow. His orders had been to observe and not engage, and the tall ships soon disappeared over his horizon. After cruising south for a little over a week, and trying to line up on an errant freighter, he forsook his aft torpedoes and began laying his mines in the western approaches to the Strait of Gibraltar.

This was the same place that the Royal Navy would often stage large convoys and military task forces before they entered the Med. The five aircraft carriers that had been assigned to Operation Pedestal had staged there that summer, and the ships he had just observed apparently conducted a major fleet exercise there. Perhaps one of his mines would find a nice warship sometime soon in these busy waters, and if not, there was always plenty of shipping in the area that might stumble upon his web. Yes, he would fight like a spider, just as his XO had advised him, and it paid off good dividends in short order.

U-118 laid all sixty-six SMA type mines off Cape Espartel in the western approaches, and then sailed southwest to look for errant traffic and a possible use for the twelve torpedoes they also brought along. A few days later they got some very good news.

On a dark night in early September, convoy MKS-7B out of Algiers and bound for Liverpool, transited the Straits of Gibraltar. It was a nice fat convoy too, with just over sixty merchantmen steaming in twelve columns abreast, and it ran right over *U-118's* web of freshly laid mines. Czygan would claim three kills that night, the small 2000 tonner *Baltonia*, the much bigger *Empire Mordred* at just over 7000 tons, and another respectable kill with the sinking of the *Mary Slessor* at a little over 5000 tons. He was elated —three kills in one night, and without a single torpedo fired! He had quickly racked up 14,064 tons, and was well on the way to earning his Iron Cross of the 1st Class with his new tactics. He was finally fighting his boat the way it was meant to be fought.

The minefield *U-118* had laid was to be a nuisance and threat to shipping for some time thereafter. Three more steamers would happen across those mines and die, adding another 12,870 tons to Czygan's tally. It was ship number four, however, that was to really put a feather in Czygan's cap, a lowly steamer out of Cadiz, christened as the *Monassir*. The ship was

renamed *Switzerland* for a time, before being loaned to the Spanish Republicans during the civil war when it was flagged Italian and called the *Urbi* to keep a low profile while carrying contraband and other unsavory cargos along the Spanish coast. After the civil war concluded, the ship was returned to its owner, who favored it with the name *Duero*, after the flat, rocky wine region of north central Spain centered on the town Aranda de Duero.

It was always considered bad luck to rename a ship, though the practice was common. But to rename a ship four times was uncommonly bad. And so it happened that the ship with four names was also the fourth to happen upon a mine in *U-118's* stealthy web on the night of the 10th of September, 1942, exactly 5 months sooner than it should have suffered that same fate.

It seemed like a small thing, a lowly tramp steamer hitting a mine laid by a hungry, frustrated U-boat captain, but it was the night that changed the entire course of history—not only of the war, but for every day that followed. For a very special passenger was aboard the ship that night, a drifter, indigent laborer, and a virtual nobody that had been taken on as cheap labor in the fire room a few weeks earlier.

His name was Gennadi Orlov.

Chapter 2

At only 2000 tons, *Duero* had no armor to speak of, and damage from the mine explosion that shook them all awake that night was enough to hole the hull and ship a good deal of seawater. It was only the steamer's good fortune that a British destroyer was close by, and able to respond quickly to take the ship under tow and drag *Duero* back to Gibraltar. With many compartments flooded and sealed off, the ship's captain accepted an offer to send a good number of his crew over to the British destroyer on a lifeboat, and Orlov and Rybakov were among them.

"Now don't say anything, Orlov," Rybakov had warned him. "Remember, we're neutral non-combatants. I've been aboard several British ships in my day, and never had much to worry about, but you need to keep a good head on your shoulders, and keep your mouth shut too."

Orlov was only too happy to get off the rusty old steamer, thinking he could just as easily disappear and jump onto any other ship in the harbor once they made landfall, and continue on his merry way. But they had not counted on fate and time having their say in the matter, for the British ship that had come to their aid that night was the destroyer HMS *Intrepid*, out on routine channel patrol and captained by one Lieutenant Commander Colin Douglas Maud.

That same boat had made a wild run at a strange phantom ship in the Med some months ago, as Maud desperately charged in to fire his torpedoes. He would not score a hit that night against *Kirov*, but now he unknowingly had a piece of the ship right in the palm of his hand. It wasn't long before Orlov came under his watchful eye, for there was something about the man that belied his being a simple and common laborer on an old Spanish steamer.

Maud was an old salt, as seasoned as they ever came in the navy, and he knew sea faring men when he saw them. Orlov caught his eye immediately, just as the life boat was tied off and the men came aboard. It was the way he moved on the boat, handled the ropes, reached for all the right places as he climbed, his footing sure and steady while the other men clamored, and slipped, and fairly well looked like a bunch of land-lubbing monkeys—but not Orlov. There was a man who knew the tang of salt in the air, and a man who knew the sea. Maud was sure of it from the moment he set eyes on him. And there was something more… the easy assurance of the man, the sense of

presumed authority about him, and the revolver in a side holster that he spied easily enough, though the man was making more than a reasonable effort at concealing the weapon.

Wee Mac, as he was called in the Royal Navy was on to this stranger in a heartbeat, and some inner sense was telling him to be wary. His easy handle was a bit of a misnomer, for Maud was as stout a man as they came, barrel-chested, with a full black beard and the aspect of a pirate on the Barbary coast. He took one look at Orlov, noticed the revolver, and then tapped the Hawthorne cane he always held on the rim of the gunwale to get a warrant officer's attention.

"See that man there," he pointed with the cane. "He's armed. I won't have armed men on my ship not sworn to the service of his majesty's Royal Navy. Get round to the Master of Arms and have him see to the matter at once."

"Very good, sir."

Orlov was indeed armed, and with a Glock pistol that would not be conceived, designed or built for many decades. It was "Comrade Glock," the very same pistol he had brandished on the bridge of *Kirov* as insurance that he and Karpov might pull off their quiet little mutiny without any trouble. The weapon would be seized, in spite of Orlov's boisterous complaint, putting his hand protectively on the holster and prompting two Royal Marine Guards to quickly chamber rounds and take aim at his chest. Rybakov quickly intervened, whispered to him that they would have it returned once they reached port, and diffused what might have become a very ugly situation. But the revolver was taken to the bridge to satisfy one Lieutenant Commander Colin Douglas Maud, and being a curious man, he had a good long look at it. And so it began.

* * *

At first glance Captain Maud thought the pistol was a Russian TT-33, particularly when he learned the man it was taken from was apparently Russian himself. Yet when he flipped open the holster and slid the weapon out he could see that it wasn't a Tokarev after all. Very curious. Maud knew something of handguns, and it wasn't a Polish Vis, or a Browning Colt M1911 either, weapons Tokarev was thought to have relied upon when he designed the TT-33. He had a very long look at the pistol indeed.

It was, in fact, a high performance Glock-31, firing the formidable .357 SIG cartridge from a 15 round clip. The weapon was designed in the mid-

1990s, and noted for its considerable stopping power and accuracy over long ranges. It's name was engraved along the flat barrel siding, though not apparent to the uneducated eye. The first letter of Glock was enlarged and almost looked like a circle, broken at one end where the letters LOCK had been inserted to the interior and rested on the lateral horizontal line that would designate the letter "G." To the right of this he had his first clue as to the origin of the weapon, for the word 'AUSTRIA' was engraved next, and then the weapon caliber of '.357' The same odd Glock logo also appeared on the gun's handle.

Maud had never seen this make and model, whatever it was, and for good reason. There wasn't another like it in the entire world—at least the world of 1942, for this particular handgun had been manufactured in 1998, all of fifty-six years in the future. And there was something most unusual mounted along the underside of the barrel…something that looked for all the world like a viewing scope, though it would be impossible to sight through it given its present position, mounted by a pair of clips or brackets forward of the trigger guard. Perhaps it was meant to simply be carried in that position, then removed and re-mounted on top of the barrel when needed, or so he thought.

It was not a view scope of any kind, however. It was a Russian made laser range finder that Orlov had adapted to his weapon some years ago, and it never entered his head that it might seem just a tad perplexing to anyone of this era who might inspect the gun, because he never expected that anyone ever *would* inspect the gun.

The long list of unanswered questions about this man and his weapon now began to mount up in Captain Maud's mind, and he quietly told his Executive Officer to have the Russians brought up to the Ward Room, along with a couple of Marine guards. He wanted to start asking his questions, and see what he might learn about these men.

When he finally got a look at the two men he could clearly see the vast difference between them. One man, calling himself Ivan Petrovich Rybakov, clearly had the look of an itinerant sea slug, his hands and face blackened with coal stains, and a raw, unkempt look about him that spoke of a scoundrel. This man managed some broken English, which made things a bit easier for Maud that night, because the man he was interested in could speak only Russian.

His name, he soon learned, was Gennadi Orlov, for the Chief had no qualms about using his real name here. He knew that no one aboard *Kirov*

would ever know of his whereabouts or have any way to possibly find him. Rybakov did most of the talking at first, telling the Captain that they had signed on some time ago as common labor. He said he had come west from Hungary when it seemed likely that the war was going to come east. He wanted to get away from it, slipping beneath the advancing front to make his way through Southern France to Spain.

The other man's story wasn't as believable. When questioned, Orlov told Rybakov to say he had been on a Russian merchant ship in the Black Sea, and also tired of the war he had jumped ship in Turkey before catching another tramp steamer west through the Med. That was what he told Maud, but the burly Captain seemed suspicious.

"Well, you're a long way from home," said Maud, looking the man over with a careful eye now. It would have been a very hard life to be on a steamer in the Black Sea. The Germans had U-boats there now, or so he had heard. They had disassembled the damn things, rafted them down the Danube and put them back together again in the Black Sea! In fact, they were under the able command of one Helmut Rosenbaum, former Kapitan of *U-73* in the Med, the very same submarine *Kirov* had dueled with off the coast of Menorca. He was only there because Fedorov had given him a life, even though the man had done his best to try and put a torpedo into the Russian battlecruiser.

Yes, thought Maud, it would have been a hard life in the Black Sea, and an even more arduous journey west through the Med to reach Spain, yet this man did not have the gaunt, hungry look of his companion. He was well built, well fed, and had a cocky, self-assured look about him that said many things to Captain Maud as he watched the man. This Orlov was someone accustomed to giving orders, not taking them. He seemed quietly irritated with this interrogation, answering with curt and hard-edged statements in Russian that did not seem to paint a very credible picture. He had forgotten the name of the ship he came west on. He claimed he worked in the fire room the whole long way to Spain, but Maud had seen stokers and knew their look at once. Orlov's brief few days at the job did not see him get that charred look, hands smudged, fingernails blackened and sometimes impossible to wash. No, he had nothing of the look of a real stoker, or shovel man. In short, he was lying.

The longer Maud sat with these men the more he was certain of that. They were liars, both of them, and most likely up to no good. Rybakov he could

dismiss. He seemed to be what he claimed, but not this Orlov. No, this man had a military air about him. His story had more holes in it than a sieve, and he had a most unusual pistol in his possession. His jacket, too, had a military cut to it, and an odd way of catching the light. He did not fail to note the buttons at each shoulder that were clearly there to mount missing rank insignia, though he said nothing of this. The jacket's collar also had places to mount pips. Yes, this man was an officer, and he was sure of it as he tapped his Hawthorne walking stick on the deck, concluding his interview.

He had come to suspect that Orlov was probably in some intelligence arm or another. Spain had a way of drawing these sorts like maggots on meat as the war now entered its fifth year. The British SIS had men there, as did the Abwehr, the French underground, the Vichy French, the Italians, and there was still an odd mix of shadowy groups in Spain itself, a remnant of their recent civil war. It would not surprise him to learn that this Orlov was a Russian spy, and with that thought in mind he decided to hold these men in a locked room below decks, and have them sent over to British intelligence in Gibraltar. As soon as they made port, he would make a call once they tied off in the harbor, and have a squad sent over to pick the men up. He would let them know that Orlov was clearly not what he professed to be. Let the boys at MI6 have a look at them, he thought. I've enough on my plate as it stands.

* * *

Gibraltar was more than a vital harbor and airfield for the British it was their gateway to the Med itself, and one of the most vital bases in all the empire. Often thought impregnable, the 'Rock' was a source of constant anxiety to the British, who feared that any concerted attack might capture it in spite of all defensive measures. There were three major Spanish artillery batteries in range, one in North Africa at Mount Hacho, two others within five miles of the port near Algiceras. Over 30,000 Spanish troops were nearby on the mainland of Spain, and the British feared these could be reinforced by German troops to present an unstoppable siege force against the 15,000 men that could be garrisoned on the Rock.

A bastion of British Sea power for centuries, Gibraltar was the home of Force H under Admiral Somerville, and a nest for the British Special Intelligence Service, there to defend the vital base from saboteurs of every stripe. The Italians had been trying to bomb the place for years, and the night

sky was often pierced by the long cold white fingers of search lights during the air raids. By day the RAF kept a watch on the Rock and discouraged such visitations, but the enemy tired to subvert operations there by other means as well.

Italian frogmen from the *Decima Flottiglia MAS* mounted many operations against the harbor, secretly working out of a private estate at Villa Carmela about three kilometers up the Spanish coast, and then from the Italian tanker *SS Olterra*. They managed to get at a few merchant ships, but did little other harm, though their presence was also suspected as a means of infiltrating agents and saboteurs into Gibraltar.

To improve the defenses, a warren of tunnels and caves, were drilled into the limestone. Deep beneath the Rock itself was an entire city in a series of tunnels and caves bored out by British and Canadian engineers with diamond tipped drills. It had its own power station, hospitals, troop barracks, and water and food supplies capable of supporting up to 30,000 troops. In fact, the Rock had more miles of tunnels underground than it had roads above.

It was into one of these long, labyrinthine tunnels that Orlov and Rybakov were taken, to a hidden bunker operated by the British Secret Intelligence Service, MI6. They, too, had a very long look at the pistol Orlov had been carrying, and a lot of questions for him after they managed to locate a man from the Russian liaison in the MIL(R) section and get him in as a translator. It was not long before they called in men from other branches of their intelligence services, Defense, the Technical Group at MI10, Military Security, Eastern European Experts from MI3.

Orlov’s story was not adding up. His weapon was most unusual, and the peculiar scope it mounted soon astounded them when it emitted a thin, narrow beam of greenish light the like of which they had never seen. MI6 had more than a drawer full of its own gadgets: watches, rings, key chains, tie clips, special shoes, but this one trumped them all. Orlov’s explanation that it was simply a flash light did not wash. It only deepened their suspicions about this man and his pistol.

Intelligence services had been more than interested in anything Russian in the waters around Gibraltar ever since the remarkable “incident” involving a strange warship that had set the whole Royal Navy charging to the scene the previous August. There had been a battle off the southern coast of Spain involving the battleships *Rodney* and *Nelson* in the covering force for Operation Pedestal, and it was now classified information, and very hush,

hush. The scuttlebutt had been that a disaffected sea captain had sailed the battlecruiser *Strausbourg* from Toulon to try and put some steel in the backbone of Vichy French forces prior to the Torch landings in North Africa. But there were few men of any experience who could believe that single ship could have put damage on both British battleships as it obviously did, and even fewer men in MI6 who bought the story—until they were told in no uncertain terms that that is exactly the line they were to hold to on the matter.

Rumors were that the ship was not French after all, but Russian, and an Able Seaman who claimed he had been present for a meeting between the Admiral of the rogue ship and Admiral John Tovey was suddenly reported missing one day. No more was said about the incident.

The ship, whatever it was, had been "escorted" to St. Helena for the duration of the war. That was another official line, though strange rumors had begun to circulate about it as well. When the veteran diver Lt. Commander Lionel Crabb had been summarily called to special duty and sent out to St. Helena, the rumors gathered even more steam.

Crabb, called simply "Buster" by the Americans on the Rock, was an amiable and experienced diver who had been instrumental in countering the efforts of Italian frogmen against ships in the harbor. He made regular dives to check for the placement of limpet mines on ships, winning him a George Medal and a promotion for his work. Now the Admiralty wanted him to take a good long look at the seabed around St. Helena, where it was rumored the mysterious ship had vanished in a bank of fog in late August, just as it arrived under escort by a pair of fast cruisers. He found nothing at all, not the slightest trace of any wreckage of disturbance of the sea bed, though that report was buried and Crabb was told never to speak a word of it.

He obeyed that order for years until he let slip in a bar one night in 1956 that there had been nothing on the seabed off St. Helena even remotely resembling the wreckage of a ship. Days later Crabb would disappear while again diving to investigate the propeller assembly of another Soviet ship, the cruiser *Ordzhonikidze* that transported Nikita Khrushchev on a diplomatic mission to the UK.

So matters 'Russian' were suddenly given a special sensitivity in MI6, particularly at a vital base like Gibraltar. Orlov's strange appearance immediately got the attention of a good many branches of the intelligence service, and he was soon locked away in a cave, deep below the Rock.

Rybakov was vetted easily enough, a fish that was quickly cast back into

the sea of drifters and vagrants on the Spanish coast. For Orlov, however, it was the beginning of a long and difficult series of interrogations, and it was not long before word of this strange Russian prisoner, a supposed ally that the Soviet authorities seemed to have no record of, got round to Bletchley Park.

Chapter 3

Lieutenant Thomas Loban leaned back in his chair, regarding the man before him with concentrated attention. ‘Orlov,’ he thought. It meant ‘Son of Oryol,’ the eagle. So where has this one flown in from, I wonder?

Loban was a five year veteran of MI6, the son of a wealthy businessman who had married into equal wealth in the UK after the First World War. His mother was Elena Chase, landed old money from Cambridge, and she made sure her son had a good education, seeing him graduate with honors at the university there and then enter the Special Air Service soon after to ripen up and see a bit of the empire, and the world it spanned. He was eager to serve, quick minded, and with a sharp eye for details that soon saw him at a post in the intelligence arm where his bilingual skills had proved most useful.

Touring Eastern Europe with his father as a youth, he had a good sense of the culture, finding it much more to his liking than the stuffy class ridden British society, and he often spent long summers abroad in Belarus, Ukraine and eventually Moscow, where his father still had offices trying to manage his mining business. Loban made quite a few contacts there, and more than a few in some very dark corners of that city. When the second war came, he was home visiting his mother, and quickly posted to the Foreign Service Desk where he soon finagled a position at Gibraltar. He had seen the place on tour with his family as a younger man, and always yearned to return. Now the dusky underground tunnel complex beneath the Rock was not quite what he had in mind all along, but he spent most of his time above ground at the signals desk, reading and translating reports coming in from the Eastern Front to help the service paint a good picture of what was going on there.

MI6 did not assign military ranks to its agents, but he kept his SAS rank when he signed on for the duty, and his mates were fond of calling him “the Lieutenant.”

This assignment was something new, a break in his usual routine, and he found it somewhat interesting. A man had been picked up on a Spanish steamer that struck a mine in the western approaches. There was nothing all that peculiar about that, but the more he looked at this man, the more he came to feel that fate and chance had delivered a very interesting catch to the dragnets of MI6 this time around, a very interesting catch indeed.

“Let me sum this up, if you will, Mister Orlov,” he said in perfect Russian. “You were on a steamer out of Istanbul from the Black Sea, and all the way through the Med to Cadiz, and yet you cannot name the ship?”

“I was there for work,” said Orlov. “Who cares what they call the ship? I wanted passage west and it seemed the only way I was going to get here.”

“You don’t like your homeland?”

“Mother Russia?” Orlov gave him a wry smile. “Every son of the east loves the Rodina, eh? I just had no love for their stinking war, that’s all.”

“You were in the service there?”

“Everyone was in the service, and I was no exception.”

“Then you are a deserter.”

“If you wish. But I was a very clever one. Most end up dead, or roped into the work crews, or fodder for the NKVD. I got smart before things got too bad, and I got out. What of it?”

“What of it? Well they shoot deserters these days, at least that’s what I hear, Mister Orlov, and I hear a great deal.”

Orlov simply folded his arms, cocking his head to one side, unimpressed. “So shoot me,” he said coolly. “You working for Josef Stalin these days too?”

Loban smiled at that, then changed the subject. “So you were in the military. Where? What unit?”

Orlov had to think fast now, and it had to be convincing, yet he knew what he was going to say. It was only a matter of fetching the details, because something told him this man would not be satisfied with the broad strokes. He was going to want details, and Orlov labored to recall those long hours on the knee of his grandfather, listening to the old man telling him stories of the war, of the siege of Sevastopol, and how he made it out on a steamer before the Germans closed their ring of steel around the city, slipping down to Novorossiysk. The poor man ended up in Stalingrad.

“Russian Navy,” Orlov said with conviction this time. “Merchant Marine. *Ukraina* was the ship, though I wasn’t on it too long. The Germans got to it in Novorossiysk and I was beached. The rumors came down that they were going to roll us all into the army, and I wanted none of that. So I took a leave of absence.” Again the smile covering the obvious admission of the crime of desertion.

Loban made a note to check on the ship, but he would soon find the story would pan out. *Ukraina* was indeed a passenger and cargo ship operated by

the Black Sea State Shipping Company. The Germans got it with Stukas in the harbor as they closed in on the port at Novorossiysk. Orlov had never been on it, but his grandfather had, and he told his grandson all about it, many, many times.

"Your Captain? What was his name?"

"Polovko," Orlov replied easily. His grandfather had talked about the man endlessly. Polovko said this…Polovko did that… Polovko had a great big sea chest where he kept his vodka and tobacco, and his grandfather had found in him a ready source of comfort. 'Always find your Polovokos in this life, Gennadi,' the old man had told him many times. 'Blat and babki get you only so far. The Povlovkos do the rest.' Orlov listened well.

"So the Germans sunk this ship of yours, and you deserted to avoid conscription into the army. Is that right?"

"Correct. I'm navy. I'm a sailing man. I wasn't going to stick around and end up in Stalingrad like all the rest."

"Stalingrad? Well it looks like the Germans are making a big push for that place now. Your countrymen are having a rough time there."

"Sorry to hear it," said Orlov. "The Germans will lose, of course, and it won't be the first time we kick their behinds. We'll get Rostov back soon. Kharkov too." Orlov had listened to the earbuds tell their tale while he was on the *Duero*, lazing away an hour on break and thinking he might fill in his knowledge of what was happening in the world that month. All he had to do was squeeze the button on his jacket collar or right earbud and then ask his question. The Portable Wiki would respond like a good short order cook, serving up any segment of the history he desired. He had learned that this was, indeed, the month the Germans launched their offensive aimed at Stalingrad, but they would lose that great battle, and all those other cities as well when the Russian winter counterattack reached its high water mark before the spring thaw began to set in. Then there would be the careful consolidation of the line until the great summer battle of Kursk.

"Wait until things thaw out this summer," Orlov bragged. "We'll kick their asses all the way to Berlin." He folded his arms, realizing he was straying just a bit, but thinking he could pass that off as sheer bravado.

"Well I surely hope you are correct, Mister Orlov, though it seems they will do so without any help from you." Loban left that out there for a moment, goading Orlov a bit to see if he would get a reaction. The big Chief was stolid and unmoved.

“They won’t miss an Able Seaman from the fire room.”

“I see… You don’t much look the part, if I may say. Our Captain Maud says he’s seen a thousand stokers and shovel men, but never one as clean as you.”

Orlov knew he had to tidy up these little details, and he was doing what he had learned long ago in the Russian underground. When somebody questions you, then tidy up that loose shirttail, and tuck it in with a nice little lie, a little *lozh* to cover your weak point—but always remember it. It was clear to him that he had been singled out because he did not look the part of a vagrant ship hand. There was little he could do about that for the moment, so he tried to simply pass it off.

“I’ll take that as a compliment,” Orlov said with a grin. “Does your Captain Maud want to dance with me as well?”

Loban smiled. “Oh I wouldn’t want to run afoul of Wee Mac. You’ve seen the man, built like this rock we’re under. Get cheeky with Mac and he rap you with that walking stick of his, and make it sting.”

“I can handle myself,” said Orlov, his eyes narrowed, arms folded over his broad chest.

“I don’t doubt it,” said Loban. “But in point of fact, I would say you were not an Able Seaman at all, Mister Orlov. Your jacket there has shoulder buttons. Our officer’s coats have the same.” He looked at Orlov, his point obvious. “So I would think only an officer would have such a fine jacket, yes? Or are you going to say you stole this one from someone else? I think not. Your name is plain to see on the breast pocket.”

Orlov knew he was in a bit of a corner now, and a lie would just not do, so he told the truth. “Officers get demoted,” he said sullenly. He was quick to find some sure footing in that response, for it wasn’t a lie, and he didn’t have to make anything up on the fly that he might forget about and get caught in a contradiction later.

“Demoted? Then you were an officer?”

“They called me the Chief,” said Orlov matter of factly. “I got things done on the ship—kept the men in line—that sort of thing.”

“Why were you demoted?”

“I have a bad temper,” said Orlov quickly. “Somebody bothered me and I busted his face open. The Captain didn’t like it so he made me an Able Seaman and said I could learn what it was like to work my way up the ranks again and learn to treat the men properly. Bullshit to that! The Germans did

me a favor when they sank that damn ship. So I gave myself a promotion and slipped away. Good riddance." He had the bit between his teeth now, and was enjoying his tale, half true, half fabricated, and easy to remember.

"Very good…" Loban made another note, then turned to a different matter. "This pistol you were carrying, was it government issued?" He held up the weapon, eying it in the wan overhead lighting then setting it down on the plain wooden table in front of him. It wouldn't be normal procedure to interrogate a detainee with a weapon in the room, but the clip had been removed, and there were men on the other side of the mirror watching the whole scene very closely, and transcribing the conversation.

"Of course not," said Orlov, smart enough to realize that it was the damn pistol that had landed him in this mess in the first place. 'Comrade Glock' had raised the eyebrows of every man who laid eyes on it, and he knew he had to come up with a convincing story about it. "It was custom made for me in Moscow by a dealer."

"Custom made? By who?"

"A man named Glock, his name is right there on the gun, can you see it?" It was a safe play, as Gaston Glock, the Austrian engineer who designed the weapon would be a boy of 12 years now, and would not found his company until the 1980s.

"This bit here? I see…And this Mister Glock makes guns for a living in Moscow?" Another note. "What about this peculiar scope that was attached? Mister Glock made that for you as well?"

"Of course. I told him, I needed a light so I could target things in the dark. He said he knew just what to do."

"So you're saying this is nothing more than a flashlight?"

Orlov nodded.

"It's a very odd light. Doesn't give off any illumination at all."

"It's only for targeting," said Orlov. "You see the light, and then you know what you are likely to hit, eh? What's so mysterious about a stupid flash light?"

"Well it's like no other torch I've ever seen. Such a narrow beam. And green? Does it shine through some kind of tinted glass?" The first working laser would not be developed for another eighteen years, in 1960, an intense and very narrow beam of concentrated light on a single wavelength.

Orlov simply shrugged. He knew there was nothing his grandfather had ever told him about it, and it was one of the dangling shoe laces that was

likely to trip him up and tear his whole story apart if he got into it. The laser range finder, the earbuds, and the jacket, how would he explain those away if these men got too curious? They were going to be real problems if he couldn't talk his way out of this mess soon. Thus far they had fished out the earbuds in his jacket pocket, but he told them they were merely for sleep, simple earplugs, and said nothing more. It would never occur to any of them that they were actually wirelessly in communication with the Polyflex-fabric computer in his jacket lining, powered by solar sensitive fibers that constantly charged a wafer thin battery. They had never heard of computers, so how could they look for something they knew nothing about?

He was wrong. This man had the earbuds out again, and the jacket was hung on a wall peg across the empty room, too close this time, and well in range of the computer. The man was toying with the earbuds, which made Orlov somewhat edgy and nervous, though he tried to appear unconcerned.

"These ear plugs of yours…Somewhat solid, eh? Not very comfortable for sleeping I would imagine."

Again, Orlov simply shrugged. The man was rolling the earbuds between his fingers, then peering at the thin metal screen attached to one side, and Orlov knew his story might come cascading down in a heartbeat.

"Also custom made? By this Mister Glock, I suppose?" The lieutenant fixed him with a sure eye now, knowing that they had to be ear pieces for a communications device of some sort. But it was most unusual. A wireless unit this small? He wondered how it could possibly function. The chaps in the technical group wanted to pry the damn things open to have a look, but he persuaded them to wait until they went over the matter with the detainee. He could now see that the ear plugs were a sensitive spot for this man. He noted how Orlov shifted uneasily, looked away when he brought the matter up, a sure sign that he was uncomfortable about the plugs.

Orlov's silence was as damning as anything he might have said at that moment. It told Loban that these were, in fact, very special devices. They had a peculiar raised area on one side that seemed to give slightly when he squeezed the ear plug….

And then it happened, one of those moments of pure happenstance that would change the whole tenor of the interrogation. The quaint, tinny voice of a woman sounded from the ear plug in his hand, speaking in Russian! Loban's eyes widened, and he looked at the plug. It had come from there, from the little metallic screen on one side.

“My, my…” he said, raising one plug to his ear and pressing on the raised area again. The voice was much louder now, clear and sweet in his ear. *“Please speak clearly, and ask your question.”*

He took the plug from his ear, his mind racing now. This man was obviously wired to receive communications from another accomplice, but for the signal to reach way down here beneath the Rock meant that the other party would have to be very close. It suddenly occurred to him that Orlov may have had every intention of infiltrating this place, in just the manner he had been brought in!

Loban cradled the ear plugs in the palm of his hand now as he looked the red-faced Orlov squarely in the eye with another question.

“Who is she?” he said slowly. “Is she your control or just a local contact? Suppose you tell me who you are *really* working for, Mister Orlov.”

Part II

The Watch

"May He who holds in his hands the destinies of nations make you worthy of the favors He has bestowed, enabling you with pure hearts and hands and sleepless vigilance, to guard and defend to the end of time, the great charge He has committed to your keeping."

—J. Reuben Clark

Chapter 4

The Golf, Cheese and Chess Society had been working overtime again that summer. The men of that elite group of analysts and code breakers were again having their feet held to the fire over the *Geronimo* incident, though there wasn't time for golf or chess any longer, and very little cheese to go around. The 'Society" had been given that humorous handle instead of calling it the official name, which was the Government Code & Cipher Station at Bletchley Park, some 40 miles from London up a country lane outside Milton Keynes.

Also called "Station X" or simply "BP" for Bletchley Park, the unit had been embarrassed in recent months by its inability to run down the true origin of the strange naval raider that had been putting holes in Royal Navy ships again, much to Whitehall's dissatisfaction. The ship had first appeared in the Norwegian Sea, ran the Denmark Strait with a quiver of deadly new weapons, which they nearly put right on top of Churchill and Roosevelt when the two leaders met at Argentia Bay for the Atlantic Charter conference a year earlier. That part of the "incident" was now a closely watched secret, never revealed to the public or even most arms of the military itself. Only a very few men knew the whole story of what had happened that cold, stormy week of August, 1941, and Alan Turing was one of them.

Holding forth in 'Hut 4' off the main estate buildings, Turing had been instrumental in breaking the Enigma code to give the British a head start against the Germans, but it had not helped the intelligence nest in the *Geronimo* incident. 'The ship,' as it was now sometimes called in hushed conversations, had been dubbed *Geronimo* since its sudden disappearance off the coast of Newfoundland. The official line was that it sunk that week, a victim of a pack of American Destroyers who went down to a man to put the demon ship in its grave. Yet those very few in the know were well aware that *Desron 7* was only a cover story, more for public consumption than anything else. The odd thing about it was that the destroyer flotilla had indeed vanished, initially presumed sunk, until they sailed merrily into Halifax harbor twelve days after they had been reported missing in action.

The story they told was difficult to believe, though each and every man interviewed on the five surviving ships corroborated it. They claimed that

they had suddenly lost sight of the enemy raider in the thick of their torpedo run, finding themselves alone on an empty sea, with the weather all wrong and no sign of the massive explosion they had spotted moments earlier off their starboard aft quarter. The once turbulent seas were now strangely calm, and they could not reach anyone on the radio, resorting to signal flags and lamps until their commander could gather his five remaining destroyers together and conduct a search of the area. But the enemy was gone.

Captain Kauffman, the group leader aboard DD *Plunkett*, eventually decided to turn about and head back to Argentia Bay to join the throng of ships anchored there for the Atlantic Charter meeting. When they got there they claimed the entire settlement, airfield and harbor facilities were a burned and blackened ruin. Astounded by what they saw, Kauffman claimed he even put men ashore to look for survivors or signs of what may have happened, but saw only charred ground, burned to glass in some places, and utter devastation.

Shaken by the discovery, and believing that Roosevelt and Churchill had perished in the gruesome attack, they searched about for some days before finally giving up hope and heading for Halifax. To their great relief, the city was still there. The five destroyers came sailing in, their crews waving at stunned stevedores and wharf workers in the harbor, for these were the five ships that had been missing! Time had caught another big fish in her net when *Desron 7* disappeared, but now she threw these little fish back, in to the seas of 1942 where they belonged.

Their ‘report’ was not received well by the Americans, and it stretched the bounds of credulity to think that these men could have claimed to have searched the ruins of Argentia Bay when they knew damn well that the Atlantic Charter was well underway at that very same time. The men of *Desron 7* were either deluded, insane, or lying. They had to have made a navigation error, or so it was said, but the US Navy found no sign of anything remotely close to the description the men of the destroyer group gave. Every island in the region, and every bay, was sitting there quite unbothered. To make matters worse, they had reported that these were the brave ships that had sunk the enemy raider, and now their cover story was about to go down the tubes as well.

The Navy would have none of it. They secreted the five destroyers off to a lonesome berth, painted over their hull numbers, renumbered and renamed each ship, and then scattered them, and every man who had served on them,

to harbors all over the Pacific coast. Any man who ever mentioned *Desron 7* again was stewed, which put a quick lid on the incident. A week later a special detail was quietly sent to a lonesome and deserted bay in the area, where they proceeded to burn and blacken anything in sight. Now if anyone got too curious the navy could say, in closed quarters, that this was the bay that had been found by Captain Kaufmann and his ships.

Alan Turing was one of a handful of men who officially knew the whole story. There were probably many more who knew about it unofficially, though they were wise never to breathe a word of it. The whole thing eventually calmed down and went into the file boxes, and a long year passed. Then it happened again, the same nightmare as before, only this time in the Mediterranean Sea.

The British finally though they had the matter in hand after that remarkable parley between Tovey and the Admiral from this strange phantom raider…until it vanished, just as it had vanished from the North Atlantic the previous year.

That set the bells off rather quickly in the Golf, Cheese and Chess Society, until reports came in from FRUMEL Headquarters in Melbourne just a few days later that a strange ship was now engaged with the Japanese Navy off Darwin—and using naval rocketry as its primary weaponry!

Admiral John Tovey was quick to pay a visit to Hut 4 a few days later, and he briefed Alan Turing on the matter, astounded to think that this might be the very same ship that had vanished at St. Helena! Turing remembered clearly the conversation he had with Tovey that day, and the startling conclusion they had been forced to accept.

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

"Indeed," said Tovey. "Those photos were taken August 24th. Now Professor, might you tell me how this ship, which was a thousand yards off the Island of St Helena on the morning of August 23rd, could suddenly vanish, and then reappear off Melville Island, a distance of 7,800 nautical miles away in a period of 24 hours?"

"Well sir, the ship would have to move in ***time****. It's the only thing that might account for this sudden disappearance and reappearance half a world away."*

Even now the notion still seemed fantastic to Turing, a matter for the fanciful writings of H.G. Wells and not the cold light of reality played with in

Hut 4. Yet Turing was a man of great intellect, and equal imagination, well ahead of his day in the many fields he chose to interest himself in. He gave the matter more than passing thought, realizing that the entire logic of his assumption rested on the sole premise that the ship now found to be in the Pacific was indeed the same one that vanished at St. Helena. Yet as one photo after another came in, and reports from coastwatchers out of Milne Bay also fleshed out the information they had on this latest incident, it appeared that the Japanese now had the pleasure, or the horror, of tangling with *Geronimo*.

Turing had a contact at FRUMEL HQ down in Melbourne, a man named Osborne who fed him everything they had on the incident. It all painted the same picture—the photography, the naval rockets, and now the blackened and wrecked hulls of Japanese destroyers, cruisers and battleships for a change. Appearing right in the middle of a major Japanese offensive, 'the ship' had unhinged the whole operation just as the Americans launched a devastating counterpunch at Guadalcanal that also sent three Japanese fleet carriers and most of their planes and pilots to the bottom of the sea. The one-two punch had set the Japanese back on their heels, and changed the whole balance of power in the Pacific. It would be the beginning of an American and Allied offensive there that would not stop until it reached the home waters of Japan, though Turing did not know that just yet.

For now the news was good for a change. It seemed that *Geronimo* was no respecter of persons when it put to sea. It was ready, willing and quite able to take on all comers, and punish any naval force that tried to impede it. And then, just as it had done twice before, the ship simply vanished again!

Admiral Tovey had been making regular visits to Hut 4 ever since. Like Turing, he also found the notion that the ship had moved in time a bit of a stretch, but if a man of Turing's credentials could seriously entertain the prospect, then Tovey thought it best to at least consider it as well. Now the Admiral was visiting yet again, with an arm full of new material for the secret files, and an equal number of other questions in mind. He alone had gotten a firsthand look at the men from this ship. He spoke directly with the ship's Admiral, astounded to learn that they were not monsters or supermen after all, only a ship of men—but they were Russians!

Turing had suspected that himself once, given the place the ship was first spotted by Wake-Walker's carriers over a year ago. It was well north in the Norwegian Sea; north of Jan Mayan. To learn now that the Admiral of this ship and crew spoke Russian was quite telling. Yet Turing was convinced

that the ship, its weapons, and perhaps even its crew could not possibly have come from the Soviet Union he knew in 1942. In fact, Tovey told him that the ship's Admiral made a point of denying any association or affiliation with Stalin's Russia. All that did was further reinforce the impossible conclusion Turing had come to in his own mind.

This ship had come from some *future* time. It's weapons were decades beyond anything that any nation on this earth could produce. Its Admiral had stated that they had the ability to convert sea water to steam and therefore had no fuel problem, yet they would need something to kindle the heat required to make steam for turbines powerful enough to drive a ship of that size at the speeds reported. They clearly were not burning coal or oil to do so. Only some new propulsion system from a future time seemed to solve that riddle. This Russian Admiral even hinted that he looked upon the events of this war as history. In fact, the only way that the presence of this ship in the Atlantic, the Med and finally the Pacific made any sense at all was to consider it as having come from another era, another future time, perhaps when the theoretical discussions about the possibility of time travel had become a practical reality.

Why was the ship here? Why had it come? Admiral Tovey had made a strong point when he noted that it was indeed a warship that was sent back, not a polite diplomatic mission. Was it on a mission where force of arms would be an integral part of the outcome?

The ship's Admiral seemed to deny this, if he could be believed. He stated that he wanted no part of this bloody world war, just a quiet island where he could escape and consider how he could get his ship and crew home, wherever that was. Turing believed that it was, indeed, Soviet Russia, and given his best estimate, he thought it might be at least fifty years in the future, possibly more.

With these thoughts and questions in mind the Admiral had come to Bletchley Park again that day to continue his discussion with the brilliant mathematician. There was an odd edge to his voice on the line when he had called to arrange the meeting. Turing could sense that he seemed harried, cautious, worried about something. The whole scenario was indeed the most troubling event to come along in the war, though relatively few really knew about it. He had the feeling that Tovey was very concerned about something.

That was it, thought Turing. He's in the know now, just as I was a few weeks back when I first set my mind on this conclusion about *Geronimo*.

Now he knows…

And he's afraid.

The two men were meeting again in Hut 4, and Admiral Tovey began by reiterating a very chilling point he had suggested earlier. "Let us humor ourselves and take your assumption as true for the time being, Professor. If this ship did come from some other time, then when might it return again? Yes, it vanished as before, but we waited a long year before we saw it in the Med. Might it reappear in another year, or a month, or even any day now as it did before?"

"It very well could, sir," said Turing.

"And for that matter, when might another come?" What is it doing, Turing? Have you given that further thought? Is it deliberately involving itself in these naval engagements, perhaps with the aim of changing future events? When it vanishes, where does it go?"

"It's all very perplexing, sir, and we can only speculate. Perhaps it returns to its home base to replenish. That would seem a natural conclusion. Might it return to our time again? It's already done that once, so it could certainly be expected. Might other ships come? That, too is a chilling possibility. But as to what its mission might be, that is difficult to know. It may indeed be attempting to alter the course of events. This last incident with the Japanese was fairly well decisive, wasn't it? Lucky for us this ship can't seem to decide who's side it on in our little war. In any wise, it doesn't appear as if it has an agenda favoring one outcome or another, at least at this point."

"Quite so," said Tovey. "At first I had to believe this ship had it in for the British Empire. It was driving for the Atlantic Charter conference, and that was a very pointed thrust. Then this Admiral explained that he was not in control of his ship at the time, and that there was a difference of opinions on how to proceed."

"Your wolf in the fold, scenario," said Turing.

"Precisely. Well, that being the case, I'm of the mind that it simply wants to be left alone. This Admiral was more than likely still looking for his damnable island, if you want my opinion on it. The Japanese were just unlucky enough to get in the way this time."

"What was wrong with St. Helena?"

"Good point, Turing. Taking this line it would seem to me that the ship is not here deliberately as I first feared. Could this whole thing be an accident, and not intended at all?"

“Yes, sir, it could indeed be here by accident. After all, if it does come from some future time, and its appearance was planned, then why haven’t we seen any other interventions of a similar nature… other visitors? There’s only been this one ship, which is odd if I dare say. Why come in a warship?”

“In some ways it makes a good deal of sense, my good man. You’ve never been on the bridge of a battleship, but to feel it riding the swells of the deep ocean, and at your command, is a rather heady experience. It’s a fortress on the sea, fast, mobile, well protected, and as this ship has clearly demonstrated, it can defend itself rather handily, and go wherever it pleases. My God, this ship has sailed more than half way round this earth!”

“Yet now it may be in some distress, sir, considering all the combat it’s been involved in. If the Russians of the future knew this, wouldn’t they do everything possible to rescue these men? We’ve seen no evidence of that. And if this was an accident, it would seem to me they might realize the severe consequences of their actions and be doing everything possible to remedy this business—assuming they knew about this time displacement.”

“Do you think they know about it?”

“Perhaps they don’t. They might not know anything about it at all, just as this Admiral claimed, which makes this incident seem a little less sinister in my mind. After all, if they did know how to move through time, sending a ship like this back would seem a bit much. All they would really have to do is send someone like me back to draw up plans on all these advanced weapons we’ve seen and give them to the Russians! Yet we’ haven’t seen a shred of evidence the Soviets have anything like this in development. Yes, they have their Katyushas, but that’s hardy on par with what we witnessed, particularly in the North Atlantic when the American Task force 16 went down. So I lean toward the conclusion that that future Soviet government may *not* know this even happened. That that, too, could change if this ship ever does get home again, as this Admiral desires. If something like this had happened to one our ships. If it ever did get home again there would be inquiries, questions, a lot of digging.”

“Yes,” Tovey rubbed his chin, thinking. “Look what the Americans did when those destroyers showed up at Halifax. Look how we’ve covered up the presence and activity of this *Geronimo* ourselves.”

“And we seem to be doing a good bit of digging as well.”

“Yes we are, so I take your point, Turing. I can imagine the Soviet government in the future is going to do the very same thing if this ship ever

does reach a friendly port again. Forgive me for seeming a pessimist, but I can't say I find that notion in any way comforting. The Russians are somewhat a reluctant ally at the moment. They're with us now because they have Hitler and the German Army at their throats, but we're strange bedfellows, Professor, no matter how well the Prime Minister may get on with Stalin in his dacha. This Russian Admiral also made a point of suggesting our cozy alliance may not last in days to come. Even if this were an accident, that future government might discover how it was displaced in time, and they may not always be our allies. Things change…That's how he put it to me. Things change."

"No argument there, sir."

Tovey thought about that, nodding. "Well, Professor, you and I both know that they do not always change for the good. I'm a military man, and one sworn to protect the empire and the kingdom I serve. Perhaps I was foolish not to try and sink this ship when I had the whole of Home Fleet at my back. Now we must live with the situation as it stands. The point is this: whether deliberate or not, this ship may return one day, or others like it, and we really don't know what its purpose is. Until we do know, and to a certainty, we must take every possible precaution. Whether friend or foe, if the Soviet government of that future time ever does learn what happened to their ship, then we've another problem as well, because they will realize that this impossible notion of returning to the past is within their grasp, and that's enough to tempt any man alive, Turing. That is *real* power."

"I agree, sir, but what exactly are you suggesting we do about it?"

"A watch," Tovey folded his arms. "We need a group of men in the know on this, men who can be trusted absolutely, competent men, and we need them to set a watch on every hour of every second of every day that passes from this moment on."

Chapter 5

"I see…" Turing raised an eyebrow, thinking through the implications of what Tovey was now suggesting. "And what are they to watch *for*, sir?"

"Intruders, Turing. Visitors from this future time. I know, it's maddening to think they're even out there. Even speaking of it in these terms makes it seem as though the future is a tangible place where this ship can drop anchor as it pleases. Yet one thing is clear: if they can return to our time, we've

certainly seen that they can also muck about and cause a good deal of trouble here, and they have to be stopped."

"Is the government to be directing this effort, Admiral?"

Tovey looked at the desk, rubbing an itch on his long thin nose, his eyes alight with inner concern. "The government? Can you imagine the likes of Admiral Pound in on this notion we've been discussing? Can you even consider that the Prime Minister would give it a fair hearing? Something tells me that the less the government knows or hears about this, the happier it will be. But there are institutions *within* government that are a bit more flexible in their views."

"MI6?" Turing jumped to the obvious conclusion.

"Well think on it, Turing. You had that Enigma code in your head for some time before you came out with the solution and turned it over to the government. Do you see what I mean here?"

"I do, sir. We often receive, analyze and discuss information here that never really comes to light anywhere else. Some of it plays out to hard intelligence and becomes actionable. That's the lot we send over to Whitehall —over to the government, if you will. But I assure you, it's just the tip of the iceberg. For every cypher we decode and send through there are ten more we're tussling with, and another ten in the trash bin. Yes, we've broken the enemy's code, but it's not like reading a book. We get bits and pieces of things, and then we try to put together the best possible picture of what may be in the enemy's mind. We go to the government with it only when we think we have some certainty in hand."

"My thoughts exactly," said Tovey. "Yet consider their view of things— these men from Geronimo. It *is* like reading a book for them, They know everything that has happened from our time to theirs. Well, what we need now, Professor, is a group of sound minded and imaginative men like yourself to go over the bits and pieces on this matter and put the puzzle together. What we need is to know what is in the enemy's mind, the mind of these men from tomorrow who so brazenly call upon us in ships of war. Yet more than that, we need watchful eyes. You see, if this ship or any other like it, should return, we'll want to know about it."

"I think we might bring Peter Twinn in on this. He's been in the thick of it with the German Naval Enigma code, and now that Dilly Knox has been taken ill he's assuming more responsibility at the Abwehr Enigma section."

"You choose the men, Turing, but be very discrete about it. Secrecy is

crucial in this matter. Obviously people are going to have to know something about it, but I don't think we need to paint them the whole picture. It strains the bounds of credulity every time I think about it myself. There are a few hat bands over at Whitehall who have some interest in this *Geronimo*, but the way this war pushes one thing on to another, I don't think they'll press on the matter. In fact, you and I are the only two men alive at this moment who really have this thing by the scruff of the neck. Let's keep it that way for the moment."

"I understand what you say about Whitehall, Admiral. We've been rather busy here as well with all the signals and code traffic for this Operation Torch. The whole group has been on overtime, but I think I can bring a few men in on this, discretely, as you say. We can put good people to work on a given task without them knowing the aim, if that's what you mean, sir. We do it all the time here."

"Good. Now on another matter, that bit you put in my head about the men who might have died, and yet lived as a result of the actions taken by this ship… well it was quite disturbing. I don't want to sound morbid, Professor, but we may want to consider what can be done about that as well."

"I see… What *can* we do about it, sir?"

"We'll have to put our minds to that. First off I should think we would want to know who these men are. It would be easy enough to put our finger of the lives lost as a result of this ship. I don't think *Repulse* was fated to meet her end the way she did. The same can be said for any other man who died in engagements we've fought with *Geronimo,* particularly on the American side. I suppose we can only hope there were no Einsteins in the lot."

"Right, sir. It would be easy enough to work up a list of the casualties, but we can't do much more with it. I mean it's not like we can bring any of them back from the dead."

"Indeed, but what about the other side of that equation, Professor. What about men alive today that might have otherwise been killed?"

"How do we find them, Admiral? We can't know the fate of every man alive. How could we possibly know who was fated to die?"

"We can't, I suppose, but we can make some intelligent guesses. Isn't that how you go about solving your code riddles? You get bits and pieces, as you say, and then come to assumptions and conclusions."

"I'd love to say I could put a man's fate on my perforated tape and code it

all, Admiral, but that is a bit of a reach. Yet what you say does offer some promise. We do know a few things…Let's start with the first point of divergence."

"What's that you say?"

"Point of divergence, sir. What is the first thing this ship could have done to upset the course of events in our time?"

"Well I suppose that would be Wake-Walker's mission. He was going to hit the Germans with planes off *Furious* and *Victorious* on the North Cape of Norway, at Petsamo and Kirkenes. I'd like to think that the raid would have gone off without heavy losses, but I know better than that. We expected casualties, and a lot of them. Instead, the appearance of this ship sent Wake-Walker's boys off on our wild goose chase. A great many men died from those air squadrons. The question is which ones might have also died if the raid on the North Cape had gone off as planned?"

"We can't know that, sir, but what we could do is compile a list of all the men still alive from those squadrons and, well… We could keep an eye on them."

"I see. Sounds rather tedious, and unsavory as well."

"After that, we would have to put the crews of every man in any ship that participated in these events on the list. Then we would expand to included names of men slated for operations that we ourselves have cancelled as a result of this ship. Operation Jubilee immediately comes to mind, sir."

"That will make one hell of a list, Turing. There were tens of thousands at sea in the hunt for this ship—most of Home Fleet, the whole of Force H in the Med as well. As for the cancelled Dieppe raid, we would have the Canadian 2nd Infantry Division, five commando units, over 230 ships and landing barges, and over seventy RAF squadrons on the list. We were going to lose men in that raid, unquestionably, but which ones?"

"That' doesn't matter, sir. The point is that there are obviously a good number alive in those units now that might not be breathing. I'll say another thing about it. We had men in Number 30 commando assigned to a pinch mission there. They were out after one of the new four wheel Enigma boxes believed to be in Dieppe, and that never happened either."

"Ah, yes, Fleming's group. I had almost forgotten about that. I dare say that Fleming won't have the bit between his teeth as much now that Rushbrooke replaced Godfrey as head of the Naval Intelligence Division. We'll still use him. He's setting up a network for us in Spain under Operation

Golden Eye, and his boys are slated to go after intelligence during the upcoming Torch Operation. Sorry about that failed pinch operation at Dieppe. I hope that didn't set your efforts back here, Turing."

"No major setbacks, sir. Fleming has been promising me things for some time, and seldom delivers. I managed without it."

"Good enough, but as you can see, our list is going to be a long one. How do we manage to keep an eye on all these men? The manpower required would be enormous."

"Perhaps I could help, sir. I can't put a man's fate onto my perforated machine tapes, but I could certainly encode his name. Then we could use a machine to do some pattern matching. Should something unusual come up, and should it match one or more of the names on the list, why we might then have a closer look at those individuals with human assets. We could just hand that off to MI5. It's what they do for a living, yes?"

"Something tells me I would hate to have my name on such a list. It's damn uncomfortable."

"I agree, sir. Most things having to do with war are somewhat unsavory, but we muddle through."

"War? You make it sound as though we are at odds with our own people here, Turing."

"We will be, sir. Why do you think we even have an organization like MI5 in the first place? Yes, they run down foreign agents on British soil, but they keep an eye on the rest of us as well. If it were to be learned that one of these men on our list does something… compromising, then he becomes an enemy of fate and time as it were. If you mean to set this watch on the history, then you'll have to be prepared to do some unpleasant things, Admiral. Suppose we suspect a man on this list for some reason—say he's been reported captured by the enemy. He was supposed to be dead, and we all know dead men tell no tales. Yet now he's alive, a bit of a zombie, eh? Now he *can* tell tales. Loose lips sink ships, to put it plainly."

"Zombie?"

"A Haitian word for an animated corpse, sir, brought back to life by witchcraft. I use this metaphorically, but it's a perfect image for what these men actually are, and it gets worse. Any one of these walking dead men could do something significant, and they could also have sons and daughters who might do very much more. The cancellation of Operation Jubilee is just a small part of the picture, sir. *Geronimo* has upset operations all through the

Med and also in the Pacific. Our point of divergence is getting quite wide now, and our list will be very long indeed. The more time that passes the worse things might be."

"Damn confounding business, Professor. The more I think about it, the more impossible it seems. There were German soldiers who might have died if these cancelled operations had gone forward. How in the world do we sort them out? There were Italian ships tangling with Geronimo in the Med, and now the Japanese. Our list now grows to a point where it becomes truly daunting, perhaps impossible to even attempt."

"Right, sir. It's also a rather dark feeling to think the history may now be playing out in a way it was never meant to—at least from the perspective of the men aboard *Geronimo*. As you suggested earlier, they have a unique position of *knowing* what happens in the decades ahead. Why, they've most likely got boxes and boxes of files on it all—enough to fill a thousand libraries. Should we be vigilant? Of course we must, but here's the rub, sir… How do we know if anything has been changed, and what effect it might have had on the course of events? We don't sit on the top of the hill like they do. We just see this particularly unpleasant gully we've blundered into with this bloody war. "

"Good point, Turing. We might ask the Japanese if they feel their plans have been changed by this ship. I think we both know how they would answer."

"Right sir, but we don't know what was *meant* to be, or what may have changed. Was America meant to declare war in September of 1941? This ship had an awful lot to say about it. It's very frustrating, sir. Think of it like a good book we're set to revise. We want it all to turn out well, with our Ts crossed and Is dotted. Yet here we are stuck in the early chapters. What we need now is some way of knowing how the story was supposed to end, yes? Only then can we decide what to do about this particular chapter and the men that live in it. Some changes may be for the good as we see it. Suppose this Dieppe raid was a bloody disaster? In that light its cancellation may weigh in as a benefit. Does that make any sense, sir?"

"It makes a good deal of sense. As I say, you are a man of some imagination. But I don't think we could ever take that look ahead in the story to see how things turn out—not unless we manage to get our hands on this ship and take a ride with them when they pull their next disappearing act. I mean…well they must go *somewhere*, don't they?"

“Yes,” Turing sighed. “They must go somewhere, only where? Getting a man on board that ship would be no easy task. It’s vanished again. You seem to get on fairly well with this Russian Admiral. If this ship ever does return why not call him up and have another chat?”

The phone rang, jarring and insistent as every phone can be when it isn’t expected or wanted, but coming on the heels of Turing’s last suggestion both men had the odd feeling that it was to be a call of some importance. Tovey nodded and Turing lifted the receiver.

“Hut four, Turing here…. Yes… Yes… I see… he said what? You’re certain of this? At Gibraltar? Yes, of course! Send him at once, on the very next plane if you can do so safely. Otherwise we’ll handle the matter from Hut 4. Very good. Thank you, gentlemen.” He hung up the phone, his eyes alight with some surprise.

Admiral Tovey could see the hint of a smile on his face now. “Some news, Professor?”

“My God… that was MI6 out of Gibraltar. They picked up a man who may have something to do with *Geronimo*. We may not be able to get a man aboard that ship any time soon, Admiral, but we may just have a man *from* that ship—sitting in an interrogation room under the Rock at this very moment!”

Chapter 6

The car drove quickly along the narrow winding roadways carved in to the Rock, down from Sentinel Hill to Queens Road and then along Ward Way to turn north up the eastern coast towards the North Front Airfield. The field itself was a narrow rectangular strip that cut across the isthmus north of the Rock and extended out onto the bay, supported by limestone quarried out of the Rock itself over the last three years. The small airfield around it could support up to 100 fighters and several squadrons of twin engine Hudson Bombers, enough air power to provide a strong defense, yet also a highly vulnerable target from any hostile force to the north.

If Spain had ever thrown in with Hitler, their artillery could have made short work of the field, rendering it all but useless in a matter of hours. The 15,000 man garrison might hold out a while in the tunnels, but the lessons of Singapore and Corregidor proved that no fortress was invulnerable. Thirty-two miles of tunnels under the Rock were some comfort, but of limited real defensive value against a determined enemy. The Rock had no source of natural water beyond a series of catchment pools at the top of the 430 meter outcrop, designed solely to capture rainwater.

For these reasons, the British always feared their small bastion here was as vulnerable as it was important, and rumors of enemy plans to attack Gibraltar had given them fits since the outbreak of the war. There had been a plan, Operation Felix, that had been set aside when the Germans invaded Russia. Yet if the Germans could capture Gibraltar they would gain a commanding position from which to influence both naval theaters, the Atlantic and the Med, along with a deep water port that could hold and service Germany’s biggest ships. The capture of Gibraltar would drive a wedge of steel into the heart of the Royal Navy, or so Admiral Raeder believed and argued.

The detailed plans for this operation had been drawn up by the Wehrmacht in the Autumn of 1940 and personally signed by Hitler, reemphasized in Fuehrer Directive #18. It was only the failure of diplomacy that prevented the operation going forward earlier that year. Franco’s list of demands had run on and on. He worried over British reprisals should he join

the Axis, a blockade or possibly even an invasion on his Atlantic coast. He insisted any German troops involved would have to wear Spanish Army uniforms as a point of honor. He asked for thousands of tons of wheat and other resources to feed his shattered state. He fretted over the possibility that the United States would shut down their extensive Telecom system in Spain. In the end Hitler became so frustrated with the man that he exclaimed he would rather have a tooth pulled than speak with him again.

Yet others in all three branches of service, had managed to persuade the Fuehrer to resurrect the old plan, codenamed and give it new life with a new name as well. Now called *Operation Valkyrie,* General Ludwig Kübler's 49th Corps would lead the assault, and Franco's consent and the cooperation of the Spanish government would no longer matter. Spain would capitulate or be conquered, the Germans had no doubts on this.

It was a dangerous plan, but nothing more than that for the moment. Yet the existence of such plans still haunted the dreams of the SIS and other intelligence services. Their Allies' own plans for Operation Torch were slowly running on to the deadline set for early November, and it was an operation that had only been set in motion after considerable haggling with the Americans. General Marshall and Admiral King had delivered a one two punch to the British by pushing for an immediate cross channel invasion in a plan they code named "Sledgehammer." The British did everything possible to forestall it, thinking the Americans were in no way prepared to seriously confront the Germans on the continent. They prevailed by diverting the testosterone to a more graspable objective, the seizure of the French colonies in North Africa so the Allies could drive east behind Rommel's back.

Now all these plans, arguments and counter plans were held in a breathless state of suspension because of a solitary nondescript staff car rolling up to a Hudson Mk I twin engine bomber on North Front Airfield, Gibraltar. The squat plane's engines were already warmed up, and a flight of three Spitfires was waiting on the plain dirt and gravel tarmac to take off right behind it and escort the Hudson as far as their limited combat radius would allow, a little over 410 miles. With drop tanks they could take the bomber all the way up to the northern coast of Spain and see it safely off into the Bay of Biscay.

They Hudsons and Beaufighters had carried diplomatic pouches every week, key intelligence documents and photos, but this time they were slated to carry a very special cargo—Gennadi Orlov and his talking ear plugs. But a

man named Loban had other plans that day, and Orlov was not in the car that pulled up to the tarmac to deliver that day's document caches. The plane would fly with transcripts of this man's interrogation, and a warning—Orlov had escaped.

Orlov knew the earbuds might be his undoing, just as he had feared. When he had first heard the tinny voice of the AI greeting and prompt for a question back in the interrogation room in the dark, stony warren of the Rock, it had all come crashing down. He knew there was no way he was going to explain it away now. At first he gambled that the British would not easily make any connection between the earbuds and his jacket. And why should they? In the span of their own limited comprehension, the only reference point they might make for the buds would be that they were ear pieces for a wireless communications device, albeit a highly advanced one.

Loban's next question, 'Who is she?' was almost comical, however, and the Chief first thought he was not completely unmasked as yet. Yes, now the British were going to have fingers up his ass and he knew he was in for a much more grueling interrogation, but the stupidity of Loban's question told him they had not the slightest inkling that the earbuds were designed to work in tandem with his jacket and the computer so cleverly hidden within its heavy lining.

Orlov was taking no chances, however. He had to think fast at that moment, and he sighed heavily, scratching his head and asking if he could have a cigarette from his jacket pocket. He was hoping he could get to his collar button and give it a squeeze to turn the computer off, which would also mute the ear buds, and he kicked himself mentally for ever leaving the damn thing on in the first place.

Loban had been sitting within arm's reach of wall hanger, and nodded, but he simply stood up to fish out the cigarettes and then tossed the mostly empty pack Orlov's way. The jacket had, of course, already been searched, but the insulation and padding around the computer was so effective, the flexible circuitry so thin, that nothing but the cigarettes and earbuds had been found. Orlov reached for the cigarettes, his heart rate still up, and Loban fetched a silver lighter from his pocket. He lit the cigarette and quietly waited through the first few puffs before his expression clearly indicated he wanted an explanation, and soon.

"Who is she?" he said again, much louder this time as he rolled the earbud between his thumb and forefinger, and the result made an end of

anything Orlov could think of doing to somehow squirm out of the situation.

"Let me check that…" the voice in the earbuds continued. *"This might answer your question. 'She' is a third person pronoun referring to a female person or animal, or anything considered as by personification to be feminine, for example, a ship."*

Loban looked down at the earbuds in his hand, a startled expression on his face. "What the hell?" he said in Russian, half annoyed, half amazed. Then he raised the earbud closer to his mouth and spoke sharply.

"You think this is some kind of a joke, eh? Well laugh now, because we've got a line on your signal and we'll have men on you in a matter of minutes, you stupid bitch!"

Loban was lying, of course, simply trying the time honored trick of flushing the hidden accomplice out with a threat. This time he had not squeezed the earbuds to enable their listen mode, so there was only silence, much to Orlov's relief.

