Kirov Saga:

Hinge Of Fate

Altered States

Volume III

By

John Schettler
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“Fate is like a strange, unpopular restaurant filled with odd little waiters who bring you things you never asked for and don't always like.”

— Lemony Snicket
About: _Altered States: Volume III ~ Hinge of Fate_

As Alan Turing pursues the baffling discovery of the strange cache of information code named *Geronimo*, Admiral Volsky sails to meet with the British on the Faeroes, bearing an offer of formal alliance between Soviet Russia and Great Britain. There Tovey learns the startling truth behind the mysterious ship that has haunted him all his life.

Sergeant Troyak’s mission aboard airship *Narva* faces danger and mystery on the Stony Tunguska, even while elements of two other airship fleets converge on the inn at Ilanskiy—the hinge of fate.

Meanwhile, Hitler hopes to secure another vital ally so that he can breathe life into Admiral Raeder’s long advocated Mediterranean strategy. It will begin with *Operation Felix* the assault on Gibraltar. As Britain steels itself for possible invasion, the Royal Navy must now rally to the defense of the embattled garrison at Gibraltar, England’s Rock in the Med, another hinge of fate that could turn the entire course of the war should it fall. Opposing them are the three elite regiments of the German Army, and a resurgent Kriegsmarine led by a fearsome new gladiator, the *Hindenburg*.

*Action, mystery and intrigue pulse through this compelling continuation of the amazing Kirov Saga!*
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Part I – Revelations
Part II – Confrontation
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  Epilogue
“It is the past that tells us who we are. Without it, we lose our identity.”

—Steven Hawking
Part I

Revelations

“Nothing in this world is hidden forever. The gold which has lain for centuries unsuspected in the ground, reveals itself one day on the surface. Sand turns traitor, and betrays the footprint that has passed over it. Fire itself leaves the confession, in ashes, of the substance consumed in it... Look where we will, the inevitable law of revelation is one of the laws of nature: the lasting preservation of a secret is a miracle which the world has never yet seen.”

— Wilkie Collins
Chapter 1

The Faroe Islands was a lonesome outpost on the wild and windy frontier that marked the boundary between the Norwegian Sea and the Atlantic Ocean. A place that aspired to be nothing more than a quiet backwater settlement of fishermen and sheep herders, it had become a vital watch on those contested waters, a border outpost in a sea of war that would soon prove to be a hinge of fate.

Presently under the sovereignty of the Kingdom of Denmark, the small island group had been chosen as the meeting place between two nations that now stood in the darkening shadows of war. The tall brown cliffs of the islands were crowned with broad green pastures, where sheep grazed in unknowing bliss. At places, soaring spires of rock rose like stony sails along the ragged coast, and pristine falls of water plummeted to the sea in pearly white columns. Small hamlets crowded the coastline in sheltered bays, the bright red and blue rooftops of the buildings adding a splash of color to the pastoral scene.

Some said the hardy folk that lived there had first come from the Viking outposts in the seas around Ireland, while others claimed that the settlers first came from Norway and Scandinavia. They were called the Eyja-Skeggjar, the Island-Beards of old, doughty, dour faced men with hands as hard as stone. Following the invasion of Denmark by Nazi Germany, the Faroe Islands were occupied by British troops in Operation Valentine, on April 12, 1940.

Two destroyers, Halvant and Hesperus, formed the vanguard of British occupation, politely arranging a meeting with the Danish Prefect, Carl Aage Hilbert. The next day the Royal Navy cruiser HMS Suffolk arrived at Tórshavn, the seat of authority on the island archipelago, bringing Frederick Mason, the appointed British Consul, along with 250 Royal Marines. A passing protest was duly filed, but then the locals welcomed the British, realizing that their fate could be a good deal worse if German Falschirmjaegers were landing that day in place of the British troops.

Churchill made the announcement to the House of Commons just as the operation was getting underway: “We are also at this moment occupying the Faroe Islands, which belong to Denmark and which are a strategic point of
high importance, and whose people showed every disposition to receive us with warm regard. We shall shield the Faroe Islands from all the severities of war and establish ourselves there conveniently by sea and air until the moment comes when they will be handed back to Denmark, liberated from the foul thralldom into which they have been plunged by German aggression.”

The British quickly set up a naval base at Skálafjørður, a craggy outpost just south of the main Faroe Island near Torshavn, where they established their headquarters in the old fortress of Havnar Skansin. Naval guns were emplaced there for defense. The garrison was beefed up when the Royal Marines were replaced by 500 Lovat Scouts from Scotland, landing from the transport ship *Ulster Prince*. Just west of the main island, an airfield was constructed on Vagar Island, and heavily fortified. While the base was under construction, a long lake adjacent to the site served as a kind of water aerodrome, where seaplanes could land to deliver supplies and personnel. The base would allow the British to keep watchful eyes in the air over the vital passage to the Atlantic, a windy frontier outpost that was ever vigilant against the rising threat of the Kriegsmarine.

It was here, at the fledgling R.A.F. Vagar, that the meeting between Admiral Tovey and the Russians would be held. Tovey had been wise enough to say nothing to Dudley Pound of the startling revelations discovered by Alan Turing in the dusty archives of Bletchley Park. Instead he focused on the necessity of establishing a high level friendship and understanding of cooperation between the Russians and England, and he made his appeal directly to the Admiralty, saying he was in receipt of a message pointedly requesting his presence, and his alone, at the meeting to be arranged on the Faroe Islands.

Admiral Pound fluttered that British Admirals were not negotiators and diplomats, but men of war, and the prospect seemed in doubt due to his opposition, until a quiet knock on the door delivered a message from Churchill himself. Sergie Kirov had communicated directly with the Prime Minister, and asked, in no uncertain terms, that Tovey and Volsky make the first official contact concerning the matter. It was said that Admiral Volsky was now carrying a most important message, and Tovey was specifically named as the recipient.

*Kirov* anchored off the small islet of Gasholmur, seeing the proud
silhouette of HMS *Invincible* and three destroyers waiting just south of the sheer rocky outcrop known as Tinholmur, rising over 200 meters above the sea. Admiral Volsky, Fedorov, and Nikolin took the Admiral’s launch up a long, narrow fiord that led them to a muddy landing where a small concrete quay protected a tiny harbor. They stepped ashore, greeted by an honor guard of Royal Marines to escort them to the meeting site at a simple home near the airfield. It was a warm, comfortable place, with chairs arranged around a hearth where the glow of a fire cast its welcoming heat and light on all present.

Tovey was there with his translator and a few other officers, and they all stood to offer a cordial greeting as the Russians came in. “I have the very great pleasure to meet with you again,” said Tovey, shaking Volsky’s hand.

After smiles, handshakes, and an offering of hot tea, the men seated themselves, whereupon Tovey turned and asked every other man in his party to leave the room. “I shall be happy to rely on the translation provided by your mister Nikolin,” he said, “as I have no doubt that he will faithfully communicate the essence of what we must now discuss with one another.”

Volsky smiled, appreciating the candor and gesture of good will on Tovey’s part, but also perceiving something more in the dismissal of the other men. Better this way, he thought. This British Admiral wants to get down to business, and so shall we.

“Well Admiral Volsky, the last time we met under rather trying circumstances, and though we were not quick to accept your offer of support at that time, the actions you took during the engagement in the Denmark Strait did not go unnoticed, or unappreciated by the British government.”

“We were pleased to offer any assistance we could,” said Volsky as Nikolin translated. “I only wish we could have done more, but we remained uncertain at that time as to how much intervention would be wise, given the fact that I was flying the colors of a neutral state. While the weapons we employed could certainly not have been overlooked by anyone present, particularly the unfortunate German sailors we were forced to fire upon, we believe our ship was never properly identified by the German navy during that engagement.”

“All the better if that is the case.” Tovey rubbed his hands. “As to those weapons you speak of, they proved most startling. We have never seen such advanced application of rocketry, both in the role of an anti-ship weapon as
well as air defense. It was truly astounding.”

“These weapons are, in fact, the primary armament of my ship, Admiral. The deck guns you noted in our first meeting being nothing more than secondary weapons systems, as you surmised. Yet we find them very useful at times, and they are every bit as accurate as the rocketry you observed.”

“May I ask how you achieve this?”

“I’m afraid that would be a very long discussion. Let us simply say that we have developed a means of directing this fire by radar. You are aware of this technology?”

“Of course, though it is a relatively new development. Your systems must be very powerful to achieve this level of accuracy. If I am not being presumptuous, our government would be very much interested in learning more about this achievement. Is it common to all naval ships now deployed by Soviet Russia?”

“It is not. Our ship is unique in that respect. We were a secret project, a prototype.” Volsky adopted the cover Sergie Kirov had given him on the matter, thinking it a convenient way to avoid an explanation that might never be understood or accepted by Tovey. He was still having enough trouble understanding and accepting it himself.

“I see,” said Tovey. “Then this technology is in trials. Well, I should think you would be rather pleased with the results, and we would be eager to discuss these weapons further with you, if you would ever be so inclined. Great Britain is prepared to offer much in exchange for the friendship I hope you have brought here today.”

“And we would be pleased to offer much in return,” said Volsky. “That is exactly what I am now empowered to offer you, Admiral Tovey. I have met with Sergei Kirov in person, and I am also aware that back channel negotiations are now underway between his government and your own. But I am pleased and honored to be the first to formally confirm that Soviet Russia will now propose a general alliance and eternal friendship with Great Britain.”

Tovey beamed at that, as it was exactly what he hoped to secure here. “Admiral, I am grateful to be the man that receives this news, and I have no doubt that my government will eagerly embrace this offer. England stands alone in the West, yet Soviet Russia stands alone in the East. Between us lies a darkness spinning out a deadly gyre of war that now threatens to devour us
both. It is my firm belief, and that of my government, that only by joining arms together can either of us have any hope to survive.”

“Agreed, Admiral Tovey. And I will also say that together we can, and must, prevail.”

Tovey proposed a brief toast to the alliance, which would be formalized within days in London where Soviet negotiators were waiting on the outcome of this initial meeting. As the brandy warmed all present, Tovey looked at the Russians, the clear light of another matter now glowing in his eyes.

“Admiral Volsky,” he said quietly. “When I first met with you I had the distinct feeling that I had done so once before. Of course I dismissed it as the empty headedness of an old man, but I must confess that I remain somewhat haunted by this. I must now share with you a discovery that was made by our intelligence services. Frankly, I did not know what to make of it when it was first revealed to me. I found it quite shocking. If you will pardon the mystery for a moment, perhaps the best way I might proceed here would be to hand you this envelope.”

Tovey reached over to a side table where he had placed his briefcase, opening it to produce a plain Manila envelope. He stood, with some sense of gravity apparent in his features, and slowly handed it to Admiral Volsky.

Tovey had received the envelope from Alan Turing, as he had requested, and it contained five startling photographs of the Russian battlecruiser, all with those mysterious labels affixed to the back, all misdated one or two years hence. He sat down watching closely to gauge Volsky’s initial reaction as he opened the envelope. Just as he expected, the Russian Admiral’s eyes widened with great surprise. Then a look of bewilderment passed over his heavy features, and he looked immediately to his attending Captain, the man named Fedorov, who was equally astonished as he took the photographs, slowly flipping from one to the next. The Russians spoke to one another, an urgent energy in their voices. Nikolin did not know whether he should translate, but Volsky quickly told him to ask where the photographs had come from. The answer he received was equally perplexing.

“You may immediately come to believe that those photographs were taken in the course of our earlier meeting, but I assure you, they were not. I must also be frank in saying that the authenticity of these images has been questioned, though they would have to be the work of a real expert if they are fraudulent. Is there any light you might possibly shed on that question?”
There, Tovey had tossed the hot potato to the Russians and watched them pass it back and forth, with much discussion between Fedorov and Volsky that went untranslated until the Admiral apologized.

“My Admiral asks you to forgive him for a very brief moment, sir,” said Nikolin. “He needs to discuss something with Mister Fedorov.”

“Well Fedorov?” said Volsky. “What do you make of all this? We both know what those photos show. This one is that attack we suffered in the Tyrrhenian Sea, the very same one that sent me plummeting from that ladder and into a lengthy stay with Doctor Zolkin. I am certain of it. And this one here is clearly the moment of our departure from the Straits of Gibraltar, under the flag of truce I negotiated with this very same man! How could this be? That was in 1942!”

“I’m as shocked to see these as you are, sir,” said Fedorov. “But even more shocking is the notion that these could have been forged. That could not happen. How could anyone of this day and time, of this world, be privy to knowledge of those specific events to create something like this? Those landforms are very telling. That is Cape Spartel west of Tangier. And look at this one, sir! It was obviously taken from the shore, and note the ships in the background. Those are King George V class battleships, and I count four!”

Volsky raised a hand. “Forgive us, Admiral Tovey. Just a moment more.” He nodded to Nikolin to translate that. Then to Fedorov he said, “You are correct Fedorov. No one in this world could think to create such photographs as a forgery. And I must tell you that last image of the British fleet in the Western approaches is stunning. It is my very own recollection of that moment, made real in this photograph. I must conclude that these images are authentic, but how?”

“I don’t know how it could be possible, sir.” Fedorov seemed completely flummoxed. Beyond that, how could they possibly explain this to Admiral Tovey? It was a profound mystery. “I can only propose one thing, sir. Remember what Kamenski said when I revealed the strange properties of that stairway at Ilanskiy? He said there may be other places on earth where these rifts in time persisted. Could someone have brought this material from another time? After all, the existence of these photographs is no more startling than our own presence in this room at this moment.”

Volsky nodded. “Agreed. But now I think we have been impolite long enough.” He turned to Admiral Tovey, fixing him with a lingering look,
deciding something in a tense moment that might open the doors of mayhem and madness here. But there was no other course as he saw it then. To deny the images would plant a seed of suspicion, which was not what he had come to do. What did Tovey know about them? He had to explore the matter further.

“Please translate everything said from this moment forward, Mister Nikolin. Admiral Tovey, I ask your forgiveness again, but I needed to consult with Mister Fedorov here. As you may have seen, these photographs are somewhat surprising, but you will now be equally astonished to learn that they do, indeed, appear to present moments I have personally experienced. We do not think they are forgeries. Please tell me how you came by them?”

Even though Tovey half expected and hoped he might hear such an answer, it nonetheless came as a shock. The Russian Admiral was telling him these photographs were authentic? How? How could that be so? He hesitated, ever so slightly, then spoke, resolved to dig yet a little deeper into the mystery.

“Well, to answer your question, Admiral, these images came from material collected by our intelligence networks—at least it gives every appearance of that. They were all carefully labeled and organized in a file box—all arranged according to our normal formats and protocols. If you happened to review the labels on the back of those photos you will see one thing that gave me reason to believe this was all an elaborate hoax. You see, they are all date stamped in the years 1941 and 1942. This being an impossibility, I came to suggest that these photos were fabrications. Are you telling me now that you believe them to be genuine?”

“That is exactly the case. They clearly depict events that remain fresh in my memory, and that fact alone is convincing evidence that they could not be forgeries. Who could anticipate or dream up events as shown in these photos with such accuracy?”

That set Tovey back a moment. “Were they taken earlier this year? I was not aware you were in the Mediterranean.”

“Not this year,” said Volsky with just the hint of some unspoken truth in his tone.

Tovey did not quite know what he meant by that. His thought was that these were photos of the ship taken by some other intelligence service or military arm earlier this year, and then tampered with through some darkroom
witchery as he had proposed it to Turing. The four *King George V* class battleships and the deliberate misdating were damning evidence to that effect. Then the Russian Admiral spoke again, and his next words burst open the dike Tovey had his finger of disbelief firmly planted in since he had first seen the images himself.

“Now I will reveal something that you may find to be quite disturbing, Admiral Tovey. A moment ago you told me that you had the feeling that we had met before. That is so. You may now think me a crazy old fool, but the meeting we had in the Denmark Strait some weeks ago was not the first time you and I have spoken with each other, strange as that may sound to you now. We have, indeed, met before. This photo was taken some hours after that very meeting, which occurred on a small island near your base at Gibraltar.”

The minute that Volsky said that, Tovey was struck with a powerful sensation of déjà vu, a shadow of a deeply hidden memory upwelling in his mind, yet one he could simply not grasp. The barest fragment emerged in his consciousness, a place, a name.

“Las Palomas,” he said quietly. “That was the place, wasn’t it?”

Volsky smiled.
Chapter 2

Tovey’s pulse began to quicken as Nikolin translated, the yawning realization opening in his mind now that was pushing this whole matter to the edge of oblivion—sheer lunacy! For one other thing that Alan Turing had included in that Manila envelope had been a copy of the report Tovey had written summing up the very same meeting and discussion that Admiral Volsky had just mentioned! He thought it all part of the carefully contrived deception, but here was an independent source, having no connection to British intelligence whatsoever, calmly referencing the meeting his report labored to describe! A meeting that he would swear had never happened, yet one he felt on some inner level to be a reality.

Tovey was dazed, beside himself with the implications that gathered like ravenous wolves about the fading campfire of his mind. Yet even though he thought he was doing nothing more than courting folly, he ventured another question. “If such a meeting took place, Admiral, might you tell me what was agreed between us there?”

“Of course. The same thing we have just set our minds to here—a truce. We found ourselves at odds, and rather than continue a struggle that could do neither of us any good, I agreed to proceed to the Island of St. Helena in the South Atlantic in exchange for free passage of the Straits of Gibraltar and a pledge of non-belligerency in the war that is before us both now.”

There it was, chapter and verse as Tovey’s own report had described the meeting, and the agreement that was negotiated—a meeting he knew he had never taken with this man, particularly on the dates listed! Yet Tovey persisted, if only to test the fullness of the mayhem that was now before him.

“I must tell you that I am a very busy man, and one sometimes given to forgetfulness, but I could never put from my mind a meeting of such importance. I have no recollection of ever seeing you, or ever speaking with you before we first met aboard HMS Invincible, though I have harbored, as I confessed, a lingering feeling that we had met. Now you sit there and describe the very substance and purpose of that meeting, and it corresponds precisely with this report on the matter—a report supposedly written by my own hand by all appearances, but one I would swear before any court that I have never contemplated, let alone produced. It would seem logical for me to
assume you are somehow connected to this document, and perhaps to all the others found in the box I have mentioned. One more question, before I certify myself as hopelessly insane, or conclude that you are a part of a grand deception. The date... Do you recall just when this meeting was supposed to have occurred between us? Even if my own memory has failed me, my whereabouts are fairly well documented.”

Fedorov leaned over and whispered something to Admiral Volsky now, and he nodded. “My Captain here informs me now, as my recollection is a bit like Swiss cheese at times as well. But there will be no record you can produce documenting your whereabouts in this regard—except perhaps that report you have referred to. The date... Forgive me if what I now say gives you every reason to think that I, too, am insane, or playing some macabre game with you here. I assure you that I am not guilty on both counts. The date of this meeting was August 14, and a little after 17:00, in the year 1942.”

The log on the fire popped loudly, as if in protest to the facts that Admiral Volsky asserted. It was the very same information documented in the report Turing had forwarded. They all jumped at the sound, then sat there, looking at one another like marked men, and certainly bound for the only place where any of this would make even the slightest bit if sense—bedlam.

Tovey gave the Russians a narrow eyed look. Could these men, this ship, all be part and parcel with the same plot that produced that box of material Turing fished out of the archives? Why would anyone contrive a story like this? He could think of no reason, but reason was not the order of the day, or the moment here. This was all entirely unreasonable, completely irrational, some perverse joke the world was playing on them, or a devious plot that Turing may have inadvertently stumbled upon.

He shored up his will, resolved to get to the bottom of this here and now. “The date you have given me is exactly what I see noted here on this report—yet preposterous. I have read the popular novel by our own Mister H. G. Wells on the matter of time travel, gentlemen. In fact I read it many years ago, as a young boy of ten when it was first published. But I am not given to such flights of fancy, so it should be clear to us all here that this notion that we have met at some future time is poppycock... And yet.... I have had a long look at the material in this archive, and I find it all rather disconcerting in a way that is difficult to explain. It documents that our first meeting was in combat, with me aboard a battleship that we have only just commissioned
into the fleet. So this entire box is either a wonderful work of fiction, like our Mister Wells’ story, or I’m a bullfrog. Then I sit here and look at those photographs, note your own astonished reactions to the same, and am I to assume you are all in league with the perpetrator of this fiction?"

Admiral Volsky sighed. He could either agree now that this was all a hoax and spare this man the trip down the rabbit hole he had been forced to take, or he could reveal the impossible truth that he had lived with and would continue to live with here—a truth that could simply not be hidden any longer as he saw things. Then he thought of Ivan Volkov, Vladimir Karpov, and even Sergei Kirov, all men who had also taken that same impossible journey through time, all key players now in the shattered reality of this world. The truth, as impossible as it seemed, was his only recourse.

“Admiral Tovey, I could spend hours trying to explain what I am now about to tell you, but I think there is a better way. You were kind enough to invite me aboard your ship. May I suggest now that you take a moment to visit me aboard Kirov? There you will have the answer to all your questions, and if the evidence of your own eyes is not something you can believe, then I will join you in happy retirement to your Bethlem Royal Hospital, and the two of us can sit out the remainder of this war as a pair of crazy old fools.”

* * *

‘Let us go then, you and I, When the evening is spread out against the sky, Like a patient etherized upon a table…’ Tovey ran the words of T. S. Eliot through his mind now as they made their way through the small settlement towards the Admiral’s launch by the quay. ‘There will be time, there will be time… time to murder and create, And time for all the works and days of hands That lift and drop a question on your plate; Time for you and time for me, And time yet for a hundred indecisions, And for a hundred visions and revisions, Before the taking of a toast and tea…’

The ship loomed in the lee of the tall stony sail of Tinholmur rock, thrust up from the hidden depths below in some upwelling of chaos in the earth itself, its sharp, jagged edge still unweathered by wind and rain over the centuries. As he looked at the ship he felt that its sharp metallic lines were also the product of chaos, something wholly unaccountable, out of place, a misfit in time. It was as if this strange ship had haunted his nightmares all his
He thought once that his recollection of that harrowing moment aboard *King Alfred* in the Pacific had been the source of this long steeped anxiety. One moment he was charging ahead into battle, leading in the British China Squadron, his forward cannon blasting away at the ominous shadow on the sea. The next moment the distant ship seemed to be enveloped in haze, a green mist, luminescent, like the artful and eerie dance of Saint Elmo’s Fire in the high mast at the edge of a storm.

The ship just seemed to vanish, presumed sunk, but with no wreckage ever found in the shallow waters near Iki Island in the Tsushima Strait. So the official report would state that it was obliterated, though Tovey could recall no explosion big enough to destroy a ship of that size. It was a deep mystery, and the report was since lost to the weathering of time and events. Yet he always thought about it, the ship that took the Captain’s life and thrust him into his first daring moment of command.

Now as he drew near to the broad hull of the battlecruiser *Kirov*, he felt a strange magnetism, a connection, linking his life and fate to the cold metal hull and decks and battlements of this vessel. The closer he came, the more he felt that compelling sense of discovery, as if he was finally to have the answer to a stubborn question that had lingered in his mind all his life. It was here… It was this ship… It was *Geronimo*.

He could stop now, just here beneath the lowering curve of the ship’s hull, the edge of uncertainty. ‘*Do I dare Disturb the universe? In a minute there is time For decisions and revisions which a minute will reverse.*’

The growl of the small boat’s engine stilled and they came along side. Seamen at the bow of the boat tossed up the rope to tie it off. Tovey felt his arms and legs moving almost mechanically as he climbed up from the Admiral’s launch, onto the metal stairwell that had been lowered from above. It was as if he was crossing some barrier now, between the real world he had known and lived in all his life, and a world of twilight and mystery where everything he had ever learned was to be called into question.

He could feel the old and familiar slipping from his grasp with every step he took, as if he was forfeiting the safety and comfort of his old life, and the innocence of unknowing that had been his before this moment, the propriety and civility of an English gentleman’s life, the calm, rational framework that was the core of his personality. ‘*For I have known them all already, known*
them all: Have known the evenings, mornings, afternoons, I have measured out my life with coffee spoons…’

Who was he, really? What was he? How did he come to be here? These were questions that one asked of the night and stars above, in quiet moments alone, in the solitude of inner thought. Now it would all be called into question and profound doubt. Step beyond that gunwale and onto the deck of chaos and uncertainty, he thought, but he pressed on nonetheless.

He heard the familiar high strain of the boatswain’s pipe. Not one, but two Admirals would now walk the decks of the mighty Kirov. An honor guard in dress whites awaited him, and the Marines snapped to attention, bayonets gleaming at the end of their rifles.

Admiral Volsky had gone first, so as to welcome him again with another hearty handshake when he came up. “Please walk with me, Admiral Tovey,” he said. “I will now give you a tour of the most marvelous ship in the world—in this world or any other. You will see much here that is familiar to your eye, the men below decks in their dungarees and striped naval shirts, the sweat and toil of the matros, that we call our able seamen, the mishman, or midshipman, the starshini, or petty officers all falling to their evolutions to keep this ship running smoothly. The bulkheads and hatches and ladders up and down will all feel like any ship to you, but the places they lead you to will be quite different, quite astonishing.”

They walked the ship, touring the outer decks first as Volsky pointed out the broad domes covering radars and communications equipment, and the ceaseless rotation of the Fregat system high above them.

“With that we can see out to a range of 300 kilometers. You may not believe this but it is quite true.”

“But that would be well over the horizon, Admiral. How is this possible?”

“I wish I could tell you that. All I know is what I hear when my radar man, who is now the Starpom of this ship, tells me when he reports a new contact.”

“Starpom?”

“Ah, that would be the name we give to our Executive Officer, “Mister Rodenko. You will meet him when we visit the bridge. But first, let us have a little stroll on the forward deck.”

Fedorov could hear the pride in the Admiral’s voice as he led Tovey on, and he felt it as well. This was, indeed, the finest ship in the world. While he
had passed moments of real trepidation when Volsky proposed he would reveal their true nature and origin to the British Admiral, now he had come to realize that this was inevitable from the first moment they decided to remain here and intervene instead of taking their chances again with the control rods.

Admiral Volsky had the men attending their party summon a missile deck engineer, and open one of the many hatches there. The sharp, dangerous nose of a Moskit-II was seen waiting silently in its vertical silo, like a sleeping monster waiting to be called to life.

“That is one of the missiles you witnessed—actually not this particular model. This one is much bigger than the rockets we used against the Germans. And now you will hear what I say next with disbelief, but I will tell you the truth. This rocket can hit a fly on a wall, and at a range of 222 kilometers, that is 120 of your English miles. The warhead is 450 kilograms, nearly a thousand English pounds.”

Tovey was more than impressed. The interior of the silo was immaculate, the missile threatening in every line and aspect. There was clearly technology and knowhow on this ship far in excess of anything he could imagine possible. Was the admiral merely boasting to make an impression? Could this missile hit its target over a hundred miles away? How would it see it? He asked this, and got an answer.

“Those radars tell it the general location of the target, and then when it is in flight it uses its own radar, right there in the nose, to have a look for itself. It is extremely accurate.”

“My God, your advances in radar technology must be very far ahead of our own.”

“Come, now I will show you my bridge.”

They made their way up, climbing ladders and stairways, and in time came in through the aft hatch of the main citadel.

“Admiral on the bridge!” Rodenko’s voice was sharp and clear, and Tovey needed no translation to know what he had said when every officer and watchstander snapped to attention.

“As you were, gentlemen. Admiral, may I present the ship’s Executive Officer, Grigori Rodenko, a very able man. He will show you the control interfaces and systems we use to receive the data those big radar dishes send here.”

Rodenko walked them from station to station, describing the equipment as
Nikolin translated, and noting its basic purpose. They toured Radar and then Sonar, where Tasarov waited quietly beneath his headset.

“We could hear the approach of a German U-Boat from over twenty kilometers away, and if we were simply listening for your ship, we would hear it coming at many times that range.”

Then came to the combat information center, aglow with lights and status panels, where the Admiral introduced Victor Samsonov. “Here is my strong right arm, Admiral Tovey. This man executes battle orders to deliver the appropriate ordnance on the target, and he is very efficient, as the German navy has already seen.”

Tovey was taking this all in, one amazing fact after another. The electronic devices that seemed to be everywhere hummed with quiet energy. There were no telescopes for sighting on distant ships, no voice pipes for the officer of the watch to bawl out orders to stations below. Instead there was an enormous flat black panel overhead that suddenly came to life with the image of his own ship, HMS *Invincible*, where it road at anchor behind a screen of destroyers hundreds of yards away. To his utter astonishment the image was zoomed in at Admiral Volsky’s request, and Tovey gaped when he clearly saw men he recognized standing on the weather deck at their watches. The resolution and clarity of the image was impeccable.

“Now let us retire to the officer’s dining room for dinner. I am eager to repay your hospitality in hosting us for lunch some weeks ago, and there is much we have to discuss.”
Chapter 3

If a man could eat the finest cut of steak and not taste it, that was Tovey’s experience that night, so focused as he was on what the Russian Admiral was telling him.

“So you have seen this ship, and I can imagine you find it more than uncommon.” Volsky set down his napkin, taking a sip of wine as he finished. “Your next question is obvious. How could Soviet Russia build such a ship, develop such advanced weaponry, electronics, radar, and more? There are things hidden behind those glowing consoles and screens that I have not mentioned, Admiral. We have a machine that allows us to make precise calculations, faster than the speed of thought itself. The application of these weapons requires it, the hand of man being simply too slow to adequately manage these weapons once they are unleashed. The world I come from demands such precision, and a matter of even a few seconds could make the difference between life or death in battle there.”

“The world you come from? I will admit that the nature and capabilities of the weapons and machinery you have shown me here seems otherworldly, but what do you mean by that?”

“Consider it yourself, Admiral. You have seen the development of military science, and know it can be plodding at times, and take great leaps at others. But how long do you think it would be before you might have missiles that can do what you have seen us demonstrate?”

Tovey was a realist, and knew that Britain had very little to show by way of rocket development. “I must say it would take us a good number of years.”

“Precisely, decades in fact. By the end of this war you will see the emergence of this technology. After that it will grow and grow until it can do things you would not imagine now.”

“You speak of this as though you have already lived through this war and well beyond,” said Tovey with a smile. “Surely this is mere conjecture. Your engineers and scientists have developed this technology, and ours will as well one day. Perhaps you might hasten that day with a gesture of friendship and give us a leg up in that regard.”

“We would be happy to do so, but these weapons and the machinery that
controls them are very complex, as you might imagine. They require advances in many fields, aviation, flight mechanics, ballistics, metallurgy, solid fuel development, guidance mechanisms, and so on. These things all take time…”

He leaned on that last word, clearly intending it to matter and convey something more than he had said. Nikolin caught the innuendo, and did his best to translate it in a way that Tovey would understand.

The British Admiral waited, saying nothing, arms folded as he listened. Then Admiral Volsky gave him a long, serious look, and exhaled, resigned to what he must now do.

“Admiral Tovey, nothing I have shown you here could be built by any engineering firm of this day. You could set your entire war effort to the task, the Germans as well, and that of every other nation on earth, including Soviet Russia. Together they would labor to produce just a fraction of the capability we now possess. These things take time, and that is the heart of the matter. A ship this size would take years to design and build, would it not? It would take enormous resources, but I must tell you now that this ship was not built in the last five years as you might think. There are things aboard that could not be built, even if we were to wait fifty years. This ship was not built by the Soviet Russia you now know. It was built in the distant future… There. I have finally said it.”

“The future? Are we to discuss H. G. Wells and his Time Machine now?” Tovey felt a mixture of surprise, outrage and shock, but behind it was a throbbing pulse of anxiety that warned of the truth, a dangerous and deadly truth in everything this man was now saying. It was something he had known once, discovered once, set a long and guarded watch on. Yes… the Watch! That word resonated within him now, and he could feel that awful sense that he knew something that he could simply not clarify and grasp, like the fading recollection of a dream as it fled from his waking mind. He knew…

“Time machine? That would hit very close to the bone,” said Volsky. “This ship was commissioned into the Russian Navy in the year 2020. An accident occurred while we were underway in the Norwegian Sea, something we now believe is associated with our highly advanced propulsion system, and we found ourselves strangely marooned, lost, adrift in the seas of the year 1941.”

“1941? It hasn’t happened yet!” Tovey’s rational mind voiced the obvious
protest, but his inner mind knew it had happened, he had lived it through. Everything in that damnable box Turing had wrestled away from the cobwebs in the archive of BP—it was all true!

“No it hasn’t happened here yet. Not for you, Admiral, but for us, for every man aboard this ship, this war is very old history that we have studied at school and long forgotten. Now I will tell you what happened to us. We were spotted by one of your Royal Navy task forces. Appearing as we did in the Norwegian Sea, I believe they assumed we were a German raider. At that time we were struggling, even as you must be now, to come to grips with what had happened to us. It simply could not be, we thought. It was impossible for us to find ourselves displaced to another time, like the story you have mentioned. But, little by little, the evidence of our own eyes persuaded us that it was the truth, an impossible truth, and a very dangerous one. Mister Fedorov, who was the Admiral commanding the task force that first discovered us?”

“Admiral Wake-Walker, sir.”

“There—a man you may know personally, Admiral Tovey. Well, I am sad to report that the misunderstanding and confusion of mind on both sides led to a situation where we were forced to defend ourselves. It was a small disagreement in the beginning. This Wake-Walker wanted to see if we were, indeed, a new German ship, and we could not allow him to make a close approach to our vessel. I was forced to fire on one of your destroyers, and the rest, as happens all too often in war, was a sad repetition of that mistake. Your Royal Navy is quite efficient, and in fact, you were in command at that time, even as you are now. Your pursuit of my ship was dogged and determined, and it resulted in some rather difficult moments for us both.”

Tovey could almost see all this in his mind’s eye as Admiral Volsky described it, feel the anxiety of the chase, the impact of a rocket against the armor of his flagship.

“Then we were enemies?”

“Sadly true,” said Volsky. “We made our way to the Mediterranean Sea, and even fought a duel with your own battleships there… What were their names, Mister Fedorov?”

“Nelson and Rodney, sir”

“Yes. I was indisposed at the time, because the photograph of one of your planes strafing this ship was real, Admiral, and I was seriously injured during
that attack. Mister Fedorov here was in command at the time. And so you see, all the material you presented to me ashore was very surprising for us to see, for we knew it was authentic, moments we have fought and lived through, at great cost to both sides. Yes, men died on this ship in action against your fleet, and I am afraid a good many more died on your ships. I could spend hours talking about it, but in an effort to return to our own day, we tried a procedure with our propulsion system, and were able to move again in time. Unfortunately, the end of that journey now finds us here, where we appeared just weeks ago very near one of your convoys south of Iceland. Mister Fedorov?”

“Convoy HX-49, sir, just off Cape Farewell.”

Tovey sat in stunned silence, his mind laboring to protest this lunacy, but muted now by the awful weight of the feeling he had carried that all this was true. Finally he spoke... “I have read my Dickens as well, Admiral Tovey. Are you saying you now appear to me like the Ghost of Christmas yet to come? That all these engagements you say we have fought are fated to re-occur?”

“No. That need not be the case. Quite frankly, the world as it now stands does not seem to be the one we left. This will also be difficult for you to grasp, but the history we knew did not see our homeland divided in civil war as it is. The Soviet Union was exactly that, a strong union of all the states that now make up what was once Imperial Russia under the Romanov dynasty. No... We now believe the actions we took in the events documented in that box of yours are responsible for the radical changes to the history we have learned about since our arrival here—in 1940. We tried, many times, to clean up the mess we had made and set things right, but you have a nursery rhyme about a fat egg man that falls off a wall, do you not?”

“Humpty Dumpty?”

“That is the one. Well, we, too, learned that all the King’s horses, and all the King’s men could not put the world back together again as it was. We are living in an altered reality now—a world we helped to shape with our own damnable incompetence and short-sightedness. So this time when we appeared here I realized it was no good trying to mend things again, but a man my age will not easily make the same mistake twice. You and I were adversaries in that other world. This time I decided things differently. Yes, Admiral, we did meet once before, and we found reason and good will could
trump our enmity. We made peace, you and I. This time I wanted to make a friend of the Royal Navy, and not have to relive the events we had already experienced. So here we are.” He smiled, holding up his glass and taking a long sip of much needed wine. “Here we are at dinner with the Admiral of the British Home Fleet!”

Now Fedorov spoke, wanting to voice a matter he had puzzled over since Tovey first handed them those photographs. “If I may, Admiral, we find ourselves equally bemused by all of this. As you may have seen, we were quite shocked to see the photographs in that envelope you handed us, and I cannot think of how that material, this box you say you have, ever came into your possession at all! It stands as a deep mystery, for those are images from the world we came from—not this world.”

“They certainly could not have been taken in the world I know,” Tovey agreed as Nikolin quickly translated.

“Yes, you yourself know that you have only two ships ready in the King George V class now, yet that photo you handed me clearly showed four. That photo is a remnant from another time, and it images an event that now may never occur. The thought that photograph could even exist now is most disturbing; completely inexplicable. So you see, while we tell you now the seemingly impossible truth concerning our own displacement in time, we must confess that we are no masters of that. Our control over what happened to us is very limited, and the existence of these photographs, and things like that report you mentioned to us regarding the meeting Admiral Volsky had with you in 1942, well they are quite troubling, maddeningly unsettling to us, even as this outrageous tale must prey upon your own mind. How could images of events we lived through in 1941 and 1942 be here, a year before any of that ever happened, in the year 1940? Unless—and this is the only possibility we could grasp at—unless they were brought here, from some future year, and by someone we have yet to identify who is also capable of moving in time.”

“Like our Mister Wells,” said Tovey, his eyes narrowing. “Yes, just like old H. G. Wells with his Time Machine.”

Even as Tovey said that he realized how stupid and foolish it sounded, but this man was suggesting it as a real possibility. If the material Turing had dredged up in that box was authentic, then it had to come from somewhere. These men had just told him that was so. The next question was obvious to
them all.

“Brought here, you say?” said Tovey. “By who? For what reason? Was it meant as a warning of some kind? As you have just confessed, we were apparently at each other’s throats the first time around this merry-go-round.”

“We have not had time to think this through,” said Volsky. “I am sure Mister Fedorov here will have a bit of a sleepless night over this matter.”

“That is an understatement,” said Tovey. “I’ve been sitting here pinching myself, gentlemen, thinking I should wake up from a nightmare and find myself back in Scapa Flow with nothing to worry about but the 

Fedorov smiled. “You may be surprised to know that ship was never built by Germany in the history we knew—nor was your own ship anchored just a few hundred yards from us this evening, HMS 

“Never built?”

“No sir. The history we know records that the G3 class battlecruisers were cancelled due to the limitations imposed by the Washington Naval Treaty. That ship does displace somewhat over 35,000 tons, does it not? All four planned ships were cancelled, so imagine my surprise when we arrived here and I laid eyes on your ship. This world has things in it that amaze us as well.”

“Astounding…” It was all Tovey could say. It was all simply astounding. Then something occurred to him that struck him like a thunderclap. “Then you know,” he said. “You know everything—the history, the war, how it all ends.” He looked at them, his eyes open wide with the possibilities hidden within his question.

“Yes, we know how it turned out… once upon a time. But, as the existence of your own ship testifies, this world is a new reality. Everything is different here now, at least to us. It could all turn out quite differently as well.”

Tovey was silent, lost in the deep gravity of all this, yet pulled by the irresistible urge to know more. “Did I know this in the time where we last met?”

“We were never sure what you knew, though I had my suspicions that you were slowly realizing something was terribly amiss in regards to our ship.”

“Geronimo…” Tovey had a distant look in his eye now, as if he were seeing ghostly, vaporous images of a past life, always present in the hidden
recesses of his mind, yet ever fleeing from the powerful light of his conscious attention, like fitful shadows. “We called your ship Geronimo. I don’t know how I know that, but I would swear that is so.”

Fedorov looked at Volsky, not knowing what to say. This was all so completely confounding that he had no way to grasp it. Photos here before the things they imaged ever had a chance to be lived, and from another reality. And here was a man who seemed to sense the truth of all this, as though the imprint of those experiences remained branded on his soul, a remnant or shadow from that other world, like a man remembering a past life. It was an anomaly of profound importance. How could this John Tovey have any recollection of events he had never lived in this time line?

Now Admiral Volsky said the one thing that seemed to make some sense. “We struggled for some time over whether or not any of this should ever be revealed, to you or anyone else from this time. It is said that the truth eventually emerges no matter how long we struggle to hide it.”

“Yes,” said Tovey with a smile. “Our own Mister Churchill has said that ‘men occasionally stumble over the truth, but most of them pick themselves up and hurry off as if nothing ever happened.’ Well this is a revelation that I will have to sit with for a very long while, more than a stumble, gentlemen.”

“Seeing those photographs was a blow to my soul as well,” said Volsky. “In some ways I hope what we do here now will make certain none of them can ever come into being. Yes, we know how things once were, but something tells me the changes to the history of these momentous events are only just beginning, even as this war is only just beginning. I spoke to give you hope that things might turn out favorably, but I must also tell you that this war will not be the last, Admiral Tovey, and the next great war leads us to the edge of complete annihilation.” He let that sit there as Nikolin translated slowly.

“Can we avoid that future?” Volsky continued. “This is what we wonder now, but there is no way for us to know this for certain. The only way we will know how it all turns out is to live it all through, one day at a time.”
Part II

Confrontation

“Brinkmanship is the art of bringing a situation to the edge of the abyss.”

—Adlai Stevenson
Chapter 4

After his harrowing experience on that stairway at Ilanskiy, Karpov had plenty of time to think things over. Now he knew he must have been seeing events from his home world, the year 2021. It was the great war, he thought, the last great war. We wondered how long we had until the missiles would fly, and it seems they have. So that stairway must be some kind of passage in time! How was that possible? Was it only because of the nearby nuclear detonation he had witnessed? Volkov said nothing about this, so he must have gone down those steps well before the missiles were fired. How could he have moved in time—and all the way to 1908?

No, he thought. He did not get that far. He came here, to the 1940s. What was all this talk about meeting men who claimed they were NKVD? If that was so then he must have gone down those stairs a second time if he ended up in 1908. And why would that passage in time lead there? Rod-25 had done the same thing. It moved the ship from 2021 to 1941, and took us on that journey forward and back again many times. Then, for some reason, a hole in time had opened to the year 1908. He could not yet understand why this was, or even how Fedorov had managed to move from 1942 to find him in 1908, and on two occasions. What was so special about that year?

He thought about that for some time, until he revisited what had happened when that Demon Volcano had erupted in 2021. Large explosive events…yes, something about the shattering power of these events was affecting the integrity of time. That volcano blasted the ship into the 1940s, and then his own use of nuclear weapons had sent Kirov even farther back in time.

Why not Orlan, he thought? That ship was steaming just a few thousand meters ahead of me, even closer to the source of the detonation, did it move in time as well? It certainly did not move to 1908. Could it have gone somewhere else? None of the American ships or planes were affected either, as least as far as I know. We thought it was something unique to Kirov—Rod-25—but could it have been something more, something in the ship’s reactor core that Rod-25 was only catalyzing? And what did any of that have to do with that stairway at Ilanskiy? There were no nuclear reactors or detonations of any kind there. He could make no sense of it, but then again
his life had been one impossibility after another since Kirov first disappeared in the Norwegian Sea. He had come to accept the impossible as commonplace now. Yet there had to be an answer to all of this, something he was not seeing. Fedorov was trying to figure all this out long ago. I must do the same, he thought.

Why did the ship move to 1908? It was also the year where Volkov appeared when he went down those stairs. And Fedorov was able to get there using Rod-25 on both the Anatoly Alexandrov and Kazan. Why that year? Was it mere coincidence? The ship seemed to move in and out of the 1940s numerous times. First we arrive in 1941, then move to 1942 on two separate occasions. He said it was as if our position in time was unstable, like a rock skipping on a pond, and we always moved forward—until that last shift from 1945 to 1908. Was that a random event or was there something significant about that year?

He thought about that, reaching for a volume of the history of the Siberian State, and scouring information for the year 1908 to see if he could turn up any clues. Here I am sitting like Fedorov with my nose in the history books, he realized. Then he saw a reference to the strange event in late June of 1908. Yes! That must be it! Tunguska! June 30, 1908.

He read the account of an eye witness named Semedec:

“... I was sitting in the porch of the house at the trading station of Vadecara at breakfast time... when suddenly in the north... the sky was split in two and high above the forest the whole northern part of the sky appeared to be covered with fire. At that moment I felt great heat as if my shirt had caught fire; this heat came from the north side. I wanted to pull off my shirt and throw it away, but at that moment there was a bang in the sky, and a mighty crash was heard. I was thrown to the ground …”

A large explosive event—Tunguska! There he saw the map of the presumed location of the event, and a report in the Irkutsk newspaper dated July 2, 1908, published two days after the explosion. What if that event had somehow caused this rift in time, a permanent effect, instead of the transient effects they had experienced aboard Kirov? The fact that this phenomenon persisted even to the year 2021 was very telling. The impact of the Tunguska event must have been so severe that it opened this permanent hole in time, and it must have been so aligned in space as to run right along that stairway. What other explanation was possible?
He did not yet know why this happened, only that it did happen. Facts were facts. There it was, a gateway, a bridge between three separate eras. Why it seemed to involve the 1940s was as yet a mystery he could not answer. But I don’t need to know why it happens just now, he thought. Knowing that it does happen is quite enough! Now I must set my mind on how to best use it. Going back up those stairs from here is fruitless. A visit to the naval arsenal at Kansk might have allowed me to pick some nice cherries off the tree, but not any longer. The arsenal, and probably Kansk itself, has been obliterated in 2021. Yet what about going down that stairway? Yes, that was the real threat now.

That’s what happened to Volkov. He must have gone down twice, and found himself in 1908, at the source of the rift. He was probably so disoriented and confused that he never made the connection between his madness and that staircase. Too bad for him.

Yes, I could go down those stairs myself now, but what would I find? Would I find Volkov there in 1908? Did the stairway deliver each traveler to the same time? Imagine it. If I went there and did find him, I suppose I could easily convince him to come back with me. What then? Would we arrive at the top of that landing in 1940 again? Would we find that there was no “Orenburg Federation?”

The more he thought on this, the more he realized how precarious his own fate was now. Someone had killed Josef Stalin in 1908. Who? Was it Volkov? Kirov? Volkov would certainly have a motive, but Kirov? How would Sergie Kirov have known Stalin would become the monster he was? Could it have only been happenstance, a random change when these events replayed in the history?

I remember how plaintive and urgent Fedorov sounded when he learned of my decision to remain in 1908. He knew that I could topple the base pillars of the entire modern world from there. Now, with this stairway, I could do the very same thing. I could go back and get rid of Volkov, Stalin too if he’s still around. Then I could position myself within the revolutionary elite when the Tsar falls, and perhaps I would be the Secretary General instead of Sergie Kirov.

He smiled to think that he had the power to become the new Stalin of this world, right there on that back stairway. Then he considered the life he had now, a rising star in the Siberian Free State and certainly destined to rule here
in time. Kolchak is old and tired, Kozolnikov easily dealt with. I could get rid of Volkov, but chances are I would find that someone took his place if I decided to return to this year. Now I am still young, while Kirov and Volkov are both over 50. This war is the hinge of fate. It will decide how the modern world looks after 1945, and from here I have a chance to shape that world.

Back and forth he went with all this in his mind. Should he stay here, and live into the modern era, or go back to 1908 and rewrite all the history he had just come to know? Karpov was still brooding over all this in his ready room aboard Abakan when a signalman came to him, startling him with alarm and surprise. Something had been seen on the airship’s long range early warning radar.

The early system was primitive, but just enough to do the job it was designed for that day. The Leningrad Electro-Physics Institute had pioneered development of rudimentary continuous wave radio emission sets to replace the old listening posts that required a human ear to actually hear incoming planes. Continuous wave was capable of detection and bearing location of an incoming threat, but could not determine range until it was converted to a pulse system in 1934. Others argued that higher frequency or microwave systems would better serve the purpose desired. The first equipment, dubbed Bistro (Rapid) and Buraya (Storm) used microwaves and became truck mounted radar, designated RUS-1. These advances eventually became the Redut (Redoubt) pulse radar tested in 1939 and entering service by 1940.

Designated RUS-2, it could detect high flying targets out to 100 kilometers, and lower level targets at 10 to 30 kilometers. Most of this development remained in Kirov’s Soviet Russia, but there were equivalent systems developed under Volkov’s regime in Orenburg. Even so, there were no more than fifty RUS-2 sets in all of Soviet Russia as the storm clouds of war gathered, though two had fallen into hands of independent Tartar cavalry units who had captured them near Perm during a raid on the border zone there.

Realizing the importance of radar, Karpov moved heaven and earth to secure the two systems when he learned of them in early 1940. One was posted in the frontier bastion city of Omsk, and summarily withdrawn to Novosibirsk when that city was lost. The second was in Irkutsk. There the Siberian Technical Corps had managed to reverse engineer the system and, with considerable guidance from Karpov, they were making rapid
improvements. No one knew how this remarkable man possessed such a breadth of technical and scientific knowledge, but he was able to catalyze the research and remove false starts and roadblocks to set it all on the proper course. The information in his service jacket computer proved to be a limitless resource, which Karpov kept very secret. A new system, code named “Topaz” appeared in the mid-1940, and Karpov insisted that the first sets were mounted on all his airships.

The problem was where to place the new equipment for maximum effect? Mounting it on the gondolas allowed for good low level search capability, but the mass of the airship above was a major obstacle. Placing it in the nose only allowed coverage of the forward arcs, and there were too few systems available to have nose and tail mounted units. In the end, a small platform was extended from the interior frame on the forehead of the ship, and it was able to see incoming aircraft at altitude well enough, forsaking low level approaches in the bargain.

The threat of enemy planes coming in at low level could be mitigated as they would have to first cross the border zone where ground based systems could detect them. Few enemy planes had the range to venture into the vast interior of Siberia in any case. Yet Karpov was not satisfied with that. He ordered two Topaz sets for each of his airships, and mounted a second on the forward gondola to scan downward.

So it was that the fledgling Topaz system operator on the brow of Abakan spotted something he did not expect to see that day, sitting up stiffly and double checking his equipment to make certain he was not tracking the sudden onset of a storm. He squinted, adjusted his dials, and was then convinced this was something much more. His hand was on the crank to his voice set moments later, ringing the receiver in main control gondola below. The runner was off with the contact report, straight to Karpov, as he had insisted in his standing orders.

“Airborne contact, sir. Topaz operator reports a signal about seventy kilometers north, and closing.”

“Airborne contact? North of our location?” Karpov’s eyes narrowed with suspicion, his mind working like a computer. He knew the locations of all his airships, which mostly operated from the home cities they were named for. None were north of his position now, and it was 2000 kilometers to Volkov’s airfields at Chelyabinsk to the West. Only another airship could cover such
distance and return.

“Volkov!” he said aloud with some alarm. “Sound action stations and tell Bogrov to cast off and climb to the highest altitude he can get to. Never mind. I’ll go there myself. You get to the wireless room and signal Talmenka and Novosibirsk. Tell them to make ready for immediate operations, and rig for air combat. Then signal Krasnoyarsk airfield. I want fighters up, and heading this way at once!”

So, he thought, Volkov finally put two and two together. In fact, I would not be surprised to learn if he has been tracking the whereabouts of my airships ever since I left Omsk. He has men everywhere, and if he learned I had come here, with two airships, it would have certainly aroused his suspicions. Of course he would have had to take a roundabout course well to the north. All they had to do was swing well north of Tomsk to avoid our Topaz system there and then follow the Yenisey River south. But how many ships did he send?

Karpov was up at the run, and heading to the forward gondola, hastening along the mesh metal keelway until he came to the ladder down.

“Admiral on the bridge!”

He emerged to see Air Commandant Bogrov snapping off orders to a midshipman. The man saluted as Karpov strode in, all business. “Has the battalion debarked?”

“Yes sir. The last two platoons went down the ladders a half hour ago. They are all assembling at Kansk.”

“Get them to Ilanskiy.”

“Ilanskiy? But there is nothing there.” Karpov gave him an irritated look and Bogrov knew enough to keep his mouth shut and simply repeat the order. He turned quickly and collared a watchstander. “Pipe to the wireless room. The ground force is ordered to proceed to Ilanskiy immediately.”

“Have them establish a strong defensive perimeter all around that rail station.” Karpov reinforced the order gruffly. “Understood?”

The man was off at a run, and everyone on the gondola bridge was suddenly alert. They had seen Karpov this way before, and knew he was ruthlessly efficient when he set his mind to military matters.

“Are we at actions stations?”

“Yes sir. All guns manned.”

“Then what are we doing still tethered to the mooring tower, Bogrov? Get
us up there. Get me altitude! Signal Angara that if they have not off loaded their troop detachment they must do so immediately and climb.”

Altitude in any air duel between zeppelins was the key factor. As most guns were mounted on the lower gondolas, whoever had the advantage in altitude was going to have nice fat targets below them, and only a few guns could be mounted on the top of the airframe. Karpov knew he was already at a disadvantage. The other side was undoubtedly well up at higher altitudes and it would take time for him to shed ballast and climb.

Bogrov could read the Admiral’s concern clearly enough, and spoke reassuringly. “Don’t worry sir,” he said. “We are very light now after off loading all those men and their equipment. We’ll climb like an eagle and be up there in no time. The weather is low today, with cloud cover at 3000 feet. We’ll pierce that shortly and then make a very rapid ascent.”

He turned and barked orders to the Elevatorman and Rudderman, and soon they were casting off from the tower, the mooring cables retracting as the airship eased away.

“Orenburg?” Bogrov asked.
“What else?”
“What could they be doing out here?”
“Someone is getting curious.” Karpov’s eyes narrowed.
“Let’s hope this is nothing more than a probe.”
“I very much doubt that,” said Karpov. “Someone tipped Volkov off as to my whereabouts. If he had the balls to violate our airspace like this, than he sent at least two or three airships.”
“But why, sir? There’s nothing of value here? Kansk is a deep reserve supply depot, but Ilanskiy is barely on the map. I don’t understand.”
“Oh really? Well open your eyes Air Commandant. Look who is standing in front of you. I am here, correct?”
“Of course sir, but if Volkov wanted you why didn’t he act earlier? They had us outnumbered five ships to three at Omsk. Why risk coming all this way here to get into a fight?”
“Just climb, Bogrov. Leave the where and why of things to me.”
“Yes sir.” The Air Commandant folded his arms, eyeing the inclinometer and seeing they were now nosing up. “Fifteen degrees up bubble,” he shouted to his Elevatorman, and saw him rapidly spinning the big metal wheel.

So up we go, he thought with some misgivings. Yes, up we go, and if
Volkov has sent more than we can handle, we may just come down in a flaming wreck!
Air Commandant Bogrov watched the status board as the Abakan began to ease away from the mooring tower, nose up. The ship had gained a lot of potential buoyancy when the troop contingent debarked, and to compensate for the sudden loss of weight, water was pumped into the ballast tanks from hoses at the top of the mooring tower. Now the weight balance was restored to “neutral buoyancy” allowing the ship to operate normally, but it had a lot of ballast that could be jettisoned to gain altitude if needed.

“Five degrees up elevator,” he said. “Engines one and three ahead one third.”

"Aye sir, one and three ahead one third."

Bogrov keyed the airship’s internal intercom. “All hands,” he announced, “prepare to lift ship. Moorings away and ascending now.”

An Airman called out their status. “Climbing through 500 feet. Wind steady at five knots. All mooring lines secured.”

Abakan rose through the serried cloud deck and emerged like a behemoth, a massive silver fish in the sky. Sunlight gleamed on the long graceful curve of the hull, her sides and tail trailing white vaporous mist as the airship broke into clear skies.

Karpov was standing on the bridge near his chart table, one hand clasping the wall rail to steady himself as the ship continued to climb. What was Volkov up to with this maneuver, he thought? Here we have just reached an understanding at Omsk. He goes so far as to withdraw from the city, and now he has the temerity to run airships about like this—into Free Siberian airspace! Is he doing this to test my resolve?

The more he thought about that, the more he realized that there was something else behind this maneuver. Volkov clearly knows I am here, and Bogrov is correct, why would he be trying to threaten me when he had me three feet away just last week with a revolver pointed at my chest? That was theater, but the threat was real. I took a very great risk with that meeting. No, there is something more to this. He is curious. His intelligence services don’t know what I’m about here, so he is sending a reconnaissance in force.

This is a very risky thing to do. How many airships did he send? He must
know that I have both Abakan and Angara here. That means he most likely sent three airships on this mission, and they could be transporting a full regiment between them. But why? What good would it do him to put troops down here? Even if he could take Ilanskiy or Kansk, how could he hold them? His men would be isolated and we can bring up reserves on the rail line from both directions. Our main defense line is west, anchored on Novosibirsk, and I have a full division in reserve at Krasnoyarsk, and the latter is no more than 200 kilometers away by rail. Kolchak’s army at Irkutsk is just 700 kilometers away to the southeast. What is he doing here? It just doesn’t make any sense. Unless…

Now Karpov began to entertain even more suspicions. If Volkov wanted to mount a further offensive on the border zone he would definitely want to cut the Trans-Siberian rail, and an isolated place like Kansk is a perfect place to do that. We’ve moved the whole 18th Siberian Rifle Division into Omsk, except for this battalion I have with me here. If Volkov cuts the rail line here, and manages to also tie down two or three of my airships in this little spat, then everything we have east of Kansk is cut off from Kolchak at Irkutsk until we re-open the rail line. He could have five or six more airships loaded with troops and ready to swing across the border zone at any time. What if this whole mission is aimed at pulling in all our mobile and ready reserves here, well away from the front?

Technically a state of extended truce is now in force after the Omsk accords. Is Volkov going to throw that all out the window? If so there would have to be a major operation in the works. Could he be coordinating with the Japanese on this? There’s been a considerable buildup in Mongolia in the last three weeks. Damn! Too many questions and not enough answers. I need to know what’s going on out west.

“Signalman!”

“Sir!” The young mishman rushed to Karpov’s side and saluted crisply, ready for orders.

“Signal all western frontier stations to report any unusual troop movements on the border, anything at all. And all Topaz stations are to report to me over the military fleet channel every half hour. I want to know if any airship movement is detected. Cable Tomsk. I want that airship to move north and scout along the Ob River line as far as the Chulym tributary.”

The man saluted again and was off at a run.
Karpov walked to his map room, leaning over the table where he had set up the current strategic situation. Volkov was very accommodating to give us Omsk back like that. With his troops there the entire region between that city and Novosibirsk had been a no man’s land for the last three months. Karpov had pushed his 82nd Motorized Division forward to keep a wary eye on the border with Orenburg, and his tough 2nd Siberian Cavalry was patrolling well north of Omsk itself. But the bulk of his forces had remained in their defensive positions along the Ob River from Tomsk through Novosibirsk, and then in the wide bend the river made as it came north from Barnaul, and the high mountains south of that city.

He had four divisions along that line, though they were under the nominal control of Kozolnikov. As far as his intelligence served, Volkov’s troops were all still in their old winter line positions as well, six divisions at intervals along the long border zone from Oskemen in the south to Tyumen in the north. These were largely infantry formations, though there were undoubtedly more mobile formations behind that line somewhere.

Yet now that Volkov had openly joined with Nazi Germany, what were his plans for the main front along the Volga? That had to be the reason he took that meeting with me at Omsk in the first place. He wants to quiet his eastern sector down so he can move those mobile reserves to the Volga, and perhaps even pull one or two infantry divisions off his line here in the bargain. Then why make a move like this? Why risk a provocation, unless he is finally seeing the connection to his strange fate and Ilanskiy. He certainly knows I got real curious. I was foolish to come here so directly. I should have busied myself with routine matters, and then worked my way here in due course. Volkov saw me make a beeline to this place, and now he wants to know why.

