

Kirov Saga



Book VII in the Kirov Series

Devil's Garden

John Schettler

9 Days Falling
Volume III

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Kirov Saga:
Devil's Garden
Nine Days Falling
Volume III

By

John Schettler

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**Kirov Saga:
Devil's Garden
Nine Days Falling
Volume III**

By

John Schettler

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

—Milton, Paradise Lost

Kirov Saga:
Devil's Garden
9 Days Falling ~ Vol. III

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Day Seven

[Part I – *D-Day*](#)

[Part II – *The Eagle*](#)

[Part III – *Invincible*](#)

[Part IV – *Changes*](#)

Day Eight

[Part V – *Delphi*](#)

[Part VI – *Escape*](#)

[Part VII – *Tatsu Maru*](#)

[Part VIII – *Togo*](#)

Day Nine

[Part IX – *Shortwave*](#)

[Part X – *Lindisfarne*](#)

[Part XI – *Lessons Of War*](#)

[Part XII – *The 9th Circle*](#)

Day 7

*“Fix thine eyes beneath: the river of blood
Approaches, in the which all those are steep'd,
Who have by violence injured....”*

Dante Alighieri, The Inferno - Canto XII

Part I

D-Day

"Fortune favors the brave, sir," said Carrot cheerfully.

"Good. Good. Pleased to hear it, captain. What is her position vis a vis heavily armed, well prepared and excessively manned armies?"

"Oh, no—one's ever heard of Fortune favoring them, sir."

"According to General Tacticus, it's because they favor themselves..."

—Terry Pratchett - Jingo

Chapter 1

They came in fast, loud and with thunder clap surprise, the engines of the three hovercraft roaring like sea demons. The two smaller craft led the way, speeding in north of the main harbor to find narrow strands along the shore. Hovercraft 639 was up near the rail yard, landing on a narrow beach just south of a small oil loading area. The rail lines ran very near the coast here as they bent south toward the main harbor and the front ramp slowly descended as the craft stormed up onto the beach under the watchful guard of the twin 14.5mm machine gun turret. To anyone that saw it that evening, it may have appeared like a wrathful beast from the sea, 280 tons of metal roaring beneath the grey, low hanging gloom.

The plan was to hit the coast fast, and seize key objectives before the advancing German formations could reach the port. Hovercraft 640 landed about 200 meters south on a narrow gravel embankment fringed by a long stone jetty. Within seconds the front ramps were down and the rumble of the PT-76 tanks added to the cacophony of noise. They were relative relics by the year 2021, withdrawn from active deployment over seven years ago and replaced in all main line Naval Marine units by the T-80. But that new tank weighed over 42 tons, and the PT-76s scrounged up at the naval base at Kaspiysk weighed only 14 tons. Admiral Volsky had opted for anything he could get on the hovercraft, and so the legacy tank did the job better than anything new in the Russian inventory. It was actually designed to work with the old hovercraft they were using, and they went with it.

The two tanks moved quickly down the ramps followed by scores of black booted Marines with assault rifles who rushed ashore and went to ground to take up firing positions. The two tanks turned left and headed inland, flanked on each side by a squad of Marines.

Troyak had studied the map carefully to devise his plan of defense. There were only two likely avenues of approach to the harbor. One was right along the northern coast where the hovercraft landed, on a narrow strip of land that was flanked on the left by a long salt lake that ran roughly parallel to the shore. There he deployed the bulk of two platoons of Naval Marines, one landing with each hovercraft. Each platoon would deploy three RPG-7V shoulder-launched, anti-tank rocket-propelled grenade launchers as their main tank defense, and three mortars for fire support. The platoon also carried

three RPK-76 light machine guns, and the rifle sections were armed with AK-74 assault rifles.

Their first objective was the main rail yard building, which dominated all the rail spurs feeding in to the yard, with good fields of fire in all directions. Others infiltrated into the built up area between the coast and the lake, occupying the buildings to the surprise of any remaining residents still lingering in the area.

After the shock and surprise of the landing, the locals soon came to understand that these were Russian troops, and not some new fangled weaponry deployed by the Germans. They gaped at the hovercraft, astounded by the roar of the engines and amazed to see how the craft could move over land or sea.

One man was a garrison officer in the NKDV unit assigned to the area. "Reinforcements!" he cried at the top of his voice. "Reinforcements from Baku!"

That was how they had planned it, to present themselves as an elite force dispatched from Baku to stop the Germans and save the day. The two PT-76 tanks seemed more familiar to the locals, about the size of the T-34s they knew well enough, though the sharp front amphibious bow and low profile drew many second looks. Apparently Baku had new tanks as well!

Troyak came ashore with the two lighter hovercraft, debarking from the number 640 boat and leading the Marines ashore. He waved his men inland with a sharp whistle and motion of his brawny forearm, and then watched as the two tanks turned south to their assigned positions. He wanted them at the base of the long salt lake, where the second road approached the harbor from the west. It ran past the flat height of a low hill, passing right through a densely wooded park before it reached the coastal rail lines. The coastal road ran past the lake on elevated ground, and from that wooded area the two tanks had perfect fields of fire to interdict that road. They would also serve as the main bulwark to block the inland road, and they would be supported by a full platoon of Marines landing with the 609 *Aist* class hovercraft with Fedorov.

The larger hovercraft landed just south of the main harbor on a narrow beach at the base of a long jetty. It carried the mechanized platoon mounted in two PT-50 amphibious Armored Personnel carriers. They were supported by a ZSU-23-4 air defense vehicle where Fedorov held sway, riding with command headphones on so he could remain in constant contact with Troyak.

This hovercraft was big enough to carry two more platoons of Marines, one moving forward with the APCs and the second being held in reserve near the ZSU-23.

Scouts quickly learned that the local forces in the area had been ready to retreat, but now, with the arrival of Fedorov's little invasion force, they took heart and were seen in small groups of three and five men, urged back to the front line by barking sergeants. Fedorov dismounted and quickly had his men round up one of the locals, a man named Kulikov, who greeted him with a warm, ruddy cheeked smile.

"Good to see you. Where did you get that!" he pointed at the big hovercraft, a lumbering behemoth still roaring near the jetty, its twin 30mm gun turret slowly rotating on overwatch.

"A gift from Baku," Fedorov said quickly. "Who is in charge here?"

"In charge? That would be Commissar Molla, in the holding facility. You can just follow the rail line north and you will see it on your left. They were preparing to move south soon. Some have already gone. The Germans are coming!" The man pointed.

"Yes? Well, we'll see about that. How many are you?"

"We have a single battalion, but the Germans are coming in strength, at least one full mechanized battalion on the inland road, and many armored cars and motorcycle infantry on the coast road to the north. We were ordered to retreat, until we saw you come in off the sea. Amazing! I had no idea we had such machines!"

"Stalin has more in the cupboard than you may realize," Fedorov smiled. The man gave him an odd look, but said nothing more, still gaping at the ZSU-23.

"We are occupying all the ground between the central park and the rail yard," said Fedorov. "Get your men on our left flank. Can you hold the ground between the city and that hill?"

"We can try, comrade. Yes. We will fight!"

"Good. Get word to all your officers. Tell them we stop the Germans here and now. If they take this place, the road to Baku is open. Here we stand firm!"

The Sergeant nodded heartily and ran off, yelling to round up any men he could find. Fedorov climbed back up onto the ZSU-23, a vehicle using the same chassis as the PT-76 tanks, though it was not amphibious, with a big upper turret housing quad 23mm cannons. Known as the *Shilka*, and often

referred to by its nickname “Zeus” it was the God of air defense for Russian ground battalions. The quad 23mm guns could range out 3000 meters, with precision radar controlled fire that also included a laser rangefinder and a sensor pod with a day/night optical camera that could use infrared night optics to spot targets 600 meters away.

The ZSU moved off with a low growl, its metal tracks rattling on the rail ties as it followed the lines north. Fedorov was going to head directly to the detention facility and conduct the search for Orlov while Troyak organized the defense against the Germans. The vehicle soon reached a point between the park and the main harbor where the squat shape of the thick walled facility could be seen to the west. Two NKVD Guards waited by the main entrance, and one man held up an arm to signal the vehicle to stop.

Zykov was riding in the ZSU as Fedorov’s tactical advisor, and the two men emerged from the open hatch jumping down and walking boldly up to the gate.

“Who are you?” the guards asked. “What is happening?”

“We are reinforcements. Where is your Commissar Molla?”

“Molla? In there, of course. His staff car came in just a few moments ago.”

“Very well,” said Fedorov. “Open the gate. We have orders for the Commissar.”

“But we were told—”

“I don’t care what you were told,” Fedorov said quickly. “The situation has changed. The Germans are coming, and I am now in full command of the defense of Makhachkala and the harbor. It must not be taken. Now open that gate or stand aside and I will have my men do it. And be quick about it!”

The guards saw the insignia on Fedorov’s Cap—an NKVD Colonel—and the decorations on his chest. They were not inclined to argue further. The growl of the ZSU rumbling in the background was more than persuasive in any case. They ran to the gates, opening them wide and saluting.

Fedorov turned to Zykov. “Corporal. Take two squads. Go get our man.”

“With pleasure, sir!”

“And Zykov...Be firm. Take no guff from anyone. I’m going to find this commissar and see what he knows. Conduct your search and signal me the moment you locate Orlov.

They started through the gate, but Fedorov soon heard Troyak’s voice in his earbud, calling from the defense perimeter. “Colonel Fedorov—we have

company. Germans are on the north road by the oil tanks. They are coming.”

* * *

Oberleutnant Ernst Wellman was leading Kradschutzen Battalion 3, two platoons of motorcycle infantry out in front supported by three armored cars. Behind them came the bulk of the fast moving motorcycle infantry in a long column. At intervals there would be other larger vehicles, trucks and half-tracks hauling heavier weapons—a 75mm infantry gun and two 37mm light anti tank guns.

One platoon of motorcycle infantry roared up to the oil tank farm north of Troyak’s main line of defense, dismounting and rushing to secure this vital area, not knowing that the tanks were empty, drained long ago. Other troops were dismounting at the edge of the main rail yard, and with well practiced skill they began sending sections of three man teams into the open yard, heading for the main building where Troyak was watching with binoculars. The dour Sergeant pinched off his collar microphone and gave an order.

“Litchko—sniper rifle!”

The crack of the rifle opened the engagement with a single round that dropped the lead German scout right by the main rail tracks and announced to all the rest that the area was held against them. It was to be one of the oddest engagements of the war, with the veteran German infantry opposed by Russian Marines from the 21st century, men who would not be born for another fifty or sixty years!

The first kill sent all the remaining infantry to ground, some crawling to look for any cover available—old rusted barrels, stacks of wood pallets, bailing wire, and old crates. The men shouted, and one squad was up, rushing forward.

Troyak knew they intended to draw fire from his main defensive positions, but the men had been ordered to wait and Litchko’s sniper rifle barked again, two rounds in quick succession dropping two of the three men. The third man made it to cover, then poked his head up to try and locate the sniper and received a bullet for his trouble.

The Germans were back to square one, but now they heard the harsh call of orders, and soon the infantry in place began to open fire on every building within site. Troyak’s Marines watched while small teams again began to rush forward across the tracks, and again the sniper rifle snapped off shots to thin

their ranks. Yet this time too many were moving, at least fifteen men rushing forward behind the base of rifle fire provided by the remainder of the German platoon. Troyak gave the order to return fire, and the Marines opened up with their fully automatic AK-74s, firepower many times in excess of the incoming German rifle fire. They cut the German advance to pieces in sharp, well controlled bursts of fire, until all the infantry had gone to ground again, surprised by the withering automatic weapons of the Russian Marines.

Wellman was close enough to see what was happening and he immediately knew he had run into some real trouble here. He began to order up his armored cars in support. There were three at hand, an SdKfz 221 mounting an MG-32 and two SdKfz 222s with 2cm KwK 30 autocannons. The smallest tank gun designed by the Germans in the war, it was initially mounted on their old Panzer II recon tanks. The armored cars began to fire, though the weight of their additional guns soon proved ineffective against the well positioned Russian Marines. Their armor was soon found lacking as well.

“D section,” Troyak ordered through his collar microphone, “take out those armored cars.”

The Russian Marine squad laid out intense covering fire and the RPG-7Vs opened up at a range of just under 100 meters, and scored quick hits, the tandem HEAT rounds blasting completely through the thin armor of the German ACs and wrecking them in a short, violent minute.

Wellman was watching from the rear and now knew he had a real battle on his hands. He had never seen such a violent reprisal from what looked to be a hand held anti-tank weapon! He had seen an early prototype of the new *Faustpatrone* AT weapon for infantry, but it was still in development. It would be another long year before this weapon, and its successors, became the *Panzerfaust* that was so effective for the Germans later in the war. Even that could fire no more than 30 meters, but this new Russian weapon had knocked out his armored cars with lethal accuracy at least 100 meters away! He immediately radioed back for additional support.

“Becker? Where are you. I need tank support on the coast road north of the rail yard. The Russians are dug in and putting up quite a fight!”

“We’re five miles behind you,” came the reply. “But we will hasten up as quickly as possible. Get some artillery on them!”

It was good advice, and Wellman cranked up his radio to get hold of Kersten’s artillery battery, deploying north of the city for just this purpose.

There was a brief lull in the action as Wellman sized up the situation. In ten minutes time he had his A platoon chewed to pieces and all three armored cars put out of action. B Platoon was in the oil tank farm to the left of the main rail yard building, which looked to be the Russian strong point at the moment. It was a good position, with excellent fields of fire in all directions and little cover for infantry trying to advance across the rail yard. Who were these troops? The volume of machine gun and automatic fire they could put out was far beyond anything he had seen from Russian infantry before. Not even the NKVD or Guards units were so lavishly equipped.

Under other circumstances he might consider simply swarming the position, but the rate of defensive fire coming from the building was intense. He reasoned they must have a machine-gun platoon in there, and perhaps a few small AT guns. He needed to put strong suppressive fire on the position to have any chance of taking it with infantry. His only other option was firepower from heavy weapons.

“Heintz!” He shouted at a nearby sergeant. “Get the Schwere platoon up, and be quick about it!”

Word soon came in from the regimental headquarters under Franz Westhoven. His column, dubbed KG Westhoven had met with similar stiff resistance on the main road to the town. *“We are south of the salt lake now, and they have tanks and APCs blocking the advance. I’ve lost two half tracks. This is a well defended position. We will not be able to take it in an attack from march. I suggest you bring up the remainder of your Kradschutzen battalion and then let us plan a deliberate attack. I’m sending out the Cossacks to scout that low hill south of the city. We may be able to work around that flank as well. Hold on. Kertsen’s guns will be ready in five minutes.”*

“They should have been ready before we made contact, Generalleutnant Westhoven. We underestimated the Russians here. They know there is nothing to stop us if we take this place.”

“Then take it we will,” came the voice on the other end of the line. *“We have the entire regiment at our disposal, Wellman. Plan your attack.”*

Troyak’s well positioned Marines had stopped the German advance cold, just as he had promised Fedorov. But the 23rd Panzer Division was a tough and experienced formation. They had fought their way across Russia for well over a thousand hard miles, and this was just one more battle. Troyak had 180 men, lightly armed by modern standards with just two tanks and a few

APCs in support. The Germans had considerably more at hand, and the battle was only just beginning.

Note: Maps of these deployments and battles can be found at the writingshop.ws web site.

Chapter 2

The artillery started falling on the rail yard ten minutes later. The first rounds were short, blasting the dense railroad tracks and sending splinters and fragments of the wooden ties spinning up into the air when they exploded. Soon the spotting rounds began to walk forward, until the Germans found the range as one plowed into the roof of the marshalling yard building with a loud crash.

“Stay low!” Troyak shouted. He had expected this, and now he radioed back to the *Anatoly Alexandrov* where Dobrynin was serving as a command and control relay station.

“We need you to find the German artillery and radio the coordinates, Chief. They’ll cut my men to pieces in half an hour!”

The rounds started coming in threes exploding just short of the building now, and one hitting a big crate storage area there. But Dobrynin had the Mi-26 up just off shore in the grey clouds, and it was using radar to track the arc of the incoming German fire. The onboard computers easily calculated the location of the German batteries, and minutes later the Chief was radioing back to Troyak with the information.

The Sergeant ran in a crouch, leaping behind standing crates when an artillery round smashed the overhead roof and blew a good section away. Pale light flooded in, illuminating the dust and smoke from the explosion. He was up and running again, to the back of the building and out a door where he had positioned his fire support teams. Now he stared at his map to cross index the coordinates, frowning to see that the German artillery was well north of the city, almost 7 kilometers out and well beyond the range of his 82mm mortars. But he did have one 120mm 2B11 *Sani* at hand, and it could put harassing fire on the German guns and possibly suppress them, or at least force them to withdraw out of range. That would buy them valuable time.

“Fire at these coordinates,” he ordered. “You can just make the range, and pour it on!”

The sound of the rounds popping off was reassuring, though he knew the Germans would quickly move their guns farther back. He made his way into the main building, an enormous warehouse with rail spurs that would allow train cars to be moved here for repairs. The northern quarter of the building

had received three direct hits, and a fire was burning there now. Yet his men were disciplined, many veterans of the third Chechen war in this same region, fought in 2018. They had been under fire before, and hunkered down with grim determination.

Ten minutes later the barrage lifted, and Troyak heard whistles and deep throated shouts from non-coms on the other side. The Germans were making another ground attack with infantry, trying to cross their half of the marshalling yard to an island cluster of a few sheds and buildings about 100 meters from the main Russian position. They moved quickly, running low, but even after reaching the island they were soon disheartened to see that the artillery had not yet done its job. The Russian Marines opened up again with their AK-74s and the rate of fire they put out quickly stopped the German advance. Casualties were heavy, and the Germans fell back across the tracks to take cover in and around a number of old train cars there.

There came a brief lull, and all they could still hear was the sound of their own 120mm mortar firing behind them. Troyak knew the rounds were pounding the German artillery now, and the silence from the other side meant they had found the range. He reasoned it would take them half an hour to move the guns out to a position beyond the range of his mortar, but before that he would face yet another challenge—German tanks.

They heard the dull rumble coming from the north, and Troyak worked his way forward to a good viewpoint, raising his IR assisted binoculars. He saw a column of armor, five tanks advancing down the rail line just as the armored cars had come. The gritty Sergeant wasted no time. He pinched his collar mike and gave an order.

“Shilkov, is your team ready?”

“*Ready, Sergeant.*”

“Then say hello to those tanks and let them know we are here!”

Shilkov’s team was sitting behind an SPG-9 recoilless rifle with an effective range of 1300 meters using the 73mm PG-9VS shaped HEAT round. It could penetrate 400mm of armor, and with good accuracy using a laser optical sighting system. The Germans were about to get yet another nasty surprise.

* * *

Oberleutnant Wellman had neglected to tell Becker about the new hand

held Russian AT weapon, but no fire could challenge the German tanks as they moved up, some 600 meters from the main rail terminal building—or so he thought. There came a sharp report and a streak of light from what appeared to be a small caliber AT gun. The lead tank in Becker's column of five, a Pz III-L, was struck flush on its frontal armor by the HEAT round, which easily penetrated, even after being reinforced with an additional 20mm steel plate on top of the standard 50mm frontal protection. The Germans were being hit with ordnance designed to defeat heavy modern day tanks with armor over ten times the thickness of the Pz IIIs.

Wellman was shocked when the first panzer went up, smoking and set afire by the sudden hit. The Russian 37mm AT gun might penetrate 50mm of armor, but at the near point blank range of just 100 meters. They had not lost any of the newer Pz III-Ls with the extra 20mm steel plate to a 37mm gun since they deployed. The enemy 45mm AT gun was no better. Only a 76mm gun could have killed that tank, he thought, but he could see no signs of enemy armor here, though Westhoven had identified two tanks blocking the inland road to the south. His forward infantry had not identified any large AT gun position, so this had to be a new recoilless rifle. Two surprises in one day should have been quite enough, but the third surprise was jaw dropping.

The Oberleutnant watched, astounded, as two rockets came streaking out from the Russian position, finding Becker in tank number two and putting an end to his promising military career, and then smashing the number three tank for good measure.

“Mein Gott! Was werden sie schlagen mit uns?” What are they hitting us with?

The Russians called it the, Mongrel, but NATO called it the AT-13 Saxhorn-2 Anti-Tank missile, with tandem HEAT rounds. The weapon had taken down modern Israeli Merkava tanks in Lebanon, and so the relatively light armor of the Panzer IIIs was no challenge. The Germans could have rolled up a heavy Tiger-I or even one of their monster tanks from later in the war. It would have made little difference. The missile would have blown through the 185mm armor of a Tiger II with little difficulty.

Wellborn was on the radio at once. “Westhoven? Come in. What is your situation?”

The commanding officer had no better results on the inland road. “*Heavy resistance! We can't get armor into firing position. They're hitting us with something new. We're waiting for the 88s, and then we'll put ranged fire on*

those tanks.”

“Same here—some kind of rocket. They just killed Becker and three of his panzers! Where is Kersten’s artillery? Why have they stopped firing?”

“They were hit by mortar fire and fell back another two kilometers out of range. We’ll get supporting fire back soon enough. And I’m calling for air support as well.”

“Air support? Way down here?”

“Meindel’s Stukas are up over the Terek now. Just you wait and see what a few 500 pound bombs will do!”

That was good news, but Wellman had a strange feeling in his gut about this engagement. “I don’t like this Generalleutnant. These weapons have neutralized our advantage in armor. I tried two infantry assaults but the volume of defensive fire is very heavy. We must have an MG platoon in front of us.”

“We thought the same, but listen, Wellman. I know the sound of every Russian machine gun we’ve ever seen. No, this is something new, and it’s some kind of light machine gun. This is most likely a Guards SMG platoon.”

“Well enough... But if the Russian infantry fights like this from here on out...” He did not have to finish the sentence. Thus far the Germans had been able to handle anything the Russian Army put in front of them, but Wellman had an inner feeling that the law of overstretch was now coming into play. They were reaching the high water mark for the tide of steel and fire that had swept into Russia. The enemy was fighting hard at Stalingrad, and now they seemed to be equally tenacious here, and at Grozny to the northwest.

A Guards SMG platoon? Yes, that made better sense. Perhaps something more was afoot here as well. He could feel it, sense it. Something was wrong with this engagement. His troops should have been able to sweep into that rail depot in an hour. Instead he lost six armored fighting vehicles and nearly a full platoon of infantry. The rest of the column was coming up, but he ordered their 75mm Infantry gun to deploy further back and was planning to use it in an indirect firing role. He took a deep breath, watching corporal Schmidt to his left, who had been listening to the whole conversation. Wellman gave him a sidelong glance.

“Don’t worry, Schmidt. Did you think they would give us the road to Baku without a good fight?”

“No sir. But they have been retreating for so long.”

“Yes, and it started to feel easy, didn’t it? Well it’s never easy when the

other fellow says no, here I stand and you will have to come for me if you wish to pass.”

“Well what will we do, Oberleutnant?”

“You heard Westhoven. The Stukas will be here soon.”

He started pulling slowly on the fingers of his gloves, tugging at them, his mind thinking hard on something. Schmidt had seen that look on the Oberleutnant’s face before, and he knew that, quite literally, the gloves were coming off when Wellman fell into this kind of mood.

“Contact Second Battalion. Tell them to move their entire column up.” He squinted at his map. We’ll hit them on their right flank, through that oil tank farm. There’s good cover for an infantry advance there, he thought. And then we’ll just have to slug it out, building by building, until we reach that main warehouse. And we have SMGs too...

* * *

Dobrynin was on his radio, yammering in Troyak’s ear. “I’ll have to pull the Mi-26 out and return it to the *Anatoly Alexandrov*. German planes, Troyak. It looks like fifteen or twenty on the radar.”

Troyak did not like the sound of that. These would probably be those same German dive bombers they had faced earlier. The German’s weren’t stupid. They could see that he had the firepower on the ground to stop them, and what they really needed was concentrated indirect fire on the Russian position. In about fifteen minutes that artillery will be down on us again, but first things first.

“Troyak to all hovercraft. Track and engage incoming enemy aircraft! Troyak to Fedorov, come in.”

“*Fedorov here.*”

“We’ll need fire support from the *Shilka*. If you haven’t already done so, deploy your radars and prepare to fire.”

“*We’re ready now,*” said Fedorov. “*I’m heading your direction.*”

“What about Orlov?”

“*Zykov is searching the detainment center now. I was going to look for the Commissar, but then the Germans attacked so I moved the ZSU to a reserve position.*”

“Good job, colonel. Orlov isn’t going anywhere soon. Zykov will find him. Bring the ZSU up here to my position east of the lake. Just follow the

railroad tracks. But watch out for those German planes!”

The SA-N-5 was an older Russian naval SAM, with two quad mounts on the big *Aist* 609 hovercraft guarding the harbor. Called the “Arrow” by the Russians it was an old friend, but nonetheless very capable of tracking and destroying the threat posed by the German planes. Soon the scene was much the same as when the *Anatoly Alexandrov* first appeared in the midst of a Stuka raid over the Caspian Sea. The arrows streaked up into the grey sky, eager to find targets with their passive IR guided noses, and soon they began to get hits. With a maximum range of just over four kilometers, however, the German planes were already over the target and screaming down in their diving runs.

Now Fedorov looked up through his binoculars as the motors whirled to elevate the quad 23mm guns on the *Shilka*. The Russian radar guided guns were soon firing at enemy planes well above the low cloud deck, beyond Fedorov’s visual range. The noise of the guns prompted him to let his binoculars fall to his chest and cover his ears. The guns were capable of firing at nearly a thousand rounds per minute, but with a typical ammunition load of only 2000 rounds, they were most often used in short bursts of three rounds per barrel. That was still enough to put twelve 23mm rounds on a target, with good accuracy, and in sustained burst mode the gunners might fire 30 rounds per barrel and put out ten times that volume.

There were eighteen German planes aloft, and the missiles quickly got nine. The *Shilka* had already made four kills when the bombs began to fall. At least five Stukas made it close enough to release their 500 pound bombs, and now they came screaming down on the rail yard churning up the steel rails and wood ties as they exploded with thundering concussion. Three bombs fell in the yard and island between the two opposing positions, but two landed right on target, plowing right into the main depot terminal and warehouse receiving building where Troyak’s Marines were hunkered down.

The enemy planes wheeled away, the last one chased by a missile that could make a quick 6G turn to blow off its tail as it tried to flee north. The Germans had paid a heavy price, but the bombs they delivered had struck a hard blow.

“Fedorov to Troyak. Come in Sergeant.”

There was no reply.

* * *

Wellman clenched his fist when the bombs struck home. “Got them!” He had watched in horror as the sky was scored by what looked like Katyushas, but they were firing in small groups of four rockets each, racing up to find the Stukas as they tipped over into their final dive. He could not see how many planes were hit, but he could hear them going down, engines still screaming with wrath as they fell. The concussion of the bombs gave him heart, though he saw that most were falling short. Another two hundred meters and they would have hit his own position! Then the last two struck home and roared into the main warehouse and depot.

He heard the whine of artillery shells joining the awful noise of the battle. Kersten’s guns were back! Good! Now was the time to get his infantry ready.

“Schmidt! Get on the radio to A Platoon. Tell them to attack through the tank farm as soon as we lift the artillery barrage! We will move in that direction and support them.”

Wellman wanted to follow up the heavy weapons with a lightning swift infantry assault along the coast supported by reinforcements coming up from II Battalion, and the terrain near the tank farm offered the only good avenue of approach. On his own front he could throw the entire weight of his two companies in an attempt to occupy the island in the center of the rail yard, a cluster of small buildings and trees. From there they could provide flanking fire for the main assault on the coast.

“Schmidt... Signal II Battalion that they are to follow our A platoon as soon as they arrive. Now we storm these damn Russian Guards and make an end of this. Rockets or no rockets—this is work for good infantry, and of that we have plenty.”

Chapter 3

The Germans came in force minutes later. The artillery had kept heads down, and the Marines had taken a few hard blows. Troyak himself had been knocked off his feet by the concussion of the bombs when they hit the north end of the warehouse building. He sat up, instinctively reaching for his assault rifle, and wiping the soot from his eyes, knowing he had probably lost men there. He could hear calls for the medic and was soon hastening to the scene, personally carrying one man back to the mortars for treatment and removing another who had died in the bomb blast.

The last rounds of 105 mm shells soared overhead and exploded with a roar. Then the artillery lifted and he again heard the whistles. Now he looked to see that German infantry was rushing silently from the covered woods near the oil tank farm, and other sections sprinting across the rail lines to the center island. That attack looked too weak, he thought. No. They will come at our north flank by the tank farm, and those last two tanks will probably go that direction as well. He had two squads and an RPG-7 section there, but the point of the position was a building defended by a single squad. If the Germans could take that building then it would give them an anchor to move on the next one, and break into the rear of his position. They would then have access to the narrow beach where boat 639 was still waiting, their lifeline back to the *Anatoly Alexandrov*.

Troyak could hear the firefight beginning and knew he had to get reinforcements up or the Germans would eventually get close enough for grenades. He took a five man section and worked his way north where the position he had set up was a triangle of three buildings. A rifle squad was at the apex facing the oncoming Germans. The left base was the RPG section covering the rail yard that had taken down the German armored cars, the right base was a second rifle squad covering a coastal road and with clear fields of fire to the water. He could not lose that vital squad.

He spoke quickly into his collar mike: "First Platoon—Move through your mortar section to the north coast and block that road! Second Platoon—

displace fifty meters to your right and cover the rail yards. Get any casualties to the hovercraft.”

The Marines moved with expert efficiency. Five man sections firing and moving to new positions on the run. By the time the Germans reached the rail yard island the Marines had shifted and were again opening up strong suppressive fire there. Wellman’s B and C platoons were soon pinned down, but to the north the German attack was building in strength. Troyak decided to repay the Germans for that artillery barrage.

“Mortar teams—fire on the oil tanks. Saturation fires! Now!” His two 82mm tubes answered the call smartly, dropping a couple ranging rounds and then firing for effect. Soon the German advance there was being pounded, with mortar rounds striking the rusty oil tanks, burning residual oil there and sending fragments of twisted metal shrapnel in all directions. It was enough to stop the two platoons of Wellman’s recon company that had been leading the attack, and the Germans fell back. Troyak could see they were waiting for armor support, and he gave his troops a heads up.

“There’s still two tanks out there. Be ready!”

The Russians had taken everything the Germans had thrown at them, and the action on the inland road was equally hot and furious. There the two PT-76 tanks had engaged the oncoming half tracks, and dueled with more Panzer IIIs sent forward by Westhoven before the Russians unleashed a volley of hand held AT rockets to decide the issue. Their superior range prevented the Panzer IIIs from getting good shots on the PT-76 tanks, but Westhoven had already seen the problem and knew what he had to do. The Germans were bringing up two 88s and looking for good places to site them.

* * *

It was a question Commissar Molla had a very difficult time answering. How long can you breathe when I get both hands around your neck? It was very difficult to speak while you were choking, and that was what was happening to Molla now as he listened to Orlov’s last taunting rebuke.

The big Russian had moved so quickly that the Commissar could not even squeeze the trigger of his pistol! In an instant Orlov batted the weapon aside with a sweep of his arm and had a murderous hold on the other man’s neck, forcing him back on the desk where he had been sitting and tightening his big hands on the man’s throat. Molla’s pallid cheeks quickly reddened as he

strained for breath.

“So you like to collect young girls, do you? You like blonds? You stupid piece of *shit*! See how you like them in hell!”

Molla strained to escape the hold but Orlov was just too big, his weight pressing down on the smaller man, crushing him, choking the life from him. The Commissar kicked and struggled, and then the icy light in his dark eyes wavered and he went slack. Orlov held on, sneering at the man, and then released him, spitting in his lifeless face.

“*Svoloch!* I came a thousand miles to do that! Rot in hell!”

Orlov was breathing hard, yet elated that he had finally found the man he had come to kill, and finished the job. Now what? He could hear gunfire, sounds of battle, artillery rounds falling. Then he heard shouting and the sound of hard booted feet in the hallway. He had to move—think what to do!

He lunged for his service jacket where it hung on the nearby coat rack, then suddenly hesitated. If I take that jacket with me they will be able to track and find me. He could distinctly hear the sound of AK-74s now, and knew that Marines must have landed here. But other voices outside were shouting about the Germans.

In the barest moment he had to decide—take the jacket and all the power and wealth the information its computer could bring him, or leave it behind and embrace a life here, a man of this world, now and forever. He moved quickly around the desk to the window, forcing it up and looking outside to size up his prospects for escape.

Marines had landed! Marines from *Kirov* come to find him. Were they here to rescue or arrest him for his crime of desertion? Were they here to kill him? Then he realized that no one would have any knowledge of how he had killed the helicopter pilot. All he had to do was tell them they had a fire on board and the radio was dead...tell them the controls froze and the helo was veering off course. Then the missiles came...

What was it to be? Would he return to his old comrades on the ship; join in the fight here against the Germans and embrace his old life again? Or would he become a wolf in the fold, living among the sheep of this bygone era for the rest of his life. He would know everything that would happen, but not the details, not the dates and key times without his service jacket. He would be a prophet of doom; the man who knew tomorrow, but no one would believe him until something big happened. Then perhaps he could use his wits and make some decent money. But with the jacket he was a God. He

would know everything. Svetlana could whisper in his ear and tell him what he must do, like a dark angel on his shoulder. And he would be the most powerful man in the world...

He decided.

* * *

Wellman was on the radio again, screaming at Kersten to keep firing “They’re cutting us to pieces with those damn mortars. Where is your artillery? Resume firing!”

He had worked his way north with his radio man Schmidt, following the line of the railway tracks and then dashing across at a point beyond Becker’s burning Panzer IIIs. By the time he reached the long, thin island that separated the tracks, the bulk of his II Battalion was arriving. He immediately gave orders, intent on renewing the attack.

“Two of Becker’s Panzers are in the tank farm. Get your men in there and take the buildings beyond that clump of trees! *Bewegen sie sich!* Get moving!”

Kersten answered his call with renewed fire from the 105 batteries, and now the rounds were adjusted fifty meters to fall in the open area behind the main depot. The Russian mortar teams were too exposed there, and the First Platoon mortar took a direct hit, killing everyone in the shallow earthen trench where they had set up.

All Wellman knew was that the fire from those damn 82mm mortars had slackened, and his men were again making concerted rushes through the tank farm and into the cluster of trees that screened a triangle of three buildings from the rail yard. They managed to get an MG-42 into position, and it finally put out the suppressive fire to allow the Germans to move again.

Grenadiers reached the edge of the wood, close enough to hurl potato masher grenades at the building where the Russian RPG team had blasted the German armored cars. It was enough to force the Russians out, and they fell back on a dark roofed building overshadowed by a tall, rusting water tank. The Marines in the forward building at the apex of the triangle had also been forced to withdraw, the MG-42 proving too effective as it chewed through the thin wooden walls. That, and the grumble of two more German tanks grinding their way down the long rows of oil tanks was enough to force that position.

Wellman had rushed across the tracks from the island, waving on the arriving lead company of II Battalion. Men were surging up on their motorcycles, leaping to dismount and then running low, their rifles in hand and boots and equipment clattering on the cold iron rail lines. He was building up good strength now, and it would just be a matter of attrition. He lifted his binoculars to look down the rows of oil tanks, seeing his men bravely fighting their way forward, rushing from one blasted tank to the next. Then he saw something that he did not expect, a strange looking armored fighting vehicle rounding a bend in the coastal road, and beyond it, something else the like of which he had never seen in his life. He could hear the whine of big engines, a deep roar as it came to life, a behemoth from the sea!

* * *

Troyak could see the same cold logic as he watched the outermost building at the apex of his flank fall to the onrushing German attack. One of the two 82mm mortars had been hit, reducing his interdicting fire and allowing the Germans to build up strength and press forward again. The ground between the main rail yard warehouse and that position was too exposed to send another squad up, and it would not be enough even if he did. He was being hit by a full company on that flank, outnumbered five to one there. It would be all he could do to get his men out now, and safely back to the hovercraft. He squeezed his collar mike and gave the reluctant order.

“First Platoon. Execute a fighting withdrawal. Fall back on the second mortar team. Leave nothing behind!”

What he desperately needed now was more firepower to delay the German advance, but all the APCs were engaged in the battle for the inland road where Sergeant Silenko had been holding the line with the two PT-76 tanks the BTR-50s, and another 60 Marines. All Troyak had close by was the hovercraft with its twin 14.5mm machine gun mount. Then he remembered Fedorov.

“Fedorov! Where are you?”

The reply came quickly in his earbud. “*Look over your shoulder, Sergeant.*”

Troyak looked and saw the ZSU-23 coming around the bend in the coastal road. Firepower! He heard the turret motors whir, saw the four

gleaming barrels depress and then quickly gave an order. "All teams go to ground for covering fire!"

The ZSU began to pour it on, the big 23mm shells ripping up the building the Germans had just occupied, blasting through doors, shattering windows, riddling walls and sending wood splinters flying like shrapnel. A German tank forging a way along the rows of oil tanks was in a position to sight the Russian APC and was turning its turret to take a shot, but not before the radar guided guns found it first. The tank was jolted by a rain of metal, a sustained burst of 120 rounds that pot marked its frontal armor, leaving deep welts there, though it could not penetrate the plating reinforced to a 70mm thickness.

The shock and concussion of being inside a metal box hit by 120 rounds was considerable, however, and it gave one of the crewmen in Fedorov's APC just the time he needed to shoulder an anti-tank missile and send it screaming at the lead tank. The HEAT round made short work of the armor, the resulting explosion literally ripped the turret off the tank's chassis and sent it spinning against a nearby oil tank with a loud crash.

The *Shilka* had saved the moment, and Fedorov looked to see Sergeant Troyak pumping his fist as he ran up to the ZSU. "Good job Colonel! But we, can't hold here much longer if they're willing to trade casualties for ground."

"Prepare to withdraw, Sergeant. I need to check with Zykov!"

He slipped down into the interior of the ZSU and began to call. "Fedorov to Zykov, come in. What is your status? Over."

There was a burst of static, and then Zykov's voice was heard in return. "*We found the camp commandant,*" he said. "*Quite dead, and with Orlov's service jacket.*"

"His service Jacket?"

"*Yes, sir. Stuffed in the Commissar's mouth. The man's neck was broken. It was clear that Orlov may have been here, but there's no sign of him. We're still searching every room, but without the jacket to home in on...*"

"Keep looking, Corporal. We're running out of time. Dobrynin has the Mi-26 back up and he says the Germans are turning the far left flank where the NKVD has been trying to hold that hill. If they get round there then they will be south of us on the road to Baku. Report as soon as you complete your search."

The situation was going from bad to worse. The Germans were lapping at his defensive positions like a rising tide. They had paid dearly for the small

advanced they had made, but from Dobrynin's report the force building up outside the town was at least a full regiment. Thus far the superior rate of fire from their AK-74s had been a real force multiplier in the defense, and their missiles had stopped the German planes and tanks. But the enemy was moving up their *Schwere* heavy weapons teams, and one of the PT-76s had been hit by an 88 millimeter round. He had to give orders to plant demolition charges, as they had planned in the event any of the APCs were hit and immobilized. They would incinerate it beyond recognition, and leave nothing usable behind.

They were running out of time. His little invasion force had bravely defended the town, but their primary objective was still not accomplished. Damn it! Where are you Orlov? You must know we're here for you? What in God's name are you doing?

Part II

The Eagle

“You are proud because you live in a rock fortress and make your home high in the mountains. ‘Who can ever reach us way up here?’ you ask boastfully. Don't fool yourselves! Though you soar as high as eagles and build your nest among the stars, I will bring you crashing down. I, the LORD, have spoken!”

— Obadiah 1: 3-4

Chapter 4

50 miles south east of Hokkaido, 1945

Captain Yeltsin, stared at the rising mushroom cloud, amazed on the bridge of *Orlan*. He would not have believed it if he had not seen it with his own eyes. It was the first time he, or any of his bridge crew, had witnessed such a thing. They knew they carried the weapons in the belly of the ship's magazines, but had never seen what they could really do when fired in anger. Everyone gaped at the horizon, awe struck.

His destroyer was alone now, *Orlan*, the sea eagle, alone on the rising swells of doom. She was the first of the *Project 21956* class stealth destroyers delivered just before the onset of hostilities. Yeltsin had been proud to sally forth from Vladivostok with the fleet flagship, yet now there was no sign of *Kirov*, and the distant, black hulk of the American battleship *Iowa* was the only thing on his horizon, rolling like a stricken whale.

They built them very tough in this day, he thought. No ship of our era could have survived that blast. He remembered that the Americans had dropped a pair of atomic weapons on fleets anchored off Bikini Island to see what the effects were. Many ships survived the blast intact like this, sinking in time from slow leaks and hull damage. That battleship will undoubtedly sink as well. It is little more than a hunk of floating mangled steel now, and God go with the men who died there today.

Yet when it was over he was amazed to see that a second wave of aircraft was still coming in from that same heading, the planes sweeping around the tall mushroom cloud as it cauliflowered up into the gloaming sky. And further out to the west there came another large group. Karpov had ordered him to cease fire so the P-900 carrying the tactical weapon would arrive safely on target. What was he planning now? Was he going to swat these remaining planes from the sky with another tactical airburst, or were they to resume conventional SAM defense? The question was moot, as the Fleet Commander was nowhere to be seen.

He steadied himself, shaking the horror of the moment from his mind and ordered his radio man to see if they could contact *Kirov* for further

instructions. Perhaps the ship had veered off and was lost in the haze. Yet they had nothing on radar but those damn American planes. There was no initial response but the hail continued, sounding more and more plaintive with each repetition... “*Orlan to Kirov. Come in, Kirov. Requesting battle orders. Over. Orlan to Kirov. Please respond. Over. Where are you, Kirov? Please come in. Orlan to Kirov. Where are you?...*”

Frustrated and knowing the enemy planes were just minutes away, Yeltsin stepped out of the enclosed armored citadel of the bridge and onto the weather deck, binoculars in hand. They had been steaming about two kilometers in front of the big battlecruiser, but when he scanned the sea in his wake, there was no sign of the ship. *Kirov* was gone! What had happened?

Yes, they had felt the harsh wind from the explosion, the shock wave and swell from the sea, but even his much smaller ship rode it out easily, and there were no enemy planes in close. Could *Kirov* have suffered the same fate as *Admiral Golovko*, struck by a late fired round from the stricken American battleship? No, there was no sign of an explosion aft, and *Kirov* was a very big ship. If there had been an incident, or even an accident aboard the ship itself, he would have seen something. Yet what was that strange glow on the sea? He would not have time to investigate further.

The hard seconds ticked away, and now it struck him that *Orlan* was alone, and soon to be faced by a massive air attack. Time was running out. He rushed back into the bridge.

“Air alert one! Resume SAM defense! Ready all close in defense systems!”

The klaxon howled out the alert, and within seconds the first sleek SAMs were ejecting again from the ship’s forward deck, streaking wildly into the sky to seek and destroy the American planes. The roar of the missiles continued, one after another, the skies streaked by ribbons of smoke as they sped away on hot white tails. Then he heard the low, distant drone of many engines, saw the blue specks in the sky drawing ever nearer amid the roiling explosion from his lethal SAMs

Perhaps a hundred planes massed above *Iowa* had been swept to oblivion by that detonation, but there looked to be another hundred behind them, veering left and right around the angry mushroom cloud and still bravely bearing down on his ship.

“How many missiles do we have remaining?” He shouted over the growing noise of the oncoming planes.

“Sir, I read 96 SAMs still remaining and ready to fire.”

But there was a second group of aircraft off their starboard side, the planes off *Ticonderoga* and the remainder of Sprague’s carrier group, at least 160 or more contacts. He was now being attacked by nearly 280 enemy aircraft, three planes for every missile they had on the primary SAM system. They had 56 more missiles on the Kashtan system, and 8700 rounds on the 30mm Autocannons. If it came to that things will be very bad, he thought. Very bad indeed.

Sheer mass and brutal determination had been at the heart of war fighting in this era. In the beginning the Germans danced and maneuvered, running armored rings around their sluggish opponents. Four years later the allies were a massive juggernaut, virtually unstoppable, and relentlessly grinding down their enemies by the sheer weight of massed fire and steel. The Americans had beaten down the Japanese by simply out-producing them, building hundreds of ships and thousands of planes. And when Japan finally sent her last armored gladiators out, *Yamato* and *Musashi*, the Americans simply swarmed over them with relentless air strikes, like bees against a lion. *Yamato* was hit by eleven torpedoes and six bombs before her magazines exploded sending a mushroom cloud six kilometers high that was seen over 90 miles away in Japan. *Musashi* was even tougher, and took 19 torpedo hits and 17 bombs before she finally capsized and sank.

Any ship could be sunk, Yeltsin knew. Look what happened to *Admiral Golovko* when the Americans scored just one lucky hit—more a fortunate miss, as they probably never even saw the stealthy warship. They had been firing at the much larger silhouette of *Kirov*, and simply missed, the rounds falling short to strike *Golovko* by sheer chance. It will only take one or two hits to do the same to us...

Now the harsh logic of war was apparent to him. His ship was never meant to oppose this many targets. It was designed to fight as an integrated part of a surface action group, with fighters from the carrier *Admiral Kuznetsov* overhead and the support of four or five other ships all contributing to its survivability. *Orlan* was meant to fly with a flight of other proud eagles, and without them the ship was doomed. Where was *Kirov*?

“Radar, report surface contacts aft.”

“Sir, my scope is clear. I read no surface contacts on the aft quarter.”

“Sonar! Go to active search. Report any contacts within five kilometers of the ship.”

Sir, aye, active search....” There was a brief delay as the sonar pinged out its plaintive call, still echoed by the communications officer as he continued his hail: *“Orlan to Kirov. Come in, Kirov. Requesting battle orders. Over. Orlan to Kirov. Please respond. Over. Where are you, Kirov? Please come in...”*

“Sir, I have no undersea contacts within five kilometers. Continuing search.”

Where are you Kirov?

Karpov had said something that he suddenly recalled now:

“There is one thing more...Should it come down to nuclear weapons, I must tell you that our experience leads me to believe that our position in this timeframe could be affected by a detonation.”

“What do you mean?” Yeltsin still had the same question in his mind now *“Affected in what manner?”*

“It is impossible to say. We have already seen how a massive release of explosive energy sent us here. A nuclear detonation, close enough, could send us somewhere...else...”

Clearly it has sent you somewhere else, Karpov, but it left us behind... unless... Might another nuclear detonation blow a hole in time for Orlan to sail away to safety? His statement to Karpov had carried that hope.

“Perhaps this might also be a way for us to get back to our own time again.”

“That thought occurred to me,” said Karpov. *“We might kill two bears with one shot. If we do have to teach the Americans a lesson, and it changes the history in our favor, that will be one thing. If it also sends us home, so much the better.”*

“And if it puts two thousand men in an early grave?” The voice of Doctor Zolkin echoed in his mind now. *“What then, Karpov?”*

What then?

Should he follow Karpov’s lead and blast the oncoming American strike wave from the sky? And what about those fast battleships out there chasing him at 33 knots? He had sixteen missiles and he had seen Karpov put six *Moskit IIs* on the American battleship. It was still firing before the final blow ended that battle! He had three special warheads as well. He could use one to deal with the contacts to the southwest. The ship’s missiles could then be concentrated on the remainder of the Halsey air group.

Then there would be two madmen at large in the history, he thought

grimly. He looked at the men of his bridge crew, tense yet alert, performing their duties by reflex, following the protocols of their training with expert skill. His ship was also answering the call of war, engines strong and running full out, weapons firing with smooth efficiency, missile after missile, each one killing a man out there in the wild sky—a brave, brave man who may have lived a long and happy life were it not for the obscenity of this moment, this awful blight on the face of time.

Karpov has done his worst and then he leaves me here in the soup, he thought. What should I do? Do I fight to preserve the lives of my ship and crew, and at any cost? The light gleamed on his high forehead, the years taking most every hair that once grew there in his youth. He was a veteran of twenty five years in the Russian Navy, in line for a promotion, ready to add another stripe to his cuff and sew in a bigger star there as Rear Admiral Yeltsin. What did any of it matter now? Was he fighting for Russia here? Would anything he or his ship do here matter under the crushing weight of the decades to come? Something told him that he could only worsen the fate of his nation if he added to the grievous harm Karpov had already done.

He decided.

Yeltsin walked slowly over to his executive officer and quietly told him to summon the ship's chief engineer, Yeremenko. When the man arrived on the bridge the missiles were firing fast and furious from the destroyer's forward deck, streaking out to find and kill the American planes. One missile—one kill. The math was ruthless and unerring, yet with each kill the number of missiles remaining ticked one notch lower.

"Yeremenko," Yeltsin said quietly, his voice low so that no other members of the bridge crew could hear him. "I need you to prepare to scuttle the ship."

"Sir?"

"Yes, Yeremenko. The battle looks to be a glorious event out there now as our missiles punish the enemy at range like this, but the ammunition is limited. The range is closing fast. I calculate that even if every missile strikes and kills an enemy plane, we will still be attacked by well over a hundred aircraft in the next twenty minutes. Our autocannons may get five or ten more, but the rest will get their chance with us, and I expect we will be hit. You saw what happened to the *Admiral Golovko*."

"Yes sir....But what about *Kirov*? The men say they cannot see the ship off the bow any longer."

“We don’t know what happened. We have no radar contacts and there is nothing wrong with the Fregat system. The ship vanished shortly after that detonation, yet we remain. Yeremenko...The Americans must not be allowed to obtain the technology aboard this ship: the computers, weapons systems, reactors, warheads. Understood?” He finally got to the heart of the matter.

Yeremenko gave the Captain a wide eyed look, realizing what he was saying. The Captain did not believe they would survive this attack. How was it possible, a ship like *Orlan* taken down by the old planes like this flown by men who were grey haired great grandfathers before they were even born? Yeltsin was telling him the worst. The ship would have to be destroyed. There must be nothing left for the Americans to find, because if they were ever to salvage their wreckage they could leap ahead decades in a single bound. Yet the next obvious question came to him, and Yeltsin saw it in his eyes even before he spoke the words.

“But... But what about the men, sir?”

Yeltsin just looked at him, saying nothing, and Yeremenko knew that they, too, could never be taken alive by the Americans. The Captain continued.

“Is there a way we could use one of the special warheads?” Yeltsin’s eyes were searching now. “It would be quick, complete, and painless. It would be over before anyone knew it was happening—perhaps just like the fate of the Americans out there. An eye for an eye...”

Yeremenko was silent, nodding after a moment, his eyes heavy with grief. “I will do what I can, sir. I think it can be arranged. But is there no other way, Captain?”

Yeltsin had no answer, no alternative. “Carry on, Mister Yeremenko. We may have very little time.”

Lost in eternity, but with no time to spare. Now they had to hasten to arrange their own demise! The irony of the situation cut Yeltsin deeply as he turned away, the sound of the missiles firing now a strident rebuke.

Chapter 5

Tibbets was up early that morning, watching the ordnance crews in the secret hanger on North Field, Tinian. The whole squadron was flying today. The call had come in late the previous night, and they were told to be ready with all planes—including those of the 509th Composite Air Group with their special “Silverplate” bomb bay modifications.

They were stuffing something really sinister in the belly of his plane today, he knew. He wasn’t sure what to expect, really, but he knew it would be spectacular. The briefing and training he had completed had prepared him for the most difficult job any man could ever be asked to do—deliver the bomb in an act of supreme hostility to beat down a defiant enemy with overwhelming force and more violence than he could possibly imagine.

His plane had come all the way from Wendover Army Air Field in Utah, hopping to Guam and then on to Tinian where it arrived July 6. They changed the plane’s tail symbol and Victor number, and then the long training runs started dropping pumpkin bombs over Japan, big fat high explosive conventional bombs that looked almost identical to the thing they were loading that day. He had hit Kobe and Nagoya with a couple of practice runs, but they were cities. Now the word came down that he was being sent up to go after ships at sea!

“Who ever heard of a B-29 being sent out to look for a ship, Deak?” he said to Captain William S. “Deak” Parsons, who would serve as the Chief Weaponeer on the *Enola Gay* that day, arming the bomb in flight to avoid any mishaps on takeoff.

“Sounds as crazy to me as it does to you,” said Parsons. “But that’s our primary. They’re sending the whole group up.”

“Well, hell, I thought we were supposed to go with just three planes?”

“They want the sky full of wings,” Colonel. “Scuttlebutt says these ships are using some slick new rocket weapon for air defense. They chopped up a couple carrier air groups the other day, and so now they think if they put enough B-29’s up there it will increase the chance of our plane getting over the target safely.”

“I’m not sure whether I should be reassured by that or not. But look, Deak, we never trained to hit a fast moving target at sea. I was supposed to

put this thing on a city.”

“You may end up doing exactly that,” said Parsons. “Halsey is out after these Russian ships now, and he’ll likely get the job done before we even get there.”

“Yeah? Then why all this theater?”

“Because the Russians lobbed one of these things Halsey’s way this morning, that’s why...” He thumbed at the special ordnance pit where the bomb they had come to call “Little Boy” was still sitting ominously on its trailer cradle, ready to be loaded into the plane.

Tibbets gave him a look of real surprise. “The Russians have the goddamned bomb?”

“That’s what I heard.”

“And they used it on Halsey?”

“Fired the damn thing from a rocket, but it didn’t hit anything. Word is it was a deliberate show of force to try and get us to back off. They think the Russkies want all of Hokkaido, and that they sent these new ships of theirs out to warn us off.”

“God almighty...”

“You’ll hear all this in the pre-flight briefing, Colonel. I got it through back channels. I may even be shoveling shit here for all I know. But I think you’ll have a secondary target on this mission too, in case we can’t find these Russian ships or Halsey gets to them first. Hell, we’re out here loading for bear, but they may even call the whole damn mission off. We were going to hit Japan last week, and that never went down.”

The sound of a siren blowing in the distance pulled their attention to the command barracks at the other end of the field. Tibbets looked to see something odd there. They were lowering the flag to half mast. The only other time he saw something like that was when FDR died. What was going on? A jeep was racing across the field right towards their hanger, and the two men stepped outside as it came rolling up in a billow of dust. The driver was an Army Air Corps Sergeant, who saluted crisply.

“Colonel Tibbets, sir?”

“Yes, I’m Tibbets.”

“I’m to tell you your mission is on, sir, and the pre-flight briefing has been moved up.”

“Moved up? When is it scheduled?”

“Right now, sir. I’m your wheels to the briefing bunker. Haven’t you

heard, sir?”

“Soldier, I’ve been locked up in this hot house of a hanger here for the last five hours. Heard what?”

“The *Iowa*, sir. The Russians dropped the bomb on the Big Stick. She’s gone, sir.”

Tibbets gave him an incredulous look. “Gone?” He looked at Parsons. “Come on, Deak, we’ve got a briefing to go to. Let’s get a move on.”

The two men were up and on to the back of the jeep and it sped away, across the wide airfield for the command bunker. Tibbets folded his arms, jaw set, and looked over at Parsons.

“Secondary target? What do you figure this is all about, Deak?”

“Well I thought about that when I heard the rumor, and I could only come up with one name on the list of potential targets.”

“How do you call it?”

“Vladivostok...”

* * *

After Airman Bains pulled the firing lever he felt an sudden lift as the heavy ASM-N-2 BAT bomb fell from the fuselage of his *Helldiver* and ignited its rocket engine. Lord almighty, he thought as he watched the ponderous weapon surge ahead. He had lined it up right on the target, and the radar was supposed to do the rest. *Kirov* would have seen to it that the radar was useless—but *Kirov* was gone, and the technicians aboard *Orlan* had not had time to reprogram their jammers for the odd frequencies the Allies were using. The Bat Bomb had eyes, and it forged on beneath the flights of dark blue planes, its radar seeking the slippery target ahead.

Even lined up on the ship when fired, it was still hit and miss. The system was in its infancy, the first radar guided missiles ever deployed. The odd contours and radar scattering coating on *Orlan*’s hull and superstructure made it very difficult to acquire, but in a strange quirk, it locked on to a low flying *Avenger* coming in to make its torpedo run on *Orlan*, and was homing right on its tail!

As the weapon approached, the skies above and around the ship were bursting with fire, scored by missile wakes as the shorter ranged *Kashtan* system engaged with its combined missile/cannon close in defense. Yeltsin had been correct. The enemy planes in Halsey’s second wave had been heavily engaged by their medium range SAMs, their ranks thinned

appreciably with over seventy more kills. But now the missile count ran down to just 24, and the last of Halsey's brave wing was overhead, diving on the ship even as radar reported another 160 aircraft at twenty kilometers and coming at 400kph. In three minutes they were swarming over the ship as the *Kashtans* fired full out.

The missiles found two dozen planes, the cannons snarled at one after another, dropping six low flying torpedo planes off the starboard side. They saw the single *Avenger* hurtling in low some twenty degrees aft and the system rotated quickly, its great robot arms swinging the six barreled Gatling guns around to spin out a hail of 30mm rounds. They hit the *Avenger*, and it fire-balled before plummeting into the sea. The gun shifted quickly to the next target, its barrels steaming as they lifted up to fire at a swooping *Hellcat* trying to deliver a 500 pound bomb. The burning *Avenger* briefly masked the Bat Bomb, and it came barreling in to smash *Orlan* on the aft quarter, blasting the thin composite and aluminum hull with a 1000 pound bomb. Bains never saw the weapon hit. He had already turned for home, but he heard the radio chatter of his fellow aviators call out the hit, and crossed his fingers, hoping it had been his bomb that scored the kill. His luck was still good that day.