"Very funny," Loban said again to Orlov.

"Don't bother looking for her," said Orlov. "She's long gone by now. Yes, Svetlana can be very annoying at times," Orlov told him, desperate to find a way to get the train back on the tracks again. By naming a woman, he hoped he would divert Loban's attention away from the earbud gaffe. "Very well... She is my controller, Svetlana, and yes, she can be a bitch at times. That was all too typical." He gestured dismissively to the earbuds in Loban's hand. "But I suppose there's no point playing games any longer."

"Glad to hear it," said Loban. "So what is it? Are you NKVD? GRU? Naval Intelligence?"

"NKVD," said Orlov matter of factly in a long breath of smoke. He was taking the air of a man talking to his peer now, and this was his last chance, hoping that the status of alliance between Britain and the USSR at this point would get him out of the hot water he was in. But Loban was still playing with the earbuds, still rolling them between his thumb and finger, and he had again activated the listen mode, his next question picked up by the microphone.

"So where did you come from?" Loban gave him an expectant look, thinking he might hear that Orlov was attached to the Madrid NKVD Cell that had been in place there since 1938 in the midst of Franco's private little civil war. Then 'Svetlana' spilled the beans, and all over the table this time, and Orlov knew his fate was as good as sealed.

“This file was downloaded from the ship’s open library, BCG Kirov, at zero-ten-forty hours, 13 August, 2021. Logged user: Captain Gennadi Orlov, Chief of Operations.”

Loban didn’t quite get what the AI had said. The word “download” was techspeak and only first used in the year 1977 as a noun and then gaining broader use as a verb by 1980. But the word was descriptive enough as it stood, and two other words leapt out at him.

“The ship?” he said, again startled by what he had heard, now looking from the earbuds to Orlov and back again. “*Captain* Gennadi Orlov? Thirteen August *2021?* What’s going on here?”

That same evening a car was heading for a plane on the graveled tarmac of North Field at Gibraltar, but Orlov was not there. Loban had managed to move his charge out by other means, through the long warren of tunnels beneath the Rock to a secret exit on the northeast side of the peninsula. There, he led Orlov, at gunpoint, down a long rocky slope to the ragged shore where a small fishing boat had been tied off. Three men were waiting by the boat, and Loban glanced at his watch before he reached in his pocket and handed the Chief a fresh pack of cigarettes.

“For the journey,” he said quickly. “I’m afraid you’ll be going east instead of west, Mister Orlov, back to your friends on the Black Sea Coast where you can tell them all about the *Ukrania* and her Captain Pavlovko and all the rest. I didn’t believe it, and a doubt that they will either. I’ll leave it to you to decide whether the NKVD will be welcoming you home with open arms or not. You might get better lodging there than you would holed up in Bletchley Park with the MI6. Do write and tell me how things work out. This is as far as I can take you this evening, but you’ll have the company of these three for a good long while, and one man speaks Russian, Sergei Kamkov, the tall one.”

“Spasiba,” said Orlov, thanking the man in spite of his misgivings about this development. He would rather be in a boat on the sea than in a plane any day, but he had no idea where he was really being taken now, or why, until Loban leaned in and spoke in a low voice.

“You didn’t think I was going to turn you over to the British, my friend, eh? No, we take care of our own, and you’ll be in good hands with these three. Now I must go.”

That statement surprised Orlov, as Loban stepped down the slope and handed the tall man in the trio a small diplomatic pouch, saying something in

a very urgent tone of voice. Then he started back up the hill to the shadowed entrance above, and vanished into the maze of tunnels again. His charge was delivered as ordered, and he had other business to attend to. He had to find a way to get off the Rock discreetly, though by normal channels, and then work his way to a secure phone to call the wine dealer in La Concepcion, just north across the demarcation line separating Gibraltar from Spain. He would ask them to deliver a good bottle of Zinfandel to a certain address, which was his code to indicate he, in turn, had a good bottle of information to deliver to his local area handler.

"Svetlana my ass," he breathed. "He had known Orlov was not what he seemed from the very first moment he spoke to him. He was navy, that much was certain, but there was something very odd about the man. He was an officer, that was also apparent. But where? When? On what ship? The ship had been called *Kirov*, and that was very amusing as well. That cruiser, he knew, had been trapped in the Gulf Of Riga up north at the outbreak of the war with Germany. It had managed to reach Tallinn and then moved to Leningrad where it had been bottled up ever since behind German minefields, harassed by the Luftwaffe as it tried to use its main guns as artillery supporting the defenders of that beleaguered city.

This Orlov was navy, he thought, but he certainly wasn't the Captain of the cruiser *Kirov*. But intelligence had learned of a strange ship at large in the Med between August 11 and 14 last month, and Loban had been curious enough to slip off the Rock and head east, driving along the Spanish coast through Malaga and all the way to Adra and Matagorda on the cape when he heard this ship was heading that way. He had been there in time to see the fireworks of an amazing naval battle off the coast on the night of August 14th, and he had ordered several bottles of Zinfandel the very next day.

For Lieutenant Thomas Loban was a double agent, just another of many who had come out of the hallowed halls of the Cambridge Apostles, and he had been effectively working as a translator for MI6 while also collecting and passing information to the USSR for the last year. This month he had been keen on the trail of a word that had been picked up in the radio stream…*Geronimo*. Bit by bit, the real Russian Main Intelligence Directorate, the GRU, came to associate the word with a ship, and the ship was soon connected to some real naval chaos that had been underway in the Mediterranean Sea that month. They wanted to know why the British were suddenly so interested in Russian naval activities in the Black Sea, or the

presence of any Russian naval personnel in the Med.

Loban told them all about Orlov, and now he thought he might be able to give them a real prize in this catch, and deny the same to the British in one fell swoop. He lit a cigarette as he made his way through the deep tunnel network, pleased with himself. This would likely shake things up a bit in Moscow, he thought, though he did not know just how much. His act of betrayal would lead to a wild hunt that would span thousands of miles, cross continents and long decades yet to come, and the fate of the world would rest on its outcome.

Part III

Rod-25

“It doesn't matter how much, how often, or how closely you keep an eye on things because you can't control them. Sometimes things and people just go. Just like that. Sometimes, people can go missing right before our very eyes.”

—Cecelia Ahern

Chapter 7

8000 miles and nearly 80 years away another cruiser named *Kirov* was finally heading home. They had a long voyage, with plenty of time to make the ship as presentable as possible, and Damage Control Chief Byko was kept very busy. As they approached the port Admiral Volsky thought it best to make their presence known, recalling that there had been increasing tension in the Norwegian Sea even before the ship set out for those fateful live fire exercises long weeks ago.

They were followed much of the way home by the American submarine, and Tasarov kept a pair of good ears on the boat the whole while. Volsky had decided to swing north of Hokkaido, and it had been a strange feeling when Nikolin picked up Japanese radio traffic and put it on the speakers. It brought back memories of that harrowing cruise through the Coral Sea, but this was the Japan of 2021. The likes of Isokoru Yamamoto, and men like Hara, Iwabuchi, Hayashi, Sakamoto, and all the others they had faced and fought were now long gone. No D3A1 Dive bombers or B3N2 torpedo planes would be darkening the skies as they approached, and it was a welcome relief.

Their submarine shadow left them as *Kirov* neared the Japanese mainland, but they noted the Americans now had an old reliable P-3 recon plane up from Misawa Air base to take over the duty. The ship waited until it sailed through the Soya Strait and entered the Sea of Japan before they radioed home on Sept 15th, already relieved that the headlines on the newspapers Fedorov had hidden away had not come to pass. The fuse had not been lit on the war to end all wars, but the powder keg of rising tensions was still a matter of some concern.

Once Admiral Volsky made their presence known, the Russians had their own air recon operation up within the hour, overflying the ship with an old TU-142 Tupolev maritime recon plane, the Bear F/J turboprop. It was escorted by a pair of Mig-31 fighters, which flew low and slow over *Kirov's* bow, the crew waving and cheering as they came, the fighters tipping their wings in reply. The pride of the Russian Navy was coming home. Wounded and limping, *Kirov* was still the most formidable fighting surface ship in the fleet.

“We never thought about the impact the loss of the ship would have on the country,” said Karpov as they watched the planes roar past from the weather deck off the citadel.

“It would be as if the Americans lost one of their big carriers,” said Fedorov. “There’s a lot of national pride wrapped up in this ship.”

“Yes,” said Karpov dryly, “they’re going to love us for about a week. There will be marching bands, a lot of saluting and flag waving, then the questions come.” He realized that they were back in the same old calcified structure of the Navy again. Admiral Boris Abramov commanded here at the Pacific Fleet HQ, but Volsky was to have transferred in to relieve him after the live fire exercises. *Kirov* was also leaving the cold northern waters of the arctic for warmer climes here, as the Russians were getting ready to commission the second ship of her resurrected class, the *Leonid Brezhnev*, finally built out from the older *Pytor Veliky* to take over the mantle of the flagship of the Northern Fleet.

“The Admiral will be happy to hear that there is finally a ship bearing his name,” said Fedorov. “At least his first name.”

“I think he’ll soon have more on his mind that that. Yes, the questions will come soon. Do we have our answers ready, Fedorov?”

“We’ve done our best, Captain. Byko has re-metaled all the 20 millimeter round holes in the superstructure and painted them over good as new. The hull damage we can explain away easily enough as a kick from *Orel* when she exploded. I’m not as comfortable about the damage to the aft battle bridge, or even the file damage with our missing logs.”

They had decided to try and kill a couple of birds in one throw by saying a KA-40 had been aloft, hovering just above the ship when *Orel* blew up. The story was that the helo had plunged down onto the aft citadel, her weapons load igniting to cause the extensive damage there. To make it seem convincing, Byko had placed some of the old damaged KA-40 parts there, though they would largely claim that they had taken the long cruise to clean away the remainder of the wreckage. He kept these few mangled parts collected from the real accident on the aft deck as trophies, and hoped they would help explain away the total loss of the ship’s secondary command citadel.

As for the missing logs and data, they could not claim EMP damage as Fedorov first thought. Dobrynin told him that effect only could occur in the atmosphere, so instead they decided on a massive power surge that had

damaged the ship's systems and files. It was thin, but they hoped it would cover their tracks long enough to pass the inspection that was surely coming.

"How does it feel to be Captain of the First Rank again, Karpov?"

They had also thought it best to restore Karpov's old rank and authority. Admiral Volsky said he had earned it many times over, and was quick to promote him once again. No mention was to be made of the 'unfortunate incident,' in the North Atlantic, a grace the Captain did not think he deserved, but one he was grateful for. The missing nuclear warhead would be a little more difficult to explain away, but Admiral Volsky told the men to say nothing of it, and said he would handle the matter personally.

As for Fedorov, he would stand as Captain of the Second Rank now, and the official *Starpom* under Karpov. He had no objection, saying he preferred it that way, as the two men had come to a very good understanding of one another, and cooperated well.

"I was not ready to take the ship when Volsky gave it to me," said Fedorov. "I did my best, but thank God for you, Karpov. I don't think I could have fought those battles as you did. The Admiral was correct when he said you were one of the very best."

Karpov nodded, grateful for the praise, and hearing it now as sincere for the first time, not the fawning flattery he had been used to from other officers who wanted to get on his good side in the past. He was a new man now, though he knew it would probably be some time before others who knew him in the navy would see or realize that.

"What about Dobrynin?" asked Karpov. "What about this business with the reactors? They will have to perform that maintenance procedure again one day soon. What then, Fedorov? Will the ship vanish again?"

"Admiral Volsky and I had a long discussion with the engineers about it. When we reach harbor he is going to have Rod-25 removed for replacement, and he says he can run some tests and then arrange to have it stored in a very safe place."

"You still believe that control rod had something to do with it?"

"Who knows? But it was the only common denominator in all the displacement events. Each time it happened, Rod-25 was the wild card in the deck. Dobrynin is going to go over it with a microscope to see if he can make any sense of it. In the meantime, we can only hope *Kirov* stays put."

"Agreed," said Karpov with a solemn nod. "Do you think they learned anything about us?"

“About the ship? Our time in the past? Well the British certainly learned enough, and the Japanese got some hard lessons too.”

“They’ve had almost eighty years to try and figure out what happened, Fedorov. That’s a very long time. That little chat the Admiral had with the British may have revealed more than we think, and I will tell you another little secret—what the British learned in 1942 the GRU and KGB learned soon after.”

That thought darkened the moment, for Fedorov had worried about it for some time. “So far I haven’t found any clean references on the Internet now that we have satellite traffic again. A lot of vague references, but nothing solid. We’re ‘Raider X’ to some, ‘enemy action’ to others, but I’ll keep looking when we make port.”

“They will most likely send out the *Varyag* to welcome us home. That cruiser has been the flagship here, and now we hold sway, old king *Kirov*, that is if the navy can find the money to patch us back up again. Believe me, Suchkov will not be happy when he learns of the damage to the ship.”

“We’ll have to let Admiral Volsky handle that, but don’t be surprised if you find yourself at sea again soon, Captain. We aren’t out of the woods yet. China could make that play for Taiwan at any time, and then what? Then they’ll want every ship in the harbor trimmed for action as soon as possible.”

“It’s going to be very difficult, Fedorov. I mean, knowing what happened—what *could* happen so easily again. It may not be my hand on the trigger this time, but there are too many others like me in the navy…too many others like the man I once was. Knowing that this world could all blow up and go to hell again any moment will not be easy, particularly if the other side gets pushy. And if they do find us at sea again, and come at us in anger, then I may have no choice but to become that other man, that man of war I was back then. Can we avoid it?”

“That will be hard to say. We can’t disclose anything about what we’ve learned, at least not directly. All we can do is be men instead of machines if they ever send us out here again. We’ve learned some hard lessons, but yes, we are still men of war—not just you, Captain. All of us.”

“A crash course!”

“Yes… Well, if they do get *Kirov* operational again, do you think they will give the ship back to you, Captain?”

“I suppose that will depend on how the investigation goes.”

“Investigation?”

“Certainly... The questions. The Naval Inspectorate will have men here in black suits in no time. The Grand Inquisitor will pay us a visit. They did the same to Christ on his return—showered him with reverence for a week, and then started the trial. Karpov was referring to the famous parable by Dostoyevsky, *The Grand Inquisitor*, which saw Christ tried and condemned yet again after his second coming. *Kirov*, the presumed savior of the fleet, was resurrected and now coming home again, but he had little doubt that she would fare any better than the Son of God. “They’ll be a week or two going over the ship, most likely interviewing every man aboard.”

“We talked to the men, in small groups. There’s a lot of comradery among the crew, and a real spirit of élan now that we’ve come through the fire and reached safe waters again.”

“Someone is likely to slip up and say something stupid.” Karpov held up a warning finger. “Of course if anyone told the truth they would be thought insane, and laughed off the ship. But it isn’t the big truth I’m worried about. It’s the little lie. Believe me Fedorov, I was a liar long before I was ever a Captain in this Navy, and a damn good one. I’m not worried about myself, or the senior officers, but some damn *matoc* from the fifth deck is likely to be asked a question and let something slip.” Karpov acted out a brief interrogation now.

“So tell me how the aft citadel was damaged again, Gavrilov? Oh, that happened when we were hit by that plane, sir. You mean the helicopter? The KA-40? Oh, yes sir. Of course, sir.”

Fedorov nodded, his lips pursed as he considered that there were over 700 men that would have to hold to the same story for their *lozh* to stand up under any scrutiny.

“All it will take is three or four slips like that before some little prick in the Inspectorate gets a hair up his ass about it. I can tamp some of it down if it starts to flare up. You know me. I can throw my rank around pretty good. But if they get real curious, things could take a different direction. If that happens I think they will beach every last one of us.”

“You mean you might lose the ship?”

“Very likely, but I must tell you that it will not be so much of a loss in my mind now. I’m tired, Fedorov, tired of missiles, and the rank and file of the navy and all the rest of it. I think I may retire soon, after all this blows over, assuming we still have a world left here. Then they can say or do anything they want.”

Fedorov was quiet for some time, thinking, until the Captain prodded him again. “What about you?”

“I know what you are saying, Captain. I was a navigator. Yes, I love military history but, in truth, I’m not a fighting man. It hurt to know I was killing men in those engagements. A lot of men died, and I’ve seen all I think I ever want to know about battle at sea. But on the other side of it, if we stay in the service, the Admiral, you, myself, then we might have some power to prevent the war we know is coming.”

“You think we could prevent it from ever happening?”

“We’ve already kept it from starting when it was supposed to. If we stay in the service for a while we could at least keep our hand on the tiller and try to steer things away from conflict.”

“True,” said Karpov. “We would have some authority, particularly if they do end up giving us *Kirov* back again. If war does come, and starts here in the Pacific as we discovered, then they will look to this ship to lead out the fleet. It would be hard to go if that should happen, but just as hard to stay behind, if you know what I mean.”

“Yes, I do. But there is one other thing we have to worry about. There’s a lot we have yet to learn about the world we’re coming back to. Things have changed, Captain. There was no Pearl Harbor attack, no Battle of Midway, but the war ended much the same, only no Hiroshima or Nagasaki this time. I haven’t had time to look over everything after WWII, but I’m sure we’ll learn that quite a lot of furniture has been moved around. We may even find that key officers have been shuffled about in the navy. The world still looks the same. I’ll bet you that all the pieces of that old puzzle are still here, but they may be in a different order now, and the new picture may be a little unsettling.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well suppose a man takes his leave, rushes home, and finds his house was sold years ago and is occupied by strangers. If the big things can change, then the details can change along with them. We have no idea what we’re really going to find here.”

“I never quite thought of it that way,” said Karpov. “And I suppose we never will find out what happened to Orlov, will we? Is that in your research, Fedorov? Would it not be funny to see his face glaring at you from one of your old WWII photo books?”

“I’ve thought about that a good long time,” Fedorov frowned. “Orlov

wasn’t likely to do the world much good. I suppose he might have used his general knowledge of the future to some advantage, but he wasn’t an educated man. He could probably know that the Americans landed on the moon first, but could not tell you when or very much else about it.”

“That’s a blessing,” said Karpov. “Orlov’s ignorance may end up preventing a lot of grief, but something tells me his temper is going to cause trouble, one way or another. He’s cagey, Fedorov. It wasn’t all brawn and bad temper, and he will think himself more than he really is, a wolf in the fold, if you will.”

“Well… Now that we speak of this, I did find something that was a bit unsettling when I went over the ship’s library computers. Someone made a big download a few weeks ago, and they didn’t know enough to cover their tracks in the data logs.”

Karpov’s eyes narrowed. “Orlov?”

“Perhaps. Would he be that selfish and foolish to take something back with him?”

“Take what?”

“Who knows. Maybe he loaded data onto a cell phone or a pad device. He obviously planned his escape very well.”

Karpov’s eyes widened with sudden recollection. “His jacket!”

Fedorov didn’t understand and the Captain explained.

“He had a Computer Jacket, just like the Marines use for special operations. I remember him talking about how he liked it because he could listen to things on his earbuds while making the rounds, news, music, that sort of thing.”

“I can’t say I like the sound of this,” Fedorov had a very disheartened look on his face now.

“Don’t be surprised, Fedorov. You had better check the history very closely when we make port if Orlov downloaded data into that jacket.”

“I plan to do exactly that, though I’m not sure what good it will do at this point. Whatever Orlov ended up doing, it’s all over and done with now. He would have to be dead by now. It’s history. But we will be living in the world he helped build the moment we set foot off this ship. Yet if Orlov had that jacket with him, we could learn that more things have changed than I expected. Its very existence in the past would have to cause a major aberration. Computer circuitry found in the 1940s could change a great deal!”

“Now you have *me* wondering what else has changed.” Karpov had a

distant, empty look on his face. “But even if they did find it, they wouldn’t know what it was, Fedorov.”

“Oh, there were some very clever men back then, Captain. I would not be so sure. This is very disturbing news.” He gazed at the distant land form of Primorskiy Province as it reached south to Vladivostok. “We’ll make port in the next few hours. We will soon see the peak of Eagle’s Nest Hill and the shores of Golden Horn Bay. Count on both still being there. But who knows whether they still have that old WWII Soviet sub on display at the Naval Museum, or if the Oceanarium was still built here in the city.”

“I won’t miss either one, but the food at *Zolotoy Drakon* was always good, and so was the sushi at the Yamato Bar on Okeanskiy Prospekt.”

They both smiled at that. “*Yamato* Sushi Bar?” said Fedorov. “I guess the legend lives on after all, even if the ship is now on the bottom of the sea. At least we didn’t put it there.”

“Oh, but I tried very hard to sink that ship.” Karpov wagged a finger at him. “It was a tough old warthog, that one.”

Fedorov looked at his watch. “About three more hours. Then I suppose we learn whether home is still there for us, and what kind of a world we are living in now.”

Chapter 8

Vladivostok was one of only four major ports serving the vast expanse of the Russian Republic. Sometimes referred to as the San Francisco of Mother Russia, the city is located at the tip of a long peninsula, clustered on the fringes of the beautiful Amursky Bay, where long new elegant bridges connected the isthmus to Frunzenskiy Island to the south and formed a kind of Golden Gate of their own where ships pass beneath them to eventually enter the "Golden Horn Harbor." And like San Francisco, it also had a thriving and fast growing Chinese community mixed in with the city's 700,000 residents, their shops and restaurants creating little china towns here and there near the harbor district.

Like many cities in Russia, it suffered from pollution, a reputation for corruption, and a struggling economy that saw over 25% of its citizens living below the poverty line. Those who could get jobs in the industrial sector there would often wait long months for a meager paycheck, and others became self-styled tour guides serving a slowly growing tourism industry. That said, the city and its vital port remained a crucial strategic hub for Russia in the 21st century, and the Pacific Fleet still berthed its guided missile cruisers, destroyers and submarines in the region, though all too few.

One *Slava* Class cruiser, the *Varyag*, would now bow and yield its crown as the Pacific Fleet's Flagship to the newly arriving battlecruiser *Kirov*. There were a few aging destroyers, four in the old *Udaloy* Class, three *Delta III* submarines, an old *Oscar*, five *Akula's* and even some rusting *Kilo* class diesel subs tied off at the wharfs and piers of the submarine base at Pavlovskoye, south of Fokino where the Naval Headquarters had been located. One new sub, the sleek new nuclear attack submarine *Kazan* was perhaps the most formidable boat assigned to the undersea fleet based there. It was hidden in the old underground submarine pens that had been dug through the north cape of Pavlovshoye Bay.

The navy rolled out the red carpet for *Kirov* when the big battlecruiser arrived, just as Karpov said it would. There were honor guards, a marching band, a flag ceremony and a lot of military rituals. Admiral Volsky had the entire ship's compliment out in their dress whites, and he played up the

ceremony for all it was worth. Yet through it all there was a kind of reserved shock when the other sailors and officers assembled on the quays saw the damage the ship had sustained. Kirov was missing her Top Mast radar sets, there was a raw gash on the aft quarter, and obvious damage to the superstructure behind the secondary mast where fresh paint and a canvass tarp now hid the worst of the wreckage inflicted by Hayashi's D3A1 dive bomber.

The rumor that the ship had endured these insults when *Orel* blew up on sea trials provided little comfort, as it spoke only to the continued incompetence of the service, still struggling to reach the lofty goal set in 2011 of building 100 new ships before 2020. Most of these were to be smaller frigates, corvettes, and new submarines, accounting for about seventy of the planned additions. The remaining thirty would see some real new teeth put into the fleet, including two new nuclear aircraft carriers that had been planned, though neither had been completed. The fleet still had little reliable seaborne air power, and therefore could never hope to fulfill the long held Russian dream of becoming a real blue water navy.

China went shopping and bought up most of the older Soviet era light carriers. *Kiev* was now a floating hotel, and *Minsk* an amusement park. The second *Kuznetsov* class hull, named *Varyag* before it was sold to the Chinese, was now the *Liaoning*, the ship once fated to die at the hands of an American submarine in the growing squabble over Taiwan, as least insofar as one Australian newspaper had it. Russia's only fleet carrier to speak of was this ship's elder brother, *Admiral Kuznetsov*, which had also been moved east when the Russians had been quietly informed that China was planning a 'major operation' in the near future.

One relatively new frigate with the all new carbon fiber superstructure and stealth design had been assigned to the Pacific Fleet, the *Admiral Golovko,* laid down in 2012. Two more were expected soon. The Project 21956 destroyers were also still largely incomplete, though one such ship, now named the *Orlan*, or *Sea Eagle*, was proudly berthed at Vladivostok next to the new arrival.

Kirov was given a proverbial 'wide berth' off the concrete docks near Korabelnaya Street. Admiral Volsky knew, as Karpov had warned, that the Naval Inspectorate would be arriving within days, so he huddled with his Chief Engineer Dobrynin to see what could be done about the reactor control rod they now suspected as the cause of the strange displacement the ship had

experienced—Rod-25.

“What can we do with it, Dobrynin? Can we risk leaving it here on the ship?”

“If we do, sir, then what might happen the next time we have to do rod maintenance?”

“Yes, it would be most disturbing if the ship were to suddenly disappear again while berthed in the harbor! Can it be removed safely? Stored somewhere?”

“That would take some doing, Admiral, but it might be transferred to the Primorskiy Engineering Center across the bay. We have a diagnostic rod test-bed facility there, and I could study it more closely. We would put it in a radiation safe container, then barge it across the bay to the commercial pier and truck it up the hill to the center.”

“I will cut the orders,” Volsky said quickly. “Anything you need will be provided. But I want this to seem routine. I want to avoid calling undue attention.”

“I understand, sir. I can just write up a standard rod replacement order—not unusual at all after a long cruise like this. In fact, I may have to replace rods five and seven as well. I can ask for a new spare to fill in for Rod-25. It is nothing unusual.”

“Good, Dobrynin. Get the damn thing off the ship as soon as possible, then, eh?”

“I’ll have it moved tomorrow, sir.”

“Perfect… But I think we should have a man there at all times, to keep watch on it. You know how things get shuffled around from one place to another. Someone comes in looking for something and things get moved. Some enterprising supply clerk looking for spare parts comes in and sends the damn thing off to another ship.”

“We wouldn’t want that to happen, sir.”

“Precisely. So leave a man there—on my orders. If anyone questions you tell them that this comes directly from me. That should take care of it. One advantage of carrying all this extra weight is that you get to throw it around once in a while.”

“That’s what Admirals are for, sir. I’ll put *two* men on it.”

* * *

Pavel Kamenski looked up from his book, staring over the rim of his reading glasses when he heard the commotion on the stairs. It was Alexi, his grandson, racing up the steps and shouting for him with that edge of eagerness in his voice that promised discovery.

“Grandpa! Grandpa! It’s here!”

Alexi ran in, all of twelve, his knees bare between long white socks and plain brown shorts, for the weather had been uncommonly warm that week in Vladivostok. He rushed in, eyes gleaming, cheeks red with his haste. “It’s here!”

“Just a moment, my good young man. What is here?”

“*Kirov!* It’s back Grandpa. It was all on the television a moment ago. *Kirov* is in the harbor! Can we go see it, Grandpa? Let’s go and see it, please?”

“*Kirov?* Here?”

“It was on the news. They say it wasn’t sunk after all, Grandpa—just on a mission, that’s all. And now it’s home again, and here! Can we go see it?”

Alexi was no different than millions of other young boys at that age. He had cut his teeth on plastic dinosaurs, slowly graduating to toy soldiers, and spent long hours playing with them in the dirt with his friends, developing some strange calculus wherein a triceratops could be traded for two machine gunners and a sniper, or one tank. In time he slowly traded off his herd of dinos to the younger boys, and built the root and stem of a Motor Rifle Division in their place. When he got a few years older he left these behind and moved on to model building. At Christmas he might be seen slowly flying his model Mig-31 fighter about the house, turning it this way and that in his hand as the plane banked to avoid decorations on the tree, and then swooped on Tamiko, the cat.

At eleven he had taken to reading stories of great battles at sea, and building models of his favorite ships. He had a model of the old German battleship *Bismarck*, and one of the famous Japanese battleship *Yamato*, the biggest of them all. He also had a big *Shchuka-B* type nuclear attack submarine, the boat NATO now called *Akula*. But of all his models, *Kirov* was his favorite, and he had spent long hours watching it sail the seas of his imagination, and thinking that one day he might join the navy himself, and become its captain.

“Who would win?” he had asked his Grandpa one day. “Could *Bismarck* have a chance against *Yamato?* I don’t think it could, Grandpa. It only has

eight guns, and they aren't quite as big."

"I suppose you are right in that, Alexi. They were both very tough ships, but I think the *Yamato,* yes. It would win."

"But what about *Kirov?* It could beat them both together, right Grandpa?"

"I would hope so. But look at those tiny guns on *Kirov*. How could it have a chance?" Kamenski had teased the boy, knowing he would soon explain about the missiles he had so lovingly installed beneath the removable forward deck cover. He was not disappointed. Alexi had pried the plastic deck open to reveal the innards of the model ship, pointing to the tips of the missiles in their canisters of eight, like deadly eggs all lined up in a basket.

"Don't forget these," the boy admonished. "They can fly—and very fast too! They can hit *Yamato* from way over there. The boy had pointed across the room to the corner where Tamiko was sleeping in a favorite spot by the heating vent on the carpet, oblivious to the world and mindless of anything that had to do with battleships.

"*Yamato's* guns are big, but they can't fire that far. And *Kirov* has these radars. It can find the *Yamato,* even if I took it downstairs to my bedroom."

"Even in your room? Well in that case, Alexi, *Kirov* would certainly win." Even a boy of twelve could deduce what Karpov had so clearly demonstrated in the Pacific.

"Let's go this afternoon, Grandpa! Can we?"

Kamenski agreed, sending Alexi running off and down the steps to tell his mother, and then the old man quietly set his book down on the reading desk, a strange look in his eye. He got up, very slowly and walked to his voluminous library wall, squinting through his spectacles as he looked for a book, his finger running over the spines as he searched. There it was, *The Chronology of the Naval War At Sea, 1939-1945,* Russian Edition. He pulled it out, very slowly, as if there was some old, unfinished business within the volume that he was reluctant to revisit.

His weathered hand flipped through the well worn pages, as he squinted to see the dates for the year 1941. He saw his carefully underlined passage, with notes penciled into the margin. The date leading the passage was: **22 July – 4 Aug, Arctic**, in dark bold type. The narrative began: "*British carrier raid on Kirkenes and Petsamo cancelled when aircraft spot a lone ship in the Arctic Sea north of Jan Mayen."* It was the first appearance of a ship that the history had come to call "Raider X," presumed to be a German heavy cruiser, and one using experimental naval rockets as its primary

weaponry. It had been pursued and eventually sunk by British and American forces…Or was it? He puckered his eyes, reading the thinly scrawled notation he had written in the margin… "See also 23 Aug—1 Sep Atlantic."

Kamenski flipped the pages to those dates and began reading:

'Following reports received by commercial traffic at sea the British auxiliary cruisers Circassia from Freetown and the Canadian auxiliary cruiser Prince David from Halifax are ordered to intercept at the suspected meeting point a German auxiliary cruiser and a blockade-runner in the central Atlantic. On its way, Prince David sights an unknown vessel and reports it as a possible cruiser of the Admiral Hipper class. This leads to a big search operation.'

The old man ran his finger down the long column, noting how both the British and American forces in the region had scrambled to intercept this sighting. The British Battleship *Rodney* was immediately alerted, and joined with the American carrier Task Group 2.6 to hunt for the ship. Planes off the carrier *Yorktown* soon reported several merchant ships in the search zone, and then suddenly confirmed the sighting of a warship described again as a "possible *Hipper* class cruiser."

A second US Task Group quickly formed around the carrier *Long Island* to expand the search zone. The British dispatched Force F with the carrier *Eagle* and the cruisers *Dorsetshire* and *Newcastle,* and pulled the battleship *Revenge* off of convoy duty, with three more fast cruisers. In all, the combined Anglo-US forces amounted to three carriers two battleships, twelve cruisers and twenty destroyers. But the suspected ship seemed to simply vanish again, and the Admiralty received good aerial photos of Brest to assure themselves that *Scharnhorst*, *Gneisenau* and *Prince Eugen* were all still quietly sleeping in their berths. Days later, however, a US coast Guard cutter, *Alexander Hamilton,* again raised the alarm with a report of a *Hipper* class cruiser near Newfoundland.

Thinking the Germans might be trying to sneak back to home ports, the US quickly dispatched a new Task Group from Reykjavík built around the battleship *New Mexico* to block the Denmark Strait. Yet nothing was found, and the watch slowly faded away.

But not Kamenski's watch. He had been fascinated by these odd reports in the narrative, and spent much time ferreting them out. His next notation in the margin led him on to the odd "incident" in the Mediterranean at the conclusion of the Malta relief Operation Pedestal a year later. The British

covering force with battleships *Rodney* and *Nelson* had engaged another mysterious ship, presumed to be a French battlecruiser out of Toulon…

But Kamenski knew for a fact that it had not been a French battlecruiser, for his father had once been involved with Soviet naval intelligence, and Kamenski had once been a boy just like Alexi, enamored by the sleek lines and threatening battlements of warships. One day his father told him something, well after he had retired from his service, and it always stuck in Kamenski's mind. He had been reading this very book, for it was given to him by his father, and the man had come to this very passage and shook his head with a wry smile. "That was no French ship," Kamenski remembered him saying. "We had a man there, on that very coast, and he saw the whole thing. No, it wasn't a French battlecruiser, so you can figure out what it really was, eh Pavel?" But his father would say nothing more about it.

Pavel Kamenski had taken up that challenge, joining the intelligence services and quietly perusing the mystery that had begun with the odd appearance of "Raider X." He had followed the trail for many years, through libraries, books and old dusty files, staring at grainy photos in black and white—the last one being taken by a seaplane out of Milne Bay that had photographed another strange ship in the Coral Sea.

Kamenski closed the book, but he carried it with him to his reading desk, and set it down next to a cold cup of tea. Now he shuffled slowly over to the table by the easy chair where Alexi's mother, his own daughter Elena, would always leave the morning newspaper. He picked it up, the headline bold and strong, with a photo of a big ship in the harbor and crowds of jubilant people. It read simply:

KIROV COMES HOME!

Chapter 9

The car pulled up along the wide concrete quay a few days later, well after sunset. The dim street lamps cast a wan light over the dull gray wharf, but out on the bay the lights of the city shimmered on the calm water. The rear door opened and a man stepped out, wearing a long dark overcoat and a black fedora hat. He carried a thick brief case, and was followed by another man in a long gray overcoat before the car drove quietly off. The two men stood for a moment, staring up at the high battlements of the heavy guided missile cruiser *Kirov* where the ship rode at anchor, tied off to the long quay and now served by a floating pier off the starboard side where several grey metal gangways climbed up to the ship's main deck.

The man with the briefcase was Gerasim Kapustin, Chief of the Naval Inspectorate, and fresh from the airport and a long flight from Moscow. The taller uniformed man was Captain Ivan Volkov, Russian Naval Intelligence, and the two stood for some time, their eyes searching the long, sharp contours of the ship, with Volkov occasionally pointing at something. They noted the canvass tarps draped over the wound to Kirov's aft quarter, and the area that had once been her reserve battle bridge. Kapustin's eyes strayed along the tall main mast, up to note the missing radar antenna there.

With a shrug the Chief picked up his briefcase and started for the nearest gangway. They were met by a Marine Guard, who saluted, noted their identification, and then opened the gate to admit them to the ship. Their footfalls on the long metal gangway had an ominous clatter as they went, and the Marine waited a few moments before he picked up a phone from the gateway call box and rang up the bridge.

"Gate two," he said in a low voice. "They are here."

"Very well. Thank you, Corporal." It was the voice of Captain Vladimir Karpov.

Ten minutes later Karpov turned to greet the two men as they stepped onto the bridge. He walked forward extending a hand. "Welcome aboard, Director…Captain."

Karpov had never met either man, and the Director removed his hat to reveal a crop of curly grey, hair fringing an otherwise balding head, with sharp blue eyes, and a well managed mustache and beard. He looked the part,

a careful minded professor of a man accustomed to long hours at a desk pouring over charts, tables, reports and computer screens. The other man was taller, a grey wolf, colder and more aloof.

"Things appear well in order here," said Kapustin.

"Although from the look of things that cannot be said of the ship in general," put in Volkov.

Karpov's eye met the other man's where he perceived a steely coldness in the Captain, a dark haired, grey eyed career officer, tall, with stiff bearing and a pallid complexion.

"It was a bit of a rough ride, Captain," said Karpov.

"So we hear." Volkov continued to study the Captain, noting Karpov's trim, well kept uniform, his cap smartly in place and an air of sure authority about the man. This one is a fighter, he thought. He's another grey wolf, just as I am, and a man to be reckoned with. He had read up on Karpov's service history on the plane, noting how quickly he had risen in the ranks to his post as Captain of the fleet's newest and finest warship. He knew that such a post would not be given lightly, though he had heard more than one rumor about this man, that he was mean and conniving, a bit of a back stabber at times, and driven by an aggressive, restless energy. Those were qualities he understood easily enough, for his own career in the Naval Intelligence arm had seen more than enough infighting within the ranks before he secured his present position.

"Well, gentlemen," said Karpov, extending a hand to the still open citadel hatch. "We'll have more than enough time on the bridge tomorrow. I imagine you must be tired after your flight. If you would care to accompany me to the officer's dining hall, we have prepared a light meal, a little *uzhin*, and some refreshment."

Uzhin was the Russian third meal of the day, always served well after six though it was lighter than the main meal, *obed*, served around 2:00pm.

"Thank you, Captain," said Kapustin. "That would be most welcome."

Karpov led the way, pausing and turning as the other men stepped through the hatch. "You have the bridge, Mr. Rodenko."

"Aye, sir," Rodenko echoed smartly, "Captain off the bridge."

The men reached the bottom of the stairs and continued down another ladder and then through a long corridor before Karpov indicated they should turn left into the officer's dining hall.

"And how is the damage control situation progressing, Captain?"

Kapustin stepped into the well warmed dining room, smiling as he handed off his fedora and overcoat to an orderly, though he set his briefcase right beside his chair where the orderly gestured that he should be seated, and the white coated *mishman* knew better than to touch it further.

"We are making good progress," said Karpov. "Thankfully the spare parts were in inventory and our Chief Byko had had men up on the aft mast all day re-cabling the Fregat system."

"That must have been a severe explosion when we lost the *Orel*."

"It was, sir. Unfortunately we lost a KA-40 and the KA-226 at the same time. You may have seen the damage aft."

"Not yet," said Kapustin, "but we will have a look in better light tomorrow."

Karpov gestured to the table, nicely set with white linen and silver, and full-stemmed crystal for water and wine. There were appetizers, deviled eggs, accented with marinated mushrooms, as well as a plate of small open-face sardine-tomato-cucumber sandwiches. Both were sprinkled liberally with fresh dill. A plate of black bread caught Kapustin's eye, and he reached for a piece, dipping it into the cold soup called *okroshka*, in a small bowl set on his main dining plate.

"Please help yourselves, gentlemen." Karpov smiled as they settled in to begin the meal while the orderlies poured water and wine. "We'll have salads and *pierogies*, and the main dish will be stuffed *halupkis* and Stroganoff with *Kasha*.

"I see there was no damage to the galley," said Volkov, and Karpov simply smiled, not addressing the remark, but noting the veiled undertone to it that strayed towards insolence.

"I must tell you that we had come to believe the ship was lost in that incident," said Kapustin, buttering his bread. "This business with the ship's computers, tell me about it, Captain."

"Well, Director, I am not entirely sure of what actually happened to *Orel*. But it was our assessment that there had been an explosion. Their Captain radioed that they had a problem with one of their torpedoes. Apparently they mounted the wrong warhead. Then came the detonation, and it was quite significant. Many of our systems were affected, radar, sonar, communications, so we believed it may have been an after-effect of a *nuclear* detonation."

"Most unsettling," said Kapustin. "Well, we have read your report, and

that of Admiral Volsky as well. While I may question his decision to continue the ship's mission under those circumstances, I will accept it for the moment."

"I must say, sir," said Karpov. "The Admiral was considering all his options at that moment, and given the political situation we also considered that *Orel* may have been lost to hostile action, possibly by a NATO submarine. So we acted on that scenario first after a meeting of the senior officers."

"Who was in that meeting, if I may ask?" Kapustin leaned back as the second course of potato and prune *pierogies* was brought out, his eye straying to the dish.

"The Admiral, myself and Operation's Chief Orlov."

"Yet Orlov is not presently listed in the ship's compliment."

"No, sir. I'm afraid he went aft to supervise the situation on the helo deck, and was lost in the secondary explosion when the KA-40s caught fire."

"I see…" Kapustin reached for a Pierogi. "Well these look good. Be sure to count the pits if you get a prune to watch your luck."

"Not much of that on this ship, it seems," said Volkov again, with just enough of an edge to it that Karpov decided he would let the man know who he was dealing with here.

"Well, Captain Volkov," he began with a gesture to the other man's soup bowl. "I see you have a taste for the *okroshka*. There are many things best served cold like that. Pickled cucumbers, Olivje potato salad, some good Salo bacon, salami and cheese, herring and caviar, and one thing more—my favorite."

"And what is that?" Volkov met his eye.

"Why, revenge," Karpov smiled. "And some good vodka and beer." He picked up a small open faced sandwich, dilled sardines on thin rye, and took a bite.

* * *

Mishman Ilya Garin stared at the test-bed monitor, watching the flux readings closely. His prompt readings looked safe, and the rod interchange procedure was progressing slowly, approaching the half way mark when Markov would spell him on the watch. Chief engineer Dobrynin was down the hall looking over readings obtained by the electron microscope they had

used to make a close inspection of Rod-25 as it was slowly lowered into position.

They were actually working on a low grade KLT-40 naval propulsion reactor that had been built as a backup for the floating nuclear power station barge *Akademik Lomonosov*, deployed in the Kamchatka Peninsula region since 2016. The Russians thought a movable power facility would be useful in the region, and the design was so reliable that in 2018 they set up the reserve reactor as a test-bed facility in the Primorskiy Engineering Center. The KLT-40 was similar to the reactors used aboard *Kirov*, which paired two small pressurized water reactors using enriched U-234. Some models for commercial power generation might have as many as sixty-six control rods above the reactor vessel head, but this smaller test-bed model had only twelve, and much less power.

Dobrynin was quietly running the same typical rod replacement routine, while conducting a general scan of Rod-25 for any sign of corrosion, or flaw. He had mounted the rod in the central test position, in the middle of a circle of the remaining twelve rods. So today the control rod that would stand as relief pitcher for *Kirov's* starting rotation of twenty-four rods per reactor, was now actually Rod-13 in this minor league game. All told, this test-bed facility reactor might produce ten percent or less of the power *Kirov's* plant generated, a good safe environment to see if they could detect any anomalies with the makeup of the rod itself under real working conditions.

Markov came in with a folded magazine under his arm and tapped Garin on the shoulder as he took his seat at the monitor station. "Lunch Ilya," he said. "And then when you finish, Dobrynin wants you to collate the inspection results."

"More charts and tables," said Garin. "What are we supposed to be looking for, Markov?"

"Don't ask me. We just read the monitors. Let the Chief worry about it."

"He is worried," Garin thumbed over his shoulder to the long corridor behind the doorway out. "The Admiral was here all morning with him, and now more reports."

"It's the damn inspection," said Markov. "They say Kapustin is going over everything with a white glove. They're interviewing lots of crew members too, even *matoc* level."

"Lucky for us we don't know anything, eh?" Garin said glibly. "What are you reading?"

“Just a magazine.” He slid the magazine Garin’s way, open to an article where the headline read: ‘British Remember Fallen in Agreement Gone Bad.’

“Well, keep your eyes on the monitors, Markov. You can read your magazine in the break room. Yes?”

“Go and eat, Ilya. I’ll see you in another hour.”

It was actually going to be a good deal longer. Garin went down the long corridor past the inspection room where Dobrynin was working, and into the cafeteria for his meal break. Half way through his sandwich there was a noticeable flutter in the overhead lighting. He looked up, saw a neon bulb winking fitfully, and gave it no more thought. A little over an hour later he finished his tea and went back down the hallway, sticking his head into the inspection room to tell Dobrynin he was going back to relieve Markov.

“Very good, Mister Garin. How’s the food tonight?”

“It’s very tasty, sir. Good rye bread. You should try it.”

“When I have finished looking over these readouts.”

“Markov says you want me to collate the data again?”

“If you would be so kind, Mister Garin.”

Garin looked at his watch. “The cycle is nearly over now, sir. Any problems?”

“We won’t know until we get all the data from the scan. But you can commence your shutdown sequence now. Number twenty-five has already been withdrawn and the original twelve apostles seem to be praying quietly. Move in the remaining 12 rods now and commence shutdown. Markov can take his meal break.”

“Yes, sir. I’ll get right down there.”

Garin slipped out the door, and ran down the hall to the reactor room, inserting his key card for entry and waiting until he had a green access light. He pushed open the door, thinking the room seemed a bit dim, and heard it close behind him.

“Markov, your turn,” he said. “The bread is pretty good tonight, but not before we run the shutdown sequence. Then I’ll have to spend another two hours collating the data from the scan.”

He walked into the control room, thinking it seemed oddly strange. Then he realized what was wrong. His coat was missing from the wall rack. There was nothing on the monitor desk, not the book he had been reading, the empty tea cup or his pen. Markov’s magazine was gone as well. In fact the *chairs* were missing. What was going on here?

“Markov?”

Garin leaned around to look behind the monitor station, but there was no sign of the other man. Where was he? Dobrynin would have a fit if he found out Markov had left his shift early. There was no restroom in the test-bed monitoring station, but perhaps he drank too much tea and had to run out. He could understand him taking the book and magazine, but the chairs? It made no sense. The Chief was going to skin him alive. Human eyes had to be on the monitors at all times during any part of a core maintenance procedure, and he shook his head, looking at the monitors with relief when he saw no warning lights.

Stupid Markov, he thought. He’ll get himself into some real trouble if I tell the Chief he left his station. What’s he doing with the chairs? Then he reached up and toggled the switches to initiate a full system shutdown, concluding the test. Another set of twelve more rods would descend into the reactor vessel, stilling down the fission to a very low level prior to final shutdown.

The wall intercom buzzed, and he walked over to it and thumbed the call button. “Reactor Testing Room, Mishman Garin speaking.”

“Garin? Have Markov come in here with his clipboard before he takes his meal break.” It was Chief Dobrynin.

Garin looked around…the clipboard was also gone. “Sir,” he began. “Markov is no longer here, and the clipboard is missing. He must have taken it with him.” He hated to be a snitch, but it had to be said. “He was not here when I arrived to relieve him, Chief.”

“Not there? I’ll fry him in oil! Where is he, that good for nothing… Never mind, Garin. Just complete the shutdown sequence. I’ll be there in a few minutes. If I find him in the head I’ll flush his own stupid head down the toilet!”

“One more thing, sir…” Garin bit the bullet and made his report. “The chairs are missing. Both of them, sir.” He felt stupid as well, but what else could he say?

“The chairs are missing?”

The chairs were missing, the clipboard was gone. Garin’s jacket was no longer on the wall rack, the book and magazine were gone, and Markov’s tea was missing too. *Markov* was missing, and it would be the last that any man alive on earth that day would ever see of him.

Part IV

Storm Clouds

“What if tomorrow vanished in the storm? What if time stood still? And yesterday--if once we lost our way, blundered in the storm--would we find yesterday again ahead of us, where we had thought tomorrow's sun would rise?”

— Robert Nathan, Portrait of Jennie

Chapter 10

Doctor Zolkin was the first senior officer on the scene, arriving behind the two Seamen and a 2nd Class Petty Officer. There were a cluster of three or four other sailors outside the hatch, and he quickly shooed them away. Peering into the cabin, he saw the men ready to lift another man from the cot, and stepped quickly inside, closing the hatch behind him.

"Leave him there, please," he said, stepping to the side of the cot and seeing the man's limp body. One look told him he was not merely asleep or unconscious. He opened an eyelid, saw the dark weal and purple bruise marks on the man's neck, checked for a pulse there and noted the stain on his pants in the groin area. It was Voloshin, the man who had come to him a few weeks earlier with nightmare visions of a Japanese plane flying right through him. Zolkin had prescribed a good meal and bed rest, with a couple of aspirin infused with a mild tranquilizer, and sent the man to this very room on the officer's deck for some peace and quiet. That was weeks ago, but Voloshin had come back. An orderly had been cleaning the empty rooms and found it difficult to enter here. Forcing the hatch open he saw Voloshin hanging from a high welded metal hook on the wall. He was stone cold dead.

"When did you find him?"

"Just ten minutes ago, sir. He was there." The Petty officer pointed to the hook, and Zolkin nodded gravely.

"Very well, fetch a stretcher and take him down to the sick bay. I'll have to do an autopsy."

"Yes, sir."

"And I think it would be best if you do not dwell on this in the ranks," the Doctor admonished. "We have all had a hard ride of late, and the men are worn out."

"It wasn't only that, sir."

"Oh?"

"Voloshin got some bad news today."

"What news?"

"His wife, sir. He called home, but no one answered. The second time there was another man on the phone. He asked for her, but the man said there was no one by that name there."

“I see…” Zolkin picked up his emergency medical kit. “And you think Voloshin believed his wife was seeing this other man?”

The two *matros* seamen shifted uncomfortably now and the other man continued. “It’s not that, sir. Voloshin moved his family here to Vladivostok two weeks before we made our farewell voyage from Severomorsk. He had a small apartment right here in Vladivostok—in the Leninskiy District. We went there with him yesterday but…”

“But what?”

“There was no apartment there, Doctor. He had building number twenty, but the numbers were all wrong: nineteen, twenty-one, twenty-three.”

“You were on the right side of the street?”

“Of course, sir. But there were no even numbers, not anywhere on the street. It was very strange, sir. We looked up the address for his phone number, and it was way over on the other side of town, number 20 Partisanskiy Prospekt. But his apartment building was on Nevel’skogo Street. He was very upset about it, sir.”

“I can imagine he was.”

Zolkin wanted to think that the men had simply gone to the wrong address. After all, Voloshin had just moved to a new town thousands of miles from the cold north of Severomorsk. It may have been easy to become confused in the unfamiliar streets and neighborhoods of the city here. Yet, the more he thought about it the more he realized that the man would not likely forget the place of his new home, and the new life he hoped to start here.

“Very well, gentlemen. I’ll look into this. See that he is taken to sick bay at once.” He went to the linen cabinet and took out a clean sheet, covering Voloshin’s body with an air of solemnity. He was reaching for his medical bag again when someone stepped through the hatch, a tall officer in a gray overcoat with silver buttons and Captain’s stripes on his cuff. The man took a quick look at the scene and fixed his attention on the Doctor, knowing he would be the senior man present.

“What happened here?”

Zolkin gave him a quick glance. He did not know the man and so he stood formally and introduced himself. “Doctor Dmitri Zolkin, Ship’s Physician.”

“This man is ill?”

“I’m sorry, sir, but who might I be speaking to?”

The other man seemed annoyed, his eyes narrowed and a haughty air about him. “Volkov,” he said dryly. “*Captain* Volkov, Naval Intelligence.”

“Yes, well it’s Captain Zolkin here as well.” The Doctor smiled, extending a hand, which Volkov shook without much warmth. “There,” Zolkin continued. “Now that the Captains have tipped their hats, I think we would be more comfortable discussing this in my office. These men will have some work to do. Would you walk with me, Captain Volkov?” He gestured to the open door, and Volkov frowned, then stepped outside.

“You haven’t answered my question, Doctor,” he said as they started down the corridor.

“Was the man ill? No, Captain. The man was quite dead.”

“Dead?”

“Unfortunately so. From my initial observations it appears to be a suicide, but of course I will complete a formal autopsy and make a full report.”

“Were those other men involved?”

“No, no. They were just orderlies assigned to clean the officer’s quarters. They found him here.”

“This man was an officer?”

“In fact, he was not. That was Able Seaman Voloshin. Apparently he had some family problems—bad news.”

“What was he doing here?”

“It will most likely be a long story, Captain.”

“I see…Well I will want the full report, Doctor.”

“*You* will want the report? Are you a new command level officer assigned to the ship, Mister Volkov?”

“I told you. I am with Naval Intelligence, Inspectorate Division.”

“Well I am not in the habit of filing my medical briefs with the Naval Inspectorate. I thought you people were mostly concerned with ship’s systems and weapons inventories.”

“I’m afraid we concern ourselves with a great deal more, Doctor, though I can’t say that is a matter I need to discuss with you. Simply file your brief in the medical log, and of course I will want a complete copy of all those files as well.”

Zolkin raised his eyebrows. “I will hate to inconvenience you, Captain, but the logs were damaged during the accident. I’m not sure if you heard. Yes, nothing seemed to function properly and the technicians haven’t had time to get round to my office yet with a new computer. I’ve kept a few manual records, of course, for all prescriptions and drugs issued from the inventory. But there have been no formal computer logs, beyond

documenting those men lost in the accident and other injuries sustained by the crew."

They paused at a ladder, and it was clear that Volkov was not happy. "No medical logs?" he said, a note of recrimination in his voice. "This is most irregular, Doctor. In fact I may go so far as to say it was a dereliction of duty."

"I can assure you, Captain, where the notion of duty entered my mind it was entirely to be of service to the men lined up outside my sick bay door. Of course I made basic notations in my medical journal, which I would be happy to release to the inspectorate upon approval by a ranking command level officer."

"I am such an officer, Doctor. Don't trouble yourself by going to the Admiral."

"You are now in the command structure for this ship? When did you transfer in, Volkov?"

"Don't be stupid. I haven't transferred in. I'm here to complete a thorough investigation on this matter, and I will expect the full cooperation of every man aboard, particularly from the officers."

"Oh, I will be very happy to satisfy you, Captain, but around here we do things by the book. I'll need approval from ether Captain Karpov or the Admiral. After that you can spend all the time you wish trying to interpret my miserable writing scrawl. But then again, Physicians are notorious for that, yes?"

Zolkin smiled, gesturing to the ladder well. "After you, sir."

Volkov clenched his jaw, then relented and started down the ladder, flashing an angry glance at Zolkin as he went.

* * *

Admiral Volsky had finished his main meeting with Pacific Fleet Commander Boris Abramov, clearing the way for his takeover of that position. Now the two men sat in a well appointed office at the Fleet Headquarters building at Fokino, a small closed town above a small inlet some twenty-five miles southeast of the main harbor at Vladivostok. Volsky set down his teacup, staring out over the blue rooftops of the town to the small islands in the bay and wondering if he would ever get back to a place like Tahiti before he died.

“So that is the situation, Leonid,” said Abramov. “One old *Slava* class cruiser, five rusting destroyers, a few frigates, ten submarines with so many leaks we issue the men chewing gum so they can have something handy to plug them when needed. Thank God they sent us *Kuznetsov*, and now your ship. The fleet is a bit of a mess, particularly with the present situation down south in the Sea of Japan.”

“Where is *Kuznetsov?”*

“Up north at the moment, running drills with her Mig-29F Squadron. We’d still be flying the older SU-33s if India hadn’t placed that order in 2012. That gave us enough economy of scale to roll out thirty-six Migs for *Kuznetsov*. It must be getting lonely up in Severomorsk with *Kirov* and our only fleet carrier here now.”

“They just commissioned the *Leonid Brezhnev*. He’ll stand in for us there. And they get most of the new *Orlan* Class ships. But what’s this business with Japan? We must talk about that now. We’ve been incommunicado for the last five or six weeks and missed out on all the news.”

“That was quite a hat trick,” Admiral. “If not for the fact that NATO staff are getting flayed alive for failing to detect your transit to the Pacific I think *you* would be the one being skinned. Suchkov was very upset. How did you manage it?”

“Suchkov is so old he can’t even think straight any longer,” said Volsky with a laugh. “He has nothing better to do than huff and puff before they put him in dry dock for good. We are the navy now, my friend. You, me and Tamilov in the Black Sea. God only knows who they will appoint to take my place up north. Suchkov can sit in Moscow and write his memoirs now.”

“You and Tamilov can run things, Leonid. I’m afraid I am not well—heart problems, and the doctors want to do some surgery.”

“You’ll pull through,” Volsky encouraged, but he could see that Abramov was also on his last voyage, tired, pale and with that rheumy eyed look that spoke of too much time on the seas of life.

“As for how we slipped by, that is our little secret. I have some very good people aboard *Kirov*. We had a lot of trouble with the electronics when *Orel* blew up, but we managed to get a few things running from ship’s stores. I put my best people on it, and we used a new ECM package that we unfortunately lost in that last missile misfire incident I told you about earlier. But while we had it up and running it was enough to get us through the northern route undetected. That and some very bad weather and thick cloud cover.”

“Amazing. I would have thought they would have had three submarines on you the moment you deployed.”

“Perhaps they did, Boris, but that was a very large detonation when *Orel* went up. Who knows what it did to their electronics? I knew that the whole place was going to be crawling with planes, ships and helicopters within twenty-four hours. We made a cursory investigation, found nothing—not even *Slava*—and so I wanted to get my ship as far from that area as possible. NATO spent the next three days searching south of Jan Mayen, yes? I went northwest, and that’s the last thing they might have expected.”

“I still can hardly believe it. You lost contact with *Slava* too?”

“Must have been our faulty equipment.”

“Radar, Sonar, Radio?”

“Have you ever tried to listen to the deep ocean after an underwater nuclear explosion?”

“It was nuclear?”

“We believed as much, and given the threat of radiation I wanted to get my ship to safer climes. I assumed *Slava* would do the same and return home. Those were her orders, mine were to transit to the Pacific, and since I was the one who issued those orders, I decided to follow them.” Volsky smiled.

“They didn’t even find you with satellites, at least not that we know of.”

“Good point, Admiral. We don’t know what they really knew about it. For all we know they could have been watching me from up there the whole time and now they are making this media fuss to simply cover their tracks. In any case, I am here, the ship is here, and once he’s been patched up, *Kirov* will put some backbone into the Pacific Fleet again.”

Unlike their Western counterparts, ships were masculine in the Russian Navy. The Russians couldn’t think of anything with the sheer raw power and hard lines of a battlecruiser as feminine.

“But tell me about this trouble in the Sea of Japan.” Volsky folded his arms, watching the white haired Abramov reach for a computer pad and slide it his way across the desk top.

“There you are,” he said. “I’ve poked at it long enough. See if you can make any sense of it.”

Volsky read the headline, thinking of the newspaper they had found on Malus Island with an inner shiver. It read: CHINA PROTESTS NEW JAPANESE NAVAL MANEUVERS, an old story in the Pacific, but one that

was increasingly occupying the front pages of news outlets across the world."

"Another protest," he sighed.

"More than that, Leonid," Abramov cautioned. "We have satellites too. The Chinese have been moving a lot of equipment around in the last few months—a lot of mobile rocket launchers. They've been rattling their saber again over the latest election results in Taiwan. They did not wish to see a president elected there who was so firmly set on Taiwan's independence."

"Yes, for a nation always wagging their fingers at people who interfere in their own internal politics, they are very fond of also sticking them in everyone else's business."

"Just like the Americans," Abramov shrugged. "It's a new world, Leonid. It's China's world too, particularly here in the Pacific. We're just tired old men watching over a few tired old ships up here. China is calling the shots in the Pacific now, as we both know all too well. They didn't like it when Japan modified those new helicopter destroyers and then put a squadron of F-35s on them."

Abramov was referring to the 19000T class destroyer, now reclassified as light escort carriers and the largest surface combatants in the present Japanese Navy at a length of 248 meters and 27,000 tons fully loaded. Japan's constitution had prohibited the deployment of nuclear weapons, strategic strike bombers and attack aircraft carriers, but the naval planners had argued that the new ships were defensive in nature. Then they modified them to allow for takeoff and landing of the JF-35B *Lightning* Joint Strike Fighter, a small squadron of only seven planes to augment the helicopters carried by the ships. If that was not enough of a provocation, naming their last two of four units in the class *Kaga* and *Akagi* after their old WWII era fleet carriers did little to comfort the Chinese.

It was the same old story again, as nations quibbled over limits on things like weapons systems, ship classes, and naval deployments, and haggled over deserted islands off each other's coasts, mostly for the oil and gas rights in the seabed beneath them. The world of 2021 was slowly starving for energy. Oil and gas had carried the weight of development into the 21st century, but there had been no wide scale deployment of a reliable energy source that was not nuclear to stand in for the rapidly depleting resources in the petroleum industry. Nations were getting hungry now, their economies needing constant production to remain viable, and competition for any new oil and gas fields was bordering on fierce. The military forces of many key regional powers

had now become oil and gas protection services, for the wheels had to always turn, and they were starting to slow down again, in the factories of China and on the freeways of the U.S.

“The Japanese Navy now outclasses our own fleet Pacific Fleet,” said Abramov. “They have these two light carriers, then two more smaller DDH type ships in their *Hyuga* Class, ten excellent new guided missile destroyers and another thirty DD and DE class warships—not to mention the sixteen submarines. Yes, some of those older destroyers date back to the 1980s like our *Udaloys*, but they have been well maintained. We’re still scraping the rust off our older ships to see what we can get seaworthy. I managed to get three old KGB *Krivak* class border guard frigates out to train with *Kuznetsov*, if you can believe it.”

“Krivaks? We’ve been selling off the best of those refits to the Indian Navy. Now I suppose we will wish we had them for ourselves.”

“So as you can see, Japan will be no pushover.”

“You will get no argument from me on that point,” said Volsky. “I am well aware of the capabilities of the Japanese navy.” He could, of course, never tell Abramov what he really meant with that.

“Yes, well their navy now outnumbers us almost three to one here in the Pacific, and without ships like *Kirov* and *Kuznetsov*, we’ve become little more than a coastal defense force, and a bunch of submarine tenders.”

“That’s a good looking new ship off our port side at the berthing,” said Volsky.

“Yes, the *Orlan* will help a little, and we just received the fast frigate *Admiral Golovko* as well, but without *Kirov*, this is still a three week fleet, if we could even last that long.”

“I’m afraid it may take a little longer than that to get *Kirov* back in full fighting trim,” Volsky sighed. “It was a difficult journey, my friend.” Volsky lowered his voice now. “I’ll tell you about it one day, but for now I have Kapustin sniffing around over there, and a lot of questions to answer.”