Now Abakan was nose up and still climbing to reach that favored position of superior altitude in the event things should come to a fight. There were twenty helium gas bags within the main enclosure of the airship, each one nested within an air sack called a ballonet. The air in these external sacks could be vented and refilled by pumps, a procedure that was essential in managing the altitude of the airship. Venting air from a ballonet decreased the ratio of lighter than air helium to that of the heavier air inside the ship. A positive helium ratio meant the ship would rise, lighter than the surrounding air. Venting air from the forward ballonets lightened the ship there, and
helped get the nose pointed up for a climb while the Elevatorman was working his wheel.

Because the helium expanded as the ship gained altitude the ballonets also had to be vented to allow for that expansion. The procedure required careful monitoring to avoid a situation where the helium gas bags would reach maximum expansion, known as the “pressure height” of the ship, also called the “design ballonet ceiling.” For *Abakan* that ceiling was about 7000 meters, or 23,000 feet. Climbing beyond that point risked a rupture of the gas bag, and so emergency valves could vent helium to prevent that, which was never desirable. The engines and horizontal fins could also incline to assist the ascent, and in this case where an emergency ascent had been ordered, ballast was dropped from the forward sections as well.

The procedure was reversed during a descent. All they had to do was take in more air from the atmosphere and pump it to the ballonets until there was more heavy air relative to the helium. If necessary, helium could also be pumped to steel storage tanks. At this point the airship would become negatively buoyant and begin the descent. Once at a desired cruising altitude, manipulation of the elevator controls and minor venting or inflation of the ballonets would be enough to make trim adjustments. These methods eliminated the necessity of venting any helium gas, which was a commodity that was simply too rare and valuable to lose in typical operations.

*Abakan* had dropped off all but a single platoon retained aboard the ship for a security detail. One of the airship fleet’s greatest utilities was its ability to move troops and supplies rapidly from one place to another. Every airship carried at least a platoon of 25 men, but they had enough lifting power to accommodate ten to twelve times that, a full battalion.

Debarking the men at a mooring tower was accomplished easily enough, but for deploying them in the field where no facilities were available, another procedure was necessary. It involved more significant pumping of the helium in the main gas bags to smaller pressurized tanks spaced at intervals along the keel. When pressurized, helium became heavier than air to help compensate for the sudden gain in positive buoyancy when the men deployed. The airship stored a small amount of this helium as a reserve in highly pressurized tanks that could be sent to the main gas bags in the event of a helium loss that threatened the buoyancy of the ship, yet this was only for emergency situations.
Heavier ballast could also be taken on in the form of water from the air moisture condensers and rain collectors if necessary, but there were limits to both these technologies in 1940. For practical purposes, it was risky to try and debark more than a single company, or 120 men at any given time without being properly moored to a tower with a ground anchor.

Airship operations were all a careful balance of buoyancy, pressure, ballast, fuel and cargo weight, elevator and rudder control, and engine thrust, but in the hands of a well trained crew, the airship was easily maneuvered.

Air Commandant Bogrov watched carefully as Abakan passed through 1000 meters. The Airship was a “high climber,” which was a designation that arose during the First World War when the Germans built high flying airships that could operate well above the flight ceilings of British fighters of that day. He would take the airship up to 5000 meters, which was normal combat altitude by 1940, a little over 16,400 feet. If necessary he could climb another 2000 meters after that if the situation demanded such a maneuver, and reach a ceiling pressure height of 23,000 feet.

At such heights there were a whole new set of challenges for the crew—oxygen deprivation and altitude dizziness, bitter cold that could affect weapons, engines, oil and lubricant lines. Even the viewport windows could frost over and crack.

“Take us north at your best speed, Commandant.” Karpov wanted to see what he was up against as soon as possible.

“15 degrees right rudder, and coming around to zero-one-zero north.” Bogrov gave the order, and the ship began to turn as it climbed, nosing up into the endless skies.

“Have our fighters scrambled?”

“We got a report from Krasnoyarsk, sir. They have three I-15 bi-planes and another three I-16s available. Most everything else is farther west near the main front.”

“They will have to do,” said Karpov, making a mental note to increase fighter deployments to the Krasnoyarsk airfield. The I-15 and I-16 fighters were old models, some flying in Spain in the mid 1930s, but mostly getting their combat experience against the Japanese where they dueled with Ki-27 fighters over Mongolia. The newer Yak-1 had just been introduced by Soviet Russia in January of that year, but in spite of efforts to purchase them, the Free Siberian State had not been able to acquire any. Air power was limited
in the eastern state, though newer models were in production at Novosibirsk as the war began to heat up. In 1940, however, they had ten to twelve squadrons of these older fighters, and few squadrons of Tupolov twin engine bombers or Ilushin-2 and Ilushin-4 fighter-bombers.

The I-15s could reach 7000 meters, but their four 7.62mm machine guns would not bother a Vulcanized airship much, if at all. They did carry six RS-82mm rockets that could do a little more damage if they scored a hit, though they were notoriously inaccurate. Even fired from a range of only 500 meters, only about one in a hundred RS-82’s could hit a stationary target on the ground. While the massive bulk of a zeppelin made for an enticing target, the pilot would still have to get very close to fire those rockets, braving the intense anti-aircraft fire from the airships to do so.

_Abakan_ had five MG dimples along each side where twin 12.7mm heavy machine guns could rattle out a fairly lethal fire out to 2000 meters. This meant a fighter hoping to deliver its RS-82s would have to run that gauntlet to get close enough to have any chance of scoring a hit. To make matters worse, there were four ShVAK 20mm autocannons mounted atop the airship on a reinforced open air firing platform.

Against a formation of airships, this handful of fighters would be good for little more than reconnaissance, thought Karpov. Yet they can get around much easier, and if they find a target, I can order them to shadow it and radio back the enemy course and altitude. Then we’ll get up to a good firing position above that, and see if they want any trouble here.

Using instincts long honed in combat at sea, Karpov knew information was his first weapon. Find the enemy, get into the best firing position, kill the enemy. It was a lethal formula that he had used time and time again. It wasn’t long before his fighters had found something and his battle plan could take more definite shape.

“Sir, we have fighter reconnaissance reports of two large airships bearing 290 from our current position, about 110 kilometers out.” The signalman had just rushed in from the wireless room. “We should have them on our Topaz radar soon.”

“Two? Only two contacts?”

“Yes sir.”

Very interesting, thought Karpov. If Volkov knew I was here with _Abakan_, then he certainly knew that I had _Angara_ with me as well. If he
meant to make a power play here, why send only two airships? He knows I’ll see them long before they get anywhere near Kansk. He’s either being very overconfident or acting stupidly. There is no way those airships could be bringing enough men and equipment to threaten my position, but he’s certainly checking up on me, isn’t he. Something tells me he wants a much closer look at my operation here than his intelligence arm can give him. He turned to his signalman.

“Altitude?” The look of displeasure on Karpov’s face was enough of a lesson to the young midshipman.

“I’m sorry sir. The contacts are at 3500 meters.”

Karpov raised an eyebrow at that. “Let me know the minute that changes.” Then to Bogrov he said: “Make your altitude 4000 meters, Commandant. But be ready to climb again on short notice.”

He was going to show these interlopers his gondolas, and let them get a good long look at the guns there for their trouble in coming all this way. But even as he thought that, he suspected there was something more to this move by Volkov than it seemed at first glance.
Chapter 6

The Airships hung in the grey sky, as if suspended from the heavens on unseen cables. Karpov was standing on the main gondola bridge of *Abakan*, his eyes lost in a pair of field glasses as he studied the enemy ships, noting tail numbers, the training of their top mounted guns, the thin wisps of exhaust at the engines, the trim on the big tail rudders and elevator fins. *Abakan* was 500 meters above, and broadside to the intruding ships. From their tail numbers he soon knew what he was up against.

The lead ship, about a thousand meters in the van, was the very same ship he had protested over at the conference—the ship that had been brazenly named *Omsk*. Yet now he saw the bright fresh white paint that had been applied and the newly stenciled lettering: *Alexandra*—Symenko’s ship. He had heard of the man, a veteran Captain, and a bit hot under the collar from all accounts. Symenko was a Squadron Commandant in the Eastern Airship Division of the Orenburg fleet, a surly man, ill tempered, too eager to find trouble. He was probably not happy to put his painters back to work so soon. Karpov smiled, thinking. Why send this man?

The second ship was the *Oskemen*, named for the big city on the southern border zone, and both ships were in the same class as Karpov’s airships, about 100,000 cubic meter lift, maximum airspeed at about 120 knots, and each with six recoilless rifles mounted on the gondolas, with two more top mounted on the rigid gun platforms there. Yet Karpov knew he had the edge for the moment as the airships squared off, because even though he was presently outnumbered two ships to one while *Angara* was hastening to the scene from her recon sweep to the northeast, *Abakan* could bring all six of its gondola mounted guns into action, while the two opposing airships could only train their two top mounted rifles at the moment. He had the Orenburg ships outgunned six to four. They would have to climb 500 meters quickly to get any of their gondola mounted guns into action, and Karpov wasn’t about to let them even try. He had them outgunned, and he intended to keep things that way until *Angara* reached the scene.

The niceties of protocol had already begun. Karpov sent over a challenge, requesting both ships hover in place and make no change in altitude. He
asked them to state their business in Siberian airspace in no uncertain terms. Now he moved to the radio for a two way conversation with Symenko to take the measure of the man.

“What are you doing here, Symenko? You’re a long way from home.”

“Begging your pardon to barge in like this,” came the voice on the headset. It was a harsh, gravelly voice that matched the man’s temperament, and there was no real apology in his tone. “This is a diplomatic mission, and I come bearing a pouch for your eyes only.”

“From Volkov? Papers to sign? I thought we settled all that at Omsk.”

“I’m not privy to the contents, but I’m told to deliver it to you, Karpov, and so here I am. You want it, or not? If so then I’ll request permission to heave to over your tower on the river.”

“Why wasn’t I informed of this mission? I could have put my guns on you the moment we sailed up, Symenko. You’ve a lot of nerve violating Siberian airspace like this.”

“Set off alarm bells all along the rail line from here to Novosibirsk, did we? Well like I said—I have orders and I follow them. You want to complain about the violation of your precious airspace? Then you can write Volkov a nice long letter about it and I’ll happily carry it home and deliver it personally.”

Karpov frowned. The man was a real smartass, he thought, just the type he enjoyed goading from time to time. So he stuck in a barb, just for the pleasure of it.

“Nice paint job, Symenko. A lot more letters now, eh? Were you eager to drop your ground anchors at Omsk? What’s the matter. Weather doesn’t suit you at Alexandra?”

“Try that tone with me when I’m sitting 500 meters above your prow and see what it gets you, Karpov.”

“Yes? Well it looks like I’m the one sitting on your nose, Captain, and don’t think to move a muscle or you’ll soon find out that I can be a most disagreeable man.”

“That so? Well I can drop ballast and pop up there in three minutes if you’d care to do this eye to eye.”

“Drop ballast? If I so much as see anyone take a piss off that ship of yours to lighten your load I’ll put a nice fat 105mm round into your forward gas bags, and that will slow you down, won’t it? Look, Symenko. Enough with
the pleasantries. You can dock at Kansk, but we’ve only room for one ship there. Deliver your pouch and then get the hell out of my airspace.”

There was a long pause before Symenko came back on the line again. “I’m told this is to be hand delivered, by me personally, and directly to you, Karpov. No intermediaries. I’m to wait here for your answer.”

Most unusual, thought Karpov. What was Volkov thinking? What could he possibly want? There was no way he was going to ground himself with this man now. He was up in fighting trim, and with good position on these brigands, and he meant to stay there.

“I’m a busy man, Symenko. It will take you an hour to dock at Kansk and then move off so we can do the same, and there’s no way I’d ever allow this ship to do that under your guns in any case. So we’ll do this another way. I’ll ease over and send down a sub-cloud car. You want to hand off that pouch, then you can climb aboard and we’ll reel you in.”

The sub-cloud car, also call the “spy basket” or “observation car,” was first developed by the Germans as a means of anchoring their radio antenna, and then later made into a small finned gondola that could hold one or two men. It could be lowered up to 200 meters on a cable, dipped through a heavy obscuring cloud deck to allow for observation of the ground. A “man in the basket” could spot landmarks on the ground and call them up to the main gondola on a telephone line. In this case Symenko could climb aboard and be hauled up to the Abakan to make his delivery.

“Very well, Karpov. We’ll do it your way. You can ease on down and send us a basket. But I’d feel a whole lot better to see those gondola guns of yours trained elsewhere.”

“Of course you would, Captain, but you and I both know that isn’t going to happen either. We’ll wait here until Angara arrives to keep an eye on the Oskemen. Then you and I will get cozy and you can come on up with your pouch. Karpov out.”

Karpov switched off abruptly, removed his earphones and stood up, fetching his leather gloves from a jacket pocket. He pulled on the gloves slowly, flexing his fingers into a fist to tighten the fit.

“Bogrov,” he said tersely. “The minute Angara arrives have them take position off the tail of that second airship out there. Make ready on the spy basket. We’re going to have a visitor!” He gave the Air Commandant an evil grin.
Symenko was not happy. He had been told to slip in as close to the rail junction at Ilanskiy and off load a couple companies of infantry. He was to take Kansk, tear up the rail lines there, and then knock down the airship tower—that is if he could manage to get in there and achieve surprise. Should he be discovered prematurely, then he was to ease in slowly and hand off the diplomatic pouch to Karpov personally. What was the Governor General thinking? He obviously knew Karpov would be here, and with at least one airship equipped with their new Topaz radar sets. He knew damn well I wasn’t going to sneak in above the clouds and get my troops landward easily.

He shook his head, not understanding why he had been sent here. Why not send some young buck like Petrov on the Oskemen? I’m division commander! You don’t send someone like me out on a mission like this. Volkov had it in his mind to get something here, he thought. This was supposed to be a snatch and grab. Yes? And he wanted to make damn sure I had enough men with me to do the grabbing. A full goddamn battalion on each ship? Now I’m damn near maximum weight and slow as molasses if it comes to a gunfight here. Karpov already has altitude on me, and he has his guns bore sighted on my forehead as it stands.

But be polite, I’m told. Be diplomatic. Say everything I was told to say, but nothing more. That was never my calling card. If Volkov wanted me to run in here and raise hell, then he should have let me do it rigged for air operations—ship to ship. Instead I’m lugging these troops around for some kind of land assault, and Karpov will know it easily enough. It makes sense to take out the rail yard at Kansk and knock down that tower, but these orders concerning Ilanskiy—what is that all about? What could be there that would be of any interest? It wasn’t his place to question orders, he knew, but he wasn’t the sort not to do so when they didn’t suit him.

It was bad enough they took Omsk from me. I was to be City Commandant! I had good men die taking that god-forsaken place last winter. It was to be mine, and I was to be provincial Governor there. Now Volkov chokes and hands the whole city over to Karpov! For what? To keep that scrawny little bastard off our ass while we deal with Sergei Kirov? Why couldn’t Volkov pay the price out of his own purse? I made arrangements,
plans, promises to a lot of men, and now look at me, still watching the paint dry on this ship. To make matters worse, Volkov has made me a red faced errand boy in thanks for losing Omsk, adding insult to injury. I’ve half a mind to tell Volkov to fuck off and take my ship north and go rogue.

He was pacing on the bridge, restless and angry as he felt the overweening shadow of Abakan as the airship moved slowly into position to lower their spy basket. He knew he could never get away with that—going rogue. Volkov was not a man to make an enemy of. If I tried anything Pavlov on the Oskemen would never go along with it, and then Volkov would spare no effort to hunt my ass down and roast me over a slow fire.

So here I am—following goddamned orders—and in ten minutes I’ll be dangling from a cable and reeled in like a fat tuna for Karpov to grin at me and rub salt in the wounds. I should put a bullet in that man. He’s going to be more trouble out here than anyone knows, and believe me, I’m a man who knows trouble. But Karpov is too damn careful. Yes. He’ll have his men grope my bung hole for any sign of a weapon before I get anywhere near him, so no point bringing one.

And that thought did nothing whatsoever to settle his mood.

Yes, Symenko was in a foul mood today, and he had every reason to be the surly choleric airship Captain he was known to be. To say he was a short tempered man, crusty and quick to anger, was an understatement. But he was still Captain here. He still had the Alexandra, which was the only consolation he could take from this sudden turn of misfortune. Now nobody was getting those nice fat mansions in Omsk, and all the favors he was planning to call in as he doled out land and title there had blown away on the Siberian mist. He wasn’t City Commandant at Omsk, and he wasn’t regional Governor either. Now he was only Captain Symenko, First Squadron of the Eastern Airship Division, Volkov’s messenger boy.

He shook his head, slowly heading aft to find the main ladder up to the top gun platform, and thinking how much more satisfying it would be to get behind one of the 76mm recoilless rifles there and blow a hole in Abakan—blow their forward bridge gondola to hell. But he didn’t do that. Instead he climbed the long ladder up, steamed on the cold open air platform, and grunted as he hauled himself precariously up the rope ladder dangling from the Abakan’s spy basket, just a nice fat fish on Karpov’s line now.

His eyes betrayed the murderous rage in him, barely controlled as he was
slowly reeled in and the basket was tucked under the main gondola of the other airship. The cold air had cleared his head, and given him just a little time to settle down, but he was still in a foul mood when they pried open the basket hatch. He grunted, his jaw tightening as he realized how Karpov was going to lord it over him now, and there was nothing he could do about it. Nothing at all.

Then, to his great surprise, he eased out of the basket and heard a Marine Sergeant issue a sharp, bawling order, calling his security detail to attention. The men stiffened, their black polished boots stomping the metal deck in a brisk movement. They were wearing dress uniforms, and the detail Sergeant was holding a drawn saber, squared off right along the line of his nose. Another man held a flag of the Free Siberian State.

“Sir!” The Marine Sergeant spoke in a deep voice. “Welcome aboard the Abakan.” The man nodded to a private, and he piped the Captain aboard in traditional naval style.

Symenko was more than surprised, and stood just a little taller at the greeting. Karpov had him dangling from his little finger. After hearing him taunt me over the loss of Omsk on the radio I expected nothing more than humiliation here, and yet… the man has shown me a little respect. It was not something he expected, but it did much to tamp down his sallow and ill-tempered mood.

“This way, if you please, Captain.” The Marine Sergeant gestured with a white gloved hand, and the detail filed off behind the two men as they made their way out of the receiving chamber and into the main gondola. They came to a door on the right side and the Sergeant opened it, beckoning Symenko to enter. There the Captain was surprised again to see a table laid out with fine white linen, plates of cold cuts and cheese, a flask of brandy with elegant crystal glasses, and two cigars sitting quietly on a silver platter like the two airships riding in tandem now for this meeting.

Respect, thought Symenko. Yes, just a little respect for a change, and more in the last five minutes than I got from Volkov in the last month. Brandy and cigars are hardly compensation for everything Volkov just took from me and handed to Karpov…

But it’s a start.
Part III

**Tunguska**

“All large trees on the mountains were leveled in dense rows, whereas in the valleys one could see both roots and trunks of age-old giants of the taiga broken like reeds. The tops of the fallen trees were directed to us. We were going north towards the super-hurricane that had raged here years ago... I climbed Shakrama mountain and for the first time saw the unbelievable land of dead forest... everything has been leveled and scorched in the Great Hollow... and in the center of it all, a cluster of trees were still standing upright like bare telegraph poles, all devoid of leaf and branch.”

—Leonid Kulik: *Tunguska*
Chapter 7

Evgeny Krinov handed the young staffer a large box, a solemn look on his face.

“Take these as well,” he said matter of factly. “They’re just cluttering up the storage room and have become a fire hazard. So let us put them to the fire and be done with it. See that they go directly to the incinerator.”

“As you wish, sir.” The staffer took the box and hastened away, and Krinov watched him go, his eyes dark and thoughtful. That is the last of them, he thought. That will put an end to Kulik’s nonsense once and for all.

An astronomer and geologist, Krinov was a well known scientific researcher with an expertise in meteorite falls. Born in 1906, he was a two year old child when the greatest fall of his lifetime, perhaps the greatest in modern history, occurred in the strange event on the morning of June 30, 1908, just north of the Stony Tunguska River in Siberia. As it happened, however, Krinov was working at the meteor division of the Mineralogy Museum of the Soviet Academy of Sciences between 1926 and 1930, when the intrepid Leonid Kulik mounted his first expeditions to the Tunguska region to try and discover the cause of the event.

It was very strange, but Kulik had uncovered a number of key findings that could lead to the answer to the enigma. The first were the awesome physical evidence of a massive explosion in the Great Hollow. Thirty million trees were felled there, in a radial pattern where each fallen tree pointed back to the epicenter of the cataclysmic event. The second key finding had been thermal—the clear scorching of the trees, even beyond the fallen zone which covered all of 1400 square kilometers. A blinding flash of light had left its imprint in the dead wood, and searing flames left their mark well beyond the Great Hollow.

The next key clue was more enigmatic, a magnetic footprint that seemed to lay on the land, ranging 1400 square kilometers. The soil itself exhibited the effects of some strange magnetic anomaly, and it was later learned that disturbances in the earth’s magnetic field had both preceded and followed the event. Auroras and strange noctilucent clouds appeared for days after.

This was not all. There were botanic effects in the plants, mutations in the
animals, strange genetic effects that caused trees to enter a period of accelerated growth at the edge of the event, while others were twisted and stunted into malformed shapes, some flecked with small embedded nodules of glass. Exotic materials were found in the soil, and there was a measurable radiation effect, ionizing radiation that became thermo-luminescent at night, creating an eerie glow at times over the land.

Krinov got very interested in the matter, and resolved to accompany Kulik on a return expedition years later, in 1930. He still bore the scars of that journey, and in more than one way. Braving the Siberian winter was always dangerous, and he had suffered a severe frostbite on his feet that compelled him to withdraw and spend a lengthy time in the hospital. The doctors had been forced to amputate a big toe, and now Krinov walked with a characteristic limp, though that was not the worst mark the trip to Tunguska had left on him.

Kulik was convinced that the site he had discovered, that haunting swath of utter destruction in the Great Hollow, was hiding the hidden remains of a meteorite, though no evidence was ever found to support this claim. Yet Kulik’s ardor would not abate. He set himself to draining and digging up one swampy bog hole after another, disheartened to find a broken tree stump in his favored prospect, which proved it could not be the site of an impact. Anything big enough to cause the devastation that stretched for kilometers in all directions would certainly not have left a tree stump standing at the bottom of its impact crater. Kulik had forbidden any photographs of that stump, but Krinov had secretly taken several to use as evidence in the heated scientific debate that he knew would soon follow on the heels of the expedition.

Kulik remained determined to continue looking for the meteorite, and it was said that he eventually found something very strange during one of his excavations. When questioned about his findings one day the bristly Kulik just looked at Krinov from behind those dark round eyeglasses of his, his eyes strangely alight. Then he did something that astounded Krinov. He reached into his pocket and handed his associate a small hand compass.

“Find north for me please,” Kulik had said quietly.

Krinov blinked, but indulged his colleague and stood in the center of the room, consulting the compass until he could point himself north. Then Kulik got up and walked slowly to Krinov’s side, a wry smile on his face.
“Are you sure?” he said.

To his amazement, Krinov looked down at his compass and saw it spinning in mad circles. He looked at Kulik, who then stepped back,taking his seat again, gesturing that his associate should consult his compass again. Sure enough, the reading was normal now. Krinov tapped it, looking at the compass with some suspicion.

“Oh yes, I thought you would jump to that conclusion,” said Kulik. “It’s quite proper. Keep it and see for yourself.” Then he got up and slowly headed for the door, turning with a smile as he left. “Good day, Evgeny.”

Krinov never forgot that, or anything else he had learned on that expedition. He tested the compass for long years after that, and it always read true. But nothing else ever read true concerning Tunguska. It was most disturbing. Kulik had labored to take aerial photographs of the whole disaster site and delivered them to the academy to fuel the debate. There were 1500 in all, and Krinov spent a long time studying them... until they became a fire hazard.

One day, his soul still shadowed by the strange events of that brief time he had spent in the wild lands of the Siberian north, he gathered up each and every one of the negatives, put them in a sturdy box with a bunch of old newspapers, and handed them off to a staffer with the order to take them directly to the incinerator. There, he thought with just the barest sigh of relief. Now no one else will ever know...

Yet others did know, though what they had discovered in that forsaken place was kept a well guarded secret, known only to a very few. One of them was a man who followed in Krinov’s footsteps, one Nikolai Vladimirovic Vasilyev, who later assumed the title Krinov once held as Deputy Chairman of the Commission on meteorites and cosmic dust at the Russian Academy of Sciences. It was Vasilyev who had come across a hidden cache of positive photographs made by the very same negatives Krinov had destroyed that day.

It was Vasilyev who then devoted his life to the study of the Tunguska event, becoming the director of the Interdisciplinary Independent Tunguska Expeditions society, and collecting data and writing about the event to his dying day. And it was Vasilyev who penned the cryptic notes into his literature concerning the many “oddities” surrounding the event, claiming it was evidence of something much more than a simple meteorite strike, something vast and deeply significant, and a warning concerning the
possibility of a collision with earth threatening “aliens” from outer space. What had he discovered in those photographs? What was Krinov really trying to hide by destroying the negatives?

Mainstream science had long ago dismissed the notion that the explosion in 1908 had been caused by a UFO, but there are other “aliens” that come from space, and the earth had been visited by them many times before.

* * *

**Aboard** the airship *Narva*, Captain Selikov wanted to get as far away from that river as he could, but he also knew it was dangerous to do so until they had a firm fix on their location.

“This weather is clouding over again,” he said as he shook his head, clearly unhappy. “The cloud deck is very low and it extends for what looks to be two hundred kilometers in every direction. We can’t see a thing up here, and I’m not inclined to take the ship down until I can determine how thick that deck is. But we might get down right on top of the clouds and use the sub-cloud car.”

“What is that?” Orlov had never heard of such a thing.

“Think of it as a bit of an amusement park ride, Mister Orlov,” said Selikov. And he explained how they would lower a device, a spy basket, that looked like a big hollow bomb suspended on a long cable, complete with tail fins to aid its movement through the air.

“A man with good eyes in there can call up the land forms and then we can find the river again and navigate. Otherwise we could drift about up here and get even more lost than we already are. If the deck isn’t too low, we’ll reel you in and come on down.”

“Good then,” said Orlov. “Let me be the man in the basket. It’s boring shuffling about up here trying to stay warm.”

“I’m afraid you won’t get any help on keeping warm if you volunteer here,” Selikov warned. “There’s no heat in the car.”

“Well, there’s no heat up here either, so what’s the difference?”

“You can read a navigation chart?”

“Of course,” said Orlov, with just a hint of irritation. So it was decided, and Orlov was led off to the rear gondola by a *mishman*. When he saw the contraption he was about to ride in, he grinned from ear to ear. It was exactly
as Selikov had described it, the shape of a huge bomb, with windows in the nose and four fins on the narrow tail. A man could lay prone inside, his head in the nose, and make observations that he could call up to the airship bridge gondola above on a hand cranked telephone.

“Here,” said the man, handing him a pair of binoculars and a chart book. “You’ll need these.”

Minutes later they were lowering the pod on the long steel cable and Orlov thrilled to the sound of the wind whistling on the tail fins, though its cold fingers found their way into every seam and hollow, chilling him at once.

Down he went, trailing behind the great mass of Narva until the airship was lost from sight and, in spite of the chilling cold, Orlov found the ride thrilling, laughing as he was swallowed by the heavy vapors of the cloud deck. He was to call up the moment he broke through the deck, but it took much longer than he expected. Finally, when the cable was near its maximum extension, the mist and cloud thinned and the pod broke through into clear air.

Now Orlov thrilled to the sight of the vast landscape beneath him, the endless green forest of the Taiga as far as the eye could see. Small lakes and marshy peat bogs dotted the landscape, and he caught the dull gleam of water everywhere. The last time he had seen anything so exhilarating was when he had leapt from the KA-226 helicopter over the Mediterranean, and came parachuting down off the Spanish coast. Soon he spied a wandering ribbon of grey water off his starboard side, and he consulted his chart book, looking for some telltale bend or curve in the river’s course that he could match up to the drawings.

He called up the sighting, cranking up the box that operated like a military field phone and sending navigation orders to the helm. Little by little he maneuvered the airship to starboard, until they were directly over the river, and slowly heading northeast.

Then he saw it, something winking like sunlight on a diamond in the distance. He watched it for some time, then decided to steer the airship a few more points to starboard to get closer. Yes, there could be no doubt now. It was no random reflection where the sun might have broken through a hole in the clouds to find water. Could it be deliberate? Was someone was down there with a mirror or some other shiny metal, perhaps even a lantern, trying
to catch his eye? He called up to notify Captain Selikov to see what he wanted to do.

“Good news,” said Selikov on the phone. “Keep us close to that signal. We’ll hover here and see what we can find out about it. That may be a local Evenik hunter who can put us on the map.”

The airship hovered and they soon began the slow process of reeling in the sub-cloud car, until Orlov was hauled up through the cloud deck and his pod was recovered. Then Narva achieved a slight change in her gas bag pressure balance using the pumps to move helium and inflate the ballonets to reduce buoyancy. It was just enough to allow the ship to slowly descend through the thick, grey clouds until her vast bulk emerged like a great alien spacecraft, slowly descending towards the forest below.

Now they could all see the glint of something on the tundra beneath them, a bright object in a clearing that occasionally caught the sunlight that was able to pierce the weather in thin golden shafts. It was not a man after all, not a local hunter, and Captain Selikov was disheartened.

“Well at least you got us to the river again,” he said. “I had hoped we would find someone out here, but what are the chances of that?”

“You mean to move on?” Orlov seemed eager to explore the finding and see what they had discovered.

“Why not?”

“Look at this,” said the Chief, with a wry grin. He handed Selikov his compass and the hands were making a wild spin, much more erratic than they had seen before.

“Yes? So the compass is still useless. What of it?”

“It was never this bad,” said Orlov. “Whatever that thing is it may be the source of this interference. Why don’t I go down with a few men to have a look.”

Selikov seemed restless, and clearly uneasy with the proposition. He had heard too many stories of this region, the stuff of horror tales and nightmares. Besides that, he felt an unaccountable anxiety here, a chill along his spine that was not from the Siberian cold. He had been watching the ship’s elevator panel to note the airship’s pitch, and was surprised by the odd vibration he had noted in the glass leveling tube. It was not the engines, he knew. Like Dobrynin with his reactors, Selikov had come to know every sound and vibration of his airship over the years, and his engines had been running
No. It was something else, and it gave him a feeling of profound unease. There was something wrong here. He could see it in the glint of light from the clearing below, and feel it in the air all about him. Yet he could not grasp what it was, like a sound just below the threshold of hearing that nonetheless could be subtly perceived, a ghostly cantata that for him was a dirge from hell itself.

“It looks metallic,” said Orlov, his curiosity obvious as he studied the light source through a pair of binoculars. “If this is the source of that magnetic interference, we ought to have a look.”

It was only Orlov’s insistence as the nominal mission leader that compelled the Captain to relent and hover in place, descending into a clearing not far from the source of the light and hovering the ship at 100 meters.

“Alright, Orlov,” he said quickly. “We’re wasting time here. That’s probably nothing more than an aircraft that got lost out here and crashed. If you must go see for yourself, then be quick about it. We can lower you and a few men in the main cargo basket aft.”

“Good enough,” said Orlov. “Hey Troyak,” he shouted. “Bring your equipment!”

The Chief decided to go down with Troyak and another Marine, a man named Chenko, and they would do a brief ground reconnaissance to see what Orlov had discovered. Orlov did not believe in fairy tales and ghost stories, though he had to admit that Selikov’s dark mood, and the almost palpable edginess and fear displayed by many of the crew members, was somewhat infectious. His curiosity drove him on that day, though he would come to regret his little fishing expedition here in more ways than one.
Chapter 8

It was the sound that undid them as they approached, a sound they could not hear. Acoustic trauma was a well known phenomenon. Humans were accustomed to a range of acceptable sound in the 20-20 scale, from 20 Hz to 20KHz. Even within that range, sound had long been a means of warning, from the clatter of swords deliberately beating on metal shields in a formation of ancient soldiers, to the harsh warning of a siren, alarm, or claxon on the ship before a missile fired. Sound we could hear might grate upon us, like fingernails scratching a blackboard, a dentist’s drill grinding through the enamel of the tooth ever closer to the pulsing infection of a swollen nerve in the abscess. The sound we could hear could be used to soothe, or to torture, to give pleasure or pain, to lure like the siren song, or give warning of imminent harm.

Beneath the threshold of human hearing, however, sound seemed to take on other mysterious properties. Animals with keener senses used it well enough. Pigeons could navigate by ultra low level sound, it was thought that other migrating birds could hear the low infrasound of air masses passing over distant mountains and move towards it as well. Elephants could emit low sounds that could migrate through the earth itself and range out as far as ten kilometers to coordinate with other herd members. And the growl of a Siberian Tiger was said to exhibit vibrations in the range of 16Hz, below the threshold of human hearing, but nonetheless perceived as the deep, threatening warning that it was.

There was something growling on the taiga that day. They could not hear it, but they could feel it, a discomfort in the chest, a thoracic sense of doom. It was a thrumming vibration that seemed to invade their very being with the warning of injury, and the closer the three men came to the clearing, the more uneasy they felt.

“Glubokiy zvuk,” said Troyak, feeling the disturbance around them in a palpable way now. It was Russian for “deep sound,” and the gritty Sergeant had undergone special training where he was exposed to dangerously low infrasound in the range of 8-10 Hz, and challenged to perform normal routine duties—assembling and disassembling his rifle, loading ammunition,
calculating target coordinates and keying the information for a presumed artillery fire.

Orlov was not so well conditioned, and he immediately began to regret his impulsive urge to come down and see what was shining at them from the clearing. They were out of the cargo basket, once used in decades past for men to stand and throw bomblets at ground targets in the older zeppelin models. Now it was an easy way to put down a squad sized contingent from heights up to 200 meters.

A stand of trees separated their clearing from low depression in the ground, a thicket of larch and pine that seemed oddly twisted and stunted in places as they passed through, with strange burls on the trunks of the trees that appeared to be odd boils in the wood, some genetic malformation that had caused a cancerous growth on the trunks. There, in that moment of suspended anticipation, Orlov could feel his disquiet redouble with each step he took. Something was wrong here, he knew, deep in his bones. Something was ugly, and bad, and vile here, and he had to resist the urge to turn and simply retrace his steps, yearning for the relative security of the metal cargo basket now, yearning for the cold interior of the airship again, his curiosity quashed by this strange, unfathomable fear.

Yes, it was fear—a fear they could almost hear quavering in the air about them, as though something was hidden in the marshy ground ahead, waiting to emerge like a demon from hell and devour them. They would hear it, and then not hear it, and the absence of the sound had an equally chilling effect on Orlov. Silence could choke a man too. It enveloped him like a shroud, utter silence, a soundless quiet that spoke of an uttermost void, where no life of any kind could ever live. There would come a moment of absolute silence when they stopped, all three men at once, where nothing could be heard. Nothing at all…

Then Troyak stepped forward, the sound of his heavy boots on the duff of rotting wood branches and pine needles in the thicket becoming a welcome balm… until the sound came at them again—a sound they could not hear, but yet one that assaulted them as they stepped to the edge of the tree line, intruding on every sense, bone deep sound that penetrated into their minds like a throbbing vibration of something old, something primal, something lost and forlorn.

For Orlov it was pure fear that he felt at that indefinable boundary’s edge.
It brought a choking or gagging sensation to his throat that made him want to wretch, yet froze his larynx to the point where he could not speak. Beyond the edge of those trees lay the clearing, and there was something there that seemed to take him by the throat with the intent to choke the life from him. Strange visions emerged in his mind, the purple face of Commissar Molla, his eyes bulging, as Orlov choked him to death. Now the memory of an old story his grandmother had told him as a child emerged in this thoughts—the devil’s bone yard—the story he never believed, until that moment...

“A bright star fell in the far away land, and tall grey phantoms were seen to haunt the woodlands in the days after, hunting the living and dragging their souls through the fens and moors of the taiga, to the gateway of Hell…”

For Chenko it was a deep feeling of sadness that came over him, like the melancholy of Russian Toska, the feeling that could not be truly described to anyone who was not Russian. There was no escaping it, for it became one’s entire thought process when it arose. Yet here it seemed to come from without, emanating from the center of that clearing and forcibly entering his mind, as if it had crawled out of the ground and entered his soul through the bones of his leg. His hands tingled and the air seemed to thicken as he struggled to breathe, as though he were drowning.

Troyak could clearly feel the same effects he had endured in his training. It was a resonance of doom, a sonic violence that some believed could rupture the organs of the body itself at very low frequencies around 7Hz, a frequency of the brain’s own theta wave rhythm associated with fear and anger. He could not hear the sound, yet he knew, on some inner level, that he was under attack. It prompted him to instinctively prime his automatic rifle, leveling it at the open clearing as though it were filled with some unseen enemy. It was “Glubokiy zvuk,” deep sound, body sound that entered not through the ears, but the body itself.

Chenko saw this and immediately raised his own weapon, and the three men stood there, a few feet into the clearing, in the pulsing dissonance of annihilating silence alternating with that dreadful vibrato, the devil’s whisper, the sound of death itself.

There, ahead of them, something lay gleaming in the wan sunlight, but none of them ventured to take one further step. The ground all about the clearing was littered with the dead, bleached skeletons of fallen animals—the devil’s bone yard if ever there was one. The unheard sound came again, and
Orlov was the first man to break, turning and running back into the comforting closeness of the trees, yet tripping over a fallen branch and going down with a hard thump. There, right before his eyes he saw another shiny thing, what looked to be a small chunk of metal, which he impulsively grasped in the palm of his hand. He would not go back into that clearing to see what was there—to hell with that—but he would at least have this much to show for their foray into the Siberian wilds of Tunguska.

Chenko was soon at his side, eager to help him if only to get himself farther away from that god forsaken clearing. Only Troyak stood his ground, his eyes puckered as he scanned the distant tree line on the far side of the clearing, mindless so his mind could not unnerve him, his every movement no more than a well honed military reflex. A man who was afraid could not fight well, and Troyak was fearless. He knelt, shifting the pack on his back to off shoulder the equipment he had brought along. His shielded military field radio set had a mode that could detect electromagnetic interference and store the measurement level in memory. He also had a Geiger counter set that could see if there was any unseen radiation in the area. Both readings convinced him that this was no place to linger. He completed his survey, took a soil sample and sealed it off in a special container, and then turned to join the others.

He found them back in the main clearing, hastening towards the safety of the zeppelin basket.

“Orlov!” he called. “Don’t you want to have a look at that damn thing back there?” The Sergeant thumbed over his shoulder.

“Leave it!” Orlov was no longer curious. He had a chunk of something shiny enough in his pocket, and now all he wanted to do was to get back up to the zeppelin and get something hot to drink, followed by something much stronger.

Troyak looked back over his shoulder and stared at the object protruding from the matted duff of the tundra. He had heard so many tales of these hidden dens from his youth, and he knew what this must be. Kheldyu, he said to himself, a word from the Yakut Siberian dialect that meant “Iron House.” There was a vale nearby, between two rivers, that was known as Kheliugur, the “Place of the Iron People.” Others simply called them “Cauldrons” due to their concave, circular shape.

The regional lore was rich with tales of these strange dome like structures,
overturned cauldrons, half buried in the marshy ground. Place names all throughout the region testified to their existence. He knew of a stream called Algy Timirbit, which meant “the large cauldron sank.” Another was called the Olguidakh, or “Cauldron Stream.” Some said they were orange in color, like copper, but made of a strange metal that no tool could cut, a metal that could not be chipped, scratched or hammered. They were thought to be the haunts of tall demons who roved the taiga looking for the souls of wayward hunters.

Usually covered by frost and snow in the winter, they seemed like nothing more than small hills to the unwary traveler. But some of the local peoples had stumbled upon them, and those that returned claimed there was a small opening in the top, and a winding stair that led down, where a series of metal rooms were arrayed about a central core, the home of Niurgun Bootur, a demon of the taiga called the “Fiery Champion.” Shamans warned the people to stay away from such things, or they would be stricken with incurable ailments. He had finally found one, and from the feeling in his gut now, the deep thrumming sensation of peril, he knew all the old legends and tales of the Valley of Death were true. He would do what any shaman of the taiga would advise—get away from this place, and as fast as possible.

When they were all secured aboard the Narva again, Corporal Zykov came in and brewed up a pot of good coffee, spiked with a brandy. “Trouble?” he asked of Troyak, who nodded, saying only one word: “Siberia.”

“Ah,” said Zykov. “Don’t tell me you ran across old Chuchuna, the hairy wild man of the taiga.” Legends held that there was a remnant of a strange Siberian hominoid, Siberia’s Bigfoot, still lingering in a region that was completely uninhabited by humans. Even into modern times there were hundreds of thousands of square miles of land where no human had ever ventured. The name was related to the Yakut Turkic word for “fugitive” or “outcast,” and in the Siberian Evenki language it meant “bandit.”

Described as a heavily built giant of a man that stood up to seven feet tall, Chuchuna was said to have long arms and an ape-like aspect. Some thought they might have been remnants of the ancient Neanderthals, surviving to modern times. The creature had many other names, but in the West they came to be called “Yeti.”

“Who knows,” said Troyak. “Maybe a demon house, maybe a cauldron,
maybe nothing at all.” He had seen what looked like a round metallic dome protruding from the mossy duff of the clearing.

Other legends spoke of unseen creatures that lurked in the depths of the bogs, dragging reindeer and other animals beneath the dark waters there in the summer. Another told of an alien creature that wandered into the cemetery of a small village near Chelyabinsk, less than a foot tall but with grey skin, blotched with small brown spots, claws on its hands, huge eyes, and only two tiny holes where the ears should be. The creature had been called the Siberian Chupacabra, but the woman who found it called it Aleshenka.

Yakut legends held that there were places in the wilderness where tall whirlwinds of fire would emerge from the ground, and massive circular structures would appear, described as “rotating metal islands” that would fly off into the sky. They had all heard them, some old stories, some new, none believed, all feared.

“Nothing at all?” Zykov shook his head. “Look at Orlov there! I haven’t seen him look so glum since we hauled him off that trawler in the Caspian Sea.”

“Yob tvoyu mat!” Orlov swore, telling Zykov what he could do with his mother, not wanting to be reminded of his ill-fated capture during Fedorov’s expedition. “Maybe we should stick you in that metal basket and send you down there, eh? Did you see all those bones, Chenko? That place was evil.”

Troyak shifted his equipment pack. “Whatever it was, it was radioactive,” he said quietly. “We got a low dosage in the time we were there, not enough to worry about anything, but better to be somewhere else.”

“Anywhere else,” said Orlov with a shrug. “That damn place is so thick a man can’t even walk. I fell right on my face.” He covered for the embarrassment of having turned to run for the tree line, but neither Troyak or Chenko held it against him. They knew what he had felt.

Then Orlov remembered the small shiny metal he had found by chance, wondering if it was silently burning him with a radioactive emission. He reached into his pocket and pulled it out, holding it up to see that it glittered with an unnatural light. “Test this,” he said.

“Where did you get that?” Zykov leaned his way to get a better look at the fragment.

“It was right in front of my face when I tripped up. Is it radioactive,
Troyak?”

The Sergeant grunted, pulling out his Geiger counter and doing a scan of the object, eventually shaking his head.

“Nothing to worry about,” he said. “Keep it as a little souvenir.”

Orlov pocketed the object returning to his coffee, the memory of that unheard sound still deeply troubling. They were cruising at 500 meters now, but he still felt uneasy, and he could sense the other men were equally discomfited.

They all lapsed into silence until Captain Selikov came back to the aft cargo gondola and saw them all huddled with their mugs of hot spiked coffee.

“Well?” He was understandably curious as to what the men had found, but Orlov just kept staring into his coffee mug. No one else said anything, and the Captain nodded, inwardly knowing that they had just had a taste of the reason he wanted to get the ship as far from this place as possible.

“We’re low enough to navigate beneath this cloud deck,” Selikov said at last. “I could follow this river northwest, and with any luck we may get back to the main branch of the Yenisei River and find our way to the Angara. But that is 400 to 600 kilometers out of our way, and we might just as easily head south from this point. The Tunguska river bends that way here. If I follow it for a little while it will point us towards the Angara, which is where we were supposed to be all along, before that storm took us off course. In fact, the Tunguska River is pointing us right at our objective at the moment.”

“Let’s hope the damn ship’s compass settles down,” said Zykov. “How do you know you can keep us heading south? What if we get lost again?”

“I think I know where we are on the chart now. The river splits here, and one branch leads south for a while. There should be a little Evenik village called Kuyumba soon. Then it will begin to jog east again, and If you think you have seen the real nightmare in Siberia, let me tell you that you have seen nothing yet. That way leads to hell on earth. There’s a place there where every tree has been blown to the ground, for hundreds of kilometers in every direction. I think you know of what I speak.”

Selikov folded his arms, considering. “Shall we try to get south from here?”

No one objected.
They eventually found the small village Selikov had mentioned, no more than a few log cabins and wood sheds by the winding Tunguska River. Even though their compass was still quivering, the effects were less pronounced, and the Captain was confident that he had the nose of the airship pointed south. So they left the river, vanishing over the green wilderness, where small rivulets formed a web that wandered through the taiga forest, aimless waterways to nowhere. It was another three hours at about 80KPH before Selikov was heartened to see what looked to be a substantial river, running perpendicular to his present course, just as he had hoped.

“There is the Angara,” he said jubilantly. “With steady weather and a nudge in the right direction I can still navigate without a compass. Look,” he pointed for Orlov to see. “The needle still can’t seem to find its way north.”

“So how do we find Ilanskiy?”

“It should be about another 275 kilometers, due south on our present heading. Look there,” he pointed at the river below. “That’s the village of Boguchany on the Angara River. Another three hours should do it. The only problem is that we still have this odd interference on many of the ship’s systems, including our RUS-1 radar. What about that thing you mounted on the gondola?”

“The Oko panel? That is our radar,” said Orlov. “But Troyak says it suffers the same effects. We’re getting a signal but not at the ranges we would expect. It’s very strange. That is a heavily shielded system, very resistant to jamming or any other disturbances. All the radio equipment is cloudy as well. I thought it would abate when we got farther south, but it persists.”

“Well I don’t like going in blind like this,” Selikov warned.

“Don’t worry,” Orlov admonished. “This place is still out in the middle of nowhere—just a backwater stop along the Trans-Siberian rail, and I’m told there are very few trains these days. This should be a quick in and out. Troyak is very efficient.”

Selikov shook his head. He didn’t even really know why he was on this mission, or why Ilanskiy was in any way important. He had simply been told
to ferry the Marines to the location, set them down, and provide air cover while they were on the ground. Once they were recovered, then he was to bring them home. A little over an hour later, however, they were about to find out that there was more going on at Ilanskiy than any of them could have believed.

The Oko panel radar finally began to pick up a number of airborne contacts to the south, one at very close range. It was clearly an aircraft, though it did not approach. Zykov was monitoring the system with his mobile equipment pack, and reported.

“That plane was probably close enough to spot us,” he said. “As for the other contacts, they have to be airships. There is no movement. I believe they are hovering in place.”

“How many?” Captain Selikov turned his head as Zykov reported.

“I count four main contacts, and there appear to be a few aircraft up as well.”

Selikov was not happy to hear this, and quickly convened a meeting with Troyak and Orlov. “Well gentlemen,” he said. “Either someone has wind of this little mission or they have just decided to throw a party out here in the middle of nowhere. Your man here says there are four airships to the south, and if we can see them, then they will certainly see us if we continue.”

“Four airships? Sookin Syn! What have we gotten ourselves into here? Could they have been sent here to stop us?”

“I doubt anyone knew of this mission. Spies could have seen us depart from Severomorsk, or even Port Dikson, but after that we’ve been lost in Siberia, and there would be no way anyone could predict our final destination like this. No. This has to be something more, but I certainly did not expect this here at a small rail depot like Ilanskiy. What do we do?”

Orlov thought for a moment. “Can we get through to Kirov on your military radio now, Troyak?”

“Interference is still clouding over the signals, but I will try.”

“You can’t count on getting through,” said Selikov. “You have to decide whether to push this mission forward, or abort. If they are on to us, those four airships will make an end of us in short order. I’m hovering in place. Moving south now would be suicide. You want to go on with this, then you will have to do it on the ground.”

“On the ground? How far are we from Ilanskiy?”
“Well over 120 kilometers! It will have to be a very long walk if you go, and there is no way I can get you out in that event, not with four goddamn airships south. We should turn tail and head north again at once.”

* * *

Karpov sat across from Air Commandant Symenko, a self satisfied look on his face as he poured them both a glass of brandy.

“Just something to warm you up,” he said. “I regret that caution dictated I take a fairly hard line with you, Captain. But you will see that I am not uncouth, or even spiteful. Forgive my remarks concerning Omsk. They were uncalled for, but understand that city was never Volkov’s to take or give away. It was ours, the Free Siberian State, and now the border is back where it belongs, west of Isilkul.”

Symenko accepted the apology, such as it was, and took a lingering sip of the brandy, finding it very good, particularly with the fresh summer sausage and a bit of aged cheese and crackers to go along with it.

“You have a delivery to make?”

“That I do.”

“What was so important that it could not be handed off to a Lieutenant. There was no need for you to come up in that drafty spy basket.”

“Orders are orders,” Symenko said flatly, and he hefted the diplomatic pouch up onto the table.

Karpov gave it a long look, curious, but waiting. What was there? He summoned a Lieutenant, telling him to open the brief while he continued to eat his cold cuts, seemingly unconcerned, in spite of his curiosity. The man undid the leather straps, and pulled out a plain oversized envelope, placing it on the table near Karpov’s left arm. Then he saluted and withdrew.

Karpov gave it a sideward’s glance, finishing a morsel and taking another sip of brandy. “You were ordered to bring both airships, Symenko, or was that your idea?”

“Orders, plain and simple.”

“Then I suppose this must be important.” Karpov sighed, taking up the envelope and opening it to find a letter, addressed to him and signed by Ivan Volkov. As he read it silently, it was all he could do to keep the emotion from his face in front of Symenko.
It was information he had long wondered about, and now Volkov’s intelligence network had finally answered the question that had lingered in his mind for some time. They had found the ship—Kirov—his ship. It was spotted at Murmansk, but what were they doing there?

A moment’s thought answered that question. They obviously shifted, dragging him along with them as he suspected, but they would have found themselves in the Pacific. Knowing Fedorov, he would have quickly learned what had happened politically here. They certainly could not return to Vladivostok under these conditions, so they must have sailed home to Murmansk. My god, that will mean Sergei Kirov might have learned about the ship that bears his name. This opened door after door in his mind, dark yawning possibilities, and each portal filled with yet more questions.

Did that damn submarine go with them? What tremendous power they would have in that case. Kazan was even more of a threat than the battlecruiser insofar as any intervention in this war might be considered. A submarine like that would be completely invincible. It could operate undetected, delivering its lethal torpedoes unseen, like a whisper of death.

Volkov’s last notation was very cryptic. It read: “So Kirov is there, back home where it came from. My only question now is why are you there at Ilanskiy, and not on your ship?”

Yes, Volkov was getting very curious now, and justifiably so.

They were soon interrupted by the Lieutenant, who walked very quickly to Karpov’s side and bent to whisper something in his ear. Karpov could no longer control himself, sitting up stiffly, the light of alarm in his eyes.

“You are certain of this?”

“We have three border stations reporting now, sir. But the wireless room is still receiving signals.”

“Make certain this gets to Irkutsk. Then find out what is happening south of Pavlodar. That will be all.”

He waited until the Lieutenant had withdrawn, then slowly folded his hands on the table, his face set and deadly serious now. Symenko had been finishing his brandy and thinking how to ask for another glass when he perceived something was very wrong.

“Very clever, Symenko,” said Karpov, the edge of danger in his voice. “Nice little theater here.”

“What do you mean?”
“You know damn well what I mean! I should string you up and blow both your airships to hell, shouldn’t I. My, my. What have you done to so displease Volkov? It’s clear that he considers you expendable.”

“Expendable? I have no idea what you are talking about.”

“Don’t take me for a fool, Symenko! Are you going to sit there and tell me you knew nothing of this treachery?”

“Treachery? What are you saying, Karpov? I’ve told you why I am here, and treachery has nothing to do with it. Why else would I have allowed you to sit off my brow where you can bring most of your guns to bear? Now what is this about?” The Captain was getting angry as well, and the two men stared at one another until Karpov spoke.

“Three border stations have reported shooting incidents in the last hour, all along the western border. Volkov’s 17th, 21st and 9th rifle divisions have pushed into Free Siberian Territory and they are all moving on your little city—the one you hoped to get your greedy hands on Symenko. Yes, my intelligence services know more than you may think. So now you can tell me what you are really doing here before I have you shot as a hostile enemy behind our lines!”

Symenko was truly surprised, and he could not keep the emotion from his face. Karpov could see it, was still suspicious, but soon began to perceive that this Captain might have been no more than an unwitting pawn here.

“I tell you I had no knowledge of this. I was simply sent here to deliver that pouch, and I expect diplomatic immunity, even if what you say is true.”

“Oh, it’s true, Captain. I will not be surprised to learn that there is now another big operation underway out west. Very clever, this Volkov. He baits me with promises at Omsk, and we move in the 18th Siberian Rifles to occupy the place. Now he has pushed three divisions across the border, and probably more south of Pavlodar. He knows we still are sitting on our main defense line on the Ob River. So now he can take a bite and trap our 18th Division at Omsk, and all this after all those smiles and handshakes at our recent conference. I should have known better. So why should I not put a bullet through your head for your part in this?”

“I tell you I knew nothing of this! Nothing at all.”

“Does it feel good to be used, Symenko? Is that what you are telling me here?”

Symenko’s face reddened as he realized what had happened. Volkov, that
son-of-a-bitch! He’s thrown me to the wolves. He reneged on his promise to post me as Governor in Omsk, and sends me here on the eve of his operation like this, knowing what Karpov would do to me. That’s why the bastard insisted I deliver that damn pouch personally. Sookin Syn!

“That bastard betrayed me as well! No wonder he refused my posting to the Governorship. He was just trying to get me out of the way so he could give the city to someone else. It all makes sense now, this whole charade—rousted out of bed at four in the morning with special orders. Deliver the pouch personally, that was what I was told, and now I see why. Well, don’t shoot the messenger, Karpov. I have as much of a bone to pick with Volkov as you do. I tell you I had no knowledge that any such operation was planned or even contemplated!”

Karpov looked at him. Symenko was a rough hewn man, brutal at times, plain and ill mannered at others. He had read the file on him to size the man up, and Symenko was hardly the sort to use in a role like this. No, Symenko was not the artful dodger, one to mince words and handle a matter of this nature. It was probably true what he said now. Volkov had sent him all this way to be certain he was out of the picture he was painting. But what about his airships? Did they have orders here too? Were they getting ready to engage here to tie me down. I’ve gone and pulled in most of our regional reserves with this Ilanskiy business. A thousand questions ran through Karpov’s mind in an instant, yet one overshadowed them all. What was Volkov really up to?

“So you’re just the messenger, is it? You want to claim diplomatic immunity and have me kiss your backside and send you merrily on your way? I should drag your ass into that spy basket and cut the damn thing loose. That would be a nice long ride to hell, right Symenko? We are at 4500 meters up here. But before I do that let me test what you have said here. You tell me Volkov has betrayed you as well? Then join me.”

“What?”

“Don’t look so stupid. If it is true that Volkov considers you expendable and sends you into the bear’s den with that pouch, then how eager can you be to fight for him now? Is that what your Executive officer is planning? Are you going to open your gun ports and climb any second as part of this diversion? Well the minute I hear the first round fired you are a dead man. But if you are innocent in this, then I won’t hear a thing. Yes? If you are
innocent, then you will have every reason to want to screw Volkov for what he has just done to you. Right Symenko?”

The Captain steamed, his eyes looking this way and that, clearly beside himself, and struggling with both fear and anger here. Then a knock came and in rushed the young Lieutenant again, this time with no message in hand.

“Air alert sir! One of the planes scouting north has seen a large airborne contact to the northwest! There’s another airship bearing down on us!”

Karpov smiled, and slowly reached into his jacket to produce a revolver, which he pointed directly at Symenko’s forehead.
Part IV

**Best Laid Plans**

“The best laid schemes of Mice and Men
oft go awry,
And leave us nothing but grief and pain,
For promised joy.”

—Robert Burns: *To A Mouse*, (Paraphrased)
Chapter 10

So there it was, and Orlov was now in the hot seat of command with a real decision to make. Of course he looked at Troyak to see what he advised.

“Troyak?”

The Sergeant thought for a moment. “I could take in a single squad from here. We will be a long day to get there, but perhaps this will have blown over by the time we do. If not, I can set up an observation on the site and report. One way or another, a chance may come up for us to execute the mission.”

“Or to get executed yourself!” Orlov was not convinced this was a good idea. The whole mission was meant to rely on stealth. This was supposed to be a backwater outpost, not a bustling hub of military activity.

“These damn airships, they carry troops like we can?”

“More than likely,” said Selikov. “They could have a full regiment there now with four airships. That’s half the entire Siberian Aero Corps! You don’t get a concentration like that without some muscle behind it. I tell you something is going on there. Either they are expecting us, and our cover was blown somehow, or this is happenstance, but your best play would be to wait here on the ship. I can get us north, and hopefully those airships will stay put where they are.”

“You want to get us lost again, Selikov?” Orlov grinned.

“Better than the alternative, which would most likely see us blown out of the sky if we try to go south. Narva is a good ship, well gunned. I can probably beat any ship they put against me, but not four damn airships in one throw.”

“My orders are to go at any cost,” said Troyak.

“What were your orders, Troyak?” Orlov frowned, folding his arms. He felt as though he had not been fully briefed, in spite of being the ranking officer aboard from Kirov.

Troyak hesitated briefly, remembering those last moments with Fedorov when he had asked the one question no one seemed to want to deal with: “And what if we encounter Karpov in one of his zeppelins?”

“You will have to use your best judgment, Troyak. The Admiral hopes to
avoid engagement. We do not want to let Karpov know we are here just yet. Admiral Volsky is considering the matter. But you must protect the airship, and your men. This mission is very important. Coordinate with Captain Selikov. He knows how to fight the airship. You handle ground operations with your Marines. For the moment it is Volkov that we are worried about. If the situation allows you to reconnoiter down those steps and find him, report back. Admiral Volsky will give the final order. And Sergeant, no one needs to know about Karpov for the moment, particularly Orlov.”

“We were to secure the objective, then report our status to the ship,” said Troyak. “On the Admiral’s word, the mission would then proceed.”

“Well that’s it, then. They were not even sure if they could make a go of it, Troyak. We need to contact the goddamn ship and report this situation. So you do everything you possibly can to get the that radio working. Then we decide what to do.”

“And what if your radio will not work?” Selikov continued to play the devil’s advocate. “For that matter what if your compass remains fouled up on the ground? Then how will you find your way?”

Troyak simply smiled. “I could get there blind folded,” he said gruffly. “But what you say about the radio makes a good point. If we can’t raise the ship up here, it will be no different down there on the ground.”

He had his field map open, downloaded from the ship’s library and printed just for this mission. There was a village very near their position, labeled Aban. The word meant “backwater” and the place was well named, a forgotten outpost in the vast wilderness they had been drifting over. From there he saw makeshift roads and trails south towards the rail line. It would not be a difficult march.

“I will try some alternate bands on the radio, Captain. See if you can get me north of this village.”