* * *

Orlan shuddered with the hit, a billowing cloud of dirty brown smoke enveloping the aft quarter of the ship when the bomb went off. The ship rolled with the impact, listing to the port side and then rolling back again, and speed fell off noticeably. The bomb had blown right through the hull, immolated three compartments there, ruptured the main deck, blasted away the helicopter on deck, and now a raging fire started. The speed deficit resulted from thick shrapnel blasting downward and striking the propulsion drive shafts, many decks below. They had almost blown completely through the ship. Another ten feet and the bottom of the hull would have been breached.

It was a near mortal blow but the *Sea Eagle* was still alive. Chief Engineer Yeremenko felt the blast as he was working in the engineering bay. He had managed to get one of the special warheads mounted on a test bench and was performing a manual arm routine with three technicians when the ship jolted with the impact of the Bat Bomb. It was agonizing work. The technicians

with him thought the Captain had ordered the warhead made ready to use in the growing fight, but Yeremenko knew the worst. It wasn't for the Americans this time. No... This time it's for us. All of us.

He found it difficult to look the other men in the eye, and was increasingly nervous. There was just one further step he needed to perform. He would have to hot-wire the warhead on the test bench to a live fire control system on the ship, but he did not want to do this in front of the other men, for obvious reasons.

"Alright," he said. "This will do. From the sound of that we just took a pretty bad hit. You men get aft and see what you can do. I'll finish up here."

When they had gone he returned to the work, banana clipping wires to the warhead detonators and running a connection to a nearby wall panel. He managed to patch in to the ship's fire control system and reroute the signal cables for the number ten P-900 missile silo to the warhead he had here on the test bench. Only now the pulse of energy would not command a simple missile launch, but instead order the detonation of the warhead.

The sound of men running to try and fight the fires aft was loud and harassing as he worked, and it was tearing him up inside. They were out there fighting for the ship—fighting for their lives. Here he was quietly clipping a wire on the life lines of each man aboard, and ready to incinerate them all.

Yeremenko had known Yeltsin for over fifteen years, and served on two other ships with him. He knew the man to be a sober, no-nonsense officer, with sound judgment and a fair hand. The Captain knew what was going to happen here. It was simple math, and the Americans had overcome the ships formidable SAM defense by sheer weight of numbers. My God, he thought, they flew right through that mushroom cloud, right around it to get at us! What kind of men are these?

They were the men who had just fought and won a long four year war that had inflicted 36 million casualties in the Pacific region alone. They said they would be coming, and here they were, fighting, dying, yet determined to put their bombs and torpedoes on the targets they were assigned. Yeremenko knew the ship would not last another fifteen minutes.

He walked to the ship's command interlink to call the Captain. "I am ready, sir," he said. "I have everything routed to the number ten missile on the P-900 system. To do this I had to disable that silo and route the firing command signal here to the test bench. But if you activate missile number ten on your board and fire..." The silence on the line spoke volumes as he

waited. Then he heard Yeltsin's voice. Low, weary, as if the weight of every man's life on the ship, and all their successive generations was now on his shoulders.

"Standby, Yeremenko."

The Engineering Chief waited, the lights suddenly flickering. If they lost power....What then?

* * *

Ziggy Sprague was on the bridge of Old Wisky, the battleship *Wisconsin*, really one of the newest ships in the fleet. But the men called her "Old Wisky" and that was well enough. It was spelled that way too, without the letter "h", and sometimes they would capitalize the K so the last two letters would stand for *Kentucky*. That was also a ship slated for the *Iowa* class, BB-66, though it was never completed. Years later, the *Wisconsin* was fated to collide with the destroyer escort USS *Eaton* on a foggy night off the Virginia coast. The big battlewagon almost took the entire bow off *Eaton*, and *Wisconsin* had a 100 foot section of the bow made for *Kentucky* fitted at the Norfolk Naval ship yard to repair her damage. After that the ship had even more reason to bear a nickname composed of the abbreviations of two states. How the sailors of WWII came up with the name, as if they had some strange intuitive knowledge of the ship's fated collision in 1956, no one really knew. Some said it was because the ship had some parts that had been originally machined for the *Kentucky* when it first put to sea.

Call it what you will, it was a mean and angry ship at that moment when Ziggy Sprague spied the low, burning silhouette of what looked to be a light cruiser or destroyer on his horizon. They had been sailing full out at 33 knots to catch the Russians when word came in that the *Iowa* had engaged. Then they saw it, the massive mushroom rising from over the far edge of the sea. It wasn't long before he learned what had happened. The Russians had the bomb! He was still; astounded to think that was the case, but they had fired one across Admiral Halsey's bow as a warning shot that morning. Now, as the long day ended, a second sunset appeared on the horizon, and *Iowa* was gone in a hot minute.

My God, this weapon makes a whole new thing of war, he thought. No matter how big and tough we build them, if you could drop an atomic bomb on a ship it was history. Another man might have been chastened by the sight

of that mushroom cloud, and inclined to steer clear of an enemy that could wield such a weapon, but not Ziggy Sprague.

“God-damnit, they hit *Iowa* with the bomb!” He said aloud, and most on the bridge had no idea what he was even talking about. They had heard rumors, whispers passed from one hammock to the next below decks. They knew they were building the bombs bigger, the ships faster, the guns and planes better every year. Now they had something really big, and it was going to change everything. The Russians had been lobbing some mean ordnance our way, they said, but we have something even bigger.

“Damn Russians think they can back us off, do they?” Sprague was mad as a hornet. “Well they’ve got another thing to learn then. I’m taking Wisky up there and I’m going to blow the living hell out of anything left after ‘Big T’ gets finished.”

He could see that the boys from *Ticonderoga* were over the enemy now, swarming like angry hornets. Years later American carrier strike planes would be named exactly that, the “Superbugs” that had gone after Karpov and the Red Banner Fleet in 2021, but Sprague would know nothing of that.

He gave the order to announce his arrival with a salvo from his A and B turrets up front. The roar of the big 16 inch guns gave him great satisfaction.

“Helm, come right ten degrees and ready on all main guns.”

Ziggy was going to get his broadside in one way or another. “Save something for me, Big T,” he said under his breath. “I want a piece of these bastards.”

He would get his wish that day.

Chapter 6

Yeltsin was on the bridge, where any Captain should be in battle, when the second bomb came in. He had been maneuvering the ship, the speed reduced to just 20 knots now with the damage aft affecting his propulsion shafts. The fire there had finally been contained, but the damage was extensive. The Bat Bomb had taken a huge bite out of the ship with its thousand pounds of explosive. He had no idea what had actually struck the first blow, but it was fitting that it would be a fledgling missile, a guided missile developed by the Americans in WWII. The Allies had seen the weapon modeled for them throughout many hard engagements with the mysterious raider *Geronimo*, and ideas for weapons soon became deadly reality in time of war. *Orlan*, with Russia's latest missile technology from the year 2021 had been punishing the American air wings fiercely, now she was struck a hard blow from a radar guided glide bomb. Tit for tat.

The second bomb was a standard 500 pounder delivered by a lucky *Helldiver* that had survived the Russian missile gauntlet, and it did the one thing that would now seal the ship's fate, smashing down on the deck very near the *Kashtan* CWIS system and blowing it to pieces. *Orlan* still had another 18 SAMs in her forward deck VLS tubes, but now there looked to be about 140 planes bearing down on her from all compass headings. The math was simple and blunt.

It was over.

The Russian ship's surface radar had also just spotted another large contact on the horizon, a second battleship from the looks of its tall main mast and superstructure on the long range imaging system. Yeltsin saw the ship fire its forward guns, blasting out a challenge in spite of what had happened to its sister ship. Minutes later they heard the wail and whoosh of the rounds coming in, and saw six big water spouts where they fell off the starboard side of the ship.

"CIC," he said resolutely. "Activate ship-to-ship missile system, P-900 missile number ten please."

"The young officer may have thought it odd to be enabling just one missile under these circumstances. They had seen what *Kirov* had done to the first American battleship, then he realized what the Captain was ordering—it

was the number ten missile! They were going to blow this ship to oblivion as well!

“Sir, Aye, Aye. Your number ten missile is keyed and ready.”

Yeltzin walked slowly over to the CIC station, hearing a watch stander call out yet another warning.

“Conn—torpedo wakes off the port bow! Spread of three!”

The Captain saw the horizon light up and knew the enemy battleship had fired yet again. “Steady as you go,” he said calmly. He had reached the CIC and was inserting his firing key. The men watched his deliberate action, as though he had all the time in the world, one man looking out to see the torpedo wakes that had been reported with obvious fear on his face.

“Helm, come left ten degrees.” The Captain ordered an evasive turn, winking at the young Lieutenant, which gave the man heart. He had seen the Captain avoid three torpedoes in the last five minutes, and now he turned his attention to his equipment with renewed confidence.

No man should die in fear, thought Yeltsin.

The sound of incoming heavy rounds loomed in the tense air, drowning out the drone of the aircraft overhead. Too bad for them, he thought. They made it through our missile umbrella only to die here, just as their spirits were rising with the heat of their attack.

He caught the first column of seawater as the rounds came in, very near the ship in what he thought to be an amazing feat of naval gunnery. Then he flipped open the missile fire toggle and pushed his thumb down hard.

* * *

“**Make** your range 28,000 yards and fire when ready!” Sprague turned to the Bridge gunnery officer. “Let’s blow the fuck out of them!”

“Sir, aye, aye!” The claxon sounded a warning and then *Wisconsin* fired, her full broadside lighting up the gathering evening with bright orange fire that glowed on the swells of the sea, beating down the waves with their fierce concussion. He counted the seconds as the rounds streaked out, arcing up and up and then tipping over to begin the dreadful downward plunge. The Admiral was looking at his watch as the rounds began to fall. Now was the time.

The horizon erupted with white fire, a searing flash of light followed by a rippling crack that shook the ship with an intense vibration. Everyone on the

bridge shirked with alarm. There came a sudden wind, awful in sound and effect, as if some great portal had opened, the gates of hell itself yawning at the edge of oblivion.

The evil orange glow illuminated surrounding clouds, slowly fading as the fireball expanded outward like a star going supernova. The evening sky was bathed in the light for miles in every direction, and the golden fire of the explosion glimmered on the rising seas like molten gold. Soon the light deepened to a tawny shade of ocher, reddening like the early crimson light of sunrise. Clouds evaporated, to a fine steam above the roiling fireball, crowning it with pale smooth inverted dishes of fog. The shock wave radiating out from the erupting column raked the sea to lathered foam as it spread out in a perfect circle about the base, where a raging vortex of fire seemed to suck the ocean up into the reddening fist of fire above. High up, in the windswept heights above, ice clouds formed in a pristine nimbus that fell like gossamer veils to envelop the fireball in a shroud of mist. The great incandescent dome threw off a cascade of fire falls, which billowed down into the boiling ocean, causing it to hiss as the water fled to steam.

“Holy mother of God...” Ziggy Sprague was reaching for his field glasses, the intense light abated enough for him to see the broiling fireball churning up at the top of a seething column of seawater. He had seen ships go up before, but never like this!

“Looks like we hit the sons-of-bitches!” It was Captain John Wesley Roper, skipper of the *Wisconsin*, grinning from ear to ear.

“It does indeed,” said Sprague. “That looks like something a whole lot bigger than what we were firing.”

“We may have hit their magazines, Admiral. When *Yamato* went up she sent up a column of smoke and steam like that over three miles high.”

Sprague gave the Captain a look of agreement. “Well then,” he sighed. “I suppose that settles the matter. Radio Admiral Halsey. Tell him Old Wisky has evened the score. Tell him we just blew the Russians into the ninth level of hell.”

“With pleasure, sir.” Roper saluted, heading for the radio room with the good news. Some minutes later the reply came back from Halsey. It was simple, direct, and to the point.

“Sir, the Admiral sends his regards, and says he’ll get you a case a beer for that one.”

Sprague just smiled. It was finally over.

* * *

But it wasn't over. The politicians weren't done with it yet.

When word hit the papers on the fate of *Iowa* the nation was up like wailing banshees and wanting a rope around Stalin's neck. The headline in the New York Times bawled out the sentiment:

RUSSIANS SINK BATTLESHIP *IOWA* WITH ATOMIC BOMB!
TRUMAN WARNS STALIN OF A 'RAIN OF RUIN'
US Readies Atomic Weapons In Reprisal

Truman was on the radio at once, informing the nation:

"We have known the Russians have been working on these weapons for some time, as early as 1941, and before this war began for our great nation. Well, I am here to tell the Russians, and all of you today, that we have been working on them as well. Our friends in Great Britain have also been working, feverishly, day and night, to harness this great power, and we have succeeded.

"The weapons I now speak of are no ordinary bombs. They have more power than 20,000 tons of TNT; more than two thousand times the blast power of the British "Grand Slam," which is the largest bomb ever yet used in the history of warfare...Until this dark day.

"It is an atomic bomb. It is a harnessing of the basic power of the universe. The force from which the sun draws its power has been loosed against us in an act of utter depravity. It is our believe that the Russians thought they might frighten us, and so secure their claims to territories occupied on the European Front and in the Pacific where this dastardly crime was perpetrated.

"To strike at one's enemy in war is expected. But to betray your allies in arms with an act of this magnitude is inexcusable, and it will not go unanswered.

"I can report this day that the Russian forces responsible for this attack have already been hunted down and utterly destroyed by elements of the United States Navy. Our own battleship

Wisconsin, sister ship of the stricken Iowa, has had the final word at sea, but I will have yet one more word here today. The enormity of what the Soviet Union has done cannot be pardoned. It is treachery at its blackest root, perfidious betrayal of a wartime friend, and it shall be answered in no uncertain terms.

“I am today demanding, and ordering, that all units of the Red Army west of the Oder River must withdraw to Russian territory at once, and that no unit of the Soviet army will be permitted to land anywhere on the Japanese mainland, or on any islands in the Pacific that were the former territory of Japan.

“If the Soviet government does not accede to this order and ultimatum immediately, they may expect a rain of ruin from the air the like of which has never been seen on this earth. Behind this air attack will follow sea and land forces in such number and with such power as they have not yet seen...”

The Russians, of course, denied any involvement in the attack the President was speaking of, claiming Truman and Churchill sought to define the post war era in their favor and refusing to withdraw from any territory then occupied by Soviet forces. In truth, they had no idea what Truman was talking about, and said as much.

The Presidential order went out that same day, and it was answered by the 509th Composite Air Group on the island of Tinian. And so three days after the Second World War ended, the third war started, and it would rage for nine days of continued madness until the world had finally had enough.

* * *

Colonel Tibbets got the call two hours later. It was Go, Go, Go! The entire 509th would fly with him, as well as over a hundred other B-29s in a massive show of force intended to convince the Russians that any further deployment or use of atomic weapons would lead to their swift and utter destruction.

In truth, the United States was taking the gravest possible risk in hand with the order that Tibbets received that day. Yes, they had the bomb ready just as Truman had boasted, but there were only two available, and both were in the Pacific. Operations at the ultra top secret Manhattan Project in New

Mexico were ramping up as never before in a desperate effort to enrich more nuclear fuel and assemble more bombs should they be needed.

The US was already well behind in the race to atomic supremacy. Now they believed the Russians had tested their first bomb in the North Atlantic as early as August of 1941, though the Allies had first thought the Germans were responsible when the *Mississippi* went down. Years of intelligence work had slowly brought them to another conclusion—that it was a Russian ship, and not the Germans, who had attacked TF-16 in the North Atlantic. It was that conclusion that fed the fires of suspicion where the Russians were concerned for the remainder of the war.

The Russians had the bomb... Why they never used it again on the Germans remained a mystery, and it was eventually decided that the considerable resources, technical knowhow and time required to produce a bomb while under all out attack from Germany had prevented them from creating any more bombs until late in the war. By the time they were ready, Germany had already been defeated.

Yet now the Russians appeared again, with the same blighting footprint on the hallowed ground of peace as before. They used it not on their enemies, but on their friends, or so the Americans believed. They blasted yet another American battleship in a gruesome echo of the dastardly attack made in 1941. Only a very few knew of the fate of the *Mississippi* and TF-16, and of these no more than ten men alive on the earth at that time knew all of what had really transpired.

But none of that mattered now. Tibbets got the order, and the *Enola Gay* got the bomb. The planes were in the air the day after the *Iowa* was sunk, and not two hours after the Soviet authorities had issued a venomous denial of all charges leveled against them and a refusal to withdraw.

The skies were bright and clear that morning, but they had floodlights up to illuminate the runway just the same. The video cameras would record the takeoff for posterity, a newsreel for the ages. One by one the big engines sputtered to life, turning over and spinning the massive props on the enormous engines of the bombers. Tibbets felt the vibration of all four engines shaking his plane, and just before he taxied away he leaned out the side window and waved. Then it was out on the tarmac and down the long runway of North Field, Tinian.

“Hey JS, look at ‘em go!” A group of Seabees were watching near the hangers. “And to think we built the damn airfield that made all this possible.”

They had seen the bombers go many times before, but never with this kind of fanfare, and by direct Presidential order. It was awesome, as all real military power was meant to be. And it was terrible beyond the soul's capacity to measure, 425 superfortresses in the sky, and one with the power of the sun itself in its belly, all flying north for the vengeance the nation demanded. Only the final raids on Japan had been bigger, with two massive raids involving 464 and 520 planes in late May.

There was no sign of the awful fire that had ravaged the seas the night before. The B-29 bombers were in the air, flying in a massive formation northwest from Tinian. It was a little over 2000 miles to Vladivostok, and with a range just over 3500 miles the bombers would not be returning to the island that day. Instead they would land on airfields cleared and now well established on Okinawa.

If the Russians had any more ships equipped with their new missile weaponry, they would have 425 planes to shoot at, and odds were that the *Enola Gay* would get through. The Russians had built at least two bombs, and the great risk was that they had more. What if they were to load one on another of their fearsome new aerial defense rockets to blast the entire bomber formation? In the end it was decided that, in spite of Truman's dire fair warning, the US would have the element of surprise.

Part III

Invincible

*“One day you wake up and realize the world can be conquered...
I'm going to put a mask on and scrawl my name across the face
of the world...”*

— **Austin Grossman:** *Soon I will Be Invincible*

Chapter 7

“Captain?”

Karpov heard the voice, but it seemed to quaver in the air about him with a strange echo. He backed slowly away from the viewport, seeing the distant cloud of doom slowly fade in his vision, feeling dizzy and feather light.

There came a sudden mist, rising thickly about the ship, and many on the bridge crew thought they had been enveloped in the impenetrable haze that accompanied nuclear detonations at sea, known as the “Wilson Cloud,” but this was not the case. The mushroom cloud was gone, as if blown away by a sudden wind, as a man might blow out a candle flame. And there was no wind, only the dull grey of the enveloping fog, and a sudden chill, as if the ship had fallen off the edge of the world long feared by mariners of old, and was now adrift in eternity.

The Captain turned, his eyes glazed over, his face tortured with emotion. Rodenko was at his side at once. “Captain, sir... Are you alright? *Mishman!* Summon the doctor to the bridge.”

“No, no. Belay that...” Karpov held up a hand as if to reassure his *Starpom*, and now his numbed brain began to work again, and his senses began to assemble the clues in his mind—the light, the changing color of the sky, the eerie luminescence of the sea, and the hushed silence of the enveloping fog. He knew what had happened.

“Radar, report all contacts,” he said quickly.

“Captain, my screen is empty, sir. I have no readings.”

The helicopters they had up were gone as well. They had the KA-226 and one KA-40 aloft. The last was still in the helo bay.

“Sonar. Active pings. Report!”

“Con, sonar has been on active search for ten minutes. I can report no undersea contacts.” Tasarov was listening intently, monitoring his scope closely for any signal returns.

“Screw noise?”

“Sir, only our own turbines. I have no other registered harmonics or known sonic signatures.”

“What is the ship’s heading and speed?”

“Con, Helm. My rudder is steady on zero, three, five degrees northeast.

Speed thirty.”

“Ahead two thirds and steady on.”

“Sir, aye, ahead two thirds and steady as we go.”

Karpov folded his arms, his gaze still transfixed by the fog, which now began to waver in places, diffused with ethereal luminescence. He turned his head to Rodenko. “We have moved again,” he said quietly. “Moved in time....I can feel it. That detonation has sliced open eternity yet again, and the ship has fallen through, only who knows where we will end up this time.”

“We might be heading home, sir,” Rodenko suggested hopefully, but the captain said nothing, his eyes tightening, brow furrowed as he considered their situation. He stepped back from the citadel view ports and slipped slowly into the Captain’s chair, exhausted. The tension of the last few hours left him drained and spent. He could still feel the cool sheen of perspiration on his forehead, and he closed his eyes, grasping a moment of inner peace and calm. A shadow on his shoulder became Rodenko again, his arm extended with a cup of steaming coffee in hand.

Karpov looked up, smiling wanly. “Thank you, Rodenko.” He considered something briefly and then gave another order. “The ship will secure from level one alert. Assume level three, guarded watch, and secure all NBC equipment. Maintenance crews will conduct routine evolutions at their regular stations. Post watchmen with field glasses on the high weather decks and they are to observe in a 360 degree range about the ship.”

“At once, sir.” Rodenko was off, repeating the order as he was expected, and the tension on the bridge slackened noticeably.

“Mister Nikolin,” the Captain swiveled his chair toward the communications station. “Are you monitoring any radio traffic, ship-to-ship or otherwise?”

“No sir. My band is clear.”

“Please hail the *Orlan*. Request their position, course and speed.”

“Aye, sir.”

Karpov knew that with no contacts on the Fregat system the chances *Orlan* displaced with them were very slim. Perhaps the other ship did move, he thought. Who knows? But I am willing to bet it is nowhere within fifty kilometers of us now...here...wherever we are. God only knows what happened to them or what fate they suffered alone to face what was still unfought in 1945. I was such a fool to engage a force that size. It was simply too much for us to contend with.

Pride goeth before the fall, he thought. But where have we fallen?

“Mister Nikolin, activate the Tin Man optical cameras and feed the signal to the overhead HD display. Fore and aft, please, on split screen format.”

“Activating Tin Man, sir, aye.”

Karpov indulged himself, looking up at the display, though he saw only what he expected—the seemingly endless fog. Where were they, in some strange limbo where they would await their final judgment? It might be hours before they knew their fate this time. The ship’s systems could have been affected, as they were in past displacements. Then again, if they shifted forward again, would they see only the devastation of the war in 2021?

I was sent to try and buy us time to save that horror off, and now look what I have done! I couldn’t wait for the war in 2021, I gave it to them in 1945. Nikolin’s hail to *Orlan* now sounded like a funeral dirge.

“*Kirov to Orlan*. Come in Please. *Orlan*, please state position, course and speed, over. *Kirov to Orlan*—where are you? Come in please.”

“That will be enough, Mister Nikolin. I do not think they can hear us. Keep listening on your headset and report any radio traffic. Please monitor, AM, FM and Shortwave bands.” Karpov knew that if they were still in a world where life existed, he should be able to hear it murmuring on the radio soon.

Now the weight of what he had done began to feel like lead on his shoulders. He needed sleep, needed to rest, and stood on unsteady legs. “Mister Rodenko. You have the bridge. I will be in my quarters.”

* * *

The Vodka did something to renew his flagging soul. He sat at his desk for some time, staring at himself, until he realized how stupid he looked with his military cap on—Vladimir Karpov, the man who started World War Three.

They will destroy *Orlan*, he knew. There was simply too much force there for the ship to escape without our support. Together we might have run out into the Pacific, but alone the Sea Eagle was doomed. Even if we did survive that attack, our SAM inventory would have dwindled to next to nothing. Then all it would take is a couple of their fast carriers to finish us off—unless I wanted to fire off the last of our missiles and warheads. Yes, that might have put such fear into them that they would not dare to approach us again,

but we would be lost, outlaws, outcasts on the high seas, and they would have hunted us with every ship they had.

Fedorov was correct, as was Zolkin. They would have built three ships for every one we sank, and they would pursue and pursue until they made an end of us. I suppose I could have sailed to within range of one of their cities, and then perhaps they would listen to me if I threatened to destroy San Francisco. He shook his head with that thought, aghast. I have done enough harm to this world as it stands. I could not bear to believe I was the one responsible for what we saw in that bleak future, then I made a certainty of that.

He lay on his bunk, closing his eyes and letting himself fall into a deep, restless sleep. Sometime later he awoke, startled to see that Doctor Zolkin was sitting beside his bunk, a stethoscope around his neck and his doctor's bag open at his side.

"What are you doing here?"

"Now, now, rest easy," the doctor assured him.

"What time is it?"

"08:00 hours, at least insofar as the ship's chronometer is concerned."

"Morning?"

"The bridge hailed you three hours ago, and when no answer came Rodenko became concerned. He called me and I came to check on you."

Karpov saw the syringe on the nightstand. Then realized the doctor had also affixed an IV drip to his arm. "What have you done?" he said, the suspicion evident in his voice.

"Did you think I came here to shoot you full of drugs, Karpov? I'm afraid not. You appeared dehydrated and so I am simply giving you fluids."

"And that?" Karpov pointed at the syringe.

"A mild sedative to calm your sleep. You looked like you were having some real nightmares when I got here. Don't worry. It has already worn off by now. How do you feel?"

The Captain blinked, and took a deep breath. "Better, I suppose."

Zolkin nodded. "Better this than the vodka," he said.

Karpov's eyes darkened, but there was no point denying it. "I was not drinking heavily, Doctor. It was only a shot to calm my nerves. I assure you, I was fully competent—"

"No one is accusing you of inappropriate conduct, Captain, at least insofar as the vodka is concerned. I'm here to see to your wellbeing, nothing more."

Karpov looked away. “I should think you might also want to lecture me—wag a finger in my face now, eh? Well, what’s done is done, Zolkin.”

“No lecture, Captain. I spoke my mind at the officer’s meeting with the others. And yes, you have done what you have done, and I don’t suppose anyone can do anything about it now. It is all history, as they say. Though I have no idea how it will read in the decades ahead.”

Karpov realized he still did not know where they were. “Has Nikolin reported anything?”

“Not yet,” said Zolkin, reaching out to remove the IV drip and apply a bandage to Karpov’s arm. “But we do have something on the radar now. That’s why they called for you, some time ago.”

“And you let me sleep here?”

“The world will get on without Vladimir Karpov to watch over it for a few hours. You needed the rest—Doctor’s orders. I told Rodenko that they should simply monitor the contact and report if anything seemed dangerous.”

“What type of contact, airborne?”

“No, it appears to be a ship. Rodenko sent the helicopter to have a look around. It saw a ship on radar northeast of our position, about 150 kilometers out. We have been making a gradual approach for the last three or four hours. So I thought I would check in on you again to wake you. You should see the sky behind us, quite beautiful this morning.”

Karpov leaned forward, still feeling tired but much better now. “I think a good meal will work wonders for me now, Doctor. Tell Rodenko I’ll relieve him in an hour.”

“Very well, but don’t push yourself too hard, Captain. It’s not every man who gets to fight the American Navy in two different centuries in the span of forty-eight hours.” Zolkin stood up, closing his medical bag and setting a small container with medication on the night stand. “That’s for those times you may think you need more vodka, he said calmly. And I have personally found that one before bed is very handy. It will give you a good night’s rest.” Zolkin started for the door.

“Doctor...” Karpov swung his legs out of bed, leaning forward, elbows on his knees as he looked up at Zolkin.

“Yes, Captain?”

“Thank you... for your attendance here...”

“All in a day’s work, Mister Karpov. All in a day’s work.”

* * *

The food tasted better than he could remember for a very long time, and the Captain ate with real appetite now, feeling much more himself when he had finished. He wasted little time getting back up to the bridge, where he planned to make crew rotations and see about this ship on their horizon. The answer to many of the questions he took to his quarters could easily be on that ship.

Out on a weather deck for some fresh air, he looked at the sky for the first time. Zolkin was correct, it was strikingly beautiful behind them to the west, a ruddy orange glow there on the horizon, as if a second sun were rising in opposition to the eastern sun, which was slowly climbing. Very odd, he thought, wondering what caused the strange effect. The thought that it was a residual effect from the warhead he fired crossed his mind. Could they have fallen back into the waters of 1945 while he slept? This thought set him hastening to the bridge.

Along the way he stopped to talk with the men in the corridors and compartments below. He could see the questions in their eyes, wondering what was happening, and how the battle turned out. He told them not to worry, that all was in hand and that he would make a general announcement to the crew shortly.

“Are the Americans still after us, sir? Did we beat them?”

“I think we gave them much more than they wanted,” said Karpov. “They’ll learn not to tangle with the crew of this ship, eh?” He pointed to the deck as he said that, and the young seaman smiled.

Some minutes later he was back on the bridge in a new uniform, but he made a point of taking his service cap, no matter how ridiculous he thought he looked with it. They were up in the northern latitudes, and so he thought he might soon get back to his fur lined Ushanka. That was a hat!

“Captain on the bridge!”

“As you were, gentlemen,” he said briskly. “Anything to report, Mister Rodenko?”

“Surface contact, sir. We picked it up with the AEW Helo four hours ago. I thought it prudent to have a look around after you went below.”

“Well done. What did you find?”

“We have it on the Fregat system now, sir. It’s certainly a surface ship, making about 16 knots on a heading of 275 west.” He walked to the Plexiglas

screen, which triggered a bitter memory of the American fleet surging north at them just hours ago, the screen alight with hundreds of air/sea contacts. This time it was completely empty. There was not a single airborne contact reported, and only this one surface ship in the vicinity.

“What are those land formations to the north?”

“That would be the Aleutian Island chain, sir, Amchitka Island. The contact heading has been steady the last few hours and back traces to Dutch Harbor.”

“Then this is an American ship?”

“Possibly, sir.”

Karpov’s eyes narrowed. “How soon before we have them on our horizon?”

“Not long now. I would say another thirty minutes. We’re presently at 20 knots.”

“Helm. Go to thirty knots.” Karpov immediately ordered a speed change.

“Sir, Aye, ahead 30.”

“Getting curious, Captain?”

“This ship holds the answer to some very important questions, Rodenko. I intended to relieve you so you could get some rest, but can you carry on for another hour?”

“Certainly, sir.”

“Good... Then let’s see what is darkening our horizon this time.”

Chapter 8

They saw it twenty minutes later, barely visible on the horizon until Karpov ordered the Tin Man opticals to zoom in. Now they were looking at what appeared to be an elegant clipper ship steamer, hull painted white, with a fine swept bow, two stacks amidships and what looked to be three tall masts at intervals along the deck.

“That is commercial traffic,” said Karpov. “What would you say its displacement is?”

“Not more than five or six thousand tons, sir,” said Rodenko. They overlaid a metric display on the HD video feed, and the ship’s length appeared to be about 450 feet. Five lifeboats were prominently mounted along the main superstructure, but there were no visible gun turrets. It looked like an old steamer from a bygone era, but in remarkably good condition.

“Well what have we here?” said Karpov. “Let’s get closer. Continue on intercept course. The ship will come to level two action stations. Mister Samsonov, please activate the forward deck gun.”

“Aye, sir. Forward gun ready.”

The Captain was taking no chances, but as they closed the range it was apparent that the ship posed no military threat. Three minutes later Nikolin’s eyes brightened. “Sir, I’m picking up some Morse code.”

“Morse code? From that ship?”

“Possibly, sir. It is using a call sign of MPG. Very odd, sir.” He listened intently, jotting down something on his notepad. “It reads CQ, CQ, CQ, GZXW - MPG Calling ship off our port bow - requesting identification, KW – Back to you.”

“MPG?”

“Apparently a ship identifier call sign, sir.”

“Can we look that up, Mister Nikolin?”

“I will try, sir. But should I return this signal?”

“Use the radio and transmit in English. Ask them to identify themselves as well.”

Nikolin sent a standard hail, but the only reply they received was a continued stream of Morse code, nothing on voice radio. He used the ship’s computers to try and look up the call signs he was receiving, and found a

reference.

“I have a record in the ship registry, sir, but there are two references. One is for GZXW as the Canadian Pacific Steamships Company. The MPG designates this ship as the *Empress Of China*. I have looked it up in the ship database, and there is no current listing for a ship by that name.”

“Use the historical index,” said Karpov. “Find out if there were ships using that name in the past.”

“Right, sir. I have three references. They were all ocean steamship liners belonging to that same company, yet our image database would seem to match the first one: *Empress of China*, built by Naval Construction & Armament Co., Barrow, England for Canadian Pacific Steamships, LTD. The ship was making regular runs as a British Royal Mail Ship out of Vancouver BC to ports east, including Japan and sometimes even Vladivostok. Yokohama is listed as her most frequent Eastern Pacific terminal port.”

“You say it was built by the British? What year, Nikolin? When was it commissioned?”

“Laid down in 1890. Launched on the 25th of March, and her maiden voyage was 15 July 1891.”

“1891? Quite an old ship...How long was this ship in service? Does it list that information?”

“Yes, sir. The registry reads that the ship ran aground in rough seas and fog on 27 July 1911 off Yokohama. She was abandoned, salvaged and scrapped there in 1912.”

“My God! 1912? If that is, in fact, the *Empress of China*, then we...We must be somewhere between those dates, between 1891 and 1912! We must have moved further *back* in time, not forward.”

“We should verify this information, Captain,” said Rodenko. That ship could be a replica. We have never displaced to a time earlier than 1941.”

“Why would it refuse our radio hail and answer only in Morse Code? Nikolin... Signal them back in Morse. Give our callsign as KIRV. Tell them our ship’s chronometer is damaged. Request the current date and time.” It was a good ploy, because ship’s chronometers were essential to navigation in early decades.

Nikolin tapped out the message in Morse, and within minutes they received a reply. “Sir...They reply and state their ship’s chronometer currently reads 09:40 – 100708. That would be the 10th day of July—”

“1908?” The look of astonishment on Karpov’s face said everything.”

* * *

The ball dropped for the very first time in Times Square that year, marking the start of a long tradition counting down the last few seconds as time rolled on in its endless round. 1908 had begun with a flourish of celebration and renewed optimism, in an era where new firsts, and the energy of discovery still infused life with a sense of vigor and boldness.

People were different then. They were not tethered to one another by wires just yet, or slaves to modern devices like computers, touch pads, cell phones. Planes and cars were in their infancy, more items of fancy for the adventurous and the very rich than anything else. A man named Henry Ford would change all that later that year, when he began turning out the very first Model Ts from an assembly line in September. Oil was discovered on the Arabian peninsula for the first time in May of 1908, insuring that Ford's cars would have a steady and reliable source of fuel for the next 150 years.

The people of 1908 were not yet dependent on all these electronics and engines, the full bloom of a seed that was only now being planted in the fields of technology and industry. They were stronger in many ways than the denizens of our modern cities, taking life in their hands and carrying it on their broad shoulders in a way people in the modern world of 2021 would never understand. They were quieter of spirit, more settled, rooted to the land, much like the farmer Walt Whitman wrote about in his poetry, a man “of wonderful vigor, calmness, beauty of person; the shape of his head, the pale yellow and white of his hair and beard, and the immeasurable meaning of his black eyes—the richness and breadth of his manners...”

There was something of that farmer that was still the root and sinew of most people of that day. Life was more rustic, even in the big cities. It was raw, unrefined, and in some ways still vested with a quality of innocence. The world had not yet committed itself to the insanity of a world war yet, though that dreadful experience was just ahead as the century settled into its stride. It was to be a year of fire, of discovery, and first time achievements; a year of hard won races and marathon journeys of endurance. It was a year where the color of white was all the rage for navies and athletes, and for the strange and largely unexplained “white nights” that illuminated most of Europe and even parts of North America in early July.

Scientists and industrialists of that day were flush with the energy of

invention and discovery as well. A 40,000 year old Neanderthal skeleton was dug up in southwest France. Helium had been liquefied for the first time. The term schizophrenia entered the English language, darkening the ruminations of psychologists in all the days ahead. The Geiger counter was invented to detect an energy that few, if any, really understood in that day. The Nobel Prize in physics went to Gabriel Lippman for the first reproduction of colors in photography. Atomic theory was being pioneered by Ernest Rutherford at a time when a great future physicist like Edward Teller, inventor of the hydrogen bomb, was just being born. Astronomers discovered one of Jupiter's moons that year, and ruminated on comets and meteors, but failed to spot something else looming on the near horizon of the ecliptic plane, even now bearing down on planet earth.

Twelve days into the new year the first long distance radio message was sent from the Eiffel tower, marking a new era in communications. On a roll, the very next day the French pilot Henry Farman became the first European to fly roundtrip, heralding the onset of airline operations that would span the whole of the globe in decades to come. The first passenger flight actually occurred on May 14th that year, with many more to come in a time long before the endless security and check-in lines at modern day airports.

In New York City women's rights took a hit when the city passed an ordinance forbidding women to smoke. The men of the city were exempt, however, allowing them to preserve the ritual with cigar, pipe and cigarette as yet one more privilege they could lord over the fairer sex. Cincinnati Mayor Mark Breith also proclaimed that, "women are not physically fit to operate automobiles." Thankfully, the first railway tunnel under the Hudson River opened that year on February 21st, so they could go by train.

It was a good year for explorers when Shackleton climbed Mt. Erebus in Antarctica on March 5th, while at the opposite end of the earth, Frederick A. Cook claimed to reach North Pole—a proclamation that was later disputed and found to be false. In the US, one John Krohn began his walk around the entire perimeter of country, which was to take him all of 357 days. On wheels, the "Great Auto Race," an around the world marathon from New York to Paris kicked off on February 12th. They would head west to cross the US, planning to work their way up the coast through Alaska and cross the Bering Sea to Siberia where top German and American contenders would witness a truly earth shattering event before their journey ended.

Not to be upstaged by achievements in the burgeoning airline industry,

the “Great White Fleet,” a conglomeration of 16 American battleships and smaller escorts, pulled into San Francisco Bay May 5th while circumnavigating the globe and showing the world the US had a real blue water navy. Germany quickly responded by ordering the construction of four new battleships. A part of the US fleet smugly watched the explosion of an airship dirigible over San Francisco Bay on May 23rd, sending sixteen passengers into the drink, who thankfully all survived the mishap. And to prove that there was still a fast, viable alternative to those damnable flying contraptions, the Lusitania crossed the Atlantic and set a new speed record of 4 days, 15 hours to New York City.

The untimely eruption of Mount Vesuvius on April 7, 1906 had devastated the city of Naples and caused a postponement of the Olympic games scheduled for Rome that year. London was selected for 1908, and the games were held in the “White City Stadium” in Shepherd's Bush, West London. Causing a bit of a row, US flag bearer, Ralph Rose, refused to dip the flag to Edward VII when he passed in review, and it was later said that “this flag dips for no earthly king.” The chastened, upstart Americans, with all the bravado of their President Teddy Roosevelt, relented and deigned to dip their flag at last before the whole of the Royal family. To further rub their noses in it, the British ran away with the games that year, winning 56 gold to only 23 for the 2nd place US team, and taking 146 medals in all to the US 47. If the Americans believed in their imminent sunrise, that same sun still never set on the far flung British Empire.

With recreation in the wilderness in vogue, national parks were opening all over the US that year, and another national pastime celebrated its groundbreaking for the construction of Philadelphia's Shibe Park, future home of both A's & Phillies. The song “Take Me Out To The Ballgame” would be copyrighted on May 2nd, and soon sung forever after at ballparks all across the nation. And on the Field of Dreams, pitchers dominated the Boys of Summer, with Bill Burns working a no-hitter on May 21st, with two outs in the 9th inning before it was finally broken up by a hit. Another great pitcher was also denied that achievement a week later on May 30th, but he would persist and finally nail down the no-no a month later.

The year was half gone by June 30, a fine mid-summer day when the big right hander Denton True “Cy” Young stood on the mound in New York, staring in at the last man he would face that game. He had missed a chance at a perfect game by walking the first man up in the game, but now he looked in

to get the sign with the odd thought that he would need just one final out to pitch the third no-hitter of his amazing career. For a man his age, 41, that would be no small feat, and he thought to himself that it would be only fitting to throw the batter just what he expected, a fastball at the speed of a raging cyclone, the pitch that had garnered him his nickname.

Even at 41, Young was still an imposing pitcher, 6'-2" and 200 pounds, with experience and guile to equal the strength he still had in that golden right arm. Young was still building on a remarkable streak of winning seasons that would stand the test of history for more than a century. After winning 27 games in 1891, he would go on to win 20 games or more in all but three of his next 17 seasons, and for those three when he won 19, 18 and then a measly 13 games. But to atone for that he added four seasons where he piled up over 30 wins each year during that incredible streak, winning all of 36 games in 1892!

After two sub-par years, in 1905 and 1906, the sports writers had come to call Young the "Old Man" of baseball. Yet when he turned 40 the following year, he went right back to his winning ways with 21 wins and started the 1908 season with 457 wins behind him. He would win 21 more this year on his way to amassing an insurmountable record of 511 career wins. Yet, to the soft spoken and amiable Cy, this win was just like all the rest.

A month earlier to the day, he had missed nabbing his third no hitter against Washington when Jerry Freeman smacked a single off his slow pitch, a pitch modern hurlers now called their "changeup." Today, on June 30th, he was just a tad tight when he first took the mound, and walked the leadoff hitter for the New York Highlanders, Harry Niles. They picked off Niles trying to steal second, and the next 25 men would be retired in order.

From the sixth inning on the New York home town fans were firmly behind the 'Old Man,' rooting against their own team as Young piled up the outs, aided by some spectacular defensive plays by shortstop Heinie Wagner, and outfielders Denny Sullivan and Gavvy Cravath, who had just made a leaping catch at the center field fence to prevent a hit. Now there was just one last man standing. Young was only one pitch away from his 468th win and third no-hitter, a record that would stand until a young left hander named Sandy Koufax, "the left hand of God," would notch his fourth no-hitter on Sept 9, 1965.

Young reached back, spun up that big right arm in a whirlwind windup, and let the ball fly. As it thundered wildly toward the plate to secure his third

no-hitter, something much more ominous was also hurtling through the jet black skies of northern Siberia, a world away, though no one present in the stadium that day would know about it for years to come.

It came out of the northeast, a little after 7:15 on the morning of June 30th 1908, cleaving away the fading night like a great sword of doom. Its piercing blue light gleamed on the sapphire waters of the great Lake Baikal, lighting up the skies with a searing smear of cobalt fire as it sped north. Those that saw it that morning said it was as if a second sun had come that day, illuminating the vast reaches of the heavily forested taiga with its blazing light. Then came the immense explosion, high up in the sky above the Stony Tunguska River, and from that moment on the world was never the same.

A young Russian naval officer named Fedorov would witness the event in a chance encounter with a man named Mironov at the Railway Inn at Ilanskiy, and a reporter from the London Times named Thomas Byrne disappeared soon thereafter. He had been sent to get the story of the Great Race, but would end up seeing much more than he imagined.

Chapter 9

Captain Rupert Archibald stood on the bridge of the *Empress of China* holding the long eyepiece of his telescope to a grey browed eye and peering at the distant silhouette of an approaching ship with a vague disquiet. His ship was one of three built for the Canadian Pacific Steamship Company, in an agreement that was part of the Canadian Pacific Railway development that now spanned the north American continent. Once the rail lines ended in Vancouver, a means of getting things across the Pacific, particularly mail and passengers, resulted in three beautifully elegant ships, the three Empresses of India, China and Japan.

Their exotic names seemed to fire the imagination and put the thirst for adventure that would compel a long sea voyage in the minds of potential passengers. *Empress of China* could also bear the prefix RMS for “Royal Mail Ship” with an agreement to carry mail to the far east outpost of Hong Kong for the Royal Post. As such, it was no surprise that the officers and men who commanded these ships were often born of the Royal Navy itself, sturdy and experienced reserve officers from the nation that had conquered the known world with its superb navy.

The Empresses proved to be fast, reliable ships as well, with the *Empress of Japan* currently holding the Blue Ribbon for speed in the Pacific, which she won in 1897 and held for 20 years. Rated at a steady 16 knots, the ships could easily spin up to 18 knots or better. The Captain had seen the world in his day, serving aboard *Empress of India* as her Chief Officer before becoming Captain of *Empress of China* in 1905. Something about the look of this ship now bearing down on him was most unsettling. It had a tall superstructure, rising in tiers like the battlements of a great fortress, its aspect profoundly threatening even at this distance. It was certainly a military ship in his estimation.

“Have a look at this, Mister Robinson,” he handed off the telescope to his Chief Officer of the boat, Commander Samuel Robinson, simply called the “Chief” in reference to his post as first officer.

Robinson took a long look, his brow furrowing with obvious concern. He had worked his way up through the ranks of Junior Officers on *Empress of Japan* to reach his present post, and was destined to have a long and storied

career at sea.

“My goodness...Look at that bow wave! This ship must be very fast. They look like they might be making all of twenty knots.”

“And note its size, Chief. It has the look of a battleship, does it not?”

“It does, sir, but out here? Who would it be? The Great White Fleet sailed from San Francisco several days ago, but they aren’t scheduled to arrive in Hawaii for another week.”

“Let’s get off a message on the Marconi wireless. Send our call sign and request identification.”

“Right away, sir.” Robinson saw to the matter, and soon returned no more the wiser. “They say they have a dodgy chronometer, sir and request our date and time readings for navigation.”

“No identification?”

“We received the call sign KIRV, but there’s nothing in the code book for it. In fact, I checked schedules for outbound traffic. *Monteagle* is the only other ship that should be approaching us from the southwest, but she just left Shanghai on the eleventh, and there’s no way she could be this far out. Slow as molasses.”

“Indeed, Robinson. Well, this ship seems intent on making our acquaintance, but I can’t imagine why. A doggy chronometer is one thing, but what would a warship be doing out here alone like this?” Battleships of the day moved in grand formations, whole fleets deployed, and it was most uncommon to see a solitary vessel out like this.

“Can you make out her colors, sir?”

“Not at this range. In fact, I can’t seem to spy any markings or standards at all. But my eyes aren’t what they used to be. Perhaps this is a Japanese ship. There isn’t anything left of the Russian Pacific Fleet these days after that disaster at Tsushima Strait in 1905.”

“And another point, sir. She’s not making smoke. How can a ship work up that kind of speed without darkening the skies in her wake. She should be smoking like a wild locomotive, yet look, not a wisp.”

“Yes...” the tone of Archibald’s voice left something hanging in the air between them, something odd, indefinable and caddywumpus to the world they knew. The sudden appearance of this ship was most confounding, and neither man could imagine what it might be. Yet as time passed the ship loomed ever closer, their disquiet increasing with the growing size of the vessel.

“My God, Chief. Just look at her... *Look* at the damn thing. It’s massive! Why... it looks to be twice our size.” At a little over 455 feet in length, the sleek *Empress of China* was longer than most battleships of her day. She was sixty feet longer than the *Kearsarge*, *Illinois* and *Maine* class battleships of the US Great White Fleet, and the equal of the newer American battleships in the *Virginia* and *Connecticut* classes.

Yet the ship they were looking at now seemed much bigger. *Kirov* was all of 830 feet long, easily twice the size of any ship of that day, and at 32,000 tons full load there would be no ship to match or exceed her displacement for another two decades when HMS *Rodney* and *Nelson* were commissioned between the great wars. The US Navy would not have anything that big until the *North Carolina* Class battleships and, though not as heavy, *Kirov* was still a hundred feet longer than those ships. Only the *Iowa* class battleships recently faced in battle would exceed the Russian battlecruiser in length, or the massive RMS *Titanic* soon to be laid down in March of 1909 in the UK, and that by only fifty feet.

“That has to be the largest vessel I have ever laid eyes on!”

Now they could clearly see a white flag with blue St. Andrew’s cross in a bold “X” of the Russian Navy flying from atop the main mast.

“Either my eyes have failed me as well, sir, or that’s a Russian naval ensign there.”

“Russian? I know a few ships escaped from the Japanese and have been interred in places like Manila and others, but something this big? It’s unheard of! Anything that big at large in the Pacific would be well known by now. This is astounding!”

They watched as the approaching vessel drew ever nearer. “Mister Robinson. I think we’d best contact Dutch Harbor. Send that we’ve encounter a large warship, massive; apparently Russian. Send these coordinates. They should still be able to receive us. That ship looks to have business with us, and I’m feeling just a wee bit wary of that at the moment.”

“It doesn’t look like we can outrun her, Captain. And we certainly can’t outgun her. Why presume she would be hostile?”

A minute later they saw the ship winking at them by lamp.

“I’m getting a lamp signal. There, sir. Right amidships. They appear to be coming around in a wide turn now. I think they mean to come alongside us.”

“Mister Robinson. Send for Mister Cooper, and tell him he’s to bring his

sidearm to the bridge, and three stout crewmen.”

It seemed a feeble precaution given the size and vastly threatening look of this ship, but the Chief nodded and went to see to the matter. Never a dull day at sea, he thought. But what in God’s name is this thing come up from Neptune’s locker? It’s a dragon, a real beast of a ship, and in ten minutes the damn thing will be right off our port quarter!

* * *

“**Well** Mister Rodenko? Seeing is believing.” Karpov folded his arms, smiling for the first time in a good long while. “The HD video feed was one thing, but there’s nothing like the evidence of your own eyes.”

“I’ve come to believe the impossible many times over on this odyssey, sir. But are we wise to make such a close approach to this ship?”

“It clearly poses no threat, Rodenko.”

“Of course, sir. But what will they think of us?”

Karpov looked at him, considering that. “They will think they are seeing the largest ship in the world, Rodenko, and I intend to give them a good long look. Come about and reduce to match their speed at 16 knots. Maneuver to come along side that ship at 200 meters.”

“Very well, sir.” Rodenko seconded those orders, though he had real misgivings. “You realize that they’ll report our presence here.”

“Of course they’ll report it. We’re likely to be the most memorable event of their voyage.”

“Well do we want word to get out, sir?”

“Why not, Rodenko? We’re here, are we not? We were obviously displaced to this year by that last detonation. It appears that nuclear weapons play havoc with the tick of Mother Time’s clock. I’ve read some theoretical papers about it, though Fedorov would probably give us an earful if he were still here.”

“I wonder how he fared in his hunt for Orlov?”

“That was ridiculous. What difference would Orlov make in the world? It was just a waste of time and resources. That control rod should have been left here aboard *Kirov* where we could have put it to much better use.”

“It seems as though we got our chance anyway, sir.”

“We did, Rodenko, but I was remiss in thinking this single ship could confront the entire combined Allied fleet in 1945. Yes, I’ll be the first to

admit that. But perhaps my own bull headed determination to make that engagement was the real deciding factor in all of this.”

“I’m not sure I follow you, sir.”

“Don’t you see, Rodenko? I had the right idea to oppose the Americans—but not the right time or place. Had we shifted just a few years further back in time as before, I could have used this ship to determine the outcome of the Pacific War. Fedorov believes our action in the North Atlantic prevented the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor and brought the Americans into the war early. Even so, the Japanese seemed to be making a pretty good go of things at the outset. Then we showed up and Volsky sailed us right into the middle of a major Japanese offensive! We unhinged the whole scope of their operations and, in doing so, we inadvertently restored the balance of power in the Pacific. The Americans were able to establish themselves in the Solomons on Guadalcanal and defend that outpost. Then the rest of the history played out as before. Our arrival again in 1945 may seem like happenstance, but what if it was not? What if it was *meant* to happen this way?”

Karpov had a distant, searching look in his eyes now, as if he were coming to this conclusion for the first time, and suddenly seeing the possibilities inherent in the moment—endless open possibilities, for now he found himself in a most interesting position in time.

“It’s 1908, Rodenko! Nicholas II holds power in Russia now. The events of the early revolution, Bloody Sunday in St. Petersburg and the October Manifesto have only just transpired a few years ago. The First World War won’t begin for another six years! The Bolsheviks don’t throw out the Tsar until 1917. At this point in time we could make decisive changes that would affect the history of the entire 20th Century! Think of it.”

Rodenko did think on it, but the memory of that awful atomic blast and mushroom cloud still haunted him. “I mean no disrespect, sir,” he began, “but haven’t we done enough harm to the history of the 20th Century? I mean, what will happen there in 1945 now that we’re gone? What happened to *Orlan*? We destroyed that American battleship, but will they just leave it at that if they sink our comrades?”

“That undoubtedly happened,” said Karpov. “*Orlan* could not survive what we were facing. It would have taken virtually every weapon we possessed to overcome the American navy there. I’ll have to live with that, and with what we saw happen to the *Admiral Golovko*. That we avenged in kind, but this situation presents all new possibilities.”

“But we have no idea how that intervention changed the history after we disappeared in 1945, sir. What if the Americans retaliated? They also had atomic weapons. Something tells me that all we did is make things very much worse than they might have been. They knew we were Russian, sir. We barely scratched their fleet in those engagements, but our actions left behind deep distrust, if not outright enmity between the US and Russia.”

“We left nothing behind that was not destined to be born in any case, Rodenko. You remember the history of the cold war. The Americans will oppose us until it comes to the final war in 2021. And that, I’m afraid, we will lose. Once the US establishes itself as a world power it will not be defeated by an external power.”

“Unless it goes down with the rest of the world, sir. Isn’t that what we saw when we shifted forward in time? Isn’t that why we sortied in the first place—to try and prevent the destruction we saw?”

“Correct, but once again, we had the wrong time and place. The Fleet was no more capable of effectively opposing the Americans in 2021 that we were in 1945. Yes, we hurt them in both engagements, but they can replace their losses and carry on. That is not the case for Russia. The losses we sustained were decisive. Volsky has nothing left to fight with now, unless *Admiral Kuznetsov* survived. So that war comes down to bombers and missiles. And I’m willing to bet that you are also correct that we caused more harm than anything else by our actions in 1945. The Americans will take a hard line with Stalin from the very beginning. It was the wrong place, but now we are here, Rodenko. 1908!”

“I’m sorry that I don’t know the history of these years well, sir.”

“We just took a licking in the Pacific that stopped Russian expansion into Manchuria. It wasn’t the Americans this time, but the Japanese. They kicked our ass in the Russo-Japanese war of 1904. You remember your studies at the Naval Academy, yes? The battle of Tsushima Strait was fought three years ago. It was bad enough that the Japanese were able to destroy our 1st Pacific Squadron and take Port Arthur. My God, they even shelled Vladivostok! Then the Tsar dispatched our Baltic Fleet and it sailed 18,000 miles to even the score—but was utterly defeated in the Tsushima Strait. That broke the back of Russian power in the Pacific, and it became the dawn of the Rising Sun. Japan emerged on the world stage as a major power. It was truly shocking that a small country like Japan could best us in battle like that. We had one of the strongest navies in the world before that war. Yet when it was

over we were reduced to the status of a third rate power at sea.”

“I remember now, sir. Yes, the only naval force Russia has now is bottled up in the Black Sea.”

“Not so, Rodenko. See that ensign flying up there?” Karpov pointed to the Russian Naval Jack flying proudly from the mainmast of the ship. “That steamer over there has undoubtedly had a good long look at our flag by now, and the world will soon come to know and respect it once again. Russia may have lost her old Pacific Fleet, but now she has a new one!”

Rodenko gave the Captain a wide eyed look. “But sir... You mean to intervene here...after what we just went through?”

“Where else? We’re here, are we not? There is no Rod-25 aboard, and unless we run afoul of another volcanic island ready to blow its top, here is where we will stay. I suppose I could play a little Russian Roulette and fire off another tactical warhead to see if that moves us again, but who knows, Rodenko? For all we know we could just be blown deeper into the past.”

Rodenko scratched his head, realizing that the Captain made a good point. They were trapped in 1945 until the nuclear scalpel sliced open the time continuum again and...and now they were here.

“What do you propose we do?” Karpov continued. “We could take Admiral Volsky’s approach and go find an island. Yes, we could choose any little Pacific paradise we desire, take it, hold it, and live out our lives while the history rolls forward to whatever doom awaits it in the future. Or...we could use the power we have now to decisively change the course of those events. The US has not yet established itself as a great Pacific power. The Japanese have only just made their appearance on the scene. This world has nothing to oppose us but old pre-dreadnought battleships half our size! There aren’t even any aircraft to worry about. The Wright Brothers have just developed their first flying machines. The skies are completely empty here! Understand? We can outrun any ship that tries to approach us, and destroy any vessel we encounter with a single missile or torpedo if we so choose. We aren’t facing a desperate battle in 2021, or 1945, where we must fight for our very survival. *It’s 1908*, and here—here this ship is invincible!”

Part IV

Changes

“Here's to the crazy ones. The misfits. The rebels. The troublemakers... You can quote them, disagree with them, glorify or vilify them. About the only thing you can't do is ignore them. Because they change things... Because the people who are crazy enough to think they can change the world, are the ones who do.”

— Apple, Inc.

Chapter 10

“**Turn** the page, please. Yes... there in the right hand column. See for yourself... Page 363.” Kamenski pointed out the reference in the *Chronology Of The War at Sea*, and Admiral Volsky squinted, needing his reading glasses, but what he saw filled him with foreboding.