“Kapustin is a bureaucrat,” said Abramov, “very thorough too. He’ll work sixteen hour days, and no amount of paperwork will intimidate him. But it’s not Kapustin you should be worried about. He brought along Volkov, and that man is old school Naval Intelligence, sour as a lemon. He’ll be a pain in your neck in no time at all.”

Volsky nodded. Then slid the computer pad back over to Abramov and leaned heavily over the desk, his brow furrowed, eyes reflecting real worry

beneath his heavy brows. “Boris…There’s a storm coming, and a very big one I fear. An American submarine snuck up on us when we were finishing up exercises in the Pacific, and we almost put a *Shkval* up their ass. Things are wound up tighter than a spring, and anything could set them off in this climate. Yes, there’s a storm coming, and if we can’t find some way to prevent it, then we had better be ready for it. Only this time… this time if the missiles start flying I must tell you I don’t hold out much hope for the world.”

The memory of Halifax Harbor was clear in his mind now, and a dark and ominous shadow on his soul.

Chapter 11

Inspector Kapustin sat at the desk, eyes intent on the list now, and a look of perplexed apprehension on his face. Volkov stood by the door, waiting for his reaction, a half smile on his face and the look of a self-righteous snitch all too apparent.

“Are you certain of this list?” said Kapustin. “These are the names of all men who died?”

“I got it straight from the ship’s physician, sir, though that took some doing. The impudent old man insisted I go to Karpov first, and we both know what a prick that man is.”

It takes one to know one, thought Kapustin, but he said nothing, staring solemnly at the list, his discomfiture more and more evident. “But I just consulted the ship’s register, and none of these names are even listed there. Could they have been stricken from the register as these casualties were reported.”

“I considered that, sir, but decided to check. I phoned Moscow on this and got the Naval Personnel Division to sent me over the entire active duty roster for *Kirov* as of 28 July of this year. None of those names were on the list, sir.”

Kapustin leaned back, his hand straying to his chin to run through the thick stubble of his curly gray beard. “Are you suggesting that these names were fabricated? That no one actually died and that they had to make this all up to bolster this story that all the damage was from the *Orel* incident?”

“I thought that as well, sir. Until I found these in the sick bay. It seems the good Doctor kept a few paper files in his cabinet. Not everything is digital these days.”

“You searched the Doctor’s files?”

“Well he wasn’t very cooperative, sir. In fact he’s somewhat of an obstructionist, hiding behind that home spun wit of his. But I got to the bottom of things, sir. If those names were fabricated, then have a look at these.” He handed the Director three manila file folders, old crew personnel documents attached from the days of typewriters and fax machines. The documents were typical naval records, service history, promotion reviews for

three junior grade Lieutenants.

"All three of these men are on the casualty list." Kapustin was more confused than ever. "If that list was fabricated, then someone went to a great deal of trouble to produce all this material for these three men. I can think of no reason why."

"There's more, sir," Volkov rocked forward on his toes slightly, the light of the chase in his dark eyes. "I interviewed some of the men below decks. They say they knew those three men—talked about them as though they had just come from the mess hall together. Those men *were* on the ship, sir. I have every confidence in that."

"They were on the ship, you say. The men knew of them, and here are thick typewritten files on all three, but the navy has absolutely no record of these men. Is that it?"

"Correct sir, and so I asked about many of the other men on the list. Yes, the men all knew them, they were all here, sir."

"So it is obvious the list was not fabricated. They must have stricken those names from their register here, and Moscow has botched things up on their end. I cannot possibly conceive that Doctor Zolkin would write up such a list for formal submission to the Naval Inspectorate. A fabricated list? The man would have to be a lunatic to submit such a document in light of the present circumstances."

"I did say I thought him to be somewhat of an obstructionist, sir. But the testimony of the other crewmen must also be considered. I spoke with the senior *mishman* in every section where the men on that list were posted. They all spoke glowingly of their service and performance, and expressed their sorrow for their loss."

"Then how stupid and incompetent can the Naval Personnel Division be?" Kapustin threw the three manila files down on his desk now. "Have them verify their information on all these men. Tell them I want them to go into the paper archives as well. Some clerk might have thumbed his keyboard and wiped an entire data block. That's the trouble with this world, Volkov. It's all been reduced to ones and zeros. Well I, for one, am not willing to accept the fact that thirty-six men could have simply waltzed aboard the flagship of the Northern Fleet and merrily taken up posts on the ship with *no record of their existence whatsoever!*" Kapustin's anger was plain now.

"I will make another telephone call, sir, and I hope you are correct. Perhaps the files are in the paper archives, but if they are not…Then we have

some real cloak and dagger work to do here. And there is another matter. A man was found dead in the officers' quarters today—a man named Volushin—and it appears to have been a suicide."

"Suicide?"

"The men I spoke with claim he had family problems, but listen to this…" Volkov told the Director what he had learned, the whole sad tale of a simple *matoc* come home to find his wife and family, indeed his apartment as well, all missing.

"Not there?" Kapustin was irritated now. "Then they moved before this man arrived here. This is no mystery."

"I haven't been able to determine that yet, sir, but the incident was enough for this man to take his life."

"More than one sailor has come home to find his wife run off with another man, Volkov. Don't concern yourself with it."

"Another man went missing just yesterday, sir." Volkov was working down his shit list.

"A crewman?"

"Yes, sir, a fellow named Markov. He was with the Chief Engineer, Dobrynin. They were over in the nuclear reactor test-bed facility doing some maintenance and he turned up missing when his shift relief came in."

"This man deserted his post?"

"It appears that way. Frankly, I find the lack of discipline in this crew to be a matter of some concern as well."

"Aside from the damage, the ship appears to be running smoothly, Volkov. In fact, I would go so far as to say this is an exemplary crew. They complete their work rotations smartly, and there seems to be a real esprit de corps among them."

"That's just it, sir. There's an edge to them that almost borders on insubordination at times. Take this Doctor Zolkin, for example."

"There you go riding that man's back again, Volkov. Give it a rest. I know Zolkin, and yes he's a bit of an eccentric, but a fine physician, with thirty years in the service. Let him be."

"Very well, but this Karpov is a bit too cheeky for my taste," Volkov folded his arms, shifting targets.

"So are you, Volkov! I guess when they give a man that last stripe to make him a Captain of the First Rank he wants to let everyone else know it. Yes, Karpov can be arrogant at times, and his reputation is a bit sinister, but

he's a fine command level officer, one of the best in the fleet, or why else would the navy have given him *Kirov?"*

"As we have seen, sir, the navy makes mistakes."

Kapustin gave him a wry smile, then leaned back, tapping a pen on his notepad. "Anything more?"

"The *Starpom*, sir. The ex-navigator."

"Ah…yes. Anton Fedorov. What about him?"

"He was a Junior Lieutenant, and was promoted several ranks in just the last six weeks! Volsky moved him all the way up to Captain of the Second Rank. That is very unusual, sir."

"I'll make a note to discuss the matter with the Admiral when he returns from his business ashore. Is that all?"

"No sir, I have one other issue that we need to discuss. There was one man on that casualty list that *did* have a record on file in the personnel division. He was Chief of Operations, Captain Gennadi Orlov."

"Orlov? I have heard of this man. He was on a *Sovremenny* Class Destroyer years ago and worked his way over to *Kirov*. A disagreeable man, from what I have heard."

"Well he stood second to Karpov on this ship, sir. This Anton Fedorov appears to have been promoted when he was killed in that helicopter incident."

"That explains Fedorov then."

"Not entirely, sir. Fedorov was just a navigator. He had no combat training at all. Don't you think it is odd for him to be made *Starpom?*

"Perhaps, but I said I would discuss this with Volsky. Get back to Orlov. What did you learn?"

"I overheard a couple of the Marines talking about this man—Orlov. They were none too complimentary, and when I stepped into the helo bay to ask them about it, they suddenly changed their tune, became happy little school boys and had nothing but good things to say about him. It was very suspicious, sir."

Kapustin sighed, scratching his head. "Volkov, Volkov. You think the men in the ranks will ever say what they *really* think of a senior officer to his face—or to you, for that matter? You might be shocked to hear things that are said about you behind your own back. And don't be surprised to see a man's temperament change like the weather. Forget about such nonsense. Now I have a matter that is of some real concern. I spoke with the ship's

Quartermaster—a man named Martinov. This ship was issued three special warheads for this sortie, though none were authorized for live firing exercises—but one is missing, and a second has been mounted on the number ten cruise missile."

"One is missing?"

"Yes… I suppose the warhead mounted is of no real concern. They may have run some kind of drill for special weapons. But for a nuclear warhead to turn up missing? What do you think about this, Volkov. You want a smoking gun? There it is."

"Correct, sir. Could they have fired it in the drills on Volsky's command?"

"Perhaps, but it would be most irregular."

"An accident, sir? Considering what happened to *Orel*, I would not be surprised…My God! What if this was the warhead that killed *Orel?"*

"I considered that as well. These are questions easily answered when we sit down with the senior officers after the general audit. In either case, whether it was fired on Volsky's order, or whether it was a mistake, someone will have to answer for it."

That brought a smile to Volkov's face. "I *knew* there was something suspicious about the damaged logs, sir. They were trying to cover something up, it was no accident. I think they deliberately purged the records to prevent us from discovering what happened."

"Then they were quite stupid. As you can see, a simple audit of remaining weapons inventory has led us to this. If they wanted to cover this up, they should have worked a little harder."

"I don't think they could create a dummy warhead, sir." Volkov shook his head. "Perhaps this Karpov is not so clever and conniving as his reputation warrants."

"Karpov? Why do you grab Karpov's ear? Volsky is the only one who could have authorized the use of nuclear weapons. You think Karpov would have rotated a special warhead into their firing plan without his approval? Don't be stupid."

Volkov cocked his head to one side, thinking. "Then we have bigger fish than Karpov to fry here, sir. You know Suchkov is very upset with Volsky as it stands."

"Yes, he was not happy that he continued his mission, particularly incommunicado, without informing Severomorsk of his intention to do so.

Here we thought *Kirov* was lost in that accident, and the navy expended considerable time and resources investigating the *Orel* incident, including a great deal of my own time. It was even considered that *Kirov* had been sunk by enemy action. I know we don't want our egos bruised, Volkov, but not even our mighty *Kirov* is invulnerable. Hit a ship with the right weapon, in the right place, and it will sink. Well, we never found any sign of *Kirov* at the bottom of the Arctic sea. *Orel* was there, but *Kirov* just seemed to have disappeared—until she suddenly radioed in a week ago, badly damaged."

"You are correct, sir. Volsky must answer for this."

"Yes, and here he is poised to take over command of the entire Pacific Fleet, such as it is. This is no small matter, Captain. You are well aware of what's been going on politically in the Pacific. China was not happy about the election results in Taiwan. They have been taking their tea cups out of the cupboard and setting the table all along the coast from Hong Kong to Shanghai. The Senkaku Island dispute is just a sideshow. It's Taiwan they're after. They always have been. Did you see the latest satellite photography from Shantou Harbor?" Kapustin was obviously referring to the Chinese naval base there.

"Well the Chinese have moved a number of their smaller Type 071 amphibious assault ships there, and two more of the bigger Type 081s."

"We were aware of this in Naval Intelligence."

"Of course," Kapustin continued. "And you are also aware of the fact that they are moving more mobile ballistic missiles to that coastline. This may be more than a simple show of force, Captain. What do your people think about it?"

"I agree, sir. The Chinese are serious this time. They've been very patient over the Taiwan issue, and frankly more than patient with Japan. They had to be, sir, because they first needed to build a navy that could match Japan's before they started throwing their weight around. Now they have that navy, and they won't take no for an answer any longer when it comes to issues like the Senkaku Islands or Taiwan. And by the way sir, as we have signed on to the SinoPac alliance treaty, we have taken to calling those islands the Diaoyutai over at Naval Intelligence Division. One has to be at least politically correct, even if the Japanese still maintain control there."

"Well what I am suggesting, Volkov, is that things may change—and very soon. Yes, China is sending a couple of destroyers to these islands, and we must join the party. But the real business here is happening at Shantou

Harbor. I have little doubt that your satellite photo analysts will soon be reporting those amphibious assault ships are loading tanks and helicopters."

"There has also been a major re-deployment of PLAN Air Force units to the coastal airfields, sir."

"So the movement of all these planes, missiles, ships and helicopters will not go unnoticed by the Americans."

"Of course not, sir. They have already dispatched another carrier to the region. The *Eisenhower* left the Persian Gulf last week, but it did not head west for Norfolk. They moved it into the Indian Ocean, and it is joining the *Nimitz* here in the Pacific. Both ships are quite old, and scheduled for retirement soon, but they are still in the equation as far as we are concerned. The Americans can double up on that ante if things get serious here. They still have CVN *Washington* In Yokosuka ready for immediate deployment, and then *Stennis* and *Ford* on their Pacific coast at Bremerton and San Diego. That's a lot of carrier based air power if push comes to shove."

"Push *will* come to shove, Captain. There's a real storm brewing this time. Why do you think we transferred *Kirov* here to the Pacific fleet? Now look at her! We can patch her up to get her seaworthy again, but Volsky has delivered damaged goods and he's going to have to pay for it, one way or another. And that, Volkov, is why *we* are here. Yes? Follow up on that casualty list, but I think we have all the rope we need to hang Volsky with this missing nuclear warhead."

Chapter 12

Zolotoy Drakon, or the Golden Dragon, was in the growing Chinatown district near the naval moorings in Vladivostok harbor, up a plain street of weathered storefronts and eateries that were slowly remodeling for the new tourism business.

The dinner house itself was nicely appointed, with white table linen, candle light, a solitary orchid for an elegant centerpiece, and clean long-stemmed crystal wine glasses. Admiral Volsky settled into the comfortable high backed chair with Karpov and Fedorov, the irony of the moment not lost on him when Karpov mentioned their second choice for the meeting was the popular *Yamato* Sushi bar a few blocks north off the wharf district.

“Here we are, home at last, and settling in for Chinese food instead of a good borscht!”

“Things could be worse, Admiral,” said Fedorov. “The Captain here suggested sushi, but somehow I could not bring myself to that just yet after what we have just experienced.”

“Well, things are heating up again around the islands northeast of Taiwan,” said Volsky. “The Japanese have a destroyer flotilla on maneuvers and Abramov informed me this morning that the government has received a formal request for a combined show of force in the East China Sea. They want us to send a few ships to join the party. Two of their new destroyers are set to deploy from a Zhanjiang, the *Lanzhou* and *Haikou*.”

“Those are updated destroyers,” said Karpov, “their newest designs.”

“Correct,” said Volsky. “Which means we can’t very well send out a couple of old *Udaloy* class ships. It would be embarrassing. Here we taught them virtually everything they know about building a navy, shipped them the necessary weapons, and then watched them buy most of our carriers and start out producing us at our own game. We will have to send the frigate *Golovko* and the destroyer *Orlan*. Those are the only two ships we have that could show up dressed well enough to make any impression on the Chinese.”

“Excuse me, Admiral,” said Fedorov. “But why send any ships at all? It will just be a provocation. We send a flotilla, the Japanese send one, and on it goes. The next thing we know we are reading those headlines in the

newspaper we found on Malus island."

"I understand exactly what you are saying, Fedorov, But Abramov says he has been ordered to send the ships, and until the Naval Inspectorate completes this business over *Kirov*, he remains the nominal Fleet Commander for another week The orders have already been cut."

"Why not speak with him, Admiral? Convince him this is useless escalation."

"I have spoken with him, and he agrees, but that does not change the fact that he has orders from Moscow. Yes, Admirals get orders too. Hopefully this sortie will be nothing more than a dog and pony show. But in the meantime, gentlemen, I suggest we all get used to eating Chinese food. What do I do with these?" He held up his chopsticks, winking at them. Then he settled in to a more serious tone.

"How are things going aboard *Kirov*, Karpov?"

"Not as well as I might hope. We lost a man yesterday—an apparent suicide—Voloshin."

"Suicide? Did Zolkin say anything about it?"

"He said the man was having nightmares, like we all are these days. On top of that it looks like his wife and family ran out on him."

Volsky shook his head, deeply troubled by the news. "We must do more for the crew, be more vigilant and see to their needs. They have been through hell and back."

"The Inspection isn't helping matters either. This Captain Volkov is a bit of a ramrod. He's been walking the ship, talking with the men, prying into compartments below decks. Yesterday he was jousting with Doctor Zolkin. Today he spent half the day with Chief Byko."

"Zolkin? What did he want with him?"

"Ship's medical records. Reports on the men we lost during our little odyssey through the 1940s. It still sounds crazy every time I think of it."

"I have a bad feeling about that man," said Fedorov. "He seems like a dog pulling on a rope. We did our best to cover things up, and our story seems to be holding for the moment, but a man like that can be trouble, and there will likely be things we overlooked or failed to consider completely. Everything that man uncovers will just make him want to dig deeper."

"Medical records…" Volsky thought about that. "What would he want with medical records of the men we lost?"

There was a silence at the table, and then Karpov put his napkin down and

spoke. “We may have a problem here, Admiral. I received a communication from the Naval Personnel Records Bureau. It was addressed to me personally, and came in through Nikolin’s board, properly coded, so that makes it an order.”

“What did they want?” Volsky had been so busy facilitating Dobrynin’s project and conferring with Abramov that he had been out of the loop on ship’s matters.

“They wanted me to transfer any and all information from ship’s records on the men we lost. I told them that data was wiped out when the computers were damaged in the accident, but they mentioned hard files on three men. These were the men in the aft citadel when it got hit, and being Junior Grade Lieutenants or higher, they had to submit a file to Zolkin when they signed on. The Doctor overlooked these records when we purged our digital systems. Volkov found them.”

“So what is the problem?” Volsky did not understand.

“The problem is that the Personnel Division has no other information on these men. They say they have no record of them ever being assigned to *Kirov*. In fact, they say they have no record of them at all.”

“That’s ridiculous. That was Denikin, Krasnov and Rykov. I selected all three for their assignment here and got them set up in the battle bridge to complete their training for regular rotation onto the main bridge. Now I’ll be writing the letters to their family. What do they mean, no records?”

“It’s not just those three sir. They have nothing on any of the men we lost. Inspector Kapustin and his little wolf hound Volkov have been looking over the list of the entire ship’s compliment and verifying background checks on every man with Naval Intelligence.”

“Background checks?” Volsky seemed upset now.

“Yes, sir. I think they may suspect sabotage as a possible reason for some of the damage we sustained. Put that next to the fact that there is still a low simmer of talk in the ranks about what happened in the Atlantic, and this situation could get ugly very soon. You know they’re going to check the lock box on the special warheads, and verify all three are still in the magazine with Martinov.”

“I’ve considered that,” said Volsky heavily. “I suppose I can take it upon myself and say that I ordered the number ten MOS-III missile fired as part of our exercises, but that would be most irregular. A nuclear weapon is never used in such scenarios. Never. To say I ordered it would be to pit my present

rank and authority against the entire Naval Board in Moscow, and they won't like it. Suchkov is already hollering for my head on a platter. It would be just the thing he needs to turn a few more heads in his direction."

"Forgive me again, Admiral. This is of course all my fault."

"We both know it, Karpov. No need to go over that again."

"Then also forgive what I will say next. I didn't rise through the ranks to a Captaincy aboard the fleet's flagship by being a choir boy. I fought hard to get this position, and I know just how men like this Kapustin and Volkov think. I was a conniving, back stabbing, son-of-a bitch back then. I've seen things differently now after what we've been through, but if it comes down to Volkov or me, I'll know what to do about it, rest assured."

"This sort of infighting in the ranks has always been distasteful, Karpov, but I understand what you are saying. Yes, I suppose we can back Volkov down, but Kapustin is going to write the final report. Admiral Abramov has been somewhat sympathetic, and he seems to think Volkov is my main worry at the moment. I did not correct him, but I will tell you both now that it's Kapustin. Volkov is the front man. He will do the pushing and prodding and digging, but Kapustin writes the report. He makes the recommendations. They will discover that we're missing one of our nuclear eggs, and we'll have to answer for it."

"I have a possible solution, sir. I can tell you what I would do, or rather what the man I once was would do. In truth, I will also have to admit I still am that man. That same old black shark still circles in my soul, and if I let it take charge it would have come up with the simplest possible solution—blame it on a *matoc*. Say a man selected the wrong warhead. Isn't that what happened on *Orel?"*

"We don't really know," said Volsky. "I understand what you are saying, Karpov, but it's rather low."

"Of course it is. I was a man of few scruples."

"But you and I know this won't be so easy. No Able Seaman is going to have access to one of the special warheads. It would have to come from Martinov, and be mounted under his direct supervision. The number ten silo is also sealed and has multiple fail safe guards on it. How do you explain that away? Then we get to the matter of a command level key being required to arm and fire the missile, and we both know what happened there. No. This will not be easily foisted off as incompetence. No *matoc* could make that series of errors. It won't do, nor would I blame any innocent man on this ship

in the matter, living or dead."

"Then I will tell you next what this new Karpov would do—he would simply stand up to Kapustin and Volkov and take full responsibility for the whole incident."

"Very noble of you," said Volsky. "Yes, you could tell them you ordered Martinov to mount the warheads, and then you could tell them that it was your mistake as Bridge Tactical Officer, eh? But what about the key around your neck, and this one here around mine? Are you just going to tell them you decided you wanted to test a nuclear warhead while I was sleeping? Why? It is never done. It is completely unheard of, and you will lose your command, your rank, and may even be dismissed from the service."

"I've already lost my command and rank once over the matter," said Karpov. "The second time should be easier."

"But don't you understand?" Volsky held out an open palm as he explained. "Your action in defense of the ship, in a real combat scenario, is one thing. But remember, they must never know this ship ever fired a single round in anger. What would we have been firing at, eh? Try to stack that cup on the top of the plates and the whole thing comes tumbling down. The notion that we simply wanted to test a warhead won't fly either. What do I tell Kapustin then—that we were firing at the American navy in 1941?"

"Of course not, Admiral, but I think this is our only solution. I'll take the blame. It's mine and it is only right that I should pay for it. I gave the order to Martinov, told him to reset the Coded Switch Set Controller, and I fired the MOS-III. Tell them I was convinced a real test fire was necessary, that I had asked for permission to do so and it was denied, in fact expressly forbidden, and then I'll tell them I took it upon myself to countermand those orders while you were indisposed. That's what happened. It's our only way out of this mess."

Now Karpov's mind was truly working from within his old rotten center, where scheming and subterfuge were the order of the day. He knew men like Kapustin and Volkov, and he knew they were going to dig, and dig until they found something, and he explained it that way to the Admiral now, in the cold logic of the world he had fought his way through successfully all these many years.

"We have to give them something, sir. Give a dog his bone. Otherwise they will dig until they find one. Right now they are very suspicious. They are looking for possible sabotage. They can smell that something is wrong

here, and these are a pair of bloodhounds. They want blood, Admiral. If we make it seem that our cover-up has been designed to hide what I did, then it just may divert them. I can tell you right now that if Volkov gets wind of it, he'll rub his palms together and hump my ass for all he's worth. Don't you see? If we *give* them something, improbable as it may seem, it could be the only thing that stops them from discovering the real impossible truth."

Volsky stared down at his Chinese food and then rubbed his weary brow, thinking. He looked at Karpov. "I see the logic of what you are suggesting, but you know what it means for your career. It's going to raise a stink, one way or another, but I suppose it may be our only way out of this."

Fedorov had been listening, with some anguish, to the whole conversation, and now he spoke up. "I hate to say it, Admiral, but Captain Karpov's head may not even be enough to satisfy these men if they discover what I think they may in the next eight hours."

"Discover what, Fedorov?"

"The records of the thirty-six men on the list of casualties they got from Doctor Zolkin were not destroyed by the accident as we claim, nor were they misplaced by the Naval Personnel Division. I think they're going to discover that those men never existed."

Volsky gave him an incredulous look. "Never existed?"

"Don't you understand? Those men boarded the ship in Severomorsk and came from the homeland we left all those weeks ago, but this is a different world now. We changed things. In *this* world those men might not have ever been born, so I don't think you'll be writing those letters after all, Admiral."

"We did this?"

"I believe so, sir. We changed the history of WWII. Remember, I had a good many books on that war. I've studied it all my life. I purged any volume in the ship's library that related the history as we knew it, but forgive me, I kept certain books so I could see if anything had changed. As it turns out, three books I have were never even *published* in this world. That set me on a real track to find out what had changed. Remember that book I first came to you with, Admiral, *The Chronology Of The Naval War At Sea?"*

"Ah yes, that is what first led us down this crazy path."

"Well I kept that book, and I went into town and bought the latest version as soon as we made port. I've been comparing its narrative to the volume I owned, checking things out. Yes, we definitely changed things. Japan engaged the Americans in the Solomons and lost three carriers. Our action

also badly depleted their 5th Carrier Division. The Imperial Japanese Navy found itself with virtually no effective naval air arm after our intervention. It restored the balance of power to what it might have been in the history we knew, and then the war seemed to proceed on track—but there was no Hiroshima or Nagasaki. Japan surrendered in April of 1945."

"But how does that affect the men who died on this ship?"

"I can't say as I really know. We definitely changed things, so it may be that when the song replayed, a few notes were out of place. In many ways I discovered that the history had healed and repaired itself. There was no raid at Dieppe—that's another thing we changed. But the D-Day invasion still took place as scheduled in Normandy. That said, there were subtle differences, particularly in little things."

"They say the devil is in the details," Karpov put in.

"Exactly, Captain. So it could be that something may have happened to the ancestors of the men on that list, and in some macabre way, Time found a way to get rid of them."

"This is truly bizarre," said Volsky.

"No argument there," said Fedorov. "This whole incident is still completely confounding. But think of it sir. If something did happened differently, and say the grandfathers of men like Denikin, Krasnov and Rykov were killed in the war, or perhaps their fathers married someone else…Why, then they would never have existed. For us to bring them home to this world alive would create an enormous paradox. How could they be here? In effect, Time had no place for them. The history was a vast game of musical chairs, and when Karpov stayed his hand and stopped us from killing the *Key West*, everything changed. The music stopped, and there were no chairs here for those men. This world looks the same, it smells the same—why, here we are in *Zoloty Drakon*, right? But it isn't the same world we left behind when we cleared the breakwater beacons at Severomorsk last July. As I said, I have books in my possession now that were never published."

"How is it they remain intact?" asked Karpov.

"I'm not sure, but perhaps the fact that they were with us on the ship protected them. But not people—they change things—they are the living, breathing history as it happens. Time had to find a way to settle her accounts, and now I think we will find those men never existed. The only place any record of their lives now exists is right here on this ship." Fedorov pointed to his head. "Right in our heads. We knew them, sailed and fought with them,

but like those books I found missing, in this world they were never published…"

"My God," said Karpov. "Forget the nuclear warheads, that's just a matter of chest thumping and protocol. How in the world are we going to explain *this* to Kapustin?"

Part V

Rising Sun

“He who chooses the beginning of the road
chooses also the place that it leads to.”

—Henry Emerson Fosdick

Chapter13

The PLAN (People's Liberation Army & Navy) was no longer a local self defense force, and its navy was not confined to littoral coastal waters as in the past. When the 21st century got underway in earnest the Chinese Navy began to deploy more blue water capable forces in virtually every major ship category. The surface fleet, known as the *shuimian jianting budui*, had grown enormously, with new classes in guided missile destroyers and submarines, new carrier and helicopter carrier designs, and equally important, a capability for underway replenishment that allowed the navy to project power beyond the coastal waters of China for the first time since the 15th Century.

The missions assigned to the navy grew with it. It was now tasked with responsibilities to find and engage enemy surface action groups, participate in anti-submarine warfare, transport and guarantee the landing of troops on enemy shores, spoil the enemy's objective of attacking China's coastal cities and ports, and carry out reconnaissance on the seas with regular patrols. Active ASW warfare and anti-mine sweeping were a part of this task.

That said, the Chinese were still new at the game, and on September 15th, 2021, a small task force of was at sea off Diaoyutai or Senkaku Island to the Japanese, showing the flag over the oil rich sea floor beneath the deserted rocks. It was a continuation of the long war of words between Japan and China over the territory, and this time it was also something more. The islands were located about 125 miles northeast of Taipei, Taiwan, and in a perfect position to place a screening force for operations that might be aimed at that larger objective. If the Japanese came, they would come out of Okinawa and Japan proper to the northeast, and so Diaoyutai was right astride the sea lanes they would use.

The squadron assigned to the mission was therefore given ample resources. It was centered on one of their new Type 052C Destroyers, dubbed the *Lanzhou*, the lead ship in its class. With a stealthy design, this 7000 ton ship was often referred to as the China's *Aegis*, with its fixed panel AESA phased array radar, and "it" was a very capable ship. The Chinese considered their ships material objects, and did not personify them with either masculine or feminine traits.

The ship mounted 48 vertically launched HQ-9 surface to air missiles on

its forward a deck in eight cold launch cells of six missiles each. They could range out to 200 kilometers at Mach 4, providing a strong defensive anti-air umbrella over the squadron. It was in many ways similar to the Russian S-300s aboard *Kirov*, and almost as capable. The *Lanzhou* also carried eight C-805/7 anti ship missiles in two 4-cell launchers. It was known as the YJ-82 *Eagle Strike* system, a lethal sea skimmer on its terminal approach that was touted to have a 98% hit probability. Six torpedo tubes and a new 130mm single barreled deck gun that was a knock off of the old Russian 130mm gun finished off the destroyer's main weapons suite, but she also had a pair of 30mm close in defense guns and one Harbin Z-9C helicopter for additional ASW defense.

Cruising to either side of the *Lanzhou* were two type 054A frigates at a little over 4000 tons. The *Shouyang* and *Weifang*, both built in 2012. They carried a multi-purpose 32 cell VLS system that could use either SAMs or ASW rockets, and also mounted two 4-cell C-803 anti-ship missiles and six 324 mm torpedoes. Each ship also brought a Z-9C helicopter to the fight.

The fourth member of the task force was not on the surface. The *Li Zhu* was a 7000 ton submarine in the 095 class with a modified hull that provided greater acoustic stealth and flank linear array sonar. It was named for a legendary pearl that grew under the chin of a powerful black dragon, a jewel from the sea. In spite of the improvements made to the boat's design it was still noisy compared to the more stealthy Russian and American submarine designs. Even the old Russian *Akula* and *Oscar* class subs were quieter, though this boat was one of the stealthiest China now possessed. Undersea noise was never a friend of any submarine, and it would betray the *Li Zhu* that night. Revealing her position to the capable electronic ears of the Japanese task force approaching from the northeast.

The sub was out in front of the Chinese flotilla, cruising some twenty miles in the vanguard. The boat's captain, Kai Fan, had been slowly stalking the Japanese flotilla, moving quietly into a position where he could block their approach to the islands. His sonar operators had identified what they believe to be two *Abukuma* class destroyer escorts, and they were correct. These were the *Oyoko* and *Sendai* out of Sasebo, about 2500 tons each, older ships built between 1988 and 1991, but still capable for the roles they were designed to play. They were not as stealthy as the newer Chinese surface ships following the *Dragon Pearl* into battle that night, but they were well armed with 8 harpoons, octuple ASROC launchers in the older deck mounted

“Matchbox” design, six torpedoes, and a 76mm deck gun.

Behind them came the more formidable presence of the guided missile destroyer *Kirishima*, a 9500 ton vessel every bit as capable as an American Aegis Class cruiser. It was already well aware of the presence of the *Dragon Pearl* beneath the sea, and had a helicopter up off its aft fantail deck to refine the enemy boat’s location. The ship’s captain, Kenji Namura had taken the precautionary step of activating his RUM-139C VLS ASROC system, which could fire a lightweight sub-killing homing torpedo out to 25,000 meters, his modern day ‘Long Lance,’ but he would not yet announce his displeasure by going to active sonar.

For years the two sides had quarreled over the islands, with incidents where one side or another would paint a target with active fire control radar systems, or overfly a ship with a flight of fast strike jets. Namura had more support available, including Naval Marines at nearby bases. He would soon need them, for tonight China would send men from the their surface action group, and they would land by helicopter on the Island of Peace to plant the flag of the People’s Republic there. A meaningless gesture of defiance, it would set the stage for far a more serious confrontation between China and Japan that was even now beginning to spin slowly out of control.

What submarine Captain Kai Fan did not know, or hear that night, was the overhead deployment of *Kirishima’s* helicopter. It already had buoys in the water and was feeding good location data back to the *Japanese* flotilla as she slowly closed the range with her two smaller destroyer escorts. Kai Fan was nervously watching the range close to under 22,000 meters when his sonar man heard what he believed was the splash of a deck fired torpedo entering the water. It was actually another guided motorized sonobuoy, but the inexperienced sonar man interpreted the sound of its search pattern wrongly, and it had grave consequences. In modern war at sea, where computers aim and guide weapons to unseen targets, seconds become an eternity. He announced torpedo in the water, which prompted an immediate reaction from Captain Kai Fan. He already had his forward tubes primed and ready, and he fired a spread of four torpedoes.

When the sonar men shouted out their torpedo warnings on the three Japanese ships they were in deadly earnest. Kenji Namura was aghast when he realized his flotilla would very likely be hit by this flagrant attack, and he immediately gave the order to fire back. His MCH-Merlin 101 helo quickly had a *Stingray* torpedo in the water from above, and *Kirishima* added two

VLS ASROCS to the soup as the ships and subs now both deployed their countermeasures and jamming suites to try and defend against the incoming ordinance.

Two of the Chinese torpedoes were fooled, the others found *Oyoko* and split her port side hull open in a violent explosion that would end that ship's brief career forever. She would give her name to the sea that night, and sink within the hour.

As for the *Li Zhu,* the boat would become a pearl of great price that would soon fall to the bottom of an angry sea. The sonar man would pay his share, the boat's Captain Kai Fan would also sign the bill, but the world itself was set to pay the greatest price of all when the *Dragon Pearl* was hit and sunk on that September night off the Island of Peace.

* * *

Light helicopter escort carrier *Akagi*, wasted little time getting out to sea, and she would be in good company. The ship was originally classed as a helicopter destroyer, Class 22DDG to replace an older 1970s legacy destroyer by the same name that had been built around an aircraft hanger capable of housing three helicopters. The new *Akagi* was something much more, however, now reclassified as a light escort carrier after it had been modified to carry and operate the JF-35B STOVL *Lightning* fighters, which was tech speak for a short takeoff and vertical landing capable plane. The aircraft had been replacing the aging AV-8B *Harrier* jump Jets over the last decade, as well as slowly filling out air wings that had once been largely composed of F-18 *SuperHornets,* though these squadrons were few and far between. By 2021 the bugs had been worked out and it was a reliable and deadly fifth generation strike fighter asset. It had a stealthy, fuselage-mounted 25 mm gun pod and a combat radius of more than 450 nautical miles.

Akagi was one of four such ships in the Japanese Navy now, based in Sasebo with her sister ship *Kaga*. They were the largest surface combatants in the present Japanese Navy at a length of 248 meters and 27,000 tons fully loaded. That load today was partly composed of the seven JF-35Bs, nine SG-60J *Seahawk* helicopters and two Merlin CH-101s. There was room for more, with a maximum capacity of nine aircraft on deck and fourteen in the hangers, but *Akagi* had received an abrupt invitation to an event in the East China Sea, and it was a come as you are party. Depending on conditions encountered, the JDF could airlift additional assets out to her at sea—if she

survived.

With the light escort destroyer *Oyoko* already at the bottom of the sea, that question weighed heavily on the mind of Captain Shoji Yoshida. At only 2500 tons, *Oyoko* was really a frigate class vessel, and went down with two torpedo hits. While *Akagi* might be more durable in combat with her 27,000 tons, size was no guarantee of safety, a lesson the Japanese knew all too well as they remembered the demise of their proud old fleet carriers in the Second World War. His ancestor ship was nearly twice the displacement of the modern day *Akagi*.

So it had finally happened, he thought as he stared over the short forward flight deck, watching the first two F-35s being spotted. The Chinese thought they were finally going to settle the matter. They paid a high price for *Oyoko.* Kenji Namura aboard *Kirishima* had collected a heavy toll in reprisal when he took down the Type 095 submarine *Li Zhu* that had launched the bold attack. Now he wondered just how far the Chinese were prepared to go with this.

They were already holding another small Japanese Coast Guard cutter hostage in the deadly game, and they had the impudence to actually land a small naval marine contingent on the main Senkaku island of Uotsuri Jima, the old 'Island of Peace,' to plant their flag. Seven years ago it had been simple activist protestors who had dared to land on the islands, but this was something altogether different. This was the first real flexing of the vast Chinese military, and it gave Yoshida the shivers to think Japan was now boldly sailing off to confront their great hostile neighbor to the west.

Huge demonstrations outside the Japanese embassy in Beijing had been raging for months, and now the gold chrysanthemum emblem there was besmirched with eggs splattered on the walls, and the solitary flag of the rising sun waved bravely in a sea of anger in that distant city. Japanese stores and restaurants had been broken into and vandalized, then draped with bright red Chinese flags. The discord had spread to many other cities, spilling over from Shenzhen to the normally more civil Hong Kong where there had been flag burnings. The rising demonstrations had prompted the Chinese government to offer the protestors a bone by committing the further insult of placing the Japanese ambassador in Beijing under house arrest, an unprecedented breach of international protocol—but then again, war was nothing more than an ever escalating failure of manners and civility, neh?

He shook his head, disheartened. The dispute over these worthless islands

had deeper roots in the bad blood between China and Japan dating back to WWII, and now the oil and gas rights there would also play a part. It was starting again—blood for islands in the endless sea, blood for oil and gas. How many of his men would have to pay that price with their lives today, all so that Toyota and Honda could keep their wheels turning? He knew Japan had been foolish to try and purchase the islands outright instead of negotiating some amicable agreement with China. It was not a thought he wished to carry into battle at this moment, however, and so he pushed it aside, deep into an inner compartment of his mind, and focused on the task at hand.

He had seven JF-35s, enough to do what he had been ordered. They could easily cover the swift dash of his *Seahawks,* each capable of carrying a squad of his own elite naval marines to the argument. Then we will see what to do about that coast guard cutter. First he would get up some air cover. We're playing one of our aces, he knew, and there were only four in the entire fleet just like a good deck of cards. His sister ship *Kaga* was still in Sasebo, and the first two ships in the class were both assigned to Yokohama to the north. This ship is one of our very best, he thought, and I must not let my nation and my people down.

It had already started in the darkness of the East China Sea, and now it would continue, with this proud man in his proud ship, with a proud heritage at stake—and much, much more. Pride, it is said, goeth before the fall, and the abyss that was now yawning open in the Pacific was impenetrably deep. Captain Yoshida was sailing swiftly towards its edge.

He would to rendezvous with the *Kirishima*, and he would bring the new destroyer *Ashigara* along, one notch up on the *Kongo* Class ships with the new Type-90 SSM and a suite of good SAMs to give him some solid air defense beyond his seven fighters. At 10,000 tons, she was the largest surface combatant in the navy, only a seventh the displacement of the last vessel class to hold that distinction, *Yamato*. That said, *Ashigara* would have ripped the superstructure of *Yamato* apart, piece by piece, just as *Kirov* had, and the great menacing battleship of old would have never come in range to once fire her guns in anger.

Following third in line was the older DDH *Hyuga*, a true helicopter carrier commissioned in 2009 and drawing near the end of her useful life now that the four Class 22 ships had been built to take over their role. Yet Captain Yoshida was glad the ship was still active and in his wake, for she carried

another eleven Seahawks, with a second platoon of Naval Marines, should they be necessary.

One more ship completed Yoshida's flotilla that day, SS *Soryu*, the quiet *Blue Dragon* already well out in front of his task group, riding the ocean currents at a 300 foot depth. It had slipped out of its moorings at Myakojima sub base on a small island outpost 225 kilometers southeast of the Senkaku Islands group. The boat carried Type-89 torpedoes and the deadly UGM-84 *Harpoons* which could also be fired from her six 21 inch torpedo tubes.

Information was now being received an analyzed from a lone P-3C early warning plane near the disputed islands. The Chinese still had warships there holding the cutter PS-206 *Howo* hostage, and more ships were reported approaching the islands. What would this come to today, he wondered? Yoshido had been ordered to put his Marines on those Islands, remove the Chinese flag and the troops that brought it there, and oppose any and all Chinese naval units attempting to interfere with this operation. If he needed more force than he now commanded, Kadena and Naha airfields were a scant 450 kilometers to the northeast, just a few minutes cruising time for an F-15 *Eagle* or an F-22 *Raptor*. The nearest Chinese Air assets would be at Shuimen, Longtian or Fuzhou airfields, an equal distance to the west—but they were not *Eagles* or *Raptors*. Yoshida liked his cards this morning.

The roar of the first JF-35 split the air as it took off, the second plane maneuvering smartly to the ready line and waved off right on its heels. His top cover would be up at angels thirty in minutes. He would then spot and launch a third plane for any contingency that might present itself, his first *shotai* of three planes aloft and ready for battle. A strange thought came to Yoshida as he watched the operation. This could be the very first launch of carrier based aircraft in the third world war! A moment of bumbling misrecognition had prompted the *Dragon Pearl* to fire those torpedoes at *Oyoko,* and now it had begun. As the three planes climbed into the bright sky overhead Yoshida imagined how Admiral Nagumo must have felt as he watch the first three Zeros climb into the pre-dawn sky off the northern Philippine Islands at the outset of World War Two.

It was always so clean and simple in the beginning, he thought. All the uniforms were fresh and white, the well starched collars laden with pips of gold and silver, and no stain of blood or the darkened burn of flash and powder. It started with flags and honor, and national pride, and music, and it always ended in the same old thing—death and destruction.

It would not be long before he would see the true face of war with his very own eyes, and it would not be pretty.

Chapter 14

Aboard the *Lanzhou*, Captain Wang Fu Jing was the fortunate king of the Diaoyutai Islands for the moment. A small detachment of five naval marines had landed by swift boat, a helo perched overhead for additional cover, and the men stormed up the rocky shore, where a series of stony outcroppings looked like stairs climbing up to the shark fin outcrop of rock that made up the bulk of the island. There they found a statue of Matsu, the Chinese Goddess of the Sea brought by a Taiwanese fishing vessel in 2013 to protect the fishermen who worked these waters, for Diaoyutai meant the 'fishing island' in Chinese. The first attempt to land the statue had been driven off by a water cannon from a Japanese coast guard cutter, the second won through later that year.

Taiwan also laid its claim to the disputed islands, though it had wisely remained at the edge of the growing dispute between China and Japan. But now the rising clamor of war was again in the air, as China renewed its claim that Taiwan was also one of its long disputed Islands, and long overdue for its return to mainland control. The Taiwanese never really believed the Chinese would press their claim in earnest, but the recent military buildup they had watched was making men nervous in military headquarters and political situation rooms all over the globe.

China now had ships at sea to the northeast near the Diaoyutai Islands, and to the southwest out of Shantou harbor. Both surface action groups were small, but they were nonetheless positioned right astride the most obvious sea lanes any outside force would have to use if it wished to approach Taiwan.

Wang Fu Jing's Marines were now ashore on the southernmost Island of Nanxiaodao, setting up a small encampment and surveillance station there beneath a tall black outcrop of stone that sat like a great rocky Buddha in serene silence. A few sea terns perched indifferently on the nearby rocks, mixing peacefully with gulls and an occasional pelican. It was said that birds of a feather flocked together, but these had at least reached some unspoken accord to share the rocky shore with one another, where the men in uniforms

and metal ships and planes could not.

The remainder of Wang Fu Jing's squad was on the main island of Diaoyudao, or Uotsuri Jima to the Japanese, clearly visible in the distance. It was the only island in the little archipelago really worthy of the name, about four kilometers long, a green emerald jewel in an otherwise barren crown of stone. There were just eleven men here. Their small military footprint was more symbolic than anything else, but it was enough for the moment and China now controlled the Diaoyutai Islands.

The troops quickly ranged along the shore, finding and tearing down any vestige of Japanese occupation. There was not much to find. A group of right wing activists had managed to plant a few rising sun flags weeks ago, and a small white tower that looked like a miniature oil derrick. Beneath it they had gathered stones and rocks scattered on the shore and piled them up into a makeshift wall, a stubborn symbolic fortress that the Chinese soon tore down along with the flags.

There was very little else to speak of on the islands…the birds, the rocks, the scattered vegetation. Later, when the dispute was decided, men would come with survey ships, drilling rigs and other gear, and plans to erect more steel framed oil platforms that might dwarf the smaller islands in the group. That was the essence of it all. The islands really had very little to do with it.

At the moment, however, other men were on the way in two flights of *Seahawk* helicopters launching from the *Akagi*. Two F-35 *Lightings* would lead the way in with a third on high top cover and a second *shotai* of three more ready on short notice. The helos were coming in low on the water to minimize and hide their radar cross section as much as possible, but 150 kilometers to the west the Chinese had a KJ-2000 Airborne Early Warning plane up, with third generation technology that even allowed it to find and track the Japanese F-35s—or so it was claimed. The helos were seen on approach, and a warning relayed to Wang Fu Jing aboard the *Lanzhou*. Now it remained to be seen whether China would treat the coming incursion as just another standoff, a show of force by the other side to pacify national sentiment back home, or if it would be treated as an imminent threat to his assets and troops already deployed in the region.

His orders were also very clear and in certain conflict with those of his adversary: occupy the Diaoyutai Islands, establish a signals and observation post there, remove all accouterments and personnel of any foreign national, oppose or detain any force attempting to violate the territorial waters of the

People’s Republic of China.

Modern air/sea warfare was not what it once was. The concept of intercepting an enemy at sea and closing the range to fight a gun battle or even launch an air strike was long ago obsolete. The first battle opponents would fight was one of knowing exactly where the opponent was and what assets he brought to the fight so they could be properly targeted and “neutralized.” It was now a world where techniques like low observable operations, information fusion, situational awareness, high speed data networking, electronic countermeasures, and an arcane calculus juggling variables of stealth, range, payload, survivability and kill factors all combined to produce the same intended common denominator Yoshida had been musing over—death and destruction. Planes were not made of canvass and steel any longer, or even aluminum, but now became artful contoured compositions of carbon nanotube reinforced epoxy. However they were made, their intention was simple in the end—find and kill the enemy before they did the same to you.

As such, if one side in the looming fight crossed that thin line between the posing of a credible threat and the actual commitment to war on his opponent, they would have a decisive advantage. In these early hours of maneuver and deployment, the shadows of war crept onto the stage, a dangerous kabuki theater threatening to ignite the entire region in flame. While restraint was perhaps the sole saving grace holding the world from the precipice of another major conflict, it was also a damning liability in modern combat, where minutes became seconds, and seconds nanoseconds measuring the razor thin gap between victory and defeat.

Now Captain Wang Fu Jing danced on the edge of that razor, trying to comprehend the true mindset of his opponent that morning. As the sun rose in blazoning gold over the wide Pacific, he had pushed his first pawns forward to occupy the islands. Now came the stalwart advance of nine *Seahawk* helicopters, followed by a deadly knight with a *shotai* of three JF-35 *Lightning* fighters in the blue skies above.

He knew what was coming, and reasoned that these helicopters could carry no more than a full platoon of naval infantry, but it would be enough to best the single squad of sixteen men he had deployed from his lone Z-9 helicopter. The two helos on his escorting frigates had been assigned to ASW roles and were also up that morning, with buoys deployed and dipping sonar ready to seek out enemy submarines.

If he allowed these men to approach and land their troops, what would they do? Would they merely confront his men in a glorified staring contest, or would they dare attack? In that event he knew his men would resist, and then it would come down to simple numbers, and he would lose. Once the Japanese had regained control of the islands, these very same helicopters would soon be hovering over the frigate *Shouyang* where it held the Japanese coast guard cutter *Howo* hostage in the shadow of the main island. By allowing the enemy to land he would also be handing the decision to engage in combat to the Lieutenants and Sergeants on the islands. Somehow that did not suit his temperament that morning. He was Captain, and *he* would decide. His second frigate *Weifang*, was out in front screening his flagship and ready with a 32 cell VLS system bristling with Hongqi-16B SAMs.

He bit his lip, considered the unacceptable alternative of seeing his marines killed or captured, the *Howo* freed, his ships forced to sail about the islands in frustrated anger and watch the Japanese flag rising there again, and he decided to even the odds.

* * *

Weifang bared its teeth at 09:20 hours. The ship was named for the windy city of colorful kites in China, yet it was not flying kites that morning. Instead the ‘Red Flags’ were up, two cells of six H-16 SAMs each snapped up from the forward deck and bit into the cool morning air, intent on finding and killing prey. They accelerated rapidly to Mach 4.0 in a high arc, radars searching for targets coming low and slow over the sea, but the *Seahawks* were at the extreme low end of their engagement envelope. The missiles yearned for unambiguous open sky where they could soar as high as 82,000 feet. When declined to low altitude targets their effectiveness left something to be desired against anything under thirty feet, and the helos were coming in right on the deck.

The Japanese flight of nine *Seahawks* then bloomed with an array of countermeasures. Jammers, radar decoys, and radar cross section modification technologies all came into play, along with the old standby, a barrage of metalized glass fibers called chaff to create a visual smoke screen of sorts where electronic eyes were concerned. Nine of the first twelve missiles were fooled or spoofed, three were not, and that meant that nine *Seahawks* quickly became seven *Seahawks*, with one of those damaged but

still able to fly.

Ten kilometers out the surviving choppers suddenly stopped, hovered in a breathless moment of vulnerability, using the tiny island outcrop of Okiniokita-Iwa as a screen. The Japanese Marines quickly deployed lightweight inflatable swift boats, and then Marines slid down the ropes with well rehearsed precision, six to eight men to a boat. They huddled low, and the motors sputtered to life as they began flopping in toward the big Island of Peace. The Seahawks veered off, knowing their life span against successive volleys of SAMs would not allow them much more time, but *Weifang* suddenly had other worries.

High overhead two stealthy JF-35s had launched a pair of JSM anti-ship missiles from well beyond the range of *Weifang's* H-16s. They were also low flying sea skimmers, coming in at high subsonic speeds and beginning their evasive maneuvers on the terminal run. The next cell of H-16s off *Weifang* was up and after them, when frantic radar operators aboard the frigate called out renewed inbound missile warnings. Six more Type-90 SSM had been fired by the Japanese destroyer *Ashigara* and were inbound at over 1100Kph. The frigate was forced to fire two more H-16 cells and deploy countermeasures in the brief minutes she had to go defensive.

The Chinese missiles were good, but in the wild semi-controlled pandemonium of modern combat they had to be perfect. One of the Type-90s got through and delivered its 270kg warhead square amidships, undaunted by the chattering fire of *Weifang's* 30mm Gatling guns. The resulting explosion and hull damage quickly took the frigate out of the fight.

This brief respite enabled Japanese Lieutenant Arimoto to get most of his platoon in the water and spread out in a wide fan of onrushing swift boats. His men approached the island of Uotsuri Jima from the northeast, where the Chinese had posted only two men of the fifteen man squad. Their small arms fire was not enough to dissuade the onrushing boats, and a few minutes later Japanese Marines were landing on a Pacific island in anger for the first time since WWII. A brave *Seahawk* remained on station covering the landing, and soon Lieutenant Arimoto had the better part of a platoon ashore, the men working their way from the crusty coastline and up the low vegetation to the higher ground above where small outcroppings of bare rock stood like stony sentinels. The cameras were running when the Japanese staged their own version of the famous US Marine flag raising on Iwo Jima.

On the other end of the four kilometer long island the remaining Chinese

infantry received the report of the landing on radio and considered what to do. They would soon be confronted by over seventy enemy Marines, advancing even now in a methodical sweep across the island. Arimoto was detaching small groups of sentries at key positions along the way, but he would reach the other side of the island within two hours. The Chinese sergeant in command radioed *Lanzhou* for instructions.

Captain Wang Fu Jing's brief reign on Fisherman's Island would in no way challenge the centuries long dynasties that stitched 5000 years of Chinese history together. His attempt to stop the Japanese helicopter assault had failed. With only three helicopters of his own, and two of those already deployed on ASW picket duty he had little immediate airlift to get reinforcements to the island. He had twenty more Marines aboard, but even if he got them all to the main island that would still leave his men there outnumbered by at least two to one. They might hold, but how would he keep them supplied? The Japanese would soon control the sea and sky around these islands, of that he had little doubt.

When his second flotilla arrived that would again be a matter to be contested, but for now one of his frigates had taken a bad hit and might not survive to see home port again. That left him with his single destroyer and the frigate *Shouyang* was horse holding with the Japanese coast guard cutter *Howo*. Worse than this, the air cover he had called for was slow to the scene and even when it arrived it would provide only limited support. It was beginning to feel very lonesome on the wide Pacific, though help was on the way.

A second small flotilla centered on *Lanzhou's* sister ship the *Haikou* was en route with two more frigates, *Yiyang* and *Changzhou*. That said, he would still not have the troops required to dislodge the force the Japanese had now landed, unless he cruised right off shore and used his deck gun to persuade them to leave on their own. It did not seem that the Japanese had any intention of backing down. The KJ-2000 Airborne Early Warning sentinel was now reporting activity at both Kadena and Naha on Okinawa, and a line of warships advancing from the northeast. Yoshida's task force had been spotted and identified as two DDH class vessels, two guided missile destroyers, and another smaller frigate class ship. He had no reports of enemy submarine activity, but he knew that the Japanese had sub pens to the east on Myakojima. His naval reinforcements would be three hours reaching the scene and now he had to face the difficult reality of his situation.

The Japanese were coming in force. He had no doubt that there were more troops ready on those DDH class units. The thought of giving way here galled him but he knew that, at this moment, and with the imminent loss of *Weifang*, he was out gunned and out manned on the islands. It would be all he could do to rescue the stranded survivors still aboard the crippled *Weifang*. He decided to pull his men out and classify the operation as a "raid." The Japanese counter operation would become a grievous act of escalation in tomorrow's news cycle, but for now his wisest course was to follow the precepts of Sun Tsu as he considered the odds: '*When ten to the enemy's one, surround him. When five times his strength, attack him. If double his strength, divide him. If equally matched, you may engage him with some good plan. If weaker numerically, be capable of withdrawing. And if in all respects unequal, be capable of eluding him.'*

The question now was whether *Lanzhou* was even to be capable of eluding the advancing enemy. Missiles had already found the *Weifang*, and he knew his ship was next in line of sight on the enemy radar screens. He decided that he would immediately send his three helos to pick up the men on the islands, and then send the *Shouyang* to aid the foundering crew of *Weifang*. I might just be throwing another fish in the hot oil, he thought, but he could not abandon those men.

He decided to fire a disruptive covering barrage at the enemy and then withdraw to effect a rendezvous with the second flotilla centered on *Haikou*. In reprisal for the loss of *Weifang*, the Japanese coast guard cutter *Howo* would be scuttled, their crew taken in prize. It was not the victory he had hoped for, but it would be enough to save face in the heat of the moment, and possibly save lives as well.

He gave the order to activate his YJ-82 *Eagle Strike* system and fire a full barrage or eight missiles at the oncoming enemy task force, hoping to force them to go defensive long enough to pull his men off and beat a hasty retreat. Then, when he had rendezvoused with the second flotilla, and had adequate air cover, he would see how the Japanese Marines enjoyed the Spartan accommodations at Hotel Diaoyudou that night. The battle was not ending in his mind, only evolving, but the way in which it evolved next would not be to his liking.

Chapter 15

The *Silent* *Eagles* were coming, a full squadron off Naha airfield, Okinawa. The F-15SE fighters had been upgraded with new stealth features, including radar absorbing materials and new internal weapons bays. Against the X-Band radars typically used in air-to-air conflict, the F-15s would leave a forward radar signature no bigger than a baseball might. It wasn't as stealthy as the JF-35s, which might be golf balls in the sky, or the deadly F-22 *Raptors* which would appear no bigger than a marble, but it would do in a pinch. The days of tiled stealth were long gone. Now the fifth generation fighters were made out of bismaleimide (BMI) and composite epoxy and carbon fiber materials. The *Silent Eagles* would be more than enough to decide the day in their favor, or so the Japanese hoped. This was the only squadron of this plane type they had.

Today they were each carrying the new JSM anti-ship missiles, two per plane, and there were six aloft for this strike mission. Captain Wang Fu Jing saw them coming on radar, then lost them, then with assistance from his KJ-2000 AEW plane he found them again in time to launch his defensive missile barrage, but not before the *Eagles* had also fired.

Now the sky was filled with the thin tracers of sleek, deadly missiles on every side. The H-16 SAMs were like a pack of barracuda falling in with a school of tuna. The *Lanzhou* had managed to get twelve missiles up, with more firing from its forward VLS cells, and they had found and killed four of the incoming SSMs. Three more would die as they swooped down to begin their final approach, but the remaining five would get through his hastily deployed defensive barrage, and challenge his flotilla's 30mm Gatling Guns. They got two as the missiles made their final run, and the last three found the Chinese ships in a most compromising position.

Shouyang was abaft of the already damaged *Weifang*, and took a hit forward on the main deck, which ignited the missile cells there and caused a tremendous explosion. *Weifang* was showered with additional shrapnel just as a second missile came in and struck her aft quarter. The second explosion was enough to wreck the ship for good. The last missile found *Lanzhou*, rising at the last minute in a popup maneuver and falling on the deck amidships. Captain Wang Fu Jing felt the ship shudder under the impact of

the missile, saw the bright orange fires and knew he had taken a serious hit. The 7000 plus ton vessel was sturdy enough to weather the blow, but there was no way he could continue to linger in these waters. He immediately radioed the airfields at Fuzhou, berating the air force commander there for lack of air cover.

"Where are you? Where is my air support? I have one ship sinking, another hit, men in the water, a fire amidships, and a fistful of enemy aircraft on our radar screens!"

He was furious that he had to contend with both land based and seaborne enemy fighters, with nary a whisper of opposition in the skies over the contested islands. At last he heard from his KJ-2000 where it circled far to the west, unknowingly right above the submerged wreckage of the old WWII Japanese battleship *Kongo,* which had been sunk there by the US submarine *Sealion II* on 16 November, 1944. The air force was coming though they would not bring their A-game that day.

Two squadrons of Chendu J-10AH multirole naval fighters were up and coming in on afterburners as they raced to the scene, though their haste was only making them more visible on radar. They were very capable planes, with good avionics and excellent speed and maneuverability, but this was their first sortie in anger and they were not quite prepared for the heat of combat. Behind them was another group of six Shenyang J-11B "SinoFlankers" with more experienced pilots, eighteen planes in all.

When the Japanese task force picked them up on radar, they immediately began vectoring in every plane they already had aloft. The three JF-35Bs climbed high while the six *Silent Eagles* out of Naha, surged in at 30,000 feet. Even with the KJ-2000 assisting, the J-10s were having difficulty acquiring the Japanese planes. They finally got returns on the oncoming *Eagles*, but as both forces approached the islands, the Japanese pilots had already shouted out the NATO brevity code *"Fox Three"* and fired their AIM-120C AMRAAMs. The weapon was designed to engage targets well beyond visual range, (BVR), a fire and forget missile that could actively home in on its target. They had fired just inside their maximum range of 105 kilometers, outranging the PL-11 missiles on the Chinese J-10s by thirty kilometers. That small interval of thirty kilometers amounted to no more than a twenty second advantage, as both sides were closing on one another at a whisker over Mach 2. Yet those twenty seconds before the Chinese J-10s could fire was the difference between life or death. The missiles were twice

as fast as the planes at Mach 4,and the sky was soon alight with countermeasures and kills.

The first wave of Chinese planes had managed to get their own missiles away, but only seconds later they were in it up to their eyeballs. The J-10's fared badly, losing five planes to outright hits, and seeing two more damaged by near proximity explosions. Their own barrage of PL-11s failed to find even one *Silent Eagle,* as the Japanese had peeled off after firing to stay at the extreme edge of the PL-11's firing envelope. The narrow advantage that made all the difference was a little stealth, better radar, and those thirty kilometers.

As their initial missile barrage disordered the enemy, the Japanese pilots had turned again to close and switched to their shorter ranged AIM-9X *Sidewinders*, shouting *"Fox Two"* to signal the use of an infrared guided missile. It was a slower missile at just Mach 2.5, but very maneuverable and could range out to 35 kilometers. They would claim the two wounded J-10s, and one more plane as it banked in a violent turn, its countermeasure sputtering to life in a vain shower of phosphor fire as it attempted to spoof the missile that had acquired it. But the *Sidewinders* had been fine tuned to recognize the difference between such flares and a plane's tail pipe, and it was not deceived.

The agile *Silent Eagles* had swooped in and galled their prey, taking down eight of the twelve J-10s in less than five minutes. Now the last deadly duel was fought as the two sides actually closed well within visual range, (WVR), and began to dogfight. Here the experience and skill of the Japanese pilots, and the amazingly capable plane they were flying proved decisive.

"Fox Four! Guns, guns, guns!" The 20mm *Vulcan* Gatling cannon was equipped with just 510 rounds in a normal load-out, but they were enough to take down two more before the last two J-10s bugged out, heading west at full throttle to look for their big brothers in the *Shenyang* J-11s

Called the SinoFlanker by some Western analysts because it was a plane based on the Russian Sukhoi SU-27 *Flanker*, the J-11 was an able challenger to the *Eagles* and *Fighting Falcons* it had been built to oppose. It had Russian avionics, radars and engines, but many indigenous improvements as well. It was bringing a better missile too, the PL-12 that could match the *Silent Eagles* in range at 100 kilometers.

But the *Eagles* were not alone.

As the J-11's roared in from the west, unseen lightning fell from the skies

above when the three carrier launched JF-35Bs suddenly appeared on the screens of the startled Chinese pilots. The F-35s in relied on front-quarter Low Observabilty to gain the all important advantage of ‘first look - first shot - first kill’ beyond visual range. Missiles were away and the *Lightnings* struck the J-11’s hard, with each plane claiming a quick kill.

