

At the Midway

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*Midway along the journey of our life
I strayed, abandoning the rightful path,
And found myself within a gloomy wood.*

Dante (Bergin translation)

Part One

Skirmishes

I

July, 1907 — 67°28'N, 154°50'W

The third time they heard the sound they did not jump as far. Although they still had no idea what was causing it, repetition induced a kind of boredom. Even the Unknown could become tedious if it boasted anonymity enough times.

"Ice breaking up?" Cumiskey posed.

Lieutenant Hart shook his head. "All the ice is gone."

"Might be some left coming down the Salmon." Cumiskey found it hard to believe there were places above the Arctic Circle where ice could disappear. It went against his boyhood notion that the Alaskan Territory was a great white wasteland. But the U.S. Army had disillusioned him of any number of fairy tales, not least of which being the impression that seals and polar bears were not the exclusive forms of life north of the forty-six states.

"Think it's something... you know, *alive*?" he asked pensively.

"It doesn't sound dead, does it?" Hart snapped. He was annoyed by Cumiskey's dread. No, he had no idea what made the sound first heard the night before. Lieutenant Hart had scattered the men of his small expedition in order to find firewood for the night. He cautioned them to watch out for wolves. But he also knew that cottonwood, spruce, alder and willow were plentiful hereabouts. His men would not have to range far.

Then the sound. Neither a threatening roar nor a hair-raising screech. Yet its very oddity threw the men into a panic and sent them running pell-mell back to camp. It was a brief sound, preceded by a kind of diphthongized pluck at the air--a vibrato so low and intimate that it almost sounded as if it was coming from

within their own heads. "Like goin' up a mountain and havin' your ears pop," someone said later that night.

"Tooo... nel..." the sound went.

There were only a few huskies in camp, yet they set up a howl like a dozen sled teams. The expedition expected to return to Point Hope long before the return of winter, when sledding would become necessary. The dogs had been brought along for canine companionship, not transportation. They provided a strange comfort. As if, being half wild, they could act as ambassadors of conciliation between the men and the wilderness.

But the first time they heard the sound they seemed as startled and terrified as the young soldiers. They did not dart forward as though to attack the sound source and they did not run because they did not know if there was a need to. They stood in place. And howled. Only after Hart beat them did they stop. The men could tell he really wanted to beat them--to somehow erase the evidence of their cowardice.

"Hell, sir, it ain't as if we're real soldiers," Cumiskey grouched, peering out over the Kiltik and Salmon Rivers. They were at the base of a small peninsula that looked down upon the confluence of the rivers. They could see the pellucid water churned white by migrating salmon beating their way into the shallower Kiltik. The soldiers had feasted on graylings the night before--a meal some of them nearly lost when the thin forest again pitched the chant-like moan in their direction. No one volunteered to hunt down the source. And by now Hart knew better than to order them beyond the light of the campfires.

Certainly, it had given Hart pause next morning when he considered slipping away early with his Remington. But this was ideal bear country. It would be a shame to miss this opportunity. Ordering Cumiskey to come along with him decided things nicely. Not only would he have companionship, but a witness to the fact that there was nothing to fear.

Hart noted the damndest looking island in the middle of the Salmon. More like a huge dune, only dark and glistening. Nothing crawled on it. No birds alighted, though it would have made an ideal perch for the fish hawks waiting to tear into the jagged meat of dying salmon. The island was out of place.

Like the sound.

Like the United States Army?

Cumiskey's disparaging comment had hit the nail squarely. Outside of the frequent pistol shots that punctuated the gritty life of mining settlements, not one of Hart's men had ever heard a shot fired in anger. The heroics of the Spanish-American War, only a baker's dozen years past, were but vivid tales told by the top cutters in the barracks.

But everyone was *doing* things these days. The world was a busy place and America had made a conscious decision to be the busiest of the lot. If she wasn't putting it to the Spanish or Boxers, she was putting it to the earth itself. Witness the gargantuan undertaking in Panama. When finished, the Canal would make the Pyramids look like Lincoln Logs. Everyone said it. The Brits, the Germans, the French, the Japs.... The world--yes, the world was livid with envy of the new giant.

The nervous, excess energy transported down the ranks of soldiers and civilians alike. If the armed forces had their fata morgana, so too did the citizenry--a four-letter word that bespoke a world of evil and a heaven of good.

Gold.

Hart and his men had to pass through the gold region on their way up to Napatka country. They'd seen their share of rough places. They were with the Signal Corps, after all. They unraveled mile after mile of telegraph wire over unspeakable terrain just so the generals back home could avoid that terrain. While not front line troops, they'd seen their share of hardships.

Still, Kotzbue threw them. The U.S. Marshals who patrolled the mining camps were not so much peacekeepers as undertakers. Kotzbue boomed in every way. For every lode... how many corpses? Sulfur, rosin, pitch and saltpeter. Gold, guns, a crowd of men and a dearth of women. Only a preacher could decide which was more explosive and there were not many preachers around.

Lieutenant Hart was determined to get his men out before they too were infected by the fever. He set out to purchase canoes from the natives. He found it strange dealing with the Eskimos and Aleuts. Like Private Cumiskey, he had a number of preconceptions about the Great White North. Certainly, he had not expected to find the natives living in cabins instead of igloos or turning a dollar in Nome rather than hunting seals in the Bering Sea.

When a young Noatak caught his attention and showed him a craft entirely new to his experience, Hart was captivated and forgot his doubts.

Constructed in a variety of sizes, the bidarkis were intriguing vessels. The struts were cocooned in seal skin. Settling himself into one made for a single man, Hart felt snug as coffee in a cup. He took the odd two-flat oar in hand and set course across a small creek.

He immediately fell in love. This was the closest a man could come to being a fish without actually going under water. Unlike the canoe, which sat with bland resolution on the surface, the bidarki was so low that the occupant was, in effect, *in* the water, yet dry. The bidarki put Hart on whispering terms with the river bottom. Having grown up in Missouri, this was as much aquatic mystery as one needed.

Elated with the craft, Hart brought out his notions. In a place where a well-knit animal skin could prove the difference between life and death, sewing needles ranked near the top in local rates of exchange. In no time, Hart had a small fleet and was on his way.

Laurels were not something one could rest on in this busy world. Which was why Lieutenant Hart and his men had been sent up the Kiltik that July of 1907. Someone in the chain of command had decided to look into the possibility of setting up a telegraph line between Unalakleet and Point Barrow. A whaling crew trapped by winter ice could then signal its predicament to rescue crews in the south. At least, that was what the signalmen were told. A few of them believed they knew better.

Lieutenant Hart, for one.

"I want you to find a way to put that line in, Lieutenant," the colonel at the Presidio had told him. "We can't keep having our whalers going over to the Siberian Peninsula every time they get into trouble. Looks bad, the Tsar getting credit for saving American lives. This is for the honor of the country, Hart. The honor of the *Army*."

Which suited Hart fine until the colonel added, "You'll be going into country not many white men have seen, if any. I hear even the natives stay pretty much downriver. Well... between you and me... if you happen to find anything up there, Hart... anything that glitters, shall we say... keep it to yourself. Just

bring the news back to me and we'll work it out from there. Clear, Lieutenant?"

Very.

But America was young, America was virile, America was cloaked in manifest destiny. A little duplicity on the side couldn't hurt, right? Hart did, after all, work for the country that had produced J. P. Morgan.

All these concerns slipped from his mind as he came under sway of Alaska's hard-earned glacial scars. On foggy mornings, with the Baird Mountains looming to the north, it seemed they were babes lolling in the cradle of creation.

A nudge at his shoulder. Cumiskey was pointing at something.

"There..."

When Hart spotted the huge bear lumbering up the shore he pulled on Cumiskey's elbow. "Lay low, you idiot!" he hissed.

Cumiskey began to protest, but a second glance at the bear convinced him. He flattened down hard.

"That's no grizzly." Hart's excited whisper mixed dread and elation. "That's a brown!"

The brown bear was moving up the Kiltik towards the shallows of the Salmon. Every time it caught a flash of silver from the river it pumped its legs a little harder. Roughly twice the size of its grizzly cousin, the great brown's eyes gleamed. The two men watching could almost swear it was grinning in anticipation of the meal ahead.

The Remington felt ready and nimble at Hart's side. He was going to bag a brown! Not as large as some of the great browns he'd seen on Kodiak Island. Still... a brute. At least eight hundred pounds. Hart was already calculating ways to ready the head and pelt for shipment back to Point Hope. And God knew he was ready for bear steak after all the fish they'd eaten.

Slowly, he drew the rifle up. The cool barrel brushed his cheek. Prone like this, it was difficult drawing a bead on the moving target.

But the target had stopped moving.

The men held their breath. How could it have detected them? A steady breeze was hitting them in the face. They shared a brief nightmarish vision of the bear charging up the slope. If Hart missed with his one shot, the huge claws would quickly finish them.

Hart indulged in a slim sigh of relief as the bear looked away from them towards the Kiltik. Curiosity prompted him to ease off on the trigger ever so slightly. What in the world was it looking at?

"Hey...."

"Quiet!"

"No... there's something...."

The bear hunched back and sniffed the air. It seemed confused. A low grunt precisely defined its perplexity.

"Lieutenant!" Cumiskey jumped to his feet. "Oh God, Lieutenant!"

The bear heard the shout but never finished its turn. Something leaped out of the water about forty feet upriver from the odd island Hart had noted. In half a second a line of water between the object and the island erupted, showing them to be connected. Something like a rocket sliced the air. There was a brief animal screech, then an explosion of blood where the bear had been.

In shock, the men watched as the creature in the river lifted the bear higher, higher. Only the bear's rear legs and head showed outside the huge trap of teeth. Its jaw kept working, as though its last thought was of the salmon breakfast it was missing.

The monster gave a small toss of its head and the last vestiges of the bear disappeared. A lump formed in the neck of the beast and rolled slowly downward, vanishing at the base near the mass Hart had mistaken for an island.

The gun bucked hard when he fired. Though he had no doubt he'd hit it, the monster did not react.

They scrambled down the near slope into a stand of small trees.

"Wait!"

Shots rang out ahead of them. A second later came soul-tearing screams.

"The camp!"

"Are they shooting this way?"

Stray shots became as much a concern as the monster. They looked back. Had the beast in the Kiltik raised itself out of the river, the men in camp would have seen it over the short trees, but the brow of the low ridge showed scrub grass and sky. Nothing else.

Working the bolt, Hart reloaded his Remington and nudged Cumiskey with the stock.

Reluctantly, Cumiskey hefted his Springfield rifle and followed.

The shooting ahead had stopped. So had the screams. In his mind's eye Hart saw the horror show beyond the thin screen of trees. The camp in shambles. Men injured and shouting. What could be the cause? Had the river beast circled round them?

They smelled smoke. Invisible but potent. Otherwise, all was green. Evergreen and more. One did not expect so much green this far north. A strange misrepresentation. Even the beast matched Hart's preconceptions better. It was huge. Brown. Wild. A killer.

"Oh Christ, I can't...." Cumiskey stopped, then began to pull back. "I can't...."

"Don't make me go by myself." Hart found it difficult to talk.

"I can't...."

Cumiskey was still back-peddling when one of the larger trees came to life. He had no idea what was happening before his head, chest and torso were engulfed in an enormous maw. His feet kicked up, whisking the grass briefly

before a smaller version of the creature in the river lifted him off the ground.

Hart stood in shocked immobility. A scream froze in his throat, like a seal trapped in ice.

A slight flick... and Cumiskey was gone.

The monster's body had been hidden in a hollow behind a clutch of saplings. Trees snapped sideways and the ground shivered as it hopped up in front of Hart. The lieutenant had a clear look at its strong forward limbs. They were not legs. They were diamond-shaped.

There was a loud report and Hart's arms jerked as his gun leaped out of his hands. Reflexively, he'd pulled the trigger. He'd been holding the rifle waist high, pointed at the monster, but he did not wait to see if he'd scored a hit.

Bolting through the woods, he'd gone about a hundred yards when he burst into the remains of the camp.

Smoke came from the half dozen tents set up the night before. The camp stoves had been tipped over, their fires touching off the tents, which had been waterproofed with paraffin. Highly flammable, they went up like Election Day bonfires.

The fires obviously bothered the creature in the middle of the camp.

It was surrounded by the mangled remains of Lieutenant Hart's little troop and it did not look as if anyone had survived. Shreds of khaki mixed with tattered flesh.

The creature spotted him. It was another small copy of the river beast--still, far larger than the largest bull elephant. Apparently, the only things that kept it from charging were the paraffin-fed fires. It snapped at them, twisting in a circle with snarling whines, its sharp snout singed at each approach. Hart could not see light under its body. The creature moved with its stomach to the ground like a tremendous seal. Its narrow neck was incredibly lithe. It seemed to be trying to pick up the fire so it could set it aside.

"My men... my men," Hart thought. "What will they think of me?"

He ran.

A sound chased him.

"Tooo... nel...."

II

On the Cliffs of Time

The Tu-nel had met many challenges throughout their long history. Older than the family of sharks and the venerable turtles, they had sniffed the fetid breath of extinction more than once....

The last man alive, other than Hart himself, lay hurt and terrified. Both of his legs were crushed and he was quickly descending into shock.

There had been eighteen men in the camp when the two beasts burst into the clearing. The men were presented briefly with the chance to run, but they did not use their opportunity soon enough. They were stupefied by the beasts, yet on first glance it appeared the creatures were too large and cumbersome for rapid movement.

A fallacy quickly and lethally disproved. The Tu-nel dropped to their stomachs, folded back their front paddles and dug their rear limbs into the ground. Large chunks of dirt and grass were thrown back as they thrust themselves forward.

The soldiers managed to fire a few shots--to no effect. Most of them were crushed in their tents. Others were trampled in the open as they tried to make a stand or attempted to run. A few were caught in huge jaws as the Tu-nel flashed their necks like scythes across the campground. The annoying yapping of the dogs was hushed with the flick of a stubby tail, leaving a heap of fur and jutting bones. The struts of Lieutenant Hart's bidarki snapped wickedly as one of the creatures whipped around to chase two men running for the woods. It flattened

one man at the fringe, then followed the other into the trees.

Through his agony, the soldier with the crushed legs had a blurred image of animal frolic. These monsters were playing.

At least, that was the misty impression he had the instant before the beast snapping at the tent fires rolled to one side and finished crushing him.

The two young Tu-nel had been snacking on salmon during their entire trip upriver and they'd eaten their fill. Rather than making them lethargic, however, all that food fueled a burst of playfulness. The sounds the men heard the night before and that morning had been made by the mother, still in the river. Only one of the young Tu-nel belonged to her. The other, a male, was a tagalong. The young ones had slipped away from the Kiltik late last evening, chasing each other and knocking about in the trees. The huge adult found it uncomfortable moving on land, so she sat in the deepest part of the river and called to the errant young ones--who did not respond.

When they spotted the men in Hart's camp, they promptly charged. It was great sport treading the bipeds underfoot. They did not make the connection between the soldiers and the tiny wounds caused by their rifle bullets. Certainly the young male paid no notice, for he already bore deep scars on his right flank--inflicted by the mother Tu-nel when he swam too close during their first encounter. Next to that, the .30 caliber bullets slapping into his chest were hardly noticeable.

The burning tents were another matter. The young male had never encountered fire before. When he ducked his head into the fire, the sensation was more peculiar than painful and he snapped at the flames again and again, mystified as to why he could not move them out of the way.

Once the fires died down, however, the male forgot the strange phenomena and rushed into the woods to find the young female. He discovered her rubbing the length of her body against some trees. This action perplexed the male. The female hissed, rolled to her other side, and began rocking back and forth. Trees snapped and fell under her weight. She moved to the next rank of spruce and repeated the sequence.

The male sniffed and lifted its head above the trees. In the early morning sunlight his skin took on an olive-gold tinge.

Unlike the ancient reptiles that they superficially resembled, Tu-nel had prominent follicles of nasal hair. When the young male caught a whiff of smoke from the camp, his nose was tickled and he sneezed, revealing his teeth. Tu-nel teeth were long, sharp as coral, and socketed. They could slice through the thick shell of a giant marine turtle as easily as a boy bites into a cupcake.

A series of loud cracks and another line of trees went down under the female. As the male lowered himself, he brushed against some spruce boughs and a peculiar tingle shot through him. He lifted himself again and came down on the trees in front of him, his skin rasping against the rough network of limbs. The tingle was multiplied a thousand times.

More trees were felled as the male repeated the procedure. He began to emit little grunts of pleasure as he learned more and more about the art of scratching himself. Resting his chin against the crown of a tree, he slowly moved outward, laying himself and the spruce down in one long sliding motion as the branches scratched neck, body, cloaca and tail.

Within an hour, the two young Tu-nel flattened nearly three acres.

"Tooo... nel...."

All morning long the female had ignored her mother's calls and, now that her thick skin was satiated, she began loping towards the river. Unwilling to be left alone, the male followed. On reaching the crest of the shallow slope where Hart and Cumiskey had lain, they fell to their stomachs and slid down, kicking out like otters on a mud slide. They plunged into the water and darted to the adult. She greeted the young female with a snort.

The male was still excited from the morning's play, but he swam too close and his enthusiasm was rewarded with a sharp tail-slap from the mother. He fell behind the females and sulked, but things had improved. At least now when he approached the mother did not try to tear out his throat.

This trip on the Kiltik had been special to the young ones. The fresh water felt strange and clean on their skin. But the Tu-nel rarely went upriver anymore and the mother was feeling confined by the shallows.

It had been an unintended journey, the result of a combination of misfortunes and one more consequence of the noise.

After one hundred and thirty-five million years and untold tribulations, the Tu-nel had met their match. It was not something they could touch or smell. It was not something they could fight.

It was the Age of Steam.

The ocean had always been a noisy place. For one thing, it held the world's largest collection of ill-bred diners. Fish could be stupendously noisy eaters. Some made feeding sounds that would have reminded a man of a sawmill, and the mammals who shared the seas with them were no less indelicate. Gray whales plowed up large swatches of seabed while tearing through the tiny sand-tube houses of the shrimp-like creatures they preyed upon, making the ocean thud with avalanche sounds.

And the songbook of the fish was endless. The drumfish *Baridiella* drummed with its swim bladder. The croaker *Micropogon* made frog sounds and peculiar snare-drum rolls. Leaning backward, sea horses joined the two bony projections at the back of their skulls and snap-snap-snapped.

The fish had an infinite number of ways to create snorts, clacks, claps, ticks, squeaks, moans, tones, and groans. Percussive effects could be produced by hitting the ocean floor, each other, or themselves. Many fish sported sonic muscles. By burping gas from their swim bladders into their foreguts, such as the toadfish did, they could peep and burble to their hearts' content. Pufferfish ground their pharyngeal teeth as though they were undersea hurdy-gurdies. All to the accompaniment of crustacean castanets.

Then there was whale song.

There was a time when the singing whales rang the globe with their symphonies. Some could make themselves heard on the other side of the planet, setting up vibrations in the water to carry their news and intent. Those not graced with such talent could at least pass important messages along. All the whales in the world were in-the-know. Yet now, while it was a news service not yet matched by man, man had effectively scotched it. Because man had set upon the great currents engines which disrupted their long-distance communications.

The Tu-nel also had girdled the planet with their songs. One hundred and thirty-five million years of evolution had given them a matchless repertoire. Their most common transmission, "tooo-nel," was fraught with nuances and

meanings, which were taught slowly and patiently to all young Tu-nel. Their long necks and lateral temporal vacuities formed, in effect, magnificent Alpine horns. On land this instrument was fed directly from the lungs, but underwater the Tu-nel first transferred air to a special compression chamber near the base of the neck, circulating it for song while losing a minimal amount of oxygen. A glottal cavity was responsible for the hollow double-vowel sound preceding Tu-nel songs and all but erased the subtle consonant at the beginning. In ages past, under the right conditions, they could make themselves heard from sea to sea.

No more.

Disastrously for the Tu-nel, steam engines intruded directly upon the frequency of their songs. Even a small auxiliary engine could deafen them. The roar and ratchets did not hurt their sensitive ears. It was the sudden isolation that threw them into turmoil. They were accustomed to the constant hum and jump of sea music. The songs had provided them with consolation and news. A song could be a night cry or joyous birth. Songs told them where the food was, the best weather was, the enemy was. And now they were gone.

Had they roamed in herds, the result would not have been so catastrophic, but the Tu-nel gathered in large groups only during the mating season. Every year they gathered around a few inconspicuous islands in the Aleutians. As they drew closer, the sounds of the engines grew less intrusive and they could hear each other with relative clarity. This was absolutely necessary, because the Tu-nel were always voracious and the surrounding sea was heavily depopulated during their gatherings. Battling males and choiring females worked up ferocious appetites. They had to stay in constant contact with the scouts who patrolled the outlying areas. On receiving a signal, a temporary truce would be sounded and the combatants would race out to the food the scouts had located. Once fed, the male rivals returned to the deadly scrimmage, while females violently jostled each other as they orbited the arena, determining status in their own particular pecking order. The scouts, old bulls who had given up the mating battles, resumed their vigil.

In the 1800's whaling ships began plying the area regularly, sailing vessels that little troubled the Tu-nel. But as the century progressed, whalers converted to steam and became even more proficient at depopulating the ocean. The massacre of the fur seals on the Pribilof Islands was a blow. The Tu-nel had pursued the seals even as the seals chased after salmon and squid. A harsher loss

was that of the reddish-brown walrus that had thrived in the Arctic. They had once been easy meals as they grazed for gapers and cockles on the sea bed. Now both seals and walruses were threatened with extinction.

Infinitely worse, though, was that the whales themselves were on the verge of sharing their fate. The Tu-nel scouts had to range further and further away from the mating grounds to find sustenance. The Tu-nel were going hungry when they needed food the most, during the mating season. Occasionally they attacked lone whalers and revenue cutters that came their way, but sinking a large whaling ship expended precious energy, and drowning men were scrawny, meager repasts. There were never any survivors from these attacks because the Tu-nel had to pick out every morsel of meat they could find.

And then the planet itself turned against them.

Beginning in 1886, revenue cutters threading their way through the Aleutians began happening upon islands that appeared overnight, then just as quickly disappeared. For thirty years the island chain boiled in geologic upheaval. It was spooky enough for the sailors standing on the narrow cutter decks. For the Tu-nel it was catastrophic, because most of the activity took place in the vicinity of Bogoslof Island.

The heart of their breeding ground.

The ancient mating arenas now had a new topography. In the past, the Tu-nel would have established new arenas with an accommodating variation in song. But the grind of steam engines and the screech and blow of the earth caused males and females to miss connection. The birth rate dropped. There would be no Tu-nel left in fifty years--the average life span of the creature.

The mother Tu-nel and the two young ones made their way slowly downriver. Once again they broke through Naupaktomiut fishing seines, but this time the men did not rush out to fix them, for there had been rumors of something terrible in the river. Villagers were missing. The Tu-nel had reached Kotzebue three months ago. It was night, as it had been when they first entered the sound. There was no need to attack the human settlements, for their guts were full of salmon. Still, they attacked two men in a dinghy who were shooting seals that were preying on salmon. The young Tu-nel knocked the boat over and toyed with the men a little before playfully biting them in half. Then they

slaughtered two dozen seals that were great sport because of their agility.

While lumbering over the shoals, they swallowed pebbles to aid in trituration--a bird-like habit they once shared with the plesiosaurs.

Their accidental riverine foray was over. Accidental because the mother had become lost while searching for the mating arena. There was more noise in the area than ever before, for gold prospectors were arriving by the shipload. The steam engine cacophony had reached a crescendo and the earth itself had buckled and screeched like a mad woman, throwing the mother into deaf confusion.

Already, far to the south, the prelude to this tectonic activity on the Pacific Rim had reduced a great city to fire and ruin.

III

December, 1907 - 37°02'N, 76°17'W

From the Deck Log of the USS Florida:

0800 Dressed Ship; Quartermaster Jno Smith rerated Schoolmaster; Landsman Jno Wm Watkins shipped at N. News; Ship's Baker Jos Sebastiane disrated Landsman, given 5 days bread and water for neglect of duty and insubordination; Seaman Gunner Chas McCoy discharged at Hampt.; Mast gave Pvt Handly (Marine) 20 hours extra duty for insolence; Mast gave Ship's cook 1/c 2 weeks restriction for drunkenness; Seamen Atchison and Russell, 3/c Petty Off Jenkins, and 2/c Machinist Anderson declared deserters.

There was a shout as a stream of fire shot from the serpent's mouth. Smoke billowed and catastrophe seemed imminent. Ships churned the water and brought their big guns to bear. Crash after thundering crash followed hard and shook the Capes. But the monster was unimpressed and impervious as it drew closer to shore. The end was near. Sparks flew, smoke erupted, the populace screamed.

The beast reached the shallows, let out a roar--then abruptly stopped. The side of the beast burst open and a score of sailors hopped out. They banked its fires and tossed out mooring lines. Amidst the applause of the spectators, they began to dismantle the dragon and pack it away.

From the poop of the *Mayflower*, President Theodore Roosevelt clapped his hands and bully-bullied. The cannon puffs of breath that materialized in the cold December air made him seem like a miniature dragon himself.

"Signal the rear admiral. I want to board the *Connecticut*."

He stepped into the flag officer's barge. On the way across he surveyed the cheering crowds and watched the bright wakes as they unscrolled behind cutters and small craft zipping hither and thither across Hampton Roads. He thought he could hear the band on the *Connecticut* switch over from the *Merry Widow Waltz* to something more appropriate as the barge approached, then realized it must be his imagination. It was hard enough hearing the coxswain over the roar of the engine, let alone the musicians on the battleship ahead

Raising his eyes, he saw red and yellow pennants dart up from the *Connecticut's* signal bridge. The shine and spangle was all fine, of course. But nothing matched this sight: the flagship and the fleet.

And the prospect of the journey they were about to undertake.

Over the summer, ships from all over the world had anchored off the mouth of the James. Guns and aigrettes bristled as battle squadrons from Britain, Japan, Germany, France, Austria-Hungary, Italy and a half dozen lesser powers puffed and pouted for the citizens attending the great Jamestown Exposition. The excitement had been grand, the competition fierce--not exactly a comity of nations, but who cared? Gathered in a mighty heap in Hampton Roads, it seemed Man could take on the universe. Eventually, though, the party ended. The fleets sailed home. Except, of course, the one that was already home. Norfolk was the sally port of the mighty Atlantic Fleet.

There were twenty battleships in the Grand Atlantic Fleet. Sixteen of them were present, while the rest were in dry dock for repairs and maintenance. Hulls painted a dazzling white, they were like angels in metal studs--as much a boast of moral purity as of puissance.

"And about as clear a row of sitting ducks as was ever set up for the shoot," said Dr. Singleton from the foredeck of the *Indiana* class *Florida*, in the Third Division.

Midshipman Davis winced. The president himself was being ferried past them, and Singleton still could not hide his want of patriotism.

The crew had manned the starboard rail for side honors and a cheer burst forth as Roosevelt waved at them from the barge. Up on the bridge, Captain

Oates wondered how familiar the Chief Executive was with the Fleet's signal book, since every morning at four bells of the forenoon watch the ships hoisted flags indicating their number of sick and absentees. One of the fiercest rivalries between the captains manifested at this time, the winning ship showing the lowest number. As of yet, the Admiral had given no indication these flags should be lowered. Pride and shame were pennants for all to see. The *Florida* had come in second from the last--some consolation since that was better than usual.

Oates frowned at the way his men abandoned themselves to the cheer. The lack of decorum bothered him. But he had it from Evans himself that the president preferred extravagant displays of enthusiasm from his men over dour obedience.

One questioned the Rear Admiral at one's peril. "Fighting Bob" Evans had earned his sobriquet off the coast of South America in 1891. When the Chilean government aimed some rude noises at the United States, Robley D. Evans sailed into Valparaiso and threatened to blow up Chile's navy if they did not promptly apologize--which they did.

Chile! Captain Oates snorted inwardly. What a coup! What a magnificent victory!

True, Evans had fought honorably in the Spanish-American War, was even credited with destroying the enemy flagship at Santiago. But that was not where he had gotten his nickname.

Chile! It said worlds about the Rear Admiral. He was not ashamed to use the big stick, no matter how small the prey. So when he told his captains to allow their bluejackets to engage in spontaneous shouting, cheering, frolicking and other foolish behavior that evinced good morale, the captains bit the bullet.

Chile!

Captain Oates saluted as the president waved. Below and forward, he spotted the peculiar straw hat Dr. Singleton always wore--one more care he did not want to count. The day Singleton came on board, Oates knew that the doctor was going to rub him the wrong way. One of the Navy's unwritten laws was that officers had their own personal spaces, as well as their private ways of getting there. The starboard side of the quarterdeck belonged to the captain. While there, no one was to approach unless he signaled them to do so. To port other officers

congregated, avoiding the captain's gaze but keen for his call. These wardroom officers had their own particular hatchway to use when going up to the quarterdeck, staying clear of the captain's personal companionway.

That morning, as Oates ascended the short ladder, the companionway was suddenly blocked from above. He glanced up to see the swaying bottom of a pair of baggy trousers descending upon him and just managed to scamper down and out of the way before getting stepped on.

"See here, sir," he protested when Singleton came to rest at the bottom of the ladder. "This happens to be reserved for the exclusive use of the ship's commander."

"Even when there's a fire?" said Singleton breezily, then sauntered down the passageway.

"A civilian," Oates thought grumpily as he went up. Yet as he stood looking out over the roadstead, he remembered being told Singleton had spent several months with the Special Service Squadron, so he was undoubtedly versed in maritime formalities. Had he come down the captain's hatch--on *purpose*? If so, why? There could be no other reason than to... than to....

"Annoy me!" Oates struck the rail.

They were going to sail around the world. That was why Roosevelt was here--to see them off. It was an exploit never before attempted by a major steam-driven fleet. The ill-fated Baltic Fleet had only managed half the distance. The technical, logistical and political problems that had to be surmounted seemed inconsequential next to the sheer physical endurance required of them. Not that the thing itself was impossible, but the officers of the Fleet were impossibly old. Oates himself was on the near side of seventy.

And he'd been saddled with the oldest of the sixteen ships.

Twelve years earlier, Congress had grown alarmed by what was happening across the Atlantic, where the European powers were battenning the hatches for a prolonged arms race. In a trice, money was appropriated for a complete revamping of the U.S. Navy and among the first keels laid was that of the

Florida. Unfortunately, it was hastily constructed, and was out of date within eight years. Newer ships of the *Connecticut* class carried prodigious armor shields that Oates' ship lacked and, naval diplomacy being nine-tenths appearance, the older ship was given a modern-looking exterior. From a distance, she looked as formidable as any man-of-war in the four divisions. But much of it was sham.

Because much of it was wood. Wood that soaked up soot like a sponge. Wood that could hardly be cleaned or repainted.

Evans had expressed his displeasure the previous Monday--'Blue Monday', that day of the week reserved for Admiral's Inspection. Evans and his Board were piped on board with all the pomp of foreign dignitaries. They looked on stoically while the *Florida's* crew was put through foot drills, fire drills, abandon ship drills, division drills, and Colors. To the First Lieutenant, whose job it was to keep the *Florida* spotless, it seemed the men with white gloves inspected every inch of the old ship, from her trucks down to her double-bottoms. But the Admiral's chief complaint was on his lips before he even stepped on board:

"This... wood...."

Wood that Dr. Singleton harped on with the insistence of a dog mistaking a neighbor for a prowler and barking all through the night. The false armor would be useless if they were forced to do battle in the course of their journey.

Singleton was with the Fleet as a special correspondent for *Scientific American*. He was on the *Florida* as a special nuisance to Captain Oates. It was as if Evans had assigned him to the scruffiest ship they had just to give Singleton proof for his complaints. The Admiral seemed to be saying: "Here, you want to write reports on the inadequacy of my fleet? Then I give you the *Florida*, sorriest of the lot. That should give you copy, and be damned with you."

The credentials that gave him a berth with the Fleet were impressive--so impressive that the Navy had arranged accommodations for him on the *U.S.S. Minneapolis* when it had been part of the Special Service Squadron. Singleton had helped design and set up the complicated photoheliographs used by the Squadron during its expedition to the Mediterranean to study the eclipse of 1905. Rumor had it that he was with the Atlantic Fleet to observe the effects of twelve-inch shells in case they came up against the Japanese.

Ever since they destroyed the Baltic Fleet, the Japanese had begun to think of the Pacific as their personal swimming hole. Did Roosevelt anticipate a sea battle with their little Asian brothers, Kaiser Wilhelm's 'yellow peril'? If so, Singleton's presence made sense. It was always a good idea to have a scientist around who could explain a catastrophe.

The British had given Singleton his most potent source of sarcasm to date. For a long time they had heard rumors that the Limeys were working on an entirely new kind of battleship. On October 3, 1906, it fell that, once again, the grapevine of the oceans was accurate as ever. The *H.M.S. Dreadnought* would give its name to an entire class of ships. The particulars were dribbling out--not that the British Admiralty was trying to keep their new toy a secret. The *Dreadnought* could out-gun, out-race, out-maneuver and out-last anything afloat, so the Royal Navy said. And truth be known, as more and more details of the ship were learned, more than one non-English salt sadly agreed.

"We're sailing in antiques, gentlemen," Singleton had stated flatly a few days earlier. "The *Dreadnought* could sail into Hampton Roads and flatten fleet, towns and coastline in two hours. How is that for progress?"

There were plenty of officers who agreed with this observation, but they kept their doubts to themselves. Had any one of them been caught disparaging the Fleet the way the good doctor did, he might not only be reprimanded, but cashiered as well.

For days, an easterly had whipped the ships with fifty mile an hour winds. A cold gust now blew in from the *Florida's* starboard quarter. Hundreds of hats flew into the air and there was a mad scramble as the sailors and marines chased their headgear in circles. Raising himself on his toes, Captain Oates could just make out Singleton's straw hat prominent among the runaways. The doctor watched as Midshipman Davis ran to and fro, chasing the treacherous air currents beneath the turrets. Oates thought it would be a fine thing if he could see the last of that damn hat, so casual, so... *peaceful*. What the hell was he doing wearing sunshine straw on this cold, blustery day?

Oates crossed his fingers. Singleton's hat was still on the loose. The midshipman looked like a lame spider as he dodged this way and that in his attempts to retrieve it. Picture the doctor's grim visage if it flew over the port railing! His blustering at naval inefficiency would attain Lincolnian eloquence if

his straw was lost.

Midshipman Davis ran head-on into a marine who was chasing after his own short-visored hat. They went down in a spastic jumble of gangly arms and legs. The marine hopped up and went his way without a second glance at the sailor. Oates experienced a twinge of sympathy for the junior officer fresh out of Annapolis.

"Blasted way to run a navy," he grouched, turning to his executive officer, Lieutenant Grissom.

"The president has reached the *Connecticut*," the exec blandly informed him.

"Yes...."

Bounding up from the barge, Roosevelt landed on the deck at a gallop and charged over to the admiral of his choice, leaving a martial ring in the Swiss cheese plates and an OOD who could only nod amiably.

In fact, Evans was only a rear admiral. There were four other rear admirals with the Fleet, so he was only unique by presidential fiat. Fighting Bob Evans had desperately wanted the status of full admiral conferred on him in advance of the expedition. But after granting Admiral "You-May-Fire-When-Ready" Dewey the equivalent of five stars, Congress had had its fill of sea-going prima donnas. They refused the president's request to grant Evans a promotion. This meant that in the upcoming journey he would have to sit below the salt at banquets. When he entered foreign ports, the gun salutes his two stars drew would be over before the echoes came back. All of which could have been forgiven, had his most fervent secret prayer been answered:

God, deliver me from this gout, was Rear Admiral Evans' foremost thought as he hobbled forward to grasp the president's firm hand.

The president glowered at the reporters clustered on the gangway. This was a surprising expression from someone who'd won the Nobel Peace Prize. It was also a caution to the photographers to be ready next time.

Evans could not keep from casting nervous glances about him. A great many of his boys were fresh from the Midwest, where Navy recruiters had gone to flush out good-looking, all-American types. Officially, the upcoming voyage was slated for the training of personnel and the testing of new equipment. Unofficially, everyone knew that Teddy was whipping out his 'big stick' and showing it for all the world to see. In which case, it would hardly do to have foreigners observe the average American sailor--hardened, tattooed and blemished with poor teeth if he was lucky enough to have any remaining. The thousands of scrubbed-pink faces that had been poured into the Fleet had not yet won their sea legs. Standing before Roosevelt, Evans wondered which of the green lads around him would puke in front of the president.

"Bob," Roosevelt declaimed, "you know this is a peaceful mission I'm sending you on. But there's always the unexpected. If it comes to a fight, I know I can count on you."

"Good God, what's he *saying*?" some of the correspondents whispered among themselves. "Is he challenging the *Japs*?"

Fighting Bob smiled with grim equanimity and matched the firmness of the president's grasp. The possibility that they would lock horns with the Japanese was an ironic testament to the fluid world. He had been commander of the Asiatic Fleet when the Naval War College recommended its withdrawal from the Far East in 1903. The Japanese Embassy had lodged a protest. They felt that a strong American presence in the region preserved the peace.

Apparently, that was no longer their belief.

"Well vitted, are you?" the president inquired.

"Captain Ingersoll has the figures."

Evans summoned his chief of staff. Ingersoll, prepared, recited, "Mr. President, the Bureau of Supplies and Accounts has supplied us with more than six million pounds of provisions, excluding fifteen thousand pounds of English plum pudding, just arrived and to be stowed aboard this evening."

Evans noted Roosevelt's keen interest. They all understood this was the tender prelude to the best statistic of all. The admiral nodded for Ingersoll to continue.

"For the pleasure of the men, there are included four hundred sheets of popular music, thirty-two pianos, two hundred sets of boxing gloves, one hundred sets of quoits, three hundred handballs and horse billiards, sixteen tridents and sets of whiskers--for the Neptunes, when we cross the Line--eight hundred packs of playing cards, sixty phonographs, uncounted Bibles, and three hundred copies of your latest State of the Union Address."

"Bully!"

Now... the moment....

"Mr. President, the combined weight of the fighting Grand Atlantic Fleet is two hundred and twenty-three thousand tons. On the sixteen ships there is a total of nine hundred and twenty-five naval guns, perhaps the greatest concentration of firepower in history. Some of the ships mount thirteen-inchers, but just as effective are the twelve-inch guns. In all, one hundred and forty-four guns of major caliber. In five minutes of firing, one of the newer ships, such as the *Georgia*, can develop 3,927,172 foot-tons of energy. The Fleet carries 35,000,000 pounds in its magazines. We carry not only the standard Whitehead torpedoes, but many of the new turbine-driven Bliss-Leavitt models. Among the explosives are dynamite, maxemite, lyddite and shimose."

Imposing statistics, imposingly stacked. With each increment Roosevelt visibly swelled, as if gearing up for a hunt.

"Wonderful! Marvelous! Absolutely... bully!"

Ingersoll saluted, then vanished like a dropped decimal place.

Roosevelt scowled. This time, the photographers were ready. President and Rear Admiral were surrounded by pops and flashes, as though a battle were already underway.

"Yoo-hoo! Roger! Roger!"

Ensign Roger Garrett was dismantling the head of the dragon when the female voice clanged overhead. He cursed, then threw a vicious scowl at the men of the dragon crew grinning at him.

"Roger! You'll never guess... never!"

Garrett spotted the portly man struggling to keep up with the attractive brunette, and immediately guessed.

They were tied up at the Hotel Chamberlin pier. On the quay between hotel and river a large crowd had gathered to see how the magical dragon was taken apart. It was a clever, portable disguise that extended several yards fore and aft of the cutter. Garrett's dubious command. His main concern had been to prevent the burning naphtha that shot out the nose from catching the dragon and cutter on fire. He'd succeeded, but barely. The dragon's snout was charred to a crisp.

The girl's mouth, on the other hand, was moist, inviting, and constantly open. He'd met Emily--*good God, what was her last name?*--at one of the frequent football games the sailors of the Fleet played on shore while stationed at Norfolk. He'd seen her swooning extravagantly in the bleachers. Covered with dirt and sweat, he'd introduced himself to her after the game, and soon had a pretty decoration to attend his arm at the innumerable parties that made the Capes so boisterous that year. The problem was that Emily pranced at his elbow like one espoused. As of yet, the only banns had been in her heart and mind, which seemed nuptial enough for her.

He gave her a brief wave, then turned and shouted commands at the crew of the cutter at the top of his lungs.

Which did nothing to chase Emily away. Just the opposite. Clapping her hands in admiration, she grabbed the stranger by the elbow and dragged him forward. What was it she said her father did for a living? A dry-goods drummer? Yes, that was it. At least, Emily put out like the daughter of a dry-goods drummer. Things had been too dry in her life and she'd been on the lookout for something a little... wetter. Either that or she was under the mistaken impression that ensigns in the U.S. Navy made more than \$2,700 a year. Of course, if he was ever to advance himself, a wife would be a necessity.

But the daughter of a dry-goods drummer?

"Roger! Look! It's my *father*!"

Damn. For the life of him, Garrett couldn't remember... what was her last name?

He turned. "Ah! Emily's father!" They shook hands. The father's palm felt dry.

"Seems my Emily's grown quite attached while I've been away," said the dry-goods drummer.

"Well," said Garrett, cautiously veering away from the insinuation, "I've become fond of Emily."

Without further preliminary, the man asked, "And how fond is that?"

How in the world did Emily know I'd be here? Garrett wondered. She'd heard something somewhere, that much was obvious. The wonder of it was that she had stopped working her mouth long enough to listen.

Her father was taking full advantage of the crew's presence. Even as Garrett guided him out of earshot, he all but shouted, "And how fond is that, sir?"

The bluejackets in the cutter were privy to a splendid mime show. Ensign Garrett entreated the sky, then begged of the planet. He spread his arms in a bombastic explosion, then shuffled his foot in contrition. He demanded absolution and forgave enormities. He touched the father's shoulder, then the girl's shoulder. One would have thought he was trying to matchmake *them*. Then, after a firm handshake, a chaste kiss, and a display of his hand over his heart, Garrett parted from the father and daughter and returned to the cutter.

"Looks like you've been raked fore and aft, Mr. Garrett," one of the men chuckled.

"Yeah, when's the wedding?"

"Next weekend."

"But we set sail tomorrow!"

"The dragon's packed away? Good. Let's get back to the *Florida*. I've got some holystones need warming up."

"He won't do it, Methuselah. The Navy's changed. You'll see. Oh, he might kick the Japs off. That only makes sense, if we're going to California. They'd only get their heads bashed there."

Methuselah shook his head and emitted a low mucous sound. It could have been disagreement. Or disgust with the nickname the young man had pegged him with. Methuselah! Well, it was true, his face was like worn patent leather. He could no longer hear the surf without putting his ear an inch from the shore and clambering up the shrouds was a dream he'd had long ago. But his hands were still strong. He would have easily squeezed tears out of the spry upstart, if only he could raise his arms high enough to grip his shoulder. When Methuselah spoke of the past, his body filled out like a mainsail in a wester. He had lived events Seaman Second Class Amos Macklin knew only from storybooks. His spyglass was not rose tinted, but blue and white and raucous with roaring waves and rude women.

Seaman Second Class Amos Macklin paused to let Methuselah rest. He nodded amiably at a group of sightseers ogling his uniform. The whites did not know how to respond. They looked away and walked straight ahead.

Negroes had been discouraged from attending the Jamestown Exhibition. They were not allowed to ride the 'rolling chairs' or the Tanner Creek Trolley. There were no separate bathrooms or fountains for coloreds. But now that winter had chased away the largest crowds, the blacks came to see the great things Man had wrought. Most of these structures had been raised from the muggy Virginia mists by Negro laborers.

The black sailors in the Fleet did not participate in handball, quoits, or other games that their white counterparts played during their sojourn on the James. They did not attend the grand fetes, the balls, the jewel-studded ceremonies sharpened by glittering dress swords. That was all right with them. They did not care to play football in the muddy fields--they couldn't have afforded the deductions from their pay to replace ruined fatigues. Nor did the black sailors think much of the food served at the grand parties. Better vittles could be found at any of the Negro shanty towns lying outside Portsmouth and Norfolk. Of course, white men did not know how to dance, so it would have made no sense to attend their balls, even had they been allowed on the floors of the dance pavilions. Besides, they had no music worth dancing to. As for their absence from the ceremonies--well, that did rankle. But what could they say?

The consolation was too rich for the blacks to raise a protest--because, in the place where it most mattered, on the ships, all sailors were equal. The sea and the sun bleached color from all men. Rank was the only distinction on a fighting ship. And Amos Macklin stood a fair chance of making Seaman First Class within the year.

Amos had met Methuselah that summer. Fellow bachelors had urged him to join their liberty party for a bit of carousing, not to mention some trim. But Amos was smitten by a desire for solitude. He borrowed a skiff and rowed upriver. He came to a large creek and turned against its current. Cypress and gum trees crowded the banks, funneling the heat over the shallows. Catfish and bream flicked lazily below.

He came upon a small black settlement and tied up at a rickety pier that pulsed with every small wave. The shacks of the dreary hovel seemed like artificial caves excavated from solid forest. Residents nodded at him as he followed a dirt lane, a glimmer of sea-envy in their eyes. It was always good to see a black sailor decked in the natty summer whites of the Navy. Through him, they touched the horizon.

He came to a tavern. Though he had worked up a prodigious thirst, he could only cut the edge. The depths of drink where a man could, with some illusory luck, find better reflections of himself would have to remain unfathomed. Captain Oates could spot a floating red eye a league away.

The liveliest thing in the tavern was a mutt in the doorway that wagged its tail whenever children darted by. The emptiness of the place, with its woebegone stools and crate-tables, reinforced a sense of destiny thicker than the humidity. And when he saw eyes peering out of a dark corner, he was sure this was the demon he'd set out to meet.

But Methuselah was no demon. His first words did not comprise an incantation, but a complaint:

"Jackies aren't worth shit, these days."

This seemed a fair enough invitation to talk. "How's that, Methuselah?"

Constant exposure to salt spray and tradewinds had etched a convoluted chart of the major and minor sea lanes in the old man's face. The ancient,

singular sea had worked its magic into his very bones. Every port had its bevy of crusty salts, the tar from old hemp ropes still clinging to their fingers and innumerable sea-yarns hanging from their lips. Yet Amos had never met anyone so *saturated* with the sea. Just went to show that experience was the man, not the experience.

Amos found he was unable to free himself of the ancient's mystifying influence. He took Methuselah on forays into Norfolk. Once, he managed to get him aboard the *Florida* for a closer look at the New Navy.

"Humph! The *Tin* Navy!" he grouched, unimpressed.

Amos' mates made fun of his affection.

"Found your long lost pappy?"

But the time had come for separation. The Fleet was about to embark on a cruise that might take several years. The old man might not be alive when Amos returned. A mystique unique to Man, who could die with a single breath--something the ocean could never hope to do.

So he brought Methuselah out for one last sojourn by the sea.

More whites stared at them. They could not be locals, long accustomed to the sight of blacks in naval uniform.

"Maybe they know something you don't."

"I tell you, Methuselah, you're wrong."

"Damn!" the old man made a violent gesture. "I let you get away with that long enough. My name's Daniel! Daniel! Not that it matters to you. You're the one walking into the lion's den."

"Admiral Evans is nobody's fool. He depends on us!"

"Oh the niggers run the navy, ahoy! You tell me this: who's going to cook for those white boys, now the Nips been kicked off? You oughtta jump ship now, while you got the chance."

Scandalized by the thought, Amos turned away from the ancient tempest. The Government Pier and its great arch rose before them. One year ago it had not existed even as a plan. Created by the Exposition's Board of Design, it was a brief on what Americans could do when they set their chins to it. The new sea wall extended over a mile, while the two arms of the great double pier were consummated by a majestic one hundred and fifty-foot tall arch, the largest single-span bridge in the nation.

This was the same kind of mind, the same kind of *science*, that had raised the Atlantic Fleet from keel to crow's nest at the Brooklyn Navy Yard--which was even now constructing the Panama Canal. There was a word for this science: the United States. It was inconceivable to Amos that his country would revert to medieval ways of thinking and acting. Yes, most blacks lived oppressed lives, but they were Negroes... not sailors. If the blacks in the Navy were not allowed to attend the grand reviews, they were at least equal to the whites where it most mattered: on ships at sea. Amos had no doubt he would soon make Seaman First Class. It was occupation, not color, that made a clan. 'Colors' was a time of day, before breakfast. Eight bells, when the Quartermaster hoisted the flag and the band played the Star Spangled Banner.

From the Roads came the tooting and blowing of whistles and horns.

"The president's leaving," Amos observed. "They'll be running up steaming colors on the flagship."

"Ever wonder why you got liberty? Evans doesn't want any dark faces on deck when the big man's around."

"What's made you so bitter, Methuselah?"

"Ah, damn... I was born in the South."

On board the *Florida*, Captain Oates shook his head morosely.

"Something wrong, Captain?" his exec inquired.

"Hoist blue peter," Oates ordered absently as he watched Midshipman Davis hand Dr. Singleton his straw hat. He had slung his hammock, and was

here to stay.

IV

On the Cliffs of Time

Two hundred and twenty-five million years ago the earliest recognizable ancestors of the Tu-nel ruled the earth. They were the therapsids. Mammal-like reptiles.

There were also the dicynodonts, roaming in stupendous herds that stretched the horizon. The largest of these was the size of a rhinoceros.

But the Tu-nel originated with the cynodonts that preyed upon the herds. Their precursor was *Cynognathus crateronotus*, a carnivore with a dog-like visage and prominent fangs. Although only seven feet long, by working in packs they could bring down a large herbivore with relative ease.

On the early continents no other form of life challenged the mammal-like reptiles. Giant, primitive crocodiles patrolled the rivers. The long and slimy reptile *Nothosaurus* clambered over sun-baked rocks. But the broad vistas belonged to the creatures who were the forerunners of all mammals. For one hundred and thirty million years they unknowingly shaped the master plan of the planet. Someone from another world would have looked at their advanced metabolism, their enormous population, their variety and the sheer weight of invested evolution, and have little doubt that true mammals were on the verge of permanently conquering the land.

Then came the archosaurs.

The ensuing battle lasted thirty million years.

The defeat of the therapsids, the catastrophic faunal displacement, was

final--almost. The various mammal-like reptiles either died out or slipped into the holes and crevices of history. For now, a mighty triumvirate of thecodontians ruled: the sluggish crocodilians, the flying pterosaurs... and the all-powerful dinosaurs. For one hundred and forty million years the mammal-like reptiles quailed in the shadows of cold-blooded reptiles and warm-blooded dinosaurs.

Not all of the defeated therapsids remained on land. A tiny handful took to the water. Among them were the proto-Tu-nel.

During the Jurassic and Cretaceous Periods a variety of elasmosaurs and pliosaurs swam the shallow seas in enormous reptilian schools. They now wrought havoc amongst the creatures that would one day resemble them so closely. The proto-Tu-nel were driven to the evolutionary wall. They were faced with four options: they could return to the rivers, retreat to the cold polar waters where reptiles could not follow, or fight back. They could also become extinct--extinction being an evolutionary choice.

Many millions of years later, in the Holocene Epoch, early cartographers would compile their meager information to create the first maps of the world. Those maps showed two huge (and for the most part mysterious) continents with a sea in the middle--the Mediterranean. It was as if they had seen the planet from space one hundred and forty million years earlier, for in the Late Jurassic, there *were* two huge (and for the most part mysterious) super-continents. To the north was Laurasia. To the south, Gondwanaland. The sea in the center was the Tethys Sea and it was there that one species of Tu-nel fought the plesiosaurs and ichthyosaurs for oceanic domination. This branch of the Tu-nel was wiped out in a brief but furious million years.

The polar Tu-nel never had much chance of success. Most of the primitive fish of the period remained in the tropics and sub-tropics. Whenever famine struck, the Tu-nel had to enter the warmer zones to find food. More often than not, they themselves became food as they entered the domain of the aquatic reptiles.

The riverine Tu-nel remained small, archaic--and alive. Like many of the therapsids before them, they had weaned themselves from the egg-laying habits of the amphibians and reptiles. They gave birth to live young. The newborns clung to their mothers' teats.

Once grown, quickness, intelligence and luck remained the keys to survival. The early Tu-nel could slip into the water when predators approached on land or race to the beach when a great croc angled towards them. They remained quadrupeds with webbed toes. Their powerful diamond-shaped flippers would come later.

Eventually, catastrophe overcame the dinosaurs. It began with a series of great ice ages. The oceans retreated from the fertile land. The food chain of the sea altered drastically. The reptilian serpents began to starve.

On land, hot-blooded dinosaurs had no problem with the lower temperatures. But when land bridges were exposed, herds that had been kept separate for geologic ages came into contact. The result was very much like that which would happen to the American Indians when the European explorers arrived. Sometimes entire herds were destroyed by disease. For three hundred thousand years the two dinosaur orders, *Saurischia* and *Ornithischia*, maintained a perilous hold. Many species were wiped out. But a few, such as the *Stegosauria*, clung tenaciously to their ancient foothold. For all their travails, it was beginning to seem dinosaurs would survive.

Then the asteroid hit.

The weakened structure that had supported the dinosaurs and marine reptiles collapsed.

The mammals emerged.

The Tu-nel emerged.

With the giant sea reptiles gone, the Tu-nel could once again venture into the wide ocean. There was competition, of course. Encounters with giant sharks rarely ended happily. But the attrition was never on the same scale as it had been during the Mesozoic. Over tens of millions of years, the Tu-nel became more streamlined, more pelagic. One breed, descended from the Tu-nel of Gondwanaland, sported necks that took up half their body length. What made them so imposing was their strength. Having descended from bull-necked cynodonts, their long necks were far sturdier than the sinuous extensions of the plesiosaurs, whose ancestors were slender-necked reptiles. This was to be a crucial feature in the next great challenge the Tu-nel faced.

The arrival of the first whales.

V

December, 1907 — 24°45'N, 67°59'W

From a marine's diary:

Reveille at five bells; beans for breakfast; color guard; bright work call 8:15; sack call 8:30; quarters 9:15; recall 10:00; morris tube gun drill 10:10; a bluejacket was knocked overboard while working the davits but was rescued by the torpedo boat Whipple; vomited; stubbed my toe while laying below to draw clean hammocks; played checkers; went on watch at 4; somebody stole my drawers.

"Ensign Garrett has the devil up him, and I think he wants to make me his apprentice," Midshipman Beck murmured as he hunched over his meal.

"You don't have to put up with Sand-Crab Singleton, so count your blessings," Midshipman Davis responded while fighting for elbow room on the narrow table. They were in the junior officers' mess, crammed to the corners with young men fresh from the Academy. For many this was their first voyage of any length and only now were they regaining their appetites. The air was filled with awkward, new-learned slang. 'Punk' for bread; 'sand' for salt; 'slumgullion' for any kind of soup or stew; 'salt horse' for salt beef. They bolted their meals, for there was no telling when they would be called to quarters in one of Captain Oates' infernal drills. And with the ship stewards and mess men behaving the way they were, the uncertainty of dining was increased tenfold.

"Uh... make. Make! You carrying that pot or did you spill some on your head? We need some Java here." Beck eyed with distaste the murky glass of water next to his empty coffee mug. The ship's fresh water supply had been drawn from a lake in the Dismal Swamp near Norfolk. It possessed a variety of

discolorations, one part due to rust from the *Florida's* iron water tank, another part from the juniper berries that had fallen into the lake, and a third part due, no doubt, to something that best remained a mystery. A long line of admirals from the Civil War to the present swore it prevented everything from scurvy to seasickness. And after one sip of it, a long list of ratings had switched to tea and coffee, which were at least boiled beforehand.

"Hey, moke, don't any of you spades have ears?"

Amos Macklin had had no intention of acknowledging Beck. A 'moke' was a colored mess boy or hall attendant and he still thought of himself as a Seaman Second Class. But the middy's last volley picked a scab. Shrugging, he brought the coffee pot over and topped the metal cup so close to the rim that Beck could not lift it without spilling some.

"No, sir, spades don't have ears. Nor do shovels or rakes, last I heard."

Beck leaned down to sip some of the dark liquid off the edge. The ship yawed suddenly and rode up on the beam and the table jumped into the midshipman's face. Gasping, he inhaled a nose-full of hot coffee.

"Whoa!" Davis laughed.

"Son of a bitch!" Beck choked.

There were embarrassed titters from the junior officers around him. These young men had been chosen not only for their clean-cut complexions, but for their equally spotless morals. It was the rare curse that passed their lips.

But Beck had hot coffee up his nose and he knew who to blame. All the associations ran together. From a black hand had come a black liquid which had nearly gagged him--which equaled a black insult. When he turned, however, Macklin was out of sight.

"It was an accident," Davis said, his consolation soured by the doubt in his voice.

Amos Macklin was pleased as hell by his little subversion. He'd never asked for this chicken-gut job and the best people to blame were the ones sitting where he had wanted to sit.

Methuselah's nightmare premonition had come true.

Up to a month ago, the stewards on the ships of the Atlantic Fleet had been Japanese. They were popular with the crews. And the very fact that they seemed to enjoy serving the white men did much to demythologize the victors of Tsushima. The sailors who had destroyed the Russian fleet in 1905 might be less inclined to engage the Americans if they knew a few hundred cousins were on board.

But then it was announced that the grand cruise would include several stops on the West Coast. Anti-Japanese demonstrations had become endemic to California. The residents were certain the Japanese population of San Francisco and environs represented the vanguard of a yellow invasion. It all seemed far-fetched to Easterners. But was it? Several newspapers reported that an army of ten thousand Japs was practicing maneuvers just south of the Mexican border. Nothing had been confirmed, but many Americans were beginning to feel that improbable did not mean impossible. Although Roosevelt had compelled the western states to rescind some of their anti-Japanese laws, to sail past the Golden Gate with a passel of Nips on board would make poor political sense. So, abruptly, they were banned.

The black sailors drafted to replace them were finding out the hard way that joining the Navy was not like signing the articles on a merchant tramp or whaler, which assigned one a specialty--such as second mate or carpenter's mate--for the length of the voyage.

There was plenty of cooking to be done:

There was the captain's mess, where Oates ate alone.

The wardroom mess, for the commissioned officers. This was the preferred lair of the reporters, who dubbed it the 'jollification mess' in the papers.

The junior officers' mess, where Beck sat nursing his nose.

The chief petty officers' mess.

The warrant officers' mess.

And the biggest of the lot, the general mess, where the ordinary seaman

dined on some of the best food ever served to American jackies. Reporters with the Fleet made much of the fact that Japanese sailors had to do with bean-curd, fish and seaweed, while the American boys could dine on veal, sausage, succotash, potatoes, pork chops, applesauce, corn bread, eggs, and thick beef stew--not to mention the comfits that would be served when they sailed into distant ports. All of which was prepared and served up by the new, black stewards.

But since anger and resentment had a way of spoiling flavor, not all of the fine food stowed aboard for the sailors arrived on their tables in the best condition. This did not affect the captains and rear admirals. They had to pay for their own food. As a consequence, a flag officer's mess was usually a miserable affair, and a captain's not much better. But those officers concerned about the morale of their men took note of the badly prepared food in the general mess. They were certain their coloreds were burning and over-boiling and under-cooking on purpose. They took it upon themselves to assure the blacks they would win back their rating at the conclusion of the voyage. On some ships, the cooking improved. But Amos Macklin was historically-minded.

"You know what Andrew Jackson told the slaves in the War of 1812?" he said to one of his black mates. "He told them they could have their freedom, once they beat the British. We didn't get free for half a hundred years after that, and the British were beat and long gone. You know the story. We all do. Andy Jackson was laughing all the way up his white ass. That's what this navy is doing. They're laughing at us. And they call it 'nigger heaven.'"

The man to whom he spoke did not respond. Like Macklin, he had been present for a little speech Captain Oates had given the new stewards. "I know you boys have been given a raw deal, but I swear the Navy will make it up to you," began Captain Oates' speech to his new stewards. It was the closest thing they'd ever seen to a white man begging. But most of them were unmoved. Some of them had already been "met by the galley"--it was fast becoming a standard phrase--by bluejackets who were irate over the poor quality of the cooking, not to mention the glum manner in which it was served. The bruised stewards dared not tell the ship surgeons anything other than that they'd fallen down a hatch, leaving the surgeons bewildered as to why these once-nimble men were suddenly tripping over their own feet.

The steward to whom Macklin spoke was certain Macklin would be met

by the galley. He did not want to share his fate. Without saying a word, he shuffled away. Amos knew what was on his mind, and made a sound of disgust. The grand old navy--dead and gone! As a child in Savannah, he'd heard grizzled black tars regale listeners with tales of the sea; and then, when they'd had enough to drink, amuse them with jigs and sea chanties. There had been no such thing as a majority or minority in the union navy. The sailors manning the ships were from around the world. High in the sheets, you were as likely to meet a mate from Madagascar as a whelp from Nantucket. But the day of sail was gone--as well as, it was apparent to Macklin, the day of seaman equality. Just as ships still bore masts beside their funnels, the black man seemed merely a vestige of the past. Appearance was everything, and everything was white.

The day after learning of the admiral's order, Amos had received his Clothing and Small Store Requisition: watch cap, pancake cap, cap-ribbon; two sets of heavy underwear, two white jumpers and trousers, two white hats, a heavy blue overcoat, a blue overshirt, blue trousers, six pairs of wool socks, six pairs of cotton; a pair of high shoes, bathing trunks, leggings, a silk neckerchief, two towels, two wool blankets; a scrub brush, shoe brush and whisk broom; soap, assorted buttons, needles, thread, and white clothes-stops for putting it all into a few compact rolls. The Navy made a big to-do over the fact that this was given the men gratis. But the bare truth was that this was the kit of an ordinary seaman.

He needed a break from the young, innocent faces of the midshipmen in the junior officers' mess, so he went to the chief cook, an ancient black who always looked as though he were about to fall asleep, but who in fact possessed a stunning reservoir of energy. He had to. Overseeing the preparation of three huge meals a day demanded the most out of a man, if he wasn't to be met by the galley.

"I'll take the slop," Amos told him, nodding at a couple of pails.

The cook nodded wordlessly. The story of Midshipman Beck and his coffee had already circulated back to the galley and scullery. It was not surprising Macklin wanted to get away for a spell.

Opening the galley hatchway, Amos was relieved to find a stiff breeze coming in off the port beam, hitting him directly in the face. He would have to walk all the way around the superstructure and the aft turrets so that he could

empty the buckets to starboard. He'd been in the Navy too long to perpetuate the novice trick of throwing scraps into the wind--with a faceful of muck as the result.

This little chore would take him at least ten minutes--more if he could dally convincingly. With luck, he would not have to face Beck again until breakfast.

It was dark, but Amos could see the *Minnesota* and the *Ohio* from the hatchway. Their running lights glowed eerily in the light fog, like the globe lamps Amos had once seen on a misty street in Liverpool. *Ardois* lights winked continuously, like insomniac insects. Foggy tentacles reached out and grasped for the bridge and the brightwork. One of them chucked Amos on the chin, and he shivered. This was one of those uneasy nights when the world seemed set to grab you. Perhaps this hadn't been such a good idea, after all. Come to think of it, he could finish this task in five minutes, tops. The tall ventilator funnels moaned, as if to hurry him on his way.

He had taken only a few steps when he heard a man sobbing. Resting the buckets on the deck, he peered into the darkness under one of the lifeboats. It took him several seconds to make out the man prone beneath it--several seconds more to recognize him.

"Gilroy? That you?"

The man did not answer. The sobbing continued, only now Amos realized he was not crying. He was suffocating, fighting for air.

Even in daylight recognizing Gilroy would have been difficult. His face was darker than Macklin's, yet he was a white man. He was part of the Artificer Branch, a Fireman Second Class--one of the 'black crew'. This was the group that lived and worked in the bowels of the ship, along with the stokers and engineers and coal passers. The members of the black crew were the only white men Amos ever felt sorry for.

Looking across at the *Minnesota*, he noted the water surging up around its armor belt. For the first leg of their journey, Admiral Evans had ordered that a speed of eleven knots be maintained. From Virginia to the Caribbean, no variation would be allowed. The voyage had hardly begun, and already the schedule was tight. At flank speed the *Florida* could manage 16.2 knots--the

slowest in the Fleet. These were spurts that put only a brief strain on the black crews. But day after day at eleven knots was a killing pace. Combined with the tough training maneuvers they'd undergone prior to their departure, the quick transit was pushing the black crew beyond endurance.

"The *Bennington*," Gilroy gasped abruptly.

Macklin's eyes widened. "You mean the tubes?"

But Gilroy was heaving so hard he could say no more. Leaning closer, Macklin discovered the problem. The smell of gin burst in waves from his lungs.

"Damn fool," Macklin hissed. The temperature in the boiler rooms rarely dipped below one hundred and ten degrees. Toiling in that kind of inferno, the last thing a man needed in his body was alcohol. Both he and Gilroy had seen men go into convulsions and die after a long stint down below. More often than not, when their pockets were turned out a flask was found.

Gilroy regained his composure enough to run a rag over his face. After a few swipes, a streak of white mixed with blood showed through the thick crust of coal dust. Gilroy was using the same kind of emery cloth that was used to scrape rust off the metalworks.

"Lord Almighty... here, use this. It isn't clean, but it won't take your skin off."

Gilroy lifted his arm like a man hauling stones and took the dish cloth Amos held out. "Don't matter, Amos." He heaved a few more times. "We all look like you, down there. We don't have faces, anymore."

"Don't talk. Just--"

"Down there," they heard a voice say. "A couple niggers. Up to no good, I'd say."

Amos' heart sank when he saw who the marine sentry was talking to. Midshipman Beck was not the only man on board who deemed Ensign Garrett his personal nemesis. Amos had heard that Garrett was the one who led the galley gangs that ambushed reluctant stewards. If the rumor turned out to be true, he would not be surprised.

"Black ghosts, black ghosts..." Garrett chanted weirdly as he approached the two men. "Someone's scared up the black ghosts."

"Sir, I--"

"But one's not so black, eh?" Garrett leaned down and sniffed. "Call out the marines! We have a drunk, here."

"But he's--"

"--not drunk? You mean he's gundecking?" Whenever Ensign Garrett was in one of his mocking moods, which was most of the time, he had a way of pressing his upper lip inward. This exposed a gap between his two front teeth, producing a faint whistle when he breathed. "I don't think he's faking. Let's see him stand!"

Without thinking, Amos leaned down to give Gilroy a hand. The moment was not made any pleasanter when he banged his head on the lifeboat. His white kitchen hat was knocked into the slop bucket.

"Avast there," Garrett whistled. "I want to see him stand on his own."

"It don't matter, sir," Gilroy said tiredly. "It's the *Bennington* all over again...."

The whistling stopped suddenly. Of late, the name of that warship was a catchword for disaster. The year before, a boiler tube on the *Bennington* had burst, scalding sixty men to death. Word got around that the captain had known there were cracks in the tubes long before the accident. He was not reprimanded, because he remained silent about cracked tubes on other ships. The Navy had no love for Cassandras, no matter how clear their case. "You'd better watch talk like that, stoker," Garrett said coldly.

"You go down and look at the boiler tubes," Gilroy said breathlessly. "All the warrant officers know, but they're like you. They don't want to talk about it. We've hardly begun, and the cracks are already showing."

"*Your* cracks are showing."

"Go *look*! What if it goes while we're in *Estrecho de Magallanes*?" he

pleaded, his days on a Spanish tramp steamer slipping through. "That would be the finish of all of us. Not just the black crew, but Macklin here, and you...."

Amos began counting the creaks of the davit span as it rocked gently above the lifeboat.

"You're not looking to get on the binnacle list," said Garrett. "You've been at the bottle, stoker."

Creak... creak... creak....

"That's a special violation on an expedition like this."

Creak... creak... creak....

"We're not just talking about the brig. This is--"

Creeeeek....

Garrett jerked his head up.

"The wind," Amos said.

"No... we've changed--"

Marines were running aft with their bugles. They put them to their lips and began blowing wildly. Abruptly, gongs sounded.

"General Quarters!"

Curses piled on curses as plates piled on laps. Stewards dropped their trays. Mess men were thrown over steam vents. The junior officers looked like so many jack-in-the-boxes as they tried to jump out of their seats, only to drop back down as the ship lurched again.

A marine stuck the bell of his trumpet through the hatch and blew as hard as he could.

"Son of a bitch, we *hear*!" Midshipman Beck shouted as he wiped coffee

out of his eyes. He cleared them just in time to see the marine slip and fall with a loud *blat!*

Midshipman Davis had found his feet. He dashed for the hatch and jumped over the prostrate marine. Bounding on deck, he found himself at dead center of a chaotic storm of shouting sailors and marines and darkness interrupted by slashing lights.

Davis had been handed over as Dr. Singleton's personal factotum, but the alarm took him away from that onerous duty. More than just excitement, it also shot a thrill of delight and relief through his whole body.

Ensign Garrett forgot all about Gilroy the instant the bugles sounded. It was his job to oversee one of the most dangerous operations in the Navy and he had no time to think twice. Running to the forward gun turret, he opened the thick steel hatch and waited for the gun crew to arrive.

For all the fumbling and falling, it did not take long. First the tripper, nodding at Garrett and bouncing through the hatchway--followed in quick sequence by the trainer, the hoistman, one of the pointers, both of the loaders, the other pointer, the rammer, then the plugman. Garrett began to swing shut the five-inch steel door.

"Wait!"

A hand appeared. Garrett just managed to keep the door from closing completely and depriving Midshipman Beck of several fingers.

"Quick!"

Beck scurried in. With help from the middy, the ensign shut and sealed the hatch.

"Look lively, gentlemen. Let's start the marbles rolling...."

The twelve-inch turret was a potential death chamber. The slightest mistake could kill the eleven men inside, as well as the eleven men on the other side of the steel bulkhead that divided the gun cages. And the men in the eight-

inch turret, superimposed on the twelve-incher, would have little hope if a shell exploded under their feet.

Beck was in training. At this juncture, his sole task was to watch, listen, and learn. Any mistake he might spot would have to go unremarked. He could not speak, could not move.

Ensign Garrett smiled at the midshipman. This was his *métier*. They were not so much sailors as technicians. After all, the twelve-inch rifled gun was a precise machine. Weighing in at 53.4 tons, it was forty-five feet of pure menace. Charged with three hundred and sixty pounds of smokeless powder, it could fire its huge shell with a muzzle velocity of 2,800 foot-seconds and a muzzle energy of 46,246 foot-tons. If they failed to operate with the precision it demanded, they would miss the target. If they botched the job completely, they would blow up. It was all quite simple to Ensign Garrett.

Beck saw it very differently. To him, staring at the ominous breech mechanism and recoil cylinders, the turret was a chamber of horrors. The game was to eliminate those horrors. Once that was accomplished, the task was completed. Destroying the target was a bonus that gave you a good feeling later in the day. He glanced at Garrett--and for the hundredth time wondered at the strange naval formality that put him here.

In a sense, the ensign was as much a nonentity as the midshipman. Garrett was not the gun captain--one of the pointers was. And Garrett did not tell the crew which way to aim the gun. That was the task of the turret trainer, who sat amidst a jumble of wires to the left of the breech. Talking constantly into a speaking tube, his eye was locked to the periscope that peeked over the hood, while his left hand whispered over the large wheel that controlled the barbette which pivoted the one hundred and thirty ton turret. One of the pointers sat below him, adjusting the sights.

Neither did Garrett have anything to do with the loading of the gun, for that was performed by the tripper, the plugman, and the hoistman.

As far as Beck could see, Garrett's sole purpose was to shout at the right moment. A moment that would, if they were lucky, never come.

"Silence!" the gun captain commanded. This was the necessary prelude for the orders to come.

The sight-setter was listening to commands from Central Station. Far below the waterline, under the heavily armored protective deck where few shells could penetrate, it was the hub of all voice tube and telephone communication. It contained emergency steering gear, in the event the pilothouse and conning tower were knocked out. Perhaps most vitally, it held the gunnery clock. Information from the range takers overhead was transmitted to the Central Station commander, who then entered it into the gunnery clock. Combined with data from the roll gauge, which indicated when the ship was steady, the processed information was fed to the gun captains. It was they, and their pointers, who finally decided when they were on target. But without the gunnery clock to tell them the distance and direction of the enemy, they would have no idea where to aim their guns. Usually, the ordnance officer or executive officer commanded Central Station. From the gun captain's sour expression, however, the men in the chamber knew the first lieutenant was at the other end of the line. A cold, presumptuous character liked by few. No doubt he'd been a number jumper during his Academy days. Not even Garrett liked him, but that may have been because the two of them looked so much alike.

The sight-setter licked his lips. He would be calling out the range and deflection.

"Watch it there!" the young tripper hissed at the plugman, who had stepped on his foot.

The gun captain calmly reached over and slapped the tripper hard on the face.

No one said a word.

Including the ensign. With his single stripe, Garrett out-ranked everyone in the turret. But the pointer who had been assigned gun captain was just doing his job by enforcing the rule of silence. Everyone present was fully aware that within the last two years three dozen men had died in the gun turrets of the *Georgia* and the *Missouri*. There had been no survivors from those accidents to describe what had gone wrong. Perhaps someone had spoken out of turn.

From the handling room below there was a sudden slam as the automatic shutter locked under the ammunition hoist. Then a grinding from deep below, like the Devil on the steps, as the shell car rose from the magazine. The gun

captain and pointers slipped into their sighting hoods, their eyes pressed to the telescopic sights. Shell up, the rammer maneuvered its eight hundred and fifty pounds down the breech ramp.

The tripper, still smarting from the slap, levered the first powder bag into place and with the smoothness of a bank vault the breech was swung open. The plugman moved forward, ready with the primer.

"Belay that!" Ensign Garrett jumped forward. He pointed at the deck, near the large trunnion.

The men in the turret held their breath.

One of the powder bags had torn. It was a minute tear--only a small amount of nitro-cellulose powder had leaked. But if a chance spark flew out from the gears, the resulting explosion would kill every man in or near the turret. While the tripper and plugman plucked the grains off the deck, Garrett inspected the other two powder bags.

Rotten. Both of them. There was no time to check every nook and cranny for loose grains that might have rolled out of sight. For all they knew, the turret was a bomb waiting to go off. The shell car was descending. A casual spark tossed out by the hoist might result in immediate incineration. It seemed to take forever before the flash-shutters slammed and the hoist stopped.

No gun captain in the world could have prevented the sigh of relief that filled the chamber--a sigh that was also a plea directed at Garrett. They could continue--or they could stop. The ensign's word was all.

The ordnance officers of the Fleet subscribed to a grim credo: "Better forty men killed than to lose the trophy." This dictum was applied during training sessions, when there was no enemy in sight. At the moment, the men in the forward turret had no idea what was happening outside. The turret trainer at the periscope could see nothing, and no information was forthcoming over his headset. For all they knew, the Japanese fleet had rounded the Horn and was preparing to engage the Atlantic Fleet off the east coast.

The gun captain gave Garrett a glance that asked: "*Well?*"

The men could see it in his eyes. The ensign was not afraid of dying. But

he *was* afraid of acting stupidly.

Almost imperceptibly, his neck twisted.

The men understood he was shaking his head.

Captain Oates did not know his underwear was hanging out.

He'd been in his cabin looking over the chief engineer's log when the bugles sounded. Up to now, he had instigated all of the alerts on the *Florida* himself. In fact, he had one in mind for later that evening at seven bells--a half hour before midnight.

But this was totally unexpected. The captain's hand jerked, striking a bolt-shaped blot across the page he was laboring over. He was broadsided by a terrible fear:

Collision.

As he raced to the bridge, the ship lurched under him.

Collision.

The Atlantic Fleet had never quite perfected its system of night maneuvering. Most of the training off the coast of Virginia had involved flashy displays of firepower and daylight maneuvers. Admiral Evans doted over parallels, crisscrosses, tight turns and obliques, but these were all performed while the sun shown high. The spectators on the yachts and the beaches would not have appreciated the complicated yet banal moves and counter-moves that transported a fleet from one place to another in darkness.

This explained why they were running with their navigational lights on, in spite of a near paranoiac fear of torpedoes. Because, more than torpedoes, they feared themselves.

With all the long-range and rapid-fire guns on board, the ships of the Fleet could, theoretically, never see the whites of the enemy's eyes until they fished him out of the water. Yet the Navy's ship designers had not been able to shake

their fondness for the ancient Roman galleys that had once plied the Mediterranean. Their most deadly feature had been the prominent rams built low on the bow, but they had been built long before the invention of gunpowder and twelve-inch guns.

Ramming as a form of sea warfare was as archaic as necromancy, yet protruding twelve feet out front of each armor belt was a prominent, deadly ram. Since 1865, the sole victims of these devices had been friendly ships, accidentally rammed on dark, foggy nights.

Nights just like this one.

Collision!

By the time he reached the bridge, Oates was breathless and sweating. It had been a fair distance to run, from officer's country to the bridge. And his two packs a day plus the bulge at his belt--not to mention his age--made it no easier.

From the starboard bridge the senior watch officer was shouting at the quartermaster over his shoulder. On the port wing the junior watch officer looked thoroughly constipated, his face twisting into every conceivable expression.

"Helmsman!"

The *Florida* jumped to port. It took Oates several seconds to identify the ship a hundred yards ahead of them as the *Missouri*. Thank God, Captain Merriam still had his running lights on. If they had been under attack, the *Missouri* would be blacked out.

Then the *Missouri* veered sharply to port. The *Ohio* hove into view. Her lights, too, were on. She was closing fast on the *Missouri*. One brush and the ram would slice the *Missouri's* hull like a knife through cheese.

"Captain Oates!"

The exec was calling from the cubicle where the wireless was hooked up. Inside sat a young electrician, buried in a maze of rheostats, wires, coils and coherers. Leaning forward, he looked like a boy holding black clams to each ear as he pressed the headset with both hands. He mimed his frustration at what he was hearing over the set--or rather, what he was not hearing. Captain Oates

nodded. The fact was the instrument which was supposed to launch a revolution in ship-to-ship communications and tactics was notoriously ineffective. Its most frustrating quirk was that a wireless operator a hundred yards off might not receive a transmission, while hundreds of miles away it would come through clear as a bell.

"Helmsman!"

"We had to avoid the *Minnesota*," the quartermaster said, explaining the sudden lurches.

"What?" Oates looked to port. Sure enough, the *Minnesota* was not more than fifty yards distant. It was drawing away. Oates decided he would wait until later to ask how close they'd come to colliding. Right now, he did not want to know.

The Third Division's formation had gone to hell. From the faint traces of taffrail light ahead to starboard, it appeared the Second Division was no better off.

What in God's name was going on?

"It was the Flying Dutchman under command of the Wandering Jew."

Singleton! Oates winced. Who had brought *him* up here? No doubt some petty officer gasping to have his name in print had sneaked him onto the bridge. The exec knew better. But there was no diplomatic way to banish the doctor from the pilothouse once inside. He was, after all, credentialed by the Secretary of the Navy.

"What are you talking about?" Oates half-shouted when he caught Singleton grinning at him.

And....

That *hat*! He's wearing that *hat*! On *my bridge*!

"Just a schooner, Captain," Lieutenant Grissom interposed. "It cut right through the Second Division. They broke formation to avoid hitting her. I guess one of them came close to the *Missouri* and she went hard to port."

"The *New Jersey* put a spotlight on it. It was as plain to see as your shiny nose." Singleton spoke like a scout at a campfire. "There was no one on her deck, no one in the sheets. She floated by like Death itself."

This earned the doctor some incredulous looks from the officers around him. But they did not have time to dwell on his bizarre comment.

"Here she comes again!"

Oates grabbed a pair of binoculars and looked to starboard. A smallish sailing vessel was closing on them.

"It must be the *Yankton*, broken loose."

The *Yankton* was a small pleasure yacht reserved for use by diplomats and foreign dignitaries while in port. One of the auxiliary ships had her in tow. If the towline had broken....

"No...." said Dr. Singleton with a succinctness that quieted them.

She rode high in the water, as if carrying no ballast. Her bow barely stirred the surface. As she closed, the observers on the bridge looked hard for a sign of life abovedecks. From their perch high over the ocean, they could see directly into her cockpit.

There was no one at the helm.

"Sir," the exec murmured, "if a foreign power wanted to embarrass the expedition...."

No more needed to be said. The Fleet had gone to great lengths to avoid antagonizing other nations. Roosevelt wanted America to appear powerful, not obnoxious. As an example: thousands of burlap bags had been stowed on the ships so that ashes from the holds could be cleanly removed, rather than being dumped into the water as was the usual practice.

If the president was so adverse to dirtying foreign harbors, imagine his horror if they ran down a foreign ship--no matter how inexplicable its actions.

The *Minnesota* had retreated to port. A thick bank of fog made judging her

distance virtually impossible. The baleful low of her foghorn kept fading in and out--difficult even to tell what direction it was coming from. Oates wanted to slow down, but that was what Second Division had done, causing chaos in the Third. If he reduced speed, Fourth Division might run smack into his rear.

The schooner kept coming. The officers watched with widening eyes. The beams darting down from the *Florida's* spotlights exploded in a murky haze. They were not much improvement over total darkness.

"Those lights make us a fine, fat target if she has torpedo tubes amidships."

"Doctor, I doubt the Flying Dutchman carried torpedo tubes." Turning to his right, Oates commanded, "Hard to port!"

"Hard to port, sir!"

He had waited until the last possible moment for the maneuver. He was hoping the *Minnesota* was still swerving away, increasing the distance between them. Could the bridges of the *Ohio* and the *Missouri* see the bow lights of the two ships behind them? Everything was so faint.

Not the mystery ship, though. It was now close enough to count her travelers, the metal rings on her spars. Something that might have been a slicker lay on the deck next to a bin. Its fore-and-aft rig was handy to leeward--a quaint reminder to the men on the *Florida* that one did not need steam to drive against the wind.

"Rudder amidships."

"Rudder amidships, sir!"

Dr. Singleton's brief foray into levity was forgotten. He took a prominent role in the chorus of awed silence. How could she go into the wind so effortlessly? How did she maintain her trim?

The *Florida's* ram threw up a rich, snowy bone in the artificial light. The bows of the two ships came with a few dozen yards of closing a "V," then started to draw apart.

From Gun Number 3, starboard amidships, Midshipman Davis peered through the gun shutter. With only eleven feet of freeboard, the crew of the six-inch gun was blinded by spray whenever the *Florida* made flank speed or veered to port. The narrowness of the gunport limited their line of vision. Their befogged telescope sight was next to useless.

The twelve-inch batteries could, via phone or voice tube, communicate with both the bridge and Central Station. But the only contact the Number 3 six-incher had was through the electrical indicator bolted to the wall of the casemate. It displayed four pieces of information: range, command (CEASE FIRE, COMMENCE...), target (CONNING TOWER, BOWS...), and projectile (LYDDITE, SHRAPNEL...)--but nothing at all about the nature of the target. Until the searchlight beams from overhead flashed on the water in front of them, the gun crew was ignorant of what they were up against.

"Jesus! A pipsqueak schooner!" Davis fumed. "I could sink it with a spit wad."

Davis not only had a clear view, he had a clear shot. She could not be more than forty yards away--and *that* was worrisome. The *Florida* had sixteen six-inch guns mounted in broadside, twelve on the main deck and four on the upper deck. In addition, there was a battery of twenty-two three-inch rapid-fire guns, twelve three-pounder rapid-fire guns, four one-pounders, eight machine guns, and six Colt automatic guns spread fore and aft between the six-inchers, in sponsons over the gun deck, on the superstructure and bridges, and in the fighting tops. All of them were arranged to blow a torpedo boat to hell as quickly as possible. If that schooner was being steered by an enemy, and if it carried torpedo launchers, the *Florida* was practically a dead duck already.

The ammo hoist rattled behind them, but before they could get the shell to the gun they heard the breech of the gun directly above them slam shut. The gun crew on the upper tier had once again beaten Davis' team to the loading. With competition between gun crews so fierce, this was a matter of some importance even with a potential enemy on top of them.

The gun-layers murmured as they worked the dual hand wheels, the worm gears putting in motion a combination of gears to the lower left of the six-incher, which in turn operated the cam, which in turn aimed the gun. Captain Oates was marking a parallel course to the schooner, as though he had in mind a Nelsonian

broadside. Yet the command box stubbornly remained at STAND BY.

"She's got no name on her," one of the gun-strikers said in a perplexed tone.

Davis leaned forward. Sure enough--no quarterboard. Neither did she fly an identifying flag or pennant. She could be registered on the moon, for all they knew.

The desire to let loose with a round was nearly overwhelming. Davis' finger touched the trigger. It felt remarkably like the trigger of a sporting rifle.

Now... if someone would only give the command....

His finger nestled tightly in the deadly curl. A half-inch plunge would ignite the gun. He pressed his free hand against the wall to steady himself as Oates maintained the turn. Without quite realizing it, Davis had already depressed the trigger a quarter of an inch.

For a few minutes the *Florida* and the mystery ship ran parallel to each other. Grabbing his megaphone, Captain Oates stood outside and shouted:

"Ahoy! You on the schooner! Are you in distress?"

No response.

"Ahoy! Schooner! Identify yourself! Do you need help?"

Grissom and the senior watch officer chased after the captain as he dashed from the bridge. A tactful way had to be found to tell Oates his pants were unbuttoned, his underwear hanging out. But the captain's attention was glued to the schooner. The exec could not catch his eye.

The strange ship captivated Oates. Who would dare sail it blindly through the mightiest fleet in the Western Hemisphere, disregarding all the rules--the common courtesy of the sea--at their own peril?

"Ahoy! Captain of the schooner! Show yourself!"

Midshipman Davis heard the captain bellowing as he raced past his station. He watched as Oates huffed down the deck in his thick wool socks, his long johns flapping out the back of his trousers like a pair of deflated water wings.

"What's up?" one of the gunners asked him.

"We're not shooting, that's all I know," Davis sighed. He did not bother putting his hand back over the trigger, but leaned back and folded his arms in disgust.

By the time Oates had run the length of the ship, he was nearly faint. For a few moments he stared incredulously at the schooner. How had she pulled so far ahead? Then he realized the illusion of what he was seeing. She was not pulling ahead, but away. It was a result of the course he himself had set. The *Florida* had begun to go in a circle.

There was a loud snap overhead and he jumped back with a shout.

Damn. It was the flag! He was standing under the large ensign at the bow.

He glanced around to see if anyone had observed his reaction and found his exec and the senior officer of the watch staring straight at him.

"Sir... your pants are down," said Grissom.

The composure Oates had lost while pursuing the schooner abruptly returned. *Well... there. My pants are down. By Godfrey, I must be a hell of a sight.* With the waist of the trousers halfway down his buttocks, the wonder of it was not that he'd not noticed, but that he had not fallen flat.

"Thank you," he said. With great dignity, he drew his pants up, packing his long johns in with a couple of deep shoveling sweeps of his hands.

"Uh... where's Dr. Singleton?"

Grissom's response was cut off by a shout from the watch officer.

The world suddenly exploded with light.

"The *Minnesota*."

Deciding that he'd swung out far enough to avoid collision, Captain Hubbard of the *Minnesota* had begun easing back into formation... only to find the *Florida* running straight for him.

Captain Oates and the two officers raced for the bridge.

There was a great deal more clanging and frantic signaling that night before the divisions regained formation. In Captain Oates' case, the situation was not improved by the fact that the *Minnesota* was the flagship of Rear Admiral Thomas, commander of the Third Division. True, the *Minnesota* had nearly rammed the *Florida* first. But in matters of rank, precedence had no standing. Thomas took a thorough verbal thrashing from Admiral Evans. As a consequence, Captain Oates received a crushing reprimand from Thomas. Oates could not bring himself to reprove his exec, who was blameless, so he banned Dr. Singleton from the bridge. None of which helped Oates, who the next day found his ship placed in the observation ward.

And none of which changed the fact that when the sun rose and the fog cleared and the ships of the Atlantic Fleet were sorted out, the mystery schooner was long gone.

And unexplained.

VI

1905 - 1907 California Current, West Wind Drift, Alaska Current

Only once did Tremblin' Chandry try to give up whaling.

When gold was discovered in Kotzebue, the passenger trade skyrocketed. Pickings were fat on the gold run. Having grown weary of whale blood and shiftless hands, Chandry hired himself out as skipper on a steamer of the Northern Lights Line. Before shipping out with his first load of passengers, he spent a week tearing through the blind tigers and gambling dens of the Barbary Coast. While absorbing alcohol in prodigious quantities, he also gleaned information from captains who had already worked the route. The technical details little concerned him. Men who sailed passenger ships were no better than freshwater sailors, in his estimation. Always hugging the coast, seeing no more ice than a berg or two, these lubbers didn't know that north was neither true nor relative--not in the nautical sense and certainly not in the gut sense. It was blinding, endless night. It was blowing ice with dynamite and praying it loosened enough that you could free your ship. It was the very end and the very beginning, and if you couldn't actually see the planet cascading down from the soles of your feet, the compass told you it was so. North! What did they know of it? They probably drank piss and thought it first beer.

They did, however, offer useful tidbits.

He learned that Kotzebue Sound could not be entered by any deep draft vessels; they had to anchor outside the shoals and wait until lighters and other shallow-bottom boats came out to pick up the passengers and cargo. Between poor communications and adverse tides, that could sometimes take more than a week.

The miners on board would be gamy with anticipation. They'd heard that sailors up the sound found gold on their mudhooks when they hauled them in.

They went mad with the idea and more than one load of passengers had overwhelmed the crew and foundered on the shoals while trying to take a ship in.

This said everything skippers needed to know about prospectors. Men maddened by gold lust were more dangerous than men plagued by thirst. Hence, they took the illegal step of drilling holes in their water casks, creating artificial shortages. The crews approved of this, so long as they could stash their own canteens out of sight during the parched interim.

"After a week offshore they're damn near comatose," one captain told Chandry. "Quiet as lambs when the boats take 'em off."

That was all Chandry needed to hear. He staggered to his ship that very night and hammered holes in the water casks. Next morning, the first mate roused him.

"Captain, we got vandals been on board. Put holes in our--"

Trembling as he sat up--his mornings, after all, had given him his name--he cut the First off. "Passengers all aboard?"

"Yes."

"Then set sail, and don't forget to drop the pilot off." Then he fell back on his cot, asleep before his head hit his greasy pillow.

Chandry felt he understood the prospectors better than most because he understood a breed of man more desperate than the miners of Kotzebue and the Klondike. In their way, the whalers were little different from the gold miners at Kotzebue and the Klondike. In the days of sail, ships were forever getting boxed in the upper reaches of the Bering Sea, between Wrangell Island and Point Barrow. Countless men had perished in search of the final barrel of whale oil, the final strip of baleen, the final dollar. One had only to see what Chandry had seen at Franklin Point and Icy Cape to understand whalers. The shores there were littered with the corpses of whales cut lose at the last moment, when skippers discovered they'd ventured too far into the ice packs, that their kills were worthless because they themselves were about to die. Most of the whale bodies were headless, the result of quick decapitations as the whalers took the most precious oil (stored in the whales' heads) as insurance against the possibility that

they might, after all, survive.

With the coming of steam, trammeling the southern ice packs had become much simpler, almost child's play. Yet again, greed reared up, and did not blink or flinch. Once the whalers realized they were comparatively safe in their old hunting grounds, they started to go even further north, into Mackenzie Bay and the Beaufort Sea. They went as far as Baring Land and Prince Albert Land--even Melville Sound. And of course, the old dangers returned. Even steamships could not break the harsh grip of the northernmost reaches once they were caught. Crew after crew became stranded on ice which could be either land or hidden ocean. There were stations that far north. The one at Point Barrow was responsible for saving hundreds of lives. And eccentrics lived up there--"naturalists" they were called--who got a peculiar thrill out of studying the Eskimos. They, too, had done their share in saving stranded whalers. The Eskimos had rescued many an ice-bound sailor. Yet there were hostile natives, also. There was a long-standing feud between the mariners and some of the Eskimo tribes, who had been treated badly by early whalers. A few crews had been slaughtered after their ships had become trapped in ice.

Come and go, here and there, life was precarious above the Circle.

Oh, the prospectors were a tough breed. But Chandry had seen tougher. On the rare occasions he bothered to look in the mirror, for one. But Chandry made a crucial miscalculation. He could not treat would-be prospectors like members of a whaling crew. His passengers grew thirstier by the day, then by the hour. It seemed his swinging arm had been a tad too heavy the night he knocked holes in the water butts. They were still a hundred miles south of Juneau when a near-riot broke out and Chandry slapped a few faces.

The ordeal ended only after an agonizing three-day wait off Kotzebue. But that was not the end of the journey. Not legally, for Chandry was served with a Summons the instant he stepped back on shore in San Francisco. It seemed one of the faces he had slapped had belonged to a lawyer, of all things, and that the lawyer had wired a friend about the incident. Naturally, the friend was also a lawyer. Soon, Chandry sensed the vile stench of legality rising about him. Nothing good could come of it, so he quit his job and took the next train east.

All he knew was whaling. So he signed on with Fitch & Stern in New York and was soon to sea again. Unfortunately, Chandry's brush with the legal

system did not serve as a strong enough warning.

There was a provision in the captain's contract with the owners for 'bottomary bonding,' a clause common in the whaling industry. If a ship was damaged in such a way as to threaten the completion of a cruise, the captain could make the nearest port for repairs. Since no skipper wanted the money for the work to come out of pocket--and since there was rarely any money in that pocket in any event--he was allowed to sign on the owners' account. If the owners' credit was good, the ship was allowed to leave before the fee was settled so that the season would not be lost.

That December, Chandry put into Victoria--to give his crew some time on shore after a difficult passage, he said. They assumed he was lying and that he'd dropped anchor in the Canadian harbor in order to restock his rum. They were stunned when the second mate told them he had gone straight to a loan office and taken out a bottomary loan, using the owners' names as surety. The *Lydia Bailey*? In need of major repair? This was news to the crewmen. It was just like the second mate to sneak around behind the captain. But his information was too stunning to ignore. If the captain was caught stealing from the owners, where did that leave the crew?

Tremblin' Chandry was living in a haze. But one day in a Victoria flop house, when the sun broke in and he awoke in a heap, he spent a near-sober hour contemplating what he'd done. He might spend the rest of his life in jail. There was only one solution: the rest of the cruise had to be a smashing success.

With that idea in mind, he got drunk again and set out to sea.

After entering the northern hunting grounds, the *Lydia Bailey* came upon some humpbacks off Banks Island. Chandry ordered full steam for the chase.

They were about fifty yards from the whales, bow guns primed and ready, when a loud screech rattled down the length of the ship. There was no violent jarring, nor were men thrown off their feet--only a gentle "thunk" at the end. An inspection belowdecks showed no sign of damage to the hull, yet the rudder behaved sluggishly and Chandry came to the sick realization that the pintles had been damaged.

One of the prerequisites of a successful cruise was a helm that answered handily. After striking the hidden ice floe, it took the *Lydia Bailey* half an hour

just to turn. Dreams of wealth and redemption descended into nightmares of prison poverty. Chandry pulled his wool cap over his head, listened to the wind-chant of the funnel guys, and peered bleakly at the eternal day.

On a few occasions Chandry ventured to lower the boats. Instead of firing a harpoon cannon from the high safety of the bow, the crew now had to chase their prey in whaleboats, rowing the boatsteerers close enough to heave their bomb-rigged harpoons. But the results were meager. This foray into their fathers' mode of whaling left the crewmen gasping and blistered. They had not shipped on for this kind of work. The articles they'd signed did not specify hour after hour of being hunched over oars and straining their guts out.

To this misery one far more personal had been added to the life of young William Pegg, deckhand. The *Lydia Bailey* had its full complement of disreputable characters. No whaler shipped out without them. But none on Chandry's ship was slimier in the deckhand's eyes than the purser. When William signed on at New Bedford the purser's hand barely fluttered when he checked off the boy's name.

"You're stingy with that tic."

"I'm the one needs to read it, no one else."

"Let me sign. I can write."

In front of the owners, the purser could not refuse his demand. William flourished the pen across the ledger. Now let the purser try to short his pay! Now let him try to say Pegg had signed on later, not sooner!

A poor start. And things got no better when Pegg spotted the purser slinking out of the forecastle with a seabag over his arm. When William checked his sea chest he found it drastically depleted--and every depletion a book.

The diversity of books on ships was proverbial, running from Shakespeare and Kant to *Peg-Leg Pete*, *the Terror of Java* and *The Brain Eaters of Samoa*. A great deal of technical material was ingested on whaling cruises. Monotony was another word for learning and the *Epitome* was a well-thumbed favorite. Many sailors memorized large chunks out of its logarithmic tables.

There was no earthly reason for the purser to steal Pegg's volumes of Jack London, Robert Louis Stevenson and Bulwer-Lytton. William had loaned out his small library as freely as he had borrowed from others. But there it was. Theft, no matter how mindless, was still theft.

When he complained to the captain about it, Chandry slapped him with a curse and an open hand. This was something he could get away with more easily than on a passenger ship, especially when his victim was a sixteen-year old deckhand. In effect, he was telling William: "Mind your superiors, mind your elders, and above all mind their faults."

William's closest friend on board the *Lydia Bailey* was Lead Foot. He had earned his moniker during the sunset days of sail in the 1870's. No one knew his age. He insisted he'd served as a powder monkey on the Confederate raider *Alabama*, which would have put him in his seventies. This seemed the only lie Lead Foot ever stuck to. Everyone was entitled to at least one permanent untruth in their life, and since Lead Foot's was so obvious and frivolous, few ever razzed him about it. Most assumed he was a hale fifty and left it at that.