“Dear God,” he breathed. “Karpov engaged the US Pacific Fleet!”

“Apparently so.”

“He sunk the battleship *Iowa*...” Volsky read silently, a sadness rising in his eyes like a shadow. “I see...” he breathed heavily. “Then it appears that Karpov has fallen back on his old ways. He obviously did this after he took the time to deliver that letter to us, which means he deliberately sortied into the Pacific again to confront the Americans.”

“It appears that he bit off more than he could chew this time.”

“And he used a tactical warhead, just as before. But my God! The American reprisal against Vladivostok was terrible! Wasn’t that enough, three of our ships for one of theirs?”

“Actually the score was somewhat more even. I believe your enterprising Captain also sunk an aircraft carrier, several destroyers and a couple cruisers. It seems he was a very busy man. And in that final battle the *Iowa* scored a hit on what they describe as a Russian destroyer and broke its back before she, in turn, was sunk.”

“By an atomic weapon! I might have known Karpov would revert to his old ways. A bear is a bear, whether it is hunting for honey, fish or fowl. But if the Americans bombed Vladivostok, then what are we doing here? How is it the history has survived to bring the two of us here like this? The odds against it ever happening would be staggering.”

“Hiroshima is a thriving modern city today. The same for Nagasaki. The Americans destroyed both—at least in one rendition of the history. We rebuilt the city, or so I have learned. In fact, should you discuss the bombing of Vladivostok in 1945 with anyone else in your headquarters here they will already know about it.”

“You remember Hiroshima? No one else seems to here. I let it slip once... Pearl Harbor as well, and all I got were blank stares.”

“Yes, I remember Hiroshima, and Pearl Harbor as well. They happened in

the old world you and I left behind so long ago. No one else here will know about them, though they will know that Vladivostok was bombed in 1945.”

“They have seen this book of yours as well?”

“No, they don’t need my book, it is all the world they have always known, the world they grew up in. It’s all history to them. You and I were the only ones in the dark, Admiral, because we’re from another world, in a manner of speaking.”

“I don’t understand. You are saying they already know what Karpov did?”

“Certainly, just ask your Chief of Staff, or anyone else around here. They will know the history you just read, though that reference mentions nothing about Karpov. It was very vague, simply describing a Russian flotilla. They will know that history recorded an engagement between Russian ships and the US Navy in August of 1945, but nothing else—not the way the world used to be before Karpov vanished and appeared in 1945, the world we came from. That is reserved for old grey heads like yours and mine. For them, nothing has changed at all.”

“How is it we know differently?”

“Think about that, Admiral. You know a world where you sailed quietly out of Severomorsk to conduct live fire exercises. Then you know the world you came back to when you returned to Vladivostok. Now you know this world, the world after Karpov’s intervention in 1945, though you have probably been too busy to read up on things. Perhaps there are more worlds we will come to be acquainted with. I have lost track of them as they go by.”

“But Talanov does not know anything of *Kirov*’s displacement in time. He has no idea what really happened after we left Severomorsk!”

“He wasn’t even *assigned* here in that world. Talanov was in the Baltic, but he doesn’t know or remember a single minute of that old life—the life before *Kirov* vanished. When it happens, when things change, no one knows it except a very few. Talanov lives in the bliss of unknowing. He looks around at the world and accepts it as a matter of fact. It was always this way, the history he knows. Vladivostok was destroyed by the Americans in 1945. It’s history as it reads now, at least for the moment, and he has never known otherwise.”

“Then he could not perceive the change? Three days ago Karpov was here and nothing I just read in that book had happened. Talanov knew that world too, and in that world there was no such event as the destruction of Vladivostok by B-29 bombers. Are you saying he has no recollection of that either?”

“Precisely. Yet how is it *you* know these things, but he does not? This is your next question. Yes? Well, I cannot be certain, but I believe it is because you have moved in time, Admiral. You are a member of a very select group of people on this earth who have actually displaced in time. Somehow the contents of your brain are not affected by these changes. It is as if you reside on some safe spot in the time line of events now, like the eye of hurricane or the center of a whirlpool on the sea. It is a dead zone, a zone of calm and stability, and yet a place where any possibility could manifest at any moment. You are there, safely aware of all your experiences and free from the ravaging hand that rewrites history each time a crazy sea Captain decides to take on the world.”

Volsky gave Kamenski a long look, his eyes narrowing. “You say I know these things because I have traveled in time. Very well, let us assume that has something to do with it. But how is it *you* know these things, Mister Kamenski? The last time I looked you were not on the crew roster of *Kirov*.”

“Well said, Admiral. But the answer to that question should be apparent

to you. I know these things because I, too, have moved in time.”

“You?”

“Yes, and it is a very long story. I told you something of it when I discussed the odd effects we discovered with our nuclear test program, if you recall that.”

“You mean the men who went missing, like our crew member vanished at the Primorsky Engineering center?”

“Something like that, though he was sent on his way by Rod-25, just like your Mister Fedorov and all the men on the *Anatoly Alexandrov* you sent back to fetch him home. Yes, we discovered some very odd things with those nuclear tests. The most shocking thing was that time travel was possible. It was kept very secret, of course, but we have been working on it, unbeknownst to the central government, and much has been done over the years. Only a very few men will know the whole story. I was one of them, being involved in intelligence my entire career.”

“How did you move in time? You must tell me.” Volsky was very interested now, leaning forward over the copy of the book Kamenski had given him, his big eyes searching the other man’s face.

“It’s too long a story to go into it all now. But suffice it to say that some of the ships and planes that have turned up missing over the years were not lost in accidents at sea or because their compass failed them as they searched in vain for a friendly airfield. All this has been kept very quiet, of course; very secret. And only those who actually *do* move in time really know about it. You are a new member of that very exclusive club, Admiral, which is why I take the liberty of revealing these things to you now.”

The ticking of the clock on the wall was the only thing to break the silence, its unfailing round marking off the seconds of that impossible minute. “This happened in the old world? The World I left at Severomorsk?”

“It did...”

“Then it was possible that world had been altered as well. What did these other ships and planes do, eh? Did they affect the history just as *Kirov* did?”

“In some ways. Yes, we actually tried to do this, but with very mixed results. Most simply thought nothing had happened. They didn’t know, you see, but I did. I took the time to study the history after each and every experiment, and I had a good number of references I could consult to see what might have changed. I knew things were happening, even if most of the project team itself was in the dark because they never displaced in time. So

they still believed the world was the same as the one they were born to, yet I knew different. I knew the real truth. Believe me, Admiral, this can be a very heavy burden to carry. *Kirov*, however, was not planned. We had no idea that Rod-25 would cause such effects. It was an entirely unexpected event.”

“My God... then the world I came from—”

“Yes, it has changed many times, but in all those events you were one of the unknowing who changed right along with it, and were never the wiser—just like your Mister Talanov. After you displaced in time aboard *Kirov*, however, you fell into the void, the nexus point where every possible outcome of events intersect to choose a final course and destiny. Once you fall, Admiral, you are there to stay. You have been thrown out of paradise and now you have the privilege of knowing, or the burden, depending on how you look at it. This is why you now know the world has been changed when you read things like that book—because you still remember the old world you came from, and the world before you sent the Red Banner Pacific Fleet out to challenge the Americans—before your Mister Karpov did what you just read in that book.”

“Amazing...I ...I don’t know what to say.”

“As I said earlier, you have been too busy trying to manage this new war to have paid any attention to how the last one turned out. Now you know, and if you were to investigate further in a good library, you would find out a great many things have changed. I don’t know which is the unkindest fate—to live in a world of unknowing where ignorance is bliss and the world under your feet seems solid and sure, or to taste of the forbidden fruit of knowledge, and yet never have the peace of certainty. I have made it a point to consult my references each and every day, Admiral, and I must tell you that much has changed over the years. More than we have discussed here.”

“It is enough to drive a man mad.”

“I felt the same way when all this first dawned on me. In fact, I believed I was going insane at one point. Then I found out what was really happening. It has been my lifelong business to know what really happens in this world. Very few men alive know the real truth of many events reported as history in all those library books.”

“So *Kirov* was sunk along with *Orlan*. And the destroyer the American battleship hit must have been the *Admiral Golovko*. God go with them. That was a good ship and crew.”

“Was it sunk, Admiral? Is that what the passage says there?”

Volsky looked again, and now he saw that the wording was deceptive. The passage read that during the Russian occupation of the Kuriles, a small task force of the Russian Pacific Fleet armed with advanced new weapons deliberately attacked US ships and planes and was subsequently engaged by the US Third Fleet under Admiral Halsey. In that battle the Russians successfully deployed a small yield atomic weapon to destroy the battleship *Iowa*, possibly as a threat intended to get the US to back down over Soviet aspirations to occupy the Island of Hokkaido. A large US fleet retaliated by air and sea, hitting another Russian warship which resulted in the detonation of a second bomb. All ships in the Russian flotilla were presumed destroyed.

“Presumed destroyed—it says that right here,” said Volsky.

“A presumption that was easily made under the circumstances. No trace of *Orlan* or *Kirov* was ever found, at least not there in 1945 in the waters southeast of the Kuriles. There was some gun camera photography of the final American air strike. It has never been published but I was able to get hold of this photograph.”

Kamenski reached into his pocket and produced a faded photo, handing it to the Admiral, who studied it closely.

“That is *Orlan*. Note the unitary hull and superstructure. There is no question about it.”

“Well, I’ve had some time to look into it a little further, and I believe that *Kirov* survived that battle.”

“Survived? In 1945?”

“No, I believe the ship was again displaced in time.”

“Where?”

“That remains to be discovered. I am waiting for more information, but our time grows short here. This war is very inconvenient.”

“How long have you known all this?”

“That the world is uncertain, always changing, liable to take a new and startling new shape at any moment? I have known since the Tsar Bomba event I spoke of earlier. That was in 1961, but I do not think that was the first instance. The interesting new twist on all this is Rod-25, a whole new factor in the equation. This connection to the Tunguska event is most intriguing. That may have been an event capable of producing these same effects where time is concerned. We stumbled on the secret that displacement in time was possible years later, in 1961, but how to control it? That was the real challenge. I only wish we had more time to investigate this Rod-25 business

now. Perhaps it was foolish of us to send those other two rods back on the *Anatoly Alexandrov*. Yet in doing so we may have changed more than we intended.”

Volsky suddenly remembered Fedorov, and wondered if Kamenski knew the fate of that mission as well. “I suppose if Karpov did all this, then that mission was not successful. All his letter did is send us off on a wild goose chase. The idea to use the Mi-26 sounds preposterous now. What about that, Kamenski? Do you know what happened to Fedorov and Dobrynin?”

“To some extent. I can tell you that the *Anatoly Alexandrov* got back to 1942 safely, just as you planned it. Then things began to happen. Some very unusual things...because I just came from the special code room. We have received another message.”

Chapter 11

They sailed alongside the *Empress of China* for ten minutes, both sides gawking at one another through binoculars and telescopes. Yet Karpov saw no reason for any further contact. The steamer had told him what he needed to know, the date and time, and now he realized that the opportunities inherent in this moment were west, in the Sea of Japan, and not the wide Pacific.

“Ahead full,” he said calmly. “We head west now. In fact, I think we may even pay a visit to Vladivostok. Stalin would be a young man in 1908, and of no consequence. The Tsar rules now, but he is very far away. It was a three week journey to St. Petersburg from the Pacific coast. The Siberian railway had only just been completed. So we are in charge of Russia’s fate in the Pacific now, gentlemen.”

“We are in charge sir?” Rodenko raised an eyebrow at that.

“Who better? I intend to reverse the misfortunes suffered at the hands of the Japanese and set us back on our rightful course.”

Again Rodenko hesitated before he spoke. “Is that wise, sir? We could affect the history in ways we cannot yet see if we intervene here.”

“That is precisely the idea, Rodenko. No man can ever foresee the real consequences of his actions. If he tried to do so he would be forever frozen in inaction. If you want to change the world, you have to act. Admittedly, I have sometimes acted badly, but that was only because the challenge was simply too strong for a single ship to overcome. The American navy in 1945 was much bigger than I expected, and much more determined. That will not be the case here. The men of this era are no match for us now. This ship can impose its will on the Pacific and make it stick.”

“What do you intend to do, sir?”

“I believe one error I made in 1945 was not first securing the cooperation and support of our homeland. So I am setting my course for the Golden Horn Harbor at Vladivostok. *Kirov* is going home again. It may not be the city any of us know and recognize, but it will be home nonetheless. I intend to offer my services to the Tsar as the flagship of Russia’s new Pacific Fleet. With the support of the Russian Army, we will see what we might accomplish.”

“But sir... This is 1908. What if we affect the history that led to the

development of the Soviet Union—the history that led to the design of this very ship!”

“If we do so, it will be for the good Rodenko. You have to believe that. There will be no need to resort to extreme measures here as I did before. I am ordering that all nuclear warheads currently mounted on missiles or torpedoes are to be removed and replaced with conventional warheads. They will be placed in secure storage in the magazine.”

“A wise precaution, sir. Then you intend to make Vladivostok our primary base of operations?”

“Initially, but it will have the same problem that prompted Russia to look for warm water ports in Manchuria—ice. That was why Russia was expanding here in the first place. We have always sought access to blue water ports throughout our history, and we have never been successful. That is why we shiver in the ice and snow of Severomorsk and Vladivostok. Admiral Makarov of this era set his sights on Port Arthur, but the Japanese foiled our expansion here in the interest of furthering their own domination of China, and they set us back on our heels. Russia never recovered from the beating she took in the Russo-Japanese War, at least not as a Pacific Power. We never were able to achieve our true and rightful destiny here. All that changes now.”

“But how, sir? What can we do?”

“First we secure the cooperation of our homeland. Then we teach the Japanese a lesson they will not soon forget.”

“The Japanese?”

“Don’t you know the history, Rodenko? Japan’s victory against us opened the door to Manchuria. They will push us out and move right in, and we won’t get back there again until 1945. The Japanese campaign in Manchuria led to the rapid development of their army, and they will built one of the finest navies in the world over the next few decades. This is what leads to their war of expansion in the Pacific, and it took the considerable power of the United States to crush them. I intend to stop them here, now, before they ever get the chance to expand their dreams of a far eastern empire.”

“But sir! We have only twenty-one missiles in the SSM inventory.”

“Correct, but we also have thirty-two S-400s left and a hundred missiles in the *Klinok* system. The Americans have adapted their RIM-67 Standard Missile 2 as a dual purpose weapon. It can now be used against ships as well as aircraft. They also did this for their RIM-174 ERAM missile, the SM-6.

Time to get creative, Rodenko. We can do the same. The *Klinok* Gauntlet missile is effective for target heights as low as ten meters. Yes, it has only a 15 kilogram fragmentation warhead, but it could prove very useful against small craft or even coastal targets, and it will outrange most naval guns of this era as well. Don't forget our deck guns either. We have 3000 rounds for the 152mm guns, correct Samsonov?"

"Yes sir. Plenty of ammunition for that system."

"That and a thousand rounds for the 100mm bow gun."

"But don't they have battleships, sir? Look what it took to hurt the American ship just now. The Japanese were able to smash our entire fleet in 1905."

"Yes, they call them battleships, but have a look here. Mister Fedorov left quite a few of his old naval books at the navigation station and I have taken the liberty of looking up some data. These are nothing like the ships we faced in WWII. The Japanese Admiral Togo's flagship at the Battle of Tsushima was the *Mikasa*. Look for yourself, Mister Rodenko. The ship is half our size in both displacement and length. It has four 12 inch guns that can range out to 18,000 meters, and fourteen 6 inch secondary batteries. Those are irrelevant, because we will never let them get within gun range. *Mikasa's* guns normally fired at no more than 15,000 meters or less. The ship can make only 18 knots. We can sail rings around anything the Japanese Navy has, and pound them with our deck guns from as far as 28,000 meters. They can't catch us, or hit us with anything they have. True, our 152mm guns will not be as heavy as those of the enemy, but they will hurt these old ships, that I'll guarantee. In special circumstances we can use a *Moskit-II* or *MOS-III* for a decisive moment to decide the issue. And don't forget the *Vodopad* torpedo mounts. They range out 56,000 meters. How many torpedoes do we have, Mister Samsonov?"

"Sir, we have a standard load of ten *Vodopad* torpedoes and six more UGST torpedoes available for the KA-40 helo."

"There," Karpov smiled. "Put a single torpedo into the gut of one of these old ships and that will be all it takes. Why, we could sink all their battleships with our torpedoes alone!"

Karpov ran his finger down the pages of one of Fedorov's books, and then turned, addressing the entire bridge crew. "Listen to this, gentlemen. Here is a passage from one of Fedorov's books. It presents the Japanese view of the Russian Navy in the Russo-Japanese war." He began to read, looking

up from time to time to note the reaction of the men.

“The Russians are very brave—very brave. But not many are good, and they are savages. They can be very polite when it suits them, but Russian sailors are miserable people who lie on the snow, and have very little money, which they spend in buying cheap fish. They are dirty. That is all we know of Russian sailors, who are quite strange people to us. But we have no fear as to the result of a war with the Polar Bear.”

He gave the men a long, searching look. “Hear that, men?”

“He’s right about the money and fish, sir,” said Nikolin, and the whole bridge crew laughed.

“Yes, but we’ll see about raising your salary, Mister Nikolin, so you can afford a little caviar. In spite of what this man wrote of us, we are now the most powerful men on this earth. Mister Rodenko, we have sufficient conventional ordnance to smash the entire Japanese fleet, and that is what I intend to do should they challenge us at sea. But first—Vladivostok. We’ll announce ourselves and see what kind of reception we get. Then we will see about Port Arthur and the Japanese, and we will soon teach them that this Polar Bear has sharp new teeth!”

* * *

It’s name meant “Ruler of the East.” The city was a bustling frontier town at the very end of the world, as most Europeans might regard it. Its coat of arms, the famous Siberian Tiger, reflected its wild and sometimes fierce nature. Founded in 1860 as a military outpost by about 7,500 people, it had grown to a City of just over 90,000 by 1908. In many ways Russia’s defeat in the war of 1904-05 had led to its rapid development, along with the continuation of the Siberian Rail project. The loss of Port Arthur returned the city to preeminence by default, as Russia had no other suitable Pacific port.

Vladivostok was a wild mix of many cultures and ethnicities—European civility rooting itself in the central quarter, fringed by muddy streets, brothels, bars and gaming establishments, and bordered by the Oriental quarter, Millionka, which was home to numerous Chinese, Japanese and Korean immigrants. Crime was rampant there among the opium dens, and drug lords held sway in whole neighborhoods where at times they would amuse themselves in a game that sought to discover how long a man could remain alive while hanging from a rope by his neck. The First River Penal

center north of the city center was never lacking for new arrivals.

Even in the main European district along Svetlanskaya Street by the harbor quays the atmosphere was that of a devil may care frontier town, where entertainment offered by a troupe of dancing gypsies often began at midnight in the favorite Pacific Ocean Theater, and carried on into the early morning hours. Here was found the Imperial Bank, Lutheran Church, Museum, Oriental Institute, Post Office and the Upenski Cathedral, yet these staid institutions could not impose but the barest patina of civility on the place. It was still a den of thieves, gamblers, adventurers, frontiersmen, and indigent sailors, with enough cafes, restaurants, cinemas and gaming houses to keep them all well occupied. It was an outpost of debauchery at the end of two thousand miles of iron rails that scratched their way through the wilderness of Siberia. It was at once the terminal end of that long overland passage, as well as the place of new beginnings that was at the heart of every frontier.

A new beginning meant opportunity, and that prospect was not lost on wealthy entrepreneurs, which came to the city by sea in search of profit and fortune. A great department store stood near the main railway station, *Kunst & Albers*, burgeoning with wares from every quarter. Here also were the famous Versailles Hotel and the Golden Horn, offering a taste of real European luxury to passengers debarking from steamers. Military barracks surrounded the docks, a steady source human firewood for the fires of gambling, prostitution and crime in the city. Yet all this existed side by side with elegant performances at the Pushkin Theater, museum lectures, Sunday tea parties, opera at the German Singing Club, and Victorian ladies meeting in sewing circles.

With all these contrasts apparent, the city was also both a gateway to the heartland of Asia, accessible by rail and sea, and a bulwark of defense. Its famous fortress would reach final completion in 1912, standing in the shadow of concentric circles of brooding hills. It invited even as it held the world at bay and, like any gateway city, the door might be open one day or closed the next.

It was to this bawdy and feral port that *Kirov* now sailed, and one thing was at least immediately familiar to the crew as the ship approached—the mid-year gloom of fog and low clouds. Like many coastal cities, the heat of the summer simply added humidity to the atmosphere, and rain and fog was almost a daily occurrence in June and July. By the same token, the Arctic

chill of winter would often be broken by many clear days of welcome sunshine in January and February, and the autumn was particularly pleasant, the so called “velvet season” of mild temperatures, falling leaves and soft fluffy clouds painted by glorious sunsets.

If Karpov hoped to conquer the world, as it now seemed his inner ambition once again, he would first have to face the challenge of conquering Vladivostok. Yet his first great trump card was the massive and looming might of the ship itself. With accurate navigational charts, he decided to arrive well after sunset, and with the ship’s lights darkened. They could creep slowly up through the Eastern Bosphorus Strait, noting that there was no longer a great bridge there spanning the gulf.

Rodenko suggested they at least send a telegraph signal ahead to notify the authorities that a ship of the Russian fleet was returning to base. “There will be guns at the fortress, Captain, and numerous shore batteries. We don’t want some startled gunnery officer to put a shell through the citadel window.”

“Good point, Rodenko. Very well, I will have Nikolin cable the arrival of the new Viceroy of the Far East—Vladimir Karpov, to be expected before dawn on the main quay of the Golden Horn Harbor. We will have to turn out in full dress uniforms—flags, honor guard with swords and baton. Spectacle will be a big part of our initial impression. The ship alone should put them in awe, but I want to make an equally intimidating appearance.”

“But sir...Won’t they send to St. Petersburg for confirmation on this? As soon as they find out that we have not been sent by the Tsar their suspicion will become poison. They will never trust another word we say.”

“I’ve considered that, so I will make no claim to that effect. I will say we have come on our own accord, and that will be the truth. What they don’t know works in our favor. Our words will mean nothing in the end, unless there are actions to back them up. They will see the ship, and our actions will speak volumes when we put it to good use.”

“But why make contact at all then, sir? Won’t that merely complicate matters?”

“To tell them what will soon happen,” said Karpov. “I will let them know what I intend to do, and then deliver it. Only then will my demands receive any real ear from the Imperial government here. Now, we must see to the landing ceremony.”

“Very well, sir...Or should I now begin calling you Viceroy, your grace?”

Rodenko smiled, yet he was inwardly worried that Karpov's newfound energy and ambition would end up being the same heady drink that had seen him let loose two nuclear weapons on forces he perceived as mortal enemies, and the heartlessness of a man who could do that frightened him.

The Captain moved from the edge of despair to the ebullient energy of the conqueror in a heartbeat, thought Rodenko. There is something inherently unstable about him, and without Fedorov or Volsky here, as *Starpom* I am the only countervailing force that might serve to moderate him. Yet thus far all I have done stand by and watch stupidly while the Captain raged on. Fighting to defend the ship in time of war was one thing. I knew my duty was clear there. But this plan to start a war that was never supposed to be fought is quite another thing. Yet what should I do?

He decided that there would be at least one other mind on the ship that might be a confederate soul in this regard. "Well, Captain," he said. "I am glad you have recovered. It's been a very long shift. May I stand relieved, sir?"

"Yes, of course, Rodenko. Get your rest. I will summon you in six hours, just before we are due to make port. You will not want to miss the event, I assure you."

"Of course, sir."

Chapter 12

It was decided that security would be a major concern. Many of the ship's Marines had gone ashore for Fedorov's mission, but there were still two squads aboard as replacements, and Karpov gave orders that volunteers were to be recruited from the crew and a new detachment formed as naval infantry.

"I want at least two hundred men under arms," he told Sergeant Savkin. Choose the best men and start regular training exercises at once. We will not dock at the quays. Instead we will anchor well out in the bay, and go ashore by boat. The water barrier will provide additional security for the ship, and you are to mount a 24 hour guard on every quarter. No one from the mainland is to come aboard under any circumstances unless I directly order it."

"Very good, sir," said Savkin, a tall, dark haired man, sturdily built and dressed out in full cammo uniform. "And what about security ashore, Captain?"

"I will be taking a full squad, with you in command, Savkin. That should be sufficient for the time being. After all, these are our countrymen."

"Let us hope they give us a good welcome, sir."

"Why wouldn't they? But I tell you one thing—this ship is going to bug out quite a few eyes come dawn tomorrow. The city will look out as see the most marvelous vessel on earth sitting in the Golden Horn Bay, and it will be flying the flag of the Russian Navy!"

Karpov held the image of his arrival in mind with great anticipation now. It would be just as he had imagined it before when he first thought to present himself at the negotiation table with Roosevelt and Churchill in 1941, at the Atlantic Charter meeting in Argentia Bay. He thought he might get his second chance at Sagami Bay for the surrender ceremony of Japan. In both cases the obstinate and implacable nature of his enemies had frustrated him. This time he would realize his inner dream.

He ordered his Marines to conform to the image he had long carried in his mind. They were to assemble on the foredeck in their dress olive greens, long double breasted trench coats with gold buttons and collar tabs, braided gold belts and the brilliant red sash strap from shoulder to waist, where a six inch tasseled gold horsetail tied it off. The boats was decorated with red and

would proudly fly the Russian Naval Jack as they approached. The Captain made sure Nikolin had communicated his desire to meet with the local authorities at once, and requested a reception committee on the harbor quay. He called out the ship's band and had them rehearse all evening below decks before sleep. They would play the old national anthem as he and his Marines boarded their boat and came ashore.

It was a very strange night as *Kirov* slipped quietly into the bay, surrounded in a fog so thick that no one ashore could see the ship. The crescent moon had set at 13:27 hours and was down, yet there was an unaccountable glow in the sky to the northwest, and the light played eerily over the low hanging clouds, infusing the heavy fog with a strange radiance, a pale glow that carried on all through the night. The ship sat silently in the bay, all running lights darkened and rigged for black. Karpov did not want to disturb the velvet night, but with dawn his theater would begin.

The sun came, a wan light diffused through the fog, and all that he surmised quickly came to pass. Residents of the city woke up that morning and looked out their windows to see a strange shape darkening the misty the bay. The peered at it as if it had been formed of the vapor and sea itself, a massive ship, bigger than any they had ever seen in the harbor. It dwarfed the armored cruisers that were the last remnants of the once proud Russian Pacific Fleet. Where did it come from? Why was it there?

Karpov waited in the silence, watching from the citadel bridge, rocking back and forth on his heels with obvious amusement. Then, as the light slowly bloomed and restless crowds gathered on the edges of the harbor, he gave the order that all running lights should be put on and the ship's horn would blast out a greeting. The crowd reaction made him smile, some turning and running away, back into the city, and all their voices rising as they spoke to one another, wondering what this ship could be.

He knew that the mystery of his sudden appearance would serve him well, and he was counting on it to set the tone of his arrival and endow him with an aura of power and mystery. Now it was time for the show. He picked up the bridge phone and called down to the Chief Boson with the order to begin the debarkation ceremony. The ship's horn sounded once again, then came the shrill high note of the Boson's whistle. Twenty-five members of the ship's band marched out onto the long sweeping forward deck and assembled on a special platform they had set up directly above the *Moskit-II* missile silos. They would be his opening salvo now.

The sight of human beings on the ship, and not monsters from the sea, seemed to calm the crowds for a time. Then Karpov watched as the band struck up the old Russian anthem, its opening chorus being immediately greeted by applause and welcoming shouts from the shoreline. He turned to Rodenko, his eyes bright with the fire of his inner excitement.

“I believe that is my curtain call,” he said. “You have the ship, Mister Rodenko. I will be in constant contact with the bridge via the remote receiver in my coat collar. I expect no difficulties, but remember your briefing.”

Karpov had told him that should any demonstration of the ship’s capabilities be required, he had ordered a Klinok SAM to be manually targeted at the high hills above the city. Should they run into any difficulties ashore, the second Marine squad would come in on the KH-40, sure to shock and amaze the locals to no end.

“I anticipate no trouble, but be prepared should I call. The code will be *Lightning*, so remember that. This is a ship of war, and we are men of war. Remember that as well.”

“Aye, sir. I relieve you, sir.”

“I stand relieved,” Karpov repeated the familiar ship’s litany for watch standing rotations, then added one thing more with a raised finger. “For the moment...”

He turned and gave one last order. “Let the ship’s log read that Captain Vladimir Karpov disembarked to meet with the Russian delegation at zero eight hundred hours on the 13th day of July, in the year 1908.”

“Aye, aye, sir. Recording log entry as ordered.”

Minutes later Rodenko looked down from the weather deck off the citadel and watched Karpov appear on deck in his dress uniform and officer’s cap, surrounded by the Marine squad honor guard. Their black berets rose proudly as they marched, stiff backed, their pace timed precisely to the beat of a drum, black jack boots polished to a mirror like finish. Each man carried a bayoneted rifle, and the squad leader held a long silver sword, gleaming balefully in the cold morning light. Behind him came the flag bearer, with the Russian Naval Jack snapping proudly in the wind. They had no Imperial flag, so this seemed the best solution. After the humiliating defeat of the Russian Navy at the hands of the Japanese, the Captain thought the Naval ensign would be just the thing to bolster the crowd. The symbolism would be apparent to all those who watched them come, their eyes glazed with awe, jaws slack with fear, surprise and awe. They would be the sword of Mother

Russia. They would seem a phalanx of doom as they marched, with the Captain strutting boldly in their midst as commanding officer.

White gloved salutes snapped in the still morning air as the Captain was piped off the ship, the detachment smartly climbing down the ladder to board the boat tied off the port side of the ship. Horns and whistles played a flourish on cue, just as Karpov had ordered. The band had rehearsed well, and now the entire crew turned out in dress uniform, standing to attention on every deck of the ship. As the anthem ended they gave a great hurrah to the Captain as he stepped off the ship.

The band struck up the Imperial anthem a second time as the boat pushed off, the Marines manning oars now instead of using the on-board motors. Karpov did not know the words to the old anthem, if there ever were any, but the new lyrics were fresh in his mind.

*Russia – our sacred homeland,
Russia – our beloved country.
A mighty will, great glory –
These are your heritage for all time!*

* * *

“**How** is we have heard nothing of this?” The Mayor was clearly quite flustered, as much as he was amazed as he stared out the window that morning. The mist was slowly rising to reveal a massive ship, its battlements rising up like the crenellated walls of a fortress, its long foredeck and bow now crowded with officers and sailors, and a full military band. “Not a word; not a whisper of this from St. Petersburg!”

“Yet it must have been sent from St. Petersburg, sir. Where else? It was certainly never a part of the Pacific Fleet.” Tomkin was the Mayor’s chief aide for city administration, a tall thin man with a stiff hat that made him appear taller yet, and always seemed to teeter to one side on his narrow head. His prevailing trait was calm in the face of unrest, a quality that had served him well during these tumultuous times. In the last three years the city had been shelled by the Japanese, up in arms with the incipient revolution in 1905-06 where upstart rebels had actually occupied the Oblast Governor’s residence and presumed to take control of the city’s affairs, and now this... This ship...This enormous thing in the harbor appearing out of the mist like a

behemoth that had arisen from the depths of the sea.

Mayor Proshukin was his polar opposite, short rotund, impetuous, easily upset, and prone to worry. He fingered his pocket watch nervously. "Eight 'o clock. Time we were at the quay to receive this new Viceroy, Tomkin. But I want a telegraph sent to St. Petersburg about this. If I'm to be upstaged by another administrative buffoon from the west, I damn well want to know about it! You would think the Tsar has enough on his hands to worry about without meddling in our affairs here."

"Well, sir," said Tomkin quietly. "Perhaps the unsettled nature of our affairs is precisely the reason for this man's appearance. After all, things have been less than ideal here since the disaster of 1905."

"Yes, and the ship may have been sent to redress that in some ways. Enormous, isn't it? The thing is certainly a warship, but where are the big guns, Tomkin? I don't see any big guns."

"Perhaps it is merely a large armed ocean liner, sir. There are a few smaller batteries fore and aft."

"Well those are Russian navy sailors there, are they not?" He snapped his telescope down, setting it on the desk. "Odd uniforms, but they certainly know how to move with military flair. Let's get down there and meet this gentleman."

It was so unlike the first meeting of men from two eras on that isolated spike of rock off the southern coast of Spain in 1942. There Admiral Volsky had come with a small party, as inconspicuously as possible, to stand face to face with Admiral John Tovey of the Royal Navy and negotiate a brief peace. In that meeting the Admiral had made every effort to conceal his true identity, and the origins of his ship. Karpov remembered how he fretted aboard *Kirov* while the Admiral was gone, wishing he could have been part of the meeting.

Now, however, the meeting Karpov arranged was a bold, brash theater, one part ruse, one part bluster, and one very large part consisting of his ever expanding ego. He strode briskly from the ranks of his Marine squad, his boots hard on the wooden boards of the wharf, and walked up to the Mayor where the man stood with an assemblage of ministers and city officials. The Captain saluted crisply, more as a flourish than out of any deference to the other man's authority.

"Vladimir Karpov," he exclaimed, deliberately avoiding any mention of rank. "Russian Navy." He gestured to the battlecruiser anchored now in the

bay. “Gentlemen, may I present the battlecruiser *Kirov*, the new flagship of the Russian Pacific Fleet. Am I to understand that you have, of late, experienced the dishonor of defeat at the hands of the Japanese? Well I am here to restore order, gentlemen, and to reverse that fate insofar as I am able.”

Proshukin looked at Tomkin, clearly flustered and not having the slightest idea what to say. His chief aid spoke first, aiming to learn more of this man, and find out what this ship was really all about.

“Excuse me, Mister Karpov...you are the Captain of this vessel?”

“That I am, though my authority will extend far beyond the gunwales of that ship, sir. It is my charge to assume control of the city, its port and fortifications, and all military facilities in the Primorskiy region.”

“You have been sent from St. Petersburg?” The Mayor finally found his voice.

“I came on my own accord,” Karpov knew that a lie here would be easily found out, so he told the truth instead. “The Tsar has been somewhat preoccupied with the events that have become a source of much unrest in the empire. The setbacks here have not gone unnoticed, however, and they will take some doing to reverse. I am here, very briefly, to tell you what will happen.”

“I don’t understand,” said the Mayor. “I was told to receive the new Viceroy of the Far East, yet we have had no confirmation from St. Petersburg on this appointment.”

“Nor will you. St. Petersburg is a mess of Bolsheviks, Mensheviks and the Okhrana chasing both out of every church and Labor Party meeting they can find. The unrest there has only just begun, gentlemen. It will get much worse. In the meantime we are here, and there is much to be done. If you wish, please notify St. Petersburg and inform them that I intend to repudiate the Portsmouth Treaty settling the war of 1905.”

“You intend what? Repudiate the treaty? Is this a directive from St. Petersburg?”

“It is my directive. I am the sole authority in the Pacific region now, and I will shortly demonstrate that in no uncertain terms. As you can see, gentlemen, that is no ordinary ship.” The Captain pointed a stiff arm at his battlecruiser, his eyes narrowing, yet alive with inner energy. “That is the most advanced and powerful vessel Russia has ever deployed, and I am its commander. I intend to use it to further the interests of the Russian Empire, and you will take note of what I do with it in due course. You have had your

chance here, and you have lost your war. The recent disaster at Tsushima was the greatest humiliation ever to be suffered by the Russian Navy. I intend to redress that.”

Both men gave Karpov a look of complete amazement. “You intend to renew the war on Japan?”

“I do.”

Tomkin cocked his head to one side, his tall hat tilting at a steep angle as he did so, but remaining firmly attached to his head. “I strongly advise you to take no action that will upset a hard negotiated peace here, Captain. You may do more harm than good. If you have been sent here as a reinforcement for the fleet, then we will arrange for you to meet with the commander of the cruiser squadron and settle in. But there is no war here now, and we would certainly like to keep it that way.”

“That is a very narrow view, sir, and one that will end in more tragedy than you could ever realize. Now... I have no desire to meet with the other ship captains. They will not be operating with me. They are too slow and will just become a nuisance. I can accomplish my aims with the ship I presently command.”

“With a single warship? Why it hasn’t even any big guns to speak of.” The mayor squinted at the ship. “Impressive size, but where are the guns?”

Karpov raised an eyebrow, inclining his head to one side as if he were talking to Sergeant Silenko, though he was really speaking to Rodenko through his wireless jacket collar microphone. “Clear the aft deck. Show the good people of Vladivostok a little lightning.”

The Captain smiled at the Mayor. “I invite you to look over your shoulder, sir.”

The Mayor gave him an odd look, then cast a wary glance behind him. But at that moment there was a standard klaxon of warning and then something seemed to leap up from the aft deck of the massive ship in the bay. It erupted with smoke and yellow fire, streaking away as every head of the gathered throng gaped in awe to see it lance out to the high hills behind the city and explode with a loud report.

Karpov smiled. “Naval rocketry, sir. A new development. I hope I have not upset anyone’s breakfast. That was but the smallest of our missiles, and we have many other weapons of war on this ship, cleverly hidden from your view as this one was. In fact, we have enough weapons to destroy the entire Japanese Navy without them even knowing what hit them. These rockets

have an enormous range.”

The look on the Mayor’s face was one of real shock and surprise.

“Time for some changes, gentlemen,” said Karpov. “I do not expect you will believe what I tell you now, but with that ship I will bring the whole of the Japanese Navy under my heel, and stop their interference here in the Pacific so that Russia may resume its rightful place as the Imperial master of these waters. Once I deliver that news to you, perhaps you will see that I mean what I say here. Until then, you would be wise to prepare administrative quarters for my return. Tell St. Petersburg what I have said here, and you will soon hear news about it. Good day, gentlemen.”

Day 8

*“Each diverse way, along the grisly rock,
Horn'd demons I beheld, with lashes huge,
That on their back unmercifully smote.
Ah! how they made them bound at the first stripe!
None for the second waited, nor the third.*

Dante Alighieri, The Inferno - Canto XVIII

Part V

Delphi

*“I am all that hath been, and is, and shall be; and my veil no
mortal has hitherto raised.”*

— Inscription on the Shrine to Athena

Chapter 13

The phone rang again that same evening—the phone. The one behind the movable bulkhead in Elena Fairchild’s private stateroom. Captain MacRae was on the bridge of the *Argos Fire* supervising the recovery of the Argonauts when Mack Morgan informed him that something big was in the air. He appeared on the bridge, grim faced, and tugged MacRae into the chartroom, closing the door behind them.

“Black line is hot tonight, Gordon. I think things are about to get out of hand.”

“You make it sound like we’ve been to a lawn party these last few days. You might ask the crew of *Princess Irene* what they think of the situation.”

“I know, this business has been crazy, but every indication is that it’s going to get worse, and fast. The Russians are arming all their ballistic missile bastions—everything from Yedrovo in the far north to Svobodnyy in the far east. The SS-18 silos at Imeni Gastelllo and Uzhur are going hot tonight, and those are the big boys. They call that missile “Satan,” and for good reason. Damn thing has ten warheads and a real heavy throw weight. All their mobile stuff has been dispersing to sites in the Siberian taiga, or so the line reads. I saw some pretty frightening satellite image feeds. This bodes ill, Captain.”

“You think they mean to let all that fly, Mack?”

“If this war heats up any further that looks to be the next act in the play. But there’s more! The Chinese popped one off the US West coast—EMP burst at high altitude.”

“EMP?”

“It had the desired effect. Most of the west coast is dark, though parts of Seattle made it through alright.”

“Lord almighty, that was one hell of a stupid thing to do. Now the Americans will have to retaliate.”

“The Chinese say this was for those missile attacks the B-2s flew against their satellite launching sites.”

“And those raids were for the Chinese attack on the US satellite in space. Tick-tock, Mack. What happens next?”

“That’s why this information on the Russians is so hot. It looks like they

think the US will have to let one fly, and they're heating up the whole strategic triad. They've already got the boomers deployed, and the bombers are taking off tonight for fail-safe orbits. This thing is teetering on the edge of a razor now. One more provocation could set it all off like a powder keg."

"A whole lot worse than that, Mack."

"And there's one other thing. Her majesty has received another telephone call."

MacRae frowned, knowing just what Morgan meant now. "That damn red phone behind the bulkhead?"

"Right-O. I was in to brief her on the Bosphorus transit, and we were interrupted. She dismissed me rather abruptly and retired to her office. You know what that means."

"Well what *does* it mean, Mack? She won't speak a word about that phone, and I've had the guff to question her directly on it. You're the intelligence officer here. Hell, you're standing here telling me what the Russians are doing with their ballistic missiles and we don't even know half of what goes on right here under our feet!"

"Aye, it's been a mystery, and she's kept it close. If I had a mind I might try to trace those signals, but I doubt that her ladyship would be very happy about that if she ever found out what I was up to."

"That I can understand. Alright, you're off the hook. I expect she'll be wanting the two of us in her office soon enough. Every time that damn phone rings we end up making a major course change. God only knows what it will be this time. We lost an X-3 the last time out."

"Ryan made it back to Baku. He'll be in with the last of the Argonauts from BP headquarters where they left the men before they went off on that cockamamie mission. He should land in half an hour."

"Good enough. I'll see that he gets a pint or two for that, and no blaming him for the loss of that helo. They ran into a Russian missile defense battery at the Kaspiysk Naval base—S-400s."

"A nasty beast, that one. He was lucky to make it out of there in one piece. I certainly hope her ladyship doesn't have any more pretensions about engaging the Russians. We'll have our hands full seeing those two big ladies out there through the Straits. I hope to God the price of the oil made this whole odyssey worth it. We lost some good men."

MacRae was silent for a moment, letting that settle between them. They always knew the day would come when they would lose men for oil. The

world had been buying oil with blood for decades. National policy rotated about the rigs and platforms sucking the earth and squeezing the shale for every last drop they could find. Fairchild had made it safely to the eastern entrance of the Bosphorus with two million barrels, and it would pay for many things with spot prices up near \$300 a barrel now. It would buy them new ships and helicopters easily enough, but would it pay for the lives of those men?

“You’ve arranged the transit?” MacRae said quietly.

“Aye, we’ve priority access for a night move through the main channel, and with any luck we’ll be in the Aegean by tomorrow morning.”

“I don’t suppose it will matter much if this news about the missiles gets any worse.” MacRae folded his brawny arms, and there came a quiet knock on the door. Morgan opened it and Mister Dean was there, a message in his eyes.

“Excuse me, Captain. Miss Fairchild would like—”

“Just as I said, Mack. We’ve been summoned.”

“Yes, sir. But the message was only for the Captain.”

“Only for the Captain?” Mack Morgan screwed up his face, pretending to be offended. Then he smiled. “Something tells me you’ve got on the good side of that woman, Gordie.”

“Which side would that be, Mack? Are you telling me you’ve seen them both?”

The two men smiled and MacRae was through the narrow door and headed for the hatch. “You have the con, Mister Dean.”

“Aye, sir. Captain off the bridge.”

* * *

“**Delphi?**” MacRae scratched his head with that one. “Well, I’d have to look at a chart but it’s a little over 400 miles.”

“How soon can we get there?”

“The tankers have the lane tonight for a transit of the straits, so I’d say—”

“No Gordon. How soon can we get there. I’ll just need a small party.”

“Without the tankers?” He gave her a sidelong look, trying to discern what was going on here. “Suppose you tell me what you have in mind, Madame.”

“She smiled at him, knowing he had deliberately assumed his formal

Captain's role to cover the fact that her request was unwelcome. She knew the man all too well by now.

"You're going to ask me about the red phone next, aren't you."

"The thought had crossed my mind."

"Well, yes there was another call. Things are happening—more than I can fully explain right now, but we haven't got the time I had hoped to buy with this mission. I suppose it was foolish to think we'd get through this in one piece."

"You're still brooding over *Princess Royal* and *Princess Irene*."

"No, Gordon. It's not that. The oil doesn't matter now. I said that before."

"It doesn't matter? We've just spent the last 72 hours with our pretty behinds at considerable risk, not to mention the assets of the entire company. Now it doesn't matter?"

How could she make him understand? When he last pressed her on the order to send the X-3s to attack the Russian operation in the Caspian she had only revealed what was necessary—the Russians were planning an operation that would have grave repercussions and they had to be stopped, if possible. She had said nothing to him of the Watch, the long vigil on time and history that it represented, the very notion of displacement in time itself—let alone the rest of it—the things she had come to learn in recent years that were so unsettling. How could she unravel the weave of a mystery so profound that she herself barely had a hold on one single strand of that loom? The Red phone...yes, another call had come in with a warning she had long feared. It was a brutally simple message that every member of the Watch had been told to expect in the most dire emergency, at the last extreme. The signal read "48 Hours."

"Gordon," she began, feeling her way across an impossibly narrow bridge. "Something has happened that we were told to expect in the event of an extreme emergency."

"Did Mack Morgan spike your martini with his talk about the Russian ICBMs?"

"No, I haven't heard that yet, but it doesn't surprise me. It's where all this nonsense has been heading for decades. Well now we're here. It's time. We have 48 hours."

"48 hours? Alright, explain that one to me, Elena."

She walked across the room, closer to him, and sat on the love seat near her desk. He stood there, waiting, until she slapped the side of the couch

beckoning him to sit.

“Yes,” she said. “You better sit down for this one. But before you do, I’d recommend you pour us both a tote of gin.”

MacRae could hear something in her voice that he had not perceived before. The doors were opening, the guards that had kept some deep hidden secret from him all these years were being dismissed. She wanted to tell him something now—needed to tell him, and by God he wanted to hear it. The gin sounded like a good idea and he quickly filled a couple shot glasses with Williams Chase, the best Gin he had ever tasted.

“We need to get to Delphi no later than dawn tomorrow.”

He gave her a very long look. “Very well. It will be fourteen hours if we sail north of the mainland.”

“That’s too much time. We’ll have to go by helicopter.”

“Aye, that’s the fastest way. The birds can have you there in ninety minutes, but they just returned from that ferry mission out of Baku. The last helo hasn’t even landed yet.”

“How many do we have available?”

“Three, as soon as Lieutenant Ryan lands, and he’s due back in about fifteen minutes.”

“Can we get them ready to fly again as soon as possible?” She saw the look of exasperation on his face, and knew he hated being left in the dark like this, but time was running out. “Bear with me, Gordon. This is important. Order the ship to Heraklion on Crete with the tankers. I’ve made arrangements there for anchorage in the event things get worse—and they *will* get worse. I think you and I both know that. In spite of that, we have business at Delphi. I’ll want you, Mack Morgan, and a select group of men along for security—as many as we can take.”

The Captain stood up, wanting the answers to a hundred questions but knowing her well enough to have patience now. He walked to the desk phone, punching up the bridge. “Mister Dean,” he said firmly, his eyes on Elena as he spoke. “Set your course for Crete, the port of Heraklion, at the best speed possible. Escort our remaining tankers, and there will be further instructions for you when you arrive. I will be with Miss Fairchild and we will be taking the helicopters, so the ship is yours. Please let Lieutenant Ryan know we’ll be a little farther west when he arrives. He can vector in by IFF.”

“Very well, sir. *I have the ship.*”

“And Mister Dean, I want every X-3 available serviced, refueled and

ready on the aft deck by 04:00 hours. Three squads of Argonauts will deploy on this mission. Tell Mack Morgan he has the pick of the litter.”

“Yes sir. I’ll send down the order.”

“Thank you, Mister Dean.” He hung up the phone, folding his arms, lips pursed, a look of waiting concern on his face.

“Get back over here with that gin,” she said quietly. “I’m going to tell you the damndest story you’ve ever heard.”

* * *

My God, he thought. A ship appearing out of nowhere in 1941—a ship from the future? To make matters worse it was a Russian ship, and then she had told him the Russians had been playing with the notion of time displacement as associated with nuclear detonations for decades.

“It was random at first, a kind of side effect, like EMP when they first discovered that about air bursts. Now it appears they have determined how to control it to some extent,” she told him. “This ship—we called it *Geronimo* once, and still do for purposes of code—well, we now know it as the battlecruiser *Kirov*, the new ship they commissioned just a few years ago.”

“But Mack Morgan tells me the damn thing was blown to hell when that volcano erupted in the Kuriles,” he protested. Yet the same impossible answer came in return.

“No, Gordon, it wasn’t. It was displaced in time again, and this is the event we were told to watch out for—the Demon volcano eruption and that ship vanishing again. We’re on the eve of a grand transformation now. Something truly profound is about to happen—something terrible.”

“What? Is it somehow related to this ship?”

“Yes. *Kirov* has everything to do with it, but we aren’t exactly sure what to expect. One thing we were told is this: it could be catastrophic—life ending—at least life as we know it now. And the worst of it is that no one that survives will know about it. This thing will happen and then it will all change—that is if the missiles don’t finish off the world first.”

“How can you know something like this? Is this all speculation? I can understand that the world’s at the edge of oblivion now with this news from Morgan on the Russian ICBMs, but you sound a whole lot more terrified than that.”

“I am...And to answer your question, we know because we were warned

about this very moment—told what to expect.”

“Warned? By who? Has some pointy headed scientist come up with this prediction or was it a politician this time?”

“No, Gordon. The warning didn’t come from anyone here...”

MacRae cocked his head to one side, his eyes narrowing. “See here now. If you expect me to believe in little green men from Mars...”

“No, it has nothing to do with extraterrestrials either. I’m afraid our doom will be kept all in the family this time around. The warning came from the one and only place that *could* possibly know what would happen. It came from the future.”

Chapter 14

From the future? What in the world was the woman talking about? Yet the more he thought about it the more it made some crazy kind of sense in his mind. If was ever possible to perfect the science of travel in time, it would be in the future. If it was true that the Russians had been meddling with it, conducting strange experiments on the fringes of their nuclear weapons tests all through the decades, then future generations would know that and certainly do the same. If these experiments carried on through the decades yet to come...

How was that possible? MacRae couldn't quite get his mind around it. Wasn't this the here and now—the only reality? They were creeping forward into the future, second by second, and dragging the reality of their lives forward as they went, but Elena made it sound as though the future already existed out there somewhere, as if the next year had already happened, the next decade, the next century.

From the future? Who was it that came? How did she know they were from the future? How could this group she was part of believe what they were told? What evidence did they provide? One question followed another, filling up his mind until it was crowded with doubt and confusion. Yet what if the rest of the story was true? What if the Russians did discover strange evidence of time displacement when they blasted the frozen north with the enormous Tsar Bomba? What did they really find out about it? And how could they learn to control it to such an extent that they could shift a goddamned battlecruiser into the middle of the Second World War?

Then he imagined what the men of that era might have thought and experienced when confronted with this reality. If it came down to evidence of *Kirov's* displacement in time, she had told him it was ample. The Royal Navy had photographs of the ship sailing through the Straits of Gibraltar in 1942! He had seen one with his own eyes when she pulled it from a hidden vault and showed it to him. Then she spoke of changes, alterations in the flow of events, alternate history.

"We aren't sure if the war played out as it might have after that ship arrived. After all, operations were cancelled, ships, men and planes lost in action against *Kirov*. The chance that the history was altered was very high,

but no one knew for sure. They looked at the world as if things had always happened the way they were written in the library books, but that was not the case any longer.”

“This is fantastic...unbelievable!”

“Think of it this way. History became editable right about the same time photography and analog video footage went through the evolution to digital imagery.” That was the way she had tried to explain it to him.

“Remember the switch from analogue to digital? It was mandated right across the whole nation. All stations moved to the new digital signals, and from that moment anything broadcast was editable—not in the cutting room the old fashioned way, which could always be found out. No. Not like Richard Nixon blundering about to try and erase those Watergate tapes. Now they could edit pixel by pixel if they wanted to, and they often did, with no one ever knowing about it. We got the term WYSIWYG when computers revolutionized our society, but it seldom ever was. Nobody could ever trust what they saw or what they got in digital video again.”

And so they had put a watch on events, she told him, waiting for the ship to appear and planning to muster the necessary resources to deal with it when that happened. *Kirov*’s sudden appearance in the Pacific of 2021, and the ship’s return to Vladivostok, was a shock. It was a warning sign. It was something they had been told to expect and fear, and it had finally happened.

MacRae heard his own voice asking the impossible questions now: “Who? Who gave that warning? Are you saying men appeared from the future with information about this ship and its doings?”

“Men? No. Information...yes. That’s what appeared, Gordon. The Watch is a very select organization. There are only twelve active members at any given time. Should one die or be incapacitated, then another is briefed and appointed. We thought we were one of history’s greatest secrets. There have been many secret organizations through the centuries, but we thought we still had this one nicely under our hats—until we started receiving information.”

“From the future?”

“Yes.”

“How do you know that?”

“Well... let me put it to you this way. We received a transmission containing video footage on a Friday morning. It was dated four days hence, supposedly coverage of an event the following Tuesday, and it was awful.”

“Awful in what way?”

“Well, Gordon, it was rather shocking to look at. Then we presumed it was just part of the editable world out there, and a damn good video editing prank...Until the following Tuesday when it actually happened.”

“What happened?”

“One of the most dramatic and memorable events of the early 21st century, the 9/11 attack in New York.”

“You’re telling me you received video footage of the event four days before it happened?”

“We did, and it was chapter and verse identical to footage shot for the first time that day by numerous news outlets covering the tragedy—pixel perfect.”

That statement hit MacRae like a rock. He felt staggered, as though he might have actually taken a physical blow. There were tons of conspiracy theories surrounding the World Trade Center attacks, but this one trumped them all. Video footage of the event four days before it happened?

“The transmissions continued,” she went on. “We saw things that were yet to happen, and soon the evidence was overwhelming. The only place it could be coming from was the future. No one could engineer data that would so exactly correspond to actual footage randomly shot at the events in question. It was truly chilling.”

“Lord above... How did you receive these transmissions?”

“The Watch was a creation of the Royal Navy, Gordon. Every one of the early members was a Royal Navy Admiral, save one or two, and I can’t disclose names. But it was an organization rooted in the Royal Navy over the years, very secret. The British government itself didn’t even know about it. Over time selected individuals were recruited as members—people from industry, the sciences, people that mattered and worked to make a difference in the world. What they ever saw in me is beyond my imagining, but I was recruited seven years ago, and I have had certain responsibilities to the Watch I was given ever since.”

MacRae thought back, remembered that time when she had suddenly seemed different, when that distant look appeared in her eyes, a low flame of fear.

“Why do you think it was so easy for me to procure a *Daring* class destroyer for the company flagship, the ship we’re sitting on right now? The Watch is a naval organization to this day. Its presiding members are always at sea, always minding a given watch, always on patrol. When these signals

were received they always came the same way—at night, on a lonesome sea, and on a tightly controlled transmission beam to a ship of the Watch. We tried to trace it to a point in space but that led us nowhere. It was as if the signal just manifested right above the ship. I’ve never been privileged to receive one directly myself, but I’ve seen the footage of several striking events days before they actually happened. They sent us the closing price of every stock on the Dow three days before the big crash, and it was accurate to the decimal point. Someone in the future wanted to find a way to get our attention. Well they bloody well did.”

“Then this warning, Elena. This business about the 48 hours. It has something to do with these transmissions?”

“That’s about the size of it.”

“And how does this Russian ship get under the umbrella?”

“We received footage of its re-appearance in the Pacific—actual surveillance video shot by one of our satellites. The thing was this—we got it weeks before it happened. Nobody knew what to make of it, though we knew it was *Geronimo*—it was *Kirov*. We went over that footage with a fine toothed comb. No one else in the Navy had it, or knew anything about it. So we took this to be a strong indication that this event was very significant, and we moved a few assets into the region. The Americans cooperated, though they didn’t know what we were really up to. They moved the submarine *Key West* into the sector we determined the footage came from. Now comes the interesting part...”

“I’m all ears!” He was more than that now. The Captain’s very soul was open and waiting, still trying to believe all that he was hearing.

“We got two transmissions. In the first one the submarine *Key West* was attacked and destroyed by the Russian battlecruiser, and that ended badly. In the other the *Key West* survived! The Russians even shipped them a couple boxes of Cuban cigars! We didn’t quite know what to make of that until it struck us that they were trying to tell us that the history was changing. That this was a point of divergence.”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s a single action that sets the course of events off on a new heading. Sometimes such an event can be dramatic, like 9/11, and other times it might be something truly insignificant, like the cow that kicked over the lantern that started the Chicago fire in 1871—Mrs. O’Leary’s cow, though that has been disputed. Yet it’s still a good example of how a small thing can have dramatic

consequences. It doesn't take anything really big to move things in another direction. Sometimes events have a momentum of their own and all it takes is the slightest nudge at the right place and time, and you get a whole new reality."

"Astounding...Truly astounding."

"You might think of it as if a big asteroid were hurtling towards the earth. Trying to stop it at the last minute is almost impossible, but if you can get to it years before it arrives, then all it would take is a gentle nudge to divert its course. Understand?"

"Well enough."