Then the scene became a wild dance of inexperienced pilots wheeling super high performance aircraft about in a dizzying display of flying. One of the Japanese pilots lost his concentration, too jubilant after his guns had ripped a J-10 to pieces, and his *Eagle* was damaged by a near miss from a P-12 fragmentation warhead explosion. He dove, struggled for control and eventually managed to get his plane down low and head east for Naha. The last three were caught up in the chaos of the swirling aerial maneuvers, and soon joined the J-10s bugging out and heading west for friendly shores. It had been the first real combat mission flown by any of the pilots involved, and the small accumulation of advantages possessed by the Japanese planes and pilots had proved more than decisive. Yet the Chinese would learn quickly, and the next time their J-10s sortied that would have better missiles.

Aboard the *Akagi*, Captain Yoshida had been listening to the frantic calls of the pilots as they engaged the enemy planes. When it was over he heard the report. *“Enemy breaking off. We have fourteen kills! Fuel low, returning to base.”*

The men on the bridge of *Akagi* cheered, though the word *bonzai* was not uttered by a single man. When he heard them Captain Yoshida, raised his voice in a sharp rebuke. “We do not cheer the death of our enemy, nor would we have them do the same when our brothers have fallen in battle.”

He considered the situation, realizing that he now would quickly need to launch his second *shotai* of JF-35s, and soon the bridge was all business again, the flight boss on the radio giving the order to launch. Yoshida came to the radar operator’s station and pointed.

“Is that the KJ-2000?”

“Yes, sir. It had been orbiting at 40,000 feet for the last hour.”

“Send it home. Vector in a J-35 from the second *shotai*.”

Yoshida wanted to scratch out the enemy’s eyes, blinding him to the battle space and insuring that he could now move his task force to the Senkaku archipelago with impunity, but he was too late. The Chinese had seen and fixed his position long ago and had a deadly surprise in store for the Japanese that day.

The radar operator shouted out the alarm. “Sir, I have a high speed, high altitude missile inbound!”

The battle was evolving yet again. The Chinese had sent their second string fighters to the fray, fixing the attention of their enemy on the air duel above the islands, but high in space a watching American spy satellite suddenly flashed a warning to Pacific Command in Honolulu, Hawaii indicating ballistic missiles had been launched. While the brave ships had been dueling on the sea, and the planes locked in their deadly dance in the skies, Chinese archers had fired a volley of *DongFeng*-15C short range ballistic missiles, and their bigger brothers, the lethal DF-21s. Named for the east wind that was a harbinger of good favor, this wind would bring a rain of fire and anger on the unwary enemy.

They were coming for Yoshida’s ships at over Mach 6 terminal velocity, and extremely difficult target to track and hit. With just seconds to react, he gave the order to engage with his SM3 Anti Ballistic Missile system, with a blistering speed of just under Mach 8. Four were fired, but they had seen the incoming missiles too late, and they would claim only one successful interception. Five of the six missiles in the first volley would get through to the target zone, and of these two would fulfill their mission.

The first exploded high above the task force with an electromagnetic shockwave warhead designed to knock down the enemy’s electronics. The second was a straight conventional warhead, 950 kilograms of rip snorting armor piercing anger coming in at a plunging angle that went clean through the flight deck of the unlucky ship DDH *Hyuga*, and continued penetrating until it had blown completely through the bottom hull. The resulting explosion of mission ready helicopters, aviation fuel, and munitions was catastrophic. *Hyuga* had been dealt a fatal blow and the ship would keel over to starboard side, the last of her *Seahawks* sliding into the ocean, and die an agonizing death within minutes.

While not a true aircraft carrier per se, *Hyuga* was close enough, the third unit in Carrier Division two, now composed of *Akagi*, *Kaga* and the stricken DDH. No aircraft carrier had been sunk in the world since the Japanese carrier *Amagi* in Kure harbor on July 24th,1945. The sting of bad fate now sent *Hyuga* to the bottom of the East China Sea, a painful reprisal in exchange for the near lifeless hunks of rock Japan had been so keen to secure.

Aboard *Akagi* Captain Yoshida stared aft in shock and dismay, watching the *Hyuga* burn and capsize within minutes. He had more on his hands now

that he had first thought when he mused over the launch of those first three JF-35s. Just when the battle seemed to be within his grasp, the missiles had found his task force at sea, a feat that had been considered, planned for, and yet not believed possible until this very moment. China had sunk a fast moving ship with a single ballistic missile. He knew that the systems that had guided this missile to its target were high above in the airless domain of outer space, with satellite GPS navigation playing a major part in the success of the attack.

If this “incident” actually expanded to a general war, something would have to be done about that, but Japan did not have the means to insure ABM defense that involved taking out enemy satellites. It would be a task for the Americans, pledged to defend Japan by treaty since the conclusion of WWII. And if the Americans come to the fight, he thought, how long before the Russians come?

Yoshida could not think about that now. The electromagnetic shock warhead had caused its own measure of additional trouble, though it did not function as intended. A number of his unshielded systems were affected, but his essential electronics weathered the pulse and continued to function. Still, it was enough to cause some disruption to his operations, and the loss of *Hyuga* was a hard blow to ship’s morale.

Yoshida looked sullenly at his bridge crew now, reinforcing the lesson he had barked out earlier. “Who now wishes to hear the jubilant song of our enemies?” His dark eyes found one officer after another. “This is only the beginning,” he said. “And should war come to our homeland again in earnest, believe me, we will not find him a welcome guest.”

Yoshida did not know it at that moment, but that uninvited guest was already knocking on the back porch of the Japanese homeland. The salvo of deadly missiles that had blown in on the east wind was just the first fitful stirring of the storm to come. China had burrowed into the ancient soil of its homeland, digging up the bones of dynasties past to build an amazing network of over 3,000 miles of underground tunnels and hardened bunkers. Slow mobile launchers were creeping through the dark subterranean tunnels, moving to deploy for the main event that had been planned long ago.

In a matter of minutes, China had taken the deadly tactical duel for the islands to a new level. What began as a potential small unit engagement by a few squads of Naval Marines, had soon escalated to a wide area air/sea battle, and then to a strategic strike against the bases that were most essential in

supporting further Japanese operations in the area. The one saving grace had been the fact that no nuclear weapons had been brought to bear. Both sides were still wearing gloves in the fight, and the “rules” of combat had been assiduously followed.

China had been unprepared for the ferocity and determination of the Japanese counter to their planned occupation of the Diaoyutai islands, and had been beaten in a fair duel of ships, planes and missiles over the deep blue sea. Yet to beat them the Japanese had played out their very best assets in the region. The odds would get much steeper, and the Chinese promised to be a much more formidable fore than the brief action had foreshadowed. They boldly played a trump card that the Japanese had not expected this early in the game, and to the discerning minds of the military analysts back in Honolulu watching from their KH-11 satellites high in space, more was afoot than this limited hot engagement at sea.

The battle Captain Yoshida would claim as a pyrrhic victory was nothing more than shadow play on the wall, a mere distraction meant to draw the eye and ear of the enemy, and lead him astray. That afternoon the first missiles fell on Okinawa, longer range DongFeng-21s that employed terminally guided maneuvering re-entry vehicles and brought a rain of incendiary and high explosive warheads to the Japanese air base at Naha. The US base at Kadena was spared for the moment, but it remained on the target list should the Americans enter the fray any time soon. It was a subtle signal to the Americans—stay out of it and we will have no quarrel with you. The little battle that began with troops landing on distant, deserted Pacific islands had ended with ballistic missiles on Japanese soil in a strange mirroring of the last great war. But Yoshida’s rebuke to his bridge crew had been truly prophetic. This was only the beginning.

The alarm clock bomb was ticking loudly now, and the second hand sweeping ever closer to a chaos that would soon become all but uncontrollable. Within minutes of the attack, the ringing of telephones from Beijing to Vladivostok to Honolulu to Washington DC chimed out their warning on one desk after another.

A new storm was coming to the Pacific, and the first darkened squalls had flashed the lightning of war over its restless waters. It would begin there in a squabble for undiscovered oil, one tiny lit fuse that would soon ignite many others. The real war would be fought where the crude already ran thick, in the Persian Gulf, the Gulf of Mexico, and the vast new superfields of Central

Asia in Kazakhstan.

Part VI

Men Of War

"…The release of Atomic energy has not created a new problem. It has merely made more urgent the necessity of solving an existing one…He who joyfully marches to music in rank and file has already earned my contempt. He has been given a large brain by mistake, since for him the spinal cord would suffice."

—Albert Einstein

Chapter 16

Kamenski flipped slowly through the book, quietly shaking his head within as he did so. It was the History of the Japanese Navy in WWII, and he had come here to the library in Vladivostok to chase an itch he had been scratching for the last twenty years. He had learned a great deal about a mysterious incident in the Coral Sea that the history never fully explained. The Japanese had tried to cover things up, but as the years went by, more and more evidence slowly came to light. Something has happened, like a ripple of lightning across the blackened storm clouds of war. Something came out of the Indian ocean and struck through the heart of the Japanese offensive in 1942 like a steel javelin.

It started off the coast of Melville Island, where he had read reports made by coast watchers that the Japanese had engaged an Allied surface ship running east away from Darwin. The problem was that there were no allied warships worth the name in Darwin at the time, and no one seemed to be able to identify what this ship was. Yet the Japanese had pursued it through the Torres Straits and into the Coral Sea, expending the considerable power of their entire 5th Carrier Division to do so, and leaving the battleship *Kirishima* a half sunken wreck on the coral reefs of the strait. He remembered the text he had read on the incident, still vague and non-specific: *"Unaccountable losses sustained by Hara's Group prevented them from reinforcing Yamashiro's carriers at a vital moment, and the Americans were therefore able to deal with each arm of the Japanese offensive in detail."*

Unaccountable losses? That was all that was to be said about this after eighty long years? Then the mystery deepened when Admiral Yamamoto split his heavy covering force for the counter invasion of Guadalcanal and sailed west into the Coral Sea…aboard the battleship *Yamato*. That was most unusual. The *Yamato* was the symbol of Japan's prestige and power at sea, named for the ancient homeland itself. What could have possessed Yamamoto to commit it to action like that? And more—what sent it back to Kure harbor a broken and damaged ship? That had been kept very secret by the Japanese. In fact, it was never known that *Yamato* had been engaged and sustained heavy damage until well after the war.

Something mean and powerful had sailed those waters. Something

capable of defending itself from an entire carrier air wing and then bludgeoning the most powerful battleship the world had ever seen. Even now the details of that battle were very shady. It still remained a mystery. The initial accounts were that *Yamato* struck a mine off Milne Bay, and then this was revised a few years later by an American historian who claimed The USS *Sea Dragon* was returning to Australia from her third war patrol in the South China Sea and came across the *Yamato,* promptly putting two torpedoes into the mighty ship.

Kamenski took both versions of that history with a grain of salt, particularly when he managed to dig up hidden records of the damage sustained by *Yamato*. One of the guns on an aft turret had been put out of action and replaced with a barrel that had been originally machined for the *Shinano*. She also had extensive fire damage above the water line on her superstructure, damage that could only have been produced by large caliber weapons. There had been snippets of reports of naval rockets used in an engagement, which in themselves were very odd, and then he came across something that stunned him, a photo of two Japanese engineers holding up a piece of charred metal where an engraved serial number was quite evident.

Kamenski kept that number in his head for many, many years, but he could never run it down until the year 2020. He was more than a curious old man. He had spent forty years in the service of his government, with posts in the Navy, and in intelligence as well. He still had access to things a normal person would never have seen, and he had been going over some weapons production information for the new navy Moskit-II missiles when he came across the number—the exact same number he had carried all those years, and it was assigned to a missile that was mounted on none other than the battlecruiser *Kirov*, the very same ship he had taken Alexi to gawk at in the harbor that afternoon.

He knew that this was most likely mere coincidence, but made his phone call just the same—to his old friend Inspector Gerasim Kapustin, in town that week and aboard *Kirov* at that very moment. Was missile number 110720-12 still in inventory he had asked? No it was expended on trials, came the answer, and yes let us get together Sunday for dinner.

Kamenski did not know what difference that little tidbit of knowledge would make, but he knew he had asked the question for some reason, perhaps buried deep within his unconscious mind where it still sifted and churned through all the data and photos, and other puzzle pieces he had been playing

with over the years. What could hold off Admiral Hara's fleet and Yamamoto's on top of it? He was beginning to think he knew. His grandson had told him all about it that very same morning…

Then there was the cruiser *Tone*, the odd crumpling on her hull after she returned from that same war patrol. He stared at a faded old photo purporting to picture a sailor from that ship in the moment just before he committed seppuku. Oddly, out of a crew of some 800 men, there had been 346 reported suicides! *Tone* had been called the Ghost Ship ever thereafter, and any man who ever served aboard her had reported strange visions and restless nights at sea, fitful sleep and night terrors. Her former Captain, Sanji Iwabuchi, had also committed seppuku, just as the American army closed in on his final positions in Manila.

The cruiser *Haguro* had been reported sunk that same month, in that very same week, but no reason was given. She was merely listed as "lost to enemy action off Mellvile Island." It was all very strange but remained nothing more than an old man's fancy until that Sunday evening dinner when he sat down with Gerasim Kapustin.

* * *

"Have a look at this photo," said Kamenski showing his friend the book. "Yes I'm an old fool, but doesn't that look oddly familiar? If I didn't know any better I would say it was a part of a stabilizing fin on one of our Moskit-IIs."

Kapustin smiled, looking over the top of his reading glasses to peer at the photo, and noting the caption. It was dated to 1946. "Yes, it's is a very strange coincidence, but I'm glad you are still the same curious old man you always were, Pavel. When you called to ask about that missile I wondered what you were up to. Well listen to this, my friend…" He looked around the restaurant, though the two man had selected a private corner table and had little fear that anyone might overhear them. "Speaking of serial numbers, another weapon was also fired during the weapons trials for *Kirov*, or so we just discovered, and its number ends with the character X."

Kamenski raised his heavy brows, for the letter X at the end of the number designated it as an nuclear weapon, and Kapustin was telling him something very significant here. "It was fired?" He said, an incredulous look on his face. "Where?"

“I have not yet been able to determine that.”

“Have you checked the satellite data?”

“Of course, but there was nothing there for the Pacific, which is where I am guessing the weapon would have been fired. I expanded my request to look over sea lanes in the Atlantic and Arctic as well, but I won’t hear on that for a day or so.”

“My, my, this is most unusual. You know, Gerasim, I took my grandson down to the harbor to have a look at that ship. My God, it looks like it’s been through hell! That damage aft is very telling. From what I could see the ship was struck from above and the hull blew out from the inside.”

“They claim it was a missile misfire.”

“Missile misfire? Nonsense. The only missiles mounted aft are SAMs, correct? Don’t tell me any one of them could penetrate the deck and blow a hole that size in the hull. I saw the new paint job too, but they are covering something up there, Gerasim. Scrape it away and I think you will find smoke residue, or even flash damage from explosives.”

“I thought as much, Pavel, but it leads me to some very uncomfortable conclusions. I will tell you something more…There was damage you could not see from the quay—below the water line, right amidships. Yes! I sent my wolf hound Volkov down to have a look, and we discovered significant hull damage. They used the new at-sea hull replacement panels to cover it up, and then did a fairly good repair job from the inside, but the ship will have to go to dry dock eventually. It’s holed beneath the water line. They claim that was from the *Orel* incident, but honestly, can you imagine that Volsky would have sustained such damage and then decided to sail from north of Jan Mayen to Vladivostok?”

“Astounding,” said Kamenski. “More astounding that NATO wasn’t all over the ship like flies on honey. I still cannot believe that *Kirov* slipped by them like that. You say the ship was conducting live fire exercises? How could they fail to see it on satellite? What route did they take?”

“Karpov says they went north of Greenland. That, too, is interesting. He claims they found some weak sea ice and a lot of open floes.”

“That sea lane has been open since 2012,” said Kamenski. “Global warming has made the trip from much easier these days. It is still much less traveled than other routes, but I can’t imagine he sailed south round either the Cape of Good Hope or Cape Horn. Not with a gash in his side as your just described.”

“I quite agree, and if he did go north then it might have been possible to evade NATO patrols for a time. They are not as vigilant up there, and I am willing to bet that most of their assets were sent to snoop on our recovery effort for the *Orel*.”

“Most likely,” Kamenski agreed. ‘But firing missiles at ice bergs would attract a lot of attention too, yes? And *Kirov* left in late July. What were they doing all that time?”

“Volsky took the ship down into the South Pacific. I think that is probably where they conducted most of their exercises, away from prying eyes. Only a submarine might find them there, and it’s a very big ocean.”

“Yes, but a special warhead? Have you asked the senior officers what happened to the weapon?”

“Not yet, but that is coming soon.” Kapustin shrugged. “There is one other possibility… the explosion that killed the *Orel* was found to be a nuclear detonation. I made that inspection myself.”

Kamenski was shocked by the implication. “You think they fired on *Orel?”*

“It crossed my mind, though I have no evidence of this. They claim *Orel* had an accident, but perhaps it was here—on *Kirov*—and they are trying to cover it up. We will see what my investigation turns up, but given the situation in the Pacific, I wonder if I’ll have time to even complete my report before the whole place blows up.”

“Ah…You are worried about those island disputes? All they will do is cruise about with a few destroyers and test fire a missile or a deck cannon. Nothing more will come of it. They’ve been haggling for those territorial waters ever since the oil rights were disputed.”

“It’s not the little islands I’m worried about. It’s the big island.”

“Taiwan?”

“What else, Pavel? There’s a lot of movement, ships, planes, missiles. I think they mean to do something about it this time, and soon.”

“You believe the Chinese will actually attempt military occupation?”

“They’re loading nine amphibious ships even as we speak, and if I know that, then so do the Americans.”

“This sounds serious, Gerasim. What does Moscow think?”

“Moscow? They can’t even keep track of ship’s rosters these days! No, Moscow is likely to muddle along until things get out of hand. Oh, I heard they were moving some strategic bomber assets east at the request of China,

and of course, *Kirov* was sent here for a reason, yes? It's a pity the ship won't do us much good if it comes to a fight. We can re-arm her, easily enough, but that hull damage will take weeks, even months, and those big canvas tarps aft you might have seen were covering up the rest of the damage. Her entire aft citadel was blown to pieces. They say one of the KA-40's was aloft when *Orel* went up and came right down on the ship there, weapons load and all. I went over the area, but they cleaned it up very thoroughly. I did find a little wreckage from a KA-40 there but it looked too staged to my discerning eye. What do I do with this mess, Pavel? A war is coming, and we will need this ship and crew more than ever now."

"What *are* you going to do about it? Are you going to challenge Volsky? You know how respected that man is. Papa Volsky won't be moved aside easily."

Kapustin sighed. "Exactly. And with this business with the Chinese brewing up I'm having second thoughts about my whole investigation. Yes, I could go back to Moscow and raise a big stink. Suchkov would kiss me on my backside. Then when things blow up out here where will Volsky be? He'll be in Moscow wrestling with Suchkov. Abramov's health is declining and, quite frankly, we need Volsky more than ever now. He's called Papa Volsky because the men love him so much, but up north they called him King of the Northern Sea, and he's earned that title. So now what do I do? Should I write up a shit list and send it to Moscow while we watch the Chinese start a major incident? Because you know damn well we can't sit this one out. If China attacks the Japanese again, or moves on Taiwan, then we're in the *borscht* too. And mark my words, they are going to do this. I'm almost certain of it this time."

"Well…" Kamenski thought for some time. "No one says you have to file your report tomorrow, Gerasim. Take your time, dicker around, sit down with Volsky and see what he has to say. If China is about to square off with Taiwan, yes, we're in it too. And you know damn well that the Japanese and the Americans and then everyone else is in it as well. So If I were you, I would have second thoughts about starting a ruckus with Volsky. It's bad enough that *Kirov* is sitting there covered up with tarps, and hull panels, and fresh paint. What sense would it make to try and put a torpedo into Volsky now? We'll need him here. What you say about Abramov is very true. He had a heart attack last month."

Kapustin nodded, leaning over his soup and slurping it heartily. "You

know, Pavel. If they put me on an island and I could only have one thing to eat, it would be soup. I can't live without it, and you are correct, the Pacific Fleet can't live without Volsky at the moment. Yes, I can take my time. There are still a lot of unanswered questions about this *Kirov* business. Something tells me we're headed for the abyss this time, my friend. In that event, I think the best we could do is get *Kirov* seaworthy again, any way we can. I think we are going to need every last ship we have now, even those rusting old *Udaloys*."

"I think you would be wise to do this," said Kamenski. "I have my own suspicions about that ship, but in the face of imminent war, what you say makes perfect sense. It's a pity we never finished the refit on *Admiral Lazarev*."

There was a quiet ding, and Kapustin excused himself, reaching into his pocket for a cell phone. It was Volkov reporting on his investigation of the ship's roster. The Inspector listened carefully, his eyes darkening, and then said he would follow up on the matter tomorrow.

"Excuse me again, my friend, but that was my wolf chasing sheep again. That damage to *Kirov* caused casualties. Thirty-six men died."

"That is a shame," said Kamenski.

"More than that, it is now a real mystery. We got the casualty list, but when we matched it to the ship's roster, none of the names were there. So we called Moscow. They don't have any of the names on file either—not in the computers, and now not even in the paper archives—no service records, no orders cut for any men by those names. We checked every system and in ever dusty old file box in the city. The ship's physician, this Doctor Zolkin aboard *Kirov*, handed Volkov a list of thirty-six men who were killed in action, and the navy has no record that any one of them ever existed!"

"That's impossible. The list must have been fabricated then."

"Yes, but why, Pavel? *Why?* What are they doing over there? I'm the Inspector General of the Russian Navy! Did they think they could hand me such a list and I would not discover this? Is this some kind of a macabre joke? I am not amused—not one bit."

Again the cell phone in Kapustin's pocket wanted to have its say. He frowned, clearly upset now. "What is it this time?...Yes? When?... Has it been confirmed? I see. Very well, I be there as soon as I can."

He looked down at his soup bowl, then stared into his old friend's face, a sadness in his eyes this time, and a weariness.

“There’s been a shooting incident at sea off the Diaoyutai Islands. The Chinese and the Japanese are finally at it, Pavel. It’s started, and God only knows where or when it will end.”

Chapter 17

Kapustin and Kamenski were not the only men to have their dinners interrupted that evening. Admiral Volsky received the very same call, and was soon hastening into a cab for the run out to Naval Headquarters at Fokino. Karpov and Fedorov were ordered to the ship immediately.

Volsky rolled down the window, looking at his two officers and wondering if he would ever see them again. “Karpov,” he said, waving the Captain over to the cab. “Get the ship ready. Have Byko do whatever he can, particularly on that hull patch.”

“Don’t worry sir. Byko has had men in the water all week working on that problem. They also completed the missile reloads this afternoon. Kapustin was recording every last serial number.”

“Yes, well we both know what is happening now. We may have plugged one hole in the dike by sparing that American sub, but now the water seems to be coming up over the top. Remember, you are acting Captain of the battlecruiser *Kirov*. Don’t let Kapustin and Volkov push you around. And one more thing…Fedorov…Listen to him, Captain. Listen to him. He is *Starpom* this time around and you have the ship, but don’t forget those moments on the bridge when that situation was reversed. Become the same mind and heart together that saw us safely home. Do what you must, but we both know that there is something much greater than the fate of the ship at stake now, something much bigger than our own lives. We are the only ones who know what is coming, Karpov, and fate will never forgive us if we fail her this time.”

“Fedorov will stand right beside me, Admiral, and we will do everything in our power to prevent that future we saw together. I promise you.”

“I’ll have faith in you both,” said Volsky. “There’s one more thing…” The Admiral drew out his missile key, removing it and slowly handing it to Karpov. Their eyes met, a thousand words unspoken, and then Volsky nodded, raising his heavy hand in a salute, which Karpov returned briskly with a farewell smile. Then the Admiral watched his Captain turn and rush away to the nearby quay where the dark threatening profile of the world’s most powerful surface action ship rode quietly at anchor. He looked at her, still missing her Top Mast radar antenna, though now a new Fregat system

was installed on the aft mast and rotating quietly in the night.

A stirring of wind rustled the gray canvas tarp which still covered the blackened wreck of her aft battle bridge. The lone KA-40 stood a silent watch on the aft deck, and he briefly considered hitching a ride on the helo, then decided to let it be. He needed time to think before he saw Abramov again. There was other news in the back of his mind that he had not had time to digest with his Chinese food, or even to discuss with Karpov and Fedorov.

Dobrynin had called him just before sunset, strangely upset over a missing crewman, Markov. Something about his report gave Volsky the shivers, but he did not know enough about it to bring it up with the others. Instead he told Dobrynin to send for two Marine Guards and post them outside his test bed unit, and admit no one else until Rod-25 was again safely removed from the system and stored in a radiation safe container.

Now he tapped the front seat and ordered the driver on to Fokino. It would be a fifty mile trip by car, but he would probably get there faster than he would by trying to find a reasonably fast coastal lighter and crossing the wide Gulf of Peter the Great. Along the way he telephoned the HQ and asked for Admiral Abramov.

"Admiral Volsky? Good evening, sir. We were just trying to reach you. I regret to inform you that Admiral Abramov has suffered another heart attack, sir. He is being rushed to the naval hospital as we speak."

The news shocked Volsky, even though it was not unexpected. Abramov had been in declining health for the last year, and Volsky knew that with standing orders to assume the man's post, he would soon be charged with the weight of the combined operations of the entire Pacific Fleet, a burden poor Abramov could no longer carry.

It was not long before the cab had wound its way around the northern nose of the gulf, through the hamlet of Shkotovo and on through Romanovka, now heading south to Fokino. He soon saw the tall mast of the Pacific Fleet Transceiver Station winking in the night, on a high hill southeast of the town. He thought it a bit ironic that another of the four original *Kirov* class battlecruisers, the *Admiral Lazarev*, was still tied off in 'conservation status' down in the bay below Naval Headquarters here. It had been scheduled to rejoin the fleet again, but the money was never found to complete her refit, and in fact, several of her interior components had been cannibalized to build the new *Kirov*. Yet here was a good strong hull, now just the shell of a ship, slowly rusting away.

Twenty minutes later he reached the Naval Headquarters building, sensed the rising tension there in the urgent movements of staff and adjutants, knew the thickening night above would be a long one. But will there ever be a dawn, he wondered?

The Chief of Staff greeted him warmly, Andre Talanov, a stout and competent dark haired man in his late forties with a sharp eye and a good head on his shoulders. “Good evening, sir. We have received a communication from Moscow in light of both the current situation in the Pacific, and Admiral Abramov’s condition.”

“How is the Admiral?”

“We do not yet know sir, he is still in intensive care.” He handed Volsky a plain teletype message decrypt, and he knew what it was going to say as soon as he glanced at it… *“Effective immediately, FLEET ADM VOLSKY, LEONID is herewith to assume full operational command of Red Banner Pacific Fleet Operations…”*

So I am out of Kapustin’s little frying pan for the moment, he thought to himself as he read the few closing details in the message. Yes, out of the frying pan and into the fire. He folded the message and gave his new Chief of Staff a solemn look. “I expect you have much more to tell me, Captain Talanov, and I certainly hope you have a cupboard full of good tea in the building.”

“That we do, sir.”

“Very well. Let’s get started then. I suppose you’ll want to brief me on this situation with the Chinese and Japanese.”

“Yes, sir. There has been a live fire incident just northeast of the Diaoyutai Island group. We don’t know how it started yet, but the Japanese have lost a small destroyer escort, 2500 tons, the *Oyoko*, sir. It was part of a three ship flotilla and the remaining assets returned fire, sinking a Chinese Type 095 submarine. We have been in contact with Beijing, and they confirm that they have lost communications with the *Li Zhu*. The Japanese withdrew two remaining ships to the northeast temporarily. Japan issued a quick condemnation, vowed reprisal, and then put another flotilla to sea.”

“And the Chinese?”

“Their ships remain on station off the main island at Diaoyutai. They have put men ashore there, sir, and now we get word that a small Japanese coast guard cutter has also been fired on and boarded by Chinese Naval Marines off the principle ship in their task force, the *Lanzhou*.”

“It sounds like the long war of words over those islands has ended. Of course it will be in all the papers tomorrow and the Japanese ambassador in Beijing will be hopping mad.”

“I’m afraid that won’t do him much good, sir. Beijing informs me that they have occupied the Japanese Embassy there and arrested the ambassador.”

“They did what? That’s unheard of!”

“I think they mean business this time, sir. There’s a great deal going on in the diplomatic back channels tonight, but rumors are flying that a formal declaration of war is being considered. Beijing has been on the phone to Moscow about it for the last hour.”

“War? Over those useless hunks of rock in the Pacific?”

“It won’t be the first time, sir,” said Talanov, and Volsky knew all too well the truth of that statement.

“What do we have at sea?”

“The frigate *Golovko* and the destroyer *Orlan* are both in the Sea of Japan with the cruiser *Varyag.”*

“Good. Make sure they stay there.”

“But sir, they were ordered to the East China Sea to rendezvous with the Chinese.”

“They are going to be late. I am countermanding that order immediately. The flotilla is to remain in the Sea of Japan and circle in place. Someone has to act sensibly in this situation. I think it will be me.”

“Very good, sir, but won’t this cause some… political problems? The Chinese will be expecting our support.”

“Political problems are solved more easily than military ones, Mister Talanov. It would have been nice of the Chinese to inform us they were going to start firing at Japanese ships, eh? Do you think our fleet is ready for a major air sea engagement in the East China Sea? I hardly think so. You may position one or two submarines there for situational awareness, and I think it would be wise to get two IL-38s and a Bear up on long range reconnaissance. But I don’t want surface ships attempting to transit the Korea Strait under these circumstances. If we do the Japanese will have planes over them in no time, and then we will need to send fighters, and so on. No. If we deploy it will be *north* of Hokkaido Island in the Sea of Okhotsk, and in close cooperation with our naval air forces on Sakhalin Island. That way anything we have in Kamchatka can join us in the Pacific. Look at your map, Captain.

They do not call the waters south of us the Sea of Japan without good reason. Now then…I would also like a secure line to Moscow, and after that to the American Naval Headquarters in Hawaii."

"The Americans, sir?"

"Of course. Get Admiral Richardson's office on the line for me please, and ask them if he can take my call within the hour. And I want a list of everything the Americans have in the region or presently in transit on my desk in ten minutes."

Talanov had not seen this kind of decisive command style for some time, and it seemed a breath of fresh air to him after the slow and equivocating ways of Abramov. He smiled, grateful for the tone in Volsky's voice that knew how to give an order and make it stick.

"Aye, sir. Ten minutes. I'll put you through to Moscow at once." He saluted and rushed off.

Volsky went quickly to Abramov's old office, his eye falling on the family photos on his desk, a wife, daughter, grandchild. His mind strayed at once to his own wife back in Moscow. He had spoken with her on the telephone, heard the relief and joy in her voice to know that he was home safely again, and he apologized to her for the sorrow his sudden absence must have caused.

"Elena," he remembered telling her long ago. "You know that a sailor's life is fraught with many dangers, and surprises. It may be that I go out one day and do not come home as planned, but never lose hope. The navy compels hard choices at times, and some things I do you will never know. Yes, there are still secrets to be kept under my hat, and an Admiral of the fleet gets more than his fair share of them. So you just wait for me. I will come home soon enough. Busy yourself with plans for the new house in Vladivostok."

She did that, good wife that she was, but when news of the accident with *Orel* came over the television, her faithful heart was rent through. Yet she waited, a long month, not having the slightest inkling of what her husband of forty years had been doing, but never losing hope. Then one day he called her, and her heart leapt with joy.

"Leonid, you forgot to take your new leather gloves," she said, remembering that last fitful worry she had clung to when he left her.

"You packed them for the move?"

"Of course, but you know how cold your hands always get on those ships.

You'll forget your head one day."

"But I'll not forget you…"

The silence between them on the line was enough, a long distended fiber of the love they had shared together for decades. The Admiral smiled inwardly at the memory, grateful that the two ends of time that had been rejoined had left them together as man and wife, unlike the sad fate of Voloshin. Some things, he realized, were simply meant to be, in this world or in any other.

Volsky settled in to Abramov's desk, putting his personal things aside in a drawer and trying to clear his mind for the difficult days that would surely lay ahead. Talanov was back in ten minutes as promised, a look of concern in his eyes.

"There's been a development," he said flatly. "The Japanese have escalated the situation. They've sent a couple of their new DDH class helicopter destroyers and put men on the main island."

"The landing was opposed?" Volsky asked the obvious next question.

"It was, sir and hostilities have renewed. The Chinese fired on the helicopters as they made their approach and the Japanese took out that ship, one of the new Chinese Type 054 class frigates, the *Weifang*."

"They sunk it? What has suddenly possessed the Japanese? For decades they were content to sit in their islands and build the world's best cars and electronics. Now this!"

"It's that new Prime Minister, sir. You know the old Chinese proverb."

"What is that?" the Admiral asked.

"A newly appointed official burns three fires. They tend to overdo things, and Mr. Amori has taken a very hard line concerning matters related to Japanese territorial claims."

"Yes," said Volsky. "Particularly when they sit atop a lot of potential oil and gas contracts. And what are the Chinese doing?"

"There was an air duel between fighters off Okinawa and mainland China, and then the icing on the cake."

"Something tells me I do not wish to hear what followed."

"A ballistic missile strike, sir. DongFeng 15s and 21s. The Chinese hit one of the Japanese DDH class ships. It went down about two hours ago in the East China Sea. Missiles also struck Naha airfield on Okinawa. Conventional warheads, but a rather daring escalation. Those islands are still disputed territory, but there is no question about Okinawa. That is the home

soil of the Japanese nation."

"Yes," Volsky had a worried look now, his thoughts bouncing from shadowed memories of blackened cities to the rapid pulse of these current events.

"I don't think they were quite prepared for this level of conflict, sir. They sent only one flotilla of three ships, and the Japanese overmatched them. One of their helo carriers has deployed the new American Joint Strike Fighter."

"My Mister Fedorov would be able to tell me all about them. Well, the Japanese have a bad habit of catching their adversaries unprepared and paying a high price for it. Look what they did at Pearl Harbor."

"Pearl Harbor, sir?"

The Admiral suddenly realized he had stumbled, and made a recovery in the easiest way possible. For he, too, was a newly appointed official, and so he just decided to start burning a few fires of his own.

"Never mind the Japanese for the moment, Talanov. When will you have Moscow on the line?"

"Zhakarov is holding now, sir. We are waiting for Suchkov."

"Yes, we've been waiting for him to retire for years," said Volsky, and it brought a knowing smile to Talanov's eyes.

"It should just be a few minutes more, Admiral."

How true, thought Volsky. It is coming down to minutes and seconds on that alarm clock bomb again, and God help us this time, because after that comes the abyss.

Chapter 18

Karpov was doing something he seldom ever did before. He was walking the ship, just as Volsky might have done, and he was talking with the men, listening to them, hearing their concerns and seeing what he might do to help them. He worked the ship from bow to stern, checking on the progress of all work being done and encouraging the crews to get ready for action. He admired their determination and sense of duty, the smooth, easy way they cooperated with the junior officers, the confidence that seemed to underlie their every movement now. This was a ship of veteran sailors, and he was proud to be its Captain. He knew he still had a few bills to pay for what he had done in the Atlantic, and now he went to see about one of them.

When he found Troyak he was busy supervising the load-out operations for the sole KA-40 on the helo deck. The stalwart Marine Sergeant saluted and Karpov asked him to walk with him to the starboard gunwale.

"The men look good, Sergeant. How are they feeling?"

"They are in good shape, sir. Mantek had a problem with home, but the others enjoyed a good long shore leave this last week."

"What was wrong with Mantek?"

"Girlfriends," Troyak smiled.

"I understand. And what about you, Sergeant? Where is home for you?"

"Provideniya, sir. A little place on the Chukchi peninsula."

"Have you called home? I hope all is well."

"It's still there, sir."

Karpov smiled. Then he changed his tone, his voice lowering somewhat. "That was not the case with a few other men," he confided. "One came home to find his wife with another man; another could not even find his apartment here in the city. Things have changed, Troyak, do you understand this?"

"Not exactly, sir."

"That makes two of us. But I think our Mister Fedorov will sort the matter out for us both one day. In the meantime…" He gave Troyak a long look. "Sergeant, I have come to apologize to you for what I did in the Atlantic; for the position I put you and your men in, trying to set you in opposition to the Admiral. I was a stupid fool. I should have been severely punished, and instead I was handed forgiveness. I am here to see if you might spare me a little as well."

Troyak nodded gravely, and the Captain continued.

“I was wrong to do what I did, and I have only the Admiral’s grace to hold for the fact that I am standing here now and still wearing these stripes. I should be in the Brig, or worse, but Volsky gave me this chance and I am pledged to the service of this ship. I won’t let him down, or this crew down, ever again. Understand?”

“Sir, yes sir.”

Karpov smiled. “I finally learned something that you have known for some time, Troyak.”

“Sir?”

“The meaning of the word duty.”

The doughty Sergeant nodded silently, understanding. Now Karpov folded his arms, taking the stance of a commanding officer briefing a subordinate, but there was something more in his tone. He was taking Troyak into his confidence, and the Sergeant could hear it plainly.

“Admiral Volsky has been summoned to Naval Headquarters at Fokino. I believe he will be assuming command there, and thank God for that. Now that leaves us to do what we can here. There has been an incident in the East China Sea, Sergeant. The Chinese and Japanese are at it again, only this time it looks serious. It’s very likely that we will be called to action again soon. I just wanted you to know, one man of war to another.”

Troyak remembered the last time Karpov had placed himself in the same rank and file as he was with his Marines. He recalled how he had inwardly distained the remark, but this time things were different. He had heard the stories the men still told about Karpov on the bridge. The junior officers rotating down to the lower decks had painted the picture very sharply. *The enemy was right on top of us, but Karpov saved the ship. They were coming at us from all sides, but Karpov was cold as ice, and he stopped them! The big enemy battleship was trying to stick it to us, but not with the Captain on the bridge. Karpov gave them hell!* He knew he was now standing with a man of his own ilk, another warrior in the stream of life, and yes, a man of war. Karpov’s strength was not in his shoulders or arms, but he had stood his watch on the wall, and he had fought and delivered the ship safely home again. Troyak nodded, and conferred both his absolution and acceptance of the other man in that one simple gesture.

“You can rely on me, sir.”

“Yes…But I think that will be the easy part for us, Sergeant Troyak.

When it comes to a fight we will know what to do easily enough. Yet we have both seen what was left of the world on one black day after another. Something tells me we are steering a course that way even as we speak. I don't know how yet, or what we can do about it. I once thought that if I could just get the ship home safely it would be enough, but there is something more in front of us now. We may be called to war soon, but if we are ever to avoid that other world we saw, we'll have to become something more, you and I. We'll have to become men of peace as well."

"I understand, sir….At least I think I do."

"You are the business end of a platoon of highly trained men, Sergeant. But not every blow is struck to do harm. This is the only way I can think to understand it. Sometimes we fight to do some good, and we do what we must when it comes to battle. But Fedorov once told me to think also of what we *should* do, and this time I will keep his advice in my front shirt pocket, and heed it well."

The Captain clasped Troyak on the shoulder, even as he had done once before, only this time things were different. This time the gesture was real. "Thank you, Sergeant."

"Sir." Troyak saluted, and returned to his men.

Karpov headed forward to look for Fedorov, learning that he had gone to the sick bay, so he made his way there. When he arrived he was surprised to see both Kapustin and Volkov there, in some heated conversation with Doctor Zolkin.

"Welcome, Captain," the Doctor said with some exasperation. "Perhaps you can do some of the shouting now, and I can have a rest."

Zolkin was at his desk, Fedorov sitting on a chair by the wall, and Kapustin was seated opposite the Doctor with three manila folders in hand. Volkov was standing behind him like a gray shadow, a smirk on his face.

"I was asking the good Doctor here how he managed to come up with this little charade," said Kapustin, gesturing at the files.

"What are you talking about, Inspector?" said Karpov, his eyes drawn to the folders.

"You are going to tell me that you know nothing about it as well? What do I have here now, three blind mice? You are the senior officers aboard this ship!"

"He is telling me these records were fabricated," said Zolkin, an aggrieved expression on his face. "These are the files for the new junior

officer trainees that we lost in the accident aft."

"Denikin, Krasnov and Rykov," said Karpov.

"Exactly," said Zolkin. "You see, Mister Kapustin, he knows them by name without a second thought." He pointed at the Captain, claiming him as evidence on his side of the argument. Karpov realized that Zolkin had been out of the loop in the discussion he had with Volsky and Fedorov on this matter, and he was thinking how to proceed.

"Well the Captain knows them, does he?" said Kapustin slowly. "That's good, because no one in Moscow seems to know them, not their names, not their service records either. So where did these come from?" He rotated slowly in his chair, like a big threatening gun turret slowly training to engage a new target.

Karpov knew the matter was not going to be resolved easily; not here, not now. They had not come to any decision as to how it might be handled before their dinner was interrupted by the call to return to duty at once. Now Kapustin and Volkov were right back at it again, but the Captain decided what he had to do, so he keyed his Moskit-II and fired.

"This is a matter of state security," he said calmly. "Neither you, nor Captain Volkov here were privy to it. Yes, do not look so surprised, Inspector General. You do not know everything, and should you inquire about this further you will get the same reaction you received from Moscow when you went after the names on that list." Karpov was lying, of course, but he did so with such a convincing tone that it sounded completely believable.

"You are telling me… You mean to say these men are *not* dead?" Kapustin leapt to the obvious conclusion.

"This is outrageous," said Volkov.

"Oh?" Karpov turned at him, missiles ready. "You are a ranking officer in the Naval Intelligence Division, and you are going to stand there and tell me that men with names but no traceable life history behind them are not sometimes very useful? Get a head on your shoulders!" He raised his voice now, then put his hands on his hips, leaning forward and staring right at Kapustin.

"Do you know what's going on out there now?" He pointed a stiff arm towards the unseen harbor, and the ocean beyond. "Do you have any idea what's been happening these last weeks and months? Where the world is headed? You think you know everything and have it all written down there in your files? Has it ever entered your thick head that this ship disappeared for a

reason?" He pointed to the deck. Kapustin's eyes widened, a hint of uncertainty there. Volkov gave Karpov a sallow look, a mix of shock and disbelief.

"Yes," Karpov pressed on. "How does a ship like this get half way around the world without NATO knowing about it? *Yes*. Where is that missing special warhead? And by God what happened to the thirty-six men on the list Doctor Zolkin gave you? Well get a hold of your boots and pull them on, Inspector. To put it quite plainly, it's none of your damn business! But it is *my* business, and the business of this ship and crew. Forgive me if no one bothered to inform you before we left Severomorsk, but I think you were probably busy keeping track of serial numbers on some other ship then, yes?"

Kapustin gave Karpov a long look, thinking. He was Inspector General of the Russian Navy, and in that position he knew a great deal. He could tell you what was in the magazines and holds of nearly every ship in the fleet, and who was serving on them, and where they were berthed, and how many cans of paint they had on order and which ones were efficient and which ones were sloppy. Yes, he knew a lot about the navy, but he also knew that it was folded in on itself like a maze at times, and the pathways of power flowed through the heads of an alarming number of gray haired old men.

Karpov's bravado had shaken him, for the Captain had been correct —*nobody knows everything.* There were still dark corners into which he had never been able to peer. Men like Volkov behind him were often sent into those corners to bark and sniff and drag things out of the shadows. But there were times they went in and never came back out. There were places in the convoluted, old power structure of the Russian military where it was still very dangerous to tread.

Now the situation developing in the Pacific came to mind and Karpov's words began to make sense. The ship had clearly been on a very dangerous mission. He had not sorted it all through, but his careful inspection had uncovered enough to know that this ship had been in combat. It was no accident that she had a hole in her hull. That was torpedo damage. And the injury to her main mast and aft citadel was no accident either. A little scrape of a pen knife here…A sample or two in a plain plastic bag for the labs… Yes, he soon had his suspicions confirmed. The smoke and fire and residue of battle was on the ship, and the scars of combat at sea. He could see it also in the eyes and demeanor of the crew. This was a fighting ship, a man-o-war in every respect. This was a fighting crew, men of war indeed. And Karpov, he

knew, was a fighting Captain, as good as any man in the fleet by the scores notched in his fleet exercise records. Now something told him clearly that *Kirov* had been involved in some very special mission this last month, and it was no exercise.

Kapustin leaned back, eyes narrowed as his surprise faded and these thoughts ran through his mind. Then he simply gathered the three manila folders into a neat pile on Doctor Zolkin's desk and stood up.

"Thank you, Captain. I think that settles the matter for the moment." He had been struck amidships and had fires to put out. The smoke of uncertainty was now thick, and his gunners could not range on the target. He had to fall off and come about, just as Admiral Da Zara had in the Tyrrhenian Sea, and just like Admiral Iachino had at the Bonifacio Strait. Something told him, an inner instinct that had served him well for many long years, that this was not the place and time to fight his battle over this matter. If he pursued it, he might sail into hidden shoals and reefs that lay unseen in the murky waters surrounding this incident. Sanji Iwabuchi might have told him to beware of impetuosity in this regard, though he knew nothing of that man's sad fate.

"What are you saying?" said Volkov pointing at Karpov, an incredulous look on his face. "You mean to say you're going to let them get away with this insubordination? What about *Orel?* I'll tell you where the missing warhead went! What about *Orel?"*

Karpov gave him a murderous stare, and Kapustin quickly intervened, like someone pulling on a heavy leash. "Mister Volkov," he said sharply. "Insubordination? Either you were not listening to what Captain Karpov just said, or you were not smart enough to hear what I just heard in his words. I am going to flatter you and assume you are not stupid. So I will say it again —this matter is closed for the moment. I believe I have enough information to complete my report, but I may be some weeks writing it." He looked askance at Karpov and Fedorov now, then fixed his attention fully on Volkov again. "In the meantime, our work here is done, and I believe these officers have other matters to attend to."

"But—"

Volkov fought his own quick inner battle between his eagerness to make the kill and his instinct for caution. It was fight or flight, and he had always been the attack dog when it came to situations like this. But he could feel the hard chain on his neck now, and saw how the leash was firmly in Kapustin's hand, and so he stifled his protest, deciding he could deal with this some

other way through Naval Intelligence.

“Very well,” he growled. “I will make arrangements for our departure at once.” It was clear that Volkov was not happy, and he strode out, giving Karpov an evil eye as he went.

Kapustin composed himself, then looked from Zolkin, to Fedorov where he sat silently on the chair by the wall, and then to Karpov. The Captain stood, stiff backed, arms folded, eyes narrowed.

“Do you know I had a very good dog once,” said the inspector. “A Belgian Tervuren I called *Chang*. He was a magnificent animal. You know they have the thickest ruff of any breed I have ever seen. They can handle a German Shepherd with no trouble, because the other dog just can’t get its teeth through that ruff.” He clenched his fingers to illustrate the frustrated bite. “You are correct, Captain. Nobody knows everything, do they? Not even the Inspector General of the Russian Navy, though I may know quite a bit more than you realize, and enough to know I am not going to get my teeth through your ruff this time either. Perhaps we will talk again another day, but I think you are correct about one more thing, and that is why I leave you here to attend to it. The world is going to hell faster than we know, and I, for one, do not look forward to the trip. We’re going to need your sort at the helm of ships like this, and so I leave you to more important matters.”

Kapustin smiled, picked up his black felt fedora, and walked slowly out of the room. They listened to the echo of his footsteps fade to silence before anyone said another word.

Part VII

Devil in the Details

“A mountain is composed of tiny grains of earth. The ocean is made up of tiny drops of water. Even so, life is but an endless series of little details, actions, speeches, and thoughts. And the consequences, whether good or bad, of even the least of them are far-reaching.”

—Sivananda

Chapter 19

The fishing boat slipped away from the rocky shore, off the northeast of Gibraltar, soon joining fifteen others just like it where brown skinned fishermen with gnarled hands tended to their nets and lines, hoping to bring in enough to feed themselves and their family, and still have some left over to sell in the local markets.

Orlov was tired, and settled into a small room below deck to get some sleep. Hours later he found that the small boat had hove to next to a weathered old steamer and soon the three men and their very important charge were scrambling up rope nets and onto the decks of the *Sarkoy*, and heading east across the Mediterranean Sea.

Neutral Turkey enjoyed a rare privilege in the Med, as both the Axis and Allied forces were interested in bringing her into their respective alliances to gain possession of the vital Turkish Straits. The Vichy French even tried to occasionally dress out their own merchantmen as Turkish ships so they could slip past the watchful eyes of the British at Gibraltar, and a few did exactly that while others were unmasked and caught by wary Royal Navy sea captains. Thankfully, *Sarkoy* made it all the way through to Istanbul with only one close call when two Italian planes made a low overflight in the Sicilian narrows. One shadowed the ship for some time until it was well past Malta, then vanished in the overhead mist, leaving the hapless steamer to its own fate.

Orlov was content to stay where he was for the moment, though he had already considered how he would kill the three men who kept a watchful eye on him now. He noted their habits, shift rotations, and thought it would be quite easy to slip away whenever he had a mind. In time he actually came to like the tall Russian, Sergei Kamkov, and the two spent long nights talking, smoking cigarettes, and drinking vodka that Kamkov had produced from haversack. Orlov could not help but do a little boasting in those conversations, even though he suspected that Kamkov was working for the Soviet intelligence.

“The British almost had you,” Kamkov had teased. They were going to fly you off to London on plane and go over you with a fine toothed comb. Tell me, Orlov, why are they so interested in you?”

“Why? I suppose because I know so much.” He took another swig of his vodka.

“Oh, what is it you know? Loban is usually very careful. He has never once risked blowing his cover to pass a man over as he did with you. He must have thought you were a really big fish, yes?’

“Big as they come,” said Orlov. “I can tell you things that will amaze you, my friend.”

“Tell me this, then. What’s in the pouch?”

“What pouch?”

“The diplomatic pouch Loban gave me. What’s so special, eh? We were told not to open it or we’d have our fingers snapped off one by one, and with Loban, you believe what he says.”

“Well Loban said nothing to me about it. Let me see it and I’ll have a look inside.”

“I don’t think so,” said Kamkov. “We’ll leave it safe in the haversack for now. So you don’t know much after all, it seems.”

“Bullshit,” said Orlov. “He’s probably got my wireless in there.”

“Wireless? You were wearing a wireless device? A radio set? Where? How could you?”

“We’ve learned how to make things very small where I come from. I had some ear plugs with a microphone and a little speaker. That’s most likely what he stuck in that pouch.”

“Ear plugs? Impossible. That small? Who made this for you.”

“Never mind who made it, Kamkov. Just play your hand.”

If anything, this lot was a far better circumstance than being locked away in a cave beneath that accursed Rock, thought Orlov. The Bosporus would be an easy place to jump ship, when they got there and he wondered where he might go next.

Orlov wanted nothing to do with the war on the east front. He knew that no matter where he went there he would likely be picked up and pressed into service in the nearest Russian company, battalion or regiment at hand. The Germans already controlled the Crimea, and Sevastopol, and were fighting for Novorossiysk by the time Orlov found himself approaching Istanbul.

There, to his great surprise, the *Sarkoy* was met by a small trawler on foggy night in the Bosporus. Three more men came aboard, wearing black leather jackets, and dark Ushanka caps with insignia, and Orlov realized, much to his chagrin, that he was now being turned over to the Soviet

authorities in the Black Sea. So much for his plan to jump ship, he thought with some regret. Kamkov transferred over to the trawler with these newcomers. As he stepped down the ladder Orlov looked around, thinking he might make a jump into the water, but quickly discarding the notion. So far the Russians had handled him a lot better than the Spanish or British might have. As he jumped the last few feet down to the old wooden deck of the trawler he noted the number T-492 on its rusting hull.

The other two men stayed behind on the Turkish ship, and he noted that Kamkov had carefully taken the haversack with the diplomatic pouch. This was a coastal lighter, and Orlov watched his stars to make out their heading, soon realizing that they were gradually working their way along the northern coast of Turkey and over towards Georgia. Of course, he thought. A boat like this would be too small to risk crossing the heart of the Black Sea, particularly with the German Luftwaffe hovering about like black crows. No. They'll work their way all along this coast to Poti and beyond.

That would be his last chance, he thought. If I let these fur hats get me any farther up that coast they'll likely drop me at Sochi or Tuapse, right in the middle of the damn war again. If these men are NKVD they'll soon want to know who I am, and why they have no record on my name in their recruitment books. Yet this has been an easy cruise so far. If the food is good on this trawler I just may stick around a while longer. At least we don't have to worry about the God cursed German U-Boats out here. And this boat looks like a minesweeper, so there's little to fear from that as well.

He was very wrong.

* * *

Oberleutnant Klaus Peterson was the second frustrated U-Boat commander that was to become the hand of fate in this strange tale, just like Kapitan, Werner Czygan of *U-118*. Peterson's boat was *U-24*, a sub that had inherited a very proud number, for this was the second boat to bear that designation. The first had been commissioned in 1913, and fought during the Great War with much success and many laurels. On Oct 26, 1914 she had the dubious distinction of being the first German U-Boat to ever attack an unarmed merchant ship without warning, the *SS Admiral Ganteaume.* Her very next kill was something a little more spectacular, and gained her real distinction when she hit and sunk the 15,000 ton dreadnaught *Formidable.* Before that war ended, *U-24* had hit a remarkable 39 ships, sinking 34 of

them, badly damaging three others and taking one more as a prize. In all she inflicted pain and death on 137,560 tons of enemy shipping.

The *U-24* of the Second World War was another ship entirely, a small Type IIB boat commissioned in 1936. Unlike her ancestor, to date *U-24* had little to brag about. The boat had only one kill, the merchant steamer *Carmarthen Coast* hit off the shores of the UK on 9 November, 1939, and that by a mine, just as Czygan had scored his hit on the hapless *Duero*. Since that time three other commanders had taken their turns behind the periscope with no success, and by May 1940 she had come to be thought of as an unlucky boat, and was soon retired as a "School Boat" for training with the 21st Flotilla. Then in late 1942, *U-24* had been secreted into the Black Sea by a very devious route, and transferred to the 30th Flotilla there under the command of another U-Boat Kapitän who had been caught up in this bizarre web of fate, Werner Rosenbaum, formerly of *U-73*.

Kapitän Rosenbaum had just earned his Knight's Cross in the Mediterranean while in action against the British Operation Pedestal. He was one of the very few German U-boats to claim an aircraft carrier for a kill when he sunk the *HMS Eagle*, and after a strange run-in with another large enemy ship that he had never been able to identify, Rosenbaum sailed home to La Spezia and was soon transferred to Constanza on the Black Sea Coast for a new mission—command of the 30th Black Sea U-Boat flotilla, Hitler's "lost fleet" in the inland waters of southern Europe.

In an ingenious and daring operation, the Germans had partially disassembled a flotilla of six Type IIB Coastal U-Boats at Kiel, removing their conning towers by oxyacetylene torches before they moved them overland on the most powerful land haulers and tractors in Germany. They eventually reached the Danube where they were packed in pontoon crates and then made their way slowly by barge to the Black Sea. Originally scheduled to arrive there in October of 1942, they were two months early, and the young twenty-five year old Oberleutnant zur See Klaus Peterson would serve under Rosenbaum and be privileged to go out on some of the 30th flotilla's very first patrols.

He was excited about the prospect of suddenly surprising the enemy here, who had not seen a whisper of a German U-boat even in their dreams throughout the war. Peterson had trained under another well known U-Boat commander while he was on *U-14*, Herbert Wohlfarth and remembered the story that man had told him of how he had witnessed the tragic loss of the

great battleship *Bismarck*. Wohlfarth had been there, watching the final battle through his periscope, yet with no torpedoes to make good his pledge to keep the great battleship safe from all harm. He had used his last torpedoes on a couple of old cargo ships days earlier, and bitterly regretted the choice for the rest of his life. Peterson never forgot the story.

Life and fate had a very strange way of crossing life lines and making odd connections like that. For Wohlfarth trained Peterson, and now he would serve under Rosenbaum, a man who was only alive now because Anton Fedorov has recalled the KA-40 that had spotted Rosenbaum's sub where it hid like an eel in Fornells Bay, Menorca. Fedorov's avid interest in the Second World War had brought the men who fought it to such life in his mind that he could not bring himself to strike Rosenbaum down. His act of mercy was to have dramatic and far reaching consequences, the first of which was instilling a moment of restraint in another man, Vladimir Karpov. When Karpov had come on duty and learned that Fedorov spared the sub, his first instinct had been to go back and kill it, but he, too, stayed his hand. It would not be the first time he spared an enemy submarine.

So Rosenbaum lived. He took command of the secret 30th U-boat Flotilla in the Black Sea a few months earlier than he might have, and he sent out a hungry young U-Boat commander named Klaus Peterson in a boat that was straining to make its first kill since 1939. It would get its chance against another very fated ship that night, the Russian minesweeper trawler T-492.

The sun had been down for three hours and it was a dark and quiet night on the still waters of the Black Sea. Peterson's *U-24* had made the long journey from Constanza, leaving several days ago and angling southeast to the Turkish coast to look for small Russian craft that used that route to avoid German air operations. At 19:00 hours it was very dark, as the moon would not rise until 22:30, and even then it would only be a slim morning crescent, so conditions were perfect for a U-boat to be riding on the surface in search of unwary prey.

The 325 ton Type-II U-boats were among the very first new boats built by Germany after the repudiation of the Treaty of Versailles, with twelve being built in secret pens. From the first they were conceived as small coastal boats, just 140 feet in length and thirteen feet wide. With a crew of only twenty-five men and limited range they were only useful for training or deployment in restricted waters like the Black Sea. In the open ocean they would roll too heavily, and came to be called "dugout canoes," but in quieter inland waters

and coastal zones their agile maneuverability and rapid diving speed of thirty seconds made them very effective. The Type IIB could run 1800 miles at 12 knots, more than enough endurance for operations in the Black Sea. The boat had three 21 inch bow tubes for a load of six torpedoes, but that night Oberleutnant Klaus Peterson had only three left, having fired unsuccessfully at a couple of lighters along the Turkish coast the previous day.

At 19:18 hours his lookouts spotted what appeared to be a small tug or barge tender well off Poti, and Peterson silently turned his boat, aiming the nose to fire. More often than not, a U-boat might fire its torpedoes on the surface like this, and the young Oberleutnant was eager for a kill on his first patrol here. He was from the well known “Olympia Crew” of 1936, taking that name from the Berlin Olympics held the year they graduated, and Peterson hoped to win a medal or two before he was through tonight. The ship ahead did not look like much of a prize, yet he would take what he could get without complaint.

“I’m lined up perfectly, Otto,” he whispered to his Executive Officer. “Fire tube one!”

The G7e torpedo was away with a quiet swish, running true and right at the unwary Tszcz-492 where Gennadi Orlov dozed in a hammock below decks under the casual watch of two NKVD guards. Then a man shouted from above and the thump of heavy soled boots was hard on the wooden deck. Orlov was jostled awake, hearing men yelling out an alarm.

The two NKVD men were up and running for the ladder, foolishly leaving Orlov alone. He heard the word torpedo, then submarine, and the boat master was shouting for men to man the forward 76mm deck gun that had been well concealed under a heavy tarp. In that brief moment of uncertainty, Orlov’s eye fell on Kamkov’s haversack, and he moved, almost without thinking, rushing over and fishing about to get at the diplomatic pouch. There it was! He had the looped string open in a heartbeat, and groped inside, finding the earbuds and then quickly securing the pouch again and putting it right back where he found it.

He heard the sound of something warbling in the water, then a high pitched hum that he knew was a torpedo, and his heart raced to think these might be his last moments alive. But the unlucky history that had plagued *U-24* since it dared assume the mantle of its illustrious WWI predecessor would continue to plague Klaus Peterson that night. The shot was perfect, dead center on the small ship ahead, which was actually a Soviet mine sweeper

trawler, but the torpedo depth was wrong for the target's shallow draft, and it ran right under the boat!

Orlov heard it pass and sighed with relief. He considered trying to sneak on deck but he did not know where the trawler was and the prospect of diving into the sea was less than appealing. So instead he waited in the noisy darkness, hearing the grind of metal above as the deck crews worked the 76mm gun. Then he heard a loud boom, as they fired their first round back at the enemy sub, and something in him pulled for the Russian crew, not only because his life depended on it, but because they were his countrymen, distant ancestors of the nation he had left, but countrymen nonetheless.

Oberleutnant Peterson was surprised by the gunfire, hearing the round soar in and splash heavily in the water off his starboard side. "Damn! We were dead on and the fish was too deep! And that's no tug boat, it's a minesweeper! Dive the boat!"

The harsh claxon sounded and men scrambled from the tiny conning tower above. Thirty seconds later *U-24* had slipped beneath the wine dark sea and turned fifteen points to port. Peterson heard another round come in above them but it thankfully missed, and so now he wiped the sweat from his brow and struggled to calm himself. His first pounce had failed to catch his prey, so the deadly game of stalking would now begin. He angled away, thinking the best thing to do now was make the enemy think they had driven him off while he slowly circled to see if he could line up on the target again. First he needed to get well away from the place he had taken his first shot. A periscope here would only invite trouble.

He did not know that fate and time were now watching his every move, inscribing it all in their ledgers, and that one man, Gennadi Orlov, was now about to steal a peek at the books.

Chapter 20

Aboard T-492, Orlov had a sudden thought. He looked at the earbuds in his palm and slipped one into his right ear, clicking the collar button to activate his Jacket Computer, grateful and amused that the British had been too stupid to make any connection between the earbuds and his jacket. He would see what he could find out about this incident, if anything had been recorded about it, and the Portable Wiki of 2021 did not disappoint. Svetlana was in his ear with a little story in no time:

"…19:18 hours, off Poti, Georgia: U-24 fired a G7e torpedo at Soviet M/S trawler T-492 which passed beneath its target below the bridge. The trawler then forced U-24 to dive with gunfire."

How convenient, thought Orlov, smiling. He could sit there and learn what his fate would be, and whether he had to make a run for it and hit the water if this damn ship was going to be sunk that night. Now he understood why Fedorov always had his nose buried in his books and computer data while they were up in the Atlantic, and he remembered how he would advise both Volsky and Karpov on the history. He smiled, whispering "continue" and listening to what Svetlana would tell him.

The next line sent his pulse up, but he soon smiled… *"U-24 scored a hit at 21:37 hrs…"* Orlov continued listening, hearing fate breath her mandate in his ear, and then he put the earbud away in a hidden pocket of his jacket, turned the system off, and was up on his feet to go above.