Certain he would sympathize with his plight and forward his cause to Chandry, Pegg ran to Lead Foot after receiving his harsh slap. He found him propped on the poop deck, reading. He did not close *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, but raised his head, watched, and listened until the youth had finished his flood of woe. Then he shook his head sadly.

"You want justice?"

"Yes!"

"Justice for you, one William Pegg, up and facing the whole world?"

"What's wrong with that?"

"Nothing," Lead Foot said doubtfully. "You want to nail the thieving bastard to the mainmast?"

"He stole all my books!"

"Yes. But think about this, mate: there's millions of people on this world. A billion, pretty soon. All of them crowding and pushing and damn lucky if they

can raise their heads three counts to be noticed. What a howl! All those folks want their fair share, their even break, the recognition that's due. They all want justice. One way or another, I guess they all deserve it."

He rolled his finger over the edge of the novel, as though nudging dust out of a crack.

"Way south, there's a place called Easter Island. Ever hear of it?"

William was too angry to respond.

"I was with a tramp that dropped off supplies there a few years back. I met this crazy Englishwoman. She took me out to see the heads."

This piqued William's interest. He'd heard about the giant stone heads of Easter Island. While maintaining his angry silence, he leaned harder on Lead Foot's words.

"She was always walking, always scribbling in her notebooks. I hiked with her across the island and she showed me the heads up close. Then she showed me a stone slab and told me it was a sacrificial altar."

"Human sacrifice?"

"She told me there used to be forests on the island. The natives made canoes and houses out of the wood. But the population kept growing, and they needed more houses and canoes, and one day they cut down the last tree. Didn't have any choice, you see. They had to fish for food and they had to have roofs over their heads. But once the trees were all gone, the canoes went to rot and the houses fell in. It was then that they turned on each other."

"Human sacrifice."

"I didn't know how much to believe. She was a batty old gal with hair out her nose. But when I looked at those giant faces, I couldn't help but believe. They knew they were destroying themselves. They put the heads up to keep an eye on the ocean when they were gone. What they're watching for, no one knows. The old woman said they're looking for God. Maybe they're looking for... hell, *us*. But the bottom line is this, mate. Those people who made those heads... *they all got justice*. You see, justice isn't what you read or who gets voted or who

gets hanged. It's what falls out when everything else is gone. When we all get our breaks, our fair share, the world won't be able to hold it all. We'll eat ourselves up. When there's no one left to look around, that'll be justice."

None of which meant beans to William, who only wanted his books back. He wanted to knock Lead Foot over the head for giving him an old-man speech instead of backing him. In his young mind, there was only one avenue left open to him:

Revenge.

Captain Chandry continued to lower the boats. Several months' toil were rewarded with only one hundred and thirty barrels of oil, mostly walrus--hardly the kind of bonanza he'd hoped for. The men wondered why he didn't put into harbor for repairs. If he thought things were too hot for him in the States and Alaska, he could always make for Siberia. The Russians would be only too happy to relieve him of his ill-gotten booty in exchange for some genuine repairs.

What they didn't know was that Chandry had no idea where the bottomary money had gone to. He remembered taking out the loan. He remembered hoisting some drinks as a means of celebrating. He remembered seeing a constable and shrinking into an alley. And that sweet thing who cooed him up to her nest. Couldn't trust any of these tarts, Chandry remembered thinking and he'd hid the money well.

Beyond that, everything was a blank. He didn't know if he'd been robbed or had simply lost the bankroll. Certainly, he hadn't bought more than the drinks and a few hours of female companionship. Funny thing, he couldn't even remember what he'd wanted the money for in the first place. The crew groused at what they perceived as pure greed. But without the money or credit, no shipwright in the world would help him.

And then came the day God offered him a gift.

They came upon a school of black right whales. The captain kicked up his feet in glee and fell in a drunken heap. "Right whales, lads! At least thirty strong! Pipe all hands on deck! Let me tell you why they call them *right*."

Chandry ordered extra waifs, small red flags on seven-foot poles, be stowed on the whaleboats and all five of the boatsteerers grinned when he told them what he had in mind. If it worked, their worries would be over and the bottomary bond could be forgotten or at least forgiven.

The men at the sweeps worked harder than ever before. On this occasion, William Pegg was a rower with his back to the whales, as infected as the others with the feverish prospect of success. Bracing his feet against the wood chock, he put every ounce of his strength into his back. His hands burned and he was sure his spine would snap, but Lead Foot was behind him, no more winded than a horse lying down. William was fearful of the man's cluck of disapproval if he seemed lax or weak and he was determined not to let up.

The captain's plan was unveiled--an old whaling trick. Picking out a smallish right near the end of the school, the first boatsteerer lanced the creature with a barbed harpoon just hard enough to hook its flank. There was no grenade attached. They did not plan on killing it. Not quickly.

The five whaleboats were lashed stem to stern and, as the wounded whale raced ahead frantically to seek succor from the adults, the slaughter began. The boatsteersmen lanced left and right, butchering males, females and calves. The young wounded whale was the perfect engine.

With all oars drawn in, William was free to watch. He soon saw why the captain ordered the extra waifs. A red flag was planted on each whale killed or mortally wounded, as they could not use grenades for a merciful *coup de grace* for fear of alerting the others to their presence. It was strange seeing the dying whales swim with waifs fluttering overhead, as if they were stricken ships signaling for help. As far as the whalers were concerned each was a victory pennant.

"They're going to be trapped!" Lead Foot whispered hoarsely.

William turned. A bank of clouds ahead was curdled in the peculiar fashion that indicated the beginning of an ice shelf below. They passed ice cakes frosted red. Things were going their way. But the boy had a sudden sick feeling. Facing aft, he surveyed the water beyond the boats tagging along behind them and he spotted ice he'd not noticed before.

The whaleboats surged ahead. They had run out of waifs. Then there was

laughter from the lead boat.

"We got them all!"

Pegg twisted around once more. The boatsteerer and officer of the lead boat were killing the baby judas whale that had led them through the pack. It seemed a shame to William, after what they had put it through. Then again, maybe it was for the best.

"We got them all!"

Word ran back through the other whaleboats like news of the Second Coming. A cheer was raised for Jake-Leg Chandry. Briefly, it seemed all his boozing had provided him a brilliant inspiration, for not one of the whales had sunk. That was the magic of rights. They had so much blubber in them that they were buoyed up like floating treasure houses. They could be rendered at leisure, with no fear that they would slip underwater and escape their oil barrel coffers.

There was a general shout and the men acted silly. Then the officers in the whaleboats reminded them there were still wounded whales about. They pulled their bombs out of the leather beackets each boat carried and prepared to finish them off.

There was a crack. Then another. And a third. At first, they thought it was ice, but Lead Foot put them right:

"It's the call-back!"

They were incredulous. Captain Chandry was giving the emergency recall signal. At the sound of three gunshots, they were supposed to row back to the ship with all haste. Dumbfounded, the officers did not respond. Then Lead Foot, the slow, hardy veteran, raised a hoarse cry:

"The ice is closing!"

So it had not been William's imagination. The ice was moving in the rotary motion so deadly to northern mariners--the motion that chewed ships up and stranded sailors in white eternity.

There was no time to lose. The lines connecting the whaleboats were cast

off and they put about and raced for the ship. To William, every motion seemed to take an hour. A numbness came over him even as he rowed his heart out. The hulls of the whaleboats were frazzled by months of bumping with ice cakes and the outer planks had taken on the consistency of absorbent horse hair. They were already mucked with whale blood and were now gorier and heavier as they retraced their path through the killing lane. William caught the eyes of dead and dying whales. He was sure they were accusatory. "You killed us. *Why?*"

Tow lines were attached to all five whaleboats and they quickly rotated the slow-turning *Lydia Bailey* one hundred and eighty degrees. This done, the boat falls were attached and the whaleboats raised in less time than it had taken to lower them.

The captain made full speed out of the sudden harbor, which soon closed behind them. The men looked back at the bloody lagoon, which became a lake even as they watched. There were a few feeble spouts as some of the rights, still miraculously alive, swam round and round in a futile attempt to escape. It was like gold flying up in the air and falling as plain dust.

They were lucky to be alive, but it was hard to reconcile the loss. Captain Chandry fled to his cups and was raving before the sun went down. William would never forget the sight of the captain pulling down the ship's flag and wrapping himself in the union jack. Racing up and down the decks, he improvised: "Hail Merry Columbia, and the Land of Liberty! Hail Merry Columbia, and the Land of Liberty!"

It took a while for the boatswain to chase him down and put him to bed.

VII

January, 1908 — 2°30'S, 35°53'W

From the Deck Log of the USS Florida:

Mast gave deck courts to 2 Marines who left their posts without proper relief; 1 Marine given 20 days confinement; 5 sailors drunk prompting search for unauthorized spirits on board; lady visitor fell down ladder and contused arm; Mast gave Ship's cook 1/c 2 weeks restriction for drunkenness; CpM 2/c Anderson, 1/c Fireman Dicks, 3/c Fireman Lynch fined \$10 for same offence; unable to compete in race against Alabama due to mechanical problems; Observation Ward.

"Come on, ya damn fish. If it was put on the menu, you wouldn't know beans." Ensign Garrett jerked the rod back and forth in metronomic anger. He'd heard that a simple white rag would suffice as bait. If so, he had yet to see it. So far, he'd only managed to lure the dolphin into frolicking with the *Florida's* bow wave. Even more irksome was the laughter of the croakers looking on.

The port quarter was where marines traditionally mustered and drilled. The first sergeant had just dismissed the ship's contingent following bayonet drill under the aft turret and they were still sweating beneath their dark blue caps. Only their spats and khaki puttees distinguished them from the sailors. That and a certain *foreignness*, no doubt due to the fact that a large percentage of them *were* foreign. The Corps was not as finicky about birth certificates as was the parent Navy. Broken English was not a severe handicap because for the most part the files of the *Florida* spoke with their bugles. There were ninety-eight bugle signals in their repertoire, announcing everything from smoking lamp to general quarters. They lulled sailors to bed and shattered their sleep when the watch changed. They screeched up and down the corridors during drills and

tooted up the companionways to announce mess.

Nor did broken English prove a hindrance to laughter--a universal language Garrett was growing thoroughly sick of as the marines hooted at him from above.

The only precaution the ensign had taken was to use a strip from a haversack to bind the rod to his wrist and forearm. When the dolphin suddenly became convinced of the legitimacy of the bait and snapped at the simple white rag, he very nearly flew off the quarterdeck. The marines whooped louder than ever as the sailor grabbed the high rail with his free hand to keep from going over.

"Beck!" he shouted.

For an instant, Midshipman Beck considered letting the sea have its due. The stink of paint on his skin was a strong reminder that he owed nothing whatsoever to the ensign from hell.

"Beck!"

Sighing, the middy grabbed hold of the thick rod and together they battled the hooked animal.

"Let's keep the marbles rolling," Garrett hummed thickly as they shifted along the weather rail. "The niggers'll cook us fish steaks for dinner. That's what we'll have. We'll--this way, Shit-shank! Keep it away from the propellers! There... there.... By Godfrey, you stink. I've got her now. Back off."

Gladly, you bastard, Beck thought. This voyage was teaching him rough language, if nothing else. Certainly, he'd learned some harsh words that morning.

The Atlantic Fleet contained more men who'd never seen the Southern Cross than any fleet before it. When they entered the Southern Hemisphere, thousands of sailors were introduced to Latitude 00-00 in spectacular fashion.

The night before, they had been summoned to the wide foredeck, where they were introduced to a scene of disorienting light displays and fireworks. Water was pumped in wide arcs around the ship, cutting the searchlight beams into an erratic code against low-lying clouds. Captain Oates, resplendent in full

uniform, joined the officer of the deck at the bow. After delivering a resoundingly pompous speech, he peered out over the sea as though waiting for something to fly out of the darkness. A moment later the fireworks stopped, whoever was yanking on the whistle cord eased off, and anticipation came down like a muffled clap.

Suddenly, a bright flash. An apparition appeared.

"Welcome, Davy Jones!" Oates exclaimed.

"Where did he come from?" Davis whispered.

"Climbed up the hawser."

"Looked like he came from nowhere."

"No," Beck insisted, "the hawser."

"Well, then, the hawser."

Davy Jones presented a ghastly face to the gathering. Made up to look like a man who'd spent centuries at the bottom of the sea, wearing rags and skeletal slashes of paint, he wobbled forward as though walking on bones.

"Shiver me timbers, this is a scurvy lot."

They would have laughed, except that the enormous snake wrapped around his neck--intended, they presumed, to be a moray--looked impressively dangerous.

"Well, Captain... if this is what you've got, it's what you've got to work with." He turned to the OOD. "Respectfully request that the King and his Queen be allowed on board."

"Permission is most respectfully granted."

Another flurry of fireworks ensued. Beck could just discern the clank of chains under the racket. Two figures appeared over the bow--one regal, one gorgeous. Floating up on a gun hoist, they lifted their arms in a condescending salute.

"Where'd they get the stunner?" David wondered aloud.

Beck almost doubled over with laughter. "That's Mr. Edwards."

"Naaaww... is it? Great God Almighty."

The royal pair landed on the deck. The King wore an enormous silver wig precariously topped with a crown. When some of the bluejackets exploded with mirth, he tilted his trident meaningfully in their direction.

"Captain Oates," Davy Jones announced, "may I introduce you to Neptunus Rex and Her Highness Amphitrite. The Lord of the Seven Seas and his wife."

With a solemn nod, Oates held out his hand in the direction of the boots. "My ship's company, Your Majesty."

"Mmmm..." was the portentous response. With his queen at his arm, he reviewed the sailors, promenading down the deck with hard strikes from his trident, like a yeoman of doom. And truth be told, there was as much apprehension as humor in the ranks. The boots knew the Rites of Neptune could turn rough on occasion. There was no telling what would happen to them when they officially crossed the Equator.

"Why aren't the jugheads here?" someone said. There were no marines in sight.

"This is for humans only," was Beck's sincere answer.

Close up, Davis could see that Queen Amphitrite was indeed Ensign Edwards. In spite of his seaweed wig, however, he appeared remarkably feminine at the side of the burly king. His sashay was unsettlingly convincing. The midshipman experienced the deep loins thrill that he felt whenever he saw a pretty girl, and blushed. His embarrassment was compounded when Her Majesty batted her eyes at him as she passed.

"Why... that... that...."

"Hey, I think she likes you," Beck smirked when the royal pair moved on.

The Review done, Neptunus Rex straddled the anchor chain and nodded at Davy Jones. There was a brief fanfare.

"By command of his Most Noble Majesty Neptunus Rex--you are ordered to appear before me and my Court on the morrow to be initiated in the mysteries of my Special Domain. The penalty for non-appearance is as follows: you shall be given as food for sharks, whales, sea turtles, pollywogs, salt water frogs, serpents, and all other living things, known and unknown, that dwell in the sea. Your head, body and soul they will devour, as a warning to landlubbers entering my domain without warrant."

A summons that could not be denied.

The next morning, after being ambushed by shellbacks wielding high pressure hoses, the pollywog boots were confronted by King Neptune's court, the most prominent of whom was the Chief Bear. It was his job to chase down the boots no matter what nook or cranny they ran to.

And run they did. The Chief Bear would never have succeeded without his numerous assistants. Jesters and mermaids, devils and cutthroat barbers. The earlier dousing proved mild next to the tortures the shellbacks (those already initiated) dished out for them. They were plunged, pulled, yanked and dunked. Their hair was shaved in bizarre patterns. Davy Jones now had a trident of his own--attached to a battery. He took particular pleasure in supplying the boots with electric jolts that stood what was left of their hair on end. Through it all sat the Royal Baby: Chief Petty Officer Ryan, the fattest man on the ship. He wore only a diaper, and when he laughed--which was often--his jelly rolls flapped to either side of him. Perhaps most mortifying to the initiates was the fact that photographers from *McCullen's* and *Harpers* were aboard. Their cameras ate up the sights like sportsmen netting bass, each exposure a trophy.

But for Midshipmen Davis and Beck a particularly onerous rite was reserved. Summoned to the forward turret, they were inundated with blue and green paint appropriated from the ship's main supply locker. While laughing sailors gathered round, the two middies bit their lips to keep silent. Stoicism was the order of the day for the pollywog boots. One peep other than laughter would have branded them as milksops for the rest of the voyage. Ensign Garrett clattered down from the gun derrick with another commissioned officer and looked innocently at the empty paint cans in his hand. Then he ordered the

midshipmen to recite passages from the arms manual. They mumbled like men swimming in a solution of arsenic.

A photographer from *McCullen's* captured the moment. The folks at home would see.

Later, as superheated water diverted from the boilers exploded through the forecastle showerheads, Davis interrupted his howls of pain with curses directed at Garrett... and Beck. He now knew when it was his luck on the *Florida* had suddenly gone sour: the day Garrett tossed Beck a rope and told him to make a sheep-shank knot. Basic, like asking a ten-year old to tie his shoes. Yet Beck was so nervous with Garrett breathing down his neck that he had created a snarling, mutated cat's cradle instead. Resting a hand on the midshipman's head, Garrett dubbed him with a vulgar nickname that raised eyebrows on the young men around him. For fear of earning a similar title, no one protested. But the ensign caught Davis' transitory frown of disgust.

"Hey Shit-shank, you got a prick for a plank? You two were married at the Academy, weren't you?" Garrett nodded. The mere fact that they had shared a room cemented the two of them in Garrett's mind.

Any chum of Beck's was Garrett's chump. Thereafter, their misfortunes were tandem. If Beck detected grotesque sea snails in his dinner, Davis discovered tiny eels. If Beck found himself sewed into his hammock one morning, Davis was chagrined to wake up naked abovedecks.

Friendship was being tested to the limit. The more so, because Davis had had his fill of hazing at the Naval Academy, while Beck had floated through Annapolis untouched by upperclassmen. A miraculous migration, to be sure, and one observed and deeply envied by other candidates, Davis among them. He suspected would-be hazers stood in awe of Beck's pugilistic ability, so he had asked Beck to become his wife. In Academy jargon, a wife was a roommate, someone who shared everything you had--usually within reason, but not always. Razors, shaving cream, lotions and notions were all handed out freely by Davis, as well as money. True, the loans had been small. But they had never been repaid.

Still, Davis considered it an equitable exchange, because he believed he had discovered the mother lode of all luck. The upperclassmen stopped hazing

him. Choice duties seemed to come his way. Even his grades improved.

Now, none of it seemed worth the grief Garrett doled out. Davis never fully realized the consequences of his sympathetic frown until they crossed the Equator and he found himself blue.

"To hell with classmates--ow!--to hell with messmates--oh!--to hell with shipmates--ough! They must think we're lobsters!"

Beck suffered the boiling water in glum silence. There was no blunting the fact that Davis was really telling him: "To hell with *you*!" He could hardly believe it. His pal, the chum with whom he'd crammed for exams, shared graduation honors with, boxed, opened his heart to--sobbing in Davis' arms when he found his sweetheart was unfaithful--denying him! He recalled an incident on the training ship *Constellation*. They had just finished a race with the *Dale*, also on a practice cruise. In the rush to stow the running gear, Davis had let drop a belaying pin. One of the instructors, not minding his way, slipped on the pin, which then rolled against the mizzen. With a shout, the instructor leaped up and searched the deck. All he had to do was match the loose item against current assignments, and he would know who to blame.

But he could not lay his hand on the item. It could have been anything: a batten, a bitt, a camel... or a belaying pin. Anything but nothing--but nothing was found. Spotting the pin, Beck had knocked it behind some chafing gear. Then, when the instructor's back was turned, he scooped it up and slipped it into the pin rail. For this, Beck could have gone on the Report of the Day, earning punishment and possibly expulsion. Seeing this act of naval insubordination and personal charity, Davis had vowed eternal friendship to his fellow cadet.

And now it was proving as fragile as a ginger snap. It created an angry hollow in Beck that stayed with him as tenaciously as the green-blue tint on his skin. He had barely stepped out of the shower stall when Garrett approached him.

"Still a little green under the gills, Midshipman Beck?" He whistled, then dragged him aft for a bit of fishing.

He desperately wanted to join in the marines' laughter when they mocked the ensign. Even better would have been to let Garrett go over the rail. Unfortunately, the former wasn't prudent and the latter wasn't feasible. If his

gunnery apprenticeship was interrupted by Garrett's demise, he would have to go through it all again. And he might end up with some crazed commissioned officer who would fire his gun no matter how many rotten powder bags lay broken in the turret.

"Hi-yup!" Garrett chanted nonsensically as the dolphin on his line began to tire.

"Snaring the White Whale?" Dr. Singleton remarked as he ambled up, the brim of his straw hat giving a snappy salute as the wind gusted.

"Just a big fish, Doctor," Garrett responded.

Leaning over the rail just far enough to make it seem daring, Singleton announced, "Fish? You have no fish, sir. That's a coryphene. A member of the family Delphinidae. A dolphin. A mammal, as warm-blooded as you or I." He nodded at his silent escort, Midshipman Davis.

Davis and Beck exchanged quick visual darts, then looked away. A ship this size was a floating city. But it was a small city, for all that. Midshipmen might see the black crews infrequently and the captain might never stick his head into the common mess, but those who shared the same military strata could not avoid each other for long.

Davis posed respectfully for the doctor. Or as respectfully as he could, looking blue as a corpse--and with the doctor smelling like a rum ball at a fete.

The dolphin made one last bolt before succumbing to Garrett. He braced against the rail, hauled back, prayed the line would not break--and won.

"Give me a hand with this."

Reaching down with grappling hooks, the midshipmen helped bring the animal on board. With so little freeboard it was not very hard to do. They dragged the dolphin across the smooth teakwood and laid it on some chafing gear. It made little moaning sounds, like a boy trapped in a deep well.

"Fish steak!" Garrett pronounced proudly, glaring up at the marines. The tunic of his regulation whites was unbuttoned to his navel, exposing the red collar the sun had printed at his neck. Yet he sweated heavily as he stood over

the dying animal.

Shaking his head and clucking his tongue, Singleton stepped over the wet drag marks and pointed out the dolphin's blowhole. "An air breather... see?"

"Like a whale, I know."

"And like all mammals, the females suckle their young. Every bit the way you suckled your mother's breast when a babe."

"Well... now..." Garrett stuttered.

As the doctor prodded the animal with the ferrule of his cane, Beck caught a whiff of what Davis had been smelling the last several days. Jesus, a rummy! On a ship this stone sober, you could spot him a mile away.

The onlookers had been stunned by the animal's spectacular marine-gold coloring when it was hauled on board. The hue changed soon after, yet the impression remained that they had struck a golden gusher of life. None of them had any intention of capping it. The life energy spewed out like wasted oil. After a time, the dolphin went ultramarine. Its wide dorsal fin turned violet. Its dark throbbing eye pierced them with accusations. The animal contracted and straightened in imaginary leaps, making as much progress as a hanged man walking on air. Then it turned green, almost the same color as the sea around them. A return to origins. Decay.

When Garrett caught Davis glancing at him, a guilty blush shot up. The dolphin was not dying boisterously, like a sail fish or bass, thrashing about and distracting observers from the fact that it was dying. It was expiring with the grim grace of an old aunt, the variety of tones the intimate faience of her boudoir.

"Can't it die faster?" Davis asked.

"How so?" Singleton said. "It's not going to suffocate. Not quickly. Its lungs will collapse under its own weight, eventually. But the elements will kill it before that. To stay alive, its skin must stay wet. And its eyes... it'll probably go blind before it dies. Not that we contributed to its death in any way...."

A few bemused expressions were cast in his direction.

"Fish steak," the ensign reiterated.

Outside of its plaintive cries, the most wrenching thing was the dolphin's fixed, placid smile. So much agony should be able to grimace. This was like a mask on a dying actor. All that vitality could not collapse upon itself. It had to be a sham. Theater.

"Fish steak..."

Neither midshipman was convinced. Their eyes met accidentally. Here was agreement, if not friendship. Garrett had not captured a meal. He was murdering a soul. Both of the young men had grown up on farms. Both had seen farmers deal death in the barnyard like accountants ticking off figures in a ledger. Yet they sensed a terrible emotion in the death of the dolphin--caused by sheer duration, if nothing else. And the feeling that they were accomplices in crime.

Even the marines twisted in a kind of fidgety agony. The drawn out process smacked of torture. Why didn't someone deliver the coup de grace? How exactly did one do that with a dolphin?

"Couldn't we cover up its breathing hole?" one of them suggested.

Davis felt a hand on his shoulder. Upon turning, he discovered Singleton wobbling uncertainly. Was he seasick? Or just--

"Get that thing off my ship!"

Had the dolphin exploded their reaction couldn't have been greater. One of the marines, holding himself up on a gun hoist, lost his grip and fell with a loud smack on deck. The others jumped away from the catch, then jumped away from each other, then jumped away from Captain Oates, who bellied towards them like an angry bear.

"Doesn't anyone here know how to stand at attention?"

Everyone froze.

"Doesn't anyone here know how to salute?"

A pitiful chorus of, "Yes, sir," accompanied a ragged exchange of salutes.

Walking around the dolphin, Oates seemed to raise an invisible wall between the sailors and Garrett's catch. "Has this anything to do with one of your experiments, Dr. Singleton?" he asked suddenly.

"Why, uh... no--"

"How--" Oates stopped himself. He wanted to ask Singleton how much he'd had to drink for breakfast. A second glance convinced him the doctor was not only drunk, but on the verge of being sick. Perhaps he had stumbled across this little scene in all innocence. Oates would have to give him the benefit of the doubt. After all, if a story was made of this, the doctor would be the one writing it.

"Midshipman Davis."

"Yes, sir?"

"You're all blue."

"Yes, sir."

"Isn't there any way you can remove it?"

"I think it'll just have to wear off, Captain. I've tried everything else." *Except jumping into a vat of turpentine*, Davis thought, terrified the captain would suggest just that.

"All right. Would you please escort Dr. Singleton forward? And ask him to tell you about lead poisoning while at it."

"Aye aye, sir."

Singleton did not look at the dolphin again, but turned slowly and followed the midshipman away.

"Mr. Garrett."

"Yes, sir?" The ensign licked his chapped lips. Sitting out in the wind and sun all afternoon had dried him out. Beck stood awkwardly to the side, like some green fairy attendant out of *A Midsummer's Night Dream*.

"Am I speaking to the same Garrett who had a questionable relationship in Portsmouth? I believe you almost got married there, only the father rescued the girl at the last moment."

"Sir--"

"And weren't you brought before the mast for swimming naked in Trinidad?"

"I was in the water, sir. No one could see--"

"The water was exceptionally clear, is my understanding. And the ladies on that yacht could see every inch."

"I didn't know--"

"Yes... and you're the one who stopped the loading in Number One Turret when that schooner cut through our division. What if it had been an enemy cruiser? Would you have done the same?"

His question sounded like a reprimand and he realized how foolish it was. Garrett had acted properly that spooky night, for more humiliating than being sunk by an enemy was sinking yourself. The whole idea of firing--no matter how obvious the danger--was repugnant to the captain. Still, he was not here to praise Garrett, but to bury him.

"I thought it best--"

"Yes, yes. You thought it best, even though you could see nothing from where you stood and had no idea what we were up against. Very prudent, Ensign." He glanced at the marines. Were they involved in all this? Hard to tell with them. Midshipman Beck, on the other hand, was obviously an unwilling party. By all rights, Oates should dismiss the marines and the midshipman before raking Garrett over the coals, but he wanted his words to get out. For that to happen, he needed an audience. "Where are we, Mr. Garrett?"

"Sir? I believe we'll soon be rounding Cape São Roque."

"No. Look around, mister. What I mean is: *where are we?*"

Glancing fore and aft, Garrett noted Fourth Division four hundred yards behind and First Division an equal distance ahead. To starboard was Second Division. The rest of Third Division had separated itself from the *Florida* and had moved off to port.

"We're in the middle, sir."

"And what does that mean?"

"It... uh... means we're in the Observation Ward, sir."

"And why are we in the Observation Ward with five admirals and the entire Atlantic Squadron looking down on us?"

"My understanding is that it's punishment for being out of position when we reached Port of Spain, sir."

"We fell thirty yards behind, Mr. Garrett. We squeezed every ounce of power we could out of this dear old ship and we fell behind."

Garrett found it difficult to stay at attention. A breeze kept blowing his loose tunic collar against his cheek. To his chagrin, a wayward thread floated up and came perilously near his right eye like some tantalizing cabaret dancer intent on blinding him.

"What ship were you on before the *Florida*?"

"I was stationed on the *Oregon*, sir. I was a watch and division officer."

"And where is the *Oregon* now?"

"She's restricted to home waters, sir."

"And why is that?"

"She... couldn't keep up, sir."

"She was one of the most honored ships in the Navy, Mr. Garrett. During the war with Spain she sailed from the Pacific to Santiago and decided the fight when she got there. But when the Fleet reorganized she was relegated to the

backwaters as if she was nothing more than a rust bucket." Oates glanced around to make certain Singleton had not sneaked back. "Mr. Garrett, I'm sure your presence on my ship is due to the lack of manpower on the East Coast. But rest assured, if a grand old wagon like the *Oregon* can be cut, there's nothing to putting you swabbing decks on a collier."

Captain Oates took a long look at the dolphin. It had changed color again. Its faded green tint was like a distress signal from the soul.

"Get this thing over the side. Admiral Sperry is on the *Alabama* abaft." He nodded in the direction of the Fourth Division. "If you think *I'm* a sundowner, I could correct that impression by introducing you to him."

Ah, is that it? Garrett thought. True, the rear admiral was a notoriously strict disciplinarian. If Sperry was witnessing Oates' angry arm-waving, he would understand the *Florida's* skipper was disciplining the sailor who took their predicament so lightly.

"Sir, if you'd like some fish steak--"

Not much of what Oates had said had made an impact, but the look he now gave Garrett was deadly as a gun. He bit his tongue as the captain seemed to twist inward on himself, then stomped past a six-inch sponson out of sight.

"All right, Shit-shank, you heard him. Over the side with our dinner."

Beck was angry. And stunned. With a tongue-lashing like this, the ensign should have been cowed into abject silence. As it was, Garrett's command reflected nothing more than what he felt: disappointment at losing a meal. No concern at all that the captain might carry out his threat and banish him to a collier. While Beck, who'd not been the target of the reprimand, felt his legs wilt like daisy stalks.

The splash was indistinguishable from the turmoil in the *Florida's* wake. The last they saw of the dolphin was a greenish-silver sliver on the waves. It raised one flipper, then disappeared.

Dr. Singleton slipped into his cabin, downed a couple shots of whiskey,

and emerged a new man. He dragged Midshipman Davis back on deck, then beat his chest as he filled his lungs with sea air. "A splendid day! Pity you're spliced to an old geezer like me, eh lad?"

Davis could only agree, so he said nothing.

Singleton spent a few introspective moments watching the waves slip by, then recited: " $Rf = fsv^{1.83}$.' You know what that is, Mr. Davis?"

"One of the first things we learned at the Academy. Frictional resistance."

"Proportional to the wetted surface and the square of the speed. That's us."

"Sir? It's the *Florida*."

"No. I mean us. Across the surface. Reduced to formula."

Suspecting a depth he was not accustomed to, Davis offered something simpler: "It sure is blue out here."

Snorting, Singleton waved his hand as if waxing the ocean. "The bluest water I've ever seen lies between the Antilles and the Cape Verde Islands."

"You mean the Sargasso Sea," said Davis.

"If you take pure water and add a millionth of a part of ferric hydrate, it appears brown. A ten-millionth makes it green. Only a minute amount, a twenty-millionth, is needed to make it blue. The water at Capri is bluer than Lake Leman. In Switzerland, lakes like Kandersteg and Arolla are bluer still. A matter of degree. The color is the result of spectral absorption and ferric and humic compounds. Blue water really isn't blue, after all!"

And your hair isn't as white as an old goat's, Davis thought bitterly. He hid his sour expression by facing away from the doctor. When would he learn to keep his mouth shut? The most innocent observation could elicit an hour-long lecture--or worse, a demonstration. He prayed the doctor would not resume the experiment that had been interrupted when, during an intermission, they stumbled across Ensign Garrett and his dolphin.

His prayer was not answered.

A large audience had watched when Dr. Singleton boarded the *Florida* in Hampton Roads. It was not so much his reputation as his contraptions that preceded him. He was setting out to sea with a miniature laboratory: wired boxes, odd glowing tubes, tools that bore an unsettling resemblance to surgical instruments and a high-backed chair which was said to thwart sea sickness. After seeing these outlandish items brought on board, the sailors lined up to observe the doctor stagger up from the landing stage. What outrages was he contriving for them? He seemed harmless enough in person, waving his silly straw hat at the boatswain.

But the questions posed were:

"What's he going to stick us with?"

"Who's he going to cut open?"

"What's that thing hook to? And why?"

At least he had not started vivisecting sailors--yet. But no one had approached him to ask what he was planning, out of fear of being mistaken for a volunteer.

Midshipman Davis and a few others had more than a glimmer of the grim truth. Davis' hand still smarted from the experiment Singleton had put him through. That morning, the doctor had asked him into his cabin, then seated him at the small table flush against the bulkhead.

"Hold out your hand."

All unsuspecting, Davis obeyed. He had, after all, been told to conform with the doctor's wishes, so long as they did not prove too outrageous. When Singleton strapped his hand down on the chair arm, palm up, he grew alarmed. He let out a shout when the doctor stuck a needle into his palm.

"It will pass," the doctor said unconcernedly. "It can't be too painful, or it would effect my results. It's not absolutely necessary for the skin to be pricked. I would have brought my foot plates and connected them to the battery and galvanometer. Then it would have been a simple matter of soaking both of your hands in warm brine and pressing them down on another set of plates. But as you can see," he waved a hand at his cluttered cabin, "space is at a premium. A

needle is much more compact. Now... it doesn't hurt anymore, does it?"

Davis frowned. In truth, the needle had not penetrated very far. It itched more than it hurt. But the sight of it sticking out of his palm, a thin wire connecting it to the device on the table, made him a little queasy. He had to look away. This, he decided, coincided with his definition of outrageous. He would have refused to participate had he known what the doctor had in mind. Singleton surprised the midshipman with the needle, whipping it out from behind his back at the last instant. Davis had half a mind to jerk it out and rush to tell Lieutenant Grissom that the doctor was indeed poking sailors with needles, as they'd feared he would. But when Singleton showed him the indicator on the galvanometer and said, "That's you," he was brought up short by curiosity.

"How so?"

"Here. The needle is attached to this pole of a sal-ammoniac battery. Now I've just connected a steel plate to the other pole. This allows an electric current to flow through the skin, between the needle and the plate."

"Am I going to get a shock?"

"Why would I do something as pointless as that? This little gadget is the result of years of international effort. The psychogalvanic reflex was first discovered by Dr. Fere in France in 1888. This was followed by the Russian Tarchanow's work in 1890. Over the next eighteen years, the method was elaborated upon by E. R. Mueller in Switzerland and Dr. Veraguth in the States."

"You mean the needle?"

"A mere pin-prick. The strength of the current is indicated by this galvanometer, which is composed of two coils and a third suspended coil. This obviates the need for a magnet--which, like pain, can effect the results. As you can see, it has a mirror."

"I see," Davis nodded. He was beginning to regain his composure.

"Now I want you to stay still a few moments. Breathe deeply, regularly. Hold a notion of peace."

"Sir?"

"As you relax, your skin increases its resistance. I know that sounds contradictory, but that's been the finding. The resistance is shown by an increased deflection on the galvanometer. Any emotion decreases the resistance and modifies the deflection. Do you understand? I want you to understand, because I want to perform this experiment with at least a hundred sailors. If they demand an explanation, you can give it to them. I don't care to repeat myself a hundred times."

"A hundred...."

Davis nearly leaped out of the chair when Singleton, pacing the confines behind him, abruptly clapped his hands hard directly next to his ear.

"See? There! Look at the scale, not at me--the deflection registered your surprise. And not a second after inception. You have-excellent reflexes, my lad. If there was any hidden damage to your nerves, as might be caused by improper use of opiates, this could not have happened. Hysteria also can cause insensitivity, but you have no need to dwell on that. Now that we know the apparatus is working and that we have a healthy subject, we can begin. I'm going to ask you a series of questions, matching your response against the resistance scale. Ready?"

After a half hour's questioning, the doctor announced: "You are one happy sailor."

"I am?" Davis asked, wide-eyed.

"You may not know it. That's not surprising, especially in a young fellow. You don't understand the confusion of emotions. Well... who does? That's why the psychogalvanic response is so intriguing. It tells us things about ourselves that we never suspected."

Which sounded like so much moonshine to the midshipman. Outside of getting paint dumped on his head, few things had ever made him unhappier than being strapped to the doctor's contraption. He had been fearful the machine would detect the cloak of guilt that had fallen over him as he dwelled more and more on his rejection of Beck. Self-preservation did not seem a disreputable goal in his book, but disowning a friend to do it left an invisible psychic rash. Dr. Singleton's marvel machine detected none of it, however. Davis wondered if the tint of paint on his arms had foiled the device.

But as the morning progressed, and Singleton pricked subject after unhappy subject, the boy's doubts grew. One man would be grinning, and the doctor would diagnose acute depression. Another sailor, glowering from a recent tongue-lashing from a machinist' mate, was told he was radiant with love. The rest of the evaluations seemed equally off the mark. But Singleton consulted his galvanometric readings and reference charts and insisted he was correct. Davis wondered where all those statistics in the chart came from. Was there really so large a population where people who laughed were sad, and who frowned were delighted? Were sailors really so misinformed on emotions?

Men were quickly learning to dodge away whenever they spotted the distinctive straw hat and the midshipman shadow. Today, sharp needles. Tomorrow... a blunt knife?

The incident with the dolphin seemed to subdue the doctor, his medicinal shots of whiskey notwithstanding. The animal's sad, rainbow death throes had thrown him into deep depression. He watched bluejackets swerve to avoid him without giving in to the temptation to chase them down. Davis was relieved when the doctor spotted one of the black stewards lounging near a hatchway and keyed in on him. The midshipman was already getting enough grief from his peers. They suspected he was directing the doctor's choices.

No such compunction need be experienced with the colored crewmembers. It was not exactly respectable to abuse them openly, but only because that was done much more effectively in secret. As for consideration of their feelings... it was never considered.

"Well, boy," Singleton said, approaching the steward, "you look primed for experiment."

Davis recognized the darky who had over-filled Beck's coffee mug, causing him to ruin his tunic. His left eye was swollen and bruises showed on the side of his face. The tell-tale tattoo of a 'met-by-the-galley.' Obviously, Beck was not the only one Macklin had annoyed. The discolorations were courtesy of Ensign Garrett, no doubt. Davis agreed with Beck that Garrett was a devil for all time, but at least he knew how to do one thing right.

Amos Macklin was easing the ache in his back when the doctor saw him.

The galley-bound sailor was learning respect for the Japanese who'd once performed mess duties. He had been a sailor for years, yet the constant grind, stink, and sweat--plus the continuous bark of unreasonable diners--pressed the new stewards to the wall. The contempt they sensed from the white sailors didn't help. And in Amos's case, the beating he'd taken the night before tripped the world on its head.

Ensign Garrett and the three men with him had no need to disguise themselves. This was no hayseed southern town where the latest in fashion was Klan capes and slit hoods. If a ranking officer had come upon the scene, he would have halted the beating with a word to Garrett and his men not to raise a ruckus, and a caution to Amos to stop blocking the passageway.

He'd been expecting it.

He was working in the jollification mess where the noncoms ate when Garrett swaggered in and in so many words ordered the niggers to serve him.

The charred lump Amos sat before him had as much smoke as steam rising from it. The ensign stared at it long and hard. Then, smiling, he cut the blackened morsel with several hard swipes of a sharp knife, raised it to his mouth, and ate it. Amos listened to the crunch with startled satisfaction. He'd expected Garrett to throw it in his face or raise a fuss. But to chew and swallow it?

It was obvious, as Garrett savored each bite, that he was feeding his wrath, not his belly. Amos experienced a peculiar mixture of tension and resignation. He was in for a beating.

It could have been worse. Oddly enough, the four men who ganged up on him used no weapons, only their fists. The steward knew from experience that he had a good strong skull, so the blows that landed hurt their hands as much as his head. It was the strangest fight he was ever involved in. Perhaps his assailants could not put their hearts into vengeance over a burned steak. The blows from Garrett didn't amount to much. He had surprisingly tiny hands with little punch behind them.

But enough to cause soreness next morning. Between the "soft" beating and hard work, he was fairly worn out when Singleton called out to him. He tensed. He'd heard the tales, but never thought the white witch doctor would

stoop to experimenting with lowly stewards.

"You heard the doctor." Midshipman Davis stood as tall as he could before the taller black man. "Dr. Singleton wants to hook some wires to you. Don't go bug-eyed. It won't hurt much. I took the test myself this morning." Davis held up his hand to display the tiny wound. He was chagrined by the need to reassure the steward. He told himself he did not care whether the man was afraid or not. He just wanted to avoid a scene.

"How long's it going to take?" Amos queried, nervously wiping his hands on the dish rag tucked in his belt.

"Thirty minutes, no more," Singleton said.

"I gotta tell the cook."

Singleton sighed heavily, as though to say, "The Navy... no one can do anything without telling someone else about it."

Amos stuck his head through the hatchway and shouted. Someone inside shouted back with a low volt of incredulity. Out of the dark, steamy galley the cook began to appear. But one look at the doctor and he lowered his eyes, making a cast-off gesture before vanishing back inside.

Amos managed to keep from dragging his feet, but at the threshold of Singleton's cabin he stopped cold.

"There." Davis swung open the door and pointed at the galvanometer. "It won't hurt." He rubbed an electrode against his own arm. "See? And the needle... hell, it ain't nothing!"

"Would you sit, sir," Dr. Singleton commanded curtly. There was no need to be tactful. Men were animals, to be experimented upon as readily as any laboratory rat. Not that he held any brief with the slap-dash cruelty of some clinical scientists who tore through flesh as wastefully as Thomas Edison had burned out threads in search of the perfect filament for light bulbs. Sometimes being humane was simply a matter of thought and effort. Kinder ways could usually be found. But all this hocus pocus about Man being so superior to other creatures... it really put him out. Too many people confused superiority with worth. A man might be more important than an ant in the scheme of things. But

until that man found a way to beat death, he would not be superior. The fearful reluctance of this Negro was exasperating. He didn't really expect Singleton to electrocute him, did he? And his fear touched something else in the doctor. Negroes were men, but of a less worthy sort--although it was becoming extremely unfashionable to say so out loud in some (usually Northern) circles. All their wonderful physical attributes had not saved them from being enslaved over the centuries. One or two of them might shine through. But none were destined for greatness--least of all this miserable wretch. It was infuriating that a simple steward would possess such a dark rage to survive, especially when the threat was only in his mind. Even if this chair was loaded with current that would fry him to the bone, he should sit quietly. Because all of them, white or black, were...

"Sit!" he commanded abruptly, slashing the sweat off his face.

Midshipman Davis hopped back a foot, stunned by the doctor's shout.

Singleton stood behind the chair and held up the needle, which he had dipped in bleach beforehand for sanitary purposes. Cautiously, Amos approached. He paused briefly when he noted a picture gummed to the bulkhead. It was the Moon. Not the moon of a soft Georgia evening, but large, harsh, its pockmarks and blemishes lovingly delineated. Amos thought of Lucretia. He always called her Ol' Lucretia, although she was younger by several years. Lucretia was so ugly that friendly dogs chased her and sleeping cats woke up just to spit. But Lucretia was a willing girl, and popular with the boys. Amos had made love to her many times. Yet he always had to close his eyes to do it. If he had once opened them and seen her close up, he would never have been able to touch her again.

After seeing Dr. Singleton's picture, he would never again be able to look at the moon the same way.

Slowly, he sat in the chair. Like Davis, he found the sight worse than the object, and looked away. His skin felt infected.

Everything set, the doctor began running through a series of questions specifically composed for this experiment. He did not appear dismayed that most of Amos' answers came in the form of grunts and mild shrugs. Truth rested in the galvanometer, not gestures or verbal responses. Still, something about the results

bothered him. He checked all connections, then shook his head. Consulting his chart, the doctor rubbed his chin. Then he peered closely at his subject. Nodding, he began to speak in a low tone.

"Been working hard in the kitchen, haven't you? Whew! Can't miss it. You know... every human being has his own distinctive smell. These can be emphasized, depending on conditions. Heat, exercise, sudorific drugs, consumption, even emotion can all have an effect. Plutarch said Alexander the Great emitted a very powerful odor. It could not have been fear. It's granted that men and women differ. Theophrastus spoke of how beautiful women have their own distinctive aroma. Martial told of how Thais, the loveliest woman of her day, smelled of perfume though she never used a drop of it in her life. In Galopin's study, it was found fair-haired women emitted a musk or ambergris-like scent, brunettes the scent of violets. Women suffering from hysteria are also redolent of violets. I think that's most interesting. Don't you?"

"It seems," Amos said, staring at the doctor.

"Meantimes, both male and female redheads have a characteristic pungency; not offensive, mind you, but different. Mmmm...." Singleton gave Amos' pate a comedic glance. "I don't suppose you have to concern yourself with that. The races... well, their differences are common knowledge. The Chinese say Europeans smell stale--in fact, like corpses. Japanese say whites, especially white women, are absolutely repulsive unless heavily perfumed. No one--other than themselves, I suppose--can abide the stink of the Mongol. Now Negroes... all blacks, I mean... there's a kind of bluntness about their odor. On rare occasions, it can be almost refreshing. The way something sour hits the spot after too many sweets. I think it's generally agreed that Negroes smell like goats."

Amos sat frozen to the seat. Racing to the galvanometer, Singleton beamed with satisfaction when he saw the indicator. He compared his new readings against his chart, then clapped Amos on the back and announced, "Sir, you are one angry nigger!"

It was an outrage, a spit on his soul. As far as he was concerned, the ship could blow to hell--and the world, with its ugly moon, could go with it. When he

found Gilroy lurking by the galley, he was in no mood to grant his or any other white man's request.

"But, Amos, you've done it for me before," Gilroy pleaded.

"In port, you fool, not at sea. I've done enough for you. Get out of my way."

"I know you can get to the liquor cabinet. All the stewards can. Hell, they got whiskey and wine for all those foreign bastards in Trinidad, and were they grateful? Hell, they couldn't stand the smell of us."

"What? What made you say that?"

"The way they treated the Fleet, you'dve thought everyone who went ashore was part of the black crew."

They fell silent as some marines went by. Once they were gone, Amos hissed, "You'll land me in the brig, yet."

"We've known each other a long time."

"And every day cuts the odds for me. You were near to dead the other night. Haven't you learned your lesson? Drink'll kill you, Gilroy. I'll be killing you if I give it to you."

"You think I'll live either way?"

The comment startled Amos. It was something Methuselah might have said, only Methuselah was a good forty years older than Gilroy. It created a horrible sadness within him, to hear a man talk of death like tomorrow's dinner. But while he was a living creature in possession of the holy spirit of life, Gilroy was also a man who'd sold his soul. Amos drew back.

"No more. Please leave. I don't need no more trouble."

"And you've had that, haven't you, mate? Who bruised you up?"

There was no sense telling him. Even though they'd met the other night, Garrett's name would probably mean nothing to the stoker; he lived in what

amounted to a separate civilization, among the dark cohorts below the waterline. The officers he had to deal with on a daily basis were a completely different lot from those Amos faced.

"You know, I could tell you something," said Gilroy, lowering his voice even further. "Just might save your life."

"Gilroy--"

"Just bring me a fifth. Anything. Is that so much? Then I'll tell you."

"Tell me what?"

"What we found down below. Something you jolly lads up top never suspected."

It was the worst day of a terrible month of an awful year, and Gilroy was intent on making things worse. "You talking about the cracks in the pipes again? Have they opened up more?"

"No. It's not the cracks. Give me the fifth."

"Worse?"

"Give me the fifth. A lot worse."

"How do I know you'll tell me?"

"All right. Listen to me, Amos. I'll tell you. And then you get me the fifth and I'll tell you about a pair of lovely golden scarabs. The captain's keeping them under his hat. Do you hear? If you don't, by God I'll see that ensign that came up on us the other night. Looks to me he can't get enough hopping up and down on niggers."

"Go to hell, Gilroy. I don't want to hear."

But before Amos could turn away, the stoker said a word.

And the word stopped him cold.

Oates did not dwell on Garrett's behavior for very long. For a good reason.

There had been one major stop to date: Trinidad. And one major diplomatic disaster to date: Trinidad.

On December 23, 1907, the Atlantic Fleet had steamed into Port of Spain at flank speed, a glorious plume of water exploding from each bow. Ready to storm the town and sweep the damsels off their feet.

A lone fisherman watched from his boat as the Fleet reduced steam, then dropped anchor. After gazing with faint interest for a few minutes, he lowered his head over his pole and waited for a bite.

Hurrah.

Third Division's entrance had been magnificent, with one exception. Because of its faulty pipes, the *Florida* had fallen back thirty yards. Had anyone on shore bothered to watch they would not have noticed, but the Fleet abounded with rear admirals and the ship's tardiness had not escaped attention.

It was one of the worst moments of Captain Oates' career, not to mention his life, when Evans placed the *Florida* in the Observation Ward.

But even this had become a negligible concern.

While taking on fuel from colliers sent ahead from Norfolk, two sticks of dynamite had been discovered buried in the coal. More sticks were found being loaded upon other ships in the Fleet.

They were told the sticks had been planted by anarchists in the West Virginia coal fields. This was their way of bringing down a government. But Oates took it personally.

Forget falling back at Port of Spain. Forget being stuck in the Observation Ward. Forget that prime ass, Ensign Garrett.

Someone was trying to blow up his ship.

They could search the coal bunkers all they wanted, but the only guarantor was the God Oates prayed to.

They could blow up any instant.

VIII

On the Cliffs of Time

The belugas were intelligent creatures.

They knew the meaning of fear.

What was more, they understood, in detail, the cause of their fear.

They knew that if they were caught, the killers would finish them off piece by jagged piece. That was what Orcs did. Theirs would not be a razor swift death, for the Orcs would tear the small white whales into quarters. Not so horrible a fate as faced by larger whales attacked by the Orcs, remaining alive while being eaten bite by bloody bite until the heart had practically no body left to pump blood to. Still, the belugas' extinction would be unpleasant and certain. They knew this because they'd heard others of their kind killed this way.

So they fled.

The Orcs hunted in packs. They were smarter and more agile than the belugas and they were hungry. They knew what steps the belugas were taking to evade them, so they formed a picket against the shoreline and began slapping the ocean with their flukes. The belugas heard the drumming and sensed they were being herded and there was a brief minute when they could have slipped out of the trap. But they were frightened and they hesitated.

The killers had their own speech. The belugas did not understand the exact meaning of the sounds--only their import. And they knew the range was closing. The Orcs certainly did not bother disguising their intention. They continued drumming the waves.

The belugas went right. Racing--every jog to the surface a frantic

explosion of air. Their terror was written in the ironic rainbows etched in the mist of their exhalations.

To the left. The Orcs closed in.

Another jink to the right.

Then straight to sea.

Nothing. The killer whales had closed all exits. More and more, a rainbow mist. If only they could extend the surface. If only they could fly. But they couldn't fly. They knew they were not gulls. They were, after all, intelligent.

Intelligent enough to know they were about to die. Intelligent enough to also know they had a choice as to mode of death.

They turned towards the bay.

The killers closed ranks at the mouth of the bay and there was no escape.

Coming in, the belugas could feel the sharp bottom cut their stomachs, but there was no worse pain than the teeth of the killers, so they kept coming. They sounded to each other. They looked at each other for one last time in a place where they could live.

Then they could go no further.

They were beached.

The humans who discovered them stretched and dying on the shore were perplexed by their suicidal behavior.

"I've seen pilot whales do this back east."

The day wore on. The whales were mammals, but they'd long since lost the ability to survive on land. Gravity drew their internal organs down upon their lungs. The fifteen white whales were being crushed to death by their own bodies. It was a terrible, lingering death. The sun was harsh and the belugas, through their agony, saw the humans hold their noses.

"Don't they stink, though!"

"They're dying, son. They're dying."

But the killers offshore did not know this. They patrolled the entrance to the bay, expecting at any moment the belugas to emerge.

And then they heard their own death knell.

Evolution is the hidden wish list of every species--not a banal series of flukes or chance mutations. Every wish is a facet of what the species needs to survive in a changing environment. If the wishes are granted, the species endures. Since 99.99% of all species that have ever lived are extinct, it can be concluded that most wishes are denied.

The most noticeable feature of the Tu-nel, their colossal size, was the result of a specific threat. Forty-five million years ago the deadliest marine creature of the Eocene Epoch made its debut. Early paleontologists would dub it 'Basilosaurus'--'King of the Reptiles.' A few years after discovering its fossils, they realized their mistake. The Basilosaurus was not a reptile at all, but an archaeocete.

The first great whale.

A recent émigré from the land, the Basilosaurus sported two vestigial rear legs. Its two front legs were transformed into giant rudders that guided it along as it swept its flukes up and down. Eighty feet in length, it looked like a huge, obese eel with flippers. Using its widely separated but formidable teeth, it could tear any animal that got in its way to shreds, including the Tu-nel.

While deadly, the Tu-nel of the Eocene were a mere fifty feet long. They had an imposing dental armory, but their strong apsid formation (the skull having an 'arched' design, with a temporal opening that allowed the jaw to swing open at a wide angle) had been weakened by the nasal hollows that allowed them to sing. During the Eocene, the Tu-nel traveled in large herds and it was song that bonded the members of each school. The availability of so much 'meat-on-the-flipper' made the Tu-nel appealing targets for the Basilosaurus. Entire herds were wiped out by the voracious giant whales and the Tu-nel were driven from

the ocean. Had it not been for the fact that their ancestors were land-dwellers, they would have been unable to readapt to a semi-aquatic, riparian existence.

But a wish had been granted.

Again compelled to spend much of their time on land, the Tu-nel relearned some of the old habits they'd lost eighty million years ago. Their numerous ventral supports fused into a dozen huge ribs between the shoulders and pelvic girdle, and the cervical vertebrae thickened and arched--thus protecting the internal organs as the Tu-nel roamed the beaches. They were already as large as the biggest of the plesiosaurs. The enhanced skeletal structure was to promote a new spurt of growth when they made their second great entry into the ocean.

Other benefits accrued during their last major sojourn on land. Along with the vertebrae, the rest of the bones became less flattened. This caused the Tu-nel to look less like a giant turtle with a long neck and more like the now-extinct sauropods, the largest land creatures that had ever lived. Unlike Brontosaurus and Diplodocus, however, the Tu-nel were not vegetarians. To hunt in shallow waters, and on the land itself, their limbs had to become stronger. Yet they could not forsake the wide paddles that had propelled them at sea--because they could never leave the water entirely.

At the time of their defeat by the dinosaurs, therapsids were divided between those that hatched eggs and those who gave birth to live young. The proto-Tu-nel had become viviparous. Not only did the young develop inside of the mothers' bodies, but the newborns emerged tail-first. This way the birthing was nearly completed before the newborn needed its first breath of air. And (also like whales) the mother had to push the baby to the surface for that life-giving breath. It was an exceptionally clumsy process, because the Tu-nel never developed raised nostrils, like the old Brachiosaurs, or blow-holes, like porpoises and whales. Also, the necks of the newborns were not particularly dexterous, and a mother could not always nudge an infant's head above water. Next to old age and the casualties caused by the Basilosaurus, the greatest source of mortality among Tu-nel was drowning at birth. Yet babies remained too fragile to survive the crush of gravity on land. The Tu-nel never developed the ability to give birth to live young on land. As a consequence, they could never completely forswear their pelagic ways. Ever on the search for compromises (even while, for no good reason, denying others), evolution made some odd adaptations.

Among the most important concerned their four paddle-like limbs.

Carnivorous, the Tu-nel could never find enough food in the shallows to satisfy their enormous appetites. They dared not venture after larger sea game because of the toothed whales patrolling offshore. At first, they compensated by moving into the fresh water of the rivers and catching the animals that came down to drink. But the mammals had keen instincts and excellent olfactory abilities, and they soon learned which water holes to avoid.

Leaving the Tu-nel no choice but invasion.

Their first attempts at hunting on land were stupendously clumsy and usually futile. Their population dwindled and extinction lurked close for a million years.

The chief modification which allowed them to survive was a strengthening of their limbs. Tens of millions of years earlier the brontosaurus had maneuvered their tremendous ninety-ton bodies on stout, columnar legs. They had short, hooved feet, with stubs for distal bones and claws on their inner toes. They complied with the typical digital sequence of the terrestrial dinosaurs, the formula usually being either 2,3,4,5,3 or 2,3,4,5,4--the numbers indicating the segments in each digit.

The pelagic dinosaurs made nonsense of this arrangement. The ichthyosaur could have as many as a hundred segments in its transmogrified leg. In decay, its leg-fins looked like broken necklaces. On the other hand, the mesosaurus, the first land reptile to run back to a life in the sea, had a standard arrangement of fingers and toes, except they were webbed.

Life in the ocean shortened the limbs of the plesiosaurs. It also lengthened their fingers to an exceptional degree, making an excellent framework for its webbed skin. Like the ichthyosaur, it developed extra segments--in the longest fingers there could be as many as nine divisions. Yet the bones were not flattened like the ichthyosaur's.

The Tu-nel were not descended from the plesiosaurs, which had been cold-blooded reptiles. They had come from warm-blooded therapsid stock. The ancient phalangeal formula of cynognathus--2,3,4,4,3--could still be discerned. But they had made oceanic adaptations virtually identical to those of the plesiosaurs. Their bones, too, had remained somewhat rounded. Had this not

been so, their skeletons would have been too weak for a return to land.

The middle of the Oligocene showed the Tu-nel with appendages nearly as effective on land as at sea. Its limbs were only a little longer, but stronger; and while half of the supernumerary bones had fused, its front digits were flexible. It could even, to a certain degree, grasp. And the Tu-nel happened upon an evolutionary discovery that gave it some speed on land. In the early stages it had flopped around like a seal. But as its muscles developed, so too did a certain sleekness. Eventually, they began to combine limb propulsion with a mild form of slithering. It was this mobile combination that allowed the young Tu-nel to overtake and crush the men in Lieutenant Hart's camp.

Most important of all--during their frightening trips to deeper waters to give birth, the larger and stronger Tu-nel were left alone, while the smaller ones were attacked and eaten by the Basilosaurs. As a result of this evolutionary attrition, in a relatively short time the Tu-nel not only doubled in length, but in strength as well.

The *Basilosaurinae* branch of the early great whales left no decedents. Modern whales had to take a different direction. Because, when they returned, the Tu-nel simply ripped the Basilosaurs out of the oceans.

One consequence of the increase in strength and size was a concomitant development in the Tu-nel singing organs. The oceans vibrated with new songs. This was just as well, for the Basilosaurus had scattered the larger permanent herds forever. Now, for the better part of the year, the males traveled alone. Mother and offspring had to survive on their own. As a result, even after the great whale enemy was driven to extinction, the Tu-nel continued to increase in size.

What was about to hit the killer whales was the longest wish list of all time. And nearly every important item was checked off.

The Tu-nel bore in. The mother and the two young ones had heard the killers' hunt song forty miles away (the limit of their hearing with so much noise about), as well as the threatening thud of their flukes on top of the waves. They adjusted course. The stranded belugas had barely begun to understand the true meaning of sunlight when the Tu-nel tore into the Orc pack.

When going all-out, the mother could hit twenty-eight knots. It was a speed the torpedo-shaped spearfish and sail fish could more than double. On occasion, a marlin could top seventy miles per hour. For its size, though, nothing could match a Tu-nel.

They rarely hunted in packs. The mating season was the annual exception. But they had developed a concise and clever hunting code. Using a series of glottal clicks condensed into brief bursts, they signaled the location of their prey and the formation of their attack. On this occasion, the young ones produced a few clicks and grunts instinctively, but they soon dropped back. The killer whales made their own peculiar sounds. The Tu-nel recognized them and understood the nature of their target.

An adult female Tu-nel had eighty-four vertebrae in its neck, which thickened and became less flexible as the years passed. The mother could not have scythed her neck across Lieutenant Hart's campground the way the young ones had. On the other hand, the young ones would not be able to do what the mother was about to do for a dozen years to come.

The killer whales knew there was a threat in the immediate area, but they were accustomed to attack, not defense, and they were unsure of what to do. The Tu-nel hunt song seemed to come from a half dozen different directions at once. When the mother struck the pack, they were still shifting frantically back and forth just as the belugas had done before getting trapped in the bay.

The mother's neck was thirty-nine feet long. The cervical vertebrae articulated on surfaces that were nearly flat; when contracted they had a tensile strength comparable to steel. Her head was four feet long, but narrow, hardly wider than her neck. Only by staring hard could a scientist have discerned the dog-like visage of cynognathus. Following an homogalous pattern, her teeth were much like those of the carnivorous tyrannosaurus, allosaurus and ceratosaurus. Her sharp, six-inch frontals curved backwards, as did the progressively shorter teeth running to the rear of her jaw. They were made for slashing, tearing, and holding. The "chewing" was done in the gizzard. This mode of digestion would have convinced a paleontologist of dinosaur origins. In fact, it was an evolutionary development of the riverine proto-Tu-nel and was never discarded.

The mother's upper teeth were more prominent, twice as long as the lower.

To support them, a strong set of upper jaw muscles were anchored around a pair of thick, concrete-strong parietal bones, which encompassed the upper part of the head. There were no protrusions above the thin narial openings, close under the eye orbits, which mimicked the shape of the head by tapering sharply from the crown to the front of the mouth. Her head, in effect, looked like a dark, breathing rocket cone with eyes.

Backed by her stupendous one hundred and twenty-foot long body (plus a stubby sixteen-foot tail), there was only one creature alive in the ocean more massive--a bull Tu-nel. Even the sulphur-bottom whale was a mere one hundred feet and one hundred and sixty tons compared to her combined one hundred and seventy-five feet and one hundred and sixty-five tons. Far away, in the South Atlantic, the battleship *Florida* showed a length of four hundred and fifty-one feet and a displacement of sixteen thousand tons. But in flesh, bone and blood, she was the most effective battering ram ever devised. Not only that--bearing in at twenty-eight knots, when she hit a living target at right angles she proved nothing less than a monstrous trephine.

A screech of air was forced out of one of the Orcs when it was hit broadside and the ocean resounded with the snapping of ribs. By the time the Tu-nel opened her mouth, her head was inside the Orc's body. She forced her jaws open against the weight of internal organs, then snapped down directly on its heart.

Whale blood gushed up her nostrils and she shot for the surface. Whipping her head, she flung the Orc fifty yards and there was a red explosion as she blew whale blood from her nostrils. Then she raised the ancient cry--"tooo... nel... "--and the young ones responded.

The confusion that quickly surrounded the dead Orc was of epic proportions. The remaining killer whales in the pack knew it was dangerous to approach, but they were maddened by the smell of blood. With cannibal intensity, they bore in on the corpse of their companion. A couple managed to reach it before the adult Tu-nel and started to tear into its exposed guts. The dead Orc had been struck at such high speed that its body opened like a loaf, the two halves barely connected by a thin hinge of muscle and glistening black-white skin. An easy meal for the rest of the pack, if they could get close enough.

But the adult Tu-nel arrived. She snapped threateningly at the feeding

whales and they backed off. Locking the remains between her jaws, she lifted the body to the surface so she could breathe and eat simultaneously. The Orc pack began to circle her. As the smell of blood spread, they made repeated attempts to get at the corpse and, when these failed, they made threatening moves towards the mother herself. One of them managed to bite her neck, but her tough skin was impervious to the killer's teeth. She shook off the importunate Orc and continued to feed.

The pack scattered when the two young ones arrived, but when they realized the newcomers were not as imposing as the adult, they quickly returned. Cautiously, they made a few experimental forays against them. The mother made no attempt to defend the young male. In fact, she snapped at him a few times as he reached in to nip at the dead Orc.

Then one of them made the mistake of attacking the young female. The mother bolted forward and bit off one of its flukes. As blood jetted from its side, the pack turned on it and began eating it alive, leaving the three Tu-nel to resume feeding peacefully on the first corpse.

Which they soon finished off. But they were far from satiated, for they'd traveled far. For many months the threesome had wandered the North Pacific. After passing through the Aleutian chain, they had entered the Oyashio, following its cold current to the coast of Hokkaido, the northernmost of Japan's principle islands. From there, they journeyed the long arc of the Kurashio Stream and Northwest Drift Current, until the North American groundswell tickled their diamond flippers and informed them of land. They had found little to eat during their trans-oceanic peregrination.

Still half starved, the mother attacked again. Even as the killer whales fed upon each other, they were fed upon by the Tu-nel. Within an hour the pack was decimated. When they finally realized they were being worsted, the survivors made good their escape.

The Tu-nel had been lucky to find the Orc pack. This close to the Canadian coastline, the racket of Man was deafening. Dimly, the mother knew they would have to turn west again in order to find relief from the noisy coasters and auxiliary craft that crammed the waterways between Juneau and San Francisco.

They basked on the surface for awhile. When a ship approached, they

dipped under water, annoyed. After it was gone, they basked some more. They listened to the Southward Current beneath them as it began its long swoop to the North Equatorial. Then the mother sounded to her offspring and began to swim towards the evening sun.

The young male followed.

IX

January 1908 Alaska Current, California Current

Slowly, they journeyed south past St. Lawrence Island, Seventy-Two Pass, the Fox Islands. In the mystical belief that a symbol could influence reality, the owners had had the shipwrights paint a series of depth indicators on the *Lydia Bailey's* hull much like the Plimsoll lines on freighters. Now, as the damaged whaler made its way through the Strait, the marks that showed the weight of their load barely touched water. Had she been a freighter, she would have 'turned turtle' for lack of ballast.

Morale was as low as the ship rode high--the perfect atmosphere for vengeance.

There were a number of Portuguese sailors on board whom Chandry had hired off a Balearic bumboat. They had a fondness for duff, a strange-tasting dumpling of dubious Iberian heritage. William Pegg tried it once and spent the rest of the day gagging. He much preferred the balls of ground porpoise and salt pork which were the staple among the rest of the crew. At least you didn't have to drown the balls in a special sauce to make them palatable, the way the Portuguese did their duff.

The third mate was one of the Portuguese. Offended by the boy's extreme reaction to his favorite food, he ordered William into the galley. There he was forced to stand watch over the evil brew that comprised duff sauce. Made out of sour molasses and colored yellow by the saleratus the third mate insisted on adding, the mixture summoned visions of a sulphurous Hell as he heated it in a huge saucepan.

The Portuguese were not allowed to eat their duff amidships. "Damn dagos must've been raised in shit to like that stuff," Captain Chandry had fumed. He'd banished the Portuguese mess to the poop deck where the wind would carry off

the stench. This was where Pegg had to deliver the sauce once it was heated.

One day, while carrying the sizzling pan aft, he heard a too-familiar voice. Angling towards the cargo well, he spotted the purser below, sitting on a crate and swapping lies with the *Lydia Bailey's* boatswain.

It took Pegg about three seconds to decide what to do next. The purser let out a screech of pain and wrath as the boiling sauce spilled through the open hatch onto his head.

Naturally, no one believed Pegg had tripped over a coil of hemp, for he was a strapping lad known for his nimbleness. The deckhand expected a thrashing from the captain and steeled himself to meet the pain in manly silence, but much to the purser's chagrin and Pegg's astonishment, Captain Chandry did not lay a finger on him. Instead, as a rich coaster of aguardiente rolled off his breath, the captain blithely informed him that he was making him the boatsteerer of the lead whaleboat.

A strange and benevolent reaction.

While William had shipped aboard the *Lydia Bailey* as a common deckhand, a clause in the articles he signed also made him a 'preventer boatsteerer'. A boatsteerer's job was to stand on the bow of a whaleboat and strike a whale with the first harpoon. The 'preventer' was simply his replacement in case he was sick or injured. Pegg's only experience had been to strike a few small whales off Martha's Vineyard, but his muscular girth had impressed the ship's owners and they added the codicil the moment before William signed. Thus, the promotion was legal.

The boatsteerer of the lead boat was getting on in years and, three days before Pegg dumped sauce on the purser's head, the aging harpoonist was laid low by the lumbago. By replacing him with William, Chandry was allowing the boy to reap all the benefits that accrued from being a boatsteerer. He worked with the other boatsteerers in the waist of the *Lydia Bailey*, while the ordinary seamen remained respectfully forward of the tryworks.

There could be little doubt what was on the captain's mind. For all the honors, a boatsteerer's job was dangerous in the extreme. Still, William found it hard to believe his offense had been so heinous that Chandry wanted him to pay for it with his life. Over the next three weeks, he began to accept his promotion

as a mysterious gift from the sea, if not from Chandry.

During those same weeks, however, there was not a single whale sighting. Chandry had resigned himself to returning to San Francisco for repairs, but he still counted on a bit of luck stumbling across their path. A hundred or so barrels more might at least hold the owners at bay. So he struck a zigzag course to the south, gradually moving away from the mainland. There were whales out here. He knew there were whales out here. *Everyone* knew there were whales out here.

So... where were they?

Luck remained a stranger. The further south they went, the less chance they had of hitting upon whales coming the opposite direction, heading towards the Arctic feeding grounds.

The barren sea also mocked William's promotion. The boy's presence among the boatsteerers piqued Chandry and it finally grew too much to bear. Any notion Pegg might have had about being honored was knocked out of his head the day they smoked the rats.

Rats were a nuisance on whaling ships because of their appetite for whale bone and baleen. With such a meager haul, the need to smoke them out was not urgent. But nearly a month after the sauce-pouring incident, Chandry informed the crew he was going to fumigate the *Lydia Bailey*. The men accepted this in the vein it was given. It was the captain's prerogative to keep the crew busy. There could be as much whim as method in how this was done. But when he made his announcement, Chandry gave William a glance that sent a worm of queasiness through the boy's stomach.

That night, the boilers were filled with charcoal, as were the stoves in the captain's cabin and the forecabin. William was given the task of closing the cracks in the crews' quarters. Ironically, he used duff sauce, extremely sticky once it cooled, to paste the paper and rags in place. The following morning an iron pot of water was set next to one of the hatches.

"They always run for the water," Lead Foot told William as he took up a club and stood near the pot.

The fires were lit, the final seals checked, and the crew mustered on deck. Their names were called out and, once it was ascertained that everyone was out

in the open, Captain Chandry allowed the stoves and boilers to be lit.

"I don't think there's smoke in the fo'c'sle," the purser announced an hour later. Dropping to his hands and knees, he gently lifted one of the seals and whiffed extravagantly. "No, by Godfrey, I don't smell a thing. We'd better send someone in to look or this is all for nothing."

"Pretty dangerous," the captain fretted with a yawn.

"Don't want the crew idling all day, then have to do the same tomorrow," the purser asserted.

"Damn dangerous." Chandry took a sip from his mug.

"I'll go in myself, then," the purser all but thumped his narrow chest. "We can't afford to waste time."

"I can't risk losing you. Uh.... You! Boatsteersman Pegg! I think Mr. Hodges is wrong about all this, but why don't you go in and take a look?"

There was murmuring from the other boatsteerers. This was shabby treatment of one of their own. The captain was finally exposing his vengeful streak and it was a wee bit too wide for their liking. He silenced them with a glare. Had the old souse attacked them, the tough boatsteerers could have dealt with him handily enough. They were, however, afraid that he would find a way to drag them down with him when they reached port and the owners, with an army of deputies, began waving their writs and warrants.

William interpreted their murmurs to mean they would not allow Chandry to go too far. A confident look from Lead Foot reinforced this feeling. Of course, he had to go through with the deadly farce. The other crewmen would protect his life, but not his rank--something he was sure to lose if he refused a direct command.

They broke the seal and opened the hatch. Smoke billowed out. Before William could give the captain a knowing glance, he was shoved gruffly into the passageway.

The hatch was shut behind him.

He began to cough. A rat jumped out of the smoke and wrapped itself around his ankle. He shouted and kicked it away. He was about to turn and pound on the hatch when it dawned on him he was being presented a golden opportunity.

Struggling through the bunks in the forecandle, it took him several minutes to find the stove. He was already feeling faint. Gagging and coughing, he took a rag off a cot, using it to protect his hand as he took hold of the stove's handle and twisted the door open.

Reaching inside, he gingerly pried several briquettes out of the glowing clump. The rag smoldered but did not catch fire. This encouraged him to improvise the rag into a pouch for the coals.

He dashed for the door, only to trip blindly over a sea chest. "Oh Mother, I'm dying." But the thought of Chandry delivering a somber, if not sober, funeral oration just before dropping his corpse overboard gave him the dose of hatred he needed.

Struggling to his feet, he bashed this way and that until he found the hatch. He kicked it open... and found Lead Foot and the boatsteerers getting ready to kick it in from the other side.

There was a brief cheer as he straggled out.

He held up the rag, only to discover the coals had burned through, leaving him with a smoky hank of cloth.

"Fire's up, after all!" Chandry said cheerfully. "Seal the hatch!"

The crew had clumped up tight for a mutiny. They would not have let William die. But the knot of unity unraveled quickly when they saw him alive. Well done... brave fellow.... But there was a latent anger directed at the boy. They'd gone so far as to challenge Chandry--made their sympathies apparent and were ready to storm past the captain and the purser to rescue him. And here he'd come out bright as you please--nearly asphyxiated, to be sure, but a happy hero for all that.

Now they were all in the shit house.

It would have been better had they brought him out gasping, eyes rolling-- even better had they carried him out dead. Then Chandry's wagon would have been fixed for certain. As it was, they felt nothing thankful for the newest boatsteersman.

X

February, 1908 $\sim$ 53°57'S, 71°00'W

From a marine's diary:

Go on liberty in Punta Arenas--no cities further south! Got back to the Florida in one piece; sometimes the fog lifts and we can see glaciers; warned to be on best behavior, since we'll be visiting the President of Chile at Valpariso--but that won't be for a couple of weeks; temperature has dropped and we've changed to undress blues; Wiley came out of the brig last week but then got sick; he died yesterday of brain fever and we buried him at sea; I miss home.

Had Rear Admiral Evans been in his grave, he would have been turning in it. As it stood, he was over on the *Connecticut* rolling in his cot, a very sick Fleet Commander.

Captain Oates would have rolled with him, only in mirth rather than misery. Of all the unkind fates that could have fallen out for the man who had subdued Chile, none could have been worse than this. At the head of First Division, the Chilean cruiser *Chacabuco* acted as good shepherd as she guided the Atlantic Squadron through Crooked Reach, between Carlos III Island and Playa Parda Harbor. She looked on with tender, embarrassing concern as they squeezed through the notorious narrows around Santa Magdalena. She flashed a message of congratulations to the North Americans once they sailed by the black and white barber pole of Dungeness Light, signaling the worst was over.

Not that there had been any 'worst' about it. The Strait rolled out the red carpet for the grand passage. The southern tip of South America was the world's most famous graveyard for ships and crews. Oates had not heard of the weather being this moderate in years.

But if the sea was with them, the rumors were not. From as near as Brazil and as far away as Canada, messages poured in warning Evans of plots against his fleet. When a mysterious shipment of phosphorous arrived in Rio, the civilian authorities warned him the Germans were going to use it to blow up his flagship. This puzzled the rear admiral. Didn't they know that phosphorus was used to combat cockroaches on large ships?

However, most of the warnings concerned Japan. One dealt with a suicide flotilla of torpedo boats waiting to ram the battleships as they emerged from the Strait. Another message alerted them to mines sown in the narrows.

Evans scoffed, yet his lookouts were told to keep a sharp eye out for unusual boats and any knobby trigger mechanisms that might bob above the surface.

Oates watched the blinking *Ardois* lights in the division ahead. They emitted a constant, automated flash that identified each ship. To see 'C' blink meant that one was astern of the *Connecticut*, 'M' the *Missouri*, and so on in Morse. He noted how the arc beams reflected off the towing spars.

"Remember that storm off Cape Henry, Grissom? Aye, there was a hammer. That was a classic."

"I remember. The boots were so gallied they only had to look at a chuck of beans to--"

"Ah, but the way the ships plowed through the waves...."

"Beggin' your pardon, sir, but the *Florida* almost floundered. We lost half our lifeboats, and just about all our ventilator funnels. To tell the truth, sir, when we reached port, I hoisted a few hookers of beer just at the memory."

"*You*, Grissom?" Before the teetotaling lieutenant could offer a defense, Oates smiled, "Yes, it was something to behold. And yet we hear all these tall tales about the Terrible Strait!"

"Still a little bucky for the new boys, sir."

"Hmmpph. They're seasick because they expect to be seasick. It's in their heads, Grissom. They've heard too many horror stories."

Before the exec could put in a kind word for the less experienced men, Oates leaped up and pointed. "Grissom! Who is that bozo?"

For no reason anyone could adequately explain, gunstrikers in the U.S. Navy had been unceremoniously dubbed 'bozos.' The bozo Oates was pointing at staggered to the rail and heaved over the side. "Doesn't that man know where the head is?"

"To tell the truth, sir, you may think this is fine weather, but it's rough on the plebes," his Executive Officer said. "The heads are all backed up. It's pretty rank down there."

"I don't care. Spread the word: everyone use the heads, no matter how foul they become. I don't want to spend any more time in the Observation Ward. That's where we'll end up again if the flag officers see our men throwing up on our shoe tops."

The 'shoe tops' was that part of the armor belt that showed above the waterline--prominent, because of its red paint.

A spray of water whipped across the glass enclosing the pilothouse. A light tap, as far as Oates was concerned. "Not even Force 7, Grissom. No fight for life, no spindrift, no disasters. What will the journalists write about, now?" He watched the bozo vent another great gutful over the side. "Unless it's *that*."

The mad dash that resulted whenever the 'Lucky Bag' bugle call was sounded was wilder by far than the controlled panic of 'General Quarters.' While the latter required crewmen to disperse to their assigned stations, the former sent them all racing towards a single location, the common mess. First come, first seated. If you were slow in the slightest, there was no room at all.

It was an old Navy custom. Any personal articles found loose or out of place were scooped up by the boatswain or his mates and given to the Master-at-Arms, who promptly dumped them into the Lucky Bag. It was no use trying to get the property back. The former owners would have to wait until the weekly auction, when bidding was open to all. And woe to the seaman whose favorite ring or only watch cap found its way to the bag. If anyone had a grudge against him he could nurse it at will, if he had the money.

Such a procedure ensured that few articles were misplaced or out of place. But with so many men on board and so much time spent hastily preparing for inspections or running to quarters, losses were inevitable.

Three days earlier, Midshipman Beck had been helping to double-lash a whaleboat amidships when his necklace and its tiny rood ornament sneaked out of the neck of his shirt, dangling before his eyes whenever he leaned over. It threatened to ensnare his hands as he worked the ropes, so he took it off and laid it carefully in a crevice near one of the ventilator funnels.

It was not so much a religious totem as a reminder of home. His New England grandmother had given it to him two Christmases ago. She was not Catholic, but a mild Methodist. To her, the cross was a sign of worship, not denomination. She thought it might offer spiritual protection to her grandson as he ranged into the world.

When Beck returned to the funnel and found the necklace missing, he felt as if every shelf of his meager store of luck had been stripped bare. Had it fallen overboard? Not likely. It had been too far from the scuppers. The boatswain denied knowledge of it. Which meant it had probably been stolen.

Word spread that he proposed a dire fate for the thief if it was not returned to him. To his thinking, there were only two possible perpetrators. Both of them had been in the immediate area when the rood disappeared. Though he could not confront Garrett, Midshipman Davis was another matter.

"You see who took my cross?" Beck had asked Davis in a belligerent tone.

"No. Get out of my way."

"Do you know who took it?"

"No. Get out of my way."

"Did *you* take it?"

"No. Get out of my way. And go to hell."

Everyone was curious to see if Beck's jewelry would turn up at the auction. The seamen's mess was packed. Looking from the back of the room,

Midshipman Davis could just see the top of Beck's head in the third row of tables. A small dais had been laid near the galley. On it stood the Master-at-Arms.

"Pipe down, gentlemen! The Lucky Bag auction is now open."

One of the boatswain's mates brought out a duffel bag and laid it on the table in front of the petty officer.

"Our first item..." He scrunched up his nose and drew out a pair of soiled underdrawers using the tips of his thumb and index finger. "...was found fo'ard the gundeck. Now, what am I bid--"

"No!" came a unified shout, followed by a flood of laughter--although a few of the men, already weakened by the mild tossing of the *Florida*, succumbed at the sight and dashed for the nearest head.

The petty officer feigned amazement. "How can you deny such a masterpiece? There's quite a work of art on the back panel--"

"No! No!"

The Master-at-Arms shrugged helplessly and tossed the underwear into a ditty box.

"Next... ah, here's a little gem."

There were perplexed murmurs from the men as he lifted the item for all to see.

"What is it?" someone called out.

"I believe it's a camera lens, left on one of the aft hoods by our esteemed journalist friends and--"

The bidding came fast and furious and ended at \$16.50. Grudging congratulations were offered by the losers to the winner, who would undoubtedly turn around and sell the lens back to the journalist for double the price--or more, there being no camera shop in Punta Arenas.

"Now..." the Master-at-Arms drew out the next item.

"That's mine!" Beck leaped up.

"Belay that, mister! It's anyone's, now, if they can come up with the right price."

"One dollar!" Beck instantly offered.

"I'm bid one dollar. One measly simoleon. Gentlemen, I believe this item is solid gold!"

"Not the chain!" Beck clarified.

"Have a seat, mister. Now, gentlemen... how can you let an opportunity like this slip you by? Think of the women and children. Think of apple pie. Think of the poor orphans."

"Poor orphans!" some of them hooted.

"*I'm* an orphan," the petty officer told them. "And I just happen to be poor, too."

No other bids were made, however--until he raised his gavel and cried, "Going once, going twice--"

"Two dollars!"

Half of the men present had anticipated this move from Ensign Garrett. The other half were not surprised.

"I knew it!" Beck shouted, leaping up again.

"I will ask the midshipman if he is accusing Ensign Garrett of thievery," the Master-at-Arms said gravely.

"Well..." Beck said uneasily. "...not really."

"It's my understanding your little chain was confiscated properly. It was loose. It was unattended. So enough. If you don't want to start wearing much heavier chains, I suggest you take your seat and keep it."

"Three dollars!" Beck yelled, sitting down.

"Four...."

"Five!"

"Six...." Garrett had whipped a handkerchief from his pocket and was assiduously polishing the emblem on his hat, which he had propped on his knee. He might as well have been counting beans to the bunch, for all his apparent lack of interest.

The midshipman was busted. Frantically, Beck scanned the crowd. "Howard! Ahoy, Howard! Can you spare me a few dollars 'til--"

"Here now!" the Master-at-Arms interrupted. "No cadging at the auction!"

"But, sir--"

"Six dollars going once, six dollars going twice.... Sold! For the sum of six dollars, to Ensign Garrett. And may I add, Mr. Garrett, that I am pleased to see you have found religion."

Garrett looked up, startled. "Have I?"

Amos Macklin recognized the profundity in the handclasp of the oceans. The average lubber saw only a universal mass of water, but experienced seamen knew the seas and oceans were not merely convenient labels invented by cartographers. Each body of water had its own set of peculiarities--its conveniences, inconveniences, traps, tricks, sea life and seafarers. The Strait, and Cape Horn to the south, was the ground of contention for two ancient gods. Amos used his favorite ploy--taking out the slop buckets--to get his second look at the passage.

High seas had been prevalent last time. He had been on board a cruiser which was being transferred to the Pacific Squadron. If four wrestlers had stood holding the four sides of a blanket and shaken it violently up and down out of sync, they would have gotten an idea of the configuration of the water during that stormy week.

Amos had been too busy to do much sightseeing. In any event, the clouds had been too low. There was little to see. A race with death, mountainous waves, foggy embankments, and fear--that was the impression the Strait had left on him.

It was a different world now--no worse than the Chesapeake on a blustery day. Amos could clearly see the headlands--tree-covered heights that plunged suddenly at the water's edge, offering no anchorages. There were no spectacular vistas like those offered by the coast of Alaska or Norway's fjords. It was the rich texture of geographical and man-made history that awed him--which made him want to accept its challenge, rather than submit to the empty, profitless desert set out for him.

His back twitched and he leaned forward to ease the pain.

"Hey, Amos!" One of the cooks stuck his head out the galley hatch. "Get a move on! I got more shit piling up in here."

"There's shit piling up everywhere."

"What's that?"

Amos tossed the scraps and went back inside.

"That crazy Gilroy's hearing spook voices again," Stoker Gilroy chuckled to himself when he went topside for air. He crouched and listened to the two men dicker.

"It's pure gold! Cm'on, what do you say, Slayton? You could use the extra protection when you go busting heads in Nicaragua or wherever."

"It's not a St. Christopher's medal, Mr. Garrett," came the skeptical response.

"All right, make it eleven dollars. And keep the chain, ha-ha."

"Well...."

Gilroy moved away from the quarterdeck, bored. They hadn't been spook

voices, after all. Just a huckster trying to palm off a trinket to one of the uniformed natives. The fireman leaned against the weather rail, wincing as the golden scarab reflected off the slate sea. A sharp pain darted through his genitals. He wondered if his old problem was flaring up again.

He'd gotten the clap in Massachusetts. Admiral Evans had selected Provincetown for his headquarters several years earlier, when the Fleet held target practice in Cape Cod Bay. Most of the ordinary seamen had taken up temporary quarters in the nearby town of Barnstable--which soon became notorious for its blind tigers. The proprietors of these illegal taverns boasted they sold only labeled whiskey. In fact, it was labeled wood alcohol. Drinking it made sailors not only drunk, but crazy drunk. Adding insult to physical injury, the owners priced their half-pint bottles at five dollars.

Admiral Evans complained about the blind tigers to the local authorities. He also lodged complaints about the prostitutes who operated out of the empty freight cars on the wharf. To no avail. The bar owners made so much money they could easily buy off the police. And the hookers, it seemed, paid off in other ways.

In one of the most ironic turnabouts of Evans' tenure, the citizens of Barnstable protested to him about sailors playing baseball on Sundays. Since that was one of the few days his men were free to relax, Evans told the citizens to take a hike. For which, they brought suit against him and the rest of the United States Navy.

Fine citizens of Barnstable! Gilroy leered at the memory. There they were, fighting to save the sanctity of the Lord's Day--while sailors went blind, and Gilroy got the clap. He didn't even have a good time getting it. The freight car had been too frigid to enjoy much of anything, especially when you were bare-assed. Later that same cold afternoon, Gilroy had gone to the nearest blind tiger and purchased a half-pint. As he sat in a dark corner, intent on staring down the golden scarab, a man in a blue uniform came up to him, rolled up Gilroy's sleeve, and stuck a needle in his arm.

"What's that?" Gilroy had asked.

"Heroin," said the stranger, who then walked away.

Too drunk to care, Gilroy had resumed his futile attempt to stare down his

nemesis.

"All right, Slayton, my final offer--nine dollars! Believe me, I won't be making a nickel off it!"

Gilroy watched the ensign chase the marine across the upper gundeck. When they were gone, he whistled a few bars from 'It's a Grand Old Flag'.

Then he returned below.

XI

March, 1908 California Current

It was the greatest surprise of Chandry's life--short of waking up a criminal in Victoria--when they came across an enormous bull sperm whale four hundred nautical miles west of Cape Mendocino. And there was William Pegg, boatsteersman of the larboard boat. The first mate's boat. The lead boat.

It was as much a surprise to William, who never thought the captain would let him keep his promotion if a real prospect came along. If the other boatsteerers had not hummed something close to mutiny the day they smoked the rats, it was likely Chandry would have indeed reversed his decision.

"Think you can handle 'er, boatsteersman?" Chandry leered as William raced to port. He added a broad wink to his first mate, officer of the larboard boat. If the new boatsteersman botched the strike, it would be his job to recoup the situation. To kill the whale himself. Chandry's wink was intended to confirm the joke. The humiliation inflicted upon the boy if and when he failed would be meaningless if they lost a good profit in the process.

"Boatsteersman!" Chandry clapped William on the shoulder. "What do you say? You'll make us rich, won't you?"

"Aye, sir."

"Aye!"

William had taken his promotion to heart. He'd cleaned the irons, sharpened all points and barbs, made certain the pin on the harpoon would toggle properly once the whale was struck, and tightened loose stitches on the becket. He checked the grenades, saw they were dry and primed, then measured the rope and gauged its clearance. He went over to the becket box and inspected its

contents: the 'drug'--a drag pole--a six-inch doweled plank fastened to a two-foot post; the boat spade; and the waifs. When the lookout spotted the short, telltale spout of the sperm whale, the larboard boat was as ready as any on the ship.

The boatsteerer's condition was another matter. William's heart swooped and churned as he leapt into the whaleboat. His arms felt weak. He had to pee, but there was no time for it. He wanted to pray, but by then the oar was in his hands.

Until they reached the whale, a boatsteerer was just another oarsman. It was the officer of the boat who maintained the steering oars and watched where they were going. After his first distant glimpse, William would not see his target until they were upon it.

He felt so weak... he was sure he was not pulling his share at the sweeps. His two harpoons were in the becket at his crotch, and the bomb gun was in a niche next to his seat--everything sharpened or primed. He only wished his heart could also be oiled and whetstoned.

Throughout the long chase, the *Lydia Bailey* lay directly in William's line of sight. The black shadow of Captain Chandry's head showed like a pustule above the poop railing.

Someone hit him in the leg.

"Breathe!" Lead Foot commanded.

No wonder he was ready to pass out! He was so tight in the chest he had to make himself conscious of his lungs and force them to work. But it was difficult now that reality was pressing in. This whale was not meant to be a gift from heaven, but a gratuity from hell. How he handled the next few moments would determine his future.

The first mate signaled and William stood, took a harpoon in hand, then turned. The sperm whale greeted him with an explosion of air from its spout-hole surprising William with the hotness of its breath. They were to leeward, close up, and the spout was moist and explicit. Rising only four feet, the atomized water fell forward and to the left, like a mist of snow drifting off a bush. It seemed to William to be punctuating the fact that it was alive.

Steadying his right foot on the peak, he hefted the iron. He was struck by a sudden sense of... knowledge. Until that moment, he had not realized he'd been born knowing what every other Nantucket boy knew before taking a breath: where the heart of a sperm whale was located. Raising the harpoon, he struck. Automatically, he slid the second iron from the becket and lanced it into the whale next to the first. Then he reached for the bomb gun.

A familiar hand restrained him.

"No," said Lead Foot. "You got him. Let him flurry." He glanced back at the first mate. "The *Lydia's* too far off. If we kill him too soon, he might sink."

The mate nodded agreement.

"You got him, William. He's spouting blood. Let him face the sun before he dies. We've got time."

William stared at the whale, stunned. Indeed, the rainbow mist from its spout-hole had turned red. With mere rods of iron, he'd slain a giant. The boat rocked violently as the whale thrashed in the water.

"Slack your lines," the first mate ordered.

More than anything else, those words planted the compliment for all to see. William had thrown his darts so hard the barbs had hooked deep within the animal. The head pins broke properly and the hafts lay down on the whale like bizarre leeches as the harpoons toggled. As William paid out the lines, the distance between the whale and the boat increased. The sperm whale began its peculiar death dance, known to whalers as the 'flurry.' It swam out as far as the rope allowed. Then, instead of taking them on a Nantucket sleigh ride, as a whale not mortally wounded would have done, the animal struck a circle nearly a quarter mile from them.

"They know," said Lead Foot, taking his pipe out from under his oilskin. "That's the damndest thing about this business. They *know*."

The rest of the whaleboats came up. The other boatsteerers withheld their plaudits. With reappraising glances, they realized William was one hell of a big bastard. And only a growing boy, at that.

The *Lydia Bailey* steamed towards them. In retrospect, the chase seemed quite brief. Yet the mother ship was miles away. William had lost all sense of time.

The whale circled. The larboard boat turned gently.

"There's the finish," said Lead Foot softly.

The whale had turned to face the sun.

It was a doleful, familiar and intensely dramatic scenario in the lore of the leviathans. So often as to be a fact, sperm whales faced the sun before they died.

But as the steamer drew close and they began to haul the whale in, the animal abruptly showed signs of life. William was toppled and hit the thwarts with a hard thud. Chandry's curses rained down from above.

Lead Foot dropped his pipe and rushed to the cleats to secure the lines. For an instant he seemed as callow as William. It was obvious a romantic notion important to him had been chopped from under his feet. More critical, his advice to let the whale flurry was butchered under a harsh light. "That whale was fooled, too," he murmured to William. "He thought he was dying."

William said nothing, but struggled painfully to his knees and helped secure the lines.

In the end, they were compelled to use the bomb gun. William was a little afraid of the gun. The loud report and the violent recoil were not as easy to brace for as the hard thrust of the irons. When the bomb exploded in the whale's vitals, he covered his eyes, fearful of fragments. A pungent stink filled the air as the whale lost control of its bowels. In its death throes it lobtailed, whipping its tremendous tail flukes down and soaking the men in the larboard boat with shit and blood-stained water.

The other boatsteerers unleashed laudatory songs for William. He was no superhuman, after all. Like the rest of them, he had to resort to bombing. This made him a fine fellow in their eyes and they reached across the gunnels to slap him on the back. Chagrined, William accepted their compliments as consolation.

The whaler drew alongside and a large chain was lowered. William looked

on as it was wrapped around the small of the tail. Loud metallic clanking pounded his ears as the chain was drawn through the forward hawse-pipes. It seemed like a dirge for both the whale and Lead Foot, who sat glowering like a man just kicked by his lover.

It was the larboard boat's privilege to be raised first, if practicable. Rowing to the *Lydia Bailey's* port side, the first mate called up for the falls to be lowered.

William was bracing an oar against the steamer's hull when the duff sauce came down. Otherwise, it might have dropped straight into his eyes. Lead Foot saved him from falling over the gunwale by grabbing the waist of his pants and pulling backwards. It was a near thing. Had he gone overboard, his head might have been crushed between the whaleboat and the iron-tough Australian greenheart that sheathed the *Lydia Bailey's* hull.

The liquid bomb from above was remarkably accurate. The other men in the boat caught only a few splatters. Pegg's hair became a sticky gumbo. His clothes reeked of foul sauce. His neck burned fiercely as the heated sauce ran under his slicker.

Here was another kind of baptism. The high priests of vindictiveness showed their chins overhead. The bucket from which the duff sauce had been emptied was waved in triumph.

"Down lad, down..." Lead Foot cautioned, making feeble attempts to hide his own mirth.

William's hands were now too slick with sauce to maneuver the davit hooks. Lead Foot made him sit, then assumed the boatsteerer's position and took hold of the grapples. Coordinating his efforts with the first mate, bow and stern were made secure and the boat was raised.

"Down lad, down...."

"Whew!" Chandry clowned as the boatmen jumped on deck. But there was no time to rub the sauce in Pegg's wounds of embarrassment. Tradition demanded the presence of the ship's captain when first cutting into a whale. The cutting stage had been lowered and the flensers were awaiting his arrival to start. Above them, the steam winch putt-putt-putted louder and louder as the strain on it increased. This was caused by the weight of the sperm whale against the five-

and-a-quarter-inch rope it lay on. The lines rose to large snatch blocks high over the shrouds in the foremast, then came back down to the winch. As the whale settled into the cradle, the steam engine driving the winch had a harder time keeping it from sinking. Soon, though, the weight would be turned to the whalers' advantage.

Chandry clambered down the Jacob's ladder to the cutting stage. The platform extended ten feet from the side of the ship and was connected by a twenty-two-foot long walking plank. The plank was wide enough for a man to work on without too much trouble, so long as he was sober--a state rarely observed in the skipper.

He took several ritualistic belts from his mug before stepping out upon the middle of the stage. Wobbling up and down the platform with a long-handled cutting spade over his shoulder, he looked for all the world like a rummy Father Time with his sickle.

Blessed with the knack for parading his mistrust, Chandry always ordered his flensers to perform tasks long since done. The second and third mates were the flensers that day, but out on the cutting stage they had no more status than common deckhands. Chandry sanctified the proceedings with few choleric shouts. The flensers punched a hole through the rubbery fin and linked it to the tackles overhead. The other end of the chain was attached to a windlass at the back of the flensing deck. Using a stevedore's hook to gouge handholds, the third mate lifted himself to the fin and struck it a few times, extending it so tightly it barely shuddered. He looked down at the captain, as if to say, "See that, you old fool?"

A useless, even harmful, waste of time. There was no telling how much unnecessary strain had been put on the tackles and masts over the years because of the captain's penchant for doing things twice--in all likelihood, because he'd forgot doing them the first time. Leaning back against the pole that was lashed to the iron rods supporting the platform, Chandry nodded sagely.

Pushing off from the post, he hefted his cutting spade and faced the whale and ship. "Ready above!" he slurred. The men on deck barely heard him over the steam winch and the roar of the boilers under the flensing deck, but they knew the routine. Taking up handspikes, those assigned to the job inserted them into the windlass and started to turn.