"We thought the transmission was trying to tell us we were spared the holocaust of a great war that's hanging over our heads this very minute. We thought that was the gentle nudge. The sinking of *Key West* was a trigger point in the first version of the files we received. The second version was our salvation, or so we believed at first, but it didn't turn out that way."

"You're telling me this Russian ship was deliberately trying to prevent this war?"

"We think so. But they failed. They forestalled the attack on *Key West*, but it only bought us a brief respite. The events leading to the war have too much kinetic energy in them. The outcome is too close to us now, just like that big asteroid in my example. *Kirov* bought us a short interlude, a brief delay—nine days in fact. As things turned out the war starts nine days later than it might have. There's a prelude of nine more days of conventional warfare before it all goes ballistic—literally—and this is day eight, Gordon. So now you know what I mean about the 48 hours. The clock is ticking, and time's nearly run out."

"Then the Russians know about all this?"

"We aren't certain of that. They know something, but we don't know whether they are being sent any information from the future. Our intelligence is good, but let's face it, it's much easier to hide something than it is to find it. We don't really know what the Russians have learned."

"Then what was that order about to go after the Spetsnaz operation in the Caspian?"

"Good that you should mention that. I'm sorry about the loss there. Yes, it was probably stupid to think we could pull off a surprise attack and not have it be opposed. Well, Navy intelligence has had a look at the objective site. There's nothing there now."

“Nothing there? Did Lieutenant Ryan get off a missile and take the target out?”

“That’s not what Mack Morgan tells me. No. We lost an X-3 trying, and Ryan got out, thank god for that. But the target is gone.”

“So the Russians sailed off. That was a ship we were after, eh?”

“No, it was a floating nuclear power plant. They moved it alright, but not in space.”

MacRae took that in, realizing what she must be saying now.

“You’re telling me they moved it in *time*?”

“This is what we believe.”

“The bloody Russians are operating in time? With Spetsnaz commandos?”

“We think it was Naval Marines, but yes, they were mounting some kind of an operation involving time displacement. They’ve learned how to move discrete objects—objects as big as a ship like *Kirov*, and everything aboard or within a limited radius of the ship. We couldn’t understand why at first, but from our lead Admiral’s perspective it made perfect sense. A warship like *Kirov* is an ideal vehicle for intervention in a given time period. You’ve got mobility, autonomy, survivability, and power all rolled into one. If you want to stay hidden, the ocean is a very big place to hide. You can get to virtually any place in the world on a ship, and a ship with helicopters is even better. This is another reason why the Watch is always at sea.”

“That objective site—Morgan told us the Russians had a big helicopter on the roof of that powerplant.”

“We had to wonder where they planned to go with it, and with what looked like a heavy company of Naval Marines. We have people working on that problem right now, though we may not solve it in time. The bottom line is this: we think the Russians are trying to change history, possibly to redress failures or shortcomings that affect their nation badly. Up until now the changes have not been truly significant. We’ve received transmissions of dual files, a kind of before and after, if you will, and they’ve showed us how some things have changed. When did the United States enter the Second World War?

“Easy enough,” said MacRae. “August of ’41, right after the Germans torpedoed the *Mississippi*. The Yanks were shouting ‘remember the *Mississippi*’ all through the war.”

“Well you might be surprised to know that we’ve receive a transmission

of another starting point for the American entry. It was in December of that same year, over three months later after the Japanese Navy attacked the American fleet at Pearl Harbor. That never happened in the history you and I know, yet we have video of the USS *Arizona* being blown sky high in the harbor.”

“From the future?”

“Precisely.”

“Then the Russians are trying to change things? They’ve got the ability to shift a thing like that battlecruiser through time, and they’re deliberately using it as a lever on events.”

“We’ve debated the why of all this for decades, ever since we first deduced that *Geronimo* was actually from the future.”

“How long have you known—the Watch—how long have they known this ship was from the future?”

She smiled at him. “Here’s another kick in your ribs,” she said. “Since 1942!”

“All that time?”

“Yes, but it took that long watch of eighty years to finally confirm it when *Kirov* vanished during that accident in the North Atlantic last July. The thing finally came full circle.”

“Well if you know the Russians are up to something, have you figured out what it is? You mean to say that when the Americans were closing in on the Russian fleet a few days ago, the Russians just pulled a fast one and slipped away in time? Where did their ruddy ships go this time?”

“We think we know that now. They re-appeared in 1945, at the very end of the war, and raised a ruckus with the US Pacific Fleet. But get this, Gordon. We have another version of how that war ends. The Americans hit Hiroshima and Nagasaki with atomic bombs, and that is what prompted the Japanese surrender.”

“Then there was no battle over Hokkaido with the Russians?”

“Not in the files we received presenting an alternate history.”

“How do you know which one is correct?”

“We don’t. All we do know is that we now have direct evidence that the Russians are trying to change history, and in some ways they have been successful. The gap between the old line of events and what is happening now is getting wider and wider, and soon it will be a chasm that will make it impossible to ever set right again. They’re changing the history, Gordon, but instead of

applying a scalpel to the delicate weave of time, they sent this damn battlecruiser to do the job, and someone aboard has been a real bear. We haven't got all the pieces of the puzzle yet, but we've seen enough to realize their meddling is going to have severe consequences. Whatever they're doing is going to unhinge everything, and it may be too late now to do anything to stop it."

Chapter 15

Once the God Zeus released two eagles from opposite ends of the earth, and they met at Delphi, high on the slopes of Mount Parnassus in Greece. It was the center of the world, the navel of the earth, the center of Greece itself, and the heart of an ancient mysterious Oracle that carried the words of Apollo when she spoke, revealing the fate of men and nations in days yet unseen. Now it was a national park and ski resort, with a tourist center at the Oracle site ruins that drew over two million visitors every year.

They were in the Strait of Artemisia. *Argos Fire* sped on through the night as the mission was being prepared. Now MacRae looked out the cabin window, watching the hills rising in the pre-dawn light, the Rocks of Phaerades on the high slopes as they tumbled to the Malian Gulf below. His mind was still brooding over all he had heard the previous evening. That and the gin was enough to send his head spinning. That and the scent of the woman as he sat close to her on the loveseat. He spent a long, restless night with her there, and they finally joined in a way he had always dreamed about, though there was a hurried urgency to it all, as if they both could hear that clock ticking in the room.

“*O lente, lente currite noctis equi!*” she had whispered in his ear. “Go slow, go slow, ye chariot horses of the night...” It was a reference to from Ovid's "Amore," and a plea to slow time's chariot and extend the hours they had together that night, both the first night as well as the last night in this world they would share that way together.

Yet MacRae was a well read man, and he also knew it was a phrase uttered by Christopher Marlowe's Dr. Faustus. He was awaiting the arrival of Lucifer at midnight, who would come to collect his soul, and Faustus was trying to do anything possible to put off that terrible moment. MacRae felt that same way when Elena whispered her Latin, a swell of both longing and dread rising in his chest. Some devil was at work in the world now and its work was drawing nigh. He could not see him. He did not know where he was, but he suspected he might be the Captain of that damn ship—*Kirov*—the battlecruiser that had sailed through hell into some distant past.

Where were they going now as the *Argos Fire* raced through the Aegean under a black, starlit night? It all seemed impossible, the wildest stuff of Hollywood movies, but Elena had told it to him with a straight face, in the

same no-nonsense tone of voice he had heard so often at her business meetings. She was deadly serious. *‘The stars move still; time runs; the clock will strike; the devil will come, and Faustus must be damned...’*

“Alright then,” he said when morning came. “The Helicopters are ready for operations.”

“How many can we carry?”

“How many? Well as you know we’ve modified those helos specifically for the Argonauts. Each one takes a squad of twelve men. We’ve three ready on the fantail this morning.”

The night had given her the time to explain that there was a place they needed to be the following day. MacRae wasn’t happy about leaving the ship but she persuaded him that it was necessary. Yet he perceived a real struggle within her, and an anguish that was something more than fear, something more akin to grief and sadness.

“Good enough,” he caught the tormented look in her eyes, and put his arms around her. “What’s wrong? You told me so much about this time displacement last night that we never got round to the 48 hours. What is really going on here? Why this rush to Delphi?”

“No time now, Gordon. Get medical supplies, ammunition, water, communications equipment on those helos. Oh yes—we’ll need shovels. Something to dig with.”

“That sort of equipment is already there—standard loadout. Along with the missiles and everything else.”

“Forget the missiles. You can leave all that behind, if it will give us more room for food and supplies. The Argonauts should be armed, however.”

“Aye, armed to the teeth.”

“Then have the men pack additional clothing, uniforms, ammunition, anything essential. You do the same.”

“I see...” He could see her distress, but knew now was not the time to probe deeper. On the one hand she said the mission would be brief, yet on the other she was making it sound as though they would be gone for some good length of time. The lady obviously had something in mind, and so he quickly moved into operational mode in his own mind, a military precision to his thought now.

“I’ll see that the lads are ready.”

After he left her to head for the fantail, Elena Fairchild passed a quiet moment in her office. Her eyes strayed over the furniture, the artwork on the

walls, and the desk where she had spent so much of her time in the past, evaluating charts, monitoring the oil markets, researching deals. It seemed such a fruitless effort now, but it was her life before the Watch, and once it had been important to her. She realized she was letting go inwardly, releasing it all with a heavy sigh, and quiet tears. Then she flipped the hidden switch that would open the movable bulkhead and entered the special room behind her office.

There it sat. The phone, *the* phone, the red phone of doom. She wasted no time now, quickly keying a code to open the glass and then punching in a brief message on the keypad. “WS11 – ON SITE – 08:00 HRS.”

She pushed the send button, waited, eyes darkly fixed on the digital screen that had flashed so many messages in the past seven years, codes of alarm, of warning, bidding her constant vigilance, setting the course of the *Argos Fire* to seas through her regional patrol zone. All that was over now too.

The confirmation code returned. “RECEIVED.” There was a brief pause and she started to lower the protective glass cover again. Then a second message flashed onto the screen. It was just one word, as always, but this one was not in the lexicon of codes and call signs she had memorized over the years. This one came from a human heart. It read simply: FAREWELL.

It was time.

She replaced the glass, keyed one additional command to disable the phone, then retreated quickly to her outer office, sealing off the bulkhead. The sound of men moving from the lower decks seemed like a rumble of thunder, echoing through the corridors of the ship. She looked for the bag she had packed the previous evening, then felt for the chain around her neck, her hands clasped to her breast in a fleeting moment of reassurance. Time to leave. They needed to get to the site as soon as possible with her team of Argonauts.

To make their flight as short as possible, the ship had altered course, moving into the narrow Strait of Artemisia where the Greeks had thought to block the Persian fleet of Xerxes in 420 B.C. Now they were north of the fabled pass of Thermopylae where the 300 Spartans had made their gallant stand. She was through the corridors to emerge on the fantail of the ship in little time, and saw Gordon there consulting with Mack Morgan. Seeing her, he raised his hand, rotating his finger to signal the pilots. The helos began their ignition cycle as the last of the Argonauts filed into the rear

compartments. My fistful of Spartans, she thought, and God forgive me that I can't take all of them, the whole of her crew of 300. She would live with that the rest of her life, however much of that was left to her now.

* * *

She gave the ship a long look in farewell as the sleek helos rose above the fantail, engines roaring to break the quiet of the dawn. Go with God, she whispered a silent prayer. The three helicopters raced south, gaining altitude as they approached the coast and rose towards Mount Parnassus. The X-3s were one of the fastest helicopters in the world, so they would catch only a brief glimpse of the wrinkled mountains on the quick run to Delphi. They were soon hovering over the orange roofs of the town, drifting slowly to the east where the famous ruins could be seen below. The severed columns and remnants of elegant Greek architecture were laid out below them like broken teeth. They were spread out in narrow enclaves surrounded by green olive groves, monuments of ages past, the Athenian Treasury and Theatre, the Temple of Apollo, the Navel of the Earth, the Sacred Way, and the Shrine to Athena.

'I am all that hath been, and is, and shall be; and my veil no mortal has hitherto raised...' The words ran through her mind as she thought about the ancient deity, and how she had been represented through many cultures over the millennia. She was the goddess of wisdom, courage, inspiration, civilization, law and justice, and all of that would be laid on her altar now. Some said she had deeper roots, arising from Egyptian stories of *Neith*, the Goddess of War in one depiction, and a mother Goddess of the loom in another, weaving the strands of the earth together to make each new day. If ever there was a description of Mother Time, that was it, thought Elena. Well, my dear lady, I must beg your pardon a thousand times, but we're about to ruffle your skirts.

"There," she pointed to the pilot from the seat just behind Gordon, who was flying co-pilot on the mission. "That circle there. See the standing columns? Can we put down there—at the edge of those trees?"

The pilot nodded, and they began a gradual descent, the outline of the ruins sharpening as they dropped closer. Normally the area might be overrun with tourists, but not this early in the day, not with the ominous news on the airwaves about the rising tide of war. It was relatively quiet, and there were

just a few vehicles at the north end of the ruins where a small building housed staff who looked over the shrine.

“Have the Argonauts clear and secure the entire site,” she said firmly. “No one from that facility there is to be admitted. If they get pushy about it, be polite, but firm. I’ll need three or four men with spades.”

“Very good, Madame.” MacRae adopted his more formal tone in front of the other men. He still had no idea what this mission was about, or why they would in any way be interested in the relics of this old monument.

The Argonauts were quick and efficient, leaping from the helos as they alighted on a narrow patch of open ground by the edge of the trees. One squad fanned out in the surrounding orchard to one side, flanked by the other. The third squad swept north, herding a couple of early rising site visitors and a tour guide politely away. A team of four men unpacked a number of containers with the supplies they had stowed, and then opened a side compartment and produced folding shovels running to join Elena and the Captain in the center of the shrine. It was a series of three elevated slabs of smooth, grey stone, concentric circles laid on top of one another, each one slightly smaller to create three steps. The center of the topmost slab was hollow, like a stone donut, and filled with a sward of green grass.

All that was left of the stones gathered about the site sat there in mute silence, set down thousands of years ago by human stone wrights, and quietly keeping their vigil on the site through the ages.

“There,” Elena pointed. “Dig, gentlemen, if you please.”

MacRae gave her a wide eyed look. “Here? Right in the middle of the shrine?”

“It’s at least four feet deep,” she said, folding her arms.

“Very well, lads. Put your backs into it.” He’d dig a hole through the earth to Hell itself to get to the bottom of this business today. He’d dig in the devil’s own garden.

The men began to dig, and they made short work of the site, quickly shoveling away the turf and plowing away the loamy soil beneath it. For them it was just another field position, and they had dug many defensive sites in the past, though never under circumstances like these. The site staff fretted audibly to the north, held at bay by a line of dour faced Argonauts in black commando fatigues. They could see that something was going on, but a partial wall behind the last three standing columns blocked their view of the digging. To quiet them Elena sent over a man to tell them they were from the

Greek Ministry of Culture, here to do a complete site survey to protect the monuments. It seemed to have had the desired effect.

It wasn't long before the shovels struck something hard, and from the sound of it MacRae thought it was metallic, and not buried stone. They worked quickly, clearing away the soil to reveal a smooth metal surface, gleaming in the dull light, with a single cowling plate held in place by screws. Mack Morgan stood there, hands in his pockets, watching the men work with interest. What was her ladyship up to this time?

Someone produced a Swiss Army knife and they used a tool attachment to quickly remove the screws and metal plate. It revealed a familiar fixture, but one that was completely out of place in the setting—a simple keyhole. Elena reached slowly to her throat, kneeling over the dig, which was now a four by six foot trench. MacRae helped her down onto the metal structure in the trench, thinking this to be a special maintenance facility, or storage site that may house additional relics. What she could be doing here was beyond his imagining at that point, but he waited, giving Morgan a dark eyed glance, arms folded on his chest.

Elena produced, quite appropriately, a simple metal key that she had been wearing on a chain about her neck. MacRae watched as she knelt, leaning over the site, eyes closed, as if she were poised at the edge of some indefinable moment, some crossing point on the meridian of her life that would soon change everything. Then she slowly inserted the key in the lock, which produced an immediate, audible tone.

MacRae and Morgan watched intently as the top of the metal structure seemed to lift, hinging up with a low hum and forcing Elena to scoot to one side as it elevated. In light of what they had learned about the Russian ICBMs, the thought briefly crossed the Captain's mind that this could be some kind of bomb shelter, some sanctuary from the impending chaos that threatened to engulf the world.

"What in the good Lord's name is this?" said Morgan, his eyes bright with curiosity beneath his wavy black hair. He scratched his charcoal beard as he watched.

"Secret passage," said MacRae with a wink. Someone produced a flashlight and it illuminated the shadowy recesses of the compartment below.

"That looks to be six inches of titanium reinforced steel!" Morgan gaped at the thickness of the elevated door hatch.

Elena looked over her shoulder, smiling up at the men. "Captain, If you'd

care to do the honors.” She gestured at the open compartment where the light illuminated a ladder down. “Be our trailblazer here.”

The big Scott was nimble in reaching the ladder, as he had been up and down a thousand or more on ships throughout his long naval career. Down he went, swallowed by the earth, until he vanished into the deep metal shaft below the shrine, and with each step down he had the harrowing feeling that he was leaving the world above behind forever, slowly descending to a new world below.

He was.

Part VI

Escape

“I was an escapist at heart . . . I’ve always been able to yank myself out of this world and plunge myself into another. ”

— Amy Plum

Chapter 16

Orlov ran down the stairs, hearing the sounds of battle outside, pistol in hand. He had done what he came here to do, and now it was time to get free of this place and find a life for himself. But what to do? He knew that men from the ship were looking for him. The sound of the helicopter he had heard was unmistakable, though it sounded deeper and more powerful than he ever remembered a KA-40. If they were here then they must have flown all the way in from the Black Sea, he reasoned. They must have lingered near Spain, searching for him, and then tracked the signal from his jacket all the way here.

Yet something did not quite add up in that equation. He kept his jacket computer off most of the time, and knew it would only broadcast its IFF signal five kilometers in that state. The journey he had taken across the Med was on a slow Turkish steamer. *Kirov* would have had ample time to find and intercept that ship, yet it sailed merrily across the Med and through the Aegean to Istanbul before he transferred to that trawler. And if a ship like *Kirov* had entered the Black Sea, forcing the Bosphorus and Dardanelles, he would certainly have heard something about it.

He knew he had been using the jacket computer in active mode on the journey across the Black Sea in that trawler. That would have extended the range of the signal to fifty kilometers, yet the only thing that had bothered them there was that stupid German submarine. If they tracked him here, then they would have had to be within 50 kilometers of the Black Sea Coast when he made port there with his NKVD handlers. Why didn't they come for him before he started his train ride east through Georgia to his Grandmother's farm? It just did not make any sense.

Then he remembered something...that letter he had written in the journal, the note to Fedorov! He had lamented his fate at Kizlyar, and addressed Fedorov by name. Was it possible? Could that letter have survived the war and the long decades afterward to be discovered by Fedorov in the future? If that were true, then the ship made it home safely. If that were true then they must have had a real reason to try and come back for him in the Caspian. But how did they accomplish that? No one knew why the ship was marooned in time, or how it moved back and forth through the centuries—at least not at

the time he jumped ship.

Fedorov, he thought. That little weasel would be the only one who could figure all this out. Fedorov... For some reason that man wanted to find him, and badly. The more he thought about things the more this search by *Kirov* seemed desperate. Why?

They know I have the computer jacket, he thought all this while he was sitting there in the Commissar's office listening to the man trying to intimidate him with his pistol and stupid questions. Yes, Fedorov would know that jacket would give me tremendous power here. That's why they came back. It's not me they want—it's the stupid jacket! They're afraid I'll use that power. They're afraid of something I might do.

Then his brain fell through to yet another level of the problem and he realized that if the ship did move forward in time again, and they found his letter, then they might also know everything of major import that he *did* do in the years ahead. It would all be history to them. They could look it up!

So...that's why they are so desperate to find me—maybe I do something big with that jacket, something spectacular, something that upsets Fedorov's history books and causes trouble. Orlov smiled. The whole world is my garden now, he realized. I can sew and reap whatever I choose here, and I'm going to do something really big.

Now he breathed deeply knowing that he was a fated man, an important man with a destiny he was eager to find. If they wanted the damn computer jacket, then he would leave it here. He'd get on well enough without it. Commissar Molla and his pistol meant nothing now. He was going to slap it aside, choke the life out of that miserable man, and then stuff his damn computer jacket down his throat.

And that is exactly what he did.

Now he was running down the steps to reach the lower entry. Just outside he could hear shouts, gunfire. Someone yelled that the Germans were attacking. He could hear the growl of armored fighting vehicles getting closer.

He slipped into the outer yard, catching a glimpse of a tank slowly withdrawing towards the coast—but not just any tank—a PT-76! They brought tanks with them? How was this possible? There was no way they could have carried those vehicles aboard *Kirov*, and now he was amazed to also see two PT-60 armored personnel carriers loaded with modern day Russian Marines. He could hear them shouting to one another, the squad

sergeants barking out orders.

Then, just as he made ready to turn and head for a side entrance in the outer wall, he heard a sharp voice behind him. "Stand where you are!"

Orlov turned and saw a Russian Marine, AK-74 leveled at him, face grim with the heat of recent battle. "Gennadi Orlov?"

The big Chief smiled. "Comrade!" He walked slowly toward the Marine. "Thank God you've found me. I was afraid the Germans would get to me first..."

* * *

Troyak was conducting an expert retreat, peeling off one squad at a time and moving them back under the covering fire of his remaining troops in place. All the while the last of his 82mm mortar teams popped off rounds at the oil tank farm, where German infantry had been infiltrating to see if they could put flanking fire on the main railway warehouse he had defended so stubbornly.

The Germans had learned the hard way that the Russian anti-tank defense was too good to be overcome. They no longer attempted to get AFVs up close to participate in the action. Instead, they were relying on the skill and sheer mass of their infantry. Troyak was impressed with both their tactics and bravery and knew he was dealing with a real professional force here, disciplined, experienced and well trained men. They were slowly using the weight of their superior numbers to infiltrate forward, pausing when the Russian suppressive fire was too hot, advancing doggedly when it slackened for any reason. All the while 105mm rounds continue to fall in and around the Russian position.

At one point the withdrawal seemed to spur the Germans on, and they rolled forward more quickly. Troyak was forced to put together an assault squad to stem the tide. He had his men lay down a barrage of rifle grenades, then the Marines moved forward in a counterattack, moving, firing, moving, and all with the weight of the tremendous volume of fire their AK-74s could put out. They stopped the Germans again, set radio controlled charges in the building they had just cleared and retaken, then with a whistle from Troyak they began a stealthy retreat.

Troyak ordered the men back to his newly established main line of resistance, and watched intently through his infrared night vision goggles as

the Germans regrouped and rushed forward again. They were plastering the building with suppressive fire from an MG-42, and the infantry stormed in, taking it back and unaware that the Russians had left them a nasty surprise.

The gritty Sergeant raised his fist and pulled down hard to give the order to detonate the charges. The radioman gave the signal and the building erupted with a series of six well staggered explosions, gutting the interior, and anyone unfortunate enough to be inside.

That will teach them to be more cautious, Troyak thought with an evil grin. Then he was all business again, whistling to order his number one squad to peel off and fall back to the next line of withdrawal. In this way the Marines displaced, adopted new firing positions, launched occasional sharp counterattacks, and skillfully fell back again, leaving booby-trapped positions behind them each time.

There was a brief lull in the fighting as the Germans assessed their situation, and Troyak heard the rumble of trucks from the far side of the main rail yard. He knew more reinforcements were coming up, and one look through his IR binoculars told him the Germans were bringing un an engineer company with flame throwers and satchel charges.

It wasn't until the NKVD units on the high hill to the west of the city fell that Troyak knew it was time to tell Fedorov they should complete their withdrawal. The sudden appearance of the young officer, riding in the ZSU-23, had provided just the firepower he needed to stop the last German attack.

"If you want to get all these troops and equipment safely back to the *Anatoly Alexandrov*, then we need to move now, Colonel," said Troyak, still referring to Fedorov by the NKVD Colonel rank he had assumed for their mission. "The Germans are bringing up assault engineers."

"But we don't have Orlov yet! That was the whole reason we landed here!" Fedorov had a determined look on his face, but he could see the concern in Troyak's eyes and knew that they could be at great risk here. "Start your withdrawal, Sergeant. Perhaps Zykov can locate him before we have to pull his team out."

"Very well, sir. We should need half an hour. I'll buy you as much time as I can beyond that. I think we can hold them off and continue a good fighting withdrawal. As for that," he pointed at the ZSU-*Shilka*, "you had better get it back to the *Aist* hovercraft near the main harbor at once. It's not amphibious, and could take much longer to load. The other vehicles can swim off shore and we can load them there, if need be."

Fedorov nodded, and ordered the driver to get them back, but his heart was heavy. What was Orlov doing? He had to know we were here to rescue him. He did not have long to wait for an answer. Zykov called him on his jacket microphone and had good news.

“Fedorov! My men picked up Orlov five minutes ago, we’re heading for the coast now!”

“Great news, Corporal. Get him to the Anatoly Alexandrov!”

At last! They had found him! Now it was just a matter of getting everyone else off shore as quickly as possible. He radioed Troyak and gave him the go sign for a full and speedy withdrawal, elated now that the long mission offered them prospects of success.

What next, he thought? Now we get to the *Anatoly Alexandrov* and take inventory. It would be stupid to leave and then find we’re still missing a man or two. He radioed ahead to Dobrynin and told him they were beginning their withdrawal, and to have everything ready to utilize Rod-25 at his command. The desperate shift back from the Primorskiy Engineering center had worked! They got their man, and more—the mission had paid him a mysterious dividend with the discovery of the strange effects he had experienced on the back stairs of Ilanskiy. He knew that if they made it safely back to 2021, one of the first things they would need to do is get men to secure that inn.

Yet a thousand miles away, another man was already on the job there—Captain Ivan Volkov where he sat being interrogated by the NKVD Colonel and Lieutenant Surinov, and events were about to take yet another twist in a strange new direction.

* * *

Volkov had given the man his last warning. He didn’t know what these idiots thought they were doing, masquerading in these old uniforms and holding a Russian Naval officer at gunpoint like this. He looked the Colonel right in the eye...

There were three other men in the room, one holding a weapon loosely aimed at him, the other with his rifle shouldered on a strap. The last was the Lieutenant that had fingered him as somehow having something to do with Fedorov. That man, Lieutenant Surinov, was fidgeting with his glasses, trying to clean one of the lenses as Colonel Lysenko conducted the interrogation. Clearly none of the men expected any real resistance from their captive, as

irascible and uncooperative as Volkov was. Yet that worked in the Captain's favor. The NKVD men were not prepared for what happened next.

Just as Orlov had swiped the pistol from Commissar Molla's hand, Volkov lashed out again, doing the same to Lysenko. The weapon went flying across the room, and Volkov kicked hard at the knee of the one NKVD guard who had his weapon at the ready, toppling the man while the Captain wrenched at his sub machine gun. The safety was off, and he squeezed off a burst of fire, killing the other guard.

Surinov staggered backwards, but a quick step and Volkov was able to use the butt of his weapon to deliver a sharp blow to his head, dropping him unconscious as his spectacles clattered to the hard wood floor. There were shouts and hard footfalls when the last two guards came running into the room. Another burst of well aimed fire was enough to end their rush. Now it was Volkov and Lysenko.

Lysenko dove to retrieve the pistol, but not fast enough. Bullets from a PPSH-41 are much faster, and the Colonel joined his guards splayed out on the floor of the dining hall for a long, eternal sleep. The arrogance of power and the brutality with which he would treat countless innocent men and women in all the days ahead died with him. Volkov's single act of violence had done a great deal to ease the suffering of many, just as Orlov's hands had choked a good measure of despair and degradation to death when the Commissar died, though neither man knew this.

I warned them, Volkov thought in the heat of the moment. Now to get that witless Englishman. He had the presence of mind to retrieve his service pistol from one of the dead guards, then he moved quickly, out of the dining room and into the foyer where the serving girl cowered behind the front desk. The Englishman gave him a wide eyed look, obviously afraid.

"You!" Volkov pointed his weapon at the man. "Come with me."

The Captain prodded the man, goading him up the main stairway to the second floor until they reached the upper landing.

"Where is the room you were staying in?"

"There, sir... The second door on the right I think." The man looked confused, frightened, and out of place in his odd clothing; almost archaic.

Volkov forced open the door, easing in carefully before he pushed the young reporter inside. "Russian Naval Intelligence!" he shouted, leaping in behind the man, but the room was dark and silent. Volkov's eyes narrowed as he methodically scanned the nightstand, made up bed, and then he walked to

inspect the closet and restroom to make certain no one was concealed there.

“Well it doesn’t seem that anyone has stayed in this room for some time.” It was clear that he remained very suspicious of the man. “Very well, come with me. Let’s find that old proprietor and see what he has to say about things. What was your name again?”

Thomas Byrne, sir. I’m a Reporter for the London Times—here to cover the great race is all, sir.”

“Well, Mister Byrne, your name should be on the register of this inn, yes? You had better hope I find it there. Now move!” He wanted to get back downstairs to look for his men and then phone in this incident. Someone would have to come and collect the bodies he left in the dining room. He would have to file a report, but first he wanted to see about this stranger.

They were out into the hall, very near the back stairwell, and Volkov steered the man that way with one hand on his shoulder. “So you say you were meeting with friends in the dining hall, eh? Some associates? I trust you saw what happened to them when they presumed to trifle with me. Bear that in mind. Now get down those stairs!”

If the Captain thought he was confused by his first journey down the back stairwell at Ilanskiy, the second would bring him to the edge of insanity itself. He would soon find his security detail was entirely missing, the inn itself entirely different again, and the station and town of Ilanskiy itself nothing like he remembered. They started down, and along the way he heard what sounded like thunder, an ominous rumble reverberating in the narrow passage. The young man in front of him was suddenly silhouetted by a strange amber glow. Three more steps to the lower landing and they were in the dining room, but it was nothing like the room where Volkov had just killed the NKVD who were interrogating him...It was nothing like that at all.

Chapter 17

“Hold on, Jock! That looks like our man!” Sutherland hissed under his breath pointing through a gap in the storage crates of the warehouse where they had been hiding.

They had settled in, watching the entrance to the detainment facility across the street and trying to figure the best way to get inside. Sutherland was not too keen on Haselden’s suggestion that they merely walk up to the gate and present themselves.

“What’s the worst that could happen?” The Captain explained. “They’d throw us right inside, eh?”

“Well bugger me!” said Sutherland. “I didn’t paddle across the Caspian Sea and come all this way through muck and mire to get thrown in the bloody hole, mate. There has to be some other way to do this.”

Before they had time to argue the matter, they heard that strange thrumming sound above them, and Haselden looked out through a hole in the roof to see a swirling shadow in the sky. It was unlike any aircraft they had ever seen before, but it quickly vanished in the low cloud, the sound of the big engines fading away.

The appearance of the aircraft caused quite a stir, and there was too much activity in and around the site for them to even consider making a move at that point. Haselden swallowed his idea and decided to hunker down. “We’ll have to wait until things settle,” he said. “I suppose we could use the rest, and then this evening we put on the black face and see if we can slip inside that place.”

“Now you’re talking.” Sutherland was finally hearing a plan he could live with, and one his commando training could embrace. So they waited, throughout the long day until they were thinking to make a move. Unfortunately, the Germans soon presented them with another option. They could clearly hear the sound of rifle fire in the distance, men shouting, and the rumble of battle thickening with machine guns and incoming artillery. Then, to their amazement they heard an enormous roar in the distance, coming from the sea.

“What do you make of that?” Sutherland had crept to the far side of the warehouse and was peering out a dislodged board in the outer wall. Haselden

crept to his side and the two men looked out to see the strangest craft they had ever laid eyes on. It roared in from the sea with two massive engines aft and looking like an enormous inflatable raft with a steel superstructure. To their amazement, they saw the front of the craft open like a landing craft and disgorge armored vehicles that began amphibiously swimming to the shore. There were three landing craft in all, and each carried vehicles, and swarms of black booted soldiers who stormed ashore to the whistle of NCOs as the little invasion proceeded.

Haselden had seen amphibious tanks like the old Tetrarch, the Valentine DDs and the newer plans for a Sherman Duplex Drive that the British would call "Donald Duck." These tanks were altogether different, with a low profile and a sharp forward edge for scudding through the surf.

"Have a good look at that, Sutherland. Now there's a floating tank worth the bloody name. Look at them move!"

"Looks like the Germans are attacking and this lot is here to try and stop them. Now what, Jock? Is this a private fight or can anybody get in on it?"

Haselden squinted as he watched. "We lay low and see what develops. No sense sticking our three pistols and a couple Stens in the mix. If Jerry is coming in force, they'll take this place. That looks to be a good sized company landing out there, but the Germans will be coming with much more. If so, then the Russians may soon have to abandon that detention center. Let's get back and keep our eyes on that gate. We won't want our man slipping away in this mess, but all this gunfire plays to our advantage."

So they waited, listening to the battle surround them, and catching a glimpse of yet another odd looking Russian AFV that appeared to be a quad Ack Ack gun. It lingered near the prison for a time, then moved off to the north.

"Looks like they sent a couple squads inside that fortress," said Sutherland. "They may not give the place up easily, and suppose our man gets it in the middle of all this shooting?"

"Then he gets it," said Haselden. "Nothing we can do about that."

"Well how will we know?"

"We'll find out soon enough. One side or another is going to win this fight. Hold on Davey boy, you'll see."

Haselden was correct.

After a sharp battle for all of thirty minutes, they looked to see a group of men emerging from the prison entrance, and among them was the tall stocky

man they had identified as Orlov.

“That’s our man!” Haselden was jubilant. “They saw a group of soldiers peel off, and two men herding Orlov in their direction. Then a series of three incoming mortar rounds began to thump into the road and nearby rail line and the three men crouched and sprinted for the warehouse where the British commandos were lying in wait.

“Now Maitland! Now’s your time!” Haselden hissed, repeating Wellington’s order to the 2nd and 3rd Battalions of the 1st Foot Guards at Waterloo as they were sent to oppose the French Old Guard.

Sutherland knew the reference at once and gave the Captain a wink. “Up Guards, ready!” he echoed, and the three British commandos tensed up for quick action.

The Russians staggered into the building and, allies or not, the moment required the hardest possible line. Haselden leapt up, pistol aiming and firing at the two armed soldiers, who were caught completely off guard and killed with a snap of four clean shots. The three commandos were up with weapons drawn on Orlov, who gave them an astonished look.

Haselden tipped his beret to the man. He had fulfilled the first important part of his charge in finding this man, living up to the unit’s motto: *‘Attain by Surprise!’* “Sir,” he said with a well earned smile, though he knew the man would probably not understand a word he was saying. “You are now in the custody of Number 30 Commando, Royal Marines.” He gestured with his pistol to move the man on. “Take the point, Davey. Sergeant Terry and I will keep a close watch on this one. Let’s get to the harbor and find us a boat!”

Orlov had no idea who these men were, or what they were saying to him, but pistols were pistols, and the two dead Marines they had gunned down in their sudden ambush were enough to convince him that this was just another occasion to go with the flow.

They moved quickly to the back of the building, until Sutherland saw a way for them to get cross a series of converging rail lines and out onto the main harbor quay. As they moved they could see that the soldiers and vehicles they had seen were also slowly retiring toward the coastline. Thankfully, there were a good number of old fishing boats and a trawler tied off on the weathered wooden pier. Sutherland made for the craft that seemed most seaworthy. He could not believe their good luck! They had come all this way, into what looked to be a truly hopeless situation, and this Orlov all but walked up and shook hands with them!

The four men scrambled down into the boat, Sergeant Terry herding Orlov into the cabin as Sutherland and Haselden quickly threw off the ropes and pushed away. North, along the rail line approaching the harbor, they still heard the sound of active battle, but it was clear that the Russians who had come ashore in these strange craft were now withdrawing.

“Take note of everything you see here, Davey,” said Haselden. “The Russians have some very interesting equipment here. I’ll bet Seventeen would love to have a good look at those big mothers there. He thumbed at the shadowy forms of the hovercraft, which waited on the shore. Sutherland got the engine fired up and the boat began to glide slowly down the long quay to the harbor mouth formed by a converging jetty. All they had to do was clear that and they could head out to sea.

Whether it was fate, chance, happenstance, or just damn good luck, they made it out of the harbor and Sutherland beamed as he spun the wheel to point the boat due east. Like a mouse fleeing a burning building, they got clean away. The cats were too busy clawing at each other to notice them or bother them in any way. At one point, a turret gunner in one of the hovercraft spotted their trawler and rotated his twin 30mm gun about for a look at them through his cross hairs. Seeing no threat, he let them go.

* * *

Fedorov was back in the ZSU-23, elated. They had found their man, or so he still believed, and now all they had to do was get everyone else safely back to the waiting hovercraft and out to sea. Troyak was conducting a skillful fighting withdrawal and displacing back toward the shoreline. The last PT-76 tank was back and already loading on a hovercraft. Now Fedorov had to get his vehicle to the big *Aist* class hovercraft by the main harbor. The engine gunned and they trundled south along the rail lines, soon seeing the stark silhouette of the craft ahead, its forward ramp still yawning open and resting on a narrow beach.

The ZSU quickly made its way towards the maw of the beast. Groups of Marines were filing in under the watchful eyes of their Sergeants, who were counting their eggs as the squads reported in. Then Zykov’s voice was in his earbud.

“I’ve got Orlov’s jacket, but we lost a man in the prison, and two more at the warehouse just outside the main entrance. I’ve recovered the bodies.

Hope it wasn't too bad for Troyak."

"Where is Orlov?" Fedorov wanted to know where his prize was.

"I ordered the men to get him into the PT-76 for safekeeping. It's loading now to the north on the light hovercraft."

"Well check in on them," said Fedorov, "and tell everyone to head for the *Anatoly Alexandrov*. Good job, Corporal."

The job of getting the big anti-aircraft gun aboard the *Aist* was not quite as easy as getting it off, but they managed and it was soon swallowed by this metal behemoth from the sea. It rolled aboard behind the two BTR-50s, and the Marines crowded in after them. As the operation concluded the overwatch turrets had to engage German infantry trying to cross the rail lines to get to the main harbor, and the two twin AK-230 cannons riddled the yard with suppressive fire, the shower of heavy 30mm rounds being more than enough to stop the attack. Soon the engines of the hovercraft revved up and it slowly backed off the shoreline in a wash of sound and fury. They were heading out to sea, the radars watching for any sign of German aircraft as they withdrew.

The other two hovercraft reported in and Fedorov ordered the flotilla to head east, then south for the *Anatoly Alexandrov* at their best speed. Any German infantry that were huddled in positions on the shore watched them go, accelerating to over 70 knots as they swept out to sea. The troops gaped at the spectacle, shaking their heads in awe. Who were these hardy men who had blasted their planes from the sky with rockets, stopped their tanks cold, and held the entire weight of two battalions at bay?

As the flotilla retired, they passed a number of smaller craft at sea, giving them no mind and not knowing that Haselden's little band of raiders was aboard one, slowly heading east in their foaming wake.

The run from Makhachkala down to the *Anatoly Alexandrov* was no more than twenty kilometers, and Fedorov radioed ahead to tell Dobrynin they were on the way home. "Get Rod-25 ready for operation," he urged.

"I started the procedure five minutes ago when Troyak radioed he had all his remaining men aboard. But what about Bukin and the Mi-26? Shall I tell him to take off now?"

"Not yet," said Fedorov. "Tell him to hold until we arrive. I just want to be sure we still have options in case anything goes wrong."

"Options for what, Fedorov?"

It was a good question, and Fedorov really had no answer for it.

"We'll be there in a matter of minutes, Chief. Signing off."

The hovercraft soon roared up to the waiting ship, and Fedorov considered what to do. Should he send Bukin on his way to carry out Admiral Volsky's plan? Here they had just taken an enormous risk to recover a single man, and now he was about to send four more off in the Mi-26 for a thousand mile journey east to the Pacific. It seemed a crazy plan for them to try and fly all that distance and then wait, undiscovered, for nearly three years! What was Volsky thinking? Once they got home to 2021 again they would have all three control rods. Then all they had to do was land at the Kaspiysk Naval base here and put them on a fast Antonov-225 cargo plane to send them east to Vladivostok. From there they could work up a way to get back to *Kirov*... or so he thought.

But how? His mind was soon flooded with all the many things that could go wrong. First off, there was no guarantee that Rod-25 would shift them happily back to 2021. They had often appeared in a future time that was obviously beyond that year, for they had seen the devastation of the war that was fought.

That thought also filled him with dread. What was happening in the war? Had they changed anything with this mission? Did they get to Orlov in time? Did Orlov even have anything to do with the outcome at all? What if they shifted forward in time and found everything destroyed again; the naval base bombed and wrecked? What then?

That prospect was daunting enough, but now he considered all the variables they would face even if they did make it back to an intact base in 2021 and reached Vladivostok by aircraft. What would they do? They could try to take the other two rods back with them from the Primorskiy Engineering Center again. At least they would be right there in Vladivostok when they arrived—but where? There was no guarantee that they would reach the year 1945. Experience told him that they would most likely end up in 1942 again! Then it was back to waiting out the war in Vladivostok until *Kirov* appeared in 1945.

That was probably a better plan, he thought. Better than the Mi-26 trying to make it all that way alone. The fuel situation is shaky, the helo is unarmed, and it will be a long, long wait for the small crew aboard until 1945. His alternate plan sounded much more secure. He decided that would be the best call, then realized that the instant he made that choice the outcome would ripple forward across the long decades and be “history” at the other end, assuming he actually put that plan into action.

It either works or it doesn't work, he thought grimly. But I could be the reason *Kirov* never hears us calling when it arrives in 1945. It could be my meddling with Volsky's plan here that changes everything—for better or worse.

Chapter 18

“**The** mission is off? You are countermanding orders from Admiral Volsky.” Dobrynin had a confused look on his face.

“It is simply too risky, Chief.” Fedorov explained his reasoning, and then put forward his idea. “Don’t you agree that would be a better plan?”

“Well... I suppose it does sound more plausible, Fedorov. You found a way to make up for using all that helicopter fuel, but I’m not a Fleet Admiral. Volsky was very insistent that I get this damn helicopter on its way.”

“I will speak to him about it when we return and I’m sure he will understand my decision. Few plans ever play out as they were initially intended. At the moment, our best and only bet is to get the *Anatoly Alexandrov* home in one piece.”

Dobrynin shrugged. “Very well,” he said. “The procedure is underway and I am ready for rod retraction and insertion.”

“Good, Chief...Do you think we will we make it back?” The uncertainty in Fedorov’s voice was evident.

“The pattern has held steady every time we have used this rod, Mister Fedorov. One thing is probably certain, we are going to move somewhere.”

“How long do you think it will take?”

“Let me listen...” The Chief slowly raised a hand, like a conductor hushing down his orchestra with a feather light movement of his palm. He was signaling his rod technician to begin. One rod would be removed, the other inserted to maintain the steady regulation of the reaction. As the process began he sat down and listened to the reactors, his mind shutting out all the odd noise of the Marines fussing about on the ship and focusing intently on the nuclear song at the heart of the core.

He listened, hearing the telltale sound of Rod-25 rising like a clarinet above the low rumble of strings, soaring up and up as the rod descended deeper into the nuclear brew. Everything sounded normal, just as he had heard it so many times before. He closed his eyes, a slight smile on his lips, and it was then that he heard a strange harmony develop. What is this, he wondered? There was another note in the mix, then a third, though they were very muted, very distant, lilting like flutes in tandem with Rod-25. The sound changed, no longer the ascending chorus he expected, but a deep descending

refrain that sounded completely different!

Fedorov watched him, amazed by the man's obvious concentration. Everyone has some special skill, he thought. Tasarov lived under his sonar headset, and the Chief knows his way around a reactor room better than any man in the fleet.

He waited, feeling an urgent need to go and see about Orlov. His *Aist* class craft was being moored to the port side of the floating powerplant, commanded by Captain Malkin, and the two lighter *Kalmar* class craft were on the starboard side. Orlov was supposedly inside a PT-76 tank on one of those craft, and he was eager to go and see him. Then he realized that Zykov had not yet reported back and a thrum of anxiety rose in his gut. He had the distinct feeling that something was wrong, something oddly out of place.

A voice blared over the intercom loudspeaker. "*Captain Malkin to Fedorov. We have a small craft approaching off our port aft quarter.*"

Fedorov grasped the handset and spoke. "How close, Captain?"

"About a thousand meters out."

"Does it look threatening? Is it closing the range?"

"No, sir. Looks to be a fishing trawler. The crew is just giving us a wave as they pass. They must think we are a Russian cargo vessel."

"Very well. No sense causing any more trouble here than we have to. Let it be."

Those last three words were very fateful, though Fedorov did not know that as he spoke them. Let it be...

"Keep me posted, Chief." He was off to find Orlov and settle accounts with the man.

* * *

"**Not** here? Are you absolutely certain?" Fedorov had an anguished look on his face as Troyak reported. Zykov was standing next to him, a sheepish look on his face.

"We checked the tank. No one saw him. I've ordered a search of all the hovercraft and the facility itself. If he's still aboard, we'll find him."

"I hope to God we do," said Fedorov. "Zykov, what could have happened?"

"I ordered the men to get him to a PT-76," the Corporal said apologetically. "The attack was really heating up and the withdrawal was

very chaotic. I was checking every building for loose equipment and casualties. I don't know, Colonel. I found two men down in the warehouse near the detention facility, but I assumed they were casualties from mortar fire. The rounds were pounding that area pretty bad as we pulled out. Now that I look at those bodies I see that they were not hit by shrapnel from anything like a mortar. They died from small caliber fire, two rounds per man—probably pistols. I'm sorry, Fedorov... I ... I should have collared Orlov myself and dragged him home by the ear."

Fedorov could see that Zykov was very deflated. He was given the job of finding Orlov and he had done that under very difficult circumstances. But something obviously went wrong. No plan ever plays out as it is intended. He remembered his own words to Dobrynin just moments ago.

"Damn! Well maybe he'll turn up in the search," he said. "I know you did your best, Zykov."

Then he realized that the procedure was already underway. They could shift in time at any moment! If Orlov was not aboard they would lose him again, and without his service jacket there would be no way to find or track him.

"Search every compartment, every deck and storage locker. Search the air conditioning conduits—everything! Turn this place upside down if you have to. I'm going to see if we can stop the rod maintenance procedure. We can't leave here without Orlov!"

Fedorov started away but, as he was down a ladder and heading for the entrance to the lower deck, he saw something, felt something strangely odd.

He stood on the deck, looking around and scanning the gentle swells of the Caspian Sea. There seemed to be a series of ripples emanating from the ship, and expanding out in concentric circles. Was it happening? Were they starting to displace in time?

He looked out and saw the trawler Captain Malkin had reported, a small shape on the wide expanse of the sea and sailing slowly past the facility. Two men were on deck but, as he watched, the air between the *Anatoly Alexandrov* and the trawler seemed to quaver and ripple with a mirage-like sheen.

My God! He exclaimed inwardly. We are moving! The shift has begun! He could feel his pulse quicken, an urgent heat rising on his neck. He could feel the whole damn mission slipping through his hands now like a loose mooring rope. It was too late to get to Dobrynin and stop it, and Orlov was

gone, gone, *gone!*

Then he realized that if he could still see that trawler they must be in 1942. It was there, bobbing in the sea as before, though veiled with a gossamer sheen of light now. Was something wrong? Was Rod-25 failing them at long last? He had to get to Dobrynin and find out.

* * *

“**Well** have a good look at that, Jock” said Sutherland.

“I’ve *been* looking at it. Why in blazes did you follow those damn contraptions?”

“Just curious to see what they were up to. They’ve already bushed us off with no worries. What do you make of it?”

“Some kind of ship, eh? But it’s not moving. Those Russian Marines are docking up with the damn thing.”

“What’s that up on top? Looks like a big grasshopper!” Sutherland pointed now.

“Hell if I know. You’d best get to the pilot house again and steer clear, will you? Suppose they get curious and come over here to have a look.”

“Don’t worry, Jock. We’re just a fishing trawler to them. I’ve even been waving at them to look all nice and friendly. We’re a good thousand yards away and just sailing merrily off to look for some fish. No worries.”

But Haselden *was* worried. Sutherland could see it on his face, more than worry. There was a look of absolute dread in the man’s eyes, a cold fear that he had never seen before. Haselden had been through the heat of the fire in action many times before, and in situations far worse than this.

“What’s wrong, Jock? You look as though you’ve seen a ghost.”

“Never seen anything like this,” he said under his breath. “What’s wrong with the bloody sea?”

Sutherland noticed it too—the odd sheen in the air, and how it quavered and rippled, as if the atmosphere had been heated all around them. Then they could hear a low hum that seemed to deepen, descending below the threshold of hearing, though it could still be felt. A veil of mist seemed to rise about the distant ship, rolling outward and rippling the sea itself, as if the ship were pulsing and creating waves.

He watched, astounded, as the first wave reached them, lightly rolling the trawler, then another and another, a miniature tsunami disturbing the placid

sea. The mist thickened, becoming a fog that now enveloped them and became so dense that they could no longer see but a few feet beyond the gunwales of the boat. A thrumming vibration was felt, a trembling quiver in the air and sea.

He looked over to check on Haselden, still worried about the Captain, and was given the shock of his young life. The man was there...but *not* there! He seemed to be wavering in the odd mist about the ship, a look of profound fear on his face, and absolute astonishment and alarm! Then, with a strange hiss, Haselden was gone! The man simply vanished into the mist, as if he was a ghost—as if he had never been there at all!

Then all was calm.

Sutherland stepped back, eyes wide, heart pounding with fright.

“Jock?” His rational mind forced him to lurch over the edge of the trawler, thinking Haselden might have fallen into the sea, but there wasn’t the slightest sign of that in the water. The odd ripples in the calm sea remained completely undisturbed.

“What’s up with those Russians, Lieutenant?” It was Sergeant Terry calling to him from within the cabin of the boat. “Can’t see a thing in this mist.”

Neither could Sutherland, but he was still shaken by what he *had* seen—what he knew he had seen—but what he also knew was quite impossible. What happened just now? Where was the Captain?

“My God...” He let out a long breath, staring at Sergeant Terry, his face ashen white.

“What’s gotten in to you, Lieutenant?”

“It’s Jock...He was there. Right there next to me, Sergeant. And when that bloody fog rolled in, he...why he just vanished!”

“Man overboard?”

“No! I was looking right at him and he simply disappeared!”

Sergeant Terry narrowed his eyes, giving Sutherland a stern look. He had seen men go daffy under pressure, but Sutherland seemed to have the situation well in hand up until now. What was the Lieutenant talking about? Was there an explosion or accident of some kind on that odd looking ship? That rolling fog and the ripples in the sea had originated from the ship, and caught them like a bad storm front. He peered into the mist, a strange feeling in his gut that they had lost their way and were now adrift on an endless sea of oblivion.

* * *

Inside the cabin Orlov could feel it too. Another trawler, he had thought at first. Good! It beats walking, or even bouncing about in a truck on those muddy roads. If they had stayed ashore they would certainly have been caught up in the fighting that was closing in on the city. The roads south were probably cut already by the Germans.

When he saw where these men were heading, he was relieved. Another little trip by sea would be just the perfect way out of this mess, unless those Marines on the hovercraft get nosy. Who were these men? They had gunned down his Marine captors without a moment's hesitation, as if they had been lying in wait all along, ready to spring their little trap.

When the leader spoke to him in English he did not know what he was saying, but gave the man a subtle grin nonetheless. From their looks, and the uniforms they had on under their trench coats, he reasoned they were British soldiers. What in the world were they doing here? Could those men at Gibraltar have followed his trail all the way here? He found that prospect hard to believe, but considered it a possibility. If that were the case, then they would be trying to get me safely out of this region to an area controlled by the British in WWII.

Now he wished he had held on to his computer jacket. Svetlana would have given him all the information he needed about British operations and bases close to the Caspian. On second thought, the sight of the jacket stuffed down the throat of Commissar Molla and dangling like a bizarre beard from the man's chin gave him another moment's amusement. The Marines found him even without his jacket. If it were not for these three men he would probably be aboard that ship out there with the rest of the Russians.

He looked out the cabin window at the ship, thinking it looked odd and squarish to be a sea going vessel. What was it? It clearly was not a carrier, or even an *Ivan Rogov* class transport ship. Look how they had to moor the hovercraft by its side like that. And look at that monster of a helo on the top! Now he knew what he had heard before in the truck as they arrived here—that was an Mi-26! Someone went to some very elaborate ends to plan and launch this mission. They must want me very badly.

As he watched the Marines on the deck he passed a moment of regret, a feeling that he should be there with them, his true countrymen from the future

world of 2021. They were brave to come after him this way and fight off the Germans in the bargain. Fedorov undoubtedly planned this whole thing, and he most likely talked Volsky into providing all this equipment. My God, they built a whole reinforced amphibious assault company to come after me! He was almost sorry he had to disappoint them.

Then he heard that same descending vroom, felt the deep vibration as it fell into a black hole below the threshold of all sound. He sensed the charged quality of the air, and saw the eerie sheen wavering between the trawler and the Russian ship. He had felt all these things before, and each time it was an occasion when *Kirov* displaced in time. But that wasn't *Kirov* out there. It was some kind of floating facility—probably a power plant like they use in the arctic at times, or up near Kamchatka. How could it move in time?

He stared until the grey mist rolled out to envelop them, with a sinking feeling that his comrades from the future were now long gone. He was alone again, marooned again, trapped here in the middle of the Second World War without even Svetlana to help him find his way.

I still know what happens, he thought, consoling himself. I may not know all the little details, but I'll know the big things. I know how the war goes, and how it all ends. I know about Khrushchev and the Cuban Missile Crisis and the Berlin Wall and when it all goes to hell and comes falling down. I'll know enough to make a lot of money. But first I'll need to deal with these three here, and this burley Sergeant sitting in front of me will be no small task.

Three men? He looked again, seeing there were only two now. The older man, apparently their commanding officer, was no longer there. Perhaps he was on the other side of the boat, he thought, thinking what he might do next. Bide your time, he told himself. Time was one thing he had in abundance now...All the time in the world.

Part VII

Tatsu Maru

*“The two most important requirements for major success are:
first, being in the right place at the right time, and second, doing
something about it.”*

— Ray Kroc

Chapter 19

Karpov wasted no time getting the ship out to sea again, much to the chagrin of the crew. They had hoped to debark and spend time in the city, but the Captain thought it would be too dangerous at this early stage, and Rodenko agreed.

“At the moment we are the great unknown, a great surprise and novelty. They will spend the next week trying to get news from St. Petersburg about us, and in that time I plan to make a few headlines myself. Once we establish dominance here, there will be ample time for the crew to take some much needed shore leave. But for now, we have business to attend to.”

They slipped out of the harbor, and many watched the ship go, waving from the wharves and quays as *Kirov* sailed off. Karpov sounded the ship’s horn in farewell, and soon they were clear of the barrier islands and out into the Sea of Japan. He set course for the Tsugaru Strait, intending to take the most direct route to the principal Japanese ports near Tokyo. It wasn’t long before they ran into commercial traffic, outbound to the Sea of Japan.

Karpov paced on the bridge, pausing from time to time to peer at the distant steamers through his field glasses. They had seen the ships on radar long ago, cruising sedately off the coast of Japan in the Tsugaru Straits just south of Hokkaido. *Kirov* was approaching from the west, having sailed from Vladivostok the previous day.

How ironic, he thought. I believed I could get to Sagami Bay in 1945 to lay down a strong position for Russia. Now I sail there in 1908, and this time the Americans can do nothing about it whatsoever. The sea is mine! I am the sole authority in these waters now. No ship can darken my horizon without my knowing about it, and nothing can follow in my wake to ever overtake me. I go where I please; do what I please. Now I truly am the king of these seas, and I will soon issue the first of my edicts here.

He had scoured the ship’s crew to find someone who could speak Japanese. There were three men in all, and Chekov, a young *mishman* in the missile section, was ordered to the bridge. He was sitting next to Nikolin at the communications station, a headset covering his ears as he was being trained by the more experienced officer there, learning how all the systems worked. They would not need voice communications yet, as most ships of

that day did not have radio sets, particularly old steamers like those they were approaching now. Instead they might tap out communications in International Morse code.

“Mister Nikolin,” Karpov turned to the two men. “Signal that ship and find out where they are heading and what cargo they carry.”

“Very good, sir.”

Nikolin began in International Morse, but he had Chekov at hand in case the Japanese used Wabun or Kana code, a special extension of the code that allowed for the sending of Kana characters and their Latin letter equivalents. Should they be received, Chekov would assist in translating.

Sure enough, Nikolin received a dash, two dots and three dashes as the prefix signal indicating Wabun code. He wrote down what they received and Chekov slowly translated the syllables.

“O-ha-yo-u-go-za-i-ma-su,” he said at last. “They are saying good morning, sir.”

“Yes, well have them answer my question, and be quick about it.”

The seconds passed as Chekov first told Nikolin what to send in characters, and it was tapped out on the telegraph set.

“They say they are the *Tatsu Maru* and behind them is *Kanto Maru*, both bound for Dalian and carrying rice and soy, sir.”