The tang of the sea was sweet in his nostrils as he stuck his head up through the ladder hole, climbing on deck. He saw men standing tensely at the watch, field glasses pressed tightly to their eyes, and heard a third round fire from the deck gun. He was up, moving forward along the gunwale past the pilot house when one of the NKVD men saw him.

"What are you doing up here? Get your ass below!"

"Fuck you," Orlov shot back at him. "Those bastards are trying to kill me!" He pointed along the line where the deck gun was sighting. "You think I want to sit down there and take a fucking torpedo up my ass?"

The NKVD man smiled, relenting, but decided to keep an eye on Orlov, watching the easy way the big man moved on deck, the sureness of his footing, and how he shifted his weight and balance when the boat rolled. He

knew at once this man was navy, an old salt of the sea. The men were still excited on deck, and the boat's master was shouting orders. Kamkov was in the pilot house with him, and when he saw Orlov he waved for him to come inside.

"Bastard snuck up on us," he said. "It's so damn dark we couldn't see him before he got that torpedo off. Lucky for us it ran too deep."

"He won't make that mistake again," said Orlov quietly, reaching in his pocket for a cigarette.

"You think he's still out there?"

"Of course! You surprised him as well. I don't think he expected that deck gun. Probably thought this was just a fishing trawler."

"The bastard must be pretty damn hungry to waste a good torpedo on a ship this size. I wonder if it was German. How could they get the damn thing in here?"

"It's German," said Orlov matter of factly. He had asked Svetlana a follow up question before he put his earbuds away, and he knew all about *U-24*, and how it came to find itself in the Black Sea. Yes, the Germans were crafty little shits. This boat was no different. Its captain must be very good if he could put a torpedo right amidships on the first shot…and scored a *hit* on the second!

"What time is it?" Orlov asked, looking for the moon that was still not there.

"19:30 hours, or thereabouts. Getting sleepy again, Orlov?"

The Chief smiled. He still liked Kamkov, and hoped he would not have to kill him soon. There was still plenty of time, he knew, but the action would begin again in about an hour. Duels like this were not like the fast wild frenzy of a surface action. The minute the U-boat submerged successfully, it became a game of cat and mouse. The only question was this: which boat was the cat?

There was no doubt in Klaus Peterson's mind that he was in charge of the engagement now. He had been in charge of it all along. He caught the enemy by surprise, and soon he would angle in and line up on the target one more time. He decided to risk a look through the periscope on this moonless night, and soon saw that his quarry had put on speed, but was foolishly circling instead of making a beeline for the coast as he thought it might. What are they doing? He wondered?

What they were doing was quietly dropping a few mines off the stern,

leaving a little web of bristling iron behind them to hopefully ensnare the silent enemy beneath the sea. Orlov smiled inwardly when the boat master gave the order, but let them play, saying nothing. T-492 had no depth charges or sonar equipment of any kind, so the boat could not actively go after the enemy U-boat. It had to wait until the enemy showed himself again, or simply run. This was a clear case where discretion was the better part of valor, but Orlov admired the pluck and courage of these men. They were stupidly dropping sea mines as if they had any chance of hitting this sub, but they were determined.

"That's a waste of time," he said eventually to the boat master.

"You have a better idea?" The grizzled man shot back.

The clock was ticking on, and the tension winding up. It had been nearly an hour and a half now since those first wild moments. That was life at sea—hurry up and wait. One minute it was chaos and adrenaline, then long minutes or hours of doldrums. But soon the wait was over.

"Torpedo!" a watchman shouted. "Starboard side and close!"

"Sookin sin!" The boat master swore as he labored to turn the wheel. Kamkov's eyes were white with fear, but Orlov seemed calm and unconcerned. "Don't worry," he whispered to his friend. "It's a dud."

He reached out and took hold of the man's wrist to see his watch. The enemy was right on schedule. Svetlana had whispered her truth, and Orlov only hoped she had been correct, that the history still held true as recorded. The dates were off but the little details like the time seemed perfect to the second. Now he again knew why Fedorov was so edgy when he thought *Kirov* would do something to upset the thin, fragile scrawl of history in his books and records. Orlov's life depended on it running true, just at this second torpedo was again running true, right at the heart of the trawler.

They could hear it, a distant whine in the sea getting louder and louder. A man shouted, another cursed, pointing at the sea. The torpedo came lancing in and struck the boat dead on this time, and right amidships. There was a hard thump on the hull, and every man around him instinctively closed their eyes, their faces strained with fear. All except Orlov, for the curse on *U-24* was still holding the enemy in its firm grip. Peterson's second shot was indeed a dud, just as Svetlana had told Orlov it would be, and just as Orlov had told Kamkov it would be. The devil was in the details.

Kamkov opened his eyes, looking at the boat master, who was exhaling heavily with relief, then at Orlov, a strange look on his face.

“How did you know?” he breathed.

Orlov cocked his head to one side nonchalantly. “I can hear it.” He pointed to his ear. “Yes, I’ve spent some time on destroyers. You get a very good ear for these things after a while. I knew the first one was running deep too,” a little *lozh* now to put icing on his cake. “And I knew this one was going to misfire. Don’t get yourselves all worked up. He’s got one more fish in the tank, but he won’t hit anything with it. Then you get your chance later. Relax. It will be a long wait this time.”

“You sound very sure of yourself,” said Kamkov.

“I’m always sure,” said Orlov with a grin. “That’s why I took your shirt at poker, eh? I’m going below. The moon will be up soon and you’ll feel better. Wake me at midnight, will you Kamkov?”

Svetlana had whispered it all in his ear, and Orlov knew what was coming next. He had plenty of time, so he settled into the hammock below, trying to doze off again, but bothered by the sound of heavy footfalls on the deck above as the men of T-492 kept up their fitful watch. They were still stupidly fooling around with the mines on the aft deck, trying to rig them with weights to set their depth, and just listening to them made him laugh. It was a god-like feeling of power to know the fate of these men tonight, right down to the minutes and seconds. There they were, blundering about in the night on the cold wet deck above, their hands raw on ropes and chains, or tight on the wheel of the boat as T-492 wended her way slowly east towards Poti, leaving a wake of mines behind her that would now probably cause more problems for local shipping than they would for the unseen German U-boat.

A little after midnight Kamkov stuck his head down the hatch and called him. “Wake up, Orlov. The moon is up, just like you said. But there’s no sign of that submarine.”

Orlov climbed back up, yawning and reaching for another cigarette, which he shared with Kamkov this time. The crew seemed much more at ease now. The long three hour wait had lulled them with a sense of false security. Some were lounging on deck, talking quietly with one another, the men by the deck gun were sitting on the ammo crates, one of the NKVD guards was slowly pacing back and forth, his submachine gun slung over his shoulder, black Ushanka tilting this way and that as he watched the slivered moonlight glimmer on the sea.

Orlov had his quiet smoke as the time slipped by. Then it began again. One of the men working the mining operation at the back of the ship shouted

with alarm. There was another torpedo inbound off their port quarter, and every man on the ship was up with sudden energy, heads craned to look, eyes squinting, tensely alert—all except Orlov. The torpedo missed, just as Orlov said it would.

Aboard *U-24*, Klaus Peterson's luck had run out, for that was his last torpedo. He cursed inwardly, angry to think that he had put his first two torpedoes right on the mark and neither one could score a hit.

"Damn unlucky boat," said Otto on his left as Peterson lowered the periscope, clearly upset.

"To hell with that," said the Oberleutnant. "We're behind him now. Surface at once and we go after him with the AA gun!"

"That's not a very good idea," said Otto. "They have a deck gun!" But he could see the steely eye of determination in Peterson now, and he seconded the order.

U-24 surfaced in a white swell of bubbles and the hatch opened, men scrambling forward to the twin 20mm AA gun forward of the conning tower. Peterson followed them up, standing in the tower with his field glasses, and shouting at the men to be quick on the gun. He had nothing more than these 20mm rounds to throw at the enemy now, and he knew his executive officer had been correct. This was just a stupid act of defiance, but when the gun fired he took some heart, and some satisfaction in seeing the tracers chew up the water near the back of the enemy ship. A damn minesweeper, he thought. We can't even sink a damn mining trawler!

The AA guns barked as the trawler's boat master spun the wheel hard to bring his bow around and give his 76mm deck gun a chance for another shot, but Orlov knew it would come to naught. What he did *not* know, however, was that Peterson's stubborn act of defiance would have consequences he did not expect. The 20mm rounds raked the trawler, some skidding off the metal siding of the pilot house as Orlov instinctively crouched low. One of the rounds had found a target, and he looked, astonished to see that Kamkov had fallen hard and was now slumped on the deck beside him, shot through the chest. Then the enemy fire halted and Orlov could see the distant silhouette of the Germans working their gun.

Svetlana's words came back to him, playing again in his mind as he recalled the history record he had called up. *"After U-24 had fired and missed with her last torpedo at 00:38 hrs, the boat surfaced and exchanged fire with the 20mm AA gun…"*

It seemed there were a lot of little details written between the broad strokes of history. Svetlana had said nothing whatsoever about Kamkov, he thought, and he realized that those rounds could just have easily raked across his own chest. Now Kamkov was quite dead, and Orlov was quite angry. He stood up, glaring at the German U-Boat as he heard the 76mm deck gun fire in futile rage, its shot well over the enemy boat and missing by a wide margin.

Infuriated, Orlov strode over to the NKVD guard where he crouched behind the gunwale, and in one swift motion he snatched away the man's submachine gun. *"Piz-da!"* He cursed at the U-boat, flipping off the safety and opening up on the Germans, pleased to see his machine gun fire snapping off the conning tower in a shower of sparks. His cigarette butt was still between his pursed lips as he fired, sneering at his enemy.

"Don't *fuck* with me you stupid sons of bitches!" he shouted, spitting out the cigarette butt and grinning evilly when he saw the Germans secure their AA gun and run for the deck hatches. The little battle on the Black Sea was over, and he knew why. Svetlana had told him the whole story: "…*the boat surfaced and exchanged fire with the 20mm AA gun, which malfunctioned shortly afterwards, forcing U-24 to break off the attack with light machine gun damage to the conning tower."*

Orlov smirked inwardly, handing the smoking submachine gun back to the astonished NKVD man, who looked at him with awe and respect when he saw the German U-Boat quickly vanish beneath the sea again.

"Watch for torpedoes!" the boat master shouted, but Orlov simply laughed. He had written his little line in the history, with a PPD-40 submachine gun firing Tokarev 7.62x25mm pistol rounds, but it was enough.

"Don't worry," he shouted back at the boat master. "If they had any more torpedoes do you think they would have come up to shoot with us? It's over. Get some rest."

For Klaus Peterson, it was a very frustrating night. His boat was now toothless, and little more than a scouting unit. He would have to slink back to Constanza with nothing to show for his first war patrol here, but he would learn a lesson from the incident. Now he recalled Wohlfarth's story of the impotence he felt when he had to watch the *Bismarck* sink with no torpedoes to use to defend her.

Peterson's fate was not so unkind, but he would have to wait nine long months before he would get another target in his sights, for it was truly slim

pickings in the Black Sea. On that night, in June of 1943, he would find and sink a 441 ton Soviet fleet minesweeper, much like this one that would now escape his grasp. It was boat 411-*Zashchitnik* (No. 26), and he would get it with a spread of two torpedoes, never trusting to a single shot again.

Peterson didn't get his kill against T-492 that night, but he had unknowingly achieved much more. His inexperience, a torpedo running deep, and another a dud along with that jammed AA deck gun had all conspired to do one essential thing—they spared the life of Gennadi Orlov, though Kamkov was stone cold dead. Now none of the other NKVD guards assigned to bring Orlov to Poti knew a thing about that diplomatic pouch, or anything it might have contained.

Chapter 21

Tashkent was new to the Lend Lease run into Vladivostok that year. Built in 1914 by Maryland Steel, she was actually owned by the American Hawaiian Steamship Company for their Panama Canal Line, and licensed through the Far East State Shipping Company. In June of 1942, however, the ship had been re-flagged with the hammer and sickle and turned over to the U.S.S.R. to carry Lend-Lease shipments into Vladivostok. Amazingly, over 8,400,000 tons of food, arms trucks and planes had been delivered through open sea lanes on the Sea of Okhotsk, or flown in from Alaska, as Russia was effectively a "neutral" in the Pacific conflict of WWII. *Tashkent* was one of the intrepid general cargo ships bringing home the bacon.

The ship had borrowed the name from a real Russian transport ship that had been sunk in a German air attack on Fedosia on new year's day of 1942. Now the resurrected name was quietly passed on to the American owned boat, and no one was the wiser.

That day, in September of 1942, the ship also had a curious young seaman aboard, Jimmy Davis. An Able Seaman and cargo handler, he had just finished offloading some containers to the quays of the Golden Horn Harbor, Vladivostok, when he happened to witness a very strange scene.

A man came running down Kalinina Street, crossing the old railroad tracks and hurrying toward the quay, and it was soon clear that he was being pursued by several uniformed military police. Davis heard their shrill whistles as they chased the man, and shouts to other men coming down along the rail where a line train of cars waited to receive *Tashkent's* much needed stores. The man stumbled and fell, and some papers slipped from his back pocket as he struggled to his feet again. Then he was up, rushing along the quay right past Davis, his eyes wide with fear.

He stopped, breathing heavily, an anguished look on his face and stared out into the harbor. Then he put both hands to his head as though he was trying to keep his mind in one piece and retain his sanity, screaming something unintelligible Russian. There was a crack, and Davis jerked around to see that a Soviet MP had fired a pistol. The man fell to his knees, then slumped forward on the quay, unconscious as the three policemen rushed to the scene. Davis gawked at them for a while, then thought the better

of sticking around, as there would likely be questions. As he was set to leave and head back up the gangway to *Tashkent*, his eye fell on the papers the man had lost, and he slipped behind an empty wooden cargo container to have a look. He picked it up, first thinking it might be something ferreted out by a spy. Seeing it was only a Russian, magazine he almost discarded it. Then he thought some of the Russian crewmen might like it, so he took it with him hastening back to the ship.

A day later *Tashkent* was well out to sea again and heading home to Seattle. The Russian crew showed great interest in the magazine, and the it widened more than one eye. Davis noted how the men would pass it from one to another, pointing at things, clearly bemused. He thought they were looking at girly photos, and kicked himself for not looking it over before he dropped it on the mess hall table. But later he saw that it was just photos of strange looking vehicles, odd devices that looked like folding metal cases with pictures on them, advertisements for products he had never seen before. He had no idea he was looking at Toyota Corollas, Dell Laptops, and other modern devices like cell phones in the ads. To him they were just curious photos, and nothing more.

The ship made a brief stop in the Aleutians on the way home, and word of the strange magazine got round to a British liaison officer, Lt. William Kemp at Dutch Harbor. The Brits had a few Nissen huts set up on the islands to listen to Japanese radio traffic and report back home. When the liaison officer saw the magazine, noted the odd map in one of the articles, and the strange dates affixed there, he asked one of the Russians to translate a few lines, then realized he had something very unusual. He gave the man a one pound note for the magazine, carefully tore out the article, and handed it back to him with a smile. Back at his desk he penned and attached a brief note: ‘Found published in Russian periodical!’ The article soon started a very long journey in a plain leather pouch that would eventually make its way to Bletchley Park.

It was the dates on the map that first caught Kemp’s eye, 13-14 September, 1942, and the Russian crewman had translated something about an operation code name “Agreement,” a raid on the German bastion at Tobruk that the British had carried out, with disastrous results. Kemp took the whole thing for some odd way of conveying intelligence in the midst of drivel. The shocker was this: the date that morning was September 7, 1942, a full week before this operation was supposedly carried out!

He got the article quickly on a signal intelligence pouch, which was flown to Seattle, and from there to New York, then Iceland, and eventually London. Now Alan Turing was looking at it with Peter Twinn in Hut 4 at Bletchley Park.

The whole thing had been translated and transcribed, and the article was very shocking, raising alarm bells all the way to Naval intelligence in Hut 8. The article was entitled: 'British Remember Fallen in Agreement Gone Bad.' It was about Operation Agreement, slated to run in just another day, yet here was the whole thing written up as though it had already happened…as though it were history! It clearly detailed how the British destroyers *Sikh*, and *Zulu*, with 350 Marines aboard would leave Alexandria and meet up with the AA cruiser *Coventry* and the 5th DD flotilla for the planned raid on Tobruk in a little over thirty-six hours.

The details in the article were astounding! It listed officers involved, and the fate of ships and men who had yet to even join this fight. More than this, it described the sad outcome of the raid: *Sikh* damaged by German 88s and sunk while taken under tow; *Coventry* hit by JU-87 Stukas and scuttled; *Zulu* also sunk; Haselden's commando raid from the landward side beaten off with heavy losses, and he himself killed in that action; 576 allied prisoners taken and valuable code and cypher equipment captured by the enemy. In short, it was a disaster.

Twinn was a straight laced man, dressed in a tweed sport coat with vest and tie that day, his eyes bright above his starched white collar and a shock of brown hair falling on his right forehead as he leaned over the desk. He was a brilliant mathematician from Oxford who had been signed on to Hut 4 to train under Dilly Knox on code breaking methods—for all of five minutes before Knox told him to get started. Twinn worked with Turing on the Enigma code and was instrumental in solving the riddle. Now the two of them set their minds on solving this riddle.

"Could it be a warning?" said Twinn. "They've obviously gotten wind of the operation and they put this out quite plainly to scare us off."

"But the details, Peter," said Turing. "They've got the damn thing nailed down with brass tacks! Dates, times, ships involved—"

"Casualties and outcome," Twinn put in. "That's the giveaway. They want to tell us they're on to us and ready to meet this operation with full force. There's no other way to look at it."

"Turing glanced at him for a moment, saying nothing, then his eyes

darkened on the article again, complete with a map detailing the location of the planned landings, right down to the minute. It was very unnerving. It was as if they had an almost omniscient awareness of the plan.

"I can see them getting the broad strokes of this," said Turing. "They intercept our traffic even as we do theirs. But the details? They would have to come from someone inside operations to be that specific. Could we have a mole, Peter?" There was a look of warning in Turing's eyes now.

"Odd that it came from the Russians," said Twinn. "Could they be trying to tip us off that the code is compromised? After all, they are our allies in this business."

"So we'd like to believe," said Turing. "But how did they get the information?"

"It would have to come from someone inside, just as you say, Alan. This isn't the sort of detail you get from the occasional odd message intercept. They've got it all, hook, line and sinker. You may be correct. We could have a problem here. After all, they've just been bringing in people off the streets, chess players, artists, a whole menagerie of eclectic minds here. I was just a dizzy eyed mathematician myself, out of work and looking for an opportunity. Now here I am in the thick of it. Would it be too much of a stretch to think that someone was planted by the other side?"

"That would be rather disastrous," said Turing. "Just like this planned raid is likely to be now. We'll have to cable Alexandria at once, Peter. The party is off on this one. The operation must be cancelled immediately."

They started putting their heads together to find out exactly where, or who this information could have possibly come from, though Turing harbored a deep inner misgiving over the source—*Russian*—another leaf fallen from the Rodina's tree that seemed almost prescient in its prediction of an event that had not even happened.

Even as Turing thought this he suddenly recalled his long conversation with Admiral Tovey. His own words to the Admiral returned to haunt him: *"If it were to be learned that one of these men on our list does something… compromising, then he becomes an enemy of fate and time as it were. If you mean to set this watch on the history, then you'll have to be prepared to do some unpleasant things, Admiral."*

What if this article wasn't merely an effort to inform us that this operation had been compromised, thought Turing? What if it truly was what it seemed to be—a peek into the future seen by men who had already lived through and

beyond those days. By that logic Haselden, fated to die in this raid, would be made a Zombie if the party was cancelled. Turing was suddenly locked in agonizing contradiction. By saving the lives of the men slated for Operation Agreement he might now be changing all future history.

“Here’s the information,” Twinn said excitedly. “It was right here, attached to the source document in this note. Look here, it says “Found in Vladivostok Harbor.”

“Then it had to have been found by someone off a lend lease merchant ship,” said Turing definitively. It came from Kemp at Dutch Harbor. Those ships transit that route on a regular basis.”

It had come, of course, from a man named Markov, a junior rate in the engineering division assigned to the battlecruiser *Kirov*. It had been a magazine on the coffee table in the waiting area that Markov snatched up during his work rotation break, and slipped into the reactor test bed room at the Primorskiy Engineering Center across the bay at Vladivostok. Markov had disappeared on that same day, in the year 2021, and appeared, strangely, in the same location, but seventy-nine years in the past. The space he had occupied was the living room of a private home, and when Marta Vayatin walked in and saw Markov sitting on one of two chairs with an expression of utter shock on his face, she ran screaming out of the house, raising a ruckus and setting the police hastening to the scene.

Poor Markov eventually came to his senses, and ran out as well, immediately seeing that he was, indeed, in Vladivostok and looking out on the Golden Horn Bay, but everything looked completely different! The city was much smaller. Most of the new high-rise apartment buildings were gone! It had a sallow, grey look to it, and there was virtually no traffic to be seen on the major roadways. In fact, many of the streets were dirt and gravel tracks wending their way through old weathered housing blocks. He ran, as fast as his legs would take him, down the muddied hillside roads toward the harbor quays below, instinctively hoping to find *Kirov* berthed quietly there as before, a rat coming home to the ship. The rest was now history—a very personal end to Markov’s place in that story when he died of both shock and a gunshot wound on the cold concrete quay of the Golden Horn Harbor.

Turing took a long breath, realizing he had to make a very important decision now. What to do about this raid on Tobruk?

“I need to make a phone call, Peter. Hold off on this for the moment, will you?” He walked solemnly out of the room to a secure area, thinking deeply

as he went. Some minutes later he returned, still troubled, but with more sense of direction. He had called Admiral Tovey to discuss the matter. “The question is this,” he had told him plainly. “Either we save these men and ships and hope that works to the good, or we send them in as planned and then see what happens. If the results mirror the account we have in hand with this document, why…then we’ve got another problem, Admiral. It would have to mean that someone was alive, in the here and now, perhaps at Vladivostok, and with knowledge of our future.”

“Damn maddening,” said Tovey. There was a long pause before he spoke again. “You warned me about this, Professor, but I don’t think I want to look into Pandora’s jar just yet. We can deduce what you say without having to sacrifice 576 men and three ships for the information. Nobody knew the full details of that mission. You know very well that the target, force composition, and time of attack are all kept in three separate heads and they only come together for the final officer’s briefing at the eleventh hour. And I can tell you one other thing. The final force composition has not even been fixed yet. I spoke with Cairo on this yesterday. It was only just suggested that we take the AA cruiser Coventry off guardship duty in the Suez and add it to this mission, and this report you speak of had to have been written weeks ago if it came all the way from Vladivostok. How could it name that ship? No. I can’t send these men in there now knowing that this intelligence report exists on the matter. Cancel the raid, and then I think we’ll have to put all these men on our list, but I’d rather have them there alive and not dead on the coast of North Africa. We’ll talk again soon.” The Watch had made its first life or death choice. It would not be the last.

* * *

Yet that was not the only effect the coffee table magazine would end up having. Seventy-nine years later, Anton Fedorov was aboard *Kirov* after a long shift making rounds to get the vessel seaworthy again. He took a brief meal in the officer’s dining room, quietly alone with his *Chronology Of The Naval War At Sea.* He had been reading from the volume he had found here in a local book store, comparing it to his own copy, which he still kept close at hand. Whenever he came to a passage that differed, he would highlight it with a yellow marker.

Yesterday he had been reading about events in September of 1942 to see

if *Kirov's* recent sojourn in the Pacific had any immediate ramifications and to find out what may have been written about it. Now his brow was furrowed, eyes worried, and an odd expression hung on his face. He looked around, like a man who had lost something, or forgotten his watch, or wallet. Then he quickly turned pages in the new volume he had bought recently, his finger working its way down the long, narrow columns of text.

It was gone! Where was it? He had read about it just the other day, and now it wasn't there. The passage describing the operation was entirely missing! Checking carefully, he looked to see if any of the pages were missing from the book, finding nothing amiss. Yet he clearly remembered reading about the British raid on Tobruk that was supposed to happen mid-month in September of 1942. It was no longer there.

He shifted quickly to his own older volume and, sure enough, there was the passage. Could he have mixed up the two books and read it there yesterday? No, he thought decisively. He could clearly remember taking a yellow highlighter and marking off lines at the top and bottom of the two paragraph entry in the newer volume to remind himself to double check it with a second source, and there were no such marks in his old book.

"What in God's name…?"

Something had changed. His mind was a sudden whirl of possibilities as he struggled to understand what he had just discovered. Something had just changed the history again! The alteration had been so final that it even affected the new volume he had purchased, and the thought occurred to him that he might now go to every such book published and find the same text missing there from page 164. But yet his own volume, the one that had traveled with *Kirov*, remained completely unaltered.

Physical changes! The impact of his conclusion struck him like a hammer. *Physical* changes! Something had altered the history and the consequences extended to these real and tangible objects, winking out of existence for the barest fraction of a quantum second, and then winking back to the here and now again, but different, subtly changed, altered by something that had happened in the past. It was astounding! The form and appearance of the whole seemed unchanged, but the devil was in the details…Was his book spared because it had come from another world, another complete version of the universe itself? It was mind-boggling!

Then he thought about the hours he had spent talking with Karpov and Volsky about their strange dilemma. They had worried about Orlov, fretted

that he would wreak havoc on the history if he indeed survived. But Fedorov had come to the conclusion that whatever Orlov had done, it was now a finished and permanent new fact. Surely the man was dead long ago, and his legacy would have hardened like concrete in the matrix of time and life. The history would have calcified again and it could be read, if he could simply do the research on information he might find here in this new world.

But the discovery that Operation Agreement had suddenly been stricken from the rolls of time, and that the volume where he read it had physically changed to reflect that, had shaken him severely. Now he realized what had happened to the records of those thirty-six dead men in Moscow's archives. Dead men tell no tales…and now he knew his guess had been correct—these men had never been born. Time found a way to neatly expunge them from her ledgers, and then every last trace of their existence had quietly vanished as well!

Another thought struck him, even more unsettling as he realized it. The book had changed, and yet he still remembered the old passage. He recalled himself reading and highlighting the text as easily as he might summon up a memory of that last confrontation between Karpov and Kapustin in the sick bay. If something as solid and tangible as this book could change on a whim of fate, then why could he still remember the old text? It was most disturbing. And if a book could be edited by the hand of fate overnight, then might *people* also simply disappear—vanish from one moment to the next, as if they had never been there?

Then he remembered the two missing names on the duty rosters that morning. All hands were present and accounted for except two—Yolkin and Markov. They were gone and listed as AWOL. Yolkin had been in the city picking up supplies for the quartermaster, and Martinov had complained that he had not returned. Markov was over at the Primorskiy Engineering Center, but reported missing, though Fedorov had not learned the details of that incident. Then his train of thought was suddenly derailed by footsteps in the hallway outside the dining room, and the door swung open.

"There you are, Captain. I've been needing to speak with you. The Admiral has gone up to Naval Headquarters at Fokino and something very odd has just happened."

It was Chief Engineer Dobrynin.

Part VIII

The Mission

"A small body of determined spirits fired by an unquenchable faith in their mission can alter the course of history."

—Mahatma Ghandi

Chapter 22

“What do you mean he got clean away? They had him deep inside the Rock!” Admiral Tovey was not happy.

“He was to have been on the Hudson out of Gibraltar last night, sir. The normal dispatches came in alright, but there were no other passengers.” Sergeant Williams seemed a bit flustered, as any bringer of bad news would before the Admiral at a moment like this.

“Well what does MI6 have to say about it?”

“They’ve looked into the matter, sir, and come round to think he must have been helped from the inside. A corporal on the watch saw a small boat on the northeast shore about that time. He took it to be a fishing boat, as the men on the aft deck were trying to sort out their nets. But it looks rather suspicious given his absence now.”

Tovey took that in, saying nothing. Yes, hindsight was always perfect. It should have looked suspicious while the man was getting away, but the Admiral decided he would certainly not be discussing this with a Marine Sergeant. One thought quickly led to another in his mind. The east shore… If he got out that way, then that boat probably met up with a steamer. There was a lot of traffic in the Med near Gibraltar. Which one?

“Thank you, Sergeant. That will be all.”

“Sir!” The Sergeant saluted smartly, spun about and beat a hasty retreat. Tovey sat at his desk, his mind a whirlwind of possibilities. The thought that this man had help from the inside was most unsettling. He made a note to check on anyone who might have had even passing contact with the prisoner during the time he was interrogated. His immediate problem was much more pressing. Where was this man going? Reports indicated he had originally been picked up heading west into the Atlantic. The steamer *Duero* was bound for Cadiz, yet the story was that this man had originally boarded the ship in Cartagena.

That thought triggered a memory, and he opened his bottom desk drawer with the key, slowly removing a thin file marked ‘Most Secret.’ There he read again the account of coast watchers near Cartagena who had reported a strange incident in the skies there on the evening of 13 August. They claimed

to see contrails in the sky, five thin columns of smoke scoring their way through the clouds and exploding. Wreckage of an aircraft was spotted falling into the sea, and a parachute. The account gave him the shivers, for it was all too reminiscent of those infernal rockets that had been used by the enemy ship. But what were they shooting at? It could have been a plane that had strayed too near *Geronimo's* course as it headed south that evening toward that fateful rendezvous with Syfret's Force Z, but there was no report of any losses that day. Perhaps it was a Spanish plane. The incident was right astride this mysterious ship's route of approach to Gibraltar. It was very strange.

Here was a Russian, a man named Orlov wearing what looked to be a naval officer's jacket, carrying a strange custom made pistol with an odd light attached to it, and harboring these ear plugs that seemed to be some sort of advanced wireless device. Supposing he came from *Geronimo*, the man boards a ship heading west…But why? What would he be about? Could there be some mission he was undertaking in Spain? Then a dark thought occurred to him. Perhaps this man had been trying to communicate with other Russian agents and operatives in Spain waiting for him at Cadiz. He made a mental note to have Fleming's boys have a look at that city to see what they might turn up.

Then again, if this fishing boat did indeed rendezvous with a merchant ship, it might have been heading east. Fishing boats were not permitted in the main shipping channels of the strait. He decided to have a list of all commercial traffic anywhere near Gibraltar yesterday—names, registry, destinations. That would allow him to possibly get men into each and every port of call along those routes, and he hoped there hadn't been a convoy through the straits that day so his job would be a little easier. If this man was heading east, where would he go? Any Russian heading east, would have to be heading for Istanbul if he had any hope of getting back to Russia. Yes, that made sense. From Istanbul he could easily cross the Black Sea and link up with Soviet authorities anywhere along the Georgian coast.

Then his mind turned to the strange accounts that had surrounded this interrogation. Fortunately the transcript of the entire interview had arrived with the regular dispatches. He read it through, curious as to what the strange scope might have been on the pistol, the odd flashlight as the prisoner called it. This business about the wireless earplugs was also quite interesting. And who was this Svetlana?

The more he thought about the matter, more he came to conclude that this

man might indeed have been off the ship the Royal Navy had been chasing for the last year. He might have been a pearl dropped here by *Geronimo,* trying to make contact with the Soviets of this day and age…buy why? Couldn't they simply use the radio? Not without us hearing about it, I suppose. Was Svetlana his contact? That thought set his mind racing even further ahead, because if this assumption were proved true, the man could be a deliberate agent, and the information he might provide the Soviets could profoundly affect the outcome of the war, and so very much more.

Intruders, he thought. The Watch had found what looked to be the first possible case of a man at large who clearly did not seem to be what he claimed, and with marks and effects on him that led Tovey's mind back to that fateful hour on Las Palomas Island where he had faced the commander of the ship they had come to call *Geronimo,* eye to eye, astounded to find he was Russian! It was now a standing order that any Russian operative found in England and the kingdom's domains was to be closely watched by British Intelligence services. Tovey did not know it yet, except perhaps on some deep inner level of his mind, but the Cold War was already beginning in these suspicions and the orders that followed them. The reluctant allies, strange bedfellows as he thought of England and Russia, were now set at odds by this incident.

The next day he had his report on shipping traffic in hand, and checked off one after another, until he had narrowed down the possible rendezvous targets to three. He considered what to do, then picked up the phone.

"Secure line," he said waiting for confirmation. "Get me Room 39 please. Desk 17F." He wanted to speak with Fleming over at 30 Commando. Yes, he thought. This was coming down to some real cloak and dagger work, and he now realized he needed reliable men who were trained in these unpleasantries. The voice on the line was curt and to the point.

"Seventeen F. What is it?"

"Admiral Jack Tovey here, Seventeen. I want to know if we might be able to get some men east to Istanbul and have a look at a certain ship—a merchant ship bound for that port as we speak."

There was a brief pause before the voice on the line continued. *"Might I know the details, sir?"*

Tovey explained what he was after, and Fleming suggested the obvious—why not get a fast destroyer out after this ship?

"The thought did cross my mind, Seventeen, but I think I'd like to handle

this with a little more subtlety." If he sent a destroyer to intercept a neutral Turkish ship there would be questions, reports, documents, and perhaps even a formal protest from the Turks, not to mention the added risk that the ship would then be suspect in the enemy's eyes as well.

"Well sir," came the voice. *"We've some good men in Alexandria with nothing on their duty roster now that they were unable to come to any agreement in that last meeting"* Tovey noted how Fleming adroitly referenced the cancelation of Operation Agreement and the planned raid on Tobruk.

"Splendid. You pick the men, Seventeen. And here's what I'd like you to do."

* * *

When the call came in to Captain John Haselden at General Staff Headquarters days later he didn't really know what to make of it. He and his men had been sitting on their thumbs in the heat of the desert, wondering what had come over the planners back in England. First they tee up a big operation for Tobruk, and then, just as suddenly, it is summarily canceled.

Haselden was a lean, competent man, just shy of forty, and with long years of experience in the desert. In fact, he had been born right there in Alexandria, the son of Henry Ernest Haselden and his Italian wife Maria Cazzani. Before the war he had worked in the cotton trade industry, supervising commerce and becoming fluent in Arabic, French, Italian and English. Like every man his age he entered the service when war came, signing on as a British liaison officer with the Libyan air force and then working directly for the General Staff of the Middle east where his language facility was put to good use.

His specialty soon became commando operations, and he was posted to the 8th Army HQ to serve as liaison with the Long Range Desert Group. In this capacity he participated in a number of operations, including Operation Flipper, the raid on Rommel's headquarters in an ill fated attempt to capture the man hundreds of miles behind the front. Rommel wasn't there, and when he learned of the operation he was irritated to think the British would believe he commanded from the rear.

When the new raid was announced for Tobruk, he was eager to get in the thick of things again, and just as disappointed to learn it had been called off.

If he had known that he was one of the many men who were slated to die in that raid, perhaps he would not have complained so loudly. He had no idea that he was now living his second life, a new lease signed by the hand of Mother Time that would see him drawn into the ever thickening web of intrigue spinning from the spidery back of fate itself.

What in bloody hell is this about, he thought? First the whole bloody raid is knocked off, now this! Someone has a real imagination back in Whitehall, does he? First we were to get up a crew and fly cross the whole of Turkey in the dark on a pinch operation—all the way to Istanbul. Don't we already have people in Istanbul? Of course we have. They were supposed to find this man, keep their finger in his backside, and get him to a safe house before we flew in. Two days later word comes down that the ship this man is on was met by a Russian trawler and he slipped clean away, out into the Black Sea like a whisper of fog.

"Not easy to get men out there, is it," he said aloud now to Lieutenant David Sutherland. "What do they bloody well expect us to do about it now?"

"Easy does it, Jock." That was Haselden's handle with the men. "They must know what they're about. Word is that Fleming is behind this one."

"Fleming? I thought he was working in Madrid with the Golden Eyes now that Rushbrooke replaced Godfrey as head of the Naval Intelligence Division."

"He's still in Room 39," Sutherland took a long draw on his pipe now, still staring at a map he had been studying for some time. "Still answers as Seventeen F, though anyone caught saying that outside of a secure room like this would have his balls boiled."

"Yes, well what has Seventeen got on the stove for us, Sutherland? We were all set for this raid on Tobruk."

"You weren't the only one put off," Sutherland pointed a long thin finger at Haselden now. "My Operation Angelo has also been canceled. We were going to hop out to Rhodes and visit Jerry airfields there, but that's gone down the tubes as well."

"Something tells me there's an ill wind blowing, Sutherland. What's up with all these big operations being canceled? They were going to cross the Channel Coast last month from what I've heard, and that was called off at the last minute too."

"Ours is not to reason why, Jock. Ours is but to do and die. They pulled me right out of final planning for this Rhodes operation and sent me over

here."

"Looks to me like Seventeen is pulling together a fairly interesting team for this one, whatever it turns out to be. There's me with my desert chops, and then you with all your experience with the Special Boat Service. They're also sending me Sergeant Terry and Corporal Severn—both good men on a long reconnaissance operation like this. But where are we headed? Where's Kizlyar?"

"That's what I've been trying to figure out," Sutherland squinted at his map again. "Seventeen must have really cooked up something very bizarre this time."

"I have indeed," came a voice, and the two men spun around to see a stocky man in khaki shorts and desert-camo top standing in the doorframe. A floppy canvas hat hid his brown curly hair, and his eyes seemed to search the two men now, sounding them out as he walked slowly into the room. It was Seventeen F, Fleming himself. It would be years before he would use his wartime experience to write his James Bond novels, but for now he was writing the script for a new operation.

"I'm the man you've been talking about," he said quietly. "And yes, we've got something really interesting for you, gentlemen, and no one is going to cancel the party this time if I can help it."

"Well, Commander, you move like a cat," said Haselden. "I can see why they look for your sort in the darker corners of Whitehall."

"Yes," said Fleming getting a whiff of Sutherland's pipe. It smelled good, and he reached into his own shirt pocket for a crumpled pack of cigarettes. Sutherland was quick to offer his Ronson lighter.

"The business at hand, gentlemen, does indeed come from one of those very dark corners. So dark, in fact that even my sort stub their toes and bump their noses trying to get around the place. Now then…Only a very few men will ever know what I am about to tell you next. You may have heard the rumors, caught the occasional reference whispered by the men with gold hatbands and thick cuff stripes, and felt the distinct tinge of heat that soon found any man who was too loose on the matter. I'm talking about *Geronimo."*

The silence invaded the space, with an uneasiness that was clearly evident, for both Haselden and Sutherland had heard the word whispered about, though they did not know what it referred to—only that it was very hush, hush, and the sort of thing that would land a man in hot water if he ever

spoke openly about it. To hear the word spoken so brazenly by this man from the cubby holes of Naval Intelligence in Whitehall was somewhat of a shock.

Fleming saw the look of bemused surprise on the faces of the other men, and pressed his advantage. You don't walk in on men like this without an edge, he knew, and he had the one thing they lusted after more than anything else—information—knowledge of the missions they were set to perform. Yes, they were good soldiers, both of them, which is why Fleming had selected these men, but they often fought in the darkness of unknowing as well as the thickness of the night when they landed from submarines on a moonless sea and slipped ashore on black rubber rafts. More often than not the real aim of the mission they were tasked to perform was on a 'need to know only basis.' Today Fleming decided they needed to know.

"Gentlemen, you've heard that word, and now I'm to tell you what it's about. *Geronimo* is a ship—a very dangerous ship. And on that ship there are men—very dangerous men. One of these men slipped ashore near Cartagena last month, and was trying to work his way west out into the Atlantic on a steamer bound for Cadiz. A German mine and a sharp eyed Royal Navy destroyer captain conspired to bring this man in, and we had him under the Rock of Gibraltar for a time… then he gave *us* the slip. We don't know how he did it, or who helped him make good his getaway, but we will soon enough. Leave that bit to me. Now we know this man may have headed east through Istanbul on a Turkish freighter, and then slipped into the Black Sea on a Soviet trawler. To be brief about it, we want him back, and you two gentlemen are going to go after him and bring him back…" He paused, taking a long puff of his cigarette, and sizing the two men up again. "That failing," he said with finality, "you will die trying."

Chapter 23

In September of 1942 the German Army was reaching its high water mark in the war. The Allied forces had been pushed back, slowly strengthening their resistance like a bow string pulled taut, and soon the arrows of their long counteroffensive would begin in earnest. But that month the outcome of the war was by no means certain, and the world still sat in breathless fear that the mighty Wehrmacht could not be stopped. Rommel had pushed the British all the way to the Egyptian border and was haggling for supplies to continue his offensive. The German Sixth Army under Paulus was pushing into the streets of Stalingrad, while further south Kleist's 1st Panzer Army and the 17th Army surged out from Rostov into the Caucasus. "If I do not get the oil of the Caucasus," said the fuehrer, "then the war is lost."

The drive South into the Caucasus was primarily intended to secure vital resources, particularly the oil the German Army would need to feed its growing war machine. As the Russian Army fell back in disarray, the Germans quickly overran and captured oil fields at Maikop, and pushed on towards even bigger fields at Grozny. Yet the real prize lay further south and east along the Caspian coast in the major oil centers around Baku.

In that critical month, the German generals met with Hitler and presented him with a great decorated cake in the shape of the Caucasus. Smiling ear to ear, the Fuehrer was quick to cut what he believed to be the very best piece of the cake for himself, where the cook had clearly written in large bold chocolate letters: B A K U.

The question now in Hitler's mind was what to do with Hoth's Fourth Panzer Army? It had originally been assigned to the drive on Stalingrad, but then swung south, crossing the Don River and positioning itself in a perfect place to move into the Caucasus at the extreme left of Kleist's main drive south. If Hitler turned it north again, along the southern bank of the Don towards Stalingrad, there was a chance he could quickly overwhelmed the Soviet defense there and secure the city he had coveted for so long. But if Hoth were unleashed and turned south, Hitler might have his cake and eat it too in the vital drive to secure the oil fields of Baku.

The history Fedorov knew so well saw the bulk of Hoth's forces move north to Stalingrad where they became embroiled in the bitter street fighting there, which eventually ended in disaster. This time, however, the long lines of Lend-Lease trucks pouring through the Persian Corridor convinced Hitler that he had to seal this supply route off and secure the oil once and for all. Hoth went south, and he led his advance with two fast and capable divisions, the 29th Motorized with a good nucleus of armor in its Panzer Regiment, and the fast 16th Motorized Division, known as the Greyhounds. Now their sleek gray armored cars surged in the vanguard, swinging around Stavropol, south to Mineralne Vody, enveloping Pyatigorsk and Georgiyevsk and pushing north of Mozdok.

There, along the banks of the fast flowing river Terek, the Russians had prepared their final defensive line in a desperate attempt to halt the German advance. Meanwhile, further South in Baku, a quietly controlled panic had seen sixty percent of the oil activity halted, the wells capped, stores of oil poured into cisterns and floating oil tanks, equipment crated, and all of it being moved by any means possible across the Caspian Sea into Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan where it was hoped it could be used to find oil somewhere else.

If Hitler took the place, he would have the oil there, but the equipment used to find and drill for it would be long gone. At this point, however, the Germans knew nothing of this massive movement, just one of many major logistical feats pulled off by the Russians during the war. That September Hitler cut his cake, gleefully smiling at the chocolate letters on his white frosting as they spelled out Baku. The tide of war continued south and east toward the Caspian Sea, sweeping up tens of thousands as it advanced, and it would soon ensnare the life and fate of yet another man, a very important man named Gennadi Orlov.

After its duel with *U-24*, the Russian minesweeping trawler *T-492* put into the port at Poti and Orlov disembarked under the escort of the three remaining NKVD guards. That night they stayed in a small hotel near the port while the guards waited for telephone call with instructions on what to do with the man. But none of the three would live out the night. Orlov no longer had his favorite Glock pistol, but the three men were all armed, giving him ample means of getting control of the situation and making a clean escape.

He had come at last to the belly of the Old Soviet Union, and thought it

best to become someone more imposing than a tramp deck hand. So he donned a warmer leather jacket from one of the NKVD guards over his own lighter computer jacket, and also took a good sheep's wool Ushanka with hammer and sickle badge indicating he was now a captain in the NKVD. It kept people away from him, and meant he would not be asked too many questions.

He was quick to the train station, his pockets filled with rubles taken from the guards, and soon on his way, east through the dark night of Georgia and on into Azerbaijan. He rode the train all the way through Tblisi, breathing deeply and smelling the scent of home there. His grandmother had a farm in Azerbaijan, and some inner compass yearning for home was leading him there like a salmon swimming upstream to find its spawning ground.

The route took him south to Yevlakh, past the tall ice and snow covered peaks of the Caucasus Mountains. There he saw high Mount Elbrus, where the German mountain troops had climbed to the summit to surprise Hitler by planting the Nazi flag atop Europe's highest peak just a few weeks earlier. The Fuehrer was not amused. In fact he exploded with rage when he learned of the incident, for his mind had been set on securing the vital ports along the Black Sea coast so that his navy there could gain control and move supplies from the Crimea.

Hitler ranted for some time, exclaiming that: "Those crazy mountain climbers belong before a court-martial!" He viewed their feat as mere grandstanding, and of no military value whatsoever, and he was correct. Yet the loss of twenty-three men detached of mountain troops for a photo opportunity that had backfired on them did little to slow the German advance north of the jagged snow covered peaks. Hoth was making very good progress with his fast motorized divisions, and soon news that he had enveloped Grozny and unhinged the Russian defense along the Terek River line brought a smile to the Fuehrer's weary face.

There, well south of the Caucasus mountains where the German Operation Edelweiss was reaching its high water mark, Orlov left the train behind to head up into the foothills for his grandmother's old farm. He slipped away into the countryside, traveling mostly by night, sleeping mostly by day and haunting small hamlets for food, water and shelter. Occasionally he would make his way into a town for better fare, or a woman if one caught his eye. And yes, there was always a need for a good drink and some idle chat with a bar fellow when he could find one. Money was never a problem.

When he expended his cash from the guards, he simply took more from any unsuspecting drifter he encountered on the road.

In time he found himself up in the southern foothills of the mountains in Azerbaijan and slowly made his way northwest of Baku. He thought he would visit his grandmother first, quietly, hoping to find and watch her from the shadows, for she would just be a young woman of eighteen years. In fact, she would not meet his grandfather for some years yet, and Orlov spent more than one long night staring up at the stars and wondering whether they might both survive the war. What would happen to him if his grandfather got swept away into the chaos at Stalingrad and a stray bullet took his life? Orlov's own father had not been born to the couple until 1957. If either his grandmother or grandfather died this time around would he simply vanish, just as the ship had vanished, and drift away like a vapor on the mist of time?

So the powerful magnetic draw of the old farm pulled at him for more than one reason. He remembered being taken there often by his father as a young boy, and the smell of the tall green grass, crops growing in the fields, the cows and chickens all spoke to him of home. Yet on another level he wanted to make sure that his grandmother was still there, still alive, before she eventually went north as he had been told, to a very hard life and more than one moment of pain and sorrow.

When he was much older, his grandfather once told the story of how his dear wife to be had been mishandled badly on that long road north. When he finally did find his grandmother's farm, he was too late. The young woman was gone, already heading north, and he knew that those awful moments she had to endure were not far off. Unless…

The thought then came to him that he could walk that road as well, moving like a shadow in her footsteps, heading north with all the other rank-and-file, the rabble of lost souls swept away by the tide of war. He knew the names of the men who had hurt his grandmother, and the place where it had happened, for he could still see the soft ache in his grandfather's eyes when he told him the story.

So after lingering for a few lonesome hours at the edge of the farm, and picking apples from the tree he remembered finding there as a boy, Orlov pulled his black Ushanka tight on his head, fingered the cold revolver he had taken from the NKVD guards, and took to the road with a fierce determination. Along the way he got very drunk one night in a town called Quba, and found another old telegraph station, breaking into the place after

dark and tapping out a plaintive call to the old life he once knew. *"Nikolin, Nikolin, Nikolin, I'm going to find grandma at Kizlyar! Don't forget me—Orlov…"* It was a stupid thing to do, and he realized it the following morning, but vodka had a way with his head after five glasses, and he gave it no further worry. No one on the ship would ever hear it or know anything about it. His mind was now set on other matters.

Those bastards were not going to touch his grandmother this time! And if they did before he reached the place, they were going to pay for it, and very dearly. He swore this like an oath, and then moved north himself, like the shadow of death and retribution.

* * *

Far to the south, at listening stations set up in mostly forgotten outposts if the vast Central Asian wilderness, other men were tracking that shadow. They had been told to listen and look for any hint or clue to the whereabouts of a man named Orlov, and here, right in the clear, was that very name, and more, tapped out in Russian Morse Code! It was also associated with a place. On the 24th of September the men waiting restlessly at Alexandria and pining for lost operations would soon be satisfied. Seventeen-F finally had his mission.

"Here's the plan, gentlemen," he said through thick exhaled smoke. "Forget Istanbul, we were too late to get to the target there, and the NKVD got to him first. But there could only be one or two places that trawler could be headed, and we picked up signals traffic indicating it tangled with a German U-boat off Poti, three days ago."

"A U-boat?" Haselden had a bemused look on his face. "How in the world did they get one there?"

"Not just one," Seventeen said matter of factly, "they've a whole flotilla building up there, but never mind that for the moment. What this boils down to is that we now believe this man went ashore at Poti. From there it's anybody's guess where he might go, but we have people on this that are very good at making these sorts of guesses, and we've narrowed things down. This Kizlyar you were asking about Lieutenant Sutherland, is in Ossetia, northeast of Baku, up past the port at Makhachkala. It's very near the Caspian coast, which will work to our advantage."

"Good lord," Haselden exclaimed. "That has to be over a thousand miles

from here."

"About 1300 miles to be more precise," said Fleming. "But you'll be going most of that distance by air. May I see your map, Lieutenant?"

"Certainly, sir."

"Good then… The place would be about here," he pointed a brown finger at the map as the other two men leaned in close to have a look. "We'll get you on a Wellington to Tehran near dusk, and from there you'll take a smaller plane and fly up here." He pointed to a small peninsula jutting into the Caspian Sea from the east coast of Kazakhstan.

"The place is called Fort Shevchenko. There's not much there, just the ruin of the old fortress dating back to the mid eighteen hundreds, and a small town and port. Officially you're all going there to examine the place as an embarkation site for new Lend-Lease traffic. It's a perfect cover, and you won't be bothered. From there you'll have to cross the Caspian Sea—that's where your expertise will come in handy, Mister Sutherland. Now, we've got much better maps to give you, but on this one you'll cross about here…at this point, getting round the Chechen Island and this spit of land here and coming ashore somewhere in this area. From there you can pick up the old dirt road, if it's still there, and it should lead you right into Kizlyar. It's a distance of about sixty-five kilometers, as the crow flies, and I'm afraid that unless you can round up a stray camel or find yourselves a working truck, it will have to be taken on foot. That I'll leave to you gentlemen to sort out, but a week from today I want you on the target. September 30th. No later."

"With packs, weapons and supplies we'll make no more than four kilometers per hour on foot," said Haselden. "That's either one long day, or two days with more rest."

"Plenty of time, gentlemen. We'll have you in Tehran tomorrow, the 25th. We now think there's a strong possibility that he's given these men the slip. We picked up a report from a man in Poti. Three NKVD men were found dead there. That's where this bit about Kizlyar comes in. The man may be trying to reach his family there, or so we now are led to believe, his grandmother. His best bet would be to travel by train to Baku and then up the Caspian coast. Trying to find him on that route would be a long shot, so we decided to settle on Kizlyar as the target. I'm afraid that's all we can tell you. Any questions?"

"Supposing we find this man, sir—"

"There will be no supposition in the matter, Lieutenant Haselden. I picked

you because I want the man found. Period."

"Very well, sir." Haselden stood a bit taller. "What's our route home with the prisoner?"

"The same way you came in. Get him east to the coast any way you can. If you have to commandeer a vehicle, all the better. We'll have some help waiting there for you, and then you cross the Caspian again to Fort Shevchenko. Easy as pie. Here is your target, gentlemen: a man named Gennadi Orlov. Have a good look at those photos taken of the man when we had him under the Rock, and note the description. He's a big fellow, not hard to pick out in a crowd I'd imagine. He may be traveling with an older woman, so keep that in mind. This man is most likely NKVD, but those three dead men in Poti lead us to suspect he may be a rogue agent. That said, the NKVD will certainly be looking for him as well, and there may be a cadre there you'll have to deal with. The Russians are our allies, but your Lend-Lease cover will take you only so far in this matter. Don't rely on it. Remember you are British serving officers and the Queen's strong right arm if things get difficult, and act accordingly. But we want this man Orlov, and very badly."

"Very good, sir," said Sutherland. "We'll handle the NKVD."

"We'll call the whole operation *Escapade*. Appropriate enough, eh? Ah… One other small detail," said Fleming, lighting another cigarette. "The Germans have been going at it like bats out of hell. You may just get there and find you have some unexpected company. Not much, just the whole bloody 16th Motorized Division."

He exhaled, looking the men over and smiling.

Chapter 24

Kizlyar was a small hamlet on the borders of the newly declared Chechen state in 1942. The old town there was once called Samandar, an ancient site first established by the Huns, and known for its good wines and spirits that were still produced there, and for the making of knives, daggers and the curved sabers the Cossacks made famous in their rampage across the steppe lands. The vineyards outside the town would at least give them some means of cover and concealment.

That was all Haselden and his men could learn about the place from the *Escapade* briefing file as they made the long flight north. At Tehran they boarded an old British Mk IV Avro Anson, a stubby twin engine plane that was now mostly used as a trainer for bomber squadrons. A few of the old planes had found their way into Iran when the Allies invaded there a year earlier, and now they served for short run operations like this, their two Wright Whirlwind engines giving the plane just enough range to make the flight up to Fort Shevchenko.

Two planes would fly that day, one with the men and basic supplies they would need, the other with their rubber inflatable swift boat, communications equipment, tents, extra aviation fuel and other necessities. They would land at an old airfield there that the British had stocked up with additional fuel for the long flight back to Tehran.

When Haselden first saw Fort Shevchenko from the air it looked like the maw of a great seabird, with a great reddish lake for the bird's eye and a long isthmus of land jutting out into the Caspian parallel to the main coastline that looked like the top of the beak.

"What have we gotten ourselves into this time," he muttered to Lieutenant Sutherland. The lean SAS man was also peering out the window, noting the shoals and murky greenish water, especially north of the harbor where the Caspian was very shallow.

"My Lord, there's nothing here," said Sutherland, "not a tree to be seen in any direction for miles."

Eighty years on there would be much more to see. Tall oil platforms and off shore rigs would stand in tall brooding clusters over the water, their umbilical pipelines slithering down into the silted earth beneath the sea to

seek out the precious commodity of oil. In Fedorov's day a big Chevron operation would be right beneath their feet, with officers and installations right there in Ft. Shevchenko and further up the coast at Buzachi. The Kashagan superfield would be just north in the dull blue waters of the Caspian, but now the place was empty and forlorn, a vast vacant wasteland under a mackerel sky.

"That's no bother," said Haselden. He had been accustomed to places like this, wide open tractless stretches of desert that went on and on for hundreds of miles and took a man nowhere if he ever found himself lost there.

"Well it doesn't offer much cover, " Sutherland complained.

"We won't need it here," said Haselden. "Remember, we're just Lend-Lease survey officers on this side. We don't have to become commandos until we get over the Caspian."

"What did you make of that bit at the end about the Germans?"

"What of it? Did you think this was going to be a joyride, Davey boy? We'll move all night, two days in, a couple days to find this man, and then back to the coast."

"Sounds wonderful, unless there's a armored car or two at our backside. Then what? We're not packing any heavy weapons, eh?"

"I've one of those new popguns Seventeen talked about if we need it. A prototype. They give our sort all the new things for testing. Sergeant Terry will do the honors." He was referring to the new British AT weapon introduced that year, the PIAT, which stood for Projector Infantry Anti-Tank, a hand held mini-mortar of sorts that could propel a 2.5 pound bomblet a little over a hundred yards. It would not see widespread use until the Allied invasion of Sicily in 1943, but Seventeen-F had a way of getting his hands on all the latest tools of the deadly trade he and his men practiced.

"Today we play our little ruse on this end," said Haselden. "We walk about with clip boards and field glasses and survey equipment while the flight crews set up our base camp and get the wireless sorted out. Then a few hours sleep, a good meal and it's off in your swift boat we go."

"Best to cross by night," Sutherland agreed.

"Right, then we set up on the far side with Corporal Severn seeing to the boats and all, and the three of us, you, me and Sergeant Terry, make the trek west tomorrow night."

"Splendid," said Sutherland. "We'll see what we can learn on the radio

tomorrow before we leave. And let's hope the Russians don't give us any trouble and remember who's side they're on."

"Count on trouble, Davey. Count on it. That way when it comes you'll be more than ready for it. The NKVD obviously want this man as badly as we do. They yanked him right out from under our noses and shipped him thousands of miles to get him here. Now we've got to bring him back, and they won't like it. Mark my words. They won't like it one bit."

They played their roles admirably, speaking with the local authorities and hearing their requests for supplies, trucks, cranes and other equipment, and strutting about the port area with clipboards and surveying equipment. That night their supply team had set them up on the coast on the small peninsula that Haselden took for a bird's beak from the air. They had their two inflatable rafts deployed just after dark and the four men slipped silently into the Caspian, paddling west to get well away from the shore before they would risk starting their small motors to make the crossing. Their supply team covered for their absence with a clever story about survey work up the coast. The Caspian was 140 miles wide at this point, much too far to cross without a motor assist, and soon they were cruising on the dark waters of the sea, lit by a waning gibbous moon.

Sea conditions were calm, with only a light breeze and mild temperatures. The warm summer days were cooling into autumn, but still comfortable. At times they would see the distant shadowy forms of other boats on the sea, small steamships towing what looked to be long lines of grayish metal oil tanks, gleaming in the pale moonlight. These were actually oil cisterns that had been filled and floated for just this purpose, linked together by long rusty chains and then slowly towed north towards Astrakhan.

These encounters would often force them to turn their motor off and stop for a time, laying low in the black rubber inflatables until the distant traffic passed. Sutherland coordinated their movement stealthily, sending hand signals to Sergeant Terry and Corporal Severn following behind them. He navigated with a compass and the moon, guiding them unerringly west. Haselden kept a sharp eye with his field glasses, spotting out the next traffic well before it could pose any problem. At one point they got a little too close to a steamship, and a small trawler flicked out a searchlight, missing them by a close margin and then moving on again.

They made the crossing in a little over five hours and soon made out the dark flat shoreline of Chechen Island in the distance. It was located off a

headland on the western coast, the province of wild flights of seabirds which hovered and swooped over the brackish shore, gathering in thick clusters and whitening the rock there with guano. They navigated well north of the island, switching off their motors as they approached and taking to the paddles again.

Going was slow at this point, as they had to quietly navigate shoals and shallows near the coast, but they were soon ashore, dragging their boats up a thin beach to an area of low scrub. Severn would do his best to conceal the boats and keep a watch while the other three men began shouldering their packs and supplies for the long trek west.

The moon was finally down at a few minutes past four in the morning and Haselden wanted to use those brief hours before sunrise to get his team inland. They made their way along the wandering course of a small stream which eventually led them to a road about two miles inland.

“This is it,” Haselden hissed in the dark. “It should take us all the way in to Kizlyar, so let’s get a move on. We’ve got an hour or two left before sunrise, then we’ll lay low as the sun gets up, and get some rest. This road will only take us so far, because if this place is being probed by the Germans there will certainly be Russian troops there. This is going to be a bit dicey.”

That was an understatement, Sutherland thought. How in the world were they supposed to find this man? He could be any one of a thousand men in this town, and they certainly couldn’t wander about shaking hands and asking for a Mister Orlov. All they had to go on were a couple of photos of the man and his description. He may be in NKVD uniform, tall, well muscled. He might be with an older woman. It was all very thin, and he realized it would come down to patience, stealth, good field glasses, and a desperate search for a tall husky man and a woman together that might be a giveaway. They had no idea that Orlov’s grandmother was a young beauty of eighteen years.

If the team were spotted it was likely they would be taken for slackers or deserters at first sight, or worse, German scouts. He shook his head, thinking this whole mission had not even the slightest chance of succeeding. Then he chastised himself and thought: this is 30 Commando, Her Majesty’s very best, and by God we’ll get the job done one way or another.

* * *

When Orlov reached the coastal town of Makhachkala it seemed a

desolate and empty world compared to his grandmother's farm in the lush lowland hills south of the Caucasus. He had been many hard days on the road, hitching rides on passing trucks when he could. He quickly learned that he had to remove his Ushanka cap with insignia when he wanted a ride, or the driver would hasten on by, unwilling to pick up a security man who might bring a lot of trouble in his pockets.

Along the way Orlov went through Baku, where he saw firsthand the hectic and hasty dismantling of the oil rigs and drilling equipment. At one point a Commissar noticed him, with a dark surmise that promised trouble, but Orlov was quick on his feet, and simply began shouting orders to a group of nearby men who were lugging equipment towards a truck.

"Come on, you limp dicks! Put your backs into it! You there—get it up on your shoulder!" His natural authority and assertive spirit helped him play the part well, and the Commissar simply smiled, thinking Orlov was just another man from another detachment flailing the rank and file along to get the heavy work done.

Orlov thought Baku might be a place to look for Anya Kanina, his grandmother, so he lingered there for a long day, snooping around to see what he could learn, going to hotels and brothels and hostels and asking about the woman. People stared at him with dull grey eyes, weary and wary of this big man with an NKVD cap and jacket, and he learned very little.

He was hoping she had not left too long ago, and had not already endured the violation his grandfather spoke of at the hands of a man named Molla. Even now his grandfather's voice was whispering to him in his mind, like Svetlana would talk to him through the earbuds. *"And Molla, he was a dark swarthy man that one…The old Commissar Molla put his hands on your grandmother in a way no man should, and did unspeakable things. Molla and Burzan."*

Unable to find her, he decided the next best thing would be to try and track this Molla down. If he was a Commissar, he would be better known, and so he took to asking local work crews and labor detachments if they knew of the man, eventually giving up and jumping a truck north to Makhachkala. It was there that he had his first run in with trouble.

"You there—what are you doing?"