It was not their task to rotate the whale. The weight of the carcass opposed to the pull of the steam winch accomplished that as soon as the flensers cut in. Making their incisions at six-foot intervals, they separated the fin from the shoulder blade, using that portion as a lead, then rolled the blubber off the body. It was like peeling an apple, the whale's meat and musculature exposed as its fat was lifted by the men at the windlass like a banner of flesh.

William concentrated on maintaining his grip on the handspike he was pushing against. The duff sauce had begun to harden into a glossy shell. But where his hands met the spike, the friction melted the sauce and made things slippery. The men at the windlass with him plied him with complaints.

"You smell like a turd someone slipped on."

"Trade places with me, mate. I'll puke, one more minute next to this dead fish."

Seeing that William's presence was affecting work at the windlass, the first mate relieved him, drafting a hapless cook to take his place. Eyes downcast, the boy stood to the side, glazed and useless.

"What's this oakum boatsteerer about?" Captain Chandry stormed across the flensing deck. Smoke from the boilers and rendered blubber swam around him so he no longer looked like Father Time, but Satan himself.

He had not lasted long on the cutting stage. He never did. There was always an extra man at the cradle to take his place whenever the strain overtook him. Treating each whale like a new building, he broke the ground, then let the contractors take over. Once back aboard, he took three more sips from his mug and glanced about. He saw his newest boatsteerer idling next to the donkey engine.

At first, it seemed he was going to lay hold of the boy. One whiff warded him off. "Stay to looward, boy. You're a fat chip off a whale turd, you are."

Staring openly at Chandry, with his gray hair slicked back and his walrus-brush moustache soggy with booze, William was tempted to take a handspike to his bloated face. He sensed a cautionary aura at his elbow, but Lead Foot's silent warning only boosted his wrath. Philosophers! Old men! He was sick of them. They were all either drunk or resigned to incomprehensible speculations. Why

should they be listened to? Why should they be in charge?

"You're a bastard, Chandry," Pegg said. "You near killed me in the forecastle. And now... *this*." The martyr pose he stuck was marred by clenched fists.

The captain's eyes nearly popped with delight. The boy's previous restraint had perplexed and bored him. This was more like it. Cupping a hand over his ear, he leaned closer. "What's that ye say? You'll be hard of hearin' too, when you been boxed enough times."

"I said you're a--"

If he'd known the captain could move with any semblance of coordination, William would have dodged the blow. As it was, he'd barely time to blink before Chandry's huge fist caught him on the side of the head and sent him sprawling. Strong-jawed and stronger-willed, Pegg was up on his feet in an instant.

But the captain was down. His metal mug was rattling on the deck. His face twisted in confusion.

Lead Foot massaged his knuckles. "Well... there it is...."

"Yeah...." Chandry sat up and made a cutting motion across his throat. "There it is, Mr. Manahan."

Manahan? William glanced at the old man. Lead Foot had a real name? Hard to believe. It was like slapping a cheap label on the Sphinx.

A shout from starboard. Fearful something was awry with his precious catch, Chandry leapt up and started to run for the railing.

There was a loud explosion of jolted wood and the ship lurched violently to port. A huge fan of water blew in from the starboard beam. Every man was knocked off his feet. William just missed falling into one of the vat openings on the flensing deck. Through the hatch he heard screams as the men below were burned by super-heated blubber and he slammed into the starboard rail and held on for dear life. There were shouts as several men went overboard, then something dropped with a sickening "*whap!*" amidships. It was the lookout falling from the crow's nest. The drop must have broken every one of his bones.

His body rolled like a sack when the ship lurched again.

The movement stopped. Raising his head, Pegg saw Lead Foot clinging to the side of a hatch cover.

Everything pointed to a broadside collision, yet there was no other ship in sight. The deck was awash in salt water and whale blood.

Leaning over the starboard rail, they saw nearly half the sperm whale was missing. The section attached to the derrick had fallen and lay crosswise over the carcass, while the portion still attached to the whale stretched out ten feet or so into the water. A fleet of wood fragments told them the cutting stage had disintegrated.

"Where's Billings? Pitts?"

These were two of the flensers who'd been out on the platform. The purser pointed at some heads bobbing in the water. Billings, Pitts, and those who had tumbled overboard were swimming frantically towards the ship.

"What the hell was it?" Chandry shouted at them.

"Something's out here!" the second mate yelled.

Abruptly, the huge carcass began jumping, thrashing, and leapt half out of the cradle of the steam winch cables. The remains of the platform, the brackets that had connected the ship to the walking plank, boomed against the hull. The whale's internal organs looked as if they were boiling.

"There's something *inside* it!" William cried hoarsely.

They leaned out. Something was beginning to appear under the exposed ribs. The gluey, purplish mass seemed to be dissolving. Suddenly, in the thrash of blood and water, two black eyes appeared.

"Sweet Jesus!"

William was not the only one to jump away from the rail.

"Captain...."

"Yeah... I see...." Chandry was following the outstretched arm of one of the Portuguese. The head that was unveiled under the ribs was attached to something outside the whale's body. With a start, he noticed the huge brown outline at a right angle to the ship. The seamen in the water were no longer trying to get on board, but cutting waves as fast as they could to get away from the thing. Chandry took a stab at estimating its size, and failed. *Must be the aguardiente*, he thought secretly. He found himself blocking off stretches of ocean in his mind. What he was seeing could not be that big. Each time he did so, however, his eyes blurred and he had to readjust his perspective. Finally, he fixed in his mind the largest living creature he'd ever seen, a blue whale, and matched it against the outline.

Again, his gauge was inadequate. This monster was bigger than a blue... holy Mother. He turned to his first mate.

"What do you make of her?"

The mate's eyes were stark with disbelief. "It's a serpent...."

"I can see that, fool!"

To either side of the outline water splashed loudly. The beast backed out of the whale, ripping off a chunk of meat as it raised a flipper and initiated a massive turn around the ship.

Chandry stood back and nudged the clump that had been the lookout with his toe. "Ain't much left of him, is there? Damn thing near hulled us." Unsteadily, he marched aft, following the progression of the monster as it described a slow, lazy circle around the *Lydia Bailey*. "A serpent! We have a serpent! A kraken! A dragon! A hippogriff! A big fat eel! How many barrels are in her, you think?" Chandry asked, dragging the first mate with him. "How many you think, mate?"

A blue whale could yield upwards to two hundred and fifty barrels of oil. This creature must hold at least that much. Naturally, the way it ate through the carcass, it would have nothing in the way of baleen. This was a flat-out flesh eater, probably with long sharp teeth--ranks of them, if its mouth was like a shark's. But the oil would be enough, even if its long neck held not an ounce. At a stroke the cruise would be saved. Chandry would pass through Golden Gate with heavy holds and purses unclasped.

"How many barrels, mate? How many, you think?" He tripped over coils, fallen tackles, spar rings and his own feet as he circled the ship to keep the thing in sight.

"He's not going after it?" William asked pensively.

"Why not?" Lead Foot said, his eyes locked to the whale carcass. He was watching two new monsters, both smaller than the first yet still immense. They were nibbling the meat off the whale's ribs. One of them had a pair of faint olive streaks running back over its knobby brow. Lead Foot could not know he was looking at the young female Tu-nel, or that the markings on her head would vanish when she reached adulthood.

The mother returned to starboard and snapped at the young male, driving him away a short distance. She bit off another chunk of whale meat, then began orbiting the *Lydia Bailey* again.

"How many barrels...." Chandry's voice became hoarse with hope. He watched the young male shoot back to the sperm to resume feeding next to the young female. "I count three, mate. It'll take us half a week just to boil down the big one. Come up to the bow with me."

When he heard this William's heart squeezed tight. How did they know the beast had any oil in it, at least any of value? There was no sense to it. Chandry might as well be killing it for the sake of the difference. Newspapers would banner his name. The first man in modern times to slay a true sea serpent. Three, if his luck had changed drastically.

Few seamen felt squeamish about taking life, least of all whalers. The trawling fleets they sometimes passed dragged life from the sea by the ton, with no consideration that some of those netted fish might hold thoughts in their tiny brains. On the other hand, whalers never considered their prey stupid. Stories abounded of whale intelligence and cunning, as attested by a long roster of dead whalers. Yet the rights, the sperms, the rorquals, the narwhals, and the smaller pilots, walruses, sea lions and seals were mere tonnage to most of the men who hunted them. More formidable than tuna, but briny and alien. Some of them, like Lead Foot, dwelled on animal intelligence. But that did not stop him from earning his keep as a killer.

Pegg was vaguely dismayed by the greed in Lead Foot's eyes as he

watched Chandry and the first mate swivel the muzzle-loading harpoon cannon around. Didn't he see that for all the millions of unique things in the world, this was something far different? The serpents were not only unique. They were not of this realm.

The two starboard whaleboats were still afloat. Cautiously, they began fishing men out of the water. It was a frightful task. Every time the biggest serpent returned leeward the swimmers shouted their dismay as the boat officers timidly back-oared. They were pushed away even further whenever the serpent's trunk rode up. It glided so smoothly its back did not break the surface, but lifted a seamless hill of water that progressed with less effort than a fat man turning under a blanket.

They cheered when they saw the captain and first mate readying the cannon and redoubled their efforts to save the swimmers. Once the serpent was struck, its flurry might prove lethal to anyone unprotected in the water. One of the boats was bumped by the moving hill and nearly capsized.

"We'll need the foreganger," the first mate said.

"No time, mate," the captain patted him.

"One shot won't do it," the first insisted.

"It might. It will."

The foreganger was a series of irons attached by a sliding ring to the lead harpoon. Even if the first shot failed to mortally wound the serpent, the others would follow in quick succession and finish the job with a barrage of whale bombs.

Chandry was counting on the six feet of Swedish steel he and the first were lifting into the three-inch bore to do the job. The harpoon weighed over a hundred pounds, not including the foot-long conical bomb at its tip. The fuse of the bomb was cut to explode three seconds after impact. This would give the harpoon time to dig into the serpent's body and plant its four prongs at opposing forty-five-degree angles. Since the gun was charged with fourteen ounces of powder, a deep penetration was all but guaranteed. With the dart secure, the bomb would go off--and liquefy the serpent's heart.

The men in the waist drifted forward, shuffling uneasily past the lookout's body. They avoided looking into his open, staring eyes--as if they were afraid he might wink at them.

"Tie on the bells, lads," the captain chuckled. "We'll be sailin' home rich. Those swelled heads at Harvard'll pay enough just for the bones." Again, he patted the first mate gently on the shoulder. "Next time around, take a shot a few feet under its neck. My guess, that's where the bloody heart is."

"You got a way to make it lift its head, Captain?" the first mate said nervously. "Take a glom on that hide."

"Just steady... stay steady. It's coming up larboard. Don't even think about its head. Looks tougher than Ironsides. Dart the body. No animal born has a heart too tough for a whale bomb. All right... she's all yours, mate." Chandry hushed the crew, unnecessarily, and tiptoed backwards a few feet, like an acolyte making room for a priest.

The first mate checked out to starboard. The swimmers had been pulled from the sea and the whaleboats were retreating out of range. Hunkering over the gunsight, he tried to fix on the serpent as it turned in front of the *Lydia Bailey*, but it was so large he had to draw away some to get his reference. Every dozen yards or so the serpent raised its nostrils a few inches above the surface to breathe and he noted ripples where it exhaled. Almost imperceptibly, it clocked its neck gently back and forth as it sculled in front of the steamer. The first mate leaned down again and took aim.

Someone dug an elbow deeply into William's ribs as he looked on. Balling his fist, he whirled.

"*Breathe!*" Lead Foot commanded.

There was a loud report--then a high, rough whine as the five-inch thick Italian whale line shot out of the forefoot, chasing the dart.

A flat, slapping "*crack!*" signaled a strike precisely at the spot Chandry wanted. A minute trace of blood showed as the point scored the skin--then ricocheted high into the air, extending the full twenty-five yards of its range before the line went taut and the dart yanked up short. A second later the bomb that was to have wreaked havoc with the serpent's innards exploded harmlessly.

A sigh of incredulity rippled through the crew. The first mate leaned over the cannon a moment, thinking he'd missed a clean shot, but then he saw the others' expressions and knew he had been dead on.

"A *scratch!*" Chandry roared. Noting the bemused, frightened faces around him, he took out his flask and took a swig. "A tough nut, that's all. We'll find a way--"

A shudder ran through the *Lydia Bailey*.

"Lead Foot..." William began breathlessly.

Something long and dark rose above the bow rail. The first mate, back to the ocean, did not see the creature as it came down on him. His body disappeared into the mouth down to his legs and the jaws snapped shut. There was a loud crack as one of the man's thigh bones was caught precisely and broken. Blood spilled across the deck. They heard a muffled scream. As the great neck arched upwards, the muscles of the first mate's broken limb were severed and the leg thudded on the planking.

The beast dropped under the rail. Man and monster were gone.

It took the crew several moments to break free of their paralysis. Half of them dashed for the rear of the ship and William went sprawling. He did not flinch when he discovered he'd fallen over the dead lookout, but jumped and ran some more.

Until he and the others were hit by the ludicrousness of their reaction. The boy was amazed how sheer terror could make them forget they were on a ship in the middle of the Pacific. If they wanted to keep running, they'd have to run in circles.

Chandry was worrying a key ring from under his belt. Finding the key he wanted, he rushed to the gun locker. William realized he was crying. He stepped close to see the tears more clearly.

"Bastard fish... kill *my* first!" He took out an armful of guns and began handing them to the men nearest him. The boy stared at the rifle thrust into his hands. The metal was rusty. The barrel wobbled in the grip. Pegg had no doubt it would blow up in his face if he fired it.

There was a rattling of gunbolts and a volley of curses as frightened hands fumbled bullets into rifle chambers. Loose ammunition bobbed and weaved across the deck like mice trying to jump ship.

Something thumped the hull low down.

"Just the cutting stage," Chandry hissed. "It's hitting the keel."

"Look!"

They raised their eyes. The clouds were pinwheeling around the mainmast. Tentatively, Lead Foot approached the starboard rail and studied the motion of the water to leeward. Then he scurried back to the knot of armed men.

"It's pushing us at the stern."

For a few minutes they remained still as death as the *Lydia Bailey* moved smoothly in a circle. One of the deckhands noticed the steam winch racing. It was building up to an explosion now that it had no weight on it. He ran to it and cut the power.

"It's stopped."

"I turned it off."

"No... the turning."

Why didn't they build up steam and escape? William wondered. Was Chandry so much more afraid of the ship's owners than of this beast? The evidence was mounting that the whalers were no longer the hunters, but Chandry clung to his prayer. They would kill this thing and meet the world with gold-lined pockets.

With a brief, whispering swish of water, a giant brow rose above the rail as high as the bowsprit, then eased down until the head was even with the weather deck. There was a harsh thump as the serpent braced its chest against the side of the ship, then it stiffly angled its head downward... and stared at them.

The cluster of terrified humans cringed amidships. Some whimpered. A few sat hard on the deck and either buried their heads in their hands or looked up

from their low position--as if some perverse instinct in them needed to make the impossibly big impossibly bigger.

The serpent emitted a low, grumbling belch, then a moist sucking sound.

And then the beast roared.

It was a ripping of air like none other. The seamen nearly drowned in the noise. It was a cliff falling, an avalanche on the deep decibel of hell--the hatred and loathing and struggling and indifference of all time.

The men could not know, of course, that the creature was throwing back at Man all of man's noise, all the rackety screws, whining steam, hissing tubes, shrill whistles, clanking chains, splashing anchors and gushing refuse. It had been hard for the Tu-nel, approaching the clamorous Lydia Bailey. The mother could feel the noise as a bad taste. But the smell of whale blood had been irresistible.

The noise of water-going humankind, so concisely represented by Captain Chandry's ship, had made it enormously difficult for the Tu-nel to echo-locate whale packs and other prey. They were going hungry. It had been half a year since their last substantial feast.

Abruptly, the roaring stopped. Some of the men wept. But no one could hear them. Their ears were still ringing.

They barely heard Chandry when he began to scream. It was not a scream of fear, but of protest and hate--a malevolent power train directed in the face of the beast, which had resumed staring at them. He waved and blustered, heaved his chest forward and verbally fucked the beast to the ends of the earth. Then he raised his rifle and took aim at one of the gleaming, billiard-black eyes.

The creature shifted. Only a bit, but enough to send a shudder through the ship and throw the captain's aim. William felt a concussive punch on his deadened eardrums. Gunsmoke billowed around the beast's head. To William, it seemed it was trying to push its way into a box of cotton.

The dark head burst through the smoke. Apparently, the creature was not

capable of flexing its neck to any great degree, but Chandry was in no shape to run or dodge. As he stumbled backwards, the huge teeth caught him at ear level. He shrieked as they clamped down and pierced his braincase--then went limp abruptly. He was dragged over the rail and out of sight.

"Ah!"

Several men rushed to the side and fired down as the serpent dove under the keel. Then they ran to the rail overlooking the cutting stage and shot at the two smaller beasts. Once or twice the creatures flinched as the bullets hit them. Otherwise, they continued feeding on the whale carcass. The one with green stripes gnawed on one of the tail flukes. It almost looked cute, like a sea otter worrying at a clam.

When the futility of what they were doing hit them, the crewmen drifted back from the rail in a mild stupor. One of them voiced what had to be voiced:

"He's gone, now. Let's steam-up and get the hell out of here."

They glanced at each other. Was escape feasible? The deadly gleam had left Lead Foot's eyes. The Winchester he held looked like a toy in his hands. Yet when the purser sobbingly suggested they make a run for it, the old man lifted his gun defiantly.

"Run like whipped dogs? We're not helpless. We can kill these things, if we use the foreganger." He paced the deck. With his faint cetacean cosmetic, he looked like a sweaty Indian. The smell of whale shit clung to him, as it did to William. Combined with the odor of fear, it was the most horrible scent William had ever encountered. He wanted to cover his face to block out sight, sound and stench, but the sight of a latent admiral bursting like a ripe pod from Lead Foot was too stunning to miss. The gray hair that had seemed fetchingly sad in the forecabin now stood like the cloud over Moses.

Studying the other men's faces, it dawned on him how another kind of terror was locking them in place. Chandry was far out of reach of his earthly creditors now, but what would happen when the crew sailed into San Francisco without a captain or a first mate? The maritime board would laugh their story of a deadly encounter with a serpent out of court and onto the gallows.

Only when they heard the screams were they reminded....

The whaleboats!

The two crowded boats had maintained a prudent distance between themselves and the *Lydia Bailey* after observing the first mate's ineffectual harpoon shot. They were too far away to witness the fates of Chandry and the First. As far as they knew, the captain was busy planning another attack.

The creature came up under the first starboard boat like a hell-besotted demon. The boat tipped over and the creature scooped the men into its jaws as if they were scum on a pond. In the second boat the men listened to the horrible cries of their mates... and wondered at their own fate. There was no way they could outrace the swift monster if it turned on them, too, so they prepared for combat.

Silence came over the swells around the wreck of the first boat. The monster turned casually, confidently towards the second, its neck stretched high over the ocean. The men on the *Lydia Bailey* watched breathlessly as the fight began.

In addition to harpoons and harpoon bombs, each boat was equipped with a rifle and a dozen or so grenades, used in finishing off wounded whales. All the rifle ammunition was used when the bowman fired shot after futile shot into the beast as it attacked the first boat. Handing out grenades all around, the officer of the boat had the men count off two volleys. Then he waited until the creature was but a dozen yards away.

On command, half the bombs were thrown.

Two of them turned out to be squibs. The other four went off around the creature's neck.

Stopping it cold.

It paddled slowly in place, looking to the left and the right, as if wondering where the explosions had come from. This was a sitting target the whalers could not resist. They lobbed their remaining grenades. All six exploded at the neck. Then the boatsteerer and officer of the boat took up their explosive-tipped harpoons and stood ready.

The creature swooped to the right and splashed its flippers in a dance of

confusion. Before the harpoonists could take advantage of its exposed flank, it sounded.

Silence fell on them like sudden darkness. They'd seen the way the creature stove in the first boat, coming from beneath. They were helpless against that kind of attack.

"Row!" the officer yelled.

They would present a moving target. The men rowed madly, with the officer the maddest of the lot as he twisted the steering oars this way and that to create an eccentric path.

But the sound of the oars and the creaking oarlocks made it easier for the creature to locate them.

The men on the mother ship watched in anguish as the creature lifted the whaleboat high. A harpoon bomb went off as the detonator hit the gunwale and many of the screams the watchers heard came from seamen wounded by splinters.

The screaming ended quickly.

"Did you see that!" Lead Foot shouted with unexpected exultation. Belying his name, he beat everyone to the armory. With William's help, he hauled out one of the grenade cases and broke it open. Bombs were passed out.

Arms laden, they ran to the starboard rail. William felt more comfortable with the grenades. While no safer than a rusty rifle, he could at least pitch them overboard if anything went wrong.

The two smaller creatures had reduced the dead whale to a skeleton and now they were gnawing on it. The snapping bones sounded like ice breaking.

Bombs cascaded down the side of the *Lydia Bailey*, raising violent plumes as they exploded on and around the beasts. Wood and bone splinters flew up, tagging a few of the sailors through the weather rail. Rolling and squirming amid the explosions, the animals churned the water into froth.

They pulled away from the ship in a burst of speed that astonished the

crew. In mere seconds their long brown necks popped out of the water a hundred yards away. The creatures seemed perplexed as they stared back at the ship.

They also appeared unhurt.

"At least we chased them off," William said, his voice quaking like a stay line in a storm.

When the purser heard the boy's words he lifted his head. Each time a bomb had gone off he'd shouted hysterically from the niche he'd made for himself next to the deck house. Even as he battled to stay on his feet, William was stung by sympathy for the small man who had stolen his books. The theft seemed such a pitifully minor transgression that he could no longer understand his thirst for revenge.

Eyes red, but with a hopeful expression, the purser began pulling himself to his feet. "They're gone? You chased them--"

Wham!

The crew was knocked flat when something--

Wham!

Knocked down again as they tried to rise.

Lead Foot grasped the weather rail. He caught a glimpse of the largest of the creatures on the starboard beam.

"It's trying to roll us!"

Gear, tackle and men slammed into the main cabin and deck house as the ship leaned wildly to port, then fell forward as it abruptly righted itself. The process was repeated several times. The purser screeched. William reached out for him, but the man rolled out of sight. The *Lydia Bailey* lurched back to starboard and the boy was knocked dizzy when his head struck a loose barrel.

When his vision cleared, he was astonished to find Lead Foot grinning at him. The old man's head was bloody--not whale blood, but his own. It contrasted wickedly with the grin on his face. "It *can't* swamp us! We're fitted with an

accumulator!"

His words pierced William's despair. The *Lydia Bailey* was one of the few wooden steamships outfitted with the series of powerful volute springs collectively known as an accumulator. Running along the ship's keelson from the aft stokehold to the forward collision bulkhead, the system was necessary on all modern steel-hulled whalers. When a whale was winched in on the cutting stage, there was a risk of foundering in the steep Arctic swells and accumulators prevented steamers from rolling over onto their smokestacks. The owners of the *Lydia Bailey*, anticipating their prayers for a lucrative voyage would be answered, had a similar series of springs installed while the ship was being overhauled in New York.

The accumulator! The ship would lean only so far before the volute springs pushed back. The result was that the monster could only shove the *Lydia Bailey* flush on the beam. The harsh backlash was the accumulator's abrupt assertion that the ship could not be tipped over.

Lead Foot clapped wildly. "Ol' *Lydia's* no pushover, that's a fact!"

Their relief turned to horror when a dreadfully burned head appeared at the top of the aft companionway. One of the stokers. The boiler grate must have popped open, burying the man in a small mountain of searing coal. They had not heard his screams over the pounding and it seemed a miracle that he had lived this long. The ship rocked again and the stoker disappeared. He did not come up again.

Lead Foot gripped the handle of the lazaret door and wiped his chin, the way he did after drinking rum. The sight of the burned man woke him to the fact that the monster might not be able to capsize them, but it could certainly batter the whaler into a sieve.

"Why does it keep coming at us?" William shouted.

"Maybe she's a mother. Maybe we bombed her sprats."

Wham!

"It'll break its head open if it keeps up," the boy reasoned hopefully.

"Don't bet your cockles on it." Lead Foot twisted his head, desperate thoughts in his eyes. The ship was too unstable to build up steam. Besides, the tubes were undoubtedly cracked after the severe pounding. Any high pressure run through them would result in an explosion.

Set the sails? Not feasible, so long as the creature kept hammering at them. The sudden tilts and jars made going aloft riskier than hauling sheets in a full-blown gale.

Fight back? The grenades did no more than annoy them.

The harpoon cannon, then. Increasing the charge might result in the gun blowing up in someone's face. But it might also give a harpoon punch enough to penetrate the damn hides of the brutes. They could multiply the odds in their favor by attaching a foreganger.

"Pegg! *Breathe!* Come with me!"

Grasping rails, lines and the few things still lashed down, he followed Lead Foot forward.

"We'll blow him to hell, Pegg. We'll take the steam saw and filet that big bastard and when we cut the vent we'll find ol' Chandry standing up."

Their wet hands slipped over the equipment in the harpoon chest. It seemed incredible the monster had not killed itself pounding the stout hull, but it was still hitting strong and the violent movements made it nearly impossible to perform the delicate task of inserting the harpoon charges. Once he'd managed to screw them in tight and set the prongs, Lead Foot adjusted the steel rings that comprised the foreganger.

"Lead Foot...."

"I'm getting it, I'm getting it...."

"Up behind the capstan...."

Lead Foot looked up for an instant. One of the smaller creatures was peering through the rail at them. Its attention was captured by an interesting odor and it sniffed up and down the weather rail a few moments--after which it

returned to the bow.

"We've got this to do," said Lead Foot, bending over the chest. "We lance the big one, the other two won't matter."

Half walking and half crawling across the foredeck, they dragged the harpoons along as carefully as possible. Lead Foot reached up and swung the muzzle of the cannon inboard. As the boy looked on worriedly, he slammed two of the pre-made fourteen-ounce charges down the barrel.

Bracketing the gun between them, they lifted the first harpoon and fitted it into the muzzle. Then, paying out the foreganger line slowly to avoid kinks, they loaded the four attached harpoons into the exchange box next to the gun. The box was tilted, open at one end, providing a launch ramp.

"It's not going to work, Lead Foot," William gasped. "Even with the extra charge... it's too far away."

The old man gave him a hard look. "I know."

"What?" William shouted over the din as the creature gave the ship a particularly hard punch. The two had to grab the rail hard to keep from being flung over the martingale.

"There's only one way, William. We have to get the beastie up to the cannon."

"How?"

"I'm going to draw her to you, boy. You'll have to fire the cannon. Give me a hand..." They shoved the exchange box to the other side of the cannon, pointing aft. "I'll get that thing to come up the starboard beam--I think I can--and when you get a clear shot, do it!"

"What are you going to do?"

"I'll tag it with a few bombs. When it comes after me--" He slapped his hands together as he pushed off the rail and struggled aft, dodging the chaos multiplying on the deck.

Taking hold of the hand-grips, William stared at the cannon in his grasp. The trigger mechanism was similar to a musket's and Lead Foot had primed the cap before leaving. The big difference, outside of its greater size and charge, was that the gunner had to lean over the breech in order to peer through the sights. There was a good chance the double charge would explode the barrel--and take William's head in the process.

A plume of seawater fell off to starboard. Lead Foot was dropping grenades over the side.

The hammering at the hull ceased. The huge head that had roared years off their lives lifted majestically over Lead Foot--who did not back off, but chucked a grenade right in its face.

A bright flash and a steel-like clap. The next thing William knew, Lead Foot was hobbling out of the smoke. Blood gushed from his leg.

"Pegg!" he cried. "Pegg! *Breathe!* "

"Behind you!"

A dark shadow burst through the grenade smoke. The *Lydia Bailey* shuddered as the creature pressed the hull in its pursuit.

"Get out of the way!"

"Fire, Pegg!"

"Lead Foot!" William sobbed.

"Breathe, Pegg! Shoot!"

William pulled the trigger the instant the giant jaws came down on his friend.

The harpoon cannon tore out at the base, exploding into a dozen deadly chunks that shrieked through the wheelhouse. William was hit by a concussive fist that nearly knocked him off the bowsprit. Flung painfully against the masthead, he fell to the deck. From there, he gained a kaleidoscopic impression of what followed.

The creature was raising its head with its latest victim when the lead harpoon caught its massive brow. There was no penetration. The hard impact detonated the whale bomb prematurely. Recoiling violently, the creature hit the main cabin with its head, caving it in. In sequence, the armed harpoons on the foreganger glanced off its thick neck. Three of them landed among the men abovedecks, the fourth breaking through the deckhouse porthole. William saw the flash of the bomb inside, but could not hear the blast. Neither could he hear the other explosions nor the screams of the wounded men.

Above the smoke and chaos the huge beast rose higher and higher. The ship lurched wildly.

It was climbing on board!

Ignoring his pain, William leapt to his feet--only to fall hard and roll into the wheelhouse as the ship lifted at the bow. "Lead Foot!" he cried, hauling himself up by the rail bolted to the wheelhouse. Steadying himself on the angle between the deck and the cabin, he rounded the wall.

The purser was working frantically at one of the whaleboat davits.

"You'll tip it over!" William shouted. Struggling forward, he grasped the weather rail and worked over to the whaleboat platform. "You'll tip it over!" The noise of the bombs and the din of the beast had deafened them both. William thought if he repeated himself enough times, the purser would finally hear him.

The ship jumped like a derailed car and William and the purser fell against the whaleboat. Regaining his feet, the purser again set himself against the lashing.

"Both sides at once!"

The purser looked as though he was about to strike William, but he was getting nowhere with the falls. Reluctantly, he accepted the boy's help.

"We'll work them loose, then go back for the wounded. Once we get them in--" And then he caught a glimpse inside the boat. It was loaded with a breaker and several lengths of duff dough.

"You were loading the boat the whole time! You were going alone!"

The purser mouthed some words, then hand-signaled for William to loosen his end. It took only seconds. Had the purser known anything about gravity davits, he would have been long gone.

"You bastard! Lead Foot would've--"

The stern dipped. Whirling, William saw the remains of the deckhouse covered by a tremendous flipper. The creature was only half on board, yet with its chest out of the water its neck rose as high as the mizzen mast. Legs stuck like toothpicks from its mouth.

Glancing back, he saw many of the crew had rolled against the taffrail in a terrible, wounded mass. There had to be a way to get back and save them--to at least bring the whaleboat around so they'd have a chance to jump in.

There was a shocking uplift as the beast slipped off the ship with a tremendous splash. Keeping his grip on the boatfall, William just managed to stay in place.

The purser was not so lucky. Catapulted over the larboard rail he fell precisely into the mouth of the creature that had watched William and Lead Foot load the harpoon cannon. Swishing up and down the port beam, it had been observing the frantic goings-on of the odd two-legged creatures. Its jaws seemed agape in curiosity and fascination, not voraciousness. When it heard the purser shout, it darted aft to investigate--and abruptly found a man in its mouth.

It was taken completely by surprise. Before it could contract its throat muscles, the hapless purser was halfway down. The monster rolled its neck, thrashed and sputtered wildly, then vanished below the bulwarks.

The ship warped down like dropped lead. Falling, William's face struck the gunwale. He felt as if his skull had turned to mush, yet he did not lose consciousness. Instead, a red fog descended before his eyes. Red water rushed up. The largest monster, luridly red, came up full-body upon the *Lydia Bailey*. It worked its flippers over the ruined main cabin and deckhouse, its massive chest heaving like a building in an earthquake. Its eyes were incarnadine, like the sky.

The whaleboat, loosened from the cables, skittered into the water, the ropes spinning off like red pythons. Stumbling over the holding blocks, William dropped into the boat even as water crashed into the whaling ship's forecastle.

The red ocean swelled up. The *Lydia Bailey* was going under. If he didn't pay out some distance, the whaleboat would be sucked under with her.

Whaleboats were not made to be rowed by a lone man, but William's thoughts were not clear enough to recognize this as an obstacle. He clamped two oars into a pair of oarlocks. Straddling the centerboard, feet propped against the thwarts, he raised the large oars and rowed with all his might. By the time salt water hit the *Lydia Bailey's* boilers, he was well away.

His hearing had recovered enough to detect the terrific explosion belowdecks. Looking up, he discovered the world had regained its normal color. But the thing on top of the *Lydia Bailey* destroyed all sense of reality. Rising like God's own pylon, it literally shoved the whaler underwater. When the second boiler blew, the coal hatch flew up like a rocket and bounced off the creature's head. Loose ratlines coiled around it like a hoary wig.

A hump of water approached the whaleboat. Shipping the oars, William slipped down against a bench and closed his eyes.

There was an ever-so-faint swish, then a bump at the gunwale. A strange tweaky sound came close, then receded--came close again, receded again. Slowly, William opened his eyes.

He thought it was one of the smaller creatures, but at such close proximity it was hard to tell. At three yards away, it was stupendous.

The portal of Hell--only three yards away.

The huge, black, billiard-ball eyes stared at him.

Three yards away.

Yet it seemed disinclined to come closer.

William heard a deep inrush of air and his sticky shirt tugged up a little as if being pulled off. The creature was sniffing him.

It drew back a little, then came forward again. Its jaw unhinged just enough for the boy to glimpse its huge teeth. An odd, fecal stink emerged from lungs that were underwater. William cowered against the far side of the boat, his

knees drawn up to his chest.

Yet the beast stopped once more, seemingly unable to come closer. It sniffed, wobbled its head stiffly, pulled back.

It hit William like a blow from an angel: the duff sauce! It couldn't stand the smell of the duff sauce!

Tossing its long neck in revulsion and frustration, the creature announced its annoyance with a wide yawn.

From the side of its mouth the purser gazed out at William. The boy's laugh became a scream.

The purser's body--the half that was left--was impaled on the serpent's lower jaw, his head jammed neatly between two teeth, chin down, the beard touching black gums. One of the purser's hands was up against his head, palm out. A thin line of human entrails wormed in and out of the creature's rear teeth. What was left of the purser seemed to be marveling at what was gone. His face was covered with viscous fluid from the creature's throat. Before being coughed up and chewed, he had been thoroughly coated. The gleam made it seem he was crying. Or perhaps the tears were real. William met his sweet gape of amazement with scream after scream.

The purser blinked.

Then the creature slipped away.

In the distance, the largest creature swooped and dipped gracefully as a swan through the floating debris as it scooped up floundering seamen. William did not have to watch long to realize he was the last crewman alive.

In turn, the other two creatures closed on the lonely whaleboat. The one with green stripes took one whiff at the boy and flashed the water so hard the boat nearly capsized.

When the largest of the three sculled up, William could see clearly the shallow furrow his harpoon had made. It came so close William could smell its seal-like odor, oily and cold. There were odd patches on the skin similar to the discolorations around hair follicles on some whales.

The boy was so numbed by the approach and reapproach of death that a certain objectivity set in. As the largest of the creatures sniffed one final time, then turned away, William vaguely thought:

Well... I'm still alive....

And I'm hungry.

XII

April - May, 1908 — 37°49'N, 122°27'W

From the Deck Log of the USS Florida:

Mess Att. S. Thuesen, Oiler C. Waak, 1/c Fireman Newman, C. Yeo Maxwell, Cabin Cook Egan, 2/c Firemen Forrester, Haassengier, Lowman, 1/c Mach. Ohst, 2/c QM Risenberger, Lds Roberts (English), O.S. Ridley, W. O. Cook Smith etc (see attached for complete list) declared deserters; Mast gave Ship's cook 1/c 2 weeks restriction for drunkenness; tours conducted for citizens of S.F.; Lieut. Brian H. Coverlick joined as watch officer; Mast warned 3 seamen for being out of uniform; Ship Surg. lectured on perils of drunkenness and lewd women.

San Francisco had good millionaires and bad millionaires. The agreed rule of thumb was that the good millionaires were always out of power and the bad millionaires were always in. This held true even after good millionaires won an election.

For Captain Oates' money, the bad millionaires weren't such a bad lot. There was no social snobbery on display that evening, at least. Although the lobbies of the Fairmont blazed with unimaginable wealth, the rich received the sailors of the Fleet and their fellow grafters with equal gusto. Nor had fame made any of them shy. The recent spate of magazine articles exposing the corruption of His Lord Mayor E.E. Schmitz had not prevented him from joining the party. There he was now in the main lobby, puffing on his famous bassoon.

And the women? Sort of elegant and refined, sort of strange and lovely, and most of them sort of willing to listen to an old geezer fart away about the only things he knew about: oceans and ships.

The administration might be rotten to the core, but it certainly knew how to throw a bash.

The skipper of the *Florida* had lost count of all the fetes and balls he'd attended between Virginia and California. Since social drinking was *de rigueur* during this world cruise (among the officers, at least), Oates had also lost track of all the potted plants he had watered with gin while his hosts' backs were turned. Not that he was adverse to a good belt now and then, but he'd seen too many captains carted back on board their ships after dark, dead drunk.

This was a treat, though. For one thing, everybody spoke English. Well, almost everyone. Behind the tray that appeared in front of him was an Oriental face. Sighing, Oates chose a glass.

The woman holding his arm gave it a firm squeeze. Looking down into her lovely azure eyes, Oates wondered what exactly was on the young lady's mind. *Have to watch out for the innocent-looking ones*, he cautioned himself. *They're the worst of a tricky lot--and I should know*. But as the woman beamed her admiration, the captain felt his old bones shake with her flattery.

"What's that?"

"You said you were going to tell me how you searched for Atlantis."

"Oh... yes. It was a long time ago, you know."

"But I find it fascinating!"

Oates felt a stirring in his loins. Good Lord! When was the last time *that* had happened?

"I was with the *Gettysburg*. The Secretary had sent us to gather data for Sailing Directions for the Mediterranean. We were to test the new Thompson sounding machine. At the last moment, President Grant added the Atlantis mission."

"President *Grant*?" the young lady said, a bit stunned. The true dimension of his age had finally struck home.

"We had Plato for our guide. The pertinent quote goes something like:

'Beyond the Strait where you place the Pillars of Hercules there was an island larger than Asia and Libya combined. In one fatal day and night there came earthquakes and inundations which engulfed its mighty people.' Not much to go on, I'll admit. Still, after we left Horta in the Azores, we started to take radial soundings one hundred and thirty miles off the Iberian Peninsula."

"And did you find Atlantis?"

"Hard to say. We dredged up rounded pebbles. Only weather and surf could account for that kind of wear. We were fairly certain that at one time they had been near the--"

"Halloa, Oates!"

Oates was appalled when Greenlief Merriman of the *Missouri* staggered up to them. "What kind of galley yarns you feeding this lovely creature?"

Laughing, he slapped Oates on the back. Since Oates was in the process of lifting a cigarette to his lips, a face-full of sparks was the result. Merriman was one of the reasons Oates moderated his drinking. There had been a scandal in Rio when the captain of the *Missouri* failed to control his drunken sailors. Rumor said it was because Merriman had been drunk himself.

"Galley yarns?" the woman inquired.

"Scuttlebutt," said Merriman, wiping the liquor perspiration from his brow. "Rumors... falsehoods... *lies*...."

"I was just telling Miss Foglesong here about my cruise on the *Gettysburg*."

"*The Gettysburg*? Just how old are you, Oates?"

"I think you need some air, Captain. Let me get someone to assist you." Oates signaled to a pair of midshipmen standing against the far wall. They were so busy ignoring each other that they failed to see him.

"Are those 'middies'?" Miss Foglesong asked.

"Yes, but don't ever call them that to their face."

"Don't bother about me," said Merriman. "Next time the Fleet stands out, I won't be with it. Evans fired me."

"*Fired* you?"

"That's how the Assistant Secretary put it. 'Fired.' Like I was a plant foreman."

"If that's so, why are you still in uniform?"

"Oh...." Merriman turned awkwardly to survey the crowd. There were innumerable notaries, dignitaries, politicians in the social stew. The crystal chandeliers seemed to rain diamonds upon them. Little knots of people formed, broke apart, and reformed further down, like eddies in a channel. Most of the attention fell on the rear admirals in attendance, the guests of honor. Their peaked hats sailed over the assembly like fairweather brigantines in a storm. Near them were their captains, less resplendent, yet impressive enough with their tasseled swords and scabbards. If there was a touch of pirate about them, that was only appropriate in this lair of robber barons. A few privileged junior officers slipped through the assemblage, looking a little plain in their liberty blues.

"I guess I just wanted to see a bit more salad before heading back east," Merriman said dolefully. He again turned to Oates. "It's that Rio thing, you know. It could have been any of us. Sailors will splice the mainbrace. That riot in the barrio--it was the dagoes that started it."

"Perhaps, but your own beach patrol got drunk and joined them. It doesn't matter now. You don't belong here, *Mr.* Merriman. Damn it, man, how can you be so stupid? If the Mayor had known about you when you came in, he'd have deep-sixed you at the door. And how would that have looked?"

"You're high and mighty all of a sudden, Oates. Why don't you take up permanent residence in the Observation Ward? You've spent enough time there."

Angrily, Oates again gestured to the two midshipmen. One of them was looking towards the front of the room, while the other concentrated on the back. Since Oates was in the center, they failed to spot his signal. At least he was able to avoid further broadsides with the ex-captain. Merriman slipped away without another word.

"Miss Foglesong, I must apologize. That man--"

"Please, Captain. I thought you handled that awfully well." Her hands moved further up his arm. A wondrous thrill shot through him. Who would have guessed the human armpit was so... sensual?

Sailor's luck!

There was a commotion near the main entrance. Rear Admiral Evans had arrived.

He was not the same man who had shaken hands with President Roosevelt in Hampton Roads. He was rolled into the room in a wheelchair. Rheumatic gout had finally got the better of him. He'd already absented himself from the Fleet once for medical reasons after their departure from Mexico.

For awhile it seemed things would break his way. With minor exceptions, the cruise around South America had been a rousing diplomatic and technical success. Casualties had been limited to a mere two hundred or so, with only eight fatalities. Out of a combined fleet strength of fourteen thousand men, that in itself was an extraordinary achievement. Of course, insanity among the black gangs had reached epidemic proportions. Yellow fever and diphtheria had broken out on the *Nebraska*, forcing the ship into quarantine. But occurrences such as these were to be expected on so long a voyage.

Yet the wear of the journey was nothing next to the attrition of roasts and toasts. Port of Spain, Rio de Janeiro, Buenos Aires, Valparaiso, Callao. For every city there were a hundred parties, for every party two hundred toasts, and for every toast a plentitude of sailors who woke up not knowing where they were. Elderly officers dropped like beribboned flies, since they were bound by diplomacy to do most of the bibulating.

On May 6, a flotilla of rakishly-stacked destroyers joined the Grand Atlantic Fleet off the Farallones. As they passed Mile Rock Lighthouse, its foghorn wailing deeply in welcome and warning, torpedo boats swarmed up in greeting. As they sailed through Golden Gate, the eight cruisers of the Pacific Squadron emerged from Raccoon Straits. By the time they made their turn between San Francisco and Oakland, forty-three warships were gathered, the *Connecticut* leading the lot. Sheets of humanity covered the hills overlooking the bay. On Goat Island, it seemed one need only shove hard to send thousands

tumbling into the water. In Golden State Park and on Telegraph Hill people wept and cheered. Ladyfingers popped and tin cans erupted. The gun salutes of the battleships were met by roars from the citizenry.

Evans was able to witness all the fuss only because he'd spent a month recuperating on land before rejoining the Fleet off California. But it was general knowledge amongst the upper echelon that his sabbatical had been inadequate. The only cure for Evans was retirement.

Oates waited for the initial wave of admirers to abate, then turned to Miss Foglesong. "I have to speak with the rear admiral for a few minutes."

The young lady's eyes widened with renewed admiration.

"You'll wait for me here, won't you? I shouldn't be long."

"Of course I'll wait, you silly dear."

"Is that a promise? If you want, I can meet you on the portico."

"Shall I sign a pledge?"

It had been years since Oates had sauntered. Even at Thursday's parade, amidst fifteen thousand sailors, marines and soldiers, he had loped along like an overburdened drafthorse. He sauntered now, though, across the wide, gleaming parquet floor, until he stood proudly at attention before Evans.

"Ah... Oates...."

"I received your message, sir."

"Good." Evans ordered the Negro seaman at the helm of his wheelchair to back him against the wall, then dismissed him. He spoke so that only Oates could hear him.

"Have your men learned to clear the deck during firing practice yet?"

Oates blushed. The admiral was referring to an incident in Magdalena Bay--Man of War Cove, the home of the Pacific Firing Range. The Mexicans did not exactly appreciate having a United States naval base on their soil, especially

one that specialized in tossing high explosives this way and that over the peninsula, but there wasn't a whole lot they could do about it.

The *Florida* had been in squadron formation, coming up on their target station, when a crewman spotted a tompon loose on the foredeck and ran out to retrieve it. The firing sequence had already started, so he lay down instead, thinking he would be safe. When the twelve-inchers went off, the concussion snapped his neck, killing him instantly.

"An unfortunate accident," Oates said, thinking those were probably the lamest words he'd ever spoken in his life.

Evans gave him a long look, then nodded. "Very well. I have some good news for you. About this Singleton fellow you have on board. Unpatriotic to the core, wouldn't you say?"

"He hasn't had much good to say about the Fleet."

"I'm having him off. I've already spoken with his publishers. We've had too many of these reporters stepping on our toes. Doesn't do anyone any good and it's damn un-American. We got that damn Reuterdahl out of the Fleet--and about time, too. Did you know Congress is going to investigate him?" Evans paused gloomily. Yes, Congress was going after the muckraker's hide. But Reuterdahl was now demanding that certain letters--composed by none other than Rear Admiral Evans himself--be introduced in his defense. In those letters the admiral lambasted his own battleships, pointing out every major flaw in their design.

"Has Singleton been told yet, sir?" Oates asked, breaking into his funk. "I saw him around here about an hour ago and he seemed chipper enough."

"I don't know. If not, he'll find out soon." Evans caught Oates' expression and grinned. "I knew that would please you."

"I'm not dismayed."

"There are a lot of... well, retirements coming up. Lot of promotions, too. Someone with your experience and skill could certainly look forward to a star. But let's face it, Oates. The *Florida's* spent too much damn time in the Observation Ward. Wouldn't look good to penalize you, then promote you. I'll tell you this, though. Keep your ship out of the Ward for the rest of the cruise

and you might be looking at a whole new career as a flag officer."

A new career? Oates had a brief vision of himself grabbing Evans by the throat and shouting, "I'm seventy years old, you dumb Chile bastard!" It must have shown in his expression, because the rear admiral's mood improved considerably.

Well-wishers had begun to press towards the commander and the two men's brief privacy was over. Oates was dismissed.

He scanned the ballroom for Miss Foglesong. In vain. She had vanished like the wisp that she was. The music in Oates' loins squeaked to a halt.

Sailor's luck.

The night was turning as foul as a night could get.

The two midshipmen were still at the far wall, still determinedly staring in opposite directions. Oates stormed up to them. "Midshipman Beck, isn't it?"

Startled by the ferocity of the question, Beck could only sputter something that sounded like, "Sir!"

"And you are Midshipman...."

Given a fraction of a second's warning, Davis was able to answer clearly. "Midshipman Davis, sir!"

"Come with me."

Beck and Davis followed him into a small, dark garden.

"You two on the outs?" the captain said, whirling on them.

"Sir?"

"Don't lark with me. I've seen the two of you trading snubs back on board. And now you're doing it here! When the boatswain pipes and we bend cables, you're going to leave that kind of crap behind. And by God, I don't want it on board, either!"

"Sir, I--"

"Did I ask for excuses? I don't care why the pair of you want to bash heads. It ends here. Take off your gloves and shake hands. Now!"

Jumping to obey, the young men whipped off their white dress gloves and nudged palms.

"What was that? Two snails passing? I said shake!" He darted forward, grabbed them by the wrists, and jammed their hands together. "I will have amity on my ship! I will have amity on my ship!"

The midshipmen were barely able to contain their yelps of pain as Oates twisted their hands in his coffee-grinder.

"Come on!" Oates continued to growl. "I will have amity on my ship. All-fired middies... shake!"

They tried to get their fingers to mesh, but every time they came close Oates ground them in another direction. Finally, they managed to clasp.

"There," said Oates, holding them like newlyweds before letting go. "I will have amity on my ship, goddammit! And amity among my crew! Don't ever forget that!"

He pounded back indoors. Beck and Davis, struggling to pull their gloves over their contorted fingers, followed quietly.

Stoker Gilroy did not waste time inventing the lowest sort of amusement for himself in San Francisco. The sailors frequently came across Chinamen toting thirty-by-thirty inch trays on their heads. Complete, hot meals which were raced from restaurant to residence by stalwart deliverers. It had become quite the fashion on Nob Hill to give the cook the night off and order dinner by phone. And it became quite a trick with Gilroy to trip them up as they went.

"Let it go, mate," said another fireman after he'd sent his fifth Chinese flying, and his fifth Cantonese dinner into the gutter.

"What's the deal?" Gilroy protested innocently. "They're just Chinks. Hell, they give medals for killing Chinks in these parts."

"That's Japs that they're killing. And the vittles belong to the hobnobs on the hill. You make 'em go hungry for an hour, they're like to see you clapped in irons."

"A field of pansies. I'm cruising with pansies." But Gilroy left off without taunting the Oriental as severely as he had his other victims. Not much sport in it, anyway. The Chinese accepted their losses quietly, without fuss or tears. The tripped man picked himself off the pavement, picked the meal out of the gutter, wrapped it in a bundle, and returned the way he'd come.

"See? That's his supper, now. I'm helping to feed the poor, saints be praised! Ready to be canonized when you are, Pope."

With jocular bemusement the party from the black gang fell in behind him as he strutted down Kearny Street in his flared pants and pancake hat. Little did he know that he was treading stones named after the most virulent anti-Chinese demagogue of the last quarter century, but he would have appreciated the fact.

They turned north, into Chinatown.

The Chinese Quarter had been completely destroyed during the great quake and fire two years earlier. As the city was rebuilt, the city fathers made plans to move the thirty thousand Chinese further out, away from the business districts. But quick as you could say, "Ah Sin," the Chinese reclaimed their old haunts. And haunting it was. They had recaptured much of Old Cathay in their architecture. And if their new buildings weren't quite as ornate as before, they were certainly more resistant to fire.

As darkness descended, the Quarter seemed increasingly like a mystical Mongol kingdom to the *Florida* seamen. Balconies were painted all-different colors. Filigree canopies hung over the windows, cocked enticingly. Golden yellow Imperial flags were displayed in front of some of the narrow houses. And everywhere, in gold, black and crimson, were placards and signs which to Occidentals were nothing more than a series of ink pad splotches.

"Wonder what it all says," one of the black gangers commented.

"Want me to translate?"

"Gilroy, you can't even read English."

"Sure. I can . English... Spanish... Yiddish... Celtish... Chine-ish--I can read them all."

"All right, what's that one say?"

Leaning closer to the sign, Gilroy perused it a long moment, then in a stilted voice recited: "White pogue sailor like lichee nut up his ass."

"Aw, son-of-a-bitch."

Before the fire, Chinatown and the Barbary Coast were the places to go for a taste of life in the raw. Sodom and Gomorrah could not have been more completely destroyed than those two districts. But sin proved more resilient in modern times. The men strolling up Washington Street had heard all the stories of elegant gambling dens, cribs and Spanish Kitty. Women represented one of the highest forms of currency, and one of the lowest forms of human degradation. This was a place where a white man could order a Chinese girl to strip in public if he didn't like her service. Also home of the "golden girls," who lived in sumptuous 'parlor cribs'--the local euphemism for brothel--and could command up to \$250 a night (meals included). Many of the prettiest girls were slaves, kidnapped in China. Their sad plight acted as an aphrodisiac to many customers. Certainly, the thought of these helpless victims stirred fantasies in the minds of the liberty party.

Yet the first representative of sin to approach them spoke with the voice of a tiny angel. No more than nine or ten, she was a China doll in size, speech and appearance.

"Sailor-man want puff-puff?" she asked in a calm, other-worldly voice. The semi-shocked expressions of the black gang did not seem to amuse her. There was a curious blankness about her expression. Perhaps she was a wind-up doll, too. "Sailor-man come long way. Puff-puff go farther."

"Run on home to your mammy, or whatever you call them around here," said one of the more deeply offended men.

"Why do you keep treating them like humans?" Gilroy moaned. He nodded for the girl to come over. "Lot of these Chinks were shipped down from Canada in crates marked 'Freight.' That's all they are to the law. A man is how he's treated, and what the law says he is."

To hear Gilroy speak of the law in so portentous a tone was like listening to a preacher praising hellfire. A moral split formed in the party. But since none of them really knew Gilroy very well--no one did--the offended fireman was able to draw the others with him. "Let's get a drink," he said, replacing one sin with another. It was the only way he could win. "Something that'll take the edge off. Something you can taste."

"Go ahead." Gilroy saw them off with a scornful wave. "The boarding house sharks love flatheads like you."

As he turned to the girl, one of Washington Street's gaslights popped into life, catching his eye. There it was, his one true companion. Constant and faithful in the pain it invariably caused.

The golden scarab.

It reached with one of its molten claws directly into his head and snipped off its share. Then the scarab dimmed, leaving a talisman-shaped afterglow.

The girl watched him with strange, bland comprehension. "Puff-puff take it away. Puff-puff make you better."

He followed her down a dark alley. Oddly, it was safer for him here in Chinatown than it was for many Chinese. The underworld of the Quarter was dominated by the tongs, rival warlords of vice. Their warriors were the highbanders--through practice, skilled assassins. Sometimes there were pitched street battles between highbander armies. The municipal authorities were not so much indifferent as powerless to stop them. Ten or twenty years ago, many of the gang wars hinged on who would possess various royal women in the Quarter. They were celestial beings, who molded their glossy black hair into dragon-tail shapes, wore exquisite jade bracelets on their wrists and ankles, kept their hearts visible with puckered carmine lips--and tottered like drunks on tiny, crippled feet, their parents having practiced the high fashion of foot-binding.

Times had become harsher, though, and there were some things even more

fundamental than beautiful women. Most of the clashes in re-built Chinatown resulted from disputes over the gambling trade, the drug trade, and trade in general. Tense, sharp affairs, the cobblestones were frequently splattered with blood. Yet if Gilroy had gone towards the bay and the Barbary Coast, there would have been an infinitely greater chance of being rolled, robbed or murdered. He might not have much in the way of money, but he had more than a lot of others. No Chinaman would have assaulted him for it because it was well understood by the tongs that if whites became fearful of entering the Quarter, the tourist trade would dry up. Excepting whatever ills he might visit upon himself, Gilroy was better off here than among his own kind--or in the boiler rooms of the *Florida*.

The child guiding him was a coolie girl. Her feet had not been bound. She wore plain baggy pants which seemed to shift like black seaweed whenever she turned to make certain he had not slipped her leash. Some of the storefronts they passed threw forth a rich, baroque complex of sights and smells--not an inch bereft of ornamentation or items for sale. It was while passing through the heavy scents of a joss shop that the seaman caught a flicker of movement down one of the alleys. Something familiar about it. He stopped to investigate.

"Sailor-man come."

"Just hold your pants on, girl."

The buildings were so densely packed the passages between them were more like halls than alleys. Gilroy now knew the familiarity that had caught his eye: there was a sailor down there. There could be no question the man thought he was hidden in shadow--not knowing that light from an overhead window provided a hazy, revealing glow. He was speaking to a coolie girl. Not as young as the one leading Gilroy, but not much older. She had her back to a wall. Unlike most of the coolie girls, she wore a Western-style dress; at least, as far as the voyeur could tell that was what she was wearing. Because whatever it was happened to be pulled up above her waist.

The way they were chatting, one might have thought they were discussing the best sauce for chop suey. Yet the sailor had his hand up her crotch, was fondling her pudendum so thoroughly it was as if he was trying to tie a knot one-handed. A far more lurid scene than any of the wicked stereopticon slides sailors brought home from foreign ports. It was the damndest thing Gilroy had ever

seen, next to the death of his mother--and, of course, the scarab. When the girl leading him noted the couple Gilroy did not attempt to cover her eyes. She probably saw this kind of thing all the time.

"Puff-puff..." she said.

"Wookie-nookie. What's that? No, not them. Them." He pointed at a pair of men further down the alley. Though they both wore black blouses and trousers, one of them was obviously better off. He held out his hand and the poor man put something in it--the small cupped movement that said 'money'. Gilroy at first thought he was witnessing a transaction between landlord and tenant--until he saw a small pouch handed over to the poor man, who bowed away.

"What he selling, girl?"

"Nothing. Come."

"Nothing? Stay. No puff-puff until you tell me."

For the first time, a trace of emotion appeared. It was annoyance. "No important."

"If no important, you can tell."

She dwelled on this for a moment, then said, "Ashes."

"I said no puff-puff until--"

"No. The man, he sell ashes."

"You mean that poor sod was paying good money for... naw, tell me the truth, girl."

"I tell truth."

She was so matter of fact Gilroy concluded she was indeed telling him the truth, though only in part. Shrugging, he set out with her again. They came to a niche between two stores. There were no lights. Gilroy did not see the heavy oak door until the girl gave it a distinctive rap. Nor could he see who the girl spoke to, nor the slit through which he knew he was being observed. When the door

swung inward, a warm wave of incense spilled out.

"Come-come," said a voice.

The girl did not enter with him. Now that the catch was secure, she slipped back into the street, looking to hook more customers for the opium den.

After passing through a series of lovely, patterned screens, Gilroy found himself in a tiny, windowless room bare of all but a wooden chair and table.

"Ten dollar," said the ancient seated at the table, his skullcap orbiting a moon of white hair.

"Ten dollars!" Gilroy protested. Damn, if he hadn't been neatly snookered. He had little doubt that if he walked out now, the Chinese would make no move to stop him. Yet by bringing him this far, through darker and darker veils, his voluntary entrance became, in stages, voluntary imprisonment. Through another hall came alluring aromas that made him aware of enticing visions, of things sought and things gained. "You have a heavy pocket, sailor. You can trust us. Ten dollar all we ask. We do not cut throat or leave you in sewer."

"Yep, I bet not," Gilroy sneered. There was no one else in the room with them, but he had the impression a dozen strong hands would stretch out for him if he made any kind of threatening move at the old man. The inviting smell was too much to resist. He reached into his tight pocket and warily pulled out his greenbacks. All the money he had in the world. "Don't spend it all on fancy women, you old bandit."

Another man appeared and took Gilroy through the enticing hallway. What was at the other end of that passage was as seedy and depressing as he could have hoped never to imagine. Bunks were packed tightly against every inch of wall space. It was like a forecastle, only a thousand times more cramped and smoky.

"Lay here."

Half a lifetime of taking orders at sea made him loath to obey them on land. A curd of protest formed in his stomach. Since he had money on the line, however, acquiescence came more readily than usual. He looked at the soiled bunk the Chinaman indicated, then shrugged with the conclusion that he'd spent

nights in worse. It creaked with a hundred small moans as he curled up on his side.

The Chinaman took out a small vial. "Bye-bye juice," he smiled at Gilroy as he delicately placed a small thick drop on a steel shaft much like a hatpin. Holding the head of the shaft over an oil flame, he heated it into an ocher-colored globe. He added more raw opium from the vial, until a pellet the size of a pea sat on the hot pinhead.

A long-stemmed pipe elaborately carved to form a dragon's neck, with a fiery snout at the mouth, was brought out. The man expertly flattened the cooked opium across a tiny opening in the bowl. Holding the bowl over the flame, he swung the stem over to Gilroy's head. The sailor fastened his lips to the serpent's mouth and inhaled.

They were singing 'She Was Bred in Old Kentucky, But in Boston She Was Beans' when Ensign Garrett led six men of the Beach Patrol into the bar.

The Beach Patrol was a new arm of the Navy, established by none other than Roosevelt himself. For too long, American seamen had run amuck in the various ports of call. A jackie staggering drunk back to ship was a sight too often seen by the public. The president knew this would never do on a voyage of prestige, more a political campaign than a military one, so the Beach Patrol was charged with the task of reining in rioters and drunkards before they got out of hand.

It had met with some success, but also with one spectacular failure. In Rio, a large patrol comprised of men from several ships went in to break up a bar brawl. When the fight escalated dramatically, the Beach Patrol itself joined the fray, knocking Brazilian heads with gusto.

Not many enjoyed the duty. But there were exceptions.

It was during their stopover at Santa Barbara that Ensign Garrett realized he'd reached his limit for parties and entertainment. Attending the Dance of the Flowers at the Plaza Del Mar, he'd watched dancers dressed as narcissus, white lilies, daffodils, tulips, California poppies, and God knew how many more ludicrous floral arrangements hop and dance for a thousand sailors and politicians.

Certainly, the female dancers had shapely legs--when you could see them through their costumes. But at the announcement of each number, the ensign found himself increasingly overcome by despair and boredom.

Other men already had their itineraries for San Francisco. The historically-minded could visit Mission Dolores; the litterateur could view the Robert Louis Stevenson commemorative statue; the artistically-minded could admire the famous statue of Saul; astronomy could be had at the Lick Observatory; and Mt. Tamalpais stood ready to be scaled by the athletic. The YMCA Naval Clubhouse offered the usual spectrum of sober pastimes, while the Naval Pavilion set up extra cots for the men who chose the less sober ones.

Having no desire to surfeit himself further on local amenities, Garrett approached the Master-at-Arms and volunteered his services.

"It'll be a lark," he said.

Snorting, the Master-at-Arms handed him a brassard, then said, "You're officially a part of the Beach Patrol. Now let me tell you why it *won't* be a lark."

Garrett was appalled by his next words. Everyone had read the reports of the typhus epidemic that had broken out in San Francisco after the fire. It had been brought under control for the most part--but something else had reared its brutish head.

"That's right, ensign. Plague."

"You mean... like the Black Death?"

"You got it."

So much for his fantasies of taking on drunks, and perhaps cracking a few heads in the line of duty.

"I want you to go to Fillmore Street to meet with Dr. Blue."

"Dr. Blue?"

"Really quite an honor for you. Rupert Blue is the foremost expert on plagues in the country. President Roosevelt sent him out here when the Board of

Health wired for assistance."

Garrett was so honored that he was tempted to rip off the brassard on the spot. For which the Master-at-Arms would have had him up before the Mast in two shakes, the last thing the ensign needed. He was trying to keep a low profile around Captain Oates, who gave him an evil, jaundiced eye whenever they passed each other. So Garrett saluted the Master-at-Arms and headed out for Fillmore Street.

An hour later he found himself in front of a long gray warehouse. Hundreds of rats were piled out front, some dead, others only wounded or dazed. The piles squirmed.

Men in low hats walked up with more, cheerfully swaying their inverted bouquets. Noting Garrett's expression, one of them swung his half dozen in the ensign's face.

"Oh, no-no-no!" said Garrett.

The man they were paying court to stood at a side door, handing out sums of money for each rat added to the heap.

"Ah, brought us some brown rats, did we Tom? *Mus rattus*, not very common these days. But there's one of our fine, fat friends in the middle: *Mus Norwegicus*. Those gray Norway rats are conquering our quiet little Indians, I'm afraid." He paid off the rat catcher, who strolled happily down Fillmore counting his bills.

"Dr. Blue...?"

Dr. Rupert Blue tipped his hat. "You must be Garrett. Your boss telephoned to say he was sending you up here. I guess he wanted you to see what you're all up against. Scout out the enemy, so to speak."

"That was the Master-at-Arms."

The doctor nodded at the pile. "I suppose you already knew about the yellow fever epidemic that hit San Francisco after the earthquake and fire. But

the city fathers have managed to keep this quiet. Up to now at least."

"What? Rats?"

"Plague."

The Black Death, after all.

"If you'll step inside with me, I can show you--"

"Well actually, sir, if you can just show me your map. The Master-at-Arms said there were some districts off limits."

"Nonsense!" Blue held up his hands. "Medical science has come far, Seaman Garrett. You must come in and see. Except for the regulars, we don't get very many visitors."

Workers emerged from the warehouse and began picking rats out of the piles. Following them in, Blue and Garrett passed large vats of bichloride of mercury, used to finish off the rats not already dead.

"I try to get the catchers to bring them in alive. If they're killed beforehand and the body grows cold, the fleas abandon ship. Best to dispose of rats and parasites all one go."

The stench was unspeakable. Dr. Blue inhaled and exhaled as though bracing himself in clean mountain air.

"Damn fleas are what you have to control," Blue went on. "They get the disease off the rats, then bite humans--boom! Bubonic plague. Sand fleas, rat fleas, mouse fleas, dog fleas, even Indian plague fleas--all of them found on our crew. The rats, I mean. The prime culprit is *ceratophyllus fasciatus*, found on the Norway rats. Sixty-nine percent of the ones we've counted have been of that variety."

"You count *fleas*?"

Garrett was just able to stomach the impromptu tour--until Blue took him into the annex. Six men stood over a long table wielding sharp surgical instruments. Several were whistling to the accompanying clink of a white

porcelain dish that was being passed around.

"This is our 'Ratatorium,'" Blue announced proudly. "Once the rats are tagged, they're brought here so they can be skinned, preparatory to microscopic examination for infection. Each one of my boys can clean five hundred specimens a day."

There was a dull splash as one of the workers scooped out a rat's entrails with his bare hand and tossed the bluish mess into the dish.

"Oh!"

"I knew you'd be interested, Seaman Garrett. It's too bad President Roosevelt can't see this. He's the one who sent me out here, you know."

"Oh!"

The men at the table glanced up at him.

"Is there something wrong?" Dr. Blue inquired.

"The men. From the Beach Patrol."

"Did you want to bring them in here, too?"

"No! I'm supposed to meet them."

"If it's urgent--"

"Yes!"

Dr. Blue took him into his office and showed him a map of the city. "By no means let any of your men enter the Lobos District. That was the site of one of the larger refugee camps after the fire and some of the worst outbreaks. If any sailor wanders in, do not let him back on board his ship. I have the backing of your fleet commander on this. If someone carried infected fleas onto a battleship, every man on her might be dead in two weeks."

"Understood."

"We're still finding infection on Telegraph Hill. And in the Mission District

south of Market Street. Any of your men go in those areas, you'll have to scrub them brighter than a beet. And their clothes will have to be burned. And... my advice is to keep everyone out of those areas, also."

Garrett and his men were posted along Market Street. They patrolled the blocks between Stewart and Fremont. Any bluejackets they encountered coming down from the north were turned back. If they protested, Garrett would stand aside.

"Go ahead, it's not my future."

Invariably, he was darted with a suspicious glance. "What do you mean by that?"

"Just means the clap is the least of your worries, if you keep going."

"Bullshit."

"Fine, fine. But when you strip in the shower and your mates start laughing at your blue balls--"

"*What?*"

"Didn't you know? That's one of the effects of the plague. You know... swelling of the tongue, blindness, blue balls.... What I was saying was, when your mates start laughing at your pecker shriveling up like a bean--"

"*What?*"

"Didn't you know? That's another effect. The plague's tough on peckers. Makes it hard to...." At this point Garrett would stick his tongue in his cheek and waggle his billy club up and down. "And it's twice as hard to get it up once you're dead," he would add.

In fearful silence, the protesters would turn back. Garrett's act was so good his own squad was half convinced. News of the 'blue balls' spread like wildfire. By evening of their second day in port, it was the rare bluejacket who even approached Market Street, let alone try to cross it.

This left Garrett's men with little to do. When a policeman encountered the

squad on his beat and informed them of the trouble some sailors were stirring in the Blue Periwinkle, one block up Front Street, Garrett saw the perfect salve for boredom.

The bluejackets in the bar were into their third stanza of an off-color chorus when the Beach Patrol arrived. All of the songsters were off the *Florida*.

"Mr. Garrett!" they called, then fell silent when they saw his brassard.

"Mr. Garrett's not one of us tonight," one of them murmured.

"Who says that? I'm always at one with the lads."

"If that's true, Mr. Garrett, come and tell us if you think this beer's been watered."

Garrett had heard of watered Scotch, but never diluted beer. His face showed genuine shock. He turned to the proprietor, a beefy man with both arms braced on the counter. "Now, sir, you would never allow such a thing in your establishment, would you?"

"He would!" the bluejackets shouted in unison.

The owner slammed the countertop. "I call the police and what do I get? More blue devils."

"Sir...." Garrett placed his hand over his wounded heart. The sailors, seeing things going their way, began to titter.

"Lies!" the owner yelled.

"He's calling us liars, Mr. Garrett!"

Garrett cautioned them to sit back down. His small squad was outnumbered four to one, but every man jack of them was a bruiser specially chosen for this job. As they moved into position between the bar and tables, the bluejackets were given full opportunity to appraise the strength of the Beach Patrol. Chair legs squeaked sulkily on the floor as they reseated themselves.

"Watered beer..." Garrett mused out loud. "I think that's the most

monstrous thing I ever did hear of."

"Not nearly as true as this," said the owner, indicating a broken wall mirror behind the bar.

A sad inward moan.

"You say these men here are responsible?"

"They threw a stein at it!"

"Mmm-hmmm...." Garrett turned to the bluejackets. "That a fact?"

"I meant it for his head!" one of the seated men boasted.

There they were: accusation and confession. Civilian malfeasance was one thing, but wanton destruction of private property by a serviceman was another kettle of fish.

"Boys..." Garrett sighed.

Seeing things go against them, the boys fell silent.

"But first things first," the ensign said brightly. "Bartender! Set out seven mugs of what they were having. The Beach Patrol will see how fit your brew is for human consumption."

The men of the squad grinned as they bellied-up to the bar. Garrett downed his drink slowly, with many judicious nods and shakes of his head. The room was as quiet as last year's storms. Touching his chin in indecision, Garrett finally said: "Can't tell. Need another round."

The men of the Beach Patrol gravely nodded agreement.

"You'll be paying for this, right?" the proprietor grouched.

"Just fill us up! And be quick about it!"

The seated bluejackets grinned. This was the Garrett they knew.

"Down the hatch!"

Upon finishing his second drink, Garrett allowed himself a dramatic pause. He spent a long time looking at his cracked reflection in the mirror. Then he slapped the counter and declared, "Say, that was a damn fine drink. Finest beer I've had since Portsmouth."

"But Mr. Garrett--"

"Sir," he said, turning to the proprietor, "I'd like to know your brand. When I get back home, I want a keg shipped east. And thanks for the drinks, lads!" He went over to the astonished bluejackets. "What's he charging you here? A dollar a drink? Yes, that's steep. But what's a dollar a drink to men of the world?" He leaned closer for words the owner could not overhear. "You dumb bozos, the beer is *green*. Now pass the hat around for the drinks and the mirror. We'll be just up the street all night, so we'll hear if you don't pony up."

Outside, the ensign patted the warm green beer in his belly and belched.

"'Twas unfortunate you had to lean for the scalawag, Mr. Garrett," said one of his men. "But unavoidable."

"Ah...." Garrett did a drum roll on his gut. "I could use some sack time. What's the hour? Our relief should be coming up any minute."

"I don't see what you boys are fussing about. Your turn will come, and soon." Lieutenant Grissom cocked his hat and leveled a smile at the mess men. "We've only been here two days. Once the other parties start coming back, you'll get your shore leave."

The black faces before him did not register disgruntlement--only bemused pain, strictly for the executive officer's benefit. They had anticipated his answer. They wanted their grievance noted, but not necessarily acted upon. If the white officers felt the Negro crewmen were trying to force them into a decision, life would become all the harder for them on the *Florida*. No, they only wanted to make certain their silence was loud enough to be heard.

Amos Macklin mastered his rage. When Grissom dismissed them, he turned to the cook and told him he was going out for air. The cook, who was his superior, nodded. He appreciated Amos' stoic silence. Allowing him to go was

his way of thanking him.

Three hours since sundown--but you would never have guessed it in the vicinity of the Fleet. Along with the cruisers of the Pacific Squadron, they swayed at anchorages reaching from Oakland to San Francisco. Each ship was decked with huge lights that spelled out its name. From mainmast to fighting mast, *Florida*, *Connecticut*, *Ohio* and all the others challenged and overpowered the stars.

"Seaman First Class..." Amos whispered to himself.

Smaller lights glided by in the distance, seemingly unconnected to the water, and Amos recognized the deep chuff of the tugboats--undoubtedly a part of the omnipresent Red Stack fleet, which had a monopolistic hold on the bay. He'd once piloted a tug--spent a summer towing ships in and out of Jacksonville. Not a bad job, but all those peeks at the sea had lured him out of the harbor and into the Navy.

The Red Stacks drew his attention east, to the thunder of rolling stock along Oakland's outstretched piers. He could swim that distance without difficulty. He could light out west. Land surrounded him. Practically any direction would do the trick.

"Jump ship while you can," Methuselah had urged him in Norfolk. Right this moment, that was a mighty temptation. To get free. To get clear. Go up to Alaska, perhaps. Stake a claim. Even a black could speak his mind if he had enough gold.

An auxiliary engine aft of the stokehold hatch vented steam from its safety valve--a piercing note, like a prison whistle. Grasping the main deck weather rail, Amos was caught between using it as a handhold or a vault.

"C'mon, Jack Johnson... c'mon, Jack Johnson...."

A chant Amos had heard on numerous occasions as details of heavyweight matches were read out from the wire. It had become his personal mantra, a way of urging himself forward when things got tough.

"C'mon, Jack Johnson... c'mon, Jack Johnson...."

He chanted for fifteen minutes.

The Red Stacks floated out of sight.

But Amos Macklin held.

XIII

May, 1908 — 28°20'N, 177°22'W

1640 Hours

"Hey, listen up: 'Can you draw this simple stick figure? If so, the *DAYTON ART ACADEMY* can help you Develop Your Talent. Professor Andre DeFlaunce, noted ARTIST and former Professor of ART at the SORBONNE--as well as CURATOR OF THE LOUVRE--can reveal to you the Secrets of turning Idle Doodles into ART AND CASH!!!"

Private Kitrell held a pencil tightly in his good hand and carefully followed the illustration in the *Harper Monthly's* thick advertising section. When done, he proudly displayed his artwork. "Well?"

"I didn't know shit had a face," observed Private Depoy.

"After I've made my first million--"

"Tell it to the marines," Depoy snapped.

"But... that's *us*."

"The boy's quick," Depoy granted.

A faint series of gunshots interrupted them.

"Top Cut's swanking on A-range again."

The men seated in the shade of the relay station looked out across the lagoon towards Eastern Island. Because of the dwarf magnolia and beach grass

that flourished there, it was also called Green Island by the men of the tiny garrison. Its vegetation was positively luxuriant compared to that of the aptly dubbed island where they now sat: Sand.

They could just make out Sergeant Ziolkowski waving his arms as he emphasized something to the marksmen prone in front of him. A cluster of smoke puffs burst from their Springfields. This time, a gust off the Pacific carried the sound away.

"Those boys couldn't shoot holes in a camel if it was sitting on their face," said Depoy, easily dovetailing his insults.

"Go sit on them and see," shot Kitrell, scratching the bandage on his right hand. He was considered the detachment's resident intellectual. Right now, his left arm was in a sling as a result of his reading. A couple of months before departing San Diego he'd happened upon an oddly punctuated ad in *McClure's*:

*A JAPANESE VICTORY: Japanese Strategy--The Flank Attack (against the individual or an army--and the ever successful) Application of the Unexpected reveals ALL THE SECRETS OF JIU-JITSU the wonderful Japanese Method * **
*

Printed by the Japan Publishing Company, it declared Captain Skinner, the author, would show how BRAINS AND SKILL could overcome mere brute force. The advertisement even quoted President Roosevelt: *The art of Jiu-Jitsu is worth more in every way than all our athletics combined*. To top it all, it was stated that 'A Japanese Victory' would soon be adopted by the U.S. Navy for instruction of its crews on war vessels.

This was enough to convince Kittrell, who promptly put his dollar in the mail. He received his copy of the manual one day before leaving for Midway. Once on the island, he'd studied the book and its illustrations for several months. Deciding he was ready, he concluded an appropriate test subject would be, naturally enough, a Japanese. He attacked one of the smaller fishermen.

And now his arm was in a sling.

It had been a bad break. His arm was still tender.

This did not deter other marines from borrowing the book and following in

Kittrell's footsteps. The idea of tossing Ziolkowski around like a meal sack had strong appeal. They had to be careful. The sergeant had let it be known he would personally set the arm of the next man who broke it in this manner. They could just imagine what that meant.

Adjusting his sling, Kittrell returned to his copy of *Harper's*.

"Anything in there about us?" Private Hoffman asked him.

"Marines occupy Midway!" Depoy intruded. "Enemy flees! Citizens cower! Sand spit safe for democracy!"

His headline was late. The island pair had been discovered in 1859 and claimed by the United States under the Guano Islands Act. It was garrisoned by marines in 1903.

"If Lieutenant Anthony hears you, he'll sic the Top on you."

Depoy shrugged and lay back on a scrawny patch of grass. Shading his eyes, he kept a wary eye on a frigate bird hovering nearby. The most perilous thing on the island was bird crap.

"We're the most isolated marine outpost on earth," Kittrell said importantly. "You know that?"

"Well, run up the flag and piss on my grave."

Depoy was always cranky around Kittrell. This was due as much to envy as anything else--because Skinny Kittrell, inept, a fumbler, impractical, dreamy, goofy, with a silly woman's laugh, was one of the detachment's most prized members. Kittrell was a demon of the squares, a chess master who played as though he'd invented the game. Which made him invaluable, because Lieutenant Anthony, commander of the garrison, was a chess fanatic.

The lieutenant owned an illustrated pamphlet of some of the key tournaments of recent years. It was never far from hand. Hunching next to a cheap wooden set, he would follow the moves of the masters with deep, glowing envy. Before arriving at Midway he'd sustained his imagination with fantasies of defeating Chodera or Shipley. He dreamed of taking Grassi's place in Como and beating Perlasca into tears. When Kittrell landed on the atoll and Anthony

discovered his talent for chess, he rubbed his hands in glee. What luck! He could pass the rest of his stint on this hideously dull plot of coral sand in the throes of chess ecstasy. His enthusiasm was multiplied when two of the other replacements, as well as the new civilian, also turned out to be players. This was swell society, compared to the blank year preceding it. A year in which his grandest accomplishments had been the planting of marram grass and some dabbling with a proposed golf course.

Against Sergeant Ziolkowski and Hamilton Hart, the civilian, Anthony played on a par, winning and losing a near equal number of matches. He usually won when he played Depoy, but he could never be sure if the private was losing on purpose, thinking Anthony would make life miserable for him if he didn't.

When he first sat across from Kittrell, however, the private demolished him with such effortless ease the lieutenant was left numb and perplexed. Consequent games were not much different. It took some time for Anthony to catch a glimmer of what was happening. Kittrell was a master of the sleight of hand, drawing one's attention away from the real action. Anthony had spent too many years studying the master strokes of chess geniuses. Now he was compelled to view the entire board. What he finally comprehended was that it was not simply a square of squares, but an integrated active process. With a shudder, he realized how illusory the physical dimensions of the board were. It was small, yet vast, with all the complexity of the microcosm scientists were beginning to speculate upon. And Kittrell, at a glance, comprehended things which Anthony only vaguely imagined.

The private's hearty good cheer was infuriating.

With equal alacrity, Kittrell defeated Ziolkowski, Hamilton and Depoy. Depoy would sit before the barrel on which the game sat, play ten moves at most, then kick the barrel over with a curse and stomp away. Hamilton Hart, on the other hand, approached the board as if he was about to be defeated, played as if he would be defeated, and rose... defeated. The dullest of Midway's players in character if not in style.

A fair-sized audience always gathered when he played Ziolkowski. It was a treat to watch the Top lose. He would gear himself up as though entering battle, eyes keen, jaw determined, his powerful hands clutching his knees. When determining colors he would select one black pawn and one white pawn and hide

them behind his back as he mixed them between his fingers. It was well-known that Ziolkowski preferred to make the first move. Occasionally, a daring soul would make idiotic gestures at Kittrell, as if trying to tell him which of the sergeant's hands held the white pawn. With a roar, Ziolkowski would chase him off. Then he would hold out his fists and let Kittrell choose. The private never took more than a second to make his selection.

Once the game was under way, Ziolkowski was all silence and intensity. There was no time limit. Midway was timeless. Why bother with a clock? The Top might spend forty-five minutes, even an hour, determining a single move. Meanwhile, Kittrell would read, saunter down the beach, or harry the gooney birds. When he heard the sergeant shout, he would trot back, glance briefly at the board, then make his move and wander off again. As the game progressed, Ziolkowski's face would grow redder and redder, his neck muscles would swell, his bare toes would bunch into stones. No matter how far behind he got, he never gave up. He might have only a king left against Kittrell's small army. No matter--he would struggle for a stalemate. Once defeated, he would stand, plop his campaign hat on his head, nod, and walk silently away. Kittrell once ventured pointing out the Top Cut's problem: "You're trying to inflict casualties. That's not the same as strategy. You're aiming for the wrong thing."

Ziolkowski was unresponsive.

The awesome fact was that no one on the island had ever beaten Kittrell at chess. Anthony, Ziolkowski and Depoy often seemed to be racing each other to be the first to do so--Hart was the only one who did not seem to care. That this uncoordinated, bookish, undersized, entirely nondescript marine could beat them every time was too much to bear. It was almost too much to comprehend. Kittrell was a force of nature that had to be overcome.

In the shade of the telegraph building Depoy could only glower at his fellow Leatherneck. He was tempted to challenge him to a game, but he didn't feel quite up to being humiliated.

Sand Island was not entirely bare. A few ironwood trees had been imported from Australia. Also from Australia--via Golden State Park--was marram grass. Several times a week Lieutenant Anthony put his men to work planting grass in the dunes. By placing it deep and cutting it off at the surface, the marram stooled out as it grew, making new cuttings possible. Once the dunes

were anchored, more exotic plants could be imported. But they had only begun planting grass in 1906. As of yet, nothing on Sand could be described as lush. The clumps of grass crouched like dying beavers, while the trees were no more than sick saplings.

The seated marines would have preferred lounging on Eastern, but--theoretically at least--they were guarding the building behind them. Small and white with a red tile roof. "Look's like an Italian outhouse," was Depoy's comment when he first saw it. Situated on the northern end of Sand Island, it was owned by the Commercial Pacific Cable Company.

And protected by the United States Marine Corps.

When Commercial Pacific arrived on the island, the only human residents were a group of thirty Japanese fishermen. More Japanese were imported to work on the relay station that marked the halfway point of the submarine cable that stretched from San Francisco to Shanghai.

The Japanese not only proved industrious workers, but busied themselves with slaughtering the wildlife on the island. The feathers of many of the birds were strikingly beautiful and drew good prices in the home country. Midway was already recognized as paradise for birds. Over the last hundred years, however, experience had shown such sanctuaries could quickly become abattoirs. The United States decided Midway would not become synonymous with extinction. In addition to the relay station, the marines were sent in to protect the rookeries. More to the point, the Japanese and Germans held most of the strategic 'line' atolls along the Pacific equator. Midway was a rare item: a strategic gem that was already owned by the Americans.

Thus the marines landed.

The original detachment contained twenty men under Second Lieutenant Clarence Owen. Because of the workers' unruly habit of getting drunk on saki and shooting up precious equipment, as well as feathered friends, the lieutenant's first act was to confiscate all the Japanese guns. Stop shooting birds and start pouring concrete, he commanded.

Once the station and auxiliary buildings were completed, most of the construction workers were shipped back home. The dozen or so who'd become acclimated to the Americans' odd behavior remained behind as laborers and

cooks.

Over the years, it was realized that the extreme isolation of the Midway post produced behavioral oddities in the garrison that were noticeable even to the tolerant Japanese. This was rectified by relieving the men at two-year intervals. Still, two years of isolation, reinforced in many cases by a nearly complete ignorance of English, could make a man behave in some pretty strange ways.

Out of boredom, the men in the shadow of the relay station now turned their attention to one of those strange manifestations. Private Lieber, stripped naked (there wasn't a woman within twelve hundred miles), was rowing back and forth across the lagoon in search of his favorite prey.

1713 Hours

One thing certain to raise Lieber's hackles was to be called 'Fritz.' As a consequence, everyone on the island called him 'Fritz.' Except the Japanese, who called him 'Flitz.'

Heinrich Lieber was the son of Rudolf Lieber, tanner, pamphleteer, would-be anarchist. In 1897 Rudolf penned an imprudent letter to an acquaintance in Parma in which he discussed Wilhelm II's upcoming trip to Jerusalem. Rudolf listed the many excellent opportunities there would be to assassinate the Kaiser and mentioned Haifa as a particularly good spot. Rather than follow this advice, the Italian tried to kill his own despot, King Humbert, but he failed and Rudolf's letter was discovered in his apartment.

News of the assassination attempt in Rome reached the Liebers before the police did. Rudolf fled with his family to Hamburg, thence to New York. Young Heinrich did not understand why the story of the escape had to be repeated to him again and again, seeing as he had lived it.

He left home to escape poverty, only to find more of it on the streets. He worked as a garbage collector, a bill collector, and a dead horse collector. Meanwhile, his thoughts ranged across the injustices of the world.

One could not grow up with an anarchist without some of it rubbing off. Assassination had been a worldwide vogue in his youth. Empress Elizabeth of Austria, wife of Franz Joseph, had been stabbed in the heart while walking down the Quai Mont Blanc in Geneva. Premier Canovas of Spain had been shot while on holiday at the spa in Santa Agueda. A bomb had killed five policemen in the Rue des Bons Enfants and the next year another was tossed directly into the Chambre des Deputes. Of course, the crown went to the six inches of steel thrust into the stomach of President Carnot of France in 1894.

It seemed to Heinrich that injustice was the only justice for men without wealth or reputation. Knocking about New York, his daydreams ranged variously from murdering the mayor, the governor, a senator or two, and the president. The anarchist Leon Czolgosz beat him to the latter when he shot McKinley in 1901. But there was always someone else to assassinate, because there was always someone else who ruled.

Meanwhile, he grew tired of collecting things and took a job as an actor at Coney Island. This entailed switching roles as much as twelve times a day as he raced back and forth through the concessions to the various stages and 'living exhibits.'

By 1904 the amusement park at Coney Island was without doubt the largest of its kind in the world, spilling over onto Brighton and Manhattan Beaches. One of its central exhibits was *The Boer War*, in which skirmishes between British troops and rebels were re-enacted. Instead of shooting real political figures, Lieber found himself firing blanks at South African insurgents. Charging blockhouses and revetments, he took a curious satisfaction in acting out the role. Some of the other actors thought he flourished his bayonet with too much enthusiasm. But surface cuts and powder burns aside, no one was harmed in the mock battles. It provided an emotional release for the young German. Not only that, it paid.

It also opened doors to other jobs in the area. Over a period of two summers, he was a bit player in *The Creation*, *The Great Galveston Flood*, and *The Trip to the Moon*. He also spelled as a barker for the Coney Island Steeplechase, which provided him as much amusement as it did the public. Watching grown men rock on wooden horses as they raced opponents down the sloped track evoked roars of encouragement and laughter from the spectators. The manager correctly predicted that Lieber, barking the ride with Teutonic,

barely comprehensible authority, could lure even the most staid passersby into feats of mock-equine derring-do. Professors vied with illiterate stevedores, matrons challenged seamstresses, all for a little pink slip of paper--the First Place prize that entitled them to a free ride. Such scenes took place in Wilhelm's Germany only when the upper class grimly dared itself to mingle with the lower. The longer Lieber lived in America, the more he began to see the land of his birth as twisted, unnatural. Turn of the century German plays, opera and literature gushed with blood and sexual perversion. Taking Darwin to heart, they believed this represented reality. Still, in the land of blood and iron, everything had to fit in its proper place. So the baggy, grisly Unknowns were given a rigid home in the fine arts.

But Americans! They looked cockeyed at you, told you the world was theirs for the taking, that everything that could be known would be known, given time and native know-how--and then institutionalized skewed perception in the freewheeling spirit of Coney Island. There was the *Trip to the Moon*, where lunar dwarfs escorted you around extinct volcanos; *Hell Gate*, which took you through manmade rapids into the infernal regions; '*Bumps*,' where people were tossed about like popcorn on tin; the moving-picture machines--which cost a penny to view, but which drew large crowds nonetheless because of Anthony Comstock's protest that they seduced public morality.

Lieber's personal favorite was the *Foolish House*, a huge maze of mirrors that left him gasping with the confusion mere reflections could cause. He would spot the exit--only to have it resolve as a reflection of the exit. There was Lieber--yet only a reflection of his reflection. Sometimes he would stand before a mirror and see nothing--walking forward, though, he would hit clear glass. Strangers appeared alarmingly intimate--yet whirling, Lieber would see only himself.

This was America at its best. Taking common tricks of the cosmos, unmasking their rich complexity, then converting them into simple amusements. Not a denial, but an admission. By no means could one laugh at God. But one could sometimes enjoy the Joke with Him.

None of Lieber's stage duties required much in the way of the spoken word. Unlike the steeplechase proprietor, the theatrical directors saw no charm in his accent. He was a sturdy lad who made a good-looking prop. His career at Coney would have ended with the season had he not proved himself handy with tools--a legacy from his hated father, who did carpentry on the side. He spent the

winter building new sets, repairing storm damage, helping redesign shopworn spectacles. The pay was meager but the life amusing, if not entirely fulfilling.

Then came the day an entrepreneur approached management with a sensational plan for a new exhibit: *The Fall of Port Arthur*.

While scholars and interested amateurs gleaned their history from books, visitors to Coney Island learned from vivid reenactments. Biblical and historical recreations were highly popular. Best attended were the battles. *The Boer War* played to packed open-air houses. *The Fall of Port Arthur* promised the same.

It was a wonderful undertaking. Models of Japanese warships five times as large as a man were made to seem even bigger using illusions of perspective and realistic backdrops. Smoke poured from their funnels as they stormed up the channel, firing broadside after broadside. All of which would have been impressive enough. What made *The Fall* truly awesome, however, was the cinematic screen hidden behind the backdrop. Explosions, soldiers landing and storming the heights, Russian volleys tearing through their ranks, were all projected from behind the screen. Used in conjunction with live sound effects, it was the most impressive display Lieber had ever seen. And he helped to build it. When finished, and summer came, it was mobbed by amazed spectators.

Lieber returned to his role-playing duties. Yet as he dashed from Dreamland to New Walk, across Neptune Avenue and down Coney Island Avenue, past the Scenic Railway or through Luna Park, scraping off greasepaint from one show and slapping on pancake for another, he nearly always found a way to pause by the Port Arthur panorama. It was not the ships so much as the martial air that captivated him. The old Prussian blood coming up. He had learned during his long ocean voyage between Hamburg and New York that he was not made for the sea. The health inspector at Ellis Island had kept him in isolation for a week, convinced he was contagious, when he was really only seasick.

So if he could not join the Navy--what?

There was the East Side Army recruitment center, but it was closed much of the time. Even when open, the recruiters seemed so dull and dismal you'd have thought you were enlisting in Sing Sing.

The great change in Lieber's life came when he ran into a group of marines

at the Port Arthur Exhibit. He was startled to discover he could clearly understand what they were saying.

Why... they were Germans!

Thus, he waded into their conversation--and into the Corps.

It was heaven on earth. Compensation for the rigors of Parris Island came in the form of his drill instructor; he was from Eschwege, a town on the Werra, practically dead center of the Fatherland. Teutonic in thought and action, he made Lieber feel as though the South Carolinians were the aliens, not the other way around. A multitude of nationalities, in addition to German, were scattered throughout the barracks. The Marine Corps seemed to be nothing less than a Foreign Legion smack in the American southland.

Lieber earned high praise from the sergeant from Hesse, as well as from the *Kommandant*. He seemed destined for a great career in the Corps.

Then came disaster.

A month out of boot camp, he drew a unique historical assignment. Just over a hundred years earlier, Admiral John Paul Jones had gone to the great spinnaker in the sky. He was interred in the country where he died, France. It seemed a crime that America's first great naval hero should be entombed in a foreign land, so preparations were made to transfer the body to a crypt in a new chapel in Annapolis. This was a major public relations event for the Navy. Only the snappiest, handsomest sailors and marines were chosen for the honor guard.

An atavistic thrill darted through Lieber when he joined the detail for the voyage to Paris. The nightmarish passage from Hamburg was forgotten. He suffered not a single moment of queasiness on the journey over, and decided his awful experience on the immigrant ship had been due to the overcrowded, despicable conditions in steerage. Sadly, he was only half right.

As Jones' body was piped on board the *Brooklyn*, Lieber stood at port arms above the gangway. The ship was crowded with photographers, who had difficulty keeping their tripods steady as choppy water from the Channel disturbed the harbor. It was as if the ghosts of drowned British sailors were intent on one last broadside against their old foe.

Suddenly, Lieber was overcome by nausea. He vomited roundly and loudly on the bier.

As fast as he could clean himself off, he found himself in the Marine Barracks at the Portsmouth Navy Yard. This was sally port of the Atlantic Cruiser Squadron, which the Leathernecks had cruelly dubbed the 'Atlantic Harmless Squadron.' He made countless marches to York Beach and back--twenty miles in full pack--and every so often he pulled OD duty. This entailed handling and manhandling drunken sailors and marines as they staggered back from the bars in Kittery. He never had the heart to arrest anyone. The New Hampshire base was home to the Navy Prison, whose guards were notoriously sadistic.

The Marine Corps counted ten thousand men and officers under its banner, most of whom were stationed either on ships, at embassies, or at any one of dozens of American outposts around the world. Portsmouth was considered a waystation, not a permanent assignment, for anyone who stopped there. While at the Yard, he barracked in a comfortable New England-style building. An Irish girl came in from Kittery to cook for the marines. For all the forced marches and police duty, it was a life of relative luxury. To the German, it seemed someone was softening him up for a blow.

He half-expected the orders he finally received:

The Philippines.

After Admiral Dewey defeated the Spanish at Manila Bay, the Filipinos' jubilation soured quickly when they discovered the Americans weren't liberators, but one more occupying army. Their reaction was swift and deadly. The Americans called it the Philippine Insurrection. A drawn-out affair with a few pitched battles and innumerable ambushes. In 1902 it was officially declared suppressed. But there were still skirmishes and back-alley ambushes.

For all its remoteness, the village was world famous. During the Insurrection, C Company of the 9th Infantry had been ambushed there. Two-thirds of the soldiers had been killed. Many of those men had tried to surrender. They'd been subjected to unspeakable tortures before being allowed to die.

The marines were sent in. They had only one thing in mind, and they did it. At the ensuing court marshal it became known that the marine commander

had ordered his men to kill every native over ten years of age.

A war like that could not be forgotten or forgiven in the space of a few years. When Lieber arrived there were still isolated atrocities. The stray soldier or marine was occasionally murdered by disaffected tribesmen. But most of them had been won over, albeit grudgingly. Uncle Sam was investing millions of dollars in the Phillipines. Roads, railways, bridges and telegraph lines began to crisscross the islands. The far parts could suddenly hear and touch each other. Power stations, schools and sewage systems sprouted in the towns and villages. During his nine months on Samar, Lieber worked like a navvy. He cursed the day he'd heard of the *Fall of Port Arthur*, where he had met the marines who convinced him to enlist.

While doing battle with a renegade tribe in the interior, he found himself shouldering arms alongside a Moro Muslim--one of the former, much-feared *insurrectos*. He suddenly realized the absurdity of his occupation. He was a German fighting for America, allied with a Moro also fighting for America, over a country that was not America's.

Malaria ended his stint. Given massive doses of atabine, his skin turned a rich yellow. As if to mock his condition, the Corps transferred him to Tientsin, where he remained for a year. The marines stationed there kept themselves busy by dodging battles between the various factions of Christian and non-Christian Chinese. When Lieber's company was withdrawn, he was sure he would finally return to his adopted homeland.

He returned to America, all right.

Midway was a territory of the United States.

Neither the Corps nor the ghost of John Paul Jones could forgive him his moment of nausea in Marseilles. Lieber acquiesced silently. His father had come to America to escape Prussian hauteur and indifference. By entering the military Heinrich had, in a sense, returned to the fold. He was philosophical enough to accept the consequences of his action. One more stupid life-lesson to learn and put behind. Once his term of enlistment was up, he would kiss the Corps goodbye.

There was a slight juggling at the stern.

"Flitz! Ovuh there!"

Ace was pointing toward one of the outcrops of coral in the lagoon. Lieber stared hard at the water between the skiff and islet, but saw nothing beyond some gooney birds bobbing aimlessly on the small waves.

Ace shrugged. "I thought I saw one, Flitz."

"And you a fisherman...."

The Japanese drew a rueful countenance. He frequently accompanied Lieber on his shark hunts. He was as perplexed as the German by their sudden absence.

"Where are they?" Lieber grouched. They had not seen the tell-tale dorsal of a shark for well-nigh two days. Unusual. As long as he'd been on Midway, he'd never had to perform the arduous chore of chumming the water to lure sharks to the lagoon. If a deadly hammerhead was not lurking about, there would at least be a sand shark or two. But now... nothing.

Without forethought, he jumped into the water.

"Flitz!"

"*Verdammen Japanisch!*" Lieber cursed, raising a wet fist. Only ten years as an American, and already his German was ungrammatical. Most immigrants remained clustered in ethnic communities. They handed down the language of the Fatherland to their children, while reinforcing it in themselves. But Lieber was not only isolated from these lingual islands, he was separated from consistent language of any sort. He'd been sent to lands where French, Spanish, Tagalog and Mandarin were spoken. The Corps itself was a polyglot. And the man in the boat above him was shouting in Japanese--cussing up a dung heap, for all Lieber knew. His own speech had become a mishmash of half-sentences and pig-phrases. That his Low German would suffer drastic erosion in the ebb and tide of foreign tongues was only to be expected.