* * *

Symenko thought quickly. Join him? Why not? It was either that or a bullet to the head. Isn’t that why Volkov sent me here in the first place? Then again, this could be my fire test. Volkov was fond of leaning heavily on an officer to test his mettle. Suppose I kill both birds with one stone. Let Karpov think I’m amenable to his proposal. Once I get back to my ship it will then be
a simple matter to get to a better position and then stick it to Karpov here. But first, the theater. What about Captain Petrov aboard the Oskemen? He certainly won’t go along with this. Petrov is a straight shooter. In fact, he was probably sent along on this little foray to send back reports.

“That is not our airship,” he said quickly. “As far as I know we were sent alone. I know nothing about a third ship.”

“You don’t sound convincing.” Karpov was adamant. “In two minutes I’m going to blow your ships to pieces, Captain, but of course you won’t be alive to worry about that.”

“No! Wait! What you say makes sense to me. This is all Volkov’s doing. I swear it! I was told nothing of this—only to come here and deliver that pouch. But Volkov, damn his soul, he knew what would happen if we were caught here when he crossed the border. You are correct, Karpov. I have been thrown to the wolves. So why not join them? Yes? And why should you open fire on our ships when they might make a nice addition to your Aero Corps?”

“That sounds a little better, Symenko. You are starting to think now, but how can you be trusted? If you are willing to turn colors so easily, might you not do so again?”

“What would you do in my place, take a bullet in the head, or live to get a chance to stick it to Volkov for everything he has done? And to me, he has done more than you know. Yes, I was promised the governorate at Omsk. Why do you think my ship was renamed? That is the least of it. My trouble with Volkov goes back years. I opposed him when Denikin was still alive, and he knows that. He could not purge the ranks completely, but that is what he has been doing—rooting out all Denikin’s old followers one by one. I was one of the last, and always wondered how he would try to get rid of me.”

That should sound convincing, thought Symenko.

“Now you need not wonder any longer…” Karpov lowered his revolver, eyes tight, thinking. “You will surrender your airships?”

“I would order it, but I cannot speak for what Petrov might do.”

“Petrov?”

“He’s Captain of the Oskemen, and one of Volkov’s boys. I’ve little doubt that he was sent here with me to prevent what we are now discussing, though I do not think he foresaw that you would haul me up here in a basket. We anticipated docking and meeting on the ground.”

“You have troops aboard?”
“Of course, two light battalions.”

“Why, Symenko? If this was simply a delivery run then why bring two battalions along?”

“You’ll have to ask Volkov that.”

“You had no orders to debark and operate on the ground?”

“Of course not. What would we do here?” A lie was best at this point, thought Symenko.

“You might try tearing up the rail line for a start.”

“Look, Karpov, if we wanted to do that then we would have done so between Krasnoyarsk and Novosibirsk. We know you have the 91st Division in reserve at Krasnoyarsk, and by god we knew you had airships right here! So why come here for a rail sabotage operation? No. It is just as I have told you. I was to come here, deliver that pouch and be done with it.”

That bit about hitting the rail line west of Krasnoyarsk made sense, thought Karpov. That would prevent the 91st from getting to the main front quickly, but yet, Symenko is here, red faced, big eyed and now ready to talk business. Let me see what he knows.

“Suppose I spare your life here—assuming you can deliver your airship intact. As for Petrov and the Oskemen, leave them to me. But what else do you know, Symenko? Are you telling me you had no idea this offensive was being planned? There would have been orders cut, munitions to be moved forward, and supplies. The roads would have been prepped and cleared. Sapper teams would have been training for cross border action for weeks. Beyond that, Volkov would need airship support. Your division would not have been enough. He would have had to cut orders and bring up units from the southern divisions. You heard nothing?”

Symenko stopped at that, thinking, remembering, his eyes suddenly registering recollection. “Yes! Pavlodar was detached south last week—right in the middle of your conference.”

“Pavlodar?”

“That’s ship number three in my division… But I had orders to take my ship up to Perm before this little venture was sprung on me.”
“Perm? What were you to do there?”

“We never know. Volkov moves us around like chess pieces. More often than not my ships are used for reconnaissance, but we never get operational orders until we arrive at our assigned patrol station.”

That was useful information, thought Karpov. He might want to keep Symenko alive for a while, just to see what else he could learn.

“Then what about Pavlodar?”

“It was sent south to operate with one of the southern divisions.”

“What ships?”

“Sarkand, Tashkent, Samarkand, Kazan—big ships, all 150,000 cubic meter lift, and high climbers too.”

“Why would one of your ships be detached south right before a major operation? We were watching your division—all four ships—and they were being well dispersed as per the agreement we made with Volkov at Omsk.”

“Yes,” said Symenko. “I was taking my ship to Perm. Astana was pulled west, and only Oskemen was left on the line. Then I got these orders to rendezvous with Captain Petrov at Tyumen, and we were to sneak in here well north of the rail line and, well, here we are.”

“Yes… Here you are. Volkov could have sent me a cable to tell me anything he wrote in that letter. He could have also told me to expect you, so as to avoid any unpleasantries. But that isn’t what he had planned, was it? He wanted to make sure things would get edgy here. That’s why he ordered you to swing well north and approach this place unseen. Well, I have news for you, Symenko, Pavlodar is back, only now we’ve identified at least three other airships coming up from the south. Volkov dispersed your division, showing me the open hand near Omsk, but all the while he was clenching another fist behind his back. I have little doubt that those ships you just mentioned will be crossing the southern border zone even as we speak.”

Symenko held up a finger, thinking, playing the act out as best he could.

“And now I recall orders for the 8th Kazakh light armor to move! Yes, I signed transfer papers for a young Lieutenant last week. He was tired of freezing his ass off in the Aero Corps and had been wanting a posting to a ground division for some months now. When I sent him off we talked about how bad the food was down south—he was posting to Karaganda—but he said his division wouldn’t be there long. Those were his exact words.”

“What other divisions were on that border zone?”
“15th Rifles, way down at Oskemen, and the 22nd just arrived to replace a worn out unit at Pavlodar.”

“Yes, we saw them pull out, the old 19th. They were good for nothing, but it looked as though Volkov was lightening up his deployments on the line, so we were glad to see them go.”

“Don’t be so happy. The 22nd is a specially trained unit, Karpov. It’s air mobile! Damn thing operates with that very same airship division coming up from the south. Why... They’re going to swing in over the mountains down there! That’s what they’re up to! There’s a big hole in your line there. I’ve scouted it many times and wet my beak in the high lakes of the Altay Mountains. With that many airships Volkov could lift a full brigade and drop it right on the city your ship is named for.” Symenko smiled. There, he had just thrown the bear a nice fish.

“Abakan?”

“You have nothing there, eh?” Symenko pressed his argument while he had Karpov nibbling. “Don’t you see? Volkov could take Abakan and cut the road all the way south to Mongolia—cut off your 107th division down there and leave them to the Japanese.”

Karpov frowned. “You know a good deal more than you let on, Symenko. Keep talking and I just may find a place for you in my command staff. But first we have a situation here to resolve. What do we do about this Captain Petrov?”

“He won’t surrender his ship, not Petrov. That man is a stiff prick, if ever there was one. He’ll fight.”

“But not long. I have Angara sitting off his hind end.”

“He’ll drop ballast and come up shooting.”

“And he’ll go down the same way. Leave that ship to me. The question now is what to do about your ship? Who is your Executive Officer?”

“Barmenko—a good man, but he’s with me. In fact, most of my officers were with Denikin. Others transferred in.”

“Sounds like Volkov was getting all his rats onto the same ship, but no offense meant, Symenko.”

“None taken, Karpov. Well, I can tell Barmenko we’ve permission to dock at Kansk. We could ease my ship over there, and I could order Petrov to stay put where he is. Then you settle affairs with him any way you wish.”

Karpov smiled. “You see, Captain. The things they say about you have
been very much exaggerated.”

“Oh? What have you heard?”

“That you are a hot headed old fart, too quick to anger and without a reasonable bone in your body. But I find you quite reasonable, wouldn’t you say?” Now Karpov raised the revolver, pointing it right at Symenko’s head again, and this time he pulled the trigger.

Chapter 11

There was a dry clink, and Symenko jumped as the hammer of Karpov’s revolver snapped down on an empty chamber. Karpov smiled, seeing the look of real fear on Symenko’s face now.

“The other five chambers all have bullets,” he said as he fixed Symenko with that same evil grin. He knew damn well that Volkov would have never sent a rabid dog like Symenko out as a courier boy. No. And all that talk about losing his appointment to the Governorate was a nice little sob story. He had his suspicions about Pavlodar moving south like that, and Symenko had just confirmed them, along with a good hint at what was soon to transpire on the southern border zone. Could he be believed?

The Lieutenant rushed in when he heard the gun clink, his eyes wide. He saw Symenko slouched in the chair, breathing hard, a look on his face like a trapped animal.

“Get him to the brig,” said Karpov. This man was too useful to kill just now. “Then get the spy basket ready and signal the Alexandra that their Captain is returning.”

What happened next was planned from the very moment Karpov had news of these air contacts. He knew he had to act quickly, because a third contact had been spotted and it could be here within the hour, changing the odds considerably. For the moment, he had the advantages of both position and surprise, and he was going to use them while he could.

“A pity you won’t be able to see what I’m about to do to your airship,” said Karpov. “Good day, Symenko—at least for me.”

He was up and out of the briefing room, his footsteps hard on the metal
grid of the keelway as he hastened forward to the main bridge. He was down the ladder quickly and ready to fight.

“Admiral on the bridge!”

“All guns manned and ready, Bogrov?”

“Aye sir. Shells chambered and guns trained on the targets. We couldn’t miss if we tried.”

“Very good. In a few minutes we will begin lowering the spy basket to return Captain Symenko to his ship. He’s in the brig, but no one down there will know that. Lower it right down on that open gun platform so it blocks their line of fire. The moment that basket comes in reach of their crew, we open fire. Signal the gun crews. All batteries fire on code red! Be ready on that signal flare.”

“Aye sir! Code red.” Bogrov nodded to a Lieutenant, and the order was quickly piped down to the gun pods beneath the gondolas. He had his ship hovering perpendicular to the Alexandra so he could bring every gondola gun to bear on the target. He had a big 105mm recoilless beneath the bridge gondola, three 76mm guns under the main gondola amidships, and two more of those on the aft gondola. Six rounds were going to be a most unpleasant advantage in the opening salvo, and Bogrov was correct, at no more than 200 meters range they could not miss.

Down went the spy basket, even as word was passed via field phone to the upper gun platform on top of the ship: Ready on signal flare one. A young mishman was fitting the red tipped round to his flare gun, waiting for the order, and then the phone rang again. He looked smartly to the gun master, who nodded. “Red, red, red!”

The sound of Abakan’s broadside split the silence with a loud roar. Six rounds blasted into the cotton canopy stretched over the duralumin airframe of Alexandra, penetrating easily and exploding deep within the ship. Not even the Vulcanized gas bags could close a wound from a high explosive shell in that caliber. Alexandra shuddered under the blow, sheets of her envelope fabric torn and set afire, gas bags penetrated and venting their precious helium, shrapnel cutting men down on ladders and lacerating the interior ballonets with a hundred tiny cuts.

“Drop ballast!” Karpov shouted over the action of the guns. “Full retraction on that spy basket. Fire for effect!”

Now both ships seemed to belch white falls of water from the ballast
tanks on the undersides, which fell in a grey rain seeding the clouds below. *Abakan* immediately began to rise, intending to stay well above her adversary, even as the open top gun deck on the *Alexandra* desperately trained and returned fire with the two 76mm recoilless rifles there. With the spy basket now clear, the second volley from *Abakan* struck her foe again, and two guns hit that platform, killing every man there and silencing *Alexandra*’s only reprisal unless she could gain parity in altitude.

But that would not happen. Karpov smiled as he watched the gun duel through his field glasses. There was a moment when the aft 20mm AA gun on the enemy ship was able to rake his central gondola with a burst of fire, but then the big 105mm gun under the bridge scored another direct hit on the brow of the enemy ship.

“That’s the way!” Karpov shouted. “That’s my big bag buster!” He could see that there was now severe damage forward on the *Alexandra* where the 105 had ruptured at least two main gas bags with that last shot. Even though the elevator controls were desperately trying to get the ship’s nose up, and *Alexandra* was bleeding more ballast forward, the ship’s tail was much lighter. The airship’s nose tipped downward, and the tail rotated wildly off axis as it careened up, riddled by continuing gunfire.

They put fifteen holes in the outer canvas in the first three minutes. Smoke bled from the nose of the ship, and her big tail fins seemed to jut obscenely up, the rudder moving to try and control the airship’s wild turn. Then one of *Abakan*’s 76mm guns put a round right into the aft port engine near the tail, and it exploded in angry red and yellow fire. Karpov clenched his fist when he saw the propeller blown clean away, still spinning wildly as it plummeted down and away from the ship.

The spy pod was finally hauled up, and Karpov smiled to himself. A pity I didn’t just put Symenko in there so he could see what I did to his ship, he thought.

Now he turned his field glasses north to see what was happening with *Angara* in its engagement with the *Oskemen*. His ship had the advantage of surprise, but that battle was still raging. That stiff prick, Symenko had talked about, Captain Petrov, was better than he expected. He had been ready on all ballast tanks and he dumped everything at once in a desperate emergency drop to try and rapidly gain altitude. He had his nose up, engines full out, good elevator control, but it wasn’t going to be enough. His ship still had
nearly a full contingent of troops aboard, and it was just too sluggish with all that weight. Angara was much lighter, maneuvering in a nimble, fiery dance above the other ship and riddling the enemy’s tail fins and elevators with deadly fire.

Both ships rose up into the grey sky, but Angara maintained the advantage of position, and so Oskemen decided to run. Karpov could see all six engines revving madly to gain power, and he saw the enemy ship level off, no longer trying to gain altitude it could never reach in time.

“That’s right, Petrov, you son-of-a-bitch,” Karpov breathed. “Yes! You run level when outgunned from above. You get your ass out of there.” He could see Angara revving up her engines to pursue, but that ship had risen over a thousand meters above her foe and the gunfire was now less effective. Rounds were reaching the target, but exploding above and beside the enemy ship in bright angry blossoms of fire that became blackened roses of smoke in the sky.

Karpov took one look at the Alexandra, burning forward, belching smoke from her wounded brow, flames devouring the cotton canvass envelope. He knew that ship was finished. We must have ruptured half her gas bags, he thought. They’ve lost all buoyancy and gone critical. That ship is going down.

Alexandra had dropped too much ballast trying to climb, and now he saw men flinging equipment overboard in a desperate attempt to halt their descent, but with a full battalion still aboard the loss of buoyancy had become fatal. They could try to jettison their spy baskets and cargo lifts, thought Karpov, but it will still do them no good.

There came a terrible hissing sound, and Karpov knew that the other ship had opened all their emergency pressurized helium tanks and were pumping it into any gas bags that were still intact. Then he heard another explosion, and saw the side of the ship burst open, revealing the duralumin frame like the bare metal ribs of an animal that had been flayed alive. A man dangled from one of the girders, then fell, a tiny speck vanishing into a cloud below with a fading scream.

“They blew a main gas bag amidships!” said Bogrov. “Tried to pump in too much reserve helium! They’re finished now.”

“All engines ahead full!” Karpov shouted. “Come fifteen points to starboard! Let’s get after the Oskemen!”
He took one last look at the *Alexandra*, seeing the ship falling like a stricken whale descending into the depths of the sea of clouds. It was a long way down. They were up over 4500 meters, and the ship was now going into an uncontrolled descent, nose down, trailing black smoke as it vanished, swallowed by the cloud deck.

The thrum of *Abakan’s* engines was a loud roar now as the airship hastened north. Karpov could see that *Angara* had halted her rapid ascent by venting helium to her reserve tanks and pumping air to the ballonets. Now that airship had leveled off and was also running in pursuit of the *Oskemen*, about 1500 meters above the enemy ship and an equal measure behind.

“Range to *Oskemen?*” He looked at his gun director and had an answer soon enough.

“Sir! I make it 5200 meters, and we’re closing.”

“He’s going to dive, Admiral,” said Air Commandant Bogrov. “He’s going to try to get into that cloud deck.”

Yes. Petrov was another sort. He had the nose of *Oskemen* down, and slipped deftly into the thickening mist. Once masked by the clouds their gunfire would not be able to sight on the target. Damn, thought Karpov. Now we will need to track them on radar. I must get to work with a way to radar control these guns.

“Topaz system! Call out enemy contact by range and bearing.”

“Sir! I have the range at 5000 meters, bearing 290.”

“Gun Master. Fire on those coordinates. We may not hit anything, but we can damn well let them know we are coming. Signal *Angara*. Tell them to drop a thousand meters elevation.”

They were gaining on the unseen contact, but Karpov knew his fish might easily slip off the line. At this rate *Oskemen* could run half an hour or more before we might make visual contact to get guns properly trained again. Petrov might even get down below the deck to prevent that unless we come down to look for him. That could be dangerous in this weather… and there is still that third ship to worry about out there. The bastard is good. He’s done everything I would have done and he just might slip away.

The roar of *Abakan’s* engines was fearfully loud now. The men huddled in their heavy woolen coats, dark Ushankas crowning their heads with the flaps pulled down over their ears, warming them as they muffled the sound. The airship vibrated with the urgency of its labor, and then the engine status
board lit up with a bright red light. Bogrov’s eyes flashed as he scanned the board.

“We just lost number six engine!” he shouted over the din. He knew engineers and mechanics were already running to the scene, and they would have men out from the aft gondola hatch and down the ladder to that engine in no time, but it would be bitter cold at this elevation. They were over two and a half miles up!

“That won’t be fixed any time soon,” he said with a shrug.

“What’s our airspeed?”

“80KPH, and we’ll hold that with the other five engines running full out.”

“Topaz operator, are we closing?”

“Range 4800 meters, but holding steady, sir.”

Bogrov shrugged. “They’ve still got six good engines, but they’re heavier than we are. At this rate it will be a long chase if we can hold onto them. We’ve certainly got a fuel advantage. Angara is much closer. They should be able to catch the bastards.”

“There’s a third ship out there somewhere, Captain. Any readings? Is our fighter still shadowing?”

“No sir. They had to return to Krasnoyarsk.”

“He could be leading us right to that number three ship. What do you figure they have, Bogrov?”

“Anyone’s guess sir, but they did have the flagship in the western region for that conference at Omsk.”

“Ohrenburg? That’s Volkov’s ship, and he wouldn’t send it out on a mission like this.”

Or would he, thought Karpov? It was clear Symenko had more in his orders than the delivery of that diplomatic pouch. That’s why I should have shot the bastard the minute I knew he was lying through his teeth. Was he playing for time with that delivery, time for that third ship to come in at high elevation on us? No time to find out now. I’ll deal with him later. Then the Topaz operator called out a position update.

“Sir, I think he’s descending. We’re closing on his position, but the actual range being reported is out of sync. That can only mean he’s losing altitude.”

“Very well.” Karpov had to decide what to do. Should he go down after this ship? What could he be up to? Think! Then he realized what Oskemen was trying to do. He wants to offload his troop contingent. He’s too damn
heavy to maneuver in a gun fight, and if he gets those men landward he can also climb much easier if he needs to do so. But he’ll have to hover to deploy his cargo basket and put squads down. There’s no way he could do that if we’re close. It doesn’t make sense.

“Shall I order Angara to get down after them, sir?” Bogrov was waiting, his eye on the altimeter board. They still had no reading on that third ship. If they both went down after the Oskemen, then that unknown contact could come in on top of them and turn the tables with the same advantage that had just sent the Alexandra to a fiery death. One of his ships would have to stay at good elevation to prevent that. He decided.

“Alright, order Angara to descend and pursue. We’ll remain up here on overwatch.”

It was the only decision he could make given the circumstances, and he hoped that the moment Oskemen hovered to debark her troops, the Angara would be able to catch the damn ship in the act and make short work of her.

But it would not happen that way.

Already 3000 meters below them, well beneath the grey cloud deck. Petrov’s men were standing in tense lines all along the main gondola, their rifles shouldered, eyes grim and set. A loud warning claxon blared and a ripple of movement animated the troops. A gunnery sergeant bawled out an order. “Hook up! Ready on red!”

The light came on and the men heard the aft gondola hatch open as another alarm bell rang. The Sergeant yelled out an order. “Go!”

The first men took three brisk steps and were out through the hatch, leaping from the gondola at 1500 meters. One after another the two lines shuffled tensely forward, the boots of the soldiers loud on the deck plating as they moved, grunting with exertion. The battalion was one of the specially trained air mobile units of the 22nd that Symenko had unwisely named during his interview with Karpov. It was parachute trained, and soon the skies were blooming with soft white chutes, like a school of a hundred jellyfish drifting in the sea, with the great, whale-like shape of the Oskemen high above.

Even as they fell, they could see the smoke rising in the distance from the place where Alexandra had crashed to earth in a fiery wreck. But many men on that ship had leapt to safety this same way, and they were already assembling into makeshift squads, and rushing for the cover of nearby trees
in small groups. Only two companies made it off in time. The rest went to a fiery doom. Yet as the sun began to lower on the horizon there would be five elite companies on the ground, all assembled and ready to head south for the place they had been ordered to strike that day.

Ilanskiy.
Chapter 12

Zykov looked at Troyak, a warning in his eyes. He had been working the radio equipment, shifting bands when he suddenly picked up clear signals. He tuned it in, the hiss of the interference abating as the sound of sharp voices broke over the speakers. The two men knew what they were hearing immediately. Those were the hard voiced orders of officers signaling one another on the ground, and the longer they listened the clearer the picture became. There was an operation underway somewhere ahead. Troops were assembling and moving on the ground.

“This doesn’t sound good, Sergeant,” said Zykov. “I’ve heard three different unit designations already. There’s at least a battalion out there somewhere. Very close.”

Captain Selikov had taken Narva to a position northeast of the village Troyak had pointed out. They were hovering at 2000 meters as Zykov tried to get through to Kirov again, when the close signal contacts were picked up, commanding his attention.

Troyak had a restless look on his face. He had been sitting with his men for what seemed like an eternity, cooped up on a submarine and then finally back aboard Kirov again to rejoin the Marines there. They had one good fight in the Caspian that got his blood up and put that fire in the belly that he always felt in combat. Now he could smell another good fight forming out there somewhere, like a man smelling rain at the edge of a storm.

Their Oko panel was now close enough to break through the odd interference that had been restricting its range. He already knew that there were four other airships south of them, very close to Ilanskiy, and then the radar system lost one of the contacts. He knew exactly what that meant. There was a fight underway. This was not a unified force of four airships. They were in battle, and one of them had just gone down.

So what did all this mean? An airship duel, men on the ground shouting harsh battle orders. He could read the situation well enough, though he had no idea who might be involved. Yet it was clear that some of those airships had deployed men here, just as he was intending, and they were already forming up for a battle that he could smell coming, just as he could hear it in
the radio voices Zykov had stumbled upon.

Somebody was having a nice, private little fight out here, right in the middle of his well planned operation. The old military maxim that no plan ever survives first contact with the enemy was well proven here. They had thought to slip in quietly, riding the soft grey clouds and then deploying at night. They had thought to make their stealthy approach in the darkness, infiltrating through the wooded park he recalled, just behind the railway inn. It was to be a quick mission, the position easily taken by his well trained Marines. Now what should he do?

Troyak could hear the battle slang easily enough. There were fighting men on the ground, Lieutenants and Sergeants bawling out orders, and now they began to hear the mutter of small arms fire in the background, and the sharp pop of mortar fire through the hiss and static of the radio. It was clear that someone else had moved men and equipment to this place on airships, and a well planned raid was underway by another force. He had no idea what it could be about, though Fedorov had told him this place was very important.

Could these men know just how important that railway inn was? Could they know about that damn back stairway Fedorov had gone down? He remembered how the young navigator, then made a commanding officer on their first mission to Ilanskiy, had told him that incredible story of what had happened when he went missing down those stairs. He had gone back to yet another time, with no nuclear detonation or control rod in the mix. It had something to do with those stairs, the very same stairs Troyak was now tasked with taking and possibly destroying here, though now the odds were shifting against his mission.

They could not get farther south aboard the Narva, not with an airship battle underway there at the moment. Captain Selikov was very skittish about putting his ship in harm’s way, though it appeared to be well armed. That said, if anything happened to Narva, there was no way for them to get back to Murmansk, and that would be a very long walk. So Selikov was probably correct—they had to preserve their line of communications back to the home base. Narva was their only means of extraction and safe return. It could not be compromised.

Now the situation on the ground had changed considerably. He could take his men in, deploy from here, but they would most likely soon find themselves pulled into the fight he could hear growing in those spotty radio
transmissions Zykov was tuning in. He could lay low and wait things out. That battle would have to resolve one way or another, but how many troops were involved down there? Would more be coming? His orders were to report his status and let the Admiral decide whether they were to make a go of it.

“Alright, Zykov, enough of that. See if you can punch through a signal to Kirov.”

“Good enough, Sergeant. I’ll keep trying.”

Troyak’s instincts were to deploy his men and go now. The lure of combat below pulled at him. He wanted to get down there and join the fray. This was obviously part of the long simmering civil war Fedorov had told him about. The thought that he might soon have to take up arms against his own ancestors was suddenly disquieting. There had been a lot of talk between the Admiral and Fedorov and the old deputy Director, Kamenski. They had been trying to sort through this impossible puzzle and find a way to put the pieces back together again.

Troyak knew that if he took his men down there he would find no friends on the ground, even if every man was a brother from his homeland. They were all dead and gone before he was ever born, but they were Russians nonetheless, and he would be forced to make them his enemies if they came between him and his objective.

Now strange thoughts that might bother Fedorov came to his mind. What if someone down there is sitting quietly on the tree of life in the branches below where he and his men now sat? He doubted if there was anyone down there from the Chiuchi peninsula where he had been born, but he had men here in his contingent with roots from all over the homeland. What would happen if one of their great grandfathers was down there, and they died here in this fight?

He shook his head, realizing that those were useless thoughts. He had enough to worry about if he took his Marines into battle. The bullets and mortar rounds would be more than enough, clear and present dangers that would quantify themselves in bright red blood when they struck home. An unseen death of annihilation because of all this time business was not anything he could fathom or worry about now. Yet the thought of killing his fellow Russians if it came to it did give him some pause.

Time passed, and Zykov’s eyes seemed clouded over with frustration. He
looked up at Troyak, shaking his head. “I don’t get it,” he said. “We can receive now, but I just can’t seem to get a signal through on any of the military bands that Nikolin will be monitoring. The interference is very close. Its clouding over here, at the source—not out there somewhere.” Zykov pointed plaintively.

Troyak nodded. So it wouldn’t be up to the Admiral or Fedorov after all. Orlov would throw his two cents in, but Troyak had his orders. I was to make the final decision if we were unable to get through. Orlov was not to be considered in command. So it’s down to me now, he realized, not the Admirals and Captains and deputy Directors. It’s down to a Marine Gunnery Sergeant with a hankering to get on the ground and kick some ass.

And that was exactly what he was going to do.

* * *

In Russia they were called the ‘Black Death,’ the elite Russian Naval Marines, their faces streaked with dark grease paint, black berets and dark coats, with heavier mushroom shaped helmets netted with camo scheme when called for. They were called for now.

Troyak had three squads of seven men each, and they were heavily armed with assault rifles, grenade launchers, RPGs, a *Pecheneg* Bullpup 7.62 machine gun, and a handheld *Ilga* SAM in each squad. Their motto was a simple one: “Where we are, there is victory.”

“A chance to put my Bizon-2 SMG back to work,” said Zykov naming his weapon as he checked the gun mechanism. “High impulse Makarov rounds in a helical sixty-four round magazine. Very good in a firefight, particularly at close quarters.” He never tired of saying that about his weapon.

“I’ll stick with my Bullpup,” said Chenko. “It combines the firepower of a good heavy machine gun and the mobility of an LMG. Superb accuracy, excellent durability, and with the night vision sight I can hit targets at 1500 meters with this little boy.”

Kolnov was checking ammo on his GM-94 multi-shot grenade launcher. It had pump action, with a three round tube magazine of 43mm grenades, and could be hand fired for close quarters action, which is what it was designed for. That was his fallback. His primary role was fire support with the AGS-30, a belt fed automatic grenade launcher with a high fire rate 30 round drum.
It had an adjustable day or night sight, and could range out 2100 meters.

Another man carried an RPG-30 Kryuk, or “Hook,” which was a man portable 105mm anti-tank weapon, with rounds that could defeat 650 mm of rolled homogenous armor, or blast through 1500mm of reinforced concrete and 2000mm of brick. That was almost eighty inches! The Sergeant considered whether or not to take a mortar, but with light, powerful weapons like this at his disposal, he decided against it.

The fighting man had a kind of love affair with his weapon. He lived with it, day in and day out, and would die without it in combat. The other Marines were carrying more standard AK-12 Kalashnikov assault rifles, all with night sights, muzzle fired grenade packs, and plenty of ammo. By WWII standards the three squads would make up a platoon with the firepower of a full company. The typical Russian WWII infantry squad might have two sub-machine guns and eight carbines. Troyak’s squads had the equivalent of seven machine guns, and with much more support fire from the RPGs, and other hand held anti-tank and SAM weapons they were packing. The Black Death was ready to rumble.

Now all Troyak had to do was convince Captain Selikov to get them a bit closer. “There’s a fight going on down there,” he said. “I’d like to get my men into it fresh, and not after an eighteen hour hike.”

“You mean to go down anyway?”

“I have my orders.”

Selikov naturally looked to Orlov, who was standing with arms folded, brooding on the matter. The Chief said nothing, still wondering what was so damn important about this mission—Fedorov’s mission. It had something to do with all this time travel nonsense, but he was not exactly sure what was going down here. Beyond that, he was still steamed up with the thought that he had not been properly briefed.

“What is your mission, Troyak? What’s the objective?”

“As I said, we deploy to Ilanskiy, take and hold the railway inn and make contact with the ship to report our status.”

“Well that isn’t going to happen. We can’t get through.”

“Then my orders were clear,” said Troyak. “I was to destroy the facility.”

“Destroy it? We came all this way to blow up a railway inn? What in god’s name for?”

Troyak just shrugged. “I don’t ask things like that when I get an order,
Chief. They want it destroyed—that I can do.”

“And you say there’s a fight underway down there?”

“We’ve heard the combat radio traffic. Some of those airships must have put men down too.”

“For the damn railway inn?”

“Who knows, Orlov? They have their orders—I have mine.”

The best laid plans of mice and men have often gone awry.

Selikov smiled. “That’s this whole damn war in a nutshell, isn’t it. Alright, Sergeant. I can get you closer. We’ll have to drop down low, and it will be damn risky if another airship gets elevation on us. Narva is a big ship, but we don’t climb fast. If someone catches me hovering to put your men down we could be in real trouble.”

“Don’t worry about that, Captain. We brought along a few things that can get you out of the stew if that situation arises.”

Orlov grinned at that. “Alright then, how many men are you taking—just the two squads as planned?”

Troyak hesitated a moment. He wanted all his men with him now, but how could he convince Orlov to stay aboard the airship as the Admiral and Fedorov wanted?

“I’ll need twenty men,” he said.

“All three squads then?”

“Correct, but I have a problem, Chief.”

“What problem?”

“We need someone who knows what they’re doing here on overwatch. I need a man here on our radio set, and someone who can handle a needle and thread.”

“Needle and thread?”

Troyak nodded his head to a nearby weapons cache where two of the Ilga, “needle” SAM missiles, were leaning against a bulkhead wall. “If what the Captain warns about should happen, I need a man who will know what to do about it. Can you man that post, Chief?”

“Me?”

“This airship has some good recoilless rifles mounted,” said Troyak, “and we may also need fire support. I’d like you to coordinate all that with the Captain here, protect the ship, and read our signals for the extraction.”

“Then assign a private, Troyak. I was figuring to get on the ground.”
“Are you ready for combat? All my men are. That’s all we train for. Once we get down there we’re going to be moving fast and humping a lot of equipment and firepower. It’s going to be tough work, and we may have to engage anyone that gets in our way. Besides, I can’t hand off ship overwatch and extraction to a private here, or even a corporal.” A little Lozh now, and some butter on Orlov’s bread was in order.

“You’re senior officer,” Troyak finished. “You’re the only man who can hold this thing together on this end. You command from here.”

It was probably more than Troyak had said at any given one time for months. He was a man of few words, and hard actions, but he knew he had been ordered to make sure Orlov stayed on the airship, and he did his best to convince him here. Then, seeing Orlov hesitate, he said one last thing, and in a tone that Orlov instinctively could hear and understand.

“Those are my orders, direct from Admiral Volsky. You are to coordinate with Selikov, manage the defense of the airship, and oversee the extraction on overwatch. I am to handle the ground operation with my Marines.”

Orlov also heard something more there—my Marines. Even though Orlov had once been busted and placed in Troyak’s detail he knew he was never a member of the club. He was a ship’s officer, not a ground pounder, and Troyak was also correct to point out this would be a combat mission, and Orlov had never been trained for that. He knew that trying to buck the gritty Sergeant would lead to nothing more than a needless confrontation, so he relented.

“Alright, Troyak. Take your men in. I’ve got your back.”

Troyak walked over and clasped him by the arm. “We’ll be counting on you, Chief.”
Part V

*Paradox Dreams*

“Is all that we see or seem
But a dream within a dream?”

—Edgar Allan Poe
Chapter 13

Narva hovered in a wide clearing between two stands of pine and was slowly retracting the cargo basket after delivering the last of Troyak’s Marines. Captain Selikov had taken a risk to get the men closer to their objective, particularly when they saw the zeppelin duel to the south was slowly migrating north of Ilanskiy. He swung the airship a bit east, away from that action, and then turned south to approach Ilanskiy from the northeast, getting to within about 20 kilometers before Orlov, who was monitoring the Oko radar panel, reported that an airship had taken notice of them and was now heading in their direction.

“Then up we go,” said Selikov. “And we must be quick about it. We’re twenty men light, so that’s a lot of weight gone. We should be able to get up beyond 2000 meters in no time, but I would expect that contact is much higher.”

“I make it 4500 meters,” said Orlov.

“Then we go up as well. I can’t take the chance that they will get elevation on me. We’ve a lot of lift now, and I don’t think they can match us if it comes to a reach for altitude. Fifteen degree up-bubble and all engines ahead full. God speed to your Marines, Orlov. I don’t like the looks of this situation.”

“Nor do I,” said Orlov.

They made a rapid ascent, passing through 4000 meters in just ten minutes and still climbing. The other airship they had been monitoring was circling now, and Orlov wondered if they might also have them on some form of rudimentary radar. It can’t be seeing anything very well with this interference, he thought. My Oko panel is still only able to give me 50 kilometers coverage—very strange. That’s a third of its range and it is very resistant to jamming. What could be jamming us here in any case? Certainly nothing from this era.

Down on the ground Troyak called in on the radio. His voice was cloudy, but their modern equipment had the power to push through the static and maintain contact at this close range. The Marines were assembled and already
moving out to the south. They had set down near a small logging hamlet, then skirted a high tree line that screened that place and started off, soon coming to a thin wagon trail, which they followed south.

The terrain was not bad, and there was a lot of open ground that had firmed up over the cold nights, which made for easy walking. Troyak took in the smell of the land, the trees and fauna, and was reminded of home. All the men felt it as well. They had finally set foot on Mother Russia again, after what seemed like an eternity aboard the ship. It gave them an eager feeling of completion, though the thought that they might be marching into a combat situation was somewhat distressing. They were no strangers to combat, veterans all, but these were not Germans like they had fought in the Caspian. They were their fellow Russians.

They made an easy six kilometers per hour and were coming up on another small settlement noted as Tamara on Troyak’s map. It was then that they heard the distant sound of small arms fire, and the mood of the men suddenly shifted to the purpose of their mission. Their senses keened up. Marines hefted their weapons, and Troyak moved from line of march to a two up, one back, deployment of his three squads. Zykov was on his left as he led the detachment forward into thick woods just south of the settlement.

This is good ground, he thought. We’ll easily skirt that hamlet and move through these woods like fish in water. An hour later the woods began to thin and break up into wide clearings, and the sound of a ground battle was more evident. Troyak saw that the trees thickened east of Ilanskiy where the rail line approached. There was a small stream that ran just north, and parallel to the rail, and it was well wooded, offering his men a perfect avenue to approach the town unseen. When they reached the end of this feature the ground opened again where segments of the woodland had been logged and cleared.

The Sergeant was in constant communication with Zykov and Chenko, who was leading the number three platoon behind him. He knelt, raising a silent fist as a signal to his own squad, which crouched low, waiting. Then he spoke through his collar microphone to Zykov.

“There’s fire on my right coming from that thicker woodland,” said Zykov.

“There’s a flooded march just beyond it, and a causeway from the settlement north of that area leading right into town behind the railway inn.”
Troyak was consulting his map. “So we’ll have to follow the rail line in. It will swing down and approach the inn from the southeast. I’ll lead. Bring your men up on my signal.”

Troyak checked his weapon, then waved his men on. They crouched low, moving like black shadows, out from the trees and along a narrow footpath that was leading them to the rail line. As they approached, Troyak suddenly heard men shouting in a dialect he recognized. They were reaching a culvert near a short stone rail bridge when a light machine gun opened up on them. Thankfully, the fire was not well aimed, but it sent his men to ground.

Troyak listened, recognizing some words from the Khanty dialect, one of 36 indigenous languages in the Siberian region. Troyak knew several, and many words from others, and this one was common along the Ob River valley. So he decided to try something, and raised his voice.

“Hey, watch out! Who are you shooting at?” He spoke in the same dialect.

Silence. The gun stopped. Then a hard voice spoke. “Who are you? State your unit.”

Troyak decided any designation would do, and he knew his map, so he extended the ruse further. “7th platoon,” he called out keeping that well open to interpretation. “We just came up from Nizhniy Ingash! What’s going on here?”

“What are your orders?” The voice was still hesitant.

“We need to get to that damn railway inn!” The truth served the Gunnery Sergeant well enough, and he just let it stand there.

“Anyone on your right?”

“Don’t worry, Sergeant.” Troyak knew who he was talking to now, another NCO in charge of this squad he was facing, and he had sized up the situation to understand that this was a reserve unit positioned behind the tree line to the north to watch these roads. He needed to convince this man he was a friend.

“Your flank is clear. We scouted the rail line the whole way in. Come on, you’re wasting time. We’ve got the heavy weapons.”

The other voice did not respond for a time, and then finally called back.

“Come up to the rail bridge!”

Troyak did not want to risk his men, so he decided to go alone. He signaled that they should remain in place, and moved up quietly to a small
stand of trees just below the bridge. He saw movement ahead, through the bridged culvert, and surmised the other sergeant was there. Then he could see him, raising his fist in salutation.

“How many are you?” The other Sergeant still had a guarded edge to his voice. The sound of gunfire increased off to the north.

“I have three heavy squads,” Troyak said quickly.

“Come ahead then. The rail line is clear all the way to the town center.”

Then came the sound of heavy weapons fire, and Troyak looked up to see an amazing and unexpected sight. A huge steel grey zeppelin had descended from above the town, a vast shadow from above, and its black gondolas were spiked with gun barrels that were now pouring heavy rounds on the town’s defensive positions.

The battle that Troyak had crept up on was bigger than it sounded. West and north of the town, two companies of the Grey Legion 22nd Air Mobile, off the Oskemen, were attacking a single company of Karpov’s 18th Siberian Rifles. The remaining two Siberian companies had broken into six platoons stretched along the town’s northern edge, with good fields of fire over the lower wetlands to the north. But at least three more full companies of the 22nd were deployed to this sector. One was pushing in between the action farther west, and attempting to flank the extreme left of the Siberian line. Two others were trying to fight their way across a small causeway that Troyak had identified on his map earlier. If they won through they would soon swarm through the town center and easily overrun the railway inn. Troyak’s Marines had approached from the far right, where the Siberian line hooked south through a woodland area to the rail line.

Small arms and machine gun fire was already thick at the causeway, but the line had held, the stubborn Siberians holding tenaciously until the sudden appearance of the airship. Now it was blasting the Siberian positions from above with 76mm recoilless rifle fire from its main gondola, and a heavier gun up front on the bridge gondola.

Oskemen was back.

The crafty Petrov had swung south below the cloud deck while the Angara was struggling to descend and take up the chase as Karpov had ordered. He hid there until Angara came down after him, and once the two airships were feeling their way through the clouds at about 1000 meters, he fired flare rockets off his starboard side, then turned hard to port and dropped
ballast for a fast climb. *Oskemen* broke into clear air, but when the Captain on the *Angara* spotted the flares slowly descending on parachutes, he took them for the running lights of his enemy, and maneuvered to gain position on them. When he fired his forward gun off the bridge gondola, *Oskemen*’s sharp eyed watchmen made out his position, and Petrov maneuvered off his tail.

Minutes later the *Oskemen* nosed down again into the soup, all guns blazing on the big fins and elevators of the *Angara*, returning the insult it had endured when first ambushed at the outset of the engagement. Yet Petrov’s gunners were very good, and they put three 105mm rounds into the big vertical rudder that completely jammed its useful operation. *Angara* could not maneuver, and could do nothing more than to climb into the thickening clouds and try to hide from the other ship, but Petrov had other business. He immediately turned south, racing to support the troops he had put onto the ground, and now he arrived in the thick of the assault on Ilanskiy, his heavy guns lending much needed fire support to the Grey Legionnaires.

Troyak had no idea which side he might support in this fight, but he was talking to this one, a fellow Siberian, and so he decided that he could do one thing to easily convince this cautious Sergeant that he was a friendly force.

“Hold on!” he called to the other man at the far end of the railroad bridge, still crouching low, suspicious of this sudden incursion on his flank in the midst of a firefight.

Troyak pinched his collar mike and delivered a quick order to Zykov. “Put a needle right through the main gondola on that airship!”

Zykov barked back the order and his SAM team of two men quickly off shouldered the hand held weapon, which looked like an old style bazooka, and was fired in much the same way. Seconds later the SAM streaked up at the big target above, boring right in on the main gondola as Troyak had ordered, and blasting through the thin shell with a bright orange explosion. One of the three 76mm guns there was destroyed completely, the other two pods riddled with shrapnel, and there was a fire amidships on the gondola that quickly involved the number three engine.

The Russians defending the town hooted jubilantly, their voices obviously surprised and delighted with what had happened. “Good enough, Sergeant?” Troyak shouted to the shadow by the bridge. “Come on! I need to get my weapons teams up and we’ll finish the job.”

He heard the other Sergeant shouting again in the dialect he understood,
telling his men to stand down. With no time to lose, Troyak waved his squad forward, and the Marines rushed on, Troyak in the lead. They passed into the culvert and under the rail bridge, and saw the Siberian Sergeant staring sheepishly at these big, well muscled men in dark camouflage uniforms and mushroom top Kevlar helmets. Troyak grinned at the man, clasping him on the shoulder.

“There’s no one on your right, Sergeant,” he said. “But from the sound of things there’s a lot of action on the left flank. Follow me!”

They pushed on through the tree line, then skirted the rail line as it made a wide sweeping arc south and curved up towards the town center. Now he began to recognize the place again, for he and Zykov had searched a long hour for Fedorov when he had first gone missing here, though that seemed ages ago. Yes, thought Troyak, this is where we slapped that smart ass NKVD Lieutenant around, and made him clean out those box cars with his squad. No trains here today, and maybe no gulags further east either.

The place looked strangely empty, devoid of life and haggard with neglect. Ilanskiy was no longer a way station for Stalin’s prison trains. Stalin was dead.

Troyak saw the big airship come about, whistling to Chenko when he saw his men come up. “RPG-30!” He yelled, pointing at the airship. Chenko whistled and his squad soon had the weapon in action, which was a man portable 105mm anti-tank weapon that was so good it had come to be called the “Abrams killer.”

“Put one more round into that aft gondola and silence those guns.” Troyak pointed, and the RPG was quickly deployed, a light weight shoulder fired weapon that was designed to defeat reactive armor by firing a decoy rocket ahead of the main shaped charge. The RPG-30 could blast through 650mm of armor. It could smash through the side armor of the toughest battleship, and the zeppelin would pose no challenge in that regard. So Chenko disabled the decoy and instead selected a special long range thermobaric round that relied on the oxygen in the air to create a much enhanced explosion and fire, with a very strong shock wave.

The airship was about 500 meters above them, just within the 600 meter range of this special round. It blasted into the aft gondola, exploded, and blew it clean away, along with both 76mm gun mounts and the number five and six engines in the bargain. The sustained blast wave was so violent that it also
blew away much of the duralumin frame above the gondola, and ignited a fire that would burn the Oskemen to a torrid death. The nose of the airship canted upwards as the fire consumed its tail. Fire and shock had ruptured most of the aft gas bags, and the higher buoyancy in the nose quickly pulled the ship’s front end up.

The Siberian squad that had come up with Troyak’s men gaped in awe at the sight of the massive airship in raging flames above, black smoke clouding out like sable blood. Only the two good engines on the forward bridge gondola were still running, and they slowly dragged the burning hulk of the airship northwest over the open ground beyond the village, where it began to fall. They saw long rope lines extending down from the undamaged nose segment, and men clinging to them, hoping to reach the ground before the blazing wreck of the ship as the Oskemen fell to its doom.

“Alright!” Troyak shouted at the Siberian Sergeant. “Take your men across the rail yard and work your way west. That’s your fight now. We’ll hold the town center.”

His manner was so commanding that the Siberians immediately obeyed, their rifle squads rushing across the rail yard and into the town beyond. Troyak smiled. Now to see what is happening at that damn railway inn.
Chapter 14

Troyak led his Marines swiftly on, racing past squat warehouses by the rail yard and into the cluster of small dilapidated houses at the edge of the town center. The railway inn was another two or three blocks, and he stopped to reorganize his squads, barking sharp orders to the men.

“Weapons teams here! Set up your AGS-30 here!” This was the belt fed automatic grenade launcher with a high fire rate 30 round drum. It would stand in for the lack of a mortar team, and they had a full pack of extra ammo drums to lay down some good sustained barrages. Troyak pointed out the direction of fire. “Right there,” he said. “Make your range about 800 meters. Rifle squad, on me! Demolition teams ready! Zykov! Follow me in!”

The assault rifle squads of five men each moved out, the sixth man was a demolition expert, and the seventh stayed behind with the heavy weapons to fire on Troyak’s order. The men moved with expert swiftness, racing from the lee of one house to the next in brief rushes covered by at least two men on overwatch at all times.

Up ahead Troyak saw a building labeled “Secondary Boarding School Number 1,” and he remembered it from his last visit to the town. School was out today, and there had been no classes in session here for many months. Beyond this place lay the railway inn, so he signaled for a silent approach.

“Zykov, take your squad around the right and through that wooded park behind the inn. Signal me when you are in position. You men, follow me.”

He was through the back doorway to the school building and inside, intending to get a good look at his objective across the street before he committed his men further. He reached a window and peered cautiously around the edge. There it was, with the same quaint sign he remembered: Rail Crew’s Holiday House. It was here that Fedorov had first stumbled down that back stairway, and the iconic figure of the young Sergei Kirov had come up after him. It was here that Ivan Volkov had vanished in the year 2021 in his hot pursuit of Fedorov, so close on his trail in space, yet eighty years off in time.

The railway inn was the hinge of fate that day, for that dark stairwell was a portal to distant times where a knowing man could place his hands on
levers that would move the decades and reshape the contours of all modern history.

Now Troyak recalled his orders. He was to take the building and report back to Admiral Volsky on Kirov for final orders. Well, that wasn’t going to happen. They had tried the radio several times and though they could still raise the Narva, they could not get through to Kirov. He put a man on the radio and told him to keep trying.

Now he had to decide. Do I go down those steps to look for this man, Volkov? What in God’s name will happen here if I find him? First things first. Secure this inn. He could see that the entrance was guarded by three men, and he knew there were probably more inside.

The sound of gunfire raged beyond the inn, and he knew the Siberians were hard pressed now. Angered by the fiery loss of their only ride home, the Grey Legionnaires were pressing their attack with fierce abandon. Troyak stuck his head out the front school door and shouted at the guards.

“Hey! Pizda! Get your men up to the front. I’m bringing up two reserve squads to hold this place. Move!”

The guards gave him a wide eyed look, one reflexively leveling a rifle in his direction, but Troyak paid it no heed. He walked right up to the three men, scowling at them. “Didn’t you hear me? Move your men up to support the perimeter! And get that rifle out of my face, Corporal, or I’ll shove the damn thing down your throat!”

The men looked and saw the rest of his rifle squad coming up behind him, hard men the like of which they had seldom seen. One passed a fleeting thought that these were the enemy. Their uniforms were strange and they carried unfamiliar looking weapons. Their insignia was nothing they recognized, but then Troyak gave them an evil grin. “Did you see how we toasted that stupid zeppelin? We’ll make short work of the enemy just the same.”

“You were sent by Karpov?”

That name jolted Troyak a moment, but he seized on it, realizing a moment when he saw one.

“Of course—who else? We’re taking over here. Move your men out to the causeway!”

It was all it took to gain entry. The sheer force of Troyak’s presence and will power, his uncanny command of the Siberian dialect, the dour Marines at
his side, and a little lozh. The guards ran off to the front line and Troyak signaled Zykov to bring his men in. He took his squad up the main stairway to the second floor and the men instinctively tramped down the hallway and into the empty boarding rooms to take up firing positions at the windows. They found three more men inside, and sent them on their way.

Now Troyak noted that the upper landing to the back stairway was taped off. He had the presence of mind to give one order that mattered here: “No one is to use that back stairway under any circumstances. Understood? If I give a withdrawal order, and for any reason you cannot get to the main stairs, then use the windows. Otherwise you can check in here for an extended stay.”

Zykov’s team swept through the park, coming to the clearing where a round waterless fountain surrounded by a low, red brick wall sat just behind the inn. He soon saw that the perimeter defense had finally collapsed. The causeway had been forced by the determined assault of Volkov’s engineers, who brought up a heavy machine gun to suppress the defensive fire while three rifle squads had raced across. The enemy was now just two blocks away, and he reported as much to Troyak when he reached the inn.

“Alright,” said Troyak. “We’ll hold here until we secure this place.” Then he gave an order for his grenade launcher. “Drop 200 meters and fire for effect!”

The pock, pock, pock of the rapid fire launcher sounded on the crisp air, and soon the small 30mm grenades were popping off all along the front of the enemy advance. The Siberian riflemen had fallen back through the town and were trying to regroup in the big concrete locomotive depot. A main street from the causeway came right through the town between the inn and the depot, and he knew the enemy would come that way. That would leave Troyak’s Marines as the only force east of that road against the Grey Legion.

“What do you figure we’re up against, Sarge?” said Zykov as he deployed his men on the first floor.

“At least two companies, maybe three.”

“A battalion? Good! It’s a fair fight for a change.” Zykov smiled.

Troyak sized up the situation. I can hold this inn indefinitely, he thought, unless they have heavy weapons, which I doubt if these men came off those zeppelins like we did. But if I let them sweep into town and surround this place… He didn’t like the thought of that.
If he was going to take the risk of going down those stairs, then the inn had to be secure. Fedorov had warned him that time passed at different speeds at both ends of that stairway. He didn’t quite understand it, but grasped the fact that even if only a few minutes passed for him, it could be hours for the men he left behind here. And what if it took him hours, or long days to track down his quarry? What if Volkov was nowhere in sight? What if he ended up in some other year? The unknowns associated with a sortie down those stairs were simply too great.

Now he looked at Zykov, a glint in his eye, dark brows furrowed over his bulldog face. “We can’t let them box us in here.”

“Agreed. But why hold here at all? We should just blow this place to hell and be done with it.”

That made sense. That was what he should do.

“Take your squad back through the park to those storage sheds on the other side and flank that causeway. We need to hold this intersection.” He pointed to his map with a thick thumb. “I’ll take a heavy rifle squad forward and take this position here. Then we’ll show them what they’re up against.”

* * *

Fedorov was sleeping restlessly that night. *Kirov* was still anchored in the Faroe Islands and they had been discussing future plans for the ship with Admiral Tovey. Soon they would be bound for Reykjavik. Their plan was to swing up to Hornsrandir, the northernmost cape of Iceland on the Denmark Strait in the Westfjord region. Fedorov knew that there were several old farm houses and hunting cottages there, and he had come up with the idea that they could set up a generator and *Oko* panel radar team in one. It would give them radar coverage over the whole approach to the strait, and preclude the need to ever use the valuable KA-40 to patrol the region. Admiral Volsky found out that they had six *Oko* panels aboard, two for each of the three helicopters they would normally carry, so it seemed a good idea to him, and he heartily endorsed it. From the tip of that icy, windswept horn they could close the Denmark Strait, and Tovey was very glad to hear this proposal.

“We will call it the Ice Watch,” Volsky said to Fedorov.

Fedorov had selected the place he had in mind, on a stony finger of land called Hornstrandir. It was a green desolate preserve, pristine in its simplicity,
with emerald swards that swept up at near 45 degree angles to the edge of a jagged coastline that suddenly dropped off in sheer cliffs to the rocky shore and cold sea below. The local farmers were abandoning the region now that war had come, seeking safety in the larger communities to the south. So it would be a bleak and lonesome watch there, in a land where legends held that spirits and trolls haunted the stony vales, and polar bears roved the shore to look for seals, or anyone foolish enough to be at large there.

The details of that mission, and his worry over Troyak’s mission, had kept him awake that night, a fitful sleep as he sifted through possible outcomes. What had happened to the Narva? They had missed five consecutive radio checks since leaving Port Dikson. He had this in the back of his mind all through the Faeroe Island conference with Admiral Tovey, but now it came to the fore.

Did they suffer some mishap or accident, or was this a simple radio failure? Did they get through to Ilanskiy? If so, what was going on there? Some inner sense kept nagging at him that there was unforeseen danger at the heart of this mission, deep dark trouble that he had not considered or accounted for. What had he overlooked? Then he sat up in his bunk, suddenly realizing something, his eyes wide and alert.

No! Troyak cannot go down those stairs! Why did he not think of this earlier? He had been so busy with his duty on the ship, planning the meeting with Tovey, and he should have realized this before. He should have talked it over with Kamenski, and now he thought that he may have made a fatal mistake. It was imperative that he get through to Troyak now, and he was up from his bunk, throwing on clothes and grabbing his service jacket and hat to run down the long corridor to the citadel.

A sleepy eyed watchstander heard footsteps on the ladder up to the main hatch there, but was very surprised to see Fedorov when he burst through the entrance. He sat up, startled, and then instinct served and he shouted: “Captain on the bridge!”

“As you were.” Fedorov was immediately to the communications console. Rodenko was standing the late watch and he came over with a curious smile.

“Need to send a message?”

“Any word from Troyak or Orlov?”

“None, sir.”

“Well, we have to get through. Is there any way we can boost the signal
from our end? What if we piggy backed it on our over the horizon radar?"

“It would get lost in the microwaves. But we could switch off that system, and then use its high power amplifier to boost our HF radio signal. In fact, I can even configure the top mast radar antenna to receive.”

“Do it, Rodenko, as fast as you can.”

“I’ll need an engineer on the main mast. It’s not something I can toggle from the console here.”

“Then get someone, and wake up Nikolin, I’ll need him here.”

The young mishman at that post was only too glad to be relieved when a sleepy eyed Nikolin showed up on the bridge ten minutes later.

“Sorry, Nikolin,” Fedorov apologized. “I’ll see that you get the entire morning watch off, but I need you here now. We’re going to try something.”

It took another forty minutes, but the radio engineer soon called down from the top mast above the citadel and reported he had cabled the HF military broadcast system to the powerful radar amplifier equipment on the mast.

“Alright, Nikolin. Can you frequency hop from about 1.6 to 60 MHz? I want to blast a signal so loud at them that they would have to be deaf not to hear it.”

“With that kind of power they would have to be dead,” said Nikolin. “Either that or the radio sets are all destroyed.”

That thought gave Fedorov no comfort, and Nikolin regretted it the moment he said it, but they pressed on with the plan. It was a tense five minutes, but then Nikolin saw his secure signal line go green and he knew they had managed to make contact.

“Got them!” he said with a smile, and Fedorov sighed with relief. But a sudden pulse of anxiety swept over him now. If I give this order, he thought, then my own fate is directly involved this time. I could create another insoluble problem for time, and this time she just might go after the offender—me! Yet he knew he had to do something. That stairway was simply too dangerous.

He closed his eyes. Even if it meant he might now be casting his soul to the wolves, he had to act. Then he reached for the handset and pushed the send button.

* * *
Troyak’s men gave the onrushing Legionnaires a nasty surprise. The enemy had crossed the causeway and were working their way past an old abandoned garage and vehicle park. Troyak let them come, then gave the hand signal for his men to open up. They cut down the two lead squads in seconds, the staccato of their assault rifles sharp in the air. The third enemy squad retreated quickly. They brought up two machine guns to try and answer the heavy automatic weapons fire from the Marines, but the RPG-30 made short work of them.

“Sergeant Troyak! I have comm-sig from Kirov! It’s Nikolin!”

The Sergeant had just reloaded his assault rifle when the radio man he left with the two demolitions experts sounded off in his earbud. “Here it is sir, I’ll patch him through to you.” The man toggled his speaker switch but it was not Nikolin. Troyak immediately recognized the voice of Fedorov.

“Fedorov here. It is imperative that no one utilizes the back stairway. I repeat. Sergeant Troyak—your mission down those stairs is cancelled. Implement plan B, and then move to extract your team. I repeat. Plan A is aborted. There must be no sortie on the stairwell. Implement plan B and extract. Over.”

Troyak had his answer. He kicked a little ass here, pushed these odd legionnaires back over that causeway, and now he was considering what to do about those stairs. The problem was solved when this order came in from well above his pay grade. Plan B was just what Zykov had advised. Blow the place to hell and then pull his men out. Someone has had second thoughts, he realized. Good enough. He acknowledged the signal, reported his status, and confirmed his new orders.

Even as he did so he heard a distant train whistle, sounding high and shrill above the mutter of small arms fire to the west. A train was approaching, and he knew it was probably carrying much needed reinforcements for the Siberians. My brothers here will have what they need to beat these Kazakh scum off now. He had heard the distant shouts of the Legionnaires and he recognized their dialect as well.

“Alright,” he said decisively. “Get back to the railway inn, Litchko,” he said to a nearby rifleman. “Demolition team,” he called on his mike. “Stand ready.” He pinched his collar mike and then gave Zykov the news.

“Hey Zykov! We got through to the ship! Orders are to do things your
way now. We blow the place sky high and extract. Spot for the grenade launcher, then notify Narva on the radio. We’ll say goodbye and then pull out.”
Chapter 15

“I’m not sure why I never thought of this before,” said Fedorov. “I knew it was problematic, but then it just hit me!” He was sitting in the officer’s briefing room with Admiral Volsky and Kamenski. “So I gave the order, sir. I hope I was not out of line.”

“Considering the situation,” said Volsky, “I believe you acted appropriately. But explain it to an old man again, if you will.”

“Well sir, I had been wondering what might happen here if Troyak did go down that stairway and managed to find Volkov. I knew it was a long shot, but what if he did make it to 1908 as I did, and managed to find him? What if he took him back up those stairs again? Where would they appear? In my experience, I returned to the same time that I had left, only what was just a few minutes for me at the bottom of those stairs was much longer for Troyak and Zykov. But at least it was the same year. So I thought that it must be something to do with the traveler. Perhaps there was a connection between the moment he leaves and the place he ends up, as if he had some kind of tether or life line when he went down those stairs, like someone going over a cliff with a safety rope. Then I realized that Volkov was not in this year—1940—so how could he return to this time with Troyak? We can only speculate, but we have been assuming Volkov went down from the year 2021, so his connection would be to that year. How could he go with Troyak to this year if this holds water?”

“But that isn’t the reason you gave this order,” said Kamenski, a knowing light in his eye.