Orlov had just stepped off the truck and was wandering along the street, his eyes watchful as he scanned the dull sided buildings and muddied streets. There were many soldiers about, some marching in long lines along the

roadway, others gathered in small groups in the dingy streets looking tired and dispirited. Orlov knew instinctively that the challenge had been directed at him, though he tried to ignore it, walking slowly toward the nearest building.

“I say you!”

Orlov felt a hand on his shoulder, and he turned, frowning to see a short stocky man in a police officer’s uniform staring up at him. His insignia was of a Lieutenant, which immediately worked to Orlov’s favor, as he had taken the rank of an NKVD Captain, and the man saw this at once.

“Oh… I’m sorry, Captain. I thought—”

“You thought I was another drifter off the line, Lieutenant? Well if you must know I’m looking for a place to take a good long piss. I’ve been on that damn truck for hours.”

The officer smiled. “The hotel, sir. Right there.” He pointed at the building Orlov was sizing up himself. Then the Chief thought this man might be able to help him.

“What’s been going on here, Lieutenant?”

“The war, sir. What else? I am Anatoly Ivanovich Anokhin, military police. The division is setting up positions outside the city to defend the port. You are with the Makhachkala Division, yes?” Orlov nodded, saying nothing as the man went on. “Well they sent a battalion out yesterday to the front. The Germans are swinging north toward Kizlyar. A lot of civilians are still on that road. It could be very bad if the Germans get through.”

“I see,” said Orlov. “Well we’ll stop the bastards then, won’t we.”

“Of course, sir.” The officer forced a smile.

“Listen Anokhin, I’m going there myself, eh? I want to find a man named Molla, and another man—Burzan. You’ve heard these names?”

“Commissar Molla? Yes, sir. He went that way—to Kizlyar. You are assigned to his unit? Good luck to you then. He’s a hard man, that Molla. One of Beria’s men—he always finds his henchmen down here. If I were you I would stay clear of him. Molla came through here yesterday with three truckloads of women from the villages. He says they’re going up to Astrakhan, but who knows what he really means to do with them.”

Orlov’s eyes narrowed. His bet that any local Commissar of note would be well known and easily found had paid off. Three truckloads of women…. He didn’t like the sound of that.

“Good then,” he said. “Now I’ll take that piss.”

The Lieutenant saluted and went about his duties, and Orlov shuffled into the hotel, giving the desk clerk a sallow look and asking him for directions. Safe in the men's room, he took a moment to activate his Jacket Computer and ask about the Makhachkala Division. He learned it was a special NKVD Rifle division formed from the local border defense, railway security teams, and supply train guards. It was attached here to the 58th Reserve Army and would remain in the region for another two months until that November. Now his Captain's getup was likely to see him trundled off to some defensive post in short order, he thought.

He considered what to do, and decided his best bet would be to say he had orders for Commissar Molla. His brawn and natural assertive nature would back most other men down if he was questioned, and his Captain's rank came in handy as well. All he had to do was steer clear of a nosey Colonel if he ran across one, as his present rank would trump most other officers he might meet on the road. His need to deliver these secure orders for Molla would surely get him on a truck heading north, and he had to get there soon, because he knew where those truckloads of women were going, and it wouldn't be any place they would ever care to remember.

A lot of equipment was still moving north from Baku. The trains had been creaking with the weight of old rusting pipe, weathered drills and derricks, tools, shovels and anything else they could safely remove from the oil works. They intended to use them to find new oil elsewhere, and vast work camps were being set up, now collecting thousands to serve as raw labor in the new oil fields. Commissar Molla would find his grandmother here, he knew, and then he would take her and all the others in those trucks to God knows where. He had little time to waste now, and so after a meal and some brief rest at the hotel, he went out to look for another ride north to Kizlyar.

The city was now a gathering point for fragments of broken army divisions that had been shattered in the fighting and were slowly regrouping here, receiving supplies from barges offloaded at the port. He saw shoulder patches of the 317th, the old Baku Division that had been destroyed at Izyum and reformed here, and also the 319th, a new Rifle Division forming here along with the NKVD units.

He sighed, realizing that no matter how hard he tried to escape from it, anywhere he went in Russia now the war would soon find him, as it had found him here in the muddied streets of Makhachkala. No matter. He had come a long way now, from an aimless drunkard whoring his way along the

Spanish coast, across seas and around the high mountains to this desolate place—but he had a mission now—he was no longer a lost and wandering soul, and that made all the difference.

Part IX

Letters From The Dead

"Dead letters! Does it not sound like dead men? Conceive a man by nature and misfortune prone to a pallid hopelessness, can any business seem more fitting to heighten it than that of continually handling these dead letters, and assorting them for the flames? Sometimes from out the folded paper the pale clerk takes a ring—the finger it was meant for, perhaps, molders in the grave; …he whom it would relieve, nor eats nor hungers any more on errands of life…"

— Hermann Melville, Bartleby The Scrivener

Chapter 25

Fedorov found Karpov on the bridge, pulling him aside, his eyes serious with some hidden energy and obvious concern. “Can we speak in the briefing room, Captain?”

“Very well, Fedorov,” said Karpov, half distracted by the scene being displayed on the overhead HD video monitors. They were delivering two more helicopters today, and he was watching a KA-40 maneuvering to land on the aft deck. He turned to Rodenko. “Keep an eye on things for a moment, Lieutenant. I’ll be with the First Officer in the briefing room.”

The two men entered the room off the back of the citadel bridge, and Fedorov made a deliberate point of shutting the door for privacy. The Captain saw that he had a couple of thick volumes under his arm, with book markers jutting from them to mark out places he had obviously been reading. Fedorov and his books again, he thought, but he had learned to listen to his young *Starpom* by serving in that same role for him in the Med, so he paid close attention. When Fedorov went to his history books he had something on his mind, and it was most likely important.

“What now Fedorov?” he pointed at the heavy books as the younger man set them on the briefing table.

“Something very odd,” said Fedorov. “I was doing some reading about the war to see what we might have changed. Look, here—this is my original volume of the *Chronology Of The Naval War At Sea*. You remember, it’s the book I gave to Admiral Volsky.”

“Only too well,” said Karpov. “This rat of a man actually snuck into the Admiral’s quarters to have a good long look at that book.”

“Well this other book is the same publication I picked up in the city a few days ago. I was comparing the two to see what was different, and in September of 1942 I noted an operation in the Med—this one.” He was fingering a passage in his original volume for Operation Agreement, scheduled and carried out Sept 13-14, 1942, the raid on Tobruk.

“It was in the old volume as well,” he said. “But there was just a minor variation, a man who survived that was supposed to have died in my original version. So I marked the passage for further study—marked it with a yellow

highlighter like I did with these other passages."

"My God, Fedorov! You'll be old and gray before you ever run down all that research." There were yellow marks dotting the text here and there as Fedorov turned the pages.

"Perhaps I will, but then something very odd happened." He told Karpov how he had gone to look over the passage again and found it entirely missing in the new volume.

Karpov folded his arms, giving him a bemused look. "What do you mean it was missing?"

"That says it all. The passage was gone, yet it was clear as a bell in my head the day before. I knew I had read it there, and marked it with my yellow highlighter…See here, no marks in the original book, but I was certain I marked it in the new volume."

Karpov suggested the obvious, that he had simply mixed the two books up, but Fedorov kept shaking his head. "No sir. I'm certain. You must believe me on this."

"How is that possible?"

"That's what I am trying to find out. I have an idea about it, but I can't be sure. Chief Dobrynin came to me and said we lost a man—Markov. He went missing over at the reactor test bed facility."

"Yes, I heard the report. What about it?"

"Well they had just completed their procedure on the control rod—Rod-25, the very same control rod we suspected here on the ship. Then, Markov vanishes, and not just the man. His jacket was gone, the tea he was drinking, books and magazines, his data clipboard and pen, and get this—both *chairs* were gone. Everything in the room that was not an integral part of the building itself just vanished!"

Karpov did not know what to make of that, but the connection to Rod-25 took him the next step without too much urging from Fedorov. "They moved into the past," he said in a low voice. "Our suspicions about that control rod were correct. Did Dobrynin learn anything about it?"

"He went over it with a microscope, but frankly, he's not a physicist. He was just looking for aberrations or other obvious abnormalities, but the rod looks normal."

"There must be something about it that is different from the others. This is astounding!"

Fedorov looked at the Captain and simply said: "It looks like the amount

of mass that can physically move is probably dependent on the power of the reactor where it finds itself. The ship had a twenty-four rod reactor, two of them in fact. That's ten times the power of the test bed facility reactor. Rod-25 is the wildcard. Whenever it’s inserted into the reactor core it causes the time breach, and displaces loose mass within a given radius. In our case that loose mass was the entire ship!”

“Did the reactor itself disappear?”

“No. It was an integral part of the building itself and the facility around it. The displacement effect did not have the power to move all of that mass. It doesn't simply scoop physical mass of a given area and leave a gaping hole. It’s much more fastidious and simply moves free objects within a given radius of the reactor itself. In this case anything that wasn't nailed down, including Markov. This is the best guess I can make about what happened, and I have no way of knowing if I'm even correct.”

“Then you suspect Markov had something to do with the history changing in your book? How can you know he went back to the same time period?”

“I started with that assumption. I thought that Rod-25 had some vibration or affinity for a particular point in the past, or perhaps it's simply a question of power. It moves things approximately 80 years into the past, Markov vanishes, and then this operation clearly evident in the history I know suddenly never takes place. It was there just yesterday, right in the new book I bought. Whatever happened changed the course of history again, but the amazing thing is this: it caused a physical change in the book itself!”

“Well it's all beyond my understanding,” said Karpov. “I still can hardly believe any of this happened in the first place. How could it change books—change facts that you knew to be true. If you remember this, then others who read that same book would also remember. The facts of history are quite clear, Fedorov. This is nonsense. How can they just change overnight like that?”

“The facts are clear? Who killed President John F. Kennedy? The facts on that will differ from head to head, Captain. Only a few might know the real truth, and it may be quite different from the written history of that event. We only record a small percentage of everything that happens out there. The real truth is that things happen the historians never really know about, or write about. Written history is just the tip of the iceberg, the part that shows in the waters of time. The rest is largely unknown, but that’s the part that really matters.”

Karpov had a frustrated look on his face. “What are we supposed to do about this, Fedorov?”

“I asked myself that same question, and realized that I had to find out what happened to Markov to nail down this cause and effect. Well thank God for the Internet. The amount of information available to us now is absolutely amazing. I was able to find a report on Markov's death! He *did* shift into the past. He was killed, right here on the harbor quay in Vladivostok, in September of *1942*. He was caught breaking and entering a home above the harbor, or so the report read. He then fled to the quay, and was shot by pursuing officers. The military police report was right there in the archives. I looked up the address listed as the location for the suspected burglary. House no longer exists, but the nuclear test bed facility was built in that exact location twenty years ago.”

The silence conveyed Karpov's amazement, and he was equally impressed by Fedorov’s tenacious investigation of the matter. The dogged ex-navigator had been the one mind and voice that had enabled them to make some fleeting sense of their impossible situation, steering their course through the turbulent waters of time.

“Heaven’s above…can you imagine poor Markov?” said Karpov. “One minute he is sitting there staring at his reactor gauges, then he suddenly appears in this house. It must have been maddening. But how did that change the history? How could it affect this operation you say was canceled half way around the world?”

“I thought about that for some time and could not make the connection. Then I realized that it must have been something in the book or magazine he had in the control room with him that day. They went back too. Mister Garin said he was reading a copy of *Russia Today*, and a science fiction novel. I went out and bought a copy of that magazine and look what I found.” He handed the magazine article to Karpov, who stared wide eyed at the headline on Operation Agreement. ‘British Remember Losses In Agreement Gone Bad.’

“This is the operation you spoke of?”

“Exactly. It was a background piece published in tandem with another article about planned British Petroleum operations in Siberia. Those have been cancelled too with all this war talk.”

“Astounding….Simply unbelievable.”

“Yet it happened. This one article from our world today was enough to

contaminate the history to an extent that I saw actual physical changes here—in our time! That is what is so astonishing. Think about it, Karpov. The change was very small, very subtle. I'm willing to bet that no more than a handful of people on this earth might have noticed it. Who sits around reading this history for recreation?"

"Yes, how many are as crazy as you, Fedorov?"

Then something occurred to the Captain that did not make sense. "Just a moment…We didn't even make port until September 15th. Dobrynin took that control rod over two days later. If Markov vanished, wouldn't he appear after this operation was already concluded? You said it was scheduled for the 13th to 14th."

"Correct. Well we know these time displacements don't seem to respect our calendar. When we moved we often lost hours, days and even weeks. Markov obviously appeared well before the operation. Who knows how, but the British must have gotten hold of this article, and it probably froze their blood. But do you realize what this means?"

"It means the whole world is crazy," said Karpov. "Am I going to wake up tomorrow and find Brezhnev never lived?"

"I would think it takes something more than a minor change like this to affect the life of such a man, but who knows? The important thing is this—*the history isn't fixed!* This situation we find ourselves in is the result of millions and millions of individual events all tumbling down like grains of sand in the hourglass of time. It's an alternate history, markedly different from the one we left behind in Severomorsk—but Markov has just changed it. It isn't fixed! If he can change it, then *we* can change it too."

"Apparently so," Karpov shrugged. "We've already changed it several times, with each missile we fired. I've changed it with my own actions."

"Unquestionably. There was no Pearl Harbor attack, no Battle of Midway. None of that is written up in that new volume there, and believe me, a lot more has changed. I've only had a few days to look into it all. Yet the amazing thing is that whole segments of the history remain intact, flawlessly intact. It's as if it were all a big mirror, perfect until you come upon a section that has a crack that suddenly distorts the image. Everything is different there, but the rest of the mirror is fine."

"If the book changed, why not you, Fedorov? How could you remember that passage was there. How can you be so sure?"

"I really don't know. I tried to figure that out and the only thing I could

think of is that it's because *we* are the ones changing things. All of us, the men on the ship here as well. We're not from this altered timeline. We belong to the world we left back in Severomorsk. No one I talked to in the city seemed to know a thing about Pearl Harbor, for example. I asked a few people in the library. They were clueless. We know that the Japanese were supposed to attack there on December 7, 1942, but here, on this alternate time line, they never did, and no one knows about it."

Karpov sat down at the briefing desk, taking a deep breath. "Here we are at the edge of another world war and now we have to deal with this! What can we do about it, Fedorov? I realize you cannot help yourself digging in to all of this, but to what end?"

"I'll tell you what we can do. We can find Orlov."

The name fell like ice in a pail of hot water between them, and they both immediately grasped the implications. Orlov, alive in the year 1942 and with a Computer Jacket harboring the Portable Wiki.

"We have unfinished business, Captain, and until we find him, everything, and I mean *everything* is at risk. It could very well be that the outcome of these events we're preparing to face here in the Pacific are not inevitable as we now believe. The dominoes don't have to fall the same way each time—at least we hope this is the case. Look what happened with the *Key West.* It could be that we had nothing whatsoever to do with the devastation we saw in the world, not you, not me, or even the ship itself. It could have been something *Orlov* did, or failed to do in the life he led after he jumped ship. Understand what I am saying?"

"Orlov? He caused it?"

"All I know is that this world, this situation we face now, is a world that Orlov lived in all those years ago. Suppose we find him—figure a way to bring him home. All this would change!"

"But how?"

"I've been trying to find out what happened to him for a good long while, and I think I may have found a trace of the man in my research last night."

"You mean in the history books?"

"Of course. Nobody goes through this world without leaving some mark on it. Again, thank God we're living in the information age and I can call up archival records on the computer. Well I found something. You'll be amazed. I found that man's footprints in the history, and by God I think I can figure out where he went after he jumped from that helo."

“Where? What did you find about him?”

“It seems the British got hold of him and had him at Gibraltar. Then he slipped away. The next fragment I picked up was an entry in this very book.” He held up the new volume of the *Chronology Of The Naval War At Sea*.

“His name came up in a brief engagement between a Soviet Minesweeping trawler and a German U-boat in the Black Sea. So I followed the breadcrumbs. He was listed as a prisoner and suspected murderer of three NKVD guards in Poti. Then comes the kicker—the British went after him. They mounted a commando raid to try and recapture him. Take a look at this…” He opened to a new bookmark and showed Karpov the Passage: *25 Sept. 1942 – Operation Escapade sends a small commando unit into the Caspian region to look for a suspected Russian agent.*

“But it doesn’t say anything about Orlov,” Karpov protested.

“No, the book is very vague, but I found two other sources that give more details. They were after Orlov. It was kept very secret, but I dug things up.”

“I’m sure you did.”

“And there’s more…” Fedorov now reached into his jacket pocket to play his last trump card. He handed Karpov a folded piece of paper and the Captain took it slowly, almost as if he was afraid of what he might see there. He opened it and read silently, his features clearly reflecting the surprise and emotion he felt.

“Son of a bitch,” he whispered. “Where did you find *this?*”

Fedorov just smiled.

Chapter 26

The truck made its way along the thin dirty track that passed for a road. Now the passage of vehicles and people had widened it, trampling what little grass had managed to scratch a living on its fringes. It growled past the wide rolling vineyards, the vines still thick with ripening grapes that Orlov had picked and sampled any time they stopped. The harvest was near, but this year the wine would have to wait and molder on the vines. The peasants of Kizlyar had all been rounded up, the men set to digging trenches on the western fringe of the town, the women carrying wood and setting up encampments and cooking sites to feed the weary soldiers that came in on the trucks.

Orlov was one of them, jostling along with a small rifle squad until he gave the men a warning frown and jumped off when the truck neared the outskirts of the town. None of the men moved to follow him, and the truck rolled on.

Orlov wanted to have a look around, noting the winding course of the Terek river to the west of the hamlet. It stretched away to the north, lost amid the rolling farmland, the vineyards and scatterings of trees that clung to the banks in small groups. He could see the work parties digging there on the eastern bank, building up a wall of earth and loose stone to hide gun positions. Some cut trees which they laid out as obstacles for enemy tanks and vehicles, but there was no sign of any fighting here yet.

He saw a small stream that had been diverted from the main river to bring water in to the town, and so he followed it lazily along the southern fringe of the settlement until it bent north and led him in past a few hovels and weathered barns. The sparse trees here still had leaves, though they were yellowing and starting to fall. He passed an old man leaning heavily on a cane near a tall stand of grape vines, then came to a deep trench dug across the road as a kind of defensive barrier in front of an old red brick building. A plaintive red flag was nailed to the door, and he took it to be an official building.

Molla, he thought. Perhaps the bastard is hiding out here. He made for the building, his hand in his pocket fingering the revolver he had taken from the NKVD guards. The door opened with a dry squeak and his footfalls were

heavy on the bare wood floor.

Two men were drinking at a plain table, and they turned to give him an unfriendly look. “What is it?” A balding man with a thick neck spoke up, wiping his lip with the back of a fat hand.

“Commissar Molla?”

“Not here,” said the man. “What’s your business?”

“I have orders for the commissar.”

“Orders?” The man gave him a toothless smile. “Orders he says,” this time he was nodding to his companion, a scraggly officer with Lieutenant’s bars on his shoulder. “Well Molla don’t take orders lightly.” The man laughed, his voice gritty, then he coughed, clearing his throat before he spat on the floor.

Orlov walked slowly across the room. “Where is he?” he said in a low voice. The edge of a threat was plain for both men to hear, and the heavy set man gave him a frown.

“I says Molla don’t take orders, eh? He’s Commissar, or haven’t you heard. He *gives* orders, and you better get used to it. That shiny badge on your cap counts for nothing up here.”

“Is that so…” Orlov drew out his pistol, then slowly reached for the bottle the men had been sharing with his other hand, looking it over. It was a brandy, well noted in the region, and he raised the bottle to take a sip. The two men were clearly not happy about it.

“Not bad,” said Orlov. “Maybe I’ll keep it. But then again, maybe I’ll break it over your thick skull.” He gave the fat man a murderous look. “I’ll ask you again. Where is Molla?”

“Up the road with the truck convoy,” the heavy man said quickly enough. “He’s up herding the women, as always—one of Beria’s men. You heard of him, yes? Big boss man Beria. You want Molla, then look for the trucks with the women. He’s usually not far afield.” He gave Orlov a wide eyed look, watching him take another long swallow from the brandy. Then the big Chief set the bottle down with a thump on the table.

“Thank you, Comrades,” and he walked out the way he came.

An hour later he came to a long line of the trucks pulled off the side of the road leading north from the town. Men were carrying boxes of food and drink from old buildings and warehouses along the side of the road. Inside, he could see women, young and old, huddled in the shadows, and he realized he might find his grandmother here.

Orlov stuck his head into the yawning opening of the first truck. “Anya Kanina?” He puckered his eyes, staring at the sallow faces of the women where they sat on the plan flat wood bed of the truck. The fear in their eyes was plain to see, but no one spoke a word. “I am looking for Anya Kanina? Has anyone seen her?” Silence was his only answer, so he moved up the line to the next truck, getting much the same response.

Five trucks on he saw a woman shrink a little deeper into the shadows when he called out the name, and his heart beat faster. Could it be her? He leaned in, staring into the shadows to get a better look at the woman, noting her youth, the long blonde hair that his grandpa always talked about. *“Oh, your grandma was a real beauty, Gennadi. Her hair was like gold silk…”*

His excitement and relief brought a broad smile to his face, and his impulse was to jump into the truck and go embrace the woman. Yet she was obviously afraid, shirking away from his gaze and huddling deeper. “Anya Kanina?” he said jubilantly.

“Leave her alone,” an old gray haired crone put her scrawny arms about the woman protectively. “Hasn’t she suffered enough? Tell the Commissar to find someone else this time, the bastard. Yes! Shoot me if you wish, but you’ll not hurt this poor girl again. You’ll have to drag my dead bones out of here first. Leave her alone!”

Orlov felt a surge of anger when he heard the woman speak. The Commissar…That bastard Molla! *Sookin syn!* He turned abruptly, eyes set, jaw tight, his hand stiff in his NKVD jacket pocket. Then he strode away towards the old warehouse where the men were sorting through a supply cache, a dark light in his eyes.

“You! What are you doing?” The stranger’s voice was sharp and demanding. There were six men in dark trench coats and black Ushankas, their PPS submachine guns hanging from their broad shoulders on thin leather straps.

“Commissar Molla?” Orlov got right to the heart of the matter.

“Who wants to know?”

Orlov stepped up to the group, his heart still pounding, his excitement in finding his grandmother now a barely controlled anger in his chest. “Orders for the Commissar,” he said, eying the men with a frown.

“I’ll take them.”

Orlov saw the woven gold and white on red felt of an NKVD officer’s badge on the man’s sleeve, a colonel from the insignia on his hat, and the

man was looking him over from head to foot.

"You are Commissar Molla?" Orlov's finger moved to the trigger of the pistol in his jacket pocket, and two of the other men now seemed tensely alert. He knew if he fired and killed this man he was a dead man himself, but he did not care.

"Molla is down the road. If you have orders for him, give them to me. I'll see that he gets them."

Orlov shook his head. "Sorry comrade Colonel, I was told to speak directly to the Commissar. Where is he, please?"

The colonel did not like that. He was a man accustomed to seeing other men do exactly what he told them, and without any lip or hesitation. He was, as the fat man in the red brick building had hinted, one of Beria's men. Lavrentiy Beria was the notorious head of the state security apparatus, and he had some very vile habits that often saw him send men out to sweep the villages for young pretty women, particularly when he was near his old homeland in the Caucasus as he was now. The colonel put his hands on his hips and squared off to Orlov, anger evident on his face.

"Did you hear me, Captain?"

Orlov noted the leather straps crossed on the man's chest, the prominent collar boards, thick black belt with a gold star in a square buckle, flared pant legs above black leather boots. Another damn officer, he thought, his hand tightening on the revolver.

* * *

Haselden squinted through his field glasses and saw the group of NKVD men taking to another tall man, and something did not seem right to his well trained eye. The group was tense, one man in the back was pointing a sleek submachine gun at the newcomer. Something was wrong here. He peered through the glasses, adjusting the focus and thinking that this might be their man. He stood a head above the others, and his uniform was different. Clearly he was not like the other NKVD men they had been watching near the warehouse from their well concealed cover blind.

"Damn, Sutherland. Have a look at this. Could that be our man?"

Sutherland took the field glasses, careful to note the sun so the lenses would not catch the light. He took a long look and sighed. "Your guess is as good as mine," he said. "He's too far away to get a good look at him."

“But the whole scene looks suspicious. Looks like trouble.”

Their conversation was suddenly interrupted by the sound of a church bell ringing out a warning in the town. Sutherland pivoted slightly, re-focusing on the distant river to the west. “Well, well, well… Looks like we’ve got company.”

Even as they finished they heard the distant, mournful mutter of machine gun fire, and then the high whistling fall of an incoming round. There was an explosion near the river, a little south of the main town site, then another and another.

Haselden knew the sound of those rounds. They were coming in from an 8-cm schwere Granatwerfer 34 German mortar. The weapon earned a fierce reputation for its good range, accuracy and rate of fire during the war, though this was more likely due to the expertise of the men who used it. Haselden could see that these were simple covering fire rounds, getting the range as much as anything else, though those machine guns had to be firing at something.

“Looks like Jerry is crashing the party,” said Sutherland.

“It certainly does,” Haselden returned, steely eyed.

As the first rounds came in the group of NKVD men acted quickly. Three had their weapons trained on Orlov and he was hustled up into the back of a truck. Haselden had to think quickly. “Look, Davey, if that’s our man he’ll be out of town and heading north on a truck if we don’t move now.” His sibilant whisper conveyed the urgency of the moment as he reached for his STEN gun.

“Well we didn’t come all this way for nothing,” said Sutherland firmly. “Let’s get on with it then.” He looked over his shoulder, flashing a hand signal to Sergeant Terry, who was quickly mounting a round on the nose of his PIAT and slapping home a C-clip cartridge on to top of the Bren Light Machinegun he was manning. The Sergeant was their fire support man, and on Sutherland’s signal he opened up on the front of truck with the LMG in a series of brisk, short bursts.

Haselden and Sutherland were up and running in a low crouch, closing on the back side of the warehouse. There was shouting, men running out of every door in the old building, weapons ready, and over it all came the whine of more German mortar rounds and now the distant growl of an armored car.

The two commandos fell in behind some cover, with Sutherland rolling to one side and already laying down covering fire. The NKVD men scattered,

jumping behind any cover they could find and Haselden was up and running. He reached the warehouse and tossed a flash-bang grenade through the wide open door, then ran north along the back of the building.

Sutherland was starting to take return fire in crisp, burps from the Russian submachine guns. Now Sergeant Terry swiveled his Bren to the left and barked out a return, forcing the black Ushankas to go to ground. Sutherland was immediately up and running in towards Haselden's position. Smoke was coming from the open back warehouse door, and now Haselden tossed another flash-bang around the corner of the building. He was very near the truck, but heard the engine thrum and saw the vehicle starting to move. He looked back at Sergeant Terry and flashed him a quick hand signal. Terry had the PIAT up in a second and the sharp pop of the round firing bit the air. The warhead struck the front right door of the truck and exploded like thunder. The vehicle rocked with the blow and a fire started.

Now Haselden was around the edge of the warehouse, STEN gun at the ready, and firing as he went. Sutherland was right on his heels as they leapt for the back of the truck. Haselden reached it first, peering into the back through the thickening smoke. It was empty, and his eye soon saw why. The canvass top near the front cabin had been torn back and was dangling loosely in the smoky breeze. Obviously the men who had scrambled inside had dislodged the canvas and slipped out when Terry's Bren gun first bit into the steel of the engine cowling. He swore under his breath, then wheeled on his team mate, his arm stiffly pointing down the line of trucks.

Sutherland saw him turn and fired again at something on his left, then he moved as fast as his feet would take him, running the opposite direction, down the long nine of trucks that were all suddenly moving, their engines thrumming, wheels spinning madly in the dirt as the drivers gunned the big engines. The whole column was working its way back on to the road, and as Sutherland approached he could hear the screams of women and children.

Damn, he thought. The man was nowhere in sight, nor was there any sign of the bloody NKVD men. He heard the renewed firing of Sergeant Terry's Bren, and now he looked to see what appeared to be a full company of brown uniformed infantry running from the edge of the town, up this very road, and across a wide field to positions at the edge of the Terek river.

Haselden saw the men coming, heard the crack of small arms fire, the bullets whizzing by, but he had not seen what Sutherland knew. He was bravely providing cover fire in the hope that Sutherland could get to their

man, but it was a hopeless cause. Just as he realized that the Russians were about to make a final rush at his position, he fired one last sharp burst from his STEN and then fell back, reaching into his breast pocket for a command whistle.

Haselden blew three shrill notes, the signal to fall back to the secondary position they had scouted and prepared earlier by an old barn. He knew he had to get quickly back to a position where he could cover Sergeant Terry's withdrawal with the heavier weapons and he raced to a low stand of grapevines at the edge of the vineyard that had once filled the warehouse with barrels of wine. That was in a better day, and the long, regular rows of vines had not been properly pruned or well cultivated this year when the war came south. Yet they were enough to give him a little cover, and he laid down a base of fire, seeing Sutherland dashing into the same plantation off to his right.

Terry made a skillful withdrawal, and the chaos of the German attack now commanded the full attention of the Russians. The three men eventually fell back along a stream bed that wound its way around the north fringe of the vineyard and made a breathless rendezvous behind an old weathered barn.

"Bloody hell," said Haselden. "Anyone hit?"

The others were winded, but unharmed. Sutherland eyed his right shoulder where a bullet had just nicked his jacket. "Now what?" he breathed heavily.

They could see the line of ten trucks hurrying down the road to the north leaving a wake of dust behind them. Then, to their great surprise, the column stopped briefly, and a moment later the lead truck turned right onto a secondary road heading east off the main track. One by one the ten trucks followed, the last of them stopping and disgorging a fist full of dark coated NKVD men in black Ushankas who fanned out and went to ground. They were soon firing at something to their north and Haselden snapped up his field glasses to get a better look.

"Germans!" he rasped. "Three bloody armored cars and infantry. The road north is cut mates! Sutherland—your map! Where does that east track lead?"

Sutherland was quick to his breast pocket and had the wrinkled map open in a heartbeat. "Christ! That's our road. Remember we worked our way well south off the road as we approached the city. But that's it, Captain. Look, it works its way up round this wine country and then picks up the main road

east to the coast."

"Then they're trapped?"

"No, look here, sir. They can take this track and get round the marshland here to head south. It will take them right on down to Makhachkala again, and from there south to Baku if they have a mind."

"Well, the Queen's luck is with us today, lads. We need to get this man before he ends up dead. He won't be much good to us then."

"Dead men tell no tales."

"Right you are, Sutherland."

Haselden squinted at the map then pointed with a dirty finger. "Here," he said definitively. "We can work our way through these vineyards and then follow the north bank of this river heading east. That's bound to be bad ground out near those marshes, and slow going even for those trucks. So if we move quickly we just might be able to get to this bridge before they do."

"That's got to be forty kilometers!" Sutherland had a weary look on his face.

"No, a bit more like fifty, so we'll need a vehicle. If we find anything with wheels that runs we can take this road and cut them off… at Kazgan. It's our only play."

"Let's get to it, sir." Sergeant Terry was already up and shouldering the PIAT. They had a long road east ahead of them through some very tough country, but the mission was still on.

Chapter 27

Karpov stared at the page Fedorov handed him, still reading, a look of shock and amazement on his face.

"Fedorov, are you reading this? Are you listening? I know you must have spent many long nights in your search. Well here I am! Yes, Gennadi Orlov, the Chief, the one who bruised your cheek that day in the officer's mess. Here I am at Kizlyar, out here in the middle of nowhere, and back on a truck for Baku. I came to find my grandmother, and to see her in all her innocence and youth before she went north and Commissar Molla put his hands on her, but I was too late. I will find him soon enough, and kill him before he ever gets the chance to set his eyes on her again, but we ran into some trouble. The Germans! Sookin syn!

I'm with Beria's men, and I don't think they like my story, or the NKVD badge on my hat. They couldn't find me in their book of names. So they gave me an interesting choice—either to die as a deserter or return to the work crews at Baku. I chose the latter, and the Germans sent us on our way. Svoloch! Something tells me I'm headed for a good long stay in Bayil. I always did have a Bolshevik heart. It's not that I am not afraid to die. I worked my ass off in the service because I love my people, my country, my Motherland. I want to tell my comrades in arms that I have never known cowardice or panic. I left you all to find a life here on my own, and one I never could have before. I do not know what may have happened to you and the ship and crew I once served. My dying wish is that you destroy our enemies once and for all. Be heroes, be valiant men of war so that history will remember you as defenders of the Rodina. Should you ever find this, and learn my fate, I hope that you, courageous Russian sailors, will avenge my death."

—Gennadi Orlov, 30 September, 1942

Karpov folded the paper solemnly, slowly handing it back to Fedorov. "So Orlov finally found his backbone."

"I found references to that action at Kizlyar, but it wasn't in our history. Books we might find here today record that the German Sixteenth Motorized Division pushed elements of its reconnaissance battalion toward Kizlyar in

late September, 1942. They were after the oil in Baku, of course, but they got stopped—not only there, but elsewhere along the line of the Terek. The action seemed to be thought of as particularly important. It prevented a wide general envelopment of the Terek river line defenses."

"So they send him off to Baku. Where did you find this letter?"

"The letter? It took a lot of digging, but it turned up on an obscure web site. A fellow named Smerdlov was publishing the last letters from Soviet men and women who died in the war, both on the front and in the prisons and camps. He called it 'Letters from the Dead.'

"Then this is Orlov's last letter? It's over? You mean to say he is already dead?"

"It's 2021, of course he's dead. But he was alive at the time he wrote that, in 1942. It could be that Orlov wrote this later in a diary at the work camp, or even in Bayil—that's the infamous prison on the south bay of the city there, sometimes called Bailkovka. Tens of thousands were shipped off to Siberia during that damn war, but the prison was full in Bayil just the same. It was a miserable place. Did you know that Stalin even served time there in 1908? Poor Orlov…Maybe he died there, maybe not. There's a lot we still don't know."

"Well if he's dead then Orlov can't change anything."

"Think again, Captain. He's *already* changed things. The result is what we see outside—the headlines being written for the newscast tonight. This war is coming, as sure as night follows day. The Admiral has been haggling with Moscow, but they're taking a hard line there, or so I have heard. Here we sit, getting the ship ready for battle again, and if we thought we had trouble before, this fight is going to be the real hell. Did Orlov cause all this? Did we? Or was it meant to happen in any case. We can't know any of that for sure, but Orlov changed something, just as we did, just as Markov did. There are cracks in the mirror, and before long we won't be able to see ourselves there any longer. We've got to do something about this."

"Something tells me you have a plan."

"Look at the date on that letter, Captain. The one thing we do know for sure now is Orlov's location at a given point in time. He's at Kizlyar on the 30 September, 1942. He says he was on a truck to Baku, so we have a good fix on his whereabouts."

"But it isn't 1942, Fedorov. We're here in the year 2021!"

"At the moment…." He let that hang there, the implications of what he

was saying obvious to them both. But Karpov pushed on that half open door just the same, and heard it squeak with an ominous sound.

"What are you suggesting?"

"You asked what can we do about it." Fedorov closed his book with a hard thump. "Yes, we can still change things, Captain. We can go and get the man, that's what we can do. We can find Orlov and bring him back where he belongs—him and that damn computer jacket he took with him. That's the real threat now and we have the power to change things with Rod-25. And we need to get to him before he ends up in Bayil."

"My God, Fedorov, your suggesting we pull that hat trick again? With the ship?"

"I have an idea…"

Karpov shook his head, somewhat exasperated. Here he was trying to pull the ship and crew together for imminent war, and now his first officer comes to him with this! Yet even as he thought this he heard the voice of Admiral Volsky in his head: *"And one more thing…Fedorov…Listen to him, Captain. Listen to him. He is Starpom this time around and you have the ship, but don't forget those moments on the bridge when that situation was reversed. Become the same mind and heart together that saw us safely home. Do what you must, but we both know that there is something much greater than the fate of the ship at stake now, something much bigger than our own lives. We are the only ones who know what is coming, Karpov, and fate will never forgive us if we fail her this time."* He could at least listen to what Fedorov was saying. He owed him that much.

"Alright, Fedorov, out with it. What crazy idea do you have this time?"

"There are two ways we can try this," Fedorov began, somewhat excitedly. "One way is to use the ship as before. We would have to get Rod-25 back and mount it as the maintenance control rod."

"Then what?" Karpov would be the devil's advocate. The grave situation they were facing demanded it, but he would listen nonetheless. "Do we just sail out and vanish again?"

"Something like that," said Fedorov. "I was thinking we get up into the Sea of Okhotsk, or in the gulf west of Sakhalin Island south of the Tartar Strait. We'd be less visible there. The fog is thick as pea soup. Then we put men ashore and travel to Kizlyar."

"Who are you talking about?"

"I'll go. And I was thinking of asking Troyak and some of the Marines—

volunteers."

"A rescue operation, eh? That's a thousand miles from the coast. None of our helos could even fly that far, let alone back again."

"We go by the Siberian rail."

"Then you get there and do what? Ask around for Orlov? The place would be crawling with NKVD. And what about the Germans? Meanwhile what do the rest of us do? We just sit there in the ship off Sakhalin Island, waiting while all hell breaks loose here with this war? This is madness, Fedorov. And when they learn *Kirov* sailed and disappeared again, what will they think? I'll tell you as much. They'll think a big fat American submarine ripped open our belly and put us at the bottom of the sea, that's what. Only they won't have time to look for us, because the missiles will be flying. The nation needs this ship desperately now if it does come to war. All eyes will be on us if we sail again, and the hope of the nation. Have you considered that?"

"I have…Not that I relish the prospect of *Kirov* going to war again. All we'll do is push the world a little closer to the abyss if we do that, and you and I both know that this ship has a lot of muscle left, wounded or not. If we push, we push hard."

"I understand what you are saying, but consider the men, they've been through hell. We can't ask them to do this again. If we have to fight here, that's one thing. The men will understand that. It's why they signed onto the navy in the first place."

Fedorov shrugged. "Alright, then there's another way. We leave Rod-25 where it is and go back from the Primorskiy Engineering Center…Just like Markov…"

Karpov just looked at him. "But how will you get back?"

"I don't know."

"You don't know? Well neither do I. Here you sit worried about a man like Orlov and his Portable Wiki, and you assume this situation we're facing here can be laid at his feet, but then you can glibly suggest you go back yourself with Troyak and his Marines? After what we saw with Markov? Damn it, Fedorov. Listen to yourself! What makes you think Orlov is the devil incarnate now? For all you know he died there, or in Baku, and that was the end of it. Anybody who found his jacket wouldn't have the slightest idea what they had in their hands. Orlov may have done nothing. He could be completely innocent of the crime you fear he has already committed."

Fedorov looked down, rubbing his forehead. Karpov was correct. What

did he really know? Who was he to say that Orlov was responsible for anything going on in the world now. Was it just an easy way for him to excuse himself, the Admiral, Karpov and the ship? No. They were all equally guilty if any crime had been committed here. When he looked in that broken mirror he would have to be man enough to say he saw his own face there.

"Perhaps you're right, Captain," he said, feeling somewhat deflated. "Yes, it is a crazy idea. There's no way we could take the ship and do what I propose under these circumstances, and what you say about plan B is equally compelling. If we try to follow Markov and go back that way, then we'd all be trapped there in the past. I'd like to think that I would be cautious enough to behave myself there, but I'd be the man who knew tomorrow, and that is a temptation I would not wish on any man."

"And then there would be Troyak and the Marines to think of as well," Karpov put in.

"I know…" Fedorov had a defeated look on his face. The Captain was the voice of reason this time, and he had to put his wild notions aside and face the reality of their situation now.

"What's going on out there, Captain? I've had my nose in 1942 the last two days."

Karpov scratched his head, thinking. "I've been watching the headlines and I can rattle them off from memory: Russian Fighter Jets Breach Japan Airspace, Japan Warns China Over Missile Attack, Vows Reprisal, North Korea Warned Against Provocative Actions, Taiwan Enters Fray In China Japan Sea Spat. They've kicked the football into the U.N. Security Council for the moment, but you and I both know what's going on behind the scenes —the telephone calls, the angry words, the threats. And I have little doubt that men in every military base on the globe are sharpening their spears. I heard they flew in two squadrons of strategic bombers and new squadron of T-50 PAK-FA fighters. That's our fifth generation stealth fighter, so you know they mean business."

"How much time do you think we have?"

"Hard to say. If things are taking the course we fear, then the U.N. won't resolve anything. Japan will ask for a resolution condemning China's ballistic missile attack on Okinawa. China will veto it. That was a big mistake the UN made long ago to allow any single permanent member a veto. A vote of four to one from permanent members should have been decisive."

"In another world," said Fedorov.

“Precisely. Well, it wouldn’t have mattered anyway. Russia would have voted with the Chinese. As it stands now the Japanese have a small detachment camping out on those worthless islands, and both sides are moving ships and planes around. But the real threat is Taiwan. It was the major flash point in that newspaper we found, yes?”

“That’s what it sounded like.”

“The Admiral called me yesterday to ask about the ship. He told me the satellites have been seeing a big Chinese buildup along the Taiwan Strait. He thinks this business over the Diaoyutai Islands is nothing more than the overture. The curtain is about to open on act one of this little drama, and soon.”

“He thinks the Chinese will attack Taiwan?”

“Most certainly. It will start with a demand, of course. Then China will pass some kind of resolution declaring Taiwan as an integral part of the People’s Republic. The Taiwanese government will rebuke them and on and on it will go for a few days while the Americans move their carriers.”

“Yes, the carriers. That’s how it really caught fire according to that article. Remember, the Chinese moved the *Liaoning* out to sea and the US stopped it with a submarine. That led to the attack on the *Eisenhower*. Any news on that ship?”

“It’s coming,” said Karpov. “Volsky says it’s in the Indian Ocean at Diego Garcia.”

“I don’t like the sound of that,” Fedorov fretted. “They may be loading nuclear warheads from stockpiles kept there.”

“Sharpening their teeth? Most likely, just as we are. They made a special delivery today.”

Fedorov was not happy. “How many?”

“You know that is always undisclosed until we actually put to sea with orders.”

“Martinov knows.”

“Of course Martinov knows. How do you think I pulled off that nonsense in the Atlantic? Well I’m not asking him this time, and believe me, I’m have no great urge to see any of them mounted on a missile after what we’ve been through and seen. In the meantime, I hope we’ve put this plan of yours to rest, Fedorov. We have more on our duty list than worries about Orlov.”

Fedorov looked down at the folded paper he had handed Karpov, the letter from the dead, feeling a strange connection with the man who must

have surely met his own fate and died decades ago. They were living now in the world Orlov and the men and women of that generation left them. To think that Orlov alone could shape the contours of the entire world was nonsense. Yet something told him that voice of reason was wrong, some aching sense of warning that set his adrenaline rising. Deep down, that persistent inner voice still whispered the truth: they had to get Orlov or the world would end in fire.

Part X

Enter The Dragon

"If you ignore the dragon, it will eat you.
If you try to confront the dragon it will overpower you.
If you ride the dragon, you will take advantage
of its might and power."

— A Chinese Proverb

Chapter 28

Major General Zhu Hong boldly strode down the long aisle into the Security Council, a red bound book under his arm. He seated himself in the front row of the Chinese delegation, and to see a military officer there was quite an omen, as well as a message to the world that now watched with nervous interest on their television screens when they could pull themselves away from the thousand other distractions of the day.

The heated discussion had been a typical theater of back and forth, with one side making pronouncements, condemnations and threats, while the other side sat stolidly waiting to make reprisal. Neither side was listening to the other, and the stage was now littered with props and maps and displays showing photographs and documents. The Japanese Ambassador showed video footage of the sinking of the small DDE *Oyoko*. The Chinese Ambassador showed photos of families weeping for the sailors lost aboard the submarine *Li Zhu*. The Japanese showed film of the captured Coast Guard cutter *Howo*, and its hostage crew paraded before cameras in China. The Chinese showed Japanese troops illegally landing on the reputed Chinese soil of Diaoyutai, and the burning of the Frigates *Weifang* and *Shouyang*.

On it went, with the Japanese showing the terrible destruction of their helicopter carrier *Hyuga* and then the final images of the missiles exploding on Naha airfield, a barrage of six ballistic warheads that had cratered the runways and blasted a hanger to pieces there, with smoke and fire making a dramatic backdrop to the scene. He shook his finger in solemn admonition, stating that this was the homeland of the Japanese nation, and of that there could be no dispute. The escalation, he said was a cowardly act by a nation who had suffered military defeat at sea and a desperate attempt to save face, and nothing more.

The Chinese Ambassador brushed his accusations aside as nothing more than the mutterings of an old fisherman, which brought the only ripple of muted laughter to the scene, quashed quickly when the Japanese Ambassador stood stiffly and led his delegation out of the room.

The issue then passed to the American Ambassador, who lamented the inability of nations to resolve their disputes without resort to military conflict,

before stating that China should be well aware of its obligations on the world stage.

The Chinese Ambassador retorted by showing satellite photographs of the American carrier *Eisenhower* at Diego Garcia, and asking where it was going? “Before the distinguished American Ambassador decides to lecture the People’s Republic of China regarding its obligations, perhaps it would explain why this aircraft carrier now hastens to the scene. It appears that the United States is also quick to put forward a military solution to the dispute now under discussion, so their words are hollow when they presume to point a finger at China in this matter.”

To this the Americans gravely trotted out even more placards with additional satellite photography mounted and showing the dramatic buildup on the coast of the Taiwan Strait, week by week, as amphibious ships were being loaded, the power plants of more frigates and destroyers blooming alive on infrared, the aircraft lining up on coastal air fields, and finally the movement of mobile ballistic missile launchers.

“Mister Ambassador,” he said pointedly, “We now note that the Chinese military has deployed army troops amounting to three full divisions on this coastline, with up to two brigade sized elements now loading on the ships in these photographs. The islands now under dispute in this discussion do not have sufficient space for even a tiny portion force. So kindly tell us where *these* troops are going? Why is China loading weapons and men of war on ships?”

The cat named Taiwan was quickly out of the bag, as it was no mystery as to what the Chinese intended. It was the Chinese Autumn Moon festival back home that September, and the Taiwanese Ambassador angrily held up the traditional festival moon cakes he had obtained that had been molded in the shape of his home island. “The Republic Of China,” he scolded, “is not a confection to be eaten by our greedy neighbors to the west! Taiwan will state categorically that it will oppose any and all attempts to violate its territorial integrity with the full might of its armed forces on land, air and sea.”

To this the People’s Republic Of China warned that they may attempt to do so, but would soon find their efforts lacking and they would be wiser now to acquiesce and submit to the authority of their rightful masters in Beijing. He spoke at length of the long years that China waited patiently for her wayward son to come home, until he had well tried the patience of every delegation in the room prompting the Taiwanese Ambassador to slap his hand

on the table demanding to be heard in the middle of this diatribe.

He rudely reminded China that his nation did not stand alone, nor did the Japanese nation stand alone, which set the American delegation to nervous whispers as the inevitable strings of attachment would eventually bind both Taipei and Tokyo to Washington, the work of treaties and mutual defense agreements that had stood for eighty years.

China shouted down the Ambassador, berating his bad manners. “The younger son should never presume to speak thusly before his elders,” he said angrily. Then he reminded the audience that the People’s Republic did not stand alone either, which set the Russian delegation to nervous whispers, and on it went.

When the American delegation next took the floor to make their closing statement they did so with gravity and a somber, well rehearsed candor. “Yes, gentlemen, it is clear that treaties and obligations now force the United States to the regretful step of deploying deterrent forces in the region, in the hope that they may never have to speak in anger over these matters, but with the firm resolve to do so should China persist in this aggression and threaten or attack any party to the treaties and mutual understandings I now speak of.”

China’s Ambassador took this for the threat it was, looked hotly at the Russian delegation, and began reminding the Americans that SinoPac was also an organization dedicated to peace, but not peace at any price, and that any interference in what it considered the internal affairs of the Chinese people in the matter of Diaoyutai or Taiwan would be treated as an act of war.

It was then that Major General Zhu Hong, made his sudden appearance, striding boldly down the aisle and throwing his thick red book on the table as he took the microphone.

“I too, have pictures to show,” he said coldly, and he proceeded to hold up photos of the USS *Washington* battlegroup at Yokohama, now putting out to sea, the USS *Nimitz* battlegroup leaving Hawaii after a recent port call and now heading west, the USS *Eisenhower* battlegroup now moving east towards the Singapore Strait.

Then he held up one last photo, of a chalky while stretch of sand in the Gobi desert, around which there was drawn a thin red outline in the obvious shape of an aircraft carrier. He pointed out two deep craters that would have been direct hits on the flight deck by ballistic missiles fired from a range of 2000 kilometers. The day was long gone, he said, when the American Navy

ships could carry the big stick their president Theodore Roosevelt first gave them. China had big sticks of its own, and then, to the utter shock of everyone present, and right before the worldwide television audience, General Zhu threatened the United States with a nuclear attack if it became embroiled in a conflict between China and Taiwan.

"If the Americans bring their fleets and send their aircraft onto the disputed zone to violate China's territory, I think we will have to respond with nuclear weapons," Zhu Hong told the stunned circle of balding men around the Security Council. "And should the United States respond in kind, we Chinese will prepare ourselves for the destruction of all of the cities east of Xian. Of course the Americans will have to be prepared to see hundreds of cities destroyed by our missiles," he added gravely. "When it is all over, we estimate our population will be reduced to some 300 million, roughly equal to the population of the United States today. But if that tomorrow comes, your people will all be gone. There will be no United States to speak of." His cold calculus concluded, the General stood up, taking his thick red book in arm. "This has been decided," he said with finality. "There will be no further discussion." Then he turned and strode up the aisle, quickly followed by the whole of the Chinese delegation.

The stunned delegations watched them go, unable to believe such a threat could be so callously pronounced in the Security Council chambers. At the American delegation, Ambassador Stevenson was shaking his head in sheer disbelief. He turned to his assistant, James Porter, and frowned.

"Never let your vigilance drop when the ships start sliding off the spillways in the Pacific, Mister Porter. The Chinese have been building them for the last fifteen years, and now it's come to this again. Once you build the damn things the men in white and blue uniforms want to use them." He heard a quiet tone sound, and realized one of his staff members in the second row had just received a call. Stevenson turned, a grave expression on his face as the young staffer leaned in and whispered the latest news.

Stevenson quickly zipped up his attaché case and stood, feeling the blood flow into his long legs after the grueling three hour session. He knew he would be making a full report to the brass to receive further instructions within the hour. "Better get General Gabriel on the line as soon as we reach the office. And I'm sure Admirals Ferguson and Richardson at PACOM will want to weigh in on this...Who else? Carlisle at PACAF, and probably Ghortney too."

“Ghortney, sir? He’s ready for the retirement ceremony next month.”

“It may have to wait, Porter. Looks like we’ll need a Fleet Admiral again soon and Ghortney’s at the top of the list. He’s an old carrier commander. Perhaps that fifth star might convince him to stick around.”

“That’s an awful lot of admirals in on one call sir. Will this go through the Joint Chiefs or the Oval Office?”

“Probably both. Such insanity has to be dealt with,” he said in a low voice, “and the sooner we get about it, the better.”

* * *

High above the Pacific, NROL-50 was watching the latest developments very closely from space, and 2nd Lieutenant Matt Eden was on the duty roster that day at the Naval Intelligence Center. He was taking a good long look at airfields throughout Central and Southern China, and especially at sites where more advance air squadrons were known to be deployed. The Chinese Air Force had taken a good hard jab to the nose in that recent engagement with the Japanese. He had heard the intelligence circulating through his analysis unit, and was not surprised.

A gaggle of J-10s up against six *Silent Eagles* and three JF-35s, he mused? Fat chance. The Chinese should have left those J-10s on the tarmac where they belong. It was an aerodynamically unstable design from the get-go, and needed fly by wire flight control systems to keep the planes from flying apart in a tight turn or other maneuver that overstressed the aircraft. It was a great plane when the flight control system worked, but when that wire was cut by a good pair of electronic clippers…

He smiled, wondering if the Japanese had tried anything similar to the in-flight NS-111that was now a top secret addition to the noses of some very select squadrons of aircraft in the USAF. In any case, they *Eagles* probably had them in their crosshairs well before those J-10s could lock and load. It was over before it started.

But this latest development he had been watching was a little more troubling. He had checked three key airfields now, and the story was the same. The supposedly hidden underground bunkers were starting to see some daylight for a change. He had seen a planes emerging in groups of six and quickly maneuvering for takeoff. The top down silhouette was unmistakable, and he was quickly counting noses, realizing he was seeing a very significant

deployment here. Ten minutes later he was on the phone to his deputy commander with some very bad news. It looks like the Chinese mean business this time he thought.

"Deputy Commander. Go ahead."

"Deep Black Ten, sir. Lieutenant Eden reporting. The bats have left their caves."

"Single sighting?"

"No sir, I have it in triplicate and I'm rolling over for three more vectors and some additional photography."

"Very well…We'll see what they have over at ASIA and Keyhole. I'm sure they've been more than curious this week. Check three more, and get those photos in my inbox ASAP."

"Right, sir. Eden out." They were going to check with the Japan Aerospace Exploration Agency. Whoopi doo! He ran a mental finger about in circles. Well, they would have the same thing in their inboxes soon enough. Eden was inwardly pleased that the Deputy Commander took his report as breaking news. The Keyhole crowd will be on it in minutes now, but he had it first.

My, my, he thought—*Vampires.* The Chinese didn't call them that. Their handle was more culturally appropriate*: Shen Long*, the *Mighty Dragon*. It's original name had been much more to the point: Jian-20 or Killer-20, the annihilator. The US had taken them down a peg or two by calling them bats and, as they were particularly nasty bats, the term *Vampire* that had long been associated with an incoming threat was an easy evolution. But call them what you will, the new fifth generation J-20 stealth fighters would live up to the name, and then some. They usually slumbered in their deep hidden bunkers, with only occasional outings to let us know what they had if they ever needed it, but not today.

When the plane was first flight tested nine years ago in 2012 during a visit to China by then Defense Secretary Gates, US analysts stated the J-20 had the potential to "put some of our capabilities at risk." Eden smiled inwardly at that, thinking of the men in the planes and ships that might soon have to face down these *Vampires*. The thought that higher government had reduced them, and the machines they operated, to mere 'capabilities' was somewhat disturbing.

The Lieutenant knew what was happening here. It was quite evident. Japan got herself in a scrap and Taiwan is next in line. But Uncle Sam lives

just down the street, and the carriers were coming, the symbol of American power and prestige at sea for over eighty years. The J-20 was a premier fifth generation maritime strike aircraft capable of long range, penetrating attacks against formidable air defense environments. Now the big and relatively slow aircraft carriers would face an opponent with the range to reach and attack them by more than one means. The *Vampires* may soon be riding the buffalo's back, he thought, and I get to sit here and watch it in living HD video.

His satellite roll maneuver was nearly complete, and his board read green for new target coordinates. He'd have a look at three more airfields, but had little doubt that the story would be the same. This is going to get a whole lot worse before it gets better, he thought…A whole lot worse.

Chapter 29

CV-16 was the carrier *Liaoning*, named for a swift river that flowed through China's northeast province by the same name. In an odd irony, the second character that made up the name of this ship of war was *'ning'*, the symbol for 'peace.' The province's strategic location on the Yellow Sea adjacent to North Korea on one side to the east, and the capitol of Beijing to the southwest, had given it the auspicious nickname of the Golden Triangle. There a long peninsula reached from the province towards the Chinese mainland and out into the Yellow Sea, and near its tip was the big naval center and harbor of Dailan.

It was a massive complex, a major terminal for the arrival and storage of the oil being burned by China's enormous economy. Parts of the harbor were occupied by the big Dialan West Pacific Oil refinery, its squat metal storage tanks gleaming in long rows along much of the eastern arm of land that created the Gulf of Dailan.

Across that wide bay the western shores saw the city gathered in a warren of high rise concrete residential buildings that rose in massive clusters, their tops often shadowed by tall red metal cranes where new floors were being added as China continued to build its infrastructure. Ninety percent of all the large industrial cranes on earth were in the People's Republic, and they did not sit idle. City after city was a bustling hive of energy and new construction, with some places seeing the simultaneous construction of upwards of fifty new high rise buildings as any given time. There were no more than ten to twenty new buildings of equal stature under construction in the whole of the United States, which showed how profoundly the industrial power of the world now rested on China's broad shoulders.

South of Dialan was the Xiaopingdao Submarine base where the new Type 094 and 095 submarines were docked, along with older *Ming* class diesel boats that had been hand-me-downs from the Russians years ago, their old *Romeo* class. Even further south was Lushan harbor, the old Port Arthur that had been a bone of contention in the 1890s between China and Japan. The Tiger Tai Peninsula protecting the bay there still had old scars of war, with the ruins of fortifications dating back to the 1800s. There were also

several airfields, the airbase at Tuchengzi, weapons bunkers, SAM sites and other obvious signs of military activity.

There, sitting proudly in the harbor itself, was the *Liaoning*, the Ex-*Varyag*, brother ship of the Russian carrier *Kusnetsov*. Its freshly painted ski-jump forward deck swept upwards in an elegant yet highly functional design. The Chinese had acquired the unfinished carrier from Ukraine for the paltry sum of only 18 million, with an additional two million for the blueprints. After haggling with the Turks for three years to get permission to tow the ship through the Bosporus Strait, the Chinese set about with loving care and considerable industry to finished the job of her construction and fitting out. The old name passed to an aging Russian cruiser now based at Vladivostok, and the Chinese christened the ship *Liaoning*, all 67,500 tons, now trimmed out with navy white and gray paint and festooned with colorful flags.

Being the first fleet carrier in the Chinese Navy, *Laioning* occupied the place of honor that any elder son would have in the family. Two newer and larger carriers had been under construction since 2012 and were rapidly being readied for their trial by fire. *Liaoning* was now an elder brother indeed, as the first Shenyang J-15 fighter had successfully landed on its decks on the 25th of November, in the year 2012. The decks had been given a good zinc chromate primer and then covered with a durable non-skid surface. The superstructure and island had been fitted out with the new *Sea Eagle* search radars and electronics, including advanced phased array radar. Air defenses were added, including four *Flying Leopard* FL-3000N missile batteries in a big lunchbox of 24 fire and forget TY-90 SAMs, each capable of passive RF tracking and infrared guidance with a range of nine kilometers. It was, however, a last chance terminal defense weapon, just like the two Type 1030 CWIS 30mm Gatling guns that covered her rear port and starboard quarters.

The real bite from any carrier was in its air wing, and *Liaoning* would carry a minimum strike wing of thirty-two J-15 fighters, a Chinese knock off of the deadly Russian SU-33, their navalized version of the SU-27 *Flanker*. A subflight of six Z-8 helos and two new Russian K-31 AEW helos would complete her wing. In the months prior to its initial deployment, pilots and flight crews rehearsed their roles in an extensive training program that took place on the roof of the Naval Research Center at Wuhan. A complete full size mockup of the carrier’s deck and island had been built there for rigorous training.

The so called ‘threat environment’ a ship would find itself in was

constantly evolving as new missiles and aircraft were deployed, and its defenses had to evolve to meet new challenges, year after year. The J-15Bs of 2021 were an upgrade from the originals, and now a proven and capable aircraft. The men who fought in the ships had also evolved. Now, nine years later, *Liaoning's* original Captain Zhang Zheng had risen to the post of Admiral in charge of the entire Dialan Naval complex, overseeing all operations in the Yellow Sea Command.

Admiral Zhang Zheng was an intelligent, experienced and technically competent man. Born to a military family in 1969 he was now fifty two, and had sacrificed much for the navy life he so loved. At the academy he had pledged that he would not marry until he first became captain of a ship, and he had forsaken the lures of lucrative business opportunities to remain in the service all these many years. He had served on a frigate, guided missile destroyer, and eventually was given the great rose of the fleet when he took command of *Liaoning* in September of 2012.

Zhang studied abroad in the United Kingdom at the Defense Language Institute and the British Joint Services Command and Staff College. As such he was fluent in English, as were many others aboard *Liaoning*, which became China's international ship for a time after its commissioning. Ninety-eight percent of the crew aboard the carrier were graduates of that same college. Now Zhang would be taking over as commander of the Dialan Naval District, though he still would hold the title of official commissar of the carrier *Liaoning*. It was a difficult moment when he left the ship, saluting proudly to the crew assembled on the deck in their dress whites, and struggling to hold his emotions in hand.

The next time a flotilla of surface action vessels took to the sea they would not have to wait for fighters lumbering in from coastal bases over 400 kilometers away. This time the swift, agile Shenyang J-15 *Feisha 'Flying Sharks'* would be circling overhead, waiting for prey. China's eldest brother was going to war, but *Liaoning* would not sail alone.

Far to the south a second carrier was ready to put to sea at the Sanya naval base at Hainan, the new *Taifeng*, or *Typhoon* class super-carrier, China's first of two in this class. It's sister ship the *Haifeng* or *Seawind* was also feverishly fitting out at the Jiangnan Shipyards of Shanghai. Laid down in 2012 and 2014, these two new designs would be China first indigenous aircraft carriers, all of 72,000 tons, with an air wing of sixty-eight advanced strike fighters. *Taifeng* knew a challenger was coming in CVN Eisenhower, and the ship was

being readied to bar the way on her maiden voyage.

The war of words at the United Nations had reached as startling and final an end as the sudden lethal descent of the ballistic missiles that fell on Naha, Okinawa. Now the gloves were off, and the next time ships and planes deployed in the region it would be with the expectation that any contact they encountered was a hostile enemy.

* * *

"So what do we do about this situation?" said Rod Leyman, White House Chief of Staff. He was meeting with Lt. Commander William Reed, a defense analyst expert for many years who had been called in to the West Wing to brief the civilian decision makers there. After the startling theater at the UN that day, secure phone lines had been jammed throughout DC, Langley and the Pentagon. "Are the Chinese blowing smoke up our ass here with this nuclear threat?"

"It was very unusual to see the military march in like that, sir, and with such a pronouncement one might easily think it was meant for public consumption."

"Yes, just a little taste of fear to get the folks back home here all worked up. Well I must tell you that several senior officers think we ought to take this very seriously."