Muffled shouts came from above as Ace fought to keep the skiff upright. It would serve the little yellow bastard right if it overturned. *Call me 'Flitz' one more time and I'll push you in.*

The Oriental curses vanished in the oily underwater sounds. Lieber's spite was supplanted as the glowing wonderland of the lagoon greeted him--Midway's tiny sea, circumscribed by a five-foot high coral reef. Rich, inexplicable aqua and emerald shadings shuddered under the uncommon blue. Coral spiraled up from below, craggy green and jagged red. Castles for red snappers, moray eels, lobsters, parrot fish. Between the coral, ripples of light danced over small sand deserts, winking in and out, as full of undulating mirages as the Sahara.

It was odd how, crossing the ocean in a ship packed with émigrés, his sea sickness had fostered a deep revulsion for the sea--its waves, its interminable breadth, its smell. Yet here, he was able to bob around like a cork with no ill effects. Leaping in was like hopping on board a fat, warm, willing fraulein. The lagoon a luxurious female... which almost made up for the complete absence of real women on Midway. The immigrant ship, and the Brooklyn incident that had landed him here, were anomalies. Modern man's way of navigating the mains was a fiction, a trumped up means of separating himself from reality. The difference between plying the ocean and being in the ocean was the difference between sump and crisp sea.

His head broke the waves a couple dozen yards from the skiff. Ace waved at him dourly. Leiber brought up a hand and made a slashing motion across his throat. Interpreting this as a distress signal, Ace began rowing furiously in his direction.

Leiber shook his head, figuratively slashed his throat again, and forced a wide grin. Ace kept coming. Cupping his hands around his mouth, Leiber bellowed:

"If I cut my throat, maybe then the sharks will come!"

Ace did not pause.

It was humiliating. What if someone on shore was watching? Would they think the little yellow bastard was rushing to save the noble, brawny German from drowning? What a hoot they would get out of that!

"If I cut my own throat, maybe then the sharks will come!" Leiber cut across his throat several more times and laughed loudly.

"Flitz! Flitz!" Ace nearly knocked his head off with an oar as he drew

alongside of him.

Leiber chopped a slice of water with the side of his hand, sending it into the Japanese' face.

"Don't struggle, Flitz! Here, grab this!" Ace held out his shark grapple.

"Ah! Ah! No! No!" Leiber hit his own head in exasperation. "If I cut my own throat, then maybe the sharks will come! Ha! Ha! Ha!"

"Just grab hold! I'll pull you in!"

A series of unintelligible sounds convinced Ace that Leiber was in even worse trouble than he'd first thought.

"Grab hold, Flitz! Grab hold!"

"Listen to me, you yellow demon!" Leiber raised his hand, and with each of his words sent a shock of water into Ace's concerned face. "If... I... cut... my... throat... then... maybe... the... sharks... will... come!"

"Flitz... are you drowning?"

"Nein!"

"Then what are you saying?"

"Repeat after me. If...."

"If...."

"I cut my throat...."

"I cut my throat...."

"Then maybe...."

"Then maybe...."

"The sharks...."

"The sharks...."

"Will come... *Verstehen?*"

"We're staying?"

Leiber broke into a long string of guttural expletives Ace could not begin to follow. He was still wearing an expression of concern and perplexity when Leiber took hold of the gunwhale and tipped the skiff over.

"Flitz! Flitz! Help! I can't swim!"

Another series of gunshots could be heard from Eastern Island.

1732 Hours

"No one in the world can hold a Springfield perfectly still when it goes off. But you plebes've got to learn to hold it still *before* you pull the trigger. Let's try the prone again."

The squad went down on their stomachs. A moment later there were howls of pain and anger as Sergeant Ziolkowski began walking on them, stepping from ass to ass like a boy hopping rocks in a stream.

"Jesus, Top!"

"I think you have me confused with someone else. Now tell me the truth. Don't you think a little damage to your manhood might improve your aim? What was that? Did someone call me a fucking Polack? Well, that's better than Sweet Jesus. I'm a fucking Polack, yeah. I'm the worst fucking Polack of your worst fucking nightmare."

One of them rolled away to avoid being stepped on.

"Enderfall! Get your ass back here! You're the worst of the lot. How the hell did you get in the Corps?"

He flexed his red chevrons and stepped away for a minute to allow their curses to subside. In fact, most of them were decent shots, due in no small part to his violation of Navy regulations. No permanent alteration of a standard issue firearm was allowed. But Springfields were not serviceable as issued, in the sergeant's estimation. The steel band near the muzzle held the wooden stock so tightly to the barrel that it did not allow for lengthening. He showed his men how to pare away wood around the band so that the barrel would slide rather than bend when heat expanded it. He also taught them how to set the trigger pull, ream the rear aperture to make it larger, and file down the bolt-stop. He even had them blacken their gun-sights with candle wax.

Any of these procedures would have provided grounds for a demotion if a training camp commandant had found out. Lieutenant Anthony knew about it, of course. It was virtually impossible to hold any secrets in a place as tiny as this. But he chose to ignore the improvised gunsmithing for the simple reason that he'd done the same things to his rifle years before. This was not the national shoot at Camp Perry, Ohio, after all. Anthony had once attended the Governor's Match to watch rifle teams from the Army, Navy, National Guard and Marine Corps test their skill against each other. Rules for the match were provided by the National Board for the Promotion of Rifle Practice, and they were strictly enforced. There had been a great scandal when the Navy's midshipmen, who'd scored highest, were disqualified when it was discovered they had applied their emery clothes in places they shouldn't have. But the rules themselves were the scandal. You did not teach men how to survive on the battlefield by forcing them to comply with unnatural strictures. One did not fight a modern battle wearing dress gloves.

Ziolkowski continued his lecture. If their next assignment was the Philippines or China or Latin America, his boys just might make it through alive.

"You! Adjust that sling on your arm. Don't let it hang useless. It's not your dick, you know. Let it help you! All right, snappers, the left elbow goes directly under the right. Keep your body at a left angle to the target. Spread your feet apart, the insides flat on the ground. Hold the rifle on the left heel, not on your palm. There's no need to grip the stock. Got it?"

"Aye, Top!" came the chorus.

"Move your hands up to the sling-band, but don't press against it. That

would push the rifle away from your shoulder and you'd waste time pulling it back. By then you'd be dead."

"Hell, Top. This is Camp Perry shit. We won't get time for this in a real scrape."

"You saying you won't get time to aim? What do you plan to do in a battle, boy? Whittle your dick? You get trapped in some palmetto scrub, you'll bless the day I taught you to shoot. Enderfall! Ever try kissing a Moro? You'll end up kissing his black ass if you don't sight your target. The Corps might not miss you, but your Mum will."

No one laughed.

"Grip the rifle lightly--*lightly*--placing your thumb on the stock. Now lift the butt to the shoulder. Don't lift your right elbow off the ground or look toward your shoulder. Enderfall! Didn't Saint Francis bless you this morning? What the hell--"

"I'm a southpaw, Top."

"I'm not surprised."

Like NCOs world over, he considered his men a disreputable lot. The fact that they were indeed a disreputable lot did not help. Out of his nineteen men, three were known to have spent long terms in the brig, three others probably had, one was mentally incompetent, two were physically incompetent, and Private Enderfall was probably a sexual deviant. A shameful percentage of misfits. Christ, it wasn't as if they were *sailors*.

To top it all, Sergeant Ziolkowski could not sharpen his eye with an occasional boost of whiskey. He would have fought any comer who suggested marines were all drunkards. But the fact of the matter was that 'dead marine' was slang for an empty bottle of hooch in every one of the armed services. And that's what Midway was: one giant dead marine.

Half the men present had served on the China Station, and the comparison was stark. In Hankow one could buy some of the finest wines in the world from French commission agents. In Chefoo a case of Haig Scotch could be had for \$10. And though the temperature staggered around the hundred-degree mark in

summer, one could always sit under a punkah fan with a Gordon's gin sling to compensate for the weather.

A few bottles were brought ashore when the supply ships came in, but that happened only twice a year. Attempts were made to rectify the situation. Grass, bushes, berries--anything that fermented was distilled in a quest for a viable local brew. To no avail. Kittrell had read how the Mongols brewed an intoxicant from fermented mare's milk. Midway had plenty of donkeys wandering about its two main islands. The herd used to haul materials for the relay station had bred freely. But when they attempted the Mongol recipe, the result smelled so bad no one would get near it, let alone drink the vile concoction.

With one exception. Ziolkowski was not one to be put off by mere smell and appearance. He'd fought the Boxers in China, had been among those who stormed Peking and rescued the foreign legations. He'd seen action at Lofa, where Chinese corpses had been piled in huge, loathsome masses. During the Filipino Insurrection he'd seen and smelled things no sane man would even want to imagine. "This is the milk of kindness after what I've been through," he boasted to the enlisted men. When they continued to look at him doubtfully, he added, "Hell, when I was with the Scouting Fleet I visited every cantinero in the Caribbean. I've been to places where the water smelled worse than this."

He spent a week in the tiny infirmary after only half a cup of Midway's own koumiss.

The men potted away at the twenty-inch bull's-eyes for a quarter hour, with meager results.

"All right, if you can't shoot straight, I'll have to tell you about the Death of a Hundred Cuts."

The men moaned. Whenever the sergeant was feeling particularly vindictive, he would regale them with details of an execution he'd witnessed in Peking. Each recital dealt with a single cut, elaborated upon so lovingly that the men grew nauseous just listening. "Last time I told about... what was it? Cut Number Thirty-four? Now, Cut Number Thirty-five... that was a thing to behold. Just behind the ear--" He stopped when he spotted Lieutenant Anthony coming up the beach. "All right, snappers. Up on your feet. Here comes the *teniente*."

"Goddamn, Top," said one man getting up slow. "You buried my whacker."

"Shouldn't've been hard in the first place. Pr'sent-Hupp!"

"And how are our marksmen doing today, Sergeant?" said Anthony.

"Shipshape and Bristol fashion, sir," Ziolkowski said. Not a complete lie. It was the sergeant's perfectionism that prevented him from being satisfied.

"Don't go heavy on the ammunition," Anthony advised. "We only have four cases of six-millimeter left."

Ziolkowski kept a placid countenance. Anthony possessed the cardinal virtue all NCOs cherished: He let his sergeant handle the men. But he also possessed the one character trait Ziolkowski could not abide in any man: he whined. Lieutenant Anthony had served honorably in the Dominican Republic and Nicaragua. He could not comprehend why he'd been relegated to this flyspeck in the Pacific. The mystery at times moved him to near-hysteria. Catching the sergeant's ear, he would repeat his service record over and over--not asking "why?", but letting the inference speak for itself. A bit of tact that went unappreciated by Ziolkowski. The lieutenant was a whiner. He could not accept his fate-cum-orders. The sergeant himself had participated in several notable campaigns, had been wounded twice, had been recommended for the Navy Cross. And still, he was here. All because he called an ignorant ass an ignorant ass, and the ignorant ass in question also happened to be a captain.

Nothing to whine about, especially for a lifer. It wouldn't take much luck for him to see action again. Could be the Philippines again. Could be Latin America. Could be anywhere, the way the world was going. No reason for complaint. No cause to debase himself by whining.

The lieutenant was also a master at opening old wounds. The six-millimeter ammunition he referred to was for the Lee rifles, which Ziolkowski had sworn would never be used by any squad of his. He had first seen the Winchester-produced Lee while a Legation guard in Seoul. When some Korean soldiers attacked the ultimate symbol of imperialism in the Hermit Kingdom, an American-owned electric streetcar, the marines were sent in to save the property. During the riot, Ziolkowski found the Lee about as useful as a club. Unlike the Springfield Model 1903, in which the bolts were pulled up, back and forward, the Lee bolt was pulled forward and back. In a hot firefight this action threw off a man's aim. Since its camming power was poor next to the Mauser and

Springfield, the Navy began foisting the unloved weapon on marines and sailors stationed at remote outposts where little trouble was expected.

It did not matter that their worst enemy on Midway was boredom. When Ziolkowski arrived and found only Lees on the island, he called in some favors. The next supply ship brought four crates of Springfields.

Lieutenant Anthony was well aware that the unloved Lees were locked away in a supply shed. But every so often he mentioned the six-millimeter, an ironic reminder that replacing the Lees had been unauthorized. It was strange behavior in the man who was supposed to be in charge.

"Well... uh... good job, Sergeant. Carry on."

Anthony slouched away.

"What are you staring at, Enderfall?" Ziolkowski bellowed. "The target's out there."

"But, Top, you heard the lieutenant. We can't waste--"

"We've plenty of three-aught left. If you don't think so, I'll put you to counting it. By the way, Enderfall... I'm giving you butts, again."

Which meant Enderfall would have to stand near the targets and indicate hits with a dotter--dangerous because the Top sometimes liked to wing a shot by his ear just to show it could be done.

1850 Hours

Sometimes, just before making a fool of himself, Lieutenant Anthony was aware that he was about to make a fool of himself. But to stop and reconsider what he was doing or saying would, he felt, be cowardly. One had to plow ahead in life. Damn the torpedoes, damn the consequences....

Damn.

He had promised himself to stop mentioning the Lee rifles to Ziolkowski, because doing so only made him look foolish. Yet he'd done it again. There was something about this place that, to one degree or another, affected them all the same way:

It turned them into clowns.

What had he done to deserve Midway, the most distant dumping ground for misfits ever conceived? He had an honorable record. He'd seen action in Nicaragua. At least, whenever his unit approached a group of rebels, the rebels broke and ran. His most memorable event had been his bout with dysentery. As for his tour of duty in Haiti... at least he had *carried* a gun. But his main job in Port-de-Paix had been to hire natives to go out and shoot other natives.

Not much, but enough for a captaincy, at least. Instead, he got....

Depoy, who'd been caught making moonshine in the First Point Barracks at Guantanamo.

Kittrell. As much as Anthony sought his company, he could not ignore the fact that the chess genius had been found to be speculating in fruit shipments at one of the Caribbean banana-ports.

The hapless Lieber, who'd done nothing more (or less) than puke at an awkward moment.

There were the more sinister cases--Enderfall, for one, and Hoffman, who'd killed a *contratista* (a banana plantation overseer) who had had too much *casusa* in a barroom brawl on the Mosquito Coast. Self-defense. Nothing would have come of it, except that the plantation was owned by a large, influential U.S. fruit packing company which chose to take offense.

All of which went to highlight Anthony's predicament. He'd done no wrong... offended no one... kissed the requisite asses with nary a complaint.

"Only for two years," he kept telling himself. But the world was speeded up. Things were happening with kinescopic rapidity over the horizon. Midway's record prior to the relay station consisted primarily of shipwrecks, madness and suspected cannibalism. Not a proper history--and you could not participate in history without a history of your own or at least a place with something

resembling a civilized past.

There was a crunch as a gooney bird crashed to the ground nearby. Nothing to be alarmed about. That was how gooney birds almost always landed. They were, sadly, the perfect emblem for the marines stationed here. The most notable bird on the island was also a clown.

This one dug its long yellow bill out of the sand and shook its black-tipped wings. Anthony looked away. He found their eyes, gleaming darkly from under their long white lashes, curiously unsettling. They were like the eyes of the last woman he'd slept with. Falling back gently, she had glanced up receptively, redolent with musk and wisdom....

He *had* been here too long. It was so futile to think of women. To make one's self swell with cheerful abandon, only to be faced with an enormous absence. It made Anthony's mouth dry. Why, this deprivation could almost tempt him to go over the hill--only there was no hill to go over.

Most of the gooney birds had departed earlier that summer, flying as far west as the Kuriles before returning to the atoll. The few left were either unattached males, moping about like the rejected suitors they were, or gooneys who'd returned early from their aimless migration for no particular reason and who would soon leave again for no particular reason.

Why... they sounded like the Corps.

A slick of light shot across the water as the sun started down. Strolling down to the beach, Anthony stepped into a boat and began rowing across the lagoon. On the way to Sand Island, he passed Private Lieber and his Japanese shadow... what was his name? No matter. They all called him Ace. Lieber saluted crisply. The Japanese followed suit. Anthony had tried to explain to the Orientals there was no need for them to salute him. But they did not seem to comprehend his reasoning.

They were clowns, too.

As he neared Sand, electric lights glowed to life around the relay station. This was a bit of ostentation on the part of the Commercial Pacific employees and the marines did not complain. It got uncommonly dark on Midway at night. Certainly, on clear nights a man could see well enough with the moon and stars

shining down. But when the island's usual muck of wind and clouds returned, a man could become as lost as anyone in the Black Forest.

Someone was on the shore ahead.

"Hamilton! Take hold!" Anthony tossed out a line.

Hamilton Hart caught it and secured the boat dockside.

"Another marvelous evening."

"Yes," said Hart in a monotone.

Anthony did not really expect more from the cable station supervisor. For a man who oversaw the flood of cable traffic between three continents, he was remarkably terse. Anthony guessed he was ten years younger than his own thirty-five. Yet he stooped like an old man and wore the face of ages.

Anthony knew better than to say more. He also knew he was about to make a fool of himself... again.

"I like the way you've set the lights about the station and compound. Gives a touch of home."

No response.

After walking the length of the pier in commendable silence, Anthony continued, "You never said where you hail from. I'm out of Washington, myself. The *city* that is. Not much of a town, really. Even with all those monuments. But those lights around the station... they remind me of home."

"I wish they'd turn the damn things off," Hart said crossly.

"But I thought you.... Listen, Hart... about that Chink you hang around with. I hope he hasn't... well, influenced you. I mean...."

"You mean, do I smoke opium?"

"It's just that some of my men were over by his shack the other night. They could smell it. Bonehead's a dope fiend."

"We know no such thing. And his name is Chung-Ho. Chung works in the company garden, and when he's free he helps with my balloon--"

"Yes, I wanted to thank you again for your offer--"

"If you're thinking of searching his belongings, I'd advise against it. He hasn't done anything wrong. Neither have I, for that matter."

"No, of course not. Only, when you do spend time with anyone, it's him. We just don't want you to Jorgenson out on us, that's all,"

To 'Jorgenson out' was Midway vernacular for going mad. As incredible as it seemed, to newcomers at least, this desolate outpost had a legend. That it was a legend known throughout much of the English-speaking world was due to no less a writer than Robert Louis Stevenson.

In 1886 the *General Seigel* landed at Midway on a shark-hunting expedition. One of the fishermen preferred dynamite over reel and tackle. While in the process of bombing the lagoon, he accidentally bombed himself.

The expedition's fortunes did not improve after that. A storm came up and wrecked the schooner. Then the first mate, a Dane named Jorgenson, took to murdering the others. He'd killed two of them before the rest caught on. When they repaired the schooner and set sail, they left Jorgenson behind.

But Midway was a shark-hunter's paradise. Only a few months after the departure of the *General Seigel*, the *Wandering Minstrel*, a British bark, sailed into the lagoon. The captain assured Jorgenson that he was rescued. But another storm came up, wrecked the *Wandering Minstrel*, and left a new cast of castaways on the atoll.

A few years earlier, soon after Brooks stumbled across the island, the U.S. Government attempted to establish a coaling station on Midway. Tons of coal were dumped on Sand Island. The government was estimating the cost of dredging a channel into the lagoon when the *U.S.S. Saginaw* wrecked nearby. The entire project was given up as a bad idea.

As a result, however, several lighters had been left behind. Some of the men of the *Wandering Minstrel* constructed two sailing craft out of their remains. One was wrecked before it got out of the lagoon. The other put to sea. Its pitiful

crew was never seen again.

The remaining survivors slowly went insane. Their condition might very well have been due to scurvy. With no vegetables available, their gums rotted, they became weak. With the infernal screeching of thousands of birds constantly in their ears, their sanity crumpled.

Jorgenson apparently returned to his murderous ways, and did in several more sailors. To escape the wrath of the other castaways, he convinced a Chinese boy who had been a cook's helper on the *Wandering Minstrel* to escape with him on a hastily-built raft. After forty-three days at sea, they landed in the Marshalls. By then, Jorgenson was a confirmed lunatic. The rest of his life was spent in an asylum, in a haze of babble.

But it was what happened afterwards that made Midway famous in the literary world. A fishing schooner appeared over the horizon. The handful of survivors from the *Wandering Minstrel* cheered. Saved at last!

But the skipper of the schooner was a very odd bird. A strange, gruff figure pale almost to the point of being albino. He acted as though he'd known about the Midway survivors in advance. More, he knew the *Wandering Minstrel* had had a substantial amount of cash on board her when she struck the reef. He demanded all the money as the price of rescue. Having no choice, the survivors turned it over.

It was one of these survivors that Stevenson met in Honolulu. The novel that resulted, *The Wrecker*, became a best-seller.

Had he Jorgensoned out? Hart mused upon the possibility, then answered. "No, Lieutenant. I still have one or two atoms of wit about me." With that, he walked away, down the dark line of the shore.

Anthony's blush was hidden in the cumulating darkness. He slouched. "I knew better," he berated himself. "I knew...."

1902 Hours

Hamilton Hart would have thrived on Midway but for one thing: It was not isolated enough. Within its two square miles, it proved difficult to avoid the other thirty-seven men on the island duo. Complete silence on land might have translated into peace of mind. As it was, with the marines around, barking at each other to ward off boredom, memories were triggered. Hart wanted no memories. He wanted something just short of death. Sometimes even that.

Against the relay station a knot of marines took on a brilliant sheen under the fading sun and emphasizing arc lights. For a few minutes they looked like golden warriors. Then the sun failed completely and the glow became harsh--more appropriate to the purposeless stream of invective that flowed down from them. Would they have fulminated against life had they been seated on some exotic veranda in the South Pacific? Probably. Soldiers were like old men who spat seeds and stared. There was always something to curse about in this vale of tears. That was how most of Hart's men had been when he was a lieutenant in the Army.

There was no way Lieutenant Anthony could have known that Hart's surly silence was his way of keeping a grip on himself--that he had Jorgensoned out long ago. He did not want to babble again the way he had babbled in the nightmare woods on the Kiltik. And it had not stopped there. He had babbled to the U.S. Marshal in Kotzebue. He'd babbled on the boat that returned him to San Francisco. He'd babbled to General Funston when he reported back to the Presidio.

It was Funston who finally closed his mouth. He had been Acting Commander of the Pacific Division during the great quake and fire. He'd told his troops to shoot down any looters they saw. And shoot them down they did, by the score. When the general meant business, he made it clear in no uncertain terms. He turned a cold, deadly eye on Lieutenant Hart.

"Pending investigation, I'm sending you to Angel Island. You will report to the Twenty-second Infantry commissary at Fort McDowell and remain there until this matter is cleared up."

Those words ended Hart's career in the Army. He would not--indeed, could not--resign until the expedition dispatched to hunt for survivors returned. But by the time searchers arrived upriver, winter had set in. Scavengers had disposed of the bodies of dogs and men and a blizzard erased all trace of the camp by the

Kiltik and Salmon Rivers.

Without proof of some sort, the Army could not prosecute Hart for dereliction of duty. Nor could they deal him a dishonorable discharge. But by Godfrey, they would not give him an *honorable* one. Hart's resignation was the best solution for all involved.

"Numba One work on balloon tonight?"

Hart shrugged as a tiny man in tattered trousers appeared like a tiny dust storm out of nowhere. Chung-Ho Chu was so tiny he could have been mistaken for a large doll. Hart was the only Occidental who'd taken the trouble to learn the Chinaman's real name. To everyone else, he was known as Bonehead. It was not exactly an insult. Inventing names was a cherished pastime on the atoll. Most everyone had a moniker, and few were flattering.

No one knew how Bonehead had come to this spot over a thousand miles from Chengchan Tow, his home in the Shantung Province, or what his purpose was in being here. Hart wondered if it had anything to do with the movement in China to wipe out the opium industry. He knew Chung smoked the drug on occasion, but he had not lied when he told Anthony that Chung did nothing wrong--because nothing seemed wrong to Hart anymore. And when Chung spoke of dragons, the veridical shudder that bolted through Hart seemed to exclaim the reality of unreality.

"I am one of the *Lung Tik Chuan Ren*," Chung had proudly declared. "I was born in the Year of the Dragon." Hart had the typical White difficulty with adjudging the age of Oriental people. Though unfamiliar with the Chinese new year calendar, by piecing together other remarks he concluded Chung had been born in 1880, which made him twenty-eight years old. "People born in the Year of the Dragon are good. They are not sly and don't trick others. They want things done right. But they have some problems. They want to be in charge. They are brickheaded."

"I think you mean 'hardheaded.'"

That night several months earlier Chung's words carried a peculiar smoky aroma Hart's way as he spoke. He nodded benignly when his English was corrected. "Parents most desire to have their children in the Year of the Dragon. It is exceptional luck. I am guaranteed a long and fruitful life."

Chung was in one of his rare talkative moods, and Hart in an even rarer mood to listen. He had asked Chung to tell him about dragons. He learned that Eastern dragons were nothing like their medieval European counterparts. Rather than being destructive, their dragons were the source of *sheng chi*--the celestial breath that provided the essence of life. They gave man the seasons of the year, the earth, the wind and abundant warm sunshine. When human potentates refused to heed their advice, they were offended and instigated wrathful storms. The smaller dragons were practical jokers, turning rice into goo and punching holes in rooftops. While dragons originated in China, some had moved on to other lands. You could tell where they came from by the number of toes. Chinese dragons had a full compliment of five, Indonesian dragons had four, Japanese had three, and so on.

Chung lived in a little shack set apart from the others. He socialized by approaching other Midwayans while muttering bitter non-sequiturs in what may or may not have been an established language, then scuttling away like a crab avoiding a foot. It did not seem appropriate behavior for a descendant of dragons. He was far from being a leader and--as far as Hart knew--had no children. His very existence made Chinese astrology every bit as flimsy and inaccurate as its Western counterpart.

"Numba One sit all night looking at water again?"

Hart wondered why, of all people, Chung had latched onto him, the island's only other bona fide hermit. It was as if the Chinaman's enjoyment of solitude was perversely increased by sharing it. But after his usual introductory inanities, Chung subsided into a tranquil silence; often following, sometimes not; sometimes seated next to Hart as he watched the moon-specked waves, as often disappearing like a puff of opium smoke.

They settled down on a sandy knoll. It briefly bothered Hart that Chung might be parroting him by turning an extravagant gaze upon the ocean and sighing. But what did it matter, so long as he said nothing? Two diesel generators were chuffing inland--one for the fresh water distillery, the other for the relay station and its lights. The outdoor lights were a concession to Hart's operators, city boys who liked their paths well lit. They monitored intercontinental cable traffic twenty-four hours a day. If an emergency arose and they had to get Hart, they did not want to stumble through the dark to the company house.

Lieutenant Anthony was right. Lit up, the station did indeed look like something lining Pennsylvania Avenue. A monument to man's ability to create artificial solace in lonely places. But to Hart's thinking, the fuel spent running the generators was wasted. The only lights truly needed were inside the station, where the telegraph operators monitored intercontinental cable traffic twenty-four hours a day. And the distillery was not really needed. All one had to do was scrape away some sand to find water. Brackish, but drinkable.

A swash of water drew his attention. For a moment, he would have sworn he saw a ship's mast. He noted Chung staring hard at the water's edge.

"What do you see?"

Without answering, Chung stood and began walking towards the beach. Something was out there, all right. But if it was a ship, Hart had no doubt someone would have seen it on the horizon before sunset.

They were well beyond the light emanating from the station and compound. Yet Hart could discern Chung's outline against the stars, an animated simulacrum denting the night. Ahead of him something tall rose. It moved and for a moment Hart mistook it for a very thick mast.

Light blew into the world. The marines at the station had noticed something odd seaward and had switched on a spotlight.

The creature raised itself out of the water, its chest propped on the sand. The light seemed to explode off its wet skin, showing the entire length of its neck.

Chung-Ho hesitated only a moment. He glanced back at Hart and said in a wondrous tone, "A dragon...." Then he added to the astonishment of the onlookers by continuing down the beach.

"Bonehead!" the marines at the spotlight shouted. "Chung!" Hart added in a voice loaded with disbelief. But Chung either did not hear or was ignoring their entreaties. He had always been like a man in a trance. The presence of the beast did not shock him out of character.

The creature was momentarily dazzled by the light. It swayed back and forth a few times in confusion. Then it saw Chung and froze--its perplexity

compounded, as if it was not accustomed to having its meals walk right up to it.

"Chung!" came Hart's frantic cry.

The Chinaman stopped and looked down. "*No toes!*" he cried out. Then he raised his eyes. Man and creature stared at each other. The marines fell silent, stunned in every way.

"Bonehead!" came Hart's final, horrified commentary.

The creature slowly dipped, paused... dipped, paused... lowering its head in tentative stages, until it was directly above the man. One might have thought it was about to lick the man like a loving pet. It sniffed. As though picking a bug off a petal, it opened its jaws and took Chung-Ho between its teeth.

The man's scream was short-lived.

The ground began to shake. The thud of donkeys was a familiar one on Midway. They were descended from the draft animals that had been let loose after the construction of the relay station. Living off marram grass and the brackish but salt-free water only inches under the sand, they roamed in wild herds. But the profound counterpoint of mini-quakes was a new sound. The spotlight swung wildly.

2020 Hours

Lieutenant Anthony dashed into the quad when he heard the commotion. He could see the frantic shadows of men racing about the spotlight fifty yards away. There appeared to be something on top of the relay station. It was rising in the air. He could not imagine--

His heart thumped to his throat when he realized the thing was not on the building, but beyond it--alive and coming closer.

"Name all the waters, all the countries, all the capes and major bays you would have to pass if you started at Chicago and traveled to Manila via the

Horn."

This had been the final question on his Marine Corps entrance examination. The Secretary of the Navy himself had chosen him for the honor, there being no state senator for the District of Columbia. Along with algebra, geometry of the plane and solid varieties, and geography, spelling was very big with the examiners. Anthony had prepped at Swaveley, a cram school open to the privileged sons of Corps' alumni. But with the Marine Corps Band practicing on the balcony in Band Hall at the Washington Marine Barracks where the test was given, spelling words like physiognomy, tonsillectomy and psoriasis had verged on the impossible.

Yet he had passed and the next thing he knew he was staring across a river at Port Royal, South Carolina. The Corps had situated its School of Application at Parris Island, site of an old navy yard. There, Anthony learned small-arms firing regulations, drill regulations, tactics, organization, hygiene, rifle instruction, signals, engineering, security, and administration.

None of which helped him with what he was seeing now. Miami and San Juan lay one thousand and thirty-two miles apart. Cabo Raso jutted between Cayenne and Sao Luis. The Corps did not bother teaching him monsters did not exist because that was a given.

And here was a monster.

Lieutenant Anthony's men carried their rifles wherever they went. He'd told them this was to prevent the Nips and Chinks from breaking into the armory--contained in a small shed--and overthrowing the ostensible government. In reality, this was a concession to Ziolkowski, who could turn a devil's jig at the sight of rust or verdigris on bluing. By making them keep their guns by their side, the sergeant could make certain they were properly maintained, and know who to blame if they weren't.

The problem that immediately presented itself to Anthony was that his men carried little ammunition. It would take more than a few rounds of .30-06 to bring that beast down. Reaching into his pocket for his keys, he dashed across the compound.

He never made it to the armory. A horrible animal scream came from high in the air. Whirling to his left, he saw something spray across the sand, black and

glistening like oil gushing from a hose. Before he could look closer, something hit him boulder-hard. A bell rang and shouts sounded.

When next Anthony opened his eyes, he was a dozen yards from where he'd been--the world top-up and down. Lights blinked on and off. Before he passed out, Anthony saw what had hit him. Lying in the sand next to him was a donkey's head. Its mouth worked spasmodically in a lung-less bray of anguish.

2031 Hours

On the other side of the lagoon, men stood on the short dunes and tried to catch a glimpse of what was happening on Sand. The tiny points of Gooney Island and Spit Island marked the mile distancing the two major islands of the atoll and aided their sense of perspective. The creatures only *looked* small from here.

"First Squad! Fall in!" Ziolkowski shouted. "Not you, Enderfall. Hustle your ass to the shack and get the Rexer." He noted Lieber running up breathlessly from the lagoon. "You go with him, Fritz, and bring the ammo. On the double! The rest of you: load and lock!"

Boats were dragged into the shallows. When Enderfall and Lieber returned, everyone piled in. They began rowing across the lagoon.

"Top... do you see that?"

A scream shot out across the water. The rowers hesitated.

"Dip them, boys. I see them, too. But the others are in trouble. We've got to--Well, thank God for that."

Rifle shots rang out. The marines had begun to fight back.

2053 Hours

Ziolkowski and his men saw not only the huge creature closing in on the relay station with surprising speed, but also two giants bounding through the quad. They could just make out the dark shapes of donkeys bolting madly in all directions. As one of them darted through the compound, it was taken from behind. Teeth clamped over its backbone, it continued to gallop as the creature lifted it. Limbs were severed one by one as the creature gnawed. Before swallowing, a great shake separated the donkey's head from its body and sent it flying. The men in the boats were amazed when the head knocked down a man running towards the armory.

Private Lieber was stunned, horrified and entranced by the spectacle. Where had such magnificence come from? Eager for a closer look, he stroked so hard he outpaced the other rowers and started the boat in a circle.

"Ease off, Fritz!" Ziolkowski shouted. "You've got us catching crabs back here."

Palms hot and wet, Lieber fell into sync. The dark seemed to draw the boat down, hold it back--at least, to Lieber's thinking. To the rest, the boat was shooting ahead heedlessly into the maw of death.

"When we land, I want order arms, you hear?" Ziolkowski called out to the boats. "I don't want any of you doing a rabbit into the bushes. Fritz, extend to the left with three men. But not far. We'll be snapping in on volleys. And for God's sake be *quiet*. I want to come up behind that big one."

He wants to sneak up on that? the men wondered in dread as they exchanged glances. It might be better than charging down its throat, but it was not nearly as good an idea as rowing back to Eastern.

Lieber looked down. His Springfield was hidden in shadow at the bottom of the boat. He felt around with his bare toes to make sure there was no water leaking in. No good going ashore with a wet gun. The beast was wonderful, yes, but something so magnificent and terrible could not be allowed to live.

Ziolkowski's plan for an orderly landing was shattered when the largest of the creatures crushed the relay station. The imported tile roof avalanched backwards, collapsing the shed behind the building--the shed that held the main

generator.

After a loud crash and bang, everything went dark.

2100 Hours

The marines firing at the creature from the station avoided being crushed by inches. The operators inside were not so lucky. Their screams were cut short as walls and beast caved in on them.

Private Kitrell ran up to the creature. With his good arm he pressed his Springfield against its flank and fired. The recoil knocked him back.

"Skinny!"

A flipper like a bulwark whipped up. Though barely grazing Kitrell, he was thrown twenty yards.

"Skinny! You stupid... you stupid...." Depoy hesitated. The beast terrified him. The sudden darkness terrified him. The smell of deep things risen was so strong it drove him back. But a mate was down. "Come on!" he shouted over the noise. Dropping his gun, he raced forward. He could just discern Skinny Kitrell's prone form. He was unconscious--if not dead. Taking hold of his arms, he waited for someone to grab the legs.

No one appeared.

It was as stark a shock as the beast itself. But an instant later two men showed up and helped him raise Skinny off the ground.

Timber and masonry snapped and buckled as the creature made rubble of the building. Depoy sensed it had attacked the building because of the spotlight next to it. Now that the light was gone, it was trying to decide what to attack next. To the marines, it was obvious. There was food in the area. *They* were the food.

The beast's slightest movement could result in them all being crushed. Once they had a firm grip on Kitrell, they scrambled wildly... falling, dragging themselves and the unconscious man a few more yards before slipping down again. Depoy ran straight into some dannert wire, the remains of a fence that had once corralled the donkeys. He was cut savagely, but made no noise. No one spoke. Visions of Bonehead exploded in their brains.

2108 Hours

On Eastern Island the Japanese workers had watched Ziolkowski's marines depart with dismay. Ace was particularly vexed when he saw Lieber go with them without a single backward glance.

Other than storms, the worst thing he'd ever witnessed at sea was off Cape Naka-Shiretoko. Ace was talking to two men in another small boat. Abruptly, the man who was seated shrieked, throwing up his arms in sudden agony. Yet he did not stand. A sail fish had mistaken the boat for prey and hulled it, driving its sword completely through the boat and impaling the man's rectum.

Fatalism and religion helped the fishermen deal with weather and waves, but only a nasty turn of cynicism could counter the nasty things the ocean dished out. Mentally, the Japanese fishermen were better prepared than anyone else on the island for the abrupt appearance of the Tu-nel. They were horrified by what was happening on Sand, but tales of sea serpents abounded in Japanese fishing lore. The creatures across the lagoon were but three mythological monsters come to life.

"We have to do something."

"Without guns?"

"There are Lee rifles in the armory."

Ace jumped as if pricked. The fishermen glanced at each other with wary surprise. Minutes later, they were piling into one of the fishing boats.

2116 Hours

The fire in the station guided Ziolkowski's party.

"We'll bring it down with a few stiff volleys," he asserted.

No one was convinced, but they followed him nonetheless. Oddly, it was not so wrenching coming up from behind. The beast was like a large, steep hill, with little beyond a stubby tail to identify it as something else. They wondered why it remained so still as they sneaked up. They could not know it was investigating a smell it only vaguely recognized: burning human flesh.

"Enderfall," the sergeant hissed, "keep your ass close. I want you to feed me the clips."

After his sorry experience with the Lee rifle while stationed in the Hermit Kingdom, Ziolkowski had gone in search of a good Mauser. It was while snooping around one of the European armories that he learned about a new kind of portable machine gun--a nasty producer of mass death with a palindromic name. After some heavy dealing with a regimental quartermaster, he acquired a Danish Rexer.

Hugging it close, he led his men to within a few yards of the tail. He realized suddenly that it was only short relative to the rest of the body. One swipe from it could practically destroy his command. The safest course would be to fan his men as he'd originally intended, but he now wanted a concentrated burst, if possible against the head.

Abruptly, the beast's massive rear flippers dug into the ground, flinging up a quarter ton wall of sand that fell over the marines.

Blinded, choking, they clawed their way back to their feet--and promptly fell again when the earth shook like a beaten pillow. Lieber lost his rifle in the new mound. He spent several desperate moments trying to dig it out, then gave up and fled.

He was not the only one running. Up to that instant, they had been mercilessly prodded by Ziolkowski. But now the sergeant was speechless, preoccupied with spitting what seemed to him like the better part of a dune out of his mouth. With his stern voice temporarily silenced, the insanity of what they were trying to do struck them. It was crazy, marching right up to the beast like this. The only sane response was to race away.

But... where was the monster?

They stopped. The fire in the generator shed had spread to the station. Plenty of light to see by now. But no monster in sight.

They could hear it, though. It had moved beyond the station. It sounded as if it was moving past the company compound.

2134 Hours

The Japanese prudently decided to land at Picket Point, almost half a mile beyond the station. But as they neared Sand Island, they noted dozens of terrified donkeys clustered at the water's edge. Racing up close behind were two of the monsters. They tore through the frightened animals, crushing many of them, slashing at others with their long teeth. The third beast, impossibly larger, lumbered up and joined in the slaughter. The maimed donkeys sounded like women screaming.

The fishermen changed course.

Landing below the relay station, they encountered Ziolkowski's routed men. The marines' eyes were wide with incredulity and terror. They seemed ready to shove the Japanese out of the way and commandeer their boat. They hesitated when they realized the beast was not chasing them.

This gave Ziolkowski time enough to catch up. The fringe of hair orbiting his bald pate stuck out at right angles. He looked every inch a devil.

"Well, boys, that was a helluva stand you made. It'll rank right up there

with the Alamo and San Juan Hill, won't it now?"

Eleven pairs of eyes stared blankly at the sergeant.

"Top Cut, did you have your eyes open?"

"Easy, snapper. Any of you manage to keep hold of your rifle? A fine bunch. Your grandfathers must've fought the British at Washington. Think you can go back and get them?"

"What?"

"You know, the little sticks that go 'boom-boom'? You've got time. On the double! Enderfall! Get your ass over here! Where the hell are my ammo clips?"

The Japanese shook their heads. It seemed inconceivable that the stalwart Leathernecks had panicked, leaving their weapons behind. Ace experienced a keen sense of shame for Lieber; he'd run like a coward, just like the rest of them.

2148 Hours

Privates Depoy and Hoffman, along with the rest of the marines who'd been lounging near the station earlier that evening, crept towards the compound in search of Lieutenant Anthony. They could just make out the monsters at Picket Point as they feasted on warm donkey meat. It was a feeding frenzy. Hideous, unnatural sounds rolled across the dunes.

Anthony had last been seen entering the company house. Slowly, the marines neared the quad. Without realizing it, they employed an Indian-fighter approach--half crawling, jumping behind tiny hillocks, instinctively dodging snipers where none existed.

The compound was a shambles. The frames of the three small houses and the barracks shone like bare whale bones in the moonlight. Guards were posted at the far end of the quad while Depoy and the others sifted through the ruins. Every so often the fire at the station flared enough to light up their surroundings.

The ground had been packed down like a playing field--oil barrels, fences, bushes were flattened--and unexplained shadows shifted eerily across the sand.

There was a moan.

"Over there...."

Depoy peered at a dark mass near the armory. They took a few tentative steps. The gory mess before them was not something they cared to see close up, but when the moan was repeated, they rushed ahead.

They had been looking at the crushed head of a donkey. In the semi-darkness it was nearly indistinguishable from how they imagined a badly mangled man would look. Beyond the head lay Lieutenant Anthony. Less than a foot away the ground was deeply indented.

"Jesus, *teniente*... can you stand?"

"*Teniente*?" Anthony said with wan disapproval.

Though he was drenched with blood, they soon discovered his only wound was a nasty gash on the side of his head.

"What happened?"

"We got bashed, Lieutenant. We got bashed bad."

Another group of men appeared. Deciding that Anthony had recovered sufficiently to know what was going on, Ace announced:

"We want the Lee rifles."

2158 Hours

Ziolkowski and his men soon joined them in the quad. After consulting with the lieutenant, a defensive perimeter was established around the relay station. They searched for survivors in the wreckage.

None were found.

0610 Hours

The longest night of their lives ended when the pink bolster of sunrise unrolled over the island. Lieutenant Anthony ordered Ziolkowski to send a man a few hundred yards towards the northern end of the island. His curiosity getting the better of him, the sergeant went himself.

"Enderfall! Get your ass over here! Fill a satchel with clips. You're coming with me."

After creeping across the dunes, the two men lay down and parted a thin veil of marram grass to study the lone monster on the bloody beach.

It seemed as if a quarter of the island's donkeys had been killed and most of those had been eaten. The sergeant's impression was that the beast was feeling stuffed. Lolling on the beach, it raised one front flipper, then the other one, as though waving at the sun.

"Helluva fiz," he commented. "Look at those green stripes. I wonder if it-- Enderfall! Get your ass back here! You fucking deviant, I've got my eye on you. I heard about you in Manila. Get ready with those clips. We're going to have some bastard steaks for breakfast."

The sergeant drew up the Rexer. From a distance it looked like a large rifle, but up close one noted the distinctive perforations in its barrel. Depoy had told him they'd fired over two dozen shots at the monster that had destroyed the relay station without slowing it a whit. More firepower was called for and the Rexer had it. A five-second burst could empty a clip, each of which held twenty-five cartridges. With a pile of clips at his side, he could easily fire three hundred rounds per minute. After fitting one of the long, curved magazines into the top of the breech, he opened the two narrow supports at the front of the barrel, lay on his stomach, and took aim.

Out of habit he braced the gun against his shoulder. But the recoil was

minimal. The Rexer had, in effect, two barrels, inner and outer. When Ziolkowski pressed the trigger the recoil drove the inner barrel, the breech, and other moving parts two inches back into a powerful spring built into the stock.

A line of bullets raced up the sand, then began stitching the beast itself. Ziolkowski had chosen the easiest target first, hitting the enormous flank. The creature whipped its sinuous neck back and forth, more perplexed than hurt.

"So you think that tickles, you son of a bitch?" He took another magazine from Enderfall and reloaded. "Let's see what you think of this."

Shooting at the base of its neck, he tried to work a path of lead to its head and eyes. But the creature threw its neck back and forth so quickly that Ziolkowski was unable to blind it. The sergeant fetched up a moment, startled, when the creature let out a sound.

"Tooo... nel...."

Pushing itself off the beach, it splashed through the lagoon to the edge of the shelf. The very fact that it was moving away convinced Ziolkowski his gunfire was at least annoying the beast, so he began firing another clip. The few bullets that missed kicked up water in tall, narrow geysers. The creature snapped at them like a dog biting a stream of water from a hose. Spent cartridges clicked like small change in the sand.

"Tooo... nel...."

Suddenly, the lagoon exploded. A tower of seawater transformed itself into a monster more than twice the size of the one he'd been shooting at. It was moving fast....

Inland.

Briefly, Ziolkowski switched his fire to the mammoth. It hit the beach and kept coming.

"Enderfall!"

But the private had bolted. Ziolkowski was also convinced. He jumped and ran.

He swerved. If the creature chased him instead of Enderfall, he wanted to lead it away from the relay station. There would be no way they could defend themselves. Not with mere Springfields.

The ground shook so hard his teeth rammed together. He could not bring himself to glance back.

He soon ran out of land. Facing the ocean, he shouted, "No!" He might be a marine, but he would die on land. Bad enough getting eaten by a big fish without the little ones getting a nibble, too. The idea didn't make much sense... but that was how he felt. Bracing himself, he turned.

The monster was gone.

So was his Rexer.

It took him nearly a minute to conclude he might still outlive the morning. He was shaking violently, trying to bring himself under control with an objective glance at his fear. The last time he'd reacted this way was during a fight with the Cacos in the jungle near Ouanaminthe. He bore a long scar across his abdomen from that encounter.

He was still shaking. *My gun.*

"Goddamn it!" he swore, biting his mouth. Maybe... if he moved....

He retraced his steps, praying the whole time no one could see him. He found the Rexer halfway up the nearest dune. Still shaking, he picked up the gun and turned. He marched stiffly past the compound, cursing all the way back to the relay station. The men at the perimeter gaped at him. Enderfall had told them he'd been killed. Well, count on the Top Cutter. If anyone could return from the dead, he'd be the one.

"Goddamn it!" He stomped through a group of men without looking at them. "Goddamn it!"

"Sergeant..." Anthony said in a low voice as he approached. "Are you all right? We could only see the brute's head. It looked as if--"

"Goddamn it!" Ziolkowski raised his Rexer. "I kept my gun!"

Impressed, the other marines nodded understandingly.

Men were sent out to search for those missing and not accounted for. A handful were found scattered in sandy niches, some jabbering like idiots. It took some time to bring them round, but there was one who could not be brought to his senses.

When they found Hamilton Hart, he was balled up in the sand. Over and over he babbled:

"Not again! Please God, not again!"

There were several Chinese stranded on Eastern Island. Watching the giant sea creatures sculling across the lagoon, Lieutenant Anthony postponed any attempt to retrieve them.

XIV

May, 1908 — 37°49'N, 122°28'W

From a marine's diary:

Passed in review before California Governor Gillette; 5,000 of us, bluejackets, marines, all ranks; just like in San Diego, I was in the fifth set of fours; all this marching--I've earned my land legs! Supposed to march again in Oakland in a few days; went on a search detail with some SF policemen to find body of Sgt. Briscoe, who jumped overboard as we entered the harbor; we didn't find him, but I saw much interesting shore life; the sergeant has been declared a deserter, but the money says he drowned; his clothes have been sold; we wonder why he jumped; a whole slew of marines beached for bad conduct; I must say we don't make a very good impression on the locals; spent my last liberty in Vallejo and saw several ranches, which made me think of home; was introduced to Miss Linda Grace; she is very beautiful and also very nice; last night I dreamt about Mother standing on the front porch and waving.

Three hundred yards west of the Commercial Pacific Cable Company office the telegraph cable slipped into the ocean and began its twenty-four hundred mile journey to Hawaii. As he stared out the office window, Captain Oates pondered that distance, as well as the thousand-plus miles beyond it that led to Midway. It would have been madness to send him on to Honolulu with so little preparation. Rear Admirals Thomas and Sperry were ordering the *Florida* to bypass Hawaii altogether, making a beeline to the atoll.

"What do we know about Midway?" Thomas hemmed. "Well, let's see."

The last time Oates had seen him close up, Thomas looked like an overage schoolboy who'd just passed an exam he'd fully expected to fail. As Rear

Admiral Evans became increasingly ill, it was Thomas who was assigned to take his place at notable gatherings. And it was making him just as ill. His speech was slurred. His hands shook. Was he still drunk from the bash at the San Francisco Civic Center? Or the rapid-fire series of *fetes royal* in Marin County? Perhaps he had not recovered from the cascades of punch served outside the De Young Memorial Museum. And then there were the hundreds of private parties thrown off like sparks from the main events.

It was probably an accumulation of them all, Oates thought. Which did not change the fact that the semi-inebriated, semi-ill, and completely pooped man before him was the new commander of the Fleet.

Only an hour after speaking with the *Florida's* skipper, Admiral Evans had roused himself from his wheelchair to deliver a fiery speech in the banquet hall of the Fairmont. The effort cost him dearly. The very next day he was so sick that he hauled down his flag and turned command over to Thomas.

His replacement was as ready for a world cruise as a rotten tomato was for market. The consensus was that the flag officer standing next to him this moment, Admiral Sperry, would soon take the conn. But like any civilized man, he had to await his turn.

"Midway...." Thomas had difficulty focusing his thoughts. His eyes, as well. They wandered over the plush Commercial Pacific office and landed in confusion upon Mr. Schwed and Mr. Follet, the company officials who had prompted him to shoot off a wire to Roosevelt.

"Uh... lots of storms around there, I think. Plenty of wrecks, that much I know. Coral atoll surrounded by a reef." He wiggled his brow at his fellow rear admiral. "Great God, Sperry. We've got the entire Grand Atlantic Fleet at our disposal and I can't think of a single man who's been to Midway."

"I can tell you this much," said Schwed, nervously unfolding a chart on his deck. "It's at 28.14 north latitude and fourteen minutes off the 180th meridian. The station on Sand Island not only connects us to China. It's a vital link in the Honolulu-Luzon Submarine Cable. I know the insurrection in the Philippines has been quelled. Officially. But it should make us all uneasy, losing contact with our troops there."

Oates leaned over and glanced at the map. "That's not what I need."

"I know. I'm afraid our sounding charts for Midway are all at our Honolulu office. The ones we had here were destroyed in the Great Quake."

Before Oates could comment on this, there was a knock at the door and Lieutenant Grissom entered. The executive officer of the *Florida* had to look twice at Thomas and Sperry before recognizing them. He twitched uneasily as he stood attention. Things did not bode well when flag officers sneaked around out of uniform.

"It's done?" Oates asked him.

"Yes, sir. The *Florida's* tied up at Long Wharf. I'm afraid we had to use the Red Stacks to tow her. With the better part of the crew on shore, there wasn't enough time--"

"Bragh!" was the sound Sperry made. He was the son of a New England brass manufacturer and it showed. "This is supposed to be a secret move, Lieutenant!"

Grissom was nonplussed. He had been concerned about the bill the Red Stack Company would present them, not secrecy. How could one move a battleship across the bay without anyone noticing?

"Sir..." The exec turned this way and that, not sure who to address. "There were trains waiting for us. They knew we were coming."

"That would be your food and other supplies," said Sperry. "I have friends with the Commissary who know how to hold their tongues. But you'll have to do the coaling yourself. The Oakland longshoremen won't load coal. Bunch of anarchists who don't like to get their hands dirty, I suppose. Now you see why you have to get your men back quickly as possible. It'll take you most the night."

"Yes..." said Thomas tentatively. Then, more firmly, "Yes!"

Addressing Grissom's look of utter perplexity, Oates said, "I'm sure you'll agree no captain can run his ship effectively unless he confides in his exec."

The rear admirals grunted agreement.

Taking a slip of paper off Schwed's desk, Oates handed it to Grissom.

"Commercial Pacific received this cablegram at Honolulu four hours ago."

The exec read: "MID UNDR ATAK STOP FIRE IN."

"Oh my God," Grissom whispered. "The Japs?"

Oates dismissed this with a wave of his hand. "Probably a fire in the cable house. Catastrophic, perhaps, but... well, look at it. The telegraph operator was obviously so rattled he couldn't spell."

"Deleting letters is standard practice," said Mr. Schwed. "It's faster. More economical. The operator was in control. The station was put out of commission before he could finish his message."

"Let's see, now," said Thomas. "At sixteen knots you can make three hundred and eighty-four miles a day. That would put you at Midway when... next Sunday?"

"We've reassigned colliers from the Samoan expedition to accompany you," Sperry gruffly intruded.

Thomas nodded grimly. The Pacific Squadron had been dispatched to Samoa in preparation for a possible alliance with the Germans, who controlled the islands. If the presence of the Atlantic Fleet in the Pacific sparked war between the United States and Japan, the Americans would be fighting shoulder-to-shoulder with the Kaiser's men--an acute reminder that a Japanese invasion of Midway was a distinct possibility.

"If you'll excuse me, gentlemen. My exec and I have much work to do."

"Get your men back quick as you can!" Sperry reiterated. "But for God's sake don't fly blue peter or your steaming colors. We don't want the whole world to know!"

"If it's war, how will the world *not* know?" said Grissom once they were outside.

Oates let the implied criticism of Sperry pass without comment. Sighing, he took out a telegram. "This came two hours ago."

The exec unfolded it and read:

"TO ADMIRAL THOMAS STOP I AGREE WITH YOUR PLAN STOP LOGISTICS WILL NOT ALLOW SENDING ENTIRE FLEET STOP ONE SHIP WILL HAVE TO DO STOP THIS MUST BE KEPT SECRET TO PREVENT MORE RIOTS AGAINST THE JAPANESE ON THE WEST COAST STOP MY WARMEST REGARDS TO THE CAPTAIN OF YOUR CHOICE STOP TR."

"The president can afford to spell it all out," Grissom said wryly. "So... it was Thomas who picked the *Florida*?"

"Or Sperry. And his reason's obvious. Have you seen the newspapers? People are making a joke out of our wood armor. We're an embarrassment." Oates hailed his driver. "Grissom, I'd almost bet my bottom dollar Sperry doesn't think the Japs are out there any more than I do. They didn't concoct the cablegram. Neither one of them would go that far. But by Godfrey, now they have the perfect excuse to shove the *Gray Gizzard* out of sight."

"I'm surprised you made it this far, Tom," Frank Timley said, tossing Dr. Singleton's manuscript on the desk. "You certainly make no bones about your opinion of the Fleet. I hear you even speak directly to the officers about...." He tapped the manuscript. "I can see why Oates wants you off the *Florida*. I would want you off, if I was skipper. *Scientific American* will never publish this. I'm almost ashamed to send it on to the editors. You see, Tom... we're planning to run a long article refuting Reuterdahl's claims."

The hard chair Singleton was seated on creaked angrily as he tried to relax. "Henry Reuterdahl joined the Fleet in Virginia as the Navy's official artist for the cruise. He got a first-hand look while painting portraits of the ships. He wrote a critical article and now he's being crucified. But he's right. If we go up against the Japanese, we'll end up with sushi for a navy." He considered this clever and grinned. "Science is supposed to be objective, Frank. Shouldn't both sides of the story be told? If SA is going to publish a refutation of Reuterdahl's charges--why not a confirmation, too? Be a hell of a boost for circulation. Pro, con... yin, yang...."

The Timley Agency overlooked Mission Street. If one pressed against the

window, one could see the U.S. Mint on the next block. More gold was coined there than anywhere else in the world, and very little of it was in Singleton's pocket. He wondered at the odd transformation the precious metal underwent on its southward voyage. In Alaska, it was wild mustang dust that sent men into convulsions of greed and desire. At the assayer's office it was divided and quantified. On guarded revenue cutters the wildness was leashed and guarded. And finally, at the Mint, it was molded and tamed. The inevitable crime that arose around the coinage had a banal formality unlike the cataclysmic outrages of the Yukon, where you fought everything: man, beast, weather, earth. Minted gold pitted men against an abstract economy. When a rash of train robberies broke out in the West, the marines were sent in to guard the shipments. They shot a few bandits, and the robberies stopped. The full weight of the government said: You may not rob gold in great quantity, unless you abide by the rules.

Singleton thought of himself in terms such as these. He was a wildcatter of the mind. His brain was precious ore, not yet stultified by a mold. He had failed to shape himself after the Navy's pattern. So the Navy had sent in a moral landing party to interdict him at home. A man of thought could not thrive without the money that came from places like the U.S. Mint.

Timley rose from his chair and paced the floor. "The editors went out on a limb to sponsor you on this expedition."

"They got their money's worth," said Singleton, waving at his manuscript.

The literary broker held up both hands, as if trying to express a blank between quotes. "Doctor... the Reuterdaahl case has shocked the nation. The uproar is tremendous. It's being viewed as the most treasonous act since Arnold at West Point. Reuterdaahl has been subpoenaed by Congress. And you want to throw gas on the fire. No, sir. We'll have to talk about severing your ties with *Scientific American*."

This brought Singleton up short. "Fire me? But--"

"But what? You're a contributing editor. Not a board member. Not an associate editor. And even if it was a real 'job'... anyone can be fired from a job."

Singleton maneuvered tightly, drawing loud squeaks from the chair. The flask in his pocket ground painfully into his hip. "Now Frank, let's be reasonable."

"I don't know why we went to the trouble to get you this assignment. Tom, I can smell your breath from here. You never used to drink like this."

Singleton's first impulse was to inveigh against Timley. It was base, ungentlemanly, to speak of another man's drinking habits, especially to his face. But then the truth pierced his stomach like a cold pick. Over the last few years, he'd leaned more and more on remuneration from his magazine articles, rather than collegiate stipends. Lapping up the prestige of being published in the leading scientific journal of the day, he'd ignored the fact that this was how he was feeding himself. The flask in his pocket called to him urgently.

"Frank, I rather enjoy composing articles for our little ragsheet," he said with feeble joviality.

Hands clasped behind his back, Timley stood at the office window and watched a line of guarded bank cars stutter up the street. A deep sigh came from him, like an opinion long since settled upon. "From now on, you can write them for someone else. We've had a request from Admiral Evans himself to have you removed from the *Florida*."

"Well, I realize--"

"Face it. He could have abandoned you in South America."

"He wouldn't have dared."

"Why not? He did it to Reuter Dahl." Timley eased slowly into his chair like a teacher fearful of sitting on a tack. "No, Tom. This is a parting of ways. We can't risk alienating the Navy, especially since they're funding so much research these days."

"What about--"

"You? Well, what about you?" Realizing his hands were resting on the rejected manuscript, Timley lifted them and leaned awkwardly to the side. As if touching the paper might accidentally sanction it. "You brought it on yourself."

The numbness that had come over Singleton during the last two years was gone in a burst. He was suddenly terrified. What would he do? How would he live? He pushed himself forward to protest. The rim of his metal flask caught the

chair arm and fell out of his pocket, clattering on the wood floor. The cap popped off. Amber fluid gurgled out.

After the first puff, Gilroy had coughed some, and felt the high of hyperventilation. While he was wondering if he'd been bamboozled, the Chinese purveyor of dreams cooked the second pellet. When he turned the pipe towards him and the fireman took another toke, Gilroy became sick as a poisoned crow. It was the beginner's sickness, similar to that of *mal de mer*. Only after the doctor of hallucinations had administered a third dose did the nausea pass. Then came clarity, the pristine assurances of the ineffable.

Before being swept into another world, however--a world where the scarab remained prevalent, but gentler--the practical side of his mind took note of something the Chinese man was doing: He was carefully placing the ashes from the bowl into a small container similar to a snuff box. It was only then Gilroy recalled something he'd heard years ago, on the run to Formosa. Chinese who could not afford opium often purchased its ashes from opium dens. Chewing on them could produce a modest kick all its own. Gilroy now knew why the doctor of dreams was saving the smoky residue, and what the well-heeled Chinaman was selling to the poor man in the alley.

When he returned to the *Florida* two days later--on time, since that was the extent of his leave--he was drained, euphoric, depressed--and determined. He would buy as much used opium as he could before the Fleet struck out for Hawaii. He could not imagine sailing around the world without some kind of medical aid. And since the black gangs' lot showed no sign of improving, perhaps he could convert the ashes from the boilers to the ashes of dreams.

He requested additional leave. There was not much for a stoker or fireman to do on board while in port, so it was granted.

He found the spot where the liberty party had been accosted by the China doll, and backtracked from there. He kept an eye out for the coolie girl, ready to dodge out of sight if she saw him. He did not fancy her reporting to the tongs that he was searching out one of their dealers. Even ashes might sell dear if they knew how badly he wanted them.

He was lucky. Chance had crossed their path with the girl's; now chance

kept her away. He found the alley where he'd seen the sailor fondling the prostitute. No sign of the well-heeled ash salesman. It had been Gilroy's hopeful assumption that the corner was a regular spot for him. After lingering over an hour, however, the fireman concluded he was wrong. He was about to attempt worrying the girl out of the nooks and crannies of the Quarter in order to question her, when he spotted the ash salesman scurrying up a side street. He trotted across the pavement and intercepted him.

He'd already decided the best way to approach the subject was to flash his small roll of greenbacks. The Chinaman barely glanced down before attempting to side-step him.

"Hey! I just want to buy some of your ashes. I'll pay, you can see."

"No ashes, no *yuan*," the polished coolie tried to wave him off.

"What's the matter, you don't like white men?" Gilroy pressed, annoyed. "Or is it sailors?"

"I must go."

"Go my ass. I've been waiting here all day. And I smell a mouse."

They were passing one of Chinatown's innumerable, shadowed alleys. Gilroy pressed his shoulder against the smaller man and made a quick, herding loop that swung the ash salesman off course. Once away from the main traffic, Gilroy grabbed him by the scruff and pulled him further out of sight of passersby. One had to show proper caution. The salesman was unquestionably a member of one of the tongs and had deadly friends. Whites were not murdered in Chinatown--but occasionally they disappeared.

"You speakie English, so you know I not crimp." Gilroy pinned him against a building with one powerful arm.

"I no have," the ash salesman hissed.

Briefly, the seaman wondered if he had the wrong man. Damn Chinks all looked alike. He was on the verge of giving up, when he suddenly felt the man shift under him. The quick movement to his belt could only mean one thing.

Gilroy brought his free hand up and caught the man on the side of the head with his fist. The ash salesman gasped. Gilroy let him drop. When the man went into convulsions, the stoker knew what was happening and dragged him even deeper into the shadows. By the time he stood back up, the spasms had ceased.

"Dumb shit," Gilroy murmured as he leaned over and uncovered the knife. "That would've looked right pretty under my ribs."

Quickly, he searched the body. The pouch was tucked under the man's blouse. Gilroy unfastened it, then got the hell out. Doing his desperate best not to run, he walked fast up the street, working up a sweat by the time he'd reached the outskirts of Chinatown. He slipped into a bar. The proprietor looked up and sneered at him. He'd seen too many bluejackets of late.

"Beer," said Gilroy.

"One dollar," said the owner, making no move towards the tap.

"A simoleon!" Gilroy balked.

"See that mirror there? Some of your friends did that, and I haven't seen one cent in damages. So up front, blue-boy, or not at all."

"You're worse than the Chinks," the stoker complained, but paid. He needed to sit and think, and a beer would help mightily. Taking his stein in hand, he found a corner table and sat, sipping nervously.

Forty-five minutes later he concluded he had not been followed. Removing the silk pouch, he glanced warily at the handful of patrons in the bar, then poked his finger through the drawstring and slowly pulled it open. *No wonder the poor bastard fought with his life*, Gilroy thought. There were no ashes in the small sack. Instead, he discovered the genuine articles. About thirty tiny opium pellets, plus a hard six-ounce chunk that could be severed and cooked in small pieces for smoking. There was even a small stem and bowl inside which could be snapped together in half a second.

Gilroy's moan of excitement was cut short by the thought that every tong in the city would be after his hide. Could they identify him? Probably. The China doll coolie girl would cull him from memory and point out his interest in the ash salesman. She'd probably get a royal walloping when the elders found out what

she'd told him. They would quickly instigate a search for the crazy-eyed sailor.

He briefly gave consideration to finding the girl and snuffing her small life. But that would have involved returning to Chinatown, a prospect he did not relish--and which would have probably been suicidal, anyway. Still, it would take them some time to put a full search in motion. They might not have even found the body yet. It was well-hidden behind some garbage pails. And once they did, and the search was begun, they were faced with the prospect of keeping the entire length of the Embarcadero under observation if they wanted to intercept him before he could reach his ship. No, odds were he'd gotten off clean. He decided to celebrate with another expensive beer.

It was green.

But what the hell.

He was still in the Blue Periwinkle three hours later when Garrett led a party through glass doors.

"You again!" the proprietor exclaimed. "I've got some words for you!"

"Later, old man. We're looking for-- Ah! There's one of ours."

He pointed at Gilroy. One of the men wearing brassards came up behind the fireman and clamped a hand on his shoulder. It didn't stay there long. Gilroy, who had seemed to be asleep, came up swinging. There was shouting. Next thing, Garrett's man was pushing off the floor, looking to fight.

"Avast there!" Garrett ordered when he saw the stunned expression on Gilroy's face. "You just snapped the man out of the best dream he ever had." He thrust a nickel into Gilroy's palm. "Take the Fremont & Bryant trolley back through South Park. You understand? Get off on Bryant and run down to Pier 34. Got that?"

"Pier 34," Gilroy answered breathlessly. "Yes, sir."

"There's a cutter waiting to take you across to Oakland."

"Me?"

"And any other lollygags I catch. We're shipping out."

"Tonight?"

"Don't linger by the docks. There's plague down there that'll turn your balls blue and... aw, forget it. Still got the nickel? Then go!"

The ensign could not have guessed how wondrous this all was to the fireman. His escape from the tongs was now assured. And the nickel! He grinned as he picked up his cap. Heaven must be at flood tide, and the largess was dropping right down into his hands.

Garrett was preoccupied with other things. This was as close to his element as he would probably ever get in this man's Navy. It had all the trappings of an old English press gang. The only reason he had not allowed his man to whale into Gilroy was the shortage of time. The Master-at-Arms had made it clear he was to avoid head-knocking if at all possible. The men of the *Florida* were to be extricated from the city in a trice. The ensign was even given a bag of change for trolley fare to facilitate matters. Oates must have a fire up his burner to be in this much of a hurry.

"Son of a bitch," the man Gilroy had knocked down said, rubbing his jaw. "I'dve liked to--"

"Maybe you'll get lucky in here," Garrett interrupted him as they approached another bar.

The prospect of bashing heads lifted their spirits. The Beach Patrol crashed into the next tavern with a vengeance.

At dawn next morning, as they sailed past Potato Patch and Seal Rock, the clustered seals barked an ironic farewell to the *Florida* and the colliers trailing her. As the ship stopped to let off the bar pilot, men gathered at the rail to listen and wonder. They were exhausted, yet wakeful.

All through the night they had labored. The coaling had been complicated by booms and gaffs swinging overhead and the mechanical braying of donkey engines as other supplies continued to be loaded. Men arrived piecemeal. Those

who were landed on the far side of the mole had to dodge the constant shuttle of train engines and boxcars. More than one seaman stumbled on the dark tracks and came up gashed and bruised.

A charter arrived with men bearing Haas ice cream sodas for the crew. This drew bitter laughter. Oates was offering meager consolation.

And even less information. What the hell was going on?

As the sun began pecking through distant clouds, the men watched the pilot's dinghy bob across Duxbury Reef, their moans of dismay all but audible. The Point Reyes light offered solace... but only to those who were arriving.

"Steer Sou' by Sou'west," said Oates before retiring below to his cabin. Admiral Sperry had told him to show a false course when departing.

Just in case Jap spies were watching.

XV

May, 1908 - 28°20'N, 177°22'W

Day & Night

Each day, the monsters returned. Sometimes they came as a god-like triumvirate, a sky-high wall of steel-like flesh. Sometimes they bounded up on shore alone, inquisitively, and sometimes they arrived in playful pairs. The marines had no idea where or when they would appear. There was no pattern.

The ocean had become a grisly jack-in-the-box, with three Jacks, huge and deadly. For the most part, their attention remained centered on the donkeys. But during the second morning of the siege, a Japanese dared the lagoon. There was something on Eastern Island he felt he had to retrieve, but he never told anyone what it was or why it was worth risking his life. Paddling frantically in a rowboat, he made it halfway across before the water turned dark. The creature barely showed its head as it took both man and boat into its jaws. To the men watching from shore, it was a simple event. Like a pebble dropped in a pond. Splinters of wood followed the dark underwater shadow out of the lagoon.

"He have a name?" someone had asked.

Lieutenant Anthony was in a deadly quandary. He shared the opinion of his day that the Chinese were an inferior breed. On a par with the Japanese, only the Japs had a respectable navy. There were three Chinese left on Midway, now that Bonehead was gone. They were a lowly, withdrawn group of men. Bonehead had been merely the lowest of the low.

Though bullets had no effect on the beasts, Anthony's concern for the unarmed Chinese was not mitigated. What rice-eating warlord would believe a

story about sea monsters? Orientals were being murdered by the general public in California every week. Why not by the U.S. Marines on Midway? Yet while the Californians might not experience remorse for their actions, the lieutenant felt a twinge for his fellow marines posted on gunboats and in consulates on the China Station. The bellicose generalissimos would use any excuse to rebel against the domineering Westerners.

Who would believe the monster story? Goblins, ghosts, witches on broomsticks. Angels on pinheads and rickety fairies. All out of vogue, all long shelved. And none more hoary than the venerable sea serpents. Anthony could hardly believe it himself. It seemed the only way to maintain credibility was to pray the monsters stuck around until a ship could come along and verify the marines' story.

What to do about the three men stranded on Eastern? He was almost embarrassed to broach the subject to his men. They had probably already written them off. Three less Chinks in the world. So what? There were plenty more where they came from. As usual, Anthony bit his lip, argued with himself, and did nothing. For a while, at least.

They were all nearly shattered by fear. But Hamilton Hart was reduced to mindlessness, at least during the first night and day. Slowly, details of what had happened in Alaska came out.

"You were in the Army?" Sergeant Ziolkowski said with vague distaste.

"My command... my entire command...."

Eighteen men slaughtered in the blink of an eye by the same creatures now besieging Midway.

"How do you know they're the same?" Lieutenant Anthony demanded.

"How many of them do you think there could be?"

"Oh... I see what you mean."

"They followed me. I was the only one left and they followed me."

Anthony first suspected the civilian was irretrievably unhinged.

Fortunately, common reason brought him back.

"If they were after you, they wouldn't spend all day chasing donkeys. It's just simple bad luck."

"Hardly simple."

The donkeys had been their salvation. But at the current rate, the meat on the hoof would soon be gone.

1200 Hours

"This doesn't bother me. I come from a long line of dead men."

"Beg your pardon, Top, but that's pure horseshit."

"We'll soon have help," Ziolkowski responded. "Midway's what its name says, the link between the East and the West. With the cable out of commission, they'll send a ship in no time."

"A cable ship," Lieber said sourly. Such a vessel would take months to reach them. Commercial Pacific would attach a grapple to the southeast end of the cable and follow it out from Honolulu in an attempt to find the assumed break. They would think a whale had become ensnared while pursuing squid, severing the line. It had happened before.

"So what's your bellyache?" the sergeant growled. "You saying we can't stand up to a few overgrown fish for a couple of months?"

It was precisely the wrong thing to say. He knew it. Unfortunately, there was nothing else to say.

"If you don't let me buck up your spirits, I won't waste my breath," Ziolkowski growled. "Enderfall! Stop wavin' that gun. Won't help none if you shoot yourself in the foot. Not here."

"Top, where the hell did those things come from?"

"How the hell should I know? Where did *you* come from?"

It was noon. With the exception of the unimpressed birds, the island was quiet. The lieutenant and sergeant were faced with a tough tactical problem. Nine hours earlier, one of the creatures had come within thirty yards of the compound before it was spotted. It had been dark, the moon blanketed by clouds. The creature's dark skin had blended perfectly with the night.

They'd thought the shaking of the ground would warn them of any approach. Now it seemed the creatures could move silently as snakes, when they wanted to. The only thing that saved Anthony's bivouac was the sudden appearance of three donkeys running towards the beach. The creature had immediately taken out after them.

They needed some kind of warning system. Lone men would have to sit out on the beach on dark nights....

And do what? Fire off a warning shot? What better way to cut their own throats? Firing a gun would draw the creatures' attention and reach the same result: more dead marines. They could dig small versions of the large bunker Anthony was having built at the compound. From them, a lookout could stick out his gun and fire a warning shot. But would the beast catch the flash, as well as the sound, and attack the sentry? And Ziolkowski was familiar enough with night-fighting to know how jumbled sounds could become in the dark, even on an island as featureless as Midway. A lookout might have to squeeze off two or three rounds before they knew where the shots came from.

Sighing, Ziolkowski looked out at the ocean, thinking this was a damned typical spot for a marine to die. He'd give a finger or toe in exchange for a cool Philippine mango right this moment. Fine, ripe and golden. But this thought attached itself to a grim memory.

Fort Vickars. He was standing aloof from a group of cavalymen inside the gate. A guard up on the wall did a double-take when he spotted a Moro warrior strolling into the quadrangle. He was a huge, strapping black man, with a kriss--a Malaysian sword--in his right hand. The cavalymen took note of him and pulled their carbines out their saddle holsters. The Moro ignored their shouted warnings. They opened fire.

The Moro was hit in the chest--and broke into a trot. The Moro was hit in the chin--he raised his weapon. He was hit in one lung--and proceeded to chop up five soldiers. It was only after the guard up on the wall put a bullet through the base of his skull that he went down.

He was taken to a marine guard-house. Ziolkowski spoke with him three weeks later. The Moro was up and about. A blue spot under his eye marked the exit wound of the bullet that had hit him in the back of the head. The scars on his chest and chin were healing nicely. There were photographers all around him. They were amazed he was alive, and wanted proof for the folks back home.

But it left Ziolkowski with a sickness of heart. In the States, there was a great deal of talk about racial superiority. Of the 'white man's burden,' and the need to put the world straight. But if any of those pasty-faced theoreticians had seen what happened at Fort Vickar, they'd have pissed in their little shoes. Every marine had a Moro story. They were an awesome breed. Courageous, possessing magnificent physiques--and frightening as hell. It started Ziolkowski to thinking just exactly what was meant by 'superior.' His conclusion was simple and obvious: weaponry. That was why he had wheeled and dealt so hard for the Rexer. Why he doted on it like a daughter. If he ever came up against the Moros again, he'd have enough firepower to mow them into hayricks.

But even a Moro would have wet himself on seeing the demons from the sea. Just about every man on Midway already had. And about all that could be said for the Rexer was that it made a fine lot of noise.

He reported back to Anthony at the compound.

"We post look-outs at night, we might as well dig their graves now."

"Then we'll just have to concentrate on the bunker."

Using timber and masonry from the shattered barracks and warehouse, the lieutenant put his men to work building a stout bunker in the basement of the main compound house. This had a small cellar with a concrete floor. Because Midway's water table was so close to the surface, this was the only place reasonably waterproof. It was an arduous task, fighting back the sharp coral sand and shoring up the damaged walls. But no one thought twice about the work.

Obviously, the only way to survive would be to get underground as quickly as possible. The hammering and their strained breathing sounded flat and hopeless in the dead air.

There was a supply of canvas in the warehouse, laid in for the handful of ships that passed their way. Most steamships still carried sails in case their engines failed. While coaling at Midway, they often had damaged sheets replaced or repaired. The canvas was now cut and sewn into sandbags. The marines and Japanese fisherman piled the bags along the rim of the bunker, with gun slits every few yards. If the monsters came their way, the marines would open up on them--for commentary, if not effect.

Stripped to the waist, Lieutenant Anthony worked alongside the others. It was a time for minimal rank and maximum effort. All the honest digging and lifting told on his slack muscles. The muggy heat made him feel as though he was wearing a wool shirt. Only by removing his mind from the present could he keep going.

Midway. What had he done to deserve it? It seemed the last pleasant memory to his name was the blustery day they had walked--he and his sister--into the hills above their grandfather's clapboard house in Lynchburg. He was ten, she twelve, and they had gathered chestnuts for an evening roast. Returning to the house with two heavy bags, they spread the nuts on the live red coals their father had prepared in the back yard. Anthony's stomach had grumbled, but the wait was more than made up for by the toasty odor. The chill wind swept down, and more than once their father had to chase down a spark and stamp it out. Then their mother had come out with an old pail and they had set the nuts inside to cool. After that came the roasted meat, bedtime, and dreams of more.

Anthony prayed that on the day he died, he would get the chance to remember that evening one last time.

Midway! Midway? What could one say? His father had made captaincy by the age of thirty-five. And here he was, that very age, and still only a second lieutenant without prospects. He imagined going home, pulling out a map of the world, and trying to find the sandspit.

"Where'd you say you spent the last couple years?"

"I'm looking, Dad. I'm looking. Can't we roast some chestnuts or

something?"

"Midway... Midway... there's a speck. No... that's a fly turd. What'd you say you did there?"

"We guarded valuable United States property."

"What could be so important that far away from the shipping lanes?"

"All right, Dad. We stood guard over birds. No. We stood guard over bird *shit*. All right? If you don't like it--"

"Lieutenant!"

Anthony jumped and nearly knocked over Hamilton Hart.

"You're swinging that shovel pretty far."

In fact, Anthony had almost taken Hart's head off as he dug and argued with his father simultaneously. "Sorry," he said. He eyed the Commercial Pacific employee warily. He seemed to have recovered from his fearful stupor, and was busy filling and hauling sand bags. Anthony felt uncomfortable around him, nonetheless. He was a reminder that the ultimate nightmare could really happen to an officer--the loss of an entire command. There was no question in the lieutenant's mind that if all his men were killed before him he would commit suicide rather than face a Naval Board of Inquiry.

"I couldn't help overhearing what the sergeant told you. About the need to post lookouts on the beach at night." He shook his head. "I've been away, I think."

"I don't understand."

Hart pointed towards the ruined relay station. "I have to go back."

"There's nothing left."

"Has anyone looked?"

"We dug out the bodies of your people." Anthony was perplexed.

Telegraphs were extremely delicate devices. The pounding the building had taken and the subsequent fire had undoubtedly put it out of commission, at least until a company ship arrived.

"I haven't done enough. Not nearly enough."

"Wait! Come back here, Hart. We need every hand!" Anthony was unsettled by the look in the civilian's eyes.

"I can make up for it. All of it!"

"Hart--"

"Let's begin with Sergeant Ziolkowski's problem. How to communicate safely in the dark. If you can bring me utensils--silver and aluminum plated--I can take care of that right quick."

He was talking like a madman and Anthony considered treating him as such.

1340 Hours

Ace felt a sharp jab in his ribs and jumped to the side. Working steadily at the bunker wall, he'd paid little attention to the jostling around him. The man who had poked him so roughly, if accidentally, was Private Lieber. He gave a little bow, momentarily forgetting marines never bowed back. Lieber gave him a blank look of indifference, then resumed digging.

"Ah, Flitz!" Ace yelled angrily. "You rude!"

"Huh?"

There was yelling. Then a gunshot.

The men dropped their shovels and raced to the rifle stacks. The coral sand sucked at their feet.

A sentry was running madly towards the compound. Far behind him, one of the creatures had clambered up on the beach and was yawning widely in the afternoon sun. The Japanese and marines, now armed, stood stupidly, watching the beast. Their situation seemed so hopeless. There was no point in crouching behind anything, since no one was firing at them. Standing in rank and file would be useless, too. The creature would just run them over. Running would have been next to meaningless, with so little running space. And charging the beast in an attempt to chase it off the island had been proved deadly dangerous by Ziolkowski. So they stood. In effect, waiting for the creature to make up their minds for them. Until Ziolkowski, having grabbed his Rexer, ran up to them.

"Now here's a fine group of boots," said Ziolkowski, coming up. "Whose lunch are you waiting for? Fall in!"

This might relieve Lieutenant Anthony of the onerous chore of issuing a command directly to his men, but it did nothing to rid them of the beast. The lieutenant, standing on tip-toe, could just make out its grotesque head over the dunes.

"Sergeant...."

Ziolkowski nodded. "Enderfall, come on."

They struggled up the crumbly slope of Mt. Pisgah. All of forty-two feet in height, it was the tallest dune on the atoll. It had been dubbed 'Mt. Piss' by Depoy when he found out Kitrell, who had a prudish streak, would duck behind it whenever he took a leak. The name stuck for a month. Then one day Anthony overheard some of his men talking about going over for a whiz on Mt. Piss. A reprimand began curling his lips, when Kitrell assured the lieutenant they had called the dune Mt. Pisgah, not Mt. Piss.

"Mt. Pisgah is part of a mountain range near the Dead Sea. We thought it'd be nice to have something biblical around."

Stunned by this unsuspected piety, the embarrassed Anthony retreated.

Even Depoy had to applaud Kitrell for that one.

"Why us again?" Enderfall fumed as they reached the crest.

"Weren't *you* tired of digging?"

"Yeah. Guess I was."

From the summit they looked down directly on the northern beach. They could see the entire length of the beast. They could also see it was not alone.

Hamilton Hart was crouched in a small gully not two dozen yards from where the creature lounged. It was obvious he'd been caught in the open and decided it was safer to hide than run. All the creature had to do was stretch its neck and its shadow would fall over him.

If he bolted, the beast would quickly spot him. But it was beginning to seem he would have to try. The creature was sniffing the air--leaning back, rocking, performing a kind of serpentine promenade... and working its snout so assiduously that Ziolkowski could see the nostrils flex. There was a resounding slap-like sound.

"Shit. The damn thing farted."

"Glad it's downwind."

Over Enderfall's protests, the sergeant began setting up his machine gun. If the beast took off after Hart, he would try to distract it with the Rexer. Ziolkowski was beginning to feel like a Legionnaire. In the grand tradition, he would be picking a fight he was sure to lose.

The creature emitted a series of bleats. If a mouse had grown five times the size of an elephant and squeaked, it would have sounded similar. Its face was dark brown--no green stripes. When it shuffled forward, Ziolkowski touched the trigger. Suddenly, the creature lurched away from Hart and settled on some dwarf magnolias, the only trees of any size on Midway. They were crushed instantly when the creature lay down on them.

"What a pity," the sergeant murmured. "That's the only natural shade for a thousand miles."

The beast seemed perplexed by the sudden disappearance of the trees. It raised its head, looked left and right, and let out another monstrous squeak. Grunting, it began rocking back and forth.

Ziolkowski's eyes popped. "He's scratching his stomach!"

The luxury did not last long. The magnolias were quickly reduced to splinters and sawdust. Snorting in disgust, the creature flopped in the sand and rolled. Most of the gooney birds in the vicinity flew out of harm's way. Had it been the nesting season, far more would have been killed.

Ziolkowski swiveled his gun on its bipod, momentarily tempted to direct a few bursts against the monster's belly in the hope it would prove a softer target. But he dared not make the attempt with Hart so near.

The creature began sniffing again. That fresh morsel, so close, so tempting....

"Let's dance again." Ziolkowski locked the clip and adjusted his sights. "May I have this waltz, you fucking bastard."

There was no need to see Hart's expression to know what he was thinking. His whole body was knotted in terror. He was getting ready to run.

A call sounded across the water:

"Tooo... nel...."

The monster froze, then darted its head up, looking towards the lagoon and Eastern Island. Ziolkowski raised his sights. Could he cut the thing's throat with a burst? Still, he held off. The more he observed, the more he was convinced the creature's hide was tough as nails all around. He fantasized on the possibilities of a three-inch gun, a standard weapon with most landing parties. And a six-incher-well, that would slice the bastard's heart nicely. But artillery had not been allotted the garrison. Who could have foreseen trouble on Midway?

After all its clumsy flopping, it was stunning to see the creature abruptly lower its head and shoot across the beach fast as a horse. It hit the water, then bounced across jutting coral as if it was no sharper than fresh dough.

No... there were no soft bull's-eyes on these brutes, Ziolkowski concluded sadly. Only the eyes. And they had up to now been too quick for a clear shot at them.

"Hart! Hart! Up here!"

If Hart had been terrified before, he seemed utterly paralyzed by his good fortune. Ziolkowski trotted down the slope to confront him. "What the hell are you doing out here?"

White as a ghost, Hart rose from behind the bush. "I was measuring how much wire I'd need--" He took a single step and fell.

"Enderfall! Get your ass down here and give a hand to this civilian."

"It left." Gasping, Hart turned over. "Why did it leave?"

The sergeant was wondering that himself. The creature had not dived underwater, but was paddling on the surface in the direction of the lagoon. He could not see Eastern Island beyond the bight.

"Up you go, Hart. Standing out on the beach, you were just tempting that bastard ashore. What the hell were you doing, anyway?"

"Your problem... signaling at night. There's more than enough wire. We can strip it from the submarine cable."

"Ah... you mean string it back to the compound and give a yank when--"

"The movement might attract the serpents. I can do better. As I was telling the lieutenant, if I can get some forks... metal forks. Or spoons."

Ziolkowski had little time to question Hart's sanity. When they returned inland, they found the compound in an uproar.

"Volunteers! I want volunteers!"

"What's going on?" the sergeant demanded.

"The warehouse *Posten* came back. He reports *die Schlangen* are attacking Eastern."

Ziolkowski knew what a *Posten* was. He'd been in the Corps long enough to learn more than a few German words and phrases. He could guess from

Lieber's tone the meaning of *Schlangen*.

"The Chinks...." The sergeant shook his head. "Poor bastards. But what's the *teniente* on about?"

"He's going to rescue them."

"What? He's going to risk good men to save *Chinks*?"

The sergeant walked over to Anthony. The lieutenant misinterpreted his determined expression. "No, sergeant. You stay here. No use both of us.... Patterson! Good. McDonald! Good. Lieber! That's fine. No more. We can't repair the *Iroquois* and there wouldn't be enough time if we could." He was speaking of the island's sea tug, which had been disabled by difficulties with the engine well before the arrival of the monsters. "We'll have to take the motor launch. Enough room. And we might be able to outrace them."

"I don't think so, sir."

"Well, sergeant... what are we if we don't take the chance?"

Stupefied by this senseless bravado, Ziolkowski raised his Rexer in salute as Anthony and his three volunteers disappeared in the direction of the lagoon.

"You going to let them go like that, Top?"

"Yeah, they'll get ate up."

"So?" Ziolkowski shouted. "Go to hell for a few Chinks--that's the *teniente's* business. Now man those shovels. Those bastards'll be back. If we're not dug in, we'll end up the same. Enderfall! Not you! Take three men to the fuel shed. I want you to roll some gasoline drums down to the beach. You heard me. And make sure you roll them *away* from the water distillery."

1412 Hours

What the hell am I doing? Lieutenant Anthony wondered halfway across the lagoon. *What can four rifles do against those behemoths?*

More than what three unarmed Chinese can do, came a guilty response that was paradoxically relieved by a deep sense of satisfaction. He had finally made up his mind about something.

Anthony checked his Springfield. It had been quite a while since he'd used one. He found himself wishing he'd paid some attention to Sergeant Ziolkowski's firing range lectures. The unauthorized gun was about as clean and battle-ready as a rifle could be. Packed in cosmoline when it arrived, it had been kept impeccable ever since. Cams, safety lugs and the bolt interiors had been lubricated with graphite paste. The bluing was protected by wiping down the exposed metal with chamois skin dampened with oil. To prevent the stock from warping, boiled linseed oil had been rubbed frequently into the wood. When stored in the shed, Ziolkowski kept an open canister of calcium chloride nearby to reduce excess moisture. The guns of Midway were as healthy as human care could make them. Coming down to this, all that care seemed an exercise in futility. Yet there wasn't a man in the boat who didn't hug his Springfield as if his life depended on it.

Private Lieber acted as coxswain. At full throttle he guided the craft to the nearest beach. Most of the time his eyes were glued to the great necks of the creatures ahead of them, weaving back and forth at the far end of Eastern. The closer the boat came, the more profoundly the water shuddered. The vibrations were transferred to the boat, increasing the nervousness of the volunteers. Glancing down into the clear water, he noted the lagoon seemed empty of life. Even the sharks had abandoned the area. Had they sensed the approach of the monsters? Were they as afraid--though it was hardly conceivable that sharks were capable of fear--as the humans were? Lieber couldn't blame them, if that was the case. As fantastically beautiful as the monsters were, the private would have swum away, too.

He had no idea why he'd been so prompt to volunteer. From the stunned expressions of the other volunteers, it seemed they could not tell what had overcome them, either. Perhaps it was the utter conviction and courage that suddenly burst from the Loot--all the more overwhelming from a man who'd rarely spoken to them, seemed the model of reticence. Standing on the prow like some jarhead George Washington, he was an unlikely inspiration. Even as the

thudding on the island became perceptible, Anthony's campaign hat tugged the air, as though saluting the danger. A dark semaphore of sweat flattened the back of his blue shirt. A man charging on water--a feat almost as impressive as walking on it.

Lieber clipped this blasphemous thought with a harsh interior admonition. So, he had volunteered. The act of a fool. But it was in his blood. His father had been accused of plotting to murder the Kaiser. A human monster. Here was a true monster in the flesh. The very spirit of Wilhelm.

There was no sign of the Chinese. If they had any sense, they would have dug holes to hide in as soon as they saw what was happening on Sand. There were one or two rowboats on the island, as well as a sampan. But if they witnessed the fate of the Japanese fisherman who'd tried crossing the lagoon, they would know how dangerous such an attempt would be. Besides, up to now there had been no incentive to leave. For reasons of their own, the creatures had limited their attacks to Sand.

"They could be dead," said Anthony doubtfully. "We wouldn't know until we searched the entire island."

Lieber reached down with his free hand to check his haversack. The bullet clips felt hard and lumpy. "Death to tyrants!" he murmured as the boat scraped the sand. He killed the engine and jumped out with the others. They dragged the boat a short distance up the beach.

The womanish screams of donkeys carried a half mile on the wind. There was still no sign of the Chinese. Anthony was hit by an embarrassing realization. He did not want to pull the launch up very far. Even if the creatures did not chase them, necessitating a quick escape, he wanted to stay on Eastern as little as possible. But for the life of him, he could not coordinate the tides in his head. Even looking at the waterline, he could not decide if it was high or low. It would go hard on them if the tide came in and took the boat away. Rather than admit part of his mind was paralyzed, he ordered one of the men to stay with the boat. Lieber and the other volunteer gave the third a stern look, as if cautioning him not to attempt leaving without them. The third man put his hand over his heart, then imitated the movements needed to start the motor. Then they exchanged startled glances, surprised at their ability to jest at a moment like this.

Anthony had been giving some thought to their tactics during the trip across. The first break with his plan had just occurred. He was about to face another.

"Fan out and search. We'll meet back here in thirty minutes?"

"Thirty minutes?"

No one else had a watch.

"All right...." Anthony was frightened and flustered. He wanted to strike his head and re-order his thinking. "Go as far as you can, then come back. And do it quickly as possible. Don't call out. Don't draw attention to yourselves. If they chase you...." Another sentence clipped short. He was about to order them not to run towards the lagoon if chased. If the creatures followed one of them to the boat, their only means of escape might be destroyed.

What a rare bird, Lieber thought. You didn't see many weak sisters in the Corps. Especially ones who charged into dangerous situations, then stopped cold like confused ducks waiting to be shot. Court martial or no, the German had had enough of pish-pashing.

"Herr Leutnant?"

"Yes?"

"Fuck it, sir. Let's do it."

They moved inland.

1441 Hours

"Enderfall! You couldn't cut salami in a knife factory. Didn't I tell you to move the drums away from the distillery? Can't you see what I'm up to? Goddamn sexual deviant, move 'em down, *down!*"

The gasoline drums were moved further along the beach. The men were already tired from all the digging at the bunker and this pointless labor further exhausted them. When they reached a spot that satisfied Ziolkowski, they dropped to the sand and stared across the lagoon.

They could just make out the four men who comprised Anthony's crazy expedition. Whenever the creatures raised their heads, their dark brown hides contrasted dramatically with the sun-brightened dunes. The men below seemed like fleas worrying at the flank of a three-headed, imperturbable beast.

"Enough gawking. Enderfall! You stay here with me. The rest of you get back to work on the bunker. You don't want to spend another night out in the open, do you?"

This cheerful prospect prompted a mad scramble back to the compound. Observing their panic, Ziolkowski allowed himself a brief moment's satisfaction. Then he turned to his black sheep.

"We stay here."

"And what?"

"Die, most likely," said the top cutter, not without some glee. A part of him had been terrified that someone might have witnessed his flight the day he abandoned his gun. But the more he looked into their eyes, the more it was confirmed no one had seen him. Maybe there was a God. Maybe He was looking down on him this moment, getting ready to snuff out his Leatherneck life. All well in good. God had been the only witness, after all. He never squealed. And the sergeant was grateful enough to give up his life in exchange for His benevolent reticence.

As the largest of the creatures raised its long neck, one of the small human dots stopped still in the open. At this distance it was hard to tell, but it seemed as if the creature had something in its mouth. When it gave its peculiar head-flick, Ziolkowski knew. Either a man or a donkey was rolling around inside, shooting craps in hell.

"You might end up with a new commander, Enderfall," Ziolkowski said. "Then your ass would be all mine. How does that sound?"

"Doesn't sound too good, Top."

"How the hell you end up a sexual deviant?"

"That story's a lie."

"That's what you say. But God's watching, Enderfall. He's watching close and He knows."

1452 Hours

Lieutenant Anthony could have told his sergeant more about God than the sergeant would ever want to know. When the largest creature lifted its head, Anthony could clearly see the mule leg jutting out of its mouth, flexing spasmodically like a toy crane. After the monster tossed its head, it fixed the lieutenant with a long look.

As though he'd just glanced into the cold stone eye of Medusa, Anthony froze--and stared back. The giant eye that was turned in his direction was black, living coal. It did not have the flat death-in-life aspect of a shark's eyes, but a bright, almost amused, almost intelligent gleam.

Anthony dropped to his hands and knees. He could bear to look no longer, but his legs would not work. The best he could do was kowtow to death as it prepared to clamp down. He remained in that position for over a minute--not so much blind to terror, but blinding himself against it. When he finally looked up and found the creature had once again disappeared behind the dunes, the terror did not fade. It lay festering inside of him. It slowed his movements, his thoughts, his soul. Pushing unsteadily to his feet, he could feel the beast looking out from within, convenient to the murder of his heart. God had borne down on him. God had laughed with raucous malice in his ear.

God. Unmerciful. Unforgiving. Without design. Just God. And He was Death.

Anthony staggered a short distance before realizing what he'd done. Still

staggering, he retraced his steps and picked up his rifle. He might as well be dead. But he was still a marine.

1507 Hours

The two low sheds where all the Chinese save Bonehead maintained their quarters were undamaged, but empty. Lieber was surprised. The sand, marram grass and gooney bird nests nearby were twisted and flattened in giant swirls, as if the monsters had held a cotillion. The German imagined the Chinamen dashing for the shacks and being intercepted before reaching their spurious protection.

Faint voices suddenly halted him. He circled around the huts. Behind them the sand crested where one of the creatures had turned sharply. He stopped and listened. The island was a caterwaul of screeching birds, panicked donkeys, and the drumbeat movements of the monsters. He had to wait several moments before hearing the shouts again. He found the spot along the ridge of sand where the shouting was loudest. Now he remembered: There had been a storm shelter here. He pounded his foot against the ground.

The men below heard. Their cries grew frantic.

He lay his rifle to the side and began scooping sand. The shouting grew louder, as though the trapped men believed they could hold Lieber in place with their voices.

"Quiet down!" the marine hissed. "You'll be stuck here forever if I become knockwurst."

The sand began to jump as the Chinese pushed at the storm door. A moment later they burst out, gasping for breath. A half hour more and they would have suffocated. Their sobs of gratitude were cut short when they saw the sinuous necks beyond the dunes.

"Boat," Lieber whispered. "Boat."

They knew the word. And when he pointed, they knew the direction. They took off for the lagoon with Lieber at their heels. Rounding a grassy hummock, he ran into Lieutenant Anthony. It had been about fifteen minutes since he'd last seen him, but the *teniente* wore the craggy expression of a man who'd just seen his wife die of old age. He said something.

"Sir?" Lieber asked, not understanding.

The lieutenant mumbled something else. Lieber could still not understand him. He pointed at the running Chinese. With an unintended pidgin lilt to his voice, he said, "Boat! Boat!"

"Good...." Anthony nodded almost absently and followed.

A rifle shot.

Both marines stopped and looked back. One of the creatures had moved away from the trapped donkeys. It made quick darting movements as it came inland. A moment later, they saw the third volunteer racing in their direction.

"He's leading it to the boat!"

"He's leading it to *us*!" Lieber countered.

They stepped back a few paces, then paused again.

"Goddammit... goddammit...."

Lieber shared Anthony's fear and frustration. "We can't leave. He's a stupid bastard."

They kneeled and took aim.

The creature swept up like a land-going cruiser behind the running marine. It was one of the smaller beasts. They aimed for its eyes and quickly learned what Ziolkowski had found out with his Rexer. With its whipping back and forth, scoring a head shot against the creature involved the wildest luck.