“No sir. I was also trying to understand what would happen here—to us, to this whole world we find ourselves in. If Troyak did find Volkov, and if he was able to bring him up those steps, well... would there be an Orenburg Federation? What would happen? I just couldn’t see how everything in this world could suddenly re-arrange itself right under our noses, and if it did, would we still know about it? What about Troyak? Would he know why he was even sent there when he reached the top of those steps?”

“I see what you are getting at,” said Kamenski, calmly poking at the bowl of his pipe. “If he did find Volkov and bring him to this year, or any other
year for that matter, then he would have never had a reason to go there and look for him in the first place.”

“Paradox,” said Fedorov darkly, and the word itself carried a sinister new meaning for him now. He explained it as best he could. “Paradox is not simply some thorny problem—I think it is the force that rearranges things when time is confronted with an insoluble contradiction. It is a real and dangerous force.”

Fedorov had hit on a great truth. Paradox was time’s black hooded executioner, the slayer of impossibility, a sharp sword that cut through the Gordian knots they had twisted with their meddling.

Kamenski gave him a solemn nod. “This is the first time our own necks have been on the chopping block,” he said. “Yes, the edge of paradox is a very dangerous precipice to hike along. We must be very careful here. I cannot say how that problem might resolve itself, Mister Fedorov, but something tells me that time would find a way. Yes. Mother Time does not wish to have her skirts ruffled any more than necessary. She would find a way.”

“Agreed,” said Fedorov. “Yet I realized something else that might be impossible. Volkov is here—in this world, at this very moment! How could he then be brought up those stairs by Troyak?”

“Correct,” said Kamenski with a smile. “Yes, he could not co-locate. There cannot be two Ivan Volkovs here in this moment, one the young man who disappeared in 2021, and one the old man who now rules the Orenburg Federation, or so we have learned.”

“But we rescued Mister Orlov,” said Volsky.

“Correct Admiral,” said Fedorov, but we brought him back to a place and time where he did not exist at that moment. We brought him back aboard to the year 2021, a year he had left long ago when Kirov vanished.”

“I see,” Volsky nodded. “So a person cannot go to a time or place where he already exists. This makes sense.”

“And if he tries to do so he puts time in a most uncomfortable position,” said Kamenski. “He creates work for paradox—yes, Mister Fedorov, I agree with you. Paradox is not simply a mind puzzle. It is death itself—worse than death! It is the force of utter annihilation. If Volkov tried to go up those stairs to this time, then paradox would have to get rid of one version or the other, yes?”
“What about us?” said Volsky. “We’ve been shifting all over time and back again.”

“But we have never shifted to a time or place where we already existed. Each time we shifted we seemed to bounce a little ahead in the 1940s… until we appeared here, in a safe time before our first arrival, but one with a short lease, or so I fear.”

“And summer's lease hath all too short a date,” said Kamenski, quoting the famous bard himself.

Fedorov nodded. “So you see why I have been worried what will happen to us come July 28th next year?”

“Yes, you believe we will be asking Mother Time to make a choice. Which Kirov will she permit in that time and space, this ship, or the one arriving from the year 2021?”

“The one that must arrive from 2021 in order for this ship to even be here,” said Fedorov.

“Mother Time will have to choose,” said Kamenski, “and being busy with other matters, she will not want to be bothered by us again. We have certainly caused enough trouble for her as it stands. Yes?”

“Then she will hand the matter over to Paradox,” said Fedorov. “And one ship or the other must fall beneath his axe.”

“So you ordered Troyak to abort his sortie to 1908 for this reason? You wanted to keep this paradox from happening?”

“Yes sir. I realized there could not be two Volkovs in the same time and place.”

“Well,” said Kamenski. “Time can be quite the magician, Mister Fedorov. Troyak could have collared him, and the Sergeant could have returned to 1940 on his journey up those stairs, while Volkov reappeared in the year 2021, still thinking he is hot on your trail along the Trans-Siberian rail line.”

“Perhaps, sir, but then I return to my first problem.” He swept his arm at the unseen world beyond the ship’s bulkheads. “What happens to this world? What happens to the Orenburg Federation, to all the troops facing off along the Volga. What happens to all the history this moment now rests on? I’ve been reading how Volkov slowly rose to power and established control of Denikin’s White faction after Sergei Kirov forced him out of the Bolshevik movement. Do all those books get re-written, and do I suddenly forget I ever read them this week past?”
At this Kamenski gave him a sympathetic smile. “This is exactly what happened to me,” he said quietly. “I tried to explain it to Inspector General Kapustin once. It is very disconcerting when you reach for an old favorite book, read the chapter where you left off, and find the story is coming out to be something quite unexpected! Then you go back a few pages and find out one of the characters is missing!”

“And you have told us you remember things,” said Fedorov, “from time lines that no longer exist, at least not from our perspective here.”

“Correct, just as you remember the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, and the Americans reprisal at Hiroshima at the other end of that war. Yet there are those who remember the bombing of Vladivostok instead, and have no recollection of Pearl Harbor or Hiroshima.”

“So we retain memories of past times we have lived in.”

“Apparently so,” said Kamenski. “Strange little remnants remain stuck in our head. Are they figments of our imagination or real remembered events? Is your memory of what you did yesterday a real thing, or something you construct within your own imagination? If it is a real thing, then where does it go if you die? Where do all those memories of all the days you have lived go? They are no more substantial than the images from a dream you have in your sleep, and in fact those images are woven from the very same cloth your lived memories are made from.”

Now Admiral Volsky reached for the small flask of Vodka he had in his jacket pocket, giving them both a grim smile.

“The two of you will make a drunkard out of me yet. How can we possibly sort through all of this?” He took a small swig, offering the flask to the others, who both politely declined.

Kamenski tamped down the bowl of his pipe, thinking. He lit the tobacco again with his lighter, watching the thin curl of smoke billow up. Fedorov had been warming his cold hands on a mug of coffee. Each man had their own places to find small comforts.

“So you were worried that this world we now sit in would just go up in smoke like the tobacco in my pipe, correct Fedorov? And I suppose you were worried that you would go up in smoke with it. Yes? And if not, and we are still here when the next wave of change passes through, would we remember anything of the old life, or would our memories vanish too, like the flame from my lighter when I close it?”
“Perhaps I thought something like that, sir.”

“Perhaps, perhaps. But remember that Mother Time does not like to make these kind of decisions. In fact, I believe she will do everything in her power to avoid turning out the dogs.”

“The dogs?”

“The hounds of paradox, Mister Fedorov, the wolves of change that she holds fast with the rein of causality. When time is presented with a situation that cannot be resolved in any other way, she releases the hounds. But before it comes to that, a little sleight of hand will also serve her quite well at times. Notice how you just prevented Sergeant Troyak from going down those stairs and asking an impossible question of time that could make her very disagreeable. You see what I mean? Time finds a way.”

“And what about plan B,” said Volsky. “Have we heard anything further on that question?”

“I have Nikolin glued to his chair,” said Fedorov, “with orders to contact me the instant Troyak confirms the demolition was carried out.”

“Don’t hold your breath, Mister Fedorov,” Kamenski said quietly, and he took another long slow drag on his pipe.

“Sir?”

“Well… If your Sergeant Troyak destroys that railway inn in 1940, then how in the world did you go down those steps in 1942, to eventually end up here and get the idea for this little mission? For that matter, how did Volkov go down those stairs in 2021?”

Fedorov’s pulse quickened at that. My God, he thought. I may have set up yet another paradox by ordering Troyak to demolish that stairway! This is what he had feared. If Kamenski is correct, that would be impossible, and how might time handle such a dilemma? She would have to handle Troyak first, he thought darkly, and realized he may have just signed the Sergeant’s death warrant.

* * *

**Troyak** was back at the railway inn with his assault rifle squad. He looked to see Zykov’s men falling back through the park behind the inn with cool precision.

“Hold here!” Troyak raised his fist. They could see that a squad of grey
coated soldiers had again come up the roadway from the causeway and they
would soon filter in to the town center. “Zykov! Take three men and lay a
spider web across these roads.” He was referring to a special kind of anti-
personnel mine used by special forces to discourage pursuit on missions like
this. The mine would be set, battery activated to eject and deploy up to six
stakes, trailing thin tripwires that would shoot out in all directions like the
web of a spider. Should anyone trip on them, the mine itself would then pop
up a center core that would explode in a hail of fragmentation shrapnel. A
single web set on a road would buy them the time they needed to slip away.
Zykov set three in an arc protecting their line of withdrawal.

“Private,” said Troyak. “Set off your charges.”

The man nodded, and produced a hand held device with a small
retractable antenna. He turned a dial on the back, called out a warning, but
Troyak reached down and tapped his shoulder, his palm open as he reached
for the device. Then he thumbed down hard on the detonator switch. There
was first one, followed by a second loud explosion, with charges set at each
end of the back stairway. Troyak waited until the smoke cleared, then raised a
small pair of field glasses, studying the inn carefully. The entire left side of
the building, including the dining hall, the chimney from the hearth, and a
large segment of the second floor above were completely destroyed.

Troyak had just done something impossible, or so Fedorov would believe
when he radioed in the report. Yet that thought never entered his mind. This
was just a simple search and destroy mission, and the little engagement with
the zeppelin was only icing on the cake. It was time to move his men out.

“Alright, back the way we came, and we’ll get ourselves into that tree line
north of the rail leading east. Once we get well away we’ll signal the Narva
to arrange for an extraction point.”

The men had picked up all their equipment and began moving quickly
through the narrow streets until they passed the tin roofed warehouse
buildings by the rail yard. From there they sprinted across a 300 meter
clearing and back into the woods that would take them to the culvert and
small railroad bridge. Even as they went, Troyak looked over his shoulder to
see the massive shape of yet another zeppelin descending from the clouds
over the small town. Its guns began to blast away at targets on the ground, but
he gave it no mind. His mission was accomplished.

The back stairway at Ilanskiy no longer existed.
Karpov had been up on high overwatch in the Abakan, worried about that third airship out there somewhere. He was listening to the radio traffic as Andarva continued its pursuit, and keeping one eye on his Topaz radar system, bothered that the strange interference was limiting its effectiveness now. Volkov must have rigged some kind of jammers for that frequency. I’ll need to see if I can get the engineers to figure out frequency modulation and find some ways of hardening my equipment. This damn war is only beginning, and there isn’t anything in any of Fedorov’s history books about any of it. Not here.

The news had also come in on signals traffic that confirmed Volkov’s treachery. Six divisions had crossed the western border. The 17th, 21st and 11th Orenburg divisions were all pushing for Omsk. South of that city, the 9th, 22nd Air Mobile and 15th divisions had crossed the border in a drive towards the Ob river line positions near Barnaul. At least four more airships had crossed there on overwatch, and all he had to oppose them near Barnaul was old Krasny. The men in the Aero Corps called it Big Red, due to the dull red tarp used on its outer shell. It’s real name was the Krasnoyarsk, and he knew that he would now either have to pull that airship out of there or Big Red would likely be a flaming wreck within 48 hours.

The third airship he had been watching for seemed very close on radar, then it withdrew north, possibly discouraged when they saw Abakan was on to them and heading their way, or so he thought. Then he got the news that there were Grey Legionnaires on the ground and attacking Ilanskiy, and he turned Abakan about, heading back to the town.

He followed the action closely on radio, learning of Angara’s fate, alive but unable to maneuver and out of the fight. When the Oskemen doubled back to lend fire support to the Legionnaires on the ground, he pressed Abakan into a rapid descent, intent on getting down there to engage. When he arrived, however, the matter had already been settled. The sight of the flaming duralumin skeleton and the wreckage of the Oskemen on the ground gave him heart. We took down two of Volkov’s airships!

Three hours later he was on the ground, his mood considerably darkened as he stared at another pile of wreckage, this time at the site of the railway
inn.

How did Volkov know, he asked himself? That was obviously why he risked those airships and all his men here today—to get a demolition team in here and take out that back stairway.

“What happened to my guards here?” He could see no bodies.

“Sir,” said a nearby Lieutenant. “The heavy platoon you sent relieved them and took over this position.”

“Heavy platoon?” Karpov gave him a strange look.

“Yes sir. They were the ones who took down that second zeppelin. Damn thing was giving us hell, and they just blasted it from the sky. When can my men get their hands on those weapons, sir?”

What was this man talking about? Karpov questioned the Lieutenant further and soon got a description of the men from this platoon, which struck a hard chord in him.

“These men,” he said quickly, “they all wore this black camouflage uniform? And did you see any unit designation?”

The Lieutenant thought, then he remembered the odd shoulder patch he had seen. “Yes sir. It read ‘Maritime Infantry,’ a symbol of a ship’s anchor, gold on black.”

“And above that a white skull wearing a black beret?”

“Yes sir. That was it! They said they were a special unit, sent to assume this post under your direct orders. I didn’t know we had such men. They were fearsome. Stopped that zeppelin with two shots!”

Karpov’s eyes narrowed. Maritime Infantry, he thought, the Black Death! My God, that was Troyak and his naval Marines! Who else could knock down an airship like the Oskemen with two shots? They must have used shoulder fired SAMs, or even heavy anti-tank weapons. Damn! Volsky and Fedorov were behind this. Who else? The men reported spotting a parachute operation before this ground assault. Did they come here aboard the Oskemen? Were they working with Volkov now?

Then he remembered that third airship, the one he had detected and approached in the heat of the battle. There had suddenly been odd interference on his radio sets and the Topaz radar system went completely bonkers. That was it! Jammers! They must have come aboard that third ship. Symenko said he had no knowledge of it, and I’ll soon revisit that question with him. If this is so, then it was either a third ship sent by Volkov… No!
Now he remembered the letter Volkov had sent him. Kirov was spotted at Murmansk. So perhaps they came on one of the Soviet airships. They still had two or three airships up north. It’s the only thing that made any sense. How would Troyak and his men be working with Volkov with Kirov all nice and cozy in Murmansk?... Unless that letter was a lie, and meant to misdirect me.

Now the scene of the demolished back stairway took on a whole new meaning. Fedorov, he thought. But how would he know about those stairs? His damn history books, that’s how. He must have dug something up.

He gritted his teeth, a disgusted look on his face, and no one around him wanted to meet his eye. The scar on his cheek seemed just a little more twisted and evil looking, and his eyes smoldered with inner anger.

“Lieutenant!” he said sharply.

“Sir!”

“Take as many men as you need and go house to house. Turn out everyone in this village and find me the man who owns that railway inn.” He pointed a thin finger at the wreckage.

It wasn’t all gone, he thought. Most of the lobby area, the main stairway and a portion of the upper floor are still intact. Someone built the damn thing. There would have been plans.

Yes… plans. That was what he was sifting through in his mind now. First he would find out who built this inn, the architect, the carpenters, the plans. After that he had plans of his own.
Part VI

The Operation

“The planner is a potential dictator who wants to deprive all other people of the power to plan and act according to their own plans. He aims at one thing only: the exclusive absolute preeminence of his own plan.”

—Ludwig von Mises: Planned Chaos
Chapter 16

It was the final hours of the long conference with the British on the Faeroes, and there was a restless energy about the ship. It was a kind of tension, like a bow string held taut, waiting for the moment of release that was sure to come. These hours of quiet had been good for the ship and crew, but Volsky knew they all would have an enormous amount of work ahead of them in the days and weeks ahead, and the sense that they were slowly running out of time seemed to prey upon him. The war was so enormous, so all consuming. How could they make a difference—just one single ship?

Admiral Volsky leaned back, eyeing the empty glass of brandy on the table as he took one final meeting with Tovey, his eye drawn to the candle on the centerpiece, casting its warm glow as it was slowly consumed by the flames. Time, he thought. Yes, time is the fire in which we all burn. Yet how is it I have been spared my inevitable demise in those flames? Or have I? Even though I find myself here before my own time, I don’t think the second hand of my own clock has been wound back. I’m certainly not getting any younger for all this travail. Wiser, perhaps, but I still spend my days like that candle, no matter what table I find myself on, and my glass of brandy empties with every sip I take, just like everyone else here. So how many days are left to me?

He knew that these thoughts were the quiet fears of every man, an inner voice he seldom hears in his youth, but one whose whisper grows ever more insistent as old age creeps up on him.

Admiral Tovey seemed lost in his own thoughts for a moment, and Fedorov was watching him closely. This revelation would take some time in the here and now to be fully believed, but Tovey had seen things here on the ship that were hard evidence he would not easily dismiss.

“Well, Admiral,” Tovey said at last. “One day at a time. Yet it would be a comfort to me to know at least how things might have turned out once. A man needs hope…” He waited, the silence drawn out between them. He had asked, but not pressed on the question, though it burned for an answer within him.

At that moment there came a knock on the door, and Volsky turned, an
eyebrow raised as the adjutant came in. “Excuse me, sir,” the man said quietly. “You asked to be informed as to the radio broadcast intercepts.”

“Ah, yes. Put it on, please.” He pointed to the radio set on a bookcase at the far end of the dining hall. “We have been monitoring your radio broadcasts in the event of any formal announcement that might bear upon these discussions,” said Volsky. “I am told your mister Churchill is now speaking before the House of Commons.”

The adjutant walked briskly to the radio and switched it on, and the voice that was immediately recognizable to every man present was speaking, his words so timely in answer to Tovey’s question that it seemed as though he might have been there in that very room, putting forward an opinion that spoke directly to discussion at hand.

“…I do not think it would be wise at this moment, while the battle rages and the war is still perhaps only in its earlier stage, to embark upon elaborate speculations about the future shape which should be given to Europe, or the new securities which must be arranged to spare mankind the miseries of a third World War. The ground is not new, it has been frequently traversed and explored, and many ideas are held about it in common by all good men, and all free men. But before we can undertake the task of rebuilding we have not only to be convinced ourselves, but we have to convince all other countries that the Nazi tyranny is going to be finally broken.

“The right to guide the course of world history is the noblest prize of victory. We are still toiling up the hill; we have not yet reached the crest-line of it; we cannot survey the landscape or even imagine what its condition will be when that longed-for morning comes. The task which lies before us immediately is at once more practical, more simple and more stern. I hope—indeed I pray—that we shall not be found unworthy of our victory if after toil and tribulation it is granted to us. For the rest, we have to gain the victory. That is our task.”

Churchill went on to speak of the United States and the mutual cooperation he could see growing between England and America, and then made mention of the new offer of alliance and friendship with Kirov’s Soviet Russia. Nikolin translated the words as they were spoken in English, and Volsky smiled as Churchill finished his speech.

“For my own part, looking out upon the future, I do not view the process
with any misgivings. I could not stop it if I wished; no one can stop it. Like the Mississippi, it just keeps rolling along. Let it roll. Let it roll on full flood, inexorable, irresistible, benignant, to broader lands and better days.”

The broadcast concluded and Admiral Volsky extended a hand to Tovey, gesturing to the radio set as the adjutant switched it off and quietly withdrew.

“Well there you have it,” he said. “There is the hope a man needs, Admiral Tovey. I know what you want to ask of me, but as your own Prime Minister so eloquently suggests, I do not think it would be wise to speculate on the outcome of this war while the battle still rages. That outcome, that future is out there, as we can certainly attest. And yes, it will come to us as surely as the inexorable flow of that river. I will say only this to you now. The hope you can clearly hear in that man’s voice, the determination with which he sets himself to the task of facing the unfolding hours ahead, will not be wasted, or spent in vain. Is that enough for you?”

Tovey smiled, feeling a sudden lightness of being. “More than enough, Admiral Volsky.”

“Good! Then let us attend to what we can do in the here and now as we toil up this hill. As I have come here with this offer of alliance and friendship, and with certain means at my disposal, what can we do in this dark hour to assist you?”

Yes, now to that which lies before us in the here and now, thought Tovey, and to leave off the impossible speculation over the twisting of the past and future into a shape we might wish. That can only be done here, now, and it will be done by men and steel, with the vision and will of a man like Churchill behind both. Now to the practical survey of the landscape we can see, the moment at hand.

“Well Admiral, we have two great concerns at this moment. One is the imminent invasion of our islands. Even now we fall under the hammer of the Luftwaffe, and our Royal Air Force is hard pressed. If they fail, and the Germans gain air superiority over our shores, then we face a very grave moment when the war may come quickly to these islands and we will finally feel the enemy’s hand at our throats.”

Volsky looked at Fedorov, remembering what he had told Sergei Kirov in a similar dinner meeting they had shared together. Then he had assured Kirov that Germany could not successfully invade Great Britain. Why not at least do the same here?
“I do not wish to say anything that might slacken your guard, Admiral Tovey. But my Mister Fedorov here is somewhat of a student of military history, and he does not believe the Germans can successfully invade. Fedorov?”

“Correct, sir. Not while the Royal Navy stands resolute.”

“Yet if the R.A.F. should fail us, my ships will soon be seen to be quite vulnerable. We have already faced the hard fact that the German Kriegsmarine now has seaborne air power that poses a grave threat.”

“Yet you saw that I have the means to redress that if my ship is anywhere near the action,” Volsky reassured him.

“Yes, those marvelous aerial rockets you possess. Might they be put to the defense of our homeland as well?”

“If I may, sir,” said Fedorov. “This is about the time the Germans began to intensify their air campaign against England with Adler Tag, the Eagle Day.”

“Yes,” said Tovey. “We have some very capable men at a place we call Hut 6, and they intercepted and decoded the German directive concerning this attack.”

“Then you may also know the approximate strength of the Luftwaffe will be well over 2500 planes in these actions. I’m afraid we haven’t quite that many missiles at our disposal. While potent, our resources are limited, and therefore are best applied to decisive engagements where we can aim them right at the hinge of fate, as your Mister Churchill might put things.”

“I see,” said Tovey, realizing that everything had limits, and even the power of this amazing ship he was visiting was not boundless.

Fedorov could see he was discouraged and offered another thought. “I might say that your Royal Air Force may prove more resilient and capable than you might imagine at this moment. If need be, and the battle becomes desperate, perhaps the Admiral might consider a technology transfer. The radar sets we have discussed, for example. They can dramatically increase your awareness of the battle space over England. Such a radar set at Margate, Hastings or Eastbourne on your Channel Coast could see the German fighters the instant they take off from their airfields as far inland as Lille and Amiens.”

“Our Air Chief Marshal Dowding would certainly welcome that. He places great faith in our radar sets. Would you consider such a transfer?”
“It would require our own service personnel to operate the equipment,” said Volsky, “but yes, it might be arranged if the situation becomes desperate. Beyond that, however, we are a power at sea, as you have seen. Is there anything we might do for you in that regard?”

“Our intelligence indicates you have already done a great deal, Admiral. We owe much to you for your timely intervention during that recent engagement in the Denmark Strait. The Kriegsmarine is much more of a threat than I believe Whitehall anticipated. They might have pushed right out into the Atlantic, and in my mind they will certainly try again. We have not yet seen the full weight and power of what they are now capable of, and this business with the French fleet remains a grave and unsettled matter.”

“Oh?” Volsky looked at Fedorov. “I thought the British had already resolved that.”

“Not quite, Admiral,” said Fedorov. “It seems that a good part of the French fleet escaped to Toulon,”

“That is so,” said Tovey. “We had hoped to bottle them up at Mers-el-Kebir and settle the matter there, but they seem to have had advance warning. Admiral Gensoul took his ships to sea, against orders, we have since learned, but very wisely. Now that Vichy France is openly courting alliance with Germany the French fleet at Toulon is a real threat. Beyond that, there are three ships in particular that trouble my sleep these days, and they are all located in French African ports on the Atlantic.”

“Perhaps we can assist you there?” Volsky suggested.

“My watch remains with Home Fleet, for the moment, but we are picking up some rather disturbing intelligence concerning operations in the Mediterranean Theater. The Royal Navy is strong, Admiral Volsky, but we also have our limits. The Vichy French have powerful ships at their disposal now, and we will have to face them, the sooner the better, for as long as they hold that sword at our backs I can never stand an easy watch here against anything the Kriegsmarine might do again.”

“Well, Admiral, I do not think my ship will be needed in our own home waters any time soon. We taught the Germans a little lesson recently that they will not be eager to repeat. There are many things I could do for you. One might be to stand a watch with you here. I could single handedly close the Denmark Strait to access by German surface raiders. This might relieve you of that burden, and allow you to use your ships elsewhere without concern for
that channel."

"That would be much appreciated, but sir, what if you were to find
yourself opposed by a force the size we lately encountered? It is true that our
combined efforts were able to deter the Germans in the last go round, but
what if you were caught out there alone?"

"If it came to it, the result would be the same. I will tell you now, and this
is no mere boast, that you have not yet seen the full measure of what this ship
is capable of. I could stop anything the Germans send at me. Rest assured."

Tovey smiled. "Well then, the Denmark Strait is yours, Admiral. The plan
to establish your Ice Watch is also a splendid idea, and I thank you. I can also
arrange facilities at our establishment at Iceland should your men need shore
leave, and of course I would make it my intention to stand out cruiser patrols
to assist your operations, and even place them under your command if it
would facilitate that watch. You cannot sail on indefinitely. Might I arrange
for fuel transfers to that port so that you may replenish?"

"That will not be necessary," Volsky said with a smile. "In fact, we can
sail on indefinitely. We do not use diesel fuel oil on this ship. Our propulsion
system can operate without any necessity for re-provisioning."

This was yet another surprise to Tovey, as he could not conceive of the
possibility. "You require no fuel at all?"

"We certainly need regular maintenance, as any ship must. As for fuel, we
carry all that we will ever need with us at this very moment."

"Quite extraordinary. We must discuss this further some time."

"There are other things we might assist you with that will not require
missiles," said Volsky. "Our Mister Fedorov is also very adept at signals
decryption, are you not Fedorov?"

"That I am, sir, in my way."

"You see," said Volsky, "information is as much a weapon in this war as
anything else. The questions you will want to ask us about how this war turns
out attest to that fact. Yes? Well I must tell you that these events may at times
ring true to what we knew in our own time, yet at others they are dramatically
different, and things happen that are completely unknown to us. That battle
we found ourselves in, for example, was one that will not be found in any
history book I have ever read. It is something we wrote together as we stood
our respective watches and fought side by side. This will be the case again.
There will be things that may occur here, and we will have no foreknowledge
of them. That said, we have a man here with a keen ear and the ability to
decipher codes.”

“Indeed?” Tovey now looked at Fedorov with a new eye. “We have such
a man as well,” he said. “In fact, I have only lately come from a meeting with
him, and it was he who uncovered the photographs and other material I
shared with you here. Perhaps your Mister Fedorov might wish to meet with
our people, and with our own Mister Turing at Bletchley Park. We’ve been
working the German Enigma code, and any help you might offer would be
greatly appreciated.”

Fedorov passed a moment of apprehension, realizing that he had no innate
ability to decipher codes of any kind. If anyone did on the ship, it would be
Nikolin, but the applications he had on his pad devices already stored the
life’s work of the very man Tovey had just mentioned, Alan Turing. Fedorov
knew that he, like the moon, shined by the light borrowed from that great
mind.

The thought of actually meeting Turing was as compelling to him as this
meeting here with Admiral Tovey, but he wondered in those brief seconds, if
he might upset some delicate balance again. Turing’s work on the Enigma
code was not yet finished. Yet my application stores all the conclusions he
will come to on his own. Could I reveal them? Would that affect his work?
What might happen if he never comes to those conclusions on his own and
relies on my computer data, my Enigma tool? Would that mean that tool
could never exist or function as it does now? He realized that he was skirting
the dangerous edge of paradox here, and felt a moment of cautious alarm.

“Perhaps some caution would be advised here, Admiral,” he said to
Volsky, holding a hand up to stay Nikolin’s translation of that.

Volsky was quick enough to see that Fedorov had some issue with this, so
he deftly skirted the matter and moved on. It was eventually decided that
Fedorov might meet with Turing in the near future, though that was
deliberately left indefinite. As for the radar it was decided that they would
first monitor events and only intervene with the technology if it appeared
England was losing it air battle with the Germans.

The radar would be just a nudge that would assure the delicate balance
Air Chief Marshal Dowding was maintaining in his deadly duel with the
Luftwaffe, and enough to ensure that the Battle of Britain would again be
won by England. The real work would be done by the brave and dogged
pilots of the R.A. F., but the Oko panel could be there to let them do their job in the most efficient way possible.

As for the ship itself, Kirov would stand a watch on the Denmark Strait, a place that had long been the favored channel chosen by German surface raiders reaching for the Atlantic convoys. Volsky could, indeed, make good his boast if he wished. While the ship’s missile inventory was limited, he nonetheless had enough power in hand to stop any ship or ships that would attempt to try his patience. But even as he warned Admiral Tovey, things would happen in this war that no man could truly foresee or fully anticipate.

And they did.
Chapter 17

The aid and pledge of friendship offered by the Russians was a great relief to Tovey, but he knew there were things that he learned that would best be kept highly secret. Admiral Volsky had urged his discretion in the matter before the two men concluded their Faeroe Islands conference.

“I hope you do not think I am unforthcoming in regards to the support we can offer you now,” he had said. “I insisted that you come alone for this visit aboard my ship, and for reasons that should now be obvious to you. Things we have revealed to you here will not be easily explained to others. In fact, I would suggest that you consider limiting the information you have in hand to only the most trusted few.”

“In that I agree fully,” said Tovey. “You can rely on my discretion, Admiral, as I am sure I will rely on you.”

Volsky nodded. “I must tell you that I considered this matter long and hard before making the decision to contact you and make these revelations.”

“I am grateful that you did, and also for the able services of your Mister Nikolin here as he builds a language bridge between us.”

Nikolin smiled at that, as did Volsky.

“Yes, our Mister Nikolin is a most capable man. In fact, we owe him more than he may realize, for when the fate of this ship and crew once hung in the balance, it was Mister Nikolin here that saved the day when he came forward with information that was vital and timely.” At this Nikolin blushed, and he gave Tovey a much abbreviated version of that line, but he was deeply appreciative of the Admiral’s praise.

“That said,” Volsky continued, “it is the question of timely information that we must now discuss. Information is power. It can move the hinge of fate we have talked about, but I must tell you now that there may be others in this world with access to information that could prove decisive to the outcome of this war, and they are not all our friends.”

“Others?” Tovey was not quite sure he knew what the Admiral was hinting at here, and Volsky could see this.

“Admiral… Until Mister Fedorov and I have determined how those photographs and reports came into your intelligence archive, I would be very,
very cautious. Fedorov’s suggestion that they could only exist here if they were brought here by someone at least makes some sense to me—but there is a darker side to that. Who might this person be, I wonder? How did he get here? I must tell you now that the cracks in time that allowed my ship and crew to slip through to this era remain a great mystery. We came to believe that it was our own foolish meddling here, as evidenced in those photographs you showed us, that caused all the fractures in the history that is now unfolding here, but now we are not so sure of this.”

“Yes, well there is good and bad in all of that. Your meddling was kind enough to see to the delivery of HMS Invincible to the Home Fleet, if I can believe what you have told me, and I would have been lost without her these long and arduous months.”

“Very true. Yet what I am trying to suggest now is that, even as we have slipped through those cracks, some of our analysts have come to think other men may have done the same. A few we know of, but those photographs you have showed me lead me to suspect that there are others we may not know.”

“I understand the implications,” said Tovey. “Perhaps we need to keep watch on more than the cold seas, Admiral.” Even as he said that, he was struck with the feeling that he had come to this same conclusion before, and set a long and well guarded watch on time itself, one that extended through all the remaining days of his life.

“This is a matter of some concern to us,” Volsky continued. “We are presently involved in an operation to see if we can collar some of the other men we do know about, and plaster over a few cracks in the wall, if that makes any sense. I have no illusions that I can ever mend the world and restore things to the way they once were—at least the way I once knew them to be. But I must tell you, even though you may see our coming here as the arrival of a guardian angel with a flaming sword from some unseen future, there are dark angels as well. There are dangerous men at large in this world.” He let that linger, and Tovey thought long and hard about it after the conference concluded and they bid each other farewell.

Volsky had said enough to tip his British counterpart off as to the need for secrecy and vigilance, but he did not tell Tovey anything more about the fate of that operation, or that one of the men he was most worried about from that unseen future, one of those dark angels, was named Ivan Volkov. Nor did he reveal the fact that another man at large had been a member of his own crew,
the former Captain of the mighty Kirov. Volsky had decided to reveal nothing of the operation that was then underway at Ilanskiy, or its vital purpose. Tovey had enough to chew on as it was.

Kirov departed, heading west to take up the post Volsky had agreed to watch in the Denmark Strait. This gave Tovey the time he needed to work out with King George V and Prince of Wales, two most welcome additions to his Home Fleet. It was not long, however, before other dangerous men, well known to Tovey himself, began to make plans and arrange meetings of their own.

* * *

**Hitler** had his doubts about the conference as his train made its way through Vichy France under heavy guard. Was he making the right decision here? Was Canaris correct in pointing out how unstable and unreliable Franco and Spain might be as an ally?

It was raining, and the gloomy weather seemed to settle over the whole affair, promising failure and an end to all the grandiose plans that had been argued and debated for months. Now it would all come down to this, a final meeting arranged in a train car at Hendaye on the Franco-Spanish border, and no one would have thought that this simple rain storm could have unhinged the entire strategy of the war in the West. But that is exactly what the gathering weather front threatened to do. It would not be the silver tongued arguments of the negotiators, or even Hitler’s blistering personality and iron will that would decide the day.

It was going to be something quite different.

* * *

In the late summer of 1940, the Germans were faced with any number of alternatives. Flush with victory, and with new allies flocking to their banner, Hitler believed his forces were invincible. While many now argued the time had come to consider taking the war to Soviet Russia, Admiral Raeder continued to advocate strongly for alternative operations aimed against Britain. The most direct approach would have been Operation Seelöwe, the planned invasion of England, but as it progressed, Raeder continued to
identify more and more obstacles to its success. Germany had no amphibious ships worth the name. It had few craft suitable for landing operations or cross channel assault, particularly to move heavy armor or mechanized support units and their artillery. Beyond that, the strength of the Royal Navy was unbowed, and the recent engagement in the Denmark Strait did little to convince Hitler that the new Kriegsmarine he had ordered was as yet ready for the job.

Goering stepped up at this point, claiming he could smash the British with his Luftwaffe, and this confident boast, coupled with a request for a delay until the Spring of 1941 for Seelöwe, led Hitler to issue the following orders:

"An attempt must be made to prepare the operation (Seelöwe) for 15 September 1940. The army should be ready for action by then. The decision as to whether the operation is to take place in September or is to be delayed until May 1941 will be made after the air force has made concentrated attacks on southern England for one week. The air force is to report at once when these attacks will commence. If the effect of the air attacks is such that the enemy air force, harbors, and naval forces, etc., are heavily damaged, Operation SEA LION will be carried out in 1940. Otherwise it is to be postponed until May 1941."

Even as Goering launched his air force at Britain on “Eagle Day” in August of 1940, Raeder continued to advocate strongly for a second alternative, a way to defeat Great Britain by taking a more indirect approach through the Mediterranean. “Take Gibraltar, Malta and the Suez Canal, and you have all but destroyed the British Empire outside the UK. What good are their colonies in the Indian Ocean when they are completely isolated? Then we have a direct link to the Oil from Orenburg. It can flow through the Bosporus to ports in Southern France and Italy, and once these routes are established, all the resources we need will be in hand. Then Soviet Russia will have no option but to sue for peace, or to join the Axis as Orenburg has done.”

“Yes,” Hitler agreed, “But remember this as well—Britain’s hope lies in Russia and the United States. With Russia smashed, Britain’s last hope in Europe would be shattered. Germany then will be master of Europe and the Balkans. Russia’s destruction must therefore be made a part of this struggle. The sooner Russia is crushed the better, and the Spring of 1941 would be the time to begin. Can this operation against Gibraltar be completed before
then?"  

"It could be launched this winter, my Führer, assuming Franco agrees. All that would be required would be a few divisions, yet the fruit such a victory returns in the harvest will be considerable. How many divisions will be necessary for the struggle against Soviet Russia? How long before we have a clear decision there, and secure rail and sea connections to the Orenburg Federation? Your Generals tell you three months, but I think it will be very much longer."

"And you tell me three months will take me all the way to the Suez, Raeder. Can I believe you any more than Jodl?"

"Take Gibraltar first, and watch the dominoes fall, my Führer. I am certain of it."

It was a compelling argument, and one that Hitler began to show more and more interest in, particularly when Jodl and others began to look on it with more favor when it became evident that Goering could not deliver on his promise to smash the R.A.F. The incredible sacrifice of the British fighters in their stalwart duel with the Luftwaffe would finally put an end to Hitler’s dream of Operation Seelöwe. Hitler told Halder to continue the planning, but as nothing more than a deception to keep psychological pressure on the British. Now his thoughts turned south to Gibraltar.

A British fortress since the early 18th century, ‘the Rock’ was a bastion of Royal Navy sea power and the crucial link between her Atlantic and Mediterranean forces. If the Germans could capture it they would gain a commanding position from which to influence both naval theaters, along with a deep water port that could hold and service all their biggest ships. There was no comparable port on the Atlantic French coast, and the capture of Gibraltar would drive a wedge of steel into the heart of the Royal Navy.

Hitler listened, seeing the opportunity but yet hesitating for two reasons. What would Britain do in reprisal? Would they seek to mount an amphibious operation through Portugal? Would they land in Morocco or French West Africa? The head of the Abwehr, Admiral Canaris, had argued just that, but when Goering saw how he attempted to persuade the Spanish Foreign Minister to discourage the plan against Gibraltar, he took steps to intervene. Canaris was seen to be the obstructionist he was, and his influence was minimized by an unexpected troika of all three arms of the German military, Raeder, Goering and Jodl.
OKW finally agreed. Before anything was decided about the East, the West should be held secure. Now that Italy had also joined the war on Germany’s side, it might be possible to drive the British from North Africa, Egypt, and isolate them from their colonies in the Middle East and India. The British Empire would be broken in two, and crumble.

Hitler decided the matter. He was the planner that would unhinge all other plans and force his will on the world, or so he believed. The war in the West would now supersede his plans for the invasion of Russia. France was already courting alliance, and only Spain and Portugal remained holdouts on the continent. Detailed plans for the operation against Gibraltar had been drawn up and completed by the Wehrmacht ahead of schedule, and soon they were personally signed by Hitler.

Now there was only one question: Would Franco cooperate?

Preliminary negotiations were underway at that very moment. Franco’s list of demands had run on and on. He worried over British reprisals should he join the Axis, a blockade or possibly even an invasion on his Atlantic coast. He suggested that any German troops involved would have to wear Spanish Army uniforms as a point of honor. He asked for thousands of tons of wheat and other resources to feed his shattered state. He fretted over the possibility that the United States would shut down their extensive Telecom system in Spain. In the end Hitler became so frustrated with the man that he exclaimed he would rather have a tooth pulled than speak with him again.

Urged on by Raeder, Hitler had agreed to this one final meeting on the Franco-Spanish border to secure Spain’s cooperation. If those negotiations failed, Barbarossa was still sitting quietly in his back pocket. The only obstacle to Raeder’s plan was Franco’s Spain. Would he join the Axis, or at the very least cooperate with Germany in the initial phase of the Mediterranean campaign?

Ever equivocating, and a master of playing one side off against another, Franco was proving to be a difficult fish to haul in. Canaris also seemed to be quietly undermining the effort to move Operation Felix along, suggesting that Franco, and Spain itself would be a shaky and unreliable partner. At Raeder’s urging, Hitler agreed to meet with Franco and his foreign minister to see for himself if the man could be relied upon, and then persuaded to cooperate with the plan.

Hitler knew what Franco wanted, nominal administrative control over
Gibraltar after it fell to German hands, military and economic aid, a slice of the French colonies in Tangiers and French Morocco across the straits. All this could be arranged, for without Spain, the Gibraltar operation was as problematic as Operation Seelöwe, and Hitler always had Barbarossa if Franco proved to be adamant.

Yet none of that mattered, really. Things had already been quietly decided by another man, witless, unknowing, yet slowly tightening a screw on the hinge of fate that would soon decide the future course of the war.
Chapter 18

Hitler’s train pulled into the little railway station at Hendaye, the rain still pattering on the roof as it came to a halt. No one imagined that a rainy day in Spain was threatening to make an end of all these plans and devices; all these directives and negotiations. No one knew how it had been foiled. In fact, in the history Fedorov knew, the rain prevailed, just as it might have here if not for the diligence of one simple man the previous day.

He was not one of the negotiators. There were no medals on his chest or titles attached to his name. He was not one of the planners, scheming and brooding over maps. No. Juan Alfonso was just a simple janitor, last man on the shift the night before the meeting in Madrid. He was supposed to make all the final checks, working through the train car by car to see that all was in order, for this was no ordinary train.

The following morning the Caudillo himself, Francisco Franco, would be riding in this train, along with Foreign Affairs Minister Ramon Serrano Suñer. They would travel to Hendaye on the Franco-Spanish border for a secret meeting with the Führer of Germany, Adolf Hitler himself, and his own Foreign Affairs Minister Joachim von Ribbentrop. There the two sides were set to negotiate the possible entry of Spain into the war on the side of the Axis powers, a stroke that would have grave implications for the entire course of the war.

It was raining that night in Madrid, and the forecast called for more rain the following day. Juan Alfonso was nearly done with his work that night. He checked the engine and coal cars to see that all was in readiness, then inspected the wheels and undercarriage of each car. Tired and cold, he ventured inside to dry off and eat a bit of cheese that he had in his tool kit.

Alfonso looked around as he sat in the main coach, listening to the sound of the rain on the roof and thinking that tomorrow would see all these important men here in that very car, perhaps sitting right there where he sat at that very moment. Then it happened, the tiny spill of water from above, just a few drops at first, falling on his pant leg, but then more until a steady drip had developed, slowly building a pool of water on the floor of the car.
He looked up, seeing the row of screws in the ceiling and wondering if something might be loose there. It was very late, and he was very tired, but the longer he sat there, the more he realized that he could not go home just yet—not until he stopped that leak. Who knows, perhaps Franco would be seated in that chair, and if it rained again tomorrow…

He opened his tool box, hearing the dry squeak that was, in fact, the hinge of fate at that moment. Juan Alfonso reached for his screwdriver, and slowly stood up, getting a nice fat drop of rainwater on his cheek for his trouble. We’ll see about that, he thought, testing each screw until he found two loose candidates. Yes, that was the problem. The cowling was loose there, and the water was slowly working its way through.

He paused a moment, thinking, then fished about in his tool box until he found a pocket knife and the old chamois cloth he used here and there in his work. He could spare just a little here, he thought as he carefully cut a strip away. Then he loosened the screws enough to allow him to work the chamois into the crevice there, poking and prodding with his pocket knife until the cloth was tucked away, completely unseen, before he retightened all the screws again. There… That was all it needed. The leak was stopped.

He sighed, put away his tools and slowly closed the box before starting away, off shift at long last and heading home. The sound of his footfalls on the coach floor would echo through time, though he could not know that then. For Juan Alfonso was going to set events in motion that few could see at that moment. Juan Alfonso, a leaky roof, a screwdriver, pocket knife and a bit of chamois—no, it was not supposed to happen that way at all.

Juan was supposed to simply leave work and go home that night, and not sit there listening to the sound of the rain on the roof of that train car. He was never supposed to see or feel the tiny fall of water drops he had just attended to. The leak in the roof was supposed to have gone unnoticed, in spite of his very careful inspection of everything else that night.

The following day the ministers would board the train. It would roll north for that decisive meeting with the Germans on the border, and it would be raining all that day. The Spanish minister would take the seat where Juan had enjoyed that brief moment of rest with his nibble of cheese. The nasty leak there would become a nuisance that would drive the minister to distraction, to the point where he was completely irate and out of sorts when he finally reached the meeting site several hours later.
His anger apparently carried over to the negotiations, and he was so adamant and testy that his demeanor, along with Franco’s persistent equivocation, convinced both Hitler and Ribbentrop that the Spanish could not be dealt with. No deal was signed in the history Fedorov knew, and Spain ended up joining the Allies instead. The leaky roof in that train car had worked its will on fate.

But not this time.

Not after Juan Alfonso sat in that seat and saw those rain drops falling to soil his pant leg. Everything was going to be different now, because that bit of chamois and a couple well tightened screws were enough to stop the leak, which was enough to remove that annoying and persistent perturbation for Foreign Affairs Minister Ramon Serrano Suñer. Instead he was in a fine mood when he arrived at Hendaye on the border, so agreeable that he even served to soothe Franco’s doubts and smooth over his objections, and the outcome of the meeting was quite different.

The meeting was held, and Hitler and Ribbentrop worked diligently to allay all Franco’s fears. They pledged that Germany would protect and defend Spanish interests against any reprisal, provide grain, sign lucrative trade agreements, even secure the telecom network owned by AT & T. So in spite of his many doubts, Franco and Spain would cast their fate to the wind and shake hands with Adolf Hitler that day, and everything would change. It was not supposed to happen that way, but a simple man named Juan Alfonso made it so.

The German Plan

“Operation Felix,” was now to become Germany’s next primary operation of war. Hitler emphasized all his key objectives in Fuehrer Directive #18:

“The most urgent duty of the French is to secure their African possessions (West and Equatorial Africa), offensively and defensively, against England and the de Gaulle movement. From this the full participation of France in the war against England may develop. Political measures to bring about the entry into the war of Spain in the near future have already been initiated. The aim of German intervention in the Iberian peninsula (cover-name 'Felix') will be to drive the English from the Western
Mediterranean. To this end: Gibraltar is to be captured and the Straits closed. The English are to be prevented from gaining a footing at any other point on the Iberian peninsula or in the Atlantic Islands. The preparation and execution of this operation is planned as follows:

**PHASE I**

a. Reconnaissance parties (officers in plain clothes) will draw up the necessary plans for action against Gibraltar and for the capture of airfields.

b. Formations detailed for the operation will be concentrated at a considerable distance from the Franco-Spanish frontier and without previous briefing of troops. Three weeks before troops are timed to cross the Spanish-French frontier, a warning order will be issued. In view of the low capacity of Spanish railways the Army will detail chiefly motorized formations for this operation, so that the railways are available for supplies.

**PHASE II**

a. Units of the Air Force will set out from French bases and make a well-timed air attack on English naval forces in Gibraltar harbor. After the attack they will land in Spanish airports.

b. Shortly after this attack units detailed for operations in Spain will cross or fly over the Franco-Spanish frontier.

**PHASE III**

a. An attack will be made with German troops to seize Gibraltar.

b. Forces will be made ready to invade Portugal should the English gain a footing there. Formations detailed for this purpose will enter Spain immediately behind the forces intended for Gibraltar.

**PHASE IV**

After the capture of the Rock, the Spaniards will be assisted to close the Straits; if necessary, from Spanish Morocco also.

General Ludwig Kübler's 49th Corps would lead the assault. The German mobile divisions would cross the northern passes of the Pyrenees and sweep south, straight through Madrid and on to Gibraltar. The assault forces for Gibraltar would be spearheaded by a company of the elite Brandenburger commandos, and a special fallshirmjager unit. These troops would soon be supported by a crack regiment of the Grossdeutschland Division and the 98th Regiment of the 1st Mountain Division, their initial assault elements to be air lifted by the Luftwaffe, and landing at Spanish airfields. 26 medium and heavy artillery battalions, and three engineer battalions would follow
overland.

Their flank on the Iberian peninsula would be watched and guarded by the whole of the 39th Korps, the 16th Panzer Division, and the ‘greyhounds’ of the 16th Motorized Division. Further forces had been detailed to support the main overland operation, including a detachment of the 3rd SS Panzer Division, and two more infantry divisions would be detailed to cross the straits and occupy the shores of Spanish Morocco.

“I also request that the problem of occupying Madeira and the Azores should be considered,” said Hitler, “together with the advantages and disadvantages which this would entail for our sea and air warfare. The results of these investigations are to be submitted to me as soon as possible. As to the Vichy French, now let them prove their pledge of alliance with us and use the ships they sit on in Casablanca and Dakar to support such a move.”

This extended campaign would deny the British these valuable outposts as staging areas for counter-operations against Gibraltar and Spain, while at the same time affording Germany valuable refueling stations for its navy. They would also sit astride the convoy routes Britain used to move supplies and resources to and from Freetown and around the Cape of Good Hope.

Gibraltar, however, was the real prize. Once the German Army had hold of the fabled “Pillars of Hercules,” the British would be denied this vital base, and it would soon serve German/Italian needs while they continued the fight to destroy what remained of the British outposts in the Mediterranean. Then the Axis Powers could finally voice the old Roman claim when they once referred to the Mediterranean as *Mare Nostrum*, our sea. Malta would be completely isolated and fall within a month. The British position in Egypt would be in grave danger, as the Germans could move forces to North Africa easily by sea, while the British would have to rely on supply lines thousands of miles long, around the Cape of Good Hope. The British Army in North Africa would be effectively cut off.

The *Kriegsmarine* had returned to friendly ports after the abortive sortie to harass the British convoy shipping in June of 1940. They began the operation with a game of shadow boxing, aiming to draw the attention of British heavy ships, but encountered a mysterious adversary that seemed to foil their every move, sinking the tanker *Altmark* and forcing them to backtrack north to refuel with an alternate supply ship. A strong battlegroup of the German fleet had then sortied, *Bismarck* and *Tirpitz* leading the way
beneath the heavy grey overcast, intending to strike south for the Atlantic. There they met the Royal Navy on equal terms for the first time at sea since the big sea duels of WWI. They learned, much to their great surprise, that new and powerful weapons of war were now threatening to upset the careful balance that would decide naval supremacy in the Atlantic, and by so doing, decide the war.

Suddenly Raeder’s plans were all thrown to the wind. The development of rocketry had received passing attention in Germany before the war, but now it was given the highest possible priority. If the British could field these weapons, or the Russians as it was later learned, then so could Germany. Seeing that the application of the weaponry was apparently limited, and observed on no other Russian ship, the Germans concluded it must have been a new prototype, deployed in battle for the very first time.

There had not been a hint or whisper of these weapons in the Mediterranean, and no British ships seemed to have them. Yet the impact they had in German war planning was nonetheless significant. What if Soviet Russia had these weapons ready for use as a land based system? This, among other reasons, prompted Hitler to postpone the immediate invasion of Soviet Russia until intelligence could be developed on the scale of deployment for these new weapons.

In the short run Doenitz argued that no rocket cruiser could in any way harm his U-boats, and was glad to see that his budget for new construction was dramatically increased, while that of Raeder diminished. The Germans would finish the fitting out of only one more major capital ship, the *Oldenburg*. The third big battleship Hitler had ordered long ago, the *Brandenburg*, was summarily cancelled, and the steel allotted for the project was diverted to the production of small screening ships like destroyers, and more U-Boats, and the completion of the large fleet carrier the Germans had captured from the French in Saint Nazaire. The name itself would also transfer to that ship, and carrier *Joffre* would soon be christened CV *Brandenburg*.

As for the fast AA cruiser *De Grasse*, Raeder managed to preserve enough of his resources to convert this ship to a hybrid escort cruiser/carryer, the *Hannover*, named after the old pre-dreadnought battleship from an earlier day. These two ships, would join *Peter Strasser* in the shipyards and were expected to reach completion by mid-1941 to bring Germany’s carrier fleet to
a respectable four ships.

Yet Raeder had much more planned, just as he had explained it to Doenitz earlier. His navy would play an important role in Operation Felix, and that attack would be supported by the core of his new battle fleet in a gamble to break the back of the Royal Navy by seizing Gibraltar. Raeder would send out his gladiators once again, hoping to draw the Royal Navy into another pursuit and battle at sea. He would fling his newest battle squadron down through the Faeroes Gap and into the heat of the action. And they would be led by the greatest champion the German Navy had ever put to sea—battleship *Hindenburg*.

Raeder could see the ships moving in his mind’s eye, even as he visualized them on his battle map in the operations center at Wilhelmshaven. If his Admirals and Kapitans kept good heads on their shoulders, then he could guarantee Hitler that his segment of the plan would be accomplished—disrupt the Royal Navy so badly that any hope of reinforcing Gibraltar or landing forces in Portugal or Morocco would be impossible. This he could do, rockets or no rockets. Every variable and factor in the equation of his thinking told him that his fleet was ready for the task as Germany prepared to strike at another hinge of fate—Gibraltar.
Part VII

*Dakar*

“You must never underestimate your opposition.”
—John Scarlett
Chapter 19

The Allied situation in the Mediterranean theater was far from secure by mid 1940. The twin blows of Italian hostility and the metamorphosis of France from ally to enemy had left the United Kingdom and its Commonwealth allies to stand alone. Most of their strength lay in Egypt under General Archibald Percival Wavell, a tall, broad shouldered, thick necked man who had been in the British Army since the Second Boer War. He had also spent a year as an observer with the Russian Army, and learned the Russian language before serving in the First War. Now he found himself elevated to Commander-in-Chief Middle East, which encompassed all of East Africa, Greece, the Balkans, and Palestine.

It was an enormous task considering the fact that Wavell’s force in Egypt was vastly outnumbered by the Italian colonial armies in Africa. By August of 1940 it consisted of the British 7th Armored Division, 4th and 5th Indian Divisions, the 2nd New Zealand Division and mixed forces comprising three British brigades. Plans were underway to reinforce Wavell with a South African Division and a pair of Australian Divisions that were still forming. The R.A.F. could at least muster an assortment of 300 planes, and the Royal Navy at Alexandria had three battleships, four cruisers and 12 destroyers.

Against this force the Italians could boast they had numerous field armies, amounting to over 75 divisions, though most were undermanned and ill equipped. They also had twice as many battleships in theater, good fast cruisers and destroyers, and a robust submarine fleet. Regia Aeronautica had 400 planes in Libya with another 300 in the horn of Africa, and three times as many more in at home aerodromes. The threat Italy represented on paper looked very serious, and this led Wavell to adopt an early policy of cautious containment, like a man staring down a bee hive on his back porch, and wondering whether the first tentative jabs would result in a whirlwind of stinging reprisal.

What the Italians did not have, however, was the will to use the forces they had, and the skill to use them effectively. In spite of its size on paper, the Italian Army proved to have very little sting at all, and even less inclination to swarm on the enemy they clearly outnumbered in every category of arms. In August they began to buzz about at the Egyptian frontier, where small
skirmishes and quick cross border raids were the order of the day.

British garrisons on other key Mediterranean outposts such as Malta and Gibraltar, were also ill equipped for the gathering threat of war. As France fell, Malta had only four old Gladiator fighters, still in packing crates as reserve planes for the British carrier HMS Glorious. Of these only three could be kept working, given the names Faith, Hope and Charity. Four Hurricanes arrived in late June, and another seven in July to build the fighter defense there to fourteen planes. They were joined by three Swordfish, a single Skua, one Hudson bomber and two Sunderlands. As Tovey concluded his Faeroe Island conference with the Russians, the carrier Argus was preparing to make a ferry run with twelve more Hurricanes, and three Maryland bombers were also flown in, largely for reconnaissance operations.

There were five battalions assigned to Malta Command along with a mix of artillery, anti-tank and AA guns, and a couple companies of fortress engineers, all gathered into the Malta Infantry Brigade. Gibraltar was equally thin on air power, as the agreement Britain had with Spain forbade offensive bombers there. 202 Squadron flew Swordfish and Sunderlands on anti-submarine patrols. On the ground, the Rock was garrisoned by only three battalions of infantry, two companies of fortress engineers and the 3rd Heavy Artillery Brigade. A fourth battalion, the Black Watch, would arrive in short order.

At sea it seemed that both sides had paused briefly to take stock of their respective situations. The Italians seemed to be half-hearted participants in the war, a member of the Axis more in name than deed. They busied themselves with laying mine barrages off Pantelleria, sub sparing with British ships transiting the Red Sea, and with little result. The bulk of the Italian fleet largely sat in their home ports, while Regia Marina operated with its submarines, using them as transports, mine layers, and mounding defensive patrols in key waterways.

For their part, considering the dire situation at Malta, the British mounted a well named hasty sortie that was again led by the enterprising young carrier commander Christopher Wells. HMS Glorious was still standing in for the Ark Royal, and “Operation Hurry” was teed up to harass and distract the Italians. Escorted by the battleship Valiant, three cruisers and eight destroyers, Wells mounted a quick strike against airfields near Cagliari on Sardinia as cover for CVL Argus, which flew off those twelve much needed
Hurricane fighters for Malta, nearly doubling their fighter contingent in one throw.

It seemed that neither side had taken the full measure of the other, like two boxers tentatively jabbing and moving about one another in the first round of a prize fight. The British counted the eggs still left in the French navy’s basket, and knew that something had to be done about them. Operation Menace was the result of that brooding, a plan to make a direct challenge to the French African port of Dakar on the Atlantic. There sat the formidable battleship Richelieu, and the even more dangerous new design the powerful Normandie, with twelve 15-inch guns. To make matters worse, this force could be easily supported by the battleship Jean Bart just up the coast at Casablanca, along with a light cruiser, seven destroyers and eighteen submarines.

The Admiralty still regarded this as the most immediate and dire threat to future war operations. Sitting right on the Atlantic, the thought that the French might one day sortie with this entire force and cut the convoy routes south around the Cape of Good Hope was a very real and present danger. Something had to be done about it, and, much like the recent Operation Catapult aimed at Oran and Mers-el-Kebir, Operation Menace was aimed at facing down the best of these ships while they lay at anchor and eliminating the menace they represented to England’s future war effort.

A small convoy of 4200 British Troops and 2700 Free French troops departed from the Clyde, escorted by three cruisers and four destroyers. Along the way the cruiser Fiji was hit by Lieutenant Jenisch on U-32, and the cruiser Australia suffered a near miss, but the force squeaked through to rendezvous with a strong detachment from Force H. The combined force headed for Freetown for provisioning prior to their planned approach to Dakar. There they would offer another ultimatum, and should the French decline, it was Vice Admiral Cunningham’s job to smash the French fleet and land nearly 7000 troops to seize this vital port. If successful it would leave only Casablanca to be accounted for, but the French got wind of the operation, and immediately dispatched naval reinforcements from Toulon.

Three cruisers and three destroyers had been ordered to the colony of Gabon near the Congo, where De Gaulle’s influence had seduced the local authorities there away from the Vichy fold. Instead they were ordered to Dakar, and a battle that was never written in any of the history books Fedorov
had in his library was now gathering like the restless late summer clouds that formed off the African coast.

* * *

Situated a little over 900 kilometers south of Dakar, Freetown was the capital of Sierra Leone and a valuable British sanctuary on an African coast largely occupied by Vichy France. As such it became a valuable stopping point for outbound convoys and a place to dock and replenish warships serving to escort them.

Captain Christopher Wells was out on the weather deck of HMS Glorious, sailing under fair skies and calm winds. The ship was riding easily, her belly topped off with fuel and a flight of four Swordfish spotted on deck and ready for immediate takeoff. Remembering a day very like this in the Norwegian Sea some months ago, Wells had also posted lookouts on his high main mast even though he might have dispensed with that this go around. Glorious had been alone then, with only two destroyers in escort, and Wells still shuddered to recall those difficult moments when he had struggled to save the ship from a pair of pursuing wolves in Scharnhorst and Gneisenau. Now he felt a good deal more secure, surrounded by a family of strong Royal Navy ships that included the battleships Barham and Resolution, heavy cruisers Cornwall and Cumberland arriving from Capetown, and a flotilla of six destroyers fanned out around the bigger ships like a gaggle of geese.

Wells’ good friend Lieutenant Woodfield came out on the weather deck to take up his watch, pleased to see the Captain there.

“Still mixing with the lower ranks, Captain?” he said with a smile. His friend had moved up another rung on the ladder of command while Woodfield remained a Lieutenant.

“Fine day, Woody, and we’re finally ready to settle accounts with the French.”

“Still brooding on that business off Mers-el-Kebir?”

“We never got there. Most of the French fleet slipped right out the back door to Toulon.”

“Not quite, Welly. You notched your belt with a pair of battleships as I recall.”