"Of course, sir. Any aspect regarding potential use of nuclear weapons needs to be taken very seriously. Thank God we've only seen one go off in anger over all these decades."

Leyman wasn't quite sure what Reed meant with that, but moved on, and the Lieutenant Commander kicked himself inwardly for the slip. Yes, there had only been one—the one that put down the *Mississippi* in 1941, and though the United States had two bombs ready for the Japanese by late 1944, saner heads had prevailed and Japan surrendered before they had to be used. But even now, over eighty years later, few men really knew the whole story of what had happened in the Atlantic that day in early August, 1941. He made a note to watch himself, and listened to Leyman's next question.

"There's been a recommendation that we take down their satellites, and do it now."

"That's a sound preventative strategy, sir. The real high ground in modern warfare is outer space. We've got systems in place that can go after their birds; they have some limited capability to go after ours. But whoever strikes

first is going to have a real edge. Thumbing the other guy in the eye in the first round is a tried and true tactic."

"I'll take that as a yes from you. Now, speaking of satellites, we got a report that the Chinese were moving some planes from inland airfields to the coast." He handed Reed a photo from his briefing file. "Can you tell me about them?"

Reed took a long look, nodding his head as if he expected the development. "J-20s," he said matter of factly. "It's an advanced stealth type strike aircraft, sir."

"Well is it as good as our fighters? The Navy is all up in a tither over this."

"It's a decent aircraft, sir, low-observable airframe, particularly from the forward aspect, and a good weapons suite. It's fast, and it has the range to get out after targets well off shore—a combat radius of over 2000 kilometers. Our older fighters will have some trouble with it one-on- one. Put a *Vampire* out there against a *Hornet* and the other side may have the edge."

"Vampire? I thought these things were called Dragons?"

"The Chinese name is *Mighty Dragon*, sir. We just call them *Vampires*, or bats for short. In some ways they're a stealthy version of the old Russian Mig-25 *Foxbat*…. hence the handle."

"Well what I want to know, Commander Reed, is whether or not these things are going to beat us."

"I can't tell you that for certain, sir. What I can say is this. That FA-18 *Hornet* we put out there may be past its prime, but it won't be alone. We have a couple of carrier squadrons with our new F-35 *Lightnings*. But there's more to all this than which plane is better. It isn't just stealth and missiles that will decide this thing, sir. A good combat aircraft today has a long checklist. Yes, its radar signature and missiles count for a lot, but then there are things like its integrated electronics, the reliability of its radar and engines, the Electronic Warfare system it's using, the ability to synthesize both onboard and off board sensor data—information from satellites, ground based systems and other assets like AEW or AWACS planes. Then we get to how good that pilot is, the training he has and the maintenance routines that put his plane in the air that day. And how long can he stay there? That takes a well practiced and reliable air refueling capability. Wrap it all up with good hardware and software and you've got the whole package—the real modern aircraft worth the name when it comes to war fighting."

“So what’s the bottom line, Mister Reed. Is that what the Chinese are going to be throwing at our carrier task forces if we send in the *Eisenhower* and *Nimitz?”*

“No sir, I don’t think so. These planes have a few things on the list, and I’ve already mentioned those: good range, speed, stealth and weapons. As for everything else on my list, I don’t think they can come anywhere near us, sir. We’ve been at this for years, decades. This new J-20 was just delivered in large numbers three years ago. We estimate they may have no more than a hundred in inventory, and this will be their first invitation to the dance. As for pilots, they’ll have some good ones in the seat, some bad ones, and some miserable ones. But every plane we send up is going to have a rip-snortin’ expert in the harness, and that’s no brag, sir. So think of these planes like darts. They’ll throw them at us, and occasionally they’ll hit something.”

“Our carriers?”

“They’ll try, but they’ll have to get through hell’s gate first, sir. I think they will most likely make high speed runs at our AEW assets, at-sea replenishment ships, command ships, the smaller Marine Amphibious carriers will be more vulnerable than our fleet carriers. But it’s never quite like that, sir. These targets aren’t sitting out there alone. We’re a highly integrated Air/Sea combat force. All those assets will have a carrier air wing up and angry for defense, sir, and if you want to know what our boys are capable of just ask Saddam or the Ayatollah.”

“Correct me if I’m wrong, Mister Reed, but Saddam is dead,” Leyman said glibly.

“My point exactly, sir.”

“Then you believe we can safely move these two CV battlegroups —say into the East China Sea?”

“I think I would stand off just a little farther out, sir. We don’t need to be in those waters to project our force there. Remember, we’ve got assets at Kadena on Okinawa as well.”

“Yes, but look what happened at Naha. Are we to expect a rain of these ballistic missiles on our airfields in the region as well?”

“If we get into it, I would certainly count on that, sir. I described those J-20s as aimed darts. Well the ballistic missiles are another matter entirely. Think of them as arrows, and fired by some very good archers.”

“Can we stop these things, Commander?”

“We can try, sir. And to bring it back full circle, I would begin with the

satellites, and I wouldn't waste much more time with that. The General made a real show if it in the UN when he dragged out that photo of a cratered airstrip in the Gobi. Yes, they can hit a target, as we clearly saw, but they have to know where it is, sir. As it stands now, they can sit up there with satellites and see exactly where *Eisenhower* and *Nimitz* are at this very moment. Take down those satellites and they'll have to rely on three other things: air reconnaissance, submarines, or over the horizon radar. We can shoot down the first one, find and kill the second one with our own subs, and jam the third one. But the satellites? You've got one option, sir. Get them as soon as you can."

Leyman took that all in and slowly set his briefing file on the table. "I see," he said. "Well just how many of these ballistic missiles are we talking about, Mister Reed? All it took was six of the damn things to raise hell at Naha."

"I'm afraid they have quite a few more than that, sir."

"How many? Are we talking about a couple hundred here?"

Reed rubbed his nose, and then looked Leyman in the eye and told it to him straight. "No sir, we're talking about a couple thousand, over 2,200 by our latest estimates."

"My God…" Leyman reached for a glass of water.

"And then there's one other matter, sir."

"For heaven's sake, these damn missiles are quite enough, but go ahead, Commander. What else have they got in their back pocket I need to know about?"

"Well, sir….They have the Russians."

Chapter 30

Admiral Volsky sat behind the big desk in Abramov's old office at Naval Headquarters, Fokino. It was now his new home, his new ship, and somehow being chained to a desk forced home the realization that comes to every admiral over the age of sixty years—the bone yard was not far off. This was the last post he would likely hold in the navy, and the shadow of imminent retirement was already darkening the light of his long and distinguished career. Soon he would be like the old ships in the graveyard bays of Sakhalin and Kamchatka, and the sight of the rusting hulk of the second original *Kirov* Class battlecruiser, *Admiral Lazarev*, seemed to mock him where it rode at anchor near the Fleet Munitions Depot down in Abrek Bay.

Yes, he thought, There you sit, Lazarev, just as I sit here at Abramov's old desk. This chair was his, and now it's mine until they drag me off to some desolate harbor where I can rust my last years away. Maybe one day they will name a ship after me, the Admiral Leonid Volsky, and then I will live again and cut through the open seas under a starry night…But not today. Now I have other matters to attend to, the things that choked the veins and arteries of old Abramov and put him in that hospital bed. And the worst of it is knowing the futility of it all—knowing the dark end it all comes to, and sitting here trying to find a way to still be a serving Fleet Admiral in the Russian Navy while I strive to prevent the very thing that the ships and men I command were made for.

We build them, and by God we will use them one day. That was the sad and inevitable logic of war. The *Admiral Lazarev* had not seen much action in her brief career. She was laid down in the old harbor at Leningrad in 1981, commissioned in 1984, sailed about for a time with visits to Aden, Luanda, Vietnam, and then sat uselessly at her port berthing, retired in 1999. Her heart was ripped out a few years later when they unloaded her nuclear fuel, just like Abramov.

His eye wandered to the squat buildings southwest around Chazhma Bay where the Ship Repair Facility received the old depleted fuel that was at the heart of the fleet's nuclear powered submarines. The long thin steel of the Trans-Siberian railway would receive fresh fuel from the Machine Building Plant in Elektrostal and return spent fuel assemblies for storage or

reprocessing at the Mayak Chemical Combine in Chelyabinsk. Heart surgery, he thought, wondering how many years he had left himself.

Nothing lasts forever…

His Chief of Staff, Talanov, buzzed him, breaking his reverie with the news he had been expecting. *"Good morning, Admiral, Captain Karpov and Captain Fedorov are waiting as ordered. Shall I send them in?"*

"Please do. Thank you, Mister Talanov."

The door opened and the two men entered, smiling to see the Admiral again. Volsky stood to shake their hands, invigorated to see them, and gesturing warmly to the two chairs before the polished maple desk.

"Well, gentlemen, I expect you have seen the theatrics at the United Nations. Astounding to think the Chinese would make such a display."

"The talk is that there has been a split between the civilian leadership and the military, sir," said Karpov.

"Perhaps," said Volsky. "The Chinese ambassador seemed as surprised as everyone else when that general stormed in and took the microphone. So now they are pouring over their maps over there, and pointing fingers at islands and rattling off numbers and the names of men and ships they will send there to fight. There is nothing more dangerous than an Admiral or General with a compass and a map. Sadly, that applies equally to me at this moment. I called you here because Moscow wants us to mobilize the fleet and make a strong show of force in accordance with our 'obligations' under the SinoPac treaty." He used his fingers to put quotation marks around the word "obligations," a cynical look on his face. "Of course the Americans are also dipping that same old tea bag into their hot water, and so the table will soon be set for some very uncomfortable company in these waters."

"It appears so, sir," said Fedorov. "I've been watching for the clear warning signs we were privileged to learn about from that Australian newspaper. We've already avoided one tripwire when we spared the *Key West,* and I suppose that was mutual, as they could have put torpedoes into us long before Tasarov's equipment came back on-line and we knew the sub was even there. Yet it looks like that may have only bought us a brief respite. The other warning signs are shaping up in the news now like a bad storm on the horizon."

"Quite so," said Volsky. "We received word this morning that the Chinese are lighting the fires under that old carrier they bought some years ago. The *Liaoning* is blooming on infrared and getting ready to put out to sea

from Dialan. We've seen deliveries of additional J-15 fighters on satellite, and their new J-20s. They're putting together a strong flotilla this time. This was the next major incident mentioned in that newspaper, was it not?"

"Yes, sir," said Fedorov. "Yet the spin on that report in the article we found seemed to indicate that the American submarine that sunk the *Liaoning* did so in reprisal for the loss of the *Key West*. We've already re-written that part of the story."

"Perhaps, but I tend to think this attack on *Liaoning* was also meant to send a strong message to the Chinese not to attempt an invasion of Taiwan."

"Yes, sir, but it would be an alarming way to do so. A telephone would serve just as well, or a microphone at the UN."

"Very true," Volsky smiled. "Perhaps the Americans will act intelligently in this situation and this attack will not occur. But remember Dostoyevsky: it takes something more than intelligence to act intelligently. I wonder if the Americans have that missing factor in this situation. They've had their way on the world stage since the end of World War Two. They won't like the Chinese starting to throw their weight around, and may act stupidly."

"Well it seems we may have only bought ourselves a couple week's delay in the course of events, sir. That article stated that the *Liaoning* sunk on September 7th, and here it is weeks later on the 21st and it has not yet left Dialan. CV *Eisenhower* is presently in the Strait of Malacca and approaching Singapore. It was supposed to have been sunk a week ago, so events are running about two weeks late. That time has been filled by the incident in the Diaoyutai Island group and this war of words in the UN. Unfortunately, it may have worsened the situation. There was no mention of that incident in that newspaper we found, but now the Japanese are also involved. That means the US is obligated by two treaties. This may compel them to take stronger action."

"The question is whether the Americans will attack *Liaoning* this time," said Karpov. "If they do then the dominoes are falling as before. But even if they do not attack the ship, I think these dominoes are going to fall another way."

"Correct," said Volsky. "This is why there may be some wisdom in what Moscow wants for the moment, strange as that may sound. If we make a strong show of force now, it might convince the Americans that they will have to deal with us along with the Chinese. It could give them pause, and perhaps allow time for negotiations. I have already spoken with their Admiral

Richardson and expressed my sentiments on the matter. He seems a reasonable man, but may soon be compelled to act by the civilian leadership over there, just as I am now."

"There was news today that their Admiral Ghortney may be named Fleet Admiral and replace him," said Fedorov. "That is very rare event to see a five star Admiral there. It only happens during wartime."

"Yes, the Americans have sent a strong signal with this move. Richardson came up through their nuclear propulsion division, but Ghortney is a carrier man, a fighting Admiral. Let us hope the Chinese get the message. We certainly would, but they haven't had a nice long eighty year cold war with the Americans. We have instincts and understand the nuances of an adversarial relationship like that. The Chinese may not yet know how to play the game. They have made their first move by pushing a pawn out to challenge the Japanese for those useless islands, but it is clear they now mean to post a strong knight on Taiwan. The Americans will play out the *Ruy Lopez*, of course. And post a Bishop with their carrier battlegroups holding a knife to that knight's neck." Volsky was referring to the famous *Ruy Lopez* chess opening where a white bishop immediately sortied to challenge the black knight. "But as for the moves we must now make, and the message we must send, I'm afraid no one is getting any sleep at the RVSN." He was referring to Russia's strategic missile command center. "The missile fields of Svobodnyy may soon be warming up the silos. Hopefully it will not come to that any time soon, but in the near term I will have some orders for you now. I hope the ship is seaworthy, Mister Karpov."

"We've done a great deal in the last week, sir. Byko has had men in the water every day reinforcing that hull patch, and we've done more metal work from the inside. The Fregat system is up and running again, and they've mounted a new sensor on the top mast, though they still have a lot of work to do there before it's functional. As for the aft citadel, I'm afraid all we could do was clear the wreckage, clean it up, and throw a coat of paint over it. They put up some bare frame steel beams to support a new roof and laid down some metal plating there to keep out the elements, but there's no armor to speak of. The space is just being used for storage and other equipment. The damage aft from that bomb hit we took has been patched over, but we still have no fire control system for the Klinok silos there, so we'll be a little light on SAMs for that system. I told them to load the missiles anyway. We can always move them, and Rodenko is seeing about cross circuiting with the

forward fire control radars. To compensate, they replaced our S-300s with a nice new upgrade."

"The S-400s?"

Karpov nodded in the affirmative. "All three range variants." The newest Russian ship-based air defense system, S-400F *Triumf,* was a 'suite' of air defense missiles that utilized the new long-range 40N6 missile effective out to 400 kilometers, 250 miles, with a bigger 180kg warhead.

"That will be an unpleasant surprise for the Americans," said the Admiral.

"Indeed, sir. As for the rest, we've completed missile reloads for the *Moskit-IIs* and other SSMs late last night and they are moving away the cranes."

"Then you will be ready to put to sea directly?"

"The ship is ready, sir."

Fedorov had a troubled look on his face and spoke up, haltingly at first, but gaining more resolve as he went. "Sir… I have a request to make. Are you aware of the incident with Markov over at the test bed center?"

"The missing man? Yes, Dobrynin reported it, but I have been too busy to follow up. I had him seal off that facility, and I suspect you have been doing some digging on the matter, right Fedorov?"

"I have, sir." He told the Admiral what he had discovered about the changed passage in the naval history chronology, and his thoughts about Orlov. Karpov folded his arms, thinking they had put this to rest, but bearing with the situation as Fedorov had his say.

"Very mysterious," said Volsky. "You suspect the British found that magazine article and cancelled their operation, and then your book changed? That is somewhat disturbing if it is true."

"Indeed, sir, but only one book changed—the one I bought in the city when we arrived. My original book is just as it was."

"What does that mean, Fedorov?"

"It means that we remain in a privileged position sir. We are unaffected by the changes in the history, at least this is what I believed at first. But then I discovered something else. Another crewman went missing the same day Markov vanished, a *matoc* named Yolkin in supply. He went into town to fill an order for Martinov and never returned."

"I see," said Volsky. "Well as much as I hate to suggest it, this may be a simple AWOL, Mister Fedorov. Who knows why this man was missing? It could be a girlfriend, or some other matter that sent him off."

“Possibly, sir, but I did some further research. Inspector Kapustin was somewhat perturbed when he discovered they had no records in Moscow for any of the men we listed as casualties. Well we must now add yet another man to that list—Yolkin. I checked with Moscow on him as well. There is no record that such a man was ever signed on to our active duty roster.”

“But we’re sitting here discussing the man,” said Volsky. “I remember him, short, a little heavy set, and his nose was always red from the cold when we were up north.”

“Yes, and the men in his section remember him as well, sir. But there is no longer a physical record of him, not even in the backup of the data we made before we purged our logs and files. It’s changed, sir, just like the book. It was made after we shifted forward, and did not come from the world we left behind in Severomorsk. I interviewed Yolkin’s closest friends, found out his birth date and went so far as to look for this man’s birth certificate. There are lots of Yolkins, of course, but not this one. He’s vanished, just like Markov, but it’s as if he never even existed…”

That statement surprised Volsky, and lent considerable weight to Fedorov’s argument. “Never existed? Are you telling me the incident with Markov caused this man’s life history to be changed to a point where he was never even born?”

“All I can say for certain is that there is now no record of his existence, no birth certificate, school records, medical records, tax or credit information. Yolkin has been completely erased from the ledger of life. It could have been a side effect from the Markov incident, but he died within minutes of his appearance in Vladivostok of 1942. I found the police report in the wartime archives. They found his wallet, of course, and when they saw his identification they probably assumed it was a fraudulent ID, though I’m willing to bet that if he had any Rubles in there it would have raised an eyebrow or two. It’s hard to make any connection between Markov and Yolkin’s disappearance, other than the fact that they both vanished the same day, which could have been coincidental.”

“Then how, Fedorov? How do you explain this?”

“I wish I could tell you, Admiral. More time and research might lead me to a more definitive answer, but there is one other possibility—Orlov.”

“Orlov? He would have died long ago. How could he be responsible?”

“This is what I first believed, Admiral—that Orlov’s life and fate had been sealed, and that the world we returned to here was therefore the final

result of any change he may have worked on the history. It was easy to think he may have had something to do with this imminent war we are facing, but I discarded that. There are too many thumbs in that pie to blame it all on Orlov. Then I discovered something in my research on the man." He reached into his coat pocket and handed the letter he had shared with Karpov to the Admiral, who read it with a silent sadness shrouding his features.

Volsky read the last few lines aloud: "*Be heroes, be valiant men of war so that history will remember you as defenders of the Rodina. Should you ever find this, and learn my fate, I hope that you, courageous Russian sailors, will avenge my death."* He folded the letter slowly, setting it in the desk.

"Very sad," he said. "Avenge him? We do not yet know how he died, or at who's hands. Kizlyar…Yes there was an NKVD division operating there once. Strange that you should find it, but I do not understand how that changes anything here, or causes a man like Yolkin to simply disappear."

"This is what I told him," said Karpov. "He suggested we attempt to go find Orlov and bring him home, but there is a little more on our plate to deal with now."

"Go and find him? What do you mean, Fedorov?"

The young Captain explained what he had suggested, and then admitted that Karpov had convinced him that such a mission would not be feasible with the ship given their present circumstances. "But there is one thing I wish to bring up, sir," he pressed on.

"It has to do with that letter, and yes, also with these crazy ideas I have in my head now about bringing Orlov home. I was doing some reading on all this—theoretical papers on the idea of movement through time. Believe it or not, there are serious minds who have contemplated this possibility. Well, I found a paper published by an American physicist—a man named Paul Dorland. His ideas were very radical, and he posited a complete theory of time travel and how it might be possible through the creation of a controlled micro black hole. I was trying to discover some reason for the odd effects caused by Rod-25, but it wasn't the physics in his paper that caught my attention, it was this amazing glossary of terms he had dreamt up to define how time travel would work, and what the consequences would be should it ever occur. He put forward an idea, a term that he called a Nexus Point. The essence of it was that once a willful agent with the power to act determined to do something to alter the past, time seems to be suddenly held in abeyance. The outcomes and possibilities resulting from this person's decisions and

actions seem to have an effect on what actually happens, and the power to physically change events—just like that book changed or like Yolkin vanished, or like Voloshin when he discovered his wife and apartment were missing and killed himself."

"I don't understand," said Volsky. "Nexus Point?"

"The way he explained it was that time flowed like a river. So then think of a whirlpool in that stream. This is the Nexus Point, the place where different streams of time merge and flow together and then resolve to some new direction. In that whirlpool anything might happen. Imagine a leaf caught up in it, swirling about. When it finally returns to the river it might have moved to a different place, taken a different course. *Kirov* was a leaf in the stream of time sir, but I don't think our journey is over yet. I think we are still caught up in the maelstrom. We still have Rod-25, and the power to use it and, as long as we do, then nothing is decided and we cannot return to the normal flow of the river."

"You are saying that our possession of Rod-25 is the problem?"

"Both the problem and the solution, sir. Rod-25 caused this dilemma, but it is also the only means we have of redressing it. With it we have the power to change the order of events again—to change the flow of time and all the history from 1942 to the present. We can rewrite the headlines we read in that newspaper. We have already edited the story, but now we can make it new."

Karpov's eyes were alight as he listened, for he had heard that same Siren song and been tempted by time and fate long ago. "Yes, we *do* have that power," he said in a low voice. "This Rod-25 business. It worked it's magic at the test bed facility just as it did aboard *Kirov*."

"Exactly," said Fedorov. "As long as Rod-25 remains viable, it enables time displacement. Rig it up in a low power twelve rod reactor as Dobrynin did at the test center and we get missing magazines, teacups, chairs, and Markov. Put it back on the ship with its twin 24 rod reactors and we get a battlecruiser making visits to the high seas of 1942!"

Volsky raised his eyebrows with astonishment. "You never cease to amaze me, Fedorov. You bring this insanity into the room and actually make it sound rational. What you are saying is that your discovery of that letter makes it possible for us to do something about Orlov, yes?"

"Correct, sir. We now know exactly where he is on a given time and place. We have the equivalent of his GPS coordinates in the history, and we have the means of going there ourselves, finding him, and bringing him back.

We have the power."

"But only if we use the ship…." Volsky frowned. "This is correct what I say, yes? If we use the test bed facility we have a one way street. There is no reactor at the other end with Rod-25 to send us home."

"Right, sir. That facility does not seem to have the power to move anything but loose objects within a limited range of the core. Yet as we have seen in a more powerful reactor setting Rod-25 can move an entire ship! We then have options. We have helicopters, men like Sergeant Troyak and his Marines."

"Men of war," said Volsky, remembering Orlov's last plaintive letter. "So what you are suggesting is that fate is waiting on *us?* That until this possibility no longer exists, the world will never rest at ease and settle down again?"

"Something like that, sir."

"And if we were to do such a thing as you suggest, undertake a kind of rescue operation, what then?"

"Then we will have at least packed out our trash," said Karpov. "Forgive my speaking of Orlov in those terms, but we will have recovered the man and his damn Computer Jacket and cleaned up the last of the mess we created."

Fedorov seized on that point. "After all, sir, didn't you find it strange that we appeared here at the precise moment necessary to either kill or spare the *Key West?* It's as if time was forcing us to make that choice so she could get on with her business. Now we have this letter, and yes, more unfinished business. Don't you feel it? The moment seems breathless. Things are building and building to some climax, but time is waiting—waiting for us to make *another* choice."

Volsky, took a long breath, settling into his chair, thinking. "Then we have two options that I can see. One is to get this Rod-25 back aboard *Kirov*, and hope that perhaps we might do something one day, presuming this strange displacement ever happens again. And the other choice is to utterly destroy that control rod and close the matter here and now, and then we live with what comes next, and forfeit the power to change it ever again, except by means of blood and steel in the here and now." He had a distant look in his eyes, as if seeing the days past or perhaps peering into some unknown future and seeing it as a real place and time in his imagination.

"So what do we do, sir?" said Karpov. "What do we do with the greatest power anyone has ever seen on this earth—the power to change everything,

the entire world? There's a great dragon out there, and it's about to start a war. We've already seen the end of that story. What do we do about it?"

Volsky smiled, still thinking. "This reminds me of the old Chinese proverb," he said at last. "If you ignore the dragon, it will eat you. If you try to confront the dragon it will overpower you. But if you *ride* the dragon, you will take advantage of its might and power. Gentlemen… We can't ignore this, and I'm not sure we can win this war by confrontation on our own, or prevent it from taking place. But by God, yes, we *do* have power, Karpov, and we can ride the Dragon's back."

Part XI

Siren Song

“This is the one song everyone
would like to learn: the song
that is irresistible:

the song that forces men
to leap overboard in squadrons
even though they see beached skulls

the song nobody knows
because anyone who had heard it
is dead, and the others can’t remember.
Shall I tell you the secret? …”

— Margaret Atwood: Siren Song

Chapter 31

Admiral Volsky's eyes shone with new light now. He was no longer that old Admiral, sitting at the desk of another old admiral, and looking longingly at the retired hulk of *Admiral Lazarev* down in Abrek Bay. There the ship sat, the image of *Kirov* from without, but nothing more than a gutted, empty hulk within, powerless and forgotten. But not so for *Kirov*, he thought. There was power to take to the seas again, real authority to strive and contend and decide. And they also had Rod-25, a mysterious magic wand with power unlike anything the world had ever seen. They had discovered it unknowingly, blundering into a distant age and time to wage war on war itself. And though they fought there to preserve their own lives and fate, they had also unwittingly decided the lives and fate of many others. What they did before, they could do again.

The red telephone sounded an insistent tone on his desk. It was Talanov: *"Excuse me sir, but I think you had better bring up your news feed."* It was the UN General Assembly this time. The Chinese ambassador was completing a lengthy speech and making a formal demand, and ultimatum, for the passage of a resolution in the Republic of China renouncing independence.

"They are asking Taiwan to surrender before the shooting has even started there," said Karpov.

"Always a good move, but not one likely to produce any results," said Volsky. "This is mere formality. Moscow informs me that they will move on Taiwan no later than midnight tomorrow. Their submarines are already deploying from the major bases at Sanya and Yulin on Hainan Island to form a picket line in the South China Sea, and their new aircraft carrier is preparing to move into those waters. There is activity all along the coast from Shanghai to Dailan, Guangzhou, Shantou, Beihai and even Hong Kong. Air units are being moved and the entire navy is ramping up for deployment. We must do the same. I am going to call Admiral Shi Lang and see if I can buy us a little more time. He may not have any choice in the matter, but at the very least I will know more of what to expect in the days ahead. We have less than forty-eight hours to decide what we must do with *Kirov*."

“The ship is ready, sir. We can sail within that timeframe.”

Volsky considered, looking at Fedorov and seeing the concern on his face. They had three weapons now, time, blood and steel. The problem was that there was all too little of the first, even though eternity was within their grasp in Rod-25.

“Mister Fedorov,” he said at last. “If you have any last thoughts on this matter, then let me hear them. What do you propose?”

Fedorov looked at Karpov, then set his jaw. He explained that there were two possible ways to get Orlov—one by using the ship, and the other by simply following Markov’s ill fated route. “I understand that using the ship may be impossible at the moment, sir. So I’ll go, with your permission. I’ll go to the test-bed facility and follow Markov’s route. It moved him to September of 1942, right where we need to go to find Orlov. He thinks they were taking him to Bayil Prison in Baku. If so, he’ll be in one place for a good long time. We could try and find him there.”

“How will you get there?”

“The Trans-Siberian rail.”

“That’s a long way, and very dangerous.” Karpov pointed out the obvious. “Getting back out east to the coast here with Orlov would be even more dangerous. I assume that is your plan, yes? We’d still have to run the procedure aboard *Kirov* again to bring you home, Fedorov. Taking time out to excuse ourselves from World War Three will not be easy. Even if we could do such a thing, how will we know when you are ready for extraction? And suppose we do this and the ship ends up in 1944! You could be left at the coast for a very long time waiting for our helicopters to show up. In fact, you could be left there for a lifetime.”

“I’m afraid I must agree,” said Volsky. “It would seem complete madness to send *Kirov* off into the ether under these circumstances. That ship is the heart of the fleet now. We have *Admiral Kuznetsov* at sea just south of Beringa Island, our only existing aircraft carrier, and it is escorted by three old *Krivak* Class frigates. We’ll have to do better than that. On the other hand, we have the greatest weapon imaginable at our disposal if we dare to use it again, and if it has the slightest chance of preventing this war, then we must try. Have you thought about this, Fedorov? If it works as with Markov, and you vanish as he did, how will we know what has happened to you? How could we possibly come back for you?”

“I’ll let you know if I get back to the target date safely, sir.”

“What? How will you do that, Fedorov? I don’t think there’s a secure telephone line anywhere in old Vladivostok to the year 2021.”

“No, but there are secure locations here in Vladivostok that go back centuries. I happen to own one that will come in very handy.”

“I don’t understand.”

“The old Naval Storage Depot, sir. Cellar number five. It still has old storage bins dating back to WWII, some even earlier. My father was a navy man, and so was my grandfather. He had one of the bins there, and it passed to my father and then to me. I just went to check it yesterday. It’s still there, completely untouched for decades. My grandfather’s old uniform is tucked away in a steamer trunk, and I’ll slip a note into the breast pocket.” He held up an old, weathered key, smiling.

“Nobody has bothered them at all these years,” he said. “Just have a man waiting there with this key, and as soon as we vanish he can open the bin. My letter should be right there waiting for him. I got the idea that we could do this when I found Orlov’s letter.”

“Astounding,” said Volsky.

“So you’ll know if I’ve made it back safely. Then I’ll head for Kizlyar via the Trans-Siberian rail.”

“That’s a huge distance,” said Karpov. “What if you *don’t* make it back safely? Look what happened to Markov! You said he was shot dead by military police on the quay within minutes of his arrival there.”

“That won’t happen to me, Captain.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“Because Sergeant Troyak will be with me.” He folded his arms.

“Troyak?” Karpov raised his eyebrows. “You’ve spoken to him about this?”

“He volunteered this afternoon, and two of his best Marines will round out the team. In fact he showed me comm-link devices you can use to track us on extraction. They use them for special operations.”

“You told him everything? He and his men know the risks?”

“And they also know what’s at stake.”

Volsky smiled. “Well, well, well… Yes, if you take Troyak back we will definitely get your letter, and I think you will get to Kizlyar as well. I have little doubt of that. But make no mistake, Fedorov. This is still going to be dangerous. Troyak and his men are among the best in the fleet, but they are men nonetheless, not robots. A bullet will kill them, and you, easily enough.”

“I understand, sir. It’s the risk we’ll have to take.”

“I admire your courage in this, but I must tell you that *Kirov* may not be able to come back for you.”

Fedorov knew this was the one weak link in his plan. *Kirov* might soon find itself in battle, and there was no guarantee that the ship would survive or ever find a way to extricate itself and use Rod-25 to return for them. But he had a plan.

“There’s another way, sir. *Kirov* is not the only ship with nuclear reactors. The *Anatoly Alexandrov* is in the Caspian Sea at this very moment and it operates two KLT-40B naval propulsion reactors—the exact same power rating as *Kirov*.”

“*Anatoly Alexandrov?”* Karpov raised an eyebrow in surprise. “That’s just a floating nuclear power facility. It was delivered via the rail quay at Kaspiysk to Gazprom for use in its Kashagan superfield offshore drilling operation. But I don’t even think it is crewed at the moment.” Karpov knew much about the operation as he had been a former executive in Gazprom before coming to the navy.

“Precisely, sir. It’s fully functional, but not yet scheduled for operations—and with no crew on site it is just perfect for what I have planned. All we would have to do is send Dobrynin and a few engineers with a security team from the ship. It’s anchored about ten kilometers off Kaspiysk harbor, and that is only about 120 kilometers south of Kizlyar! We can fly Rod-25 to Uytash airfield at Kaspiysk tonight. We have a coast guard base there, hovercraft, helos, the entire 77th Guard Naval Marine force at our disposal. If the Admiral orders it, we could easily commandeer the *Anatoly Alexandrov*, secretly install Rod-25, and it would shift the entire facility back. It displaces only 21,500 tons, which is less than *Kirov*. Perhaps we could move one of the new assault landing ships at Kaspiysk. I believe the *Lt. Rimskiy* is stationed there. It can range out to 1000 kilometers, requires only a small six man crew, and can transport 140 tons—a fast hovercraft, a helicopter, or even tanks! If you moved it tight on the *Alexandrov*, I think those reactors will shift it back as well. That would give our Marines a fast mobile platform for the extraction mission, and a few surprises inside in case we run into trouble. You can signal your arrival by radio and home in on us. We can meet you anywhere on the Caspian coast!”

“Amazing,” said Volsky. “You have the whole mission planned!” He sat with that for a moment, thinking, and realizing that as wild as the operation

seemed, they had to try.

"Very well…It's decided. You have your mission, Fedorov, but why not launch it from the *Alexandrov?* Why risk the long journey east from here?"

"It will take time to set things up in the Caspian, Admiral"

"Yes, perhaps several days, even a week."

"But I can leave tonight from here. Yes, it makes for a long, hard journey in 1942, but if I don't act immediately the situation could change here with these recent developments. A week from now who knows what we will be facing? We should act immediately, sir. This way I can verify the day of our arrival with a letter as planned. We know the approximate time we might displace to from the Engineering Center, but not so with the *Alexandrov*."

"Suppose you appear in September of 1942 as with Markov, but the *Alexandrov* shifts to a different date, perhaps in 1943 or 1944? Or not at all?"

"These are the risks we will have to accept, Admiral. If the relief force shifts late, then we wait for you. If you never come…Well, I will write you a long letter about us." Fedorov smiled, but it was clear that he knew all too well that this might be the last night he would ever see the world he had been born to, or at least the semblance of that world, changed as it was, a chameleon of time and fate.

"Very well," said Volsky heavily. "Go to the test bed facility and call me on a secure line when you are ready. On my command have Dobrynin run the procedure. I will issue orders immediately and Dobrynin can then lead a team with one or two engineers and a Marine detachment from the ship. They'll be on a plane for the Caspian region tonight. Admiral Kamilov is an old friend —he commands the Caspian Flotilla and I can arrange for everything Dobrynin will need when they get there. The remainder of the Ship's marine detachment will go with him as well. The whole thing will be a top secret operation, and make that stick."

"Thank you sir!"

"Don't thank me yet, Fedorov. We may never see you again."

"We'll win through, sir. I can feel it."

"I believe you…and may God go with you, but what if this mission fails, and you are trapped there in the past?"

"I've considered that, sir, and I have a solution."

"What solution? What will you do?"

"We will have to end our lives…. It sounds terrible, but it would be the only way."

Neither man said anything. Volsky rubbed his brow, then spoke softly, a sadness in his voice. “Orlov heard the siren’s song, and now we follow. We jump right overboard even though we see the bleached skulls on the shore. But the end of that song is too often death. Let us hope you and the others do not have to pay that price.”

He looked down to the harbor, saw the *Admiral Lazarev* again, breathing deeply. “This leaves the ship free to do what we must in the here and now.” He turned to face Karpov.

“As for you, Captain, you are going to lead the Red Banner Pacific Fleet out tonight. Weather conditions have been worsening and it looks like we will have a storm on our hands. It will keep prying eyes in space from following our deployment. I’ve recalled *Admiral Golovk*o and *Orlan*, a couple of new ships to keep *Kirov* company. You’ll also have the cruiser *Varyag*, four *Udaloy* class destroyers and our best attack submarine in escort, the *Kazan*. The rest of our submarines have already deployed in a wide arc east of Japan.”

He reached for a map to show Karpov his plan. “We will use the storm front for cover. Your mission will be to rendezvous with the *Admiral Kuznetsov*, add those four ships to your flotilla, and then we thump our chest. There won’t be another surface action group within a thousand miles with the firepower you have at your disposal, and you’ll have carrier based air power and anything else we can give you from our airfields. You will be the most formidable force at sea, so while Fedorov is on his way to the history books, you will take *Kirov* and lead the fleet north of Hokkaido to the Kuriles. You are acting Task Group Commander. Understood?”

“Very well, sir.” Karpov sat taller, the pride in his eyes evident.

“You are to conduct operations intended to make a show of force, but not to provoke or engage our adversaries. If you find the flotilla under direct and immediate threat, then you will take appropriate offensive and defensive measures utilizing conventional weapons only. I repeat. No use of tactical nuclear weapons is authorized. You will have them, but you must not use them unless you receive a direct order to do so. Is that clear?”

“I understand, sir.”

“Other than that, you have complete discretion as to how to employ your force to achieve our ends. Deter the enemy, and if he will not be deterred, then oppose him, but realize every missile you fire may be the one that sets off this war in earnest. Then the ICBMs fly. Remember, Karpov, if a nuclear

warhead is your only tactical option, then your battle has already been lost, and the fleet with it. I believe you, of all men now walking this earth, know the hard truth of that. In fact, you are the only man in this world now who has ever ordered the use of a nuclear weapon in anger. Let us hope that first time was the last."

Karpov nodded, his eyes serious, realizing what the Admiral meant all too well. "Rely on me, sir. I will not let you down."

"I will rely on you both, as I did before when I could not stand on these old legs and was stuck there with Zolkin in the sick bay. The world is on your shoulders now, gentlemen, not just the fate of the ship. God go with you both."

* * *

That night Fedorov met with Sergeant Kandemir Troyak and two Marine volunteers, Corporals Bukin, and Zykov. The four men moved slowly down the long corridor in the Primorskiy Engineering Center, with Engineer Dobrynin following behind. When they reached the sealed test bed facility, Dobrynin indicated a spot across the room where four chairs waited in a zone he thought would be closer to the effect produced by the reactor.

"I still have no idea why this happens, Fedorov. Are you sure you want to try this again?"

"We're determined, Dobrynin. Let's get started. When we finish you will need all the time left to you to get Rod-25 back aboard *Kirov*."

"Very well, I'll initiate the procedure, and then move to the data center. I can use those panels to monitor the reaction, and I think they are far removed from any possible effects." He turned and pointed above the door. "I had a technician place a camera there, and I'll be watching you throughout the procedure. Those chairs are securely bolted to the floor, so you are the only free objects in the room—you and your equipment."

Dobrynin shook their hands, and then the telecom panel on the wall sounded with a quiet tone. It was Admiral Volsky wishing them well, and thanking each man for their service.

"Don't forget to retrieve my letter, sir," said Fedorov. "It's very important. I will note the time we arrive and the time you can hope to expect us at Vanino on the coast."

"Are you sure it will remain undisturbed all those years?"

“I have every confidence in that, sir”

“Very well…Ride the Dragon’s back, Fedorov. We will do everything possible to come to your aid. You may begin, Chief Dobrynin.”

Dobrynin left to initiate the procedure, and then the wait began. The first hour seemed to pass with agonizing slowness. The implacable Kandemir Troyak seemed completely unbothered, quietly checking his equipment. He had spent many long hours waiting like this, in cold helicopters chopping through the black night for hours to a secret mission point. This was no different. The other two men were equally cool, checking arms, ammunition reserve, supply packs, comm-link system, and other things Fedorov had never seen.

For his part Fedorov had a small map tube and compass for navigation, along with other documents he had prepared. His pack carried high energy food sap pouches and other food stores. He went into town the day before and bought up any old rubles he could find released before 1942. They also had small ingots of gold and silver to give them a little more buying power. Their clothing was warm, packs remarkably light, as they had determined to live as much off the land itself as possible.

Another long hour passed, and Rod-25 was in retraction mode. Dobrynin’s voice reassured them that all was well, and then they heard it. A distant sound, undulating, shifting in tempo and pitch as Dobrynin’s voice faded into a garbled wash. The sound increased, seeming more urgent as the volume amplified. The siren song of time was calling to them, beckoning, tugging at their minds with an insistent quality that seemed almost seductive. The light in the room fluttered. The men stood and Fedorov looked down at the chairs, which seemed to suddenly fade in and out—there, not there, and then they were gone.

Dobrynin looked up at his monitor with a shocked expression. Where there had once been four chairs and four men quietly waiting on them in the room, there were now three empty chairs and one man standing by the fourth with an astonished look on his face!

Chapter 32

The nuclear attack submarine *Kazan* slipped quietly from its underground pen at Pavlovsk Bay, restored to full operation for the specific purpose of housing and supplying the deadly new submarines of its class. There were only three, with *Severodvinsk* in the Northern Fleet and *Yasen* in the Mediterranean, but they were the best and quietest attack submarines Russia had ever designed. Four more had been ordered, but the money never came and neither did the subs.

Kazan left the base submerged, the thick overhead fog and low clouds also masking her departure on infrared. The boat would be the tip of Karpov's spear, a fast, deadly forward scout heading east for the passage above Hokkaido Island. Within the hour the ships of the Red Banner Pacific Fleet would follow in the cruising order Karpov established: frigate *Admiral Golovko,* destroyer leader *Orlan*, and cruiser *Varyag* would lead the way, *Kirov* would then follow with the four *Udaloy* class destroyers in her wake. These eight ships would rendezvous with the carrier *Admiral Kuznetsov* and her three *Krivak* class frigates—the twelve apostles of Russia's Red Banner Pacific Fleet were going to sea.

They slipped out of the Golden Horn Harbor like a whisper in the night, passing Russky Island and then turning east to skirt the coast and approach Fokino where Admiral Volsky waited in his office, his eyes heavy with sadness as he stared out into the foggy night. Then there came the distant call of a ship's horn, three long notes in the quiet night. Volsky recognized it at once, and knew the fleet was now passing Askold Island just off the bay at Fokino. *Kirov* was signaling farewell.

The telephone rang and he picked up the receiver with a slow, deliberate movement, as if he was afraid to hear the news it might bring. It was the man he had sent over to Naval Supply, Cellar 5, beneath the old Fleet Logistics Building on Svetlanskaya Street. He had told him to call his office at midnight, and the man was very punctual. *"Lieutenant Kaslan reporting, sir."*

"Thank you for your timely call, Lieutenant. Please go to storage bin number 317. Use the key you were given to gain access. There you should find a steamer trunk with a naval officer's coat. Please search the pockets,

and should you find any envelopes or papers of any kind, secure the trunk and bin and then bring the documents to this office at once. In fact, bring anything you may find in those pockets. You may leave the jacket undisturbed. Understood?"

"Yes sir. Would you like me to call and verify the discovery of any items before I leave the facility, sir?"

"I will hold on this line, Lieutenant. Please make your inspection while I wait."

"Right away, sir"

Volsky heard the man's footsteps echo in the hallway as he went, a hollow sound that grew fainter with each footfall, as if the man were now stepping back over years and decades with each footfall. There came the sound of a dry metal squeak, an old door opening with great reluctance, complaining like a sleeper roused in the long dark of night. There was a shuffling sound, something heavy being moved on the metal floor of the storage bin. He waited breathlessly, imagining the scene with the light of his mind's eye standing in for the small flashlight that must surely be in the Lieutenant's hand. What was there?

He heard a quiet bump, then the plaintive creak of the metal door on the bin as it closed, and a brief rattle as the padlock was secured. Then came the footsteps again, faint and growing louder, returning from the past. Volsky took a deep breath, waiting, his heart beating faster. Suddenly there was a sharp sound, muted but discernable, a single hard plunk followed by a heavy dull thump, and something falling heavily to the floor. Then silence…*no!* Not silence… A second set of footfalls, the sound of dry leather on cold concrete, and a hard heel—clop, clop, clop…*Someone else was there!* Volsky heard the dull sound of something being moved, his eyes widening as he tried to imagine the scene. He knew immediately what was happening. It was a body being dragged on the concrete floor! There was another rattle of metal, a crisp zipping sound and someone grunting with physical effort. Then he heard a door of a metal bin close, and the clopping footfalls receded, echoing as they faded away.

Silence…Dark, awful silence.

Volsky waited, but he knew what had happened. He slowly put the receiver back in its cradle, and reached for another phone, thumbing a secure line, his pulse quickening.

"Security," came the voice.

“Admiral Leonid Volsky here. Please send a detachment of five Marines to my office at once.”

“Yes, sir… Is there a problem, Admiral?”

“Five Marines, please, on the double.”

“At once, sir.”

* * *

They stood there in the silence of a very dark room, chilled by a sudden cold. The sound they had been listening to had reached its shrill crescendo, and then the shadows around them slowly resolved to form and shape. The Sirens had called them to another shore and, to Fedorov’s amazement, one appeared to have died in the singing of that fatal lure.

He stared at a heavy set elderly woman, slumped on the threadbare couch, her tousled gray hair disheveled and a look of utter shock frozen on her face. Clearly she had been sitting there, a cup of tea still steaming on the tea stand to the right of the couch, when four men suddenly appeared in the midst of her living room, he thought. She must have been literally shocked to death by these apparitions manifesting in the midst of her living room. Their intervention had produced its first casualty, he realized with some misgiving. The woman was too old to bear children, but who knows whether or not she had something yet to give to the world before she died. No one would ever know.

Four men? He looked this way and that. Where was Bukin? Troyak and Zykov were there, but there was no sign of the other team member. The Sergeant touched his collar button, listening to the earbud and called for the missing man in a low voice.

While he did this Zykov, a tall, broad shouldered, white haired man, with muscular arms and a chiseled face, was already sweeping the room with a small hand held infrared detector, and searching the premises for any sign of another inhabitant. Troyak looked at Fedorov. “No response from Bukin,” he said flatly, his steely eyes searching the shadowed corners of the room.

“It seems that our 12 rod test bed reactor has limited power,” said Fedorov. “The three of us obviously displaced intact, but Bukin could not be moved. Too much mass.”

Troyak nodded, inwardly recalculating mission parameters and assignments in his mind. No plan survives first contact in a mission, he knew

well enough.“Very well, Colonel.” The Sergeant smiled. We’ll make do.”

Fedorov spent the previous day ferreting out old WWII era uniforms from army surplus dealers in Vladivostok. He was able to find insignia and rank pins for an NKVD Colonel, and his research even indicated that there was such a man named Fedorov in the NKVD during the war. His historical counterpart was Deputy Head of the Main Transportation Directorate, People's Commissariat of Defense, a rather high ranking official, and he rose to the rank of Major General. Fedorov even bore medals for the Order of the Red Star on his right chest, correctly placed after the Order of the Patriotic War 1st class. The red enamel five-pointed silver star, with straight rays in the background, and crossed saber and rifle gleamed in the light of a solitary lamp by the tea stand. Troyak and Zykov were both decked out in NKVD uniforms as well, with black Ushankas bearing insignia. They would pose as Fedorov’s personal security detail.

“We must get across the bay to the Naval Logistics and Storage Administration.” He reached into his pocket, relieved to find he still had his key. He had given a copy to Admiral Volsky for him to check the storage bin there and look for the letter that he already had waiting in an envelope in his breast pocket. They had two choices, to go by car or boat, whichever they could secure with the least effort.

Zykov had already surveyed the house and outside surroundings. Fedorov searched the home quickly, finding a newspaper on the tea stand. The date was September 22, 1942, a perfect landing! He tore off a segment of the paper with the date as evidence, and slipped it into the envelope. That done, he sealed the envelope as they made ready to leave.

They had entered the test bed facility seventy-nine years in the future on September 21st. He thanked their good luck. They were well ahead of the date on Orlov’s letter, the day he arrived at the Kizlyar on the 30th of that same month. Yet they would have little time to lose. It was a long ride ahead on the Trans-Siberian rail, and anything might delay them.

No one else was home and the night was cold and silent. They moved quietly, stepping out into the misty darkness of the sleeping city, and made their way down the hill towards the harbor below. They had left under a rising full moon in 2021, and arrived with no moon to be found at all. Only the fog remained a common denominator. Zykov was point man, with Fedorov following and Troyak watching from the rear. Reaching the quay they found a small dinghy and commandeered it. It would be three or four

kilometers to go around the tip of the Golden Horn Bay and reach the other side, and there were few vehicles to be found. The boat would get them across easily enough, and cut their journey in half.

They crossed in a few minutes to the Dalzavod Shipyard on the northern bank of the bay, paddling up to a short pier there and slipping quietly ashore. The silent hulks of several cargo vessels and an old destroyer sulked in the foggy night, riding gently at their moorings. The moan of a fog horn sounded in the distance as they melted into the stacks of crates and old rusting oil cans stacked on the quay. Soon they had worked their way into the city, and up to Svetlanskaya Street, a much narrower road than it was in 2021. From there they turned left, heading west toward the naval Logistics Administration building, which still held that function in WWII. It was only a short walk, a little over one kilometer before they reached the building and then they just walked boldly in through the front domed entrance.

As they approached the inner door, Fedorov had an odd feeling and reached to touch the letter in his breast pocket. He felt as if a cold shadow had slipped out of the building the moment he opened the door, and he shivered. A night watchman roused from slumber when they entered, then stood groggily to attention when he saw three NKVD men walk in, two looking very threatening, and very well armed.

“As you were,” said Fedorov. “Go back to sleep. We’re just checking on a delivery, and we’ll leave by the rear entrance.”

“Very good, sir.” The man was more than happy to see them stride away, and then he settled back into the warmth of his chair, wrapping himself in a thin wool blanket.

It was not long before they found themselves in the cellar, and located Fedorov’s storage bin. He took out the letter, fishing out a pencil in his pocket so he could let the Admiral know the their fourth team member was not present. Fedorov hoped Bukin was still safe in the test bed center in the future. That would be one less life on my shoulders, he thought, and one less soul on the ledgers of time.

He opened the steamer trunk and slipped his freshly sealed white envelope into the breast pocket of his grandfather’s naval blazer. Again he had the strange thought that nearly eighty years on, a Marine was standing patiently in the cold empty cellar hallway, waiting for a telephone call from Admiral Volsky. Dobrynin must have just informed him, and he was about to make his call.

What he could *not* have imagined would be that another man was also waiting there, crouching low in the shadows beneath the stairway to the upper floors, his eyes peering wolf-like in the dark as he waited with a small pistol that would fire a drug-laden dart. A real revolver would be much too messy. How to explain the blood? No. He was waiting there with his dart gun, and the man he had shadowed to this strange place would soon be quite incapacitated. He watched him carefully, seeing him take something from the locker and then start back down the hall toward his position. Then he stood and fired, the crisp snap of the gun echoing in the empty corridor. He was unaware that another man had heard it on the open phone line, miles away in Fokino, his rising pulse chasing a hundred questions down that darkened hall.

But Fedorov knew nothing of this.

* * *

The shadow Fedorov thought he felt may have been nothing more than a strange intuition, but the man who had cast it was passing through that same door at that very moment, some eighty years on, as he left the Fleet Logistics Building on Svetlanskaya Street. A black limousine was parked just outside the main entrance to the building. The moon had risen hours earlier and was well up riding above a thin veil of misty fog and casting a wan diffused light over the scene. The man in a dark gray overcoat walked briskly from the yawning arched entry where a domed roof dating back to 1903 brooded over the walkway. He stepped quickly to the waiting limousine. The rear door opened as he arrived and he slipped into the shadowy interior.

Another man was seated in the back, and he tapped the soundproof glass partition screening off the driver’s compartment. The car pulled away from the curb and rolled quietly up the street, passing the Circus amusement building and then turning left off the main boulevard, along a winding road leading into a small residential district.

“Well?” the voice in the shadows spoke, the man’s face dark and unseen beneath the rim of his hat. The other man handed him a sealed plain white envelope.

“That was all?”

“I searched very carefully, sir.”

The other man studied the envelope in the dim light. “Very unusual,” he muttered, turning it over and seeing nothing of any note, just a blank

envelope. Then he looked at his messenger, as if suddenly remembering something. “What did you do with the body?”

“As we planned. I put it in Bin 400. I will have men remove it within the hour. Don’t worry, he’ll wake up in the park tomorrow morning with a bad headache, and he won’t remember a thing. The drug is very effective.”

“Very well. Draw the shades, please.” They pulled down the black privacy shades on the side windows and driver compartment screen, then the man with the envelope reached slowly to the back of the seat in front of him, groping for a light switch.

“Well done, Captain Volkov,” he said calmly. It was Inspector General Kapustin, slowly removing his black fedora and setting it on the seat beside him as he eyed the envelope with obvious interest. He opened it slowly with his thumb, noting how the glue seemed so old that it barely held, the paper yellowed with age, though in fact it had been sealed just a brief moment ago…a moment that had been stretched into long, long decades.

“Now then…let’s see what we have here.”

Chapter 33

The car pulled up to #21 Tunguskaya Street, a small wood sided home shaded by walnut trees. Two men exited the vehicle, one speaking quietly on a cell phone, dressed in a long gray overcoat and grey felt Ushanka, the other in a dark coat and black fedora. They walked quickly up to the front entrance, and considering the late hour Kapustin did not ring the bell, tapping lightly on the window pane in the door.

They heard footsteps, and the dead bolt being thrown back. The door opened to reveal a grey haired man with soft eyes in a heavy robe. It was Kamenski.

“Forgive the hour, my old friend,” said Kapustin. “But I think you will be interested to see what I have found.”

“Please come in,” said Kamenski. “My daughter and grandson are sleeping in their rooms on this floor, but we can go upstairs and use the library, just up there on the right.” He pointed to the stairs. “Let me get some tea for you.”

“It can wait. When you see this you will understand.”

“Perhaps, but if it’s that earth shaking, then I had better have tea. It always clears my mind. I’ll be right in.” He padded off, and the two men climbed the squeaky stairs and seated themselves in the library by Kamenski’s desk.

It was not long before he returned with a Samovar and hot tea on a tray, which he set on the desk. “There’s a little honey left if anyone takes it that way.” He poured carefully while Kapustin fretted, tapping the envelope on the palm of his hand as he watched.”

“And what do you have there, Mister Kapustin. I hope not a bill for the furnace.”

Kapustin smiled, then simply leaned forward and laid the envelope on Kamenski’s desk. The old man’s curiosity was now stirred like the honey into the tea of his mind, and he seated himself at the desk, eying the envelope as he slowly fitted his reading glasses.

Volkov rubbed his chin with some impatience, but Kapustin simply waited, watching his old friend first take a sip of his tea before he reached to

pick up the envelope. “Now then,” he said softly. “Where did you get it?”

“Never mind that for the moment. Have a look, please.”

Kamenski opened the envelope and quietly read: *“Admiral Volsky… If you are reading this then know that we have arrived safely at our destination, and will now proceed with our mission to rescue Orlov at Kizlyar. Should circumstances permit it, look for us along the Caspian coast on or after October 15, 1942. May God be with you all. – Captain Anton Fedorov.”* Another brief notation was added at the end: *“Bukin failed to arrive. We hope he is safe with you.”*

Kamenski then looked at a small printed clipping that had obviously been torn from a newspaper, peering over the top of his reading glasses to closely spy out the date: 22 SEP 1942. He set the envelop and its contents down, then reached for his teacup.

“Where did you find it? “ he asked again.

“In the old Naval Logistic Building cellar—one of the bins. Volsky sent a man there to retrieve it at midnight.”

“The envelope was sealed?”

“The glue was weak, but yes. So what is going on here, Pavel? Is this some kind of a joke Volsky is playing? We went to considerable trouble to get this tonight. It is most disturbing.”

“Indeed,” Kamenski said quietly. “So now you are the one handing me an old document from the 1940s.” The paper appears quite old, Gerasim, as well as the ink. This could be forged, of course, but a closer inspection would verify whether or not that note was written in our time, or in 1942 as it appears. The news print clipping is obviously authentic, but it could have been slipped into the envelope yesterday for all we know. Who would be writing to an Admiral Volsky in 1942? There was no such man that I know of.”

“Of course it wasn’t written in 1942,” said Kapustin. “So it must be code of some type—perhaps something in that newspaper clipping? But why, my friend? What is Volsky trying to pull with this stunt? He must have suspected we were watching him, and all the other senior officers. Is this his way of thumbing his nose at us? Saying he’s on to us?”

“Admiral Volsky is a very serious man, Gerasim. And given the situation in the Pacific I can hardly believe he would have time for such games.”

“Well there is more. We saw several armed men accompanying this Anton Fedorov to the Primorskiy Engineering Center across the bay early this

evening. Fedorov is the *Starpom* aboard *Kirov*. We left a man there to keep an eye on the place, and he reported that the Chief Engineer from the ship and a party of five technicians moved a long container into a truck and took it to the airport."

"A weapon of some kind? Was it a missile?"

"We thought as much at first, but who knows? Well I should know. Yes? I am the Inspector General of the Russian Navy! I should know, but they had Marines crawling all over the place."

"And this Fedorov returned to the ship as well?"

"We could not confirm that. He must have slipped out somehow, because we had men search the entire Engineering Center, and it was empty. The ship left two hours later, a little before midnight. The whole damn fleet has deployed!"

"It was inevitable, Gerasim. So you won't have any ships to inspect for a while and you can take that vacation you've been missing." He smiled, and Kapustin folded his arms, frowning. Kamenski took a more serious tone.

"This Orlov referred to in the note. Who is he?"

Volkov spoke up now, sounding like the perfect tattletale. "He was the Chief Operations Officer aboard *Kirov*, and was listed as a casualty."

"Yes," said Kapustin. "The only man Moscow confirmed from the Naval Records Bureau. When you called to ask about that old photo of the Japanese with that missile part I wondered what you were up to, Kamenski. So now you can wonder what *we* are up to. This Orlov was reported missing in action. Now we have a Marine sent from the Naval Headquarters at Fokino to the Logistics Building and he retrieves this strange letter from a dusty old storage bin. Volsky obviously sent the man. What is this about?"

"The third man mentioned in the letter…Who is he?"

"Bukin? We found out that he is a Marine Corporal assigned to *Kirov's* detachment. He was one of the men accompanying Fedorov to the Engineering Center tonight."

"Well this is very curious. The note says the *Starpom* is headed to Kizlyar to look for this missing Operations Chief. That's a very long trip."

"The ship's Captain Karpov and the others were very evasive when I began sniffing around that casualty list," said Kapustin.

"Yes," Volkov put in. "I had to haggle with that doctor to even get the list!"

"Let me ask you something, Inspector General. I don't suppose you

bothered to check on anything in the ship's library while you were aboard *Kirov*."

"Library? You mean the books? I was there to count men and missiles, not books, Pavel."

"Of course. But I am willing to bet there were books in that library when that ship left Severomorsk that are not there now tonight as it leaves Vladivostok. Did you not find it even passing strange that all the ship's logs and records were mysteriously damaged by this accident, but not the ship's fire control systems and communications? They all just had a flutter and now they work fine again? Did you bother to confiscate any hard drives from the ship's computer to see if they had been tampered with?"

"That thought occurred to me, but there was very little time with this business brewing up in the Pacific. The damage control teams were working all over the ship to get it ready for operations again. I couldn't start ripping computers apart. The IT personnel said they had restored those drives and had vital ship information re-written to them."

"How convenient. And then your time ran out." Kamenski finished his friend's next thought.

"I assure you that I pressed on this matter very firmly."

"It was the ship's Captain," said Volkov. "He was an obstruction from the first moment we set foot aboard *Kirov*. In fact, he flatly refused to answer our questions about these missing men, not to mention the missing nuclear warhead! He said it was none of our business! Can you imagine that? The effrontery of the man."

Kapustin held up a hand as if to calm his angry assistant. "Karpov made it seem as though the ship was on some very classified mission."

"It very well may have been on such a mission."

"He implied that, Pavel. You do not know everything—this is what Karpov said to me. I believe they were trying to cover up something related to those thirty-six missing men. Could *Kirov* have been on a black mission, perhaps to insert clandestine agents somewhere before this world goes to hell again? This is what I came to believe, and so I closed the book on my investigation for the moment. Yet I kept a watchful eye just the same."

"You were wise to do so, Gerasim. Yet given the present situation with *Kirov* out to sea again there will not be much more you can do. So I have some advice for you now. Let the matter go."

"Let the matter go? How am I supposed to explain these discrepancies—

the missing men, the missing warhead, this silly old letter from a dingy storage bin?"

"You can't explain them at the moment, so you must delay your final report. You're a clever man, Gerasim. You can bury your report under a mile of paperwork if you so choose. Simply mark the investigation as being held in abeyance due to the fleet's emergency deployment. The answers to your questions may still be aboard that ship, but it has sailed to off to war. So let the matter rest, just as you decided earlier."

Kapustin shrugged, then his features softened and he nodded at his long time friend in agreement. Volkov was clearly not happy, however, still straining at the leash emotionally, his face a clear story to be read by the other two men.

Kamenski took another sip of tea and turned to Volkov, noting his energy, and the restrained urgency of the man. Then he decided something inwardly, and spoke again.

"Mister Volkov, I think it would be good if you arrange to have some men at the airport right away. Find out where that container is headed. Perhaps your missing warhead is there, yes? Put a couple of good men on it, very discretely. This Fedorov will have to get to Kizlyar by one means or another. He may be at the airport as well, but then again… I think you should take a long train ride. Stop at every terminal between here and Kizlyar. Ask questions. For all we know this *Starpom* may be on the Trans-Siberian rail at this very moment. He will be clever as well, but you must follow him like a good shadow. Yes?"

"Rely on me, sir."

"Excellent… In fact I think you should leave at once. There may be no time to lose in this matter."

"Very well, sir," said Volkov. "I will take care of everything. If this Fedorov is on a plane or train heading west, we'll find him, you can rest assured."

"Find him and follow him, Captain, but be very clever—very discrete. Then report back to me. Understood? Report to no one else in this matter. If anyone questions you simply tell them Kamenski sent you. That will settle it."

"Of course, sir."

Volkov stood up with renewed energy, excused himself, and went quickly down the stairs, a little too loudly for Kamenski's liking, but soon they heard

the front door close and the two men were alone. Kamenski got up, walking to the library wall to take out a book, and then he closed the library door before returning to his desk.

"That was just to get rid of Volkov," he said quietly. "That man is wired to tightly, Gerasim. You should be very careful with him. I think you should send him off on another assignment soon. Send him to Omsk or Novosibirsk to work on the Ballistic Missile inventories or something. For the moment I think he will be well occupied. A good long ride on the Tran-Siberian rail might keep him busy for a while. He's dangerous, understand?"

"Very well, Pavel. He does get on my nerves at times. Perhaps you are correct. But what about this situation with *Kirov?* Do you really think I should drop the matter? Something is going on here. What could it be? These dates in 1942 on that letter. This must be code, yes?"

"Perhaps…perhaps not."

"What do you mean, perhaps not? If Fedorov is on that train Volkov will get to him in short order, and we'll soon find out."