“Dalian? Isn’t that on the coast of the Yellow Sea?” Karpov went to his Plexiglas map and noted the position, seeing that it was just north of the old Port Arthur. “So this is a supply ship bound for territories lately seized by the Japanese—territories that were formerly controlled by Russia, I might add. How very interesting. Well, tell them they are to reverse course and make for the nearest Japanese port. No Japanese ship is authorized to enter the Yellow Sea from this day forward.”

Nikolin gave the Captain a wide eyed look, but then quickly began to piece together a message with Chekov. It was some time before they got a response. “They want to know who we are, sir?” Nikolin adjusted his headset, a little nervous now, as he could almost predict how these events would transpire.

“Send that we are the Russian battlecruiser *Kirov*. Send it in International Morse code and they are to respond in kind.”

Again there was a very long pause, and Nikolin could hear that the ship was also tapping another signal to any nearby shore station to indicate they were in contact with a Russian vessel.

They can see us now, thought Karpov. Good... Let them have a good long look. He even came a few points to starboard to present the full profile of the ship, and display its massive silhouette. Nikolin reported what the Japanese were saying to shore: *Large ship sighted. Russian colors. Ship of war.*

“Well?” Karpov’s impatience was obvious now. “What do they reply?”

“Still waiting, Captain.”

Karpov could see the steamer making a turn, away from *Kirov* but still obviously heading for the Sea of Japan. “Tell them they are to assume a course of 090 degrees east and return to Japan at once.”

Even as Nikolin sent that instruction, Chekov was translating the last signal from the Japanese, still truculently in Kana code in spite of Karpov’s order to the contrary. He passed the information to Nikolin as he finished sending. They received only four characters, which Chekov had translated as: “sa-yo-na-ra.”

“They say goodbye, sir. That is all.”

Karpov just looked at him, somewhat perturbed. “Goodbye? Nothing more?”

“Still waiting, Captain.”

“Well, perhaps I can hurry them along,” said Karpov, this time turning to Samsonov. “Activate the 100mm bow gun,” he said tersely.

“Aye, sir,” said Samsonov. “Gun ready!”

Karpov watched the forward turret quickly rotate to bear on the steamer. Mounted right out on the bow of the ship, it had been moved there during *Kirov*’s redesign to allow for the installation of the larger 152mm twin batteries behind the main missile deck silos. The bow gun was a single cannon, a 100 mm/L60 DP gun from the original battlecruiser *Kirov* that was retained in the refit. As he watched the turret smartly turn Karpov passed a fleeting moment thinking that this could be the first round of the war that would change all future history from this point forward, his private war on history itself, to redress the wrongdoing of so many nations who had opposed Russian ambitions and curtailed his country’s rightful place here in the Pacific and the world. That would all change from the moment he gave the order to fire.

Then another memory suddenly returned to him like a haunting ghost. He recalled that brief moment on the quay at Vladivostok when Admiral Volsky had called to him from his car, just after they received word that the Chinese

and Japanese were fighting one another over the Diaoyutai islands.

“...Do what you must,” the Admiral had told him. “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 still see the look in the Admiral’s eye as he slowly drew out his missile key, handing it off to Karpov—the same key the two men had struggled over in the North Atlantic. Volsky was handing him more than the power and responsibility that key represented. He was also handing him his hope for a future they might win together.

Another memory crowded in behind that image. It was the conversation he had with Sergeant Troyak soon after he had formally returned to the ship, mending fences with the indomitable Marine. He remember how he apologized for his behavior in opposing Volsky.

“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?”

I won’t let him down...ever again... The words seemed a searing brand on his face now, considering all that had happened since he left Vladivostok as nominal commander of the fleet. What had he accomplished? He engaged the Americans, first jousting verbally with Captain Tanner on the carrier *Washington*, then engaging that battlegroup in a brief, violent battle in the waters just south of the Kuriles. Who knows how it might have ended were it not for that Demon of a volcano that sent us careening into the past?

Then he had the temerity and headstrong will to confront the entire US Pacific fleet in 1945—eighteen carriers, six battleships, over twenty cruisers and ninety destroyers with more than three thousand aircraft at their disposal as well. What was he thinking? The hubris and arrogance he had demonstrated quickly led to the loss of the *Admiral Golovko*, and all hands aboard, and probably the loss of *Orlan* as well. What kind of commander was he in the end? Every time things came down to a decisive moment, he had reached for the overwhelming power of the nuclear warheads on the gleaming tips of his missiles.

Now the words he spoke to Sergeant Troyak that day seemed to lash at him. The Sergeant had given him his much needed absolution, and pledged his support.

“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."

What was he about to do now, take on the entire world here? Was this blow meant to do harm, or good? Is this what he *should* do in this situation? He was clearly not at risk here. The ship was truly invincible in this era, and he did not expect to ever find himself in any situation they could not easily handle, as long as he kept a wary eye on his munitions and missile ordnance inventory, and used his power judiciously.

He could let these ships steam on their way... Sayonara. They obviously wanted nothing to do with his threatening ship and were doing the only thing a sane sea captain might consider by trying to slip away. Yet if he was to assert himself here as planned, and set history to rights, then he had to start somewhere. What was he doing here? Was he to be a man of peace, as he had lectured Troyak, or was he just a man of war, a mindless shark with the sharpest teeth in the ocean? Was he right to presume he could redress all the wrongs of the centuries yet to come? What was it that upstart American pilot had said to him before the Americans foolishly pressed that first attack on his fleet? *Might makes right*, the words of Iron Mike.

All that said and thought in his mind, he still felt compelled to do something that would get the attention of the current Japanese government. Yes, might makes right. If he gave them a pin-prick here it might save more pain in the end. He would at least give them the opportunity to comply before he resorted to any further action. With that thought in mind he decided to offer these steamers that one chance as well.

"Samsonov, fire a warning shot across the bow of that lead steamer. Nikolin—signal that if they do not immediately assume a course of 090 degrees east they will be sunk. One round please."

"Aye, sir, firing now."

The bow gun recoiled with a sharp crack and the round plunged into the sea ahead of the steamer, a relatively small splash in the water considering the huge mass of the ship that had fired. *Kirov* was merely clearing its throat.

Karpov was watching through his binoculars, hoping the Japanese Captain would not force him to better his aim and hit the ship. He saw the steamer make another ten point turn to starboard, but then it held steady on.

“Have they increased speed?”

Radar immediately reported. “Yes, sir. They have gone from eight to twelve knots.”

“Any further message from them, Nikolin?”

“No sir. But they are sending a distress signal now to any coastal station in range.... S.O.S... *Tatsu Maru* ...Under attack.”

“They’re calling home for help. Well, that will do them no good, and I suppose we might achieve something more here by making an example of this ship. Very well, Mister Samsonov. Kiss that ship’s backside with the bow gun. Aim well and put a single round into them.”

Samsonov was quick to fire, and the round was equally quick to the target. Karpov saw it strike the aft quarter of the ship and bloom up in an angry explosion. The second steamer had turned completely about and was running as well.

A flash of anger bothered him as he waited, peering through his field glasses. The lead steamer was still trying to get away. Foolish little men, thought Karpov. Can’t they see what’s in front of them? He turned to Samsonov with a final order. “Sink that lead vessel with the bow gun. We’ll allow the other to pick up anyone who goes into the sea. After all, we aren’t monsters here, and these are non-combatants. But we must establish that our word is steel, we are men of steel, and that when we give an order it is to be obeyed. After that all should be well.”

Men of steel, thought Nikolin. Another man had called himself that too—Josef Stalin, the man of steel. So now we are a ship of little Stalins at large in an unsuspecting world. He wondered just how far the Captain was going to take things, but being a junior officer he knew it was not his place to speak up in this situation. He found himself wishing that Rodenko was here on the bridge. The *Starpom* was below decks on his relief shift, and the Captain had nothing more than his own internal muse for council.

Now the sound of the forward deck gun punctuated the still airs sharply—crack—crack—crack, and Samsonov methodically fired in tightly controlled salvos of three rounds each. He had a solid radar lock on the steamer, and within minutes *Tatsu Maru* was a flaming wreck. Nikolin looked to see hapless crewmen leaping from the fiery deck into the sea. It brought to mind the same image of men leaping from the devastated hulk of the *Admiral Golovko* when the American battleship had scored that lucky hit with one of its big main guns.

All it took was that single round, he thought. But the Captain does not seem in any way concerned here. He believes we are invulnerable, and perhaps we are. That said, the Japanese Navy here beat the entire Russian Pacific Fleet, and those ships must be harbored somewhere close at hand. Something told him he would soon be watching more men go into the angry sea, and he hoped he would not be one of them.

Chapter 20

Rodenko paid a visit to Doctor Zolkin on his relief shift. There he discussed their situation, and the Doctor was still struggling with the amazing notion that the ship had continued its regression in time.

“We seem to be on a long slide to oblivion,” he said. “1908? Why this year, I wonder?”

“No one knows. With Dobrynin and Fedorov gone we seem to have no real idea what is happening. The control rod was removed from the ship, but we still move in time whenever we are close to some massive detonation. First it was that damn volcano, and then that last warhead the Captain fired must have been a little too close.”

“Perhaps the Captain might refrain from flinging nuclear weapons about,” Zolkin dried his hands with a white towel as if washing the trouble away. “That, clearly has something to do with it. What’s been going on in the night sky? Has Karpov been testing more weapons?”

“The night sky? You mean the strange glow after dark. Yes, we have all wondered about it. At first we thought it was an after effect of our latest time displacement, but it should not last this long, and it appears to be coming from well over the horizon to the northwest, up in Siberia. But it has nothing to do with nuclear weapons, that I can assure you. Thankfully the Captain has ordered the warheads put in magazine storage. He thinks our conventional weapons are sufficient now.”

“Well, what does he intend to do, Rodenko? You aren’t here for a headache or cut finger.”

Rodenko smiled. “You are very observant, Doctor, and of late I have been closely observing the Captain as well. He has been under a great deal of stress since we left Vladivostok to confront the Americans in 2021. At times he appears to lapse into remorse and depression. Then he is suddenly energized with his old, willful ambition. I’m afraid the farther back in time we slip the more aggressive he may become. That little theater he staged at Vladivostok is a perfect example. He actually announced himself as the new Viceroy of the East!”

Zolkin laughed. “My, my. That man’s ego knows no bounds. Viceroy of the East? The Captain has been spoiling for a fight with someone he could

push around for a good long while now. His only difficulty has been the fact that his enemies push back. We were a squadron of eight ships when we left Vladivostok, and now here we are alone on the sea again. The navy can do without commanders like this, in my opinion.”

“Well, doctor, now that we are here I believe the Captain intends to do considerably more. He says he wants to make *Kirov* the new flagship of Russia’s Pacific Fleet here.”

“What’s left of it. As I recall the history there wasn’t much left but a few old armored cruisers in Vladivostok.”

“But he intends to use *Kirov* to try and redress that.”

“In what way?”

“I believe he thinks he can confront the Japanese and recover the ground and prestige Russia lost to them in the war.”

Zolkin was very quiet now. “Looking for another war to fight, is he? Hasn’t he seen enough? We’ve fought the British, Italians, Japanese, and then the Americans in two different eras, and now he wants to take on the Imperial Japanese Navy again? It has been said that there is nothing more dangerous than an admiral with a compass and a map. Men like Karpov are at the heart of that truism.”

Rodenko lowered his head, thinking before he asked his next question, an edge of uncertainty in his voice now. “Doctor...What if the Captain persists with this? He will be trying to reverse the course of history itself, and restore Russia as a Pacific Power, yet with only this single ship. Certainly we are powerful. We can impose our will at sea and outfight anything we encounter here. But Japan has an army too, and they beat the Russian army of this era convincingly. I think the Captain has again bitten off more than he can chew.”

“Yes, and if he keeps doing that he will choke one day and that will be the end of it.”

“But the men, Doctor. Can we keep asking the men to fight like this? They hardly had a week ashore after we got home, and then we were out to sea again to fight the Americans.”

“I agree, it’s been difficult for them all. That Russian Inspector General didn’t help matters either. Yet I see quite a few in here for one thing or another. The men still seem rather buoyant to me. Their morale has not flagged.”

“That’s the problem,” said Rodenko. “They’ve seen Karpov fight, and

fight hard. Yes, he's a good tactical officer, but he makes grave strategic errors in my opinion. He puts the ship at risk in situations where it could easily be avoided. We could have steamed due east into the Pacific long before we ran into the Americans in 1945. I was in favor of our intervention to assist the Soviet landing in the Kuriles, but Karpov didn't have to pick a fight with those old American destroyers and cruisers when we found them patrolling there. It was as if he really *wanted* to provoke them, and anyone could see what they would do in return. Firing on those first planes they sent to have a look at us was an accident, or so I have heard. What came after was something more intentional."

"You believe Karpov was deliberately trying to provoke the Americans? That sounds very much like the man I know."

"Of course! He knew that if they came in force he could then use the real power of this ship to try and convince them they were overmatched."

"Yes, I saw his little demonstration when he fired that first missile into the sea. The strange thing was the reaction of the crew. They seemed ebullient. A couple even came by to tell me what Karpov had done, and they were literally shaking a fist in approval."

"And look what happened to the *Admiral Golovko*."

"That was a hard thing to see. I can only wonder what happened to *Orel* as well. We felt time's cold hand on our neck again and escaped a hard fate there. I wonder if *Orel* moved in time as well? It may have gone somewhere else—to another year. I hope Yeltsin keeps his head if that was the case."

"It isn't Yeltsin I'm worried about now, Doctor." Rodenko got round to the point of his discussion with Zolkin again.

Zolkin nodded. "Let's get to the heart of this, Rodenko. You came to me to sound me out regarding Karpov's state of mind. Yes, he's been under stress, as we all have. Yes, his moods have shifted considerably, but is he incompetent? This is what you are getting at here, yes? At the moment I think it would be difficult to make such a case against him. He may seem to be making irrational decisions, yet who do we take the matter to? When Volsky was here there was always some superior authority aboard, but that is not the case now. If you want my advice, you must do what you have been doing up until now. Observe, and report any unstable behavior to me. Otherwise do your duty for the ship and crew. Should the time come when things take a darker turn, I think you may rely on me to use my professional judgment. This is what you came here to learn, yes? So now you have heard it."

“Thank you, Doctor.”

“Do not thank me yet, Rodenko. If anything happens to Karpov, then this whole mess is yours. I hope you understand that and make yourself ready should you ever find yourself in that Captain’s chair.”

Rodenko thought about that, but then the sound of a deck cannon cracked and he found himself looking out the porthole to see what was happening. He could see a pair of steamers, commercial traffic, and *Kirov* was running parallel to them about five kilometers off their port side. There was just enough sunlight to catch the small plume of seawater as the first round fell in front of the lead steamer.

“Here we go again,” he shrugged. “The Captain has fired what looks to be a warning shot on a steamer.”

“A trade ship? What could he be doing now? Why bother with that?”

“I think he means to do the same thing he did in 1945 when he attacked those American destroyers in the Kuriles. He’ll sink a steamer; the Japanese will send a warship to investigate. He’ll attack that ship and on we go—another war.”

“Perhaps you had better get to the bridge and see what is going on first hand, Rodenko. Remember what I said. You must do your duty, but yet you are still *Starpom*, and second in command here now. Your voice counts, so if you have anything further to say about the matter, you must say it to the Captain’s face.”

The sound of the deck gun firing was enough to get Rodenko moving, and his heart beat faster with the anxiety of anticipation as he went.

“Thank you, Doctor.”

He was through the hatch and gone.

Chapter 21

Karpov was in the flag room of the bridge, pouring over charts and several old books from Fedorov's old library. He found them most useful for the research he was conducting now, sizing up his potential enemy. The ship was still off the Tsugaru Straits in a blockading position. After sinking the *Tatsu Maru*, he watched at a distance while the second steamer attempted to rescue the stricken crew, and when he saw the steamer turn about and head back for the friendly shores of Japan, he was finally satisfied.

Rodenko had come to him in the midst of that action, returning to the bridge shortly after the Captain ordered Samsonov to fire.

"Marching to the sound of the guns, Rodenko?"

"Yes, I heard the forward deck gun, sir, but there was no call to action stations."

"That was not necessary. We just happened across a pair of Japanese steamers bound for Dailan near Port Arthur. That traffic stops now. We will not permit the Japanese to resupply their forces in Korea or Manchuria."

That remark surprised Rodenko. "But sir, how can we possibly enforce such a quarantine? We are one ship. There could be ten or twenty ships en-route to those harbors even as we speak, most likely well south, coming from the bigger Japanese ports. There is no way we can stop them all."

"I understand that, but what we can do is set an example to show what will happen to any ship we do find in violation of this order. Once we slap a few around, the others will think twice about the voyage. We can have a great effect, even if we cannot be everywhere at one time."

"Violation? What order are you speaking of, sir? Have you communicated with the Japanese?"

"Not yet, Rodenko, but that is coming in due course."

"Then how can they be expected to comply? If you just attack unarmed ships like this it is tantamount to piracy."

"Piracy? Don't be silly, Rodenko. You act as though we are bound by the laws these little men devise to regulate their affairs. Quite the contrary! What you should realize is that we are now the sole authority here. Who do you think that sea Captain out there will complain to after I put his ship on the bottom? He will complain to his government, correct? This is exactly what I

intend. In my judgment, the next ships we encounter will be warships, and then we can make our position understood even better. I don't expect a steamer Captain to be my envoy to Tokyo, but if I shake up the tree a bit, the military command structure here will do that for me soon enough."

Rodenko seemed troubled by this. It was exactly what he suspected. The Captain was going to slowly escalate this situation just as he had in 1945. At present they were a great unknown, but soon he could envision that the whole of the Japanese fleet would be mustered against the threat posed by *Kirov*.

"Do you really mean to push this, sir? Are you looking for war here again?"

"What of that, Rodenko? You don't expect us to take a pleasure cruise here, do you? We were sent to sea as a warship in the service of our homeland. We have fought twice with that charge already. We don't lay it down simply because we find ourselves here now."

"Respectfully, sir... May I speak my mind freely on this?"

"Of course. Let me hear what you have to say."

"Are you certain you do this in the service of our homeland?"

Karpov gave his *Starpom* a long look at that, as if he were trying to see into his real mindset and discern what his objection was. "Alright, Rodenko. I sense you do not approve of what I have done here with this cargo vessel. Let me hear your reasoning." He folded his hands on the desk where he had been studying Fedorov's books, waiting, a look of impatience belying the apparent openness he offered at the moment.

"Well, sir... We have no commission to fight in these waters, not if this is, indeed, the year 1908. Anything we do here could have dramatic repercussions on all future history, and I think we should be very cautious. You have announced yourself at Vladivostok, and they will soon learn that St. Petersburg knows nothing about us. I thought that was very unwise—in fact, I thought it somewhat pretentious. Now you have attacked these unarmed merchant ships, and it will certainly lead to more trouble here."

"Yes, it will, and that is by design, Captain Lieutenant." The use of Rodenko's rank in place of his name was ample evidence that the Captain did not appreciate those remarks. "Now...It is my intention to gain the attention of our adversaries here, and let them know what they are dealing with. Only then can we make demands they may heed."

"But why, sir? Why start another war here that was never fought in the history we know? Haven't we done enough already?"

“Because the last war that was fought in the history ended quite badly for Russia. Wouldn’t you agree? If Orlov were here he would put it quite plainly. We got our asses kicked, and by a third rate emerging state. It may have been pure chance that we arrived here after that last detonation, and frankly, I see no way home again short of firing off another warhead. That I will not do. So we are here, and with the power to redress a century and more of hardship for our country. I’m going to use that power, and this is only the beginning. The real game remains to be played. Soon they will begin moving their pawns and minor pieces about, but we are the great black Queen now, and we can defeat them all. You doubt this?”

“We can certainly beat any ship they have, sir, but their entire fleet? Won’t that just be a repeat of what we just faced in 1945?”

“Of course not. These ships are no match for us now. They are mere toys in a bathtub compared to *Kirov*. The sooner the Japanese learn that their Imperial Navy is useless as a tool of foreign policy as long as we sail these waters, the better. The lessons start today.”

“And what about the Japanese Army? We will be entirely powerless to influence any outcome on land, sir. If the present Japanese government does not comply, what can you do? We certainly can’t put men ashore on the Japanese mainland. For that matter we could not even control Port Arthur with our present naval infantry contingent.”

“That remains to be seen. My hope is that the Japanese will not wish to sacrifice their precious navy and be relegated to the status of a feudal power here again. I have been reading Fedorov’s books! The development of the Imperial Japanese Navy is essential to their ability to project power in the Pacific. We can break that navy as it stands, and prevent any further development. If they fail to comply after that, other measures can be taken, but I do not anticipate this. These are not the Japanese of the 1940s, Rodenko. They defeated Russia, yes, we all know that history and have studied it in our naval academy, but now we have a chance to reverse those losses. We have a chance to prevent Japan from getting rooted in Manchuria and the Pacific as a major power. Don’t you see this, Rodenko? We can prevent the war in the Pacific from ever being fought. We can stop Imperial Japan from rising like a shadow on the world scene—right here, right now.”

Rodenko still had a sullen, troubled expression on his face. “That’s another tall order for twenty-one missiles and four thousand rounds of deck gun ammunition, sir.”

“It isn’t the amount of force that matters now,” Karpov said quickly. “The fact that we can apply that force, wherever needed, and without putting this ship at risk, is decisive here. Understand? And don’t forget that we can also count on the support of our own countrymen here. You saw the welcome we received in Vladivostok.”

“Is that what all this nonsense about the Viceroy of the East was about, Captain?”

“That was mere theater,” Karpov waved his hand dismissively. “What else would I call myself with these men? I simply use a title they might understand.”

“So you intend to provoke a fight here? You are looking to sink more ships; seek a major engagement?”

“Whatever it may take to achieve my objective, Rodenko. And don’t get squeamish on me now.” He pointed a finger at his Executive Officer, somewhat annoyed. “I made you *Starpom* because you were senior bridge officer; more mature, and with more experience than any of the others. But now you begin to sound like Doctor Zolkin! This is war. You know the old quotation—war is the continuation of politics by other means. If you do not have what it takes to stand at your post, I can find another officer to replace you. Otherwise, I expect your voice to second mine in these matters, particularly in combat. There is no room for equivocation in battle. You must either commit yourself or stand down.”

Rodenko could see that there was no room for negotiation with the Captain now. It was as if he had crossed some inner Rubicon, and now saw the days ahead as the decisive moment of this entire affair. On the one hand, he could see what Karpov was aiming for. If they could stop Japan and prevent the war in the Pacific while bettering Russia’s position in the world, it seemed a noble objective. But something told him there was a darkness behind that outwardly glowing aim in Karpov’s mind. He had seen it in the Captain before, and feared it was emerging again, bolder now than ever.

They left it there, with Rodenko leaving the bridge to resume his rest shift, but it was not long before the radar station again reported contacts in the Tsugaru Straits, heading west, and approaching the ship, and this time they were not simple steamers.

* * *

The 9th Torpedo-Boat Division had been training in the bay off Amori for the last week before returning to Sasebo to rejoin the main fleet. It was composed of four Torpedo boats, forerunners of the ship class that would be called destroyers in the years ahead. Commander Kawase flew his Broad Pennant aboard the *Aotaka*, the first of its class, and he led three more boats behind him, the *Kari*, *Tsubame* and *Hato*. They were no more than small patrol craft 150 long tons each, but very fast at 29 knots. Lined up end to end the 45 meter boats would seem puny next to *Kirov*, and they carried small 2.2 inch, 57mm guns. Their real purpose was to rush in and deliver their three 14 inch torpedoes to a larger enemy ship, and in this they had considerable success against the Russians in the last war.

Commander Kawase had picked up the wireless signal from *Tatsu Maru*, and decided to investigate. He notified his base that he was answering a distress call and following up reports of a large Russian warship in the straits. Yet he was not prepared for what he now saw on the far horizon.

The tiny two stack patrol destroyers had been steaming at twenty knots when they saw the distant ship, and with each passing minute as they closed the range Kawase's alarm grew with the silhouette he was peering at. It was definitely a warship, yet the ship's bow was very different, long and sleek as it cut through the sea, unlike the reverse bows on all the ships he had come to know. He could not see any large cannon on that long deck, only a few smaller guns to note. Yet he knew that a ship of that size would fight broadside, and that many guns could be concealed in the shadows along her sides, swiveling out from the hull on casements to take deadly aim at his tiny patrol boats.

Now he could clearly see this was, indeed, a Russian ship! It flew the flag of Saint Andrew on its high main conning tower, where he could see something strange rotating in the fading sunlight. The look of the ship reminded him of the tall battlements of Osaka Castle, the high stone fortress of the south that had broken so many armies on its walls. His instinct was to move in closer, and learn more, but something cautioned him, like the voice of a fallen ancestor whispering a dire warning to him. Be cautious here...He made a decision that would save his life, and those of all the men under his charge that day.

If this was a ship of war, and it certainly looked to be all of that and more, then his four torpedo boats were not about to start the next war here on his command. They would be no match for this monster in any case, and so he

wisely decided that his best course was to observe and report. He had come close enough, and gave the order to come about.

He turned to a junior Lieutenant and calmly told him to signal *Amori* with a report that would confirm the distress call of *Tatsu Maru*. It had already been seconded by *Kanto Maru*, when it hurriedly steamed into port at Hakodate with tales of a massive ship in the straits. "Send this," he said. "Sighted large enemy warship flying the Flag of St. Andrew. Give our position and tell them we are circling in place. Request instructions."

The message sent, it was his to wait for senior officers to decide his fate that day. Thankfully, there were wiser heads in *Amori* as well, and he was soon ordered to return to base. It was a decision he was glad to hear, even if he was prepared to face danger and even death if so ordered to defend his homeland. One does not fight a dragon with a knife, he thought. They would need no less than an armored cruiser to confront a ship like the one he was peering at through his field glasses. No... Not even that would do. They would need a battleship...they would need *many* battleships. It was the most frightening ship he had ever seen in his life.

* * *

"**They** are turning away, Captain." Rodenko knew Karpov could see that, but he wanted to make certain the Captain knew the ships were no longer closing on them. "I do not think they mean to attack."

"No, Rodenko, you are correct. I think they merely wanted to get a look at us, and what they saw may have had the desired effect. No doubt they will return to port with tales of a sea monster at large, which would be just what we need at the moment. Fear is a potent weapon, and a contagious disease once it gets rooted in an enemy. I showed them our full silhouette for that very reason."

"Those look to be small torpedo boats, sir."

"Indeed. Well they pose us no threat unless they get very close. And these do not seem to have the backbone to do that at the moment. Well enough. I think we will turn south."

"South, sir? I thought we were heading for Tokyo."

"There is no Japanese base of note here in the north. Their main naval facilities are mostly in the south at Kure and Sasebo. I had thought to visit Yokohama off Tokyo, but I think we should first settle the matter with the

Japanese Navy before I come calling on the Emperor here. As long as they think they have a navy to oppose us they will never listen to any demand I might make at Yokohama. So first things first. We go south, to show our silhouette to these little people and see what they decide to do about it.”

“I understand, sir. Helm, come about, and steady on 185 degrees.” He seconded Karpov’s order, but with a deep feeling of foreboding and regret.

The Captain had the right idea, thought Rodenko. But I think he is wrong about the Japanese. They are bigger men than he may realize.

Part VIII

Togo

*“Hear your fate, O dwellers in Sparta of the wide spaces...
For not the strength of lions or of bulls shall hold him,
Strength against strength; for he has the power of Zeus,
And will not be checked...”*

— The Oracle’s Vision, as related to Herodotus

Chapter 22

They were once called the Spartans of Japan, a hardy clan of Samurai warriors in the southern province of Satsuma. The decadence that attends to privilege and power in their position had not fallen on them, for Satsuma was not a rich province, and its samurai had to work in the fields like common peasants to eke out a living and provide the rice necessary to sustain them. Rugged and disciplined, they were a rock-like people, constantly training in the arts of war like the formidable Spartans of ancient Greece.

Every village in the province had its own *Gochu*, an organization of samurai that recruited all the young men by the age of 15. Here they would be instilled with the virtues of bravery, and the necessity of endurance, and the power of will in ensuring the attainment of both. The samurai were constantly being tested by their senior members, forced to confront their fears and overcome in the face of all hardship.

With a long and dangerously exposed coastline, the clan had also taken to the development of maritime skills. When foreign devils first came to Japan in their awesomely ugly ships of iron, the Sagumo took note of the power these new machines represented. And one, in particular, drew some very important conclusions when an enemy fleet first darkened the horizon off the shores of Satsuma.

Born in 1847, he was called Chugoro until coming of age in the youth clans in the spring of 1860 and receiving the adult name of Heihachiro Togo. He joined his *Gochu*, training and studying each day even as the boys of Sparta were put through trials to forge them into the hardened warriors they became as men. He sang at the *Gochu* patriotic festivals, recounting the tragic death of the 'Forty Ronin' and other heroic stories just as the Greeks celebrated and recounted stories of the Iliad and Odyssey.

A studious and diligent youth, he was well liked by his peers, respected, and thought of as possessing a natural quality of leadership without being showy or ostentatious. These same virtues of character, determination, assiduous study, and a quiet disposition that endowed him with a well of calm in battle, would serve him throughout his life. He took up with a favorite schoolmate, Kuroki, who would also take a dramatic role in the

defeat of the Great European power of Imperial Russia. The teachers of the *Gochu* did not realize it at that time, but they were schooling the boys who would become the men to usher Japan into the modern age and lead her onto the world stage with some of the most astounding and decisive military victories ever recorded in history.

Two years later an incident would occur that would set the course of young Heihachiro Togo's life. In 1862, a notable lord, a relative of the ruling clan lord of Satsuma province, was traveling home through the village of Namamugi when his procession came upon four British foreigners. Thinking themselves as the equal or better of any man in Japan, the foreigners rudely crossed the path of the lord's procession, failing to dismount or pay him any respect as he passed.

The lord's guards were infuriated at the behavior and deliberate bad manners of the British, and the resulting confrontation left one foreigner dead, beheaded with a single swipe of a samurai guard's sword, with two of the remaining four seriously injured. Great Britain, however, would not tolerate the abuse of its citizens, no matter where they were found, and protested vigorously to the *bakufu*, the central government of Japan, which subsequently offered a payment equivalent to 100,000 British pounds in reparation. It was an enormous sum, equal to nearly twenty percent of the current treasury of Japan in silver, yet it was not deemed sufficient by the British. They wanted blood for blood, but the proud samurai of Satsuma province refused to apologize or to execute the guards responsible for the attack.

A brief, little known war resulted, the "Anglo-Satsuma" war, when ships of the Royal Navy appeared off Kagoshima Bay to express the Crown's displeasure. A Japanese emissary from Satsuma came aboard the British flagship *Euryalus*, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Neale. There letters were exchanged presenting the British demands for redress, but the Japanese simply sought to delay any negotiations.

Impatient after the expiration of their 24-hour ultimatum, the British first seized several steamships anchored in the harbor and belonging to the Satsuma clan, which quickly prompted the Japanese to open fire on the British fleet with shore based cannon. They had waited until the onset of a raging Typhoon to begin this attack, thinking of how the invading fleet of Genghis Khan had been utterly destroyed by a similar "Divine Wind" in a previous century.

The British had not expected to be opposed, believing that the mere sight of their fleet at anchor would be sufficient to intimidate the Japanese, but they had not taken the full measure of the Spartans of Japan. They escalated by pillaging and burning the steamers they had captured, and then formed a battle line to bombard the town. Five trading junks were set ablaze, and an equal number of peasants ashore were killed in the attack, as the Japanese had wisely ordered the evacuation of the city before the bombardment began.

One man evacuating was the young samurai Togo, who was ordered instead to a nearby castle on the shore with other samurai to defend it from any British incursion. There he stood behind a cannon on the battlements to witness the British bombardment with his close friend Kuroki.

“Look how they form a line of battle, Kuroki! They mean to sail past us and then one ship after another will deliver its broadside to any point they desire. This is fearsome power!”

“Let us hope these stone walls can provide a shield. What of our own cannon?”

“They seem a meager reprisal in the face of that,” Togo pointed to the bay where smoke from the British guns wafted up to darken the furled sails on the main masts of their ships.”

“And with ships like that the British can go wherever they please. They can stand off our shores like shadows, like sea dragons waiting to breathe this hot fire on our ports and cities at their whim!”

“Yes, but let them dare set foot on our sacred land and then see what happens. Our samurai will muster in the tens of thousands to devour them. We will cut them to pieces and feed their entrails to the birds!”

“I would hope so, Kuroki, but remember, the British have guns as well. They can kill well beyond the range of even the best of our swordsmen.”

“And we have archers.”

“They have cannon to bring ashore with their infantry—artillery, mortars, siege guns. My father has seen these things.”

“Our valor and numbers will overcome them, and the Gods will favor us too. Is this not the heavenly land, Togo? Do not learn fear by watching the British bombard our city here.”

“Oh no, Kuroki, I do not fear them—but I respect them for what they are and what they can do with the weapons they have, many far superior to anything we have here. No. I learn something else entirely from this.”

“And what is that?”

“Just this, my friend... An enemy approaching from the sea must be fought at sea and stopped there, *before* they can bring the power of their cannons to bear on our sacred homeland.”

“A good lesson, but I’m afraid it is one we cannot heed at the moment. We have no ships to stop the likes of this at sea. Only these forts and the cannon we should be firing instead of all this talking!”

“Not at the moment,” Togo said with determination. “Yet one day soon we will have ships like that. Japan is an island nation surrounded by the sea on every side, just as England is. See what the British have done? We must do the same. Japan must have a great navy, the greatest in all the Pacific, if not the world. Only then will we ever ascent to our rightful place in the events of this century. Without a navy, all we can do is sit here under these guns and sharpen our swords in utter frustration, because the British need not ever set foot here to humble us. Those ships can strangle our trade and commerce, and keep us landed here forever if we let them. That must not happen. The next time an enemy comes from the sea, we must be ready to meet them there, and prevail.”

The incident was one of many after the emperor’s earlier edict to “ban all barbarians” from the Japanese homeland earlier that same year. And after that was decreed, enemies did come from the sea, and from every direction. Navies from France, the Netherlands and even the United States were soon involved in conflicts with the Japanese, who responded with the battle cry, “Revere the Emperor and expel the barbarians!” But the Barbarians were not so easily cast out, just as the realities of the modern world Japan was now entering could not be held at bay.

From that moment forward, Togo devoted himself to the study of maritime matters and warfare at sea, for he knew the fate of Japan would rest on her ability to defend its shores with a strong navy, just as Great Britain had so ably demonstrated. After studying at home on the *Kasuga*, a 1290 ton wooden paddle-wheel warship purchased from Great Britain, Togo moved on to the warship *Ryujo* as a midshipman, a ship that was also built by the British. There he trained under a sub-lieutenant of the Royal Marines, invited aboard as an advisor after sentiments towards foreigners had subsided.

Togo soon won a scholarship to travel to England and learn the art of warfare at sea from those who were its undisputed masters for centuries, the Royal Navy. He arrived at Southampton in July of 1871 and studied diligently near the site where Admiral Nelson’s famous ship HMS *Victory*

was moored, often visiting the ship and coming to see Nelson as a kind of spiritual mentor, a demigod of the high seas and strangely, as his own ancestor from a previous life. During his years in England Togo had also learned that language, keeping a journal in English wherein he once wrote that he was convinced he was the reincarnation of the British Admiral.

He learned much of the culture of the West, which had both rawness as well as refinement in his eyes. Though he never quite grew accustomed to the food, the style of architecture or the massive burrows of cities like London, he came to appreciate the iron at the heart of the British character, and the artistry and skill they showed at the making of war. They once called their ships men-of-war, and indeed they embodied that name in every action they undertook on the world stage. In his eyes, Britain was truly great, and deserving of that honorific title. Japan, he thought, must be great as well.

He was called “Johnny Chinaman,” by the British, a nickname given more out of their own ignorance of Asia and inability to distinguish between Japanese and Chinese in any significant way. Togo resented the label, and fought more than one battle with his English schoolmates to lay it to rest.

The Japanese trainees were also in the UK awaiting the completion of several battleships they had commissioned. In 1878 Togo was assigned to one of these for the voyage home to Japan. He sailed in *Hiei*, along with *Fuso* and *Kongo*. These were not the ships of the same name that fought in WWII, but their forerunners from the pre-dreadnaught era, the first real fighting ships of the Japanese Imperial Navy. They were actually no more than armored corvettes, using a combination of both sail and steam power for propulsion at a sedate 14 knots and displacing no more than 3,700 tons. By 1908 they had already been retired and decommissioned.

China had built bigger ships by the time Togo sailed home, and an arms race was soon underway that saw Japan enlisting the aid of France to build a fleet of armored cruisers, and the British for the design and construction of a new idea, the torpedo boat, which became the forerunner of the destroyer class ships of the future. These *Kotakas*, or ‘falcons’ of the sea would play a big role in Japan’s victories over China between 1894 and 1895, and over Russia in the Russo-Japanese war of 1904-05. At nearly 30 knots, the small 150 ton boats carried 14 inch torpedoes that would become the bane of the Russian fleet.

Yet the English also gave Togo a sense of what the world was really like beyond Japan, even allowing him to partake in a voyage to circumnavigate

the globe aboard the training ship *Hampshire* in 1875. He contracted a disease on that voyage which nearly took his eyesight and would have ended his career, but pulled through to regain his health after much hardship. And Togo put those eyes to very good use, learning much by studying the operations of the British and French at sea, and the French Army when it fought the Chinese in Formosa.

In Japan's war with China in 1894 the young man, then a Captain aboard the cruiser *Naniwa*, demonstrated an uncanny ability to navigate the treacherous waters of international relations when he sunk a British freighter chartered by the Chinese to carry supplies. The incident might have brought Great Britain into the war on China's side, but jurists ruled that the sinking was entirely appropriate under the rules of international law and regulations of war. Chinese soldiers carried by the ship had taken control of the vessels when threatened by Togo's ship, and so they became legitimate prizes of war.

Togo's star rose and he was soon promoted to Rear Admiral and commander of the Japanese Naval War College. When war with Russia called him to action again in 1904 Japan had much more of a navy to rise to the challenge. The Japanese Navy Minister personally requested that Admiral Togo be appointed Commander-In-Chief of the Combined Fleet, and it was the wisest appointment the Emperor ever made.

Thought to be a 'man of good fortune,' Togo's luck and considerable skill saw him achieve a stunning and decisive victory over Russia. He handily defeated their First Pacific Squadron, investing Port Arthur, besting them in the Yellow Sea and bottling up their armored cruisers in Vladivostok. When the Russians sent their entire Baltic Fleet to restore order, Togo soundly defeated them at the famous battle of Tsushima Strait. He was a legend by 1908, his name nearly synonymous with the Japanese Imperial Fleet he so ably served.

Togo's victory at Tsushima sent real shockwaves around the world and hastened the demise of the last Tsar of Russia. While that nation was soon descending into the turmoil of revolution, Japan consolidated her position as the rising preeminent power in the Pacific. All history had pivoted on that single battle, which would eventually lead Japan into conflict against the Chinese, and then the Americans in WWII. It would forever relegate Russia to the role of a third rate naval power in the Pacific, with little influence beyond the cold northern shores of the Kuriles and Sakhalin Island, and Japan had even taken half of that from them in exchange for peace.

The American President in 1908, Teddy Roosevelt, had helped to broker that peace at Portsmouth to end Japan's war with Russia, but he soon realized that Japan was now a force to be reckoned with in Asia and the Pacific. As much to demonstrate America's ability to move from one ocean to another, Roosevelt secured funds to have the entire US Navy battle fleet circumnavigate the globe in 1908, the battleships all dressed out in clean white paint.

On that day, just as the *Tatsu Maru* first set eyes on the massively threatening silhouette of the battlecruiser *Kirov* off her port bow, the "Great White Fleet" of the US Navy was approaching Hawaii, 16 battleships and other auxiliaries preparing to make a brief port of call there and continue across the Pacific with planned stops in the Philippines, New Zealand, Australia and eventually Japan.

Roosevelt would show Japan the entire might of the US Navy, and perhaps smooth out the way for better relations with in the days ahead. It was a clear application of one of his favorite maxims—to 'speak softly and carry a big stick.' But the Great White Fleet was soon to find much more than a long and arduous sea voyage as it continued west, just as Admiral Togo was soon to find that the fires of war with Russia were not yet fully extinguished.

A new enemy was coming at Japan from the sea to throw down the gauntlet of challenge. Another man of war was on the scene now, in a ship unlike any other in the world. Karpov's shot across the bow of the *Tatsu Maru* was indeed the opening round of a new war, and one that would change the fate of all nations with interests in the Pacific for centuries to come.

Chapter 23

The sound of the distant horn call seemed to have an urgent edge to it. Heihachiro Togo stopped, listening closely as he tied off the brace of pheasant he had been hunting, binding their legs with a small twine. He looked to see a rider approaching, hastening up the hill as though pursued by demons. This man is coming to find me, he knew. Something must have happened. But what?

Togo was a man of quiet resolve, and one who rose to a position of great authority after years of routine and diligent work in the Japanese Navy. A strange feeling of alarm rose in him as he watch the rider come, but he stilled his mind, imposing calm and order on his thinking.

His given name meant “Peaceful son,” and his surname “Togo” referred to the nation of the east. Thus this “peaceful man of the east” was the Yin force at the heart of Japan’s energetic Yang when it came to war. He was once heard to remark that “peace has its victories too, and more renowned than those of war.” In fact, the Admiral’s own biography, to be written in 1909, would be entitled “Benevolence and Peace.” Yet when it did come time to engage in battle, he did so with a single minded belief in the attainment of victory.

A simple man, he took pleasure in the simple things of life, loving his family, nature, hunting with his dogs, or work in his beloved garden. In spite of his notoriety and fame, he shunned pomp and ceremony, sought no medals or fanfare, and carried out his work with assiduous attention, seeing to everything in his charge yet not interfering in the work of others. To some it seemed he accomplished all his work with a seemingly effortless efficiency, yet no man in the navy worked harder.

He was also a temperate man, with a level-headed disposition, and never one to indulge in strong drink to the point of intoxication. Only a clear mind could attend to all the many details his post required, and his was a mind as placid and cool as a mountain pond of melted spring snow. He was frugal, never wasting anything, yet generous to a fault. Modesty, honesty, and honor were all watchwords to live by, and he embodied them all in the conduct of his own life. In reporting to his superiors, of who there were few in the Naval Department or Imperial Palace, he always made sure to verify the information

he related personally. As such, speculation never entered his mind, though he asked and answered a thousand questions each day in the course of his many duties.

A courteous man, he was keenly aware of the concept of “face” and might often turn his head at a breach of conduct, relating his displeasure quietly, behind the scenes, in an effort to allow the offender the means of recovering face and doing what was correct. At other times all it ever took was a turn of his head to take notice of an offense, and the men responsible would soon be earnestly working to remedy their behavior.

When war came with Russia in 1904 Togo rose to the challenge with the same quiet dignity and sense of purpose. He was keenly aware of the fact that the responsibility for Japan’s entire navy rested upon his shoulders, one that was built by long years of energetic work, with many ships acquired from foreign manufacturers or taken as prizes of war when Japan fought China. It was, to him, like an irreplaceable sword, beautiful and deadly, yet one that might be broken if mishandled in combat, for he knew all too well the destructive power of modern weapons and war in general.

When he trained his men and ships, he endeavored to infuse the exercise with as much realism as possible, preferring live shot to dummy rounds in any test of cannon. Time in battle was a brief, violent affair, but time to prepare for battle was endless. When battle came, one had to be bold and aggressive, but to move with predetermined calculation, and so he was given to write long multi page battle orders assigning position, speed and formation for each division of his fleet.

When war was declared it was his intention to become swift master of the seas between Japan and the great European adversary that many thought would prove an insurmountable foe. He would not let this enemy come from the sea. It would be found at sea and opposed there, and once Japan had defeated the Russian Pacific Fleet, then they could lie in wait should any reinforcements be sent from the Baltic, which is exactly what happened.

Togo saw the capture of the first Russian ship in that war as a fateful omen, and often mused on the hand divine providence might have played in those events. The ship was, in fact, named *Russia*, and his crew gleefully related that they had “taken *Russia* by storm” when they secured the prize.

In his first action against the Russian fleet near Port Arthur, Togo kept the range well open, at 8,000 yards, which was considered good range for naval action at that time. The superior gunnery of his ships paid off well, and he

sustained very little damage from the enemy while inflicting far more serious losses. His precious fleet had been protected, even as it was used to good effect to win the battle.

Later, when he met the Russian reserve fleets in the Strait of Tsushima, his command to the fleet was weighted with the importance of that imminent battle: “The rise or fall of the Empire depends upon the result of this engagement. Do your utmost, every one of you.”

When the fighting began, he remained on the open air bridge, refusing to shelter in the conning tower much to the distress of junior officers at first. Yet, through shot and shell when the enemy concentrated fire on his flagship *Mikasa*, he was never scratched or wounded in any way, which endowed him with an aura of invincibility. Such notions were far from his own mind, humble man that he was, but to his subordinates the light of a demigod soon seemed to surround him, and they came to revere him as the great hero he became.

It was not simply the fate of Japan that was at stake in that war, but of Imperial Russia itself as well. Beyond that, the battle opened the door to Japanese expansion in the Pacific that would not end until men like Chester Nimitz, Bull Halsey, Ziggy Sprague, and a host of other brave and determined officers and sailors, defeated Japan completely in WWII. But those events were far off and unseen by anyone alive that day in the Straits of Tsushima. It was a grand battle, and an even grander victory for Japan and the quiet Admiral that led the fleet to glory that day.

Historians have selected three great Admirals of the world naming Horatio Nelson of Great Britain, Togo as the ‘Nelson of the East,’ and Chester Nimitz, who revered Togo himself, and assiduously studied his planning and tactics.

This was the “little man” Karpov was sailing south to find and confront, as different from his own character as day is to night. When Togo stood in the aura of invincibility on the bridge of the *Mikasa* at Tsushima he did so with bravery, inner resolve, and with a feeling he was fated to succeed there, that he was, indeed, a fortunate man and favored by the Gods.

Yet now another man who also thought himself invincible was bearing down on the coast of Japan like a threatening storm—Vladimir Karpov. Togo’s virtue of quiet humility, and sense of honor seemed entirely lacking in Karpov. In their place was hubris, arrogance and a willful aggressive nature that had little regard for the lives or fate of any who might dare oppose him.

He commanded a single ship, yet one that had challenged entire fleets composed of fast, well armored warships supported by aircraft carriers and thousands of planes. He had confronted every enemy who opposed him with unrelenting power, and in many ways he was successful in defeating his opponents at every turn.

He had held off the Royal Navy in the Atlantic and roundly smashed the hapless American fleet that had sailed into his path, unaware of the danger he posed. In the Mediterranean Sea he had frustrated the Italians, beating a pair of their finest battleships, and then took on *Rodney* and *Nelson* to prevail in battle yet again. In the Pacific he had bested Admiral Hara's carrier division, left Sanji Iwabuchi stranded on a coral reef in the battleship *Kirishima*, and dueled with the mightiest ship Japan would ever build, and one of her most famous Admirals, Isokoru Yamamoto. Then after returning to his own era, he used his cunning and aggressive tactics to surprise and nearly sink Captain Tanner's CVN *Washington*, fending off the American 5th Fleet in the process.

His own crew had also come to see their Captain as invincible, even in the face of overwhelming odds when the ship returned to 1945 and was faced by sixty ships and a thousand American aircraft. They saw Karpov as a fighting Captain who would do whatever was necessary to protect the ship and prevail against the enemy. Whether *Kirov* would have survived subsequent engagements with the American fleet, either in 2021 or 1945 was not something they considered. What they did know is that the ship *did* survive, no matter what the odds, and each time it was Vladimir Karpov in command of the battle. Now both men would face one another, Togo and Karpov, and the winner would decide the course of history from that day forward.

It was not long before word of the incident in the north reached Admiral Togo. It was coming to him now, even as the rider climbed higher, his horn still calling out alarm.

Togo had been supervising Japan's newest port on the coast north of Osaka at Maizuru. It had been built to provide them a base to keep a wary eye on Vladivostok and quickly get ships into the Sea of Japan without first having to sail around the big southern islands or through the narrow Straits of Shimonoseki. Before the war Maizuru had been an isolated coastal town, with only slow road connections to the big cities to the south. Now, however, the rail line was completed, and supplies flowed easily to the port.

He had been hunting that day, dressed in his old clothes and wandering

about the hills with a rifle and a pair of faithful hunting dogs. Returning in the evening he heard the call of a distant horn, growing louder as he descended the hills to the port below. It was not long before he saw a horseman with a uniformed messenger, his dogs barking fitfully as the rider came up.

Togo called his hounds to his side, his calm hand on their necks as he waited. Soon the dogs were sitting quietly and the rider dismounted, saluting, and then bowing politely. “Your pardon, Admiral, but we have received an urgent message from Tokyo.”

Togo raised an eyebrow, saying nothing as he waited. The man reached into a leather pouch at his side and produced a scroll, which he handed to the Admiral, bowing again. As Togo unrolled it slowly, he had the distinct feeling that something ominous and portentous was being unfurled with the opening of that scroll. He read the characters there with a stern eye: “*A Russian warship has sunk the streamer Tatsu Maru in the Tsugaru Straits and is now moving south. Please make any arrangement necessary to settle this matter.*”

The message was vague as to any details of the incident, and completely open as to the wishes of the Navy Department concerning its resolution. It was immediately clear to him that Tokyo was leaving the matter to him, and he immediately wondered what this ship could be? The war left Russia virtually helpless in the Pacific, with no fleet to speak of. There were still a few armored cruisers in Vladivostok, but the notion that they would dare sortie and engage commercial shipping in Japanese home waters was preposterous. If this turned out to be the case, he would deliver a swift reprisal.

Now we see the virtue of Maizuru, he thought. Ships at Kure and Sasebo were 400 sea miles away to the south, but he had wisely decided to position Admiral Kamimura’s flying squadron of armored cruisers here, along with two battleships that had been taken as prizes of war from the Russians. The ex-Russian *Poltava*, was now renamed *Tango*, and the ex-Russian *Admiral Senyavin* was now the *Mishima*. Supported by Kamimura’s six cruisers, the force was more than adequate to confront and defeat anything the Russians could have sent from Vladivostok.

Could they have slipped in reserve units from their Black Sea Fleet, he wondered? If that were so his intelligence experts should have heard something of it. A fleet cannot pass through the Suez Canal without some

notoriety. Right now the Americans were stealing most of the headlines with their Great White Fleet circumnavigating the globe. The navy has been itching for a fight again, and it was even suggested that they should plan to ambush and destroy the American fleet as it approached Japan for a scheduled visit to Yokohama. Togo believed that would be most unwise, and squelched the plan with his considerable influence and prestige. Yet what were the Russians up to now? He would send Kamimura to have a look and report.

“Sir,” the messenger said politely. “Please take my horse to hasten your return to the harbor.”

“That will not be necessary, Lieutenant,” said Togo. “But you may ride on ahead if you please, and tell Admiral Kamimura that he is to prepare his flying squadron for immediate operations. The two battleships will be made ready for sea operations as well. I will be there directly to meet with the Admiral. Please have a car ready for me. Something tells me I will be leaving for Kure before nightfall.”

“At once, sir!” The rider was quick to mount his horse and was soon riding swiftly down the slope. Togo watched him go, bothered again by the strange thought that the man was carrying the first order of another great war, one that would decide everything. Why he felt that he could not see. The Russians could bring the whole of their remaining Black Sea Fleet and it would do them little good here. He would defeat it as handily as he had beaten their Pacific and Baltic fleets. Yet he had learned to heed and respect the inner warnings that emerged like shadows in his mind. This shadow was particularly dark and foreboding.

He whistled to his dogs, and started walking briskly down the slope as they ran to follow. Whatever it was in the darkness of his mind, it was beginning now, and each step he took carried him ever closer to it. The life he had led, celebrated by his peers and basking in the light of the great victory his navy had won three years ago, was now fading. A new test was before him now. He could feel and sense another enemy coming from the sea.

Well, he thought, when an enemy comes from the sea, we must find it at sea and defeat it there. And that is exactly what we will do. I have every trust that Kamimura will handle the matter with little difficulty. Then will come the outcries of protest, the negotiations, the lament and call for reparations. It was said by many that Japan should have taken much more than it received in the treaty of Portsmouth that ended the war with Russia. Many thought that

the whole of Sakhalin Island should have been seized, not the half that they were ceded. Japan also took Port Arthur, Manchukuo, and the Russian built rail lines leading north, but others said that all of Korea should have come under Japanese control, just as they said that all of Formosa should have been taken when China was beaten years earlier.

Now they will want me to occupy Vladivostok, he thought darkly. We shall see what comes of this. It may be nothing at all. After the war there was an uprising in that port city. The unrest in Russia and particularly Siberia may have renewed. This may be no more than an upstart cruiser captain thinking to gain redress for the humiliation we inflicted upon Russia in that war. So be it. One Captain or many, we are ready.

Then what is this shadow hovering over my mind and darkening my soul? The day is fine and I have a brace of pheasants to take home for the evening meal. Why this feeling of dread?

Chapter 24

“**Saito** sent this message?”

Togo was meeting with Vice Admiral Kamimura now in the headquarters office at Maizuru. “How was it the report reached him so quickly?”

“There was quite a stir in the Tsugaru Strait, Admiral. Crewmen off the *Kanto Maru* were telling wild stories when they returned to port with the survivors. Kawase’s 9th Torpedo Boat Division was training there, and they went to investigate. Now Kawase is telling wild stories.”

“What stories? What do you mean?”

“Only that the ship responsible for this attack was very large, certainly a battleship. It looked like a great dragon at sea, or so the fishermen now say.”

“Fishermen see many things at sea that are never there,” said Togo. “But what did Commander Kawase see? His word I can believe.”

“The same report, sir—a very large ship. Kawase was wise not to engage, and requested instructions. Apparently a telegraph was sent directly to Saito in Tokyo, and it was he who sent this message in return.”

“The scroll was unsigned. That is most unusual.”

“Yet the signal referenced his name and office, sir. It was Saito.”

“*Please make any arrangement necessary to settle this matter,*” Togo read the scroll aloud again. “What he really means is settle the matter quietly. He merely hands it all to me. Very well, we will settle the matter. I can read enough between the lines on that scroll to know that Saito wants this handled with as little fuss as possible, and without provoking a major international incident. He has recently been questioned by the European reporters concerning dispositions of the fleet with the American Navy approaching.”

“Yes, they seem somewhat anxious. The London Times has been circulating all those rumors about the plan to attack the Great White Fleet. Saito has had his hands full of late. Did you read his statement to the reporters? Here it is, in today’s paper: *Vice-Admiral Baron Saito, the Japanese Minister of Marine affairs, declares that he is willing to make an announcement as to the disposition of the fleet and the intentions of the Government with regard to it, if there is any real need to allay the excitement said to exist in America, but that the suggestion of aggressive designs on the part of Japan is so utterly baseless as hardly to be worth attention.*”

“Just like Saito,” said Togo. “He uses five words when one will do, and puts legs on a snake. Well...Before we can assure him that this will be settled quietly, we must first know what we are dealing with. Tonight I must leave Maizuru for Kure and the main fleet. I do not anticipate we will need more than your division here, Kamimura, but we will be ready should you need us.”

“I’m sure we can handle a single Russian ship, sir.”

There it was again, that strange feeling of presentiment, a swell of unaccountable anxiety emerging from within. Togo was standing, staring out the window at the growing columns of smoke as the ships in the harbor fired their coal burning stoves and boilers. He turned to Kamimura, a distant look in his eye.

“Take your squadron as far north as Wajima on the Noto Peninsula,” he said quietly. “See what you find there.”

“What if we find this ship, sir?”

“Get in close. Have a good long look. See what they have to say.”

“And if they fire on us or try to escape?”

“Your cruisers will easily outrun a Russian battleship, if that is what this truly is. Besides, I believe the sight of your battle line will chasten this ship.”

“They won’t like the fact that we have *Tango* and *Mishima* along. It may enflame the situation. Perhaps we should leave them here. They will only slow us down.”

“No. The battleships will sail with you. You may lead with your cruisers, and break off into a separate squadron if the action requires it. I leave this to your judgment. Certainly the sight of their old battleships now flying the standard of the Imperial Japanese Navy will gall them. That is my intention. If they say anything about it with their guns you can tell them they can either surrender their ship as well, or there will be one less Russian battleship at sea. But do not fire first. If hostilities break out it must not be said that Japan has struck the first blow.”

“Wasn’t *Tatsu Maru* enough, sir?”

You may ask them about that. See what they respond, and keep me informed. I should reach Kure about the time you get up north.”

“Very good, sir.” Kamimura saluted, ready to go to his flagship, the armored cruiser *Izumo*.

“One thing more,” said Togo.

“Sir?”

“Be careful, Kamimura...Be careful.”

* * *

“**Con.** Radar. Surface contact bearing 195 degrees from the southwest. Speed 18 knots. I read eight separate returns.”

“Eight contacts?” Rodenko wanted to see the returns on the screen. Sure enough, there was an obvious battle line of eight surface ships cruising in formation, strung out like pearls on a string.” He walked to the forward view screen, looking at the horizon and seeing a distant smudge of charcoal in the sky.