“Who could forget that,” said Wells, still remembering how he felt when
he first received the news that his *Swordfish* from 823 and 825 squadrons, planes sent out by his command, had found and sunk the old WWI era battleships *Bretagne* and *Provence*. He had raised his hand against Britain’s former allies, put over 1300 French sailors into the sea, and so enraged the French that they now openly sided with the Axis. It was all his fault, or so he believed for a good long while after that, in spite of Admiral Somerville’s praise for his conduct in the operation and assurance that he would have done the very same thing, distasteful as it was.

Now he was back in the same game, out assigned as primary air cover asset for Operation Menace, the British plan to seize Dakar. They were already three hours out of Freetown, heading north for the showdown that was supposed to play out like the original plan for Mers-el-Kebir. Yet like that plan, the French had again been forewarned of the British moves. Ships out of Toulon had already been dispatched to reinforce Dakar, and had managed to slip past the watch at Gibraltar on a dark night the previous day. Wells got that news only an hour ago, and knew he would soon be tasked to get planes out to look for the Toulon squadron.

“I don’t like it, Woody,” he said. “I look out at those two fat battleships there and should feel at ease, but I have misgivings about this mission. Something tells me the French are on to us.”

“So what if they are? R.A.F. got a look at that squadron that slipped past Gibraltar and it’s only three light cruisers and a few destroyers. They say it put in to Casablanca. That won’t be much help to the French given what I see around us here.”

Woodfield might have been more cautious had he know that the French Squadron had sailed into Casablanca the previous morning to re-provision and sortie again, with one more addition to the fleet that could be very troublesome, the battleship *Jean Bart*. This force had already slipped through the Canary Islands and was heading south for the Cape Verde Islands where the French were staging their own little operation as part of a much bigger plan that would soon unhinge far more than either man could imagine that fair morning.

The British troop convoy had detached the cruisers *Australia* and *Devonshire* to look for the French ships, but they had been unable to find them off Casablanca. These two cruisers were still patrolling far to the north, and slowly working their way down to Dakar.
“So we go for the gold, Wells.” Woodfield was still exuberant. “I’ve heard that bullion reserves for the Bank of France were spirited off to Dakar. That’s reason enough for us to get hold of the place, eh? And that harbor is far superior to our anchorages at Freetown. With it we’ll have a good watch on the convoy routes south, and then it’s on to Casablanca to finish things up.”

“I wish I had your enthusiasm,” said Wells. Yes, Woodfield had the spirit in him this morning, a lieutenant’s dash and bravado. Wait until he wears a Captain’s hat one day and feels the weight of those new stripes on his shoulder boards.

“Just keep a positive attitude, Wells. We’ve sixteen good 15-inch guns out there between those two battleships.”

“Yes well the French will still out gun us. They’ll have twenty!”

“But those ships will be sitting in the harbor—a pair of nice fat geese.”

“That’s what we thought at Mers-el-Kebir. If they’ve sent this squadron from Toulon, then they’ll certainly know what we’re up too here. I wouldn’t keep my ships anchored in port, and I’m not so sure the French will either.”

“Well, we’ve got a man or two there, don’t we? Latest word from the signals traffic is that both French battleships are still sitting in port.”

“At the moment,” Wells cautioned. “We’re still a full day south of them here. Let’s hope we find them there this time tomorrow morning when we’re sitting off Dakar.”

It was going to be a long 24 hours steaming at 18 knots to get the British squadron up north to Dakar. By this time tomorrow Wells expected he would have most of 823 Squadron’s Swordfish in the air, with 825 Squadron spotting on deck to join them. Before that he would have to get a reconnaissance flight up north of their position to look for any sign of that flotilla from Toulon.

Wells passed a sleepless night, up from his bunk twice and pacing on deck with a pipe that he had taken to smoking. The rituals of the habit seemed to calm him a bit, and let him think things through, his thoughts wafting up with the smoke.

Morning came with the signal arriving from Vice Admiral Cunningham aboard HMS Resolution: “Ultimatum to be delivered by wire at 09:00 hrs. Mine laying to begin 09:15, with torpedo squadron ready to receive strike orders at that time.”
Wells was ready. He had dispatched four *Swordfish* of 823 Squadron north on a wide reconnaissance fan, with four more loaded for the mine laying operation. The last four would join with the twelve planes of 825 Squadron to form his strike element. He was to send one plane in at the crack of dawn to overfly Dakar and report any signs that the French might be trying to get up steam.

The report he received from that little sortie was most disconcerting. The lone *Swordfish* was up at 05:00 and on its way. Thirty minutes later the word came back that changed everything. There would be no need to issue any ultimatum later that morning. The French fleet was gone.
Chapter 20

“This latest information from Bletchley Park is somewhat alarming, sir.” Daddy Brind had come in with another dispatch, but the mention of Bletchley Park immediately got Admiral Tovey’s attention.

“The Germans seem to be running several mobile divisions through training in Southern France, very near the Spanish frontier. I don't know quite what to make of it, but scuttlebutt seems to think the Germans may have intentions involving Spanish neutrality. We received word from Bletchley Park yesterday that there may be a high level meeting being arranged.”

The implications of what Brind was saying were not lost on the Admiral. Spain's neutrality had been a great bulwark for the British operating out of Gibraltar. The vast land area of the Iberian Peninsula, safe behind the ragged walls of the Pyrenees mountains, offered a welcome buffer of security for the vital British base. Admiral Tovey raised an eyebrow, thinking.

“If the Germans have intentions involving Spain,” he said, “then all these troop movements we’re seeing may have a darker purpose. Perhaps the Admiralty is keeping a hat on this for the time being, but I expect we'll hear about it if there is any truth to these rumors. Lord, what a nightmare.” The Admiral’s mood was somber and serious now, and Brind found him somewhat distracted, a distant look in his eye, as if he were considering something deeply that seemed insoluble to him. He seemed a bit haggard of late, ever since that meeting at the Faeroe Islands with the Russians.

“Do you really think the Germans would attempt to mount an invasion of Spain at this time, sir?” Brind folded his arms, his eyes serious, his expression one of genuine concern.

Tovey set down his tea and perked up, drawn back to the here and now. “It may interest you to know that R.A.F. has had a look at this concentration in southern France, Mister Brind,” said the Admiral. “It appears there are two full mechanized divisions forming up just north of the passes. Latest intelligence has them designated 16th Panzer Division and 16th Motorized
“Division.”

“Only two divisions?” Brind was not impressed. “It’s a long way from France to Gibraltar, sir. If the Germans commenced an operation of this nature my guess is it would take 30 days or more, even if Spanish resistance folded in the face of such an attack. That would give us plenty of time to load up fast troop ships and get some boys down to Gibraltar if need be.”

“And suppose there is no resistance…” Tovey let that hang there, watching Brind close to gauge his reaction.

“You mean to say—”

“Yes Daddy, this note from Bletchley Park you mention could be the ticket the Germans need now. What if Franco throws in with them? These two heavy divisions in southern France could just roll right in unopposed. This is an entirely new kettle of fish. It’s not my watch, but if the Germans are bold enough to pull off something like this we’ll be looking at plans for a counter-invasion of Spain before we know it, and the Navy will be paramount in that instance. In this light, all this steam up in the German fleet seems rather ominous. Let’s just hope the rumors are simply that.”

“Well sir, there are also rumors about the buildup on the Polish Russian frontier, but that may not be a wise move for Hitler, not now that hostilities have resumed between Orenburg and the Siberians.”

“That’s what’s so damnably bothersome about all this.” The Admiral leaned back in his chair wishing he had had another three hours sleep. “That meeting at Omsk led us to believe Volkov had come to an arrangement with the Siberians. Then a week later he crosses the border with six divisions. Well he won’t want a fight with the Soviets until that resolves itself, and the Germans would be wise to leave Russia sleeping quietly as well—and that is what worries me. Spain… It’s the logical next move for them. It’s either that or they open hostilities against Russia. Big build up there as well. Hitler may be taking on more than he can chew, but we’ll have to plan for every possible contingency.”

“That we will, sir,” said Brind. “Good to know the Russians have thrown in with us. This offer of a technology transfer was gracious. Is their radar really that good, sir?”

“So I have been told.” Tovey folded his arms, wishing he could fully unburden himself here and let Daddy Brind in on all that he had learned during that conference with the Russians. Away from them three days now,
the normal routine of his work at fleet headquarters here at Scapa Flow had occupied his mind, but the amazing revelations that had been made still lay on him like a magic spell. At times he found himself sitting at his desk, staring out the window, or pouring tea and taking a single sip and then letting it go cold in his hand as he sat, his thoughts ranging on distant possibilities that he struggled to foresee.

“Well,” he said. “I’ve been sitting on my duff reading and writing reports the last three days. Now I must make a few deliveries. Have a plane waiting for me at Kirkwell, will you?”

“Of course, sir.”

“I see Hood has been swaddled up at Greenock. I’m going down to have a look at her and see how the work is going. But I’ll be flying directly to London from there. Have the two new fellows out there ready for a stroll in 48 hours. I’ll want them north of Londonderry, and HMS Invincible can join them. I’ll collar a destroyer in the Clyde and come out to join the party when my business is concluded.” The two new fellows were King George V and Prince of Wales, Britain’s newest additions to the fleet.

“Very good, sir. I’ll make the arrangements and see that all the invitations go out.”

“Good then… Oh, and Mister Brind, make sure I’m kept fully in the loop regarding that operation at Dakar. And as to that buildup north of the Spanish Border—phone down to RAF Saint Eval and ask them to have another look. Put my name to the request.”

“I will, sir.”

Tovey was up and on his way, opening the door and hearing a dry squeak that seemed to grate on him. We’ll need to get that oiled, he thought, stuffing the thought away like a man pocketing his handkerchief and forgetting about it. But far to the south, the dry squeak of the hinge of fate was grating on other men, in the warm late summer waters off Dakar.

* * *

“The Flagman seems to be well into it this morning,” said Wells as he stood on the weather bridge of HMS Glorious. Commander Lovell nodded agreeably, smiling as the man stiff armed his flag signal and sent the last plane from 823 Squadron running down the deck for takeoff.

Wells leaned on the gunwale, noting how the new slate grey paint still
looked so fresh on the ship’s wounds. They had done a bang up job to get her up and running again, but he knew the old girl was still scarred underneath that greasepaint, with the char of smoke and battle.

“Mister Heath has called up, sir,” said Lovell. “He’s recommending another pair of Gladiators from 802 Squadron come up for fleet air defense.”

“Good enough,” said Wells. “In fact, I’d be more comfortable with a full flight of four planes up. See that Heath gets the message.”

“Aye sir.” Lovell flicked off a salute and went inside, leaving Wells to his muse.

So today’s the day, he thought, another showdown with the French. I can’t believe they will be any less agreeable, and they’re out there somewhere, probably within easy range of Dakar if they hope to defend that place.

Dakar was situated on a long 40 kilometer isthmus that jutted east from the African mainland and came to a sharp point, which was the westernmost point of Africa. Beneath this the isthmus stretched another 14 kilometers, angling back towards the mainland until it reached another sharp point at Cape Mamuel. The harbor was just north of this, one of the best on the African coast, and a knife pointed directly at British convoy routes bound for Freetown and Capetown.

After learning that the harbor at Dakar was empty, Wells had a bad feeling about this mission. This was not expected, though it should have been assumed after what happened at Mers-el-Kebir, he thought. The French were of no mind to sit on their backsides and wait for us to come calling. They obviously got wind of what we were up to here and slipped away. Now I’ve got to find them. HMS Glorious is the eyes of this battle squadron, and the thought that a pair of French battleships are at large now is most disconcerting.

He remembered the last two battleships that had caught Glorious napping on her return leg from Norway. That would never happen again, he resolved, but the shadow of that engagement still lay heavily on him. Two more battleships… I don’t think Vice Admiral Cunningham had things planned this way. We’ve a pair of old ladies out there ourselves, good ships, but a bit long in the teeth. Barham was passed over when they refit the rest of her class. They had only replaced a few AA batteries and pulled her old wisdom teeth in the two remaining torpedo tubes. She had just come out of the dock yards
at Liverpool a few months back, after suffering a torpedo hit from U-30 the previous December. *Resolution* had kept company with the 1st Battle Squadron of the old Grand Fleet during WWI. Both were slow at no more than 23 knots, and if it came to a chase they would have no chance against the newer French ships they were now hunting.

How could the French have slipped away like this, he wondered? Our cover operation to Freetown as Force M obviously didn’t fool anyone. It was put out that Force M was in transit to Capetown to pick up a convoy. The French might have men there who relayed information as to our departure, but we turned south and got well out to sea before swinging around to head north for Dakar. In spite of that the French seemed to know our every movement. It was as if they had read the fleet orders and knew our exact planned arrival time here at Dakar.

With the French fleet missing, the troop convoy assigned to the landing operation was kept to the south until the enemy could be located again. There was no way the operation could be launched until those ships had been accounted for. Three hours later Wells received a signal from his scout planes. The French fleet had been spotted north of the long Ishmus of Dakar, but they were not running north for Casablanca as Vice Admiral Cunningham believed they would. Instead they were heading south, and the light of battle and a thirst for vengeance was in the eyes of their commander, on one of the most formidable ships that would ever sail, the battleship *Normandie*.

* * *

**Rear** Admiral Plancon, Flag Officer, French Navy West Africa, had decided to take personal command of the operation. Once inclined to continue as an ally of Great Britain, he had suffered a hard change of heart after the attack on Admiral Gensoul’s fleet fleeing from Mers-el-Kebir. He called an emergency meeting with Admiral Laborde on the *Normandie*, and Captain Marzin on the battleship *Richelieu*, and resolved to immediately put to sea when he received the dispatch indicating the British intended to occupy Dakar. He would not allow his ships to be caught in the harbor. So after first steaming north to evade detection and communicate with his reserve squadron at Casablanca, he turned about and resolved to hover north of the long isthmus of Dakar and lie in wait there.

Plancon knew the British had a great advantage with their carrier based
aircraft, and he was under no illusions that he would actually surprise his foe, but the sudden realization that the French intended to seek battle here would certainly give them second thoughts about pressing any claim to Dakar, or so he believed. France had produced some superb modern battleships, but had been blind to the utility aircraft carriers would provide. Their single operational carrier, the *Bearn*, was now in the Caribbean with a pair of cruisers. The ship they had begun to build to replace the aging *Bearn* had just been captured by the Germans.

So he had only the few planes he could launch from his capital ships for eyes, and no radar, yet he knew one thing—the British would come to him. He did not have to worry about finding them. The Royal Navy would act with the same confidence and determination that it had demonstrated earlier, only this time they had not truly taken the full measure of their adversary. The French fleet was fully capable of defending itself, and posed a far greater challenge than Vice Admiral Cunningham believed.

It had once been called the *Force de Raid*, based on the Atlantic with the mission of challenging any German ships that might threaten French territory. The officers and sailors were proud of both their country and their mission, and though they did not have the long years of experience of the Royal Navy, they had determined to fight as best they could.

*Richelieu* alone would have posed a grave threat at sea, given her speed, heavy armor, and an escort of fast modern cruisers and destroyers to sail with her. If the two British battleships could catch her, the issue would have been decided their way, though not without risk of sustaining damage in the battle. But *Richelieu* was not alone. The ship the French had built to answer Washington Naval Treaty violations by Germany was with her, the true heavyweight of the fleet, battleship *Normandie*.

Inspired by the design of *Richelieu*, the *Normandie* had the same heavy protection, including 320mm belt armor and 170mm on the decks, which was 6.7 inches at its thickest point. Where *Richelieu* had two quadruple 15-inch gun turrets mounted forward, *Normandie* had this exact same armament, and then a third quadruple turret mounted aft. Pound for pound, her broadside of twelve 15-inch barrels had a throw weight that would match designs built later in the war like the American *Montana* and *Iowa* class battleships, fully a third more powerful than either *Barham* or *Resolution*. Together these two ships would outgun the British with twenty 15-inch barrels to sixteen. And
while the British gun turrets had good protection with 330mm face armor (13 inches), the French ships had at least 430mm, of good face armor. Their sides and roofs were also better protected, so with the business end of the battleships, the guns, the French had a clear advantage.

*Normandie* had to have special docks at Brest built for her, and when completed she truly lived up to the name Dumas had used to describe her, a “super battleship” capable of meeting and defeating any other ship on earth. Yet the ship was raw and untested. Her guns and fittings were only recently installed, and the magazine was half empty when she fled her homeland for African ports. Work crews still roved her labyrinthine corridors and inner decks, tightening fittings, and laying cable and wire to get her internal communications in working order.

Her commanding officer, Admiral Jean Laborde, was a disciplined and loyal man, though he had no great love for his superior, Admiral Darlan. His animosity towards De Gaulle and the British was even greater, and as the newly appointed commander of the French High Seas Fleet, he was determined to make them pay for the insult and treachery they had demonstrated in attacking Admiral Gensoul’s Squadron. Laborde was the fighting Admiral, Plancon his nominal equal as the authority commanding naval operations in French West Africa, and together they would stand on the bridge of *Normandie* and lead the fleet to battle.

A man of 62 years, Laborde still exhibited a youthful aspect and had much physical energy. He was, in fact, in the prime of his life at that age, and destined to live to the venerable age of 99 years—if he could survive the battle he so eagerly sought here with the Royal Navy this day. His ships were untested, their crews unbled, and they were pitted against both veteran ships and crews. It would be the face off of the old well tried ships and guns of the British, which had first faced battle in WWI, against a new navy that had been built to face the challenges of this new age.

And it was about to begin.
Chapter 21

“**Well** gentlemen,” said Vice Admiral John Cunningham, “it appears we have a battle on our hands.” He was one of two Admirals bearing that name, and framing British operations in the Med like a pair of strong bookends. His namesake, Admiral Andrew Browne Cunningham, known as “ABC” in the officer corps, was commanding operations in the Eastern Mediterranean.

A navigator by training, John Cunningham had served in the Battlecruiser Squadron aboard both *Renown* and *Hood* in that capacity, and went on to become commander of the Fleet Navigator School. So he could read a map and compass, and knew the position noted in the signal he just received was very close to his present location. But he was no stranger to battle. Before moving up in the ranks he had commanded the same ship he was on at that moment, HMS *Resolution*, and was glad to be back aboard with his feet planted firmly on the rolling metal decks of a good battleship.

He looked over his shoulder, seeing the distant silhouette of the aircraft carrier *Glorious*, which he had ordered to fall off and maneuver out of the battle zone. Vice Admiral Cunningham’s fate had been strangely entwined with that ship, and the man that now commanded the carrier, Captain Christopher Wells. It was Wells who had sent that message into his hands as Cunningham led the cruiser *Devonshire* south in the evacuation of Norway: “*W/T from Glorious – Most Immediate - Two battlecruisers, bearing 308° - 15 miles, course 030.*”

The two battlecruisers then had been the German ships *Scharnhorst* and *Gneisenau*, intent on making a fiery end to the hapless carrier. At that time, *Devonshire* had been charged with the mission to safely transport King Haakon and the Norwegian Royal Family, and a considerable store of gold bullion as well. Cunningham knew the message would become troublesome, because he also knew he could not answer that plaintive call for help. He had every copy collected, and took charge of the ship’s log books, discretely, and he was very lucky that *Glorious* had somehow managed to escape on her own.

Now he had just been handed another message that was eerily similar—again from Wells aboard HMS *Glorious*: “*W/T from Glorious – Most Immediate – Air search confirms two battleships, two cruisers, four*
Two battleships, thought Cunningham, and well attended, even as I am here. He noted his old command, HMS Devonshire was in the van, followed by the Cumberland. The cruisers Australia and Delhi had been detached to keep watch on the troop convoy far to the south, but he also had five destroyers in hand, Faulknor, Foresight, Forester, Fortune and Fury. So it was to be an even match, ship to ship, and he had every hope he would come off the better.

“Ahead two thirds and come to 310. Flag Officer will signal all ships to follow.”

“Aye sir, ahead two-thirds and coming to 310.”

“Signal all destroyers to take position ahead and prepare for torpedo runs.”

Cunningham was going to take his squadron northwest, emerging from behind the long isthmus of Dakar and hope to catch his enemy on their present course, and by so doing cross their T. Unfortunately, that would not really matter much to the French. Their bigger ships were front heavy with firepower, with sixteen 15-inch guns that would have good forward arcs of fire. Their ships were built to hunt and chase down ships like the Graf Spee and Admiral Scheer, and to be able to bring tremendous fire power on them even as they pursued.

With two twin turrets forward, and two more aft on each of the British battleships, the French would outgun the British two to one in any nose to nose face off. So Cunningham knew he had to show the French his broadside, offering them the big silhouettes of his battleships in order to even up the gun duel, and turning broadside the French would only get stronger when the after quadruple turret on Normandie could be brought into action.

In ordering ahead two thirds, Cunningham’s squadron would make only 18 knots. Full out, his battleships could give him another six knots, but he was soon to learn that the younger legs of his adversary would also pose a great challenge. The French had yet another advantage in the action that was now unfolding—speed. Cunningham was waddling up at 18 knots, like a proper English gentleman with his walking stick or cane, intending to give his foe a good poke in the belly when he got in range. For their part, every ship in the French squadron could make 30 knots or better. Led by Le Fantasque and her sister Le Terrible, their large destroyers, could run at an
astounding top speed of 45 knots, and cruise easily at 40 knots for sustained periods with moderate fuel expenditure. They were, in fact, the fastest destroyers ever built in any era, and at 434 feet they were a hundred feet longer than the British destroyers, and better armed.

The large destroyer *L’Audacieux* was well named that day, leading on the right flank of the French formation. It began to put on speed, making a bold charge as the British formation came into sight. In its wake came the light cruiser *George Leygues* followed by *Montcalm*, fast capable ships at a little over 9100 tons full load, with three triple turrets housing 6-inch guns. They had sighted the oncoming British destroyers, which had raced up at their best speed, and a fast paced gun and torpedo duel ensued, with the experience and skill of the British destroyer captains really shining.

The British fired their first torpedoes directly into the intended paths of the oncoming French ships, and a 21 inch lance off the destroyer *Fury* struck *George Leygues* full on her port side as it swerved in an unsuccessful attempt to dodge the deadly spread. Then the British destroyers wheeled to port, running parallel to the French as they continued to launch torpedoes, their deck guns blazing away at the fast French destroyer in the lead.

*George Leygues* continued on for some time, her gun crews bravely firing until the list due to the flooding below the waterline became impossible to counterbalance. The light cruiser made a vain attempt to turn about, but foundered, keeling over to port and slowly sinking as the crews scrambled to abandon ship.

Hit by three 4.7 inch rounds with a fire near her forward turret, *L’Audacieux* swerved hard to starboard to avoid yet another run of torpedoes off the British destroyer *Fortune*, and put on amazing speed as one threatened her from behind, literally leaving the torpedo in her wake. The turn send her racing right across the bow of the oncoming French battleships where she sought to find and join the three other French destroyers that had led in that main column.

The last ship from the French left, the light cruiser *Montcalm*, ran on past the foundering wreck of *George Leygues* and right into the skilled 8-inch gunfire of the British heavy cruisers. *Devonshire* and *Cumberland* were out in front, and ready for action when they saw Blue Five raised by HMS *Resolution*, the Squadron Flagship, well behind them. *Montcalm* bravely ran due west for a time, trading salvos with the bigger cruisers until two good hits
convinced her captain that he was overmatched and outgunned. The light cruiser made a hard turn to starboard, coming around to turn north and cross the bow of the French battleships just as *L’Audacieux* had done. Her fires being too serious, and threatening a forward magazine, the ship then turned northeast and was out of the fight.

The opening rounds had gone to the far more experienced and capable seamanship and gunnery of the Royal Navy, but the bell was now ringing for the main event.

Captain Marzin aboard the battleship *Richelieu* shook his head as he watched the demise of the screening forces to his left. As *Montcalm* scurried across his bow and turned away, he decided it was time to roll up his sleeves and enter the fray. He had spotted the tall, proud mainmasts of the two British battleships, still steaming almost due north, and he knew he had the speed to cross their T by turning due west. The range was over 18,000 meters, but the two heavy cruisers that had bullied the light cruiser *Montcalm* were much closer. He decided to see if they wanted to stay in the fight when faced with a real adversary, and ordered his big forward turrets to train on the *Cumberland*.

The 15-in guns of the *Richelieu* blasted away, the whole of her main battery deployed forward on those two quadruple turrets. The first rounds were over, but surprisingly tight in their pattern of fall. With a projectile weight of just under 2000 pounds, only the Italian 15-inch guns had more muzzle velocity, though their shell casings were not as reliable as the French rounds, and the powder bags were inconsistently packed. The British 15-inch/42 caliber guns on *Resolution* and *Barham* were proven designs in two wars, but had a much lower muzzle velocity and range than the guns on *Richelieu*. All told, the French would claim they had the best 15-inch gun then in service, and few might have argued with that when they saw the result of the third salvo that found the *Cumberland*, straddling her severely with one of the four rounds striking home amidships in a thundering roar.

The two British cruisers were now the ones outgunned, though they stayed in the fight, and *Devonshire* scored a hit on *Richelieu*’s forward deck with an 8-inch round. The superb deck armor on the French battleship, 6.7 inches thick where the shell hit near the B turret, was enough to shrug off the hit, and the blast effect from the shell barely bothered the 16.9 inch face armor on the quadruple turret. A second 15-inch shell put *Cumberland*’s aft
Y turret out of action two minutes later, and it was only the imminent arrival of the bigger British battleships that prompted Captain Marzin to hand off his fire on the British cruisers to his secondary batteries while the bigger guns retrained to face HMS Resolution.

Now the main event was in full swing, with Vice Admiral Cunningham immediately coming thirty points to port so he could bring his two aft turrets in to the engagement. Opening salvoes from Resolution were well aimed, but long, and Barham’s first warning rounds were off the mark as well. For a short time the British enjoyed a brief advantage, double teaming against Richelieu and outgunning her two to one. In that duel it was Resolution who found the range before any other ship, and put a 15-inch round right on Richelieu’s belt armor, just below the water line, at about 15,000 meters. The round did damage, but did not fully penetrate. It was stopped by a special inner lining between the armor and inner hull, with a rubber substance the French called “Bourrage.” Should fragments penetrate the armor, this water exclusion material was designed to reduce the likelihood of flooding, a system unique to modern French battleship design.

Richelieu’s fire control systems also proved to be very good that day, and Resolution suffered a good hit aft, and another on her side armor, which was just a little tapered off and thinning at that point to only 152mm. The ship was penetrated, with the shells close enough to the aft magazine that the resulting fire there forced Cunningham to order it flooded, limiting Y turret to only ready ammo on hand.

Then came the thundering roar of all twelve 15-inch guns of the Normandie. The ship had been trailing about 2000 meters behind Richelieu, and had now completed its turn to bring all three of its quadruple turrets to bear on Barham. The barrage was only short 200 meters, a frothing comb of tall white geysers surging up from the sea in tight patterns of four. Barham answered with her eight 15-inch guns and the duel was on.

For the next ten minutes the battleships ran on a mostly westerly course, parallel to one another and firing for all they were worth. On her fourth salvo the aft turret of Normandie was lucky enough to put two of her four 15-inch rounds into Barham. One fell amidships, just behind the ship’s single funnel, where it smashed the cranes and catapult for seaplane launches. The second fell right on the armored roof of the X turret, and blasted clean through the thinner 5 inch armor there, with a tremendous secondary explosion when
rounds and powder bags being lifted from the magazine below went off.

The turret was nearly ripped from its housing, badly askew, the barbette exposed and blackened by the raging fire. Both barrels were canted down onto the deck, and every man within thirty yards of the hit was dead in an instant.

Vice Admiral Cunningham heard the bellowing explosion, and turned his field glasses aft, seeing the tall column of think black smoke rising above Barham.

“That doesn’t look good,” he said quietly to Captain Oliver Bevir, who had been with the ship since late 1939.

“Hell of a good knock from the look of it,” said Bevir, but the roar of Resolution’s guns pulled his attention back to the fate of his own ship. He could see that the Richelieu had put on speed, and though he had ordered all ahead full battle speed, Resolution was laboring to make 22 knots full out, and the French bettered that by eight knots. The range had closed to under 10,000 meters but the French ships were pulling ahead, and they might soon get into a very good position to turn fifteen or twenty points to port and cross the British T.

It was then that the inexperience and undue ardor of the French fast destroyers on that flank caused a bit of a faux pas that spared the British heavy ships further damage for the moment. The three destroyers led by Le Fantasque came cutting across the bow of Richelieu again, running at their amazing top speed that was approaching 45 knots. Le Terrible and Le Malin followed, and behind them L’Audacieux had joined this group, which was now attempting to make a high speed torpedo attack.

Devonshire and Cumberland had both wisely come to port, crossing ahead of the British battleships and then turning south away from the torpedoes in a big hook. The bigger battleships labored on for some minutes as Cunningham gaped at the speed of the French ships, their long sleek hulls gleaming behind frothing bows. Amazingly, the destroyers had begun to make smoke as they made their approach, which obscured the whole region between the bigger ships and imposed a halt on that main gun action.

“Damn impudent!” said Cunningham, then he quickly ordered a fifteen turn to port, getting Resolution on a heading to avoid the first spread of enemy torpedoes. Barham, however, was unable to follow suit. The fire aft from the severe hit she had taken was threatening several boiler rooms, and
her speed had fallen off to 17 knots. The French destroyers had broken up the fight just when their battleships were getting the better of it, but now they paid for that ill timed maneuver by getting a hit. A 21.7 inch torpedo struck home, shaking the old battleship *Barham* yet again.

Cunningham saw the hit amidships, a worried expression on his face now, replacing the cool confidence he had displayed for the first time. “I think we’d better hear from Captain Cooke about that,” he said in a low voice, and Captain Bevir gave a discrete order to have a signal sent requesting *Barham’s* status.

When next sighted, the French battleships had unaccountably turned ten points to starboard, and to Cunningham’s eye they appeared to be breaking off. He led his squadron into yet another fifteen point turn to port, running about 210 for a time, and then thought the better of his situation and came around to 150 on course away from the French battleships. *Devonshire* and *Cumberland* saw the maneuver and matched it smartly, and it appeared the action was concluding, though they continued to fire at a pair of French heavy cruisers, *Foch* and *Algiere*, that had been behind the line of the bigger battleships.

Admiral Plancon saw the British turn, half angered, and half impressed by the brave charge of the four destroyers, and so he ordered *Richelieu* to come thirty points to port, intending to continue the battle at longer range. Now one other advantage of the new 15-inch guns on the French battleships came into play—their tremendous range. They could elevate to fling their big rounds out an astounding 45,000 yards in testing, though no one thought they would ever hit anything at such a range. After Cunningham’s final turn the range had opened to about 18,000 meters again, but when the French gunners re-sighted the British battleships they began to pour it on again from all twenty 15-inch guns.

And they were getting hits.
Part VIII

One Fine Morning

“Gatsby believed in the green light, the orgastic future that year by year recedes before us. It eluded us then, but that’s no matter—tomorrow we will run faster, stretch out our arms farther. . . . And then one fine morning—
So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past.”

—F. Scott Fitzgerald
Chapter 22

It was time for the cavalry.

The fast French destroyers had raced southwest, outrunning the fire put on them as the British gunners struggled to adjust their range, never having faced a ship with such speed before. During the main gun duel, the British destroyer squadron had turned southwest behind the battleships, crossing their wakes. Now the squadron leader aboard HMS Fury, Lieutenant Commander Terence Robinson ordered all ahead full in an attempt to get after the French destroyers, which had just made another high speed turn to make their final torpedo run against the lumbering British battleships. Yet they would not get there in time.

The French destroyers surged forward to get inside 5000 meter range and brazenly fired their torpedoes. They were well aimed and would be difficult for the slow British battleships to avoid. Minutes later Cunningham felt HMS Resolution shudder under the impact of a good hit forward that he saw coming but could simply not evade. Barham was also hit yet again, her speed now falling off to only 12 knots.

Seeing the plight of the British battleships, Admiral Plancon urged his Captains to turn south and finish them, and this they did, with the sharp bow of Richelieu leading the way. It looked to be a very bad day for the Royal Navy, now outgunned twenty to fourteen, and with both battleships wounded and Barham down on one knee.

Cunningham swore under his breath when he saw the French battleships turn, knowing they had the speed to close to any range they desired. The French destroyers had finally turned about, and were fleeing from a fistful of angry British destroyers, with both sides exchanging gunfire during the chase. At 36 knots the British were running full out, but the big French destroyers had nearly a ten knot advantage on them, and LtC. Robinson knew he would never catch up. He had chased them off, giving Cunningham’s damage crews a little time in the corner, but now the bell was sounding again and the French heavyweights were coming to the center of the ring, smelling the blood on their foes and looking for a knockout.

They hadn’t counted on one last arrow in the Royal Navy’s quiver,
however, or on one determined young Captain that was taking aim even now aboard the carrier HMS Glorious.

Far to the south Captain Christopher Wells had been receiving reports from his scout planes as the action unfolded, and he immediately knew he would have to get his Swordfish up and ready for battle. He had the last of 825 squadron up and circling over the carrier, joining two flights from 823 squadron to make twenty planes in all. When he heard that Barham appeared to have taken a big hit aft, he knew he had to fling his squadrons north at once.

The last of the Old Stringbags dipped their wings in farewell and the light horse hastened north, and they came upon the scene just as the French destroyers were scurrying away after their final torpedo run. Lieutenant Commander Jim Buckley was the nominal strike commander, and he ignored the destroyers, roaring overhead to get at the real threat posed by Richelieu and Normandie. He would receive the DNC that day for his gallant attack, steady on in his attack run as he led the Swordfish in. LtC. Leslie “Bill” Baily and Telegraphist Donald Bunce would also get awards, posthumously. Their plane was the victim of the heavy Ack Ack fire thrown at them by the Richelieu, though they still got their torpedo in the water, and it was aimed well enough to score a hit.

Four Swordfish were shot down by the six twin 37mm AA guns on each battleship, a high cost in the action, but one that was heated enough to give the French second thoughts about continuing. When Richelieu was hit by the first wave of ten planes and Admiral Plancon saw yet another wave swooping low to attack, he gave the order to turn about. The big ships swept around in a wide arc, reversing their course and steering to avoid the deadly torpedoes.

Jim Buckley scored his hit on the Normandie, but her superb underwater protection, among the best on any ship in the world, prevented serious damage. Seeing that his pilots had turned back the French advance, Buckley ordered his mates to form up again after they had already launched their torpedoes, as if yet a third wave of planes was ready to follow in the last of 825 Squadron.

The French had seen all they wanted of these pesky Swordfish, with both ships hit and many near misses that were only narrowly avoided during tense moments on the bridge of Normandie. The cruisers Foch and Algiere matched the turn made by the battleships and the whole French formation
headed north, leaving the British to lick their wounds. The Force De Raid had lost the light cruiser George Leygues, with Montcalm damaged and out of the action. Richelieu had taken two 15-inch hits and a 21 inch torpedo, but was still seaworthy and able to make 28 knots. Normandie had been unscathed by the British guns, and shrugged off a torpedo from Jim Buckley, but the jab was stiff enough to back her off.

For their part, the British destroyers had acquitted themselves well, finally chasing off the pesky French destroyers. Devonshire and Cumberland had minor damage, though Cumberland’s aft Y turret was out of action. Resolution had taken three hits and a torpedo, but Barham got the worst of the beating with four 15-inch gun hits, the loss of an aft turret, and two torpedoes to the body, both on the same side of the ship. She was listing badly and her Captain Cooke was counter-flooding to try and stabilize the ship.

Resolution moved ahead and took her in tow, and with the two heavy cruisers in attendance, the British squadron limped south, bound for Freetown. De Gaulle fumed when he received word that the planned landing at Dakar would have to be cancelled, and his troop convoy was turned about as well.

“Operation Menace” was over, or so it seemed, but the French also had one last parting shot to administer. Hidden beneath the sea, a doughty knight named Lancelot was peering through his periscope at the ponderous retreat of the British battleships. He quietly turned the nose of his sub, the Beveziers, and fired a pair of torpedoes at the trailing ship, like a wolf singling out a wounded water buffalo. They would both strike home on the badly damaged aft quarter of the ship, and it would be the final blow for old Barham that day.

Already foundering, Barham began to ship more water heavily aft, and the damage was so severe that it was soon evident the venerable old ship would be lost. Captain Cooke got the bulk of his crew off to be pulled out of the heartless sea by the British cruisers. The destroyer squadron churned up the area looking for Captain Lancelot and Beveziers, but to no avail. All things considered, the French Navy would soon realize it had scored its first victory against its old nemesis since the days of Napoleon, when a French squadron in the Indian Ocean, under Guy-Victor Duperré achieved a victory over a British Royal Navy squadron commanded by Captain Samuel Pym in
August 1810.

Britain now concluded that it was facing a dangerous new foe with the French squadrons based at Casablanca and Dakar. This threat, and the shadow looming over the Rock of Gibraltar, now became the focus of the war. When First Sea Lord Dudley Pound learned of the setback, and the details of the battle were forwarded, he immediately began looking for a head to chop off.

The reinforcements Vichy France had sent to Dakar had played a prominent part in the battle. While the light cruisers *Georges Leygues*, and *Montcalm* were badly beaten, with the former sunk, three large destroyers that had joined Admiral Plancon’s task force had ended up causing considerable harm after finding their nerve. Pound insisted the ships should have been intercepted as they transited the straits of Gibraltar, and fixed blame for this failure on Admiral North, who was Somerville’s nominal commander at Gibraltar.

As to the conduct of the battle itself, there was much ballyhoo in the reports, and the actions of Christopher Wells were roundly praised. It was decided that his timely air strike had perhaps prevented the loss of the battleship *Resolution* as well. Wells had received no orders to mount his strike at that time, and did so on his own initiative. While Vice Admiral Cunningham received some criticism for his conduct of the battle, his head did not seem big enough to put on the chopping block. Instead the conduct of Wells was used as an example of proper initiative in time of dire threat, and became the whip the Admiralty used to flay Admiral North for failing to intercept the French reinforcements.

The word soon went forth from Whitehall: “Their Lordships cannot retain full confidence in an officer who fails in an emergency to take all prudent precautions without waiting for Admiralty instructions.” North was soon packing up his desk at Gibraltar, but before he could catch his plane home, other events of a much greater magnitude would overtake him.

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News of the French victory echoed in the halls of Berlin, and Hitler’s last reservations over adoption of Operation Felix were put aside. “The French put their battleships to good use,” he crowed as he signed the final orders.
Plans for the operation were then given the highest priority, and a meeting was convened with all the principle commanders to finalize matters. At that time, Admiral Raeder emphasized the importance of the Atlantic island outposts in the Azores, Cape Verdes and Canary Islands.

“These must be also considered as primary objectives,” he urged. “They should be one of our main blows against Britain.”

“And how do you propose we get the troops there, Raeder?” Hitler’s question was an obvious one. “You cannot even promise me command of the Denmark Strait! Must I go to the French for naval support in such an operation?”

Raeder reddened under the insult, though the truth behind it was the real sting. The French had just turned back a British operation aimed at Dakar. Might they not then provide the perfect covering force for the extended operations from Gibraltar to Spanish Morocco and the Atlantic Islands? He stiffened as he regarded the map on the conference room table, swallowing his pride and thinking strategically to give the best advice he could.

“What you say is obviously true, my Führer, but the French cannot conduct such an operation alone. The British have just suffered a humiliating defeat, and they will be keen to avenge it. I have little doubt that they are planning reprisals even as we speak. Certainly they will have their eyes on these Atlantic islands, even as we do. The seas around the Azores, for example, are a black hole. That region is too far away for them to provide air cover, and so it makes good hunting grounds for our U-boats. They will want to redress that.”

“Canaris?” Hitler looked at his intelligence chief now. “What do you know about this?”

“We have developed some information that the British have such operations planned. One is aimed at the Azores, under the code name “Accordion.” Another is aimed at the Cape Verde Islands under the code name “Sackbut.”

“Sackbut? What in the world is that?”

“I believe it refers to a musical instrument of the renaissance era, my Führer, a trombone.” Canaris pantomimed the instrument as he spoke. “The name literally means push-pull.”

“Yes? Well if the British have such operations planned then push may soon come to shove. I will direct the Luftwaffe to see to the possibility of air
lifting troops to these islands. Once they get there it will be Raeder’s responsibility to keep them supplied.”

“In this the French forces at Casablanca and Dakar will prove most useful,” said Raeder. “Once the first phase of the Gibraltar operation is concluded, and that port is secure, then we will see what we can develop in the way of naval support for this extended thrust to the islands. Once secured, they will prove invaluable to our U-boat operations and force the British convoys to traverse the deep Atlantic. This is an operation that could decide the war. I will therefore consider it a top priority that heavy units of the Kriegsmarine break out for deployment to this region. We are working round the clock to prepare adequate facilities at Brest and Saint Nazaire, and also to move enough anti-aircraft defense to those ports to protect them from inevitable attack by the R.A.F.”

At this Goering spoke up, his cheeks red, eyes alight, for here was finally an operation his Luftwaffe could undertake with every hope of success. “Now that the direct attack on Britain has proved to be more challenging than we expected, I will be able to relocate fighter assets to protect these ports and support our Mediterranean strategy. I can provide one fighter wing and two bomber wings. Our initial air raid will be launched from Bordeaux. While this is underway the other fighters will transfer to bases near Seville.”

“Yes?” said Hitler, his eyes dark and unfriendly. “I hope you put them to better use here, Goering. Do not think I believe those inflated statistics you have sent me on British losses over England. I have it on good authority that your air offensive has been a disaster! That said, I can perhaps believe what you say now. The British have very little in the way of fighter defenses to oppose Operation Felix.”

“No?” said Goering.

“Very well,” Hitler concluded. “With Gibraltar secure, we will continue the operation, occupy Spanish Morocco, and then immediately move troops by any means possible to the Western Sahara.”

“A preliminary appraisal of good basing areas has already been prepared,” said Goering. “Certainly we can gain access to the French bastions there at Casablanca and Dakar, and the Rio de Oro area south of the Canary Islands has been selected as good ground for an aerodrome.”

“What troops will be assigned to the operation?” Hitler looked at Keitel
now, representing OKW and the Army.

“My Führer, the Sturmdivision is now ready for action. The 98th Regiment of First Mountain Division will be commanded by General Hubert Lanz, and his men are hardened veterans from South Bavaria. They have been joined by Count von Schwerin’s motorized Infantry Regiment Grossdeutschland. The elite Brandenburgers will spearhead this attack on Gibraltar.”

“And what if the British land in Portugal?”

“Two mobile divisions will prevent that—the 16th Panzer and 16th Motorized.”

“And the islands under discussion?”

“Once Gibraltar is secured I have earmarked three infantry divisions for support and follow up. Goering has assured me he can move men by air if need be.”

“I have been collecting transport aircraft required,” said Goering. “The 22nd Luftland Air Landing Division performed admirably during the invasion of the Netherlands. They are the right men for the job. Infantry Regiment 16 of this division is ready for immediate transport to Spanish Morocco. It will be accompanied by the Division Reconnaissance Battalion, and Pioneer Battalion 22.”

“Reliable men,” said Keitel. “Once they are on the ground and the Royal Navy has been sent packing, then we can begin the follow up phase and move infantry to the African Coast. From there, we will be able to execute the planned operations against the Atlantic islands.

“And what is the planned start date?” Hitler tapped the table, an eagerness in his eyes now.

“September 16th,” said Goering.

“The sixteenth?” Raeder seemed surprised. “That is a full moon.”

“Of course,” Goering smiled. “My bombers need to see what they will be aiming at.”

“But the British will see your planes as well, Goering.”

The portly Air Marshall clucked, shaking his head. “Don’t worry, Raeder. There is only one small airfield at Gibraltar, with no fighters assigned. I will smash the place in three hours.”
Chapter 23

Admiral Tovey sat at his desk with the reports on Operation Menace, a blight of typewritten pages that became a litany of excuses and finger pointing. He shook his head, again realizing how unprepared Britain was for the task of launching offensive operations that relied on combined forces from the army and navy. The operation had been problematic from the start. There was confusion from the very first, on the docks at Liverpool when the stevedores reported they had not adequately planned for the stowage of all the equipment and supplies required by the land forces. Truckloads of equipment were wheeled in, stowed, yet without any proper accounting of what was going on each ship. Cargo vessels were stuffed to the gills when it was found that tonnage remained on the docks that had been allocated to ships that were too full to take on even one more crate… And on it went.

In typical British understatement that Tovey knew carried much more weight than it seemed on the surface, the Admiralty had noted that “the present organization for combined operations is not satisfactory.” If the German planners knew just how unsatisfactory Britain’s combined operations and sealift capabilities were in the late summer of 1940, they might have been even more assertive. It was not surprising then that early consideration of the Atlantic islands Raeder had been keen to occupy came to a lukewarm recommendation that they should not be occupied, unless it was believed that the enemy was about to do so.

The troops assigned to the failed Operation Menace were returned to Freetown, Sierra Leone, arriving there on the 20th of August, 1940, along with the Royal Navy covering force.

“Well Mister Brind, It appears that we are going to have to spread the butter a little thinner in the weeks ahead. With Barham gone and Resolution getting ready to limp home to Rosyth for repairs we’re no better off now than we were two months ago, even with the new battleships coming off trials and ready for duty.”

“That is regrettably true, sir,” said Brind.

“And look here—this late directive from the Admiralty expresses dissatisfaction that our Denmark Strait patrols are to be handed over to
untried elements of the Russian Navy—that is exactly what it says here.” He handed Brind the note. “Has anyone informed their Lordships that those untried elements were largely responsible for turning back the German Operation Valkyrie?”

Brind gave him a long look. “You’ve seen this Russian ship up close, Admiral. What do you think?”

Tovey raised an eyebrow. “A marvelous vessel, to be sure. The ship has weapons and technology aboard that would make you blush with embarrassment, Daddy.” Tovey knew he had to be very discrete here, as much as he might want to confide in Brind. For the moment, however, he had sent a quiet message to Alan Turing at BP instructing him to secure the contents of the *Geronimo* files, as they were now being called, and await further notice, and to say nothing whatsoever about any of it until he had heard directly from Tovey.

The Admiral knew he was now sailing in dangerous waters, concealing from his own government, and the Admiralty itself, the true nature of the Russian ship, and the evidence that had apparently already been gathered about it by the Navy… in another world, another time line! It was something he still struggled to admit to himself in his own mind, and he knew that he could not hope to ever breathe a word of what he knew to men like the First Sea Lord, Dudley Pound. Not knowing what to do about it, he opted for secrecy as the Russians had urged him, but there was a lonesome edge to that watch, like a man standing alone on the last wall, with the awful weight and responsibility for the fate of his nation now resting squarely on his shoulders.

“The Russians can hold their own in the Denmark Strait. I’m convinced of that, and will make every effort to convince the Admiralty as well. We’ll watch the passages east of Iceland, and see that Force H at Gibraltar has what it needs to get back up on its feet.”

“There was more in the basket than Cunningham took with him,” said Brind. “If *Rodney* and *Nelson* had been along, I wonder if the French would have been willing to lock horns with us.”

“Indeed, but they were well east covering that supply run out to Malta. I’m afraid that is an operation we will have to repeat time and again, and at some risk.”

“The Italians haven’t had much stomach for a fight,” said Brind.

“They may take heart after seeing what the French just accomplished,”
Tovey admonished. “Now… What to do with the forces allocated to Menace? *Resolution* will have to be brought home.”

“Of course, sir.” Brind was looking over the list of those ships. “*Cumberland* took a knock as well, sir. She’s missing a couple teeth with the loss of Y turret.”

“Then get her to Rosythe. We’ll leave *Australia* and *Delhi* at Freetown in her place. The other cruisers and the F-Class destroyers should return to Force H. What about the ground element? We’ve got a Royal Marine brigade and all of De Gaulle’s force at Freetown now.”

“Admiral Keyes seems ready to have another go,” said Brind, referring to the former Admiral of the Fleet Sir Roger Keyes, who had come out of retirement to take an appointment as the Director of Combined Operations—the man who had been responsible for the overall planning for Operation Menace.

“So he wants to take another swing, does he? Well he had best get his stumps, bails and creases in order when he draws up the field plan next time around.” Tovey was referring to the layout of a cricket field, thinking the whole operation was nothing more than a proverbial ‘sticky wicket,’ when the ball might take an unaccountable bounce on wet ground.

“The Prime Minister suggested a coup de main against Casablanca,” said Brind. “Keyes is all gung ho for the venture. I read the report this morning, sir. Here are his exact words.” Brind lifted a page from the pile on his desk and read: “If the enterprise is confided to us we will get on with it full blast. If I have the responsibility, you may be certain that it will be planned to the last detail, and you will not hear anything about difficulties, hazards, and potential dangers.”

Tovey smiled. “Confidence is one thing, Daddy, but reckless abandon quite another. We shall have to take the full measure of difficulties, hazards and potential dangers every step of the way now. We have no leeway for further mistakes.”

“Well Keyes says he has over 2500 first class men down at Freetown now, led by excellent officers spoiling to fight. De Gaulle is stuck there with his troops as well and the two forces won’t like sharing billets there for very long.”

“They need not worry on that account,” said Tovey. “I have no doubt the Germans will find work for them very soon. This talk of an operation against
Gibraltar freezes my blood. I’m going over to Bletchley Park to see about the intelligence personally, but in the meantime Force H is light two battleships. What can we possibly send them, Brind?”

“A good question, sir. The entire battlecruiser squadron is on crutches, and we won’t get Hood back until next year at this rate. Renown and Repulse are somewhat better off, but will still need long weeks in the shipyards.”

“So that leaves us with only Invincible, King George V and Prince of Wales here,” said Tovey. “Somerville will just have to get on with what he has: Valiant, Nelson and Rodney. As for Cunningham at Alexandria, he still has Malaya, Warspite and Queen Elizabeth. We’re stretched thinner now than ever, unless we pull Revenge and Ramillies off convoy escort duty, and I see no alternative to that now.”

“Agreed, sir. Shall I cut the orders?”

“Make it so.”

“Where to you want the old girls, Admiral?”

“Bring them home. If nothing else they can watch the waters east of the Faeroe Islands. That leaves us only the Iceland passage to worry about.” Tovey sighed, feeling very weary, but knowing he had yet another long flight to London ahead of him. “I’m off to Bletchley Park, and I shall meet up with fleet units by jumping a destroyer at Holyhead as usual.”

Tovey had every reason to be worried about Gibraltar. All through the Kingdom the grey heads were coming to the conclusion that the Rock was in a very precarious situation now. No formal announcement of Spanish cooperation with Germany had been made, but rumors were circulating at Whitehall, and bits and pieces of intelligence were beginning to paint a grim picture. German units were drilling on the Spanish Frontier, and undercover men in Spain had observed road clearing operations and repair work being done on bridges and causeways.

Churchill had been casting about for some remedy should the base be lost. Some had suggested an operation against Oran or Casablanca. Oran was discarded as being too vulnerable and with an unsuitable harbor. Casablanca was already considered, as Tovey knew, but was also deemed too vulnerable to enemy air attack, and requiring too much in the way of ground forces to defend against any concerted effort pushed down from Spanish Morocco. The Atlantic islands also glittered now as potential wergild should Spain turn her back on Britain. Could the islands be seized without creating a diplomatic...
mess with Portugal, or forcing Franco’s hand? Churchill expressed his attitude very simply one day, his pragmatic logic cutting through the problem easily enough.

“All my reflections about the danger of our ships lying under Spanish howitzers in Gibraltar leads me continually to the Azores,” he had written to Whitehall. “Must we always wait until a disaster has occurred? I do not think it follows that our occupation temporarily, and to forestall the enemy use of the Azores, would necessarily precipitate German intervention. Moreover, once we have an alternative base to Gibraltar, how much do we care whether the Peninsula is overrun or not? I am increasingly attracted by the idea of simply taking the Azores one fine morning out of the blue, and explaining everything to Portugal after.”

When Tovey arrived in London the following day, a plan to do exactly what Churchill was proposing materialized out of the blue and landed in his briefcase. It had been in the works for some time under the code name “Accordion,” but for security reasons it had recently been renamed “Alloy.” Three battalions under Brigadier General Morford had been detailed to seize the Azores, and another two battalions under Brigadier General Campbell would occupy the Cape Verde Islands under code name “Shrapnel.”

As for the valuable Canary Islands, they were seen as a possible prime target of the enemy, and also as the island group that might offer Britain the most easily defended port facilities should they lose Gibraltar. A plan was also mounted here under the codename “Chutney,” but it was soon changed to “Puma,” and Churchill commented that “one wanted the biggest possible cat to catch a canary.”

Tovey would now find out exactly how the cricket field he would have to play upon might soon look. Planners for these operations, most notably Admiral Sir Roger Keyes, were eager to begin. “Procrastination is the thief of time,” said Keyes, “and time is half a victory, which, being lost, is irrevocable.” Tovey was presented with a list of merchant ships, oilers and troop liners available, and asked to provide two aircraft carriers, two battleships, two heavy cruisers and at least eighteen destroyers.

He took the news like a bleeding man being asked to donate blood, but in the end he agreed that *Ramillies* and *Revenge* could be pulled off convoy duty as he had already decided. He could either assign *Ark Royal* and *Illustrious* to the operation, or bring *Furious* out of her berth at the Clyde, and pull the
enterprising Captain Wells and HMS *Glorious* from their present duty. In the end this was what he decided to do, still wanting carriers available for the watch on northern seas. Admiral Pound agreed, and Tovey was off to Bletchley Park, his briefcase just a little fatter with these reports and plans, and his resources just a little thinner.

It wasn’t until his car pulled up at the estate, and he saw Alan Turing fiddling with his bicycle gears, that he allowed himself to smile. This time he was the one about to spring the big news on the intelligence master. Let’s see if Turing can decipher this business about the Russian ship when I tell him what I know now, thought Tovey.

“Good to see you again, Admiral, though I wish the news in the intelligence circuits wasn’t so gloomy.”

“I can certainly agree with that,” said Tovey. “Anything more on the German buildup in Southern France?”

“We’re getting some bits and pieces decoded. The two motorized divisions we’ve identified are now on standby notice, and this might interest you, sir, the Germans have moved one of their big ships from the eastern Baltic to Kiel.”

“The *Hindenburg*?”

“I’m afraid so. The ship has apparently just completed trials. We’ve decoded an order indicating the Germans are bringing their fleet to a higher level of readiness again. *Graf Zeppelin* has moved to an anchorage off Oslo, and a few of their newer ships were assigned to that task force.”

“Is the Admiralty aware of this?”

“They will be shortly, sir. I believe the dispatches went out this morning, but you have it right from the horse’s mouth now.” Turing smiled.

“I must say it’s the last thing I’d care to hear about. I’ve just come from a meeting with Admirals Pound and Keyes. They seem to be intent on teeing up an operation against the Atlantic islands. It’s all this worry over Franco, Spanish neutrality and Gibraltar.”

“Those worries may be well founded, sir.” Turing had no comfort for Tovey this day. “We have now identified the code word for a planned German attack against Gibraltar as Operation Felix.”

“Any indication as to timing?”

“We’re watching, but the general consensus is that they might not go forward with such a plan until the next favorable moon. That could be any
day now, as the moon is waning and will be dark on the 31st. If nothing
develops, then the next window would be September 30th to October 3.”

“Let us hope nothing does develop in the short run,” said Tovey. “We’re
playing for as much time as we can get now, what with so many ships laid up
for repairs.”

“I saw the reports on Operation Menace, sir. Not very encouraging.”

“Indeed, well they’ve just handed me another briefcase full of the same
sort. Coincidentally, those plans call for operations during that same period,
September 30th as the moon wanes to black. You never heard that from me,
Mister Turing.”

“Of course, sir.”

Tovey seemed to linger on an inner thought for a moment. Then he fixed
Turing with a steady eye. “What I am now about to discuss will fall firmly
within that same category. In fact, you will be the first and only person privy
to the matter.”

Turing raised an eyebrow, proud to be so trusted, but also realizing what
this must be about. “I assume it pertains to the envelope you asked me to
send?”

Tovey smiled.
Chapter 24

“It does indeed,” said Tovey. “I shared those photographs with the Russians in a very private meeting recently, and I must tell you that they were as flummoxed as we both were over the matter. Yet that was only half of it. They pointedly admitted that the photographs were authentic.”

The interval of silence harbored something quite profound, yet both men now seemed to know that they were of the same mind. “Mister Turing,” said Tovey. “You made a telling point when I last left you, suggesting that no one could have anticipated or predicted the events depicted in those photographs, and that it would therefore be a complete waste of time for us to consider the documents you uncovered were part of some deliberate deception. It would be nonsensical.”

“Agreed, sir.”

“Well, this is precisely what the Russians believed, and more, their Admiral indicated that those photographs depicted events that he personally lived through!”

“Yet those dates are in the future,” said Turing.

“Quite so, and this was leading to a very alarming conclusion.”

It was that overwhelming question that he had run through his mind on the verse of T.S. Eliot.…. Oh, do not ask what is it, let us go and make our visit. This brought him to the tour of the Russian ship.

“At that point the Russians invited me to visit their ship, and what I will now tell you must be held at the highest level of secrecy. No one else will know it, and I mean no one—not the Admiralty, not even the Prime Minister…. The real thunder comes now, Mister Turing. I was told that the photographs are authentic, and when I discretely pointed out the obvious misdating on the labels, I was told those dates were also accurate.” He let that stand, scratching his nose uncomfortably, but Turing simply nodded.

“You do not seemed surprised to hear that,” said Tovey.

“Oh, I find it earthshaking, but I suppose I’ve had a good long while to consider the matter. This echoes the very same logic I applied to the situation when I first uncovered those files. If they were all fabrications, that led to one mystery, as to why anyone would be producing such material. If, however,
they were authentic, dates and all, then we had hold of another cat by the tail, and a rather ferocious one."

“Well I think it may have sunk its claws into the both of us,” said Tovey. “The question now is how could this be possible? That was, of course, what the Russians asked. They were very disturbed by those photographs. One, in particular, was supposedly taken just after this Admiral Volsky and I had concluded a meeting—the very same meeting referenced in those reports you found in that box. Yet it was the date and time of the meeting that was truly astounding. The man claimed it occurred on August 17, 1942.”

“Indeed…”

“Do you take that with a grain of salt or are you inclined to believe such a statement?”

This was the heart of it, and Turing could see that Tovey was obviously leading him to the front door on something here, so he leapt ahead and rang the bell.

“Admiral, as impossible as it may sound, I must tell you that I am willing to take this Russian Admiral at his word. Because I have already worked out the only possible explanation for all of this, and I think you are about to confirm my own judgment on the matter.”

“Is that so?”

“Yes sir. You see, for any of this to be true, the photographs, the reports, the testimony of these Russian officers, one fact, and one fact only must also be true, and that is that these men, and their ship, have come from another time—a future time. It’s the only way this Russian Admiral could claim he met with you in 1942. Yes?”

Tovey smiled. “You have it exactly,” and he seemed very relieved, taking a deep breath and exhaling slowly. “Now then… As to this ship I was invited to tour, that was the icing on this little cake we’ve had in the oven. You will be amazed at what I tell you next. I was shown things on that ship that boggle the mind. I understand that you have designed some unusual equipment here to aid in your decryption effort.”

“Yes, we’ve developed what you might call an analog computer of sorts. That is, in fact, what the German Enigma machine is. I’ve spent some time thinking in that direction.”

“Your Universal Turing Machine?” Tovey smiled.

“You know about it?”
“I read your paper on it shortly after we met. Very interesting work, Mister Turing. Well now… and I mean no disrespect here, but it seems the Russians have taken your work to heart. I was shown devices on that ship that make all our computing machines look ridiculous. They use electronic machines to control every aspect of their operations—navigation, radars, fire control for their weapons, communications—all of it. While I cannot say I am up to speed on all our latest technologies, I knew enough to realize I was seeing things that were entirely beyond our present capabilities, things that would take us decades to develop on our own. Well, these Russians told me flat out they had come from the year 2021, a statement any man alive today would dismiss as pure malarkey. Stating the impossible, is one thing. I suppose any man capable of telling a straight faced lie could do so, and I’ve heard more than my fair share of tall tales over the years. But seeing these devices, these incredible machines they have on that ship, well, it was very convincing. In fact, assuming this ship had come from some unseen future was the only thing that made sense.”