"Oh, he's probably on the train alright," said Kamenski, "but I don't think Volkov will find him." He leaned back, sipping his tea. "I'm going to confide in you now, my friend. This is another reason why I wanted to get Volkov on his way. Very few men alive today will know what I am about to tell you." He gestured to the many volumes in the book cases of the library. "As you can see, I do a lot of reading and research. Quite a lot for these old eyes. Well now… what I am about to tell you may surprise you, even shock you. You may be tempted to pass it off as the senility of an aging man, but you would be wrong to think this. Yes, I forget where I lay my reading glasses on occasion, but my mind is still very sharp." He tapped his forehead with a finger.

"I have a particular interest in naval history, and I am quite fond of this book, for example." He pointed to a thick hard bound volume of the *Chronology of the Naval War at Sea.* "How to put this…" Kamenski thought for a moment. "Well, my friend, suppose you had a favorite book, or perhaps even a favorite movie or song. You may have read it many times, seen it many times, or hummed that old tune in your head a thousand times. Then one day you decide to reach for your book to look over a favorite chapter, and you find it strangely different. The scene you had thought to read about was not there, and more than that, other things happen in the story that you cannot recall at all! There you sit waiting for your favorite part of the movie,

and it never comes. There you sit humming that tune in your head and when you finally put the song on the stereo player, it is…different, changed. In fact in parts it is now completely unfamiliar."

"I understand, Pavel, but what are you getting at?"

"Well you might be somewhat upset, to say the least, if you ever did find that your favorite books or movies and songs had changed. It would bother you to no end, yes? And then your friends would probably convince you that you just had that old tune wrong in your head all those years, or that you simply forgot that part of the story in your favorite book. What is the harm, eh?" He reached for his tea, taking a very long sip before he continued.

"Now then, I'm afraid my research leaves me very little time for stories and movies, but I do spend a good deal of time in books like that one." He pointed at the Naval Chronology. "Imagine my chagrin one day when I pick up this volume and look up a reference I was very certain about to check on some detail—and find that the passage no longer exists! There it was in my head, clear as a bell. I had read it just that same afternoon. Then I go back to check on a minor detail and it is nowhere to be found. So I check other reference books, and to my great surprise, none of them mentions this incident. Well now you might begin to think yourself a crazy man indeed," he sighed.

"Gerasim…It is one thing to find notes in a song out of order, or even to be surprised that a character in a book you were so sure of was simply not in that favorite story of yours. But when your *history* books start to misbehave in this manner, then you take real notice. Yes? Then you sit up late at night with that dusty old volume on your nightstand and you read, and read, and go to sleep hoping it will all still be as you remembered it when you wake up the next morning. One day you find something has changed again, and your curiosity increases, your determination redoubles. You become a man on a mission to discover just what may have happened to cause this impossible thing that you swear has happened. You become a very determined man, in fact."

Kapustin had been listening, though he began to sense a nonsensical edge to what his friend was telling him. He nonetheless continued nodding, without objection, adopting the time honored forms of vranyo, the polite listening of one man as another spins out a little lie, or a boastful exaggeration. Only when the story was complete would it be proper to make any objection. Kamenski finished, looking at his friend to see how he was

reacting to all this.

"You are telling me you think the history recounted in this book has changed? What is in your tea tonight, Pavel?"

"Ah, yes," said Kamenski. "That is the first thing you consider. People change their minds all the time, but a book cannot re-write itself. It is a fixed and certain thing—unless it gets deliberately edited and re-issued. We do that sort of thing often enough, but then we get two books, yes? Side by side. One has the old text, and one has the new. Yet this is not what I am speaking of. I am talking about opening to a passage or incident in the history you know as well as your own last name and finding it *different*, subtly changed—or worse than that—finding it missing…and then sitting there wondering why you are the only one who can remember it."

"History is a story that men write, Pavel. You know that as well as I do. I'm sorry if you forget your books and think they have changed, but I am talking about something more than this now—a nuclear warhead missing. *Men* missing. Thirty six men listed as killed in action that this world never seems to have heard of."

"Nor would you have ever heard about them if this Doctor had not prepared that list. Have you considered that, Gerasim?"

"Well… I suppose not."

"The Doctor made a mistake, but I cannot really blame him. How would he know that there would be no record of any of these men? How could he check on something like this in a few hours time with Volkov gnawing at his ankle. So he gave you the list. But you, my friend, you are a careful man. You checked with Moscow, and these dead men are truly dead—so dead that they were never even born."

"You mean there *was* a black operation, yes? This was all part of a cover up?"

"No, Gerasim. I mean they were never born. And as for the nuclear warhead, I know exactly what happened to it, and it had nothing to do with the *Orel*, nor is it on its way to the airport tonight. That was just another suggestion to throw Volkov off the scent."

Pavel Kamenski was not simply a curious old man living in a quiet suburb of Vladivostok with his daughter, grandson, cat and walnut trees. He was an old navy man, moving from active service into the Naval Intelligence arm as well. But his long career did not end there. He was, in fact, the recently retired Deputy Director of the KGB, and he knew quite a bit more about

Kirov than the his friend the Inspector General would ever know.

He looked at Kapustin, thinking that what he was now about to say might change his friend's life forever. Yet there was nothing else to do at this point. Volkov he could manage easily enough. But Kapustin was his friend of many years, and he knew him well. He was going to keep digging in this back yard until he dug up another bone, so he had been prepping him for this revelation for some time, slowly sharing small pieces of the puzzle to gauge his reaction. It was time to bring some focus to the picture. The man was Inspector General of the Russian Navy, a lofty enough post to make allowance. Yet what will he do when I finally pull the wax out of his ears and he, too, hears the Siren song? Will he go mad, as other men have? We shall see. He reached for the samovar.

"Here, Gerasim, let me warm your tea."

Part XII

Standoff

"Very few veterans can return to the battlefield
and summon the moral courage to confront
what they did as armed combatants…
they are often incapable of facing
the human suffering and death they inflicted…
they see only their own ghosts."

— Chris Hedges

Chapter 34

The news whirred on, 24 hours every day, moving from story to story in staccato tempo. The top of the hour replayed the grim warning from the Chinese general at the UN while Fox News rattled verbal sabers in reprisal and an aging Bill O'Reilly pronounced judgment on the story, rallying the right-leaning audience frequenting that channel. On CNN the more liberal talking heads chatted and speculated and trotted out ex-Army and Navy "experts" to explain what had happened in the East China Sea, and what might be coming next…after this brief commercial break.

In a strange juxtaposition of the profoundly serious with the insanity of the irrelevant, the news was quickly followed by a raft of "other news," celebrity showcasing, and mindless 'entertainment.'

Wall Street hated the war news. It was not long before the market lost a cool 1200 points, and fell another 350 points the following morning. Commentator Art Hogan nabbed the quote of the day to explain the carnage: "This market is going down like free beer. I would say if there had been a day when we're trying to price in a worst-case scenario, this might be it." Money looked for safe havens in bonds, then fled to gold and other precious metals as it always did in times of crisis.

When they weren't watching TV, Americans hit the malls and supermarkets in a spate of quiet panic buying. Prices began to spike and shortages of many things on the "hundred items to disappear first" list became reality. People felt the shadow of impending war at the gas pump more than ever, then at the super market and the cost of everything from their phone calls to their Blue Rays. Milk was selling at over $4.50 per half gallon. Gasoline was now well over $6.50 per gallon and still cheap compared to prices in Europe and the UK. While millions sat with their after dinner coffee and browsed on 'The Huffington Post,' the war but had already escalated in the pulsing, restless energy of the Internet.

Half a world and eight time zones away, Unit 61398 was also very busy that morning in Shanghai. Operating from a plain high rise like any of a thousand others around it in the sprawling mega-city, a select cadre of

Chinese military IT and computer specialists were now working overtime to penetrate and exploit any weakness they could find in US defense and infrastructure networks. They attacked the power grids, hydroelectric projects, refineries, satellite and GPS communications networks, telecommunications and cell phone systems, air traffic control, financial institutions, and also made pointed attacks on key defense sites. Cyberspace and outer space were to become the first arena of confrontation between East and West.

That list of strategic targets was surely frightening, but most Americans first felt the attacks when Unit 61398 did the unthinkable in a clever and yet highly symbolic act of defiance. They took down prime time TV on a major network. The feature movie that night was a rerun of the science fiction classic *Independence Day*. A massive shadow had just passed over the site of the Apollo Moon landing, and an thrumming vibration shook the landmark footprints of Neil Armstrong in the ominous opening scene that promised "you ain't seen nothing yet." The next scene showed a cyberpunk scientist scooting about on his lab chair in the SETI listening post, somewhere in the Arizona desert. He had hold of an odd signal that had interrupted the rock song blaring in the background: *"It's the end of the world as you know it…"*

There was nothing like a little widescreen mayhem and total destruction to make the home audience forget their troubles. The ex- summer blockbuster was to be followed by something even more spectacular: *2012*, the mother of all disaster movies by this same director. Soon the massive alien ships of *Independence Day* entered the atmosphere and made their way to designated rendezvous points over major world cities. Jeff Goldblum was fussing over misplaced aluminum cans in his role as the genius cable repair guy. He would soon figure the whole thing out, and then rush off to the White House with his Apple PowerBook to warn the president of the impending attack.

The first half was a fabulous mix of awesome special effects as the alien ships appeared and then fired their death rays to begin the extermination of the human race. Scenes of chaos and destruction would abound, then the Air Force would launch a feeble counterattack. The alien force fields were impervious to all our weapons, even nuclear bombs. But the creatures in the ships had not reckoned on Jeff Goldblum and his Macintosh. The hero would write a computer virus and use a Roswell UFO to deliver it to the alien mother ship.

Meanwhile, the President himself would lead the next attack, aided by a

drunken ex-crop duster as his wingman. The computer virus would foil the alien force fields, allowing the crop duster to get through to deliver the attack on one of the alien ships—payback for all the molestation he endured as an abductee earlier in life. The clear message: Americans never lose, not even when they're up against aliens in UFOs. Americans have guys like Jeff Goldblum and drunk crop dusters always lurking in the background and ready to save the world at a moment's notice.

So while the ships and subs of seven nations slipped quietly from their berths in the Pacific, Americans turned their attention to the 50-inch plasma on the walls above their fireplaces, oblivious. The first segment was over and they were sitting through another commercial break learning more than they ever wanted to know about fashion crazes, facial cream, Cialis, and the impending baseball playoffs.

In spite of the crisis, it was amazing how little real information ever came over the mass media. Besides, the aliens were blowing New York and Washington DC all to hell just after the commercial break, so the thought of $6 or $7 for gas and a little more on the heating bill this winter wouldn't really matter as they watched the President of the United States ask the alien in the Roswell facility what they wanted us to do. When the movie resumed the captured alien mouthed the reply, spoken through the hapless character actor Brent Spiner, aka "Data" from the popular *Star Trek* series. It was one simple word, spoken in a long, rasping reprisal: *"Die…"* and a hell of a way to open negotiations. It was fortunate the nation had Jeff Goldblum on the job this time.

Then the movie feed itself was interrupted, with a rarely seen message frozen on the screen.

"We are experiencing technical difficulties—Please Stand By"

* * *

That same morning the thin cord of sanity that stretched between Seoul and Pyongyang for long decades of uneasy peace was suddenly terminated when the daily test of the 'Red Cross Hotline' failed. Colonel Sun Yun Kim stood holding the receiver to his ear listening to the line ring and ring, with no answer, until it eventually dissolved into the long heartless buzz of an empty dial tone. He reset the receiver and keyed the system to try again, only this time the line was completely dead.

The last time this had happened had been the early morning hours of March 11, 2012 when North Korea used the incident to protest military maneuver in the south and UN sanctions aimed at inhibiting its nuclear program. The two countries had no formal diplomatic relations since the tentative truce was signed in the 1950s and technically existed in a suspended state of war. It was no wonder, given the situation in the Pacific, that the border "truce village" of Panmunjom was more than edgy that morning.

Pyongyang had responded to the rising tension in typical fashion by setting its military on high alert. The tiny starving enclave of repressive hegemony in the north fielded the world's fourth largest standing army, with over a million men under arms on active duty at any given time and another eight million in reserve. With 1000 ballistic missiles, including a handful that could reach the west coast of the US, 5400, tanks, 2600 AFVs, 1600 SPGs and MLRS systems, its ground forces were a snarling dog on a thin leash that stretched all the way back to Beijing.

The "incident" was another grim reminder to the US that if it wished to rush to honor two existing mutual defense treaties with Japan and Taiwan, it would soon find the ante upped and have South Korea to worry about as well. The ravenous North was only too happy to oblige, with its massive armed forces all dressed up and with only one place to go. It was going to be a very long day in the situation room of the White House deep underground bunker.

* * *

The long line of warships sailed east, past the submarine base where SSN *Kazan* had slipped away hours earlier, then northeast into the Sea of Okhotsk. Karpov was taking the fleet north of Hokkaido Island, to the one Russian controlled channel there south of Aniva Bay, Sakhalin Island. It would be a long day's sailing at 25 knots, and they timed the transit to occur at midnight the following day. There the Japanese watch post at Wakkanai at the northern tip of Hokkaido would surely spot the ships, and relay the count to JDF Headquarters in Tokyo.

A Kawasaki P-1 Maritime Patrol aircraft was already up from Misawa airfield, Japan's new replacement for the aging US P-3s. It was a sophisticated new surveillance plane, with advanced signals processing capability and new Artificial Intelligence to advise the Tactical Coordinator

(TACCO) on best intercept course plots for its alternate role as an ASW strike aircraft. Ten such planes had been procured, giving the Japanese good coverage along the long archipelago of islands that they now controlled. With range just shy of 5000 miles the planes had excellent endurance for the surveillance role it was tasked with that night. It could sit over Hokkaido Island safe in Japanese airspace and use its excellent AESA radar to watch the ominous procession of warships to the north.

The fleet continued due east in the Sea Of Okhotsk for yet another day, making for the wide channel south of Urup Island in the Kurile chain. By day the skies above the flotilla were patrolled by pairs of MIG-29s off airfields in the Kuriles. By night the ships would deploy their own helicopters in wide arcs around the main formation to keep a wary eye out for submarines. Nothing was seen or heard, and no challenge was mounted from Japanese naval or air forces. They had enough on their hands with the angry dragon they had roused from its long slumber, and were content to watch from a respectful distance as Karpov led the fleet out towards the deep blue of the Pacific. It was soon clear to them that this flotilla of formidable warships was hastening to join the Russian *Admiral Kuznetsov* carrier group already operating in the waters off the southern tip of Kamchatka. That force was now heading southwest towards the Kuriles to effect a rendezvous.

South of the Japanese mainland, the wayward brother ship of *Kuznetsov*, sold off and adopted by the Chinese years ago, had already deployed from Dalian naval base and was poised to enter the Yellow Sea. The tickling alarm clock had run the course of the forty-eight hour ultimatum set by the People’s Republic of China, and there had not been such a breathless, agonizing wait since the countdown to the launching of the first Gulf war over 30 years ago in August of 1990.

In that war and the Second Gulf War against Saddam that followed it ten years later after 9/11, the absolute superiority of Western air and ground forces had been brutally established. Only the long asymmetric guerilla war fought by the radicalized Islamics had proved again that the modern world was not an age of conquest and occupation. American forces left Iraq and Afghanistan with little to show for the billions in dollars and the thousands of dead and wounded soldiers who fought there. It was not like WWII, where the United States had decisively joined the Allies to defeat two major world powers and liberate over ten nations that had been overrun by the enemy, and did so in only four years. No, in the early 21st century America fought for

nearly 15 years in Afghanistan, and then left it much as they had found it. Two years after the last troops pulled out the Taliban were back to business as usual.

This time it was not American troops deploying from their homeland to a far distant and hostile shore. This time it was forces of a coalition that now spanned half the land mass of the world, the SinoPac alliance between China and Russia that had been signed in the year 2020. The Dragon and the Bear had settled their differences, agreed on mutual economic development of the vast untapped resources of Siberia, where China's hungry manufacturing economy was to be fed by the oil, timber, and metals there, and Russia would be flooded with the finances it so desperately needed to get back to the glory days when it had been a dominant player on the world stage.

The fear of imminent war was circling the globe, and when Taiwan issued a joint resolution by both the executive and legislative Yuans formally declaring independence a quiet hush settled over the region. Mainland China had their answer. Washington grimaced at the announcement, failing to prevent it by diplomatic arm twisting that had gone on for the last 24 hours. Taiwan was calling the Dragon's bluff, and whistling for the hounds to come to its aid, invoking its longstanding mutual defense treaty with the US.

Washington had walked a careful tightrope stretched between the island and the Chinese mainland since 1955. On the one hand they pledged to defend Taiwan from outside aggression, while on the other they threw a bone to the People's Republic by inserting careful language into the treaty upon its ratification: *"It is the understanding of the Senate that nothing in the treaty shall be construed as affecting or modifying the legal status or sovereignty of the territories to which it applies."*

It suited the US for decades to favor both Japan and Taiwan with promises of military aid and support in exchange for bases and allied states that would help America contain the great Dragon of the East. But now the Chinese had finally gone to sea, building a navy that would allow them to project real power there.

Tonight that navy was also moving. Amphibious ships were slipping away from their quays and piers, escorted by fast new frigates, China's new destroyers formed up in flotillas in the vanguard of these task forces, and a host of silent submarines crept out from the long coastline. They were all bound for the contested choke points and routes of approach to the region, the first trip wire that any intruder would have to face.

Back on the mainland hundreds of aircraft were queuing up at the military airfields, ready for takeoff, some sleek and stealthy, already climbing into the night with missiles hidden within their sculpted bellies, others more conventional, with their wings heavy with bombs and other ordinance. At locations all over the mainland coastline thousands of mobile ballistic missile launchers emerged from hidden caves, bunkers, and tunnels and their blood red noses lifted slowly toward the silver moon. A cold "East Wind" was about to blow as the deadly *Dong Feng* missiles prepared for launching. There were over 1100 DF-11 and DF-15 missiles available for land based targets and a another thousand older tactical missiles. With these were up to 200 of the deadly DF-21 ship killers like those that had hit a bull's eye and ravaged the Japanese helicopter carrier DDH *Hyuga* in the recent hot engagement over the Senkaku / Diaoyutai Islands.

Lt. Commander Reed had explained it as a game of darts and arrows to the White House Chief of Staff Leyman, but it was about to become a very real nightmare. Signals intelligence and satellites were watching it all with tense alertness while a great debate raged in the White House Situation Room: should the United states preemptively attack and destroy China's intelligence and GPS satellite network?

While they were talking about it 2nd Lieutenant Matt Eden at US NAVINTEL saw something very interesting on his own spy satellite monitoring station at Hawaii. Satellite NROL-50 picked up the obvious back flash of three missiles being launched from Shuangchengzi Space and Missile Center and Eden quickly reached for his alert phone.

"Deep Black Ten reporting. Red One, Red One, Red One," he said three times quickly. "I have back flash on three Red Arrows out of Sierra-Mike-Charlie, confidence high. Do you copy?"

"Roger that Deep Black Ten, Red One, three times. Will confirm."

Hot damn I hope they move on this one in a hurry, he thought, because one of those bad boys could be coming up after my NROL-50. NORAD, STRATCOM, and J-SOC, the Joint Space Operations Center, would be all over this as well. They surely picked up that back flash on infrared and know what's coming. If he was going to have to move his bird he need confirming radar and SIGINT on the missiles, and a clear line on their presumed orbital entry point and threat vector. Satellites were killed by simply putting an infrared seeking warhead into orbit for what would end up looking like a collision of two particles in an accelerator. The warhead would take an orbital

path retrograde to that of the target satellite and come flashing in to collide with it at over 18,000 miles per hour.

So while the West discussed the matter and debated the relative merits of this and that, the East acted. All that came before in the Senkaku Island group was just an overture. The three missiles Eden had spotted were now the opening salvo of a war that might indeed be the one to end all others, but they would be the last he would see.

Far below, in the rugged mountains of Xinjiang province, two well camouflaged concrete doors slowly opened and a ‘device’ resembling a massive searchlight slowly emerged from a deep hidden cave bunker and rolled out on two thin rails. It rotated, angling its massive circular shape to the sky as if it were an enormous telescope peering into the heavens. Seconds later a powerful laser fired, its intense beam vanishing into the heavens above. The Dazzle Gun had just blinded Matt Eden’s satellite eyes.

Chapter 35

Karpov stood on the bridge of *Kirov*, watching the sun rise over the wide Pacific. They were right on its doorstep, just passing through the channel south of Urup Island, some 250 miles northeast of Hokkaido. He was peering through his binoculars, north to the rising cone of the island where the long sleeping volcano called the Demon was slowly rousing from its slumber. A Holocene stratovolcano with no known historic eruptions, it had begun stirring with fitful dreams that shook the region with a spate of earthquakes over the last month, and now a geologic watch was posted. The Demon was awakening.

Up ahead he could see the three lead ships of his formation. The new frigate *Admiral Golovko* led the way, with the superb new destroyer *Orlan* cruising in her wake. Then came the heart of his surface action group. The old cruiser *Varyag* of the *Slava* Class was beyond its prime but still a potent threat with sixteen supersonic P-1000 Vulkan cruise missiles that could range out to 700 kilometers. It was the last ship in the fleet that would use that older missile. The ship also carried sixty-four of the same S-300 long range SAMs that *Kirov* used so effectively to savage the air forces of Britain, the United States, Italy and Japan on her mysterious sorties to a distant past. No one on *Varyag* knew any of that, and her Captain Myshelov was more than happy to look over his shoulder now and see the fleet's most powerful surface ship at his back.

Kirov was last in the main line, wounded but up and running again, the hull patch holding well in the open seas and the ship's speed good at a steady 25 knots. Fresh new missiles were loaded in the underdeck silos, twenty Moskit–II Sunburns, ten Mos-III Hypersonic Starfires and ten more P-900 cruise missiles—more than twice the firepower of the *Varyag*. Karpov had taken his tail of four older *Udaloy* Class destroyers and sent two to either side of this main formation as screening ships. *Marshal Shaposhnikov* and *Admiral Tributs* were off the port side, and *Admiral Vinogradov* and *Admiral Panteleyev* off the starboard side. Deep beneath the sea ten submarines were fanning out in a protective arc as the fleet prepared to make its rendezvous with *Admiral Kuznetsov.*

Rodenko reported an air contact just ahead and coming in at high speed, but there was no alarm. It was a flight of three Mig-29s and a single SU-33 in

a low diamond formation flying in tribute to the new King of the Northern Pacific, Vladimir Karpov. The planes came in low, the sun gleaming off their swept back wings, the long white contrails lacing through the blue morning sky. The roar of the flyby was followed by cheers from the men on deck, who waved excitedly at their comrades in the sky. The three Migs then turned their noses sharply up and created a wide fan as they splayed apart in the climb, and the sole SU-33 kept strait on, saluting with a wag of its wings.

Karpov smiled. Yes, the men were calling him that now, King of the Northern Pacific, just as they had also crowned Admiral Volsky with that title when he ruled from Severomorsk. The Admiral was now chained to his desk at Fokino, managing the coordination of all the various fleet components along with logistics, fleet air arm deployments, and the inevitable political problems all this would cause. At the same time he was setting up the daring operation to rescue Fedorov and the others in the Caspian, with the bulk of the ship's Marine contingent and Chief Dobrynin.

Fedorov's plan to use the *Anatoly Alexandrov* was brilliant, he thought. Knowing the fleet may have to fight very soon, was a heavy burden, and there would have been no way to safely extricate *Kirov* from battle to revisit the past. Yet now he felt the odd absence of Rod-25 as he sailed, like a man that had forgotten his wallet or keys, like a man trying to smile with a missing front tooth. *Kirov* was no longer a ship with a magic wand. The possibilities and power Rod-25 had bestowed upon them were now gone, and he felt like a god that had suddenly fallen from grace, just a common mortal man again. Yes, he realized, now it comes down to flesh, blood and steel, just as Volsky said. We no longer have time in the palm of our hand—at least I do not. Perhaps that is for the better. It removes the great temptation, and I can no longer answer the Siren Song as before. I am lashed to the main mast of the here and now. But what in the world will happen to Fedorov, Orlov and the others? The notion that his fate, and that of the world, still danced on the razor's edge of time, was still deeply unsettling.

He shook this from his mind, trying to focus on the ship and his mission. *Kuznetsov* already had helos up with *oko* AEW radar panels to extend their over-the-horizon radar coverage, and the ring announcer was introducing his likely opponent.

Carrier Strike Group Five had deployed from Yokosuka at the entrance to Tokyo Bay with a powerful squadron of the US 7th Pacific Fleet. It was comprised of CVN *Washington*, escorted by two *Ticonderoca* Class guided

missile Cruisers, *Antietam* and *Shiloh*. If that were not enough, the bulk of Desron 15 followed with five of the formidable American *Arleigh Burke* Class Destroyers: *Wilbur, McCain, Fitzgerald, Lassen, McCampbell*. Two more cruised in escort for the Command Ship *Blue Ridge* well south of the main carrier battlegroup. Karpov knew that there would also be logistics and replenishment ships at sea, and dangerous submarines were surely beneath it as this powerful flotilla approached.

The damn American Navy again, he thought, and not the one I blew to pieces eighty years ago. Yes, I sunk the *Wasp* and that old battleship, but now the odds are even. Two other American carriers were also moving into the region. CV *Eisenhower* was already at Singapore, and the *Nimitz* was hastening west from Pearl Harbor. The Chinese would have to deal with the *Eisenhower*, but these other two… He had thought CVBG *Washington* would deploy south to support the Japanese in the East China Sea. Instead it was heading east into the Pacific, ready to assume a blocking position if I take the fleet south.

Probably waiting for the *Nimitz*, he thought. That was the ship where they filmed that old science fiction classic *The Final Countdown.* How Ironic. If the American actor Kirk Douglas only knew what I know now. He smiled, then realized the grave threat that the *Nimitz* group would also represent. Against one of these battlegroups, his forces were well matched…But against both?

He had good reason to be cautious now, *Nimitz* would not be alone. It was the heart of Carrier Strike Group Eight, and intelligence indicated that it was escorted by the guided missile cruiser *Princeton* and Desron 23. This was another fistful of *Arleigh Burke* class destroyers: *John Paul Jones, Howard, Sampson, Lawrence, Spruance*, and two decent ASW frigates in *Thatch* and *Vandegrift*. So even as he led the entire Russian Pacific Fleet out that morning, the Americans were doubling down. How would he fight this battle if it came to it? He had forty-two strike planes on the *Admiral Kuznetsov* and additional land based air power if he stayed close to home, but the Americans were bringing nearly 200 aircraft to the fight!

He also knew he had a stealthy and dangerous submarine out ahead of him in *Kazan*, one of our best, he thought. It was skulking through the deep waters south of the submerged Emperor Seamounts. Yet the Americans will have subs too, and not the old diesel boats I was killing one after another. He already knew that at least one *Los Angeles* Class boat was operating out of

Guam, the *Key West*, and his threat briefing file also indicated he could expect at least one more LA class boat there. If we meet again, he mused, I will not have cigars for the Captain this time. He was the best Russia could put at the helm now, with the best ships they had. Would it be enough? Would it even be close? All he could do is have faith in his ship and crew, and in himself.

Yes, it was coming down to this now, flesh, blood, steel and something more—mind and will power. He would need all his skill in the craft of war to survive and prevail. How would the Americans measure up? They have never faced us in real battle; we have never really faced them. So now we see just how good our Moskit-IIs are against well defended targets. This fight will be much different. There will not be the slow, measured use of weapons with his SSMs fired in ones and twos against lumbering enemy battleships. No. This time it was going to be fast, brutal and merciless combat. The struggle for the first salvo was now uppermost in his mind. Should he take the initiative and strike first to saturate at least one of these formidable battlegroups with a missile barrage so intense that he would surely devastate it? The consequences of such an act would be severe. And then what would he have left to face the second carrier?

“Mister Rodenko,” he said calmly. “The moment you have surface returns from the helos on the *Washington* or *Nimitz* battlegroup I want the ship on full alert. Remember, you are acting *Starpom*. Watch them like a hawk. If you detect anything remotely resembling the launch of strike squadron, go to immediate air alert one on the new S-400 system. And Mister Samsonov, the moment we have a confirmed air strike package inbound on us I want to be ready with a full salvo of Moskit IIs.”

His officer’s nodded, intrinsically understanding that the game had changed now. This was war as they had never seen it, though they had trained for it for many years. It was a war of seconds and minutes, and not one stretching over long decades to the past where they faced an unknowing opponent with ships that had little chance of ever finding or really harming *Kirov*.

“The Pacific Ocean,” said Karpov. “Well it won’t be that way for long. “Welcome to hell, gentlemen. Welcome to hell on earth.”

As if to underscore his words there was a distant rumble from the slumbering Demon volcano on Urup Island, and Karpov saw a new column of smoke and ash rising from its high conical peak. He suddenly had a very

interesting idea.

* * *

Captain James Tanner, USN sat in the driver's seat aboard CV *Washington* with a hundred things running through his mind. He had expected to be heading south now to backstop the Japanese at Okinawa and form a northern pincer to meet with CVBG *Eisenhower* coming up from the south, but instead his orders were suddenly revised. He was to assume a position off the coast of Japan and deter the advance of the Russian Pacific Fleet until the arrival of CVBG *Nimitz*. Then, pending appraisal of the situation, he would either turn this duty over to *Nimitz* to head southwest as originally planned, or team up with that battlegroup to back the Russians off. Either way it looked to be some very tense days ahead.

"Ensign Pyle, where is that SITREP? I don't have all day, Mister."

"Sorry, sir." Pyle was at his side with a tablet and the latest briefing on what the Russians were sending out.

"Well?" Tanner gave him an impatient look.

"Yes, sir. The main body centered on that new battlecruiser is just south of Urup Island in the Kuriles. It is presently composed of battlecruiser *Kirov*, cruiser *Varyag*, four old *Udaloys*, one of their new frigates, and a new destroyer, sir, the *Orlan*. They look to be on a heading to rendezvous with this small carrier group here, the *Admiral Kuznetsov*, and three old *Krivak* class frigates."

"*Krivak* class?"

"Yes, sir. Hot dog pack, smokestack, guns in back — *Krivak*."

Tanner gave him a disparaging look, but he remembered the old rap line on the *Krivak* just the same. The hot dog pack was the forward missile battery, the stacks were amidships and then the aft deck mounted a pair of twin 76mm deck gun turrets. "Haven't seen one of those for years," he said. "They must be scraping the bottom of the barrel up there."

"It looks that way, sir. Those *Udaloys* aren't much to worry about either —Vlad, Dad, Winograd and Pantywaist. Pyle had his own name for the *Admiral Vladimir Tributs*. He just called it Vlad. *Shaposhnikov* was the old Russian Marshal he called "Dad." Winograd was short for the *Admiral Vinogradov* and the Pantywaist was *Admiral Pantelyev*.

"But I wouldn't short sell this *Kirov* class battlecruiser, sir. It's a pretty

mean looking hombre."

"No argument there, Pyle. We used to bump noses with its older brother up north in the Norwegian Sea before this new refit appeared."

"I hear this new ship is even tougher, sir."

"Maybe so, Pyle. Maybe So." Tanner rubbed his chin.

"What's it doing out here, sir? Last time I looked *Kirov* was flagship of their Northern Fleet."

"Been doing some reading lately, Ensign? It doesn't matter where the damn ship was last time you looked. It's right here and about to get in our face. Alright, you can leave that pad with me and get the hell out of here. I've got some thinking to do and I damn well won't need you around for that."

"Yes, sir. Aye, sir." Pyle scrambled off to some other duty and the Captain grinned as he went. *Krivak* class frigates. He looked at his Weapon Systems Officer, Lieutenant Deaken, sometimes called "the "Wizzo" by the bridge crew, a handle they had stolen from the air force brats. "Say, Deke. What kind of AA umbrella are these old *Krivaks* going to be packing? It's been a few years."

Deaken checked his status board, calling up the ship class and checking the data readout. "Looks to be a box of SA-N-4 Geckos, sir. Range under ten miles and a ceiling under Angels forty. Good warhead, 16kgs with a five meter frag radius. But they won't be bothering our air wing with those, sir. That's just missile bait."

"Pretty damn thin cover for the Russkie's only CV. No wonder they sortied with that surface action group."

"Aye, sir."

"What should we be worried about here, Deke?"

"Those damn S-300s on *Kirov*, sir. 150 kilometer range and fast as greased lightning."

"Damn annoying," said Tanner. "Our Harpoons can range out that far over the horizon, but S-300s can be on them in no time."

Neither Deke nor Tanner knew anything about the missile upgrade *Kirov* had received before sailing from the Golden Horn Harbor. Her forward silos now harbored the more advanced S-400F *Triumf* system, extending that engagement range even farther to 400 kilometers.

"They can, indeed, sir. And don't even think about the Tomahawks. Too damn slow. They pulled TASM from ship inventories long ago, and good riddance. Thing is, the Russians make some pretty mean SSMs. This new

Sunburn-II is a real threat, and their *Starfires* are even faster."

Tanner turned to his radar man. "Bougie, how far out is that SAG centered on *Kirov?"*

"Feed from Misawa has 'em at about 800 nautical miles now sir. Hawkeye confirms….Hello?….What's up here?" Ensign Bogue was poking at his SATCOMM link panel. "Sir, I just lost data link on our GPS Satellite. Checking it now, but I'm completely red on that link, sir. I don't think it's a local system failure."

Tanner didn't like the sound of that. Not one bit. "Someone taking pot shots at our satellites?"

"I'll check SIGINT traffic. Nothing on my board, sir…Wait a second. Coming in now, sir. Confirmed ASAT strike at zero nine forty. Red Arrows."

Tanner set his jaw, resigned to the fact that he was going to have to take some rather direct action now, and very soon. "That makes this thing hot for us as well as the Japanese," he said. "Well that's all I was waiting on, gentlemen. We're not sitting on 104,000 long tons of steel out here to get a suntan. Get the Air Boss on the line and have him spot the Royal Maces ASAP. Diamondbacks on deck with the Dambusters in the number three hole. Eagles batting cleanup."

"Aye sir, spot for strike, sir, Maces and Snakes leading off."

Strike Fighter Squadron 27, the Royal Maces, were still flying F/A 18E Super Hornets, but the plane was more than capable with new avionics and added stealth features over the years, even though it was schedule for replacement by the F-35s. The squadron had been flying since 1967, with A-7 Corsairs over the skies of Vietnam. They fought all through the 1970s in Nam, provided top cover for the Iran hostage rescue attempt in 1980, then received their first *Hornets* in 1991 in time for the first Gulf War. Twenty years ago they were in action over Afghanistan after 9/11and the Second Gulf War. One thing the US Navy had was experience, with more raw combat hours logged than every other navy on earth combined.

As Tanner was thinking the situation over Ensign Bogue suddenly had another surprised look on his face. "Sir, I have a radio message hail from the Russians. Right in the clear!"

"What is this a phone call from Moscow?"

"No sir. It's that Surface Action Group up north. I've got their CO on the line. Their Comm Officer is translating to English."

Tanner raised his eyebrows. "Well I'll be damned."

Chapter 36

Nikolin translated as best he could. “Good morning, Captain. How can I assist you?” He was conveying the American Captain’s words, and looked at Karpov, waiting for his response.”

“Tell him we have one of those interesting situations here that we seem to have been rehearsing for the last eighty years. I just want to be sure he’s memorized his lines.” Nikolin translated, smiling.

“Oh, we know our part well enough, Captain. Just can’t figure why you’re out here spoiling the show.”

Nikolin was very good, and the conversation moved seamlessly on, though it seemed to Rodenko and the other members of the Bridge crew that Karpov was having his talk with Nikolin himself, and some of the things that came out of his mouth as he translated what the Americans said made them laugh. The Captain had a smile himself, realizing that there would be a little dance of words at the outset and he jousted verbally with his counterpart in the American battlegroup to the south.

“Of course,” said Karpov. “You are all too fond of thinking you are the hero on stage. But I have a surprise for you, Captain. A phantom has come to the opera this morning, and I’m standing on its bridge.” A little chest thumping was always par for the course in these exchanges. Karpov expected it from the Americans, so he thought he would get the first missile on its way at the outset.

Nikolin listened, his eyes bright under his headphone set. “Is that so?” he translated. “You and those four old Udaloy’s you’re towing? You dragging them out for some more target practice? Going to try and pull another disappearing act like you did in the Atlantic?”

“Did you miss us?” Karpov smiled, ignoring the insults, as did most of the bridge crew. “We hurried back as soon as we could get here. Thanks for the escort home. I hope the officers aboard *Key West* enjoyed their cigars.”

More laughter, but Nikolin was listening intently now. He looked at Karpov, thumbing his microphone off to whisper a message. “He sounds more serious now, sir. I think he’s getting down to business.” A moment later he translated.

"Look, Captain. I'm standing on over a hundred thousand tons of might and muscle out here, and have a look east. We've got more for you, stage right. This is the United States Navy speaking now, and I am its duly authorized ambassador at the moment. So get the message: You and your fleet can sail around all you want up there in the Sea of Okhotsk. Go on up and pay a visit to Kamchatka. I hear the weather is nice up there this time of year. But you come out here on the deep blue and it's my watch, understand?"

Karpov expected this. The Americans had patrolled the deep water oceans, particularly here in the Pacific, since their decisive victory in WWII. He thought it ironic that *Kirov* had been instrumental in winnowing down the odds for the American carriers when they faced the superior forces of Yamamoto's fleet, just weeks ago in his own mind, though now it was old history to this new adversary he faced.

"Yes, you Americans are the world's policeman, I forgot. Well I'm afraid the rest of the world was never quite comfortable with that arrangement, Captain Tanner. Your policy was too often one where might made right, but you are not the only nation with determined men in ships of war. On the sea the boldest steer, and I'm one of them. So is this ship. I don't need an invitation to sail these waters. The Red Banner Pacific Fleet goes where it pleases."

"That so? Is that what you call it these days? Where are you headed, Captain? You figure to weigh in with the Chinese in this scrap over Taiwan?"

"Have you heard of SinoPac, Mister Tanner? You know very well that we are compelled by agreements and alliances signed by the Russian nation."

"As are we, Mister Karpov." The American had used his name for the first time. "The United States has pledged itself in defense of the sovereign nations of both Japan and Taiwan. But we won't sort that business out here, will we?"

"I suppose not," said Karpov. "We're just here to let you know the Chinese won't be in this alone. You ought to think carefully about your next move, Captain. Very carefully."

"Damn if that doesn't sound threatening…" Nikolin paused. "He's being sarcastic, sir," he whispered, then continued translating. "Look, Karpov. We can't sort out the diplomacy. I leave that to the men in suits and just follow orders. It's ours to determine what happens in the water between your ship and mine. You Russkies used to love to bump gunwales with us in your day,

but that time has passed. Your ships have been rusting away in your harbors for the last twenty years."

"That's a pretty old lady you're riding, Captain. Same goes for your buddy out east on the *Nimitz*. Commissioned in 1975, was she?"

Nikolin paused, then said: "Oldies but goodies, and we've sang quite a few tunes in our day. Fact is we've been out here since you were a babe in arms, Captain. That says it all. We know what we're about. I don't suppose you've ever seen anything in the way of a serious fight, but I have. I've beat on Iraqi's and Iranians and Afghans too. I've been the government's muscle out here for a good long while. Rustle my feathers and I can fill the sky with fire and brimstone. This is the Fifth Carrier Strike group, and I lean heavily on the word strike. Do you get my message now, sir?"

"Loud and clear, Captain. Well let me say this to you. You have an expression about the dilemma of being caught between the devil and the deep blue sea. Yes? Well you have already laid claim to the latter…. I'm the former. I don't have feathers, just nice thick scales, a pointy tail, and two red horns. I am not a man you wish to trifle with here, and advise you not to underestimate the capabilities of the Russian Navy."

"That so? Well I guess your target practice last month has got you all hot and bothered. Look, Karpov, enough of these word games. I'll give it to you right in the clear. I'm standing off the coast of Japan for one reason—I was ordered here by the United States government—and nobody else is going to darken my shadow. You stay up north with your babushkas and I have no quarrel with you. Point your bow south and cross 43 degrees and I have to figure you've got bad manners after hearing this, and bad intentions to go with them. Do that and I'll darken your skies and ruin your morning. Are we understood?"

Karpov didn't like that, but he thought for a moment before he answered. "Something tells me the skies will be darkening soon in any case, Captain, and not only here. You and I may have something to do with that if we want to continue on like this. You have your orders; I have mine. You're here to keep an eye on me. I'm here to keep an eye on you. It's that simple. We've been at it for eighty years, and this is no different. But things do tend to get a little out of hand when this much metal puts to sea. So let me be equally frank with you. If I see anything even vaguely resembling a strike package within 200 nautical miles of my position and heading my way I'll have to interpret that as an attack. Are we clear on that, Captain? Do you get *my* message?

You want to fly around and chase a few seagulls, that's your business. Head my way and we'll have our next conversation with missiles. I wanted to have this little chat to see if we could avoid that. Any thoughts before you go back to your morning coffee?"

Nikolin waited. "He's thinking, sir…." There was a long pause on the channel before he began translating again. "I think we understand one another, Captain Karpov. You just remember those 43 degrees. Yes, I'll chase a few gulls down here. It's a favorite pastime for a carrier Captain. But I hear the birds up north are pretty sparse."

It was a subtle way of telling Karpov the Americans had no intention of pressing the issue. Both sides were clearly 'showing the flag' and the muscle behind it, but neither Captain wanted this to go any further than it had to.

"Haven't seen so much as a seagull this morning," Karpov replied. "And I have also heard the waters south of 43 degrees are a still polluted by that old reactor at Fukujima. Yes, Captain Tanner. I think we do understand one another. I suppose we can only hope that our respective governments can come to a similar understanding. Enjoy your coffee. Karpov out."

Captain Tanner scratched his head, a bemused look on his face. Karpov had quietly stated his intention to say above the 43rd parallel and pose no threat unless his fleet was approached to within 200 nautical miles. His carrier aircraft would have to get inside that to launch their *Harpoons*. With their Block II AGM-84Ls they could fire at 150 nautical miles.

The Russkies still like to hang tough, but it had been a long time since they could walk their talk. This battlecruiser out there was a capable ship, no doubt about that, but it didn't have much company. I've got 5th and 8th Carrier Strike Groups out here armed to the teeth with nearly 200 aircraft and this guy thinks he can still thumb his nose at me? The devil incarnate, is he? My ass. He had read the file on this Karpov, and he didn't see much that impressed him at all. The man had probably never fired a missile in anger at a real target in his miserable life. Who in hell did he think he was laying down law to the United States Navy?

Tanner had a mind to get up north and call this man's bluff, and send those rust buckets he called the Red Banner Pacific Fleet home to Vladivostok and Kamchatka where they belonged. Yet his better judgment intervened and told him their 'understanding' would be much preferred to a battle at sea here. He didn't have to sit on that thought too long, for ten minutes after his little radio parley with the Russians he had a priority one

Flash Z message in hand, and was looking at the confirmation code being handed him by his XO. A Flash Z message was reserved for the most urgent operational combat messages, trumping all other traffic on the wire and to be taken as an immediate and first priority order.

"FLASH -FLASH –FLASH," he started to read aloud, then kept the rest. Holy mother! Someone's got a hair up his ass on this one. He was just ordered to find and sink the battlecruiser *Kirov*, at any and all costs, and to do so immediately.

He was going to have to renege on the little gentlemen's agreement he had just negotiated with this Russian Captain up north. Now the sudden change of orders that put him here instead of the East China Sea and the hasty advance of the *Nimitz* group to the west suddenly made sense. The suits back in DC must be drinking some real strange cool-aid, he thought. Apparently they wanted the Russians to know the US meant business and was willing to put the best they had at the bottom of the deep blue sea to make sure the message stuck. But what didn't add up was why this ship?

He looked at his XO. "Flash Z on this one, Skip. Better tell the Air Boss to double up on those strike packages. I want the Maces and Snakes ready to dance in thirty."

"Aye, sir." Skip Patterson had a troubled look on his face. "You figure it was that ASAT hit, sir?"

"Could be, but Intel indicates the Chinese were behind that. PACOM says they launched three *Red Arrows* and also fired lasers early this morning. They took down two GPS navigation satellites and a couple of our Intel birds over their territory. I suppose they'll claim the space above China is theirs too, but that's where it stands. Somebody starts scratching your eyes out and you damn well do something about it. We'll probably hit them with our new *Skybolts* today to even the score, but this is quite an escalation if they're pissed off about the satellites. DC wants to drop a hammer on someone. But why the battlecruiser? Going after the Russians is just going to get butt ugly, and real fast. And why *Kirov* as opposed to some snot nosed Russky sub out there that gets a little too nosey? We'll have to take on that whole Surface Action Group now."

"It's the best they have, sir. Put *Kirov* down under and the Russians can pretty much go home and leave us with the football."

"What about the *Admiral Kuznetsov?"*

"We can handle him, sir. Suppose we give the Russians a two for one

special this morning."

Tanner looked at his coffee cup, knowing it was stone cold by now. "There's a lot of dead metal on the bottom of this ocean," he said, a forlorn tone in his voice now. I guess Davey Jones has room in his locker for a little more. Let's just hope old that we aren't included."

* * *

Half a world away another Russian naval commander was about to deliver message himself, in one of those snot nosed Russian submarines that was getting a just little too nosey. A tiger was on the prowl in the Gulf of Mexico. The *Tigr*, was hovering on the turbulent waters of the gulf, though 200 feet above the seas were raging with the fury of a hurricane Victor. *Tigr* was an improved *Akula* class nuclear submarine, sleek and dangerous like the animal it was named for, with 8 big torpedoes and 40 fish to go with them. Fast at well over 30 knots submerged, it was also very quiet for an older boat, among the best the Russians had aside from their three new *Yasen* class boats.

But *Tigr* was not quiet enough that morning as it moved slowly through the oil blighted waters of the gulf. It had been picked up off the northern coast of Cuba by a fiery senator from Virginia, the SSN *John Warner*, among the very best attack subs in the US Navy, and a boat that trumped anything the Russians had. Dan Phillips had the boat that day, and he was keeping a steady ear on the *Tigr* in his pond, and his hand on the trigger. What was it up to? With events in the Pacific wound up so tight, it was a bold and provocative move for the Russians to send an *Akula* into the Gulf Of Mexico, and a most unwise decision insofar as Phillips was concerned.

His sonar man had a passive fix on the Russian sub, and it did not seem that the other side even knew he was there. He had two torpedoes up and primed, and then he heard the one thing that he dreaded every moment he had ever sailed at sea.

"Con, Sonar. Torpedo in the water! Range 1500 meters and… and *increasing* sir…It's not headed our way, Captain."

"Not headed our way?" Phillips took a fast look at his Plexi chart and knew immediately what was happening. "Mother of *God*," he breathed. "Ready on tubes two and four," he said sharply. "Arm torpedoes!"

"Sir, tubes two and four ready, and torpedoes armed, aye!"

Seconds later two Mk 48 torpedoes were also in the water, and homing their way toward the distant tiger in the sea. By the time the *Akula* heard them and thought to turn its head and bear fangs, the Mk 48s had the target in their crosshairs, their active electronically steered 'pingers' guiding them unerringly forward. A moment later they struck home with a ripple of underwater thunder, two 295kg warheads striking the Russian sub and virtually blowing the boat in half. But the *Tigr* had already finished what it came here to do that morning. It had fired a single 650mm torpedo with a massive 450kg warhead, though it would never fire another.

The *John Warner's* sonar man had been correct. The big torpedo was running away at high speed now, not seeking the American boat, but finding instead a much bigger prize in the dark waters ahead. It was homing in on the massive underwater segment of the British Petroleum/Exxon Mobile super rig dubbed *Thunder Horse*, and it was about to take down one of the principle production facilities in the Gulf. Hurricane Victor, raging with winds near 200 miles per hour above, would do the rest.

Hours later, when the storm had passed and raged inland on the Texas coast, a helo swooped low over the restless waters of the Gulf, the pilot aghast at what he was seeing. It was a British Petroleum ride, out from Port Fourchon in the Mississippi Region on an emergency rig tour after Hurricane Victor cut a swath through the production zone at sea. Thus far 15 platforms had sustained damage that would be at least a week in repair, perhaps longer. This was the last planned stop for the day, to the crown jewel in the joint BP-Exxon operation in the region. They were going out to *Thunder Horse*, the world's largest semi-submersible oil platform, so big you could put three football fields up on the topside area. It was *fully* submersible now.

"Look at that!" the pilot pointed at the badly listing platform. *Thunder Horse* was keeling over on her massive industrial orange flotation columns, and apparently still taking on water. Constructed in Korea and delivered to Corpus Christi, Texas in 2004, the rig had problems from the very first. Some grease monkey had set in a bad six-inch pipe, and water was misrouted between ballast tanks causing a major list in 2005. The big platform almost tipped completely over during that incident, and it took a week to pump out the water and get the ballast tanks balanced again. Six weeks later it weathered a blow from Hurricane Katrina, and the last few brushes from the big storms never seemed to bother the immense platform—until now. The 650mm torpedo was a little more than the design engineers had ever planned

for.

“What could have caused this?” The engineer aboard knew they had not suffered a direct hit from Victor this time. Yet the damage was plain to see. “Can you get a bit lower, I want to check the other side.” The platform had finally sorted out its teething troubles and was brought on-line in June of 2008. She was expected to deliver all of a billion barrels of oil over her 25 year industrial life span, but this was a problem that could cause a drastic setback in that schedule. The 250,000 barrels she might have contributed to that total today were obviously not going to be delivered, let alone the daily expected quota of 200 million cubic feet of gas. She was obviously floundering, and in very deep water, sitting right astride block 778/822 in the Mississippi Canyon, the bottom over a mile away, some 6300 feet below. One of her massive cranes was already completely underwater.

“Damn, with Mad Dog damaged we can’t lose Thunder Horse,” said the engineer.

Mad Dog was dubbed one of the 50 projects to change the world by Goldman Sachs, sporting the world’s largest single piece truss spar, one of the biggest lifts ever set in the Gulf of Mexico, about 190 miles south of New Orleans in the Green Canyon plot. The big dog was permanently moored to the seabed, with a capacity to produce up to 100,000 barrels of oil and 60 million cubic feet of natural gas per day, much smaller than *Thunder Horse*, but significant. She was also damaged, but still intact.

“Shall I spread the word?” The pilot gave the engineer a sheepish look.

“Better tell the techs on Mad Dog to get over here first,” said the engineer. Crews were already working to restore the 24-inch lateral connecting *Mad Dog* to the *Caesar* oil pipeline. Her Natural gas was transported via a 16-inch lateral connected to the *Cleopatra* gas pipeline, both part of BPs Mardi Gras Transportation System in the Gulf.

“Lord,” the engineer was scratching his head, eyes wide as he surveyed the platform below them now. “We’ve got a fire down there too! With *Caesar* and *Cleopatra* off line, and big rigs like this in the water, we’re buggered for weeks, mate. Better blow the horn. This baby needs help fast. Damn thing’s about to go down under!”

“Right-o,” said the pilot, flipping his headset on to begin transmitting. “Mad Dog, Mad Dog, this is BP Survey, Over. “

A scratch voice answered in a few seconds. *“Go ahead, Survey.”*

“Thunder Horse down, mates. Repeat. Thunder Horse down. Survey

engineer says we'll need all your people out this way on the double, with anything you can float, over."

Someone swore on the other end of the transmission. Then the voice came back, *"Roger that, Survey. Thunder Horse down."*

The Saga Continues…

Kirov Saga
Nine Days Falling

As Fedorov launches his daring mission to the past to rescue Orlov, Volsky is caught up in a web of intrigue spun out from the dark corners of the KGB. The long journey west is fraught with danger for Fedorov's team when they encounter something bewildering and truly astounding, an incident that leads them deeper into the mystery and origin of Rod-25. Yet even as they stalk Orlov's shadow, the hunt is joined by Beria's NKVD and Haselden's 30 Commando in 1942.

Karpov faces his toughest challenge yet when Kirov is hunted by a US Carrier Strike Group and a determined Captain with orders to sink the Russian battlecruiser at any cost. Meanwhile, a desperate situation in the Caspian Sea endangers Volsky's attempt to reach and rescue Fedorov's team. The lines of destiny meet in a Nexus Point of violence and mayhem that will decide the fate of the world.

As the fuse of conflict is lit across the globe, the dread war has finally begun when the Chinese move to bring home their long wayward son—Taiwan. Combat begins from the very first chapter and rages throughout the entire novel as the war begins on the high seas and burns like a searing fire into the vital oil rich regions of the world. From the pulsing bitstream of the Internet, the deep void of outer space, the oil soaked waters of the Persian Gulf and Black Sea, to the riveting naval combat in the Pacific, the world is swept up in the maelstrom of chaos of war over nine grueling days.

This is the story of that deadly war to end all wars, and the desperate missions from the future and past to find the one man who can prevent it from ever happening, Gennadi Orlov. Can the mystery of Rod-25 and Orlov be solved before the ICBMs are finally launched?

OTHER BOOKS BY JOHN SCHETTLER

Kirov
The battlecruiser *Kirov*, is the most power surface combatant that ever put to sea. Built from the bones of all four prior *Kirov* Class battlecruisers, she is

updated with Russia's most lethal weapons, given back her old name, and commissioned in the year 2020. A year later, with tensions rising to the breaking point between Russia and the West, *Kirov* is completing her final missile trials in the Arctic Sea when a strange accident transports her to another time. With power no ship in the world can match, much less comprehend, she must decide the fate of nations in the most titanic conflict the world has ever seen—WWII.

Kirov II – Cauldron of Fire
Kirov crosses the Atlantic to the Mediterranean Sea when she suddenly slips in time again and re-appears a year later, in August of 1942. Beset with enemies on every side and embroiled in one of the largest sea battles of the war, the ship races for Gibraltar and the relatively safe waters of the Atlantic. Meanwhile, the brilliant Alan Turing has begun to unravel the mystery of what this ship could be, but can he convince the Admiralty? Naval action abounds in this fast paced second volume of the *Kirov* series trilogy.

Kirov III - Pacific Storm
Admiral Tovey's visit to Bletchley Park soon reaches an astounding conclusion when the battlecruiser *Kirov* vanishes once again to a desolate future. Reaching the Pacific the ship's officers and crew soon learn that *Kirov* has once again moved in time. Now First Officer Anton Fedorov is shocked to finally learn the true source of the great variation in time that has led to the devastated future they have come from and the demise of civilization itself. They are soon discovered by a Japanese fleet and the ship now faces its most dangerous and determined challenge ever when they are stalked by the Japanese 5th Carrier Division and eventually confronted by a powerful enemy task force led by the battleship *Yamato*, and an admiral determined to sink this phantom ship, or die trying. In this amazing continuation to the popular *Kirov* series, the most powerful ships ever conceived by two different eras clash in a titanic final battle that could decide the fate of nations and the world itself.

Kirov Saga: *Men Of War*
Kirov returns home to a changed world in the year 2021, and as the Russian Naval Inspectorate probes the mystery of the ship's disappearance, Anton Fedorov begins to unravel yet another dilemma—the secret of Rod 25. The

world is again steering a dangerous course toward the great war that blackened the shores of a distant future glimpsed by the officers and crew. Fedorov has come to believe that time is waiting on the resolution of one crucial unresolved element from their journey to the past—the fate of Gennadi Orlov.

Join Admiral Leonid Volsky, Captain Vladimir Karpov and Anton Fedorov as they sleuth the mystery of Orlov's fate and launch a mission to the past to find him before the world explodes in the terror and fury of a great air and naval conflict in the Pacific. It is a war that will span the globe from the Gulf of Mexico to the Middle East and through the oil rich heart of Central Asia to the wide Pacific, but somehow one man's life holds the key to its prevention. Yet other men are aware of Orlov's identity as a crewman from the dread raider they came to call *Geronimo*, and they too set their minds on finding him first…in 1942! Men of war from the future and past now join in the hunt while the military forces of Russia, China and the West maneuver to the great chessboard of impending conflict.

The *Kirov Saga* Continues with the blow by blow depiction of this great war over its first nine grueling days of intense conventional warfare in book V, *Nine Days Falling.*

The Meridian Series – *Alternate History & Time Travel*

Book I: *Meridian* *– A Novel In Time*
ForeWord Magazine's "Book of the Year"
2002 Silver Medal Winner for Science Fiction
The adventure begins on the eve of the greatest experiment ever attempted—Time travel. As the project team meets for their final mission briefing, the last member, arriving late, brings startling news. Catastrophe threatens and the fate of the Western World hangs in the balance. But a visitor from another time arrives bearing clues that will carry the hope of countless generations yet to be born, and a desperate plea for help that leads the team on a mission to the Jordanian desert of WWI, where they are entangled with fabled exploits of Lawrence of Arabia.

Book II: *Nexus Point*
The project team members slowly come to the realization that a "Time War"

is being waged by unseen adversaries in the future. The quest for an ancient fossil leads to an amazing discovery hidden in the Jordanian desert. A mysterious group of assassins plot to decide the future course of history, just one battle in a devious campaign that will span the Meridians of time, both future and past. Exciting Time travel adventure in the realm of the Crusades!

Book III: *Touchstone*
When Nordhausen follows a hunch and launches a secret time jump mission on his own, he uncovers an operation being run by unknown adversaries from the future. The incident has dramatic repercussions for Kelly Ramer, his place in the time line again threatened by paradox. Kelly's fate is somehow linked to an ancient Egyptian artifact, once famous the world over, and now a forgotten slab of stone. The result is a harrowing mission to Egypt during the time frame of Napoleon's 1799 invasion.

Book IV: *Anvil of Fate*
The cryptic ending of Touchstone dovetails perfectly into this next volume as Paul insists that Kelly has survived, and is determined to bring him safely home. Only now is the true meaning of the stela unearthed at Rosetta made apparent—a grand scheme to work a catastrophic transformation of the Meridians, so dramatic and profound in its effect that the disaster at Palma was only a precursor. The history leads them to the famous Battle of Tours where Charles Martel strove to stem the tide of the Moorish invaders and save the west from annihilation. Yet more was at stake on the Anvil of Fate than the project team first realized, and they now pursue the mystery of two strange murders that will decide the fate of Western Civilization itself!

Book V: *Golem 7*
Nordhausen is back with new research and his hand on the neck of the new terrorist behind the much feared "Palma Event." Now the project team struggles to discover how and where the Assassins have intervened to restore the chaos of Palma, and their search leads them on one of the greatest naval sagas of modern history—the hunt for the battleship *Bismarck*. For some unaccountable reason the fearsome German battleship was not sunk on its maiden voyage, and now the project team struggles to put the ship back in its watery grave. Meet Admiral John Tovey and Chief of Staff "Daddy" Brind as the Royal Navy begins to receive mysterious intelligence from an agent

known only as “Lonesome Dove.” Exciting naval action and top notch research characterize this fast paced alternate history of the sinking of the *Bismarck*.

Note: *Golem 7 is the book that led author John Schettler to continue his exploration of alternate history naval fiction in the breakthrough Kirov Saga. Fans of alternate history / time travel adventure will enjoy all five books in the award winning Meridian series.*

Historical Fiction

Taklamakan ~ *The Land Of No Return*
It was one of those moments on the cusp of time, when Tando Ghazi Khan, a simple trader of tea and spice, leads a caravan to the edge of the great desert, and becomes embroiled in the struggle that will decide the fate of an empire and shake all under heaven and earth. A novel of the Silk Road, the empire of Tibet clashes with T’ang China on the desolate roads that fringe the Taklamakan desert, and one man holds the key to victory in a curious map but from a trader in the Bazaars of Kashgar.

Khan Tengri ~ *Volume II of Taklamakan*
Learn the fate of Tando, Drekk, and the others in this revised and extended version of Part II of Taklamakan, with a 30,000 word, 7 chapter addition. Tando and his able scouts lead the Tibetan army west to Khotan, but they are soon confronted by a powerful T’ang army, and threatened by treachery and dissention within their own ranks. Their paths join at a mysterious shrine hidden in the heart of the most formidable desert on earth where each one finds more than they imagined, an event that changes their lives forever.

The Dharman Series: Science Fiction

Wild Zone ~ *Classic Science Fiction – Volume I*
A shadow has fallen over earth’s latest and most promising colony prospect in the Dharma system. When a convulsive solar flux event disables communications with the Safe Zone, special agent Timothy Scott Ryan is rushed to the system on a navy frigate to investigate. He soon becomes embroiled in a mystery that threatens the course of evolution itself as a

virulent new organism has targeted mankind as a new host. Aided by three robotic aids left in the colony facilities, Ryan struggles to solve the mystery of Dharma VI, and the source of the strange mutation in the life forms of the planet. Book I in a trilogy of riveting classic sci-fi novels.

Mother Heart ~ *Sequel to Wild Zone – Volume II*
Ensign Lydia Gates is the most important human being alive, for her blood holds the key to synthesizing a vaccine against the awful mutations spawned by the Colony Virus. Ryan and Caruso return to the Wild Zone to find her, discovering more than they bargained for when microbiologist Dr. Elena Chandros is found alive, revealing a mystery deeper than time itself at the heart of the planet, an ancient entity she has come to call "Mother Heart."

Dream Reaper ~ *A Mythic Mystery/Horror Novel*
There was something under the ice at Steamboat Slough, something lost, buried in the frozen wreckage where the children feared to play. For Daniel Edwards, returning to the old mission site near the Yukon where he taught school a decade past, the wreck of an old steamboat becomes more than a tale told by the village elders. In a mystery weaving the shifting imagery of a dream with modern psychology and ancient myth, Daniel struggles to solve the riddle of the old wreck and free himself from the haunting embrace of a nightmare older than history itself. It has been reported through every culture, in every era of human history, a malevolent entity that comes in the night… and now it has come for him!

"Every book, every volume you see here, has a soul. The soul of the person who wrote it and of those who read it and lived and dreamed with it. Every time a book changes hands, every time someone runs his eyes down its pages, its spirit grows and strengthens."

— *Carlos Ruiz Zafón, The Shadow of the Wind*

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—Nathanial Hawthorne

The pleasure has been mine in writing this, my friends have all been gratified, now it's your turn! Spread the good word, and thank you so much for reading!

John Schettler

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