“Activate Tin Man opticals.”

“Aye sir,” said Nikolin. “Feeding the image to the overhead display, sir.”

The high-res video feed was somewhat hazy given the distance, but Rodenko saw enough to be concerned. These were not commercial ships, nor were they tiny patrol boats like those that had approached the ship earlier in the Tsugaru Straits. *Kirov* had turned south, and skirted north of the long Noto peninsula that protruded from the mainland like a bent finger, pointing at the island of Sado off Japan’s northwest coast.

It was mid-day and the ship was sailing under clear skies and bright sun five miles off the relatively deserted cape of Onaga-saki. A high hill rose to a height of 285 meters there, right on the bent knuckle of the finger of the peninsula. The Tin Man opticals were good enough that they could clearly see the two sizable guns mounted in a round turret on the forward deck of the lead ship. Behind this was the bridge and conning section, with three stacks amidships and two tall masts that looked like those one might see on a sailing ship of old. Rodenko had no doubt that there were men high up in the crow’s nests of those masts, scanning the seas ahead. If they had not already spotted *Kirov*, they soon would.

“Range, Mister Yeremenko. Always include range in your contact reports.”

“I’m sorry, sir. I read contact range at 48,520 meters and closing at 70kph factoring in our present speed of 20 knots.”

Now Rodenko wished he had Fedorov at hand to tell him what these ships were. They were not as formidable as the warships they had faced in WWII, but yet those guns looked threatening and he wasn’t sure of their range. He decided to turn out to sea and watch how the oncoming ships reacted.

“Helm, come right ten degrees and steady on 220.”

“Sir, my rudder is right and coming to 220, aye.”

He thought for some time before he gave his next order, as he was certain that it would immediately bring the Captain to the bridge. *Kirov* had the speed to avoid a conflict here, and Rodenko had that uppermost in mind as he walked to the navigation plot with a question.

“Mister Kalinichev, if I come to 230 and increase to 30 knots can that contact still intercept?”

“Kalinichev made some quick calculations, using a light pen on the Plexi screen to denote the new heading. The computer quickly put up a predictive plot.

“Sir, the computer indicates possible interception here, but the contact would have to increase to twenty knots.”

“What do we have to steer to avoid them?”

“We would have to come another fifteen or twenty points to starboard beyond 230, sir. If we steer anything under 250 they will come within 5000 meters. At 255 the best they can do is 10,000 meters. At 260 that range increases to 15,000 meters, and so on.”

Rodenko considered that, knowing that each minute he hesitated would bring the ships closer. The WWII ships they had faced earlier could easily fire out to 15,000 meters. Would the guns on these ships have the same range? The Captain had been studying Fedorov’s books, and now Rodenko realized he should have prepared himself better as well. There was no excuse for not knowing the capabilities of the enemy he might be facing here, yet it was partly because he did not wish to immediately see these ships as foes that he hesitated.

He had complained to the Captain that he heard the forward deck gun firing with no call to action stations. In less than 30 minutes these ships could possibly have the range to engage them. What should he do?

“The ship will come to level two alert,” he said quietly.

“Sir, sounding general quarters at level two.”

“Helm please come to course 270 due west. Increase to 30 knots.”

“Sir, ahead 30 and coming round to 270 west, aye.”

They could feel the powerful surge of *Kirov*’s engines as the ship moved from its cruising speed of 20 knots to near full speed, and began a wide turn to starboard. On this new heading Rodenko reckoned the closest the enemy could come would be 25,000 meters. That was still within range of the ship’s

152mm deck guns, but a long shot for the enemy, unless these were battleships. Rodenko did not have much time to speculate. Karpov was on the bridge five minutes later.

“What is the situation?” He was immediately at Rodenko’s side, and received a full report. He looked at the radar returns, the navigation plot, and then made a quick decision.

“What are we on this heading for, Rodenko? Our objective is south, not west.”

“Sir, I moved to open sea to maintain the range until we could ascertain the nature of the threat.” It was a more military way of saying he was trying to avoid engagement, and luckily, Karpov bought it.

“Very well...” The Captain was staring at the overhead Tin Man display. “Fedorov would come in handy here,” he said. “But to my eye those do not appear to be the pre-dreadnaught battleships of this era. They are most likely armored cruisers.” He walked to the flag bridge and consulted the books he had been studying there. “Yes...These would be carrying an 8 inch main gun. Technically it could fire out to 18,000 meters, but real action ranges for these ships would be closer to 8,000. Decent armor...twenty knots maximum speed.”

“Our present course and speed keeps the range at 25,000 meters in fifteen minutes, sir,” said Rodenko. “After that we should easily shake them off.”

“Well within range of our AK-152s. Very well, activate our forward turret. 152mm battery, please.”

Samsonov was quick to oblige and reported guns ready. As before, the Captain summoned Chekov to assist Nikolin and they began to send wireless Morse. Karpov’s first message was blunt and to the point. He identified himself as the battlecruiser *Kirov* of the Imperial Russian Navy, and ordered the Japanese ships to stand down and return to port. The Japanese message was equally blunt.

“Sir, they require us to reduce speed and prepare to be boarded for inspection. They say they are hunting a ship responsible for the sinking of the steamer *Tatsu Maru*.”

“Is that so? Well tell them we are the ship responsible, and as to their request for us to reduce speed, it has been denied. They will break off and return to port.”

Rodenko folded his arms, inwardly shaking his head. Things were developing just as he expected. The Captain knew exactly how to aggravate

his foe and force an action here. He wanted to engage these ships, and this was no more than a thin veneer of civility on the violence that would soon ensue.

“Sir,” he suggested. “They cannot catch us on this heading. We can easily outrun them.”

“We are not here to run from these ships, Mister Rodenko. Helm, come left fifteen degrees to 255 and steady at 30 knots.”

“Sir, coming left to 255 and steady on.”

“That is better. We turn to face our foe, Captain Lieutenant. We do not run from the enemy. We are here to teach them to run from us, if they can. Mister Chekov, tell them they have five minutes to reverse course or they will be presumed hostile and fired upon.”

They waited briefly, but the only response they received was a speed change from 18 to 20 knots and a slight course adjustment. Then a final message came and Chekov translated. “You have failed to comply and we will engage you.”

Karpov smiled. “Threatening us, are they? I suppose the range is a bit far for them to see this ship is twice the length and displacement of the largest battleship in their navy! No matter. What is the current range?”

“Sir, radar has the column at 32,900 meters and as we are now on converging courses, the range is closing.”

“Samsonov. Let’s send them a more direct message. Target the lead ship. Their commanding officers were fond of leading the charge in this era from what I have read. We’ll make an example of his ship first.”

“Sir, I have radar lock on the lead ship in the formation.” Karpov walked slowly to the Captain’s chair and did something he seldom ever did at the edge of combat. He sat down. Nine times out of ten he would be at the view screen with his field glasses. But now he sat, almost casually on the rotating chair, elbow on the arm rest and hand stroking his chin.

“You may open fire with the forward battery. Three salvos, please.”

Rodenko watched the computer controlled turret rotate smartly with a low whir, the guns elevated at just the precise angle required to put rounds on the target, which was now painted with powerful targeting radars. The sharp report and swift recoil of the twin battery snapped the silence on the bridge with three sharp cracks that sent six rounds at the enemy.

Minutes later two would strike the forward deck of *Izumo*, penetrating the relatively thin 2.6 inch armor there and exploding below decks. A single 12

pounder gun on the bow was put out of action, its crew killed almost instantly. Two more riddled its big 8 inch turret, smashing the side armor there, and the last two struck the conning tower, causing considerable smoke and explosive shock, but failing to penetrate the thick 14 inch armor protection. It was enough to jar the ship, as if Karpov had given the Japanese a rude shove at the outset of an argument. Smoke from the fire caused by the two rounds exploding below decks soon billowed up, adding to the dark stain in the sky from the coal fired ships that were laboring to pursue them.

It had begun.

Day 9

*"I felt some wind;
Whence I said: "My Master, who sets this in motion?
Is not below here every vapour quenched?"
Whence he to me he replied: "Full soon shalt thou be where thine eye shall
answer make to thee of this,
Seeing the cause which raineth down the blast."*

Dante Alighieri, The Inferno - Canto XXXIII

Part IX

Shortwave

“You can keep pondering on which thing to do first or which path to take or by simply taking action now of most any kind, you may just find yourself on the way to where you most needed to go.”

— **April Bryan**

Chapter 25

The translucent sheen in the air quavered and slowly faded away. The sky brightened to azure blue and Fedorov looked up to see a flight of puffy white clouds overhead where there had once been low, slate grey skies. It was the first clue that they had again displaced in time, and he immediately raised his field glasses, scanning the seas around him. Oddly enough, the Soviet trawler that had been passing by was still off their starboard side, as if nothing had happened. Had Rod-25 failed?

Then he considered the darker prospect—that the control rod had again worked its magic, only the radius of its influence was greater than they expected. It may have moved that trawler right along with us, he thought. It was one problem on top of another!

They had searched the entire facility, every hovercraft, every AFV and the helo as well, but there was absolutely no sign of Orlov. Fedorov asked Dobrynin to halt his rod maintenance procedure but it could not be done. They had already dipped the rod, and extraction was underway. If there were to be any effects then nothing more could be done to prevent them. Soon after, they saw the telltale signs in the air around them, the strange smell of ozone, the unaccountable chill, and now these effects had finally dissipated.

“Captain Malkin, we need to get a detachment of Marines over to that trawler at once. Use a swift boat and cover them with a good machine gun or two.”

“Shall I send Sergeant Troyak, sir?”

“Send Zykov. He’s been moping over losing Orlov, so it might do him some good.”

“You haven’t exactly been cheery since we got the news he was missing,” said Malkin.

“It was a hard blow, Captain. I came all the way from Vladivostok in the year 2021 to get here and find that man. To have him in custody and lose him at the last minute like that was hard to bear.”

“I understand, sir”

But Fedorov did not have to wait long for good news. Zykov was soon on the short range communications system through his service jacket and reporting something that brightened Fedorov’s mood considerably.

“Well I’ll be a donkey’s ass, Colonel! I have Orlov here on this damn Soviet trawler! He’s with two other men in NKVD trench coats, but they have on khaki uniforms beneath. I think they are British soldiers! They looked as though they were going to put up a fight, but the 50 caliber machine gun convinced them that would be most unwise.”

“British?” Now Fedorov was completely stumped. What would British soldiers be doing in a Soviet trawler on the Caspian Sea? How did Orlov get there? He gave orders for Zykov to lead the trawler over to the *Anatoly Alexandrov* at once, and rushed to the communications room.

“Have we raised anyone on shore yet?”

“No, sir. We’ve been sending standard hails to the naval facility at Kaspiysk, but we get no answer.”

“Anything on radar?”

“It has not been functioning, sir. We are only now starting to get coastal returns as the system reboots. The sea around us appears clear out to 15 kilometers, and our range seems to be increasing by degrees as time goes by.”

It was just like the slow recovery of their electronics aboard *Kirov*, thought Fedorov. All the signs were indicating that they had shifted in time, but where? Now that they finally had Orlov, his mission was successful, but did they get back home to 2021? Was the world still there waiting for them? Then he felt compelled to go and see Orlov when he came alongside the facility, and he rushed down to the lower decks.

He soon caught sight of the big Chief, his head crowned with a black Ushanka and wearing an NKVD trench coat like the others. The two men had not seen one another for long months, but it seemed more like the centuries that had separated them. As the Chief came up the ladder Fedorov could not suppress a smile.

“My God, Orlov. You are one hard man to find! Do you know how long I’ve been looking for you?”

“I knew it would be you,” Orlov said sullenly.

“You knew it would be me? Then why didn’t you make contact? We lost good men searching for you here!”

“That should be obvious. I didn’t want to be found, Fedorov. You’re just going to drag me home to stand at a court martial. The prospect of a life on my own was much more appealing.”

“I’m not here to judge you, Chief. Just to find you and bring you home. Do you have any idea what’s been going on since you left the ship?”

“Of course not! I’ve been dragged from one ship to another, transferred from the Spanish to the British to the Russians and now apparently back to the British again before you came along.”

“Who are these other men?”

“Hell if I know. They gunned down a pair of Marines Zykov attached to me and led me off at gunpoint. I was planning how to ditch them and make another getaway. Then Zykov showed up again. That man is like a bad shadow.”

The corporal smiled at that. “I could smell you, Orlov, even that far away,” he jested.

“Is that so? Well there were three of these others until just a minute ago. You’d better have a good look around, Zykov. You lost a fish! One man probably went into the water when they saw you coming.”

Zykov’s face reddened, and he quickly shouted orders to a handful of Marines, telling them to get out in rubber rafts and search for the man.

Fedorov folded his arms. “Well, what were you trying to pull jumping ship in that KA-226?” He was justifiably upset with the Chief.

Orlov pursed his jaw, expecting this question and ready with an answer he hoped might better his situation. “What do you mean? I didn’t jump ship! They wanted an *Oko* radar panel up on that mission and the goddamned technicians didn’t have the correct cables installed. So I grabbed the hardware with some tools and boarded the helo to finish the job. The stupid pilot reported a fire on his control panel and it was playing havoc with all our electronics. I was spending too much time on the bridge when this whole thing started. I should have been down below decks knocking heads together. Then maybe the damn equipment would work.”

“That’s why you didn’t respond to our hails?”

“Of course! The radio was dead, Fedorov. That should be obvious.”

“But Karpov said you were deliberately jamming us. I had to have Kalinichev isolate the jamming frequencies to try to track you.”

“Yeah? The system came on by itself. It was probably that fire, but who the hell fired those missiles at us?” Orlov knew the best defense was a good offense. “We were trying to get control of the chopper. I look over my shoulder and see a fist full of S-300s coming at us! Thank God I had the presence of mind to have a chute on and jumped before you blew us to hell. The pilot wasn’t so lucky. Whoever gave that order to fire has that man’s blood on his hands.”

Fedorov was shocked to hear Orlov's version of those events. The story was entirely plausible. They had reacted to the incident on the spur of the moment, and with the pressure of their race to Gibraltar and the British fleet bearing down on them. He was new to command, somewhat rattled, worried over what Orlov might do or what might happen if the technology on that helo survived intact. He had given the authorization to fire, and Karpov was only too happy to oblige. Now he felt a tinge of guilt over how he had handled the matter. Orlov in a helicopter heading away from the ship was one thing, but seeing him here now put a human face on it all. He looked tired, disheveled, dragged half way around the world from where he leapt to safety, just as he had said.

"We... we didn't know, Chief. We thought you were abandoning the ship. The helicopter had advanced technology aboard. There was no way we could allow it to possibly fall into the hands of the Spanish or anyone else in 1942. You know what we decided with Admiral Volsky."

"It was Karpov, wasn't it? That little bastard had it in for me ever since he tried to take the ship. He wanted to blame that all on me. I noticed how he wheedled his way back onto the bridge in no time at all, while I was rotting in the brig, busted, and sent down to the Marines." He looked at Zykov now, who had been listening to all of this with some amusement.

"No offense, Zykov."

"None taken, Orlov." Zykov grinned. "But you mean sent *up* to the Marines, yes? I have a bone to pick with you for making me take that damn train ride all the way from Vladivostok to find you here. We never leave a man behind."

"What do you mean? Vladivostok? You made port there?"

Fedorov took a moment to explain some of all that had happened after the Chief left the ship, and how *Kirov* eventually returned to Vladivostok. He also told him there was a big war brewing, and possibly underway now.

"It's too complicated to go into all of it, Chief," he finished. But we used that same control rod off *Kirov* to get back here and rescue you. If what you say is true, then there will be no court martial. You can come home, Chief, come home where you belong. There was nothing you would do here but cause trouble, eh? And we've meddled with the history enough as it stands. It was my aim to find you and bring you back home. We found your service jacket."

Orlov laughed at that. "Very clever, Fedorov. I forgot it could track my

location. Well I stuffed it down that Commissar's throat to try and be done with this whole affair."

"You killed the Commissar?"

"Of course!"

"Why? What did he do to deserve that?"

"What did he do? He bothered my grandmother for starters, and that was enough. You think he was some kind of angel? He was herding young women for Beria—you know the history. I just did the world a big favor by choking the life out of that man, that's all."

Fedorov knew that was probably true. Molla and so many others like him had caused nothing but pain and misery, just like those NKVD men Fedorov had confronted on the journey west, and they had been responsible for the suffering and death of tens of thousands. Yet who knows what Molla did to keep the world on the course it was sailing. Killing him, removing him and all his ancestors from the time line was one thing—restoring the lives of all he may have killed, and adding in all their offspring was quite another thing! It had enormous ramifications as to how the history might play out. He tried to explain this to Orlov, but the big Chief just shook his head.

"How many Germans did our boys just butcher with this little amphibious landing, Fedorov? What about them? What about their lives and children and all their grand children as well? Don't think I'm some kind of madman or monster here. I satisfied myself with Molla; you've done much worse. You should have just left me alone here if you were so worried about your precious history books."

Again, Fedorov could feel the iron in Orlov's words, because he was correct. What did he think he was doing launching this much force at the history to try and save just one man? He had placed the burden, and the blame for the entire war, on Orlov, but the Chief made a good point. There was no way to know whether he was responsible for any of the events that were unfolding in 2021, or for those blackened cities and coastlines they saw.

Now he came to doubt everything he had been doing, from the very moment he was elevated to command of the ship. They had all looked to him to solve everything, to explain everything, to figure out what was happening—but he was just a navigator! He really didn't know why any of this was happening, why Rod-25 worked its magical effects. That was just one part of the mystery. What was going on with that back stairway at Ilanskiy? He had ideas about that, thinking it might have something to do with the big

explosive event at Tunguska, but it was nothing more than his own wild speculation. There was no way to figure all this out. They just had to live through it as best they could.

Now the weight of the history he so loved seemed an impossibly heavy burden on his small shoulders. He thought he might blame Orlov, and now he was thinking it might all be Karpov's fault. Yet behind it all was a nagging doubt that he was just as responsible as either man, and that if there was any fault to find here, he had best begin by looking at himself.

He shrugged, suddenly feeling weary beyond measure. Looking around him he saw all the men and equipment gathered here, all scrapped up by Admiral Volsky to make certain he might be safely recovered. Now the elation in finding Orlov was replaced by a feeling of profound discouragement. No matter how hard he tried, he realized there was no way he could navigate the dangerous reefs of all the history to unfold from 1942 to 2021. For that matter, he didn't even know where they were!

"Well..." He looked at the two British soldiers, realizing this was yet another problem in his column, and another man was missing as well. They were obviously from 1942, and now they were his charge. How in the world would he get them back there where they belonged? He couldn't think about that just now. His mind was too full of other urgencies and priorities. First he had to find out where they were.

"Zykov, have these two escorted to a secure room below. I'll see if we have someone who speaks English aboard and check in on them later."

Then he gave Orlov a long look. "We're all tired, and you look like you could use a good meal, Chief. Follow Zykov to the mess hall and get something to eat."

He looked at the corporal now. "He is not to be handcuffed, and he is to be accepted as a member of this crew, with his full rank of Captain restored."

"Very well, sir. A promotion and a good meal will do any man some good, yes Orlov?"

"Right," said Fedorov, "but don't get pushy and start ordering the men around. And promise me you won't jump ship!"

"Where are we, Fedorov? What is this thing?" Orlov gave the facility a wide eyed look.

"The *Anatoly Alexandrov*. It's a floating nuclear power plant. We've got that control rod aboard, and we just used it to displace in time...somewhere. I'd better go and see about that while you eat with the Marines. You're

Captain of the second rank now, though I'm afraid *Kirov* is a little far away for us to still call you the Chief of Operations. I may still do so by habit for a while."

"Where is the ship—at Vladivostok?"

"We don't really know..."

Orlov raised an eyebrow at that, nodding. He had not expected this grace. Fedorov, naive as he was, had bought his whole pile of shit and paid full price! Good enough. He would go have some food, get some sleep, and then figure what he might do next. For now, however, there was one part of him that was glad to be home. He started after Zykov, who was showing him the way.

"Welcome back, Chief," said Fedorov after him, and something in the sincerity of the other man's words touched him. He turned, forcing a smile on his otherwise grumpy and miserable face.

"Thank you, Fedorov," he said in return. He didn't know why, but he meant it.

Chapter 26

Troyak was watching the coastline closely with his field glasses as they approached. They had taken a high speed swift boat that had been part of the *Aist* hovercraft inventory, and now he was with Fedorov and a squad of his best Marines. They could not raise anyone on radio, and so the only thing to do was to go ashore in a landing party. Fedorov was leery of using the Mi-26 at this point, so the boat made perfect sense. It was small, much more inconspicuous than one of the hovercraft, and fast enough to get them ashore in good time.

“Well at least everything is here, Fedorov. The coastline doesn’t look developed like it should be in our day. Do you suppose this is still 1942?”

“Then where are the Germans we were just fighting? They would have taken the port at Makhachkala by now. The warehouse by the rail station was on fire and we should still see it burning. I see no sign of fighting ahead.”

Troyak nodded, but had nothing more to say.

“Look, there’s the new lighthouse they built in the 1800s.” He pointed to a hill rising from the shore where an octagonal tower stood with a lantern fixture at its top. “That’s Aji-Arka Hill. I’ve been up there before. Peter the First made his camp up there when he mounted his campaign against Persia in the early 1700s. The place was just a small fishing port at that time.”

Troyak was amazed at all Fedorov knew. “How do you manage to fill your head with all these facts, Colonel?”

“I just read a lot, Sergeant. Reading is my way of getting into worlds I might never have a chance to visit in the flesh. And sometimes it can be a very pleasant time to escape into the past and leave the sorrow and pain of routine navy life behind.”

“Yes, until you actually *do* start visiting that past and find German infantry shooting at you.” Troyak smiled. “The past has seemed far more dangerous than the life we had on the ship, Fedorov.”

“I suppose that’s true...But where in hell have we ended up this time? Can you make for that sand bar south of the harbor?”

They eased up to the shore, and Troyak’s Marines fanned out, much to the surprise of a group of fishermen who were working to untangle their nets. Nothing in the landscape looked right to them, and Fedorov knew they were

certainly not in the future. He could see rows of small buildings made of sun-dried brick, what looked to be a small public bath house, a few open water pipes where people would pump water, and few buildings of any real size.

It was clear that a railway like the one they had just been defending was getting started here, but it was much smaller. Fedorov had the sinking feeling that reminded him of that moment when he had stepped outside the dining room at Ilanskiy and saw the rail yard was different, the train was missing and the whole town site reduced to a cluster of just a very few buildings. My God, he thought. We've gone *back* in time, not forward!

He approached one of the fisherman, who stepped back, somewhat intimidated by his uniform and the obvious military bearing of the Marines.

"Good day, sir." Fedorov removed his Ushanka, trying to appear less threatening. "We are Navy sailors and our ship had foundered on a Caspian sandbar. We've lost our navigation charts in a bad storm. Can you tell me what port we have found here?"

"What port? Why, this is Petrovsk. Where have you come from?"

Fedorov was confused at first. Petrovsk? Then he realized that was the old name for the port and town that became Makhachkala, but the city had not been called that since the late 1920s! He needed to find out the date. "We put out from Astrakhan some weeks ago, but the sea has not been kind to us. Our ship ran aground and it has taken us many months to refloat it. What is the date? What has been happening? Have we slipped into another year while we were struggling at sea?"

"Another year? No. it is still the summer, July if you want to know. The weather should tell you that much."

"And the year?"

The man gave him a perplexed look. "1908, of course! You must have been at sea a good long while if you are that confused."

Fedorov half expected to hear that. The clues were stacking up in his mind, one after another, and things were now starting to make sense. Dobrynin told him that Admiral Volsky had confided something about the control rods they were sent.

"*These are very unusual,*" he said. "*The inspector General looked up the source materials, and they have some very strange trace elements that were mined near Vanavara. You know the place—it is very near the Stony Tunguska in northern Siberia!*"

That word spoke volumes of untold mystery in Fedorov's mind. He had

been fascinated by the Tunguska event since he was a young boy, reading any story he could ever find about it. The largest impact event in recorded history, it was felt over a wide area, its effects lighting up the skies as far away as London for days after, and it had just happened, if this fisherman was correct. If this was early July of 1908 they might still see the effects in the sky after dark, even this far south.

Tunguska...He remembered reading the story by Alexander Kazantsev, a pioneer of UFO research in the Soviet Union. There had been many theories as to what the event actually was, but Kazantsev hypothesized it was the crash of an extraterrestrial spacecraft. Fedorov eagerly read those old stories, like *Burning Island*, *Stronger than Time*, and *A Visitor from Outer Space*. At one point Kazantsev speculated that the event may have been a Soviet Time-ship that was out of control! How ironic, he thought. If Kazantsev only knew what Fedorov knew now!

Admiral Volsky told Dobrynin that large explosive events had been shown to disrupt the fabric of space and time as well—particularly events involving nuclear explosions. This they had experienced with their own eyes, but Rod-25 had remained a mystery, a conductor's wand that seemed to open a connection between their time and 1942 with uncanny regularity. Yet now something had changed. They would always move from 1942 to 2021 and back again, but for the first time they had obviously displaced further into the past. Something was wrong.

"It did not sound correct," Dobrynin had told him earlier.

"What do you mean?"

"There were other voices in the choir, other harmonies and frequencies that I never heard before. I know this sounds strange, Mister Fedorov, but I listen to the reactors, and I hear things there. This time the score was different."

Then, while they were searching the *Anatoly Alexandrov* for Orlov, Fedorov was shocked to see that someone had been a little too curious about the strange cargo they loaded onto the Mi-26, and they opened the containers! What possessed anyone to do that was beyond his imagining, but the lids had not been properly fastened. His first worry was of a radiation leak, until Dobrynin told him these were completely new control rods that had never been used before.

"We just put them in a radiation safe container because if they were eventually used it would come in handy."

1908...He had found another hole in time linking 1942 to that very year, the same day of the Tunguska event. Now it seemed that the action of Rod-25, perhaps influenced by the presence of the other two control rods, had orchestrated another surprise, and all things fell through to this year, the year that the materials finding their way into these rods first came from the depths of outer space! Whether by asteroid, meteor, black hole or spacecraft did not matter so much. The reality he was facing now was that they had slipped much farther back in time, and so the damage they could do to any future history here was exponentially greater.

“Well I thank you,” he said graciously. “My men and I will be returning to our ship now. We’ve finally got it seaworthy again. Good day, sir.” He nodded to Troyak, and the Marines boarded the boat and pushed off.

“Use the oars,” he said quietly. “No sense arousing undue curiosity. We can start the outboard motor when we get further out, away from prying eyes.”

“Where to now?” Troyak gave him a searching look.

“A good question, Sergeant. Let’s get back to the *Anatoly Alexandrov*. I need to speak with Chief Dobrynin.”

* * *

“**1908?**” Dobrynin had a look of profound shock on his face. “I was afraid something like this was going to happen when Volsky handed me this mission. Just go and fetch Fedorov, he said, and be sure that helicopter gets safely launched. Nothing was said to me about a visit to 1908. What is happening, Fedorov?”

“I was hoping you could help me sort that out, Chief.”

“Yes...Things were different this time. It did not sound correct. What we can do about it? I have no idea.”

“We discovered the seal on the other control rod containers was loose. Could that have been a factor?”

“Your guess is as good as mine, Mister Fedorov. But now that you mention it, there were other harmonies in the sound. Then it descended, and I was not expecting to hear that at all. The only thing I can suggest is to seal those containers and run the procedure again. Yet I can make you no guarantees as to where we might turn up this time.”

Fedorov sat with that for some time, and he knew that it would only be a

matter of time before some passing cargo vessel would happen across them, just 15 kilometers off the shores of what would one day become the Russian Naval facility at Kaspiysk. The sight of the massive Mi-26 sitting atop the roof of the floating powerplant would be shocking, to say nothing of the big hovercraft moored alongside. As he wrestled with this, he was approached by a junior officer with an odd report.

“Captain, sir,” the man said. “We have been monitoring signals traffic after we sent out our initial hails to try and contact the base at Kaspiysk.”

“The base?” Fedorov gave him a distracted look, his mind still deep in thought.

“Yes, sir. We had no answer, but we broadcast on all channels, just as you ordered, and we just now picked up a signal.”

“What kind of signal?”

“It was on the shortwave band, sir. The call sign prefix was KIRV, and the senders name was coded NIK.”

Fedorov was stunned. “When did you receive this?”

“Just minutes ago, sir. In fact, it’s the only radio signal we’ve picked up.”

“Where was the signal coming from? Could you locate it?”

“I was a DX specialist at one time, sir. The signal was very fleeting, and we only caught a minute or two of it. I could not pin down the entity of origin, but the location prefix was PN.”

A DX specialist was a shortwave operator who focused on receiving and identifying the location of distant radio signals that could propagate for thousands of miles around the earth at times. Fedorov was astounded! He immediately recognized what the call sign prefix was, the four character identifier for *Kirov*! The sender name was obvious as well. NIK was the handle Nikolin would always append by sheer habit to any message he encoded. As for the location, as a trained navigator he was also very familiar with the Maidenhead locator map, which bisected the world map on a grid and assigned letters to each column for longitude and each row for latitude. By cross indexing the two letters you could get a general idea of the approximate location of the signal, and this message had been coded PN. He immediately knew that latitude was in the Pacific, and very near to Vladivostok!

He rushed to the radio room, eyes alight to get a Maidenhead map and confirm his assumption. “My God!” he said. “How is this possible?” The signal is coming from a map box centered on Korea, with the Yellow Sea on

one side and the Sea of Japan on the other. He had seen a hundred messages handed to him by Nikolin to plot ship traffic, and they always ended the very same way. He would triple hyphen, then append the Maidenhead locator code followed by his own operator's code, NIK. One fact tumbled upon another in a wild moment of realization. *Kirov... Here...In 1908...*In the waters off Korea or Japan!

"Get another transmission off at maximum power. Boost the signal any way you can! Give our call sign, Maidenhead coordinates and append the operator code FDV. Send it on our military shortwave band. Do it now!"

* * *

It came in loud and clear, rising above the low band transmissions, though Nikolin was surprised to see it was on a higher military transmission band. The call sign did not mean anything to him at first, though he wrote it down to look it up. ANAV. Then the message transitioned into a standard military hail call, and it was giving a specific target, the operator the sender was hoping to contact. To his great surprise it was him!

"Captain..."

Karpov was in the Captain's chair, watching the HD video feed from the Tin Man. "Have they changed their minds, Mister Nikolin?" He assumed Nikolin had received a message from the Japanese. He had been pounding their cruiser squadron with all three of his twin 152mm batteries for the last several minutes. The lead ship, which he presumed to be the flagship, had fallen off the battle line, burning badly amidships after three more hits had shattered a tall mainmast there and blown away one of the cruiser's three smoke stacks. Jet black smoke enveloped the ship from the truncated stack.

"No sir...I'm receiving a coded message on the military shortwave band. It's from another ship, sir."

"What ship? Rodenko. Are there any other contacts on radar?"

"No sir, we have only the eight contacts we are presently engaging"

"Captain, I have the ship call sign prefix now. ANAV. It's a Russian ship, the *Anatoly Alexandrov*."

That gave Karpov a moment's hesitation, his head turning sharply to the communications station.

"What did you say? *Anatoly Alexandrov*?"

Karpov raised an eyebrow in surprise. "That's a floating nuclear power

facility stationed off the Kaspiysk naval base. Volsky was going to use it in that operation to rescue Fedorov! Are you certain that was that callsign?”

“Yes sir! It can’t be anyone else. The first shortwave long distance calls weren’t made until the early 1920s. And the operator code on this one was FDV. That’s Fedorov, Captain. He always signs that way. He’s trying to contact us via shortwave! Those signals can reach virtually any location on earth using skywave propagation.”

The Captain passed a moment of complete confusion. It was as if he had been caught right in the middle of an elaborate crime, with the authorities bursting in to apprehend him. He felt a sudden jab of guilt at the thought Fedorov was trying to signal them, pulled back to that first meeting with Admiral Volsky when the young navigator had put forward his plan to find Orlov. Fedorov! What was he doing here...in 1908?

Suddenly the crack of the ships 152mm deck guns was a jarring distraction. Karpov felt light headed, strangely bothered, and then quickly turned to Samsonov. “Secure deck guns,” he said sharply. “That will suffice for the moment. Mister Rodenko!”

“Sir?”

“Resume evasive heading and maneuver to break off from this engagement. Head west if you must, and get us beyond their visual horizon. Then turn the ship south and resume course 180 at your earliest opportunity. I’ll need to work closely with Mister Nikolin at the moment, and I think we have taught these ships a lesson. This message now has top priority.”

Chapter 27

It was a slow process, and the signal faded at times and was lost, but they were able to get a message through. Nikolin worked out the subsquare location on the grid from Fedorov's signal.

"They are right in the Caspian Sea, sir. Just off the coast at Kaspiysk."

"My God, they must have run their procedure with that damnable Rod-25 and then shifted back here even as we have—but why 1908? Our shift was caused by that explosive detonation. Why would they shift here as well, to this day and year? It doesn't make any sense."

"I'm getting a voice signal now. They're using a frequency above 12MHz to improve integrity. Got him sir!"

"...Read me on this channel. Repeat, this is Anton Fedorov aboard Anatoly Alexandrov on location in the Caspian sea. Calling battlecruiser Kirov. Please acknowledge."

Karpov nodded his head, giving Nikolin the go ahead to respond.

"Roger that, *Anatoly Alexandrov*. This is *Kirov* calling. Reading you five by five, loud and clear, Fedorov. Lieutenant Nikolin responding."

"Ten Four – Nikolin! Am I ever glad to hear your voice! Where are you? Over."

Karpov reached for the handset now: "Fedorov? What are you doing here? Do you realize what year this is?"

"Captain Karpov? Good to hear you, sir. To answer your question, we really have no idea why we are here. Dobrynin ran his procedure and here we are. I have just verified the date. Over."

"Well, what in God's name are you going to do here?"

"...Good question, Captain. We have Orlov! But when we attempted to use Rod-25 to return home, we ended up here instead. Now we must see what we can do about all this. Is Orlan with you?"

"No. Orlan is not here."

There was silence on the line for a time. Then Fedorov returned, his voice uncertain. *"Orlan did not shift with you? And what of Admiral Golovko?"*

"Neither ship shifted here with us. We are alone, and I have no idea what has happened to Orlan."

"Might it still be trapped in 1945, Captain?"

This time it was Karpov that hesitated before he spoke. "That is possible, Fedorov, but given the circumstances we were facing, I doubt the ship survived..."

There was another pause that seemed interminably long, and Karpov realized that Fedorov must be reading between the lines of everything he was saying here. The man was not stupid. He would soon understand that there was combat, though the Captain had no intention of going into the details here. Yet Fedorov's next question was very pointed, and touched on the heart of the matter.

"Captain....How did you shift here? Rod-25 is with us."

"There's no point discussing that, Fedorov. The fact is, we are here, and with no way to get home, or so I believed until I heard your voice."

"I see...Captain, I don't have to tell you how important it is that we do nothing to interfere with the history of this time period. We must work to rendezvous and get to you with a control rod. Over"

Karpov ignored the first half of what Fedorov said. "And how do you propose to get here? Do you expect us to sail into to the Black Sea and have no one here notice this ship?"

"We have an Mi-26 loaded with fuel and two more control rods that may work just like Rod-25. Our plan was to fly them to you on the Pacific coast, over."

"Fly here? It's a huge distance, Fedorov. Even for an Mi-26."

"We may have the fuel...But perhaps you could sail our way and we could arrange a rendezvous some place closer. What is your present position?"

"We are in the Sea of Japan at the moment." Karpov sounded impatient now, almost as if he resented this sudden and unexpected development and saw it as an interruption. It would certainly mean his planned operation here would end abruptly, and they would again be dipping an infernal control rod into the nuclear soup aboard *Kirov*. Who knew where they might turn up next? He was now at a decisive point in history, with exactly the right instrument to impose his will on time. Now comes Fedorov with another outlandish rescue plan.

"If you could get to the Arabian Sea, or even the Bay of Bengal it would give us much more safety margin on the fuel. I think we could get the Mi-26 there easily enough. Over."

Karpov pursed his lips, his inner resistance to the plan obvious on his

face. He stood up straight, noting Rodenko was watching the scene closely. He will argue that we must look to the welfare of the crew, he thought. He will want us all together again with one happy party here on the ship—including Orlov, eh? Somehow the thought of seeing the Chief again did not seem very appealing to Karpov. Now he needed time to think this over and decide what to do. He raised the handset.

“We will discuss this with the other officers here, Fedorov, and see what should be done. I will contact you again in 48 hours on this frequency at 18:00 hours.”

Again the long pause. *“Two days? Why the delay?”*

“It’s another long sea voyage and a risky plan, Fedorov. I will need time to consider it and make plans.”

“Very well, Captain. If you have an alternative plan, please let me know and we will do our best to try and reach you. If you come west you need only worry about the Singapore Strait. Make a night transit there and then you should be able to make most of the rest of the voyage without undue notice. In the meantime, try to be as inconspicuous as possible there. Over.”

“I understand, Fedorov. We will discuss this later. Karpov over and out.” He switched off the handset with a hard squeeze of his hand.

Fedorov! Intrepid, brave hearted Fedorov. He had come all the way across Siberia to find and rescue Orlov. Now he was trying to rescue Kirov and get them safely home, but to what end? They could not even get themselves there. How the *Anatoly Alexandrov* shifted here to 1908 was still an unanswered mystery.

I could sail half way round the world for this rendezvous and then what, Karpov wondered? Would those other control rods even work? If they did work, where would the ship turn up? Would we return to the future and find ourselves in the midst of a great war, a solitary ship to confront any enemy we encountered? Our twenty-one missiles would count for nothing back there. Here they represent enormous power, decisive power, the power to choke the breath from fate itself!

He stood up, deeply troubled. Then he remembered the engagement they had been fighting, and turned to Rodenko, who was still watching from across the room at the Plexiglas situation board.

“Report, Mister Rodenko. What is our status?”

“Sir, we are at 48,000 meters and opening the range. Those main masts looked to be several hundred feet high, as is our own radar mast here. But we

should slip over their horizon in a few minutes.”

“Very well... Then take the ship south. Maintain 30 knots for the next ten minutes, then fall off to two thirds. No need to put stress on that hull patch.” The ship was still a wounded warrior, with a reinforced hull patch from that torpedo damage inflicted in the Mediterranean Sea by that German U-Boat.

Karpov shook his head, remembering the incident. That was a very crafty U-Boat Captain, he thought. He was hiding in that shallow inlet and when Fedorov finally realized it he still let the boat go. He did not want to upset his history books. That was Fedorov, so worried about the order of things, and trying always to set the broken china back in place in the cupboard. He did not see the big picture here, though he undoubtedly knew this history very well. His only concern was now arranging this rendezvous as quietly as possible.

“I will return to my rest shift, Rodenko. You have the bridge.”

“Very good, sir.”

“Captain off the Bridge!”

* * *

He went to Zolkin, though he did not know why. He knew what the Doctor would tell him, that he had no right to start his own private war here with the Japanese.

“What do you hope to accomplish, Captain? You will have to kill men to do it, that much is certain. How many more will have to die to satisfy your desire for power?”

“You may think I do this only for myself, Doctor, but that is not the case. I do this for Russia. You know the history. The revolution is festering even now as we speak. Men like Trotsky, Lenin and Stalin are all in the mix. Even the man this ship is named for is alive here, a young man somewhere. They will take some time with their revolution, but it is coming like a bad storm.”

“So what can you do about that? I think the Tsar is doomed. The First World War is coming as well. Nicholas will not survive that. It will bleed the country and make an end of his reign. How can you prevent it? And even if you could, would you prefer the house of Romanov to Stalin?”

“Yes, you are correct, Doctor. I cannot control all these events. But what I can do is establish Russia as a Pacific power again, and fend off all comers. There was an uprising in Vladivostok just after that disastrous defeat at the

hands of the Japanese. They wanted to break away and look to their own fate, independent of European Russia. That is something we could do here.”

“What? Set up your own little empire? And you expect me to believe you do all this for the homeland? You have just said you would wash your hands of it all and leave the Tsar to his fate when the revolution comes. Well let me remind you that the revolution came here as well. The Bolsheviks defeated Denikin, and finally Admiral Kolchak, the last of the Whites.”

“Yes, but that wasn’t until 1920. There is much we could do before then. The Bolsheviks had very few enclaves in Siberia until late in the Russian Civil War.”

“So what do you propose to do, Captain? I have heard you announced yourself as Viceroy of the East. Kolchak tried that line as well. Didn’t he announce himself as ‘Supreme Leader of Russia?’ All that got him was an appointment with a firing squad.”

“Kolchak was not prepared to master the situation on land. He was a Navy Admiral, with little training in ground maneuvers.”

“And you are a Navy Captain with even less! I will warrant that you can take control of the seas here, Karpov, but Siberia is a very big place. No one will see *Kirov* sailing boldly over the taiga to enforce your will. Men like Denikin and all the others will soon realize that you are relatively powerless to affect events inland. Oh, I suppose you could control Vladivostok, and probably keep the Western powers from trying to intervene in the civil war. But you must realize your own limitations. You want to set history right for Russia? Well Russia may have other ideas about what it wants, and what will you do if Denikin, Kornilov and the other Whites tell you to go to hell? Your dream of a Far East Republic will vanish just as it did for Kolchak. And when they lose to the Reds, as they will you know, then what will you do?”

“A good speech, Doctor. Denikin was in the Caucasus worried about the Jews, and I need have no dealings with him. But if I choose to do so I can smash the Red Army and ensure a victory by the Whites.”

“How? Your cruise missiles will need a very long range to do that. The final big battles were fought well inland at Orel and Samara.”

The Doctor made a good point. The range of his Moskit-IIs was only 120 miles, and the MOS IIIs could reach only 90 miles. Karpov shrugged. He had not mentioned the use of nuclear weapons, but that was obviously what was on the Doctor’s mind.

“Power can be achieved by other means,” said Karpov.

“Are you going to start blowing things up again?”

“I know that is your great fear, Doctor, but that may not even be necessary. The mere demonstration of power can achieve dramatic ends.”

“Did that work with the Americans? All they did was come at you harder.”

“These are not the Americans of 1945. The men of this era have far less real power in their hands. Their ships are obsolete old rust buckets compared to *Kirov*.”

“Face it, Karpov. To achieve anything like the scenario I think you are creating in your head, you will need the close cooperation of these men. You will need someone like Kolchak, for example, and a White Army that can hold its own against the Bolsheviks. Otherwise they will prevail and Stalin will eventually rise out of the fires of the civil war. What then? You want to face off with Stalin?”

“Don’t you understand, Zolkin? Knowledge is power too. I can know all the history as it is about to unfold. Stalin? I did some reading the other day. You want to know where Stalin is at this very moment? He’s in prison at Baku! Why, if I chose to do so I could sail to the Black Sea and send helicopters there and make an end of Stalin before he ever becomes a factor in Russian history.”

“My God! Listen to yourself. Sometimes I really wonder if you are serious about all this. Well... I’ll give you one thing, Captain. You have power here, that much is obvious. You want to go kill Stalin? I suppose no one can stop you. Do that, however, and another man may rise from the dark corners of history to take his place. Your knowledge of future events will come unraveling the moment he dies. Fedorov will tell you this. Anything you do here will have dramatic repercussions. So this knowledge you think you can use will soon be useless when everything starts to change. Yes, someone will rise in Stalin’s place, and you will not know who that man is, or how to reach him. History may be far more resilient than you realize.”

Karpov shrugged. “This is all academic,” he said. “The question is what do we do about Fedorov?”

“Fedorov? Yes, he wants to try and rescue us. He’s a good man, Captain. You know that as much as I do. He will want to do everything possible to let sleeping dogs lie here. The world is going into the cauldron of the First Great War soon, and back home it’s about to go into the *last* Great War. Those dogs will soon be on the hunt without any help from us, in both eras.”

“Do you think this plan of his will work? I mean... well how did it come to pass that he appeared here, in 1908? What if those control rods just end up sending us even farther back in time? Fedorov devises all these plans and schemes, but he really has no way to control what happens, any more than you say I do.”

“Yes, Karpov. In the end we are all at the mercy of time and events. Call it fate, call it the will of God, but there is something bigger than you or me or Mister Fedorov at work here. We are like blind men in a dark closet looking for the right coat here. Whatever you decide, consider the men on this ship. They may not share your dream of conquest. Have you even bothered to consider asking what they might want to do? Well, here’s a thought you can put into your own scheming head. Suppose you do something here; something that changes everything. Suppose the grandparents of men aboard this ship don’t survive in the new world you create? What happens to the men then? Do they end up dead, never born, just like the men on that list Volkov was all worked up over, with no record they ever existed? Suppose your *own* grandfather dies. Then what?”

Part X

Lindisfarne

*“For with the flow and ebb, its style
Varies from continent to isle;
Dry shod o’er sands, twice every day,
The pilgrims to the shrine find way;
Twice every day the waves efface
Of staves and sandalled feet the trace.”*

— Sir Walter Scott

Chapter 28

The sky was low that day when he arrived, the long causeway leading the way across the South Low where it meandered into the sea. At low tide there was a mile or more of mud flats here, until the causeway rose on the far banks of Holy Isle. At high tide the low was entirely submerged by the sea, cutting the island off from the greater shore of England to the west. To this day the tides dictated access to the isle, and now they had gracefully withdrawn for his Lordship, Sir Roger Ames, the Duke of Elvington, who passed quickly over the narrow way in his town car.

The bare windswept stone of the island greeted him, called whinstone by the locals. It was a hard and durable rock, and it had hidden secrets here from the world for many centuries. He passed beneath the Snook along the narrow neck of Holy Isle, following the narrow road as it hugged the coast through the village, past Riding Stone and Cockle Stone to the castle at Lindisfarne on Beblowe Crag. Cobblestone as it ended, it would take him all the way the boat houses, three herring boats cut in half and set upside down on the green earth. The gap was walled in and a door installed. How quaint, he thought.

There he would thank the driver, and have his effects moved up the long flat stairs to the lower battery of the castle itself, where he had so arranged it that he would have the entire facility to himself. If Mister Thomas was prompt, he should be waiting for him to move the luggage. The driver would be dismissed before high tide, and it would be just he and Thomas left alone at the castle, on the eve of their great adventure.

They would take their meal, all arranged and set out at that very moment on the long oval table of the dining hall. It sat at the edge of a great hearth stretching in a wide arch, with stolid brickwork rising to the vaulted ceiling. It was once an old bread oven, but it would hold a nice fire and warm their meal. He had a mind to tour the 'ship room,' where a rustic model of an old tri-mast frigate was hung from the arched stone ceiling, as if it were sailing there in formation with 17th century Dutch candelabra chandeliers. After that they would spend a few quiet hours of quiet in the upper gallery. There were some old books to pass the time, and a lovely cello he might play, listening to

the sound echoing in the empty halls of the castle.

Ian Thomas got quite a kick out of the ship room. “My, look at that, it’s as if a ghost ship were sailing through the room, sir.”

“Indeed, Mister Thomas. Wouldn’t you be thrilled to ride on a ship like that?”

“I certainly would, sir.”

“Well, that may soon be arranged.” The Duke let that hang, a subtle clue to the business ahead, which had Thomas very curious to learn more. Yet he knew enough not to probe. He would be told anything the Duke decided he needed to know in good time. So instead he kept to the particulars of their immediate schedule. After a sumptuous dinner they shared a glass a brandy in the upper gallery until the Duke stood up, looking at his pocket watch.

“Will we be leaving the castle tonight, your grace? Shall I arrange for a car?”

“In a manner of speaking...but no, a car will not be necessary. I should like to walk the shore for a time and see if I might happen upon old Saint Cuthbert stringing his beads. Would you be so kind as to see the luggage gets up to the small bedroom off the long gallery? You’ll find it right on the landing at the top of a narrow stairway there, just outside the gallery on the upper battery.”

“Right away, sir.” Apparently they were staying the night there at the castle.

As evening fell the Duke walked in the walled garden, once a vegetable garden for the castle garrison, enjoying the cool sea air on this last night. He would end with a final walk on the stony shore as the darkness settled in, listening to the sound of the surf on stone and the cooing of the fulmars roosting there. At one point he thought he heard the distant barking of a dog and looked to see what he thought was a white shepherd roaming near the edge of the castle, but it seemed to vanish in the mist.

There had been an old priory on the island dating to the 600s, long before the castle was built many centuries later in the 1500s. Venerable saints like Adian and Cuthbert both preached the Gospel from the isolated island base, finding it a special place to withdraw from the world to commune with the sea, and their God. Adian died there and his remains were buried beneath the ruins of the old Abbey, and it was said that Cuthbert had a vision that night of the saint being taken to heaven by Angels.

Yes, the place has always been a portal between this world and others, the

Duke thought as he walked. The Angels come and go, and the saints take their repose here while the monks painstakingly copy their glorious Gospels. He had always been fond of the Lindisfarne Gospel, and had even tried to acquire it at one point in his career. I may accomplish that yet, he thought to himself, but not here...not now.

The Monks fled when the Vikings came, and were said to have wandered for generations, carrying with them the body of Saint Cuthbert. The Vikings almost made an end of the place when they ravaged the shore, and Lindisfarne was uninhabited for all of two centuries until the intrepid Benedictine Monks returned.

The sun set very late that day, at well near eight 'o clock, and the new moon was not yet up, so the night was thick after darkness came. The Duke walked alone on the quiet shore thinking of all he had done in the years past, the slow but steady rise to wealth and fame, his acceptance as a Peer of the Realm, which was most unusual for anyone outside the Royal Family in modern times. Yes, he thought, I will be hard pressed to do any better in the years left to me, but at least I shall have the thrill of the hunt back again. I was getting a bit jaded at the top of the tree. Time to live again.

He breathed in the cool sea air and quietly said goodbye to the life he had brought to this place, and to the whole of the world beyond the shores of that isolated, holy isle. Then it was up the long wide stairs to the castle again, the approach leading to the pantry on the lower battery and through the kitchen to find the stairway up to the second level. The castle as it stood that day had been lovingly restored by the noted architect Sir Edwin Lutyens in 1902, who fashioned an Edwardian home on the upper floors. They would catch a few hours rest in the bed chambers there and then rise in the dark well before dawn, with the crescent moon low over the submerged tidal zone on the muddy shores leading up to Fulwark Burn and Buckton. It was the last moon, he thought, the moon of the Ninth Day.

Mister Thomas had placed their luggage in the small bedroom as directed. They warmed themselves with a cup of hot tea in the kitchen before they left. Then the Duke led the way to the back of the narrow room by the gallery where there was a small closet.

"I'll just be a moment," he said quietly, stooping to enter alone, his hand tucked into the pocket of his outer coat. He soon emerged, a wry smile on his face and a gleam in his eye.

"Well, Mister Thomas, are you ready?"

“Certainly, sir. I’ll take the bags downstairs right away. Will there be a car coming for us this morning?”

“No, my good man. You may bring the luggage this way.”

To Ian’s surprise the Duke was gesturing to the open doorway of the closet. His first thought was that his lordship intended to leave the bags there for safekeeping, and that they might then pass the day here sightseeing on the island. Yet as he entered the narrow door he felt a sudden chill, a distinct draft of cold air rising. The Duke was right behind him.

“I’ll take that bag,” he said, holding up a small flashlight that now illuminated a dark portal at the very back of the closet. “Two is a bit much to manage on this stairway. There’s a small landing just inside the entrance. Pause there, please, while I secure this door. And do mind your step, Mister Thomas. The stairway is somewhat treacherous, and it’s a long way down.”

Thomas had heard of secret passages in old castles—every boy had dreamed of them at one time or another. Well, here was a fairly good one right at his feet! He assumed it was a hidden back stairway that would take them to the north end of the castle. Why the Duke wanted to take this dark, narrow stairway he did not know. As they stepped through the entrance to the landing the jittery light revealed the topmost flight of stone cut steps, very steep and narrow. Cobwebs draped across the narrow way, and the place could have done justice to any haunted house. The Duke handed him a folded umbrella.

“There you are, my man. Swipe aside those cobwebs with this. If you would be so kind as to lead, I’ll light the way as best I can.”

“Very good, sir.” Ian lifted the bag he was to carry, still thinking this was an odd way to make their exit, with the Duke carrying the last of their luggage. The sound of the upper closet door closing behind them had a certain finality about it, though he didn’t know why he felt that way.

Down they went, thirty steps to another stone landing and a second door. The Duke set down his bag and stepped up, quickly inserting a small metal skeleton key into the lock there with a strange click and what sounded like a quiet electronic tone. “And yet another flight,” he said as the doorway creaked open on dry metal hinges.

The sound echoed up the dark stone stairway behind them, and Ian could now see that this second flight angled off to the left in a new direction. Well that will at least point us towards the cobblestone road when we get down, he thought. The door closed behind them again with a metallic click this time,

and it was thirty more steps down, and very steep, growing colder as they went.

“Ground level,” said the Duke with a smile where there was yet another door, opening on yet another flight of stairs, darker and more foreboding than any they had traversed. How very odd, he thought.

“Now we get to the heart of the matter,” said the Duke, setting down his bag. “Mister Thomas...Are you certain you wish to accompany me on the journey that now lies before you? It begins here, and may not end for a very long time.”

“Sir, you have my full commitment.”

“The circumstances may be hard on us both at times.”

“I understand, sir. You may rely on me entirely.”

The Duke took a long breath, then spoke a quiet verse of poetry, as if to christen their adventure: “If there be spirits in the air that hold their sway between the earth and sky, descend out of the golden vapors there and sweep me into iridescent life. Oh, came a magic cloak into my hands to carry me to distant lands, I should not trade it for the choicest gown, nor for the cloak and garments of the crown...”

Thomas gave him a bemused look.

“Johan Wolfgang von Goethe, Mister Thomas. From *Faust*. We’re about to sell our souls to the devil, my good man. Good then. Let’s get on with it.” He gestured to the stairs, lighting the way again with his small LED flashlight.

Down they went, into dense, musty cold that seemed to find a way quickly through their coats and vests and chilled them to the bone. Ian felt a brief sensation of dizziness as they reached the bottom, feeling just a bit claustrophobic in the constricted space.

What’s wrong with me, he thought? I spent days and days digging out that narrow tunnel to fetch Churchill’s ashes for this man, and never felt a twinge of anything like this. Yet something about the space was deeply unnerving, the quiet, the dark, the cold of decades lying here in this narrow way. They were in a long stone hall now, and this time the Duke edged past him to lead the way. It curved round to the left again, and then began to slowly angle up in a gradual climb. Ian had lost his sense of direction by now in the dark, but he reasoned they must still be beneath the castle. Another door barred the way ahead, which the Duke quickly opened with his strange key.

“Quite a maze down here, your grace. I had no idea these passages were this extensive beneath the castle.”

“You’re in good company, Mister Thomas, because no one else knows about them either—at least no one that matters. Here now, the final door. Just let me get this key out of my pocket again and we can begin.”

* * *

Two other men were also on a narrow stairway at that very same moment, though they were thousands of miles and long decades away. Captain Volkov led the Englishman up the main stairway to his room, searching it quickly and then hustling the man down the dark back stairway. Where has that proprietor gotten himself to, thought Volkov as they went? Where are my men? This whole situation was very odd, and most irregular. Who were those imbeciles posing as NKVD? They paid a very high price for their little reenactment, whatever they were doing here. He was intent on locating his men and getting to the bottom of this mess. There would be a report to file now. The local authorities would have to be called in, and the coroner. Yet he was certain his position would absolve him of any wrongdoing here. Those men had interfered with a naval officer, and threatened him at gunpoint. They got just the same in return. It was purely self-defense.

The dining room they found themselves in was obviously the same room Volkov had been in before. He could tell by the window arrangement, but now it was all strangely different. The windows were shattered, and an amber glow from outside was illuminating the room. What was going on here? Where were the bodies of those idiots he had to deal with here a moment ago?

Volkov was tensely alert now, and Byrne could feel his hand tighten painfully on his shoulder. They moved to the front desk, and Volkov studied the situation carefully. No one was there, just a register open on the desk, a pen there as if it had been dropped at a moment’s notice. Where was that serving girl that had been cowering behind the desk? She probably ran off when things got violent. Gunshots will have that effect, so he thought nothing more about the fact that the lobby and foyer were deserted now. He squinted at the scrawled handwriting in the register, noting the names there: Lt. Hans Koeppen, Ernst Maas, Hans Knappe, and the date was very odd in the registry, 30-6-08. Sure enough, he saw the name Byrne there as well. The Englishman

was telling the truth.

“Koeppen,” he said aloud. “The thirtieth of June? The year is obviously wrong. 2008?”

“One of the contestants,” said Byrne, glomming on to the information as if to buttress his story with this strange and dangerous looking man with a gun.

“Contestants?”

“In the Great Auto Race, sir. The race I am here to report on.”

“What are you talking about, you fool? There is nothing of the kind underway here...” He had no knowledge of the famous historical event, a grueling race from New York to Paris, and not crossing the Atlantic, but heading west across the United States, the Pacific, Siberian Russia and all the way to Paris through Asia and Europe. The last three cars had endured the waist deep mud of Siberia, to get this far, and the German team was now in second place, trying to catch up with the speedy Thomas Flyer car of the American team.