Lieber was stunned by the magnificent impossibility of the brute, a planetary rhino at full gallop. What a thing to stuff, mount, contemplate--for you

could not think reasonably about the impossible unless it was stuffed and mounted.

The marine trying to escape was not so appreciative. He knew he was going to die. The knowledge forced his mouth and eyes open as if by sharp bamboo splinters. His howl of protest over his fate could barely be heard over the pounding limbs and the peculiar bleats of the creature. When he saw the long shadow of its neck descending from behind, he leaped sideways into a drainage ditch. The creature reacted deftly, as though it had trained for this very maneuver. Dirt and sand exploded as it rammed its snout into the ditch. There was a scream as it plucked the man out.

Lieber did not know he was screaming also. He fired, advanced a few steps, fired again. The thing was impossible. It *had* to be controlled!

But a volley of Prussian expletives proved as useless as bullets against the creature.

"Come on!" Anthony shouted. Determined not to lose Lieber too, he slapped the back of his head to get his attention. "Marine! Follow me!"

The creature let out an odd, resonant squeak. An instant later its green-striped partner poked its head up in curiosity, then began a monstrous scamper over the dunes in their direction.

This was enough to convince Lieber. He and the lieutenant ran for their lives. They saw the motorboat already in the shallows, engine idling. The marine at the stern and the Chinese waved wildly, urging them on. Raising a splash as they hit the water, they tumbled over the gunwale at full tilt.

"Where's--" the marine at the stern began.

"Dead!" Anthony shouted. "Go!"

Throttle opened, the boat surged forward. Its progress was distressingly slow. The two beasts gained on them. Lying in the bottom of the boat, gasping for breath, Anthony and Lieber were surprised to hear gunshots over their heads. The lieutenant turned over. To his dismay, he saw two of the Chinese had taken up their Springfields and were blasting away.

The Chinese ignored him and fired until they ran out of ammunition. Lieber jerked away as they reached into his haversack for more cartridges. He tried to stand. The boat gave a lurch and he banged against the thwarts. The Chinese held him down and pulled off his pouch.

"Thieving Chinks!" Lieber cursed through bloody lips.

Sitting up, Anthony saw what was prompting their defiance. The creatures were in the water not fifty yards away, coming on fast. The motorboat seemed to be sitting still, though the marine's white knuckles on the throttle showed they were making best speed. The lieutenant looked ahead. His heart sank. Sand Island seemed a world away. They weren't going to make it. He opened and closed his hands, as though contacting himself for the last time.

Suddenly, the water around the creatures' heads erupted in a hundred narrow spouts. Ziolkowski's aim was impeded by the intervening motorboat, but that did not stop him from laying down a blanket of machine gun fire. The men in the boat shouted when strays hit the wood walls, throwing up painful splinters. But when they saw all the churning was confusing the beasts, they set up a silent cheer. Slowly, the boat pulled ahead.

"We live!" one of the Chinese exulted.

"Maybe...."

Ziolkowski stopped firing the instant they hit the beach. "Back! Back!" he yelled.

They raced inland. Lieber risked a glance backwards. Without the suppressing fire, the creatures quickly reoriented themselves. They were halfway out of the water.

"Down! Down!"

"We can't! They're--"

Something sailed through the air.

"Grenade!"

The concussion felt like a steel plate knocked against their heads. Another explosion. This time, hearing the whiz of shrapnel, they dropped to the ground as the fire from the first explosion began setting off the other drums.

The conflagration caught the green-striped creature as it straddled the line of drums. It yelped in terror as the fire jumped up around it. The other creature held back, emitting high-pitched squeaks of fear and commiseration.

Baffled and singed, the green-striped creature fell back on the beach. It flopped in the sand, then rolled away from the fire and flopped in the water. The other creature scooted over and nudged it inquiringly.

The lagoon blew--seemed to rise in the air. The high plane of water broke and the head of the largest monster emerged. The gas-fed flames whipped in circles as it let out a roar that caused the marines and Chinamen to melt into the ground with terror.

Ziolkowski readied his machine gun for a last stand. His gray veteran eyes popped with disbelief at what happened next.

The biggest serpent attacked the smaller, unburned creature. It slammed into its flank with a horrific body slap. The smaller creature let out a screech and dodged the flashing teeth. A great rip of blood spurted when it was caught at the shoulder, but it swerved sharply and escaped serious wounding. The larger creature chased it to the mouth of the lagoon, then turned and hurried back to Green Stripes, touching it dotingly with its muzzle and going over every inch like a concerned mother.

The realization hit all the observers at once.

"Mama Monster! And she thought the *other* one hurt *that* one."

"Not so bright, after all...."

The fire died out, but the men remained to watch. The two creatures in the lagoon paid no attention to them. The mother closely went over Green Stripe's hide again and again. The smaller creature did not seem badly burned--but appeared to enjoy the attention.

XVI

May, 1908 — 37°50'N, 126°06'W

From the Deck Log of the USS Florida:

Summary court awarded 12 marines 2 month's restriction for returning 2 hours late from liberty in SF and being drunk, disobedient, disrespectful and obscene; Mast awarded 3 marines 10 hours extra duty for leaving their posts; Mast gave Ship's cook 1/c 2 weeks restriction for drunkenness; 3/c Machinist Blovonske given a meritorious Mast; while in SF 12 enlisted men assigned by Naval Militia of the State of New York as replacements arrived by rail and were graded Seamen, Ordinary Seamen and Landsmen; sited strange sail to the north; Captain commented it reminded him of the unknown ship the Fleet encountered in the Caribbean (that mystery was never solved); stowaway discovered on board.

The engine churned the superheated air with hundreds of gleaming insect legs. Rods, pistons, beating frantically, going nowhere. Gleaming like teeth in the midst of a bloody meal. Self-consumption. Always the engineers were squirting lubrication on the intimate parts, priestly unguents for the anointed and the dying. At one point, during the wild turn around the Horn, oil had run short. The engineers substituted olive oil. The smell had been memorable.

Feed valves hissed in back-handed approbation as he passed through to the boiler room. Down here, men were able to convert fire and metal into 16,500 horsepower. One had only to feed the golden scarab to produce one of the mightiest powers on earth.

This was not a metaphor for Fireman Gilroy. He'd invested too much attention on the mechanics, spent too many years feeding the beast, first on a

Spanish tramp steamer, then for Cunard, then for the American Navy. In all fleets, on all ships, the beast was the same.

He'd recognized the golden scarab and its molten legs long before his first puff of opium; long before the night that mysterious sailor pumped gold liquid into his arm. The drugs merely threw off a disguise Gilroy had seen through years ago, when someone who claimed to be his father cut the throat of the woman who claimed to be his mother. Why had that been? Gilroy had often retraced the moments before the murder. The man who said he was his father had just brought home three herring from a market on Lewis Street. The fish were wrapped in a Yiddish newspaper. Nothing out of the ordinary about that. Manhattan's Lower East Side was a conglomerate of Old World Jews, as well as Galacians, Hungarians, Russians and Rumanians. The English language was as rare as a cool breeze between East Houston and Division. In fact, when some of those new characters called social workers showed up, the universal cry from the denizens of the tenements was: *Luft, qibt mir luft*. No one could breathe, it seemed. Gilroy could not imagine the meaning of fresh air.

But he knew he would have herring that evening, and his mouth watered as he watched the woman who said she was his mother unwrap the package.

"Well look at this, now," she said in her sad voice when she glanced at one of the articles on the wrapping. She swept away loose scales. "It's Mrs. Gould, now. She's gone and killed herself."

The man grunted. "Another yid, that's all."

"Go on, now. How can you say such a thing? You'll be knowin' her from the tobacco shop on Canal. Poor old Abe must be heartsick, and me not knowin' the funeral."

"How do you know all this?" the man who said he was Gilroy's father asked.

"I told you. It's right here in the paper."

"That's a yid paper. Don't say you can read it."

"Oh, some bits of it. What's the bother? Look: '*Genumen di gez*.' The poor dear killed herself with gas. Even the boy can read it. Here...." She drew Gilroy's

head over the fishy paper. "Don't tell me you can't read that."

"*Genumen di gez*," Gilroy read obediently.

"Now even you know you can't step out the door without hearin' it. So what's the harm if we read it, too?" With that, she took a knife and prepared to behead one of the fish.

"Yes, what's the harm." And then the man who said he was his father smiled at the woman he called 'wife', took the knife gently from her hand, then quick as a trolley spark whipped it across her throat. Gilroy remembered blood pouring down upon the herring.

He wondered: Was that really Gilroy who screamed and ran? Yes, of that he was fairly certain. He was a quick little runner, the boy called Gilroy. He'd almost made it to Hester Street before the man caught up with him. Somewhere, he'd dropped the knife, or else Gilroy would have died right there, in front of the Yiddish Rialto. But fists were something the man who called himself 'father' always had with him. The boy's arm was yanked from its socket as he was whirled around. He saw the great fist come, but could not duck. The air rose with shouts in a half dozen languages just before the sky separated into two distinct entities.

And in the crack was the golden scarab.

They took him to the Beth Israel Hospital near Rutgers Square. Then someone said something and he was carted down to the East River and put aboard the Camp Huddleston Hospital Ship School, moored across from Corlears Hook Park. The medical students said something to a man who called himself a doctor, and the doctor said something to a man who called himself a policeman.

Gilroy never found out what happened to the man who called himself his father.

All he new was that a new force had entered his life.

The golden scarab set in the evening, but quickly sprang back up with the gaslights. The only time it really bothered Gilroy was when it reached out with one of its molten pincers and snipped at a spot deep in his head. Still, one had to

make a living no matter what bizarre creatures cropped up in the world.

It was a short hop from the hospital training ship to the piers. Gilroy walked down one gangplank and up another--a deckhand at eleven years of age. His occasional howls of pain startled the rest of the crew, so he was sent to work below, out of earshot, in the deafening cacophony of the engine room. A few years as a grease monkey, on one ship or another. Then as a coal passer or stoker, on one ship or another. He found his happiest home on the Spanish tramp steamer, with an entire crew as demented as he was. But while off the coast of Africa, someone decided it would be amusing to open the sea cocks, and the ship went down in clear weather. After being rescued, Gilroy was able to find passage to England. It was there that he got a job on the Cunard Line.

In 1905, recruiters from the United States Navy began hanging around the piers where passenger liners were tied up. The Navy was having awful luck with stokers and coal passers. A bad lot, for the most part. Shoddy in appearance and manners, wasteful with coal, and at turning trials they refused to make the all-out gut effort modern battleships needed to reach flank speed. It was decided a better breed of fireman could be had on the luxury liners, where speed was at a premium. So in a bit of authorized piracy, proven firemen were bribed away from their old jobs and into the service.

Gilroy among them.

Of course, the scarab came along for the ride.

No great legerdemain had been needed to squirrel the opium past the boatswain. Neither Garrett nor the Master-at-Arms bothered to search him. To them, it was enough to get his sad body back onto the *Florida*. His main concern was the first lieutenant. Third in command after Oates and Grissom, it was his job to keep the ship clean--no small feat on a coal-burning vessel. He was the one who ran a white glove through the galley in search of renegade grease. The officer who measured the regulation three inches between the ends of a seaman's clothes bundle and the stop that knotted it together. If anyone stumbled across Gilroy's cache, it would be him. Gilroy could not risk hiding the pellets near his berth. Nor did he want to hide them all in one place, since his entire supply could be wiped out in one swoop. So he broke up his stock. He taped one small bundle behind the flush mechanism in the engineers' head, one in a deep recess in the paint locker, and the third behind some paneling in one of the night messes.

His 'opium den' was in the firemen's shower baths. These were located immediately above the boiler rooms. The rich combination of human and soap smells, as well as the hot steam from the long line of showers, would serve to hide the drug's fruity smell. Slipping in alone, Gilroy would sit in the head next to the steam-heated drying racks where the firemen hung their clothes. If someone pounded on the stall door, he could slip his pipe through the gap in the side and hide it in the valve niche behind the rack. As of yet, he had not devised a way to heat and liquefy the pellets before putting them in the bowl. He'd been limited to swallowing the pellets raw. The sensation was more powerful than that caused by laudanum, but it did not go directly to the source of his craving.

Even so, it was becoming increasingly difficult to hide the effect the drug was having on him. The members of the black gang had been working shorter shifts since the fleet's departure from the Virginia Capes. While this gave them respites from the hellish temperatures, watch-and-watch increased the number of shifts. The constant shuffling soon began to tell on the opium eater. The opiate induced a lassitude nearly impossible to overcome, especially when combined with the extreme heat. Worse than that, instead of being able to lay back and inspect the visions in his mind, he had to confront a reality that was already severely warped.

And there was bitterness. Something he had in common with everyone who labored below the waterline. The black gang had anticipated several weeks of rest and entertainment in San Francisco. It had been promised to them. It was a promise too easily abrogated. Word had filtered down that there was trouble at some isolated Pacific outpost. But if it was serious, more than one ship would have been dispatched.

The stokers and coal passers saw it every bit as clearly as Captain Oates himself. This was punishment for spending so much time in the Observation Ward. Clear and simple. Morale plummeted. They could barely bring themselves to lift an empty shovel or scuttle, let alone fill one.

Gilroy could hardly bear to look into the fires, anymore. All manner of creatures were giving birth and dying in the huge Babcock and Wilcox boilers. They possessed nasty glowing tongues. They hooted at him as he approached with a heavy coal shovel, and abraded him rudely as he stepped back. When his shift was over, only one thing could provide him with relief.

The drug not only robbed him of appetite--it stole his sleep, too. That surprised him. He thought opiates were supposed to escort one sweetly to a soft dreamland. Yet he found himself spending hour after hour staring at the jackstays that held up his hammock. When the Master-at-Arms or engineers' mates came to rouse the tired firemen, they would find Gilroy up and about, his hammock already stowed in the nettings.

They complimented him on his alertness.

The fire lived. Gilroy fed it, so he should know. God was called Babcock and Wilcox. Gilroy grimaced as he contrived a census. There were thirty-two boilers on the *Florida*. Did that mean there were thirty-two gods? Or was it only one God, manifested thirty-two times? To complicate the matter, there were two furnaces for every boiler. Sixty-four golden scarabs? Or did one Being have sixty-four golden, bloody hearts? Damn! No wonder ministers were so confused. Try and figure it out! One thing was certain though: Chunks of coal screamed as they were sacrificed.

"If God is this horrible, we have to murder Him."

Gilroy's words were not heard over the din.

Opium was not the only illicit thing that had been smuggled on board.

Well, not exactly smuggled. The officer of the deck had nodded amiably as Singleton waltzed on board. He had not known that the doctor was *persona non grata*.

It was an indication of the haste with which the *Florida* had left the West Coast that Dr. Singleton's cabin had not been re-assigned. His charts, experimental devices, and books remained untouched by porters. As far as he could ascertain, no one knew he was there. But after one day's fasting, he realized that would not last long.

Stowaway with the Great White Fleet.

An intriguing title for an article, no doubt. Would anyone publish it? The editors of the scientific journals would turn up their dry noses in horror. But

there were plenty of magazines for the general public, and they paid quite well. It was possible he could come out of this with some of that newly minted gold in his pocket. Besides, he'd reached a point where the only thing left was to try.

One thing he felt confident of. Captain Oates could not toss him off the *Florida* now they were a hundred nautical miles from land. It would be difficult steeling himself against the scorn that would be heaped on him--but at least he did not have to concern himself with drowning.

One of the luxuries of residing as an honored guest of the Fleet was having hot running water in one's cabin. Singleton might no longer be honored, but he still had the water. After trimming his beard to the jawline, he washed himself off with a wet cloth and dressed. Oates must be sitting cozy, thinking he had rid himself of the doctor. My, how his eyes would pop!

Planting his straw hat on his head, he downed a jigger of I. W. Harper Rye, took up his gold-knobbed cane, and stepped into the corridor.

A swagger. That's what he needed. Holding the cane loosely, he climbed the stairs and swaggered across the deck. He soon abandoned his eccentric walk, however. He couldn't tell if the sailors were staring at him because they had not expected to see him again--or laughing at him because of his funny walk. He was famished. Mess had been sounded by the marine buglers, but he was at odds trying to decide where to eat. He briefly considered walking boldly into Oates' wardroom--no sense delaying the inevitable. But the captain's mess was separate--sometimes a guard was posted outside it. Otherwise, Singleton could eat whenever he wanted to. And his primary concern was food--*now*.

The inevitable would have to wait.

Midshipman Davis never regretted an empty seat as much as he did now. He did not see the doctor until Singleton lowered himself next to him in the junior officers' mess. He very nearly gagged on his beans. He'd been told the doctor would not return. In fact, the ensign who'd informed him of this--not Garrett, thank God--had known of the midshipman's travails with Singleton and had gone out of his way to reassure the younger man.

"You can breathe free, now. The old coot's gone."

Well, not hardly.

"Bless my soul, if it isn't Mr. Davis! Never expected to see me again, eh?"

"No, sir."

The midshipman's stunned expression told Singleton what he needed to know: Word had spread... he had been banished from the *Florida*. In confirmation of this two marines came up behind him.

"Beggin' your pardon, doctor. Captain Oates requests your presence in his wardroom."

"Does he, now? And he sent the marines to fetch me? That doesn't quite jibe with naval courtesy, does it?"

"Captain Oates--"

"Yes-yes-yes. Is it all right if I eat my supper, first?"

"The captain said immediately, doctor."

"And if I refuse?"

"I'll have to insist."

Davis heaved a sigh as wide as the galley as the doctor was escorted away. So, Singleton's presence was unauthorized--or else the exec or an ensign would have been sent to get him, not the marines. Perhaps there was some justice in the world, after all.

A black hand appeared in front of him as one of the stewards retrieved Dr. Singleton's untouched plate. Glancing up, Davis found himself exchanging glances with Amos Macklin.

He had found it difficult facing Macklin ever since the day Singleton compelled the black man to sit in his 'truth' chair. Considering that humiliation, and the beating he'd taken, the midshipman was surprised he had not jumped ship in San Francisco. Why had he come back? Amos would be risking a more severe beating if he was caught taking French leave. But the odds would be with

him. The Navy had the highest desertion rate of all the armed services. There wasn't enough manpower to track them all down.

But here he stood, for whatever reason. And his loyalty to the Fleet (if that's what it was) was paying dividends already. Seeing the doctor being taken away under guard must be giving him the laugh of his life. Hidden, of course. It wouldn't be prudent for a black man to laugh at a white. Not in front of hundreds of other whites.

Davis, too, thought it best to suppress his mirth--until he glanced up at his peers and saw them looking in his direction. He could not resist returning their grins. He envisioned Oates slinging Singleton into the brig, and his beans glowed like gold in his stomach.

The doctor's confidence waned as he was escorted through wardroom country, an area abaft the after twelve-inch barbette, where the chaplain, commissioned officers and captain maintained their quarters. When one of the marines knocked on the captain's paneled door, Singleton felt as if someone had rapped his heart with bare knuckles.

"Come."

Captain Oates was eating a gray, pasty gruel. It absorbed all his attention, leaving none for Singleton, who remained standing between the two marines. For the entire day previous, Singleton had remained hidden in his cabin; due to the haste with which they had departed San Francisco, it had not been reassigned. The oozing substance in the captain's bowl looked utterly revolting, a reminder of how stingy a captain's mess could be while at sea. They did, after all, have to pay for their own meals. But this carried economy too far. He wondered if Oates was eating this stuff on purpose, to tease the doctor. As though to say: "See? This is what I have to eat. Not very appetizing, is it? But you'd go at it like the finest New York tenderloin right now, wouldn't you?"

The loud clack of typing in the next room put an edge on his unspoken sarcasm.

His stomach growled volubly. Oates paused. With unprecedented delicacy, he dabbed his lips with a broad white napkin, then nodded. The steward took the

bowl away.

"Is this what they call 'coming before the mast?'" Singleton said with forced jocularly. Oates ignored him, looked at one of the marines.

"Is Lieutenant Grissom on his way?"

"He was getting the day's coal diary, sir. He should be topside in a moment."

"Mmmm.... Well, I--Yeoman! Belay that typing!" Oates tapped his fingers on the edge of the table a few times, then pushed out his chair. Walking to the paneled wall, he turned a judgmental eye on a painting of the *Florida*.

Good Lord, Singleton thought, *it's an oil by Reuterdaahl!*

The exec entered the wardroom. Returning his salute, Oates reseated himself. "Mr. Grissom... as you may have heard, we have an unauthorized passenger aboard the *Florida*."

"A stowaway, Captain?" The exec gestured dramatically.

"Dr. Singleton will be confined to quarters for the duration of the voyage, however long it might take. I want a guard posted at his door every watch. His meals will be taken in his cabin. When he has to answer the call of nature, he will be accompanied to the head."

"Captain--"

"Did someone speak?" Oates turned his back on Singleton and left the wardroom.

Not exactly unexpected, Singleton thought as he was taken away. After all, Oates could have thrown him in the brig.

"What's for supper?" he asked the exec.

"The galley's closed. You'll have to wait until tomorrow."

"Is it alive?"

"If you call it living. That's a sun fish. Saw one dragged up in the *Bahia Escocesa* once. They stuck it with knives, shot it, cut off chunks--stank to high heaven--and the thing acted like nothing was happening. Damn fish didn't have more brains than a sponge, but it weighed a full ton. Wasn't 'til they cut out its heart we knew it was dead. They're alive, but it takes a day to tell."

A group of men had gathered next to the starboard lifeboats to observe the odd creature. At first they'd thought the huge fish was something that had fallen off a ship or something that had drifted out from land. Nothing alive, certainly.

A shiver ran through the less experienced bluejackets as the fish passed to stern. If any animal was hypnotized by God, here it was. It stared up at the sky without end. Its other eye, turned down, stared at depths without end.

"If family resemblances mean anything, I'd say it looks a bit like your mother, eh Mr. Beck?"

"Sir?" said Beck.

There was a threatening rise in his tone that caused everyone within hearing to glance at the midshipman.

"Mr. Garrett...."

"Aw...." Garrett turned away from the ocean and its peculiar occupant. His comment had been off the cuff. One of those insults he was forever handing out to the lower ranks with no thought to consequences. One look at Beck told him this time was to be different. The middy was going to do something rash. Worse, Garrett was touched by embarrassment. He knew he could be an ass. His dim popularity on the *Florida* was mingled with a potent bad taste. No one liked him to the same degree that some of them loathed him.

"Mr. Garrett, I'll thank you to take back that remark."

"And what remark was that?"

"The one about my mother."

Garrett tried to dismiss this with a flip of his hand, as if to say he'd not been paying attention to what he was saying--it was already forgotten.

There was a palpable, contrary energy in the air. The shout of the ocean thrust apart by the *Florida's* ram had drowned Garrett's words. Only a few men at the weather rail had overheard his comment to Beck, but no one could miss the sharp look the two men exchanged. Another of the ensign's insults. What else?

"Mr. Garrett!"

"Don't say something you'll regret." Truth was, a touch of fear advised Garrett's caution. He'd had no intention of verbally cutting to the bone--only a mild, denigrating slap. He was in the exquisitely awkward position of having to stand up for himself, while being clearly in the wrong.

"Mr. Garrett...." Beck dared not do anything to risk his career in the Navy. Yet he dared not do nothing. He stood stupidly for several moments, terrified by his own silence. And then he remembered the announcement that had been made that very morning. An announcement delivered to the mess by none other than Ensign Garrett himself.

Boxing matches would be held the next day.

"Mr. Garrett, I challenge you to a fight. Tomorrow, at the tourney."

Garrett stared at him. It was the worst thing he could imagine hearing. How could he have guessed, that morning, that he was announcing his own execution?

XVII

May, 1908 — 28°20'N, 177°22'W

1750 Hours

Hamilton Hart, late of the United States Army Signal Corps, did not blush in the least as he gave the marine lieutenant before him details of his 'mouth telegraph.'

Anthony stared at him with frank incredulity. "Is this how you've been spending your time? First you run off when I need you, then you run off when Sergeant Ziolkowski asked for help. I can't emphasize this enough: We need men digging--"

"There's an hour of daylight left. The outpost bunkers are done, but you'll never get this finished by dark." He indicated the men toiling at the main compound bunker. Only half the men on the island were still working, the others having fallen exhausted on the sand. Had it not been for the repeated cave-ins of loose coral sand, the bunker would have been completed hours before. Anthony was using the basement of the largest company house as a starting point, but two of its cement walls had been severely damaged in the first attack. The lieutenant considered Hart's words for one reason alone. If the bunker was not ready by nightfall, their only line of defense would be the gas drums Ziolkowski had circled the compound with. Experience showed they made excellent bombs. But they would need advance warning what direction the creatures were coming from to know which drums to set off.

Part of Hart's idea appealed to Anthony. By laying wires stripped from the trans-oceanic cable from the outposts to the compound, lookouts could give a tug and warn of the creatures' approach.

"Not enough," Hart insisted. "What if they change direction? Or stop? You'd be blowing up your gas supply to no purpose."

"But what you propose--"

"Works. All we need now are volunteers."

Anthony wiped his brow with his forearm. After escaping from Eastern Island with the Chinese, he'd spent the next few hours digging at the bunker. He could barely lift his arms. "I was thinking... something in the line of a telegraph."

"I could make one. But a lot of equipment was burned up. I want to save what's left for the wireless."

"Wireless. There's no wireless telegraph on Midway."

"There will be. The miracle is the batteries. We had a few in storage--the fire didn't touch them. After that, we can use the converter."

"If it works." The evening sun was rolling up the ocean like glowing oil. Not even an hour left. Anthony looked at the marines who'd fallen out of the work detail--the Orientals, inured to drudgery, were still hard at it. "All right. Those men are idle. Might as well put them to some use. Sergeant Ziolkowski!"

Ziolkowski crawled out of the pit, sand caked thickly on his skin.

"Sergeant, Mr. Hart thinks he can bring Western Union to Midway. I want you to take these men here and help him out. Follow his instructions... no matter how crackpot they may sound."

"Lieutenant--" Hart began.

"My men's lives are going to depend on this."

Ziolkowski looked dubiously from Hart to the spoons and forks in his hand. "Sir...." he began uncertainly.

"I need you to cover the detail with your machine gun. You'll be going out to the beach.

The sergeant nodded. He was in excellent shape for a man in his mid-forties, but he was almost prostrate from the day's exertions. Any other time he would have seen the need to conserve his energy. But as more and more Leathernecks dropped out, Ziolkowski had no choice but to join in. Not only was the extra manpower needed, but the honor of the Corps had to be upheld. Couldn't let the Chinks do all the work--not when their lives were at stake. But he was worn out. However harebrained the civilian's scheme, it came as a welcome relief from all the digging and shoring.

"Marines!" he shouted at the men lying down. "I see you all found your ass. Now let's see if we can find the rest of you! Enderfall! Get your ass over here!"

"You can't mean it, Top. Did you hear what he wants us to do?"

"Oh. Did I hear an opinion, or did a gooney shit on your head?"

"But--"

"OK, Hart. Show me how this is done," Ziolkowski demanded impatiently. He grabbed a spoon and a fork and held them threateningly in front of Enderfall's face. "Pretend you're eating turkey."

"What about the spoon?"

"Cranberry sauce."

Last light was fading. The lines to the outposts had been laid out earlier. Hart briefed the men on a succinct, peculiar code, invented even as he spoke.

1931 Hours

To many men in the Corps, a broken arm was a golden arm--a virtual license to goldbrick. But Private Kitrell's broken arm could not have been more useless. Before the arrival of the creatures, there had been no need for him to shirk duty. His prowess at chess put him in constant demand. Anthony was chary

of assigning him arduous duties after the enlisted man thrashed him on the squares. It might be seen as spite. Kittrell might take to losing on purpose if he thought he would be punished for winning. And then the keen mental challenge, about the only thing that alleviated boredom around here, would be removed. Thus, his chores rarely amounted to more than a bit of raking on the proposed golf course, or--distasteful enough to the natty Kittrell--scrubbing bird shit out of the cistern.

All in all, a pretty leisurely life for a private. When the Japanese fisherman he had decided to test his jiu jitsu powers on turned the tables and threw him over his shoulder, he bemoaned his stupidity even as his arm crumpled sickeningly. What a waste! A broken arm was useful for evading labor, but there had been no labor to speak of.

It was all coming back on him. With the extinction of Man on Midway in the offing, chess was the furthest thing from his mind. Intellectual games, smugness, neatness--all were supplanted by the burning edge of terror.

He was manning the most dangerous post on the atoll.

He wondered if Ziolkowski had put him out here out of spite. "You might not be able to do much with that arm, but you can sure as hell put a fork and spoon in your mouth," panted the veteran, sweating from exhaustion after another day's digging at a system of trenches around the bunker. Problem was Kittrell *did* need both hands to work Hamilton Hart's odd device.

In his mouth were two spoons, one silver and one aluminum. Each was attached via a stripped cable wire to a man in the bunker, who also had one aluminum and one silver utensil in his mouth. Aluminum connected to silver and vice versa. Hart had reiterated that the metal objects should not be allowed to touch each other while in their mouths.

"Don't we need batteries?" Kittrell had asked.

"The human body is quite capable of an effective E.M.F." Hart was busy knotting a wire around a fork. Only when he glanced up and saw the bemused expressions of the men he was instructing did he realize the marines had no idea what he was talking about. "Uh... E.M.F. Electromotive Force. The alkaline saliva in the mouth acts on the aluminum, creating electricity. We are the batteries."

One of the connecting wires was intentionally broken. In order to transmit, Kitrell had to bring the two ends together. On the other end, the signal would be received as a peculiar taste. Short contact would be a dot, long contact a dash. Per Hart's code, two dots meant a sighting, three meant they were moving inland, three dots and a dash meant it was moving east, and so on. The three other mouth-telegraph teams were similarly set up, with minor variations in code due to their positions.

With one arm in a sling, Kitrell found it difficult holding the wire. He finally devised a way of looping one of the broken ends around his index finger. An occasional adjustment with his good hand kept it in place.

The white line of the shore unraveled as the last light faded. Hunched in his hiding place, Kitrell found being alone unnerving. He had grown up in Indianapolis, accosted by constant city sounds. The clop-clop of horses, the shouts of boys in the streets. "Hey, sissy-boy! Come on out, sissy-boy!" This was the boyhood insult that had planted the desire to become a man. A marine. There was the clank of cars coupling in the railway yards. Distant factory sounds, the outpour of men from the flour mills and meat-packing plants, and the whoosh of the White River. He'd never thought that, by enlisting in the Corps, his worst problem might not be the harsh training or the irrelevant banana wars or the bug-infested backwaters he found himself assigned to. No, it was the silence pervading solitary outposts that wore on his nerves. The awareness that the regular, reliable Main Street ruckus was not the form civilization took everywhere in the world bothered him. Home boys yelled. Natives screeched. Either of which was preferable to--nothing.

Which described Midway perfectly. During the day, of course, the sound of birds was continuous, making up for the absence of civilized traffic. But night brought a death-like silence to the atoll. Of course, there was the comforting chug of the telegraph and distillery generators and the eternal sough of the Pacific--though, oddly, when not stormy, less impressive than the White River.

But there was so little to grab hold of here and say, without doubt, "This is America."

In fact, it was nothing less than a primeval wasteland. Looking out over the ocean, he saw it as not only the vast barrier between here and home, but the savage watery terrain of the ages. Everyone accepted there were mysteries in the

world. Yet it was a facile belief. With so many things known, there were not enough unknowns to throw them off balance.

And now came all unknowns, packaged in three tremendous carnivores who found the stage far too small to include man.

It was a night like the previous one, with the thin clouds obscuring the moon just enough to turn the ocean into an enormous black pit. The sand spit was distinguishable from it, but only tantalizingly so. You could stare at still water for the longest time before realizing it was land.

Clicking the fork and spoon together, Kittrell fidgeted in his hole. *God, let me see tomorrow, I'll pray to you every day.* He turned his silent prayer into a hum. The hum grew louder as the evening progressed. While the horizon rolled over on itself in front of him, he worked himself into a fine baritone.

Suddenly--a rich soprano squeak. He gaped at the tenebrous outline that approached the shore. He forgot all about the fork and spoon, the code Hart had taught them, his reason for being there. On the verge of screaming, he abruptly realized he was looking at a cloud. High up, at a distance, but huge and close-looking with the bright stars behind it.

He fought back a sob of relief and crossed himself--good Protestant though he was. Sitting back, something stabbed him in the ass. Yelping, he hit the top of the tiny bunker as he leapt.

He'd sat on the fork.

Pulling it out from under his body, he held up both fork and spoon to make sure the connections were still firm. He took plenty of deep breaths, then set himself to the task of relearning everything he had just forgotten.

2006 Hours

The men who were supposed to sleep could not fall asleep, while the guards could barely keep their eyes open. Lieutenant Anthony had noted the

phenomena the night before. But when he reversed the duty roster, the wrong men sprang awake and the rest nearly toppled at their posts.

Near the door of the bunker, Hamilton Hart sat with three other men. Each had a fork and a spoon in his mouth, the wires attached to them extending to the different outposts. Every so often the lieutenant or Ziolkowski would come by with a battle lantern to check up on them. Like boys wearing dunce caps, they avoided looking at each other. Yet for all their embarrassment at the sight they presented, none of them let up. They had not removed the utensils to spit, even when they tried to talk and ended up drooling over themselves. It was fascinating, this little contrivance of Hart's. News of horror would not be transmitted to their eyes or their ears, but to their *mouths*, an idea stranger than their mangled words could convey.

The long hours of inactivity gave the former signalman time to plan ahead. Going through the debris of the relay station, Hart had discovered much of its equipment reparable to one degree or another. He was sure he could construct a wireless set. Alone, it would have a signal radius of only a few hundred miles. But the range would be increased dramatically if he attached an antenna several hundred feet long to his balloon. A volunteer would have to be found to go up with the balloon, since he would have to stay on the ground and operate the wireless. And that was a problem. A captive balloon was difficult to manage, especially in high winds. A novice might easily make a mistake and crash.

It had taken him months to construct the balloon. Most of that time had been spent cadging canvas and generator parts from Lieutenant Anthony--time well spent, if what he was planning came to fruition.

Hart's mind drifted away like the balloon he was contemplating. His thoughts traveled to the Eskimo village he and his men had spent the night in during their trip up the Kiltik. It was a Nunamiut village. Nunamiut was not the name of the people, but of their way of life. They lived off the land, as opposed to the Tareumiut, people of the sea. Neither style was exclusive. The first group of Numanuits Hart's men encountered was headed for Sheshalik, on the coast, taking advantage of the July thaw to fish. But they wore clothing and mukluks made from caribou hide, and caribou was their main source of meat. The soldiers met another group of Naupaktomiut about fifty miles up the river, netting ptarmigan near the shore. They were friendlier than the sea-faring Eskimos; they had not been antagonized by whalers. They invited the white men to sleep over

at their village. Hart accepted.

That night the men of the village and the U.S. Army signalmen came together in a large spruce-walled meeting house, a sod-covered *karigi*. It had a large central fireplace. Long benches lined each wall. Hart and his men found their circumstances quite amenable, though the the Naupaktomiut were unquestionably savages. They wore it on their faces. The women were tattooed on their chins--the design not etched like sailors' tatoos but sewn into the skin, using sinews covered with soot, when they were children. The men's chief adornment was equally barbaric. As boys, they had holes cut through each cheek, just below the mouth, cleaning the blood out by taking a mouthful of urine and blowing it through the wounds. Following this labrets, plugs of ivory, were inserted.

Hart learned this through a native interpreter, a man who had spent much of his youth at Kivalina, where white men carried on trade with the white whalers. He was kept busy the rest of the night as the Eskimos and soldiers swapped tales.

The natives laughed when the signalmen told them of the vast deserts they had traversed while stringing wire. Wastelands they understood. Anyone who'd hunted in the Chukchi Sea knew about the eternal ice and snow further north. And there was their own land, in winter. But a desert of *sand*? Hart found out that the Eskimos' laughter was their way of calling someone a liar.

But they seemed amused, nonetheless. So he went on to tell them about the Bering Sea tunnel that had been proposed by an American consortium. The Americans had been holding concession negotiations with the Czar, who was very keen on the idea. The tunnel, and the road connecting it to the Siberian Railway, would run three thousand miles, from East Cape to Kansk. The tunnel itself would run forty miles, at a depth of one hundred and seventy feet, and cost around one hundred million dollars.

His story was greeted with amazed silence. For no reason Hart could readily discern, they believed every word. It was, in fact, true. But so were the deserts. Either they were convinced of the possibility of the tunnel, or the translator had couched it in language that made the idea more plausible. Then again, perhaps they were simply stunned by a race of men who would even dream up such a scheme.

In the middle of his recital a woman had entered, causing a momentary stir among the men. Not that women were excluded from the *karigi*. A number of them had come in to listen to and observe the strangers. This one was different, though. Hart had paused, but she lifted her hand, indicating he should continue. When he was done, several native men turned to her, seeking her opinion.

"She is the *anatquq*," said the translator in a tone that needed no translation. She was a witch doctor, a medicine woman. Also, something of an elder and village advisor. The English-speaking native went on to explain that this was a rare occasion indeed. Their *anatquq* was a cantankerous soul who usually shunned gatherings. But she needed to know the motives of the strangers, and what they portended. After listening to Hart she nodded, said nothing, yet peered closely with hard eyes.

"You aren't the first white men she's seen. There are the Friends."

Hart understood. The California Yearly Meeting Friends Church had been operating a mission downriver for over ten years, doing their best to combat the influence of tobacco, rifles and--above all--liquor among the natives. White Man had introduced these demons to the area, and the Friends believed only the White Man's God could save the Eskimos from them. Several Naupaktomiut, including the medicine woman, had visited the Friends' church at Kotzebue. She was impressed by their words, in particular their sermons against demon rum. She remembered when it was first brought in by whalers, in 1860. She had been a small girl then, yet vividly recalled how hunting parties left the village to find food, only to fall in with traders and get drunk instead. As a result, famine had struck the river villages for many seasons. Still, the fact that the Friends were every bit as white as the traders who poisoned the hunters bothered her. She had been brooding on this for some time, now. The arrival of the Signal Corps had, apparently, signaled the moment to speak out.

Her tone was low, unemotional. Almost a monotone. Although she was highly respected, even revered, the men saw no disrespect in talking while she talked. They were commenting on what she was saying long before she finished. And the English-speaking native maintained a running translation throughout, for the benefit of the signalmen.

And then she said something that brought a profound hush across the room: "I had a vision of a *tirichiki*. It was upriver, where the white men are

bound."

By the natives' reaction, Hart suspected she was speaking of huge snowdrifts or fierce rapids. Obviously, something extremely dangerous.

"What's a turkey... well, what's that she said?"

But the translator shrugged helplessly, unable to think of the correct word in English. "It's a monster, but not a monster. It's a demon. Or a pet."

Before Hart could press further, the old woman shifted the flap on her caribou-skin parka and continued. "It was a true dream. We who live here know the old story. How the young man Kultuk killed a boy and stole his food. When the boy's father came home, Kultuk broke the shaft of a spear and stabbed him as he came through the door. He committed evil, bringing evil on himself--but in a way he could not guess.

"He went home to his wife and she told him of a fat village near the sea. He said he would go there and see what he could take. His wife tried to stop him. 'No one has ever come back from that village,' she said. But he ignored her.

"He found the village. In the *karigi* of the village there was a pet--a huge monster with scaly skin and tentacles. A *tirichiki*. Kultuk found a soft spot in its skin and killed it with a spear while it slept. Then he set out to rob the village.

"The men of the village found that their pet had been killed and began searching for Kultuk. They had just trapped him when from out of nowhere the *tirichiki* appeared. Kultuk grabbed each villager in turn and threw him into the monster's mouth. But Kultuk soon ran out of enemies, and was swallowed himself.

"The stomach of the *tirichiki* was bright red. It was lined with the faces of its victims. Kultuk struck the faces, and suddenly everything went dark. After many days, he saw a light. It was a hole. Using his spear, he widened the hole and escaped.

"He found he had killed the *tirichiki* again while cutting his way out. He looked close to make sure it was dead, then set out again to rob the village.

"But the monster came back, and swallowed him again."

The *anatquq* closed the folds of her robe.

"Kultuk had entered upon an eternal battle. That was his punishment for killing the boy and his father. Whenever he thought he had slain the *tirichiki*, it attacked him again. Yet the *tirichiki* itself was also fooled, for whenever it felt it had killed the man, Kultuk found a way of escaping. Neither beast nor man could ever be certain. The people of this village know this story well. But I had a true dream."

The translator was still relaying the story when the old woman got up and left. Whatever conclusions the white men wanted to draw from her story would be their own. Had the Naupaktomiut incurred eternal enmity from a *tirichiki* by allowing the whites into their village? Or was the story directed at the white men, a warning to go no farther? Hart was interested by the variation on the Sisyphus theme. He wondered how many more stories the *anatquq* had in her. Seeing the rapid accumulation of the products of civilization in their camps and villages, it was apparent the Eskimo way of life was being drastically altered. Someone should put the woman's stories in writing, so that the old ways and tales would not be forgotten.

Hart's men found the subject tedious, and were glad when their hosts turned from mythical monsters to more risqué adventures. For the rest of the night the *karigi* rocked with laughter as stories were exchanged on a subject even more ancient than monsters.

Later, of course, it dawned on Hart that the *anatquq* had not been trying to overawe them with native lore. She'd had, as she'd put it, a true dream. A fact that haunted Hart almost as much as the attack itself.

Struggling back downriver, alone, he eventually stumbled into the village. The Naupaktomiut were not glad to see him this time.

They had helped him as much as they could, yet they did not offer to escort him to his people. Catastrophe had struck twice. The day after Hart's men had passed through on their way upriver, again three weeks later. All told, seven men had vanished. Survivors spoke of something vast and dark, moving, and Hart's story confirmed them. They equated his earlier arrival with the first appearance of the beasts, and were afraid if he stayed much longer they would return. He was the forerunner of death. Nor could they offer him a *bidarki*, since

too many boats had already been lost when the fishermen vanished.

Still, Hart's memory of the villagers supplied him with a warm inner glow over the tortuous weeks it took him to reach the mouth of the river. The weather was clement, and the nights not unreasonably cold. There were berries and fish to eat, if barely enough to stave starvation. Yet Hart's world was now twisted beyond recognition. He was not even sure he wanted to return to white civilization. The Army would strip him of rank, civilians would look at him askance, and Hart himself would face mirrors with uncertainty. When he finally stumbled into Kotzebue, his hunger was as much of the soul as of the body.

He had believed the creatures were born of the vast unexplored Alaskan interior. How else to explain their absence from the bestiary? Yet here they were, at Midway. The same creatures, no doubt. Thousands of miles from the Kiltik. Still, his fear was moderated by an odd elation. Perhaps his luck was not awful, but spectacularly good. He was, after all, being presented a miraculous second chance.

Even after he was relieved from the fork and spoon telegraph and he fell asleep on a pillow of sand, his mind refused to rest. He did not dream of monsters, however. The embellishments of his imagination fed his fear, yet also somehow transported him beyond horror. He dreamed of things floating, high up and over the horizon, where he was greeted by Abraham.

2200 Hours

Private Lieber, on the other hand, dreamed of nothing but monsters. Before Sergeant Ziolkowski nudged him awake, the terrors from the sea ranged far and wide over the vistas of his subconscious. They consumed everything in sight, including the land itself. One of them wore a mask of the Kaiser and charged with a guttural roar, while donkeys ran in panic, braying in an all too familiar voice. His own.

"Ach!" Lieber's eyes popped open.

"Your shift on the mouth-gram." Which was what Ziolkowski called the

fork and spoon.

Lieber could just make out the sergeant's outline in the dark. "Am I awake?"

"Hell, I think so. What kind of question is that? Get down to the bunker."

"I can't see."

"Follow the ropes."

"Ach, where are *they*?"

"Take my hand."

Lieber allowed himself to be led to one of the guide ropes Anthony had laced the compound with. "Follow this one in," came the gunnery sergeant's command as he secured Lieber's fingers to the rope. The private shivered. He had seen Ziolkowski just before nightfall. The Top was still alive, no question about that. Yet darkness disembodied him. His voice floated down from the infinite. From the realm of the dead. It reinforced the feeling--shared by most of the others--that they were dragging their feet in their graves.

A troglodytic existence might extend their lives a month or so. It was preferable to standing out in the open and waiting for the end, but not by much. The situation was hopeless--and for a handful of them, dreary, even boring. Had the creatures not shown a proclivity for sinking small boats, they would have rowed away no matter what the risk because it was simply something to do.

Lieber was not one of these. He was intensely interested in the creatures. How could puny man destroy such beings? His imagination ran rampant with death-dealing prospects.

Taking up his post in the bunker, he carefully wiped the saliva off the utensils as the marine he was spelling rose up.

"Semper Fidelis," Depoy whispered sarcastically.

"Shemper F-eeus," Lieber responded, the fork and spoon already in his mouth.

Settling in, he found he was not in the least bored by this duty. It summoned all the patience he used while awaiting the approach of a shark-- knowing all the while he might lose a hand, a foot or his life in the upcoming battle. Lieber enjoyed a good shark steak, yes. But more, when he killed a shark, he felt he had achieved a small victory over evil. The big fish did not always win.

Something so magnificent it could not be killed.... It stirred Lieber's soul. With their pluck, intelligence and courage the marines on Midway should have been able to kill any creature on the planet. With cost, perhaps, but with a carcass or head for a trophy in the end. Not so now. There was a new master of the earth.

It seemed oddly appropriate, to be crouched in inky blackness contemplating an indestructible god. The men hunkered around him seemed like bedraggled survivors of a destroyed civilization. The objects in their mouths caused them to hiss and drool as they breathed. The early morning hours lumbered past like ancient freighters. Every so often the man next to Lieber would begin to snore, inciting a kick from him. Once, the sleepy marine murmured, "Aw hell, it don't work. Even if it did work, it don't."

Lieber was connected to Private Kitrell at Picket Point, the northernmost tip of the island. Unlike the men in the bunker, those stationed in the outposts would not be relieved until daybreak. They had been allowed a brief nap before nightfall, but a better inducement to stay awake had been offered by Ziolkowski: "I might be making surprise inspections on you. If I find anyone sleeping, I won't just blow the grampus. I'll shoot him on the spot."

No one doubted he meant it.

Around three in the morning, with the bland unchanging taste of metal in his mouth, Lieber began to wonder if Kitrell had fallen asleep. Outside of chess, Lieber felt a kind of friendly disparagement for Skinny. He was the clown of the detachment, Midway's own human gooney bird, clumsy landing style and all. He had been present the day Skinny made his catastrophic foray into the realm of martial arts. Ziolkowski had been present also. He insisted on calling the new method of combat 'Jew Gyps-You.' His scorn knew no bounds when the Japanese fisherman threw Kitrell so hard they could hear his bone snap twenty yards away.

"Won't gyp many Jews like that!" was Ziolkowski's nonsensical observation.

While helping to set Kitrell's arm, Lieber told him, "Don't pay any attention to the Top, Skinny. When this mends, you can toss him over your head."

"Yeah," was Kitrell's response. Usually voluble, intense pain reduced him to an equally intense inner communion, as if he had finally stopped talking in order to discover what it was he'd been saying.

Lieber wished Kitrell would say something now, even if it translated as a mere signatory taste on his tongue. Hart should have provided them with more than directional signals. A simple way to say 'hi' would have been nice. It would at least have assured Lieber that Skinny had not nodded off.

He began poking his tongue around the fork tines, giving himself small jabs to stay awake. Then he began alternating the tip of his tongue between the fork and the spoon. Funny. All his life he'd used items like this almost every meal, yet he'd never considered their shapes before. The spoon, upside down, like an inverted lip, a kind of culinary representative of Cupid, kissing the diner with each bite. The fork, a diminutive reminder that anything alive could be boiled, sliced and impaled for consumption....

At first, Lieber thought he'd accidentally punched a hole in his tongue with one of the fork's prongs. Suddenly, something bitter entered his mouth.

The damndest sensation. Like taking bites out of a metallic grapefruit.

It happened three times. After a pause, twice more.

"Hey!" one of the men slurred as Lieber threw his utensils down and scrambled over his outstretched legs.

"They're coming! Two of them!"

Ziolkowski was already at the entrance. "Pipe down! What the hell--"

"Two of them! From Picket Point!"

"Enderfall! Get your ass--"

"I'm here, Top!" Enderfall's voice quavered. "You're loaded and ready. You're not going out there, are you? I don't think--"

"Ah! Shit! Goddammit! Shit!"

"You OK, Top?"

"Never you fuckin' mind," Ziolkowski whispered fiercely. He had banged his head hard on the bunker entrance while leaning down to speak to the men inside. Stars flared up. For a moment he thought he was going to pass out. Cursing helped him stay conscious. "Fuckin' goddamn, who built this fuckin'... you! Inside! Stay on your toes! We still got one out there we don't know where the fuck he is. Enderfall, you stupid fuck, you sure the Rexer's loaded?"

"Listen!"

The only sound was a breeze through the stiff grass and the distillery generator.

"I don't hear anything."

"I know, Top," Lieber whispered. "All the donkeys must be gone."

"Shit...."

"Damn right, Enderfall," said Ziolkowski. "We're next on the menu. Where's the *teniente*?"

"You mean me?" Lieutenant Anthony's voice bubbled like oil out of the dark.

"We got a signal, Lieutenant. Two of them coming in from Picket Point. They should reach the wire any moment."

In the jungles of Mindanao, Ziolkowski had set up trip-wires connected to rock-filled tins to warn his company of the enemy's approach. What was good against Moros would be good against monsters. Hart's biological telegraph gave them advance warning, but the wires would tell them when the creatures were on

top of the gasoline drums at the perimeter.

Anthony and the marines with him followed the guide ropes to the northern edge of the compound. The drums were in a direct line with the rope, so they could tell which way to fire.

Ziolkowski snorted when he heard the choppy whispers of the Japanese behind him. They needed every gun on the line, including the Lee rifles.

"Flitz! Is that you?"

Lieber felt Ace grope for him. "Let go, will you? Get in line, so we don't start shooting each other."

"We die together, Flitz?"

"Shut up. You--Listen!"

"I hear it," said Ziolkowski.

A heavy sliding sound like water shoving up under.

Then a lively rattling of cans.

Gunshots rang in volley. The bursts lit up huge forms in front. Black-brown, lifting, so high the heads remained in the dark--until they swooped down in reaction to the flashes.

"They're at the drums!" Anthony fired low to puncture them.

"Fritz!" Ziolkowski yelled. "Grenade!"

"*Jawohl*, Gunnery Sergeant Ziolkowski!" was Lieber's ecstatic cry as he charged out of the trench, grenade in hand.

"*Flitz!*"

Lieber raced forward even as the creatures leaned towards him. He broke the hand grenade's fuse against his belt buckle and let it fly, a hissing wasp of smoke spiraling out. He could smell the gasoline. Loud breathing roared in his ears.

"Flitz!"

He looked up. Green Stripes. Looking right down on him. Coming right down.

The men in the compound had stopped firing. Even the sergeant dared not fire his smooth-dealing Rexer.

But a shot rang out. Right next to his ear. The same instant, one of Green Stripe's eyes burst like a chunk of coal busted by a hammer. Its screech of agony was instantly squelched by the grenade and gas blowing.

Lieber and Ace were thrown back by the blast. The German had a brief, crushing vision. Then opened his eyes to see Ziolkowski had taken Green Stripe's place and was looking down at him. He could barely hear the Top through the din in his ears.

"Get up! Got a signal from Frigate Point. Another one's coming from the south!"

Ace was being helped up by his fisherman comrades. His clothes smoldered like a devil's jacket and his eyes rolled slightly, as if he was unsure what was up and down.

Whirling, Lieber saw the gas-fed flames had already begun to die out. "You got one in the eye."

"With a Lee," Ziolkowski said in amazed disgust.

"The bullet should've gone straight into the brain."

"Flitz," Ace said woozily, "maybe they don't have brains. Maybe it's all from the stomach."

They were able to reach the guide ropes before the fire flickered out.

"Fall in here," Anthony called from the south trench. "The big one's coming."

"It's working, isn't it?" came a voice from the center of the compound. "I

knew the telegraph would work. I knew it."

"Keep it down, Hart. Do you have a rifle? I can't see."

"I forgot--"

"Then get one! Follow the guide ropes to--"

A rattling of cans.

"Open fire!" Anthony shouted. And immediately followed his command with a frantic, "Cease Fire!" when he saw two men next to the wire, lit up by gunflash.

"Stop!" the two yelled, falling to the ground.

Ziolkowski eased off the trigger of his machine gun just as a burst was about to cut the men in half. "What the--"

"The guide rope came loose," said a voice in the sudden darkness. "We thought we were following you."

"You stupid plebes, get back here! Hurry!"

They heard the two men stumble towards them, following the Top's bark as though it was a stout line.

"Fuckin' plebes, you weren't following the rope. You carried it out there with you."

"Top... there's something out here."

"Come on...."

"Top!"

The rock-filled cans were tripped loudly, like a hollow clatter of doom.

"Goddamn, can't see shit!" Ziolkowski aimed the Rexer high and squeezed off a long burst. The flashes revealed the two men racing towards the compound. Behind them, the largest serpent was exposed with kaleidoscopic extravagance.

One of the running marines made the mistake of looking back. He stumbled against the other man and they fell in a heap.

"Fire! Everyone fire! Up! Over their heads! Fritz--you got the grenades?"

Lieber clutched his rucksack close to his side and struggled up.

"Hold it," Anthony stopped him. "You can barely walk." He reached into Lieber's sack and removed two grenades.

A shout of horror exploded. The two marines had picked themselves up off the ground, but were still close together when the creature darted its long neck towards them. Screams tore out as the monster bracketed them, puncturing their shoulders and lungs with its saber teeth and reaping them in a shower of blood.

The men in the compound would have seen none of this had not Ziolkowski maintained his fire. They jumped back, certain the beast was stretching into the compound proper. That close. So close. They were splattered with blood.

"Fritz! Get a fucking grenade on that!"

Instead, it was Lieutenant Anthony who darted out. As he ran, he heard the metallic dot-dot-dot as Ziolkowski drilled the drums, allowing gas to pour out. Anthony's back tensed. The sergeant was firing only inches past his elbow. Above him, the beast created a grisly rain as it chewed.

Striking the top of one grenade against his buckle, he arced it at the leaking drums. Then fell to the ground, awaiting the shock of explosion.

Nothing happened.

He had just seen two of his men swept up like appetizers. And he was next. Fear cramped his limbs as he struggled to his knees. Shouting with terror, he rapped the second grenade hard against his buckle, desperate to hear the distinctive pop and hiss, to see the tiny curl of smoke that would tell him the fuse was broken and the grenade activated.

"No! You no hit it right!"

The next thing Anthony knew, the bomb was snatched out of his hand. Smoke still rising from his baggy shirt and pants, Ace looked like an Oriental joss. "This is how!" he yelled, then banged the grenade against the side of his head.

Even as Ace tossed it at the gas, it dawned on Anthony they were much too close to the drums.

Whoom!

A fiery wreath of flames rose on both sides of the beast. It let out a howl as it whipped in a circle. Ace and the lieutenant had fallen flat, but when the creature's tail whirled down it gouged out a great crescent of earth, lifting the two men like gophers turned up by a plow. In a hurricane cloud of dirt and sand they soared over the heads of the men in the compound.

"Ready!" Ziolkowski cleared the grit from his eyes and swiveled his gun to face front.

But the creature had departed. A wide gap in the flames revealed its escape path.

By the light of the fire, Lieber was able finally to locate Ace. His temple was covered with blood.

"You stupid Nip!" Lieber said, helping him up.

It took a little longer to find Lieutenant Anthony. He had been thrown into the ruins of one of the company houses. His head had fetched up between two support beams. They preferred to think he had felt nothing when his neck snapped.

XVIII

June, 1908 — 34°50'N, 151°00'W

From a marine's diary:

The Florida banished from the Fleet! Scuttlebutt has it that we're headed for Midway Island; never heard of it; there was a Midway at the World's Fair in Chicago; I don't think it's the same! Must be a scrap heap for derelict battleships; rose at 4 bells, lashed hammock, polished buttons, and ready to go on watch early this morning; later we cleared for action and I drilled on the six pounder; Beck and Garrett! Mother would faint dead away if she saw all the betting going on here.

The *Florida* had seen many notable events and achievements in its career, but nothing had ever captured the imagination of the crew like the boxing tourney announced that June of 1908.

When Captain Oates learned of the impending match between Midshipman Beck and Ensign Garrett, he expressed doubts to his exec, Lieutenant Grissom.

"Do you think Garrett will be able to put up much of a fight? He looks fit--all my lads do. But... he's not very broad in the shoulders."

"Hard to tell, sir. He's spry. But one good hit...."

"He might take a thrashing. Won't look very good, a midshipman manhandling an ensign. Then again, it will certainly take the men's minds off this--" he made an expressive gesture "--*detour*. Besides, from what I hear, Mr. Garrett might deserve a comeuppance."

"It was only a dolphin, sir."

"Oh, not only that. There was that girl back in Norfolk--hear about that? And other things."

"You mean the stewards. We don't know if he was responsible. Anyway, the niggers needed to be put in line."

"I thought that was *our* job, Mr. Grissom."

The sailors gathered on the quarterdeck like supplicants awaiting the Sermon on the Mount. Indeed, there was an almost religious fervor in the congregation. They were present to witness a sacrificial spilling of blood. For one man to physically dominate another was a holy event. Nothing could be settled in this world until it was understood who was in control. Without that knowledge, Man would be as aimless as a flock of gulls at night. Certainly, Captain Oates was the supreme authority on the *Florida*. But boxing represented the footing of his domain.

This was illustrated at its most fundamental level by the first match of the day: a fight between one of the ship's stewards and the boatswain's mate.

Depending on the mood of the officers, blacks were either banned from or cajoled into boxing on naval vessels. Naturally, most whites thought it beneath their dignity to engage in fisticuffs with Negroes, and even more undignified to get knocked down by one in a fair fight. But there was a new world heavyweight champion, black as night and an undeniable blot on white manhood. There was probably not a captain in the Fleet who did not fantasize of culling a proper challenger from his stout lads to battle Jack Johnson and win back the title. People were already calling the Atlantic Squadron the Great White Fleet, and it seemed only proper that the Great White Hope should come out of it.

Of course, this meant would-be challengers would have to fight black men, in order to brush up on the subject.

Amos Macklin had fought in over a dozen matches, winning most of them. Unlike Midshipman Beck, however, there was no question of his having a choice in his opponent. Had that been the case, Ensign Garrett would have been cream

o' wheat long ago.

Right now, he was squared off against the boatswain's mate, for whom Oates had high hopes. He was about the same height as Amos, but burly and much slower.

Three left jabs were enough to throw the mate off balance and a right threw him to the mat. Amos stood back and cast his eyes down. It was best not to look at the hooting ring of sailors after a brief affray like this. Certainly, it would have been suicidal to gloat.

One man in the crowd was strangely quiescent. Amos raised his head a little and found himself looking at Ensign Garrett, all decked out for the fight to come. It was then Amos knew he could afford to grin. Thoughts of Jack Johnson and White Decline were not at the top of the list, today. The eager eyes popping on the weather deck were awaiting Garrett vs. Beck. Amos caught a whiff of fear from the edge of the ring.

Fear never truly vanished from a fighting ship. Overlaying the *Florida* like an invisible hairshirt was fear of humiliation, fear of botching an assignment, fear of showing fear--of being shown up as an inadequate man among men. The smell was as prevalent as the stench of bilge water. It was highly noticeable among the blacks on the ship; to be so easily dispatched to the galleys, robbed of their rating, was a consummate embarrassment--the thing most feared. Their birth decreed it.

Amos recognized his own fear. The last time he had gone to the voting office in Savannah to register, he'd been brimming with pride and confidence. He departed shattered and heartbroken. Georgia had just introduced a literacy requirement. Anyone who wanted to vote must be able to read abstracts from the state constitution. This did not faze him. When he was a boy he'd worked as a janitor's helper in a nursing home. An old woman there had taken a shine to him and taught him to read. Within a year, he was flipping through Bleak House as though it was a primer, prompting the old lady to declare him the brightest boy she'd ever met. It was an observation he bore with pride--a pride that, over the years, became something of a conceit.

But when the registrar shoved a parchment towards him to test his reading skills, he found the writing incomprehensible.

"This isn't English."

"It's the state constitution," the agent nodded agreeably.

"But it isn't English. It looks like Latin."

"Maybe, but it's still the constitution."

"Can you read it?"

"I can read the letter of the law. And that says, I quote: 'Anyone who cannot read selected parts of the state constitution shall not be granted the privilege of voting.' Unquote."

"But--"

"I think you best move on, boy. There's a line building up behind you."

Well, Amos consoled himself with feeble humor, whoever said Georgia was a part of America? But it was a sign--and the Navy made proof of it. There was no reason for complacency. Nothing had changed. The only proper, and safe, emotion for a black man was fear.

Yet in the world of odors, differences could be discerned between moral fear and physical fear. Amos had won all his fights--except two. Both losses had been at the hands of a large fireman; though he scrubbed up for the fights, it was impossible to get all the coal dust out of his skin on short notice. Amos had the strange feeling he was fighting a mulatto rather than a grimy white man. He was slow, as most stokers were. But none of Amos' rapid punches made any visible impact. The stoker just kept coming, grinning, taking blows, grinning, taking gut shots, grinning. He threw very few punches. He had to save his wind for chasing Amos in circles. Besides, once he trapped Amos, only one shot was needed. The stoker had a right that could knock you back to Bible class.

Amos had no desire for a rematch, but pressure was put on and he had no choice. The men wanted to see if the first knockout had been a fluke.

It hadn't been. The only difference in the second fight was that he ran even more. It didn't help.

He had smelled fear that time--his own. A stench right up his nose. This was what caused men to weaken like children, to dread, to cower. Not the implacable foe, but the noxious fumes generated in one's own body.

The white sailors had had a high old time that day. Amos had revenged himself by devastating six challengers in a row. But it did not erase the memory and smell of defeat.

But now the reek of fear was not his own. For all his calm exterior, his smirk, his seeming indifference, Ensign Garrett was a deeply frightened man. Not only of the possible beating he might take, but of what they all feared most: public humiliation.

Well, Amos thought, it was about time.

Yet for a moment he was touched by pity for the ensign. He recalled the secret beating he'd taken outside the galley. Garrett coming in at him, flailing his small ineffectual hands, more like an angry child than a grown man. Ensign Garrett could not beat the petals off a wilted daisy, was Amos' conclusion. He deserved to be flayed alive. And yet....

Before Amos could search out Beck to get a better idea of what the ensign faced, he was shuffled belowdecks. The sailors had grown tired of trying to rouse his opponent and were carting him away.

A few minutes later, Garrett stood in his place.

Midshipman Davis had mixed feelings about missing the fight between the ensign and his erstwhile friend. It might prove to be memorable, if one sided. Davis was one of those who believed Beck would make short work of Garrett. He'd boxed against Beck himself at the Academy. Scheduled for three rounds, Davis found himself talking to angels within thirty seconds. When the instructor finally coaxed him to consciousness, he discovered he was not the only one flat on the mat. Beck was down, too.

"Did I hit him?" Davis asked with groggy incredulity.

While stanching the flow of blood from his nose, the instructor shook his

head. "No. He took one look at this gusher of yours and passed right out. Mr. Beck has a lovely right cross, but he'll never have the killer instinct."

When Beck walked into the junior officers' mess all sprite and cocky, he pointedly avoided sitting with Davis. Had events run their normal course, their grudge would have culminated in a match of their own. But Beck was sickened by the sight of blood and Davis was an easy bleeder. Neither desired a repetition of their Academy embarrassment, so their disaffection sat festering. For all his eagerness to see Garrett thrashed, it was harder swallowing Beck's swagger.

Still, it came as a blow when he was ordered to stay with Dr. Singleton in his cabin while the fight took place in the shadow of the aft turrets.

"Is he sick, sir?" he'd asked Lieutenant Grissom.

"Aye, and still under arrest."

When the marine posted at Singleton's door smirked knowingly, Davis caught a strong whiff of the truth.

"Come to keep an eye on the old souse?" the doctor slurred as he entered. "I asked specif-f-fically for you, young man. Oates said *someone* had to watch me... make sure the old fool don't slip with the razor or something. Bad press, bad press. Either that or he's curious where I get my liquor. Anyway, I say, 'Why not my old companion, Midshipman Davis?' And here you are."

He was seated in an odd-looking chair Davis had noted on earlier visits to the cabin. The middy refrained from asking about it. The doctor might decide to put him in it and Lord knew what it was designed for.

"I see you looking at my throne. This was invented by Dr. Brendel. Out of Tschupackowka. Russia. Successfully tested on the Hamburg-American liner, *Patricia*."

Davis gave in. "Tested for what?"

"Why, seasickness! The prevention thereof. Uh... the corkscrew motion of the ship is compensated with lateral movements. The gyrations of Neptune, reciprocated by a motor connected to a belt, which is attached to the eccentric actuating the seat."

Davis could see the eccentric, all right. Quickly, he sat at a small sea table before Singleton could rise to offer his own.

But the doctor seemed incapable of rising. He thudded from side to side, between the high padded arms of his experimental chair. The low hum of the motor revved to a whine whenever it fought to right itself. The sea was steady. The imbalance came from the doctor, who swayed in the chair as though sitting out a typhoon. Every so often, Singleton would lean too far out, setting the chair into a crazy spiral that whirled him slowly like a top. Each time he emphasized a point by throwing up his hands, he went into a spin.

The dreaded mood-detecting machine was nowhere in evidence. On the table, in its place, stood a tall multi-tiered series of game boards. Chess pieces were arranged on the bottom two levels. It looked harmless enough, so the midshipman asked about it.

"Premiered by Dr. Ferdinand Maack at the Karlsbad Chess Tournament last year," said the doctor, who in Davis' estimation knew the name and address of every crackpot inventor in Europe and America.

"So it is chess."

"Three-dimensional." Singleton leaned forward to adjust some of the pieces. The chair lurched and he knocked down half a row of white pawns. With a resigned sigh, he eased back.

"I play," Davis offered. Better to wrap up the time with a new game than indulge Singleton's tedious maundering.

"Mmpphhh, you know the moves, I'm sure. In some respects, this comes far closer to the analogy of war beloved of armchair strategee... strategee... strategists."

Singleton inserted a finger under his collar and flicked out his shirt a few times. Davis remarked the gray nipples of his flabby breasts under the sweat-soaked cotton. Once, he'd spotted Captain Oates lounging on a yacht off Cape Cod. He, too, seemed in need of mammary restraint as he flopped to his side. Davis wondered if that was where the derogatory phrase 'old woman' came from. Did men become... well, *less* than men as they aged? His own nipples brushed uncomfortably against his stiff tunic as he squirmed. What a dreadful fate!

Singleton dropped back. The little motor in the base of the chair whirred. He tilted, nearly fell out. The electric whine intensified and he straightened up.

"War... well, that's three-dimensional, right? Two-dimensional chess is a pale imitation. Eighty-one squares as compared to eight hundred and thirteen, parallelopipedons. Sixty-four to five hundred and twelve. The number of major pieces remains the same, but there are more pawns. Most of the moves are identical, simply extended to three dimensions. But the knight--ah! That's where the true art comes in. It..."

"Yes?" Davis prodded.

The doctor seemed to turn to stone. Disappointment leaked back into the midshipman's mood. Singleton had finally managed to interest him in something, only to veer off in the middle of his dissertation.

"I... I'm not very good at it." He pushed backwards. The motor whined. He produced a flask, took several sips.

"Sir, if you don't mind my asking... why did you come back?"

"Don't be a fool. Money, of course. And I can make a fine purse, now. 'I was a prisoner of the Grand Atlantic Fleet.' That's an article that'll sell, I'll warrant." Seeing the midshipman's anger, he softened his next words. "I think you really want to ask: Why do I drink?"

"No, sir. More like, why do you drink so much?"

"Fair enough." He took out a flask and took several sips. "What were you doing three years ago?"

"Sir? I was in school."

"Did they teach anything about the great eclipse of 1905 in that school?"

"We read about it some."

Stretching out his hand, the doctor described an arc in the air. For the first time Davis noted his wedding band. Hard to think of this old fart being married.

"From Hudson Bay to Newfoundland, then across the Atlantic. Great swatches of the planet blotted out. Spain, Algiers, Tunis, Egypt. Total. But a total eclipse can't last for more than seven minutes. Very rare. The eclipse of 1905 lasted three minutes, forty-five seconds. We had to prepare a year in advance to make the most of those minutes. Much like all your training on the six-incher, wouldn't you say?"

Davis caught faint shouts through the scuttle. Had the Beck-Garrett fight begun? Or was it the preliminary bout?

"Nine expeditions were sent out from the States alone. Many more from the European nations. To look at the Sun. What we see is the photosphere--mere surface. Current theory has it that it's made up of billions of granules five hundred miles thick, floating on a dark surface." Singleton shrugged. "After that, there's a theoretical 'reversing layer'--called so because it reverses the solar spectrum. Farther down is the chromosphere, the red mass of hydrogen. It's from there that flames shoot up as much as one hundred thousand miles. Think about that, lad."

Not much to do with the cost of tea in China, Davis thought wearily.

"I was with the *Minnesota*. We dropped off Professor Bigelow at the Puerta Coeli Station in Spain. He would be performing experiments with the camera coelostat and the spectrograph. Meanwhile, we sailed on to Algeria.

"You can't possibly imagine how delicate our instruments were, how carefully they had to be managed." With unintended parody he demonstrated this fact by turning tiny invisible knobs. "We had a fifteen-inch camera mounted on a polar axis, a concave grating spectrograph, prismatic polarigraphs for measuring the polarity of the corona, a chromospectrograph--"

"Yes, sir."

"Uh... all the instruments were calibrated at the Naval Observatory in Washington, of course. But they had to be set up so precisely... a millimeter off and the results would be useless."

Listening to the doctor's long, sad sigh, Davis looked at him keenly. No doubt, this extended prologue was leading up to a point. The middy found his interest piqued in spite of himself. He sensed the profound event Singleton was

about to reveal had much to do with his fall from grace. He looked like a man whose vision had skipped off the present and was sinking in the deep past.

"We were quartered in an old palace. I was given a room once used by a bey. Princely, to say the least. Come morning, we passed through Guelma...." The doctor stared at the shot glass on the table for a long moment, as though contemplating formality. Then he shrugged and took another long pull from the flask. "They all wore white there. They were a filthy, godless race... and they all wore white.

"The day came. August 30. And I handed over my duties to the naval science attaché."

Davis waited for his explanation. After a minute of listening to the little motor whir and whine, he grew impatient and asked, "Why did you do that, sir?"

"I couldn't function, lad."

"You were sick?"

"You mean snookered? No. I was supposed to make the final adjustments. Had to be sober as a bell. What happened... I don't know. You see, the night before.... What I'm trying to describe is a perfectly ordinary event that had extraordinary consequences. I'd drifted off by myself. Just looking around. All white. Kaffir or Moslem, didn't matter. All dressed in blessed white. Even their buildings, like adobe. All that virginal boasting in a land as scurrilous as Gomorrah. It was evening, you see. I had to get back to the site to take some astronomical readings. And just as I looked up I saw a minaret. And just above it--impaled almost--was Venus. Like some renegade Star of Bethlehem. And then the muezzin called for evening prayers...

"Do you know what a conjunction is, midshipman? The old astrologers believed in them. Venus, the minaret, the call to the faithful. It was a cabalistic moment. An evil conjunction. At that instant I lost... *me*. Nothing mystical. I didn't lose myself *in* something. I'm no saint. I'm a scientist. I simply lost contact..." he pinched himself, "...with this. With it all. I knew I wouldn't be able to function the next day. I suppose that's how I came to be here. When I handed over responsibility for the expedition to the attaché, the Navy thought I was being generous. Giving them the honor of discovery and all that. They were so thankful they gave me a berth with the Fleet."

"I don't get it," said Davis. He'd expected something more dramatic. An encounter with Berber pirates, a mutilating sword thrust. Singleton's epiphany seemed so groundless. *Stupid*. He looked away. It was hot. He yawned.

"Midshipman Davis," the doctor slurred, "I didn't expect you to understand. It was everything to me, though. Since that night I haven't been able to finish reading a single book. Not Euripides in the original. Not James to pass the time. I can't concentrate. I've lost focus. My *self*."

"You mean you forgot everything?"

Singleton reared up, startled by Davis' voice. The look in his eyes suggested he'd forgotten the midshipman was present. He had been speaking to himself. Already flush, he went even redder. "I... well, no. It's still all there. Up here. But it's... uh... jumbled. The Periodic Table is gone, for one. I remember all the elements. Used to be able to recite them in order. Atomic weights, valences. No more. The organization is...." He wiped his face. Davis could tell he was embarrassed. "And now here I am with my... my armamentarium, if you will. And I can't use a whit of it. "

This seemed a gross inaccuracy to Davis. Singleton had been playing with his scientific toys since day one of the voyage.

"Ah... it was an act of God in a godless land," Singleton concluded, averting his eyes.

Davis concentrated on the fight sounds coming through the scuttle. Forget Singleton, starting a story he couldn't finish. The fight outside would finish and he would only hear the report of it. Christ, what was the doctor going on about, anyway? He'd been in fine scientific fettle when he stuck all those men with needles.

Or had it all been a hoax?

He felt imprisoned. Worse, locked up in an insane asylum. Drunk as he was, Singleton saw a grand, comprehensible tapestry underlying his non sequiturs. Davis saw only a vermicelli mess.

Midshipman Beck was scared to death. He knew he had weight on Garrett. He knew he had reach. Muscle, no doubt. Moral sanctity as well.

But would he win?

Or would he make an ass of himself?

As the men cheered his entrance into the deck-plate arena he saw a small man opposite him--and had to glance twice before recognizing the ensign. Garrett was *short*. Garrett was *small*. Why had Beck never noticed that before? The physical comparison was not invidious. They were both middleweights. Yet they were at extremes in the category, Beck's one hundred and sixty pounds to Garrett's one hundred and forty-six. Like the middy, he was stripped to trunks, black rubber-soled shoes, and boxing gloves from the Entertainment Fund cache. The sinister cockiness that had made Garrett the *bête noire* of noncoms had faded somewhat, but when Beck gave him another glance to verify his first impression, Garrett tossed him a grin that seemed effortless, unconcerned, deadly. Beck's bud of resolution died a-blooming. How could he have been such a fool? Garrett would win. He would hound Beck the rest of his life. He might as well leap the rail and put an end to the humiliation.

The moment was coming. It was unavoidable.

A face caught his attention. The mere fact that it was familiar for an instant made him think it was Davis. But it turned out to be one of the marines who had been looking on, laughing, the day Garrett landed the dolphin. Damn them! The marines always seemed to be watching the sailors with a smirk, like owners taking note of their pets' antics. Swiveling his head, he noted at least a dozen of them in the audience. Why weren't they busy doing something else? And how could it be that so many bluejackets were free to look on? Come to think of it... didn't *he* have better things to do?

Beck felt nauseous. Each second beat against his stomach, turning it to jelly. He began a silent prayer, but stopped when he noticed a marine watching his lips move.

The sun poured down. A hot pulse reflected off the turrets. The petty officer overseeing the match held a stopwatch in one hand. The other hand was raised. When he dropped it, a bell was rung.

Ensign and midshipman closed cautiously.

"You called me away from the bridge for *this*?" Captain Oates' gruff tone did not conceal his nervousness, but rather enhanced it, shagged it, shaped it into an ugly monster the navigator could barely look at.

"I'm sorry sir, but we were lucky to get it. The public library lost its atlases in the quake and fire and they haven't got new ones. We found this in a private library."

Understandable, but frustrating. The atlas showed nothing more than a speck at 28°20', 177°20'W. Admiral Thomas had let drop the fact that Midway had had its share of shipwrecks. Like most atolls, its coral reefs were notorious for ripping out ship bottoms and spilling crews over the ocean bed. This left Oates blanched and infuriated. How blithely men were sent into dangerous waters! His silent fury was increased when Thomas turned down his request to scour the other ships for a decent chart of the area. No need to stir up rumors. It was hard enough thinking up excuses for the other captains for the urgent coaling of the *Florida*. Even though they were not due to leave any time soon, it seemed an insult that the heap of the Fleet had won priority for anything. But it was better to venture a few diplomatic lies than risk the truth getting out. A Jap attack on Midway could result in a wholesale massacre of *Issei* on the West Coast.

Still, a dangerous, complete revelation of the facts, as far as they were known, forcing the entire Fleet to respond, would have been preferable to making this lonely trip. Oates could not convince himself the Japanese had conquered the atoll. What would be the point? There were any number of more valuable possessions in the Pacific. There had been a disaster, no doubt. But the captain suspected it was more in the nature of a catastrophic fire in the cable station. Perhaps, as the Admiral himself had suggested, the Japanese workers on the island had rioted, for one reason or another. That would explain the frantic confusion of the last message. But war? Not likely.

I'll bet the Japs have good charts, Oates thought miserably, unable to dismiss the possibility of coming nose to nose with the Imperial Fleet. Whether by reef or enemy action, it was all too conceivable that the *Florida* was facing a quick demise at a lonely outpost.

The navigator stood up from the chart table, his compass dangling helplessly on his index finger. "Sir, I'm afraid...."

"Yes?"

"Even what little we have... this atlas doesn't seem to be very accurate. It shows Hawaii off by four degrees from what we have on our charts. Midway's so small we could miss it with the slightest deviation from the correct course and we don't even know the correct course."

"See that we don't."

Oates followed his terse command with an equally abrupt departure from the chart room. What more could go wrong? As a young man contemplating the meaning of existence, he had dwelled on the fact that you could not physically strike God. It had infuriated him that the Creator could use humans like playthings, obviously inflict pain and thwart human emotions and man could not only not stop it, but had no options for revenge.

As the years passed, thoughts of the Almighty receded like a series of stormy days. Oates was remarkably agnostic for a seaman. Omnipotent power was replaced by the tyranny of petty potentates. The Navy's Order of Command only made them slightly more visible. The president decreed, the admiral flaunted his quirks, the boatswain treated the men under him well or cruelly, depending on his whims. But the invisible potentates, the flukes and flaws that encumbered daily existence, were the real nemeses. Just as Oates considered God an adversary beyond reach, so too life itself. The foibles of men and the chance dispositions of nature were as undeniable and amorphous in their complex totality as God Himself. Once again, Oates found himself clenching his fists at things that could not be hit.

But at least he could watch *men* hit each other.

From the exposed bridge, he could see the ring that had been erected next to the boat deck. His lips raised a grin. Well... Ensign Garrett had come out. It would do the captain's bones good to see him thrashed.

Slowly, however, his grin began to fade.

He had been adrift for over a week.

The sea gulls had adopted a cockeyed way of looking at him. After the third day, William Pegg could have sworn they were the reincarnated voices of dead shipmates.

"You wanta cause trouble, boy?" one bird croaked. Captain Chandry was easily recognizable among his fellows. A gull covered with dung from crown to back, he swaggered, cried, and fell down at improbable moments. He occupied the bowstem as if it was his own, and rarely shut up. "You're a fucking mutineer, boy. I shoulda locked the fo'c'sle door and let the smoke take you. Goddamn, that was something, seeing you choke and puke. You should be the one covered in shit, not me."

"Ah..." William moaned, and covered his eyes.

He had not been able to save all the duff. When the whaleboat was tossed from the Lydia Bailey, the clumps of dough were scattered across the centerboard. In the heat of the following day the dough rose and baked, the yeast emitting an imperceptible hiss as it fermented inside the loaves. By the time William opened his eyes late that morning, the gulls had swooped down and stolen half his supply. It was their insistent bickering and flapping that awakened him. He watched them argue with each other for several minutes, bemused. Then the reality of his plight hit him and he scrambled madly to rescue the remaining loaves.

Chewing on one of the gooey lumps, the paste nearly choked him, prompting him to investigate his water situation. It was dire. In his haste to escape, the purser had only managed to get one small watercask on board. Half full, at that. *How many days, at how many thimblefuls?* William wondered.

There was no question in which bird the the purser was reincarnated. A particularly large gull with a permanent smudge on its chest was a master thief. He waddled up tamely with a friendly smirk, leaned forward confidingly, then suddenly darted to the side and snatched a dumpling. Angered by the bird's duplicity, William leaped forward. A tug-o'-war ensued, the soggy dough stretching out between them like warm taffy, until it broke and the sea gull tumbled overboard.

The boy laughed until his sides nearly burst. First the duff sauce down the

cargo well, and now this! There was no end to his vengeance against the man who'd stolen his books. An eternal crusade, as well it should be. And now what? Should he lure the reincarnated thief closer, catch him by the neck, and cut him open? It would be interesting to see if it was the absence of a heart that made him so heartless.

For that matter, bird meat might not be so bad. Raw, but more substantive than a continuous diet of duff. But the gull refused to co-operate. No matter how much William baited, cajoled, or jumped, the purser, as well as the other gulls, always managed to elude him.

Well, if not fowl, then fish.

He went through the larboard boat becket and supply chest. Taking out one of the waifs, he used the end of the boat spade to pry out one of the wires stapling the flag to the pole. Pressing the wire around an oarlock, he shaped it into a hook, making a rough loop on the straight end. After an hour's labor, he managed to split five yards off the heavy whaling line. He fine-tuned the end and fit it through the gimlet he'd made in the wire, then attached the other end of the line to the drag pole. He was able to use a toggle bearing from the harpoon as a weight. But he had only duff bread with which to bait his hook. He could only pray that there was a fish out there with a yen for Portuguese.

Sushi. He would have sushi. The thought made his mouth water and kept thirst at bay, for a while. He'd never had raw fish before, but he'd heard of the Japanese delicacy. They even ate raw heads. Something red, dripping, filling... he could hardly wait. Lowering his line, he peered over the gunwhale and whispered to the depths, "Please come, fishy... you love me, don't you, fishy?"

Just like the gulls, as the days progressed the denizens of the sea began to unmask themselves as reincarnated souls. But they remained anonymous, their song the murmurous chant of the multitude. They knew William had recognized them for what they were. This annoyed them, because they considered it the ultimate fall from grace to come back as a fish. They avoided his improvised tackle out of spite (as well as a justified repugnance for the duff offering). Why should he be allowed in the sunlight, while they were compelled to lurk below?

But the sun was the very thing that was killing him. It had sucked every breeze off the planet, it seemed, leaving William in the wide, searing doldrums.

"Come with me, into my furnace," it intoned as the boy tried to cover himself. Day lasted forever.

And the sea refused to rock him to sleep.

And the duff sauce caked and cracked on his skin. He would not clean it off. It would be his only protection if the monsters returned. It also appeared to keep the gulls at arms distance--he was fearful they would pluck out his eyes as he slept; at least, he had heard such a thing happening to other castaways.

What was wrong with the fish down there? Certainly, there had to be one in all the ocean that found duff appealing. If he could catch a bird, cut it up for bait....

William Pegg did not know that in addition to thirst, inadequate food and exposure, he was suffering from a concussion incurred when his head hit the gunwhale on the *Lydia Bailey*. The catcalls and insults of the gulls were every bit as real to him as if Captain Chandry and the purser themselves were hooting from the bow. The hallucinations were beneficial, in a way, since they helped take his mind off his gut-wrenching nausea.

Even more distracting was the ancient bird with tattered feathers that landed in the water next to him and stared at him long and hard. Lead Foot, who else? Bobbing on the waves, he began to murmur something. It took William half the day to discern what he was saying.

"Happy Easter.... Happy Easter.... Happy Easter...."

"Why'd you tell me that story, Lead Foot? Those people trapped on that island, starving, eatin' each other up--what a thing to talk about! Like a bunch of savages have anything to do with us. You won't catch white men eating each other--"

"Not you, leastwise," Lead Foot the gull blinked. "You got no one to eat!"

"Aw...." He reached for an object to throw at the bird and found himself holding something green and furry. Duff bread, already gone to mold.

"How many days?" he said, staring at the green mass.

"Those Easter Island people were so hungry, they ate anything. That's the good thing about being human, boy. You can eat anything."

"Hell, I'm not going to eat this!" William shouted, heaving the clump at the bird. He missed its head by a yard. The gull swam over, gave it a disdainful sniff, and allowed it to sodden and sink without touching it.

"Should know better than to throw shit at your old friend," the gull pouted.

"I want to die, Lead Foot. I feel so sick."

"Hmmm... what're you fishing for?"

"Anything I can eat."

"Must not want to die too bad. What're you using for bait?"

"Don't ask."

His back ached from being pressed against the planks so long. He leaned forward, resting his chin on the gunwhale and hanging his arm over the side. His shadow peered back from the unreflective water. He needed sleep. Removing the line from the drag pole, he bound it to his wrist. He watched the tiny concentric ripples that pulled away from the line in tiny guppy breaths. He tried counting them and dozed off with thoughts of infinity.

A sudden jerk woke him. At first he thought he'd made a strike--his hand had been pulled into the water. Half over the gunwhale, he thanked the stars he had not fallen in.

But something was wrong. Staring down, he noted the tiny ripples had turned red. Lifting his arm, he was horrified to find his hand was half gone.

His scream was cut short. Something streaked out of the water at him. William rocketed back and slammed into the bottom of the boat. The shark just missed biting his head off.

"Oh God--!"

The pain shot through him like a needle in the eye. There was a thump as

the shark slapped the centerboard from below.

"My hand! You took my hand! Bastard! You bastard!"

And then another beating wave of agony hit and he screamed and screamed. Water flashed over the gunwhale. The shark had an idea of tearing through the planks. But after a while it gave up. William Pegg was left alone with his agony.

Truly alone. Because the pain wiped out all fantasy, illusion, hallucination. The gulls--when they returned--no longer spoke. The sea no longer sang. Everything was sharp. The horizon cut like a razor across his nose.

But the salt that burned so fiercely also helped stop his bleeding. White powdery-looking salt formed leprous patches on the wound.

Several fingers of his right hand were gone. His thumb remained, but the muscles at the base had been torn out, making it useless. His palm was cut through at the center. The miracle was that the shark had not pulled him overboard. To William's thinking, though, that fact was a tragedy. Things were so clear now. He lived on a shining blade, stropped sharp and clean by godless simplicity.

"My hand...."

Three days after the shark attack, a week after the sinking of the *Lydia Bailey*, the Fates decreed William Pegg should live.

The *Florida* hove into view.

Midshipman Beck was not overly fond of the taste of blood. The last time he'd tasted this much was when he'd fallen off the back porch at his aunt's house in Troy. While he was still spitting out rubies of phlegm, his mother put him over her knee and gave him the wallop of his life.

Ensign Garrett was not his mother. Nor was Beck any longer afraid of him... for Garrett was slowly picking himself off the deck after a solid roundhouse from the middy. In spite of the taste in his mouth, he was beginning

to feel rather good.

The fight had gone badly for him up to this point. Garrett displayed remarkable speed as he danced around his opponent, landing blows at will. The spectators were unable to disguise their sympathies. Officers cheered and ratings moaned.

"Pick up your feet, Beck! Stop moving like an elephant!"

"Try and hit him, at least!"

Beck tried, and received two jabs in the side of his head as Garrett whipped sideways like smoke in the wind.

It hurt... but not as much as Beck had anticipated. Surprised by how lightly the blows fell, the midshipman realized he could go a number of rounds at this pace without serious harm to himself. Studying Garrett's jaw, he decided he needed only one good shot. Just give him enough time.

It happened late in the second round. Garrett, unscathed, became cocky and tried trading some toe-to-toe with Beck. Practically a gift. The midshipman took full advantage of it.

As a consequence, Garrett went sprawling on the deck. It took him two tries to make it back to his feet. Officers urged him on with wild shouts as he wobbled toward his opponent. The rest of the bluejackets fell uncommonly silent. They championed Beck, yet it was... odd... seeing Garrett flattened so succinctly. And their instincts raged. What would be the consequence?

The ensign shook his head, then came on again. He now knew better than to test Beck on his own flat-footed terms. But when he tried returning to his previous style, he found the blow had robbed him of some of his speed.

Flick... flick... flick.... He tagged Beck again and again. The spectators were impressed by his comeback. Beck himself was appalled. He'd never had an opponent get back up to fight after taking the kind of head shot he'd dealt Garrett. He felt a little queasy. What was happening here? Still, Garrett had slowed down some. The midshipman's chances of hitting his target had improved.

"Go for his head, Beck!" the bluejackets yelled, swinging back into the mood.

Beck discovered he was having difficulty seeing out his right eye. It was beginning to swell shut. He did not have as much time as he'd first estimated. If he didn't finish soon, he would be blinded, completely open to attack.

"Ooo-wah!" the crew exulted as he led with a whistling right. Garrett managed to parry part of the blow, but there was a wicked crack. Some were sure a bone had been broken.

Although he was awkward with his left, Beck tried to follow up.

"Oh!" the sailors moaned as he missed by a mile, falling against the ropes when he lost his balance.

"Phfft!" Captain Oates snorted at Beck's graceless maneuver. "If that boy fought old bulls, he'd do better." He thought he was talking to himself and was mortified when he heard a small cough at his shoulder.

"Grissom...."

The exec nodded, smiling. "If Garrett hadn't tried to match punches, this would be an even fight. He still might come back."

"You think so?"

"Drake against the Armada, sir. The lighter ships--"

"Quite," Oates chuckled.

The lookout phone rang and the exec lifted the receiver. He listened a moment, then looked up at Oates. "Sir, on the port quarter...."

Ensign Garrett had once seen a boxer die. As a boy, his father had taken him to an old-fashioned and completely illegal bare knuckle fight in El Paso. No

set limit to the number of rounds. A draw was not possible. By the twenty-sixth round, both fighters were semi-comatose. Garrett had prayed one of them would give up, not understanding that this was how they made their living, that the loser might not be allowed another match. With jobs so scarce in the Texas of the 90's, the loser might face starvation. The combatants heaved in the hot air. Dust drifted in and turned to mud on their skin.

Garrett could guess which man would die. He could see it in his eyes: the energy of hell, yet not one ounce of it could be translated to his arms. From an unknown source the other man found enough strength to hit his opponent in the chest, over his heart. The man's sudden pain was out of all proportion to the punch. He dropped to his knees, gasping. Garrett heard his father murmur, "His heart."

It was cold confirmation of a mystical event. No mistaking it. They were witnessing a man's death. Yet his opponent, every bit as hungry, could not pass up this opening. Even as the dying boxer suffered cardiac arrest, he was hit with full might in the face and not a single spectator faulted the winner for it.

A lesson never to be forgotten, especially by someone as slight as Roger Garrett. Schoolmates joshed that he was the Runt Texan, resulting in innumerable playground fights. A feisty response was worth a thousand clever rejoinders.

As Garrett entered manhood, he found if one was aggressive enough from the beginning, painful fights could be avoided. In short, being obnoxious effectively cowed potential adversaries.

It was all coming back to him now. Just as the boxer could not surrender his livelihood, even at the risk of his life, so Garrett could not afford to lose face. If he did, his uniform would become no more than an empty cloth shell.

Flick... flick... flick....

Whap! Beck connected.

Garrett did not lose consciousness. Instead, he became sickeningly aware of his body. He knew only vaguely that he was falling. What concerned him more was the dark trench that opened between his head and sphincter. It was the physical part of his will, hollowed out like a gutted deer. Oddly, even as his

limbs disobeyed, his hearing improved to an unnatural degree. He heard whispers. The sharp snap of signal flags overhead sounded like gunshots.

He searched desperately within himself for something to help him stand--and found it:

Humiliation.

Beck wanted to stand on Garrett's chest and force him to stay down. There could be no more doubt as to the outcome of the fight. The sight of the ensign's face, bloody as a fresh hock, filled him with a strange sorrow rather than any sense of victory--almost a nostalgia for something that would never be the same again. Something unfathomable would be replaced by something unknown. And Garrett, drooling blood as he staggered to his feet, reinforced that feeling by coming at him again. No one fought this hard when the reward was so paltry. There was no dance left in his feet. Beck couldn't miss.

But he did. Several times. Garrett presented such a woefully static target that the onlookers were amazed when the midshipman's blows went wide. They assumed Beck did not want to hit the ensign again for fear of killing him. Actually, the sight of his opponent's blood was beginning to make Beck swoon. He could not bring himself to look directly at Garrett. He focused his eyes slightly above his head. The wide swings were the consequence.

Finally, one landed.

There was a loud *whack!* as Garrett was knocked down again. Beck was certain he would not rise for a long, long time.

The flags snapped. And Garrett rose once more.

Dazed, he stumbled into the ropes. Some of the sailors tried to hold him there. He pushed them off. There was a profound hush. The onlookers began looking for officers to stop the fight. The petty officer acting as referee ignored their murmured protests as he allowed them to continue.

"Mr. Garrett..." Beck backed away as the ensign approached.

"C'mon, Shit-shank," Garrett slurred, confusing him with Davis. "You sayin' you started somethin' you can't finish?"

"Mr. Garrett...."

Garrett did not listen, but took several feeble jabs at Beck's head. Beck, goaded on, mustered everything for one last shot and let go.

When Garrett hit the mat it sounded as if he'd fallen from the fighting mast. If the spectators could not actually feel the deck shake, their imaginations quivered at the impact.

"You saw him," Beck said plaintively, certain he'd killed the man. "You saw him. He wouldn't stop. It was a fair--"

Marines flooded out of the hatchways, their bugles blaring.

"Stand by to retrieve craft!"

The bluejackets jumped as if a fire had broken out. They had been so intent on the match few had noticed the ship coming about. Running to the starboard rail, they saw a whaleboat not a hundred yards away. As the *Florida* drew alongside they could see someone on the thwarts. Long grappling hooks were thrust out and the boat hauled in.

A sigh of horror whispered through the sailors as they viewed the man close up. One of his hands had been all but severed. Blood had sprayed the planks. He looked like the victim of a one-man massacre.

"What're you gawking at! Henderson! Lee! Get him out of there!" Barely able to keep his feet, Garrett struggled through the gathered men. "C'mon. I think I see him breathing."

Looking from Garrett to the gory figure in the whaleboat was like switching from the living dead to the napping dead. A portion of the rail was lifted away and two sailors prepared to jump in. They hesitated upon getting a closer look inside. Dried splotches of blood were scattershot over the stern. Up the length lay oozing green masses of moldy duff bread that vented a nauseating stench.

"In you go!" Garrett yelled. Someone had handed him a towel, which was now streaked bright red.

Lieutenant Grissom had also just come forward, but Garrett did not see him. Rather than treat him like an usurper, Grissom took one glance at his mangled face and decided to keep his peace.

The men shuddered. It was as if he'd thoroughly beaten Beck, rather than the other way around. Beck himself felt as if Garrett had risen from the grave, never to be buried again. By leaping into the boat, the two bluejackets notarized his authority.

"He must be dead," one of them shouted. "He stinks so!"

"Don't take the risk. Bring him up gentle."

Turning up their noses, the two sailors raised the boy high enough for others to take him on board--a moment when the *Florida's* low freeboard proved convenient.

"Watch it! He's slick...."

"Careful!"

"Has anyone notified the surgeon?"

The funereal silence deepened as the boy was laid on the deck. Wobbling over, Garrett stared at him.

To everyone's astonishment, the castaway's eyes suddenly opened. He studied Garrett's battered face a moment, then whispered through cracked lips, "They got you, too?"

Then, slowly, his eyes closed.

XIX

June, 1908 — 28°20'N, 177°22'W

0912 Hours

Ziolkowski wasted little time burying Lieutenant Anthony and what remained of the two marines killed before him. No one on the island was particularly religious and no one protested when Ziolkowski limited the service to a doffed hat and a succinct, "He was all right, for a *tiente*. Ain't that right, Enderfall?"

"Aye, Top."

He glanced around. "Where the hell's the slopeheads?"

"Over with Hart at the warehouse."

"Goddamn heathens. But why ain't Hart here? He was a lieutenant himself, once."

"But he was Army, Top."

Crossing the dunes, he spotted some of the Japanese and Chinese carrying great swatches of material that looked similar to pongee. The segments flapped over their heads, making them look like farmers fighting off locusts. Hart stood amidst them, twirling the air with his arm and shouting commands. The rest of the Orientals were cross-legged on the sand, sewing.

"Hart!"

The civilian looked at him apprehensively. "Sergeant Ziolkowski. I'm sorry

I couldn't attend your service. But time is short. Last time aloft I had a tear. I put the fishermen to work repairing it. It's not much different from working on a sail."

Ziolkowski looked up, saw gulls gliding overhead. The fishermen were not sewing silk, but varnished muslin. "Your balloon."

The sewers paused and raised their heads.

"You were a lieutenant once. You ain't anymore. Don't take my men--and every man on this island is my man now--without coming to me first."

All the fury rushing to Hart's head evaporated when Ziolkowski abruptly turned and walked away. It had been a necessary reprimand. But while Hart had said nothing to him about the wireless set he was building, the sergeant saw the sense of a reconnaissance balloon. As it stood now, the creatures could sneak up on the island in broad daylight, emerging at any moment at a place of their choosing. Looking down from a great height, an observer would be able to spot their dark shadows approach under the clear water surrounding Midway.

1137 Hours

If a rammed ship could feel, it would feel like Lieber the day after the exploding gasoline blew him a dozen yards backwards. Every joint seemed wrenched, every muscle was sore. Doing his best to ignore the pain, he joined the other marines making improvements in the compound defenses. By late morning, they had crisscrossed several layers of mast timbers over the roof of the bunker. They had high hopes it would be proof against the creatures.