“I can only imagine,” said Turing. “Perhaps you might arrange a little tour of that ship for me as well. I would be most interested to see what you are describing here.”

“I have no doubt. It was all quite a revelation—truly life changing. Ever since that ship turned up off Cape Farewell I have been haunted by the feeling that I knew what it was, and now these men have confirmed that was so. Do you recall what you said to me at our last meeting, that one of the envelopes in that box revealed who the culprits were behind those photos and reports?”

“Envelope nine,” said Turing quietly.

“Yes, well these men confirmed that as well. It was you and I, Turing. We were the ones who gathered that material together and stowed it away, and it was all very hush hush. These men lived through those years, and everything in that box is a testament to that fact. The only question they had for me was how we possibly came by that material, here, in 1940, and well before any of those events happened.”

“That is certainly something quite frightening when I think about it,” said Turing. “It is a real anomaly of the first order.”

“The Russians thought the same thing.”

“And I suppose they immediately wondered how that material could be in
our possession, sir.”

“They did indeed. Have you given that any thought?”

“A good deal of thought,” said Turing. “This may sound odd, but I have a favorite watch. Why, it’s right here in my pocket, but a month or so ago it vanished. Of course I simply thought I had misplaced it, and looked everywhere as one might, but it was nowhere to be found. Then, as I was shuffling through that box to select the photographs you asked me to deliver, there it was.”

“Your watch?”

“Precisely!”

“In that box? Are you sure you didn’t leave it there by chance?”

“I’m quite certain that was not the case. It was like a missing tooth, and quite gone, until that very day when you were last here. Yet how could it have hopped out of my pocket and into that box—a box sealed off with thick masking tape, and buried under so much dust that it looked like it had sat there undisturbed for… well, for decades?”

“Quite strange,” said Tovey.

“Eerily so! An anomaly. That’s what I have come to call it. I’m a very meticulous man, Admiral. Some say I can be a bit absent minded at times, but they have no idea what is actually going on inside this noggin of mine. When I set my mind to solving a problem, it becomes all consuming for me. So you will please believe me when I say that I was able to work out the very last day when I could recall having possession of this watch, as I remember using the stop-watch feature to time the revolutions on my bicycle and plot out the mean time between incidents of gear failure—the chain tends to slip after a good ride, and that was the day I rode into town to do a bit of shopping. I even found the receipt from the store, and so the date is quite certain.”

“I see,” said Tovey, not exactly following what Turing was leading up to here.

“Yes, I worked it all out, then noted the date on the receipt. The 12th of June, sir. That was the day my watch went missing, and I cannot recall laying eyes on it again until I found it by complete chance in that file box.”

“The 12th of June?” Tovey found himself searching his recollection for anything significant that he could hang on that date, but it was all a blur. Thankfully Turing had more clarity.

“Yes, sir. That was the very day in June when we first receive the reports
from HX-49 regarding that ship.” Turing raised his eyebrows, waiting for a reaction to register on the Admiral’s face.

“You mean to say you believe the appearance of that ship had something to do with… Forgive me, Mister Turing, but I’m not quite sure I follow you.”

“I’m not certain of it, Admiral, but facts are stubborn things. Isn’t that what the American statesman John Adams asserted? Yes, stubborn things indeed. All I know now is that my watch vanished the very same day that ship appeared, and it ended up in that box—the box named for that very ship—the Geronimo file.”

Now Tovey nodded, suddenly intrigued by Turing’s deduction.

“Very astute reasoning,” he said. Might it be mere happenstance?”

“Possibly, but the coincidence is somewhat unnerving.”

“And what do you conclude from this?”

“A possible answer as to how that box can now exist here—in 1940, and contain evidence of things that have not yet transpired.”

“Things that might never transpire,” Tovey put in. “The Russians were of that mind. Those photographs clearly depicted our relationship as adversarial, and the Russian Admiral confirmed that. The report you gave me of a meeting on Las Palomas Island was supposedly arranged to work out a truce. Yet now, with their appearance here in our time, they believe that none of those events will occur.”

“Quite amazing,” said Turing. “Well I find it very odd that my watch should turn up in that box… as if I had put it there myself and forgotten about it, but I assure you, that is not the case, at least not in this year. In fact, I’ve rummaged about in that archive many times, and I have never stumbled across this file box before. That in itself proves nothing, but I am beginning to suspect that box turned up on that very same day, dust, cobwebs, and all.”

“What? On June 12th?”

Turing nodded in the affirmative.

“Well that would be quite a little mystery, wouldn’t it? Yet I suppose no more astounding than what we have already learned. But why, Turing? Why would your watch suddenly go missing like that?”

“It’s really quite simple, Admiral. Assuming the material in that box does indeed come from a future time, then I must assume that everything I found their did so as well.” He gave Tovey a knowing look.

“You mean your watch as well?”
“Exactly. It is already apparent that I was instrumental in gathering all that material, so I can only suppose that I must have deliberately placed my watch in that box. Assuming that, this is my theory. That box, and everything in it, is a remnant from that future time, the time this Russian Admiral claimed he lived through. When that ship appeared here, it must have dragged that remnant along in its wake. Don’t ask me how or why this is so, but it is what I have come to deduce. Time was making a little delivery, and all was in order except one item—my watch. You see, nothing in that box existed here at the moment it might have appeared—except my watch! That item could not come to this time from the future as it already existed here, and that would be quite a little paradox. And so, to resolve the matter, one of the variables had to be cancelled out. My watch goes missing in the here and now, and then mysteriously turns up in that box!” Turing smiled, folding his arms with a satisfied look on his face, as if he had just completed a perfectly sound mathematical proof.

“Rather astounding,” said Tovey. “Well… Not to dispute your theory, Turing, but the Russians suggested something else.”

“Oh?”

“Yes. The Russian Admiral seemed to rely a great deal on his young Captain to try and sort things out. The man seemed very sharp. The two of you should meet one day. That aside, this man Fedorov suggested that the only possible explanation as to how those photographs could exist would be if they were brought here by someone.”

“Brought here? By who?”

“Therein lies the rub,” said Tovey. “The Russian Admiral hinted they knew of other men who had traveled in time. He called them dark angels, and said there are dangerous men at large in this world—possibly from the future. We shall have to keep a sharp watch, and possibly put your machines to work on that little mystery. Yes?”

Turing nodded gravely. “Even so, Admiral, my theory still remains viable. No one could bring an object from the future if it already existed here. That would be very inconvenient. How could the second watch be accounted for? Something would have to happen to one watch or another. The watch from the future would have to be left behind, or in this case I think Time found a more elegant solution—the watch that existed here was simply moved.”
“Most alarming, Mister Turing. All of this gives me the shivers, and the worst of it is this…. If these men have come from the future, then they have knowledge that can be decisive to the outcome of this war. They must know how it all turned out, and of course I asked this question. The answer I received was equally disturbing. They told me that events they have observed here are out of order. Things are happening that never occurred in the history they know—my flagship being a perfect example. I was told it never existed in the world these men came from, and that was the least of it. They said their homeland was not divided in civil war as it remains today. It was one unified Soviet state.”

“Remarkable,” said Turing.

“Sadly, these men have come to believe that it was their earlier intervention, the events documented in that box, that may have been responsible for these changes.”

“Is that why they have come here, sir? To set matters right?”

“No, Mister Turing, they told me they tried to re-set the table, but the china is so badly broken that it came to no avail. In fact, they told me their movement in time was unintentional, quite by accident—something to do with a mishap in their ship’s propulsion system.”

“Amazing,” Turing was riveted by all of this. “Yet they seem to have bounced about a good deal, sir. The Geronimo file documents their movement from 1941 through 1942, and now they are here. Did you ask about that?”

“There were a thousand questions in my mind,” said Tovey, “Each one crowded out the last, and there was too little time for answers. I did press gently on the matter of the outcome of this war, and though they seemed reluctant to disclose information on that, I was given to hope that things might take a turn for the better.”

“Possibly,” said Turing. “They may hope as much, even as we do. But it could be that they now realize what I have already concluded.”

“And what is that?”

“If what you say is true, and events here have been altered because of this ship, then they may not really know how things resolve.”

Tovey nodded. “They did say something to that effect. The Russian Admiral told me he had already seen one possible outcome of all this, and it was rather bleak and foreboding. He said this war would not be the last, and
that was a rather difficult thing to hear. Then he said the only way we will know how it all turns out is to live it all through, one day at a time.”

“I see….” Turing seemed very thoughtful now. “Well Admiral, we seem to be marked men, you and I. Our initials and fingerprints are all over that box, and just as you say you have been haunted by the feeling you knew all of this, I have felt the very same way. It could be that more than my pocket watch was shuffled about when that ship appeared here on the 12th of June. Our lives seem to have been changed as well. How very strange it feels. One fine morning you simply wake up a different man, with memories in your head you take to be dreams and mere imagination—but they are not dreams. No. They are real, as all of this is real—that box, that ship, *Geronimo*. Things have changed, Admiral. You feel it, I feel it and know it to be so. It isn’t just our own fate I speak of now. The whole world is caught up in the maelstrom, and you and I, well we are standing right in the eye of the storm.”
Part IX

Fimbulwinter

“When clouds appear, wise men put on their cloaks;
When great leaves fall, the winter is at hand;
When the sun sets, who doth not look for night?”

—William Shakespeare: Richard III, 2.3
Chapter 25

*Kirov* was out to sea, cruising in the Denmark Strait after setting up the Ice Watch with an *Oko* panel radar team at Hornsrandir, the northernmost cape of Iceland in the Westfjord region. Fedorov coordinated the mission, seeing to security and the movement of adequate supplies to the outpost. The Americans will have a similar outpost here in the future, he thought as he finished up and returned to the ship on the KA-40. Yet the moment he was back aboard *Kirov* his mind returned to the impossible news he had received. Troyak had succeeded! His Marines got through to Ilanskiy and demolished that back stairway—but how? How was that possible given what Kamenski had told him?

He recalled his words from their earlier conversation, the discussion that was so daunting that it had prompted Admiral Volsky to take a sip from his vodka flask.

“*Don’t hold your breath, Mister Fedorov,*” Kamenski had said quietly, as he took another long slow drag on his pipe.

“*Sir?*”

“Well… *If your Sergeant Troyak destroys that railway inn in 1940, then how in the world did you go down those steps in 1942, to eventually end up here and get the idea for this little mission? For that matter, how did Volkov go down those stairs in 2021?*”

But he did it! Kamenski was wrong. Troyak had reported mission accomplished. To put it more bluntly, he radioed that he had blown that stairway to hell. That sent Fedorov off to the bridge to check their present situation and see if there was any unusual news on the airwaves. Were things still the same? Out here on the sea, isolated in the ice fog of the Denmark Strait, they would have seen nothing if it changed.

The first thing he checked on were the two British cruisers Admiral Tovey had assigned to this watch, placing them directly under Admiral Volsky’s command. He soon learned that they were still there, *Sheffield* and *Southampton*, on what they believed were forward radar picket duties. Shiny Sheff, as the *Sheffield* was called, had been one of the first British ships fitted with the Type 79Y early warning radar, effective out to about 50 kilometers.
The two cruisers were still there, right on station as Kirov’s own radar had them. So nothing must have changed, thought Fedorov. Nikolin also confirmed that news of the Orenburg Federation was again on the wires, with renewed fighting reported at the Siberian city of Omsk. Apparently the “Omsk Accord” as it had been called earlier, had fallen apart. So if Orenburg remained, and the civil war continued, then Volkov must have taken his trip down those stairs. Sergei Kirov’s name was also prominent in the news items that continued to follow the treaty now being signed with England.

Fedorov now wondered if he had been wrong about the importance of those stairs. What had happened? How could the history here remain inviolate? Were the changes so subtle that they had not yet been noticed? He could not help but think that Troyak’s mission had created some great contradiction, and was again dogged by the feeling that it would be his fault if it did. Kamenski’s voice returned again.

“Yes, the edge of paradox is a very dangerous precipice to hike along. We must be very careful here. I cannot say how that problem might resolve itself, Mister Fedorov, but something tells me that time would find a way. Yes. Mother Time does not wish to have her skirts ruffled any more than necessary. She would find a way.”

Time must have found a way, thought Fedorov. But how? If Sergei Kirov was still safely alive and in power in the Soviet Union, then he must have used that stairway as before, and in 1942. If Ivan Volkov was alive now then he must have also used it safely in 2021.

Then the answer struck him like a wet fish in the face, so obviously simple that he was surprised he had not considered it earlier. Troyak may have just destroyed the stairway, but he obviously did not destroy the time rift itself! So the only solution to his problem was that someone must have rebuilt those stairs. Could this be done?

This had to be the answer. The inn was restored, sometime between this moment and that date in 1942 when he first discovered the rift. Then the darker implications of what he had concluded struck him. Was the restoration done by someone who knew what they were about—someone who knew that rift in time existed? If so, who might that person be? He realized that any number of people might have inadvertently gone up or down those stairs, and now he wondered if that inn had a history of these events, the people who may have boarded there and unwittingly stumbled through that rift as he did.
Some may have returned to their correct time, even as Fedorov returned when he retreated back up those stairs. Yet others may have been trapped in some other time, like Volkov.

Then he realized that there was a record of everyone who had ever boarded at that inn—the guest register! Boarders would sign in on a routine basis, and there might also be billing records. Did the innkeepers know about the strange effects on that stairway? Could they be the ones behind this restoration, or was it someone else?

That thought led him to one dark name that might be on the list of possible suspects, and one of the primary reasons he sent Troyak on that mission in the first place—Vladimir Karpov. The threat that stairway represented may have only been temporarily forestalled by Troyak’s mission. Yet there might be no way he would ever know who rebuilt the inn, or when they might do this, which would make any future operation difficult to plan.

Yes, Mother Time had found a way, and he could at least know that he was not responsible for creating another insoluble paradox with his mission plan. That thought gave him little solace.

“Admiral on the bridge!”

Fedorov turned to see that Volsky had returned to take up his post after a long eight hour shift below decks.

“Good day, sir,” he said, but Volsky took one look at his face and knew something was wrong.

“You do not look so happy today, Mister Fedorov. Is something troubling you?”

“No sir… I was just thinking how we will recover the mission team.” Fedorov did not want to burden the Admiral again with more talk of paradox and time theory that neither of them really understood in the first place.

“Ah,” said Volsky. “I have sent a message to Admiral Golovko on this while you were busy setting up the Ice Watch team. The Narva has safely returned to Murmansk, refueled, and is already on its way to rendezvous with us here. Along the way they can reconnoiter to see if the Germans are up to anything.”

“A very good idea, sir.”

“Yes, and how was the deployment of the Oko panel? Any problems?”

“No sir. We laid in a month’s supply of food, fuel and other items for the six man team there. They are on-line now and feeding data to our main radar
display. Contacts will display on our navigation board in blue.”

“Is there adequate security? We must not allow this technology to fall into the wrong hands, which is why I hesitated to release it to the British unless necessary.”

“The Ice Watch is very isolated, sir, and the team would certainly see anything coming by air or sea in time to warn us. I’ve also given some thought to the risk of sharing technology. Perhaps we were too paranoid earlier with the fear that nothing must ever fall into enemy hands.”

“Oh? Why do you say this, Fedorov?”

“Well sir, there is simply no way any of our technology could be reverse engineered in this era. Think about it for a moment. Take the Oko panel radar set, for example. It uses a powerful 6m² radar antenna with 360° azimuthal coverage. The processing power in a single unit exceeds that of all computational devices that will be made on planet earth through the 1980s! It has integrated micro-circuitry, millions of transistors, and wafer thin digital circuits, exotic materials and other components that no power on earth could even begin to duplicate until the 1990s. The technology could be used by men from this era trained to do so, but there is no conceivable way it could ever be reverse engineered or duplicated. In many ways the same can be said of our missile technology. Our engineers could certainly improve existing models of rocketry here, but face it, you could gather the very best of the missile scientists of this era into one project, and they could not reproduce a functioning Moskit-II if they worked round the clock for ten years! It simply requires advances in too many technological areas. Our computer technology is quantum leaps above anything of this era, and it is an essential integrated component in all of our systems. Computers handle all radar and infrared detection, inertial navigation, guidance and targeting. Without them the missile is just a very efficient and deadly unguided bomb, and no power on earth could ever duplicate our computers in this era. It simply could not be done.”

“Now that you explain it this way, I must agree with you. In fact, one day the shoe may be on the other foot and we may wish these people could manufacture just a little more 30mm ammunition for our AR-62 close in defense guns.”

“That might be possible, but all our missiles and munitions benefit from decades of advanced metallurgy. We might get a 30mm round from them that
we could fire, but certainly not with the performance of our own munitions.”

“Which is why we must be very stingy about using them,” Volsky admonished, though he knew Fedorov would be the last to use unwarranted force in battle.”

Nikolin interrupted them, saying he was receiving a radio message from Operations Chief Orlov on the Airship Narva. In the next few minutes they learned that the Germans had finally stirred again from their cold northern outposts on the Norwegian coast. The Narva was flying high, and could not recognize exactly what they were seeing, but they had spotted two large ships out from Narvik and on a course that might take them very near the Island of Jan Mayen.

“There’s one more thing, sir,” said Nikolin. “I’ve been monitoring long range signals traffic and pattern filtering. The volume has taken a sudden increase, and when I listened in I discovered those letter sets again.”

“Letter sets?”

“Yes sir. A stream of letters in sets of five, and quite a bit of that now.”

“Do you have any of it?”

“I printed out this latest message, but there’s a good deal more.” Nikolin handed Fedorov the message, and he noted the telltale letter sets that indicated this was a special message being sent in the German Naval Enigma code. NVXCO TYQUY BTURS OVWPD VPVKZ UPZGH, and on it went. Fedorov wasted no time getting to his pad device with the Enigma decoding application. Using that day’s date, he soon established that his rotor position should be set at IV-V-III, with a rotor start position KXU and the rings set at VQG. Ten letter pairs were also set on the plugboard, and when he decoded the message he soon had his answer. It read: ‘Activate Plan Fimbulwinter, Stage I, with Alfargruppe, effective immediately. Fleet commander to execute Stage II, with Jötnargruppe, at his discretion. Plan Felix to follow.” The Admiral was watching him closely, noting his intense concentration with some admiration.

“Trouble, Mister Fedorov?”

“What else? These are fleet movement orders, Admiral. These words here are ship units being ordered to sea—a major fleet movement, sir. The shocking thing about it is that there are only two ships on that list which might have been active at this time in the war, Scharnhorst and Bismarck. Unless they are code names, there are others listed that I’ve never even heard
of. They must be code for something else, because the Germans could not possibly have this many ships operational in 1940.”

“I suppose we should not be surprised, Fedorov. Admiral Tovey has a new ship. Yes? So the Germans may have been busy in the shipyards as well.”

“Indeed sir. But it’s this last word here that I’m worried about.” He pointed to his application screen. “Felix.”

“A new German battleship?”

“No sir. The battleships on the list are Bismarck and Hindenburg, more than enough to worry about. But this last word comes later, after a series of movement orders. It refers to an operation name—Operation Felix. That was the German plan to attack Gibraltar! But it never happened in the real war.”

“The real war, Mister Fedorov? This one isn’t convincing enough for you?”

Fedorov forced a smile at that. “This would indicate a major point of divergence, sir. At this time the Germans had three options for prosecuting the war. One was to strike directly at Great Britain with Operation Seelöwe. That plan was discarded when Goering failed to break the R.A.F. and secure airspace over the Channel. The second option was to open hostilities against Soviet Russia with Operation Barbarossa, but that did not happen until 1941. The third was to pursue a Mediterranean strategy, striking indirectly at Britain by driving a wedge right through the heart of her empire. Remember our discussion when we were down there, Admiral?”

“How could I forget it? I still get headaches from that fall I took.”

“Yes, well there are three places Britain needs to hold to have any chance of prevailing in the Mediterranean and eventually knocking Italy out of the war. Suez in Egypt is the heart of their operation in the east, Malta is the lynchpin in the center, and Gibraltar the key outpost in the west. It’s the gateway to all future offensive plans there—Operation Torch, the landings in North Africa, the Tunisian campaign and invasion of Sicily and Italy—these all depend on Gibraltar standing as a viable British base of operations. Up until now the war in the West has followed a fairly familiar course. The campaigns in France and Norway have turned out much as they did in our history. But if Gibraltar falls we could be looking at a radical change in the entire course of the war. It would have to mean that Spain is either invaded by Germany or that it becomes an active belligerent against England. If this is
so the Germans will have access to ports from Tromso to Gibraltar.”

“These German ships plan to sail all that distance? That does not make good sense to me.”

“Agreed. But I don’t think that is their objective. These orders simply indicate the Germans are planning to put battlegroups out into the Atlantic. Operation Felix would be undertaken by the army, but a sudden sortie by the Kriegsmarine like this would certainly strain British resources. It would mean Admiral Tovey could not send reinforcements to Force H at Gibraltar.”

“That at least makes sense. Does it say where the Germans are planning to break out?”

“No specific locations are mentioned, but there are references to rendezvous points. The names for battlegroups appear to be Jötnar and Alfar. I looked those up. They refer to giants and elves in Norse mythology. And the whole operation is being called Fimbulwinter.”

“Codes within codes.”

“It appears so, sir, but I do not have to think too hard to interpret this. Fimbulwinter was the name of a harsh north wind that comes before the end of the world. Jötnargruppe would probably be the heavy battleships, Alfargruppe the lighter supporting ships.”

“I see…” Volsky pursed his lips, considering all this. “A cold wind blowing from the north…. We had best pass all this on to the British, Mister Fedorov.”

“With your permission, I will have Nikolin send a report to Sheffield, and they can transmit to the Admiralty on their normal channels.”

“Agreed,” said Volsky. “And we should notify the Ice Watch that the weather in the Denmark Strait may be taking a turn for the worse. They may soon be picking up this contact the Narva spotted. In the meantime, let us steer to the southern end of the Denmark Strait. We may have unexpected guests for dinner, though I do not think they will like what we have on the menu. If the Germans bother my watch, I’ll be serving up missiles in short order.”
Chapter 26

More than one dinner was going to be bothered by uninvited guests that night. Phones jangled in the Admiralty, and alarms leapt over the wires from Whitehall to Scapa Flow. The British already had wind of the operation, the first rising swells of a cold north wind. There was movement in the Norwegian Sea, and reports of much activity on the waterfront and berthings at Kiel. The berth for Germany’s formidable new battleship Hindenburg was reported to be empty from the latest R.A.F. overflight. The Bismarck was also missing, and presumed to be on the move north. Giants were on the loose again, and British Sunderlands took off, flying north of Dogger Bank to scour the sea even though sighting was hampered by thick clouds and fog. The Germans had deliberately chosen this weather as the perfect cover for their operation.

One Sunderland pressed on north towards Kristiansand and got into trouble when a pair of Me-109s found it and riddled the plane with gunfire. The signalman got off a plaintive S.O.S. before he went down into the sea for a forced water landing.

High above, Oberleutnant Marco Ritter banked his Me-109 and came around with a grin.

“Somebody is getting curious!” he said over his short range radio to his wing mate.

“And someone else gets credit for another kill,” came the return.

“Not for me, Heinrich,” said Ritter. “I don’t count fat seaplanes. If you want it you can chalk it up on your account. I’m just counting British fighters.”

Ritter was flying top cover again for the Graf Zeppelin, operating now to clear the airspace around the carrier and its escorts as the ship waited the arrival of her principle battle units, Bismarck and its big brother, the new flagship of the German fleet, the Hindenburg. Admiral Raeder’s heavy chess pieces were on the move. Their mission was to first link up with the carrier, then move at high speed up to Bergen. From there they were to continue north into the Norwegian Sea, eventually turning west towards Iceland.

The two ships that had been reported by the Narva west of Narvik were the battlecruiser Scharnhorst and the heavy cruiser Admiral Hipper, a bishop
and a knight taking up their posts south of Jan Mayen. Kurt Hoffmann led Alfargruppe, and its mission was to demonstrate towards the Denmark Strait in advance of the main breakout attempt by the heavier battlegroup, Jötnargruppe under Admiral Lütjens. It was Raeder’s shadow play, as he called it. With a big operation slated to begin soon in the Mediterranean, he wanted to draw the British Admiralty’s eye north to the cold Norwegian Sea, and thereby prevent any further reinforcement of Force H.

The Kriegsmarine had licked its wounds over the last several months, refueling and repairing ships damaged in the abortive Operation Valkyrie. Of the bigger ships, only Gneisenau was still in the docks, but the Bismarck and Tirpitz were ready for operations again, though the latter was being held in reserve at Bremen. The second aircraft carrier, Peter Strasser, was not yet operational as hoped, and it would be another six months fitting out and running through trials in the Baltic. Graf Zeppelin was therefore out on her second major operation of the war, and Marco Ritter and Hans Rudel, both survivors of the first engagement, were out for blood again.

While both of the older pocket battleships Deutschland and Admiral Scheer were also still under repair, they had been replaced in the order of battle with the addition of two faster new Panzerschiffe class units, the Rhineland and Westfalen, and another even faster new design, the battlecruiser Kaiser, was included in this operational plan. There was one more surprising ship in the flotilla, steaming twenty kilometers to the east in the heavy fog, a secret new addition to the Kriegsmarine that Raeder was now adding to his active ship list, the Goeben. Marco Ritter had a special assignment involving that ship, but it was one he kept under his hat, saying nothing to any of his wing mates until the moment was at hand.

These were the names Fedorov had decoded with his Enigma application, all assigned to a new operations It was dubbed “Operation Fimbulwinter,” a cold north wind to chill the frayed nerves of the Royal Navy on the eve of an even bigger operation planned to the south. Admiral Raeder would show the British his cards, let them see his Ace, King and Queen, and in so doing put as much pressure as he could on the already overburdened Home Fleet.

The movement of his ships would coincide with yet another sortie by the French Force de Raid from their Atlantic African ports. The long month since the action off Dakar had allowed them to make repairs, though their fuel situation was not good, and stores were running down at Casablanca. Yet
they had enough to join in the operation now being planned, a strong wind from the south as well. The battleship Normandie would be joined by Jean Bart, two cruisers and four destroyers, again in a feint towards Gibraltar with the aim of keeping Force H well occupied for the real thunder yet to come with Operation Felix. 

Now the cold north wind began to blow across the tall battlements of Germany’s newest and most powerful battleship, the Hindenburg. First conceived nearly a decade past, the ship was laid down in late 1935, the first of six planned ships authorized by Hitler in his fateful meeting with Raeder in January of 1936. Hitler first proposed that ships H and J be named after two relatively obscure figures from German history, Ulrich von Hutton and Gotz von Berlichingen. The former was a scholar, poet and leader of Imperial Knights, the latter an iron fisted mercenary who was known as Gotz of the iron hand, literally because he wore prosthetic metal forearm, complete with moveable thumb and five fingers that could be fashioned into an armored fist. 

Raeder eventually suggested the name Hindenburg would be more closely associated with the modern era as Germany rose from the humiliation of WWI. Hindenburg was the symbolic heart of Germany’s new rise to power and Brandenburg the province surrounding Berlin itself, the heart of the nation. Hitler fretted over the dark possibility that either ship might be sunk. “That name is associated with disaster,” he complained, referring to the terrible loss of Zeppelin LZ 129. “And we have already had a ship by that name in the first war.”

Raeder shook his head, his demeanor calm and confident. “My Führer, we are not building another airship here, but the greatest battleship on earth. SMS Hindenburg was the last battlecruiser to be built by the Imperial German Navy, and the last to be sunk when the fleet was scuttled. Now let this new ship be the first of this new era of German sea power, Hindenburg, rising from the ashes like a phoenix, just as Germany rises again under your able leadership. It must have this name! The symbolism is perfect.”

“And what if the ship is lost like Graf Spee? What then?”

Raeder eventually convinced Hitler that this was a trivial concern, and one unlikely to ever happen. We will build it so well that no British ship could ever stand against it,” he crowed, and Hitler finally agreed.

The massive ship was just over 911 feet long, 118 feet longer than Bismarck, and much heavier at 62,600 long tons fully loaded, largely due to
extra armor and the weight of the bigger 16 inch gun turrets. Her secondary armament was identical to that of Bismarck, with twelve 5.9 inch guns, sixteen 4.1 inch dual purpose guns and another sixteen 3.7 inch AA guns, and the ship could work up to 30 knots, making it one of the fastest battleships in the world.

Raeder had done much to try and make good on his boast that the Hindenburg would never be sunk. Her double bottomed hull was divided into 21 water tight compartments, and an anti-torpedo bulkhead of Wotan Weich steel was added. Side armor was originally proposed at 300mm, but increased to 360mm at its thickest point, which was 40mm thicker than Bismarck. The turrets were protected with 385mm, or 15.2 inches of steel, compared to 14 inches on Bismarck. And Hindenburg was also better armored on the decks and bow to protect against vertical shell falls, bombs, and splinter damage.

When finally completed, the ship was not the 80,000 ton behemoth with 18 inch guns that Hitler dreamed of, but a far more practical and efficient design, with a perfect combination of speed, power and protection. Only one ship in the Royal Navy could justifiably claim a slight advantage against the fearsome new ship, and that was the G3 class wonder where Admiral Tovey set his flag on HMS Invincible. The British ship was two knots faster, had 13mm more side armor, and one extra 16-inch gun, though Hindenburg had more extensive secondary batteries. It was even money as to which ship might come away the better, and perhaps would come down to seamanship and fate if the two ships ever met in combat.

Admiral Gunther Lütjens was on the bridge of the new battleship in the pre-dawn hours of September 10th, and a rising young protégé Kapitan Zur See Karl Adler was at his side. Lütjens was a complex and conflicted man. On the one hand he was proud to see the rising strength of the new German Navy, yet he also harbored deep misgivings about its eventual fate, particularly over Germany’s lack of adequate fuel oil to sustain operations. That prospect had brightened somewhat when the Orenburg Federation under Ivan Volkov had joined the Axis powers. Orenburg controlled the rich oil reserves of Baku and the Caspian region, but there was still the problem of how to get the oil. Soviet Russia under Sergei Kirov controlled all the railroads, and the neutral states in the Balkans and Turkey all the major sea lanes and ports which might deliver that oil to Europe and eventually Germany.
With the Royal Navy prominently based in Alexandria, the Eastern Mediterranean was under their thumb unless Regia Marina could find some way to neutralize Admiral Cunningham’s fleet. So in order for the oil to reach ports in Italy and southern France, Raeder’s Mediterranean strategy would have to succeed, and the British must be driven from Egypt. Another solution might be to invade the Balkans and open ports like Constanta, Varna and Burgas on the Black Sea coast of Romania and Bulgaria, and Mussolini was contemplating such a move. That was, in fact, how most of the oil Germany needed was now reaching the Reich, but the minor powers controlled the rate of that flow, which might be doubled or tripled if Germany could revitalize those rail lines and utilize its rolling stock.

Lütjens was well aware of these strategic shortcomings and, in spite of Germany’s remarkable string of victories, he remained doubtful over the long term prospects for the war. And now, a new shadow troubled him with the news that the Russians had been able to unhinge two German operations at sea with the deployment of advanced naval rockets. He was aware of Germany’s own missile development programs, but shocked to learn that Soviet Russia had leapt so far ahead.

“What do you make of all this talk of rocketry, Adler,” he asked his young Kapitan.

“Rockets? I find it hard to believe, Admiral. Most of this talk comes from Kurt Hoffmann, which surprises me even more. He is not a man given to exaggeration, or one to back down from a fight at sea.”

“Böhmer says he saw the rocket that sunk the Heimdal. Lindemann saw them too,” said Lütjens. “He’s a fighting Kapitan, but elected to terminate Operation Valkyrie when these weapons struck his ships.”

“That was also surprising, sir. He had Bismarck and Tirpitz! Those two ships could have backed down anything the British have.”

“Agreed, but after seeing the damage to Gneisenau, I have come to believe Lindemann was correct to be cautious at the outset. In spite of all the fanfare at the docks when we slipped our berth, we may have to be cautious here as well.”

“Tell that to Axel Faust,” said Adler, referring to the ship’s burly gunnery officer. His name meant “fist” and he was the hard master of the Hindenburg’s real power, and an ex-champion boxer for the navy as well.

“Something tells me Faust will get his chance this time around,” said
Lütjens. “We have orders to get down to Saint Nazaire. Raeder wants to make sure nothing bothers that new French aircraft carrier in the shipyards there. I told him the Luftwaffe would provide all the defense he needs, but he insists that we must establish ourselves there to gain access to the Atlantic without first having to fight our way past the British up here.”

“I agree, sir. We will be right astride the convoy routes there, and it will give the British fits. We can sortie at any hour and there is no way they can stop us.”

“Perhaps,” said Lütjens, with far less enthusiasm. “But we have to get there first, Adler. And Axel Faust may be busier than he realizes in a few days time.”

Adler looked at Lütjens, thinking something, but saying nothing. He had come to feel that the Admiral was becoming too sour of mind and heart, and did not think he had the same iron in his backbone that the builders had put into his ships. “Well sir,” he said at last. “Perhaps we may soon be able to call on Gibraltar! The operation is underway on the Franco-Spanish border this moment. Five days from now our troops will be ringing the doorbell there.”

“That would be most promising if we could take Gibraltar,” Lütjens agreed.

“Of course, sir. And if it comes to a fight up here, I do not think Axel Faust will disappoint us. I heard him talking with Hartman down in Bruno turret yesterday. The men are eager for battle. They are tired of shooting up garbage scows for target practice, and want a real British battleship to sink this time around. This is not Gneisenau, sir.”

“True,” said Lütjens, “but may I remind you, Kapitan, that Gneisenau had 350mm on her side belt armor, only 10mm less than we have here. That was a very sturdy ship, and it will be months before we can put it to any use after the beating it received from those naval rockets. Most of the damage was on the superstructure, where the side armor was of no help.”

“Don’t worry, Admiral. With Graf Zeppelin alongside we will find the enemy long before they even know we are close at hand. And he who finds his enemy first also has the option to strike first. This is the difference. Gneisenau was taken by surprise. From what Otto Fein told me, they thought they were steaming up on a slow British man-of-war when it fired those rockets at them. Forewarned is forearmed. We will have air cover over us,
and more than sufficient warning of the enemy’s dispositions."

Lütjens smiled. “That was what Kapitan Böhmer thought aboard Graf Zeppelin last time out. Then the missile found his task force before his planes ever had sight of the ship that fired them. I will tell you one thing, Adler, if that is true then it changes everything. All our ships would be rendered obsolete overnight! So I find myself of two minds. I want to see these rockets first hand and learn for myself what their capabilities might be—assuming they do not sink us first.”

Adler said nothing to that, as he could not imagine it possible. Then Lütjens looked at his watch, noting the time.

“Speaking of Böhmer,” he said, “we had better signal our intentions. Tell him I plan to steer 240 for the next three hours, but then we are heading south. See that Lindemann gets the message as well. Bismarck will be in the lead position.”

“So soon, sir?” That will put us on a course for the Faeroes. I thought we were heading out to Iceland.”

“Not this time,” said Lütjens. “No… This time we are going to be just a little more direct. The British will be thinking we will try the Denmark Strait or Iceland passage again, just as before. We will do everything to strengthen that notion, as Hoffmann has orders to demonstrate there with Scharnhorst and Hipper. Alfargruppe is already operational, but that is just a feint, and this time we play our hand out with an inside strait. I have a few surprises planned for the British as well.”
Chapter 27

Admiral Tovey received the warning through channels from the Admiralty, his eyes darkening with concern. The Germans were on the move, and the operations now seemed to be associated with an even more ominous prospect—an attack against Gibraltar! Tovey had been there with the Cruiser Squadron just before being promoted to Admiral of Home Fleet. He knew the place well, yet had no illusions about its prospects of resisting a determined attack from the land. There were no more than four battalions in the garrison, and it was unlikely Gibraltar could be reinforced by sea once the attack began.

The Admiralty was of the same mind, in spite of the vital nature on the base and its intrinsic value as a symbol of British power. Gibraltar was a hinge of fate in so many ways, and yet the screws were weak, and rust had crept in over the long decades of British rule. The War Cabinet had long known that if Spain cooperated with Germany, the airfield at Gibraltar would be useless within hours, and the harbor within a day. Now the Admiralty was already casting about for some alternative place to base the units of Force H while also mounting some effective counter to the juggernaut of the German military.

Churchill was flabbergasted to learn that the Admiralty had no firm plan to reinforce Gibraltar. When it was explained that it would be impossible to land fresh troops in a harbor under fire from enemy artillery, the grim reality of the situation became apparent. Gibraltar would have to stand or fall with the garrison it had, but Force H would do what it could to lend support if the Germans actually carried out an attack.

The instant Tovey received the warning that *Hindenburg* was missing he ordered his ships to four hour steam, and put to sea immediately thereafter. Yet now he had a new problem to deal with. Admiral Pound had never been easy with the posting of a Russian battlecruiser to the watch on the Denmark Strait. He made the obvious point that even though Russia had signed a pledge of alliance with Great Britain, the Soviet Union had not gone so far as to declare war on Germany. Still involved in obvious negotiations with
France and Spain, Germany had also refrained from declaring war on Russia, and so an uneasy tension remained all along the Polish frontier.

“Suppose this Russian ship is capable of defending the Denmark Strait,” Pound had said at the Admiralty meeting. “That alone would be a stretch, but even if it were so, this creates some rather thorny political problems. The Russians are not keen to engage in open hostilities with the Germans—this Admiral Volsky you speak of aside. Unless they go so far as to declare war on Germany, I find it inappropriate to have that ship posted to such a vital position. The Denmark Strait is the route most often chosen by German raiders.”

“Believe one thing,” said Tovey. “This ship can fight. I have no doubt it can hold its own on that watch. That said, I agree with your political assessment of the situation. If, however, I ask the Russians to withdraw, then I shall have to take up that watch myself in HMS Invincible, and leave the Iceland Faeroes Gap to the debutantes.” Tovey was referring to the two new King George V class battleships, still untried and out for their first combat sortie.

“They should be able to manage,” said Pound.

“Perhaps, but it had been my intention to keep the battleships together with me and undertake a more active campaign by entering the Norwegian Sea. Playing on the back row to guard all the exits to the Atlantic allows the enemy to choose his breakout point, and it will force me to spread very thin resources even thinner. If I take all three ships north now, we might catch the Germans before they turn for their intended breakout point.”

Their Lordships discussed it further, but in the end Admiral Pound would have his way. So Tovey caught a plane to Holyhead where he jumped on a fast destroyer to rendezvous with HMS Invincible, already well out to sea. Home Fleet was a full day out of port from Scapa Flow, now steaming at 20 knots to a position southwest of the Faeroe Islands. With him Tovey had his two new battleships, five cruisers, and a handful of destroyers. The carrier Ark Royal was already further west approaching Iceland to use her air wing there on active search. Tovey would take Invincible and the cruisers Norfolk and Suffolk to comprise his western task force. HMS Illustrious would stay on the Iceland-Faeroes watch with the other two battleships and remaining escorts, York, Glasgow and Newcastle,

His dispositions complete, Tovey signaled the remainder of his squadron
farewell and detached at high speed for Reykjavik, where he intended to meet with the Russians and convey the decision Pound had forced upon him. He had some misgivings about leaving the debutantes on their own, but had faith in his Captains, Louis Hamilton taking a new post from Otway-Ruthven, who was taken ill aboard *Prince of Wales*, and Wilfred Rupert Patterson as the Squadron Flag aboard *King George V*.

Some hours later Tovey got a signal from *Kirov* indicating that at least two German warships seemed intent on trying a run through the Denmark Strait. They had been spotted by the Russian Airship *Narva* approaching Jan Mayen. He went to his chart room, laying out a ruler on the map. That was just over a thousand kilometers to the north. If the Germans made good speed they might be able to run the strait to a position west of Reykjavik on 24 hours. That gave him plenty of time to get *Invincible* into position. He put on thirty knots and aimed to be off Reykjavik in seven hours, one good night’s sleep away. There he would meet briefly with Admiral Volsky to explain the Admiralty decision and relieve *Kirov* in the Denmark Strait.

As to *Hindenburg*, the weather was very bad, and no word had come from the north, where F.A.A. planes had been out searching for any sign of the battleship. Last reported near Bergen, the Germans could now be anywhere in an ever widening farthest on circle. Initial reports had suggested there might be at least two battleships in the German task force, which is why he wanted to stay with his two new girls and maintain an advantage in firepower. As it was, his strength was diluted on a much wider front now, largely at Admiral Pound’s insistence.

He passed a fitful night’s sleep, with images of the dark silhouettes of distant ships sailing through his mind. When morning came he shook off the weariness and tried to clear his thoughts with a cup of stiff coffee. The weight of command was now heavy on his shoulders, but the closer he came to his newfound Russian allies, the lighter the burden became. If the Admiralty only knew the full truth he had discovered about this Russian ship... He shook his head, realizing that he could not breathe a word of what he knew and still be regarded as sane by any man he had sat with at the recent meeting. Perhaps Admiral Fraser might eventually be brought into the foyer. Fraser had always given him a sympathetic ear and fair hearing, but how would he react to the truth if it was finally revealed?

He would think it preposterous, thought Tovey, even as I did when Turing
first began to open that Pandora’s box of photographs and reports. The shock of seeing his own hand writing on those documents was still profound. He clearly heard his own voice in the line and letter of those reports, just as he might have written them, yet it was all… preposterous. That was the only reaction a sane man could offer.

Word came from *Ark Royal* that the forward scout planes had sighted a large warship on an intercept course. *Kirov* was approaching, and he turned the bridge over to the able hands of Captain Bennett to get down to the aft boat deck.

* * *

“Your airship has done me a great service,” said Tovey as he shook hands with Admiral Volsky and Fedorov again aboard *Kirov*. “It appears that we have wind of the fox loose up north, but there is still a wolf at large.” He shared his report concerning the German battleship *Hindenburg*.

“That would be *Jötnargruppe*, from a word referring to ancient Norse giants,” said Fedorov, and Nikolin translated.

“Well named, because this is a monster of a ship—a match for my flagship *Invincible*, which says a great deal. We are not yet certain as to its intentions, but coast watchers reported it leaving Bergen ten hours ago and heading north. It may be planning to join with these other contacts to form one powerful battlegroup. In this event, I should be grateful for your assistance here, though I do have some news to share with you.” He told them, as diplomatically as possible, what the Admiralty had decided.

“This does not come as a surprise,” said Volsky. “We have already quarreled with the Germans on two occasions, and the situation is somewhat delicate. Thus far I have exercised considerable restraint, but if we were to engage again, and sink a major German capital ship…”

“I understand the implications,” said Tovey. “If at all possible, I should like to bear the burden of combat here, though your assistance in finding the enemy would be much appreciated.”

“But what if the Germans do form a battlegroup too large for your single ship to engage?” said Fedorov.

“They must choose one passage or another,” said Tovey. “Indications are that they are looking at the Denmark Strait again. That is the opinion of the
Admiralty. But I have two good ships posted in the passage east of Iceland should they take that route. Given the circumstances, it would be my decision to fall back and recombine Home Fleet if either of my present task groups is overmatched. A position a couple hundred miles southwest of Reykjavik would put me in a good location to intercept a German task force in either passage as it exits into the Atlantic.”

“A sound tactic,” Volsky agreed. “Well we have certain assets that may assist your search. We have set up one of our radars on the northwest cape of Iceland. It will see any ships as they enter the Denmark Strait, with coverage nearly all the way out to the Greenland Ice floes, about 200 kilometers for surface ship contacts. How might we cover the passage east of Iceland, Mister Fedorov?”

“The airship Narva is meeting us here in six hours, sir. They have an Oko Panel radar system aboard, and if we send them out to a position on the northeast coast of Iceland, that will see any ship attempting to take that passage. The airship can loiter over land indefinitely.”

“Good, that will be much better than using our KA-40. Well, Admiral Tovey, I think we can assure you that if the Germans come anywhere within 200 kilometers of Iceland, we will find them.”

“Thank you, Admiral. I am truly grateful for your assistance. We’ve a number of convoys to and from Liverpool, and we wouldn’t want to let the fox into the chicken coop.”

“Or the wolves,” said Volsky.

Tovey smiled, wondering how to bring up his next question, then he decided to just come out with it. “As to the other matter revealed in that Enigma intercept,” he began, “you say it bore the code name Felix?”

“Yes sir,” said Fedorov. “It was a German operational plan for an attack on Gibraltar.”

“I see… Well, you will forgive me for wanting to take a peek at the cake while its baking, but I cannot help myself. This operation Felix… Does it succeed?”

“We do not know,” said Fedorov flatly. “It was never attempted in the history we know. If it does take place, then it would be a major divergence in the course of the war as we know it. I must tell you, however, that if the Germans do launch such an operation, at least as planned, I believe it has a very good chance of succeeding.”
“You know of this plan?”

“It was well documented. The Germans would commit at least three full regiments, all veteran troops, and they will also have two divisions in reserve on the Iberian Peninsula to forestall any move you might make by landing troops in Portugal. I can give you the exact German order of battle, though it may have changed from the history we know.”

“I will gratefully pass it on to the War Cabinet, though I don’t know what good it will do us to know just how steep the odds are. A landing in Portugal? I’m afraid that is out of the question. It would take months to plan an operation on any scale that would make a difference, and we’re still on invasion watch.”

“Admiral, if the Germans do launch Operation Felix, then I think it is safe to say their plan to invade England has been cancelled. We have followed the radio reports on the air battle over Britain. You have done remarkably well in checking the Germans there, just as it occurred in our history.”

“Yet not without great cost. It was very thin with the R.A.F. at times, and I was tempted to ask you for one of those radar sets. As it happened, we managed on our own. The pressure seems to be easing now. In fact, we’ve learned that the Germans have pulled out several bomber squadrons for other deployment—possibly this operation Felix we are discussing.”

“That would be very likely,” said Fedorov. “I must also tell you the German Plan Felix also contained provisions for the possible occupation of Spanish Morocco, and the Canary Islands.”

“That would be a matter of some concern to us. We do have plans to kick a little sand in Jerry’s face should he get pushy at Gibraltar. We have several operations, some underway even as we speak. It will be our intention to immediately seize the Azores, and then Madeira. Our recently failed operation against Dakar will be revisited, this time with adequate naval force to deal with the French. And Wavell has been ordered to begin an offensive against the Italian advance into Egypt.”

“Operation Compass.” Fedorov knew of the operation.

“You know of it?”

“Yes sir, though it did not occur quite this early in our timeline.”

“Yes, Wavell tells us he’s not quite ready,” said Tovey. “But the War Cabinet has urged him to do anything possible to defend Egypt. My God, the thought the Germans may be coming for the Rock is enough to deal with, but
we simply cannot lose Egypt...” His eyes carried the obvious question, and Fedorov could see the terrible dilemma. Here they were holding the keys of time and fate, with knowledge of the entire course of the war, at least as it once played out, and Tovey was knocking at the gate and asking to be let in.

“Wavell may surprise you,” said Fedorov. “But I’m afraid that if the Germans do launch this operation, the war will hold many more surprises, even for us if we remain here. Everything will change and I can only take an educated guess as to what may or may not happen. Will Wavell and O’Connor hold off the Italians? They did in our history, but if the Germans attack Gibraltar it may mean they have chosen the Mediterranean as the main focus of their war effort in the next year. That could mean you will be facing more than the Italians in the Western Desert, and possibly very soon.”

Tovey took a deep breath, and his anguish and worry were quite evident. “I must tell you, gentlemen, that this whole affair is on the razor’s edge at the moment. When you arrived on the scene in June we had only seven planes on Malta, another vital outpost. We’ve 36 there now, and plans to deliver 12 more Hurricanes in a few days time. We have exactly three radar sets in the entire Mediterranean theater—one at Gibraltar, one at Alexandria and the last at Aden. The operations we have planned against the Azores and Madeira will involve no more than a single Royal Marine Brigade of three battalions. We’ve got one more teed up with the Free French to have another go at Dakar, or perhaps the Cape Verde Islands. Our effort now is purely defensive. We must seize these outposts to secure the convoy route to Freetown, South Africa and by extension to Suez and Egypt. But I must tell you that it will be some time, perhaps as long as another year, before we can build up enough strength to contemplate further offensives. We’ll be fighting to hold Egypt for the foreseeable future. The question now is when will Russia and America join in?”

Fedorov looked to Admiral Volsky, who nodded, giving him quiet permission to speak further. “As to Soviet entry into the war,” he said, “Hitler decided that in June of 1941 when he launched an operation called Barbarossa and attacked the Soviet Union. That may or may not occur now. It all remains to be seen. As to the American entry into the war, they are of a mind that they can remain neutral until such time that they have adequate forces built up to make a meaningful entry. But you can count on their support, Admiral. I think you already know that much. The timing of their
entry, as we knew it, was late in 1941.”

“A long wait,” said Tovey with another sigh.

“And there is one more thing you must know,” said Volsky. “We are here now, Admiral Tovey, but we do not know how much longer we can stay put. Our candle is burning as well, and if Mister Fedorov is correct, it may soon blow out. We may be forced to leave this time before late July in 1941, or we could be facing another problem—annihilation.”

“I don’t understand,” said Tovey.

Volsky explained. “We first shifted in time to arrive on the 28th of July, 1941. That date therefore looms as quite a threat to our continued presence here.”

“I see…” Tovey thought for a moment, suddenly remembering Alan Turing’s long discourse concerning his watch. He shared the story with the Russians to see what they might make of it.

“Amazing,” said Volsky. “You say the watch vanished the day we arrived here, and then turned up in that box?”

“Quite so, Admiral, and our Mister Turing seems to think that when faced with the inconvenient problem of having to account for two identical timepieces trying to occupy the same moment, time seems to have simply moved his watch. Might the same thing happen to your ship come next July?”

Volsky raised his heavy eyebrows, wondering. “Fedorov? What do you think of this?”

“Very strange, sir. Time seems to have exercised a little sleight of hand, just as Kamenski might describe it. I would like to think we might get off just as easily, but we are human beings, sir, not pocket watches, and moving us about like that may be… uncomfortable.”
Part X

Wolves

“Don’t expect justice from the Lord of the Manor, nor mercy from the Wolf Pack.”

—German Proverb
Chapter 28

Convoy HX-69 was making good time, though it was just a little late embarking from Halifax for the long journey to Liverpool. Now it was three days out from its destination port, and though the sailors could almost smell the scent of home in the tang of the rising wind and sea, this was one of the most dangerous legs of the voyage.

It was 23 ships when it first set out from Halifax on the 28th of August, under command of Commodore J. S. Ritchie of the Royal Navy Reserve, aboard the Dutch steamer SS Ulysses. Nine more ships joined the odyssey at sea two days later, and another 15 ships on September 1st to swell the ranks to 47 ships. Ulysses was a stately looking merchant steamer, with a long black hull trimmed in white at the gunwales and a tall single stack amidships. There had been no suitable British ship available at Halifax, and so the Commodore gratefully accepted Ulysses as his convoy flag. The Dutch crew was smart and efficient, though Ritchie noted they were a bit loose in maintaining steady revolutions on the turbine. The ships speed might vary between seven and ten knots, but maintained a good average over time.

Captain Jugtenberg and the other Dutch officers were excellent navigators, taking regular measurements with compass and sextant, and there was easy cooperation between Ritchie’s staff officers and the Dutch crew. The convoy was carrying a wide range of minerals and supplies—iron ore, bauxite, steel, lumber, diesel oil, gasoline, sulfur, and other general cargo.

Commodore Ritchie had been pleased to have had a fairly uneventful crossing until they encountered heavy swells on September 3rd. One sheep, the SS Condor fell astern with engine trouble, but managed to catch up in time for the planned emergency turn maneuver executed on September 5th. Ritchie remarked that the station keeping and overall speed of the convoy was the best he had ever seen. On the 7th, however, the sea increased at midnight, with a fresh gale force wind from the northwest frothing up rough seas at dawn the following morning. Fimbulwinter was upon them, though no man in the convoy knew it just then.

The ships were spread out in lines of nine abreast, with Ulysses in the number five position on row one. Seven of the ships were newly arriving
escorts, sent out to bring the convoy home on this final three day run. They included older Admiralty Class destroyers like HMS Arrow and Winchelsea, the Canadian destroyers Saguenay and Assinboine, and corvettes HMS Heartsease, Clarika and Camelia.

Ritchie felt fairly well protected to have seven sheep dogs escorting his flock now, but the wolves were about on the wild sea that day and they would have more work than they expected. Arrow was part of the Western Approaches Defense Force based at Greenock. Commander Herbert Wyndham Williams, had her out in front of the convoy, nervously sniffing the waters for any sign of the U-boats that made this place a favorite hunting ground. He was supposed to have been destined to take a promotion to the light cruiser Birmingham one day, but that would not happen in this timeline. The Germans had already put that ship at the bottom of the Denmark Strait.

HX-69 was also supposed to have completed its run into British ports without incident, but that history was about to change as well. Williams had already seen evidence of wolves on the prowl when he stopped to pick up survivors of Poseidon, a Greek ship that had been torpedoed a few days ago. Now he was feeling just a little ill at ease, the cold wind biting, with the promise of a hard winter to come in the months ahead.

At 09:00 a signal came in that a periscope had been spotted off the starboard side of the convoy. HMS Winchelsea was on the watch there, and was quick into action churning up the choppy seas even more with a burst of speed. Commodore Ritchie ordered the convoy to make an emergency turn to port, away from the attack but he was too late. A torpedo wake was sighted and within a minute the oiler Charles F. Meyer exploded in an angry red fireball and was soon enshrouded with acrid black smoke.

U-99, a Type VIIB boat under Kapitan Otto Kretschmer, had just taken the first bite out of HX-69. When he saw the massive explosion in his periscope, Kretschmer smiled, thinking his good luck was holding after a shaky start. On his first patrol, he was returning to Bergen with a medical casualty when he sailed into the path of the German battlecruiser Scharnhorst. An eagle-eyed Arado pilot thought he was seeing a British submarine and swooped into attack. Before he reached port the submarine was attacked a second time by German aircraft, and six days later he had to make another emergency dive when a German plane dropped three bombs on his position, sending him all the way to the seabed where he bumped his nose
Those days were over, and he had settled in to three more good patrols since that time. He logged 22,700 tons on his second patrol, bettered that with 57,890 tons on his third patrol, and already had over 18,000 tons up on this patrol with another two weeks left to hunt. Kretschmer already had one Knight’s Cross for his work, and he was aiming to get his oak leaves this time around, and destined to be the number one U-boat ace in the Kriegsmarine.

“That had to be in oiler,” he said quietly to his First Watch Officer, Leutnant Klaus Bargsten. “Come right twenty degrees. Emergency down bubble, and make your depth 150 feet. There's a pesky destroyer up there looking for us.”

Winchelsea would have no luck that day, because Otto Kreschmer was a fated man. Bargsten nodded with a smile, not knowing at that moment that his own personal fate would be destined to become entangled with that of a mysterious unknown ship. In one telling of those events, Bargsten would command U-563 with orders to join the Grönland wolfpack forming up south of Iceland in August of 1941, but the boat’s Captain would see something in his periscope lens that pricked his curiosity. He spotted what looked to be two British battleships, which were in fact King George V and Repulse hastening west. Both ships were hit and burning, and Bargsten came to believe that there must be other U-boats about. Eager to get into the action, he turned west, and eventually came very near another strange looking vessel, which he tried to engage with a badly planned long shot. He paid for that mistake with his life, because the long shot he took came in a moment of great tension on the bridge of the battlecruiser Kirov.

At that time Captain Vladimir Karpov had just seized control of the ship in the North Atlantic, intending to force a decisive engagement with the Allied fleets that were hunting him. The strident warning called out by Tasarov, torpedo in the water, set Karpov off like a time bomb, and before the incident ran its course, the massive angry mushroom cloud of a nuclear weapon would blight the Earth for the first time in human history.

In so many ways, Bargsten was the match that lit the fuse to begin the great unraveling of the history that had taken so many centuries to weave. His was but a single errant thread, yet, when pulled upon, it precipitated chaos in the loom of fate and time. And there he was again this day, huddled in the
conning tower of U-99, smiling at his Kapitan, taking silent lessons as he watched how easily Kreschmer commanded his boat—the devil’s apprentice.

Kreschmer would hit 46 ships in his brief career, under the emblem of the lucky golden horseshoe painted prominently on the sail of the boat. A quiet, methodical man, Kreschmer had earned the nickname ‘Silent Otto’ as he worked his craft. His motto was ‘One torpedo... one ship,’ and he demonstrated that with the swift kill he had just logged against the oiler Charles F. Meyer. He would always say that his mission was to sink ships, and not men, and would render assistance to any survivors he ever could, but this time the close proximity of the British destroyer forced him to evade. But he had his kill, on his way to become the tonnage king of the U-boat service sinking over 273,000 tons.

One day I will get my chance, thought Bargsten as he watched his Kapitan with admiration. He would end up sinking less than one percent of Kreschmer’s unmatched tonnage, just 22,171 tons in the five kills he would log in his career, but the last torpedo he would fire would shatter the history of the world.

“We’ll linger here for a while, then creep up on them again tonight,” said Kreschmer. He was famous for his night attacks, firing from the surface, but with the moon waxing, the weather would have to stay clouded over for him to risk that tactic. He would end up getting one more ship later that day, a vessel carrying sugar and rum called Traveller, much to the chagrin of sailors back in Liverpool who were expecting the rum. That kill convinced Commodore Ritchie that he was in infested waters here, which prompted him to make a fateful decision.

“We’ll get no mercy from the wolf pack,” he said to his first mate. Let’s alter course just after sunset and come fifteen points to port.”

The convoy would execute the maneuver smartly on command, and it would take the remaining 45 ships right into the path of another great wolf, the Lord of the Manor, flagship of the German Navy, battleship Hindenburg.

* * *

Tovey was back aboard HMS Invincible when he got the news that a scout plane out from the fledgling air base on the Faeroe Islands had failed to return. What he first took to be trouble with the thickening weather soon
became cause for alarm. A message was received saying the plane had been engaged by German fighters, and shot down. That could only mean that the German aircraft carrier *Graf Zeppelin* was on the prowl somewhere near those islands, as they were too far from Bergen to be bothered by fighters based at that location.

This led Tovey to reconsider his deployment of the other two battleships. They had been steaming northwest all day, and were now in a position some 200 miles west of the Faeroes. What if the Germans shunned the more distant coast of Iceland and turned south near those islands instead? He immediately sent a signal to the Admiralty, and Captain Patterson on *King George V*, suggesting this possibility, and advising the cruiser *Kent* should investigate. Admiral Pound sent back a contrary opinion. Tovey was handed the message ten minutes later. “*Admiralty and First Sea Lord do not concur. Continue on your original posting. HMS Kent to remain on station with Illustrious.*”

This was his fate now, he realized, to be shadowed by the meddlesome Admiral Pound, second guessed, with his orders countermanded at every turn. This was the price he was paying for the hospital bill he had handed the Royal Navy on his first major engagement—*Hood*, *Renown* and *Repulse* all laid up for repairs.

When the next message was brought in, it was a sad vindication in seeing his worst misgivings confirmed. R.A.F. Vagar in the Faeroes, the place where he had learned the startling truth concerning the Russian ship and crew during his meeting with Admiral Volsky, was being shelled!

“*R.A.F. Vagar under large caliber naval gunfire at 23:20 and taking heavy damage. Three planes destroyed and base no longer operational. Casualties.*” He read the message slowly to Captain Bennett. “By God, they’ve snookered us! The Germans are running the inside passage! Large caliber naval gunfire—that can only be from a capital ship, and here I am nearly 600 miles to the west watching the back yard while *Hindenburg* is skulking right past the front gate!”