The more Volkov looked about him, the stranger everything seemed. There was no computer at the front desk, the furnishings, lamps and chairs, were all antiques, though wonderfully restored. Everything was different, and the calendar... another oddity obviously there for decor. They were making this place out to be an old inn from centuries past.

“Where is everyone?”

“Probably out near the tracks, sir, where I should be. The *Protos* is leaving this morning. That’s the German team’s car. I was just running upstairs to fetch my notebook when I found the door locked on the upper landing and began knocking to see if I could gain access. Then you appeared with that other older man, and...well, I’m very confused, sir. Are you with Mironov?”

“What? Mironov? I am with the Russian Naval Intelligence, and I have had more than enough of this nonsense. Is this Mironov the associate you spoke of earlier?”

Byrne followed what Volkov said as best he could, in spite of the fact that his Russian was limited. Yet he heard enough to realize this man was an intelligence officer, and Mironov’s warning about the Tsar’s secret police, the *Okhrana*, rose as a warning in his mind now. “He was just another boarder,” he said, not knowing what else to say. “I had breakfast with him. I thought perhaps that you were with his party.”

He had seen Mironov go up the stairs after that other strange man left them, the one who called himself Fedorov. Then Mironov appeared again, a troubled look of astonishment on his face. He said nothing, striding quickly across the dining hall and out the main entrance there by the front desk.

Now Volkov seemed to be peering outside. "Through that door," he said gruffly, nudging Byrne out. They emerged to find the northeastern sky still aglow with a strange light, as though there had been some tremendous explosion there and the whole taiga forest was set aflame. There was still a distant rumble of thunder in the air, as though from a cannonade, or more explosions.

"My God," said Volkov as he stared at the sky. He could only think that a nuclear detonation could produce such a scene. "They've finally done it," he breathed. "It's begun."

Chapter 29

The door was above them this time, and it took the strength of both men to raise the heavy stone lid with considerable effort. It opened on a cold empty room, its far wall and roof broken and open to the low sky above. A grey mist hung over the scene, pale and diffused with the light of an early rising sun. The cold air of the tunnel was unabated in the stark scene they entered, and Thomas saw here the broken remains of the castle in which they had just passed a comfortable evening's rest.

"My lord, where have we come?"

"Step lively, Mister Thomas. Here, can you give me a lift up?"

Thomas helped the Duke gain a firm hold and assisted as he climbed up through the opening. He reached down to receive the luggage and set it aside, then extended an arm to Thomas, heaving him up.

"A bit of strength still left in these old arms and shoulders," said the Duke, breathing in the cold foggy air.

"My God, that stone lid looks like it hasn't been moved in ages."

"I don't suppose it has. In fact that passage will lie in undisturbed silence for another hundred years once we get it shut again. Well now, let's get down to the lime kilns. There will be a boat there and we can row over to the mainland."

"But sir... What's happened here?" What was his Lordship saying? Another hundred years? "Is this the same castle, sir, or have we come all the

way over to the ruins of the old Priory?”

“No Mister Thomas, you are standing in Lindisfarne Castle. I’m afraid it’s in a sad state at the moment. Come along, we’ve no time to lose. Set that stone lid back securely, my man. Yes, that will do.” The lid settled with a strange click.

Thomas was still somewhat confused, but the Duke seemed very purposeful and eager to be on his way, so he took up the luggage and the two men started to make their way through the castle. It was clearly Lindisfarne. Thomas could recognize the layout of the walls and the high whinstone crag where it was set on Holy Isle. But there was no sign of the Edwardian chambers they had stayed in on the upper battery. The grounds seemed unkempt, the walls and stairs in sad disrepair. With all the talk of imminent war, he wondered if the place had taken a bomb while they were negotiating the steep stairs and passages beneath the castle, but he would surely have heard something like that, and there was no sign that anything of the sort had happened here.

“Your pardon, sir... but the castle—”

“Yes, yes, a pity, isn’t it? Jacobites made quite a mess of the place in years past. Well this was the way it was most of the time, just an old coast guard lookout point. It won’t be restored for many years. The Dundee lime kilns are still working, though I doubt we’ll find anyone there at this hour. The tide is up and the sea will have the island in its grip for another two hours. By that time we should be well on our way.”

Thomas was again thrown in to confusion. “It won’t be restored for many years? Whatever do you mean, sir?”

“Not now, Mister Thomas. I’ll explain it all when we’re safely out to sea.”

Thomas knew enough not to press on the matter, so he labored along with the luggage as the Duke led the way. They worked their way down to the edge of the sea near the lime kilns where they saw two old boats overturned on the stony shore and tied off to a rusted metal ring anchored to the ground.

“This one looks to be in better shape. Let’s get it tipped over and then we’ll ease it to the water’s edge.”

They heaved the boat up, the wood heavy with damp moisture of a recent rain. Wooden oars wrapped in a heavy tarp were tucked away underneath. Once they had it right side up the two men pushed from the stern and slid it along over the smooth wet gravel of the shore. Thomas heaved in the two

bags and then fetched the oars, pushing the boat until its bow was well floated on the listless surf.

“I see you’ve a good pair of boots there, Mister Thomas. Those will work out well. Let’s have another shove and then I think we can ease it out with the two oars.”

“Very good, sir.”

In time they were both on the boat, settling in on the broad wood bench and fastening their oars to begin rowing. “I’ll have you know that I was in the thick of it with Regatta racing on the Thames at one point, Mister Thomas. Why, I’ve launched at three in the morning near the Horseferry on the Thames and rowed to Sunbury for breakfast at half past seven. Then it was on again until lunch at the London Stairs above Staines. After that I pushed right on through Windsor Bridge by two in the afternoon to Eaton. I haven’t the strength of a twenty year old any longer, but I prepared for this sojourn with a daily workout for the last six months and I’m fit as a fiddle. We’ll have to be quick about it, as I mean to take the South Low over the mudflats rather than going all the way round the seaward side of the island. Fortunately the tide is still well up. I think we’ll make it well enough.”

They rowed for some time, a long pull for nearly ten miles up the coast to Berwick upon the River Tweed, and there they saw the outlines of a large sailing ship, with two prominent masts lying at anchor off the mouth of the river.

Thomas was grateful that they seemed near the end of the long haul, but understandably perplexed. The Duke had hinted he might soon get his wish and ride in a sailing ship, and here it was!

“May I present to you the Brigantine *Ann*, Mister Thomas. She’s a British merchantman, as you can see, the sails nicely squared off on both the fore and main masts. My, My, her rigging and cordage look to be in very good shape. I’ll bet she’s grand when all those sails get unfurled and into the eye of the wind.”

“Amazing, sir.”

“Quite so. Well... I promised to fill you in on the details of our situation, and I suppose I had better do so before we make our final approach. You may find this somewhat awkward at first, Mister Thomas, but I had my eye on you for some time and selected you precisely because I believed you had the character and daring to fill the bill.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“A great deal may be asked of you on this little adventure. At first you may feel quite out of place, but the situation will grow on you in time...Yes, in time...”

The Duke looked over at Thomas, noting the confused expression that crossed his face and then a wry smile taking its place. “Oh... I understand now, sir. A nicely made adventure, just as you hinted. I had no idea there would be a tall ship on the coast this week, but it will make a grand play in any case.”

“Yes, well I’m afraid we are not playing at this adventure, Mister Thomas. It would take a good deal of time to explain it all to you, but if you’ll just ease into the thought that we are entirely somewhere else at the moment, and let me do most of the talking when we board that ship there, I think the situation will grow on you soon enough.”

Thomas raised his eyebrows, yet was not surprised by this development. He had worked with many noble and wealthy men over the years and was much acquainted with their eccentricities. Sir Roger Ames was no different from many he had come to know. They collected oddities like the ashes of great men before them pressed into gemstones, and they moved in arcane circles of which he hadn’t the slightest notion. He was only glad to have been taken under the wing of the Duke, and decided he would certainly not be one to spoil the party here. He would play along and indulge the man. This was to be his grand fantasy, a little safari on a sailing ship and then off to parts unknown. Well enough. He was ripe for an adventure, and something told him this would be a very nice change of pace. It certainly beat digging tunnels beneath graveyards. A jaunt on that ship seemed most appealing.

“Ahoy!” the Duke raised an arm as they approached the brig.

“Who goes there?” came a throaty voice from the gunwale.

“You may announce me as Sir Roger Ames, Mister Thomas, but make no mention whatsoever of my title as Duke. Address me as Mister Ames, if you will, from this point forward. There was no Peer of the Realm in Elvington until I was appointed, and these gentlemen will not recognize any Dukedom

established there. Simply tell them I seek passage on this ship, and a conference with their Captain Cameron.”

Thomas nodded and cupped his mouth to project his strong voice. “His Grace Sir Roger Ames, seeks passage and lodgment aboard, if you please. Can your Captain Cameron receive him straightway?”

“His Grace?” came the voice out of the mist again, and they could hear hobnailed boots moving on the wooden deck. “Very well, come abaft. There’s a good rope ladder astern.”

“No need for the honorifics,” the Duke cajoled. “Mister Ames will do in most cases. You may use the prefix ‘sir’ if you wish. It was as much a simple politeness as anything else these days, and did not necessarily indicate knighthood.”

“Sorry, sir. Long habits I suppose. I’ll be more mindful.”

The slip made by Thomas had actually worked to their advantage, for when the Boatswain heard it he thought the better of sending these two unexpected sea vagrants on their way. Instead he sent word to the Captain that a gentleman had come calling, and asked for him by name. Yet the Duke, thinking that loose lips sink ships, decided to reinforce his point with Thomas.

“When mixing with the men on this ship I would advise you to be rather mute, Mister Thomas. There should be no mention of current events, news, and certainly no babbling about with anything to do with our ridiculous pop culture. In fact, it might be best that you remain dutifully seen, but seldom heard, if you follow my meaning. Please don’t take offense, but beginnings are delicate matters and I should like to set the tone here.”

“I understand, sir. No offense taken.”

They maneuvered the boat, shipping oars when they came alongside with a gentle bump. Thomas tied off the boat and then took a firm hold on the ladder. “Shall I go up first, sir? I’ll get some men to fetch the luggage.”

“Well enough.”

The Duke stood up, rolling his weary shoulders. In spite of his daily regimen, the long haul was a bit taxing for his 50 years, and he could feel the soreness in his upper back and shoulders. He was second up the ladder and Thomas helped him through a narrow gate and onto the main deck.

“Mister Ames’ effects are still below,” he said. “Oh yes,” Thomas remembered his manners now. “May I present Sir Roger Ames.”

A heavy set man in a plain white shirt, waistcoat, and grey trousers made

an affable bow. "Thomas Delson, sir. I'm Boatswain here, and welcome aboard the *Ann*. Forgive me to say we were not expecting to take on any further passengers."

"Yes, yes, well it can't be helped. Yours is the only ship off the coast just now. I've an urgent need to get somewhere, and this seemed the only practical solution. Now then, is Captain Cameron aboard?"

"That he is, sir, below decks in his cabin. I've sent a boy to alert him. Just follow me and I'll lead the way." He turned to two hands who were watching the scene with some interest. "You men there, up with that luggage."

"Good," said the Duke. "My footman, Mister Thomas here, will wait with the bags while I see the Captain and settle affairs." He gave Thomas an admonishing glance as if to reinforce his earlier remarks about being seen but not heard.

"Very good, sir." The Boatswain had given the two men a good long look, and thought their clothing and manner of dress to be most unusual, but he was not prepared to question the men further. The gentleman certainly carried himself well enough, and looked to be upper class in deportment and aspect, though his hair was close cropped and he did not wear a wig. That was not unusual, so he would leave it to the Captain to sort this business out.

Thomas waited as Ames was led off, taking a hatch and short stairway down to the Captain's cabin, where the Boatswain knocked gently on the door.

A muffled voice answered—"Come," and the Boatswain eased the door open. "Visitors, Captain. One Sir Roger Ames."

The Captain was seated at a narrow wood desk studying a map and rose with a polite smile. "It isn't often I receive such a pleasant surprise in the morning. Do come in, sir. That will be all, Mister Delson."

"Thank you for receiving me without any notice, Captain," said the Duke. "I have urgent need of passage and come to beg your forbearance if you can find room for two more."

"Indeed," Captain Cameron raised a thin brow. He was a man in his later thirties, dressed out in a navy blue Captain's waistcoat with brass buttons. His greatcoat hung on a nearby peg, along with a black cocked lace hat of felt, braided with gold looped trim.

"Forgive my appearance," the Duke went on. "I'm dressed for adventure more than propriety at the moment."

"Of course," said the Captain. "And may I enquire as to your need for

passage?”

“The coast of France or Belgium. Any port of call will do, sir.”

“I see...Well sir, we’ve watered and provisioned in Edinburgh yesterday, and just eased down the coast for a brief anchorage here. How was it you learned of us, if I might ask, sir?”

“Suffice it to say I’m in the know in my position, Captain. A stout ship you have here. You once had Letters of Marque and Reprisals for action against the United States, did you not?”

“We did indeed, sir. That sorry war was good for nothing, though we were in and out of the thick of it in our day. Of late it’s been ferry duty, what with the army mustering on the continent.” The Captain gave him an odd look now. “You will forgive a poor sea Captain for being unaware, but I have not heard of a Sir Roger Ames in Northumberland, sir.”

“Which is just the way I prefer it, Captain. If you want to know the truth I’m a simple gentleman looking to make my way to the continent—a gentleman of some means, but a simple man nonetheless. Now then...I’ve an engagement to attend an affair being put on by the Duchess of Richmond in Brussels, five days hence, and I was desperate to arrange passage to the continent before that date. As you can see, I am traveling light, with no more than a footman in escort, and I can, of course, reward you handsomely for your accommodation.

“You’re in luck, Mister Ames. I was just consulting my charts here, and intending to set sail for Ostend within the hour. I would be most pleased to entertain you and your footman aboard my ship.”

“Splendid. Here...” The Duke reached into his pocket and set a small gem on the Captain’s map, right on the spot where Ostend was labeled in the Channel. “I’ve carried that in my pocket to compensate you. I’m afraid packing sight drafts and other currency is inconvenient for me given my present circumstances. Most of my itinerary has already been arranged, but given an unaccountable late start, I missed my ship in Edinburgh and was told you might still be riding off this coast.”

The Captain stared at the gem, a small stone, but obviously a diamond, his thin brow rising again.

“But sir, he began... This will in no way be necessary.”

“Now, now. I insist on it, Captain Cameron. There’s hardly enough profit in a merchantman’s voyage these days. I very much doubt you’ll be acting on those Letters of Marque to seize American prize ships in the Atlantic any

longer, but do accept that as a token of my appreciation. I realize how boorish it is of me to come rowing in out of the fog like this without notice.”

“Well, sir, it is a handsome reward indeed, and will set the books right soon enough. At your insistence I will accept, and welcome you aboard. You are too kind. I shall insist you quarter in this very cabin, sir, and we shall have you to Ostend by mid-day tomorrow.”

That went well enough, thought the Duke, very well indeed.

Chapter 30

“I’m afraid you may have misunderstood me earlier, said Sir Roger. He was lounging on the Captain’s bed below decks with Ian Thomas seeing to their effects and luggage by the table. “I trust you had a good look at this ship and crew while you were waiting.”

“An efficient lot,” said Thomas. “I had no idea there was a ship like this still sailing, and I’ll say one thing for them, they certainly dress the part. Is this a new venture, sir?”

“A new venture? No Mister Thomas, it’s quite an old one. This ship is a British merchantman, built in the year 1801.”

“It’s a very authentic reproduction, sir.”

“That’s just it, my man. You see this is not a reproduction at all. It is indeed the ship built in 1801 at Rotherhithe by the shipwright John Randall. The man launched over fifty vessels in all, including some very notable ships like HMS *Defiance*. In fact, after completing this ship, he built the *Illustrious* just before his death, a 74 gun ship of the line. An industrious man, this Mister Randall. Well, the point of all this is to make it known to you that this is the original ship *Ann*, a small brig in the employ of the British East India Company until 1817. We are standing on that very vessel, sir, not a replica.”

“I see... Amazing that they could make it seaworthy again like this without extensive work.”

“No restoration is needed. The ship is a little past its prime, I’ll warrant. It will be sold in just a few years, but we are standing on this ship just as it was in the year 1815. She has a crew of sixty men, along with the two of us. Of late she has been assisting in the transport of supplies for the British Army in Belgium.”

“Right, sir. I’ve warmed up to the notion and I believe I can play my part well enough. We aren’t dressed for the period, but I’ll try to be inconspicuous.”

The Duke gave Thomas a long look, his lips pursed with thought. “This is not theater, Mister Thomas. It is not a pleasure cruise either, nor a fanciful notion in my head. In twenty-four hours we will make port at Ostend. I suppose that if I have not persuaded you to the reality of our present situation by then, you will have ample evidence for your eyes there. Once we do land

on the continent we have but a few days time to get to our destination.”

Thomas did not know what to make of that, and was cautious about any disagreement with the Duke at the outset of what looked to be a long journey. He decided to change the subject a nudge and see what he could learn. “I did not ask about the itinerary earlier, sir, out of respect to you and all.”

“Of course, but I think it’s time you knew. I aim to land at Ostend, make my way by carriage to Brussels where I will see if I can slip into the gala affair being thrown by the Duchess of Richmond. Anyone of note will be there. Now I haven’t an invitation, mind you. That may be a bit dicey, but I’ve wheedled my way through more than one door on manner and force of character alone in my day. Just be your dutiful self as footman and I think I shall have no trouble.”

“Certainly, sir.”

“After the ball things get very interesting.”

“In what way, sir, if you don’t mind my asking?”

“Well, there’s a good bit of news that arrives that night. The Duke will be in attendance, along with the Princes of Orange and Nassau and a very long list of others, mostly officers in the army. We’ll find quarters in the city and leave our baggage there. Then we’ll venture out and have a look at the battlefield.”

“The battlefield, sir?”

“Yes, of course. Why else are we here? Imagine yourself in the year 1815—the tenth day of June to be precise. The Duke I speak of is Field Marshal Arthur Wellesley, the 1st Duke of Wellington, and the battlefield, my good man, is the field he made famous—none other than Waterloo.” He gave Thomas a studied look, watching his reaction closely.

“Waterloo? Oh, I’ve always been keen to have a look at that field, though never had the time. Is there to be a re-enactment, sir? I would at least think they would have such an affair in June, and not late summer as it is, though no one would know that by this weather.”

“No re-enactment, Thomas, no more so than this boat we’re on. I’m talking about the real event now *the* Battle of Waterloo, of which you are at least somewhat acquainted.”

Thomas just scratched his head, feeling somewhat uncomfortable. The Duke was holding to a strange line here, as if he wished to remain entirely in character for the adventure he had in mind. Very well, he would indulge the man. After all he was promised several million pounds in compensation for

this little jaunt, and all expenses paid for the duration. If Sir Roger wanted to play his little game, he would certainly not be a Lumpkin and make any protest.

“It’s very likely we will dine with the Captain and his officers soon,” said Ames. “In that instance my remarks earlier about being seen but not heard may be something to keep in mind. We’ll likely be discussing the history and all. Follow along as best you can, and no small talk about sports or anything else, my man.”

“Right, sir.”

It was late and the two men had not had much sleep. The Duke rested on the Captain’s bed and Ian strung a hammock, which was comfortable enough, particularly when the ship rolled with the sea. After mid-day they rose and took some air on the main deck with Captain Cameron, an amiable man who invited them to dine with him in the officer’s mess that evening, just as Ames had predicted. This was, of course, obviously all arranged for the Duke’s pleasure, thought Thomas. Well, I’ll bring my appetite, and open my mouth for the food if nothing else.

Having had nothing more than fruit and energy bars that had been packed with the luggage, they were pleased to be treated to roast Capon served up by the ship’s cook, with potatoes, carrots, celery and some nice thick gravy.

“Yes, our Mister Dawson is quite the cook,” said the Captain. “They were seated at a long table, and the introductions had been made when they were joined by the ship’s first mate, Lieutenant Edward Jones and a Mister John M. Bennett, the ship’s surgeon. Just as the Duke has suggested, the men discussed maritime affairs and the war of 1812 with the United States that was apparently part of the history of this ship.

“It’s a pity the war ended so badly after that fiasco at New Orleans,” said Ames.

“Well, we showed them round the block when our General Ross put the torch to Washington!” Captain Cameron poured more wine as he spoke, topping off the glasses for all the dinner guests. “The impudence of those people! The Royal Navy numbered all of 600 ships in 1812 when that war broke out, and the United States had no more than eight frigates and fourteen more sloops and brigs. Why, we had 85 ships in American waters as I heard it. How the Americans managed to hold out as they did is beyond me.”

“Yes,” said Ames. “Well something tells me that England and the United States have now set their differences aside to become good friends. The

problem now is this urgent business on the continent again with Bonaparte. That devil is loose in the garden again.”

“Indeed, sir. We have heard no news of developments there—only that we’re to keep a steady flow of supplies and provisions.”

Thomas looked askance at the Captain, realizing the man must be warming to his role here and putting everything in the present tense for the Duke’s pleasure. Sir Roger joined in heartily.

“As I read things there will shortly be some rather significant events taking place, what with old Bony back and marshalling men under the tricolors again.”

“Welly will handle him,” said the Captain.

“I have no doubt. Though I suspect the French have mustered a sizable army, and are undoubtedly moving north even now.” Ames was taking obvious delight in the situation.

As Ian Thomas watched these men, noting their expressions, clothing, and the raw authenticity in every way they presented themselves, he was more and more amazed. This man Ames must be wealthy beyond measure, he thought. My God, he’s gone and arranged this whole little show, hired in actors of this caliber, and now he plays this bit out with such a straight face you would think it really was 1815 here!

“Bony will stick his nose into Belgium soon enough, if he hasn’t crossed the border already,” said Sir Roger.

“Wellington hasn’t much to fight with, considering his army is filled out with hordes of Dutch troops these days.” Captain Cameron was finishing his Capon as he spoke. “Most of the veteran divisions have yet to return from that fiasco in the Americas.” He was washing it all down with a sip of good wine.

That also caught the attention of Ian Thomas. The wine was vintage, or at least it appeared to be by the labels, which were clearly dated 1810. They had to be props, he reasoned, as no wine that old would be palatable in 2021. Yet the attention to detail in all this was striking.

“I shouldn’t worry about Wellington,” said Sir Roger. “He’s got some stout hearts and sturdy men at arms under his command now. Maitland’s boys are top notch. The same can be said for Hill and Picton. And we mustn’t forget the Prussians! Old Blucher has over a hundred thousand men at arms, or so it has been rumored.”

“You seem to be fairly well informed,” said Captain Cameron. “Yet one

never knows what he can believe these days. The French can be very cagey. We were in Ostend three days ago and there was no mail of any substance in the postal bags for the run back to Britain. It seems the entire French border zone has been shut down tight. Nothing is getting across one way or another. A local stevedore says they're even shooting birds as they try to fly over the river. That bodes ill, gentlemen, as any dull spot in the turbulence of European affairs might better be interpreted as a proverbial calm before the storm."

"What you say is very true, Captain," Sir Roger agreed. "French agents will stir the pot well in Belgium. There's a great deal of sympathy for the French there. Wellington will be at the engagement I am planning to attend in Brussels, and he'll have to demonstrate a fairly light-footed dance step if he is to keep a good eye on Bonaparte. I shall let you gentlemen know how things turn out should I come this way in days ahead."

"What would you lay odds on the outcome if it comes to war again soon, Sir Roger?"

"Well of course I'll have to pull my oar the Duke of Wellington."

And so on it went, with Thomas listening until the wine dulled his senses and made him want to sleep again.

They were soon back in the Captain's quarters for the night, and the Duke was lying on the bed, resting his eyes. The room was lit by the glow of an oil lamp and the gentle rocking of the ship seemed to lull them toward sleep again.

"You held out bravely in the mess hall, Mister Thomas. Odd to pass a meal without the barest whisper of a television, radio, cell phone or touch pad at the table. I suppose you think this is all a grand act to satisfy the indulgence of a silly old man with nothing better to do with his time and money."

Thomas smiled, glad that the Duke was coming clean with him now, or so it seemed.

"Yes," Ames went on, "it would take a pretty penny to arrange a scene like this, the ship and crew being rather spectacular, eh? Well, you haven't seen anything yet, my man. The wine was very good tonight, was it not?"

"It was, sir, though I may have had one glass too many. Those men had me half believing I was really on a British merchantman at the edge of another era. Quite convincing, sir."

"Yes, quite. Well, you sleep on it now, and when you waken in the

morning have a good look around at Ostend when we make port. Then I think all will be made clear to you.”

Thomas needed his rest that night, the last night of that proverbial calm before the storm as the Captain put things at dinner. By mid-day the following morning they spotted land and were soon sailing towards the small harbor, but what he saw there was something that no amount of money could have staged.

The place was nothing like the Ostend of 2021, so strikingly different that he first thought they had come to some smaller harbor on the coast. There were no tall buildings or hotels rising on the main waterfront, no cranes for offloading cargo containers. He could see no vehicle traffic on the coastal road to the north as it approached the harbor, and no sign of any other significant commercial sea traffic or tourist cruise ships...just sailing ships, more two and three mast wooden ships than he had ever seen before. This must be a very special event, he thought, but as the *Ann* negotiated the narrow mouth of the harbor he could see that it appeared to be a town from another place and time.

Sir Roger leaned on the gunwale, smiling. “Ever been to Ostend?”

“Once or twice, sir...”

“Things have changed, have they not? I have endeavored to persuade you as to the period we now find ourselves in, Mister Thomas, but let me say it plainly to you. You will see no motorcars, or busses, or steamships here. You will see no aircraft in the sky, no ugly electrical power lines, and no high rise buildings with glass facades. All of that was from the world we left behind.”

Thomas was looking from the harbor quay, where every person he saw now was in period dress, and then to Ames, an incredulous look of amazement on his face.

“Yes,” said Ames. “That little stairway we took in Lindisfarne Castle was more of a journey than you may have realized. With each step we took we were, in fact, traversing time, as well as space. The years have fallen away and, to make matters short, we have reached a bygone era in that short walk. As I said before, this is no play or theater. It is indeed the year 1815 and, after I mix about at the ball being thrown by the Duchess of Richmond, we are going to the Battle of Waterloo.”

Thomas could not believe what he was hearing, yet the evidence of his eyes was more than persuasive. This was clearly not modern Europe, and either he was still well hung over, still asleep, or the Duke was telling him the

truth here!

“Waterloo?” It was all he managed to say. “How is it possible? Why on earth?”

“How it is possible will be something I will relate to you in more detail later. As to why...Well I trust you have packed your military effects in that luggage we’ve been dragging around. A good rifle with a long range scope will come in very handy soon, because we are going to kill someone.”

Part XI

Lessons of War

“We all make mistakes. We know we make mistakes. I don't know any military commander, who is honest, who would say he has not made a mistake. There's a wonderful phrase: 'the fog of war.' What 'the fog of war' means is: war is so complex it's beyond the ability of the human mind to comprehend all the variables. Our judgment, our understanding, are not adequate. And we kill people unnecessarily.”

— Robert MacNamara

Chapter 31

It was a long train ride, but Admiral Togo finally reached the Harbor at Kure, eager for news. He had a carriage waiting for him at the train station, and was taken immediately to naval headquarters where he was surprised to find Saito waiting for him there. Apparently the Vice-Admiral and Minister of Naval affairs was also curious as to what was happening, and he had come all the way from Tokyo to meet with the Fleet Admiral and discuss the matter.

“You say it was a Russian ship?” said Togo. “You are certain of this?”

“That was the report. The ship was even named in the signal we received: *Kirov*. It came across that tramp steamer, *Tatsu Maru*, and we have seen what they did. Thirty-two men died in that attack! It would have been worse if *Kanto Maru* had not been on the scene to pull men out of the water. Our Captain Kawase was on maneuvers out of Amori with a few torpedo boats and wisely cabled me in Tokyo before taking any action. He reports this is a very large warship—very large. It must be something we haven’t seen before. So I handed the matter to you. What have you done about it?”

“*Kirov*... Yes, I have no knowledge of this ship. Vice Admiral Kamimura has sortied from Maizuru with his squadron of armored cruisers and the two battleships we took from the Russians. I thought we’d send them along to remind them what happened last time they challenged us at sea.” Togo was drinking green tea and he reached to fill Saito’s cup now. “I have just been informed that we have received a wireless telegraph from him, so I thought I would enjoy my tea while I am waiting for the transcript.”

The wait was not long. As if on cue, there came a subtle knock on the door, and Saito turned his head expectantly. “Well they did not wait for your tea to grow cold. Let us hope this is good news.”

An adjutant came in, handing a transcript to Admiral Togo while Saito looked on with some curiosity. Togo read it for some time, a look of concern disturbing the otherwise placid calm of his face.

“Kamimura reports an engagement,” he said at last. “They spotted this

Russian ship and it fired on them at long range. There was damage to his ship and two others. Then the Russians broke off before his squadron could close on them. The ship was last seen heading south in the Sea of Japan.”

“Then it could be coming this way,” said Saito. “Good! The Russians sail right into our strength. Have they learned nothing?”

“There is more... Kamimura’s cruiser *Izumo* was hit eight times and forced to fall off his battle line early in the action. Yet the inspection of the damage indicated it was inflicted by a small caliber round, perhaps no more than 6 inch shells.”

“And how many times was the Russian ship hit by our gunners?”

“It seems our ships never got close enough to fire. This is most unusual.”

“Surely our cruisers have the speed to run down a Russian battleship! They are much faster.”

“That is not what Kamimura reports. He indicates the Russian ship had tremendous speed in addition to these new long range cannon. A gun of that size might range out to 15,000 meters but it is not likely to hit anything at that range, unless fortune favored this ship. No, a 6 inch gun is best fired at no more than 8,000 meters to achieve any accuracy. For *Izumo* to receive eight hits at a range even beyond his larger 8 inch guns is most unusual. The ship was also able to elude our cruisers in spite of every attempt to catch it. This is an important development. Yes, Baron, this must be a new ship. There can be no doubt about it given these facts.”

“Are you certain Kamimura does not exaggerate to cover his shame? How many ships did he have?”

“Six armored cruisers and two battleships.”

“And yet he failed to find and sink a solitary Russian battleship? This is shameful. No wonder he makes such reports.”

Togo set his tea down now, his eyes still darkly scanning the transcript of Kamimura’s report. “No, Minister,” he said with finality in his voice. “Kamimura believes this is a new ship, as I do. He is a steady officer; cool under fire. He will not exaggerate in the interest of covering personal shortcomings. This ship must have slipped by our watch on the Tsushima Straits and made it into Urajio in recent weeks. We have not been as vigilant as we should, as it certainly escaped our notice.” Urajio was the Japanese name given to the Russian port of Vladivostok.

“What does this mean, Admiral Togo?”

“It means the equation of war at sea has just been given a new variable.

Speed and range... that was the tactic this ship used according to this report. It makes good sense when a single ship is confronted by superior numbers.”

“If so I cannot imagine what the Russians hope to accomplish by doing this—engaging unarmed commercial ships and firing on Imperial cruisers! This is an insult!”

“Perhaps you should ask them, Minister.”

“I have done as much. Do not think that I entirely disowned this matter when I first informed you of the incident with *Tatsu Maru*. I have lately received a cable from the Russian Legation, but they claim to have no knowledge of this incident, or of any ship matching the description of this vessel. That was a lie, of course, because our spies in Urajio reported that a large Russian warship arrived there last week, and it put ashore a party of Marines and officers with some fanfare. The Mayor of the city turned out to greet them, and then they set out to sea shortly thereafter. The sinking of *Tatsu Maru* occurred the following day.”

“I see... I was not aware of this information. Then this ship must have sailed directly for the Tsugaru Strait.”

“Why else do you think I have come all this way from Tokyo? Do you know that the American battle fleet is also in the Pacific at this very moment, steaming for Hawaii?”

“Of course. Do not tell me there are still officers arguing that we should ambush them and become the supreme authority in the entire Pacific. I am growing very tired of putting out those fires.”

“There are such rumors still circulating, in spite of your orders to the contrary. Some feel that the approach of the American fleet is certainly a threat.”

“Now you begin to sound like the reporters for the London Times, Baron. Weren’t you the one complaining that our own fleet dispositions posed no threat to the Americans?”

“Indeed, but the situation has changed. Suppose this is a new Russian ship sent from their shipyards in the Baltic. You are well aware that the British have completed formidable new designs for battleships in recent years. Their HMS *Dreadnought* is a fearsome ship with ten 12 inch guns, Admiral. Our ships have only four, and we will not have anything to rival that ship for at least four years. Suppose the Russians have built a new ship like that as well, and they mean to test us in battle to determine its merit.”

“They would be foolish to do so. A solitary ship? Such a vessel would

need to be supported by a fleet. It might stand as a strong flagship, but it surely cannot stand alone. I do not care how fast it is. Its speed, when confronted by the might of our current fleet, can only be used to flee from us. What good is a ship that cannot stand and fight? Beyond that, to risk a new ship in this manner, and also create an international incident in the process... well this would be the doings of a very foolish man. Perhaps the Russian Legation was being truthful. They may have no knowledge of this ship. It may be a disaffected Russian sea Captain with a bone to pick.”

“Then you believe we should accept the Russian denial concerning this matter?”

“At the moment. It would be very impolite to suggest they were deliberately lying to us.”

“But what if this is a deception?”

“That will be proved one way or another, and very shortly. It will be proved at sea, which is where we will deal with any enemy that threatens our nation from the sea. Once I sink this Russian ship, let them deny they ever sent it, but that will not change the facts.”

There came another soft knock on the door and the adjutant entered, bowing low and begging to be excused. This time the cable he bore was a message for the Naval Minister. Saito took it and read it quickly, his eyes widening as he did so.

“So, Admiral. Now we get to the heart of this. A wireless telegraph message was just received, and it is signed by a man named Karpov aboard the very ship we have been discussing! This man states that a naval quarantine has been imposed to prevent any and all shipping from entering the Yellow Sea. He threatens to attack and sink any ship flying Japanese colors that attempts to do so! The impudence of this man! Who is he? I have not heard this name.”

“Nor I, Baron.”

“I will put my people on this to find out. In the meantime, what do you intend to do about this? Such a declaration is a direct violation of the Portsmouth Treaty. Its intention would be to starve out our garrisons at Port Arthur and Manchuria by cutting the sea lanes and restricting supplies to long overland marches in Korea. This is, of course, impossible, and cannot be permitted.”

Togo was silent for some time now. Then he looked calmly at the Baron Saito and made his reply. “This man is either very stupid or very bold if he

thinks he can impose such a demand with a single ship. That would be quite impossible. Therefore I am led to suspect that there may be more Russian ships en route, possibly hoping to catch us by surprise. As I said before, this ship would need the support of a fleet.”

“We would have certainly heard of this if any more Russian ships were heading our way.”

“Yes...I discussed this with Admiral Kamimura, and he was of the same mind.”

Saito frowned, his face revealing suspicion. “The *American* fleet,” he said with an edge of doubt evident in his voice. “It is certainly heading this way even as we speak. Roosevelt worked quite a deal with his intervention at Portsmouth. We got much less in that treaty than our victory should have accorded. Many said we were treated like the defeated power. You saw the demonstrations and protests in Tokyo. And now here we are busy printing up invitations and arranging ceremonies for the expected visit of the American Great White Fleet later this year—but what if it visits us early, Admiral? What if the Americans have some secret accord with Russia? You know the Tsar’s government is on shaky legs now, and our victory has only worsened his position. Now there is trouble in Europe rising like a bad storm. The British have made overtures to the Tsar, seeking his support should it come to war there. They have approached the Americans as well. This is very suspicious.”

“It is your job to sort through all the cobwebs in the diplomatic cupboards, Baron. I will confine myself to the military realities of the situation. If this ship is heading south as reported, and if it does intend to create a major incident, then the military solution to this is very simple.”

“What do you suggest?”

“This ship cannot get into any position to enforce a blockade in the Sea of Japan. That is too much area to be patrolled by a single vessel. No, it must reach the seas off Weihaiwei and the region reaching to Inchon in Korea. That is the bottleneck that we must always keep open—a very strategic stretch of ocean. This is why the British were wise enough to establish their China Station there at Weihaiwei. And to reach those waters this ship will first have to transit the Tsushima Straits. We will sortie with the Imperial fleet from Kure and Sasebo, and sail to Port Arthur with a large convoy of supply ships. If we move quickly we can close the Tsushima Straits and catch this ship in a nice net of steel, just as we caught the Russian Baltic Fleet in

1905.”

“Yes... another victory there would put a perfect bookend to this little affair.”

“Correct. If this man Karpov wishes to attempt to stop our convoy from reaching Port Arthur, then he will have to show himself and fight. Pecking at a few cruisers and running away will not avail him. At some point he will have to make a stand, and he will have to use something more than a 6 inch naval gun when he sees the Imperial Japanese Navy darkening his horizon. If he does flee, then he only increases the shame and humiliation we have already forced upon the Russians, and we become stronger yet.”

“Well said, Admiral. I completely agree. Perhaps you are correct to assume this is a renegade sea Captain with delusions of grandeur or a thirst for revenge. In fact, diplomatically, that would be the best possible line to play out in all this. It might allow the present treaty to stand unblemished, and then after all this is over we can make our displeasure known and request reparation for the loss of *Tatsu Maru* and the damage this ship has inflicted on any of our other warships. I have every confidence that, with your plan, this matter will be easily resolved.”

“That is good to hear, Baron Saito. Yet if I were you I would cable Port Arthur and make sure they are not surprised by a maneuver on land as well. If this ship is sailing with the knowledge of the Russian government, then it will certainly need support on land.”

“Yes, I will do so. But what about the Americans, Admiral Togo? What if my suspicion is correct?”

“Then we will have a very uncomfortable greeting for them when they arrive,” Togo said quietly. “Instead of visits to the Imperial Palace and the Tea Gardens, we will visit them at sea with the whole Imperial Fleet. I do not advocate this, or even believe it will be necessary, but you should realize that we are more than capable of defending ourselves. Our fleet is bigger than it was before we defeated Russia. No other power can match us in the Pacific at the moment, not even the British. If the world did not learn that lesson of war in 1905, then we will teach it to them again.”

“That said, we must keep close watch on the progress of the Great White Fleet. Speaking of that, the British are allies, are they not? Their China Squadron at Weihaiwei might come in handy in this situation.”

“Possibly...but I do not think it will be necessary. In fact none of this may even be necessary. Kamimura returned to Maizuru to replenish his ships, but

he has every intention of sailing out yet again to cover the coastline south of that harbor. It may be he will find this ship again before we do, and finish the job. This may be nothing more than a tempest in a teapot, Baron.”

Chapter 32

The RMS steamer *Monteagle* was yet another ship of the Canadian Pacific Railway Company arriving from the Atlantic in 1906 to augment trans-Pacific service. She was a stolid, twin-screw vessel of 5,478 tons, with a single stack aft that would allow her to steam at a sedate 12 knots on a good day. Unlike the other ships in the service of Canadian Pacific, she did not have the sleek and elegant lines of a clipper-steamer, nor would she ever set any records for speed. Her freight had been varied over the years, from cattle boats and coal during the South African War, to refrigerated goods kept in her ice coolers. Bearing the designation “R.M.S.,” she was also an official mail ship carrying the Royal Mail. Of late she had been refitted with cabin-class accommodations for 97 passengers with room for as many as a thousand more below decks in steerage.

She had just recently completed a mail run from Vancouver to Yokohama, and then on to Shanghai. Now *Monteagle* was east-bound again in the Sea of Japan, having transited the Tsushima straits the previous day. She was heading for the Tsugaru Strait between Hokkaido and Honshu for a stop at Amori, and from there she would make a brief port of call in Dutch Harbor before swinging down to Vancouver again.

It was just her bad luck that day to be wallowing along in the exclusion zone Karpov had drawn in his mind. The Captain knew he could not patrol the entire sea, but wherever *Kirov* sailed, no other ship had leave unless he decided to permit the passage. This was the first ship he encountered since the sinking of *Tatsu Maru* and that brief scrap with the Japanese Navy. He thought he might teach a lesson to other powers in the region that their shipping was also unwelcome in Japanese waters. At the same time, a hard line here might renew his own resolve, and that of the crew, as he considered what to do. Fedorov’s sudden appearance in the mix had been most disconcerting.

So the Captain received the news of the new radar contact with quiet satisfaction. In fact, he had deliberately turned fifteen points to port three hours ago to take the ship closer to the coast of Japan to see what he might find.

“Signal that steamer, Mister Nikolin. I want to know their registry, cargo,

and what ports they are bound for.”

He had his answer soon enough and quickly told Nikolin that their cargo of mail from China was to be considered contraband and they could not proceed unless it was first inspected and all mail bound for Japan removed.

“Sir,” said Rodenko, not understanding what the Captain was doing. “Why bother with a ship like this?”

“There could be significant military and diplomatic parcels in that mail cache, Rodenko. It is time we disrupted the flow here. Besides, it is not only Japanese registered vessels we will have to concern ourselves with, but those under foreign flags as well. Once we make an example of a few ships, the sea traffic to Japan should thin out considerably. News of an angry shark in these waters is exactly what we want here. We will board that ship and seize their mail cache. I want a party of twenty naval infantry ready in fifteen minutes.”

“Very well, sir.” Though it was clear Rodenko was not happy about the situation, he nonetheless sent the order down to the helo bay where the Marines would hold forth. They were to prepare a launch to make the boarding approach, and while they did so, Karpov maneuvered the ship in very close.

“That should give them a good long look at what they are facing, and it will certainly make the impression I want here.”

Yet the Captain on the other ship, even if intimidated by the sudden appearance of this monstrous warship off his starboard side, still had the pluck to make a strong protest.

“Captain, they are citing international laws of the sea and claim immunity as a neutral country undertaking commercial enterprises.”

“Well, tell him these waters are no longer considered safe international transit zones. This is now a military exclusion zone.”

Nikolin’s signal was sent, but the steamship Captain continued his protest, stating that any boarding would be illegal under international law and he was well within his rights to prevent it.

“Prevent it?” Karpov smiled. “I believe this man needs a little lesson or two. Mister Samsonov, if you please.”

“Captain?”

“Forward bow gun, as before with the Japanese tramp steamer. Give them a shot across the bow.”

“Aye, sir.” Karpov watched the deck gun quickly rotate to bear on the target with a single sharp recoil as the round was sent on its way. Then they

waited, and the protest coming now from the *Monteagle* was ever more strident.

“Sir,” said Nikolin. “They now threaten to file a formal protest with the Russian government and state our conduct amounts to piracy and is outrageous.”

“Outrageous? My, what a colorful man. One more round, Mister Samsonov. I want you to hit the aft quarter of the ship if possible. Aim for that solitary smokestack.” Then to Nikolin he said: “Let them know we will disable their engines if they fail to cooperate.”

The sound of the gun was sharp in the air again, and the round hit home with a bright flash. It ignited a fire aft and Karpov laughed as he looked through his field glasses seeing how the other ship’s crew scrambled to put out the flames.

“Ask that upstart sea Captain if he wants me to repeat the lesson,” said Karpov, a smug look on his face.

The steamer quickly flew a white flag in return, and the boarding party had no further trouble making their inspection of the ship. There they found and confiscated five sizable mail bags, and removed them. When they returned to *Kirov* the Captain told them to store the material and he would look it over later.

“Did you have any trouble, Sergeant?” he asked over the intercom.

“No sir, but there were casualties on the ship when we got there. The second round aft killed three civilians.”

“Regrettable,” said Karpov. “Well it can’t be helped. Perhaps that sea Captain over there will get the wax out of his ears and listen the next time he’s given an order.”

To strengthen the lesson Karpov had Nikolin send over one last blunt message of warning. “*RMS Monteagle. You are instructed to make for the nearest port and if you are found in these waters again, you will be sunk.*”

Nikolin sent the message, but it went much farther than he or Karpov ever could have imagined, for among the 97 passengers booking accommodations on the *Monteagle* that day were several American citizens who had the unfortunate luck to be watching the incident from the aft gunwale of the steamer. Samsonov’s second round ended three lives, and the lives of all their successive generations, in one swift blow. And it also lit a fuse that burned all the way to the fiery heart of a most extraordinary man, and one determined to protect and defend the lives of American citizens, no matter where they were

found in the world.

* * *

Theodore Roosevelt was in a good mood that morning, looking over reports on the progress of his latest grand venture. “Yes, we’ve fairly well kept all European powers at bay for the last hundred years, lately finishing with the Spanish, Mister Mahan.” The noted naval strategist was with the Roosevelt that day at the Presidential hunting camp in Yellowstone. “That was, in no small part due to our adoption of your policies concerning naval power, as you well know. As this new century begins the world has been impressed by only two things achieved by the United States. The first was the Panama Canal project, joining two oceans in a grand feat of engineering. The second is the voyage of our Great White Fleet in circumnavigating the world. Nothing has occurred in the history of the navy of greater and more significance to this country. It is the most important service I have ever rendered in peacetime to this nation when I secured funding for the voyage and forced it down the throats of those dandies in Congress. After we finish with this leg of the voyage nobody will forget that the American coast is on the Pacific as well as the Atlantic.”

“I agree wholeheartedly, Mister President. Sea power is the fundamental prerequisite for national greatness, the British being the most outstanding example of that in centuries past.”

“Yes, well what do you think of the Japanese? They seem to have read your books and papers as well Mister Mahan. The defeat of the Russian Pacific and Baltic Fleets was truly stunning in 1905. I don’t have to tell you that the United States might soon have to face Japan as a major Pacific power.”

“That may indeed be our national destiny, Mister President. We now control Hawaii, and the Philippines with our own recent victory over a European power—with much thanks to your efforts in that hot little war. The Spanish certainly learned a good lesson. Yes, it may come to a confrontation with Japan in time as well.”

“Our fleet is already in the Pacific and heading west, though in spite of the rumors circulating, I don’t think the Japanese have any plans to confront us there. Do you agree that the situation in Europe remains stable for the moment?”

“I do, sir.”

“Then we have nothing to fear by sending the whole fleet west into the Pacific.”

“Not at the moment, sir. There will be trouble in Europe soon, I fear, but not where we are concerned. Germany is the one to watch there. In time it could come to war. In the meantime, however, this voyage west is the perfect demonstration of our ability to move the fleet from the Atlantic to the Pacific any time we choose. And it will establish the fact that we have strong Pacific bases to support that fleet, and friends in Australia and New Zealand as well.”

The reception of the Great White Fleet had been overwhelming on the West coast, with over 300,000 turning out in San Francisco to see the fleet off to the Pacific. They were well on their way to achieving Roosevelt’s goal of circumnavigating the globe, but now the greatest ocean on earth lay before them, and there was a very long way to go. Thus far the voyage from the east coast had gone very well, and the fleet ships held up admirably under some very difficult sea conditions, particularly in rounding the straits of Magellan.

By the time the fleet reached San Francisco, however, two battleships had to stay there due to mechanical problems, the *Maine* and the *Alabama*, but they were replaced by *Nebraska* and *Wisconsin*. At the same time an ailing Admiral Evans who had commanded the fleet on its journey from Hampton Roads was also replaced by Admiral Sperry. Two Squadrons, each with two divisions of four battleships, would leave San Francisco, sixteen warships attended by several storeships, tenders, and the hospital ship *Relief* with the repair ship *Panther*. It was indeed a grand venture, an amazing show of both seamanship as well as America’s growing industrial and military prowess. But it would soon be darkened by the shadow of a war that no one of that day had discussed or expected.

A rider came pounding into the camp on a swirl of dust, dismounting quickly and huffing up to Roosevelt where he sat by the morning campfire. He stepped smartly up, saluting as he came, and reached into a leather dispatch pouch at his hip.

“Mister President, sir. News from the Pacific!”

“Well what is it that needs a special courier, soldier? Couldn’t it wait until I get the morning Paper? You look like you’ve been riding all night.”

“It’s from Mister Root, sir. There’s been a new outbreak of hostilities between Japan and Russia.” Root was the former secretary of war, replaced by William Howard Taft after Roosevelt won the election of 1904. Now he

served as the current Secretary of State, and he was a strong proponent of military preparedness as well.

“Japan and Russia? I thought we settled that affair years ago. Let me see it.” Roosevelt reached for the dispatch, reaching into this buckskin shirt pocket to fetch out his eyeglasses. “Well, well, well...Your presence here may be fortuitous, Mister Mahan, though we may just have to postpone our hunt this morning.”

“I certainly hope the Russians haven’t crossed the border into Manchuria again, Mister President.”

“Nothing so pedestrian, my man. Why this situation is right up your alley. There’s been an engagement between Russian and Japanese warships in the Sea of Japan! A Russian battleship has apparently sunk Japanese commercial shipping and what’s this bit here?” The President leaned in closer, adjusting his eyepiece. “Well, by God, the Russians have fired on a Canadian steamship as well. American passengers were aboard and three were killed!”

“That is regrettable, sir. Why would the Russians do such a thing?”

Roosevelt folded his arms, clearly unhappy, a smoldering anger in him now. “Well God damnit, I thought I made it very clear what would happen when American citizens are harmed or interfered with overseas. That business in Morocco some years back was a strong lesson that we are not to be trifled with.”

In 1904 a brigand, the Raisuli of the Rif of Morocco, had kidnapped citizens of the United States from their home in Tangiers, a man named Perdicaris and his son. With an election looming Roosevelt made a strong protest and declared “this government wants Perdicaris alive or Raisuli dead!” The catchphrase galvanized the electorate and helped carry him to a second term, even though the “gunboat diplomacy” he exercised in sending seven warships to Tangiers was more theater than anything else.

“Are there any details, sir?” Mahan leaned in, eying the dispatch with some interest.

“The details are plain enough, Mister Mahan. Some crazy Russian sea Captain has been taking pot shots at shipping in the Sea of Japan. Here....it says he has sunk a Japanese steamer, engaged the Japanese Navy, then slipped away to fire on a Canadian ship and kill three American citizens. I spent a good bit of political capital negotiating that damn treaty in Portsmouth, and the Russians got off easy. The Japanese wanted the whole of Sakhalin Island and we talked them out of that to save a little face for the

Russians. Now where do they get off re-lighting that old powder keg?”

“Does it name the ship involved, sir? The Russians had very little seaworthy in Vladivostok after that war.”

“Which is why this makes so little sense. They were beaten to the canvas with two black eyes, a bloody nose, and a broken jaw! The Japanese inflicted a crushing defeat on them at Tsushima. Now they get up off the deck after the final bell has rung and take a sucker punch at the other fellow. That’s very unsportsman-like.”

“And it’s also very unwise, sir. Russia can ill afford another conflict erupting with the Japanese.”

“Yes... well they just hit the referee with this little swipe, Mister Mahan. Perhaps we need to let them know just how unwise that sucker punch was! You there!” The President turned to a staffer attending the campfire. “Take a message to Sperry on the Great White Fleet. Tell them I want them to make short work of that port call in Hawaii and get the fleet to Yokohama instead of Manila first. I want them there as soon as possible.”

Mahan raised his eyebrows at that. “You’re going to change the fleet’s itinerary? Might we be overreacting just a tad at this incident, sir?”

“Overreacting? That’s a thing for children and women, Mister Mahan. The President of the United States doesn’t overreact. He does precisely what he intends. I think a little restructuring of the fleet’s itinerary will be all that’s required here. The Russians will certainly take notice. The fleet wasn’t due to visit Japan until October, but I want it in Japanese home waters at the earliest possible opportunity. We’ll send another message to the Japanese Ambassador and tell them we are shocked to hear of this incident and will make every effort to set the matter right. If Russia and Japan decide to get into the ring again, this time our referee will be the sixteen battleships of the Great White Fleet!”

Chapter 33

Vice Admiral Hedworth Lambton-Meux put down the day’s copy of the London Gazette, pleased to have it so soon after publication. It was now being sent by wire to most of the important stations, and China Station was important, as he was, recently installed here to replace Vice-Admiral Moore. He had taken an interest in the stories out of London earlier that month,

concerning the strange midnight glow in the sky. Most unusual.

“Well,” he said, to the sea Captain before him, “we may have something more to do this week than loll about in the heat.” He read the notice from the paper aloud now: “Buckingham Palace, July 21, 1908. His Excellency Count Komura, Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary from his Majesty the Emperor of Japan is now to take leave of His Majesty on the termination of his Mission.”

He looked at Captain Lewis Clinton-Baker over his reading glasses. “It appears they are changing shoes again there, which will mean we’ll probably receive a formal visit here as well. It’s a pity we have to pay all this lip service to the Japanese these days, but things have certainly changed, have they not?”

“They have indeed sir, and this is precisely the occasion of my visit this morning.”

“Oh? What is it now, Captain Baker?”

“Shuffling some personnel about here too, Admiral. I’ve had an officer go down with fever and will need to fill out the bridge crew on *King Alfred* for the planned training exercises.” He handed a thin brown file to the Admiral now, obviously the candidate he had in mind for the new posting.

“How is the ship, Captain?”

“In good trim, sir. Fit as a fiddle.”

King Alfred was the current flagship of the British Pacific Squadron operating out of the China Station at Weihaiwei harbor. Situated on the long western peninsula of Shandong Province, it sat right at the edge of the gateway to the Yellow sea, and only Hong Kong superseded it in strategic importance from the British perspective. From Weihaiwei the Royal Navy could keep a quiet watch on all the sea traffic flowing into the Yellow Sea, mostly bound for Port Arthur and Dailan, which had been the scene of much conflict in recent years as the gateway to Manchuria.

‘The Old Man of Asia,’ China, had been ailing again after his defeat by Japan before the turn of the century, and the meddling of many European powers in Manchuko. Now it was the Japanese, still flush with their great victory over Russia in the Russo-Japanese war of 1904-05. Yet through all that strife and turmoil the British had kept their watch, moving ships and men in and out of Hong Kong and Weihaiwei.

King Alfred was the largest British ship presently in Asian waters, classified as an armored cruiser, the ship was the size of most older

battleships in the Japanese fleet. The IJN flagship *Mikasa*, weighed in at 15,380 tons fully loaded, and was only 432 feet long, while King Alfred was nearly as heavy at 14,150 tons, and actually a hundred feet longer. As a cruiser she did not match the 12 inch guns on the Japanese battleships. Her main armament was sixteen 6 inch guns, with two larger 9.2 inch guns mounted in bigger turrets fore and aft. She was one of four *Drake* class armored cruisers, and at 23 knots she was faster than any other ship of her size in the region. She also had new fire control fitted and electric hoists for all her 6 inch guns to speed loading and rate of fire.

Admiral Meux looked over the file, again reading aloud as was his habit: “Passed navigation and pilotage. Passed gunnery 8 September ‘05; passed torpedo 13 October ‘05. Well the gentleman certainly seems properly trained.”

He flipped to the reports section, where young aspiring officers would be rated by their commanding officers on a regular basis. “Captain Bradford has him with good professional knowledge, zealous and diligent, and then look here, a year later Captain Browning reports him as painstaking and steady, but stupid. Vice Admiral Douglas wasn’t impressed with the man either—says his manner was bad with the men.”

“I believe that was back in ‘03, sir. In recent years you’ll see marked improvement.”

“Watchkeeping Certificate received May ‘06... Well he won’t do as a navigator. The man failed the eyesight test last year.”

“I’ll be keeping Mister Graves at navigation, sir.”

“See that you do. I think I do recall this young man now that we’re discussing him. A bit headstrong in his early years. Served on *Exmouth* when she was the fleet flagship and got the bit between his teeth. I seem to remember an incident when the man was hoisting boats when his commander came up behind him and began issuing orders. The cheeky young lad simply removed his gloves, unbuckled his sword, and handed both to the commander before retiring below decks!”

Captain Baker laughed at that. “Yes, sir, that’s my man. He was just a tad prickly back in ‘05, but we’ve smoothed out the rough edges since then.”

“Painstaking... Steadily improving...Keen and zealous...reliable and strongly recommended for executive appointment. Why, that last bit was your remark, Captain Baker.”

“It was, sir. The young man is rather new to the China Station. He just

arrived here last May shortly after the turnover of command. I've had my eye on him below decks and think he may rotate up to the bridge crew well enough."

"That isn't much time below decks for an officer this new, but if you say you've had your eye on the man I will certainly defer to your judgment." The admiral took notice of the young officer's name for the first time now, flipping the attached reports down to read it on page one.

"John....A good Christian name, I suppose."

"Yes sir. He goes by the nickname Jack with the men, and they seem to have taken a liking to him."

"Very good, Captain. You may move your Lieutenant to the bridge. Who knows, the experience may do him some good. See how he does when we take the squadron out for maneuvers."

"I have every confidence in the man Admiral. In fact, I think he may work out quite well. He seems very ambitious and determined."

"Yes, well every young Lieutenant like this one thinks they'll end up First Sea Lord or Admiral of the Fleet one day, don't they?"

"This young Lieutenant may very well surprise you, sir."

Captain Baker was a bit of a profit, it seemed. For the man they were discussing that morning was Lieutenant John Cronyn "Jack" Tovey, a determined young man indeed, and fated to live up to his every aspiration.