Ziolkowski came over and watched Lieber closely. In a sympathetic tone, he said, "You're dragging. Why don't you go check up on Depoy? We haven't heard from him all morning. If he's gone to sleep, kick him in the head for me."

Depoy had been sent out to relieve Kitrell at daybreak. Muscle-sprained and exhausted, it took Lieber awhile to reach the northern post. If he found Depoy snoozing behind a dune, he was quite ready to obey the Top's injunction

to give him a kick in the head.

But there was no sign of the man. Keeping a wary eye on the ocean, Lieber made several trips up and down the beach near the outpost.

He spotted the rifle propped against a piece of driftwood. The sand around it was churned up. But so was half the sand on the island, what with the creatures and now-extinct donkeys having raced back and forth endless times.

"Depoy!"

No response.

"Turtleback!" he shouted again, employing the nickname Depoy so despised. If anything would get a rise out of the man, that would. But all was still.

Dragging himself back to the compound, Lieber asked the others if any of them had seen him. No one had.

He went to Ziolkowski and reported one more casualty. Then he staggered into the meager shade offered by some scraggly bushes, flopped down like a blanket, and fell fast asleep.

1320 Hours

In spite of the terror that had popped and sizzled at the back of his mind, Hart had never been so filled with a sense of useful occupation as he was now.

Construction of a primitive wireless was not too difficult. He was able to adapt materials from the warehouse and telegraph station. A transmitting coil, key, coherer, and relay were available. The set would be powered using Planté batteries. Once those ran down after about a week, they could use a bicycle dynamo similar to the direct current dynamo invented by the Germans and used by the British in South Africa. Affixed to a bicycle frame directly in front of a "cyclist," the dynamo was connected by a belt to an aluminum disk that took the

place of the front wheel--with a ratio of transmission designed to produce sparks four millimeters long in the induction coils and generating sixteen volts of electricity. The cyclist could send power directly to the wireless, or attach it to a portable accumulator battery; comprised of eight cells enclosed in an ebonite box, the battery could supply sixteen volts for five hours before recharging became necessary. Not much, but if the antenna and reflector could be raised several hundred feet in the air, the wireless might have a respectable range.

Hart had become fascinated with balloons after seeing them tested at Fort Myers. It was there that he learned the basics of construction. When he boarded the company ship bound for Midway, he brought with him five thousand yards of cheap muslin, three large wood retorts, a twenty-gallon copper kettle, eighty gallons of pure linseed oil, some heavy wicker, and the sundry odds and ends that would be needed to make the finishing touches on the balloon. The entire homemade kit put him out three hundred dollars. Which meant he arrived on the island broke--but rich in time.

And patience. An absolute necessity for what he had in mind. First, the muslin had to be varnished with the rubbery residue of heated linseed oil--three applications, all of which had to be brushed on thoroughly and evenly to avoid future leakage.

Then the cloth had to be cut into gores. The pattern of the gores formed a sine, so that, when sewn together, the balloon shape formed naturally.

All stitching was double, with particular care not to pucker the seams. Then the seams and stitches were varnished.

Next came the most tedious chore: making the net. A fair amount of computation was involved to make certain the net was the proper size. Made of cotton and seine twine, which was soft and elastic, Hart had to begin at the bottom of the equator and work outward, the mesh becoming smaller at the mouth.

After this, the clapper valve was easy. All Hart needed was a couple of barrel heads, planed and sanded. He cut out their centers, fixed brass hinges on the clappers, lined the inside of each with leather, and attached them to the envelope.

Five months earlier, the entire command turned out for the maiden voyage.

Coal gas was allowed to cool some in the retorts, then piped through the feed valve. It was one of the rare occasions when Hart did not mind the presence of his fellow Americans. In fact, after closing off the valve, he gave a brief thank-you speech and doffed his cap before releasing the first anchor line.

One thing he did not dare, and that was to cut loose entirely from the ground. The winds of Midway tended to come up sharply--one had only to watch the birds to see it. Once caught in an air current, that would be all she wrote for one Hamilton Hart, lost at sea while acting the fool in the air. Thus, two lines hung down from the car. The first was used once he'd reached the desired height. It dangled just above the island. When it touched the ground it took the weight off the balloon, preventing it from descending before the aeronaut wanted to. The other line was secured to a winch, giving him several hundred feet of play, but keeping him safely above the atoll. Hart might dream of the horizon, but he had no intention of going there.

How tiny Midway seemed from on high! Tinier still, the men. What did God see when he looked down? Men on foot, or inconspicuous specks?

Gooneys flew close to inspect this new bird, their wings shuddering ever so slightly as they paused in mid-air. While watching Hart fight off a wave of nausea, they seemed to say: *There. You mock us on land. But up here, who's the fool?* And then they arced away with indescribable grace and ease.

Over the period of a month Hart ascended four times. The car was big enough only for one man, but he politely offered others the opportunity to go aloft. A few of them voiced interest, including Lieutenant Anthony. But on his fourth trip an incautious frigate bird zipped into the balloon and got tangled in the netting. In its frantic attempt to escape it tore a hole in the varnished muslin. Hart was able to descend without mishap, but the incident put everyone else off.

Which meant no one else had the slightest idea how to operate the balloon. He had to train someone quickly.

Later in the day, Hart rose from the half-completed wireless set and checked on the men repairing the balloon's envelope, which had been damaged by high winds last time up. The Japanese, dressed only in their loincloths, their skin gleaming with sweat, looked like exotic human mushrooms in the late afternoon glow.

"Mr. Hot," said Ace, "we about finished. You work the telegraph tomorrow. Who goin' to fly the balloon?"

Hart looked Ace up and down--not a long process. "Best to have someone on the small side. The weight of the antenna and reflector will put a drag on her."

"You don't think it will...." Ace shaped his hand into a dying bird and made a fluttering falling motion.

"I don't think so."

"I'm small."

"You're very brave. It's what we call a captive balloon. If anything goes wrong, we can haul you down quickly."

"Mr. Hot, if anything goes wrong, it will be down here."

Hart could not help but laugh.

1931 Hours

News of Depoy's disappearance brought morale to its lowest. He could not have deserted. There was no place to run. Somehow, the creatures had sneaked up on him in broad daylight and taken him off before he could fire a shot. He'd probably fallen asleep at his post. Yet the effective silence of the deed filled them with cold dread.

But the main bunker was finished. There would have been room in it for thirty men, had there been thirty men left. In their own grisly fashion, the creatures had solved the problem of space for them.

To Ziolkowski's thinking, the completed bunker did not absolve them from the need to put up a fight. Cower? U.S. Marines? Only when there were no stones left to throw. They had to prevent the creatures from rampaging willy-nilly over the island. There were too many vulnerables. The warehouse, with its

supply of water casks and tinned food. The distillery, which supplied them with fresh water. Their sea tug, the *Iroquois*--although stepped-up on the beach with broken pressure valves, she symbolized hope. It seemed the only way to protect them all was to make sure the marines remained the center of attention.

The lookouts were dispatched before dark. The sergeant added unnecessary admonition: "Don't leave your holes. I don't care if you've got the biggest load of shit since Creation hopped up in you. Stay in, stay awake."

No one asked questions.

Lieber was roused from a sandy bed as the last light faded. He would spend another night with kitchen utensils in his mouth. He would not be relieved until sunrise.

"You've slept all day," Ziolkowski explained. "That's more than anyone else has gotten. I'm leaving one of the lamps with you. Maybe that will help you all stay awake."

No one could wake up Hart. No one knew if he'd fallen asleep or had passed out. He lay at the far end of the bunker, in the middle of an unconscious huddle of Orientals. Ace had fallen back in a *Pietà*-like pose, his mouth hanging open, a stupendous snore erupting at regular intervals. Lieber experienced an irrational moment of jealousy. He had begun to think of Ace as his personal manservant, though everything Ace did for him was strictly voluntary. Now the civilian had come along and absconded with him.

Well... to hell with it. The little Jap was a nuisance, all in all. Always running up from behind, trying to rescue one thing or another. He'd saved Lieutenant Anthony, only to have Anthony die moments later. Maybe Ace was bad luck in disguise.

Staring at the battle lantern hour after hour, Lieber's eyes met on the flame; it seemed to waver and die. Then someone kicked him and he realized he had nodded off. This happened two more times.

"Why can't I keep my eyes open?" he berated himself. "Think of what's at stake!"

He had begun to view the duel between men and monsters as a great

Entscheidungsschlacht--a decisive battle between ultimate creatures. The Cataclysm of the Ages was at hand. If he didn't watch out, he would sleep right through it.

Early that morning he was alerted to a terrible sensation in his mouth. He waved an arm. Someone shook Ziolkowski awake.

"They're coming?"

Lieber shrugged. There was no sense in what he was receiving. No attempt at code. What the hell was Kitrell up to?

What he was experiencing was a scream transferred directly to his tongue. After it had passed, and the fork and spoon regained their former metallic blandness, Lieber sensed the truth:

He had tasted death.

XX

June, 1908 — 30°45'N, 165°20'W

From the Deck Log of the USS Florida:

Mast awarded Seaman McGhin 2/c 10 hours extra duty for unauthorized smoking; Mast gave Ship's cook 1/c 2 weeks restriction for drunkenness; Pvt Danty (Marine) 10 hours slow relief for indifferent performance; at 0800 received dispatch from Opanav (1606 1015) advising no further information re Midway.

"Dr. Singleton!"

The doctor's world was limited to the confines of his sea cabin, but that world was revealing a remarkable elasticity and a marked capacity to roll from side to side.

"Dr. Singleton! Get up! The captain wants to see you."

The world thundered. Fog collapsed. Mountains floated. Singleton did not want to open his eyes to such sights. But the shaking persisted and the evidence indicated he would have to lift his heavy lids to make it stop.

Midshipman Davis was looking down at him.

"Leave me alone, boy."

"If necessary, I'm to have the Captain of the Marines send in two men to clean you up and bring you topside."

"That's... outrageous!" Forcing himself up, Singleton shifted his legs over

the edge of the cot. A wave of nausea hit and he promptly threw up on the midshipman.

"It shouldn't present much of a problem, sir," said the exec. "There's a coaling station at Midway."

"And if it's fallen into enemy hands, Mr. Grissom?"

"We'd be stranded."

"We'd be *sunk*." Captain Oates glared into the cubicle that served as their wireless station. The electrician who had passed on the bad news remained intent on the telegraph, as though waiting breathlessly for word from the Oracle of Delphi. But there were no favorable prognostications. He had finally received a clear, nearly static-free transmission, only to find that the news was bad.

The collier *Daisy Mae* had just signaled Oates that she had developed engine trouble and was making for Honolulu. There was little point in the *Florida* coming about to help, as she was now a hundred and fifty miles astern. The skipper of the *Daisy Mae* respectfully suggested the *Florida* make port, too.

In one respect, this was a relief. They would not have to coal at sea again.

Four colliers had followed the battleship through the Golden Gate. The *Florida* had recoaled three times since then. It was a nerve-racking procedure. After a collier was taken in tow, a conveyor rope was secured between its masthead and the stanchions above the *Florida's* aft turrets. Then a ton of coal divided into eight-hundred-pound sacks was hoisted to the masthead and winched across the four-hundred-foot cableway until the carrier came above the coal hatches. Unpracticed in the method, it had at first taken the crew as much as forty-five minutes to deliver the carrier. Since the *Florida* burned six tons of coal every hour, this was not a pace that would have kept her going much longer.

Their timing improved, but other problems cropped up. At one point the towline parted. It had taken quick thinking to devise a "knock-down hook," with the *Florida's* sea anchor made fast to the superstructure. Lieutenant Grissom, who oversaw the operation, then ordered the cableway lowered and the hook released. One end of the conveyor rope ran off the winch, which was kept

running so it could pick up the hook end. Once accomplished, the collier picked up the anchor and the carrier, the *Florida* took in the conveyor, and the entire rig reset so the coaling could once more proceed. Oates dwelled on the fact that if the hawser had snapped while the carrier was above the quarterdeck, everyone below would have been crushed.

They had enough fuel to reach the atoll without the *Daisy Mae*. But just barely. There were two vital reasons why the battleship required full bunkers and stokeholds the moment Midway hove into view. If a Japanese fleet was present, they would need plenty of fuel for maneuver--and escape. And with the holds empty, the *Florida* rode high in the water, exposing her red armor belt. A shot below the armor would send them to the bottom.

It was time to turn back, no question. Even if the Midway alarm had nothing to do with the Japanese, there was no guarantee the bunkers on the island could supply them with enough coal to reach Hawaii. If not, they would have to wait until another collier was dispatched. Inevitably, they would miss the Fleet at Honolulu. Another black mark for the *Florida* and finis for Captain Oates. This was the navy that urged its men to fire its huge guns even if there was explosive powder loose in the chamber. To risk all--and pay all--was the credo. Oates really had no choice.

"Signal the *Daisy Mae*: We are proceeding to Midway."

Stepping out on the bridge, he let the clean wind smack him with brisk bursts. The final degree in his decision was supplied by something that had nothing at all to do with Midway. The young whaler they had rescued was not yet entirely coherent. His ranting about sea monsters could only be the result of his wound and long exposure. Oates could console himself with the fact that this detour had at least resulted in the saving of a life.

But *whose* life? The boy had given them his name and a scratch-pad autobiography. Yet his story concerning the fate of the *Lydia Bailey* cast a doubtful light on his every word. What had really happened out there?

The ship's surgeon marveled at William Pegg's recuperative ability. "It's a shame about his hand, captain. He'd make a fine recruit, otherwise."

"And his hand...?"

"No monsters, sir, please. A shark did that. I've seen it before. The boy will live, and that's miracle enough. Fever's broken already. If it weren't for all his talk about sea serpents, I'd say a week more in sick bay would fix him up. Sea monsters sinking a one hundred and eighty-ton whaler! I hope he's not permanently demented."

The fact remained they had found Pegg where whaling ships were rarely seen. The boy had told him about the damage to the pintles. It had thrown them off course by several degrees longitude. And the whaleboat they found him in not only confirmed his occupation and the type of ship he came from, but looked as though it had been in a battle. Before leaving it behind--there was no room for it on board--the bluejackets had noted the peculiar marks on its side. It certainly appeared as if something huge had nibbled at the gunwhale.

But all this only made the boy's story more intriguing, not veracious. The weather had been extraordinarily calm for weeks, now. William had lost track of time, but guessed he'd been adrift for ten days or more. Even so, it was doubtful the *Lydia Bailey* had been lost in a storm. A storm that severe would have also capsized the whaleboat. Oates racked his mind for an answer, and soon hit on an unsettling possibility. In his delirium, William might have transformed an unknown menace into monsters. Something so horrible the lad could compare it to nothing else. Something as awesome... as a Japanese battle fleet.

That was why he needed Singleton. Oates did not consider him a charlatan. He possessed too much knowledge, was known for too many notable accomplishments, to be a fake. He also was a walking lexicography of technical jargon. If he did not know something, you would never know it by the way he spoke. With the conviction of science he could explain to William the impossibility of his delusion. Perhaps then the boy would be able to recall what had really destroyed his ship.

"Mr. Grissom!"

"Yes, sir."

"We're a fine target in these white ducks. How much battle-gray do we have in our paint lockers?"

"Enough to cover the ship twice, sir. Seems someone thought we might get into a fight."

"Then let's use it. Organize details. Every man available."

"Aye aye, sir. If I may ask--"

"I know as much as you do. I'm only eliminating a risk."

"But if we go into battle...."

"The *Bonhomme Richard* was a wooden ship and she accounted herself pretty well." Noting Grissom's pursed lips, Oates added, "If we run out of coal, we can stoke the boilers with our 'armor.' Where there's a will, Mr. Grissom...."

"Yes, sir," the exec grinned wryly. With a nod of commiseration, Oates again turned to face the sea head-on.

Oysters and packets, sailors and tunny. I have it all, and none is for me.

Every day the beast grew more voracious. There was no end to the feeding. The faces in the boiler fires had begun to coalesce into a single molten visage that winked again and again, a jester of endless pranks. Standing back, Gilroy looked at the other boilers to either side of him. He wondered if they contained beasts like his. One hundred and forty-three degrees Fahrenheit. That's what the thermometer had said last he saw it. He gazed at the other stokers and coal-passers. They dragged themselves back and forth across the sizzling deck like prisoners shackled to dead men: themselves. They slow-marched with their long-handled scoops, thumping the wood ends in a dirge drowned by engine noise. Their skin was smothered in a mascara of coal dust. Minstrels of Hell... plug, plod, ages and ages... the undead Hell. Their bodies had become dark solitary caves; their contrasting eyes were bored, fearful creatures, peaking out.

They were supposed to inspect each clump of coal to make certain it was not dynamite in disguise. Thus far, two illicit explosives had been found on the *Florida*. Both had been discovered before the Fleet rounded the Horn. Rabid anarchists and fanatical union miners in West Virginia were among the chief suspects. But no one knew for sure. There were thousands of avowed anarchists in the United States, members of a world-wide movement intent on not just bringing governments to their knees, but on abolishing them altogether. They saw the Fleet as the ultimate symbol of unnatural authority. They would have

fervently applauded any setback it encountered.

There had been no time to search the coal before their hasty departure from San Francisco, which meant the stokers had to be doubly careful. A difficult thing, with sweat in their eyes and every joint aching. But one stick alone, even soggy and broken, could destroy the five-million dollar battleship. If the unionists were the ones responsible for sowing bombs in the Fleet, the irony was lost on the black crew; they were common laborers, just like the common laborers trying to blow them up--for the good of all common laborers. The end result was a massive increase in common labor. The stokers went half blind picking through the coals. The electric torches bolted above them offered more shadows than light.

To Gilroy, watching, participating, the entire procession was twisted into a turgid, narcotic farce. Sometimes he laughed lazily at the idea that he was a part of it. But every time relaxed acceptance of his fate came within reach, something happened to snatch it away. It was intolerable. Simply unacceptable. All he wanted was to be left alone. But the world shouldered in, told him he could not relax. That he could not just drop down and die. Not yet. There was no charity in this, only greed. The world wanted every last ounce of life out of him. Of will. When he had become a hollow pit, then would it let him go?

So began his grand search.--a search as profound in its way as the deepest peregrinations of great philosophers. On every trip back to the bunkers his eyes darted further up the heaped coal as he prayed for a glint or gleam that would say: *Here I am, your passage to the greater world. The downy pillow of oblivion. Feed my explosive heart to the boiler. Sacrifice me to the beast. Your freedom--*

A hard earthy thing beat his shoulder. It was the chief engineer, demanding his attention. He had to shout directly into Gilroy's ear. It was the only way one could be heard over the din.

"Hey! You got the gawks again, Gilroy?" 'Gawks' was the chief engineer's flippant term for a heat stroke. He'd suffered it himself on more than one occasion and knew first-hand the desperate gape, the conviction of death. He was glib because he could think of no other way to approach it. The stokers did not see it that way. To them, the chief was just another son-of-a-bitch warrant officer. He wrapped his hand around Gilroy's brow. The stoker did not move. He knew the chief was testing his skin. If it was cold and clammy, he would know

Gilroy was only suffering from heat exhaustion. The remedy would be simple: a visit to the cool air topside. But if he was exceptionally hot, if his pulse--which the chief could feel through his temples--was racing at one hundred and fifty or one hundred and sixty beats per minute, he'd know they were dealing with deadly hyperpyrexia.

After several moments, he shook his head and removed his hand. "I don't know, Gilroy."

"What?"

Leaning to his ear, the chief shouted, "I can't tell. You're fucked up on something, aren't you?"

"Naw, Chief. I'm all right."

"Like hell. I see your lips movin' all the time. What the hell are you doing? Singing to yourself?"

"I'm just breathing, Chief."

"That's damn peculiar breathing. I've got my eye on you, Gilroy. You hear? You hear? I want you to drop dead before you fuck up on me. You hear? You hear?"

"I'm all right, Chief."

The boiler room was a wicked parody of tall Palladium music halls. The loudest sounds echoed with hypnagogic intensity. Thick chains shouted overhead. Gilroy turned his back to the chief. The beast was calling. Even the chief must know the beast had to be obeyed.

As word was passed of the work details, rumor seared the ship: battle.

There could be no other reason for hiding the glorious (if besooted) white flanks of the *Florida* under drab gray. Only the officers knew of the cablegram from Midway. The ordinary bluejacket thought they had been banned from San Francisco. They had been no more unruly than other crews, so this had to be

punishment for all the time they'd spent in the Observation Ward. It was the ship, not the crew or captain, that they held accountable. There was no way on earth they could eke out another knot or make the wood shields gleam like true armor. Black gangs excepted, most sailors possessed a deep loyalty, if not love, for the ships they were stationed on. The men of the *Florida*, however, pounded the decks in loathing. And now... fear.

"The Japs," word spread. "They sent us out to fight the Japs. Alone."

"Pipe down, there." Ensign Garrett hobbled towards one of the starboard work crews. For a moment, silence fell like a brick. It was nothing short of wondrous that Garrett could stand, let alone walk. His face was black and blue, the cuts were still bright, and it was a sure bet the rest of his body was in no better shape.

"We going into a fight, Mr. Garrett?" one of the sailors ventured.

"Never you mind. Just keep the ball rolling. You there! Get lower with that stroke!"

The paint fumes were potent under the hot sun. Canvas sheets were raised to protect the sections from seawater as they were first painted, then allowed to dry. This was why the sailors called it "nearpaint"--they had to lean close over their brushes. More than one of them was overcome by fumes in the confined spaces.

Each brushstroke spread their apprehension still further. Between the wood armor and flammable nearpaint, the gun decks might go up in a great sheet of flame if they were struck by even a small caliber shell.

"What happened, Mr. Garrett? Was it that boy we picked up? Did his ship run into--"

"Mr. Garrett, if a shell hit near the six-ers, it'd go right through--"

"Mr. Garrett, with no armor around the ammo hoists, won't we--"

Garrett was saved from responding when another work crew emerged from a starboard hatchway. Two things stopped the questioners dead.

First, the detail was led by Midshipman Beck, who very nearly walked over Garrett when he turned the corner. They stared at each other briefly, then exchanged stiff salutes--Garrett's being the stiffer by far. This calm exchange of naval civility had required enormous self-control on the part of both men. The bluejackets nodded admiringly. Now came the moment of truth:

"Lieutenant Grissom has instructed me to augment your detail with these men."

"Very well, Mr. Beck. Put them on the next gunport. You'll have water coming up in your face. That can't be helped."

"Aye aye, sir."

That came off well enough--but the men Beck had brought with him were stewards and messmen from the galleys, every man jack of them black. They occupied the spot Garrett indicated and cast uneasy glances at the first detail--whose return looks were equally bemused. One year ago, the stewards had been sailors. Few had thought twice about mixed crews before.

But the demotion *en masse* tainted the black sailors as much as color ever could. Everyone was glad the Negroes had been around to replace the Japanese stewards. Had they not, the whites would have been stuck with the job themselves. Yet there was little gratitude. Perversely, the unspoken belief was that they had been made stewards out of some inadequacy on their part. They were now unworthy not because they were black, but because they were stewards.

Amos Macklin noted no fine distinctions. The Navy, far from being the harbinger of a new age of equality, had showed itself as a sea-going plantation, complete with overseers and slaves. He was not so much numb with disbelief as embarrassed over his gullibility. He had believed something because he'd wanted to believe it. It was the surest way to make a fool out of yourself.

He leaned out one of the gunports with a paint roller and cursed as briny waves slapped him in the face. He'd barely started working the roller up and down when a flash of salty spray took him by surprise, blinding him. Holding tight to the roller, he pulled back.

"Hey!" men shouted as he splattered paint around. There was a messy

clatter as he dropped the roller on the deck and clutched at his burning eyes.

"Oh, fine," came a familiar voice.

A minute later he was able to open his eyes. He found himself face-to-face with Ensign Garrett. He was stunned by this close-up of the damage Beck had inflicted. Garrett could have been wearing a grisly Halloween mask. The ensign grinned at him, revealing red-tinted teeth. His mouth was still raw.

"Rough, trying to paint a casemate at twelve knots."

"Yes, sir... Mr. Garrett."

"Well, get back to it. We have to keep the marbles rolling. If we don't, the marbles will roll over us."

"Sir?"

"The yellow devils, Steward Macklin. They want their old jobs back. They're coming to get them."

Horror swelled in Amos' stomach. Not fear of harm. It was the idea that he would not be at a proper fighting post when the conflict began that staggered him. In the unlikely event of a battle, the stewards had been told back at Norfolk, they would be assigned to damage control parties. A necessary task, with no dishonorable taint to it. But it was not the job they'd trained for. Nor the status they had won, then lost.

"Mr. Garrett," someone called, "you mean it's true? We're going to fight the Japs?"

"Your guess is as good as mine," Garrett sighed.

The world blared in with trumpets and windblast. Dr. Singleton took one grimacing glance abovedecks and recoiled. "I can't go out there."

Midshipman Davis blocked his retreat. "You have to."

"The captain be damned!"

Davis was in no mood for Singleton's tantrum. Now that the good doctor had ruined his cool white tunic with his stomach contents, he was forced to wear his hot regulation blues. Sweating heavily, he relished the words duty compelled him to speak: "Sir, if you want the marines to tote you topside, that's your privilege."

"This is insufferable! All right... all right... lead the way, Mr. Davis."

The climb to the bridge was a Matterhorn ordeal that nearly undid the doctor. When they reached it, only to find out that the captain was down below, Singleton unleashed a string of oaths that would have lassoed a saint.

"He's in the wardroom," Lieutenant Grissom stiffly informed them once Singleton was finished.

Singleton was able to descend the upper decks with considerably more grace than he'd gone up them. The hot coffee Davis had plied him with had started an invigorating sweat that lubricated his movements.

In the wardroom they came on Oates in conversation with the navigator. Davis waited for them to finish before approaching. After listening to the navigator's woes, however, Singleton grew impatient and stepped forward. "Are your people still in the Dark Ages, Oates?" As a virtual prisoner, he saw no need for cordiality.

Frowning, the captain raised his head. "Sir, you are no longer a privileged guest on my ship. You'll hold your peace until spoken to."

"That's fine, but the magnetic survey yacht *Galilee* did its work in 1905. Seems to me your charts are three years out of date."

Oates stared at Singleton long and hard. If a man could literally ignite himself with wrath, Davis was sure Oates would be the one to do it. The silence extended like a long fuse. The middy began wondering how Lieutenant Grissom would handle their lonely expedition if Oates suffered an apoplectic stroke and dropped dead. Odd, he'd never noticed the scar running along the bottom of the captain's jaw before. As his face turned redder, the scar became whiter, until it looked like a strap that could be pulled off.

Finally, the dual colors abated. The captain pointed his chin at his chart table. "Show me."

Standing over the chart table, Singleton took up a pencil and made little notches in the navigator's chart of the North Pacific. "The Department of Research in Terrestrial Magnetism--that's part of the Carnegie Institute--sent the *Galilee* into these waters because they were a complete unknown as far as magnetic observations were concerned. Fortunately, I was at the Hydrographic Office in Washington when the new charts came in. Uh... Mr. Davis. Would you be so kind as to go to my cabin. In my trunk you'll find the volume *Lines of Equal Magnetic Variation*. With that, I think we can sort this out."

Having listened to Singleton maunder on and on about his crippled intellect, Davis wanted to ask if he thought he was up to the calculations he was talking about. He gave the captain a dubious glance. Oates nodded. The midshipman saluted and left.

Peering closely at the chart, Singleton asked the navigator, "How old is this?"

"Ten years, I think. It was the only one we could find on short notice. The only one with Midway on it, at least."

The doctor's rude snort sufficed for an opinion. While awaiting Davis' return, he elaborated: "There are three sets of lines that denote terrestrial lines of force. The Lines of Equal Declination--that is, the Lines of Equal Magnetic Variation to you seafarers. Then the Lines of Equal Magnetic Dip and the Lines of Equal Magnetic Force. These last two are vital, since they determine how much a compass can be thrown off by iron in a ship. But right now we're concerned with the navigator's chart."

Those who had known of Singleton's sorry condition but an hour before were agape. They were all the more impressed when he spun some of the variation coordinates off the top of his head. On returning with the charts from the doctor's cabin, Davis stood at the back of the wardroom--the most amazed of them all.

"How many navigator's have been browbeat by their shipmasters when they missed the mark? Yet every twenty years the magnetic compass shifts one degree. In some places, such as Rio de Janeiro, it only takes six years for the

change. We blame ourselves for poor navigating when it's the planet itself playing tricks.

"Let's surmise a stormy passage to Hawaii from San Francisco. The night skies filled with clouds, no celestial sightings possible--depending solely on the compass and using unrevised charts. The *Galilee* discovered the magnetic field had shifted one to two degrees east since charts were made in the 1870's. Given a two thousand-mile voyage, a navigator could find himself off one-sixtieth of the distance traversed--thirty-five miles! I understand Midway is a mere two miles in diameter. A target one could easily miss given the old magnetic readings.

Davis' astonishment was shattered when Lieutenant Grissom, who had joined them a few minutes earlier, chimed in. "I'm afraid you've missed the point, Doctor. The nights are clear. We've been able to obtain very accurate shootings from the stars. It's not the compass, it's the chart itself. It's not a proper one. Not much better than a schoolboy's map."

Singleton's guise of intellectual superiority crumpled, and the rest of his body sagged with it. Now he looked like a simple, foolish drunk. "Ah. Well. Damn. Well, Mr. Davis, unroll that on the table, please. This is--uh, ignore the magnetic readings, then. This is still more accurate than what you've got." He pushed away from the chart table.

Grissom and the navigator took his place.

"Yes, doctor," Grissom said after looking over the new chart. "This is exactly what we need. Thank you very much." His tone said, *We thank you in spite of yourself*.

"I noticed all the paint being splattered about. Going into battle?" Singleton touched a spot on his face, as if making sure he still had nerve endings. "If my services aren't required here, perhaps I can offer myself as a journalist from the monthlies."

"Right now, I need you for something else."

Singleton shaded his eyes. The only light in the wardroom came from small electric fixtures. In his condition, they were more than enough to inflict severe discomfort. "Yes, Captain? What is it?"

Outside the infirmary, as Oates related the tale of William Pegg and the *Lydia Bailey*, replete with drownings and sea monsters, Singleton pressed his hands to his head, a pained look on his face.

"Exposed for that length of time, inadequately protected from the elements--" There was a pounding in his head, not helped by the noisy clang and clatter of the ship. Yet the anticipation of talking to someone claiming to have seen serpents--beasts that had destroyed a whaler, no less--sent a curious childish thrill through him. It was all nonsense, no doubt. Still, it would be intriguing to witness the revival of an ancient myth.

"You might see or imagine anything," the captain agreed. "But the boy did see *something*."

The doctor immediately understood what Oates was leading up to. He was to be the luminary of science, the calm of reason in the storm. But when he entered sick bay and saw William lying like a tossed rag, sympathy suddenly crushed his chest. "My boy... my poor boy...."

Captain Oates lifted his brow. He'd not anticipated this outburst. A gush of alcohol-induced emotion was the last thing they needed. He nudged Singleton to warn him against histrionics. Taken unawares, the doctor toppled over.

The ship's surgeon rushed in. "Doctor!"

Singleton smirked up from the deck. "Doctor...."

Appalled, Oates strained to help the surgeon and Davis lift the portly man to his feet. "Get a grip on yourself," he whispered fiercely. "You're not helping anyone by acting like this. Certainly not the boy."

"Young man...." Singleton glanced back at Oates, then sat on the bunk next to William's. "I've been given a general summary of your miraculous rescue."

William's good hand gripped the empty space where his missing fingers had been. Turning slowly, he looked the doctor dead in the eye. "The gulls talked to me. That in your summary? They cussed, told me lies, kept me company. I know that was all in my head. Their *sounds* weren't real. But those serpents were. They killed Lead Foot. They killed everyone. They'll kill you, if you run up on them. I know what I didn't see. I know what I saw. If you come to try and

talk me out of it--"

"Please! Son! I just came to chat. My name is Dr. Singleton. Paleontology is something of a hobby of mine. You know, the study of monsters. Ancient, extinct monsters. Calm down! *Supposedly* extinct monsters. Now, why don't you tell me what they looked like?"

Like Oates before him, Singleton found himself pole-axed by the boy's conviction. As the details of William's ostensible delusion came forth, Singleton's concentration focused. What was he hearing?

"I'm going to get a drawing pad. With your aid, I'd like to make a picture of these creatures. And with your help, I'd like to perform a little experiment."

Dr. Singleton felt his lungs tighten like two great bolts in his body. He asked the boy again: "What was the length of these creatures?" Again the boy gave him comparisons between the length of the *Lydia Bailey* and the animals which had destroyed it. Again, Dr. Singleton checked his galvanometric readings. They were wildly erratic. Which, in the contrary way of the psychogalvanometric register, meant the subject was absolutely calm.

It had taken a bit of courage on the doctor's and the boy's part to enter this experiment. As minor as the wound caused by the needle was, Singleton found it unsettling sticking William in the palm with it. The boy had suffered to such a degree that even a pin-prick seemed too much to add. William did not look at all trusting. He had only one healthy hand left, and the doctor seemed intent on puncturing it to little purpose. But all the friendly yet skeptical looks visitors had given him goaded him into uncertainty. Singleton did not tell him this device would reveal the truth. That might have been perceived as an insult. Instead, he suggested this was a way to convince others of the truth. And so William had held out his hand.

Something the doctor had not told Midshipman Davis about the psychogalvanic meter was that it was an excellent detector not only of moods, but of lies as well. A peculiar electric current excited a person's skin when he or she told a lie. The intense surge in activity would cause the indicator to become very still, like someone listening to a great piece of music for the first time--an odd analogy that had popped into Singleton's mind the first time he read about

the device's lie-detecting capability.

When William repeated his story, the meter went wild, indicating complete calm and truthfulness. Singleton had expected at least some variation. It was almost like applying the test to a corpse.

Fifteen minutes later he stood before Captain Oates on the foredeck.

"Is that test of yours infallible?" Oates asked, turning red.

"By no means. But this boy's not lying about the *Lydia Bailey*. Something sank her, and I don't think it had anything to do with Japanese battleships. He's too detailed. The only thing analogous would be...I mean to say, the only thing that jibes..."

"Jibes with what? Are you saying he saw some kind of dinosaurs? I've been almost fifty years at sea, Doctor. I've heard of many a strange thing. Seen a few myself. But never anything like this."

"Dinosaur, yes. What he describes sounds very much like a plesiosaur. But he ascribes it too many non-reptilian characteristics. Traces of hair, for one. Not an abundance. A few bristles around the snout. But he remembers them vividly. He also says one of them roared so loudly they could not hear for several minutes after. I know of no reptiles that can make that kind of noise. The creatures seemed to move extremely fast when they wanted to, which does not fit the conception of large cold-blooded lizards. Also, the plesiosars were very slender. Gracile, one could almost say. Pegg says his animals had extraordinarily thick brows. That might account for their ability to pound at the whaler without injuring themselves. But that's not a plesiosaur characteristic."

"Why are you telling me this? He elaborated on his hallucination and you're passing it on as fact."

"A myth is as good as a mile. Sorry. I'm speaking of possibilities, not facts. Quite different things. You're right, of course. Nothing nature could come up with would be more dangerous than Admiral Togo coming over the horizon, except perhaps a typhoon. You have to prepare for the worst. And I agree. Camouflaging the *Florida* in battle gray is the most prudent course. I'm only saying there's a degree of truth in what Pegg's telling us. There has to be, or the psychogalvometric response wouldn't have been so clear."

The smell of nearpaint lay thick over the *Florida*. Another day and she would be difficult to spot from a distance. There would be a line of white running along the base of the ship's hull. She rode so low in the water, however, that Oates believed the waves would hide it.

"This is no help," Oates berated Singleton. "I want to find out if those three serpents were really Japanese battleships

"That boy is as sane as you or I."

"You?"

"Very well, Captain. As sane as *you*."

"What did he see?"

"Monsters of the mind? That's what you want, isn't it?"

"Of all people, I would have thought you'd be skeptical."

"Understood," the doctor chuckled. "But note this: What that boy describes sounds very much like a Mesozoic plesiosaurus. Are you familiar with that animal?"

"A sea-going dinosaur. I saw fossils of one at the Natural History Museum in London."

"First discovered in the Lias rocks of Lyme Regis in 1821. Extinct for a hundred million years. Yet sailors and historians have been describing a creature very similar to it for the last two thousand years. Aristotle, in *Historia Animalium*, describes plesiosaur-like creatures living off the coast of Libya. They attacked oxen on the shore, as well as sailing vessels. He wrote that the serpents could sink a large trireme by holding on and pulling it down."

"He wrote a great deal of other nonsense as well."

"In *Historia de Gentibus Septentrionalibus* Olaus Magnus reported the destruction of a Norwegian fishing fleet by serpents in 1567."

"And some charts still have sea monsters on the compass rose. I know the

fairy tales, doctor. I wouldn't have thought someone like you had made a study of them."

"I read newspapers, too. If you want modern sightings, there is much to choose from. I suppose the most famous was in '91, when an enormous long-necked creature attacked bathers at Pablo Beach, Florida. In 1902 there was the *Fort Salisbury* incident. The officer of the watch, the helmsman and the lookouts all agreed the beast they saw was nearly six hundred feet long by thirty feet wide. And there's the prize, just three years ago. The Earl of Crawford--former president of the Royal Astronomical Society--was cruising off Parahiba, Brazil in his steam yacht, the *Valhalla*."

"I remember," Oates sighed.

"The yacht was crammed to the bulwarks with scientists who all saw the same thing. We can't dismiss the boy's story out of hand, captain. Not while they're putting stories of sea serpents on the front page of the Illustrated London News, reported by some of the preeminent scientists of our day. My only qualm concerns the size of the creatures Pegg describes. They can't possibly be that huge. If the whaler was sunk, it was perhaps due to mishandling. Maybe her master was trying to catch them and hit a reef instead."

"Let's return to the realm of probability. I've seen how the ocean can trick a man, especially when he's on his last leg. I'm a lot more concerned about Jap shells and torpedoes than what Pegg thought he saw. That's why I let you out of your cabin. I want to know if I might be facing battleships or cruisers, a single ship or a fleet. You should share my concern, doctor. If we go down, you go with us. I've heard too many of these monster stories." The doctor's floppy straw hat taunted him. He had to fight down an impulse to snatch it off Singleton's head and toss it overboard. "My father spun all these yarns for me when I was a boy."

"Captain--"

"I repeat, there's a good chance we'll be going into battle soon, Dr. Singleton. If so, there's an equally good chance we'll all die. If you want to help--if you don't want to die uselessly--I suggest you conduct yourself in a more logical manner. Otherwise, you can confine yourself to quarters."

"But Captain Oates," said Singleton with a perky flip of his brow, "I've shown you another possibility. Why do you refuse to consider it?"

"Probably because I can still smell the liquor on your breath." Oates had turned sharply on his heel to return to his wardroom when the wireless electrician burst through a nearby hatch.

"Captain! I've gotten a signal from Midway!"

XXI

June, 1908 — 28°20'N, 177°22'W

0906 Hours

Filling the balloon with coal gas was a tricky procedure. Great care had to be taken to keep the net from going askew as the envelope expanded. It had to be weighted down firmly, but not tightly. After inserting the gas hose and opening the retort valves, Hart began walking nervously around the balloon, shifting sand bags as it filled. All the while he kept Ace by his side, giving him instructions.

He told him how to use the drag rope, the barometer, the thermometer, and the index. The latter was simply a light ribbon, about a foot long. "You can't always tell what direction you're going in. If the ribbon stays flat down, you're going up. If it flutters up, you're coming down."

"Ah," said Ace profoundly.

"If you start coming down before you're ready, throw out the drag rope. If you start coming down too fast, toss the ballast: these bags of sand." He spent the rest of the lecture explaining the tail valve and the maneuvering valve. Then he asked the Japanese to repeat his instructions. Ace nodded several times, then answered, "Don't fall out."

"Good enough." Hart smiled grimly, patting him on the shoulder. A little later he noticed Ace downing a small meal of raw fish and rice. "Be careful with that. It's rougher up there than it looks."

"Ha! I ride big waves in my little boat and never sick."

It took an hour to inflate the envelope. When it was ready, Ace hopped in the car. He was grinning.

"Give 'em hell, Ace!" Lieber shouted.

The higher the balloon, the higher went the reflector and antenna wires attached to the gondola. No matter how still the air, the balloon would be constantly moving. This would make any signals they received erratic, to say the least. While Hart might be able to broadcast two or three hundred miles, he hoped to pick up wireless communications over a much wider area. He also realized that someone a thousand miles away might hear him--or no one at all.

On the ground, everyone but Ziolkowski cheered. Outside of giving orders, he had been glumly silent since the loss of Depoy and Kitrell.

Ace waved wildly. Then, abruptly, he heaved. The men below scattered to avoid being hit by his breakfast.

At four hundred feet he pointed south. A sentry atop the warehouse saw him and focused his binoculars in that direction. It took him several moments to spot the three creatures basking outside the lagoon. When he relayed his sighting the men murmured their disappointment. They had hoped the one wounded in the eye might be dead by now.

The balloon was anchored in the center of the compound. Hart had taken extra care as to the stoutness of the winch cable. There was no way to maneuver the balloon beyond raising and lowering it. He set up his wireless set near the winch. He'd found an undamaged headset in the relay station. After adjusting the earphones he hooked up the batteries--and was immediately immersed in a sea of static.

The marines around him crouched like freezing men afraid of fire. To most of them a wireless telegraph was an ominous device, transmitting the unseen and receiving same. Using one was a little like talking to ghosts.

Hart had been keying no more than fifteen minutes when he suddenly grabbed the headset and held it tight against his ears. Men not on duty or asleep drew closer. Finally, the civilian looked up.

"My God, a battleship! The *Florida*! Not four hundred miles southeast and

heading our way. They heard me!"

"The *Florida*? Last I heard she was at Juan's-Toe-in-the-Mole."

They ignored Ziolkowski's skepticism. A battleship! The men cheered.

"What is it, Top?" Lieber asked the sergeant when he remained aloof from the celebration.

He snorted. "A battleship? Not likely. Maybe he's mixed up his signals."

"Top, listen, about Kittrell."

"I should never've posted men on the beach. I should've pulled everyone into the bunker. There's room. The monsters won't attack the distillery. If they wanted fresh water they would've taken it before."

"Top, how would they--"

"They must drink seawater somehow. Ah, Jesus, we could've dug holes like the mules if we had to drink. How many have we lost?"

"You cannot blame yourself."

"Now Hart's the only one left who can play chess and he's Jorgensoned out. Gone gooney."

"Take it easy, Top," Lieber said in a low voice. "You're not making sense."

Ziolkowski gave him a long look, then lowered his head and nodded.

Hart keyed some more, then listened. "They're at flank speed. They'll reach us late tomorrow morning. They keep asking about a Japanese fleet. They seem to think we're under attack."

"They got it half right."

"They're low on coal. They want us to load up our barges and bring them out when they arrive."

"How low?" Ziolkowski asked, glancing west at the umber smokestack of

their disabled sea tug. The *Iroquois* had been beached because of damage to her steam tubes. Without it, they couldn't shift the barges up the channel to the coaling station, let alone out of the lagoon.

"They won't be more specific. I think they think I might be a Jap, trying to lead them into a trap. Either that or they think Togo's eavesdropping. My guess is the position their wireless operator gave me is bogus, to deceive the enemy. She might be much closer than four hundred miles. I can't believe my signal reaches that far."

"Well, tell them the sorry truth. She's going to have to get her engineers ashore to repair the *Iroquois* or no one's going anywhere. Damn. Why didn't they bring coal ships with them? Don't they know we're at the end of the earth?"

"Do I tell them about the serpents? We have to give them some kind of warning. But they might not believe me. Might even think it's part of the 'trap.'"

Ziolkowski hesitated a minute before responding.

0915 Hours

Lifting his cap and mopping the sweat off his brow, Lieutenant Grissom leaned further into the wireless compartment and repeated, "*Serpents?* How does he sound?"

"Sound, sir?" the young wireless electrician asked.

"Can't you tell something about an operator by the way he keys?"

"He sounds okay to me, sir. He's identified himself as HH with Commercial Pacific. Old hands never spell out their names. This guy sounds like he's been pounding the keys for years. Hard to tell, though. The signal keeps breaking up."

"Sweet Jesus...." Grissom turned to Captain Oates. "It has to be the Nips, sir. If they had someone who knows Morse and English, they could lead us into

an ambush."

"With *serpents*, Grissom? It would be a better trap if they did nothing at all. Just lay low and wait."

"Maybe they're trying to frighten us away."

"Too risky for them. We might see the ploy and think they're afraid of a fight." A yeoman handed Oates a note from the wireless electrician. After perusing it, he handed the pad to Grissom. "You might be right, though. They say their tug is beached. Boiler tubes. Perfectly feasible. It always seems to come down to weather and tubes, doesn't it?"

"It could be a clever ruse--trying to get us to turn about before we even see the island."

"Or...?" Oates asked, seeing doubt on his face.

"As unlikely as it is... the boy, sir. He claims to have seen three serpents. It's a pretty big coincidence."

"Notify the Chief Engineer we need him to cobble together a group of his men to go in with the landing force."

"Aye aye, sir."

1132 Hours

Outside of its isolation, its coral reef and the omnipresent birds, the most noticeable aspect of Midway was its brightness. Even more common than an ankle twisted by stepping into a mutton bird hole were persistent, blinding headaches caused by the reflection of sun off sand and water.

Heinrich Lieber had once heard a Lutheran pastor go on and on about the Eternal Light of Heaven. But eternal light could be as much a hell as the eternal abyss, the daggers of brightness lodged permanently in one's eyes and brain.

Midway cast a blazing analytical eye on everyone who landed on the atoll. Certainly, more than one marine felt like a specimen on a slide.

Lieber had to cover his face with his hands and squint through his fingers in order to keep track of the gondola. After a couple hours of this, he turned to Hart. "I haven't seen him for a long time. Could he be sick?"

"We know he's hungry," said Ziolkowski. "Fritz is right. Let's haul him in."

They took hold of the winch cables and brought the balloon down. There was no sign of Ace until the car had landed. He was lying in the bottom of the basket.

"Ace!"

"Uh...."

Although Ace was soaked in vomit, Lieber did not hesitate pulling him out.

"Same thing's happened to me a couple times," said Hart. "There's nothing more I can do to stabilize it."

"Where did you see them last?" Ziolkowski shouted at Ace, trying to reach through his stupor.

"They gone... sail away...."

"Like hell. You can't even look at your fucking nose without tossing."

"I'll go up."

Ziolkowski gave Lieber a skeptical glance. "You're too heavy." He turned to Hart. "He's too heavy, right?"

"He doesn't look much heavier than me," said Hart, studying his new volunteer. "If he needs, he can get rid of some of the ballast."

"Won't one of them do better?" Ziolkowski indicated the Japanese knotted around Ace. He was loath to send up one of his men in a contraption he was sure

would, sooner or later, plummet out of control.

"It's all right, Top. I used to work at Coney Island. They had balloons there and no one got hurt. Looked fun."

"*Fun!* I've got four dead men and one dead lieutenant!" He counted only Occidentals. "Then go up with the gooneys! You'll land the same way." He illustrated the gooneys' clumsy and sometimes fatal landing style with a brusque clap of his hands.

The envelope was refreshed with a burst of coal gas. Lieber watched and listened closely as Hart demonstrated the valves and equipment. Lieber climbed in and the anchor line was released.

The most unsettling thing about the balloon was just that: There was no place to settle. Although Hart had put a firm floor in the gondola, as soon as the balloon was off the ground Lieber felt as if the basket was dropping out from under him. His slightest movement was instantly exaggerated. He made the mistake of watching the ground during the ascent. His last meal began to churn as the island whirled beneath him. The nausea abated somewhat when he raised his eyes.

The grand spread of the planet was breathtaking. The zenith sun laid a faint muggy mist on the horizon. Scanning the jewel-blue ocean, he soon spotted the creatures. All three of them, still to the south. The sergeant was right. Ace had lost his wits along with his breakfast.

The monsters seemed to be in a purposeless daze, floating idly under the noon sun. Even with binoculars, the only indication they were alive was an occasional swan-like lifting of a head. Lieber wondered if all the donkey meat they'd eaten had made them sick.

Or maybe they were finding humans hard to digest.

1248 Hours

"Gentlemen, what Mr. Pegg has described is this...." A tripod and board stood before the officers in the wardroom. Uncovering it, Singleton revealed one of the drawings he had labored on all afternoon, with William guiding each stroke. His brief training in draftsmanship stood him in good stead.

Dr. Singleton had acquired a new habit. He'd begun to clasp his hands in front of him, nervously kneading his fingers. When he caught himself at it, he stared down in wonder and made himself stop. Five minutes later, he found himself doing it again.

"As you can see, one of the creatures is as long as the whaler, or nearly so. I've drawn an outline of the *Lydia Bailey* for comparison. The only creature we know of this size is alive this very day: the blue whale. Not only that, the blue whale is the largest animal *ever* known to have existed. Now, if we take into account the refraction of sunlight in water, as well as the human element--men under duress almost invariably exaggerate their adversary--we might safely say we are dealing with a creature a little more like this...." He uncovered a second drawing. "The plesiosaur."

It was then that the officers' skepticism became open. Low laughter riffled through the assembly. The animal Singleton indicated, even in threes, could not possibly sink a whaler.

"While not as grandiose as what Mr. Pegg has envisioned, we are speaking of a discovery of the utmost magnitude. A plesiosaur can pose no danger to a modern battleship. Our real challenge is to capture one of these creatures alive."

The laughter became louder. Singleton smiled and nodded.

"All right, gentlemen, maybe you'll appreciate this: If there *are* plesiosaurs at Midway and we *do* capture at least one of them alive, the fame and wealth you achieve will not end until the day you die."

A hush fell across the wardroom.

Up to now, William, still seated on the cushioned chair from where he'd presented his story, accepted Singleton's rebuttal with equanimity. But the talk of capture startled him. He stared at the doctor with stark amazement.

"Beggin' your pardon, Doctor. There's no way you can catch any of the

serpents...."

Singleton lowered his head, like a matador challenged by a calf. In deference to William's sufferings, he would say no more. But there was no doubt the men in the room were more impressed by the boy than by the scientist. Oates had told them about Hart's transmissions. The marines on Midway could not have been pushed into such desperate straits by the fishy beanbags Singleton described. The doctor, besides being a knocker, was a know-it-all who refused to be proven wrong. If he could not cast aside his books and face the thing before him, he would have to be put aside himself. They did not believe the boy's story--they just preferred to.

As the meeting broke up, several men went over and patted William on the shoulder.

Not one word was spoken to Singleton.

XXII

June, 1908 — 29°31'N, 173°10'

From a marine's diary:

Sea serpents!!!!?????

0420 Hours

"For example, there's Star Number 1830 in the Groombridge Catalogue. It moves with an angular velocity of seven seconds per arc annually. A small fact on a big scale. But if you draw the analogy of a boy with his bullroarer, you might see what I'm getting at. The pull of the string is the centrifugal tendency and is equal to the square of the velocity of the bullroarer divided by the length of the string from the hand to the toy. So... let's say the centrifugal tendency is equal to an acceleration of the one-five-billionth part of a mile per second."

"And?"

"And instead of the bullroarer, we use Groombridge 1830. From there, we can calculate the weight of the universe."

"So tell me, how much does it weigh?"

"Unfortunately, we would have to know how far away Groombridge 1830 is. We can see it, all right. But we don't have the distance. Once we do, though...."

Captain Oates found himself smiling. In spite of his pompous armature of

facts, Dr. Singleton could sometimes prove a fascinating companion. He was sober now--the last vestige of alcohol blown to stern when he joined Oates on the bridge.

Lieutenant Grissom came out. "Two hours, captain." He gave Singleton a long glance.

"I wanted to see the sunrise, Lieutenant Grissom."

"*Which* sun?"

"Grissom," said Oates, "how well are you versed in ship silhouettes?"

"I know British colliers have black funnels, sir."

"Come now, Mr. Grissom. Don't let the doctor's presence intimidate you. Concentrate on battleships."

"An Italian *Sardegna* class battleship has tandem funnels, but they also carry one fo'ard; single mast, with her hull painted black and her superstructure white. Incidentally, the *Italia* includes sixteen-and-a-quarter-inch guns in her armament, a single one of which... well, the only wops we'll meet out here are the ones we have on board.

"The French used to subscribe to the *Jeune Ecole*, which was to attack an enemy's commerce rather than his fighting ships. But with the introduction of anti-torpedo nets and rapid-fire guns, they've had to revise their ideas. Doctor, the most dangerous-*looking* silhouette you'll ever see is French. They now practice what is called 'fierce-face' in the belief that if you can scare someone off without firing a shot, it's as much a victory as a sinking. They have very large funnels and built-up masts to lend the impression of fighting bulk. To compensate for their extreme freeboard, they have an exaggerated 'tumblehome;' that means the upper deck is narrower than the hull at the waterline. Peculiar looking... as though they were floating docks instead of warships.

"A British battleship would show two masts with double yardarms; the *Royal Sovereign* class carries their funnels in tandem, so if we were abeam it would look like one instead of two. As for the *Dreadnought*--"

"Oh, I think we can skip *that*," said Oates irritably.

"Yes, sir. Moving to the Pacific: All Chinese capital ships were built by the Germans and most of those were sunk at the Battle of Lissa in 1896. As you well know, the Japanese also destroyed the Russian fleet eight years later. So I presume our main concern--outside of sea beasts--is the Japanese. Their ships are painted metallic blue-to-gray, with red bands near their funnel tops. The *Fugi* and her sister ship the *Yashima* would each show two heads of smoke coming over the horizon. Of course, they would also see the smoke from our funnels. And at Tsushima, the Nips opened up on the Russians at a range of seven thousand yards--nearly twice what anyone else can do."

"Most impressive."

Grinning, Oates said, "Very good. Now, see the men not on watch get as much rest as possible."

"Aye, sir. But it's hard for anyone to sleep."

"Every rumor is like twenty cups of coffee," said the captain in a speculative tone.

A faint glow touched the horizon to starboard.

"We'll have the sun behind us when we come up on Midway," said the doctor.

A good sign. The enemy--in whatever form--would be blinded by the morning light when they steamed in.

0450 Hours

Grissom was right. Most of the men could not sleep. The forecastle was charged with excitement. The form of the adversary mattered little. Whether fish or fleet, it was something unknown. If fish, it would be the adventure of discovery. If fleet... well, death too could be an adventure.

Not only excitement, but pain kept Ensign Garrett awake. He felt even

worse than he looked. Lying down was agony, standing was just as bad. He prayed for sleep. But the slightest rocking of his hammock rubbed sore bones against damaged muscles, springing his eyes open as he suppressed a shout of misery. That he should never have fought Midshipman Beck was obvious. Equally obvious was the fact that he could not have backed down without loss of honor. There it was; and here he was. He did not perceive the awe of the men who had witnessed the fight. Only the humiliation, the crushing loss of status. He met men's eyes as he had always met them--only now, he did not see them. In effect, he'd learned to look blindly into the multifarious face of the crew. Before, he'd only been able to do that with women.

It could have been worse.

What a godsend William Pegg had been! His rescue not only diverted everyone's attention from his defeat, but the story he told circulated quickly belowdecks, where belief far outweighed disbelief. Concern of impending battle with Togo's sailors was replaced by quiet awe. The ensign garnered only brief glances as he passed crewmembers in the corridors. The ordinary bluejackets had sea serpents on their minds. A far more imposing prospect than a beat up and bruised commissioned officer.

Problem being, Garrett was infected, too, only his anticipation was heavily dosed with dread. Ever since the night he had stopped the loading of the forward turret, he had been plagued with doubts concerning the powder bags. During maneuvers and gunnery practice at Magdalena Bay a dramatic increase in efficiency and rate of fire had been achieved, although comments were made on the poor quality of the powder bags. But Admiral Evans had succumbed to gout and been sent home. There was positive confusion in command.

Still, it would not do for a ship of the line to blow up while firing salutes in a foreign port. It was rumored the bags would be replaced once they reached San Francisco. If so, the *Florida* had not remained long enough to benefit.

A chill underlay Garrett's physical pain. What if it was true? What if they were about to confront Togo's proud fleet? If powder came loose in the turret again, would he once again halt the firing? The question had given him silent fits during the fleet exercises in Man-of-War Cove. Every time a charge was brought up, Garrett all but crawled on the deck in search of loose powder grains. On any other part of the ship the gun captain and his men would have smirked. But a

silent consensus filled Turret One. No comment would be made where their safety was concerned. To hell with damning the torpedoes. Let Garrett search.

But he no longer cared. If they were sunk in an encounter with the Japanese, all trace of his defeat by Beck, of his shame, would be erased. Besides, he was now too sore to get down on his hands and knees. By obeying orders to the letter, he might succeed in blowing up the *Florida* before a single salvo was exchanged.

0451 Hours

Midshipman Davis gave up trying to sleep. Men kept moving below his high-slung hammock. His mind reeled with fanciful heroics. He would sink a battleship with a well-aimed shot. Or the *Florida* would be hit, the men around him would go to pieces, and he would remain at his station and stave off disaster.

But... the hammock squeezed his shoulders. It brought to mind the canvas sack they'd sewn the bluejacket in at Magdalena Bay before submitting him to the sea....

He shot onto the deck. He stowed his hammock in the nettings and went out to the berth deck, where the lower tier six-inch casemates squatted near the water.

Whispers haunted the hatchways and corridors. Marines in their narrow blue caps nervously fingered their brass trumpets. In some respects, they had the most hazardous job on board. In the midst of battle, they would have to dart back and forth behind the steel and wood barriers, delivering messages and tooting commands. And at any time they might be called upon to land on a hostile beach.

Too much to dwell on. For Davis, primary consideration lay with the six-incher in his charge. Sea salt could play havoc with the gun's mechanism. Only with constant cleaning could the efficiency of the piece be maintained. For perhaps the fiftieth time in the last twelve hours, Davis took an oil rag and worked on the exposed gears. As he backed away to admire his handiwork, he

bumped into someone standing behind him.

It was Beck.

"Going to rip into them, eh?" Beck said.

Davis was wise enough to say nothing when there was nothing to say.

"I don't think it's ever going to happen... no, course it won't. But you know, old pal... we might take some losses. I might be one of them. So might you. I just thought... well, isn't it obvious what I'm thinking?"

"I was checking the gun," said Davis.

"Hey, what the hell. What I wanted to say is... why don't we kiss and make up?"

"That's a hell of a way to put it."

"Only trying to make it easy. On both of us."

For a long moment Davis stood silent. He could not explain his hesitation. Not at first.

With the gunports closed, only a few dull electric torches shone on the covered gun deck. The bruises on Beck's face could only be surmised, though from what Davis had heard they were far less severe than those he'd inflicted. But that was just it. He was the man who had thrashed Ensign Garrett. Beck was a fellow to admire and to reckon with. It was hard for Davis to swallow his new notoriety. While Davis himself was at the same place he'd started at the day before, the week before, the year before. He was speechless in the face of his own insignificance.

Beck interpreted his silence as something else.

"Maybe you can't see it. I have my hand sticking out here. If it's too dark.... Okay, I won't beg. I guess bastards come out with the season."

He stalked away.

Davis heard voices and nervous laughter above him. No doubt the gunners on the upper deck were also checking their six-inchers. Perhaps, on the eve of battle, some of them had been able to mend broken friendships. But Davis found himself frozen against it. No matter how easy Beck wanted to make it, envy would never make it easy for Davis.

0510 Hours

"We know you're stashin'. They brought you in late, eh, Gilroy? My guess is you brought in a load from Chineese-town. What is it? Opium? Start your own little den? Or was it--no, not heroin. Your arms aren't marked. Own up, or we'll toss you in the furnace, you'll see."

"Don't threaten me," Gilroy hissed. "I'm telling you, it's nothin'. I just been under the weather."

"Oooh-hooo! that's weather in your eyes all right. Two white poppies and an opium typhoon. Come on, Gilroy, we're not asking for the whole kit. Just a fair shake three ways."

Had he been thinking clearly, Gilroy would never have tried such a puerile lie. The two stokers before him had been watching him almost as closely as the Chief. They recognized a path they'd walked down themselves on more than one occasion. Obviously, they wanted to stroll again.

They had no prospects. There was no promotion out of the hellhole. They could, of course, refuse to re-enlist. Jump ship, even, if their lives depended on it. Many sailors abandoned the Navy and few were ever caught. But they had no place to go. Rather than put themselves through the effort of the hard chore of thinking about options, they sought peace. If they became addicts that was all right. It might be considered a sensible occupation compared to what they were doing now.

Gilroy saw his own desperation reflected in their eyes. They were greedy for oblivion. They would do anything to feel nothing. He gauged them warily. If he didn't split his cache with them, there was no doubt they'd drop a few hints to

the Chief--after trying to force it out of him in other ways.

"All right. You're right. Meet me in the paint locker amidships, lower deck."

"I don't think so. We're coming with you now."

The stare he gave them was noncommittal, an emotional blank. Finally, he nodded slowly. "All right. Follow me."

They scurried like sick rats down the corridors and hatchways, as though they already had the opium in their pockets. Marines kept a wary eye on them. One had to keep a wary eye on firemen and stokers. One never knew when one of them might succumb to the heat and labor and go berserk. The Leathernecks had a word for it, borrowed from veterans of the Philippines: *huramentado*. It originally applied to Sulu Moros. In battle one of them would go crazy for blood and attack no matter how bad the odds. But the insanity could also erupt in the middle of a quiet village. A warrior would stroll out from under the ilang-ilang trees, smile at the people in the market, then whip out his Maylasian sword and begin hacking everyone to bits. If there were soldiers in the village--it didn't matter which army--they shot the man down like a mad dog, because that was precisely how they thought of them. *Huramentado* was a mystery to white man and Asiatic alike. But the mystery was not half as bad as the unpredictability.

Same with the stokers. One knew it was the heat that caused them to go off the deep end, but one could never predict when it would happen. The black gang was aware of how their shipmates viewed them. Every so often, one of them might leap at a bluejacket and yell, "Boo!" just to see them jump. But it was not a joke they played very often. Someone might mistake it for *huramentado* and club the offender in mid-laugh.

"Here you go."

After glancing up and down the corridor they entered the paint locker. It was really a small paint factory, redolent of blanc fixe, barytes, silica, lithopone, petroleum thinners, China wood oil and soya bean oil. After the magazines, it was the most flammable part of the ship. Every container was tightly sealed, all brushes kept clean. But with the *Florida* switching to battle gray a good deal of work had been done and the air was rich with fumes. Even so, as Gilroy pulled the gluey pack from its niche near the scuttle vent, the quickened breath of the

two men watching told him they were quite willing to light up here.

"I've a pipe."

"Light up now?" one of the other stokers said.

"I do it all the time. The fumes hide the smell."

"You mean--"

"Haven't blown up yet."

"Then you're one lucky bastard. Smells like the inside of a bomb in here. 'Sides, I've... uh... seen this done before. You got to heat up the opium, first."

"Not this. It's a special batch. Just pack the pipe like it was tobacco."

"You're full of shit. I never heard--"

"You'll never get a better chance than now. You realize how hard it is to find a place to smoke this so's no one notices?" Gilroy's lie was bold and dangerous. So far, he had not found a chance to smoke any of his opium. Laudanum pills had been all he could manage.

"It's a wonder you haven't been caught." The second man looked at him closely. "But you've been taking something, there's no denyin'."

"Oh, fucked up royally, no doubt. So here's the dope and here's the pipe. How do you think I got this way?"

"I don't suppose a puff would hurt. Not if you can light it straight, like you say."

"Now you're talking."

The two men watched eagerly as Gilroy opened the pack, then cut off a small chunk with a penknife. He filled the bowl, then handed the pipe to one of them.

"I'll watch the door," Gilroy said, moving away.

"Right. And I'll take that, first."

Gilroy handed the pack over.

One of the stokers lit a match over the bowl while the second leaned forward to puff. A small coil of smoke rose and drifted sluggishly towards the vents. Carefully, the man with the match drew away and blew it out. The opium in the bowl smoldered. They looked at Gilroy inquiringly.

Before they could move, he grabbed a container of paint remover from the shelf and whipped off the cap.

"No!" Gilroy commanded as the man who'd held the match started forward. "Ease off, there. Now, hand me the pack."

"You're full of shit, Gilroy. You don't think--"

Gilroy swung his arm. A stream of highly flammable liquid arced outwards, coming perilously close to the bowl. The man with the pipe could not jerk away for fear the tiniest glowing fragment would ignite the room.

"You motherfucker! Don't--"

Gilroy did it again, this time lacing the pipe-holder's shirt with a long wet streak.

"Give it to him!"

"But--"

"If he does it again we'll all three go!"

The man with the package studied Gilroy briefly. "He's crazy enough," he sighed. Gilroy held the can high, ready to splash everything in sight if either of them made a false move. "Thieves fall out," the package man murmured as he handed the opium over.

"We're not fucking thieves," Gilroy protested. "Just fucking dope fiends." Then he laughed. "Which don't mean jack shit to you, because you're fucking dead."

Swinging his arm wildly, the fluid spiralled out, hitting the man with the pipe in the eyes. Gilroy kicked the second man in the knee as he charged. There was a loud crack. The man fell. He emptied the can, saw the first flash of ignition. Then he was out the door, slamming it hard behind him. For an instant he was afraid he would have to hold it shut as the second man crawled forward and pounded from inside.

"You bastard! You fucking--!"

There was deep rolling whoosh as the fire swept the room, turning the two into living torches. Their screams were cut short.

The explosion bombed Gilroy's ears, blew him back against the corridor wall. He just missed being seared by flames shooting out. He'd not crawled six yards before a sharp burst *alla breve* startled him to his feet. The marine in the corridor was sounding the call for the fire control parties. He paused, heard the corresponding bugle call forward and knew his message had been received. He turned to Gilroy.

The stoker was gaping at the deck. The package had split open in his fall. A line of opium trailed up the corridor. The portion that had spilled out when he fell was on fire. It was impossible to distinguish its odor in the inferno. Already the smoke and fumes were making the passageway unbearable.

"What the hell is this, grease monkey?" the marine demanded, noting the dark smoldering clumps of opium.

Somehow, the marine was to blame. Gilroy just knew it. In grief and rage, he grabbed the unsuspecting man by the neck and slammed him against the wall. His air choked off, he could not shout for help. He would have been dead the next instant had it not been for all the laudanum Gilroy had ingested the last few weeks. It had sapped the stoker's main strength. His arms quivered like a baby's.

Still, the marine could not push him off. Nearly twenty years as a fireman had made Gilroy's biceps thick as bandirons. He was only freed when another marine came up from behind and low-leveled a punch to Gilroy's kidneys.

"Clear the deck! Clear the deck!"

Sailors leapt out of the way as the fire control parties shot down the bowels of the ship--and Amos Macklin was caught out of place at the worst possible time. In the pocket of his white steward uniform was a flask of gin for Seaman Gilroy.

It was the look the stoker had given him the night before that undid him. Passing in the shadow of the lifeboats--the blackout would not begin until midnight--his eyes had shown with peculiar whiteness. Piercing eyes. Evil.

But most unsettling, eyes without recognition. Gilroy had stared right through him, ghosting past Amos as if he were a wall to be pierced and left behind. His face was as black as the night beyond the arc lamps. Turning, Amos could just make out the form of Dr. Singleton. Gilroy went up to him. They exchanged words, but Amos could not hear them above the racket of the work crews.

The noise, oddly, increased the sense of isolation. Whistling in the dark *en masse*. The lights carved out a stark cave of loneliness. Come midnight, when the blackout went in force, it would be merely emphasis of their remoteness.

Gilroy was about to do something crazy. Of that Amos was sure.

He'd been relieved when the stoker stopped pestering him for liquor. He assumed it was a brief respite, that Gilroy had picked up a few bottles in San Francisco and would resume his nagging once they were consumed.

The look he gave Amos seemed to confirm just that. He was dry. Time to own up, or Gilroy would report him to Ensign Garrett. The steward would not have given in to what he perceived as an unspoken command. Gilroy looked so gaunt and haunted Amos felt he was only a few steps short of death. If the stoker died, a good chunk of the steward's worries would go with him.

One more pint just might do the job.

He had tried to get some sleep. Like almost everyone else on board he found the prospect of battle on the morrow pounding his temples, making even a light doze impossible. Swaying in his hammock, he wondered if Gilroy lay awake also. If so, he was probably waiting for Amos and scheming his vengeance if Amos did not come. The attempt to sleep was pointless when thoughts like this preyed on his mind. Sneaking into the galley, he unlocked the

liquor cabinet and filled a pint flask with gin.

He was passing one of the dynamo rooms when the fire alarm was raised. As men poured through the hatches, he had the fleeting impression they were after him. But they only wanted him out of the way. He waited a full minute after they were gone before allowing himself a sigh of relief. A sigh that was throttled when he saw two marines hauling a man up the corridor. There was no mistaking the grimy attire and complexion. The man was a stoker. As they came close, he recognized Gilroy. Obviously injured, but the Leathernecks were not treating him gently. Holding him up by the armpits, they banged his shins painfully as they dragged him across the coaming.

Before reaching the spot where Amos stood they dodged to the side, disappearing into the warrant officers' mess. Empty this early in the morning, they could only be going in for privacy. Amos wanted nothing to do with it. When he heard a cry of pain, he knew he should run back to the liquor cabinet and return the gin to its clear glass bottle. It was not so much sympathy as curiosity that prompted him to edge in the direction of the hall. And annoyance. No sailor took kindly to marines mistreating a mate.

"So who paid you off? The Japs in California? Where was it? San Diego? San Francisco? They pay you with dope, you fucking--"

The sentence ended with a loud slap.

"Don't kill him. The Navy'll do that for us."

Amos' scalp went cold when he heard the next voice. It was Gilroy--yet not Gilroy. A heavy timbre weighed the voice, shale sliding across shale. A devil in a sideshow. "Navy? You're Navy!"

"Hey, what's that?"

"You fucking jugheads don't think you're Navy. Well, you are! You got more saltwater up your ass--"

There was a harsh, dull echo.

"What's that again, grease monkey?"

"Sea-boy sailors, green as the Seven Seas."

"Hell, leave it. He set fire to the ship. He'll hang sure enough."

The man speaking did not seem convinced. Amos guessed his main concern was that they might be held culpable if they accidentally murdered the stoker. He peeked into the mess.

And was horrified when Gilroy instantly saw him and shouted, "There's the black bastard at fault. Goddamn nigger put me up to it!"

The marines exchanged skeptical glances, but one of them nodded at the steward. "Come over here, boy."

"That's the one fought Hensley the other day. You're a helluva fighter, boy. But don't try any tricks with us, or we'll finish you."

A wild fire of terror raced through Amos' vitals. He could not believe his own stupidity. The Leathernecks could do almost anything they wanted to him and not one man would care. If they discovered the flask in his pocket they would have all the moral justification they needed--not that they needed any. They could fuck him up proper and he'd be only one more bloody nigger.

"Don't dawdle. Come here. We just want to ask you about this shit shoveler."

Amos found himself unable to meet their faces. He gazed out over the galvanized tables of the mess, gleaming with nickel dullness, like morgue slabs. The warrant officers' mess. He'd worked here any number of times since their departure from the Capes.

No. He had slaved here.

And he was about to act the slave again. He knew it. He felt it crawling up inside him, a body of nausea.

"What do you say? You put this greaser up to setting the paint locker on fire?"

"And mind you, it's murder, too. I heard the screams."

"Couldn't miss the smell," the first marine added.

"Amos Macklin's his name," Gilroy slurred through his bloody mouth. The black man could now see one of the reasons for the stoker's strange tone: One of his front teeth flapped back and forth like a toppled saloon door as he spoke. "You take him down like you're taking me, he'll tell you. Goddamn nigger was--"

He let out a howl as one of the marines punched him in the spine.

"Shut up, greaseback! All right, boy. What've you got to say for yourself?"

Dignity abandoned him. The instant he opened his mouth his voice, normally a rich baritone, became an inarticulate whine.

"I don't know nuffin', marse. Please, suh, I don't know why he's sayin' doze things."

"Marse!" the marines erupted. They pointed at each other. "Marse! Never been called master before!"

Amos took advantage of their hilarity by begging to be let go. The flask felt like a burning cross in his pocket. Even the whites on board were severely punished for carrying unauthorized liquor. He could only expect worse. Far worse. Any moment, he expected it to fall out and crash to the deck, guilt and accusation in one liquid flaming form. His behavior was no longer voluntary. The sheer necessity for survival caused the slave to hop out, to break into a cringing song and dance. Amos Macklin, amazed critic, watched from somewhere else as the chattel bowed, pleaded, shuffled, and all too quickly convinced the marines of his harmlessness.

"Don't let him go!"

His screech earned Gilroy another rough tap from his captors. As Amos backed out of the mess hall, he heard one of the marines comment, "That boy don't know shit, grease monkey. You're a self-made nigger, you are. And a murderer."

"And a traitor."

0545 Hours

"Where's Grissom? Goddammit, where's my exec?"

Captain Oates was racing down one of the aft passageways when he finally spied the lieutenant trotting towards him. Seeing Oates, he raised both hands and nodded.

"It's under control...." He stopped to catch his breath. He'd been in the thick of the fight against the blaze. Face and forearms covered with soot, he looked like one of the black crew. His collar had become a crust of smoke and sweat. "We lost two men.... They were trapped in the locker. Ten more were overcome by the smoke and fumes... and something else."

"What do you mean?"

"There's a couple of them I don't think'll pull through."

"But it's under control."

"Yes." The lieutenant girded himself against Oates' inevitable response to his next words. "It was sabotage, sir."

"What!"

"And murder, I believe. That's what the captain of the marines thinks." He relayed what the marines had learned from Gilroy. Unquestionably, they had employed their own quick, brutal method of forcing a confession from the stoker. But the exec did not bother telling Oates of his suspicion. After all, the *Florida* was his ship. He would probably have approved.

"You said we lost men to the fumes... and something else?"

"Aye. I heard a story once about a warehouse fire. In one of the treaty ports. There was opium stored inside. When they tried to put out the fire, they started seeing things...."

"Hallucinations? My God, are you saying--"

Grissom braced himself against the corridor wall. He had inhaled some of the fumes himself.

The captain was not a man who kept his peace when angry or flustered. "Have you confirmed this? Have you?"

"The stoker fell asleep soon after. No one's been able to wake him. That's what the marines tell me, at least."

"Wake him! Dammit! Wake him! I'll see to it! He'll know there's a God in Heaven and Hell when I finish with him! Dammit, what if he's a Jap spy? We've got to know!"

Turned out by the bugle calls echoing madly through the corridors, sailors had darted to the hatchways to see what was happening--only to be shoved back by the watch as the damage control parties and marines raced aft. Baffled and fearful, they wondered if a battle had already been fought and lost. A concern that was trebled when they saw injured men being carried to the infirmary.

"Hell if I'm going to wait to find out," Ensign Garrett told some of the others in forecastle. In bare feet and boxer shorts, he started to follow the stretcher bearers. Then he thought twice, and went back to don a cotton undershirt. He had no desire to put his colorful abdomen on display. That done, he caught up just as the injured men were being taken through the infirmary door.

The surgeon had been preparing as thoroughly as any gunner on board. His bandages, unguents and extra beds were set in order as if to tempt patients, while surgical instruments were laid out in all their cruel gleaming sharpness as if to chase them away. But these early injuries came as a surprise, the more so because of the peculiar symptoms some of them evinced, a profound lassitude verging on death.

There was no mistaking what had happened to Gilroy, however. The curious sailors gathered outside the infirmary took one glance at the fireman as he was carried in and knew immediately the marines had fallen in love with him.

"Here's the bastard," they said, dumping him on one of the extra cots. No sense giving him one of the softer beds.

"What happened to him?" the surgeon asked.

"He fell asleep."

"Fell on his face, too, it seems."

"This is the grease monkey that started the fire."

Gilory was not one of the engineer's mates. However, the marines on the *Florida* used the derogatory term, nearly as old as steam engines themselves, for anyone who worked near the ship's power plant.

"How do you know that?" the surgeon asked them.

"He told us."

The surgeon raised his hand in frustration. "Then why bring him here? Take him where he belongs!"

Exchanging grins, the marines hefted the unconscious stoker and carried him out. Garrett could not resist the urge to follow. The way the Leathernecks were acting, they were as likely to toss him overboard as into the brig. Along the way the ensign heard details of what had transpired below. He was incredulous. All his indifference fell away. One of their own had tried to destroy the ship. *His* ship. The twelve-inch gun Garrett had invested so much intellectual and emotional energy upon might have been sent to the bottom by some idiotic, drug-intoxicated stoker. The opprobrium would have been endless, the shame eternal. The *Maine* was remembered for being sabotaged by the Spanish. The *Florida* would have been ballyhooed as the battleship sunk by a dope fiend. Next to that, the possibility that they all might have been killed was secondary.

There were angry murmurs among the bluejackets, but the marines held them back. They were jealous of their victim. No one else would be allowed to beat up on him. But there was one sailor they could not stop.

Captain Oates roared up, cursing and spitting hotter than memory served. The bluejackets squeezed back against the walls, appalled by the apparition. Even when they had been posted in the observation ward, the captain had not looked this mad. A rabid land-going shark. With no concern for formality, received or returned, he bowled over several sailors and followed hard on the

marines carrying Gilroy into the brig.

"Wake him! Wake the son of a bitch! Get him on his feet. Set fire to *my* ship, will he!" He knocked the marines aside and grabbed the stoker, shaking him like a doll. No one had suspected such strength in the old man. It soon became obvious Gilroy would not open his eyes again any time soon. Frustrated, Oates turned on the gawkers at the door. He immediately spied out the nosegay of bruises that comprised Ensign Garrett's face. "You! What are you doing away from your station? Out of uniform!"

"Sir, I--"

"Mr. Garrett, what the hell are you doing running around in your shorts?"

This stunned them all, since half the men present were in their shorts. Those further back in the corridor began slipping silently away, hoping Oates had not and would not spot them. Those in front had no such hope, Garrett least of all. Facing Oates in this temper was as bad as staring down the throat of a typhoon. The ensign went blind with embarrassment. He turned sideways, like a man in a lopsided duel praying the marksman's bullet would only glance him. The captain came forward. The end of the ensign's career seemed at hand.

And then an angel appeared--in the guise of Lieutenant Grissom. Slipping between the captain and the sailors, he put on a breathless air and whispered, "Sunrise, captain. And we can't raise Midway."

0610 Hours

Brought up short, Oates blinked, as if a matador had disappeared before his eyes. "Nothing at all?"

"HH told us he would signal at first light. We've received nothing."

Oates contemplated the implications a few moments, then looked from his exec to the men trying to make themselves invisible in the passageway. "All right. You men in shorts--stay in them. You men in uniform. Strip. There's going

to be some hot work today, I guess. We'll do it like Dewey in Manila Bay. I was there, in case you didn't know. Down to our skivvies and giving hell to the Spanish. Gather the men on the gun deck and give them the word."

The crew gathered at the gun deck and Grissom read out from the Articles for the Government of the United States Navy.

A cheer, ragged but heartfelt, burst from the sailors. Hot hell and glory!

1030 Hours

"Battle stations!"

The men scattered, their bare feet pounding a martial tattoo. The C-clef staccato of bugles spread rapidly through the ship, frantic hammers of sound waking the few men not already awake, putting delight and fear of the future into those who were.

"Clear for action!"

Davits, boats, ventilator funnels and flagstaffs disappeared from the decks. Preprinted labels that said 'Overboard in Action' were attached to items that might get in the way. More than one bluejacket alleviated the suspense by surreptitiously tagging the backs of mates racing past.

The first lieutenant excused himself from the bridge and went below to Central Station.

Pulling open the hatch to the twelve-inch turret, Ensign Garrett studied the smooth milkline of dawn to the east as he waited for the gun crew to arrive. The captain's rebuke stung bitterly. He had been ready to die for the sake of the *Florida*. Now he was half inclined to die with her. His last day on earth--possibly. A line of clouds curdled. So be it.

In they came. Plugmen, pointers, gun captain, the rest. Last to arrive was Beck. The man who had taken a beating and the man who'd inflicted it stood

together as they pulled on the cumbrous hatch. Their eyes did not meet. Beck was looking ahead to avoid embarrassment. Garrett held his gaze on the deck, looking for loose powder.

He had no intention of stopping if he saw any.

Part Two

Battle

XXIII

0000 - 1238 Hours

Ziolkowski had posted guards around the compound, then positioned himself in the middle of the quad. He'd averaged three hours of solid sleep every twenty-four hours. Yet he was not exhausted. He'd served in enough campaigns to have learned the art of sleeping in brief snatches. Leaning against his Rexer, he closed his eyes in fleeting moments, dozing, yet ready to snap awake at the least sign of enemy activity. Around midnight came the plaintive song of the creatures.

"Tooo... nel...."

"Henderson! Enderfall! I think they're headed towards the warehouse."

"I don't know, Top," came a worried voice. "There's something moving out this way, too."

It seemed the nadir of military form not to leave sentries out. But Depoy and Kitrell preyed on his mind. Ziolkowski saw no point in suffering more casualties at the listening posts now that the *Florida* was due in the morning. So, with the creatures prowling Sand Island, he had to decide on one more retreat.

"To hell with it. Back to the bunker, everyone!"

The guards raced back, their hands on the guide ropes that led them straight to the bunker's entrance. Ziolkowski stayed put until Enderfall shouted all were inside. Then, grabbing a rope, he dashed across the quad. He had just made out the dim light behind the bunker's blackout curtain when a loud hot chug charged the air behind him. His blouse billowed out, then clung.

He was running in space.

Stinking humid breath shot over his skin and down his back. The light from the bunker seemed to dart away like a mayfly.

Panic sucked his soul. One of the creatures had launched after him, catching him by the shirt. He knew what would happen next. He had seen it happen to others. The serpent would nod its head and he would be flicked between its teeth.

It was the Rexer that saved him. He held on to it unthinkingly, spasmodically. Added to his own stocky physique, it supplied enough weight to tear the shirt off his back.

He plummeted. He could not see the ground, only knew it was coming. No way to know when to roll to reduce the impact.

He could hear bones snap when he hit. But he felt only the beating out of air. Lights sprang out. Then pain came sweeping like a comet, unifying his broken body in a scream of agony.

0000 - 1238 Hours

Lieber and Hart had seen the terror of a million nights hanging like a huge ghastly bauble outside the bunker. When running into the bunker they'd felt the guide ropes whip violently in their hands. Something huge was trammeling them and they shouted for Ziolkowski to hurry. The dim light of the battle lantern allowed them to see the Top a second before he took flight. They yelled in dismay.

When Ziolkowski fell, they did not hesitate. They dashed forward. The creature was not aware the morsel had slipped away and was busy flipping its head in an attempt to turn the shirt into something tastier. Lieber and Hart grabbed the sergeant, ignoring his howls of anguish as they dragged him inside.

Sand exploded through the entrance, blinding the men and burying those nearest. Some of them felt death on their face and screamed.

Hamilton Hart was one of them. The scream forced from his lungs was the scream of Alaska, of the Kiltik, of all the men who had died under his command. It was about to happen again. Only this time, he would be a full participant in the death rite.

Yet even as terror crippled his mind, his body responded to the emergency. He leapt to the front of the bunker to help free the buried men. First he uncovered Lieber, then others. Two were unconscious. As they dragged Ziolkowski to the far end, he opened his eyes and moaned, "My fucking leg...."

"Looks like shit, Top."

The bunker shook again. Sand rained down through the crossworks.

"Douse the lamp!"

"Belay that!" Ziolkowski shouted. "I think they already know where we are."

This drew a peculiar twist of laughter from some of them. The sergeant had been laid next to Ace, who had become feverish after his morning in the balloon. The Japanese took one look at Ziolkowski, moaned, and fell back. Hart glanced at them.

"I think they're all out there."

"How do you know that?" Ziolkowski gasped.

"It sounds like it."

"Hell, one alone sounds like a herd. Hold off. We want to toast them all."

"Gott!" Lieber jumped back from one of the narrow gun slits as a dark shadow leaned in.

The bunker shook like sticks.

"Blow it! The Top don't know--"

Ziolkowski forced himself up on one elbow. "This Top Kick knows a fucking coward when he sees--" Then the right side of the bunker began caving in. His mind changed quickly. "Do it, Hart!"

Just before he touched the wires to the battery poles, it dawned on Hart the creatures might have destroyed the connections. They had buried the wires three feet deep. The remaining gas cans were buried half their height at an angle so that the explosions would be directed towards the center. But his calculations and precautions seemed meaningless in the turmoil. After all, they'd figured the bunker would hold out at least a week--and it was already a shambles.

He pressed the wires to the battery.

His teeth shifted sides when the gasoline bombs went off. Through a gun slit he saw volcanoes erupt. Heat shot in like live coals down a chute. He shielded his eyes with his forearm. Light flared through his lids. He let out a laugh of triumph.

Then he felt the walls caving in.

XXIV

June, 1908 – 28°20'N, 177°22'W

From the Deck Log of the USS Florida:

All hands formed on gun deck and Mr. Grissom read the Articles of War; this caused great consternation among the crew but the Captain has expressed the possibility that we are entering a war zone; 2/c Seaman Swofford put on half pay (\$13 mo) for assaulting a gunner's mate; advised that had this happened after the Articles had been read the penalty might have been death.xxxxx

1130 Hours

The island came up like a chip on a pond. A peculiar apple-green reflection in the sky was their first indication. One would have thought they were coming up on a tropical paradise rather than a meager crust of sand. They noted the dark patterns of birds in flight, yet it was not until they were almost on top of the atoll that the lookouts saw its white outline. The next instant, every eye began scanning for smoke from enemy funnels as a sense of reality took hold of their senses. If the Japs were about, they posed a far deadlier threat than the things described by William Pegg.

"Captain... this is an atoll," said the exec.

"Quite right. Ring back two-thirds. I don't want to squat over any outlying coral."

"Back two-thirds, sir!" The engine room telegraph rang loudly in the tense

pilothouse.

"Right, eighteen degrees rudder."

"Right, eighteen degrees rudder, sir!"

"Note those breakers, Grissom."

"Nasty, sir," the exec agreed.

"Keep two and a half cables between us. God knows how many have wrecked here."

The crash of the sea against the ram simmered down to a sluggish parting of water. Raising his binoculars, Oates fixed a wary eye on the reef, then peered at the island. Other than the birds, there was no sign of life offshore or on. "That must be Lower Brook."

"According to the chart, they call it Eastern now." Grissom left, returned a minute later. "Still no signal from Hart."

Oates experienced a twinge of sadness as he listened to a petty officer repeat the soundings that were coming in over the telephone. In earlier days he'd hearkened to the leadsman's chant from the foredeck, a different little song for each sounding as the man on the leadsman's platform heaved the chains. The Navy's conversion to giant capital ships had eliminated that charming necessity, so reminiscent of a suitor approaching a coltish and wary female who could sink him with alarming ease. The world was now much too fast for the old chants... and too distant. The leadsman was remote, far out of earshot from the bridge. He called out the depth briskly to a boatswain's mate, who then relayed the information to a petty officer, who in turn relayed it to the captain or watch commander. *Might as well be listening to Madame Blavatsky talking to the dead*, Oates thought grimly.

"We should be able to see the balloon HH told us about."

"Nothing on the water."

Fifteen minutes later, Grissom raised an arm. "There's the coaling station."

"No damage I can see. Damn. I was hoping... no, there's no way we can risk going into the lagoon."

"The barges are tied up. I can't--okay, there's the tug. On the beach. I hope the boiler tubes are all that's wrong with her."

"Hmmpf."

"And that would be the relay station."

"What's left of it. *Something's* been here, lieutenant."

"Yes, sir. Still nothing on the water."

"They could be hiding on the other side. I don't see any masts or smoke, though."

"Looks like they've been moving a helluva lot of sand. Or something very large--" Grissom spat, as if he could not believe what he'd been about to say. "Could've been a sneak raid by the Nips. Take a few prisoners, turn things on end."

"In short, a warning to President Roosevelt to stay out of the Pacific." His voice tinged with concern, Oates wondered out loud, "You don't think Togo himself is out here, do you?"

The exec stared bleakly at the possibility that the man who had annihilated the Russian fleet was at Midway and tactfully declined to voice an opinion.

"Not a soul...."

"We'll have to send in a landing force."

"In time, Mr. Grissom. Let's steam around her first." His voice was querulous. Time was the last thing they had. But he dared not go in without scouting the situation.

"Nothing on the water...."

Picking up the brass telephone connecting the bridge with the masthead,

Oates rang the forward lookout. "You see anything on the islands?"

"Nothing, sir," came the tinny response. "There are some buildings inland-on Sand Island, I guess that is. One's a warehouse, I think. It doesn't appear damaged. Everything else is flattened or burned. It looks to me like the garrison's been wiped out, sir."

"Let me know if you see anyone, alive or dead."

"Aye aye, sir."

"Uh, captain...?"

Oates glanced at his exec. "Yes?"

"How can we be sure this *is* Midway? All we have is a speck on the map. The cable director drew this map up from memory."

"See that burned out shell on the north shore of Sand? It looks similar to the submarine cable station in Newfoundland. That's the relay station, all right." Oates was about to step out of the pilothouse when the lookout phone jangled violently. He nearly pulled a muscle turning back. "What?"

"Captain, to starboard...."

"Where to starboard?"

Grissom overheard and ran to the starboard wing of the bridge to scan the water with his binoculars.

"Do you see masts?" Oates asked when the lookout failed to elaborate.

"Sir... I...."

"Well?"

"Nothing, sir. I thought I saw... it must be a patch of coral."

"Are we in danger of hitting it?"

"I... don't see it anymore, sir." The lookout's tone anticipated a backlash

from the captain. But the skipper was too flustered to issue a reprimand and slammed the phone on its hook.

The whole thing was spooky. No sign of life on shore. Ghost sightings on the beam. Made his skin crawl. He braced himself on the bridge screen for a moment, then joined Grissom. He opened his mouth to speak, stopped, raised his Zeiss glass to starboard. Certainly, in weather as clear as this, the seaman in the mast bubble would not have risked Oates' anger for nothing. But what could he have seen?

Damn peculiar.

Peculiar too was the very weather which should have eliminated uncertainty in any sighting. Where were all the clouds and storms Rear Admiral Thomas had told him about? The atoll was as serene as a lady's boudoir. Then again, Oates knew better than most how false that kind of serenity could be.

"What did he see, sir?" Lieutenant Grissom asked, staring hard to starboard.

Instead of answering, Oates said, "Have you seen the coal returns? Whether we like it or not, we're going to have to send in a landing party. If we don't start loading soon, we'll be dead in the water by tomorrow morning."

"I'll notify the Captain of the Marines."

1212 Hours

The gun captain listened through his headset, then nodded down at the others. "Permission granted."

There was a barely perceptible sigh of relief as Garrett and Beck turned the bolt and pushed open the turret hatch. For a moment the only change was the influx of morning sunlight. The men squinted. Some of them sneezed. Then the direction of the ship changed slightly and a fresh breeze wafted through the hatchway. Overhead and aft, they could hear other hatches clang open as gun

crews won permission to relieve the sweltering heat in their turrets.

Opened up, the rule of silence was temporarily suspended. The men exchanged comments in low tones. No one had the slightest idea what was going on, only that the fight they had expected seemed somehow delayed. No antagonist, bestial or otherwise, was in sight. Turning back towards the chamber, Garrett bumped into Midshipman Beck. Both men jumped as though static-shocked. The men in the turret glanced briefly their way, then looked off into a nonexistent distance.

1235 Hours

No one was allowed out on maindecks. Anyone caught in the open could be killed or blown overboard by the concussion of the twelve-inchers and Captain Oates had given Dr. Singleton his deadliest look when warning him to stay away from his bridge. Which left him two options: He could remain in his cabin and get drunk or he could wander belowdecks.

While he had managed to stay sober over the last forty-eight hours, the stain of embarrassment had not washed away. The scornful looks the bluejackets tossed at him as he staggered to sick bay to interview Pegg had marred him forever. He doubted he could ever give up drink, but he would take every precaution against ever appearing drunk in public again. If he sequestered himself in his cabin while all hell broke loose outside, he would go mad. And get drunk.

So he wandered the passageways, bemused but sober. Sudden storms of sailors would appear gullying through the corridors, prompting a wild dash on his part to escape their path. But most men were at their stations. Where was Midshipman Davis? he wondered.

He went through one of the heavy water-tight doors near the torpedo room and came upon a long empty corridor that was, except for the thrum of engines far below, completely silent. This uniqueness tempted him to enter its length, yet each step brought increasing disquiet, as though he had entered a world where silence was no longer golden.

"Doc! Hey, Doc!"

Singleton was so astonished by this voice from nowhere that he whirled a full circle. "Hello?"

"I got something to tell you. Hurry! They'll be sending down another guard any minute."

Something dark and sinuous emerged from the wall. The doctor could just make out the glimmer of an eye above the outstretched hand. Moving ahead cautiously, he encountered a face that was little more than a smear of soot and blood.

"Closer."

"This is the ship prison, isn't it?" Singleton noted the small barred window. "I mean, the brig."

"Doc, if you can get me a drink... something to cut this taste in my mouth--you can see it tastes pretty bad--I can tell you something that'll save your life."

"Why are you in there?"

"No one'll know, if you hurry. The provo came and took the guard away. Wanted him with the landing party. But they'll be sending someone else."

"I have to go."

"Doc... I hear you got rum and whiskey in your cabin. Everyone knows it. You don't half walk, but crawl. So c'mon, you can spare a drop... *sir*."

Even through the narrow opening, Singleton detected the stench of long sweat mingled with coal dust. The devil's own cloud poisoning the atmosphere. The doctor reeled back in revulsion and fear. A caged animal was pointing out a horrible fault to a human.

And the animal was right.

1243 Hours

"Move it, move it. If you can't lift your black ass, drag it!"

The stewards were not the only ones shifting cargo in the lower holds, but the petty officer overseeing the job chose them as the chief targets for his insults.

These were desperate minutes. The ship's ballast had been shifted in the belief they would have a fight on their hands the moment they reached Midway. Now it seemed they would be taking on fuel first. All the hard labor done the day before had to be reversed. Cargo and ballast had to be adjusted to accept the load of coal.

The *Florida* was paying a heavy price for the festive spirit with which she had departed Hampton Roads. Not only a superabundance of supplies, but five pianos, a ton of party favors, an equal weight in fireworks, extra tables, crockery and victuals--all the innumerable notions needed to make foreign dignitaries happy--inflicted a grievous burden on her fighting trim. This imbalance had not been a drawback during their practice runs off Mexico. At that time, their coal bunkers had been full, offsetting the holiday load. But with the bunkers now nearly empty, a major reorganization of materiel was required to allow smoother, quicker maneuvering.

Amos had missed the first detail. Captain Oates had been insistent that his men be well fed on the eve of battle, so the stewards had been kept busy on the messdecks. After the last bluejacket had eaten, Amos had tried to sleep. Because of the overcrowded conditions, the stewards were compelled to sleep in the common mess. Finding sleep impossible, he had tried to deliver the flask to Gilroy.

Shamed by his confrontation with the marines guarding the stoker, he'd barely returned to his hammock before word came down: The fight was off. They would be taking on coal. Work crews were needed immediately to reshift the cargo.

"And that means you," the petty officer barked as he roused the stewards.

Tons of party supplies had to be laboriously removed. The insidious coal

dust penetrated the protective canvas coverings. From there, it was transferred to the men in the detail, then to the passageway walls. Palm prints lined the corridors like children's graffiti.

Chains clattered and men shouted warnings against things falling or things about to fall. The sounds registered as faint echoes in Amos' mind. He was dead from exhaustion and lack of sleep; dead in spirit after his humiliation before the marines. The thick mesh imprisoning the electric bulbs in the passageways chopped the air with cruel shadows. Amos would have been little surprised had a warden popped up to tell him his execution could be delayed no longer.

For so long he had contemplated rebellion against his predicament. Burning Ensign Garrett's supper and the ambush that had ensued from that act had been but the opening shots of the war.

The abject creature that had cowered before the marines shocked him with truth. A lone man's moral shout stood no chance of being heard in the mechanized, modern world exemplified by the Navy. At most, it could be misinterpreted as a knock in the machinery. Garrett's beating had been almost conversational next to what the marines could dole out. And no one would hear.

There was a gap between the leg and body of the upright piano he was helping to carry. Turning a sharp corner, they rested the instrument on the deck for an instant. The gap closed on Amos' palm. His howls rifled the corridor as he lifted his end to pull out. But the piano leg had clamped tight against the frame, locking his skin no matter how high he raised it.

"We've no time for this!" The petty officer stiff-armed Amos in the chest. Blood spurted from the web of his hand as he fell back. "Get a bandage on that. We can't have you staining the goodies. Then get back here!"

On his way to sick bay Amos overheard preparations for a landing party. He could not resist the building excitement, listened eagerly for details of who was going, what was expected.