He was over to his plotting table at once, scratching his forehead as he eyed the position of Captain Patterson’s battlegroup. “Send to *King George V,*” he said to a Watch Officer. “Tell them to come about and steer 190 and come to full speed. The Germans will have to steer that course to get down round Ireland… And my God, look here, Captain Bennett. That’s HX-69 there, bound for Liverpool.” He fingered a spot on his chart, right in the path
of the oncoming threat.

“We’d best inform the Admiralty,” said Bennett, “and have them scatter that convoy, dangerous as that may be in those waters.”

“Agreed,” said Tovey. “Make it so. He placed two rulers on the chart now, laying one along the suspected course of the German squadron, and another from his own position to a point about 500 miles east of Glasgow. An equilateral triangle formed between the Faeroes, that point, and his ship.

“We could get back into it,” he said glancing quickly at Captain Bennett. “I could turn now and put on thirty knots. Certainly the Germans will do the same, and they’ll have to steer this course until they reach this latitude. Only then can they turn south around Ireland.”

“Right through the Bloody Western Approaches,” said Bennett. “Damn bold maneuver, wouldn’t you say?”

“That so,” said Tovey. “Well, we must make them pay for that.”

“What about Patterson’s group?” Captain Bennett eyed the position of King George V to the north.

“He’ll make 28 knots at his best speed. The Germans have a slight speed advantage, only two knots, but that means they’ll slip away unless we stop them.”

“And what about our watch here?” Captain Bennett stated the obvious, and Tovey gave him a look that seemed to see right through him, his mind obviously fixed on some solution.
“I’ll be in the W/T Room,” he said. “Come about to take that course and go to thirty knots at once.”
“Aye sir, off we go.” Bennett gestured to a Watch Officer and the order was passed to the helm. HMS Invincible was heading south.

* * *

“**Well** Fedorov,” said Admiral Volsky. “It appears we have not worn out our welcome yet.” He had just received the message from Nikolin. Admiral Tovey had sent a code on a special channel they had arranged and was requesting that Kirov resume the Watch on the Denmark Strait for the next 24 hours.

Fedorov had seen all the other message traffic, and put the puzzle together. “I guess we can tell Narva they will not be seeing anything north of Iceland,” he said. “The Germans have just announced themselves at the Faeroes!”

“That they have. What do you think this is, Fedorov? Could it be a diversion?”

“In once sense it is,” said Fedorov. “They showed us Alfargruppe just north of the Denmark Strait first. Now we know that is comprised of only two ships, and I think that is the real feint here. This business at the Faeroes, that is Jötnargruppe, the giants, and from the list of ships we decoded in that Enigma signal it will be Bismarck and Hindenburg. Yet in my opinion, this is also a diversion.”

“Oh? What else can the Germans throw at the British? Hindenburg is their biggest ship. Yes?”

“They can throw three crack regiments at Gibraltar, sir. I believe this is a ruse aimed at keeping the British Home Fleet well occupied for Operation Felix.”

Volsky sighed heavily, folding his arms.

“Correct, Fedorov. The only question I have now is this: what should we do about it?”
Chapter 29

“I’m afraid we are a little too far away to do much about Gibraltar,” said Fedorov. “Besides, what could we do? It will not be a naval operation. The French Fleet might also cause some trouble for Force H, but if Admiral Somerville is sharp he already has his ships up on four hour steam. He won’t want his battleships sitting at anchor if the Luftwaffe comes calling, and this they will certainly do if they mean to attack Gibraltar.”

“But surely that operation is of greater significance than our post here,” said Volsky.

“True sir, but again, what could we do? Gibraltar’s fate now lies with the mettle of its garrison. I don’t suppose you are contemplating putting Troyak and his Marines ashore there.”

Volsky smiled. “No, I think they have done enough with this latest mission. It is good to have them all safely aboard the ship again—including Orlov. But I can see that you were surprised it succeeded.”

“I was,” said Fedorov. “Especially after what Director Kamenski suggested. If Troyak could destroy the back stairway at Ilanskiy, then how did I find it and go down it in 1941? How did Ivan Volkov do the same in 2021? But yet, Troyak reports his demolition was a success.”

“How is this possible, Fedorov?”

“It’s a real mystery sir, like so much of what has happened in these last months. I have been muddling over it for some time.”

“Yes, I have seen you muddling, young man. I noticed your heart was not in the recent fire drill exercises.”

“I’m sorry sir, my mind was elsewhere, and it concerns Captain Karpov.”

“Or is it Admiral Karpov now?” said Volsky. “That man sees no limits. In his present position he can still do a great deal of harm.”

“Did you see Troyak’s full report sir? He noted that there were several airships present when they arrived; some belonging to the Orenburg Federation. I find it curious that they would be that deep inside Free Siberian territory. Troyak says there was a battle underway, both on the ground and between those airships. Yet we only just learned of the Omsk accord. What was that about?”
“Apparently that accord was not entirely successful.”

“Yes sir. Fighting has broken out between the Siberians and Orenburg again. A major offensive is underway.”

“It is very likely that Karpov and Volkov met at that meeting in Omsk,” said Volsky.

That gave Fedorov a start. “If they did meet,” he began, “do you think they would have recognized one another?”

“Who knows?” said Volsky. “Volkov was a young man when they first met aboard Kirov. He would be a man of my age now, ready for the pasture.”

“Don’t underrate yourself.” Fedorov said quietly. “You have many years of service left. But this is what I was worried about when I hatched that scheme to send Troyak off to Ilanskiy. If Karpov did realize Volkov was the same man he met on Kirov, then the next question he would ask would be a very dangerous one. He would want to know how Volkov came to be here, and that could lead him to discover it had something to do with Ilanskiy. That was, after all, where Volkov would have first appeared if he went back to 1908 as I did.”

“True,” said Volsky, “but haven’t we already solved that problem? You were just telling me Troyak was successful.”

“Yes, but I find it very suspicious that there was a battle underway at Ilanskiy. It leads me to conclude that both sides must know there is something significant about that place.”

“Well now that that stairway has been destroyed, you can rest easier, Fedorov.”

“I wish I could, sir. I was certain that something would happen if Troyak succeeded in destroying those stairs, but… nothing happened at all! I thought it would have prevented Volkov from finding them in 2021, and therefore prevented the rise of the Orenburg Federation. In fact, I was deathly afraid that we would be swept up in the whirlwind of change Troyak’s demolition would cause, but… here we still are. So I can only assume the stairway must have been rebuilt sometime before I first found it in 1941, and that prospect still has me very worried. For the time being, we have eliminated the grave and serious threat that someone could pass through that time rift to alter the past again, and by so doing compromise our own status and fate here in this time. Yet we must keep a close watch on this situation. The problem is not resolved.”
“Do you expect me to send Troyak in a blimp every other month to have a look?”

“No sir, that would be impractical, and dangerous. But this battle at Ilanskiy has dark implications. I think it means Volkov and Karpov both know about that stairway.”

“They had no great love for one another when they first met in 2021, so it does not surprise me that any agreement they may have reached at Omsk has fallen apart. Now they will tussle over Ilanskiy like a pair of dogs quarreling over a bone.” Volsky smiled as he continued.

“That accord, as you call it, would have been very bad news for Sergei Kirov. It would mean Orenburg could have transferred all the forces it now has deployed against Siberia to the Volga front. One side or another must have gone back on their word. Perhaps it was Karpov, which would fit his character well. If so, he has done us a great favor. You were telling Admiral Tovey about the possible German attack on Russia in 1941, and we both know the Soviet Union’s chances of surviving that are not good without the support of both Orenburg and Siberia.”

“Agreed.” Fedorov shrugged, seeming very disconsolate.

“You are looking as pale as Admiral Tovey,” said Volsky.

“I suppose I am, sir. Your remarks to him about the problem we face come July next year still weigh heavily in the equation. Yes, our candle is burning here. We are the light that shines twice as bright in this era, yet we both know the other end of that—we also burn twice as fast. Here we are talking about Gibraltar and the ground war in Russia and, in spite of all the advanced weaponry we possess, it seems we are powerless to influence these events, even a minor division scale action like Operation Felix where no more than three German regiments will make the actual attack.”

“We are a naval power,” said Volsky. “There is only one thing we can assure wherever we stand a watch, and that is control of the sea. In many ways that will decide whether the Allies ever can begin their counteroffensive. They must control the Atlantic and Pacific to bring the power they have to face their enemies on land. At this point in the war, control of those seas is hanging in the balance, and so you may take heart and believe we have some vital role that we may play here. Nothing can match us on the sea. Yet all power has limits, Fedorov. This is something you and I must know, and the one thing that Karpov forgot while he was here.”
“He remains a grave problem, sir—Karpov. Something tells me that there may have to be a reckoning with him in all this if we remain here.”

There was a moment of silence between them, as each one pondered that. Then Volsky nodded, speaking the thing they were both now considering. “We are a naval power,” he said, “but Karpov has established himself on land. And look now, Fedorov. He is at war with Volkov and the Orenburg Federation! Yes, Karpov is a threat, and a very dangerous one. But how is it said, Fedorov? The enemy of my enemy is a friend.”

“I see what you mean, Admiral, but given Karpov’s nature, the squabble between Karpov and Volkov may not be permanent. He is an opportunist, and he will do whatever is necessary to further his advance. One minute he signs an accord with Volkov, the next sees the two sides battling at Ilanskiy.”

“Yet this wedge between them is to our advantage,” Volsky pressed. “We must consider how to use their newfound enmity to strengthen our position—Kirov’s position.”

“Are you suggesting we try to contact Karpov and sound him out on this?”

“The thought has crossed my mind. As you said yourself, he may suspect we are here if he thinks we used Rod-25. He is now at war with Volkov, and though we do not know how that will turn out, we do know one thing—as long as those two fight one another, Sergei Kirov’s position is strengthened. You see, Karpov may call himself an Admiral these days, but he is really a general. He’s a force on land. If we could find a way to get him to see the importance of preserving Soviet Russia, then we could do much to affect the outcome of this war. Perhaps he can still be reasoned with.”

“Could we ever trust him again?” Fedorov asked the most obvious question. “He’ll do whatever it takes to further his interests.”

“So we must show him that it is in his interest to preserve Soviet Russia. Otherwise Germany will crush our homeland. Make no mistake, Fedorov. Hitler will smile and shake hands with Volkov until he has defeated Sergei Kirov. But Volkov is sitting on the one thing Hitler really needs—the oil fields in the Caucasus and Caspian region. He wants that oil. Do you think he will simply ask for it politely? No. Once he defeats Soviet Russia, Orenburg will be next on his list. I think we can get Karpov to see this, and to realize his fate would be the same unless he sides with the Allies.”

“You forget how headstrong and arrogant he can be,” said Fedorov. “He
knows what we have in the magazine, and he will argue that we should use the full measure of our power here. I can hear it now.”

“Indeed,” said Volsky. “I suppose we could sail down there and deliver a nuclear warhead on the German assembly area in Spain if they are staging for this operation. The troops in Gibraltar would have quite a show, and the Germans would gasp in utter awe when they see their elite regiments evaporate before their eyes. Then I suppose we could send an ultimatum to Herr Hitler and tell him he gets more of the same if he does not relent and call off the wolves.”

“That is what Karpov would probably do,” said Fedorov.

“Yes, Karpov sees power as a blunt instrument. He exercises considerable guile to get himself into a position to use it, but when the time comes for its application, he fails miserably. Do you think Hitler would make peace if we stop his attack on Gibraltar this way?”

“No sir, I do not. Look what the Americans did to Japan when they first firebombed Tokyo, then dropped the bomb on Hiroshima, and still that was not enough. It required Nagasaki as a further demonstration that annihilation was at hand should the Japanese not surrender. They did not know how many atomic weapons America possessed at the time. There were only three, but they might have had fifty for all the Japanese knew.”

“Interesting,” said Volsky. “We have only three—the same power that the Americans will have five years from now. Would they be enough to win this war, or at least bring it to a halt? This is the nightmare I have considered ever since we made the decision to stay here and side with the allies. Yes, it means that we might kill a great many people if we use these weapons. Then I weigh that against the millions that will die in this war, and think the cost may not be too high. It is a real dilemma, Fedorov.”

Then Volsky summed things up. “So on the one hand we see the limitations of our Moskit-II missiles, and how powerless we are to effect events involving land operations. Then on the other hand we hold a hammer that could smash Berlin and probably even kill Hitler in one blow.”

“But would it end there sir? Would we also have to smash Orenburg and Volkov, and then Karpov too? And what about Imperial Japan? Their empire begins from a much stronger position in the Pacific than they had in our history. Might it not take all our warheads to tame that dragon?”

“I see what you mean,” said Volsky. “We get dropped into the midst of
the greatest war humanity has ever fought. Sometimes I feel like that fellow in the American shark movie.”

“Shark movie? Oh yes—you mean Jaws?”

Yes, the one where he is throwing chum over the side and the great shark suddenly appears.”

“Who can forget that scene.” Fedorov smiled.

“Well I see this war,” said Volsky, “and in spite of all the power we have now, I sometimes think we are going to need a bigger boat. Tovey and the British know this to be true. They know they cannot defeat Germany on their own. All they can do is try to hold on as best they can.”

“Agreed, sir. They desperately need the Americans to enter the war as soon as possible. They are the bigger boat I think you speak of. But if Karpov doesn’t get them to declare war on Germany early as he did once, then it will be up to the Japanese to light the fire that prompts the United States to enter the war.”

“Pearl Harbor? Do you think it will happen in this time line, Fedorov?”

“That is a very real possibility, but as Tovey said, it will be a long wait until December of 1941, and we may have to face our hour of paradox before then.”

“So here is something you can put that scheming mind of yours to work on, Fedorov.” Volsky tapped his Captain on the shoulder. “How can we get the United States into the war as soon as possible?”

“They seem likely to sit for some time while they build up their armed forces, sir. But America can be roused to sudden anger, as we have seen. When their old battleship Maine blew up mysteriously in Havana harbor, they used it as a pretext to go to war with Spain. ‘Remember the Maine, to hell with Spain’ became their battle cry in the Spanish-American war. Then there was the sinking of the Lusitania in 1915. It was a British ship, but there were 128 Americans aboard, and it enraged the country, hastening their entry into WWI. Pearl Harbor had an even more dramatic impact.”

“Indeed,” said Volsky. “Then how could we create a similar incident here if the Japanese do not take the matter into their own hands?”

“You mean sink an American ship?”

“I know it sounds treacherous, Fedorov, but we must consider all our options now. This war is simply too big for us to manage. It is too big a weight for Britain to carry. You know this. It will be a year or more before
they can even contemplate real offensive operations that could make any difference in this war. And what will they do? They cannot invade France alone. In fact, they could not even invade North Africa alone to deal with the Vichy French. Tovey was just telling us that. We need a bigger boat, Fedorov, and there is only one nation on this earth that can build it—The United States of America. Only they can build the planes tanks and ships that will eventually stop Germany and win this war.”

* * *

A bigger boat… A bigger bomb. That had been the mentality that drove the nations of the world to the edge of annihilation. General MacArthur would sum it up in a speech to the nation after Japan’s surrender when he said of the use of war to resolve disputes: “We have had our last chance. If we do not now devise some greater and more equitable system, Armageddon will be at our door.”

Yet here, in the year 1940, Armageddon was still impossibly far away, over years of struggle and difficult sacrifice to be made by millions. For now, it was still about that bigger boat, the ships that Germany and Great Britain had built in their arms race before the outbreak of hostilities. And the largest and best ships on either side were now locked on a collision course to meet in the crucible of war.
Admiral Lütjens had signaled farewell to *Graf Zeppelin* two hours ago, just before he made his bombardment run past the Faeroes. The vital aircraft carrier would not be risked in an Atlantic sortie at this time. Its role was restricted to provide air superiority on this mission, something Marco Ritter delivered with his characteristic bravado and skill. The carrier would return to Bergen with an escort of light cruisers and destroyers, and the heavy units would press on at high speed to make their breakout run to the Atlantic.

Ritter lingered in the skies over the Faeroes until he was satisfied that the British had no surprises there. They had not seen a whisper of enemy carrier based aircraft, leading Lütjens to believe that they had caught the British by surprise. Satisfied that the operation was successful, it was now time to find a friendly deck to land his 109-T, but strangely he signaled to his two wing mates to follow him south.

“Where are we going?” Klaus Heilich called on the short range radio channel.

“Just follow me, and you will see in good time.” Ritter banked away, his wing mates following smartly, and all three planes dove to a lower altitude. It was not long before they broke through the low clouds, heading east away from the Faeroes, skimming right down on the deck above the fitful sea. The roar of his planes engine thrummed with reassuring power, and Ritter smiled as he rode the wave tops. Then, looming out of a fog bank ahead, he saw the ship he was looking for, laughing when he heard the surprised voices of his wing mates.

“A little secret, Klaus,” he called on his radio. “That is the *Goeben*, our Flugdeckkreuzer, and we are all going to join them. Some of our best pilots are on that ship for this mission, Hafner, Brendel, Ehrler, so you had better mind your business!”

The ship was one of Admiral Raeder’s little surprises, a hybrid between a fast cruiser and a light escort carrier, with a small air squadron of 12 planes. There were already six fighters aboard, and three *Stukas*. Ritter’s flight would complete the squadron and, as the three fighters gained a little altitude to overfly the ship, they gawked at the sleek lines and unusual design. The
forward section looked like one of the new Panzerschiffe cruisers, with a
typical conning superstructure, a single stack, and two twin gun turrets
forward with 28cm guns, just like those on the Scharnhorst. The barrels had
been designed as spares for the battlecruisers, but had been worked into this
design and put to better use instead of leaving them in the warehouses. Aft of
this section the remaining two thirds of the ship was a flight deck, about 20%
shorter than the deck of the Graf Zeppelin.

“That’s a short deck down there, so be careful,” Ritter called. “Now you
know why I was drilling you on landings all last week. Make sure you don’t
miss your hook up!”

The Goeben had been east of the main group, and much farther ahead,
keeping a watchful eye on the Iceland passage in case there were any nosy
British cruisers about. It was the only ship of its type built, out to sea for the
first time after an extensive training run in the Baltic. Its four 11-inch guns
would make it a match for most any 8-inch gun cruiser it encountered, but it
also had tremendous speed on its long cruiser hull, and could work up to 36
knots to run from any ship it could not safely engage.

Designed as a scout ship, the Goeben had Germany’s latest naval radar on
her mainmast, and its nine BF-109T fighters would provide a strong fighter
shield over the battlegroup. The three Stukas would give the ship just a little
more sting, one flown by Ritter’s newest recruit, Hans Rudel. The ship was
already well south of the Faeroes, out in the vanguard to trailblaze the way
for the battleships.

Rudel was on the flight deck when the last of Ritter’s three planes landed.
“Good job in rough seas like this,” he said, congratulating Ritter as he
jumped down from his cockpit.

“I’ve practiced that twenty times,” said Ritter. “Just as I made you do the
same last week! Everyone wanted to know why they had to train for landing
with a short hookup cable. Now you know.”

“I was not aware we even had this ship!” Rudel was elated to be among
the elite team of pilots chosen for this mission.

“That’s because it was kept secret, Rudel, and listed as a seaplane tender.
They had the ship in an enclosed berthing at Kiel, and even its trial runs in
the Baltic were kept a secret. I was only told about it last month.”

“How do you hide a ship like this, Marco?”

“Ask the Russians how they hid that rocket cruiser of theirs, eh? Well, we
have a few tricks up our sleeve too. Right about now the big ships will be pounding the British on the Faeroes. In thirty minutes we go up again, this time to look for the convoys. You’ll get all the fun, Rudel. I’ll have to be up there on overwatch again.”

“Good to know you’ll be there, Oberleutnant!

It was only Commodore Ritchie’s sad fate that his convoy, HX-69, was in the wrong place at the wrong time when Rudel and the other two Ju-87 Stukas came calling. Ritchie was on the weather deck of Ulysses with his field glasses supervising the detachment of all ships bound for Methil. They would have to go up and over Dunnet head on the north cape of Scotland, and were among the first detachments after receiving orders to scatter the convoy a day early.

He heard the planes before he saw them, craning his neck up to scour the grey clouds. Then the sound of the engines increased, gathering strength and power, and he heard a chilling wail when he saw the first plane diving out of a cloud bank like a falcon. It was Hans Rudel, leading in his birds of prey, and he bored right in on the number three ship in the first line, Voco, a small 8600 ton tanker carrying lubricating oil. True to form, he put his 500 pound bomb right on the target, blasting right through the deck and igniting the volatile cargo below in the holds with a broiling explosion.

Kelbergen, the number one ship in the second steaming row was the next to be hit by Rudel’s wing mate, a Dutch freighter carrying steel scrap. The 500 pound bomb missed and straddled the ship, but the pilot had also dropped the two smaller 100 pound wing mounted bombs, and one struck home to start a fire on the aft section near the main cargo access. The third Stuka straddled the Lylepark with its 500 pound bomb, and the hit was close enough to hole the hull.

“Where in blazes did they come from?” Richie kept looking nervously about, dreading more planes falling from the sky, but none came. If Graf Zeppelin had been ordered in, the heavier strike wing aboard would have had a real feast here, but in Ritchie’s mind the damage to Voco was bad enough.

“Send to R.A.F. Stornoway,” he said to his First Watch Officer. “Tell them we bloody well need fighter cover out here. Jerry has pulled a rabbit out of his hat. Those were Stukas!”

* * *
R.A.F. Stornoway got the plaintive call, but they had little more than a few Avro Anson bombers at hand to do anything about it. The base was still under construction, being built on a former golf course in the windy northern Isle of Lewis off the coast of Scotland. There were also 12 Fairy Albacore bi-plane torpedo bombers stationed there in 827 Squadron, but neither plane was likely to be sent to mix it up with German fighters or Stukas.

The storm crows were just the heralds of more trouble to come. An hour later Ritchie heard a strident call from the forward watch. A ship had been sighted on the horizon, and now he was staring through his field glasses at what was obviously the rising silhouette of a warship. His one hope was that it was a Royal Navy battleship sent to bolster their escort. What else would be at large on these waters? HMS Arrow, out in front, was sent to see about it, advancing at high speed and signaling by lantern.

What they got back was the bright roar of distant guns, and the unwelcome plumes of heavy shells, two big rounds falling into the sea ahead of the destroyer. The battleship Hindenburg had just fired its first shots in anger.

“Signal all ships, emergency turn! Thirty points to starboard!”

The signal flags went up, followed by a frantic message from the W/T room: HX-69 under attack by German dive bombers and large enemy warship. It would soon have to be amended. There was more than one wolf in the pack that had found his sheep. Krutschmer’s U-99 had signaled the position of the convoy, and the information was quickly passed on to Lütjens.

Now the hunt began.

HMS Winchelsea was the first ship to be hit. The old Admiralty W Class destroyer had been laid down in 1917, and had little more than four QF 4.7-inch guns to challenge the oncoming enemy. But it did have speed at 34 knots. The ship had done little in the war thus far, except to pick up stranded sailors sunk by German U boats in the Western Approaches. Now it faced a real minute of horror as it realized the size and nature of the enemy threat. Hindenburg turned its extensive secondary batteries loose on the British, and the destroyer was soon hit and burning from three 5.9-inch guns. Winchelsea thought it might get close enough to get a few of its 21 inch torpedoes in the water, but that was not to be. The destroyer was suddenly struck by a bigger round, and not from one of the battleships.
A sleek, dark ship came surging ahead of the main German force, its battle ensign snapping stiffly in the breeze as it took the lead position in the formation. It moved so quickly that the British thought it was a fast light cruiser, but it was something quite more, the new German battlecruiser *Kaiser*. At 35,400 tons, it was as heavy as a *Revenge* Class British Battleship, yet could work up to the amazing speed of 36 knots. Designed like a pocket battleship, it had two twin-gun turrets forward and a third aft. Originally meant to be an improved *Deutschland* Class ship, it was supposed to get the same 11-inch guns, but soon evolved into something better when Raeder proposed they use the same turrets that had been designed for *Bismarck*, with a total of six 15-inch guns assigned to the ship.

Raeder had originally planned to build twelve Panzerschiffe, each with 11-inch guns, but the larger weapons simply proved to be much more effective, and the shipyards could not build out the whole Kreutzer program. Only two had been built, *Rhineland* and *Westfalen*, and they were now escorting *Graf Zeppelin* home. But *Kaiser* had been born of the same litter, bigger, faster, more powerful, and it was the ship that broke the back of HMS *Winchelsea* with one smashing 15-inch round.

When Commodore Ritchie saw the destroyer blow up, he knew the fate of his convoy was sealed. HMS *Arrow* launched herself bravely at the oncoming German ships, but soon got pummeled by the combined fire of forty 5.7 inch guns between the three German warships. Ritchie gave the frantic order for all ships to scatter at once, and the feeding frenzy was on.

*Kaiser* began blasting away at the slow merchant ships, striking the British ships *Barrdale* and *Martland* soon after the *Arrow* went down. Then came *Bismarck*, next in the line with her eight 15-inch guns feasting on the gasoline tankers *Tornus* and *Pontfield*, and ripping them apart with raging fire consuming the ships when they were hit. Finally came the Lord of the Manor, looming up like a massive steel castle, the mighty *Hindenburg*.

Now 16-inch guns were turned on the convoy, blasting the steel carrier *Penrose*, and three other merchant ships. Tall columns of thick black smoke rose into the grey sky, as the carnage continued. They died in great numbers, *Beaverdale*, *Roxby*, *Bridgepoole*, blasted away and keeling over in fiery wrecks. *Lord Byron* would not make its appointed delivery of grain to Methil, and the Benzene in *Dosina* was burning on the sea.

Commodore Ritchie watched in horror as one ship after another came
under those fearful guns, blown up, burned, their cargo and crews scuppered into the sea. As the heavy rounds began to fall near *Ulysses*, he called out in desperation. “Where’s the bloody navy! God help us!”

A 5.7-inch round struck his ship, jarring the bridge. Another gave the ship a hard thump amidships, and a bigger 15-inch round fell just twenty yards off his port side, the blast enough to rock *Ulysses* with its heavy swell and splinter the weather decks with shrapnel. The W/T room was still sending out its frantic S.O.S when another round silenced the radio, killing every man there. *Ulysses* was burning, and tears streaked the face of Commodore Ritchie as he watched his flock cut down, ship by ship.

*Kaiser* had put on speed to get down near the last ranks and was busy sending the crude oil tanker *Taron* to its fiery doom, and the sulfur on *Olympos* would never reach Belfast, nor the fuel oil on *Tricula*. It would be the greatest single tonnage lost for cargo ships in the war thus far, with 28 ships lost before Commodore Ritchie spotted even more misery bearing down on them. Another dark silhouette was on the horizon, coming up behind the German ships, and he saw the glow of fire from them as well. To his great relief and surprise, the shells they fired were not aimed his way, but at the German battleships instead!

All that night Captain Patterson’s task force had been laboring through the heavy seas, and the long hour of agony when the Germans slowed to feast on the convoy had given him just the break he needed. *King George V* and *Prince of Wales* were on the horizon, and the Royal Navy was coming to fight.

Aboard battleship *Hindenburg*, Lütjens had been watching the carnage unfold, not unmoved by the plight of the men he was putting into the sea, but this was what he had come here to do, the hard edge of war. When the first rounds came in they were well short, but he turned and studied the fall of the shells. Very strange, he thought as he saw the close pattern of four shells abreast. Two twin-gun turrets would almost never land their shells with such precision in a single line like that. He first thought he was dealing with the older British Battleships in the Revenge Class, but the British ships were getting closer, and coming much too fast. He turned to Captain Adler with a question in his eyes.

“These look to be something new, would you agree?”

“They do, sir. Most likely the new British *King George V* class ships
we’ve seen working out on trials. Shall we turn and give battle?”

“Those ships have twenty 14-inch guns,” Lütjens considered.

“And we have fourteen 15-inch guns with Bismarck and Kaiser, and our eight 16-inch guns will make all the difference,” said Adler.

“Possibly,” said Lütjens, “but our orders were to get after the convoys, and this we have done. Look, Adler! There must be thirty ships burning and sinking out there. No. We have done enough for one day, and a fight with the Royal Navy here is not part of our operational plan. Come to 220 and give me thirty knots at once. Signal all ships to follow.”

“But sir!” Adler’s eyes were sharp and on fire as well, his dark hair and aquiline features grim and set. He wanted to sink his talons into something more than a merchant ship, and saw great advantage here. “We outgun them!” he complained. “We should fight!”

“Yes, we certainly do, but you do not outgun me, Captain, unless I have miscounted the stripes on my jacket cuff. Second my order! We are moving south into the Atlantic.”

Adler stiffened under the polite but pointed rebuke, and turned to his Executive officer. “Come to 220 and thirty knots. A pair of British battleships has the Admiral worried he might miss his tea.”

Lütjens turned slowly, eyeing the Captain with an unfriendly look. “It may interest you to know that there is more going on here than a Sunday jaunt through this convoy. There is a war on, Captain, and a major operation is getting underway even as I take the time to explain myself here. We have a part to play in that campaign, and that is exactly what we will do. And if you ever make such a remark to me again, particularly on this bridge, I will have you sent down to the brig for insubordination!”

Adler raised his chin, lips tight, but knew better than to say anything else.

“I beg your pardon sir, I only meant—”

“We both know what you meant, Adler. Don’t worry, something tells me you will get your battle with the Royal Navy soon enough.”
Part XI

The Rock

“Look at a stone cutter hammering away at his rock, perhaps a hundred times without as much as a crack showing in it. Yet at the hundred-and-first blow it will split in two, and I know it was not the last blow that did it, but all that had gone before.”

—Jacob August Riis
Chapter 31

The Spanish called it Jebel Tariq, the name of the imposing limestone mountain that stood as one of the Pillars of Hercules, and to the rest of the world Gibraltar had long been called “the Rock.” It had been Britain’s impregnable fortress for generations, honeycombed with miles of tunnels packed with supplies, and capable of withstanding a siege for months. It had withstood fourteen sieges since the 11th Century, with walls, fortifications, bastions and more modern gun casemates studding the craggy limestone rock on every side. But in spite of this venerable reputation as an unconquerable fortress, British war planners knew the invincibility of Gibraltar was certainly a myth now in modern times, and they saw it as highly vulnerable to any concerted attack.

To begin with, it had only one airfield at the far north of the five kilometer peninsula, dominated by a prominent limestone mountain, and this field lay on exposed ground that could be easily brought under enemy guns on the other side of the Spanish frontier and put out of action in a matter of hours. In 1940 Spain did not permit offensive planes there, and so the British had no fighters or bombers to speak of beyond those assigned to reconnaissance roles, and a few Sunderland seaplanes floating in the harbor anchorage. This also left the Rock open to bombing missions, though it endured these with surprising ease, the latest being a 64 plane raid mounted by the Vichy French in reprisal for the attack on their fleet. The French managed to sink a tug and coastal lighter docked in the harbor but did little more than this.

Companies of Royal Engineers still drilled through the innards of the rock, with quarrymen and Artisan Engineers still tunneling to create a warren of underground rooms that could shelter thousands of troops, unfortunately the garrison was not that large in 1940. At the outbreak of the war only two battalions were in the garrison, the 2nd Battalion, King’s Regiment and the 2nd Somerset Battalion. These were augmented by two more battalions by August of 1940 with the arrival of the 4th Devonshire Battalion and the 4th Black Watch Battalion. These troops, plus an assortment of 3 inch and 3.7 inch AA guns, including ten 40mm Bofors were all that manned the
labyrinthine tunnels, with one battalion holding the lonely frontier near the airfield, and three farther back in the town and fortress Rock.

The strength of Gibraltar did not lay in its sheer limestone cliffs or gun batteries, like the old 9.2 inch naval guns that covered the straits, nor did it rest in the sinew of the four battalions deployed there. The powerful Royal Navy units of Force H that used the harbor as their primary base were the real strength of the Rock. A battleship that might risk the 9.2 inch shore batteries and run the strait with impunity would not dare to even contemplate such a move while ships like *Rodney* and *Nelson* were anchored with guns that could range out all the way to Spanish Morocco. As Sir Alexander Godley once stated: “With His Majesty's ships controlling the harbor we may rest assured that this important jewel of the Crown is in safe hands.” Thus if Gibraltar were to be taken, the Royal Navy would first have to be forced out to sea.

This was the task handed to Goering’s Luftwaffe, a task he believed he could undertake with every chance of success, for there were no squadrons of *Spitfires* and *Hurricanes* waiting to oppose his bombers. So it was that the Luftwaffe became the real spearhead of the attack, while the army assembled its substantial force of two full corps staged on the Spanish border near Bayonne. The ground element would cross the frontier even as the first bombers assembled at French airfields for their preliminary raid, with six squadrons of Ju-88As flying from Bordeaux to target British vessels anchored at Gibraltar.

* * *

**Lieutenant** Douglas Dawes had been up on O’Hara’s battery most of the day, taking in the spectacular views of the bay while he served as supply liaison officer for the Royal Artillery. A relative newcomer to the Rock, he was “fresh off the boat” as the old sods would say, and still given to walking about in his officer’s jacket. A tall, handsome man, he had come to the service the easy way, through connections that were well established in the convoluted British aristocracy. Now Dawes was making his way down the weathered stone steps, his duty here finished as he was turning over the clipboard to a new young Lieutenant and heading to a new post the next morning.

I’ll miss the view from up here, and the nice cool breeze, he thought.
Tomorrow he was going down to the harbor to report for a stint as Duty Officer on the North Mole. At least he’d get a nice close look at the battleships, he thought. From way up here they looked like toy boats in a bathtub, but he expected they would be quite impressive once he got right down on the water’s edge.

That night he took a last meal at Bleak House, the Officer’s Mess on Europa Point at the southern end of the Rock. “Off to mingle with the cuttlefish?” said another young officer. They were often given to hang names like that on the rankers, the enlisted men or throngs of sailors that would come ashore when the big ships came into the harbor. That was one thing Dawes never got the hang of himself. Yes, he was an officer, and accustomed to certain privileges that came with his Lieutenant’s bars. There was nice fine linen on the tables here. Decent wine was served with the meals, and brandy after. The rankers would get none of this when they lined up in the mess halls aboard those ships, but Dawes was not one to lord his position over any other man.

“I’ve heard things are a bit busy on the Mole,” the other man said. “You’ll have to get in the swing of things right off the bat.”

“That I will,” said Dawes, but he had no idea just how busy he would be after a last restful sleep and early rising to take his post. “I’m to report at 05:00.”

“Ungodly hour,” said the other man.”

“Which is why I’ll need my beauty sleep tonight,” said Dawes.

Another officer, a man named Cornwell, had listened in from across the table and spoke up. “Well you’d better hit the bunk soon, Mister Dawes. From what I’ve heard Force H is weighing anchor just after sunset.”

“Is that so, Corny? Drat. I had hoped to get a good close look at old Rodney or Nelson tomorrow.”

“Then you’d best get down to the mole after supper. Something’s up, I tell you.”

Dawes raised an eyebrow. “Probably just another run out to Malta. HMS Glorious left some days ago. I’ve heard they’re still trying to ferry planes out to Malta in case the Italians find their backbone and want to do anything about it.”

“Not bloody likely,” said the man.

Dawes emptied his wine glass, setting it down and dabbing his lips with a
napkin. “Well gentlemen, no brandy after dinner for me, and I’ll have to have my evening smoke on the way to the barracks.”

He excused himself and was out the door, glad in some respects to be away from the banter at table. People were always teeing up ideas over what was going on in the war, but no one ever really knew anything. But the rumors tonight began to take on new meaning when he took a brief stroll past the old Moorish lookout and along Windmill Hill barracks until he could get a decent look at the harbor.

The officer had been correct. Something was afoot. He saw that three destroyers had already slipped their berthings at the Destroyer Camber and were out through the main harbor entrance into the bay. That was standard operating procedure if Force H was about to sortie again. The destroyers were always first out the gate, sent to sweep the bay and snoop about in the channel to the south just in case an enemy submarine might be lurking. There were quite a few destroyers there at the moment, but he could already see two more getting underway.

So where is the Royal Navy off to tonight, he wondered? Corny was spot on with his remark. He could see that both Nelson and Rodney had good steam up, and all the cruisers. The whole fleet was putting out to sea tonight, which could only mean that someone was going to be sorry they decided to pick a fight with the Royal Navy. The sight of the battleships made him feel proud.

Perhaps I should have signed on with the Navy, he thought. Here I ended up with the Royal Artillery, a bloody Support and Logistics Officer. It was hardly the sort of post a man would boast about after the war. All he had been doing was shuffling about at a few 25 pounder batteries up on Windmill Hill, and coordinating with the bigger shore batteries.

Ah well, he thought. I suppose I should be grateful that I’ve a nice warm bunk to be settling into, with a nice glass of wine in my belly tonight. It really doesn’t seem much like there’s a war on. The French got their dander up and raised a ruckus here last month. That was all the excitement we’ve had out here. There’s been a lot of talk at Officer’s Mess about the French Fleet these days. Word has been going round that there was a scrap down south and a couple of our ships took a few hard knocks. Come to think of it, I haven’t seen the two older battleships lately. Both Barham and Resolution are still out to sea. Now these last three here will be joining them. The battleship Valiant
also had a good head of steam up, so that will empty the cupboard here.

What could be going on that needs all these ships at sea at one time? Were the rumors true? Was there a battle on with the French Fleet down south? And what about all the talk that Admiral North was being relieved and heading back to England?

Well that settles it, he thought. Just like me to get a post at the North Mole right after all the big ships slip away. Now I’ll just be sitting up there in that dreary tower watching rusty old merchant ships and fishing trawlers. It will be no fun at all. He had a ten hour shift the first day out—just sit there, keep a lookout on the mole and answer the phone. It was going to be a very boring assignment, or so he thought.

But he was very, very wrong.
Chapter 32

Just after 01:00 on the 15th of September the sirens began to wail when Gibraltar’s lone early warning radar, one of only three presently in the Mediterranean, picked up the inbound German raid. Almost immediately the long thin columns of the searchlights reached up into the dark skies, probing the soft late summer night for any sign of the enemy. Troops rushed to the 3.7 and 40mm batteries, elevating the thin barrels skyward as the first, distant rumble of the aircraft engines could be heard. The crews had scored their very first kill the previous month against the French, shooting down a single plane, and swiveled their guns into action with a jaunty confidence that would soon dissipate as the whistling bombs began to fall.

Dawes was awakened by the noise, sitting up bleary eyed in his bunk and hearing the haunting wail of the sirens. What in blazes? Are the French at it again? Then the bombs began to fall and he had the presence of mind to get dressed and look for a pith helmet.

Outside he ran towards the Naval Signals Station where he could get a good look at the harbor and town on the west side of the island. It was nearly a full moon, so he could see the town and harbor easily enough, and noted the dark shadows of the ships that remained anchored. There didn’t seem to be any trouble in the harbor for the moment, and the lights of the town itself had all been blackened. The sight of the searchlights fingerling the darkness gave him an eerie feeling. Then he heard the thrum of engines and a sound unlike any plane he had heard before. It was a screeching wail, like a demon from hell, a howling sound that chilled his blood. Then came the first awful crash of the bombs.

There were explosions down at the southern end of the town, and a fire there. He could soon see that bombs had fallen near the Grand Parade, a wide area where troops would stand in ceremonial parade, and the navy bands would play. The light from the fire soon illuminated a warship there, so there was still some remnant of Force H at hand. Moments later he saw bright tracer rounds leap up from the harbor area, and heard the sharp crack of gunfire. The ship was firing, her stacks now getting up steam that drifted up to be illuminated by the pale moonlight.
The bloody French, he thought, but that wasn’t so.

These were German pilots, veterans of many grueling runs over English soil where they had faced intense anti-aircraft gunfire along with the superb aerial defense of the R.A.F. The fire put up that night seemed light by comparison, and the German planes soon began to pound known gun installations, the harbor district, the fortified line of pill boxes, and mined wire at the north end of the airfield. The big 9.2-inch gun at O’Hara’s Battery where Dawes had finished his day the previous evening on the top of the Rock got particular attention from the Stukas, receiving three hits within the first hour until it was put out of action. In other places the damage was far less than Goering had promised, though it was immediately clear that he could at least claim one boast—the airfield was pot marked with craters, the main hangers on fire and the old rifle range buildings to the north and east flattened by direct hits.

Now the truth behind the rumors became apparent. Forewarned that the German troops in Southern France were on the move, Force H had slipped its moorings at sunset and taken its heavy units out through the straits and into the Atlantic, where they hovered under the thin air defense umbrella provided by HMS Hermes.

The German Ju-88 night raid was augmented by squadrons of Ju-87 Stukas protected by Bf-109s, and their mission was to target and silence British artillery positions and deal with any ships that remained behind in the anchorage. These were the planes that Dawes had heard, the scream of their diving runs so very jarring to the nerves as they came in. If ever there was a sound that warned of imminent danger, it was the wailing sirens of the ‘Jericho Trumpets’ when the planes swooped in like dark evil crows.

Only one destroyer was left in the harbor when they arrived, the Hotspur, and though it was straddled by two near misses and badly splintered with bomb fragments, it was otherwise unharmed. Lieutenant Dawes stared at the scene, realizing that the war might not be so dull and uneventful after all. It went on for the better part of an hour, and several fires had started down in the town before it was over. When planes began to home in on Windmill Hill Dawes realized he had better get to a shelter.

He huddled there for some time, until the all clear was finally sounded after two in the morning. Rumors passed like fire in the shelter. These were not the French. Talk went round and round about it until a gritty Sergeant, a
man named Hobson, finally chanced to speak up and interrupt the two other officers that had been debating the issue.

“If I may, sir,” the man said darkly. “If the Germans have gone to all this trouble to pay us a visit, we may very well be in for more trouble ahead. I’ve heard 2nd Kings Rifles has all been called out to the wire. Mark my words. They’ll be coming across the lines in due course.”

“I should certainly hope not, Sergeant,” said another Lieutenant in the Artillery. He was one of the officers that always seemed to lay on the old ‘chin chin’ a bit too thick for Dawes’ liking.

“I had my mind set on watching a good filly run the race course tomorrow morning.” The Lieutenant was referring to a makeshift racing circle out beyond the airfield and very near the frontier with Spain. The officers often ran horses there, and bet on the outcome while they had a good smoke, watched by men from the 2nd King’s Rifles, who sat behind their Vickers machine guns in their bunkers guarding the wire, and cheered the horses on.

“Well sir,” said the Sergeant. “If you do go out to the lines tomorrow, I can only hope you have a very fast horse.”

Something about the remark carried a hidden warning, and when the all clear was finally sounded, Dawes kept thinking about it as he finally settled back into his bunk to try and get back to his fitful sleep. What did the Sergeant mean by that? Was he suggesting the Germans might be coming with more than an air raid?

He only managed another two hours sleep before he had to get up and on his way down the hill and up through Buena Vista east of Rosia Bay to the harbor. There he saw that the German pilots were much better at their jobs than the French ever were. There was damage near the Destroyer Camber where Hotspur had been finally driven out to sea, and he saw the wreckage of several buildings off Grand Parade, the smoke from the fires still hanging in the air.

As he continued on, up past the Coaling Island and the old fortified position known as ‘King’s Bastion,’ he heard men talking in small groups by the wharfs and quays, and with worried faces. Soon he came to his tower south of the North Mole, and climbed up to report for duty. He was relieving another haggard looking Lieutenant

“Busy night,” said the man. “ Didn’t get a wink of sleep. Well, At least you’ll have the day shift, and no bother with German planes buzzing about
your ears. I was afraid they would put one of those bloody bombs right on my head!”

Dawes gave him a thin smile, then took his seat in the still warm chair, eyeing the telephone on the desk with some misgiving.

“That’s it,” said the other man. “Any problems and you just ring up the Colonel on the other end of that line. It’ll be dark another hour, so mind your orders should you hear anything out of the ordinary. You can expose the Mole with searchlights, but I wouldn’t get too jumpy. The sun will be up soon, and it’s almost breakfast!” The man smiled, and left Dawes sitting alone in his tower.

* * *

The German planes finished their work and landed at airbases near Seville, where supplies and air fuel had been secretly forward deployed to allow them to replenish and be available for rapid sortie turnover. They would have plenty of time to pound British positions, demolishing the radar station, knocking out several gun batteries, striking Devil’s Tower Camp and the barracks further south at Europa Point. They deliberately avoided targeting the main wharf and docking areas but soon drove the intrepid *Hotspur* out of the harbor—all this while the land assault force moved south.

The frontier gates on the Franco-Spanish border had been thrown open five days earlier, at a little after sunset on September 10, 1940, a full three months earlier than the initial plans had envisioned. It would be slow going at the outset as the long winding columns of motorized infantry made their way through the high mountains to Pamplona, some 60 kilometers away. Two days later the R.A.F. had seen them in the mountain passes, and the alarm had been secretly wired to General Liddell at Gibraltar, allowing Somerville to discretely move Force H out of the harbor.

They were through that town and on their way south through Navarre and then on to Soria. By dawn the Germans had demonstrated the lightning fast ground movement they had been famous for in France during the Blitzkrieg, and were passing through Guadalajara just northeast of Madrid. From there they surged due south to Granada, planning to approach Gibraltar along the coast of the Alboran Sea. It would be a journey of some 650 miles in all, with the columns averaging 30 miles per hour on good roads, slower in the
mountainous regions.

By nightfall on the 15th of September their mad rush south was complete, and they had spent some time resting and assembling the front line units at La Linea. There they met up with forward elements that had been flown in to Spanish airfields to begin surveying the British lines and sighting for mortars and artillery. They worked closely with Spanish troops who knew this ground and could show them areas offering the best cover for infantry assault. They took particular note of the British bunker positions, assigning support fires and demolitions teams to each attack.

By the time the Luftwaffe got about their business that night, the element of surprise was long gone, except for a few little tricks of the trade the German army would bring with them. One would be the swift pre-dawn assault on September 16th, by a forward deployed unit of the elite Brandenburg Commandos. This 150 man contingent slipped into the bay in jet-black rubber swift boats and were approaching the prominent North Mole of the Harbor. Others had secretly moved in as frogmen, and were already lingering near the mole. One plan called for them to approach in the hold of a merchant ship claiming to have been the victim of a torpedo attack, but it was discarded in favor of a bold night attack by boat.

They waited until the pre-dawn hour, when the waning gibbous moon that was still near full would be very low, and already behind the 1700 foot high mountains overshadowing Algeciras across the bay. As soon as the moon was below the highest peak there, the first boats came in quietly, the black paddles dipping silently in the still waters. But there was just enough light for the sentry on the mole to catch the wet gleam on the sides of the lead boat. He stopped, peering into the darkness, and called out a time honored challenge, the litany of the Chief Warder of the Tower of London as he made his final round with the Keys each night to lock His Majesty’s Tower.

“Halt! Who goes there?”

Silence. Then came a voice in proper English saying they were seamen off a Spanish lighter that had been towed in to the smaller harbor of Algeciras to the west. The proper response to the challenge was, of course, only two words: “The Keys.” Had that response been given, the sentry would have asked: “Whose Keys?” to which the unexpected visitors should have answered: “King George’s Keys.” That done the sentry would have simply said: “Pass King George’s Keys, all’s well,” and carried on with his watch,
but instead he quickly unshouldered his rifle to take aim.

Unfortunately the Germans had already taken aim as well. The crack unit was armed with sub-machine guns and there came a short, sharp burst that cut the sentry down. Then the first boat came scudding against the mole and the Brandenburgers scrambled up with demolition charges, wearing dark black uniforms and caps and racing swiftly along the Mole. They reached a narrow viaduct, which ran just north of the seaplane moorings and connected the mole to the shore at a spit of land that was once called “The Devil’s Tongue.”

The gunfire had just broken the silence when the telephone jangled at the harbor observation tower. Lieutenant Douglas Dawes was on duty that morning, still bleary eyed after a fitful night’s rest on Windmill Hill. Now he was Harbor Defense Officer for his ten hour shift in the North Mole Tower, peering into the shadows through the dirty glass windows when the phone rang.

“Yes? Duty Officer, North Mole.”

“What in blazes is going on there? Was that gunfire? Is there movement on the Mole? Expose! I should have you court martialed!”

“Right away sir!” Dawes put down the telephone and gave the order: “Expose the Mole!” Searchlights switched on, bathing the whole area in bleak white light, and Dawes could see men running in a crouch along the viaduct, and the slow rotation of one of the 6-inch naval gun batteries there—which suddenly went up in a tremendous explosion. The Brandenburgers were there to lay charges on the guns that could face north at the German assembly area and put them out of service. Now they were racing across the viaduct to the Devil’s Tongue.

A lone machine gun opened up from a sand bagged position on the tongue, and Dawes saw three of the German commandos fall. Then he heard the lead commando squad returning fire in sharp bursts with their sub-machine guns, and a firefight was on. The Germans ran for the cover of warehouses on the north end of the tongue, tossing in Model 24 grenades, the famous “Potato Mashers,” before bursting in with their guns blazing away. Others threw a variant that had been modified to produce smoke, which rolled like a thick white fog, masking the narrow viaduct. Lieutenant Dawes watched, almost in awe at the precision and ruthless advance of the Brandenburgers.
They were led by Leutnant Wilhelm Walther, the man who had captured the Meuse Bridge with an eight man team from this very same unit during Operation Fall Gelb in the battle for France. Walther already had 25 men over the viaduct and into the warehouses, and they were systematically clearing those buildings. More grenades soon silenced the chatter of the British machinegun and suddenly Dawes realized he was in a most precarious position, alone in his tower watching the steady advance of these elite German commandos.

Another 6-inch naval gun, positioned just south of the Devil’s Tongue, rotated and blasted away at the warehouses at near point blank range. It was at this point that Dawes thought he had better get down from the tower, just as a spray of small arms fire shattered the glass windows. He scurried down the ladder, with rounds snapping off the metal tower legs with bright sparks, and then leapt to the ground, the whine of ricocheting bullets frightening him out of his wits. Taking a deep breath, he crawled behind a shed at the edge of the Harbor Recreation Ground, then raced across the field into the edge of the town near the Gibraltar Post Office. Eventually he made his way south to the King’s Bastion near the Harbor Coaling Island, where he reported to the Flag Officer there for new orders.

“What was wrong with your old orders?” The man bristled at him, but with level British calm he folded his arms and simply said: “Well sir, the Germans seem to have shot my observation tower to pieces, and very nearly skewered me at the same time.” King George’s Tower had fallen.

The Flag Officer finally looked at him, seeing the soiled uniform from his long crawl to safety on the recreation field, and noting a nick on his left shoulder, and the stain of blood there. “I see… Then get yourself to the Hospital and see about that shoulder, Lieutenant. You can report back when you’ve had proper medical attention.”

Dawes saluted and was on his way. His wound was not bad, a mere scratch from a grazing bullet, but it would not be the last he would receive in the next 72 hours as the British Garrison dug in its heels and began to fight for its life, and the life of Britain’s position in the Western Mediterranean. On that day, September 16, 1940, Spain made a formal announcement that they had joined Italy, and Vichy France as a member of the European Axis powers.

High on the hills of the upper Rock, a troop of jittery Barbary Macaque
monkeys chattered restlessly. The German bombers had frightened them badly the previous night and, sensing imminent danger, they deftly skittered down the craggy slopes and over the Devil’s Tower Road towards the shore. No man on the airfield watch saw them go, nor any man of the 2nd Battalion, King’s Rifles on the frontier line. Somehow they slipped through the minefields and wire unnoticed, scrabbling along the rocky shores of Mala Bahia and leaving the high, bomb scarred limestone cliffs of Gibraltar behind. With them they carried away the legend that as long as these troops of monkeys held forth on the Rock, the territory would remain under British rule. No man in the garrison knew it just then, but the Barbary Macaques were leaving.
Chapter 33

Captain Christopher Wells was on the bridge of Glorious, and well on his way to the Azores, having been hastily summoned to this new post by Admiral Tovey. There he was to meet with HMS Furious and a small convoy, escorted by two cruisers and twelve destroyers. His own task force would provide air cover for the newly planned and renamed Operation Alloy, and his heavy escort in the battleship Valiant with four more destroyers would provide any needed naval muscle for the landing.

“Look out Captain,” said Lieutenant Woodfield. “This signal has just come in from Gibraltar. It looks like the Germans are going to have a go at the Rock!”

Wells took the message, eyeing it darkly as he learned the air strikes had begun and German troops were reportedly massing on the Spanish Frontier just north of the territory at that moment. Here he was heading west to the Azores, with his first outing as nominal task force commander, and looking fitfully over his shoulder and wishing he had his ship back with Force H for the real fight that was brewing up.

“Damn,” he swore. “We slip out the back door just as Jerry comes knocking. I’ve half a mind to get back there and give them what for.”

“Don’t go getting a big head, Welly,” said Woodfield. “Leave that row to Somerville and Force H.”

“But he hasn’t any real air cover now,” said Wells. “Hermes can throw up a few fighters, but something tells be the Germans will becoming full on. I’ve a bad feeling about this.”

“Right,” said Woodfield. “Why do you think we’re out here anyway? If we lose Gibraltar we’ll need anchorages down this way, and the Azores are a good place to start. We ought to go ahead and take Madiera and the Canary Islands as well, before the Germans get ideas about them.”

“We may indeed,” said Wells. He had received a secret briefing on the operation he was now providing cover for. Two ocean liners, SS Karanja, and the Polish Merchant liner Sobieski, were packed with the 1st and 5th Royal Marine Battalions and the 8th Battalion of the Argyll & Sutherland Highlanders. They had been held in readiness in British Ports and reinforced
at the last minute by 2 Commando, with the whole contingent code named “Paradox Force.” Commanded by Brigadier General Morford, their mission was to seize Fayal Island and Porto Del Gada Harbor, as well as San Miguel Harbor at Horta. The Commandos would land and occupy Terceira as a suitable place to begin building an airfield.

“Three battalions to grab these islands,” said Wells. “They might do a world better if they were on their way to Gibraltar now. The garrison there is fairly light.”

“No since throwing good money after bad,” said Woodfield. “Pardon that remark, but if the Germans come in great strength, as I believe they will, then it’s only a matter of time for our boys on the Rock. Better we get something in return, so buck up, Captain. You’ve been in on all our offensive operations thus far, and this time I think we’ll pull things off without a hitch.”

“Yes? Well it’s not a real fight. We won’t find anything there but the local militia or island police. At least at Dakar we were ready to have a go at the French, until those bloody battleships showed up. Something tells me we have a long way to go before we can really get in the ring with the Germans again.”

“Tell that to the Black Watch tonight,” Woodfield admonished, and Wells gave him a nod, his thoughts with the troops back on the Rock now, knowing what they would likely be facing in the days ahead. He also knew that Force H would have put to sea immediately, and there would be no way off the peninsula for any man in the garrison.

* * *

The Germans were bringing the equivalent of a full division to the assault, composed of tough, veteran troops, while two more motorized divisions watched their back and flank along the Portuguese border. The planners gave far too much credit to their adversary that day in accounting for a possible British landing on the Portuguese coast. The Royal Navy and Army were still fiddling about with a far less ambitious plan to take small Atlantic island outposts instead, and barely managing to scrape up the troops and transport shipping necessary for those modest operations. A larger landing in Portugal was out of the question.

High on the North Face of the Rock, up past King’s Lines and Pidsley’s
Advance, there was a hidden observation post with a long view slit cut into the limestone. It had a spectacular view of the whole airfield, and the men inside soon heard the boom and thunder of artillery fire, and saw the first rounds kick up dust and clumps of earth on the field. The initial barrage lasted twenty minutes, ending with rounds of smoke fired by German Nebelwerfer batteries that enshrouded the whole scene.

Down in one of the forward pill boxes, the troops heard what sounded like the rumble and rattle of armor. “Tanks!” came the warning shout, and a few old 2 pounder guns began to fire. Soon there came the booming sound of explosions, which heartened the troops when they thought their defensive fire had scored hits. As the smoke thinned, however, they gaped at the scene, seeing what looked like squadrons of miniature tanks grinding their way forward into the minefields and wire, and then blowing up, one after another.

“What in blazes?” One man said as he stared at the diminutive tanks, no more than five feet long and just under two feet high. The Germans called them the *Leichter Ladungsträger*, or ‘light charge carrier,’ with a 60kg demolition charge that was designed to be deliberately detonated to clear mines, barbed wire, blow bridges or blast pill boxes and buildings. Designated the Goliath, the German troops called them “Beetle Tanks,” and they were crawling in great numbers over the mined area, blowing themselves to smithereens.

Behind them came the German assault engineers, all experts at clearing mine fields, and two full battalions in strength. They would soon be followed by the hardened troops of the 98th Regiment, 1st Mountain Division, the Edelweiss Division that would have conquered Europe’s tallest peak at Mount Elbrus in the history Fedorov knew. They were advancing towards the area known as ‘the racetrack, a roadway that circled the airfield runway and rifle range in the flat land north of the Rock. There several detachments of 2nd Kings Rifles held forth in slit trenches and improved positions behind an anti-tank ditch that cut across the road near the small Passport Office building. Needless to say, the men they saw advancing on their positions were not carrying passports to gain entry, but rifles, machineguns and demolition charges.

Finally alerted to the danger, the 25 pounder artillery positioned at the old Windsor Battery on the rising slopes of the Devil’s Tower, and 5.25-inch QF naval guns around Princess Anne’s battery on Willis Plateau, began to fire.
One gun there had been damaged by the German *Stukas*, but three more began firing at the exposed ground crawling with enemy troops and engineers.

The Germans endured losses from artillery and mines that the Goliaths had not cleared, but pressed doggedly forward, finally reaching the anti-tank ditch, which now gave the infantry excellent cover. There they rushed at the British defensive positions in well coordinated attacks, the rattle of MG34 machineguns answered by Vickers HMGs resounding from the imposing sheer cliffs of the Rock. At times the fighting was hand to hand, but the weight of Germans numbers carried the position.

One battalion each of engineers and mountain troops focused attention on an area known as ‘North Front,” on the western side of the isthmus where the Passport Office was. A second kampfgruppe of two battalions were assaulting the hangars and service buildings at the north center of the field in the Race Course area. Squad after squad raced forward, weathering intense defensive fire to get close enough to fling demolition satchel charges and grenades at the line of the defense. The casualties were heavy, but the Germans would take both positions within the hour, forcing the remainder of the King’s Rifles to withdraw back over the runway in a mad dash to the cemetery where their main line of defense was established.

There were two burial grounds, one dubbed the Jewish Cemetery in the west and the main cemetery in the center, where pathways meandered through the crosses and tombstones, which now provided cover for the second line of defense held by a company of the 2nd Somerset Light Infantry Battalion. As the King’s Rifles withdrew, these men peeled off and jogged right along the line to cattle sheds on the east end of the isthmus.

The Jewish cemetery was open ground, and too exposed, so the line bent back as far as Devil’s Tower Road, then through the main cemetery to the cattle sheds. By 11:00 the Germans had brought up elements of the Grossdeutschland Regiment, and a company of the 3rd Battalion of the mountain troops made another daring assault by boat on a narrow sandy beach near the Slaughterhouse. The place was well named, as Vickers machineguns positioned by the Somersets in the Cattle Sheds and Devil’s Tower Camp exacted a very heavy toll on the beach, decimating the leading platoon before both artillery fire and two well timed *Stuka* attacks silenced those guns. The remaining infantry quickly occupied the Slaughterhouse,
now eyeing the tall sheer cliffs ahead.

There was only one defile that they could climb, and it would be one for the record books in the annuals of war. 2nd platoon led the way, with Leutnant Groth urging his men on. Ropes with hooks were fired up in special mortars, and though several failed to take hold, others were lodged in the craggy rocks. The men began to climb. The defile would take them up to the Great Siege Tunnels, on the upper galleries of the north face of the Rock.