* * *

"**Step** lively, mates," said Tovey. "Can't you see that old *Kent* out there has already got up steam?" The Lieutenant pointed across the anchorage to the three stack *Monmouth* Class cruiser lying at anchor. Word had come down to make ready for the scheduled exercises, and Tovey had his blood up for the outing, eager to get away from the sweltering harbor heat and out to sea where at least they could make their own wind if they got up a good head of steam.

"They've only got one stack puffing, Lieutenant," said a midshipman.

"Well, that's one more than we've got fired up at the moment."

"But we've got four stacks, sir. How do you suppose we'll be up and ready before a smaller ship like *Kent*?"

"With grit and elbow grease, gentlemen. Now step to it! If we aren't ready to weigh anchor in another hour they'll be out in front and waving their

backside at us the whole way out of the harbor. Let's get the lead out, eh?" They had orders to make steam, and by God, that was what they would do, and well before HMS *Kent* blew smoke from all three stacks. And showed them up yet again.

"Mister Tovey, sir!"

The young officer turned, his eyes narrowing on another seaman who had come up behind him as he urged his mates on.

"Yes, what is it?"

"Message from Captain Baker, sir. You're to leave off here and head to the bridge straight away."

"The bridge?"

"What have you gone and done this time, Lieutenant?"

Tovey looked for the man who had called that out, but he was already down through the hatch and gone. The last time the Lieutenant received such a notice it was to receive a good tongue lashing from the Captain over a discussion between officers the previous evening. Perhaps the Captain had something further to say.

"See what I mean?" Tovey put his arms on his hips, head cocked as he called after the men on the ladder down. "The Captain has eyes too, and he can damn well see that stack charring up on *Kent* as plain as day. Now you men press on and get down to the boiler room to see about it."

He shook his head, wondering what the Captain really wanted this time, and worried that it might indeed be something to do with his remarks in the officer's mess the previous evening. A few of the men had been discussing tactics and the general consensus was that a good broadside at range was the best possible play in a sudden one-on-one engagement. Armored cruisers were often used in scouting roles, and would often find themselves in small groups, or even alone when they might happen on an enemy ship.

"What? A broadside with six inch guns?" Tovey put in. *King Alfred* had eight such guns on each side, but she could rotate both her forward and aft turrets as well to bring the two larger 9.2 inch guns into the mix.

"Well we'd have to be damn close to hit anything," said Tovey. "Those casement guns can theoretically range out over 15,000 yards with a heavy charge, but good luck hitting anything that far out. No gentlemen, I'm an advocate of speed at the outset. I'd show the enemy my bow and put on a full head of steam to squeeze every knot out of those boilers I possibly could. Harass them with all our forward facing guns as we come in, then swing

round and give them the old broadside well inside 10,000 yards. 8,000 yards would even be better—ideal I should think.” It was a strategy he would put to use in the future, though the ranges involved would change as gun size increased. Tovey would one day end up leading more than one good fight at sea.

“Concentration of firepower is always best, at any range,” came a voice behind him. Tovey had his arms folded and did not know who made the remark, but he batted it aside with the sharp intelligence he would become known for at sea. “At any range? On my watch I would use my cannon at the best range suited to them. If that means a little reliance on speed and armor to achieve a better firing solution, so be it.” The complete silence after his remark prompted him to turn his head, and there was Captain Baker, lips pursed with disapproval. He had come into the mess hall in the heat of the discussion and threw out the remark to test his young officers.

Later that evening he summoned Tovey to the bridge and took him aside in the plotting room for a private chat. “See hear, Mister Tovey. Concerning your remarks in the officer’s mess this evening... If you chance to contradict another officer ever again, you had bloody well better turn your head first and look the man in the eye so you will know who you’re speaking to.”

“Yes sir. Of course, sir. I’m terribly sorry. I meant no offense.”

“No offense taken, Tovey. This is simply a matter of decorum.”

“Yes sir.”

“Very good then. That will be all.”

“Sir!” Tovey saluted and went to leave, but the Captain scratched his ear, adding one last word.

“You were correct in one thing,” he said quietly.

“Sir?”

“That bit about reliance on speed and armor. I gave it some thought and find it sound advice, depending on the circumstances of course. But just remember that *King Alfred* is the flagship of this squadron, young man. In that role she will be at the head of her formation and expected to lead the battle line in. So in nine cases out of ten we will not be talking about single ship broadside, but that of the entire squadron. This is concentration of firepower, Mister Tovey. Don’t forget that.”

“Of course, sir. And thank you, sir.”

Tovey never did forget it, and he came to understand that the essence of combat at sea was to somehow find that perfect balance of firepower, speed,

and armor that would win the day. It was a chemistry of steel, sea conditions, wind, and the fall of shot at selected range, and it could make all the difference between victory or defeat in the barest fraction of a second. There also was one more thing, he knew. You have to know your enemy first, and know him well.

He would get his chance to test his theories soon enough, and face a man in combat on the high seas that he was destined to encounter again many years hence, on the cold swells of the North Atlantic, in another life that would never even exist unless he first found a way to survive this one.

Part XII

The Ninth Circle

*“The banners of Hell’s Monarch do come forth
Toward us; therefore look,” so spake my guide,
“If thou discern him.”*

— Dante: The Inferno, Canto XXXIV

Chapter 34

They had lingered in the Sea of Japan for days now as Karpov tried to decide what to do. It seemed to him just as his campaign had begun, Fedorov appeared to cast the shadow of guilt on him with his obsession over not breaking the eggshells of history. Well, I am sorry Mister Fedorov, a ship with this much power leaves a wide wake. I barely flicked my little finger at those Japanese cruisers, and they could do nothing about it. That Canadian steamer was merely a distraction. I need to decide whether to commit myself here or to try to get the ship home.

He knew what he wanted to do, deep inside, but now that the men knew there's a way home it could be difficult to burn this last bridge deliberately. Zolkin would certainly have a fit.

The decision weighed heavily on his shoulders, but that thought suddenly presented him with a possible solution. Zolkin! The Doctor's words returned to him in the heat of his rumination.

"We are like blind men in a dark closet looking for the right coat here. Whatever you decide, consider the men on this ship. They may not share your dream of conquest. Have you even bothered to consider asking what they might want to do?"

Of course! That was the answer. He would explain their circumstances to the men and see what they would do. They would vote in a secret ballot. No man's name would be compromised. They could speak their mind without fear, and then at least the Captain would know where he stood.

He had given them all his reasons for the action he planned. "We have beaten off every enemy we have faced and survived to fight again," he said over the ship's PA system. "Now we are here, far from home and, short of detonating another nuclear warhead, we are likely to remain here, or so I believed. Yet we have just discovered that Captain Anton Fedorov has managed to get back to this year and time as well, only in the Caspian Sea aboard *Anatoly Alexandrov*. He proposes to bring us new control rods by helicopter, though if we use them, we have no guarantee as to where they will take us, if anywhere at all. We might move forward, or even further back in time. This cannot be known. So we can now do one of two things, either try

to rendezvous with Fedorov and see what happens, or remain here in this decisive era where we now find ourselves, and change the sad future our nation must face in the decades ahead.”

He went on to describe the history of this time and place, the prospect of restoring Russia to power in the Pacific, the idea of preventing Japan from ever rising as a military power here and bringing the Americans into the Pacific in WWII. “Russia has some hard years ahead,” he finished. “The revolution is coming, and it will be shaped only by those men who dare to do so here and now. Yes, we can try and go home to our world of computers and conveniences, and all our loved ones there. But, as we have seen, that world may not be so comfortable after all if the war we were fighting has continued. Who knows, we may get there and find only the ashes of the history I hope to change. Now, here, we have a chance to prevent that war and shape the future ahead. I realize this asks every man to sacrifice much, the entirety of the life you left behind, and to begin again here. So I leave this decision to you, the fighting crew of the battlecruiser *Kirov*. We have come a long way together. Now you decide where we will go together in the days ahead.”

He gave the men time to talk among themselves and decide how they felt about the situation, still lingering in the Sea of Japan. On the twentieth of July the vote was finally taken and the Captain was pacing fitfully on the bridge. Nikolin tabulated the results and made the announcement on the bridge. “Captain, sir. I have counted all the ballots and the crew votes 128 in favor of sailing to rendezvous with Fedorov, but a strong majority of 582 vote in favor of remaining here with you at the helm.”

Karpov had his eyes closed as Nikolin read the results, and now he opened them with a smile. “Five to one,” he said quietly. “Very well. You may make the results known to the crew, and then we must get about the business of building that new world I promised them. If that means that we must first make some changes to *this* world, so be it.” He looked at Rodenko now, looking for his reaction. He nodded, and the Captain took that as his assent, though he had no way of knowing how his first officer had actually voted.

It was decided.

At 18:00 hours on that day Karpov joined Nikolin at the communications station and they began broadcasting on the shortwave radio again as he had promised Fedorov. Now there was only one more man to convince, he thought, knowing that Fedorov would definitely not approve of this decision.

Ten minutes later Nikolin had a clear signal.

“Fedorov, here,” came the familiar voice. *“We’ve been waiting to hear from you, Captain.”*

“Well enough, Fedorov. We have considered your plan, and I have discussed it with the officers, Doctor Zolkin, and the entire crew. Over.”

“Good to hear it, Captain. Which option seems most feasible to you. Do you think you can make it to the Arabian Sea? If not, the Bay of Bengal should be close enough. We wish we could come all the way to the Pacific, but we had to use fuel to search for Orlov, and that leaves us no margin of safety. It’s a very long way. Over.”

“You will not have to worry about that, Fedorov....We have decided to stay where we are.”

“Say again, Kirov? What have you decided? Over.”

“We are remaining here, in the Pacific of 1908. Our mission was to defend Russia, and this we will do, but from this place and time, when a ship like this battlecruiser can really make all the difference in the world.”

There was a considerable pause before Fedorov came back. *“Did I hear you correctly, Captain? You are staying here? But you can’t do that, sir. The danger—”*

“We can and we will, Fedorov.” The Captain cut in, sending right on top of Fedorov’s incoming message.

“What in God’s name do you think you are going to do?”

“It may not be in God’s name that we do anything, Fedorov. That is the nature of war. You know the history as well as anyone. We will restore Russia as a Pacific power and prevent Japan from becoming the militaristic power that leads her into World War Two. What do you expect us to do back home? All we could do is sit there waiting for the ICBMs to arrive. Besides, Fedorov. You have no idea whether or not those other control rods will even work, or where they might send us if we try to use them. Am I not correct?”

Again the long pause... *“Yes, that is so, but Captain, anything you do here could have terrible consequences—things you cannot foresee now. It may seem so easy from the bridge of Kirov now, but it never is. We should at least try and get the ship and men home safely. I came all this way just to find Orlov, and by God we finally have the man. What you propose now is utter madness! It will change everything!”*

“They is exactly the idea, Fedorov. Yes. We are going to change everything.”

“I cannot believe this! You have no idea what you are doing. You are betraying more than your own pledge to me and to Admiral Volsky here, Karpov. Do you remember it? What about the Russia you pledged to defend? Our homeland is in 2021, not here! We have no business even being here!”

“Do not think this is entirely my doing, Fedorov. You will want to make me out as a traitor and consign me to the Ninth Circle of Hell. Better to rule here than to serve in heaven, eh? So be it. Yet you should know that I put this question to the entire crew, the vote was decisive, five to one. We stay *here*. How is it we even find ourselves here? Have you wondered about that? We are here for a reason, Fedorov, and I think I know what that reason is now. If you must return to the future we came from, then do what you must.”

“...You must reconsider, Karpov. This is insane what you propose now.”

“That has yet to be proven, Captain. If you do make it back, you may read the history we write here yourself and see if we prevail. Once we finish here we will contact you again. If you still remain marooned in this time, as we are, then we will reconsider your plan. But do not get your hopes up, or wait for us. We have a world to change, Fedorov. I know that is the worst thing possible in your mind. You want to keep all the eggs in the nest, safe and sound, but that is clearly impossible now. We could not do that in 2021, nor even in all our battles in World War Two. But here, we are invincible, my friend. You know that. Here we make the real decisive difference! That is all that matters now. There is nothing more to be said. I wish you and the Admiral well. Yes, I know you will judge me, but so will time and fate. Kirov, over and out.”

“Captain...Listen to reason here! You cannot do this!”

Karpov gave Nikolin a hard hand signal to cut the transmission, and he did so, though he could see pain in the young officer’s eyes. He looked at Rodenko and the others, knowing this would be hardest part of the decision before them.

“I know you all loved Fedorov,” he said quietly. “Yet you also know he would do anything to set the table as it was before we left Severomorsk so long ago. Understand that he cannot assure that in any wise, no matter what he does. He had no intention of ever arriving here, in 1908; any more than we did. So you see he really has no control over what happens. Yes, it is hard to turn our back on him now, but this we must do. We are here, on these waters, in this ship, at this moment. The men have decided to stay and fight. So God bless Fedorov, but he will not understand what we must now do. He was

always the white Angel, I was the demon of shadows. He would *never* understand me any more than white can know black.” He sighed, walking slowly toward the Captain’s chair. “Helm, come to 180 and steady at twenty knots.”

“Helm answering, Captain, Coming round to one, eight, zero, Aye.”

* * *

The transmission ended and Fedorov stood there, a shocked expression on his face. Dobrynin was sitting on a chair by the main operations console.

“So Satan has fallen from heaven and now he rules in hell,” he said quietly. “I cannot say that this surprises me as much as you, Mister Fedorov.”

“The man is insane,” Fedorov said with a defeated tone in his voice. “What you say is not too far from the truth, Chief. The ninth circle of hell was reserved for traitors, particularly those who betray the trust of their nation. Karpov has been trying to do this all along. I could feel it even before we learned he was here. He wanted to strike the decisive blow and kill Churchill and Roosevelt at the Atlantic Charter meeting. Then he argued we could destroy Malta or Gibraltar and change the course of the war that way. After that it was the Japanese, then the Americans. He keeps looking to find his Waterloo, well, now he has found it here.”

“What do you mean?”

“He’s right about the ship being invincible. There is nothing in this era that can pose a threat if he maneuvers smartly here. So I can only guess what is in the man’s mind now. He will probably think to first challenge the Japanese again, and reverse the outcome of the Russo-Japanese war. That sounds like the obvious thing to do, but anything could happen from here on out. Anything... If he starts another war here it could affect all Russian history, all world history from this point forward. Russia might not even enter the First World War. And considering that man has nuclear weapons at his disposal still—in 1908! It is truly chilling.”

“What can we do?” Dobrynin held up an empty hand. “Do you want to launch the Mi-26 mission now anyway? We might be able to get to the Pacific. We could strip the helicopter down to the bare essentials—just food, fuel and those two control rods. Perhaps even one will do.”

Fedorov’s mind was a chaos of plans and counter plans, and all beset now with the real terror of what Karpov was going to try to do. How could he

decide anything now? He felt completely powerless here. But he could not simply sit there and do nothing. The idea of trying to find *Kirov* in the Pacific now was fruitless, and Dobrynin made that evident as he continued.

“Then again, even if you do find the ship, Karpov could refuse to use the control rods. Why, he could even shoot the Mi-26 down if he wanted to.”

“Zolkin was correct,” said Fedorov dejectedly. “And I was a fool to think I could trust and rely on Karpov without the countervailing authority of the Admiral to keep him in check.”

“Technically Karpov is the acting Fleet Commander now. Volsky is in strategic command, but Karpov was given the Red Banner Fleet on the operational level. In fact, that makes him your superior officer.”

“Yes, and what happened to that fleet?”

“I suppose we will never know...unless we do get home, and then you can read about it as the Captain suggested.”

Fedorov’s eyes suddenly brightened, and he spun around. “Yes...That’s the only thing we *can* do here. We’ve completed our mission, and for some reason we ended up here. Who knows why? Maybe it was only to learn what Karpov was going to do, but we can’t do anything about that at all here. You are correct, Chief, he would simply refuse to use the control rods until he had his way.”

Dobrynin nodded quietly.

“Then we go home,” said Fedorov flatly. “At least we *try* to go home. If we do get there, and anything is still left of the world Karpov leaves us, then we can discover exactly what he does. There will be history, times, places, events.”

“What good will that do us?”

“We would still have the control rods, Chief. This may sound strange now, and I have not yet thought it through, but I think Karpov is correct about at least one thing here. There is something decisive about this year—1908. We have all fallen through some hole in time into this nice little circle of hell here, all the Fallen Angels gathered here together, and this is where it must all end. The question is how? What can we do? The helicopter idea is futile. This whole plan with the *Anatoly Alexandrov* of mine was useless. It wasn’t Orlov we needed to worry about. I was wrong. He wasn’t the demon we set loose in the world. It was Karpov all along!”

“Then what do we do?”

“We have to stop him before his actions here become irreversible, that’s

what we do.”

“But how, Fedorov? The hovercraft and all these Marines will do us no good here either.”

“Not here—not now. First we must get back home. Look Chief... You say you can hear the change in the reactor when it happens, yes?”

“It has a very distinctive vibration. Yes, I can hear it like I might hear music, if that makes any sense.”

“Alright then, we’ll try again. Do you suppose you could do something with the reactors, just as Doctor Zolkin suggested once in jest. He said to go have the Chief fiddle with the reactor and send us home. Is there any way to make adjustments in the procedure to change things?”

“Possibly,” said Dobrynin, thinking about it now. “I could vary the rods scheduled for replacement. I usually go odd-even-and so forth. That’s what I was doing on *Kirov*. Perhaps I could break that sequence and try something different.”

“Odd even? Do you remember which it was when we always shifted forward?”

“Why yes...even, yes, it was an even numbered rod each and every time, though I never considered that before.”

“And this last shift here?”

Dobrynin smiled. “Odd, Mister Fedorov, very odd. Of course! This is why that shift sounded so different to me. I was expecting a rising melody, and the orchestra descended into chaos.”

“Well, that’s a start. We use an *even* numbered rod now, though why would that matter?”

“They are all placed in different locations in the reactor core, so the neutron flux is different, almost like a different note played on a wind instrument changes the tone, if that makes any sense to you.”

“Then you could listen and remember the sound of a forward shift? Is that possible?”

“Of course. I hear the reaction every time it happens. It descends when we slip backward in time, and it ascends when we move forward. I know the sound well enough if I hear it.”

“And perhaps you could also fiddle with those other two control rods in their containers. Lids on, lids off, who knows what we might do. I know it would be hit and miss, but we have to try, Chief. We’ve got to get home, one way or another, and that before Karpov does something catastrophic here.”

“What does it matter when we go? Won’t everything he does be finished and done when we get home? The man and the whole crew will be in their graves when we get there. It’s a hundred and thirteen years before we get home!”

“I think it does matter....” Fedorov was thinking hard now. “If we leave this time before he does something decisive, perhaps we still have a chance. Suppose we learn what he does and then return here—to this moment—before he even does it!”

“Suppose we could return—to what end? To have this discussion all over again here with Karpov?”

“No, Chief, to *stop* him.”

“But how, Fedorov? You haven’t answered that yet.”

“I think I may have a plan, but first, somehow, some way, we have to get safely home and then find a way to return to this moment. I only hope your inner ear is a good one. Can you remember what that last shift that brought us here sounded like?”

“Remember it? I recorded it! I’ve been listening to the reactor sing its song to the heavens ever since we got here, trying to figure out what was happening. So lately I’ve been recording the sound from all these shifts so I could sort through it and see if I hear anything that leads me to an engineering process.”

“Excellent Chief! Then there’s a chance you might be able to get us here again—to 1908. I’m counting on that—in fact I think the whole world will be counting on that. Let’s get started! I’m going below for a moment.”

“But Fedorov...suppose I can work my magic and get us back here again. What will you do? We’ll be facing the same problem we have now!”

“No, we won’t be here in the Caspian. Once we get home we can fly to Vladivostok with all the control rods and be right there in the Pacific. Then, if we shift again, *Kirov* will be very close.”

“What if Karpov refuses to let you board the ship?”

“Don’t worry, Chief. I have a plan. But first, there’s still one other problem I need to resolve here.”

Chapter 35

Fedorov sat with the two men, a signalman named Chenko at his side to interpret, and the looming presence of Sergeant Troyak standing behind the men to keep a good eye on them.

“I am Captain Anton Fedorov,” he began. “Who are you?”

“David Sutherland, Lieutenant in the service of His Majesty’s special forces. This man is Sergeant Jack Terry.”

“What were you doing here?”

Sutherland knew the rule—name, rank and serial number. He had given the first two, but these were Russians, supposed allies, and not enemies, though they had been forced to treat them as foes because of the necessities of this mission. And he was still shaken by what he had seen, doubting his own sanity now and feeling like a fish out of water. So he decided to talk with these men and see what he could find out about them.

“We were sent to find a man—the man we had with us when your Marines made our acquaintance.”

That gave Fedorov a start. These men were sent to find Orlov? How could that be? It would mean that the British knew about the Chief. What could they have learned that would have prompted a mission like this?

“You were sent to find Orlov—that was the man you were with. Sent by who?”

“What does that matter? We were given orders to find him, and that we did, until you blokes came along.”

“Here? In the Caspian Sea? How did you think you might find him here?”

“I’m not at liberty to discuss that, sir.” Sutherland folded his arms, still feeling very distressed and with this unaccountable feeling that something very odd was going on here. He would once refer to himself as ‘a lucky Scorpio, and an unconventional, adventure-seeking Scot,’ but this was more than he bargained for.

“Very well...” Fedorov considered the situation. “Was there another man with you—a third man?”

At this Sutherland seemed very distressed. Protocol whispered that he should say nothing of Haselden. After all, the voice said, what if he simply slipped overboard while you weren’t looking? No! said another voice in his

head, you know damn well what you saw, and he blurted it out.

“He... he just vanished!” Now he looked at Sergeant Terry, as if still trying to convince the man. “I tell you Haselden was right by my side on the gunwale and then the man simply faded away.” The minute he said that he realized the Russians would probably think he was sporting with them to avoid revealing any further information. So he was surprised when the young officer leaned forward, a very serious look in his eye, and questioned him further about it.

“Vanished? You saw this with your own eyes?”

“That I did,” Sutherland said stubbornly, though Sergeant Terry gave him a frown of disapproval.

“You are telling me the three of you were all in that boat together and then you saw your comrade disappear?”

“That’s about the size of it.” Sutherland felt like a fool now, but in for a penny, in for a pound.

“You’re certain he did not go overboard? We have had men searching for him for hours, but there’s been no sign.”

“Well...I should like to believe that, sir. Yes, that would make all the sense in the world to me, save for the evidence of my own eyes. I...I was looking right at the man and he simply...well he simply faded away!”

Sergeant Terry raised his eyebrows now, thinking the Lieutenant had finally broken under the stress of all they had been through. Yet Sutherland had been with the Black Watch at Dunkirk. He had been through many missions far more arduous than this one. Was the man daft?

“Did you see this happen as well?” Fedorov asked the Sergeant now, giving him an earnest look.

The translator finished and Sergeant Terry, shook his head. “I was in the cabin keeping an eye on this Orlov fellow, and saw nothing.”

“I see...” Fedorov had a very serious look on his face now. Was this British Lieutenant pulling his leg now, or was he serious? The man seemed quite upset, though he was trying bravely to recover his composure. It was clear to him that he had experienced something that rattled him badly. Could he be telling the truth about the third man? Then he suddenly remembered something that broke the log jam of his thinking. Haselden! He named the man Haselden!

When they first returned to Vladivostok Fedorov spent some time trying to find out what may have changed in the history of WWII as a result of their

actions. He had run across that name, but struggled now to remember—yes! He was looking at operations that were supposed to have transpired, and comparing them to his books—the books that had remained aboard *Kirov* when they shifted. Strangely, they bore the history of the world they had come from, even though copies of those same volumes found elsewhere had changed. Then he remembered it! *Operation Agreement*! Yes, the operation that had been written up in that article he found in *Russia Today*. He even remembered the title: ‘British Remember Losses In Agreement Gone Bad.’

Markov had that magazine with him in the operations room of the Primorskiy reactor test center! It went back with him and must have been discovered there where he appeared in 1942, and it clearly recounted an operation the British would conduct the following month. It was this that led him to believe the history was still at risk, subtly changing, and that is what led him to look for any evidence of Orlov in the past. He had found something, and took it to Karpov first. The memory of that meeting in the flag bridge of *Kirov* returned to him now...

“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....”

These were those very same men! These were the men sent on *Operation Escapade* to find Orlov! Now he remembered who Haselden was, the Captain in charge of the whole mission, and it was his fate that first set him searching through this part of the history. Haselden was supposed to have been on another mission—*Operation Agreement*, the planned British raid on Tobruk. In fact, he was supposed to have been killed on that mission, but it was cancelled.

My God, thought Fedorov. Haselden was a zombie, the walking dead. He was a perfect example of a man who lived that should have died, and he was reassigned to *Operation Escapade* to look for Orlov! That change in the history had led him to find evidence of Orlov here in those letters from the dead, the journal entry that enabled him to locate Orlov at Kizlyar. He was astounded at how all these facts twisted round one another, and how all these men were all caught up in the net of mystery now.

He looked at Sutherland, understanding why the man was so ill at ease, and believing that he had, indeed, seen the third man simply vanish—but why? Was it because Haselden had been fated to die all along? Was he deemed expendable in the strange, convoluted accounting logs Mother Time was keeping of these events? Then another thought came to him.

“The third member of your party—the man you called Haselden a moment ago—may I ask how old he was?”

Sergeant Terry gave Fedorov a strange look. “Can’t say as I would even know.”

“Well then...” Fedorov took another tack. “You men seem young, and very fit, not much over twenty if I had to venture a guess.” His eye was very good. Sutherland had been born in 1920, and was only 22 years old in 1942. Sergeant Terry survived the war and was to die at the age of 85 in the year 2006, and so he was just a year younger than Sutherland.

“This may seem an odd question, but was this Haselden your same age?”

“What does that matter,” said Sergeant Terry, thinking this Russian officer was fishing. Sutherland should have kept his mouth zipped tight. What was wrong with the Lieutenant? He gave his companion a stern glance,

thinking to buck up his morale.

Fedorov discerned a good deal with that response. Haselden must have been the commanding officer. He had asked Orlov about him earlier, getting a description of the man, and the Chief seemed to think this Haselden was in charge. If he was above the Lieutenant then he would have been a major, or even a Captain by rank. Yes, and he would have been older and more experienced than these two here. If they were in their early twenties, then they were born around 1920. But if Haselden was much older he might have been born...*before 1908!* What would happen to a man if he tried to shift to a period in time where he already existed as a younger man or child? If Haselden had been born before 1908, which would put him in his later thirties in 1942, he might be an infant or child in the year we find ourselves in now—1908.

Yes! It would be impossible for the man to manifest here in a time where he already existed. He had often wondered about that. What if they shifted to a near past, a time just before they had been born? What would happen to them at that moment of their own birth? Could two versions of the same person co-exist in the same moment? It was a maddening paradox, but he thought he may have discovered the answer—a flat NO! Time would not permit this to happen. Haselden could not shift here with the others if he had already been born before 1908. Sutherland was telling the truth. The man simply vanished during the transition, vanished into the oblivion of paradox.

Time had balanced her books, yet now he had to decide what to do with these other two men. He could not tell them where they were, and if he left them here they would face the same paradox that may have claimed Haselden, for in just a few years they would reach the time of their birth. Yet how could he get them back to their own time in 1942? They were getting ready to run the procedure with Rod-25 again. If, by any chance, they ended up bouncing back to where they were in that year, then he might set them adrift well outside the radius of the *Anatoly Alexandrov*. If they shifted somewhere else...He realized that their fate was somehow bound up with his own now; with Orlov, and all the rest of them there.

“Well gentlemen,” he said quietly. “We’ll have to hold on to you for a while yet. In fact we may have to hold on to you for quite some time. I can’t explain everything now, but in time, once we sort this business out, I will try. In the meantime, our Sergeant Troyak here will see to your needs.”

He left the room, heading for the operations center where Dobrynin was

preparing to run the procedure again. The Chief had listened to the recording they made of their shift here, and now he was given the daunting task of trying to reverse that outcome and get them home.

“Can you do it, Chief?”

“I have no idea, Mister Fedorov. Yet all I can do is try, and we are ready to begin.”

“Very well, we’ve lingered here long enough. I used the time trying to find that missing British soldier while we were waiting to hear from Karpov, but I think I know what happened to him now. The ship is battened down. Everything is securely fastened and radar says there is nothing within five kilometers of us at the moment, so hopefully we won’t take anything else with us. Let’s begin.”

Even as he gave that order a sudden thrum of anxiety rose in his chest. What if Karpov changes the history so radically that we are never even born or alive in the year 2021? If we try to return there, how would time account for our presence there in 2021? Will we vanish like Haselden? He realized they could be trying to shift themselves right into oblivion! Then another inner voice calmed him. It said that Karpov would never even be here unless they were all alive on *Kirov* and lost on this strange odyssey. Somehow he had to feel an essential part of it all, and have faith that paradox could not reach out to steal him away.

A darker thought came to him...What if Karpov does something that set the world on a course to catastrophe? What if Rod-25 politely takes us to the year 2021, but there is nothing left of the world—just those devastated cities we saw each time we shifted forward? This means the Great War was fought *before* 2021! That’s why we saw the destruction everywhere! Then we had *Kirov* at hand to go back into the past and try again. But what could I do with the resources here on the *Anatoly Alexandrov*? His mind went round and round, but there was no more time to consider these things.

Dobrynin nodded, looking over at a technician at the operations console and raising his finger like a conductor about to begin a composition.

“We’ve selected rod number eight for replacement, and so let us begin.”

The technicians began throwing switches and even Fedorov could hear a change in the sound of the reactor now as servo motors and other systems kicked in to begin the procedure of withdrawing a the control rod from an active reaction. Meanwhile, Rod-25 waited in place above the core, ready to descend again into the nuclear soup.

Chief Dobrynin closed his eyes and listened. He had to remember the sound of their fall to this place in time, and now reverse it. He listened, hearing the overture in the subtle vibrations and sound frequencies; hearing things that none of the others seemed to notice at all. He raised a hand, speaking softly as he listened. "Begin replacement rod insertion. Set timing at interval two."

There it was, he thought, the song to the Angels. He could hear it, feel it, and with each vibration pattern he knew what should come next. He made several other adjustments, first subtly increasing the insertion rate, then slowing it down again, and all the while Rod-25 sang its song, a distinctive voice in the choir of the 48 other rods working to control the nuclear reaction, like the soloist leading on the others in a rising chorus of neutron flux.

It was not long until they began to notice the same strange effects again. There was a tang of ozone in the air, a sudden chill, and the odd luminescent, pulsing waves that emanated from the *Anatoly Alexandrov*. Then the air seemed to thicken around them, a deep mist enveloping them.

And they were gone.

Chapter 36

The score was played, to the very last note, ascending the scales of infinity to find shape and form again in another time. Dobrynin heard every note, varying the rhythm and time at intervals, and subtly leading the operation with the harmonies he listened to in his head so many times.

They were back—somewhere, and Fedorov wasted no time trying to find out where they were as soon as it became evident that the *Anatoly Alexandrov* had stabilized in this new milieu. He turned to the communications station and had them immediately send out an emergency signal to the Naval facility at Kaspiysk on channels that had been reserved for his operations, and with special coding. To his great surprise, they got a return signal in confirmation, and voice communication soon ensued.

“Wild Geese, Wild Geese, we read you. This is Mother Hen. Over.”

“Mother Hen. This is Wild Geese, please confirm date and time. Over.” To his great surprise and delight, they had arrived back in the year 2021, just hours after they left! Of course, he thought. He just learned that they could not ever shift to a time where they already existed. They would have to arrive there after they left, or they would be faced with the paradox of seeing duplicates of themselves. If Haselden’s experience was any guide, Time would not permit that.

“You did it, Chief! My God that song in your head brought us home. We still have time to do something. It isn’t too late! How did you manage it?”

“Don’t ask me to explain it, Fedorov. Just be grateful we’re here.”

“Yes, and we have no time to lose. We need to get everything ready to go, Rod-25 and the other two control rods as well. Get them on the helicopter and we’ll head for the airfield at Kaspiysk. There was an Antonov transport plane there, and it can get us to Vladivostok faster than any other way I can imagine. Now get me Admiral Volsky on the secure mission channel. Top priority!”

“Right away, sir.”

* * *

Admiral Volsky had been listening to everything Kamenski was telling

him, trying to sort it all out in his own head, and wishing Fedorov were there to help him. The shadowy ex-KGB man had come to him with startling evidence of Karpov's shift to 1945, and the fate of the Red Banner Pacific Fleet that fell from heaven into that hell of a war again. Now he wondered about the mission they had planned for the *Anatoly Alexandrov*.

"What about that, Kamenski? Do you know what happened to Fedorov and Dobrynin?"

"To some extent. I can tell you that the *Anatoly Alexandrov* got back to 1942 safely, just as you planned it. Then things began to happen. Some very unusual things...because I just came from the special code room. We have received another message."

"Another letter? From who? Was it Fedorov this time?"

"Not another letter, Admiral. This time it was a radio call, and yes, it is from your young navigator. I told them I needed to speak with you first about these matters. The call is holding on line one if you would care to pick up your telephone. I think we may both learn just a little more of this story now, and have some of our questions answered."

Volsky gave him a wide eyed look and picked up his desk phone, quickly punching line one. "Admiral Volsky," he said.

"Admiral! This is Fedorov. Good to hear your voice, sir."

"Fedorov...Just a moment..." He pushed the speakerphone so that Kamenski could listen in. "There now. Where are you, Fedorov?"

"I am aboard Anatoly Alexandrov in the Caspian, sir."

"Thank God! Dobrynin got through to you. That is good news. And what of your mission, Fedorov? Did you find Orlov?"

"We did sir, and we have him aboard. It was a very long journey, and now we are home."

"And the Mi-26? Did it get safely away to the coast with those control rods?"

"No sir. I was forced to cancel that mission. We needed to use the helicopter to find Orlov. It's a long story, Admiral, but I will explain it to you as soon as I get there."

"Then Kirov is still trapped in 1945? I have some evidence it may have been destroyed there."

"No sir... The ship is not in 1945. There was another incident. It's Karpov, sir. He's back to the same mindset as before. He was thinking to do something dramatic, something spectacular."

“Yes, I have been discussing that with someone here, yet the outcome is not yet clear to us.”

“I can tell you that Kirov shifted again in time, sir. There must have been another detonation to cause it, just like the first one. And you know what that means...”

“Yes, yes, Karpov resorted to nuclear weapons. We have evidence of that as well. You were correct, Mister Fedorov. The history is not set in stone. It is still changing.”

“Yes, sir. I thought it was Orlov all along, but it was Karpov. He shifted further back in time. The ship is now trapped in 1908!”

“What? 1908? This is a most shocking development, Fedorov. How did you learn this?”

“Because I have been there too, sir. I will tell you about it when I arrive, but first I must tell you that we were able to reach Karpov on shortwave and we proposed your mission to him. He put it to the crew and they voted to stay where they were!”

“What? That’s impossible? How could they do this?”

“I believe the Captain has persuaded them that they are better off there than they would be in attempting to return here. I can half understand that. After all, there was no way we could predict what would happen if he ever did try to use those other control rods you found. What an amazing development!”

“But what now, Fedorov? The ship is marooned in 1908?”

“At the moment I have a very pressing need for two things, Admiral. First I need priority orders for a fast cargo lift from Kaspiysk to Vladivostok. We will bring the control rods with us.”

“I can cut that order immediately, Captain.”

“Good, sir. Then I need a ship—somewhere in the Pacific. I will tell you why when I get there. Can you arrange it?”

“Yes, I suppose I can, Fedorov...” Volsky thought on that a moment, wondering what Fedorov was thinking.

“We will talk soon, Admiral. But trust me, I have a plan. Fedorov Over and out.”

Kamenski smiled as the Admiral hung up the telephone. “An enterprising young man. 1908? That is very interesting, but now the more I think of it, the more it begins to make sense to me. 1908... You know that was the year of the Tunguska event.”

“How could that effect the ship?” Volsky saw the puzzle pieces, but he could not yet put them together in his mind.

“Have you ever had a persistent gopher or a mole in your nice front yard or garden, Admiral?”

“What has that to do with anything?”

“They are very clever animals, thankfully short lived, but very clever. If one gets well established in your garden it become a little devil there, and it will eat the roots of everything growing, killing off the lawn, the flowers, and anything else. Believe me, I have had more than one battle with these creatures in my garden. They dig tunnels to make their entry, then a main tunnel where they create a nest, food cache, and many side tunnels for escape hatches. You can try everything to root them out, and fail—water, gas, traps. They are very clever and persistent little devils.”

“Mister Kamenski. Please make sense!”

“Forgive me, Admiral, but bear with me here. You see, a gopher will dig all these little tunnels in the ground, and at varying depths. I tried to dig down into one to set good traps, only to find, by chance, that the rascal had an even deeper network. That is what may be happening here. *Kirov* fell through a gopher hole in time when that first detonation occurred aboard *Orel*. That sent you down the hole to 1941, and the ship had a very hard time trying to climb back out. You dug around a good bit of history in the process, and every time you popped your gopher heads up out of the hole all you saw was a dead and barren garden, never realizing it was your own handiwork that killed everything off. Well there are deeper holes, in that garden, Admiral, and I think *Kirov* just found one that sent it sliding back to 1908! Who knows how these holes got there? Perhaps whatever came out of the darkness of space that day in late June of 1908 was the real devil in the garden. It may have created all these holes in time with that impact; holes that remain to this day.”

“You are speaking of the Tunguska event again?”

“Yes. Now I begin to see the connection. As fate would have it, we found materials for our control rods in the ejecta of the Tunguska event. Stick them into a nuclear reactor and they become nice little spades that cut through the soil of time rather well, wouldn’t you agree?”

“I see...” Volsky finally had a handle on the problem now.

“Yes, and we have been digging in the devil’s garden, Admiral, like a mole or vole will sometimes come along and re-colonize abandoned gopher

holes. Believe me, I have been gardening for a very long time. From what your Mister Fedorov tells me, we still have a mole down there in your Mister Karpov. There is still a devil loose in the garden.”

“Yes, and I can just hear Fedorov now. He will tell me that in 1908 Karpov could cause so much damage to the course of events that the history would be completely unrecognizable.”

“Very true, Admiral. With a ship like *Kirov* he could do a good deal of harm, and very quickly. Nothing could oppose him, at least at sea. How his mischief might affect events on land remains to be seen, and you and I just may be able to read about it soon.”

“Yes, Kamenski! Why don’t you consult those references you mentioned to me earlier. Can’t we find out the end of this tale now? Won’t it all be history we can read in any library?”

“Perhaps...and then again perhaps not. Remember when I told you why you and I recalled the old history, but no one else?”

“Yes. You said it was because we have traveled in time.”

“A pair of funny looking little gophers, you and I.” Kamenski smiled. “Well, I talked about that dead space in the course of events, like the eye of a hurricane where all is still and calm. Can you feel it, Admiral? Here we sit, deep underground in our own little gopher hole in this reinforced bunker, and at the edge of an event that could prove to be the destruction of all humanity. Here we sit, waiting for the ICBMs. This war has run out for nine long days, and now it is about to really begin. Unfortunately the beginning and the end are one and the same when it comes to ICBMs. It is my guess that others like us have also gone into their little holes, just as we have, and some of them may be holes in time as well as space.”

“Others?”

“We are not the only ones who have learned about some of the things we have been discussing here, Admiral. Yes, there are others, and they may have ways of digging in the garden of fate as well. But here we sit, you and I, and the world seems breathless. We can hear the clock ticking out the last moments of the time that may be left to us, and that sound grows ever louder in our minds and souls. At any minute the alarm clock may go off, and then what? This we do not know. But at this moment I think all fate and time is waiting for something that will prove to be the decisive element in all of this.”

“Waiting for something?”

"I should say *someone*, the person the outcome of these complex events truly depends upon."

"Who do you mean, Karpov? That man has always had a devil on his shoulder, Kamenski."

"Yes, he is certainly in a time and place now where he might change everything, and the moment he *does* do something irreversible, then our time here may finally run out. But I do not think it is Karpov the world now waits upon."

"Not Karpov? Who then? Orlov? Does he have something more to do with this?"

"Perhaps he has already done his work in the garden, Admiral. No. I think we are waiting now for that Antonov to get those control rods to us here. We are waiting for your Mister Fedorov, and so is fate and time."

Volsky thought about that. Fedorov was rushing here with all the control rods they had collected. "I see...But can't we just find out how all this ends by consulting your library?"

"No, I think we must simply wait. Your Mister Fedorov has some kind of plan, just as he told us, but until he actually works it we cannot know the outcome in our time here. There may come a moment when my old books change, and then we may read about it. But that moment will not occur until Fedorov gets here and actually *leaves* us again...in time. Only then can we know what might happen. On the other hand, you may wish to accompany him and actually take part in the story that is yet to unfold. That may be a little more satisfying than simply reading about it. So for now, we will have to wait for him and see how the story plays out."

"My God...Fedorov...with another plan. I wonder what it is this time?"

Kamenski sat down quietly, a wry smile on his face now. "Don't look so dejected, Admiral. It won't be very long before we know how all this turns out. In the meantime, suppose you and I have a nice cup of tea."

* * *

"**So** you got your way with the Admiral, Fedorov?" Chief Dobrynin gave the young officer a clap on the back. "But I still have no idea what you plan to do. How can you possibly stop Karpov from doing all these things you fear? What good will a ship do you, if the Admiral even has anything left afloat at Vladivostok? You forget the Americans are still at war with us."

Getting it out to sea may be difficult.”

“Not a ship, Chief. You are correct. The Red Banner Pacific Fleet doesn’t have anything left that could pose any threat to *Kirov*. I should have been more specific. What I really need now is a *submarine*. You told me you suggested this to Admiral Volsky when he first proposed the operation to you with the Mi-26. I came round to that as a better solution myself. We’re home, Chief, and now we get ourselves a goddamned nuclear powered attack submarine, that’s what we do! We install the control rods there, and then you have a good long listen. If you could get the reactors on the submarine to sing that same song that you recorded on the *Anatoly Alexandrov*, then we might just return to 1908. It may be a long shot, Chief, but we have to try. If we do make it back, this time I won’t be sitting on a floating power plant in the Caspian Sea. No! This time I’ll be right there in the Sea of Japan aboard the one nemesis Karpov has always feared and respected—a nuclear attack submarine! Then maybe he’ll listen.”

“A very good plan, Mister Fedorov, but what if he *won’t* listen?”

Fedorov gave him a long look, but said nothing more.

The saga continues!

Dear Reader,

Yes...I meant to end this story by now, but events have taken longer to relate than I expected, and Mister Fedorov has pulled the story to a place it now needs to go before the end. So I invite you to spend just a little more time with me, as I present yet one more volume of this strange tale.

Kirov Saga: Armageddon
Kirov Series, Book VIII

The lines of fate have brought the most powerful ship in the world to a time and place where it can make decisive changes to the history. Driven by his own inner demons, Captain Karpov now believes that with *Kirov* in 1908 he is truly invincible, and his aim is to impose his will on that unsuspecting world and reverse the cold fate of Russian history from 1908 to the 21st century. But it is not just the fate of a single nation at stake now, but that of all the world. What is it Karpov may yet do to affect the outcome of the Great War in 2021? Or was he *responsible* for that war, a suspicion he has had all along?

Shocked by Karpov's betrayal, Anton Fedorov plans a mission to stop the Captain before he can do irreversible damage to the meridians of history. Now Admiral Volsky must do everything possible to launch this final mission. The nuclear attack submarine *Kazan* has retired to a secure patrol in the Sea of Okhotsk after joining Karpov in his duel with the US Pacific Fleet in 2021, yet the submarine must now risk discovery to take on some very special new crewmembers with a very unusual cargo. The journey to the Sea of Japan becomes a perilous one when the Americans and Japanese of 2021 discover the location of the submarine and make their own plans as well.

Join Anton Fedorov, Admiral Volsky, Chief Dobrynin, Sergeant Troyak and Gennadi Orlov aboard *Kazan* as they launch this last desperate mission to confront the man, and the ship, that now threatens to change all history and unravel the fabric of fate and time itself.

Coming soon from the Writing Shop Press!

OTHER BOOKS BY JOHN SCHETTLER

Kirov

The battlecruiser *Kirov* is the most powerful surface combatant that ever put to sea. Built from the bones of all four prior *Kirov* Class battlecruisers, she is updated with Russia's most lethal weapons, given back her old name, and commissioned in the year 2020. A year later, with tensions rising to the breaking point between Russia and the West, *Kirov* is completing her final missile trials in the Arctic Sea when a strange accident transports her to another time. With power no ship in the world can match, much less comprehend, she must decide the fate of nations in the most titanic conflict the world has ever seen—WWII.

Kirov II – Cauldron of Fire

Kirov crosses the Atlantic to the Mediterranean Sea when she suddenly slips in time again and re-appears a year later, in August of 1942. Beset with enemies on every side and embroiled in one of the largest sea battles of the war, the ship races for Gibraltar and the relatively safe waters of the Atlantic. Meanwhile, the brilliant Alan Turing has begun to unravel the mystery of what this ship could be, but can he convince the Admiralty? Naval action abounds in this fast paced second volume of the *Kirov* series trilogy.

Kirov III - Pacific Storm

Admiral Tovey's visit to Bletchley Park soon reaches an astounding conclusion when the battlecruiser *Kirov* vanishes once again to a desolate future. Reaching the Pacific the ship's officers and crew soon learn that *Kirov* has once again moved in time. Now First Officer Anton Fedorov is shocked to learn the true source of the great variation in time that has led to the devastated future they have come from and the demise of civilization itself. They are soon discovered by a Japanese fleet and the ship now faces its most dangerous and determined challenge ever when they are stalked by the Japanese 5th Carrier Division and eventually confronted by a powerful enemy task force led by the battleship Yamato, and an admiral determined to sink this phantom ship, or die trying. In this amazing continuation to the popular *Kirov* series, the most powerful ships ever conceived by two different

eras clash in a titanic final battle that could decide the fate of nations and the world itself.

Kirov Saga: *Men Of War ~Kirov Series, Book IV*

Kirov returns home to a changed world in the year 2021, and as the Russian Naval Inspectorate probes the mystery of the ship's disappearance, Anton Fedorov begins to unravel yet another dilemma—the secret of Rod 25. The world is again steering a dangerous course toward the great war that blackened the shores of a distant future glimpsed by the officers and crew. Fedorov has come to believe that time is waiting on the resolution of one crucial unresolved element from their journey to the past—the fate of Gennadi Orlov.

Join Admiral Leonid Volsky, Captain Vladimir Karpov, and Anton Fedorov as they sleuth the mystery of Orlov's fate and launch a mission to the past to find him before the world explodes in the terror and fury of a great air and naval conflict in the Pacific. It is a war that will span the globe from the Gulf of Mexico to the Middle East and through the oil rich heart of Central Asia to the wide Pacific, but somehow one man's life holds the key to its prevention. Yet other men are aware of Orlov's identity as a crewman from the dread raider they came to call *Geronimo*, and they too set their minds on finding him first...in 1942! Men of war from the future and past now join in the hunt while the military forces of Russia, China, and the West maneuver to the great chessboard of impending conflict.

Kirov Saga: *Nine Days Falling, Kirov Series, Book V*

As Fedorov launches his daring mission to the past to rescue Orlov, Volsky does not know where or how to find the team, or even if they have safely made the dangerous transition to the 1940s....But other men know, from the dark corners of Whitehall to the KGB. And other men also continue to stalk Orlov in that distant era, led by Captain John Haselden and the men of 30 Commando. The long journey west is fraught with danger for Fedorov's team when they encounter something bewildering and truly astounding, an incident that leads them deeper into the mystery of Rod-25.

Meanwhile, *Kirov* has put to sea and now forms the heart of a powerful battlegroup commanded by Captain Vladimir Karpov. He is soon confronted by the swift deployment of the American Carrier Strike Group Five out of Yokosuka Japan in a tense standoff at sea that threatens to explode into

violence at any moment. The fuse of conflict is lit across the globe, for the dread war has finally begun when the Chinese make good on their threat to secure their long wayward son—Taiwan. From the pulsing bitstream of the Internet, the deep void of outer space, the oil soaked waters of the Persian Gulf and Black Sea, to the riveting naval combat in the Pacific, the world descends in nine grueling days, swept up in the maelstrom and chaos of war.

This is the story of that deadly war to end all wars, and the desperate missions from the future and past to find the one man who can prevent it from ever happening, Gennadi Orlov. Can the mystery of Rod-25 and Orlov be solved before the ICBMs are finally launched?

Kirov Saga: *Fallen Angels ~ Kirov Series, Book VI*

The war continues on both land and sea as China invades Taiwan and North Korea joins to launch a devastating attack. Yet *Kirov* and the heart of the Red Banner Pacific Fleet has vanished, blown into the past by the massive wrath of the Demon Volcano. There Captain Karpov finds himself at the dying edge of the last great war, yet his own inner demons now wage war with his conscience as he contemplates another decisive intervention.

After secretly assisting the Soviet invasion of the Kuriles and engaging a small US scouting force in the region, Karpov has drawn the attention of Admiral Halsey's powerful 3rd Fleet. Now Halsey sends one of the toughest fighting Admirals of the war north to investigate, the hero of the Battle off Samar, Ziggy Sprague, and fast and furious sea battles are the order of the day.

Meanwhile tensions rise in the Black Sea as the Russian mission to rescue Fedorov and Orlov has now been expanded to include a way to try and deliver new control rods to *Kirov* from the same batch and lot as the mysterious Rod-25. Will they work? Yet Admiral Volsky learns that the Russian Black Sea Fleet has engaged well escorted units of a British oil conveyor, Fairchild Inc., and the fires of war soon endanger his mission.

All efforts are now focused on a narrow stretch of coastline on the Caspian Sea, where men of war from the future and past are locked in a desperate struggle to decide the outcome of history itself. Naval combat, both future and past, combine with action and intrigue as Volsky's mission is launched and the mystery of Rod-25 and Fedorov's strange experience on the Trans-Siberian Rail is finally revealed. Can they stop the nuclear holocaust of the Third World War in 2021 or will it begin off the coast of Japan in 1945?

Kirov Saga: *Devil's Garden ~ Kirov Series, Book VII*

The stunning continuation to the *Kirov* saga extends the action, both past and present, as the prelude to the Great War moves into its final days. The last remnant of the Red Banner Pacific Fleet has fought its duel with Halsey in the Pacific, resorting to nuclear weapons in the last extreme—but what has happened to *Kirov* and *Orlan*?

Now the many story threads involving Fairchild Inc. and the desperate missions to find Orlov launched by both Haselden and Fedorov all converge in the vortex of time and fate on the shores of the Caspian Sea. Fedorov and Troyak lead an amphibious assault at Makhachkala, right into the teeth of the German advance. Meanwhile, Admiral Volsky and Kamenski read the chronology of events to peek at the outcome and discover the verdict of history. Can it still be changed?

Turn the page with Admiral Volsky and learn the fate of Orlov, Fedorov, Karpov and the world itself. Follow the strange and enigmatic figure of Sir Roger Ames, Duke of Elvington as he reveals a plot, and a plan, older than history itself on the windswept shores of Lindisfarne Castle.

The Meridian Series (Time Travel / Alternate History)

Book I: *Meridian – A Novel In Time*

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The adventure begins on the eve of the greatest experiment ever attempted—Time travel. As the project team meets for their final mission briefing, the last member, arriving late, brings startling news. Catastrophe threatens and the fate of the Western World hangs in the balance. But a visitor from another time arrives bearing clues that will carry the hope of countless generations yet to be born, and a desperate plea for help. The team is led to the Jordanian desert during WWI and the exploits of the fabled Lawrence of Arabia.

Book II: *Nexus Point*

The project team members slowly come to the realization that a “Time War” is being waged by unseen adversaries in the future. The quest for an ancient fossil leads to an amazing discovery hidden in the Jordanian desert. A

mysterious group of assassins plot to decide the future course of history, just one battle in a devious campaign that will span the Meridians of time, both future and past. Exciting Time travel adventure in the realm of the Crusades!

Book III: *Touchstone*

When Nordhausen follows a hunch and launches a secret time jump mission on his own, he uncovers an operation being run by unknown adversaries from the future. The incident has dramatic repercussions for Kelly Ramer, his place in the time line again threatened by paradox. Kelly's fate is somehow linked to an ancient Egyptian artifact, once famous the world over, and now a forgotten slab of stone. The result is a harrowing mission to Egypt during the time frame of Napoleon's 1799 invasion.

Book IV: *Anvil of Fate*

The cryptic ending of *Touchstone* dovetails perfectly into this next volume as Paul insists that Kelly has survived, and is determined to bring him safely home. Only now is the true meaning of the stela unearthed at Rosetta made apparent—a grand scheme to work a catastrophic transformation of the Meridians, so dramatic and profound in its effect that the disaster at Palma was only a precursor. The history leads them to the famous Battle of Tours where Charles Martel strove to stem the tide of the Moorish invaders and save the west from annihilation. Yet more was at stake on the *Anvil of Fate* than the project team first realized, and they now pursue the mystery of two strange murders that will decide the fate of Western Civilization itself!

Book V: *Golem 7*

Nordhausen is back with new research and his hand on the neck of the new terrorist behind the much feared "Palma Event." Now the project team struggles to discover how and where the Assassins have intervened to restore the chaos of Palma, and their search leads them on one of the greatest naval sagas of modern history—the hunt for the battleship *Bismarck*. For some unaccountable reason the fearsome German battleship was not sunk on its maiden voyage, and now the project team struggles to put the ship back in its watery grave. Meet Admiral John Tovey and Chief of Staff "Daddy" Brind as the Royal Navy begins to receive mysterious intelligence from an agent known only as "Lonesome Dove." Exciting naval action and top notch research characterize this fast paced alternate history of the sinking of the

Bismarck.

Note: Golem 7 is the book that led author John Schettler to continue his exploration of alternate history naval fiction in the breakthrough Kirov series trilogy.

Historical Fiction

Taklamakan ~ The Land Of No Return

It was one of those moments on the cusp of time, when Tando Ghazi Khan, a simple trader of tea and spice, leads a caravan to the edge of the great desert, and becomes embroiled in the struggle that will decide the fate of an empire and shake all under heaven and earth. A novel of the Silk Road, the empire of Tibet clashes with T'ang China on the desolate roads that fringe the Taklamakan desert, and one man holds the key to victory in a curious map that guards an ancient secret hidden for centuries.

Khan Tengri ~ Volume II of Taklamakan

Learn the fate of Tando, Drekk, and the others in this revised and extended version of Part II of Taklamakan, with a 30,000 word, 7 chapter addition. Tando and his able scouts lead the Tibetan army west to Khotan, but they are soon confronted by a powerful T'ang army, and threatened by treachery and dissention within their own ranks. Their paths join at a mysterious shrine hidden in the heart of the most formidable desert on earth where each one finds more than they imagined, an event that changes their lives forever.

The Dharman Series: Science Fiction

Wild Zone ~ Classic Science Fiction – Volume I

A shadow has fallen over earth's latest and most promising colony prospect in the Dharma system. When a convulsive solar flux event disables communications with the Safe Zone, special agent Timothy Scott Ryan is rushed to the system on a navy frigate to investigate. He soon becomes embroiled in a mystery that threatens the course of evolution itself as a virulent new organism has targeted mankind as a new host. Aided by three robotic aids left in the colony facilities, Ryan struggles to solve the mystery

of Dharma VI, and the source of the strange mutation in the life forms of the planet. Book I in a trilogy of riveting classic sci-fi novels.

Mother Heart ~ Sequel to Wild Zone – Volume II

Ensign Lydia Gates is the most important human being alive, for her blood holds the key to synthesizing a vaccine against the awful mutations spawned by the Colony Virus. Ryan and Caruso return to the Wild Zone to find her, discovering more than they bargained for when microbiologist Dr. Elena Chandros is found alive, revealing a mystery deeper than time itself at the heart of the planet, an ancient entity she has come to call “Mother Heart.”

Dream Reaper ~ A Mythic Mystery/Horror Novel

There was something under the ice at Steamboat Slough, something lost, buried in the frozen wreckage where the children feared to play. For Daniel Byrne, returning to the old mission site near the Yukon where he taught school a decade past, the wreck of an old steamboat becomes more than a tale told by the village elders. In a mystery weaving the shifting imagery of a dream with modern psychology and ancient myth, Daniel struggles to solve the riddle of the old wreck and free himself from the haunting embrace of a nightmare older than history itself. It has been reported through every culture, in every era of human history, a malevolent entity that comes in the night... and now it has come for him!

“Every book, every volume you see here, has a soul. The soul of the person who wrote it and of those who read it and lived and dreamed with it. Every time a book changes hands, every time someone runs his eyes down its pages, its spirit grows and strengthens.”

— Carlos Ruiz Zafón, *The Shadow of the Wind*

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—Nathaniel Hawthorne

The pleasure has been mine in writing this; my friends have all been gratified, now it's your turn! Spread the good word, and thank you so much for reading! If any of you have questions, thoughts or observations please feel free to email me at john@writingshop.ws. I answer every email I receive.

John Schettler

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