It dawned on him that the pain in his hand succeeded where self-loathing and secret reprimands had failed. He felt he had awakened from a long sleep. Not a nightmare, but a more frightening numbness. A hundred rounds of boxing, winning or losing, could not have done the same. Pugilistic pain was something he was familiar with and always prepared for. This tearing out of skin and flesh

between his thumb and index was nothing more nor less than an arbitrary, blind-stupid accident. The very fact that anything could happen at any time hinted the possibility of things one could make happen. The penalties were there whether you willed them or not, whether they were man-made or not.

Then he stepped into the infirmary and saw the men injured in the fire Gilroy had started. Amos had assumed Gilroy became an incendiary in a fit of madness. As a consequence these men had been grievously hurt--by chance. Did they consider their pain the key to spiritual wakefulness? Listening to their cries and moans, he knew for a fact they did not. He realized now he was merely lucky. The piano had not grabbed him on a bone, or fallen on a foot. Had it been so, he would be nearly as blind with suffering as these men were.

"Here!" The surgeon tossed him a roll of gauze. He was obviously too busy for Amos' minor injury. Besides, he did not like tending blacks. Unlike many doctors, he did not attack wounds but nursed them like feverish babies until they were healed. He was a good doctor, but his personal and professional philosophy made him reluctant to tend like a slave someone he considered half a slave. "Wrap some of that around your hand."

"I'm not crippled," Amos said nonsensically as he caught it with his good hand. Turning, he unintentionally locked eyes with a young man propped on a bed. "You're the boy they picked out of the water," he said spontaneously.

"William Pegg, aye," the young man said.

He cast a wary eye at the surgeon. He and two surgeons' mates were peering closely at a sailor who'd inhaled opium fumes. One of them was taking notes. They paid no attention to Amos as he slipped over to William.

"Cut my hand open," Amos explained when the boy glanced down.

"Got mine half bit off," William boasted, lifting the bandages clumped at the end of his arm. "Don't ever fall asleep with one arm out the boat."

"That's a damn shame." Sitting on the edge of the cot, he spoke as he wrapped the gauze around his wound. "Is what they say true? You saw some kind of monsters?"

"I saw them." William lifted his chin. "Don't believe me if you don't."

"I guess I don't know either way."

"We've slowed down. I feel it."

"We've reached Midway."

"Isn't that in the Aleutians?"

"Down from the chain. Closer to Hawaii, but further west either way."

"Why are we here?"

Amos paused in his self-ministration. "No one's told you?"

"I guess not."

"And I guess... no, you wouldn't hear much down in sick bay. Tell the truth, I don't know all that much myself. They say Midway's been attacked and we're sending a landing party to look."

William bolted up. "They can't go out!"

"Pipe down! No one's seen anything. I heard them aft."

"You don't know how fast they are! No one's listened to me!"

"We have lookouts. They can see miles in every direction."

William was unconvinced. He began pushing himself out of bed. Amos glanced at the surgeon. He did not want to be accused of agitating the patient. "Git back down!"

"No! Help me up! I know something that can save their lives."

A dark coal flared in Amos' chest. The last time he'd heard words to this effect had been when Gilroy told him about the dynamite in the bunkers. It had been his way of extracting liquor from the steward--twisting personal greed into a shared necessity. As difficult though it was picturing a dark purpose behind William's words, Amos warily asked, "Save whose life?"

"Anyone out there. Anyone in an open boat."

"Ease down! Sawbones'll kick your butt he sees you--"

"You're a cook, aren't you? That's a cook's uniform."

Since a cook had more status than a steward, Amos nodded.

"You can help. We can cook something that'll save the landing party."

"Say what?" Amos was tempted to hold the boy down. But if the surgeon looked over and saw him wrestling with his prize patient, he would lose what little rating he had left. "You're going to get us both sunk."

"Where's the galley?"

"Take your pick."

"Take me to the nearest."

His hand throbbed with pain. Returning to the work detail would be futile and someone had to keep an eye on this lad, so obviously distraught. As William struggled into a pair of trousers from the ship's stores, his eyes seemed to sink for an instant. Amos thought he was going to pass out. Reaching around, he reluctantly helped the boy cinch up. Neither the surgeon nor his assistants noticed as they slipped out.

The galley in the common mess was empty.

"We need to get a fire up."

"Not during battle stations you don't."

"You said the lookouts could see everything. They'll warn us and we can douse it. Get me a saucepan. A big one. I'll start the fire."

"You're not making a whole lot of sense. You need to get back in bed."

"The serpents hate this stuff. They hate it! They hate it!"

Amos was tempted to hit him over the head with the kettle. Instead, almost hypnotized by the boy's intensity, he placed it on the fire ring.

1325 Hours

The davit pulleys squeaked peevishly as the two large assault boats were lowered. At nearly dead stop, the men on the *Florida* could hear the boom of waves against Midway's northern barrier. They were nearly two miles out from the islands, dark wafers barely showing above the spume. The deadly reef was much closer. Though the weather was still with them, the swell was powerful. Oates made sure to give the assault party a proper lee. Everything from the bridge indicated a smooth entry through the northeast entrance to the atoll. A smaller gap in the barrier was sketchily indicated to the south, much closer to the islands, but Oates dared not risk it. He had no intention of entering at all until the northern breach was properly scouted and sounded.

The marines hunkered on the thwarts as the coxswain swung out. There were two signalmen with the boats. They tested their lamps as the launch propellers nibbled, then bit hard into the waves. *Wink-wink, wink-wink*. Human communication reduced to components, little better than squirrels clicking at each other in the trees.

"Ah, Grissom...?"

"Sir?"

He looked at his exec a moment, then pursed his lips. Stepping into the pilothouse, he took up the phone to the forward mast lookout. "Don't be afraid to sing out if you see anything out of the ordinary. Do you understand?"

Grissom heard a voice buzz at the other end and faced away so Oates would not see his grin. Obviously, the skipper was convinced he'd driven the lookout into a coma with his earlier gruffness. Now, of course, if a seal popped its head out of the water a mile off, Oates would probably know about it within seconds. Better to be over-informed than the victim of an abject and fatal silence.

The mild wind ruffled the smoke from the funnels, which began to roll down in gray waves over the landing party. Oates had wanted to come to a dead stop, but the chief engineer advised him the old engines might seize up if they

weren't kept idling.

"Landing force away, captain."

They look like ghosts already, Oates thought, watching them through the smoke. He leaned over the bridge weather rail like someone trying to fly. He had to fight down a powerful impulse to call the mast again.

As the boats were launched, all stations returned to battle alert. In the forward twelve-inch turret the gun captain tried to follow the marines and the tiny contingent of sailors accompanying them through the peep-sight of his periscope. All he saw was smoke bordered low with water. Garrett, Beck, and the rest of the gun crew sweated profusely in the resealed chamber. Silence prevailed. Garrett turned a hawk eye on the deck. Not a speck of powder in sight. During his brief minutes in the open, several fresh gusts had shot over the bow, almost literally lifting his spirit--nearly taking his hat and, it seemed, his desire to let everything blow to hell. Even after closing the hatch, returning to the electric-brood swelter of the turret, he realized his wish to die, to erase all embarrassments, past and to come, was not as keen as before. All the humiliation in the world could not eliminate the bizarre charm of the world. He needed only to open his eyes and let the wind flick his cap to have his optimism reawakened.

XXV

0000 - 1338 Hours

The heavy masts that were meant to keep the creatures out had succeeded, but at the cost of trapping the men inside. When Hart set off the gas bombs, one of the monsters had fallen back on the reinforced basement. The thick wood spines snapped. Screams of terror were cut short as sandbags and timber rained down.

The roar of flames, the growls of angry giants, subsided. A strange,

punctuated silence descended. Planks creaked as though irked. Rivulets of sand coursed through broken cement walls. Water gurgled up through the caulking, spreading into an inch-deep pond.

Slowly, human sounds intruded on the primitive stillness. Soft moans. Then a whisper.

"Is anyone else alive?"

Lieber's question was answered with a racking cough.

"Is that you, Hart?"

"I'm all right. I think. How about you?"

"Don't know... can't move." Then a moment later, "Ach! *Donnerwetter!* That hurts! Well... at least I didn't break my neck."

As the night wore on, more of them regained consciousness. One man screamed for an hour. The others were not sorry when death silenced him. It seemed an eternity before the voice they were desperate to hear bellowed, "Goddammit! Oh shit, goddamn! I hope to fucking hell I'm not dead. I don't want to live eternity like this."

"Top!"

"Someone get this thing off me."

"Sorry, *Herr Feldwebel*. We're all pinned down. Or dead."

"Can't see a fucking thing..." Ziolkowski mused. "How come we aren't burned up? Hart? You alive, Chowderhead?"

"Hart's over here, Top," Lieber informed him.

"Sorry, Hart. Figured you for a goner."

Up to now, Hart had not dwelled on the possibility that *he* had been given a nickname. It fit. Chowderhead and Bonehead--they'd been the perfect couple. Hiding his wounded pride, he said, "The sandbags protected us from the fire."

When they collapsed they snuffed out the battle lantern. We're lucky."

This drew morose chuckles from some of the trapped men. A little later they heard new movement.

"Who is that?"

"Uh... me."

"You *digging* over there?"

"Yeah... well, I'm trying to get out. Mind giving me a hand?"

"You mean you're not pinned down?"

"No. What happened? I got whacked on the head."

"Enderfall, get your ass over here and dig me out. No, belay that. What good am I with this leg? Help Fritz. You still with us, Fritz?"

"Yes."

"I have some matches--"

"No!" Hart shouted. "I smell gasoline. I don't think all of it ignited."

"That's right, Enderfall. You'll have to reach around and grab ass to find us. That'll do your heart good."

"Oooooo...."

"Ace!" Lieber called.

"Oooooo...."

"Come on, Enderfall," Ziolkowski commanded. "This is what you've dreamed of. Ain't none of us can move but you."

"Aw, Top...."

If homoerotic grasping and groping was Enderfall's penultimate fantasy, he

had his fill that night. With serpentine twists he maneuvered through the fallen beams, over moaning men and silent bodies. But he only succeeded in spreading the chaos. If he tried to lift a timber off one man, it placed unbearable strain on another. And the space was so cramped he could not help banging against the injured. Enderfall's major accomplishment was keeping men awake who would have been better off asleep.

Hart's legs went numb. He'd added to the stink of evacuated bladders after too many pinched hours. Like Lieber, he managed to wiggle his toes enough to convince himself no vital nerves had been severed.

When light began filtering in, he noted something odd gleaming on the timber next to him. To pass the cumbersome minutes he concentrated on it, trying to guess what it was.

Recognition did not come gradually, but in a horrifying burst. When sunlight abruptly shot through one of the larger gaps above him--and fell directly on the scattered brain of one of the marines. Hart caught his breath and averted his eyes.

With the sun came a budding of conversation among the Orientals trapped in the bunker. The Chinese warbled lowly, their sentences worming aptly as they described the horrors around them. The Japanese spoke in brief, harsh torrents that seemed to push at the beams as they discussed ways to extricate themselves.

The whites offered very little beyond low curses. They seemed to have no language for catastrophe beyond a catastrophic breakdown of language itself. They waited to see what Enderfall would do, now that he could see what he was doing.

"Hell, I'm the one in deep shit," he whined as he labored at the beams. "If those bastards come back I'll be stuck out here. You're all buried and safe."

"Of all the fucking luck, you had to be the one loose," Ziolkowski groused.

Those who could see the sergeant noted his pallor. Those who could see his broken leg knew it would have to go.

"I'm doing my best, Top," Enderfall griped. And he was. But the morning light made him wary. The dreadful blows that had killed or wounded the marines

and civilians lay open to view. At one point Enderfall stumbled over a man who'd been scissored in half by two beams. He ran out. The men below could hear him crying. He did not come back for a long time, and the trapped men were in an agony of suspense after the sobbing faded away. After an hour had gone by, Ziolkowski let out a bellow that lifted Lieber's hair. Still no response.

"They got him," someone cried softly.

Two more hours passed. Suddenly they heard shuffling, and Enderfall's face appeared.

"I couldn't come back," he said breathlessly. "They were on the beach. If I'd moved they would've seen me. They only took off a little while ago." He returned to his labors. The morning wore into noon. The heat was stifling. A stench rose from the dead.

Lieber's hand came across a loose nail. Wanting a date on his tomb, he etched "*Im Feld*, 24 Junis, 1908" on the timber that held him down.

"Hey!" came Enderfall's excited voice.

When they heard the boat motors, three men who had already half freed themselves lost their pants and a good deal of skin in their haste to finish the job and look. Enderfall abandoned the bunker and ran into the quad. When they heard his cheers, the men below cheered also. Enderfall returned flush with joy. "They came! Hart was right!"

The civilian could not look in his direction. To do so would have meant glancing across the grisly cerebral patch of what had been a man. He noted the tilt of disbelief and awe in Enderfall's tone. Hart had foretold the future with supernatural accuracy. The battleship *Florida* had indeed been en route and was now seeding the island with a new contingent of marines. That the telegraphic process was as plain as Marconi, well-publicized, comprehended by physicists the world round, seemed to sink men without the knowledge into dumb savagery. Enderfall--and some of the others--looked at Hart as though suddenly recognizing a sorcerer in their midst.

The telephone rang tinnily. Oates swept it up.

"The landing party has formed on the beach, sir. The file-closers are moving up."

"You can see them?"

"The smoke is breaking over the lagoon. I don't see anything else. No one's come out to greet them."

Oates hung up. It was beginning to seem they were too late for either salvation or vengeance.

"Sir... I hope that's not hull damage I'm seeing," said Grissom.

"On the lighter?" Oates swung his powerful Zeiss glass around, but the funnel smoke danced in the downwind and blocked the *Iroquois* from view.

"I could be wrong, sir. The way she's stepped up on the beach, it could be something lying against her."

"What are we doing here?" Oates sighed suddenly.

"Sir, hell if I know."

All guns were trained out. Oates was about to order a stand down from General Quarters when the lookout phone rang again. Wearily, he reached into the pilothouse and picked it up.

"Captain! Torpedoes! Bearing Green Oh-Three-Oh direct!"

1350 Hours

As the marines from the battleship freed their trapped compatriots, they listened in disbelief to the story the survivors told them. Yet there was no

denying the great gashes in the earth, nor the fact that some of the compound buildings had not been knocked over, but *flattened*.

Ziolkowski was gently lifted out of his near-grave. He gave a whoop when he saw the landing party's three-inch fieldpieces being hauled up the beach.

"We'll show the bastards now! One round in the gut... just one...." And then he fainted.

The *Florida* marines stared at the unconscious, grizzled veteran. Whatever their private opinion of lifers, they respected their judgment in things military. The second lieutenant in charge of the contingent ordered a defense perimeter established around the compound, putting the three-inchers at its core.

"Is this everyone?" the lieutenant asked Enderfall, pointing down at the men still trapped in the bunker.

"I don't know. I... I don't know...."

"Sergeant Hoskins! Detail some men to search--"

He was cut off mid-sentence.

The guns of the *Florida* had erupted.

1406 Hours

On seeing the wakes for himself, Oates had immediately ordered the messengers on the bridge to run like hell down the starboard side and tell everyone in hearing to fire at the three approaching objects, now almost abeam. The torpedoes had been spotted far earlier than he would have thought possible. With luck, they could blow them out of the water before they got close.

Midshipman Davis was tying a cord around his shorts, which had started to drag the more he sweated, when the electric indicator on the casemate wall clicked and he looked up to see: COMMENCE FIRING.

"Fire at what!" he cried, seeing nothing out the gunport.

On the decks and turrets above them machine guns began to chatter. Spent cartridges drummed on the metal plates like a storm of railway spikes on a tin roof. An instant later the top-deck six-inchers plugged the air, sending deep thuds up and down starboard. About seven hundred yards out he could see the water explode. But nothing else. He slapped the breech of the six-incher in frustration.

"Mr. Davis!" one of the gunstrickers shouted. "It can only be one thing! Tor-
_"

"Fire at the strikes!" Davis yelled. They were too low to see the wakes, but if they could not shoot at an unseen target, they could shoot at a target seen by others. They ranged in on the white wall of water that was coming closer and closer to the ship.

"Fire!"

The swift jerk of his arm spoke to those who could not hear through the din and their earplugs. They leapt back. Davis squeezed the trigger. Underneath, the deck jumped. There was a screech from the mount spring as the gun recoiled. Then they were at the breech. The casing shot out in an acrid plume of smoke and cordite and clattered on the deckplates. The next shell was already rammed home.

Pump!

That was how the six-incher concussion felt. Not a sound, but a deadening of sound. Like the deafness induced by hard coughing.

Pump!

One had to move fast to avoid the ejected casing. Davis dodged, then peered through the gunport. The view to starboard was blocked by a thick cloud of smoke. It did not affect their rate of fire. They had not been able to see anything in the first place.

1410 Hours

Damn! Oates' gunners had been trained to fight enemy fleets--to concentrate on the enemy's "knuckle," the apex of his deployment--not submerged torpedoes. Confused, the gunners churned the ocean into a foam of wild shots. They might as well have been shooting in the dark.

After ordering the machine guns and six-inchers to fire, Oates ordered flank speed. He hoped to "comb" the torpedoes, which entailed aiming the ship at them to present the least target possible. The helmsman whipped the wheel over, but they were making too little headway. The torpedoes would reach them before the *Florida* was halfway into her turn. Though the engine room bell clanged wildly, it would be several minutes before they could raise full steam. Oates had considered the possibility that the area was sown with Japanese mines, but the new kind of self-propelled torpedo--fired from an invisible submarine--had been the threat furthest from his mind. Underwater craft were primitive, pop-bolt affairs incapable of long ocean voyages.

Or so Oates had believed.

Running out to the bridge, he was just in time to witness the first ragged salvo. The noise was terrific, like having cymbals clapped against one's ears.

"Sweet Jesus, Grissom!" the captain bellowed at the top of his voice. "*Submarines!*"

"I'm not so sure, Captain. Those wakes must have been over a mile out when the lookout spotted them."

Oates ran inside and took up the phone to the crow's nest. Out the side of his eye he caught the glint of cascading cartridges. There were two .30-caliber machine guns halfway up the fighting mast, about twenty feet below the forward lookout. Next to the lookout, they had the best view of what they were firing at. They showed no sign of easing off. Obviously, they saw something.

The crow's nest lookout did not answer for a long time. Oates assumed the gunfire was making it nearly impossible for him to hear the telephone ringing. Then, abruptly, came a voice--hard to hear--but frantic beyond reason.

"Slow down, son! I can't understand a word!"

Across the pilothouse the ordnance officer was making overwrought gestures as he spoke into his own telephone. Oates read from his expression that his gunners could no longer bracket the wakes in their range finders. The captain pressed his lips against the mouthpiece in his hand. "What's happening up there? We've lost track--"

A flurry of incomprehensible fear shot out.

"Calm down! Listen, son, we're depending on you. Tell me clearly--"

"*Serpents!*"

Nothing else he said was understandable. In the midst of guns and gunfire, Oates felt a terrible chill.

The ordnance officer was calling to him. The next thing Oates knew, the cacophony of guns shifted to port.

"They've changed course!"

Grissom raced in, eyes wide. "Sir! I saw them! It's *them!*"

"Why are we firing to leeward?"

"They swerved abaft. They're headed for the lagoon."

1422 Hours

Lieber let go with a long string of Teutonic epithets as the two marines working the beam off him suddenly raced out of the bunker.

"Hart! They've abandoned us!"

Hart stared at him. "*They're coming back.*"

Gunshots sounded on the beach. And a chorus of fear and pain in the bunker when the men still trapped ignored their wounds and struggled to free themselves.

The earth shuddered. Hart watched as a clump of marram grass came loose and rolled down past his head. He moved his right arm up and tried to gain purchase on the broken concrete behind him. His fingers slipped. He tried again and again, tearing his skin. Blood dripped from his fingertips. "Fritz... goddammit...."

"They have artillery. I heard the Top."

Ace's head appeared slowly out of the clutter of masonry. His head was bloody. He reminded Hart of the Assyrians in the Book of Isaiah who woke up dead. Shoving his hands outward, he was able to haul himself part of the way out of the rubble. "Fritz, there's something wrong. I come apart somewhere...."

"Hold on, Ace. If you'd come apart, you wouldn't be talking."

Above, more rifles spat.

"Why aren't they using the artillery?" Hart cried. "They can't--"

There was a small, flat "boom!" The trapped men shouted excitedly. Three more rounds followed in quick succession.

But when they heard screams, the men in the bunker lost their voices. The roar gobbled the air out of their lungs. They were galvanized by the next splash of screams, began to wriggle like captured worms, desperately, blindly, with nowhere to go even if they got out. Several men began to sob. Hearing the shock, horror and deaths of their fellow marines without being able to lift a hand to help them was as bad as sharing their fate.

The ground slammed up, quaked and shattered. Timber rolled over and crushed men a second time. A shadow fell. They glimpsed a long dark neck and a marine caught sideways in giant jaws, terror and blood raining down.

"What do you expect me to do?" Oates shouted. "Fire on my own men?"

"There won't be any left if you don't!" Grissom insisted frantically.

The silence that had fallen over the battleship was eerie, a kind of collective seizure. The creatures that had slipped through the two points of coral in the channel had twisted left and right, as if annoyed by the crash of naval ordinance. They unwittingly dodged the hundred-odd six- and eight-inch shells and thousands of machine gun bullets aimed at them. Their speed alone threw gunners off target, the majority of shells landing fifty yards behind them.

Then the firing ceased and amazed sailors looked on as the three giants lifted themselves onto Sand Island and attacked the landing party. A faint "dink" in the air indicated the fieldpieces at work.

1450 Hours

He'd been reprimanded before for a transgression in Number One Turret. Only this time, Ensign Garrett wanted to fire the twelve-incher rather than suppress it. Under extraordinary circumstances, he had the authority to overrule the gun captain.

And things could not get more extraordinary than this. One of the pointers was speaking. And the gun captain, rather than hitting him, was listening to him.

"The three-inchers missed! It's a slaughter. Oh God--why doesn't the captain do something?"

His choked sobs tore at their hearts. The gun captain peered through his own telescope, then pressed his hands to his headset. With abject helplessness, he turned to Garrett. "Still no orders."

"Are we ranged in?"

"Central Station homed us on the island. But that's the last I heard from them."

"Then let's start the marbles rolling," Garrett said tensely. "Open fire."

Biting the inside of his cheek, the gun captain said, "On your authority?"

"I'll piss it in blood on the deck if you want. Fire!"

1454 Hours

The men in the pilothouse were too distracted to notice when Singleton once again trespassed on their aerie. He pressed against the broad glass and stared towards the atoll like a child gaping through a store window. "Ahhh...."

"What are they, Singleton?" Oates demanded when he saw him.

"Plesiosaur.... No. Much, much too big. Oh... it's not possible. Captain... this is God telling us what fools we are. They're going to kill everyone on the island. You must fire on them."

"Dammit!" Oates slammed his fist against the side of the binnacle. The compass float bobbed violently. "Get off my--"

The next instant half the men in the pilothouse were flung onto the deck. Light ripped through the sky. Singleton was gashed cheek to jowl by broken glass as the windows burst in hundreds of jagged pieces.

They were barely back on their feet before the *Florida* was whipped even more violently to starboard, water flipping up in a great curl, as though a redwood had been dropped flat-smack in the ocean.

As the ship righted herself the men in the wheelhouse leapt to the bridge screen. Boiling gray clouds swept leeward. Through a break in the smoke some of them caught a glimpse of a twelve-inch shell as it skipped off the waves like a flat stone, then hopped over the length of Sand Island, catching a glint from the

sun before disappearing. On the island itself huge plumes of sand erupted.

Oates whirled on Grissom. "*Who ordered that salvo!*"

Grissom had a dozen tiny cuts on his hands. Picking himself off the deck, he grasped a stanchion to steady himself. "The gun captains must have fired on their own."

"*All of them?*" Oates gasped. What his exec was telling him was as impossible to believe as the creatures themselves.

1456 Hours

The earth heaved up with a terrific force even the monsters could not match. Four times the earth broke against the sky. Shock waves rolled and crashed.

The men in the bunker went numb, deaf. Their inner beings shriveled with the conviction of death. Some were buried a third time.

Lieber lifted his hand, felt nothing. He tried to listen to the heavy shower of sand, but heard nothing. All he could see were jagged forms penetrating the harsh cloud that was slowly settling down. But there was no mistaking the sharp odor of maxemite. The creatures were not the only authors of destruction. Midway had undergone bombardment from the *Florida's* big guns.

His eyes burned. He closed them. On opening them next, he saw an arm moving spasmodically not five yards away. Someone was suffocating. And there was not one blessed thing he could--

He attempted moving his legs. To his astonishment, he not only tried, but succeeded. The drumming limbs of the monsters and the man-made quake had combined to shift the beam off his legs. His trousers were shredded, his knees and the top of his legs shorn of skin. But he was free.

He could not work his legs. Still, by grabbing hold of timber and masonry,

he was able to lurch towards the arm.

Hart's face was buried under a bare inch of sand. Pinned down as he was he could not lift his head even that much. All Lieber had to do was reach across and scoop a couple handfuls away.

"They shelled us, Hart." Lieber arched as pain gripped his legs.

"You got loose," Hart gasped. "Can you make it into the quad?"

"It has to be done," Lieber agreed. With every foot up an ordeal of physical anguish, Lieber worked his way out of the bunker.

1504 Hours

Ensign Garrett did not shirk responsibility. When he saw the gun captain grab at his headset, he knew the ordnance officer was transmitting every curse he'd ever learned at sea. Who the hell had given the forward turret permission to fire? As the gun captain cringed, Garrett got his attention and pointed at himself. The gun captain nodded, then spoke into his mouthpiece. A moment later he blanched and turned a guilty eye on the ensign.

"Mr. Garrett, he says you are to wait here. The Master-at-Arms is putting you under arrest."

Garrett nodded.

Captain Oates was not going to wait for a formal Mast. Two armed sailors came to remove Garrett to the bridge. They were dazed, hardly capable of concentrating on the task at hand. Compared to sea beasts, a puny human prisoner was small game indeed. As Garrett was marched aft, they passed Amos Macklin and William Pegg. They stank to high heaven. Garrett's bruises, which he had all but forgotten about, throbbed mysteriously when he caught Amos' eye.

On the bridge every eye was turned on Sand Island. The smoke had not yet completely cleared.

"Give him credit, sir. That broadside chased the serpents off." Lieutenant Grissom saw Garrett, rolled his eyes and turned away. The ensign felt his career shoot craps with that roll. He could only hope worse wasn't in store. He stared at the back of Oates' head. The captain's neck was as red and beefy as his face with layer after layer of harsh summer burns. Tiny hairs had been bleached and curled by weather.

Then the captain lowered his Zeiss glass and pushed away from the rail. Any notion Garrett had of Oates as a helpless old man was immediately squelched.

"The fisherman. I should have known." Oates' blue tunic was buttoned tightly at his neck and the flesh bulged out like a frog in song. He had the same dazed look as the guards: trying to act in a rational manner while staring the impossible in the face. "What you did in Number One was mutinous. You incited others to mutiny."

"I take full responsibility, sir."

"Do you? Do you also take responsibility for the men killed by your treason?" He threw an angry glance at his ordnance officer. "You realize the other turrets also fired? They thought the wires had failed."

Garrett swallowed hard. Telephones were almost as new to the Navy as radios. Transmissions often became garbled, or failed completely. The ensign had known he was risking a full broadside when the forward turret fired. The other gun crews would assume they had missed a command and follow suit.

"Mr. Garrett, you can't take responsibility. That belongs to me." The captain's neck pulsed madly in the tight collar. He seemed ready to crush his cigarette out in Garrett's eye. He spat out angry clouds as he spoke. "But I can see you locked away in hell. I could have you hanged for this. Goddammit, I *will* have you hanged. The Articles of War... the Articles...."

He wavered, apparently overcome by his own wrath. He began to lift his cigarette, then seemed to find it too heavy and let his arm drop. Going over to the sea chair bolted to the deck, he dropped heavily onto its thin cushion. "Mr. Garrett...."

The phone jangled. Grissom answered. His mouth twisted. "Wakes, Red,

One-Oh-Oh! Captain, they've circled the island!"

Captain Oates said nothing. He gripped the chair arms, his knuckles white. A tiny curl of smoke rose next to the entrance of the wireless cubicle. Oates' cigarette had rolled against the bulkhead after slipping from his fingers.

"Captain, if we cut to starboard, they'll come up on our beam. We can blow them out of the water with our twelve-inchers."

Dr. Singleton was rapturously awaiting the reappearance of the creatures. The exec's words barely registered in his mind. Yet the captain's steady silence perturbed him. Turning, he looked at the man in the sea chair and he rushed forward.

"See here!" Grissom shouted as the doctor took hold of Oates' collar.

"Back away, Mr. Grissom. Your captain needs air. Uh... I believe you're in charge, now."

Lieutenant Grissom moved to push the doctor away. But when Oates neither protested nor affirmed this action, he paused.

"Captain Oates has taken ill." *Sotto voce*, he added, "My God, man, it's his heart. Let me help him!"

For a moment, Grissom was held in a trance. Then he raced for the telephone. "Where are they now?" he demanded of the lookout. He listened a moment, then cursed. "We'll never match their speed in time."

"I see them!" a petty officer on the wing shouted.

Grissom again hesitated. It appeared the creatures were coming around the atoll after their rude ejection by the twelve-inchers. They were nosing towards the northern opening of the lagoon, insouciantly passing a mere five hundred yards off the *Florida's* starboard quarter. There was no question they must be interdicted. But Grissom found it difficult issuing commands while Oates sat wide-eyed and helpless in the pilothouse.

"Mr. Grissom," Garrett stepped up. "Request permission to return to my post."

The exec blinked. Here was the proof. He was in charge. But he would not contradict the captain's orders--not in front of him. "You are under arrest, Mr. Garrett. Take him to the brig. Helm, hard to starboard. We'll get as close to the shoals as we dare. We have to get between them and the atoll." Grissom looked at the ordnance officer. "Order all rapid-fire guns to get ready. If we can beat them to the break, they'll come right up on us."

While the exec was giving orders, Singleton caught the attention of Oates' orderly. "C'mon, boy."

"But sir, you're not a *real* doctor."

"Even a fool like you must see we have to get him out of here."

With additional help from a yeoman they carried Oates to the bunk in the sea cabin aft of the pilothouse.

When the ship's surgeon arrived, he took one look and nodded.

"Digitalis?" Singleton asked.

"Not for paroxysmal tachycardia."

"Oh? Have you given it to him before?"

Their eyes met. The surgeon flinched a nod.

"There you have it. Incoordination and disassociation of auricular and ventricular systole."

"I am well aware of the toxic effects, Singleton. So long as he lets me know of any increase in urine within forty-eight hours--"

"But what if he doesn't? He's a stubborn man. You might try strophanthus. That's not as potent and the toxic effects are negligible. Besides, digitalis can't remove the dropsical effusion by itself. You need morphine sulphate and atropine sulphate to reduce the strain. And a strong cholagogue. Calomel, elaterium or elaterin--in conjunction with a dry diet. As few fluids as possible."

A strangled sound came from the bunk.

"Captain...."

"I..." Oates gasped.

"Don't try to speak. We'll have you right as rain in no time. You just need rest and--"

"I am not...."

Singleton and the surgeon exchanged startled glances. Considering the pain he was undergoing, they would have deemed even a murmur as an astonishing act of will.

"...a hock of ham!" Oates concluded. The left side of his face seemed to cave in. Yet he lifted one hand several inches and made a fist. "Do... you hear me?"

"Loud and clear, Captain Oates."

XXVI

1506 Hours

Through tears, through smoke, through carnage Lieber pushed himself. At first he saw no one and was certain the entire landing party had been wiped out. Here and there a gory limb poked out of the sand, victims of the shelling. They put him in mind of his own injured legs. As blood began to circulate through them, the pain became excruciating. But he soon found himself able to push up and walk, though with all the coordination of a drunken crab.

The field guns lay on their sides at the edge of the compound. There was no sign of the gunners.

Victims of the beasts.

Then he caught movement out the side of his eye and turned. It was the thirty-six-foot long U.S. ensign of the *Florida*, snapping on the main gaff like a woman waving from a window. This perked him up enough to continue his search.

Finally, Lieber saw four men crawling out from under a clutch of scrawny bushes. "*Gott sei dank!* Here! Over here!" he hailed.

"How... how can you...."

"We've been living like this for almost two weeks. I have more stories than the four of you together. So we talk about it later. We have to dig some men out of the ground."

It was something to do, something necessary, so they followed. On the way to the bunker they told Lieber of how the marines had landed with one hundred and thirteen men. They'd brought two three-inch fieldpieces with them. When the crucial moment came, they were manned and ready, but the officers in

command were further up the lagoon, near the boats. The field guns were a quarter mile away in the compound. The gunners hesitated firing with men so close to the target.

The creatures split up, the largest going for the boats, the smaller two moving inland. Shots were fired. Men began to die. The air reeked with brittle shouts of horror.

The gunners waited too long and only lived long enough to regret it. The creatures were too fast, their paths too erratic. No hits had been scored.

More men had died--until the great shells of the *Florida* ripped across Sand Island and laid blackness over all. Eight high-explosive shells had been fired: four twelve-inch and four eight-inch. One of them had hit the water near the beach and skipped completely over the island. Of the rest, only four had exploded. The reason for this was the destructiveness of the maxemite explosive used in the major calibers. It frightened the Navy as much as the enemy, so a detonator of three hundred and fifty grains of fulminate of mercury was employed to avoid premature explosions. It took quite an impact to ignite high-explosive shells. As a result, three of those that landed on the island plowed harmlessly into the yielding coral sand.

When they reached the dusty devastation of the bunker, they had a hard time deciding where to start. Some of the trapped men were alive and vigorously told them so. Some were dead and no doubt about it. The rest may or may not have been unconscious.

"Shouldn't we be getting ready?" one of the *Florida* marines said. "They might come back."

"Oh, they'll come back. They've been coming back every day. They'll keep coming back until the food is gone."

The newcomers blanched. Only now did they comprehend. Midway had become a commissary of human flesh.

"Our only hope is to get these men out and off the island. If the admiral wants to do battle with these things, he can come back with the Fleet."

Wraiths that resembled men began emerging beyond the compound. They

staggered about, in shock from the beasts and the bombardment. Considering how very few places there were to hide, it seemed a miracle to Lieber that more than three-fourths of the landing party had survived. Some of them helped at the bunker. Others scraped the remains of the gunners off the fieldpieces as a grisly prelude to repairing them. A few marines wandered in temporary, silent insanity.

The men at the bunker had been at work less than half an hour when the sounds of gunfire rolled in from the sea.

Once freed, Hamilton Hart embarked on an agonizing series of attempts to stand. When he succeeded, he looked up at a chubby cloud and thought he saw a god-like face in it. Even as the firing outside the lagoon intensified, he gave prayerful thanks.

"Maybe the *Florida* will stop them before they can get back."

"She didn't before."

At the edge of the quad a large group of men continued the frantic task of putting the field guns in operational order. Happy to be alive and unbroken, Hart cheered them on. Resting on the rubble of one of the compound houses, listening to the fear-stoked men around him, a strange ripple of peace washed over him. It was beginning to seem that some of them would live, due in no small part to his ingenuity and efforts. Blessed expiation for what had happened on the Kiltik. When the creatures first appeared at Midway it was as if his guilt, in all its monstrous proportions, had come to earth to bedevil him. But they also offered recompense. What had been horrifying was now proving sweet. For every moment his bowels threshed his fear, there was an instant when he found himself grinning for no reason--but feeling a kind of delight in existence. Now he was absolved. If he'd still been in the Army they would undoubtedly recommend him for a medal. A civilian commendation was a possibility. A handshake from the president, perhaps. He could take the photograph of him clasping Teddy's hand, march up to the Presidio, and shove it none to gently up General Funston's ass.

The horizon flashed and sputtered. What a fight was going on out there! Pushing himself up, he staggered in the direction of Mt. Pisgah. From there, he hoped to observe the long-delayed death of the dinosaurs.

1538 Hours

"That's it!" Lieutenant Grissom yelled excitedly at the ordnance officer over the metal-pounding racket.

"They seem intent on getting back to the atoll."

"Coming right into it."

"And here they come again!" the ordnance officer grinned.

The *Florida* had won the race to the lagoon. The serpents came right at them. At three hundred yards the rapid-fire guns opened up. The explosions were stitched by thousands of machine gun bullets into an aquatic inferno.

Rather than trying to escape, the creatures thrashed back and forth abeam, confused by the cascade of explosives. The gunners' fire was not very accurate. Once again, the smoke blew back in their faces, half blinding them. But the creatures' reaction improved their odds dramatically. At this rate, a hit was inevitable.

Every time the six-incher under the bridge loosed a round, the broken glass on the pilothouse deck sang jaggedly. As men passed from the pilothouse to the bridge wing, the glass was ground into slippery gravel. Some found it difficult to maintain their footing as the ship swayed. The *Florida* had to avoid the reef while cutting the monsters off from the atoll. This summoned harsh turns from the helmsman. A petty officer lost his grip on the handrail, fell, came up cut and cursing.

A lookout on the bridge nearly went by the mast as he pointed. "There! One of them's breaching!"

Lieutenant Grissom swung his binoculars to the starboard bow. His breath vanished as he got a close-up look at the head of the green-striped serpent; as it flinched its head from side to side, Grissom observed its eyes. One of them shone with perplexity and frustration. The other was dull. A second look confirmed one eye socket was empty. The creature was half blind.

The ordnance officer was shouting into his phone. On the signal bridge above them, a fire control officer was also yelling. Grissom was amazed by their intention. They were going to use the forward eight-inchers like hunting rifles. In spite of the odds against a hit, he did not stop them. It would be something to tell, if they could be that lucky. The forward turret began swinging around.

Green Stripes was already bracketed by six-inch shells. The next instant the larger guns erupted. One of the high-explosives caught the side of its long neck. A gusher of blood rifled out.

Unrestrained cheering broke out in the pilothouse.

Standing next to Grissom, Dr. Singleton eyed every movement made by the wounded creature. "It's all wrong." He turned to the exec. "They move so quickly, over such long duration. Not like the larger reptiles at all."

"But not too quick for our guns! They--why are they slacking off?" Grissom whirled on the ordnance officer. "We have two more targets out there!"

1545 Hours

Many of the gunners on the upper decks had stopped to do what Grissom had done: cheer. Their shouts of triumph quick-marched down the companionways, leaving the men below the main deck with the impression they had just massacred the entire lot of devil spawn.

Midshipman Davis banged his hand painfully on the hull as he gave a jubilant shout. Through the gunport he saw little more than a smoky haze. But the sounds from abovedecks were so enthusiastic neither he nor the other gunners could resist. The exuberant pounding of feet could be heard even through the three-inch floorplates. The hot breech added to the heat of the chamber and the moment. They did not care. This was their first battle. They had won, hands down.

The smoke cloud broke. Davis craned forward. "Look!"

Only a couple of men could look out at the same time. What Davis and the gunstriker who joined him saw was a green-striped creature twisting its neck in bloody convulsions. It streaked first one way, then another. Davis saw its jaws open wide, thought he heard a desperate animal moan. Curiously similar to heavy machinery dragged across a flashplate.

"Look at the blood. Poor bastard."

"Poor bastard?" The gunstriker gave him a look of amused incredulity.

Davis grinned sheepishly. "Well...."

His last word.

His last emotion: embarrassment.

Then confusion and terror.

1552 Hours

The mother Tu-nel leapt from the ocean and landed her massive weight athwartships. Casemates and gun decks crumpled, crushing twenty-four men to death in an instant.

The moment before their deaths, the oil buffer attached to Davis' gun burst, searing the flesh off the men in the casemate. The longitudinal keys at the top and bottom of the jacket grated like a train hitting ties as the rear of the gun snapped from the breech ring. The firing gear was percussive. Both Davis' gun and the gun above discharged. One of the one-hundred-pound shells clipped the serpent's abdomen before plowing underwater. The other was knocked sideways. Its shell severed a bluejacket as he was flung back from a ladder, then struck the ammunition hoist just as a shell was coming up.

The cordite flareback had already ignited the buffer oil, sending blue-green flames across the deck. The explosion spread the fire, killing every man on the gun platforms overhead. A dozen men were knocked back so powerfully they

rebounded off the wood and armor shields and fell below. The creature snapped at the tumbling sailors, but missed. The explosions and fire girdling her belly grew uncomfortable. She raised her enormous front flippers and slid back into the ocean.

Her departure was a mixed blessing. Her weight and impetus, as well as the high speed the *Florida* had built up, had caused water to flood across the low freeboard and would have swamped the bilge pumps had she remained a minute longer. But the fires that had already begun to sputter found new life.

Wood, cordite, corticone and dead men supplied the fuel.

1552 Hours

Ensign Garrett was clutching the window bars of his prison when the *Florida* was struck.

Behind him, Stoker Gilroy had been cackling: "Garrett! I know you. We both got the shit beat out of us and look where we end up! The world hates losers. Gives 'em to the Navy to finish off."

His demented oratory was cut short when the ship jumped crazily. He flew across the cell and whammed against the bulkhead next to Garrett.

"Ah..." the stoker gurgled almost comically as he desperately searched for a direction in which to balance himself..

The ensign's grip slipped and his arms shot through the bars, his cheek crashing into the edge of the window. The sentry in the corridor performed an unintended, almost comical flip, landing on the wall rather than the deck.

"Let us out!" Garrett bellowed at him.

But the sentry was trapped against the far wall. He was looking *up* at the brig.

"We must have struck a reef. Grissom... that stupid--"

"Fuck," Gilroy concluded.

The ship righted almost as violently as it had keeled over. Garrett slapped against the deck, while in the corridor the guard thumped down sharply.

"Let us out!"

They'd struck the reef. That seemed the only possible explanation to men belowdecks. For all the sentry knew, the *Florida* had been sliced open. He was not one to leave prisoners locked up for drowning. He unlocked the door.

"Out! Get out!"

1554 Hours

The officer of the deck sat in the pilothouse and watched life race from his body in great scarlet gouts. He had been bounced to starboard like everyone else when the monster boarded. The observers on the wing had been ejected off the bridge like shells lobbed from a mortar, landing on the lower platforms at such odd angles that every one of them was killed instantly.

It was Lieutenant Grissom's luck that he was not among them. In the rush of jubilation that had preceded disaster he had gone to the voice tubes. He wanted the ship photographer fetched to the bridge so he could capture on film the death of Green Stripes. When the ship lurched, his mouth crunched down on the pipe. The brass flap was still open. When his front teeth were knocked out they went rattling down the speaking tube

The OD was less fortunate. Whipped across the wheelhouse, he'd saved himself from falling out the window by grabbing the ledge. In the pocket of his tunic was the Fleet Signal Book. The nearest ship that would have understood the flags was thousands of miles away, but it was his duty to keep the book on his person. When it popped out, he leaped forward to catch it. As he pulled back, he was horrified to find his tunic soaked red. Glass sticking up from the

casement had sliced his neck in one neat swipe. Staggering backward, he baptized the deck with his blood. He dropped down and watched his life drain away.

Singleton shared Grissom's good fortune. At the moment of devastation he was passing the binnacle and was able to grab hold of it as he fell. Flat on his stomach, he looked on as the pool of blood from the dying man gushed towards him.

The ship straightened. With the superstructure bulkhead behind them, no one had seen the creature prop itself on the main deck. Their conclusion was the same as Garrett's:

Reef.

With his mouth bleeding painfully, Grissom battled to his feet and met the eyes of the dying man. The exec's brimmed with silent apology, convinced they'd struck the reef, that the man's death was his fault.

The helmsman had held onto the wheel throughout, at one point being swept off his feet and Ferris-wheeled three hundred and sixty degrees before landing back on the deck. After regaining his equilibrium, he gauged the distance to the reef and made certain it was maintained. He was so intent on his job he did not realize the others thought they had been hulled. Giving the now-dead OD a cursory glance, he called out, "Bearing Oh-Nine-Six, Mr. Grissom. We're leaving the island behind."

Grissom looked up, surprised by the southeast heading.

A yeoman burst into the pilothouse. "Where's the captain?" he inquired breathlessly. The soot covering his body did not hide the bright gleam of blood on his arm.

"I'm in command. What is it?"

Grissom's tone was so tentative and slurred the messenger glanced at the ordnance officer for confirmation.

"Mr. Grissom, we need the reserve damage control party to starboard...." As he gasped for breath a belt of .30 caliber ammunition went off in the fire

amidships. Bullets sprayed in all directions. There was a heavy patter on the metal walls.

"Fire!" Grissom exclaimed. "We're on fire! Again!"

The messenger was astonished the men on the bridge were so much in the dark. He quickly filled them in.

"It *jumped* out of the water?" Singleton said disbelievingly.

Grissom grabbed the command phone and in a barely comprehensible voice ordered the reserve to starboard. Only after he hung up did he look at it in wonder, as if astonished the phone had worked.

1450 - 1601 Hours

When the twelve-and eight-inchers loosed their salvos at Sand Island, Amos Macklin and William Pegg had been in the common galley. The firing gongs sounded, but Amos was so caught up in what they were doing he did not notice until it was too late. The large stew pot containing hot duff sauce shot up to the ceiling, spraying its contents on everything in sight, with the greatest dose reserved for the two men standing under it. Fortunately, William had turned down the heat ten minutes earlier or they would have been scalded.

But the galley was a catastrophe. Pots, pans and utensils were strewn over the deck. These could be explained away. But not the duff sauce.

Tossing a rag at William, he hissed, "One hand or not, you got me in this. Help me clean up!" Then he grabbed a mop and plied it desperately across the tiles. What was happening topside? The former Seaman Second Class was stuck cleaning gunk off the deck while chaos reigned overhead. Reef or war mattered little compared to what would happen to him if the Fust Luff caught them. No doubt he would accuse Macklin of dragging the sick boy out of the infirmary to practice voodoo in the galley.

When they were done, Amos gave vent to his anger. "You're more trouble

than you're worth. Go back to sick bay! Clean yourself off. Get back in bed!"

William followed him out the rear galley hatch. Both of them stopped when Ensign Garrett was marched past them, obviously under arrest. Dreading the armed guards, Amos ducked back into the galley. "Get away from me!" he shouted at William, then ran through the dining hall and into the corridor.

The air was still potent with the stench of the twelve- and eight-inchers. Amos didn't know what was happening, but from the clanging of the ammunition hoists he concluded more action was imminent. One could not shuck the Navy overnight. He had to get back to the work detail in case they were ordered into damage control reserve.

He was passing one of the ventilating trunks when he heard the deep thrum of guns pounding overhead. The shaft acted like a giant voice tube, conveying the reverberations into the depths of the ship. He raced ahead, oblivious to the looks of disgust given his duff-odor as he passed sailors in the narrow corridors.

Suddenly, the aisle tilted crazily like a game box, splaying him against the wall. He heard a familiar sound. Desperate to get back to the work party, he let out a shout of dismay when the horizontal bulkhead doors slid shut.

Nearly every other battleship in the Fleet was fitted with bulkhead doors operated by a central electrical switch. But the ancient *Florida* had the same kind of hydraulically operated doors that had given ships of the last century endless trouble. Even on a steady sea they had a tendency to close spontaneously--for no other reason, it would seem, than that they had a mind to. Amos was trapped with seven other men in a twenty-yard stretch of corridor. A dull pounding aft signaled others in the identical predicament. The hatches were made to resist the efforts of desperate men as well as the indifferent sea.

Amos was not about to wait. Help might be dead and gone and they wouldn't know it until they were dead and gone, too. The local controls were on the other side. Knowing how useless his action was, he began hacking at the steel door with a chain lever.

He'd been at it several minutes when he heard a voice on the other side and the grunts of someone twisting the hand-control valve. The door began to open. The ratchety click echoed up the corridor like a siren song.

"Out you go! All hands report starboard. We got a fire there has to be snuffed. Come on, let's keep the marbles rolling."

"There's more trapped aft," Amos informed Ensign Garrett.

He nodded at a seaman holding a crank lever. "See to it. Everyone else, follow me!"

1605 Hours

In the forward twelve-inch turret the gun crew was devastated by fear. A shell had been clanking up from the handling room when the creature boarded. There was a ferocious *wham!* as the car struck the side of the elevator, then a telltale thump as it fell on the safety catch.

Their relief was short-lived. On a separate car the powder charge had continued to rise. Just as it reached the chamber the ship lurched again.

The bags were catapulted against the top of the cage. They burst against the upper hoist and a downpour of explosive powder covered the chamber and gun crew. Mingling with their sweat, it formed a deadly paste on their skins. Only the gun captain, who had been able to keep his perch through the turmoil, was spared. Which did not disguise the fact that he was trapped with the rest of them. The tiniest spark would be enough to kill them all. Even if they were able to get out, sparks from the smokestacks and the eight-inchers above could turn them into human bombs.

"They'll have to flood the chamber." The gun captain twisted slowly around until the lines attached to his leather headgear brought him up short. "Unless we can get a hose in here." He spoke lowly, as though a shout could ignite the powder. No one could hear him through their Eliott Ear Protectors. He raised his voice. "Mr. Beck!"

"Aye!" the midshipman said tremulously.

"We need a hose in here. Fast. You're the closest to the hatch."

"Aye aye, sir...." Cautiously, he edged towards the hatch. So carefully, because if any tool fell, if metal clapped against metal, a spark....

But when he cracked the hatch open and smoke blew in, he was forced to close it quick.

"Maybe it's from the funnels," said the plugman hopefully.

The gun captain gave him an admonishing glare, but dared not reach out to hit him.

"No," said Beck. "That wasn't coal smoke."

"If we go out there... we *can't* go out...."

The powder looked like an oil slick in the dim battle light. Some of them thought they could feel the temperature rising.

Garrett was lucky after all, thought Midshipman Beck.

1616 Hours

The fire on the starboard beam was almost out of control. Grissom ordered a one hundred and eighty-degree turn so that the smoke would blow leeward, but the starboard exits were still choked black. Garrett and the men following him were compelled to use the forward hatches.

The main deck was a shambles. Wounded men had been laid out beside Number One, their cries stinging the air. Smoke wound around the double-decked turret, though as yet it was not threatened by the flames.

"Dammit," Garrett shouted. "Too much water and not enough."

They had to plug the fire mains to stop water getting down the ventilating trunks. If they failed in that, the men in the engine and boiler rooms could drown. But they needed to hook up hoses to the centrifugal pump to combat the

blaze that was about to engulf the entire starboard gun deck.

"All right, half of you--" The ensign sliced the air with his arm, chopping the men into two parties. "--cover the ventilating shafts with rubber sheets. Shove them in hard--use those deal flats. But make sure they're secure, because if we don't burn we drown. The rest of you follow me."

The smell was horrendous. The fire had found the life jacket compartment abaft the forward casemates. Black smoke boiled out as the rubber burned and melted. Where the deck was warped by heat, resin had squeezed through the corticone covering and caught fire. In turn, the precious teakwood caught. Men overcome by fumes staggered blindly. Some reached for the weather rail, only to fall overboard. The rail had been removed for General Quarters.

"We'll use the port mains!" Garrett coughed. Then he saw one of the fire teams had already attached hoses and ordered his men to take hold. Before he could give another order, a badly burned gunner came up and shouted something in his ear. Fear struck Garrett's face. With a twirl of his arm he commanded the men to continue, then he left with the gunner.

Amos had taken hold of the nozzle. As he walked backwards, the hose was yanked out of his hands when the other men pulled in the opposite direction. His curse was cut short when something knocked him hard on the back of the head and sent him sprawling. With lights shooting in his eyes, he turned over to see what had hit him.

Poised behind a lifeboat was one of the creatures from William Pegg's nightmare.

Amos shook his head. It was not the beast that had struck him, but the lifeboat. Although cleared for Action Stations, the jib locking it below the gundeck had broken and the davits had dropped down. The boat swung back and forth with a violence the ship's motion did not explain. He soon saw why. The creature was nudging the boat with its snout. It seemed to be... *enjoying* the sight of it rocking in the davits. Amos was amazed by its ability to keep pace with the *Florida*--until he spotted a huge flipper draped over one of the gun sponsons. It was hanging onto the ship! A fact soon proven when Amos began to slide starboard. The creature's weight was so great it was causing the battleship to list. He grabbed hold of a pylon to keep from sliding further.

The creature banged its snout against the boat again, this time knocking one of the pulleys loose. Amos had to move fast to keep from being crushed. Splinters of painted wood exploded off the lifeboat's hull. It twisted sideways when the boatfall caught at the bow.

A dark blur darted at him. Something white flashed--then stopped. A scream of horror boiled in Amos' gut as the creature held its head inches from him. So close. Its eyes molten malevolence. Blank hunger. The devil out of disguise. Its teeth, at this angle, seemed larger than its body.

The enormous black eyes appeared to glisten and shift. Then quick as a gun-spring it streaked sideways and grabbed a man trying to hide behind the turret.

Amos crawled as fast as he could to port, then stopped to watch as the creature made a quick snack out of the petty officer it had captured. Amos had no idea of the man's identity, was too frightened to care, so long as he had not been the snack.

Why was that?

And then came the same wondrous realization that had struck William Pegg in the whaleboat: the duff sauce!

The creature remained hitched to starboard for another minute, apparently waiting for another morsel to present itself. Then it grew tired of all the smoke and all the waiting. When it fell away, Amos could feel the weight shift off the *Florida*.

1616 - 1630 Hours

It was the helmsman who first noted they had been boarded again. The wheel jerked in his hands.

A lookout shouted. Grimly, Singleton and a midshipman stepped through the blood of the dead OOD to look through the bridge screen. Noting the jagged,

fatal shard still jutting from the casement, Grissom punched it out with an angry fist.

Below, they could see the almost loving grip the beast had on the sponson. They shouted unheard warnings to Amos as he backed towards it, then watched stupefied as the creature declined the easy meal and instead strained after the hapless man at the turret.

Inside the wheelhouse, Lieutenant Grissom called the ordnance officer to the voice tube. "Wepeat my od-has!"

Because of Grissom's missing teeth, the chief engineer at the other end was finding it impossible to understand him. The ordnance officer leaned over the voice pipe and repeated the exec's commands.

1616 - 1630 Hours

Garrett wasn't thinking. He strongly suspected he wasn't thinking. Had he been thinking, he would never have thought up the idea.

There had been a small explosion below the ammunition hoist leading to the starboard casemates. No one knew what had caused it. Had fire from the deck flashed through the trunk to the handling room, there would have been a lot less left of the lower tier. In fact, all the pounding had ignited a cordite charge. The flood cocks had been opened, but only a small amount of water was coming in. This had prevented the magazine from instantly going up. But the fire still burned and at any moment they might be watching Hell from the front row.

When Garrett arrived, men were attempting to douse the fire by pouring bucketfuls of water through the scuttle in the door. But the water was hitting only the bottom of the magazine. Through the vent, they could see the fire was at the top.

"We're finished, Mr. Garrett," the injured gunner said. "You've got to tell the captain."

"Abandon ship? Hell if I'll be a meal for those things." There was no more time to talk, no time to take into account, to press issues, to pray. Buttons flew as Garrett began ripping off his tunic. As an officer, he had not stripped down to his skivvies like the others. "Fuck, fuck, aw, fuck, fuck...."

The diminutive stature that had made his life an ongoing battle for status finally found some use. Ignoring the amazed shouts of the onlookers, he squeezed through the scuttle and leaped into the middle of the smoldering magazine.

There was a half inch of water on the deck. His tunic was already soaked from dragging it through. He gave the briefest glance at the smoke oozing down from the upper racks, then began beating at the shoots of fire with his wet garment. He had to stretch the length of his body to reach them. Every time the wet cloth struck, a loud hiss popped out of the bags.

"Fuck, fuck, aw, fuck, fuck...."

As much as he needed the help, he could not open the hatch to let the others in. The sudden draft would have fueled the fire and ignited the packed charges. This was a bitter one-man show. He felt he was only delaying the inevitable. The magazine would go and he would be the first with the news--an atomized human broadcasted over several miles of desolate ocean.

Fire singed his hands. Again and again he dunked his tunic in the pool of water at his feet and flailed at the bags. Every breath he took was weighted with reluctance as the fumes burned his lungs. He counted it lucky to still be conscious, but the smoke curls had dissolved into a solid mass at the ceiling--a cloud that moved steadily down. Torn by a fit of coughing, he leaned down to splash water on his face.

What was this? He reached down again. His hand and half his forearm disappeared. Whatever had jammed the flood-cock was gone.

Hope fueled renewed effort. Garrett beat at the flames like a blind maniacal matador. He knew success was within reach when he heard men calling for him to get out--not because he might blow up, but because he would *drown*. Desperately, he propped himself on a powder carriage. He caught sight of one last tongue of flame. He threw the soggy tunic at it and heard a satisfying hiss as it was doused. Then he jumped off the carriage and half-swam to the ladder. He

climbed to the hatch. A cluster of hands pulled him out.

"You did it, Mr. Garrett! By Godfrey, who'd've thought--"

The ensign did not hear. For him, the world had been reduced to one gigantic cough.

On the Cliffs of Time

Below the reef.

The mother Tu-nel followed the blood trail. Swooping across the coral like a dark cloud. Parrot fish flitted out of her wide path. Larger life--hammerheads, rays--had been absent since her arrival.

The visible trail was as pronounced as the olfactory one. Wending downward, she soon found her dead progeny.

Green Stripe's neck was curled around a stubby pillar of apple-green coral, the result of her death spasm--her final attempt to bite her own wound, an ancient animal conviction that pain was an enemy to be attacked and slain.

The mother nibbled at the enemy: the gaping wound in her daughter's neck. The neck juggled. Lifelike. Like life. When her nibbling and nudging stopped, so did like-life. Slowly, she realized she herself was the like-life and that her daughter had no life.

The young male was ravenous. The sailor in its belly only reminded him of his hunger. Detecting fresh blood, he bore down.

And nearly lost his life in the effort. The mother whipped around to intercept him, knocking over several mounds of coral making her turn. Had the young male not flinched in time, she would have bitten through his neck. They raced nearly a league before the female broke off her chase. She did not want to leave her daughter too far behind. There was a chance like-life would return. If so, the young female would need help getting to the surface to breathe, just as

when she was born.

The young male had not been taken by surprise. The giant female often thwarted him when he tried to share a meal. But as he cautiously made a wide turn and watched from a distance, he was puzzled by the way she doted over the corpse. Why wasn't she eating? If she would only hurry up and finish, he'd be able to take what was left. If she rushed, he could get most of what remained before Green Stripes arrived.

He did not recognize the corpse. To him, Green Stripes was an animate being. He could play, flirt, bond with her. This was not Green Stripes. Merely food.

It had been four years since he was separated from his own mother near Bogoslof Island. It was not unusual for young Tu-nel to lose track of their mothers during the commotion of the mating season. After the ritualized chaos, mothers and offspring would use their songs to locate each other.

Only this time, the young male had been baffled by the noise of steam engines as a large whaling fleet coursed through the Bering Strait. He had been lucky enough to find a large female and her green-striped daughter. And unlucky enough to have his shoulder mauled when he first tried to join them. But he persisted and the giant female grew tired of chasing him away. Intuitively, he knew it was dangerous to remain in close proximity. But the other side of intuition needed the adopted mother, no matter how grave a threat she posed.

He circled for a quarter of an hour, antagonized not only by hunger, but also by the awful noise from the *Florida*.

He was wary of returning to land, so full of smoke and noise, but the smell of blood sharpened his appetite to an unbearable pitch. The ship had proven a meager source of food. So, as the men overhead battled to save their vessel, the young male slipped into the lagoon and headed for Sand Island.

1647 Hours

Sergeant Ziolkowski looked almost fondly at his ruined leg. It would be gone, soon, and he was offering his farewell. The medical assistant with the landing party had given him a blue pill only a few minutes before being killed. Opium. And it worked wonderfully.

He had been carried to one of the launches. As the two smaller serpents bounded up the beach, the lieutenant in charge of the party and several others made a futile attempt to reach the compound and the fieldpieces. In their haste, they did not moor the launch. Gradually, the Top found himself adrift in the middle of the lagoon. Everything wore a gentle glow. His leg throbbed--he didn't care.

The screams on shore faded.

Sun and thirst woke him. The air simmered and swam. A halo of smoke shown above the superstructure of the *Florida*. From the funnels, Ziolkowski assured himself. He hummed the melody to a marching ditty, then brought forth the words that went with it: "*Prettiest white girl you ever seen.... Then she had her nigger baby.... Hi-Ho! the rolling river...!*"

At least singing sounded more sane than talking to himself. He looked woefully at his leg. The surgeon's mate had put a splint on him and made a rude bandage around the wound, but it looked awkward and ineffective.

"Least the damn thing hasn't begun to stink."

He believed the broken leg had saved his life. Watching the beasts rampage through the compound, he had little doubt everyone was dead. Not even the Rexer could have--

He bolted up. Where the hell was his gun?

And where the hell was Sand Island?

Turning painfully, he discovered the island several hundred yards to stern. He was over halfway to Eastern Island. He couldn't see much. As low as the island was, he was even lower. The only movement came from some curious clouds of smoke.

"Ah...." He lay back and closed his eyes. It could have been a minute later

when he heard movement in the water. Only then did he remember the Chinaman who had tried to cross the lagoon alone--the brief ripple and disappearance--and fear curdled his stomach.

Something nudged the gunwale. Ziolkowski watched the sky turn left, then right. The launch was being gently shoved, then pulled. He closed his eyes, not wanting to see the end. There was gentle movement. Perhaps this was death, a somnolent excursion to nowhere.

"Who's got who by the ass, now?" a voice murmured.

The sergeant's eyes popped open. A rope had been looped over the peak. Pushing himself up, Ziolkowski found himself face to face with a man struggling to haul the launch with a small rowboat and the force of his slim arms.

"Enderfall... you ass. What do you think you're doing?"

"Last time anyone saw you was in the boat. So I came out to get you."

"You came out for me?"

"Sure. You'll be out of the Corps soon enough with that leg. So what the harm if I save your ass?" He laughed.

"Well, you must be so busy looking at my ass you didn't see the engine on this boat."

"Those things scare me, Top. I've seen them blow up before. Anyway, I don't know how to start it."

"You're a fucking primitive, Enderfall." Ziolkowski was suddenly nauseous. "I'm sick... shit...."

"Puke away, Top."

He didn't want to. The opium pill helped his pain. But he felt as if it was shredding his stomach in the process. He needed something to take his mind off it.

"Enderfall... you haven't hit the target by moving the sight-leaf up or

down."

"What's that?"

"Set the sight back to the first elevation and use the wind gauge. Now sing the song...."

"I need my wind, Top. Can't you hear me panting up here?"

"Sing it!"

"First shot, one point right wind; second shot, one point left wind; third shot, two points right wind; fourth shot, two points left wind."

"Will miracles never cease? All right, changing positions...."

"Prone to sitting, lower one minute; sitting to kneeling, lower one minute; kneeling to standing, lower one minute."

"Make a marksman out of you, yet. Now--"

"Something's coming up on us."

Struggling up on both elbows, Ziolkowski looked over the gunwale. There was a hill in the water. Growing larger, coming closer.

"Enderfall, what a dumb ass you were, coming out here."

"I thought the *Florida* killed them all!"

"Dammit, keep rowing! It's too late to try the engine." He twisted sideways. Enderfall had made very little headway towing the launch. They were still over a hundred yards from the shore. *Wouldn't matter if we reached it*, he thought with drugged weariness.

"Top--"

"Yes!"

It was one of the smaller creatures.

It was too bad the blue pill did not eliminate fear as well as pain--in Ziolkowski's case, more a fear of helplessness than of death. The creature had emerged at high speed, water shooting up from its flanks in reverse waterfalls.

"Where's your fucking rifle, Enderfall?"

"Top!"

The creature bore in with hideous night in its eyes. Ziolkowski felt the launch jerk, knew that Enderfall was trying to undo the manila rope that bound them. "Yeah, let's see how far you get. After me, it's you. Enderfall!"

The crash nearly capsized the launch. But it came too soon. The beast--

Crash!

Water seemed to pump from mid-air. A hot wave blew into Ziolkowski's gaping mouth. Blinded by salt water, he felt his way to the bow.

"Hold on, Enderfall! It's the three-inchers!"

1706 Hours

It was Hart who spotted Enderfall rowing out to retrieve the launch and it was Hart who saw the creature hulking over the reef. Drawing on every ounce of will to overcome the pain in his legs, he ran to the men milling around the fieldpieces in the compound.

"Will they work?" he shouted.

They looked up, startled.

"Will they work? One of them's coming up the lagoon!"

They jumped into action. The guns were battered. Otherwise, the breeches opened and the sighting gear turned. They wouldn't know for sure until they tried firing them.

There was no hesitation. The marines were devotees of cross-training. These men knew more than how to blow bugles.

There was no more than twenty yards between the launch and the beast when they fired. Hart caught his breath. The trajectory was nearly flat, the margin for error minimal.

The shells landed precisely between the beast and the stern of the boat. Completely losing himself, Hart began clapping. "One more right there, quick! He'll sail right into it!"

But the recoil threw them off. The second barrage fell wide. The creature was unimpressed, closed the distance with the launch.

"No!" Hart moaned.

"A lousy two hundred yards, boys!" one of the gunners shouted. "Come on, we can put it down his throat!"

This was their best opportunity. The creature was making a beeline for the launch. None of the evasive bobbing and weaving of the earlier attack.

"She's a clean target, lads. Lay her on nine o'clock, range one-fifty."

Whump!

Hart caught a brief glimpse of the dark three-inch shells streaking at the creature's chest. He thought he saw a small eruption near the base of its neck.

The effect was instantaneous and dramatic. The fifteen-pound shells contained two hundred and fifty half-inch lead balls. They struck the target at three hundred feet per second.

The beast twisted in a powerful spasm as wild as a snake hoofed by a stallion. Churned water threatened the boats. They could see the tiny figure of Ziolkowski cower. Enderfall had not succeeded in separating his rowboat, was flashing his oars like a bird in a snare.

"Again!" Hart cried.

Two more rounds were attempted. But the creature's flailing was too furious. The boats swayed perilously as its tail slapped to starboard, sending up waves three times as tall as a man and almost swamping them. Yet its high frantic squeak was blessed music to the ears of men desperate to strike back.

Their relief was unbounded when the creature turned away from the boats, from the island. Joyous cheers were flung like hats to the sky. The gunners pounded each other's back.

Hamilton Hart dropped in the sand and held his head in his hands.

XXVII

1640 - 1706 Hours

The fires were out, the wounded removed below, but many of the dead had yet to be extricated. Entombed in a long line were the bodies of five gun crews, sealed in metal caskets when the giant fell across the six-incher casemates. The grisly task of prying them out was given to the second watch and the reserve damage control party.

It was the most indescribably awful task Amos Macklin could have imagined. In places, the metal plates had been flattened so thoroughly that the corpses were an inch in diameter. The machinist and shipwright were tested to the limit devising ways to get them out. Straining at jacks and levers, Amos and the others spent the rest of the afternoon at their gruesome task. Under the hot sun the bodies were already beginning to putrefy. Rags soaked in vinegar water were distributed, and they covered their faces from the nose down. They looked like bandits trying to crack an enormous safe. Frequently, Amos had to walk away to get a grip on himself.

Once, after prying open a hatch, he was inundated by body fluids streaming through a crack above him. When he'd finished puking, Ensign Garrett gave him permission to scrub down and change.

Another time, hearing a familiar voice, Amos looked up to see the ship's chaplain struggling over a mountain of crumpled wood and steel. He reached out and gave him a hand down. Eyes glazed, the chaplain murmured, "So many missing...."

"No. They're here," said Amos, mopping his brow. "Most of them."

"We should be thankful it wasn't all of us."

"It still might."

The chaplain, full of prayer, seemed unwilling to wait for a memorial service. He went to each cranny where blood oozed and offered whispered invocations. Amos wondered why he wasn't attending the wounded. But he was too dazed and tired to really care. Besides, the chaplain was a white officer--not to be questioned.

No one resented Garrett's failure to work alongside them, to lead by example. The story of his heroic action in the magazine had spread and no one could begrudge him some rest. Hunched above the gundeck, he looked like a tar baby. That he was alive at all seemed a miracle, and several officers hovered near him as if he was a lucky totem.

"Count your luck," Garrett commented to Amos at one point.

Amos glanced up, tears in his eyes. "Mr. Garrett, they were just boys." For a moment Amos was swept along by his emotions and his words went with him. "I heard about you in the magazine. You saved the ship. But then you come along and talk about these boys like they was bags of coal dust. And when you met me by the galley--"

"I don't know what you're talking about," Garrett said.

"I just can't match the two. One day you act like the worse kind of coward, the next--"

They had not heard the three-inch guns firing on Sand Island. As General Quarters sounded, they thought they were again under attack. Above them, starboard crews raced to the surviving guns. Amos watched Garrett as he clambered over the wreckage towards Number One Turret. Though under arrest,

he did not hesitate to return to his action station.

Words of hate filled Amos' head. Furious with Garrett, the Navy, and the beast that terrified him so badly, he grasped an iron lever and jammed it into a crevice with all his might.

He could not have possibly guessed that what spilled out of the crevice had once been Midshipman Davis.

1710 Hours

"No!" the gun crew cried as one when Garrett swung open the hatch to the turret. It took a moment for his eyes to grow accustomed to the semi-darkness. When they did, he let out a gasp.

"We need a hose in here," said the gun captain laconically.

"We need to flood the fucking chamber, you mean," Garrett responded. "Doesn't the bridge know they have a time bomb right under their nose? How long have you been like this?"

"Over an hour."

"And Grissom doesn't have a clue," Garrett shook his head.

"The line's dead," Beck informed him. The midshipman was a sight--as they all were. The ensign was blackened with soot, the gun crew covered with brown explosive powder. Demons of a new age. The gunners terrified and isolated.

And there was Beck, nearest the hatch, knowing all Garrett had to do was slam the hatch hard, create a spark, and his nemesis would become a human bomb.

It was too tempting.

Garrett met his eyes.

And smiled.

"Let's keep the marbles rolling," he said. Then he went to get a hose.

1706 - 1710 Hours

"They got another one!" Grissom slurred through the gap in his teeth and waved his binoculars. "That's two of them! That leaves--" His eyes widened. "Captain!"

"Two of them," Oates nodded. "At the cost of how many of my men?" Leaning on the arms of the ship's surgeon and Dr. Singleton, he shuffled slowly to the sea chair. "Angina pectoris, Mr. Grissom. Painful, but not deadly."

"I'm glad--"

"How many were lost?"

"Twenty-one known dead," Grissom swallowed. The air reeked of culpability. "Almost fifty wounded--mostly burns. Twenty four missing and presumed--"

"Forty-five dead! Forty-five! And the landing force?"

"We don't know. But there were enough survivors to strike back." He related what he had seen within the last fifteen minutes. "They badly wounded one of the serpents, if they didn't kill it."

Oates' hand shook as he reached into his tunic for his cigarette case.

"*Captain!*" came Singleton's stern warning.

Nodding miserably, his hand emerged empty.

A head popped out of the wireless telegraph booth. "Captain! Glad to see

you back, sir! Signal from Midway!"

1712 Hours

More survivors emerged. They had witnessed the success of the gun crews and concluded things were reasonably safe. Soon, they were able to count ninety-eight souls. Eighteen men remained missing, including the lieutenant who had led the three-boat contingent.

While the remaining survivors of Lieutenant Anthony's garrison were pulled out of the bunker, Hamilton Hart searched the debris for his wireless telegraph. He found it undamaged. All those men broken like matchsticks, while the delicate wireless and its battery survived.

Helped by several marines, he set up the wireless on Mt. Pisgah. With the *Florida* only two miles off shore, this was all the height he needed. However, the marines cross-training had not included things electrical. They looked at the civilian dubiously. Having survived the nightmare of the century, they did not relish the idea of holding a mysterious naked wire in their bare hands.

"Go ahead, take it. You won't get a shock. It's the antenna. It's not attached to the battery."

Still, they balked. They could see the antenna was attached to the wireless, and the wireless to the battery. All one connection, right?

"Listen, you sons of bitches! Take up that wire or you'll never see slack again!"

Hart let out a shout of delight. "Top Kick!"

Ziolkowski's litter had been set down in the shade of Mt. Pisgah. He eyed Hart disparagingly. Army or ex-Army was all the same to him. But the civilian had convinced him his strange electronic stratagems were evil necessities. There was no denying the bark of authority. The marines picked up the wire. To reinforce his command--unnecessarily--he added, "Enderfall! Get your ass over

there with them! You aren't cut loose of me, yet."

The sergeant looked like a dying man. In fact, looked like a shouting corpse. Leaning back, he spotted a familiar figure limping towards the compound. "Fritz! Come on. You aren't so banged up you can't hold some wire, too."

Toting a small water cask brought ashore by the landing party, Lieber walked over to the sergeant, took out a metal cup. The cask was strapped over his shoulder. Turning its small wood spigot, he filled the cup and handed it to Ziolkowski. "Drink up, Top."

The sergeant glowered a moment, then took the cup and drank. He was done in three gulps. He held it up for more. Lieber obliged. The second drink did the trick. The sergeant lay back, quenched. With a nod, Lieber upended the cup on its little perch and walked away.

"Well, son of a bitch," said Ziolkowski lowly. But exhaustion overcame him. He dropped back and closed his eyes.

Hart had enough men, in any event. They spread out over the dunes, nervously holding the antenna over their heads. At the end of the wire was Enderfall, still shaking from his close call in the lagoon--and smarting over his near-abandonment of the Top Cut. The one courageous thing he'd tried to do in the Corps, and he'd turned chickenshit. Like some ancient, quaking Aztec priest he faced the low sun, both arms raised. Clouds gathered round the sun-disk. They gave off a premonitory glow. Signs of war and sacrifice.

Ignoring the Top Cut's admonition to help Hart with the antenna, Lieber wove through the rubble and sat next to Ace. "Here you go." He held out a cup.

"I don't think I can drink, Flitz."

"Well, let's try this." He held the cup close to the Japanese' chin and dabbed water on his lips.

"That feels good."

"Good."

"I'm going to die."

"It doesn't look good, Ace."

The other fishermen had raised the beam off Ace's ankles, but when they tried to lift him they discovered he was pinned to the beam behind him. During the bombardment a shell fragment had drilled through the back of the beam Ace was propped against, in effect nailing him down. He'd felt the thump--strangely, however, no pain. His would-be rescuers discovered how truly dire his situation was when they tried to pull him away. It was then Ace felt what had happened to him and released an agonized scream. They dared not make the attempt again for fear of making the wound worse. They would have to cut the beam to either side of the fragment, then remove Ace to the *Florida*. Since it might take a day to saw through the iron-like wood with the tools at hand, they concluded it would be best to bring in a steam-saw from the ship to do the job. Then they could remove Ace to sick bay and remove the fragment surgically.

Problem was, until they knew all the sea serpents were dead, trying to return to the *Florida* would be tantamount to suicide. It had been sheer luck that they had been able to make it to Sand Island in the first place.

On Mt. Pisgah, Hart began to key.

'HH TO FLOR STOP PRAISE THE LD STOP WE ARE STILL ALIVE.'

On the Cliffs of Time

Green Stripes' raw wound had evoked sorrow in the mother. It would take many days before Green Stripes--as Green Stripes--would fade in her memory. Only then would the corpse resting on the coral become proper meat for scavenging. But the mother Tu-nel had never accepted the young male's identity. He was a nuisance in her life, a stranger to be chased off whenever he became too importunate. Wounded by the three-inch shell, his blood-smell filled the water. The mother did not recognize him as a fellow-creature, but a meal.

She quickly hunted him down. He had slipped through Gooney and Spit

Islands and was charging through the ocean south of the atoll, trying to outrace the pain near his shoulder. When he sensed the approach of the mother he planed in her direction. She was making hunting sounds. He would tag along, as usual, and feed off the leftovers. Hunger pains far exceeded the sting of his wound.

Something was odd about the hunt-pulse of the mother. The sonic vibrations settled around his body, pinpointing the young male as the target. Slowly, he began veering away. When the pulse became stronger, there was no mistaking her intention.

Too late, he put on a burst of speed. He was several miles from Eastern Island when the mother cut him off. He let out a sound unfamiliar to the ancient ocean: pure Tu-nel fear.

The adult caught his right fin. He was spun around in a huge arc, creating a whirlpool that sucked and cracked driftwood. He struggled, but she held, until the fin was severed and he jinked wildly to the right.

Coming alongside the male, the mother attacked the rip in his hide. She caught the edge of the wound. As the male turned she was carried with him. A ten-foot gash was torn in his side. Torn, red muscles dangled like massive chunks of bait, the young male chumming the ocean with his own body.

The mother sank her huge teeth into his throat. After fifteen minutes of wild thrashing, hopeless defensive gestures and cries of submission, the young male drooped. Its long neck swayed in the current, aimless.

The adult had torn chunks of meat from the male while he was still alive. Already her strength and energy were returning. Something like a stroke of genius came to her. Usually, she would eat her fill, then let the remains drop to the ocean bed. But a spark from the lean ages, when the riverine Tu-nel dragged their prey to the shore for future feedings, fired her own instincts. Taking hold of the male's neck, she pulled the body onto the reef south of Eastern.

The battleship was the noisiest entity she'd ever encountered. Far more rackety than the ill-fated *Lydia Bailey*. Vaguely, she sensed the danger it presented, made the association between the fire it spit and the death of Green Stripes.

She took advantage of the late afternoon light to bask. Afterwards, she slid

underwater and listened to the sea sounds.

Then she made a long, casual circumvention of the atoll. She would take another look... at the noise.

XXVIII

1715 Hours

The ship stank of smoke and cordite. A third of the dead-lights in the passageways were shattered, the broken bulbs lying in their wire cages like sharp feathers in a nest. Amos had to feel his way much of the time. Seamen cursed lowly when he touched them with his sticky hands. Coming out amidships, both he and the petty officer leading him sneezed in the sudden light. They climbed the short ladder at the back of the pilothouse and stood at attention before the bridge crew.

"Phew!" exclaimed the exec, turning his nose up at Amos. "I think we have our answer already, Captain."

Oates nodded. He could smell the steward clear across the bridge. For his part, Amos was shocked by the captain's appearance. He'd heard nothing about his seizure, and assumed his blanched countenance and the deep pain in his eyes were the result of the day's horrors.

"We saw that beast come up on you," said Grissom. "We asked you up here to find out why it didn't gobble you up, like it did that poor fellow near you. Dr. Singleton thought it might have something to do with your being a Negro."

"The beasties might not like the smell of dark meat," the doctor commented.

"No, sir. It was the duff sauce that put it off," Amos answered, unperturbed. He went on to describe his meeting with William Pegg and their foray into the galley. His listeners were not incredulous. They had, after all, seen that it worked.

"Scare up Mr. Pegg and take him to the galley," Oates said to the duty

petty officer. "And write down the recipe to pass around to the other messdecks. We're going to need enough of this sauce to coat another landing force."

"Aye, sir."

Amos was dismissed. Before leaving, he looked at Dr. Singleton. "I'm sorry about Mr. Davis, sir."

"Midshipman Davis?" the doctor said with a start.

"It seemed you two was close. I... thought you knew."

"No...."

A look of horror crossed Singleton's face.

1721 Hours

Captain Oates and his Executive Officer watched as Singleton left the pilothouse, shoulders slouched. Both men uttered soft grunts. They'd not thought the doctor would be so affected by the middy's death, which was why they had not bothered telling him about it when they saw the casualty report.

Leaving the bridge, they sequestered themselves in the small sea cabin behind the wheelhouse. Grissom noted the old man's hands shaking as he eased himself onto the narrow cot he used whenever he wanted to spend the night near the bridge. He was fond enough of Oates, had no desire for a field promotion at his expense. But he was equally concerned that Oates should not die before they reached Hawaii. A man of his word, he would unquestionably assume all responsibility for the deaths and damage on the *Florida*. Unless that bit of charity came from Oates' own lips, however, Grissom might as well resign his commission. Any claim that cast aspersion on a dead shipmaster would cause the naval authorities to look askance. Grissom would be lucky to get a job on a tugboat. In a very real way, his livelihood hinged on the captain's life.

"Our coal situation drastically limits our options, Grissom."

"We're going to have to drop anchor."

"And land more men. More artillery. We can't wait for the marines to come back to us. We don't know what their condition is." He pressed his back against the glossy wood paneling and sighed. "The greatest event in history and I'm meat in the locker."

Grissom pursed his lips. Nothing could top the Annunciation on his list of historic priorities. Notwithstanding, this collision between ancient beast and modern man was certainly momentous--if also ruinous to all involved.

"I don't want to die out here. Oh, don't look so sour. I've come to a decision. I won't die until the Inquiry's done and finished. Wouldn't want you taking any of the blame for this."

Blushing fiercely, Grissom busied himself with the cane chair across from the bunk. By the time he was properly seated, Oates had changed the subject.

"I want volunteers for the new landing party. Ensign Garrett, for one. And that murderous bastard who tried to set fire to my ship."

"Fireman Gilroy."

"And anyone else in the brig."

"Those are the only two, I believe. We need everyone else at their stations. Sir, about Garrett--"

"I heard how he saved the ship. Admirable. But he fired without orders. God knows how many good men he killed on the island."

"He may have saved plenty of them, too." The exec immediately regretted his words. The captain's complexion heightened dangerously.

"What if we'd been dipping colors to the Japanese? A twelve-incher goes off and it's war. I can't have it. Not on my ship!"

To Grissom, Oates sounded like a man trying to talk away an inoperable cancer. More faith than practicality. Yet he was right. Discipline had to be maintained. While he could not send the entire expensively-trained crew of

Turret One to near-certain death, the ranking officer in the turret was another matter.

"Very well, sir. Ensign Garrett. As for Gilroy, he was let out with Garrett during the attack. I'm afraid the Master-at-Arms hasn't been able to locate him."

The thought of a drug-crazed arsonist running loose on the *Florida* lifted Oates from the wall. Cramming his hands on his knees, he hissed, "Every available man--"

"Is searching for him. But he may have been caught under the boat deck when the casemates caved in. There are still bodies trapped down there."

Sobered by this information, Oates leaned back. "All right. But I want the search continued. There's no telling what that lunatic's up to, if he's alive. For all we know, he's an Anarchist. Probably is."

"I think that steward, Macklin, should go with the landing party. It was remarkable, the way that serpent turned its nose up at him. And maybe we could send some of the other Coloreds. They're available."

Oates nodded. "Sounds reasonable." He was silent a long moment, then said, "At Trafalgar, one of the things that hampered the Spanish most was their religion. Being good Catholics, they wouldn't toss their dead overboard, but let them pile up. Imagine it, all those corpses rotting on the deck until they could be taken home for a proper burial."

"We've got our own piled up, sir."

"For a good reason. These are shallow waters. Anyone sailing by could look down and see them wash up on shore if we sent them at sea here, and I don't fancy that. We'll have burial details take them to the island when this blows over. But for myself... I want something different. See, Nelson's sailors were Protestant. When their men died, they were chunked overboard without a second thought. They had clear decks to fight from, while the Spanish were tripping over their dead. Grissom, I'm not Catholic. Not much of anything, truth be known. But I can't but help believe having a dead captain on board would handicap the operation of my ship. Besides, I don't want my men... well, staring at me. You understand? If I die, over the side." He fell silent for a long moment.

Grissom swallowed hard. He could not think of anything to say.

Looking up from his reverie, Oates said, "About those colored boys... if they kick up a fuss, drop it. We'll ask for volunteers from the rest of the crew. This is an historic event. We don't want a footnote that we treated them like slaves."

"Very well, sir."

"But Garrett goes. No backing off on that. Picture it, Grissom. I almost made him Officer of the Deck, once. Someone like that, running my ship...."

"Sad, about Davis."

"What? Oh, yes. Poor lad. This is a deadly business." He paused a moment, then added, "Grissom, I am not a Catholic. Keep that in mind."

"Aye, sir."

1940 Hours

Throughout the ship a new, awful odor arose from the galleys. William Pegg's recipe for duff sauce had been circulated to all the cooks and was now being replicated by the gallon. Over the protestations of the ship's surgeon, William was taken to every messdeck to check the potency of each batch, like some judge in a smelly food contest. More than one cook's assistant grew nauseous stirring the brew and had to be relieved. When it became general knowledge that members of the landing party would be coated in the stuff, the prospect of volunteering was made unappetizing as well as terrifying.

So little time. The stokeholds were empty, leaving a half day's supply of coal in the bunkers. Power would be needed for the auxiliaries, especially the searchlights. The landing force would have to leave that evening if they were to start coaling next morning.

Anchors were dropped bow and stern a half mile from the southern

entrance to the lagoon. All the motor launches were still on the island. The second wave would be rowing in. Night had fallen by the time the davits were swung out and the whaleboats lowered from the second level. Rifles were stowed under the thwarts for easy access. Colt machine guns were set up in the bow and stern of each boat.

Without a fair trial? was Garrett's first thought when Grissom told him of Oates' decision. He saw the proposed second wave as suicidal, duff sauce or no. You could eat anything if you were hungry enough, no matter how bad it smelled. Garrett assumed the serpents were no different from the other beasts, so far as that went.

His ribs seemed to shift like parched earth. He'd felt the same while watching the preliminary bout the day he fought Beck. Cast adrift from iron security, at risk from the very unpredictability of a direct flesh-against-flesh confrontation. It was utterly different from the dangerous-yet-mathematical, step-by-step certainty of the twelve-inch turret. The process of loading, priming, aiming and firing made violence comprehensible. In an open boat, in the dark, no such order existed. Death in primal form, waiting.

Yet he hid his fear. Grissom eyed him closely, then nodded and left.

The forward gun crew edged around the turret. They'd overheard the exec, and looked on Garrett like someone already dead. They were stripped to their shorts, finally free of their explosive cosmetic. The ensign had hosed them down as they emerged. The pressurized water stung, but their relief had been inexpressible.

Afterwards, Garrett had entered the chamber and closed off all vents that might allow the powder-mud to leak down to the magazine and handling rooms. It took him the better part of an hour to hose the turret out. The young loader who'd been so certain he would die--and take the ship with him in the process -- looked on with tears in his eyes. Midshipman Beck patted him on the shoulder, then stepped away. He had to choke back a sob himself as he watched the dirty water flow out the lower side vents down to the scuppers.

When Garrett emerged with the hose and shot him a grin, Beck could not help returning it. He sensed that somehow, they were now even.

"It isn't right," he murmured to Garrett as Grissom walked away after

delivering Oates' edict.

"Someone has to go," Garrett stoically commented. "From the look of it, that lagoon's no deeper than ten feet. We have a draught of twenty-four feet--more, with all the party favors on board. That leaves...." Garrett made a rowing motion with his arms, then shook his head. "Aw, damn. Aw, damn...."

1945 Hours

The stewards were assembled in the Colored mess when Lieutenant Grissom asked for volunteers. He understood the silence that greeted his request, and thought he knew a good way to crack it.

"Now, all you boys were upset when you lost your ratings. I understand and sympathize. If I were you, though, I'd see this as a golden opportunity. I can't guarantee anything. You know that. But by Godfrey, I can see promotions--Seaman First Class--for anyone signing up. Now...." He leaned forward on one of the gleaming mess tables. "You can rest assured every searchlight and every gun will be trained on you. Guarding your flank, I mean. And we know the marines have at least one of their three-inchers operating on the island." He paused, flipped his hand in the air. "For all we know, the serpents are all dead, or chased off. No one's seen hide nor hair of them since early afternoon, when the marines plugged one of them. A big slick of blood was spotted near the reef--you've all heard about it. Stretches half a league to the south. They could all be on the bottom right this moment. Oversized fishbait."

Fishbait. *That's what they want us for*, thought Amos. He twisted where he sat, as if offering a profile would make him less visible. Grissom had looked directly at him when entering the mess. There was a sinister cast to his eyes and Amos had glanced away, wary of any wordless message the exec might try to convey.

"One of your own has already signed up with the party. Mr. Macklin...."

Amos started to jump to his feet in violent protest. But Grissom caught his eye and the wordless message got through: Cooperate.

Or else.

The punishments a white officer could bring down on the head of a black steward were nearly unlimited in scope and severity. For all his doubts, Amos possessed fierce ambitions. This was living hell. Grissom had it in his power to make it permanent. So Amos eased back.

And nodded.

"That true, Amos?" one of the other stewards asked incredulously. "You goin' out there?"

He nodded again, looking grimly over the man's head. He was ashamed to meet the black faces of his peers. He did not feel courageous, but like the worst type of abject coward. He was compromising his soul.

"You're a credit to your race, Mr. Macklin."

Amos had no intention of responding. He gripped the edge of the bench to anchor his wrath. And at that instant his fingers came upon something that felt like sludge.

As a group, sailors in the United States Navy were fanatically clean. Visitors to the cruisers and battleships of the Fleet were invariably amazed that, amidst all the soot and coal dust and oxidized metal, the seamen could remain so impeccable, their blues and whites so marvelously spotless. When Amos was splashed with duff sauce he'd been almost frantic to clean himself and his uniform. Promptly after his meeting on the bridge he had showered, hastily dunked his whites in a bucket of seawater, and donned his steward jacket and trousers.

Chewing gum! That was what his hand had come upon. If the first lieutenant discovered it during one of his inspections, it would mean extra duty for every colored man on board. The idea that one of them had been so stupid as to clump it below the bench blew away his inhibitions. He rose. He did not face Grissom, but the other stewards.

"What do you say, boys?" His back to the exec, his voice lowered, he added, "Let's show them."

They immediately understood. Rather than cower, as was expected, they would rejoice in the danger, and show... *them*.

Every black man on the *Florida* who was not on duty was in that room. Mess attendants--first, second and third Class. Warrant officers' stewards and warrant officers' cooks. Steerage stewards and steerage cooks. Wardroom stewards and wardroom cooks. Cabin stewards and cabin cooks. The commandant's steward. The commandant's cook.

It was a roster that staggered under its own monotony. They did not serve the Navy. They served the Navy's belly.

More than half of them stood that instant, giving a rousing shout.

They would go.

Amos was stunned. He had not meant to play into Grissom's hands like this. His call had been one of sarcasm, not patriotism. He wanted to shout them down as fools and dupes. But he had been the dupe. A golden opportunity, Grissom had said.

Well, maybe he was right.

He turned and stood at attention. Black man and white man exchanged amazed glances as they listened to the rousing cheer set up by the cooks and messmen. But Amos managed the better face and announced, "Here we are, sir!"

2000 Hours

"Dangerous?" said Singleton. "Not in the least. We're speaking of reptiles, Captain. Cold-blooded. They don't move around at night."

Grissom waited for Oates to respond. When no answer was forthcoming, he said, "Sir, more than anyone, I hope our preparations are unnecessary. But we have to take them. The whaleboats are going to be loaded with a three-pounder for the island and have machine guns mounted bow and stern. They'll have

barely enough room to pull at the oars. Besides.... Doctor, forgive me, but why do you want to go? What do you expect to be able to do?"

"Your ship surgeon has his hands full here. He's supplied me with medical equipment."

"There'll be two medical assistants with the party."

"I've had some medical experience, as you've seen."

"With traumatic wounds? Again, forgive me, but you may see young men dying. That doesn't seem to be something you can handle."

Oates watched the two men argue. He was intrigued by Dr. Singleton's persistence. There was no doubt as to his sincerity. He'd even gone so far as to remove his offensive straw hat as he made his entreaty.

His heart fluttered perilously. He felt pressure in his throat and swallowed hard. If only he could live. Return home. Read articles about himself in *McCall's*, the *Review of Reviews*, even the *Scientific American*. Written by Singleton himself, no doubt, and not very flattering to the man who'd imprisoned him. And Oates would laugh over every line of it, if he could only live to read it.

He thought of the day off the Virginia Capes--over half a year ago--when the wind took Singleton's straw hat and Davis was compelled to chase it down. Since that day, when not involved in drills or other duties, Davis had been by the doctor's side. Whenever he saw him in Singleton's presence the boy looked as if he had a sour pickle stuck in his mouth. Obviously, however, the doctor had developed an affection for the middy. Perhaps this was his way of posthumously making up for the difficult times he'd given him. An opportunity that should not be denied any man.

"Make room for him on one of the boats, Lieutenant," he ordered.

2016 Hours

In spite of the battering the starboard side had taken, the larboard whaleboat had survived unscathed. The davits had been secured below for battle stations, but the deck plates were so badly buckled there was no place to set them up. A system of ropes and pulleys was jerry-rigged and the boat was worked across to the quarter deck, where it could be lowered into the water. The stench of charred flesh assaulted the men of the work detail, turning the hard labor into a gut-wrenching nightmare. Once the boat was down and outfitted, they rushed belowdecks to shower the stink of death off their skins.

Dr. Singleton tried to glimpse the island from the landing stage, but the bright searchlights induced a peculiar blindness in those just below them. Still, he felt safe. If any of the serpents were still alive, they were probably curled up on the reef. But Singleton was puzzled. Beasts of such enormous size must require long periods of hot, sunny warmth to make them as active as they had appeared that day. What did they do when it was cold and stormy? Obviously, they did not simply roll over and die.

He shrugged off these doubts. A hand reached out--black, he noted. He was helped into the boat.

Ensign Garrett was busy securing a three-pounder in the bow of the larboard whaleboat when he spotted Singleton. "You sure about coming, Doctor?"

"Without the sun, those serpents are helpless coils of lizard flesh."

This drew grateful laughter from some of the men in the boats. It was this same reasoning that had induced the captain to delay their departure until nightfall, in spite of the dire fuel situation. As the doctor settled in the first boat, he was startled by the number of black faces around him. In fact, Garrett, a signalman, and a medical rating were the only other whites in the whaleboat.

"Join the pogeys, Doctor," said Amos Macklin. "I'm afraid you'll have to scoot down onto the centerboard. Your seat might get a little wet."

"You boys all... uh... volunteered?" Singleton grunted as he moved over.

"Lieutenant Grissom gave us a speech. Said he would guarantee our ratings when we got back to Virginia if we would turn out for him tonight."

That would explain the black man's forward way of speaking to him. The Negroes and their white officers were treating this as a suicide mission. If you didn't expect to come back, it did not matter how you acted.

"We're the sacrificial black lambs, Doctor."

"Belay that talk!" Garrett called in a loud whisper. "Cast off!"

The rowers to starboard pressed their oars against the platform and pushed. Slashes of light darted ahead of them, showing the direction. Behind them, the profound deep-well clicks of the fore and aft turrets pounded like giant footsteps across the water as the huge twelve-inchers swung around. They were accompanied by the metallic singsong of smaller caliber guns as they were loaded and aimed, the faint chimes of machine gun ammo belts unraveled and clamped in their breeches.

Oars were dipped, distance gained. Gradually, the sounds of the ship were replaced by the surf thumping against the reef. The searchlights revealed the turbulence, as well as the opening they were looking for. Fear of the serpents was usurped by thoughts of sharp coral ripping apart boats and bodies.

At the front of the boat Garrett made a wide motion with his right arm. "A little to port... there... plenty of room. A little more to starboard... let's keep the marbles rolling."

"Hey, Doc, how come you not wearing your sauce?" came a Negro voice.

"He got plenty of sauce *in* him. He don't need any on the outside."

Frustrated by his awkward position at the bottom of the boat, Singleton did not respond to their taunts.

The rowers put more back-muscle into their strokes. The mouth of the lagoon might be as roomy as Garrett indicated, but the roar of water against the reef urged them faster.

"*There!*"

"What? What do you see?"

The boat suddenly lost way as frightened men reached under the thwarts for their rifles.

"Goddammit! Don't stop! We're halfway there. Who sang out?"

"Here," said one of the men to port. "I know I saw something. The water just kind of rolled up."

"Reef. That's all. It's all about us and we'll end up on it if you don't take up those oars again." Garrett worked his hands nervously. Lucky as hell, they were. If the ocean had not been so calm, the surf equable, they would have foundered in a trough and been swamped then and there. "You want to show us white devils something? Then keep the marbles rolling. Come on, give me some cadence. Row and rhythm, rhythm and row."

Even though Garrett had met some of them by the galley, the blacks could not help chuckling at his foolishness. They took up the sweeps and stroked ahead.

"Where's the other boat?"

"She fell astern--"

The night clattered down like a bulb dropped from the sky. Sharp shafts of light streaked out to the surf, then swept towards the first boat. Water sprayed up as a burst of gunfire hit close.

"Shit!" Garrett hollered. He pivoted the bow machine gun and was about to open up on the second boat when the *Florida* concentrated her lights on them and lit up their mistake. The firing ceased.

"You sons of bitches!" Garrett called hoarsely. "Do we look like sea serpents?"

The other boat drew closer. The coxswain made an apologetic motion. "Everyone all right over there, Mr. Garrett?"

"Row. Keep rowing. We'll end up on the reef yet, we keep fucking around like this."

And then, very distinctly, the ocean hunched. The searchlights rounded off with light and deep shadow an Appalachian brow nipped by moonlight. It rose ten feet between the two whaleboats, then subsided.

The men held their breaths. The damn thing was right between them! If they opened fire, they'd end up shooting at each other.

"They *can't* be active." Singleton's voice was fear and disbelief incarnate.

The signalmen in the stern of each boat flashed urgent messages with their lanterns. From the *Florida's* signal bridge came equally frenetic responses. There was a vague sound of bugles. The searchlights began to swing wildly, trying to catch the beast in their beams.

"*They aren't reptiles!*" Singleton's words were like laughter.

"Pipe down, Doc! We have to listen!"