Dating from the 18th century, the tunnels had been dug by British engineers during the time of the American Revolution to withstand an assault by French and Spanish troops, the fourteenth attempt to seize Gibraltar, and the last until Groth and his mountain troops showed up. The tunnel had been built to reach an inaccessible crag known as The Notch, and place a battery there. Now the hidden tunnel housed generators to power the 3rd Searchlight Regiment. From there a stone stairway led down to the Middle Gallery below, deep inside the massive limestone mountain.

At places the cliff was so sheer that it was near vertical, but the mountain troops continued their climb, up 650 feet to the 200 meter line on their terrain maps, taking only sporadic fire from the cattle sheds. The first squad of seven men led by Groth himself flung their demolition charges through the embrasure openings that overlooked the airfield and cemetery, blowing away the rusting iron bars, and then they began to work their way in through those same openings. The Germans were inside the Rock with this single squad, and their mission was to find and destroy any useful enemy facilities they could, and eliminate any observation posts near that location.

Far below, the 2nd Kings Rifles were fighting for their lives in the cemetery, with the newly dead lying atop the cold stone grave plates in a macabre scene. The batteries at Governor’s Lookout and the Prince William Battery gave them as much support as they could, while under ceaseless attack from the screaming Stukas. It was soon clear to General Liddell that the position was lost, and he ordered his men to begin a gradual withdrawal through the cemetery, across Devil’s Tower Road and through some makeshift facilities that had once been used as an Isolation Hospital. They would reform near the old Moorish Castle, which blocked the switchback road leading up to the tunnel complex entrance. The north face of the Rock itself was a near vertical cliff, which could not be climbed by anyone without special equipment and training. So the action shifted west towards the Land
By 01:00 the Germans had overrun the two forward defense lines and taken the whole of the airfield. Now the grenadiers of the Grossdeutschland Regiment focused their effort on the inundated area just south of the Jewish cemetery. There was a narrow causeway that crossed the inundation to an area known as the Land Port, very near the position already occupied by the Brandenburgers. As if by pre-arranged plan, the commandos now renewed their assault, fighting their way across the market square against opposition by B company of the 2nd Somerset Light. It was their intention to clear the area south of the causeway and so allow the grenadiers to cross the inundation.

With ruthless efficiency, the Brandenburgers stormed the Grand Casemates, silencing the guns there. The grenadiers surged over the causeway, led by their tough recon battalion, and the Germans built up enough strength to force B Company back towards the old Moorish Castle where the exhausted King’s Rifles were taking up new positions.

By 02:00 the Germans were preparing to attack this position, as the remaining two battalions of the Grossdeutschland Regiment rolled south and heavily reinforced the area taken near the Grand Casemates. Soon their assault teams were working their way in to the north town area, opposed by the 4th Devonshire Battalion and elements of 2nd Somerset Light in house to house fighting. It was here that the training and recent combat experience of the Germans made all the difference. They had fought in Poland, and in the lightning dash across France, all while the Devonshire Battalion languished at Gibraltar. The German troops were among the best in their army, and they pressed home a relentless attack, pushing past the Post Office to the Civil Hospital where they flanked the end of the 2nd Somerset’s line at the Moorish Castle, which climbed the hills behind it in fortified tiers of tower and wall.

First built in the 8th century and then restored again in the 11th century, the castle walls and complexes once reached to the edge of the sea. Yet by 1940 only the prominent square Tower of Homage and the Gate House below remained, climbing the steep knees of the towering mass of Jebel Tarik, the name of the mountain which was once called the Rock of Jebel, and has since come to be known as Gibraltar. Its tower stood higher, its Kasbah Keep bigger than any other Moorish fort built on the Iberian Peninsula. It had
endured numerous sieges over the years, shrugging off the cannon fire of previous eras. Now the Germans brought up light infantry guns and began to systematically blast away at the old castle walls and abutments, but the tower stood stolidly unbroken, the crenulated teeth of the stony walls now manned by British troops firing from above. There the proud Union Jack flew from a tall flagpole and the 11th siege of the castle was soon well underway.

The Germans saw that their 75mm infantry guns would make little impression on the hard masonry of the gate wall, and so they called for bigger guns, waiting an hour while troops brought up a 150mm battery from the rear. The Gate House was the first obstacle, which stood as two imposing squarish legs of stone built up in layer after layer of limestone brick. The center receded to a walled off gate with a single vertical embrasure where the barrel of a Vickers machinegun spat fire and steel at anyone approaching. Yet the gun could not be rotated left or right, which made it easy for engineers to approach from the sides of the embrasure and lay demolition charges. The troops that had demolished the massive impregnable fortress of Eben Emael were now about to be tested again.

A massive explosion shook the Gate House, blasting away part of the wall that surrounded the embrasure and shocking the gun crews behind it senseless. Dust and smoke billowed up in a huge mushroom, and engineers pushed on through the soot and broken rock to penetrate the breach.

High above, the wail of a diving Stuka was heard, which delivered a 500 pound bomb to score a direct hit on the nearby Queen Charlotte’s Battery. By 03:00 the ancient fortification that had stood for over 1200 years was being reduced with the fire and steel of modern weapons it had never been built to oppose.

Meanwhile, Groth’s mountain troops had gained access to the upper gallery but, as the alarms went out, Liddell rushed a platoon of the Black Watch, his reserve force inside the Rock, to block their migration down to the Middle Gallery. The pipes played the quick march with drum and skirl, and the strains of “Highland Laddie” echoed through the labyrinth, giving heart to the defenders outside. But as the sun fell lower and the long shadows of the mountains behind Algeciras began to creep over the waters of the bay toward the harbor, it was clear that the weight of the German forces was becoming decisive.

They now had three battalions of combat engineers, the 98th Mountain
Regiment and the Grossdeutschland Regiment all on the line, with the Brandenburgers mixed in and fighting their way down the west coast to take the King’s Bastion near the old Coaling Island. Sir Clive Liddell was evacuating the Governor’s residence where he had set up his headquarters, and heading for the relative safety of the tunnels under the Rock.

Outnumbered three battalions to one, the 4th Devonshires were slowly pushed back, and Liddell had to make a crucial decision. Should he order them to fall back through the town, continuing to bar the way to the main wharf, or should he pull them east up the switchback roads that climbed to Devil’s Gap and the Signals Station beyond? That choice would see his entire force pressed back against the Rock itself, and eventually shut inside. It would also leave the Destroyer Camber, Main Wharf and docks, and the whole of Rosia Bay open to the enemy advance. All the service troops, shore batteries, and AA guns on Windmill Hill and Europa Flats would be effectively thrown to the wolves, along with any hope that the Royal Navy might land reinforcements in the south. He was literally between the Devil and the deep blue sea, now, or more to the point, between the Rock and a hard place.

Liddell was not yet ready to concede all that ground and lock his infantry up in the fortress tunnels, and so he ordered the 4th Devonshire Battalion to fight for every building, store, and house in the town. The one burning question in his mind now was what had happened to the Royal Navy? The force that Gibraltar was there to support and maintain had seemingly deserted the men of the Rock in their hour of greatest need.

Yet that was not so.
Part XII

Valiant

“You are well aware that it is not numbers or strength that bring the victories in war. No, it is when one side goes against the enemy with the gods' gift of a stronger morale, that their adversaries, as a rule, cannot withstand them.”

— Xenophon, The Persian Expedition
Chapter 34

Lieutenant Dawes had spent two hours at the hospital and finally had his shoulder wound cleaned up, stitched and bandaged. The medic seemed upset to be bothering with him, and Dawes had the distinct feeling that the man bore him some animosity. This was confirmed when he slipped on his officer’s jacket and began making his way to the door, pressing through the crowded room past men with much more serious wounds.

“Bloody officers,” he heard the medic mutter under his breath. “Sit about while the rest of this lot carries the burden, eh?”

Dawes gave the man a look over his shoulder, but said nothing. In fact he felt a bit wilted by the remark, and resolved to try and find something more to do. There were men here that looked like they would surely lose an arm or leg, and others with head wounds that still darkened the bandages with clotted blood. Then there were those silent stretchers, where men lay with their faces covered with woolen blankets, and all too many of them.

Dawes had retreated from the hospital as the Germans closed in, the harsh tang of blood and death on the air, and was soon swept up in the general withdrawal south through the town towards the Main Wharf. It was there, by Dock Number 3, that he finally came across a senior officer, a colonel in the 9th AA Regiment. He stepped up smartly and saluted, but the Colonel was too busy shouting at a 3.7-inch gun crew to notice him. Finally he gave him a sour look.

“Yes?”

“Lieutenant Dawes, sir. I was Duty Officer on the North Mole Tower, but have no assignment now.”

“North Mole? The German’s took that this morning.”

“Right sir. Well I’ve been pushed out with all the rest, and I’m looking to take a new post.”

“Well you might get up Breakneck Stair, or down to Europa Point to see what’s going on. They’re moving the 25 pounders north, and you could lend a hand.”

“Good enough sir. I know the Windmill Hill area fairly well.” Dawes
saluted again and was off, feeling just a bit better now that he had some sense of direction and purpose again. He remembered there was a battery of 25 pounders sited near the Georgian building known as “Bleak House,” which had become the R.A. Officer’s Mess. He had eaten there a few times, but had come to feel it was too posh for his liking. Some of the officers even took to dining in their dress uniforms, which he felt a bit odd given the more casual atmosphere of Gibraltar, where one was just as likely to see a subaltern running about bare headed and shirtless on the job.

Breakneck Stair was well named, a circuitous and sometimes steep route up the flanks of a long plateau that sat beneath Saint Michael’s Cave. As the road doubled back on itself, you would just keep craning your neck and looking up to see how much more of a trek it was before you got to the top. But Dawes decided to head for Windmill Hill by taking the road down past the other two military hospitals, and the Naval Signals Station. It would take him right up through a notch to the Windmill Hill, and from there he knew of a rickety old ladder down the side of the ridge that would land him very near the battery he had in mind.

The farther he got from the town and docks, the better he felt, and he realized the sound of the fighting, and sight of the wounded men, had jangled his nerves a bit. He went down the road past Buena Villa east of Rosia Bay, mixed in with a stream of men slogging their way towards the Naval Hospital. The sun was low and dusk at hand, and he realized how very hungry he was. It was worth taking a peek at Bleak House to see if anything was being served, and he didn’t think anyone would be swanking about there with a war on today.

Before he got there, however, he passed by the Naval Signals Station where there seemed to be quite a stir. Men were cheering and seemed well worked up over something, so he stuck his nose in through the door to see what was happening.

“What’s up here?” he ask a ranker by the door.

“Royal Navy’s coming, sir!” The private gave him a toothy grin. “Just got the signal in a moment ago. There’s to be no searchlights switched on after midnight.”

Dawes raised an eyebrow. “Good show,” he said. Then he was on his way again. The Royal Navy had scooted out 24 hours before the Germans launched the attack. That told him the up and ups knew what Jerry was about,
and now, with this news, he realized the move must have been well planned all along. He smiled, his steps just a little lighter, and soon became part of the news bustling south along the cobblestone roads as he made his way towards the ladder down to Europa Point.

The Royal Navy was coming home again! Let’s see how the Germans like it when old *Rodney* and *Nelson* let loose with those big 16-inch guns.

* * *

**Admiral** Somerville had taken Force H out into the western approaches to the straits, where the twelve fighters off HMS *Hermes* had sparred briefly with the Luftwaffe that day. When the Germans had achieved their primary goal in driving the British fleet off, they then turned the weight of their air power on Gibraltar itself. As darkness fell on the first day Somerville paced on the bridge of the battleship *Nelson*.

The news coming from the Rock was grim after the first day of battle. The Germans had overrun the airfield and cemetery, seized the North Mole, Grand Casemates, and were blasting away at the old Moorish Castle. Some few had managed to scale the precipitous north face and were inside the upper gallery, though that incursion had been contained by the timely arrival of troops from the Black Watch. It was the British position along Devil’s Road and the high ground behind it near the old Windsor Battery that seemed to be the focus of German attention now, along with continuing house to house fighting in the town itself.

To make matters worse, the French had sortied with the battleship *Normandie* from Dakar, and this ship had sailed north with lighter escorts to join with *Jean Bart* off Casablanca. Somerville believed the move to be defensive in nature, and an attempt to forestall any possible British move against Casablanca, but the fact remained that these two dangerous ships were at large to the south, and Force H would have to post a watch. The Admiralty had already been forced to cancel O.A. and O.B. series convoys out of the UK, and several already at sea had been ordered to disperse over 100 ships. There were also 97 merchantmen at sea in three northbound convoys in the SL series out of Sierra Leone and bound for Liverpool. That was a lot of merchant traffic to look after, and there would be no help coming from Home Fleet. The Germans were also on the move.
Now the Admiralty was in a quandary over what to do about Gibraltar. The situation reports, and plans already underway to occupy the Azores, were ample testimony to the fact that Their Lordships did not believe Gibraltar could be saved. Though Churchill bristled at the thought of losing the Rock, a long time symbol of British power, the practical necessities of war now weighed heavily in the matter. He first lobbied to advance the scheduled October departure for WS3, a “Winston Special” troop convoy planning to deliver reinforcements to Egypt. Might these troops get down to the Rock instead?

The Admiralty was of a mind that they would be at grave risk trying to reach Gibraltar and laid out the situation in no uncertain terms. The convoy was comprised of fast troop liners, like Georgic, Duchess Of York, and other smaller liners like Oropesa, Dorset, Highland Brigade and Perthshire. The harbor was presently contested, and so the ships would have only lifeboats available to try and put troops ashore, all under German air attack from Stukas and also exposed to shore batteries in Spanish Morocco.

The memory of the great disaster during the evacuation at Brest was still too fresh in the Admiralty’s mind. There the liner Lancastria had been sunk by German bombers with her decks packed with troops, and over 5800 died in one awful blow. It could not be allowed to happen again. A reinforcement for Gibraltar was therefore deemed impossible at this time, and quickly put out of the question.

Churchill then turned his eyes on further operations against the Cape Verde and Canary Islands with these troops, but the Admiralty argued that the reinforcement might best remain on schedule for Egypt, which would now need all the support it could get. What about the forces still lodged at Freetown from the aborted attack on Dakar? Might they have another go there? At this the Admiralty reminded Churchill that the battleship Richelieu was still anchored at Dakar from the latest intelligence reports, making a landing there another chancy prospect.

Churchill was at his wits end. “Here we have two Royal Marine Brigades sitting about on their thumbs in this dire hour, and doing nothing!” He continued to demand that every effort be made to make use of these troops, and so all the plans that had been spun out for Operation Puma and the Canaries, and Operation Shrapnel for the Cape Verde Islands were suddenly being put in motion.
In the meantime, Somerville rankled at the thought that he had been forced to slip away with Force H just when Gibraltar most needed him. He knew that he had to keep a strong force at sea, but he had three battleships, and proposed that he send one in a daring night raid to pound German positions and at least make a showing. The Admiralty waffled at this, pointing out that the moon was full and the Germans had been mounting continued night raids with JU-88s. They finally gave their grudging approval, urged on again by Churchill, who saw the move as almost a necessity. “The thunder of the guns of the Royal Navy must be heard to echo through the corridors of that embattled fortress, and will resound on through all the years to come,” he argued with styled elegance. HMS Valiant was therefore selected and ordered to detach on the night of the 16th of September.

To guard against the possibility of U-boat attack, Valiant would be given a strong escort of destroyers, and a light AA cruiser, Coventry, for added air defense. The mission was to make a quick run through the straits, let the guns roar in reprisal against German positions in the north and La Linea, and then get out with equal alacrity. They were on their way at 20:30, just after sunset, with the full moon already rising low above the horizon to the east and painting the way in a shimmering glow on the sea.

The move actually caught the German Luftwaffe by surprise, as they did not expect the British would risk capital ships in the strait under these conditions. A Ju-88 raid with 36 planes based at Seville had been scheduled for midnight, which is when the British ships planned to be south of Gibraltar after a four hour run at Valiant’s best speed from their starting point about 120 kilometers east of Tangier. When shore watchers there reported sighting the British raiding force approaching the strait, it was moved up an hour to attack the British ships as they approached.

The planes found the British squadron steaming on the moon drenched sea and began their bombing runs. The Ju-88 had been designed as a fast heavy dive bomber, or Schnellbomber, which became a workhorse of the Luftwaffe, affectionately called Mädchen für Alles, the maid of all work. The Germans would press it into service in great numbers as a reconnaissance plane, dive bomber, level bomber, night fighter and even a torpedo bomber, but tonight it was the heavy dive bomber role that was called to task. The fast twin engine planes came roaring out of the dark sky, and the air alert was raised throughout the squadron.
HMS *Coventry* was quick into action with her five 6-inch guns able to double as AA guns, augmented by two 3-inchers, and two 2 pounders. *Valiant* herself had even more firepower, with ten twin 4.5 inch dual purpose guns that soon began to blaze away with four octuple QF-2 pounders, and four more quad Vickers machine guns chattering away.

The destroyers added their wrath to the flak with *Hotspur* leading in the van, keen to get back at the Germans after her ignominious eviction earlier. *Greyhound* followed in her wake like a faithful hunting dog, while *Fearless*, and *Forester* flanked the big battleship, screening *Valiant* from torpedo attack, and the destroyer *Fury* churned in the wake of the entire formation on ASW watch.

*Coventry* scored the first kill when one of her 3-inch guns caught a German plane a little too eager to get in close, and blasted off the right wing, taking the engine off in the bargain and sending the plane into a cartwheeling splash into the sea. The lead destroyers danced ahead, too nimble for the Germans to get any hits on them, but *Valiant* was another story. A venerable old *Queen Elizabeth* class ship, *Valiant* had fought at Jutland in her youth, but now found a strange new foe in the Ju-88s.

The bigger ship was running full out at 23 knots, all her AA guns firing, but was soon straddled by a string of bombs falling along her port side. The ship rocked away from the blast, her heavy side armor taking most of the damage and shrugging it all off as *Valiant* labored on. Her gunners took down another Ju-88 before the next near miss fell just forward of the ship, but her Captain Rawlings pressed on and ran right over the fuming spray, heedless.

The squadron was now coming in range of Gibraltar and Captain Rawlings heard the call from his mainmast watch, the range finders calling out 28,000 yards. The ship’s main 15-inch guns had recently been modified to allow them to elevate to 30 degrees, allowing *Valiant* to fire out 32,000 yards, and seeing that the target was stationary, Rawlings ordered the guns into action at a few minutes before midnight on the 16th. The boom of the main batteries was indeed heard in far off Gibraltar, like the rumble of thunder heralding a fast moving storm of steel.

*Valiant* had been sent to do more than buck up the morale of the beleaguered garrison. Somerville had been discretely told that the main wharf and docks were fair game. Seeing as it was well behind British lines that
night, however, Rawlings was reluctant to fire at that target from any great range. The British had spotters up on Signal Hill and the Weather Station up on Devil’s Tower, and they called the shots as it were, seeing the first salvos coming in four enormous splashes right in the harbor itself near the North Mole.

Sergeant John Miller of the 4th Battalion Black Watch saw the first rounds fall. He had been ordered as part of his company to reinforce the battered positions near the old Moorish Castle, which was still under assault from the Grossdeutschland Regiment at that time. When he saw the big geysers of water shoot up in the bay he rallied his squad. The troops on the front line thought they were German bombs at first, having been hit the last several nights. Then someone else realized what was happening and shouted out that the navy was back.

“Right mate! It’s the bloody Navy!” Miller called out. “Listen to that, me Boyos! Those are nice fat fifteen inch guns, and the sweetest sound in the world to my ears tonight.”
Chapter 35

**Lieutenant** Dawes did not see the first shells land, as it was well after sunset and he was already down the ladder to Europa Point, with no view of the main harbor. But he certainly heard them, a loud roar and the long whistling fall of the heavy shells. He also thought it was a German bomb falling at first, thinking to find any cellar at hand to get under cover. The *Stukas* had been pounding the hill all day off and on but, from the sound of the planes overhead, these were the twin engine German bombers at hand. Then he caught a bright flash to the south, where the dark Straits of Gibraltar became the gateway that had long been known as the Pillars of Hercules. It suddenly seemed as though Hercules was there himself, roaring in anger, and Dawes immediately knew what he was seeing now.

The Royal Navy had kept its appointment. That was a battleship firing out in the channel, and he ran to the edge of the ridge to get a better look.

“Bloody marvelous!” he said to a Gunnery Sergeant there. It was Sergeant Hobson, the same man he had huddled with in the bomb shelter the previous night, the one who had the cheek to suggest the officer’s planning to watch the horse races that morning might hope they had fast steeds. He had stopped his loading of a nearby lorry to gawk at the ships out on the moonlit waters to the south.

“Lucky the Germans didn’t get smart and put artillery over there on Spanish Morocco,” said the Sergeant. “The Navy’s doing it right this time. They snuck in right in the lee of those hills.”

“Let’s see how the Germans sleep tonight under the guns of *Rodney* and *Nelson*.” Dawes smiled with an eager nod of his head.

“Oh, that’s not *Rodney*, sir. And it looks to be only one battleship that I can make out. That other ship is most likely a destroyer. My guess is that HMS *Valiant* is out there tonight, with a pair of valiant souls stuck on the Rock here to watch her do her business.”

“Wish I could say I belonged to that club,” said Dawes, just a bit dejected. “I’ve bounced about from the North Mole to the Hospital to the Signals Station, and then down here. Jerry took a whack at me this morning near the mole, but I haven’t done much of anything since.”
“I shouldn’t worry about that, sir. We’ll all have more than enough to do before this gets settled one way or another.”

That suddenly put a new fear into Dawes’ head, and he realized that this would have to resolve somehow, and he wondered how it would all turn out. The Germans had hit the Rock very hard that day. They had chased him from his tower, nearly put a bullet into him and set him on line with what looked to be sixty other men waiting for medical care. Now, with Valiant firing out there, her massive volleys rolling out with bright orange fire and a terrible roar, it was easy to think he might wake up tomorrow and find the Germans gone, but he knew that was not likely.

That thought jangled his nerves again. My God, he thought, what if we lose? What happens to every man jack of us here if those guns aren’t enough to make the difference? We’ll either be killed or taken prisoner and marched off to Berlin… and that thought gave him no comfort at all.

“What do you say, Sergeant?” he asked. “Will the Germans take a good knock tonight and give up the ghost?”

The Sergeant grimaced. “Not bloody likely,” he said heavily. “I was at Dunkirk…” He didn’t need to say anything more.

Dawes watched the battleship firing, trying to take heart with every salvo, but the ache of fear was on him now, and he found himself worrying about his fate, and the lives of everyone else in Gibraltar. The Sergeant seemed very calm, however, and so he asked his question again.

“Do you think we’ll hold, Sergeant?”

“We’ll do our bloody best.”

“But will it be enough?”

“If it isn’t then you can join the Royal Engineers, sir, and dig yourself a nice little tunnel under the Straits. Either that or you might get lucky and find the one already there.”

“Already there? You mean we can get out that way?”

The Sergeant winked at him. “Just a legend, sir. But find me the right Barbary Ape and stay on its tail when things get hot. You might be surprised!” He was up, rolling up his shirt sleeve on the warm late summer night.

“Well I’d best see to my lorry. The boys will be needing this ammunition soon enough.”

Dawes nodded, but he sat there, spellbound with the sight of the
battleship firing and finally realizing what a horror this war was going to become. We build these massive steel leviathans to hurl shot and shell at the enemy, and all the while the Germans are coming out of the night in those planes like banshees. His pulse was up and there was a thrill of excitement, edged with yawning anxiety. Here he was watching the battle being joined, with the issue still gravely in doubt. HMS Valiant probably never thought she would be directing those guns at the very harbor she would drop anchor on. The Navy is out there bawling away like someone who’s come home from the town and found a burglar has broken into his home.

Now the fight was on, and at least all he could see of it was good British steel firing away for a change. Yet that doubt was still there, a cold spot in his stomach that made him very afraid. He was not a fighting man by nature. Dawes had come in an officer, and the most rigorous thing he had ever done in his brief time in the service was a good long workout on the “Hardening Course.” Pushups and sit ups were one thing, the shock and sound of real combat quite another.

He remembered how he had looked forward to settling into a comfortable bed after that long workout. He had been stuck on the course with the rankers, and on the morrow he would swagger back into the Bleak House and belly up for a good breakfast, basking in the privileges that came with his Lieutenant’s rank.

The thought of food invariably led him to think of what might happen to them if they got holed up in those dark, dusty tunnels. If the Germans don’t kill us all first, they’ll bloody well starve us in time. He knew they had nearly nine month’s supplies laid in, but that would be a long and agonizing haul. The thought of becoming a tunnel rat did not seem at all appealing. He watched HMS Valiant get off another salvo, and then got up on unsteady legs. He needed a smoke, reaching into his pocket to fish about for his cigarette pack and lighter, and when he had them out he realized his hand was shaking so badly that he could barely get one lit. The words of a poem by Rudyard Kipling came to his mind with their sad, mournful song.

To the legion of the lost ones, to the cohort of the damned;
To my brethren in their sorrow overseas…
We’re poor little lambs who’ve lost our way,
Baa! Baa! Baa!
We’re little black sheep who’ve gone astray,
It did not take much for the spotters on the weather station hill to correct the fall of those shells. Plus 400, right 1000 and the guns were right on target, striking the Land Port at the base of the Devil’s Tongue, with the next salvos corrected to fall right on the cemetery, which was now occupied by the Germans. One round struck the silent tombstones, sending chunks of granite into the air and cratering the graves of generations past. The gunners at the Windsor Battery had been taking a pounding from the Germans, but now they cheered gleefully as the spotters slowly walked the 15-inch barrage back over the runway and across the old British lines right into La Linea, Britain’s first fire in anger to strike Spanish soil.

The intent was to get at the German artillery there, and though no one on the Rock knew it at the time, the British had some success in knocking out several German guns. Then Valiant began to make a wide turn, her lease in the relatively narrow waters of the strait run out, coming about to head back west. The German planes continued to make their diving runs at her, with bombs straddling the ship, splintering the weather deck and churning up the sea, but Valiant sailed right on through. Her aft batteries again found the bay near the North Mole, and were expertly walked due east right across the German lines, through the cemetery, and right off shore when the last rounds fell in the sea near the Cattle Sheds.

Meanwhile, the dogged Hotspur had surged on ahead with Greyhound, racing past the southern tip of Europa Point where they saw British AA gunners firing to lend their support against the German planes. Lieutenant Dawes was there with them, watching the bright tracers streak across the sky, and the night was deafened by the sharp crack of the gunfire. Commander Herbert Francis Hope Layman led the ship from the exposed weather bridge, and he saw the men waving and saluting from the flagstaff at Europa Point.

“Hoist colors!” he ordered, showing the garrison the flag, which immediately set the men to cheering. Hotspur and Greyhound raced up the eastern side of the Isthmus, past the Governor’s Cottage on the flank of
Windmill Hill and on towards Sandy Bay. They surged on past the hamlet at Catalan Bay until they were off the coast near the Slaughterhouse. There Commander Layman saw the boats on the shore, where the German mountain troops had stormed ashore to cut off the Cattle Sheds and make their daring ascent up the sheer rocky walls of the Devil’s Tower. She had only four 4.7-inch guns, nothing to speak of compared to Valiant’s broadside, but Hotspur was valiant too, and she poured it on, setting three landing boats ablaze and blasting the hillside cliffs where Signal Hill had reported German mountaineering operations were still underway. Half a squad of the 2nd Company, 3rd battalion 98th Mountain Regiment, was blown from their rocky perches and blasted clean off the hill.

The gallant rush of the destroyers did more to bolster British morale than any real harm to the enemy, but that was enough. They wheeled about at Catalan Bay, circling once as if to dare anything German to challenge them, guns blazing all the while. Then the nimble destroyers turned south and ran to rejoin the British naval squadron.

When the destroyers rounded Europa Point, Lieutenant Dawes looked to see the looming shadow of Valiant heading west through the straits, big guns still firing. There was a small fire aft where the battleship must have been finally struck by a 500 pound German bomb, but it did not look serious. The Ju-88s had emptied their bomb bays and had little to show for their effort.

Dawes watched as the two destroyers raced in the big ship’s wake, the white foam of their bows glistening in the moonlight. They followed like a pair of faithful hounds coming home to the hunter, and Dawes took off his cap and waved farewell. Some inner sense took hold just then, and it told him he had seen the last of Force H and the Royal Navy in this gallant attack, but what a sight it was.

The inner sense became a feeling of dreadful doubt again, and he took another drag on his cigarette, noting the tremor in his hand and feeling ashamed. Dawes chided himself, knowing that he had been little more than a spectator in this whole affair. What’s gotten into me, he asked himself? That nick on your shoulder is nothing to worry about. You saw that battleship out there, and how those destroyers came in with their fists shaking, ready for a fight. Buck up man, and get a grip on yourself. This party is only just beginning, and something tells me you’ve more than one more dance left on your card. Nobody gets in on something like this without good reason, he
thought, and it gave him some small comfort.

Suddenly the smell of the air and the whole scene on the bay filled him with a sense of life and purpose. He was here for some reason, by chance or fate, and he would see it through. He dropped the half smoked cigarette, stepping on it and breathing deep, trying to chase the jitters away. There was no sense standing here gawking any longer, so he turned and started back up the rise, suddenly feeling very drained and weary, and intent on finding someplace relatively quiet where he might get some sleep.

All that was on his duty roster for the day had been that ten hour shift in the North Mole Tower that was cut short just before dawn. Just sit up there and answer the telly—that was what his mates had told him at breakfast. It had been a very long day. Baa—Baa—Baa…

* * *

**Valiant** had come boldly on through the strait, braving a thickening enemy air attack the whole while, and now she was heading for the open sea again, though not yet safe from harm. Lurking in the waters just off the mouth of the straits, another threat was waiting silently for the courageous ship, which had lived up to its name in every respect that night, **Valiant** in name and deed.

The Italian Submarine **Bianchi** had been hoping for a chance to get torpedoes in the water, intending to put them right down the path of the oncoming battleship, but her inexperienced Captain, Adalberto Giovannini, had not counted on the skill and speed of the British Destroyers. **Fury** had taken the lead, and was well out in front of the battleship sniffing with her asdic sonar equipment when she got wind of the Italian sub. Lieutenant Commander Terence Robinson had the ship in fine trim. In these familiar waters, the crews had learned the depth of the sea lanes well and had excellent charts. Robinson took a very good guess as to where the contact must be, and then began to churn up the sea at top speed, ready to raise hell.

Indeed, hell had no fury like that ship on this moonlit night. The destroyer surged ahead, while the **Bianchi** veered off her firing angle, realizing her peril too late to evade. Captain Giovannini got his periscope down and gave the order to fire, then put his sub into an emergency dive, but to no avail.

The torpedoes were too widely spaced and **Fury** veered violently,
thrashing up the sea before turning and running right between the two torpedoes. The fish had been jostled about by the maneuver, just enough to set them off their intended course. Then it was time for hell to unleash her fury. The destroyer had a rack of 20 depth charges and Lieutenant Commander Robinson put them all into the water, causing a series of wrenching explosions that found and tore Bianchi to pieces. There was a last explosion, the sea welling up like a boiling pot, and then subsiding before wreckage from the broken sub bobbed to the surface.

So Valiant was kept safe from harm, her octuple mounts saying a last goodbye to a lingering Ju-88. Then her aft turrets fired one last mighty salvo of four rounds, which came in right on Devil’s Tower Road, hurting the Germans that had been assembling there. Hotspur and Greyhound came following behind the big ship, and the British squadron withdrew at 20 knots, their daring mission accomplished.

Captain Rawlings soon received a signal in thanks from General Liddell on the Rock, which was quickly passed on to Somerville and the Admiralty. The battleship had hit the North Mole, Land Port, Cemetery, Cattle Sheds—all occupied by German troops when the big rounds struck home. Beyond that, they had put the Spanish Government on notice that England knew her enemies as well as her friends. HMS Valiant had just tapped Franco on the chin with the few salvos that she managed to put on German positions in La Linea, but it was a promise of retribution, and a day of reckoning that would surely come before this war would be concluded.

For his part, Captain Rawlings aboard Valiant would be ‘Mentioned In Dispatches’ for his courageous raid under intense enemy fire, delivering timely and much needed fire support to a hard fighting garrison force on the Rock.

Admiral Somerville had been pacing on the bridge of Nelson throughout the engagement, dreading more bad news and the possible loss of yet another battleship in the hastily mounted raid. But no bad news came that night. This one was chalked up for the Royal Navy, and Somerville sighed with relief when he got the signal: HMS Valiant now west of Tangier, and all is well.
Chapter 36

The German effort on the second day was heavily concentrated in the town itself. The 98th Mountain Regiment consolidated positions near the Moorish Castle while Grossdeutschland Regiment began to push south from the Civil Hospital towards Governor’s Parade. As they did so, units from the 98th Mountain Regiment would extend south along the line of the higher ground to the east to hold the flank of this advance. This enabled the Germans to keep considerable force in the attack, which was difficult house to house fighting.

The weak area of the British defense was the area known as the Devil’s Gap that lay between the town itself and the Rock. The Germans seemed to instinctively know that this was the place to attack, and by so doing they could split the British defenders into two groups. To the west, in the town itself, the 4th Devonshire Battalion, with a company from the 2nd Somerset Light and another of Royal Engineers, put up a stolid defense but, outnumbered three to one, they continued to be attacked by fresh troops.

In the east the remnant of the 2nd Kings Rifles had retreated up the rising knees of the rock to defend the naval batteries and old siege tunnels there. With the Gate House of the Moorish Castle breached, only the tall battlement of the Tower of Homage remained in British possession, and was now defended by a company of the Black Watch. It was to be Gibraltar’s Hougoumont, the farmhouse and gate that was defended by the Coldstream Guards at Waterloo and stubbornly held throughout that great battle. Yet unlike the gates of the farmhouse that were bravely forced shut in the heat of that struggle, there was no gate here, and no way to get inside the tower itself from below. It was simply a massive stone square, with two tiers of crenulated battlements at the top where the bravest of the Black Watch took turns firing down at the German mountain troops.

Inside the top portion of the tower were four stone rooms where fresh ammunition, water, supplies and more men huddled in defense. The Germans fired round after round against the tower with their 150mm infantry gun, blasting away a fragment here a battlement there, but still the Black Watch fought on. Men emerged from the inner tower rooms to drag the wounded
back to safety, while others took their place on the battlements. One after another they fought and died, Corporal Robert Cord, Privates Nick Mulligan, Jon McIntyre, Alex Jones and Bill Barclay. A squad of German mountain troops tried to hurl up grappling hooks to begin a medieval style attack, but were cut down by a rifle team led by Lance Corporal David Nichol. The Germans hurled grenades and the British threw them back again. MG-34 machineguns would rake the battlements for long minutes, but the instant the German squads advanced, every embrasure spit fire at them from above. It was soon clear that the position would not fall easily, if at all.

General Kübler was watching the action with his field glasses, gritting his jaw when he saw the latest attempt to scale the tower wall fail. A man as rugged as the mountain itself, he shook his head with dismay. “Tell the assault team to enfilade that tower,” he said. “No hammer will break it, or the men inside. That place will not fall by direct assault.” He knew the old game of scissors, paper, rock well enough. What he could not smash with the rock of his mountain troops could be taken by a paper like envelopment, which he ordered at once. The Germans now moved to scale the green, tree sewn slopes to either side of the tower, well concealed by the thick foliage, and inside the Tower of Homage the Black Watch held on, defiant, enduring and resolute to the last man.

To the west of this position, the fighting in the town itself was going much better for the Germans. This was no ordinary regiment of soldiers at work, but the elite Grossdeutschland Regiment, and they knew their business well. Governor’s Parade and Residence was taken by 10:00 and fighting was particularly bitter near the Cathedral and Convent, the holy places desecrated by the deathly rattle and shock of war. Another two hours hard fighting cleared most of the town as far south as the edge of the Grand Parade, and soon the rifle squads were again creeping through the hallowed ground of Trafalgar Cemetery, where every grave and tombstone told a story.

A gritty Sergeant and two German Privates crouched low near one grave site, dedicated to Thomas Worth and John Buckland of the Royal Marine Artillery. One man knew the English and read the inscription aloud: “The brightest ornaments of their Corps... Killed by the same shot on the 23rd November, 1810 while directing the Howitzer Boats in an attack on the enemy’s flotilla in Cadiz Bay.”

The Sergeant gave him a sour look. “Yes? Well spread out and keep your
heads down or you will both join them here!”

Captain Thomas Norman of HMS *Mars* and Lieutenant William Forester of HMS *Colossus* must have turned over in their graves as the Germans slowly fought through their burial sites. Both men had died in the famous Battle of Trafalgar that had lent its name to this place.

Soldiers of the 4th Devons hirles fought a losing battle, their numbers dwindling until they were eventually holed up in the buildings around the Main Wharf and docks. The elegant Alameda Gardens felt the stain of war and death when a platoon of grenadiers made a brave rush over that area to reach the sand pits near Upper Witham’s Road. Meanwhile, the 98th Mountain Regiment had begun to push up onto the Devil’s Gap, intending to reach the main north south road there. It was very hard fighting to clear the gun positions at Princess Caroline’s Battery and Princess Anne’s Battery, but all these were finally taken, the British Engineers spiking the guns before they fell back to the entrance of the underground Upper Galleries.

The King’s Rifles were now shut inside the Rock, and General Liddell knew he could not hope to hold the remainder of the ground to the south through Rosia Bay. At 02:00 he finally gave the grim order that all service troops and battery crews on Windmill Hill and Europa Point should make their way into Saint Michael’s Cave, a natural labyrinth where stalagmites grinned like stony teeth. There they would stolidly hold their ground, accepting this self imposed internment rather than surrender, unless order to do so by higher authorities.

Lieutenant Dawes was shut inside Saint Michael’s cave with all the rest. In the heady retreat up the steep ground he had come across a fallen private, noting the patch on his shoulder—4th Battalion, Devonshire Regiment. It had once been called the 11th Regiment of Foot, formed in the year 1667, with a long and storied history. The Regiment fought in Holland, Spain and Austria, it’s powder blackening the air at battles like Fontenoy, Warburg, and Kampen. During the years when Napoleon loomed as the great threat in Europe, it fought as a Marine unit at the Battle of Cape St. Vincent, at the siege of Malta, in the Peninsular War, and the famous Battle of Salamanca. There it took on a well earned nickname—the Bloody Eleventh, and carried it on through the Great War, in Italy, Macedonia, Egypt, Palestine and Mesopotamia. It went ‘over the top’ at the battle of the Somme, and then one day the 4th Battalion found its way here—to the Rock of Gibraltar.
Dawes looked down at his own shoulder patch, the 10th Anti-Aircraft Regiment, Support Group, realizing that this was the first engagement his unit would have fought in—and it would most likely be the last. The fallen Private lay on a cart, where men had been taking the wounded and dead in to give them some form of decent burial. Dawes looked at the man, seeing him like a fallen Prince, and not a mere Private. The man was still cradling his rifle, and the Lieutenant was possessed with the urge to take up arms.

I don’t deserve it, he thought, berating himself. I’ve done nothing to earn it. But the impulse was simply too strong, and he found himself reaching for the rifle. Nearly three hundred years of history had carried that rifle here to this place, or so he thought. He had no right to touch it; no right to desecrate the sacrifice made by that brave young Private. Just last night he had been so rattled that he could barely light a cigarette, and he came to feel a coward.

Then the Sergeant he had spoken with the previous night at Europa Point came up, recognizing him, and folded his arms.

“Heading up to Saint Michael’s, Lieutenant?”

Dawes jumped, his reverie and self recrimination broken by the Sergeant’s voice. “What? Why yes, we’ve got the order right from General Liddell. All service troops and gunnery crews are to report to the cave.”

“Then you might want to take that with you.” The Sergeant pointed at the fallen Private’s rifle, seeing how Dawes had been eyeing it, and knowing what might be in his mind.

Dawes gave him a nervous look. Then he slowly reached for the rifle, seeing a stain of blood there, which gave him a shudder. He took the weapon up and the rifle changed hands from the dead to the living, like a dying man passing a torch. The Bloody Eleventh had just taken in its latest recruit.

Dawes shouldered the rifle trying to muster some sense of determination, but in a moment of self-confession he spoke his greatest fear. “I must tell you Sergeant, that I’m not a very brave man. It doesn’t really feel fitting that I should—”

“Now none of that talk, if you don’t mind my saying so, sir. You’ll do fine when the time comes. You just point the damn thing at the other fellow and pull the trigger—before he pulls his.” The Sergeant smiled at him. “Good luck, Lieutenant. Look for that Barbary Ape I told you about! I expect I’ll be up there soon myself, and if I get the little weasel, he’ll lead me right to the promised land.”
In modern times the tunnels of Gibraltar were a maze like warren that wandered nearly 30 miles beneath the Rock—and this beneath a physical area measuring only a mile wide and a little more than a mile long! They were layered with galleries and connecting communications passages one on top of another, like the history that had built them. Some dated back to the Great Siege of 1779 to 1783, mainly those overlooking the airfield and North Front area. Others had been built to create underground reservoirs and magazine storage areas, and when the airplane became a military threat, to create bomb shelters. By WWII even more space was drilled out to store food, generators, fuel, equipment, and ammunition.

Parts of the old fortifications and gun embrasures still bore their original names, such as King’s Lines, Queen’s Lines, Winsdor Battery, and there were halls named for Cornwallis and St. George. At the turn of the century, when old battleships began to drop anchor at the port, the Ragged Staff Cave bordering the harbor area was turned into a naval magazine. With no natural source of water, the Rock also had vast areas devoted to the collection of rainwater in great catchments.

Yet all the work done by 1939 amounted to little more than seven miles of tunnels. Artisan Engineers arrived early in this new history, drilling hard through the limestone to create another mile or two by the fall of 1940, mainly to connect existing galleries and tunnels. In the history Fedorov knew, the tunnels were not extended to a length of about 25 miles until the end of WWII. In this history they might never reach that scale, yet for the moment, the existing galleries and caves were enough to shelter the modest force garrisoned there.

The entrance nearest the British defensive positions was at Hay’s Level, between the Moorish Castle and the 18th century Siege Tunnels. It was defended by two companies of the 2nd Somerset Light on the line, and a single reserve company of the Black Watch near the entrance itself.

Farther south a company of the 4th Devonshire battalion and most of the service troops and gun crews were holed up in the famous Saint Michael’s Cave. This enormous network of natural caverns and passages had been set up as an emergency hospital, and scores of wounded sat in sullen groups
beneath the tall spires of rock, and the striated falls of Stalactites from the high ceiling above. Legend lay heavy on that place, once thought to be the gates of Hades by the ancient Greeks. It was also said, just as the Sergeant had told it to Lieutenant Dawes, that the entrance to a hidden tunnel could be found there, one that would wind deep beneath the Straits of Gibraltar to Spanish Morocco, a secret pathway known only to the Barbary Apes, the monkeys who had used it to come here ages ago.

Now the caves were part of the last stand of modern British power in the Western Mediterranean, and by day’s end most of the remaining garrison was sealed up in the old siege tunnels of the Rock. Liddell knew there would be no relief any time soon, though he had supplies enough to hold out for months. If the Germans wanted the place they would now have to fight from one subterranean passage to another, clearing the tunnels and hidden stone rooms with shock and fire.

They tried to take the main entrance by storm, thinking the defense might not yet be prepared, and as it happened Lieutenant Dawes had only just come in through the arched gate after a long climb up. There came a sound of gunfire, a warning to all that this place was no safe sanctuary. The fire of war would burn through the maw of this cave, and death would follow sure enough.

Dawes crouched behind a rock, frightened, weary, and losing hope. There he saw three men of the 4th Devonshire desperately struggling to get two wounded soldiers into the cave before the Germans could gun them down. They had fought for nearly 48 hours, grudgingly giving ground in the face of superior numbers, even though for many this was their very first engagement. Their faces were blackened with soot, uniforms soiled and bloodied.

Dawes felt the sudden burn of shame that he had not done more—not done much of anything at all! I took the first shots in my harbor tower, he thought, but all I’ve done since is get jostled from one AA gun position to another while these brave men fought and died to keep me safe. And here I am holding a rifle of the 4th Devs, and I haven’t the first idea how to use it!

He could hear the sound of the German attackers getting closer, calling to one another in harsh voices. One of the Devonshire riflemen fired at them, trying to buy enough time for the other two men to drag their wounded comrades inside the entrance. Dawes crouched behind his rock, closing his eyes, shuddering when bullets from a submachine gun raked the position, to
cut the soldier down. Then he heard a dull clink, opening his eyes by reflex to stare in horror at a German grenade!

The next five seconds felt like an eternity, but in those brief and fleeting moments, the last of his life, Dawes found the one thing he had chided himself for lacking—his courage. There it was, the cold metal stick of death that would explode at any moment and take them all, the two wounded men and their comrades trying to drag them to safety. And there it was, with only one thing to do that might save them.

Dawes moved, as if on instinct, and the newest recruit of the Bloody Eleventh leapt atop the grenade, taking the full force of the explosion to die a hero, while shielding the soldiers who had fought so bravely to give him that chance.
Epilogue

That night there came a lull in the fighting. The Germans secured positions around the Main Wharf where the remnant of two companies of the 4th Devonshire Battalion were now holed up. Then the gunfire abruptly stopped at 08:00. Soldiers approached the entrance to Saint Michael’s Cave under a white flag, and asked to pass a message to the British commander. It would offer terms, with fair treatment and medical care for all wounded upon surrender, and internment in Spain under decent conditions for the duration of the war. Liddell replied that he had no such orders, but if the Germans would abide by the temporary cease fire he would pass the matter up the chain of command.

The signal went to Somerville, still at sea with Force H, who contemplated it grimly when he was handed the message at 10:00. The enemy had taken several vital facilities at Gibraltar: fuel supplies, airfield, power station, gas works, and the plant for distilling seawater. Yet Liddell indicated he believed he could hold out, and asked for as much support as the navy could give him. As to the German surrender terms, Churchill would not hear of such a thing at this point. He railed that the fortress must be held as long as possible, and urged the War Cabinet to do everything in their power to assist the garrison.

The night raid made by Valiant had given Churchill the hope that if more force were applied by the Royal Navy, the Germans might be shelled senseless. Somerville had been at sea for days, and his home port was now largely in enemy hands. He knew that he had only a few more days fuel to operate, and the French Navy was still at sea, finally spotted some 200 miles to the south off Casablanca. Lingering in the western approaches to the straits was also dangerous, and German U-boat activity was becoming an increasing threat. That morning the destroyer Firedrake had engaged a suspected undersea target without results, and Somerville knew that with each passing hour the enemy might concentrate more resources against him.

He laid the matter out in no uncertain terms. “We have three U-boat sightings today – Expect continued air attack this evening and have inadequate air cover – Two French battleships remain at large off
Casablanca and could pose an immediate threat to convoy SL-46 and SL-47.”

Should he mount yet another night raid to bolster the garrison at Gibraltar, or move south to deal with the French? He signaled the Admiralty to seek clarification as to his orders—what was Their Lordships pleasure? In spite of Valiant’s success the previous night, the Admiralty felt it unwise to risk Somerville’s battleships in the straits again. Liddell was told to play for time and hold out, a bone thrown to Churchill. The Royal Navy, however, would do the one thing it was best at, and operate at sea.

At midnight on the 17th, Somerville got his orders. He was to find and engage the French, clear the convoy routes and become master of the waters off Casablanca. Plans were underway for dramatic events yet to come. Admiral Tovey got the word that same hour. Britain would now try to salvage some small measure of advantage while she could, and go on the offensive.

Orders were sent to Wavell in Alexandria that he should make every effort to drive the Italians from Egyptian soil. Liddell would hunker down beneath the imposing limestone fortress of the Rock, Somerville would steam south to engage the French and avenge the loss of Barham off Dakar, and the Azores would be seized the following morning with thunderclap surprise, after which HMS Glorious would return to support Force H. The troops at Freetown, and De Gaulle’s Free French fighters were also put on notice that they would not sit idle any longer. A mission was being planned to throw them at the Cape Verde Islands as soon as the French Fleet was properly dealt with.

Britain, down on one knee, bruised and bloodied by her foes, was getting up and ready to answer the next bell. Yet far to the north, Admiral Raeder was setting his own plans in motion. The German Jötnargruppe was cutting through the seas and heading south into the Atlantic, with the battleships of the Royal Navy in hot pursuit. Speed was now the order of the day, and the Germans slipped slowly away, until one ship loomed off their starboard bow, unexpected, undaunted, and ready to do everything possible to stop the German fleet. This time Lütjens would fight, but he was about to confront an adversary that would prove to be far more resourceful than he or any of his planners in the Kriegsmarine could imagine.
As the sun rose on the 18th of September, smoke charred the skies above Gibraltar. Fires were burning in the town, and south near the Main Wharf. The last remnants of the 4th Devonshires were still fighting, some holed up in sheds, houses and cellars, others huddled behind the heavy walls of the Main Wharf buildings, mostly held by 2nd Somerset Light. The Brandenburgers were at the Destroyer Camber, and the harbor itself, always bustling with activity with upwards of twenty or thirty vessels on any given day, was strangely empty now.

The Germans sent a motorized battalion of the elite Grossdeutschland Regiment down through the Devil’s Gap, led by their reconnaissance battalion. There they eyed the ridges and slopes leading up to a place called the Breakneck Stairs and Mount Misery. The entrance to St. Michael’s Cave was also in this area, where most of the remaining service troops, porters, artisan engineers, and other non-combatants were now huddled. Even the big 9.2-inch batteries on Windmill Hill and Europa Point had been abandoned, the guns disabled as the crews retreated to the cavernous passages of Saint Michael’s.

There Lieutenant Dawes had fallen to his fate, a hero in the end, dying to save the men that could carry on the fight. Sergeant Hobson saw them carry in the body, what was left of him, and took a long breath. He was tired, weary beyond measure, and the loss of the Lieutenant he had taken under his wing affected him deeply. He sat, head down, dreary and mournful, and losing hope, as were many others around him. Then he heard the quiet chattering of a Barbary Ape, and turned to see a solitary Macaque skittering into the cave. A Corporal threw it an orange peel, and Hobson smiled.

It was just what he had told Dawes about—the Barbary Ape he could follow to the promised land. Yet now he thought to catch it and hold it fast, so that Britain might still hold the Rock. But this one seemed unhappy with the meager fare it had received from the Corporal, and Sergeant Hobson watched it scrabble away over a few rocks and into a passage he knew led nowhere.

“See here,” he called after the Macaque. “Where are you off to? That’s a bloody dead end! You’ll not get out that way—in fact you’ll not get loose at all once I get my fat fist on the scruff of your neck!”
He got up, following the ape, feeling his way in the dark and expecting to catch it just round the next bend. This tunnel led south, down the last of the rocky spine of Gibraltar until it ended somewhere beneath Windmill Hill. It went on for just another few hundred yards, and he could hear the chatter of the Macaque up ahead, but it was very dark. Then he came up short, surprised to reach an impasse in a great boulder that blocked his way.

He knew this rock, as it marked the end of the passage but his Macaque was nowhere to be seen. Hobson fumbled about his shirt pocket for a lighter, holding it up to cast a wan, flickering light on the eerie carved rocks of the cave walls. He remembered the old legend that said there was a hidden tunnel that went all the way under the straits to Spanish Morocco, though he knew that was folly. Then he keened up his senses, looking about when he heard the echo of his quarry resounding, hollow and very distant.

“Now where have you gotten to?” he said, hearing only the echo of his own voice. There was no sign of the beast.

The Barbary Ape was gone.
The Saga Continues…

Altered States: Volume IV ~ Three Kings

As Admiral Tovey struggles to stop heavy German units breaking out into the Atlantic, the embattled garrison of Gibraltar is holed up beneath the Rock. Now England launches operations against Atlantic island outposts in a race to occupy those vital squares before the German 22nd Air Landing Division can claim them for Germany.

Meanwhile, General Wavell launches Operation Compass against the Italians, while Admiral Cunningham prepares a daring attack at Taranto, but it is soon learned that someone is leaking word of these operations directly to the Germans and Italians. The Axis counter is a sudden new blitzkrieg into the Balkans and the Italian invasion of Greece. Soon only Turkey will stand between Germany and the vital oil supplies of the Caucasus controlled by the Orenburg Federation.

As British fortunes reach a desperate state, Volsky and Fedorov soon learn of two powerful newcomers on the vast field of battle, and a triumvirate of powerful ships rises to the challenge, three Kings of the sea to stand as mighty champions in crucial theaters of the war.

The war effort on every side is soon focused on the Middle East. Now representing the Soviet Government, Admiral Volsky accompanies John Tovey to a fateful conference in Palestine to meet with General Wavell and an enterprising new British General named Montgomery. Like three Kings of the West meeting on the field of battle, they plan the future course of the war and struggle to find some way to stop the relentless Axis juggernaut before its shadow darkens the world. Yet to do so they must also reckon with the three Kings of the East, Sergei Kirov, Ivan Volkov and Vladimir Karpov.

Action, mystery and intrigue pulse through this compelling continuation of the amazing Kirov Saga!
THE KIROV SERIES ~ BY JOHN SCHETTLER

Kirov
The battlecruiser Kirov is the most power surface combatant that ever put to sea. Built from the bones of all four prior Kirov Class battlecruisers, she is updated with Russia’s most lethal weapons, given back her old name, and commissioned in the year 2020. A year later, with tensions rising to the breaking point between Russia and the West, Kirov is completing her final missile trials in the Arctic Sea when a strange accident transports her to another time. With power no ship in the world can match, much less comprehend, she must decide the fate of nations in the most titanic conflict the world has ever seen—WWII.

Kirov II – Cauldron of Fire
Kirov crosses the Atlantic to the Mediterranean Sea when she suddenly slips in time again and re-appears a year later, in August of 1942. Beset with enemies on every side and embroiled in one of the largest sea battles of the war, the ship races for Gibraltar and the relatively safe waters of the Atlantic. Meanwhile, the brilliant Alan Turing has begun to unravel the mystery of what this ship could be, but can he convince the Admiralty? Naval action abounds in this fast paced second volume of the Kirov series trilogy.

Kirov III - Pacific Storm
Admiral Tovey’s visit to Bletchley Park soon reaches an astounding conclusion when the battlecruiser Kirov vanishes once again to a desolate future. Reaching the Pacific the ship’s officers and crew soon learn that Kirov has once again moved in time. Now First Officer Anton Fedorov is shocked to learn the true source of the great variation in time that has led to the devastated future they have come from and the demise of civilization itself. They are soon discovered by a Japanese fleet and the ship now faces its most dangerous and determined challenge ever when they are stalked by the Japanese 5th Carrier Division and eventually confronted by a powerful enemy task force led by the battleship Yamato, and an admiral determined to sink this phantom ship, or die trying. In this amazing continuation to the popular Kirov series, the most powerful ships ever conceived by two different
eras clash in a titanic final battle that could decide the fate of nations and the world itself.

**Kirov Saga: Men Of War ~ 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, 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 ~ 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 ~ 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.

**Kirov Saga: Armageddon ~ Book VIII**

The lines of fate have brought the most powerful ship in the world to a decisive place in 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.

Shocked by Karpov’s betrayal, Anton Fedorov plans a mission to stop the Captain before he can do irreversible damage to the cracked mirror of time. Now Admiral Volsky must do everything possible to launch this final mission aboard the nuclear attack submarine *Kazan*. The journey to the Sea of Japan becomes a perilous one when the Americans and Japanese begin to hunt *Kazan* in the dangerous waters of 2021.

Join Anton Fedorov, Admiral Volsky, Chief Dobrynin, 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.

**Kirov Saga: Altered States**

*Kirov* and *Kazan* move forward yet find themselves stuck in the midst of WWII once again, only the world is not the same! The consequences of all their interventions in history have now calcified to a new reality. The political borders of nations have been re-drawn, Colonial powers vie for control of the undeveloped world, and Russia itself is a divided nation. Discovering they still possess a decisive edge in weapons technology they must now decide which side to take to end a long and terrible war that threatens millions more lives.

**Altered States ~ Volume II: Darkest Hour**

The first rounds have fallen, heavy shells smashing against the armored conning tower of HMS *Hood*, stunning the ship and its stolid Admiral Holland. Yet *Hood* fights on, her guns raging in reprisal as the pride of two navies meet in the largest naval engagement since Jutland. Even as Admiral Tovey reaches the action, the shadow of Hoffmann’s battlegroup looms over his shoulder and the odds stack ever higher against the embattled ships of Home Fleet. Off to the north the *Stukas* rush to re-arm aboard carrier *Graf Zeppelin*, while far to the south another ship hastens north to the scene, from a time and place incomprehensible to the men now locked in a desperate struggle raging on a blood red sea that may decide the fate of England in 1940. Can they engage without shattering the fragile mirror of history yet again?

Learn the outcome and follow *Kirov* north as it heads to home waters, determined to meet the man that may have changed the course of all history, Sergei Kirov. Meanwhile the action moves to the Med where the young Christopher Wells is dispatched to Force H. The British must first prevent the powerful French fleet from falling into enemy hands. The fighting has only just begun as *Altered States* continues the retelling of the naval war in an exciting second volume.

The *Altered States* segment of the *Kirov Series* continues in the book you now hold: *Darkest Hour*, to be followed by Volume III: *Hinge of Fate*. 
Further titles are planned as the days slowly tick off toward “Paradox Day” the fateful day and hour when *Kirov* was to have first arrived in the Norwegian Sea on July 28, 1941.

**Altered States: Volume III ~ Hinge of Fate**

As Alan Turing pursues the baffling discovery of the strange cache of information code named *Geronimo*, Admiral Volsky sails to meet with the British on the Faeroes, bearing an offer of formal alliance between Soviet Russia and Great Britain. There Tovey learns the startling truth behind the mysterious ship that has haunted him all his life.

Sergeant Troyak’s mission aboard airship *Narva* faces danger and mystery on the Stony Tunguska, even while elements of two other airship fleets converge on the inn at Ilanskiy—the hinge of fate.

Meanwhile, Hitler hopes to secure another vital ally so that he can breathe life into Admiral Raeder’s long advocated Mediterranean strategy. It will begin with *Operation Felix* the assault on Gibraltar. As Britain steels itself for possible invasion, the Royal Navy must now rally to the defense of the embattled garrison at Gibraltar, England’s Rock in the Med, another hinge of fate that could turn the entire course of the war should it fall. Opposing them are the three elite regiments of the German Army, and a resurgent Kriegsmarine led by a fearsome new gladiator, the *Hindenburg*.

Like Alternate History / Time Travel by John Schettler?

Don’t miss his five volume *Meridian Series!*
The Meridian Series (Time Travel / Alternate History)

Book I: Meridian – A Novel In Time
ForeWord Magazine’s “Book of the Year”
2002 Silver Medal Winner for Science Fiction
The adventure begins on the eve of the greatest experiment ever attempted—time travel. As the project team meets for their final mission briefing, the last member, arriving late, brings startling news. Catastrophe threatens and the fate of the Western World hangs in the balance. But a visitor from another time arrives bearing clues that will carry the hope of countless generations yet to be born, and a desperate plea for help. The team is led to the Jordanian desert during WWI and the exploits of the fabled Lawrence of Arabia. There they struggle to find the needle in the haystack of causality that can prevent the disaster from ever happening.

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*.

*Golem 7 Introduces Admiral John Tovey as a primary historical character, and he figures prominently in the long Kirov Saga novels that followed this book.*
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!

For more information on these and other books please visit:
http://www.writingshop.ws or http://www.dharma6.com
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“All good books are alike in that they are truer than if they had really happened, and after you are finished reading one you will feel that all that happened to you and afterwards it all belongs to you: the good and the bad, the ecstasy, the remorse and sorrow, the people and the places and how the weather was. If you can get so that you can give that to people, then you are a writer.”

— Ernest Hemingway

Thank you for reading! I hope I have given you something here that rings true as I continue that never ending journey, and hope one day to call myself a writer.

JS