"But don't you see? It's wonderful! Everything we thought we knew--"

"I'll have you bound and gagged if you don't shut the hell up!" Still wary of the coral outcrops, Garrett told the rest of them, "Watch it, boys. The current's stronger here. Push ahead. Once we get to the island we can set up the three-pounder."

Heartened by this thought, the rowers forged ahead. The men in the second boat saw them and followed.

"Almost there, lads, almost...."

The light from the *Florida* became more of a nuisance than a help. The searchlight beams were broken up by the reef as they tried to follow the boats turning towards the beach, creating monstrous shadows as terrifying as the watery hill. Of more aid was the light on the shore ahead. Via Hart's wireless, the men on the island had been advised of the landing party and had built fires to guide them.

"Damn, looks like they sent all the niggers!" came a voice as they approached. Jumping out and hauling the boats up, another marine caught a whiff of the duff and exclaimed, "They sent all the *dead* niggers!"

"Come down and help, you lazy jugheads!"

"Who's that? Mr. Garrett? What the hell is the captain thinking, sending the stewards to us?"

"We've got a three-pounder here. You want it?"

Eagerly, the marines surged into the water to lend a hand. There was a loud splash as Singleton climbed out and blundered through the surf. "They're active!" he said, struggling across the sand. "Dark as Hades and they're active!"

"Right, Doctor," said Garrett. "Give us a hand with these shells. No supercargo allowed this trip."

With an artillery round under each arm and a rifle slung over his back, Amos Macklin followed a line of men inland to the compound. Here and there a small fire uncovered hints of what had happened on the island. Buildings destroyed, the sad heaps of wounded and dead. As he took up a position on the perimeter, his chest thudded against the ground and his heart hammered with excitement. His sweat mingled with the duff sauce and dripped into his eyes. When he tried to clear them, his hand slid through goo.

"We've decided the bastards are guided by smell more than anything else," a badly injured sergeant was telling Garrett nearby. "So why not have the fires?"

Here we all are, Amos thought. But wait. Certainly, in any gallery of antagonists, Gilroy would have to be included. Methuselah too, for that matter, with his devastating vision of all the things that would go awry for blacks in the world.

Having Garrett here was a plumb. But Midshipman Davis' absence was telling.

Turning, he observed Singleton looking timorously over the shoulder of one of the medical ratings, his complexion white and sickly in the low lamplight. When the rating pulled back a wounded man's bandage to reveal a ghastly sucking wound, Amos was sure Singleton would faint.

Nobody here but us ghosts, he thought as he squinted towards the beach.

2018 Hours

His body--his joints, his pores, his flaming gut--burned with the ache and longing for an opiate. To inhale painlessness and fantasy, to remove himself from scuffed reality.

For uncounted hours Gilroy had hidden in the stokehold. Heat and thirst accosted him like devils in a desert. He could not believe his luck, getting out of the brig like that. But it was his ill fortune to be unable to reach his final cache of opium. He had hoped everyone would be too preoccupied with events topside to bother with him, without reckoning the captain's determination to track down the murderer and arsonist. Not only the Master-at-Arms and his men, but the entire ship's crew was on the alert for him. It was a bitter lesson Gilroy had learned near the forecabin. A young seaman had stepped down a hatchway and seen Gilroy lurking near one of the tarpaulin lockers.

"You're a coal passer," he'd said.

There was no sense denying it. A stoker's complexion never recovered after a few years in the boiler rooms. "Just going through this." Gilroy opened the locker. On top of a roll was a long, stout canvas needle. He hid it against his forearm.

"Why? What are you doing in this part of the ship? What's your name?"

"My name?"

An odd innocence crippled the boy's suspicion. He did not flinch as Gilroy walked up to him. Stood openly, unexpectant.

Gilroy whipped up his arm and forced the needle through the boy's eye as hard as he could. Into his brain. He died without a word, but with tremendous violence, his body convulsing on the deck, the curled spasms of his hands gashing paint off the wall. The body unconvinced by death.

Gilroy was mildly surprised by his act. Just looking at the thrashing body

exhausted him. He yawned, nearly fell asleep on his feet. Then he heard voices approaching and retreated. Further down. To the harsh iron terrain he knew so well.

His hours in the empty stokehold were not so bad when compared to the hellish boiler room. Eventually, though, his thirst became predominant, more powerful even than his craving for opium.

Echoing footsteps gave him plenty of warning when the search party came down the passageway. Scurrying to the nearest shovel locker, he became acutely aware of every limb and muscle as he squeezed himself in. The press of his biceps against his stony pectorals. The way his sphincter tickled as he drew his legs in and squatted.

"You know what we'll do with that murdering bastard?" came a familiar voice. "You know, lads?"

That was the Master-at-Arms. A prim-looking man with tiny pursed lips. The stoker could have squashed his face with a backhand. Master-at-Arms! What a mighty title for a worm. But Gilroy became abruptly respectful on hearing his next words.

"When you see that bastard, shoot to kill, 'cause he's a killer. An anarchist. Your life won't be worth spit if he gets within two yards of you."

His sentences tolled back and forth across the hold like the clock of doom. The Master-at-Arms might be a worm, a slug, spittle on a snake, but he had his minions. Gilroy listened to them pounding across the deck. His skin prickled when he sensed them looking directly at the locker. Softened when they looked away. Too small for a man, was their conclusion.

The echoes receded. The hatch was slammed shut.

There it was: shoot on sight. Mad Dog Gilroy. He laughed, but the echo sounded so sinister and unfamiliar, that he quickly stopped.

"Oh, Mother, if you really were my mother, I'm a dead man."

He stood and pissed on the deck, leaving a wet trail in the coal dust. He was trying to decide what to do next when the ship jumped violently and sent

him sliding to his knees.

"People keep talking about serpents," he said as he picked himself up.
"What serpents? I ain't seen none."

This sparked an idea. Cautiously, he opened the hatch and peered out. The passageway was clear.

He darted to the nearest ladder.

2034 Hours

"Lieutenant?"

Grissom stepped back from the bridge, his face drawn. He was so exhausted he could barely move his arms.

Speaking through the bridge screen, Captain Oates asked, "Coral?"

"I don't see how. Both anchors were secured, fore and aft."

Oates went to the voice tubes and blew into one of them. "Mr. Morgan! Check the fo'ard cable again. It seems to be swinging loose."

He'd barely replaced the flap when the ship again gave a lurch. Grissom burst with unintelligible curses, his upper lip flapping where his teeth had been. Oates caught the gist:

Something was knocking them out of their anchorage.

"Captain!"

One of the lookouts was tracing the beam of a searchlight with a trembling hand. As he rushed forward, Oates knew he would be seeing one of the creatures. What he did not expect was the sight of the largest one gnawing at the chain near the hawser. The metal shone like new-coined nickels wherever its teeth left scars.

Grissom craned his head and glared up at the signal bridge, where two machine guns--the only weapons that could be brought to bear--were mounted.

"What are you waiting for? Open fire!"

But by the time the exec swiveled back the creature had let go of the thick hawser and slipped underwater.

"What *don't* they eat, Grissom?" Oates went to the telephone. "Did they make it?" he yelled into the brass mouthpiece.

"The landing force is on the beach," was the report from the foremast lookout.

The captain's relief was short-lived. Feeling an odd movement, he glanced at the unmanned wheel. It was jerking back and forth against the locked helm. "So much for Singleton and his sleepy lizards. It's pushing against the keel. After all we threw at it--"

"You all right, sir?"

Oates dismissed his exec's concern with a brisk nod. "This is a pickle, Grissom. That thing's sniffing around our bilge keel and we can't bring a single gun to bear. At least the anchors--"

A loud rattling at the bow caught their attention. The anchor chain twirled in the hawsehole like a straw in a glass. There was a great brown flash as the creature twisted to the side.

"Sir... we haven't been able to seal the starboard gunports. If it jumps on the lower deck again and we're not underway, we'll be swamped."

Oates began telling Grissom he wanted engineers manning all the bilge pumps, then remembered no one could understand his exec's slurred speech through the voice tubes. He was circling the binnacle to deliver the order himself when the shout came.

The creature leapt from the ocean, stretched above the lower decks, and attacked the searchlights on the superstructure. The parabolic metallic mirrors inside the projectors exploded in thousands of silver fragments.

Men and electrolyzed metal rained down on the larboard boat deck. Wood screeched as lifeboats were thrown off their blocks and crashed against the lower ports.

Oates had told all men in the six-inch casemates to abandon their guns if the beast came up on them like this again. Most of the gunners were able to make it through the interior hatches before the crushing weight came down on the port beam. The creature used the boat deck as a platform to reach the upperworks. Stays snapped like lace. The wire, unstrung and scything, decapitated two men on the signal bridge. Water showered off the long neck as the beast's head collided with one of the fighting masts. The overhead lookouts fell to their deaths.

Swinging in wide arcs, the creature attacked more lights, smashing everything around them in the process. Metal bent and buckled. Screams were masked under the flashes, the deep aching of steel as the aft funnel quivered. Sweeping to its right, it brushed against a machine gun platform and the cage around it collapsed. The gun stock swung on its conical mount and jammed against the bars as the gunner was knocked sideways. His hand vanished in a gory burst as it slammed through the handle block. Flesh was spliced from bone when his forearm slipped through the trip spring and cover hatch, fusing the man to the gun as it spit a long string of .30 caliber slugs down the quarterdeck. Smelling blood, the creature nipped at the injured gunner. One of its great teeth hooked on the ammo belt as it took the man by the legs. The elevating pin broke and the Maxim gun swung up with the man, hammering the decks below, sparks flung up in glowing geysers.

The morsel was obstinate. The creature flicked its head and the man broke off at the shoulder joint.

Lieutenant Grissom witnessed the ghastly flash-lit scene from the port wing of the bridge. He saw the tracers leap towards him--and barely ducked in time.

Bullets chewed through the wood wall and hit iron supports. A midshipman and lookout on the starboard wing were cut down by the ricochets. Several shots *dong-donged* off the rail and into the pilothouse, shattering the bridge clock and killing the helmsman.

The belt finished its loop. The gunfire stopped.

But not the creature, which began thudding its head amidships. The fore and aft anchors acted as confederates, pinioning the ship while the beast administered the beating. Not a seaman on board could keep his feet. Belowdecks, the chief engineer counted his luck. The boilers were damped low. Had they been at full steam, pipes would have burst and boiler hatches blown open, scalding them all to death. The catwalks screeched as metal struts worked loose and threatened to crash down on them.

In the forward twelve-inch turret Midshipman Beck and the gun crew held on for dear life. They, too, were lucky. There were no powder bags in the chamber to break open and terrify them this time. The gun was already loaded. No more powder or shells would be elevated until needed. Communications with Central Station had been restored, but the only messages they received were frantic and garbled.

2038 Hours

Suddenly, they found themselves upright.

Trembling, Captain Oates tried to push up onto his legs. He was not in pain, yet his body felt hollow. Muscles refused to coordinate. He saw a hand in front of him, was reaching for assistance before realizing the helmsman was dead. Then another hand appeared.

"She's still afloat, sir, and a miracle it is."

"Very well, Grissom...." Oates glanced at the dead men in the flickering light. "The dynamos," he hissed. "We're losing power."

Holding his hand over a gash in his arm, a lookout pulled himself up by the bridge screen. "Sir... you gotta see this."

Oates limped over, followed by the remaining members of the bridge crew. They were privy to a spectacular sight. Two port searchlights had survived the attack. In crossbeams they revealed the creature about thirty yards off. Neck craned far above the water.

"Stationary target!"

The ordnance officer was already speaking into his phone, but it was useless. They'd lost too much power. The twelve-inch turrets would not budge. The forward six-inch battery, though undamaged, could not bear on the target.

Scattered rifle shots. That was all.

"We might as well be pissing in the wind."

"The searchlights'll go soon."

Slowly, the creature began to sway. Not dodging... but dancing. A gentle metronomic rocking.

"Like a snake mesmerizing its prey," Grissom said in a hypnotized tone.

"All right, *doctor*," Oates said irritably. He went to the voice tubes and hailed the chief engineer. "Can you give me Ahead Slow if I need it?"

"We're in bad shape down here."

"That's not what I asked."

Grissom glanced over at him. "Raise anchor, Captain?"

"Do you think we can withstand another attack?"

The lights flickered again, then dimmed to a candleglow. Grissom looked at his watch. "Not yet 2100 hours," he said.

XXIX

2056 Hours

Hamilton Hart caught a round of static over his wireless. After several futile attempts at reestablishing contact with the *Florida*, he determined her radio mast must have gone down in the latest attack. He rested his headset on the ground and disconnected the battery.

With one last glance at the besieged ship, he packed up his equipment and descended Mt. Pisgah. Near the compound perimeter he came upon a man retching violently in the shadows.

"You okay?"

A flabby white face lifted out of the dark. Sweat--or tears--streamed down the man's face. Hart noted his gray hair, like an old rag dropped over his head. The man reached into the shadows and retrieved a peculiar straw hat.

"You better get inside the compound. We've lost contact with the *Florida*. We'll probably be next. I'm Hamilton Hart, by the way."

"HH? The wireless operator? I'm Dr. Singleton."

"Yes? I was told by the *Florida's* operator you said the serpents couldn't move by night. We could have saved you that misconception."

"Obviously..." They could just make out the creature rocking gently between the reef and the battleship. "...very active."

Hart was as entranced by the spectacle as were the men on the bridge across the water. "Why don't they torpedo the bastard? Just sitting there like that...."

Dr. Singleton was a stranger. Yet the look he gave the former signalman revealed a man Hart knew all too well: a man burdened by debts against the soul.

"You were speaking of torpedoes?"

"Only a pipe dream. A torpedo would be too slow."

"Not if it was guided properly."

"Guided by what?"

Singleton pointed at Hart's wireless equipment. "The French have done it. Why can't we?"

Hart saw the light. Both men exploded with excitement as they mapped the possibilities. Their ebullience startled the marines nearest them.

"We can do it! But... I'm out *here*!" Singleton moaned. "We have to get back to the ship!"

2106 Hours

Heinrich Lieber opened his eyes and saw hundreds of stars. Turning to Ace, he whispered, "I dreamed I was trying to reach home. Then I realized I didn't know where home was." He patted the corpse gently on the head, then pushed to his feet. He had no idea what time it was. Within minutes of Ace's death exhaustion had overwhelmed him. He had dropped to the ground and fallen asleep.

Before dying, Ace had insisted Lieber promise to have his remains shipped to Kushiro for burial.

Now the German turned his pockets out and showed them to the dead man. "I can't send you home. I have no money."

With every muscle protesting, every bruise blaring with pain, he climbed out of the ruins of the bunker. He looked back only once at his dead friend. "I'm sorry I lied."

Light from several campfires lay like a warm blanket over the compound, more like an amicable scene in the park than a desperate defense. He spotted Ziolkowski and walked over to the sleeping man. The Top Cut's breathing was ragged, his face pale and splotched like the skin of a sand shark. Someone Lieber had never seen before walked over to the sergeant and looked down at him a long moment. Then he walked away. Watching him go, Lieber realized there were many men around who he'd never seen before. Discerning them from the first landing party was easy. Most of the newcomers were black.

Having no desire to attend another dying man, he began to limp away. He was looking for a gun to arm himself with when a deep sob arrested his search. He whirled. Ziolkowski was thrashing on his improvised pallet.

"Top!" Lieber exclaimed, running stiffly to his side. "Hold down, Top. You're tearing off the bandages." Peering closer, it dawned on him Ziolkowski didn't hear. He was in a death match with a nightmare. Lieber knew better than to wake him. As a boy, he and his mother had shaken his father awake one night as the old man screamed and moaned, amorphous enemies at his throat. He had leaped out of bed, pummeling them both before reaching full consciousness--at least, young Heinrich had assumed his father was still sleeping when the old man turned his and Frau Lieber's faces into bloody patchworks.

But as he watched Ziolkowski the private knew he could not hold back much longer. When the injured man began rolling off the pallet, Lieber dropped to his knees and pinned his arms.

Ziolkowski's eyes popped open. The German was nearly thrown off by the powerful arms.

"Top!"

The struggling stopped. Lieber thought he saw streaks of oil running across the sergeant's face. He was about to brush them away when a closer glance told him they were tears mixed with dirt. He drew back, stunned.

"Top?"

"Fritz! You've got to do something for me."

"Yeah, Top?"

"Swear on your fucking balls, Fritz... swear you'll never tell anyone about this!"

"I swear."

"Fritz, I left my gun out in the dunes. In the sand. That son of a bitch came up so fast--and I ran. Enderfall took off and I turned tail behind him. Nearly shit in my pants. I abandoned my gun! Fritz!"

"Yes?"

"You got to go out and get it for me, before Anthony sees me without it. Before the men do! Please, Fritz. I'm begging you!"

"But the lieutenant... all right, Top. It's over by the bunker. I saw it there just a minute ago."

"It's out there. Get it!"

Lieber returned a few minutes later. "It's pretty well banged up, Top."

"Put it here." Ziolkowski patted the ground next to him.

Lieber lay the broken stock and twisted barrel of the Rexer next to the sergeant.

"Don't tell anyone I ran, Fritz."

"My name's Private Heinrich Lieber, Top Sergeant."

"I hate being fucked up like this. Someone ought to shoot me." Ziolkowski blinked at the stars, then abruptly fell asleep.

An argument had broken out in the direction of the lagoon. Lieber started over, taking a Springfield from the side of a badly wounded marine as he passed his stretcher.

Singleton had encountered an unexpected face in the landing party.

"How in God's name--" But Singleton stopped. It was apparent that the Ordinary Seaman's uniform William Pegg was wearing had been his means of

getting onto the second whaleboat. The blood-soaked bandage on his forearm indicated he'd manned the oars with the rest of them. The pain must have been excruciating, but not a glimmer of regret showed in his eyes. The boy actually seemed pleased to be present. When he heard one of the boats was going to be sent back to the *Florida*, he seemed just as pleased with the prospect of getting back on the open water.xxxxx

"They'll need rowers. I rowed in, I can row back out."

"My dear boy, if you're suggesting--look at you now, ready to bleed to death." Singleton had not quite recovered from his earlier nausea. The sight of even more blood curdled his stomach. He was about to ask William what good he thought he could do, but checked short on realizing he could ask himself the same question. "We'll see," he concluded in a stern paternal tone.

"Who's in charge here?" Hart asked.

"I believe that would be the marine captain who came with the first landing party."

"He's dead," Hart answered, giving the doctor a curious look. "I wirelessly sent that news back to the ship."

"Oh. Then I suppose it falls to Ensign Garrett to give us an escort back."

They found him at the far end of the compound, arguing with an angry flock of Leathernecks.

"We have to go back out. That's our whole reason for being here. Haven't you started loading the barges?"

Their silence provided his answer.

"We needed more artillery," someone finally ventured. "We aren't going to stay here with just two fieldpieces."

"There's three, now. That should cover us plenty. We're going out to the lighters. We're going to load the coal. And we're going to take it out to the *Florida*."

"Hell, the ship won't be left by the time we finish," a marine complained.

Even as they looked out to sea, the two remaining port searchlights on the *Florida* dimmed perceptibly.

"That's right," said Garrett. "And then what? Okay, when we go out, I'll ask only for volunteers. Until then, we shovel coal."

Heinrich Lieber did not wait. He stepped forward. "I will go with you to the boat. It's simple. If we stay here, we'll die."

Next came all of the surviving Japanese, who shared Lieber's sentiment. The Chinese quickly followed suit, as well as the rest of the marines from the original contingent.

With one exception.

"Enderfall!" Lieber hollered. "Get your ass over here!"

"What did you say?" came Enderfall's incredulous response. The German had sounded exactly like Ziolkowski..

One fact was obvious to the newcomers: After a week and a half fighting the creatures on land, the Midway contingent thought nothing about risking their necks on water.

"We could arm the tug," said one of the marines slowly. "Use the three-pounder as a bow chaser."

"But that'd only leave two for the island. How many men are you going to take out with you? Ten? Twenty? What about those left behind?"

"Details later," said Garrett, rubbing a bruise on his temple. He had every intention of putting all three guns on the tug. The coal was the most important thing. "Let's start the marbles rolling. We'll be half the night loading the barges."

Dr. Singleton and Hart came forward.

"We have to get back to the *Florida* with you."

Garrett eyed the doctor dubiously. "I don't think--"

"We have a plan. We just might be able to save ourselves and the ship."

Before he could elaborate, a frantic shout came from the shore. A moment later, one of the lookouts came running up. "The ship! It's moving toward us!"

"At the reef?" Garrett said, stunned.

2110 Hours

"Captain, there's nothing I can do. Not until that wood gets to me. There's not a lump left down here. But you've got to hurry... sir. Once the boilers go out, it'll take the better part of four hours to raise full steam again."

Captain Oates looked up from the voice pipe. Grissom blanched under his glare. "That order should have been given hours ago."

The exec nodded miserably. One of the first things he should have done when Oates was temporarily incapacitated was check the coal log. Seeing the critical shortage, he would have ordered every piece of wood available, from pianos to paneling, to be chopped up for the boilers. Now it was apparently too late. The creature had taken hold of the aft anchor and was tugging them in a slow but certain circle.

"The anchors should hold," he said tepidly.

"If that bastard has enough muscle to tow the *Florida* three hundred and sixty degrees, it sure as Dewey's nuts can break us out of our mooring."

"Aye, sir."

The order was given.

Throughout the ship, men wielding axes circulated through the passageways and wardrooms, looking to make kindling out of any wood in their

way. They hacked fiercely at the ship's fake armor, paneled walls, tables, elegant carvings. A line formed to the boiler rooms. Finely stained pine, oak and maple were consigned to the flames. Flammable varnish caused a burst that gave the chief engineer headaches, but Oates could not concern himself with that.

He was thinking of ways to disconnect the ship from the aft hawser in the event the forward sea anchor broke loose. The serpent had begun toying with the *Florida* again, yanking the ship about by its aft anchor chain. Sand Island now appeared on the starboard quarter, whereas fifteen minutes earlier it had been abeam. If the creature brought them a full circle and they lost steam completely, they'd be cast adrift. The incoming tide would put them on the reef.

Glancing out the side of his eye, he caught Grissom's stricken expression. He wanted to pat his exec's shoulder. His slip-up with the fuel was understandable, if not officially forgivable. The unnatural stress could have induced forgetfulness in any man. After all, it had given Oates himself a heart attack.

But the exec's rare lapse might prove fatal to them all. Oates walked as briskly as he could to the port wing. Raising his binoculars, he scanned the atoll and was gratified to see lanterns clustered around the coal bunker on Sand Island. Finally, they were loading the barges. Yet the job would take hours to complete. Even then, they could not coal while under attack.

"Sir, the fo'ard hawser...."

Oates turned his attention to the bow. The huge chain looped backwards through the hawsehole and rattled loudly on the flashplate.

"Son of a bitch is strong." He brooded a moment, then grew excited. "Grissom! Turn off everything! Auxiliary engines! Conveyors! Everything! Reserve all power for the searchlights and capstan. That wood doesn't give us much power, but we can still use it to good purpose."

"Sir?"

"What do you do when you've hooked a fish?"

"You reel it in?" Grissom said doubtfully.

2129 Hours

The master-at-arms and first lieutenant were assigned the task of assembling as many guns as possible on the quarterdeck. The six-inchers aft, undamaged, were depressed as far as they would go, a lucky shot in mind. Every machine gun was trained sternward. Captain Oates envisioned a point-blank fusillade directed at the creature's head.

When everything was set, Oates gave the order. From the aft bridge he could see the water boil not far astern. The dumb tenacity of the monster stunned him. It wouldn't let go! Well, all the better. In eagerness and fear, he leaned out for a closer look.

"Stay with the engine room telegraph," he told Grissom. "That thing just may be strong enough to break the chain. If so, I want full steam. If we can swing around the fo'ard anchor, we'll fire both our bow tubes. Maybe we can send a torpedo up her arse."

The ship trembled. The stern dipped perceptibly. The water was a cauldron. The creature's body bulged over the waves. Its tremendous flippers whirled upwards, raising a sheet of seawater that soaked everyone on or near the quarterdeck. Deck plates rattled and rang as the anchor chain screeched through the hawse-pipe.

Oates found himself giving the old whaling shout: "She breaches!"

The creature rocked up, the chain still in its mouth. Rifle fire plummeted, machine guns chattered, three-pounders huddled closer for a shot, but it was too close for the six-inchers. Oates watched breathlessly as tracers arced towards the head like a swarm of fiery gnats. He gripped his megaphone to his chest, ready to call out orders to Grissom the instant the beast let go.

But there was something wrong. The creature was yanking at the chain with insane might, as if intent on ripping it out of the boat. Smoke caused by friction roiled up from the capstan. No one dared go near to throw water over it, but the shower caused by the animal's thrashing prevented the aft windlass and

quarterdeck from bursting into flame.

"No!" Oates shouted to himself when he saw the reason for its behavior. The creature's teeth had become jammed between the links. It was trying to let go and couldn't.

The capstan howled with torn mechanics, steam and smoke clouding the afterdeck. Its internal ratchets pounded so hard the deck visibly jumped with each turn. Oates caught the peculiar stink of burning varnish pouring out of the funnels. If the Chief used too much stained wood, the *Florida* might blow up.

"Let go the capstan!" he yelled through his megaphone. "Let it go! Let her run out!"

No one below could hear him over the noise. A moment later, he felt as if his heart was being torn out when the capstan was ripped halfway from its mounting. An instant later the creature dove. The quarterdeck dipped perilously, was suddenly awash. There was a sucking of air as the water gushed under the mounting and hit the red-hot windlass gears. The hawser slacked, whipped, went taut again. The ship bounced twice, followed by a loud bang as the keel hit an underwater island of coral.

"It's twisted us 'round! Ahead engines!"

Too late. The soul-wrenching rip of metal could be heard stem to stern as they plowed across the coral ridge. The few men who remained on their feet were forced into a herky-jerky dance, like the hornpipes of drunken sailors. The aft hawser whipped one last time. The capstan flew up and crashed across the deck. To Oates, the sight of the powerful engine gouging through the hawse-pipe was the most astonishing hallucination since this whole thing began. There was a wicked snap as the chain broke at the hawsehole, leaving the conical engine five yards from its mount.

He ran to the pilothouse. "Grissom! Goddammit, we have to--"

He stopped cold as he noted Grissom's absence and the shocked expression worn by a yeoman leaning next to the bridge screen. With trepidation, he went to the rail and looked down.

"He heard you shout," the yeoman explained. "He couldn't understand

what you were saying. He was going out when the deck just... kind of jumped."

He'd lost his footing.

He lay at the bottom of the bridge ladder--his neck twisted at an unnatural angle.

XXX

2205 Hours

Oates found the first lieutenant on the quarterdeck, directing one of the gun divisions. A reeving line had been passed under the keel and now a collision mat was being hauled over the rent in the hull. Drawing the First to the side, he quietly informed him of the death of the executive officer.

"If something happens to me, you're in command."

"Aye, sir."

Oates was vaguely nonplussed by the ease with which his 'fust luff' received the news. He'd never been able to learn much about the man--one of those cold fish who emerged from the school and swam near the top throughout his career, retiring on a raft of mundane commendations. The type known at the Academy as a "greasoir." Any other time Oates might have made his annoyance evident, but right now they were too busy saving the ship. Damage control teams had reported a ten-foot gash in the bilge keel. The canvas would stop the leak for now, but would it be enough to get them to Hawaii?

2330 Hours

Later, in the wardroom, Captain Oates heard two sounds that amazed him: the bell sounding the half-hour and a yeoman typing in the sea cabin. Tolling the time of day or night was a naval habit so ingrained that Oates merely nodded in marvel. Chores continued to be performed even in the face of catastrophe. For all he knew, someone was below cleaning the heads. But with the *Florida* locked in mortal combat and grievously wounded, it was nothing less than incredible that bureaucracy persisted with its infernal *typing*.

"Stop that damn racket!"

The typist, one Yeoman Paige, never protested the contrariness of Oates' standing order to type up the ship's logs and other reports daily, even though the captain found the interminable clack-clack-clack unbearable. The typing ceased. The yeoman retreated into the passageway, where he would lurk until Oates was gone and he could resume his seat behind the cumbersome machine.

Oates desperately needed sleep. His arms and legs trembled. Flush, he could not determine if his lightheadedness was due to exhaustion or the drugs the surgeon plied him with. Worst of all, with every step he anticipated the paralyzing agony that had signaled his first attack. Pain that spelled death in no uncertain terms. Under the current stress and circumstances, he knew he would not survive such an ordeal again. The looks the surgeon and Singleton had given him said as much. Yet with Grissom dead and the First an untested commodity, he had no choice but to keep going. Bracing himself on the wash basin, he met the pale reflection in the mirror and saw all the cigarettes, brandy and food he'd ever consumed injected like angels of death into his very flesh. There was more wear and tear, but one consoled oneself for a failed marriage at one's peril. Clasp his hands, Captain Oates bowed and prayed. A knock at the door caused him to jump.

"Come!" he commanded, standing straight.

The first lieutenant entered. "I have that list you wanted."

"Very well...."

In a chilly, unemotional tone, the officer read: "Ensign Dobson, sick bay. Petty Officer Laughton, dead. Ensign Garrett, on shore. Midshipman Waters, dead. Petty Officer Bivens, missing. Petty Officer Simms, wounded by .30 caliber; only slightly, but he washed out before finishing the course. That leaves

Midshipman Beck."

"Beck... yes. A good lad. Is he fit? Garrett gave him some hard hits, for all his losing."

"Bruises. That's all."

"Where is he?"

"Sacking out, sir."

"Have him ready at first light. I'm going to lie down for awhile. The deck's yours."

0500 Hours

Midshipman Beck was as exhausted as a young man could get short of coma. Curled in his hammock, he was locked behind a solid door of dreams:

A dark serpent shot through the forecandle. "Hit the deck for belly inspection!" Beck leaped high in the air, higher than the ceiling, and landed with a loud thud. He pulled up his shirt and waited for the surgeon.

Who turned out to be Ensign Garrett. He sauntered down the line of seamen, thumping their bellies and looking for measles spots. When he reached Beck, he clapped his hand to his head. "Oh Lord, you're a dead man!"

"How do you know that, sir?"

"It says so right here!"

Peering down, Beck saw Garrett was right. The measles had written "DEAD MAN" straight across his stomach.

"I'm dead! Mother will never forgive me!"

When the first lieutenant prodded him awake, Beck turned away, moaning.

"Aw Fust, can't a guy get any sleep around here?"

"Mr. Beck!"

He certainly did not sound like a dream. Twisting around, Beck squinted through the dim light. "Sir? Is it really you?"

"Come on, the captain wants to see you."

"The captain? Then I need to get dressed."

"You're dressed enough."

0530 Hours

Beck raised his chin as the boatswain's mate lowered the heavy collar onto his shoulder. Then he stood so that the rear of the baggy diving suit could be sealed.

Worms of fear crawled through his heart and into his stomach. He was the only one left on board who was certified on the diving suit. That was the short and shit of it. He was not even allowed to put a good face on it by volunteering.

"Mr. Beck, you will report to the boatswain, who will assist you into diving gear. At first light you will go over the side to make certain the collision mat is secure. The starboard screw may be damaged. We want you to look at that, too. Son... this is a job that has to be done. My wholehearted desire is to see you come back unharmed. Every man who can hold a gun will be on deck to cover you. Good luck. That's all."

Might as well be tuna in a tin, he thought as he was helped to the edge of the quarterdeck, just above the diving stage. He was sluggish in his forty-pound lead shoes.

Midshipman Beck had undergone a thorough physical before being allowed to enter submarine training. No one with a short neck or high

complexion was allowed in. Complaints of the head or heart, as well as poor circulation of the blood, were also grounds for refusal. Beck had checked out as a fine, healthy specimen. Which was just as well, because after the helmet was clamped on, the suit would weigh one hundred and sixty pounds.

"Sorry about Midshipman Davis," said the boatswain.

The bout with Garrett was a remote lark next to this--his bruises love-taps from the past. The two people foremost in his thoughts were his mother... and Midshipman Davis.

Fervently, he prayed that Mother Beck would never find out the way he died. Out of respect for them both, the Navy should tell her no more than, "Lost at sea." Better yet: "Died in the line of duty." But he would gladly forgo the latter honor if the Navy saw fit to add, "Eaten in the line of duty." No matter how veiled or tactfully presented, there would be bizarre comical connotations.

Then there was Davis.

How could the son of a bitch turn his back on him, then leave no hope of reconciliation? Beck found himself gritting his teeth in anger, as if by dying Davis had slapped him in the face. Go to hell and no thanks. How many chances did one get to forgive an insult? When Davis disassociated himself from his messmate, Beck's primary response was disbelief. Perhaps Davis had not really meant to turn his back on him--had let a moment's anger and frustration spin into a lengthy grudge out of false pride. After all, would Beck have wanted to share the misfortune if Garrett had singled Davis out instead of him?

Now he would never know. The soreness in his jaw was exacerbated as he ground his teeth. Regret and pain helped dispel his fear.

In the east the sky showed red tints. The old maritime ditty came to him:

Red sky at night,

Sailors' delight;

Red sky in morning,

Sailors take warning.

On the Cliffs of Time

The creature also sensed the approach of dawn. She pulled her red-soaked head from the body of the young male Tu-nel and downed another hunk of flesh. Fighting free of the anchor chain had burned up precious energy. Famished, she attacked the Tu-nel corpse with brute gusto. Only a third of it was left. Once gone, she would have to move on--or sink the *Florida* and pry her open for the morsels inside.

Because it was not only human meat that she smelled.

0534 Hours

"That'll do it," Garrett said, clambering down the side of the barge. He checked the Plimsoll lines. "The two of them'll be enough to fill a stokehold."

A blast of steam from the sea tug confirmed her repairs. Two engineers had worked on the *Iroquois*' pressure valves throughout the night. With help from the Japanese fishermen they were able to work up a head of steam in the hours the marines and stewards loaded coal. When they slid her into the water, she seemed lumpy, like a serene hippo. But she was powerful enough to haul the barges lashed to either side of her. Maneuvering them through the lagoon would be awkward, however. The two Commercial Pacific employees who had piloted her were dead.

Garrett lifted his binoculars and scanned the reef. While the *Florida* was not listing, there was something peculiar about the way she sat in the water. Faint trails of smoke rose from her funnels. Oates was burning wood just to maintain auxiliary power.

Over a hundred men would be left on the island. The rest would go with Garrett. His crew had volunteered piecemeal throughout the night and included Amos Macklin.

"Trying to show me something, Ordinary Seaman Macklin?"

Amos made an extravagant display of hitching up his trousers. "This is where I keep them," he said.

The marines and seamen remaining on the island lashed the three-inch fieldpieces in the tug, one port and one starboard, then watched as Garrett clumsily backed the tug into the lagoon. The barges seemed like monstrous water wings.

He made for the channel.

0550 Hours

Edging slowly off the diving platform, Midshipman Beck grabbed the top spar of the underwater stage. Made up of three spars measuring twenty to twenty-five feet, it was in effect a ladder weighted down with slung shot. To the top spar were attached rope ladders on roller chocks. These enabled the diver to swing the stage close to the ship while scraping barnacles off the hull, but on this occasion Beck was using the stage to slow his descent. It was only from the sea bottom that he would be able to take in the length of the *Florida*.

On reaching the last rung, he took several deep breaths, then looked down to make certain he wouldn't land on something painful. He pushed his feet out and let go.

The suit squeezed him like a giant hand. Nothing at all like the exquisite release from gravity usually experienced by a swimmer. He waited a few moments for his panic to subside, then swiveled slowly.

The *Florida's* keel was a bare twenty feet above him, hovering like a sleeping whale. Barnacles and innumerable scratches marred the red paint of the

bilge keel. He could hear the moan of metal as chain links grated. The water was as clear as an April morning, but--

Where were the fish?

Here and there a silver flash. But no sign of the living shoals that usually brocaded coral reefs.

There was a methodical knocking over his head. A damage control team working on the hull from the inside. There were deeper rumblings from the ship itself, water sucking and burbling at the bilge, coughs and spectral whispers, as though death was pining for him in the distance.

His ears hurt--a result of the different air pressure on the opposite sides of the tympanum, they'd told him in diving school. The instructors had gone into gory detail about caisson disease: loss of vibratile movement and the peculiar purplish rash. Then the cramps. Then the agony. But that all began at two hundred feet and then only as you came up. Beck was in water no more than thirty-five feet deep. It was the aggregate pressure of twenty thousand pounds that made his heart flutter. Added to that was ordinary air pressure.

Forty-thousand pounds. That's what I have on my head. Enough to snap a neck, for certain.

Lifting his heavy lead shoes, he walked under the keel, amazed at how much larger yet simpler a battleship seemed from below. The bilge keel disappeared in the direction of the ram. A bleak expanse. Coming up under the collision mat, he noted whiskery bubbles where it covered the gash. Some leakage, but nothing serious.

Small clouds of sand rolled over his feet as he stepped around the coral outcrops. The suit's air valve mechanism clicked near his ear, sounding like a gull pecking at a clamshell. Silvery bubbles flanked his helmet, making peripheral vision through the small view ports on either side of it difficult. That was all right. He did not want to see the creature swooping down on him. Nothing he could do about it. Better a quick snuff and blackout....

The ocean shifted. The creature was so immense it could be sensed before seen. Beck could feel its enormous bow wave shove at his shoulders. Even before it hove into view, the middy lost control of his bladder.

"No..." he pleaded in the deadening confines of the helmet. With mincing steps he made a small circle.

It came like an underwater cathedral--with a certainty, a god-like ownership of ocean. It swam easily, surrounded by immense silence. Yet once it turned towards Beck, he lost all perspective of it. Coasting just below the surface, its belly snapped the tops off stag horn coral below. It veered away from the *Florida* at the last instant, swam a short distance away, returned, veered off again. Like a shark gauging its prey. Beck wished the ghostly metal hammering inside the hull would stop. He was sure the repair crew was drawing the creature's attention.

The creature glided closer. Beck had no doubt it would clip his air line. He would be suffocated or consumed. He closed his eyes as the great maw opened before him, counted the seconds, knowing there was nothing more he could do. The sea crowded into him, like the mass of young men who'd tossed their caps in the air at graduation. Well, he tried to console himself, at least I'll never have to take the officers exam.

Suddenly he heard...

...engines.

Opening his eyes, he saw no sign of the creature, but the tidal gyrations of the water tugging him this way and that told him it was still close by. He ventured another mincing minuet.

There! The tail swung away from him.

In the direction of a trio of silhouettes cutting the waves overhead. He detected the distant rattle and thud of small arms and artillery. Frantically, he took hold of the guide line and yanked three times.

Nothing happened. Was anyone paying attention to him up there? The air pump was fueled by gasoline. What would happen when the small tank went dry? Would anyone notice?

He tried to lean down to unstrap his weighted shoes, but the bulky suit would allow no more than a brief bow.

He yanked again.

And again.

0610 Hours

Holding the wheel tightly, Garrett was nearly thrown end over end by the impact. "No!" he shouted when a huge crest of water fell over the coal in one of the barges. The worst thing in a hot stokehold was wet coal, smoldering, ready to catch fire any instant.

His dismay was transformed into horror when the creature heaved the forward part of its body down like a landslide onto the barge. The creature was in a fury due to the red gash in its neck, caused by one of the three-inchers.

The tug bucked wildly. The men at the starboard gun were catapulted over the side. Garrett heard their screams even as he was flung against the wall of the pilothouse. While men were lost, the tug gained: a quarter ton of coal, raining down like black hail on the deck as the barge and tug swatted together and then apart in a geometric spasm.

"The barge is sinking!" a marine yelled as the creature slid off into the water. "We'll have to cut loose!"

"The hell we will!"

Like an omen, Amos Macklin appeared on deck. Besides the fishermen manning the engines, he and Garrett were the only sailors on board. Outside of Hart and Singleton, the rest were marines. He had refused to allow the fanatical young man from the ill-fated whaler to come along. It was bad enough hauling two civilians. When William Pegg insisted that he was fit enough to row, Garrett advised him that the only ships going back to the *Florida* were the *Iroquois* and a motor launch. There would be no rowing on the outward leg and he would be unable to help in any event. The young man's face fell and he seemed to disappear before their eyes.

"Mr. Garrett! That hit busted one of the tubes!"

Garrett slapped him on the shoulder. "Can you manage the helm? I have to go over the side."

Amos gaped.

"C'mon, lolly-banger! Can you take it?"

"I piloted a tug in Jacksonville for--"

"Good. Bring the port barge up on those collision mats fo'ard the *Florida*. Not those aft. Got it?"

There was no shame in Amos' fear. They were every man jack of them terrified to their bones.

"Aye, sir."

"You're a credit to your race. Hey! Jarhead! Hand me that ax. If I can't save the barge...."

The marine he was yelling at had an itch to put the ax in Garrett's head, but put it in his hand instead. Hamilton and Singleton came up and asked what they could do to help. "Stay out of my way!" Before they could protest, he was over the side.

"Goddamn!" he shouted the instant he hit the slope of coal.

"She's shipping water!" yelled a marine half-buried in the coal when he was knocked overboard. Garrett helped him finish digging out. His arm was broken. "Give us a boost here!"

Hands reached down from the tug and took hold of the marine. As he hefted the groaning man by the armpits, he noticed a slash of red on the side of the tug. The second marine had been crushed between the two vessels.

So much for him. Now for the barge.

Garrett took up the ax again and started up the hill. At least fifteen tons of

coal remained on the barge. The ensign was loath to lose them. For every two steps, he slid back one as the coal shifted beneath him.

He heard the distinct ring of the engine room telegraph on the tug. Amos was stopping the engines in an attempt to keep the barge from taking on so much water.

His eyes seemed to go stark dry when he saw the whirlpool to starboard. Whenever the creature made a turn in the shallows, cyclonic galaxies appeared on the surface. He caught sight of a fin, then a snout.

"Oh!" came an involuntary shout when one of the three-inchers on the tug thumped, pummeling his ears with the abrupt concussion. From the *Florida* machine gun fire rained down.

Garrett was at the top of the hill of coal when the head erupted from the water and the great neck stretched out.

His body puckered like a walnut. He felt his whole being collapse. The creature appeared quickly, like a ghost popping from nowhere. It moved in like a picture screen falling over. Immediately, all his faith in the duff sauce vanished. He began burrowing into the coal. The hot fetid breath, the rank, innumerable dead, fell over him like a cerecloth. He lost coordination, legs and arms jerked spasmodically. He fell, rolling down the slope away from the tug. The creature followed his progress with an almost disinterested tilt of its neck. Looking up from the gunwale, Garrett noted a discolored patch of skin around the creature's jaw and suspected it was caused by shell-blast. The third marine was nowhere in sight. He pressed his feet against the gunwale and shoved himself head-first into the coal. He was suffocating in an instant and had to pull out.

He squinted through the coal dust pasted to his face. He could feel the barge jerk repeatedly as the serpent bumped against it.

No more gunfire from the *Florida*, now but fifty yards away. It surprised the ensign that the gunners should be afraid of hitting him. Maybe they thought he could still save the barge.

A sudden calm came over Garrett--a numbness like the first moment of sleep. Shifting uneasily on the coal, he stood and raised his eyes. The creature stared back at him. It struck Garrett that the men in the ship had a grandstand

view of what was happening. They had seen him grovel. They had witnessed his loss against Beck. Now he would make up for it--show them what balls were all about. He recalled the boxer he'd seen as a boy dying of heart failure in the ring. A scrapper to the end. "Let's hear it, boys! Fanfare and epitaph!" Then he turned roundly on the beast and said, "Fuck you, and let's both go to hell."

The ax had fallen down the slope with him and lay half-buried near his feet. It had been his intention to hack the cables if the coal could not be saved, but the barge was no longer shipping water. The gunwale was indeed damaged, but coal had slid against it from the inside, in effect, shoring it up. He had to get out. Wishing he was already dead and free of worry, he pulled out of his hole and began climbing back the way he'd come, grabbing the ax as he went. His skin prickled. He knew the creature was still staring at him. He could smell its breath. It seemed to exhale an entire ancient catacomb from its lungs, a stench so awful Garrett retched. But he kept going.

"Okay, Mr. Pegg, let's see if your magic elixir really works." The sheer presence of the beast was like a heavy boulder on his back--a weight that suddenly increased.

A heavy thump sent Garrett sprawling. Shouting, almost screaming, he pushed up onto his knees and crawled--until a painful nudge sent him sprawling once again.

Twisting on his side, he found himself gaping at the creature's snout only inches away, saw the head flex with disgust when the creature caught a strong whiff of the duff sauce.

So William Pegg's Portuguese repellent actually worked! But how well? Dare he risk a swing of the ax? With infinite fear and caution, he rose and braced his feet as well as he could. He breathed like a man with a sack over his head. The creature's jaw was so massive he could not reach far enough beyond it to strike one of its eyes. But he could give its snout a good sting....

The barge abruptly lurched and listed. Garrett heard the tug's engines pick up.

The cables had been cut!

The *Iroquois* was pulling away.

Who had given the order? Amos? That galled. Condemned to his fate by an ebony steward.

He glanced at the ax in his hand and wondered what the hell could have possibly possessed him. He dropped it and began tunneling backwards into the coal, like a toad in the mud.

The creature watched him. It seemed almost thoughtful. It sniffed at Garrett again. There was a sudden, mighty sneeze.

The creature was gone by the time Garrett cleared the mucous from his eyes.

0643 Hours

The ocean had gonged resoundingly when the serpent pounded the barge. Midshipman Beck heard the muffled crack of wood, saw black curls of coal dust underneath the hull. He had no doubt it would smash the barge to flinders, as well as the tug.

Jesus, what's wrong with them up there? he wondered as he pulled at the guide rope for the hundredth time. He could think of a boatswain who was going to get his head knocked in once he was topside.

If he lived that long.

He saw the creature swoop away from the barge and screamed with frustration. The perfect opportunity for escape was gone.

The ocean pulsed. He found himself being rocked back and forth like a sea fan. When he tried to turn, he was lifted off his feet by the current. An enormous brownish-green blur passed before him. The seabed twirled underneath him as he was stopped cold--then spun in the opposite direction. Metal creaked overhead as the *Florida* shifted above the vortex.

Played like a pendulum, Beck swung down and up as the creature made an

elliptical orbit of the battleship. The wild movement was so unnerving he didn't notice when his air stopped.

Bright lights alternated with blank patches. The undersea world, already alien, became even less comprehensible. He listened for the click of the air valve and failed to hear it. He looked overhead for the ship's silhouette--and saw only sand and coral.

I'm turning a loop! he thought with fearful amazement.

Not for long. The lead shoes dragged him over and down. He was prone and falling when he doubled across a chimney of coral. Beck felt as though a raw bite had been ripped from his gut. Numb with pain, he could only watch helplessly as the sea bottom fell away. He could not decide if he was going in the right direction. To his right, he saw the creature--

No! It was the--

He slammed against the hull, his metal helmet banging like a bell. He saw the forward hawser hanging down not a foot away from him. He reached. Missed. As he drifted down, the chain sloped away, almost out of reach. Last-chance desperation gave him the strength to grab for it again. His gloved fingers locked on one of the links. As he drew himself to the hawser the tangled air hose yanked short. His head snapped back. Only the fact that the hawser was kept religiously clean allowed him to keep his grip. Even a hint of harbor slime would have caused his fingers to slip. He brought his legs up and wrapped them tightly around the thick chain. As he worked upwards, slack gathered in the line, making the ascent easier.

Still... no air. He saw the undulating glitter of the sun on the surface. Higher he pulled, the last breath of oxygen in his helmet spent. Limbs and lungs felt afire. His legs loosened. He could not kick. Only his arms could save him. And they were numb and pointless. He saw the vague shroud of death and shrugged inwardly. With mild astonishment he realized he could still work his hands. Might as well make one last push....

He broke the surface next to the ram. The realization that he was so close to staying alive spurred his panic. He reached for the fly screws on his helmet but could not get a grip. A dark veil covered his vision. He saw the ram an arm's length away. Encumbered and nearly asphyxiated, he might as well have been

facing a chasm, but he noticed the movements of the creature were causing the ship to swing at its anchor. If he could time his move as the ram neared him....

There! He saw his moment and leapt. Landing, he immediately began sliding down the deadly snub nose. Sweet Jesus, he was underwater again!

His hands scooted down the slippery incline. For an instant, he was terrified he would slip off the end. But the ram leveled off and he was able to keep his hold. Crawling towards the prow, he again broke the surface. He slammed his faceplate against the upper slope of the ram. After three tries, the glass shattered.

The cuts on his face were like blessed snowflakes. He arched back, gasping deeply, as though trying to suck air off the horizon. He was given a start when he saw a ghastly giant staring down on him.

It was the *Florida's* bronze figurehead.

His laughter was cut short when he saw the body. What was left of the boatswain bobbed in the shadow of one of the sponsons. Only then did Beck realize how much more dangerous it was standing out on the diving platform than it had been to dive.

0646 Hours

When Gilroy came topside and saw Midway in the distance all the stories he'd ever heard of men jumping ship on some exotic isle swam through his imagination. In his haste he did not stop to consider the size of the refuge--that a handful of men could find him in less than a day, a full complement in less than an hour. His delusion made miles out of sandy yards. He could not wait to escape into the perceived hinterland.

What was that to starboard?

He went to the edge of the deck--and for the first time saw the beast. It was twisting down, going eye-to-eye with Ensign Garrett on the barge. Gilroy felt as

if the top of his head was coming off. Lord God, Lord Almighty, the golden scarab in the Almighty Flesh.

And there was the ensign--damn fool trying to stare God down.

There could be only one reason for God to be on earth. Gilroy had no doubt of what would happen to him at the Second Coming.

He's come for me.

Looking at the damage around him, the crushed casements, the scorched superstructure--and smelling the distinctive waft of death from the bodies still trapped--Gilroy realized the *Florida* could not stand up to the creature. *Of course! Who can stand up to God?* He subdued the voice at the back of his mind. *One cannot escape from God, either.*

And there was his opportunity, right under his nose. The landing platform was out. Next to it was a small motor launch brought back by volunteers from Midway. The two men inside were working on the engine with frantic haste, though there was more fumbling than finesse in their mechanics. They were supposed to motor out and help transfer the cables from the barge. Their nervousness was understandable. On the landing stage were two other men holding ropes--as well as the remains of the three men who had tended the umbilicus and air pump engine that kept Beck alive.

Everyone else on the quarterdeck was preoccupied with events to starboard. That left Gilroy with only a handful of husky sailors to overcome.

All unsuspecting.

The force that urged him was not opium, but withdrawal from opium. His strength was sudden, unexpected. He felt as though two halves of his being, long separated, had rejoined. With wholeness came complete focus and utter concentration of purpose. In his mind he was already jumping out of the launch and wading ashore, smooth cool clam shells massaging his bare feet, sand squeezing between his toes. Only a few nonentities stood in his way.

He took up a monkey wrench left near a casement by a damage control team. Dashing to the aft gangway, he raced down the grated steps.

"Is it coming back?" one of the men on the landing asked.

Gilroy's answer was a blow from the heavy wrench that caved in the young man's skull. The other man on the stage made confused movements. Although the air pump belt was broken, the generator continued to chug, the belt whipping loosely, the exhaust snarling puffs of smoke. On the near side of the stage were two rifles. Gilroy dropped the wrench and swooped one up before the bluejacket on the landing could reach him. The way he drew back the bolt, the sailor could tell he was not going to waste time with a warning. As the gun came up, he leapt into the water. When the men in the boat saw him swinging in their direction, they followed suit.

To Gilroy's elation, the launch's engine was idling smoothly. Everything was falling into place. He cast off and started the launch in a wide semicircle abaft the *Florida*. He began to laugh. Perhaps some men were destined to escape their fate.

0702 Hours

The creature continued to orbit the *Florida*, the tug and barges like a one-man tribe besieging a wagon train. It was a bizarre, deadly-looking ritual that the serpent frequently interrupted, coming in to nudge the tug or the loose barge.

The barge on which Garrett was stranded floated sluggishly away from the *Florida*. A few glimpses were caught of the ensign scrambling across the black hill of coal. The barge might take a long time sinking. Or it might suddenly plummet underwater. Either way, Garrett's situation was desperate. Twice the creature returned and nosed through the coal heap, as if reconsidering the ensign's palatability. Soon after, Garrett vanished from sight.

Three-inch fire from the tug pestered the creature intermittently, but did not dissuade it from giving the *Iroquois* a few rough shoves. Amos found it difficult enough handling the tug and its lopsided cargo. Every time he eased close to the *Florida*, the serpent pressed its brow to the larboard beam and nudged it away. Amos found it frightening--and fascinating. It was as if the creature was treating the tug and loose barge and the battleship like bowling

pins, setting them up in just the right way--so it could knock them down in a preferred order. Its strength was amazing. The spokes of the wheel were forced out of his hands again and again, though the creature seemed to be giving them no more than a tap. At one point, he was thrown off the wheel so hard he was certain some of his hand bones were broken.

0713 Hours

Captain Oates was utterly mystified by the creature's behavior. Not attacking, not retreating. It was like the soul of a storm--on the verge of blowing itself out, then coming up again. He watched it carefully, searching for method.

The creature paused next to the ship and studied an object floating on the water. Oates focused his binoculars on it... and finally understood.

"Goddammit! *Goddammit!*"

The junior officers nearest him jumped back, startled by the almost maniacal ferocity of the captain's rage.

"Our own *garbage!* It's sniffing at us like a dog at a pail. Goddammit! Grissom! Grissom!"

The first lieutenant cleared his throat. "Aye, sir."

"Oh." Oates swept the perspiration from his face with an angry hand. "Notify the galleys: no more scraps over the side. Nothing. Not a bone, not a can."

"Does that include our dead, sir?"

Oates stared at him.

"Aye aye, sir."

Oates returned his attention to the tug and barge. Breakfast scraps were

strewn in their lee. Whoever was piloting the tug was maneuvering the barge over rinds, bones, guts and whatever else was left over from the morning and the night before. All unsuspecting, they had been chumming the sea.

"Can't you bring that fo'ard six-incher to bear?" he demanded of the ordnance officer.

One of the midshipmen on the wing spoke, but Oates did not hear him. The creature had begun swinging towards the tug again--but broke off abruptly. Its attention had been captured by the small motor launch speeding in the direction of the atoll.

"Who is that?" Oates demanded, unable to determine the man's rank through his binoculars.

"Sir!" said the OOD. He had just received the report of Gilroy's murderous activity and his theft of the boat.

"Not now, man!" Oates watched as the creature made a great gliding turn and bore down on the launch; although it had already covered half the distance to the lagoon, the creature closed the distance rapidly.

"That poor, brave lad..." Oates murmured, certain the man was sacrificing himself so that the coal could be loaded.

The *Florida* shuddered as Amos nudged the barge against the collision mats lashed to her lee.

"Stand by for coaling!" Oates commanded. "If we waste this opportunity, the ghost of that man will haunt us forever."

0718 Hours

When it became obvious that he could not out-race the creature, Gilroy swung about hard in an attempt to jink out of its path.

Suddenly, he heard laughter. He jerked his head around, certain someone was coming up behind him. But he was alone.

The creature dove only once. For most of the brief chase its long neck was raised far out of the water, bobbing like a football player trying to tackle a running back. There was an almost playful bounce to its maneuvers, as though it was happy to have such a lively target. Before Gilroy could complete his turn, he was forced back towards the reef.

He was being corralled.

Again, the laughter.

"If there's someone back there, give me a hand!" the stoker screamed.

The laughter was only briefly interrupted. When it resumed, Gilroy chanced another backward glance. All he saw was the creature, looming thirty yards off his quarter, making a strange tweaky noise with each dip of its head.

Laughter--*forward!*

"Ah!" Gilroy cried, finally cognizant of the source. "It *is* funny!" He turned the wheel hard again, facing into the sun's golden scarab. It was the revelation he found so humorous. You did not know how stacked the game against God was until He came down--as a corporeal Being--to get you. All of Gilroy's prayers were shouted back into his ears--and they were the funniest things Gilroy had ever heard. He might as well have cursed the Almighty from the beginning, for all the good prayer had done him. It made no difference.

The boat's wake was broken as the creature swept through on the turn. For an instant Gilroy thought he might slip by its right flank.

The serpent abruptly juttred its head sideways, brushing his port beam and staving the gunwhale. The engine gave a mechanical shout, flooded, choked, died. Gilroy was flung over the wheel and nearly slid over the prow. He clambered back just as the creature snapped at him. The teeth clanged like a castle gate. Gilroy cowered behind the motor housing in the center of the boat. Water washed over the broken gunwhale and sucked around the housing. Leaning down, the creature nibbled at the varnished wood. Then it hinged its jaws wide and plunged through the boat, taking half the boat and all of the man

to the deepest crater of hell.

0721 Hours

With the barge secured to the *Florida*, the *Iroquois'* passengers climbed, rolled and slid their way over the coal to reach the nearest judas ladder. Hamilton Hart stormed up, then waited impatiently for Singleton.

"Come on, man. We still have the better part of a day. If we can get enough men on this, we can finish before dark."

It was only a short distance to the deck, but the rungs had been twisted during the last attack. Hart was compelled to reach down and help the doctor up the metal twirl.

"We have to see the captain," Singleton began as the first lieutenant approached them. "Or Grissom."

"Lieutenant Grissom is dead. I'm acting executive officer. Captain Oates is quite busy at the moment. So am I. We have to get this coal loaded." He shifted them to the side with a brusque sweep of his arm.

With desperate haste men jumped into the barge with handfuls of canvas sacks. Once filled, they were loaded into the cargo net. While the net was swung over the open cargo hatch, firemen in the hold began plying their rakes and trimmers.

A sharp toot from the *Iroquois* caused the men abovedecks to look up. Amos Macklin stepped out of the pilothouse and pointed at the second barge, drifting sluggishly towards the reef. It still might be saved.

"Good God, one of the Coloreds is piloting the tug," said the first lieutenant. But he lifted his megaphone and shouted, "We're secure over here! See if you can swing out and recover the other barge!"

The marines still on the tug milled dubiously in the waist for a moment,

then resignedly cast off. Amos brought the tug about. The barge lashed to the *Florida* rocked in the sea tug's wake as its powerful twin screws bit into the ocean.

0740 Hours

Amos did not feel like a brave man. Courage meant facing something comprehensibly dangerous. The beast was certainly dangerous, but there was nothing else comprehensible about it. It was an exaggerated nightmare, a mammoth spook from the dark depths. Everything every boy had ever feared on the other side of the covers, outside the door, down the road, inside the black cave. A part of him resisted as he veered hard to starboard. His muscles strained, as if he was maneuvering an ocean liner instead of a tug. He wondered if the Japanese below would have stopped feeding coal to the boiler if they knew he was leaving the relative safety of the battleship.

But the *Florida* herself was starved for coal. A pittance would not do, either for battle or escape. The single barge would supply no more than half a day's life for the ship.

On the second barge, at the summit of the coal heap, Garrett stood facing away from the *Iroquois*. His arms were draped at his side, as if he had no energy left to lift them. Amos threw a guilty glance at the marines behind him. They had not been able to see the far side of the barge when they cut her loose. When the creature's head disappeared behind the coal, they assumed Garrett was done for. In a kind of frantic communal inquiry, Amos and the marines had decided to cut the cables and their losses. From the bridge of the *Florida* they could see Garrett moving on the barge, but no one had thought to tell the men on the tug about it.

Count on Garrett to come back and haunt them.

About a hundred yards beyond the barge, the creature swept through the remains of the motor launch, leaving a sinuous wake. Every man on the tug now knew how deceptive the distance was. The serpent could cover a hundred yards in less time than a goldfish crossing a tub. The marines manned the unlimbered and unwheeled fieldpieces.

In the opposite direction they saw the ship's surviving motor launch racing towards the *Florida*. Amos thought he saw bundled forms on stretchers. This was truly an act of faith that the battleship would win the fight against the beast and that the wounded from Midway could be better tended on board.

Oddly, in spite of his gut-ache fear, Amos found himself wondering about the last time he'd had sole command of a vessel--although he was skipper only in the barest sense. It was while rowing up that Virginia creek to the tiny settlement where he met Methuselah. So close and hot. But that small trickle fed the James River. The James fed the Chesapeake. The Chesapeake, the Atlantic. And the Atlantic was but a limb of the ocean body, all feeding and all fed. The serpent was part of the uninterrupted skin and being of water. The horror of Midway would be considered the terror of Tanner Creek or the pond that fed the creek or the clouds above that rained down. An interconnected system of fear and wonder.

And it was then Amos realized why he was so drawn to Methuselah. The old man was a reminder of what no man should ever forget. Everyone was a part of the sea. *And God said, Let there be a firmament in the midst of the waters; and let it divide the waters from the waters.* Only later in Genesis did the land appear. The way men like Singleton were talking these days, life was first bred in the sea. And while Amos held no truck with that, he knew the connection was vital. Methuselah was a not-so-diplomatic reminder that no matter how far inland one went, one was still a part of the spume and lower depths.

And a simple creek could lead you to monstrous things. Amos squinted through the wheelhouse window. He could see Garrett, still on top of the heap. Although the barge was behaving sluggishly, she seemed to have stopped sinking. Perhaps the damage had been minor. If so, it was possible the coal had shifted over and was actually plugging the leak. Such freak salvation would not last long, once the coal itself began absorbing water in quantity. Slowly, Amos approached, gauging the spot where the fenders would brush.

The ensign's back was still to the tug. He was watching the creature as it sculled in aimless circles at the edge of the reef, its great animal mass causing the waves to boom twice their normal height against the exposed coral. Amos was astonished to see Garrett stuff his hands casually into his pockets, as if he was at a zoo watching the chimps instead of facing death without protective bars. Then he heard the tug approaching and turned around. Amos eased closer. There

was only a hundred feet between them. He felt a peculiar motion underneath. The tug had begun drifting at the stern as it lost way. Unfamiliar with the craft, Amos was afraid to ring for more speed. He had visions of ramming the barge accidentally and sending it lock, stock and ensign to the bottom. He glanced up, half hoping Garrett would mime instructions to him.

He was miming, all right. Garrett's hands were out of his pockets now and on his hips. His gaze was focused directly on the wheelhouse and his expression was undisguised disgust. There was no mistaking the gesture: *The nigger's come to save me, ho-ho-ho.*

"The bastard!"

A marine popped his head into the wheelhouse. "Bring her up slow! We might still can save her. Least, we can get the ensign off."

"Yeah!" Amos yelled, then reached for the engine room telegraph and rang 'ahead one third.' He began swinging to port--away from the barge.

"What're you doin'?"

"Trying another angle."

Garrett's reaction was everything Amos could have hoped for. His mouth shot open in an idiotic gawk. With his bruises still shiny, he looked like a silly Halloween mask.

"'Nuther angle hell! You're movin' away!"

"Aw, fat off a hog. Don't fret. Just want to get abaft her some." He turned the wheel hard over and came up on the starboard side. To the marines on board it looked as if Amos had purposefully put the tug between the barge and the creature, so as to protect the coal. They would have preferred a little less audacity, although they admired the intent.

Garrett knew better, because Amos told him. His broad grin was as unmistakable as a trumpet blast in the ensign's ear.

"Catch the line!" one of the marines yelled.

At first, Garrett did not move. He gave Amos a long, deadly look that promised things to come. He seemed disposed to let the tug slip by without taking hold of the hawsers--until a shout caused him to look past the *Iroquois*.

The creature was moving away from the reef.

"Throw it! Throw it!" he screeched, scrambling down the coal heap. He caught the messenger-tipped rope and quickly had the hawser in his hands. The water near the reef was choppy. The cocoa-mat fenders banged perilously. In his haste to make fast the line Garrett nearly fell between the barge and tug. Amos discerned a frantic volley of oaths. He shouted some oaths of his own in return.

Lifting up its tall neck into the intensely bright sky, the creature paused between the lagoon entrance and the tug. It seemed undecided.

On the Cliffs of Time

No one could have known that the mother was indeed puzzled. All the violence of the day and the night preceding had taken its toll. Temporarily, she had been confused by the dead Tu-nel just outside the channel, at the bottom of the reef. Sensing death, she angled downward and nibbled gently at the giant corpse. Not breaking the hide, but goading--making certain the dead creature could not wake up. Only after floating overhead several minutes did she remember. Yes, that was her daughter. And the dullness of grief put her into a kind of somnolent reverie.

She paused over the body several more times, reinforcing her sorrow. Each pass, there was a gap between sight and recognition. Given one more day, she would not see her daughter--only a carcass. And since the Tu-nel were as much scavengers as hunters, she would begin to feed on her offspring.

For now, however, a bitter woefulness settled on her. Yes, that had been her daughter. Even the rough groundswell could not flex her heavy, dead limbs. The mother could not have pinpointed the cause of death, nor the culprits in the stricken battleship. Yet she sensed the menace, the way hornets can sense the vindictiveness of the boy who put the .22 slug through their nest--and return fire

with a vengeance.

There were other targets, as well. Less noisy and disputatious. And as she moved away from the barge and tug and shouldered her way through the channel, a fundamental curiosity prompted her. She had not looked in on Sand Island for some time. What were the sprawling little men up to?

0800 Hours

The ensign's words had come as a shock:

"No. You stay here. Every man has to count, and you'd be no help."

About as succinct and cutting a remark William Pegg had ever felt--and this after having lived on the *Lydia Bailey* with Chandry and the purser. He stood back, appalled. His wounded hand suddenly throbbed. Sympathetic looks from Dr. Singleton did not help. For the first time, Pegg felt truly mutilated.

What happened afterwards did not help. A man with a thick German accent came up to him.

"Boy, I need you. Come this way."

Since it was the only request for help forthcoming, William followed. His doubts multiplied when the man with the guttural voice said, "I watched over one man dying last night. I can't find Enderfall and I can't watch over another one. Here...." He pointed at a man lying on the sand. From ten yards William could hear his delirious thrashing. From ten feet he could smell the wound. Close up, Sergeant Ziolkowski lay in a block of shade improvised by Lieber. William wondered if he had also been pulled out of a whaleboat by the crew of the *Florida*.

"Sit with him. When he wants water, here's the canteen. When the suns comes around, keep his head in the shade with that." He nodded at a barrel bracket with canvas slung between its supports. "You can do that? You won't up and leave him?"

The boy spent a long moment staring down at the wounded marine, then nodded. "It wasn't a week past somebody sat next to me when I was like this. I don't care if...." He looked out towards the lagoon, a bleak image of Garrett in mind. No, not all sailors were like the ensign. Just as all mariners were not Lucifer's own carbuncle, like Chandry, or comparative saints, like Lead Foot. "I had a friend who died on the *Lydia Bailey*. I wish I could've sat with him."

"Good."

Lieber walked away without another word to William or a glance at Ziolkowski. It was true. He was temporarily drained of compassion, after sitting by helplessly as Ace died. Besides, he had a notion of going aloft again. If the creatures returned to the island and the wind played fair, he might be able to get right up in the face of one of them. Ace had shown a good shot could put out one of their eyes. Two good shots could blind the big one completely.

Pegg had never been on an atoll before. He was surprised by the sharpness of the coral sand when he sat. Completely unlike the kind beaches of the East Coast. He squinted in the direction of the *Florida* but could see nothing beyond the high spume of the breakers.

"That road's infested with Chink bandits, Admiral. I wouldn't put my trust in *her* escort. Like my pappy told me, might's well put a gun to your head soon as trust a woman. That's twice as true with royalty."

"What did you say?" William asked.

"I can scare up some horses from the Legation Guard. Twenty men. How's that sound?"

William stared at the marine, fascinated. The man was somewhere else--just as William had been while on the whaleboat, holding discourse with gulls and unseen fish. He looked closely at the sergeant's broken leg and the rude blood-soaked bandage that covered the bone that had pierced the skin. A dreadful sight, but no less awful than Pegg's hand, which had stank to the sky before the surgeon saved it. He was suddenly angry with the German for assuming the man would die. He could be saved! True, the second motor launch had been almost overloaded with wounded, but why in God's name hadn't they taken him out on the tug?

Garrett. The ensign insisted every man count. To him, the sergeant would be just so much useless meat.

Ziolkowski continued to murmur. William could make no sense of it. He leaned forward, but could pick up only snatches of sentences, isolated oaths.

It was as much a memory as a dream. Ziolkowski was with Rear Admiral Robley Evans, no less, under whom he had served on the China Station. The admiral had been invited to the Imperial Court, twelve miles outside Peking. His party was carried the entire way in green sedan chairs, the native coolies tireless under their load. The Chinese insisted the admiral be escorted by their own cavalry. Ziolkowski had seen the local levies and did not think much of them. They certainly could not have had any of the old Mongolian blood in them. They spent as much time falling out of the saddle and remounting as they did riding.

The Empress Dowager conceded Evans a lone American horseman.

Ziolkowski.

Nothing extraordinary occurred, yet there was something about that day the sergeant would never forget. The ambience, perhaps. The long dusty road. The palace with its broad silk swatches of imperial yellow. Or the rainstorm during the ride back. Water falling on the lepers begging at the roadside. The Chinese cavalrymen fell off their mounts in sequence like the carnival ducks at the Chicago Exposition.

The rain... that was it. Cutting the awful clouds of dust that choked them. Blessed relief. And deep breaths....

He opened his eyes. "Who are you?"

"Bill Pegg."

"You from the *Florida*?"

"I was on a whaler. The monsters sunk it."

"Sunk a whaler. Yeah, I can see it." The clarity that accompanied Ziolkowski's words began to cloud over.

William could see the delirium beginning to return. "Hey, what's *your* name?"

"First Sergeant Stanislaw Ziolkowski. Some call me Gunnery Sergeant Ziolkowski, but that's just a nick. There's only one real gunnery sergeant in the whole Corps, and you're not looking at him."

"You got anyone around here you want to talk to?"

"You mean there's others left alive?"

"See for yourself. Let me help you up."

"Wait a minute." Then with astonishing force he bellowed, "Enderfall! I know you're close by. Get your ass over here!"

Almost miraculously, an apparition arose from the scraggle of grass and sand. The man who approached was tall and skinny. His eyes were red. "Top?" he said in a small voice.

"Jesus, Enderfall... you been *crying*? Damn sexual deviant."

"I thought you were dying, Top."

"I probably am, but don't say you were crying over me. Give me a hand. I want to see what's going on."

Embarrassed by the howl of pain forced from him when Enderfall sat him up, he spent several moments grousing at things in general and Enderfall in particular. Then his eyes widened. "Look at all these men! Must be a hundred. We've got a goddamn brigade, compared to what we had before." He hailed a dejected marine slouching past them. "Hey, snapper! Who's in charge of all these Leathernecks?"

"Captain of the Marines, off the *Florida*."

"Where is he?"

"I heard he got killed on board."

"All right, who's next in line?"

"Lieutenant Forster."

"And?"

"He's dead, too."

"You ever been stationed on *land*, snapper? Got any NCOs in the neighborhood? I mean any that can still piss in the morning?"

"Just Corporal Slayton. All the rest--"

"Marine pie. I know all about marine pies, snapper. We've had our fill of them around here. Go find Slayton and bring him to me."

"I don't know where he is right this moment."

"That's why I said 'find' him, snapper."

"All right, sarge." The marine shuffled away.

"Jesus fucking lobster brain. I hope they aren't all that dumb."

William was amazed at the sense of power that emanated from him. It was difficult to recognize the feverish ranter of a half hour ago. He shifted with discomfort and embarrassment on his makeshift bed.

"Now, the two of you--get me a clean pair of pants. And, uh, something to wipe this shit off with. And make me up a stretcher. If what I have in mind comes off, you'll be toting me around--so make it handy. Young sailor, I see your hand--"

"I can tie the stretcher to my wrist."

"Good man."

"Top," Enderfall began, "shouldn't you rest--"

"And get me some of those blue pills out the boat. I feel like someone's got a saw on my leg already."

As they were leaving to do his bidding, Corporal Slayton came up.

"You're in command?"

"We're waiting for the tug to come back and take us off."

"You must've done boot in California. Marines don't wait for anything. If they do, they're sent to live with the gooney birds."

The corporal made the mistake of smiling.

"Corporal, I may be flat on my ass, but I'm in charge here now. *Verstehen?*"

"Well, now--"

"No 'well-nows' about it. You and your flea shit hats. Marines been on a boat too long, I get doubts about them. Been living soft with the plebes. When those serpent bastards come back, we're not going to be pissy in the missy. Assemble the men next to the warehouse. Now! Or I'll see you shit nothing but prune juice the rest of your life."

The corporal didn't know what Ziolkowski meant by that. But it sounded ominous enough and he scampered away.

"My leg... ah shit, my leg. And here's my Rexer." He studied the damaged weapon and sighed. "But you've got one more battle in you, Stanislaw. By God...." He wiped away his tears before anyone could see.

0820 Hours

Lieber had watched and memorized every step of Hart's operation. How to prepare coal gas in the large wood retorts. How to set up the net while inflating the envelope. He was amazed when he heard Ziolkowski was gathering the men at the warehouse, but he ignored the call. He tried to get some of the marines from the *Florida* to help him ready the balloon for flight, but all they wanted to

do was argue about the uselessness of the idea. So he went to the Japanese and Chinese who had not volunteered as stokers on the tug. The Chinese could not help. They had found Bonehead's cache of opium and were lost to oblivion. But the Japanese were clear-headed and willing. They had seen the way Lieber sat up half the night with Ace as he died--a consummate act of friendship for one of their own. They responded enthusiastically to the German's request.

They deftly spread out the net and envelope while Lieber heated the coal and filled the retorts. Then the hose was connected and inflation of the balloon was begun.

An hour later, he was disconnecting Hart's antenna and reflector from the car and casting off the land anchor. He took with him a Springfield and ammunition, plus some grenades. If nothing else, he could employ himself usefully as a lookout. But if the chance came, he would do what damage he could. Death to tyrants!

Before the captive line was half paid out, he was waving a red-bordered signal flag. The Japanese below saw him point towards the lagoon.

"The big one's coming back!"

They could not hear him, but they understood. The fishermen ran to warn the marines.

1005 Hours

"We got enough jigaboos here to start a plantation."

"Sergeant, these ship stewards volunteered for this mission."

"Yeah. We got enough jigaboos here, don't we?"

While Lieber was preparing the balloon, Ziolkowski had spent the same hour verbally whipping the *Florida's* contingent with enough vitriol to fuel a cruiser. If he could not parade on their buttocks as he'd done his ragtag rifle

team, he could at least make sure they felt the Devil lick their ass--with a notion to bite.

"I've never seen more joints pulled in my life than you ninnies dickin' in the sand," the sergeant hollered at the top of his lungs. Although his leg was still on fire, he felt much better with a blue pill in him and a change of trousers. He had been dismayed by the amount of shit he had smeared himself with in the depths of his fever. Infinitely worse, though, was the fact that Enderfall and the boy had had to cut his pants off, and then practically shear the feces off him like wool off a merino. He cursed endlessly, but only to release the pain. But he managed to bite off every derogatory comment intended for Enderfall--not only because he desperately needed the private's aid at this juncture, but also because he'd reached a startling realization: Even chicken shit could have heart. Ziolkowski admired men who gave it their all, no matter how dumb or futile their intentions. He had admired the Boxers at Chefoo. Wearing silly-assed totems that were supposed to protect them from bullets, they had charged into the European and American guns and been massacred. Unlike most of his peers, who considered the Boxers irresistibly stupid, Ziolkowski's heart had beat with admiration for them. True, he still considered them an inferior breed. But so were horses--and a thoroughbred could be magnificent.

He could not put Enderfall--who was, after all, a sexual deviant--in the same category. But in his half-assed way he did the best he could with what poor material he was born with. And in the end, what more could one ask from a man?

So he stifled his sarcasm as Enderfall cleaned off his buttocks and crotch with a damp rag. Although all of this was performed out of sight of the marines gathering around the warehouse, he still had to brace himself against the embarrassment of being washed and dressed like a helpless toddler.

Had the *Florida's* marines seen any of this, it would have been impossible to maintain his pose as a martinet. Certainly, Ziolkowski would not have been able to use one of his pet lines:

"I never saw such a collection of numbnuts in all my years. I bet you'd shit in your pants if your mother poured milk."

A daring comment from a man propped on a stretcher. Yet the sergeant was

a man possessed. He couldn't believe his luck. Yes, his leg would be lopped off the instant a surgeon came within arm's reach, but ranked before him were over a hundred marines and sailors. And they were his. Not another NCO in sight, the chickenshit corporal excepted. And with the serpents owning the local waters, the nearest commissioned officer was as far away as one could desire.

"Sergeant, they took our three-inchers out with the tug. To protect the coal."

"That makes sense. Coal's more important than a marine. Besides, they left us an English three-pounder."

"And only five rounds for it. Rifles aren't any use against those things. I think you know that."

"This man speaking is Corporal Slayton. You all know Corporal Slayton. He's served with you on the *Florida* for well nigh how many months? By the by, how many of you are fresh from Parris? Any of you have Dandburg for boot? Do any of you have hair on your balls yet?"

Bullshit, Ziolkowski told himself. *Bullshit. I'm not a marine anymore. Not much of a man, either. How can I force these men to do what they have to do in order to survive?* But as he continued to bark at them, he realized these men were straight as ramrods. They were heeding him. Amazing. He knew he could only influence them to the extent that they allowed themselves to be influenced. If only he could pace their ranks, look them in the eye. Why were they listening?

And then he knew. These men hoped to survive. The conviction that they would be punished if they refused to obey was part of that hope, because punishment would come only if they survived. They looked like odd birds to the old sergeant. Marines serving on warships wore different uniforms from those at the Stations. On land, the uniform was khaki with a broad campaign hat reminiscent of the ten gallons worn by cowboys. But broad rims were not practical in the narrow passageways of a capital ship. Hence the adoption by waterbound marines of small caps almost identical to those worn by naval officers, along with a blue uniform to help them meld with the crew. To Ziolkowski they smacked of something less than true gut-marines. For show, not fight. But that was what he had: jigaboo sailors and hothouse soldiers.

He meant to make the most of them.

"You're right. Rifles haven't done much so far. Corporal Slayton! Have your gun crew fall out and the rest sound off by fours!"

The marines and sailors, at port arms, sounded off. With a grandiose flourish Ziolkowski dubbed each group a company.

"This isn't how we're organized," Slayton grouched. "It isn't how we've trained."

"Listen up, all of you! We're dealing with something men have probably seen before, but never lived to tell. Or were never believed. What I can tell you we're *not* dealing with is a pack of geniuses. They can be shrewd sometimes. But they can be stupid as dogshit, too."

He told them his plan.

Playing sleight-of-hand with an enemy was old hat. What scared the men in the four improvised companies was the cost. Ziolkowski wanted them to buy time--the most expensive thing in the temporal world. They would be risking their lives for something no one could see: an amorphous chart of things to come. They listened to the sergeant because he was offering a gamble better than certain death.

And then the Japanese came racing into their ranks.

"It's coming from the north!" Ziolkowski shouted, putting a rein on the sudden fear and confusion. Now was the most critical moment for the Top. In a trice he had to decide who was the most capable of leading the four companies he'd created. Instinct and experience fused in a miraculous instant.

"You. Redhead. Do you know your signals? Good. You're red. Take A Company to that hill and form a file. You with the buck teeth. Do you know your signals? Good. You're green. Take B Company and form up at the distillery. Try to stay hid behind the dunes. Both of you--when you hear the center firing, hold back. No firing until you get the signal. Advance on the flank. Nothing fancy. If it charges you, run like hell. The other two companies stay with me. Slayton! Get the gun crew to the compound."

The first two companies dispersed east and west.

"Where are my signalmen?"

Two sailors ran up, each carrying bamboo poles.

"Start hooking them up," Ziolkowski ordered.

The signalmen began fitting the poles end to end as the island shuddered. The sailors' hands shook and their fingers knotted. Simple pre-made slots suddenly became impossibly complicated. The sergeant didn't help when he yelled, "Hurry, dammit! You know how fast that bastard'll be when he starts inland. Ziolkowski gave a quick eye to his men as the serpent loomed up on the beach. He could see more than one of them going creamy at the knees.

"Private Enderfall!"

"Yeah, Top?"

"You will shoot any man who rabbits without orders."

There was no time for Enderfall to protest that his hands would be full with Ziolkowski's stretcher. The two companies retreated inland and took up positions around the compound.

Ziolkowski felt his litter juggle. He could not turn to see what William was up to, but the look on Enderfall's face said it was no good.

"Come here... help me!" William shouted. "Before it's too late!"

"He's tying himself to the litter," Enderfall informed the sergeant.

"That's what he said he would do." Ziolkowski glanced towards the beach. The creature had paused, taking in the entire island with its high-perched eyes.

"I'm missing half my hand. I have to tie myself to the stretcher."

Ziolkowski suddenly regretted dragooning the boy into this predicament. "We'll get someone else--"

"No!" William moved to where Ziolkowski could see him. "There's nothing else I can do. I can't pull a trigger. But I've got enough arm to tie a strap

to. I'm not going to stand by and do nothing. If you leave me to it, I'll just walk up and kick it."

He jerked his head in the direction of the creature. Ziolkowski gave him a long look. The knobby bandage on his arm was already splotched with blood. Even in the blaring sunlight the boy's face was pale. He was burly enough, if gaunt. But something ineffable had been drained from him. He reminded Ziolkowski of lepers he'd seen in on the China Station, their steady acceptance of death--almost a desire for it. So much at odds with the manic fear of the marines around him, including the hapless Enderfall. They had the same look the sergeant had seen on men trapped in palmetto scrub when an invisible enemy directed shouts and bullets from all directions. There wasn't a man on the island who wasn't swimming in a piss-pool of terror. William was no exception. But none possessed an angel-glow of hate like the boy's.

"You don't know what kind of pain you're asking for."

"Sir, someone once told me--no, he showed me--the world's just a ball of hate. That's how it started, that's what keeps it going. The monsters prove it. If God was a monster, we'd have to do our best to kill Him, even if it killed us, too. If I don't do my part, what good am I?"

"Son, you're over my head and I think you're over your own head."

"There's no time."

It would have been a small matter to call another man over from the compound. But Ziolkowski was swayed by the boy's emotion. He nodded at Enderfall. "Help hitch him up."

While the private bound William's wrist to one of the stretcher poles, Ziolkowski kept a steady eye on the creature. It swayed as it sniffed at the air, just as the two smaller creatures had done. One might have thought it was an aimless habit, like a man drumming his fingers while in thought.

"She'll come to the bunker. There's meat in there that's been cooking all day. They'll scavenge. I saw them eat dead donkeys that were swelled up fat by the sun. Get your ass moving, Enderfall! It's heading in."

Enderfall scurried to the front of the litter and they carried Ziolkowski the

short distance to the compound. With his head propped on a roll of canvas, Ziolkowski could not look up into William's face, but he could hear the boy's heavy panting. He wondered if he was unfit to carry heavy loads, aside from his ruined hand. Then the sergeant realized these were sharp, involuntary gasps of pain. He made no comment. Let the boy admit his mistake, and they would untie him. Meanwhile, Ziolkowski was more concerned that the creature might see the two groups of men moving into position on both of its flanks.

Up and down the line men worked their bolts. Two things kept the majority of them from running: Ziolkowski's threat and, more cogently, the fact that there was really no place to run. The bunker provided grim testament to the futility of trying to hide.

William and Enderfall had rested the sergeant's litter at the edge of the compound. The boy sat by Ziolkowski's head. He showed no inclination to free his arm and offered no comment on his pain. His desperate hatred glowed. It was like the only thing he owned, something to be polished assiduously.

"Okay, boys," he told the men ranked before him. "I want some whooping and hollering from you. You know, devil-may-care. You all know about devil-may-care. You marines should. Say hello to the bastard and invite him in. I want to be a proper host."

Briefly, they gaped at him. This sure as hell wasn't in the manual of arms. Finally, some of them managed a few faint yells.

"A dog pissing on cabbage sounds louder than that!"

The shouting became general. Ziolkowski nodded his satisfaction when the serpent leaned in their direction.

"Louder!"

The creature shuffled forward about twenty yards.

A steady creaking came from the right. Rolling as far as he could to his side, Ziolkowski was treated to the sight of a giant cobra dancing high into the air. Then he shook off his confusion and stared at the balloon overhead, almost invisible against the hazy-bright backdrop. He followed the anchor line back to earth. No one was tending the winch.

"Slayton! Get that balloon down, *fast*! I'm going to refuse the center."

"What are you trying to do, Top?" Enderfall quailed.

"I want him to get a whiff."

"Of us?"

"Something even better. All that nice meat roasting in the sun. Back at the bunker."

"Oh God--"

"Shut up. He's taking the bait."

"He's charging!"

The creature was trundling past Mt. Pisgah. Just as Ziolkowski had predicted, it was making a beeline for the human flesh roasting under Midway's relentless sun.

"By file! D Company, fire!"

A volley rang out.

"C Company! Fire!"

Another volley.

"Signal A Company to advance."

Up went the rectangular signal flags on their long, segmented poles.

"Fall back, double-quick," Ziolkowski shouted. Looking up at Enderfall and the steward, he waved at his stretcher. "If you two don't mind...."

The creature's impetus was irresistible, even to itself. Though it seemed briefly distracted by the gunfire, it was coming on at a terrific pace, its rear flippers throwing huge swipes of sand as it kicked itself forward.

"I said fall back, goddammit. I didn't say *run*. Keep firing!"

As they hurried past the compound, Ziolkowski craned his head towards Mt. Pisgah. A Company had appeared. They weren't exactly charging. Instead, they forced their way through a thick mud of reluctance. It was enough, however. Whirling in surprise, the creature stopped its charge, giving C and D Companies time to form up on the perimeter next to the three-pounder.

Enderfall and William slipped and fell. The sergeant was about to lavish them with livid curses of pain when something bulbous floated into his vision.

"Slayton! Goddammit, I told you to get that balloon down!"

Breathless, the corporal ran up to the litter. "We can't. The wind's pushed him towards the lagoon. If we pull him in he'll lose altitude. Sit up, Sergeant, and you'll see. He's right over the monster."

1032 Hours

When the creature rose on the beach the Japanese manning the winch had let out line, apparently with the idea of putting Lieber far beyond the reach of the monster's long neck. Obviously, none of them had considered he might want to do battle from the air, though he thought he'd made his intentions clear when he loaded the car with rifles and ammunition. Now, he was left helpless before something far larger than the creature: the wind.

By spreading his hand, he could fit the creature between his thumb and middle finger. He had wanted a close shot at its eyes. So much for confronting it face to face. He watched the marines below deploy in three directions. The largest group occupied the compound, near the winch. Was it their intention to protect the aeronaut? If the creature snared the anchor line, he would be in serious trouble. He considered reaching for the lower valve and releasing some of the coal gas. But with so much line let out, he would probably swing out and land in the ocean.

Instead, he hefted a grenade.

A brutal gust sent the car into a vertiginous spin. Its suddenness destroyed

his seeming immunity to air sickness. Just before throwing up, he offered a grim smile to the frigate birds skimming past him. If Ace could see him now!

The balloon wobbled like a ball of catnip. It dropped precipitously, then swung out over the lagoon. Grabbing hold of each side of the gondola, he pulled himself to his feet. The grenade he'd been holding bounced against his foot and he thanked his stars he had not clapped the fuse.

He was looking at Eastern Island. Moving slowly, he turned to face Sand. To help get his bearings, he followed the anchor rope down with his eyes. It dawned on him he was about a hundred feet lower than before, which was not good... because the monster was in the compound. The large third of the landing force was pulling back towards Midway's minuscule interior. Dipping its head into the ruins of the bunker, the creature took in the odor of dead men. Its massive body rested flat on the winch.

The marines on the right continued to move in. Ever so slowly, but with enough nuisance value to cause the creature to turn--catching more line in the process.

The balloon dropped twenty feet in an instant and the car snapped up. Only by grabbing the hemp struts was Lieber saved from being flung into space.

One more like that and the balloon would be torn apart. Swiftly, he pulled out his pocket knife and sawed at the anchor rope. The creature was twisting in confusion as A Company attacked its flank.

Another--

Jolt! The balloon was thrown in a wild circle. Lieber felt his jaw lurch after his chin. His eyes were crossed by the violence of the movement. He was dazzled by his ability to keep hold of the knife. Or was it luck? If so, the luck ended as far as the rest of his equipment was concerned. All straps had broken and everything had fallen out. Gun, ammo, rations.

He returned to the captive line with a vengeance. Finally, it was severed.

And Lieber found himself floating over the southeast channel of the lagoon. Out to sea.

He saw the jagged remains of the young male Tu-nel. Even in death, it was so enormous a modest charnel house would have fit under its ribs. The great center was gutted, but skin still clung to its neck and head. Its eyes had collapsed into sad twin hollows. Lieber only briefly wondered how it had ended up this way on an isolated coral outcrop. He was more interested in the long black cloud to the north.

The *Florida* finally had coal.

1033 Hours

Up went the signal flags. A Company gladly ceased fire and fell back.

"Corporal Slayton! See that piece of coral in the lagoon? The one with all the bird shit on it? I want you to line up the three-pounder on it, range fifty yards. Don't stand stupid. I'll be giving you a nice fat stationary target."

"Aye aye, Top."

"Okay, snappers. Let's remind our guest there's a nice hot meal waiting for him."

Several green glances were thrown at the bunker. The stench had become potent.

"By file! C Company!"

The volley hooked the beast's attention. It surged towards the ruined bunker. Ziolkowski waited unbearably long before calling out to the signalmen. "Signal B Company to advance!"

Green semaphore flags snapped in the wind. The men gathered at the distillery came out firing. Confused by this new nuisance, the creature again halted.

"She's all yours, Slayton."

The three-pounder barked. There was a bright flash at the creature's flipper, instantly followed by a *bang!* With a squeaky howl of protest, the creature pulled back. The next round exploded on her flank.

The last three rounds all missed. By then, the creature was swooping and dodging in instinctive evasion as it pushed towards the lagoon.

"C and D Companies! Fix bayonets!"

"You're crazy as shit, Top!" Enderfall screamed.

"Charge!"

Slayton had foreseen and dreaded a command to advance. But to *charge*?

"Damn your eyes, Slayton! It's turning in circles. One good push and she'll bolt to sea!"

Frantic to get into action, William began lifting his end of the stretcher, expecting Enderfall to follow suit. But the private was as stunned as Slayton and only gaped as Ziolkowski dropped forward and howled.

Instead of berating William, the sergeant set up a cheer. "There you go! That's it! Let's get going! Slayton, dig the shit out of your pants! There she goes, fucking goddamn fish. We'll show you! Hey, you tar salts! Got any flags in your kit that could warn First Platoon to lay flat? They might get some stray shots their way. No? Never mind. They'll fall down quick enough when the thirty-aughts come flying. But you won't miss, will you, boots? That fish is bigger than any barn door you'll ever see. Pick it up, Enderfall. Mr. Pegg, don't let a jake hand show you up. Up and ahead, the both of you. We'll chew that bastard, we'll take a squatting shit on its head!"

His profanity went unheard by most of the *Florida* marines, the spongy atmosphere absorbing his words as much as the gunfire drowned them. But seeing William and Enderfall pick up the stretcher and start forward said it all. The old top kicker was cocking his snoot at death and he wanted them to join him.

His lunatic example was not quite enough. Corporal Slayton had to prod them on.

No goading was needed for Pegg, though. Ziolkowski got a rough jouncing as the boy ran forward for all he was worth, curling the air with inchoate curses. With some shouting of his own, Enderfall tried to slow him down.

"Don't drag, Enderfall," Ziolkowski commanded. But he too was startled by William's ferocious plunge. He'd intended to be an example, not an aimless suicide. Slayton's marines slogged ahead in two long files, firing as they went. They aimed high enough to keep from hitting the trio racing for the compound. Yet despite being burdened and injured, William managed to pass them. Ziolkowski tried to twist his head around the musette bag Enderfall had placed under his head to glimpse the creature, but all he could see was the boy's back. His bandages were sopped with blood. The pain had to be excruciating, yet he showed no sign of noticing. Just the reverse. He gave every indication of racing healthily and heartily to his demise.

And then everything stopped dead.

Only once before had Ziolkowski and Enderfall heard anything besides squeaks from the creatures--when just before chasing him out of the lagoon, the one they figured to be the mother growled angrily at the young male under the impression that he had hurt the serpent with green stripes. Now, though, it let out a roar so boggling half of Slayton's men instantly threw down their guns and ran.

William had heard the creature at full throat before. On the deck of the *Lydia Bailey*, when the monster let out a full-lunged roar while facing the crew. It had proved an announcement of horrors to come. William's determination was shattered on hearing it again. He was sure the creature was speaking to him.

I missed you once, boy. Duff sauce or no, I won't miss again.

It leaned sideways and looked directly at William. Was it possible... was that a glint of recognition? No. It was looking at William and the two men with him because they were so far ahead of everyone else.

"Come on!" Enderfall hollered, tugging in the opposite direction.

Even more mystifying than William's headlong charge was his dumb paralysis before the beast. Lowering his eyes, he found Ziolkowski looking directly at him.

"Go on, Private Enderfall," the sergeant said over his shoulder. "No sense all of us going down."

Whether or not Ziolkowski had given permission, he would have bolted. This last stroke of consideration from the sergeant touched him deeply. Instead of dropping his half of the stretcher outright, he gently rested it on the ground before running away.

The shuddering ground told Ziolkowski he was about to meet the great jaws once again. Broad daylight, this time. The creature would finish what it had begun. He reached into his pocket for his knife--only to discover it missing. Presumably, it was still in the pocket of the soiled trousers Enderfall had discarded.

"Untie yourself quick, Bill! Get the hell out of here!"

A series of jerks. William was pulling the stretcher around. "I left one behind. I won't leave another."

"Pull it over the end of the pole if the knot's too tight. Do it, boy! You can save yourself!"

Ziolkowski lost sight of Slayton's men as the head of the stretcher went down. He was sure the boy was going to escape--and was shocked when William sat down next to him.

"I'm sorry," he sobbed. "I can't pull it fast enough."

There was no time for more. Ziolkowski grabbed him by the neck and pulled his tear-streaked face to his chest the instant before the greater shadow fell on them.

But Slayton's marines--those who had not fled--began firing again. Between their ragged volleys and the fire-at-will shots from the Second Platoon, they inflicted enough confusion to vex the creature. It lumbered away from the bunker and out of the compound. Slowly, with mute reluctance, it set an oblique course across the dunes to the lagoon. After a long glance backwards, it slid into the water.

With a wild whoop the marines and sailors lit out after the beast. Shots

were fired on the run as they tried for one last pot before it disappeared under water. Even Enderfall returned. William pulled himself together and they took up the stretcher again, joining the race to the beach. They had not gone far before Enderfall tripped, went face-first into the sharp coral sand.

As Ziolkowski was spilled onto the ground, he caught a glimpse of the balloon disappearing over the water.

"So long, Fritz," he sighed. And promptly heaped curses on the hapless Enderfall.

On the Cliffs of Time

The abrupt cessation of gunfire on one flank and its sudden reappearance on the other threw the creature into a fit of confusion. Like the giant squid of the lower depths, it seemed the humans had many limbs, curling around and attacking from all directions. No man had ever laid eyes on one of these tentacled monstrosities. They could only infer their existence from the giant suction-cup wounds occasionally found on whales. And only a small number of Tu-nel had ever confronted the over-sized cephalopods. They did not plumb the depths for food the way a sperm whale did. But over millions of years the occasional encounter was impossible to avoid and they had proved unhappy for Tu-nel and squid alike. The handful of clashes had been so striking that they had been firmly planted in the racial memory of the serpents. When the female Tu-nel twisted frantically in the compound--on the compound, since she covered practically the entire quad--it was an instinctive reaction against the unpredictable, grasping squid. She was not comfortable on land in the first place. She could not move as quickly as the youngsters had and she was acutely aware of her weight. The man-o'-war stings of the bullets were increasingly annoying.

The sudden flash of pain in her flipper caused her to forget her hunger. What was happening? What had caused this tear in her skin?

It must be the land attacking her. The land was painful and heavy. To the men below she seemed to be moving with supernatural alacrity, but she only felt the weight of waterless gravity and the consequent sluggishness.

There was solace in the ocean.

And to the ocean she fled.

XXXI

1215 Hours

The machinist's mates looked on with ill-concealed apprehension as Singleton nodded and the drilling began. There was no danger. The warheads had been removed. But as a rule, sailors were made uncomfortable by the proximity of torpedoes, no matter what their condition or status. They represented a new form of naval warfare: death from the invisible. It was so ominous a threat that at the turn of the century the French based their entire navy around the submersible weapon. To the men watching it seemed battleships were as dated as Phoenician galleys. All an enemy need do was set loose a school of Whiteheads or Bliss-Leavitts, then sit back and watch as the mightiest fleets in the world were destroyed. The *Florida* was equipped with eighteen-inch torpedo tubes, as were most of the battleships in the U.S. Navy--making the twelve-inch guns topside superfluous, in the judgement of less nostalgic analysts.

The first lieutenant--the acting executive officer--had ignored Singleton's and Hart's request for help. With the captain unavailable, or indisposed, they saw no recourse but to appeal directly to the chief machinist. The *Florida's* condition remained dire. But when the officer heard their idea, he readily drew men away from the repair crews to help. With the arrival of the *Iroquois*, power again coursed through the warship. This enabled the machinists to hoist torpedoes out of the torpedo room forward to the shop on the next deck up.

"We'll have to bring them up, anyway," Singleton reasoned. "We won't be able to launch them from the bow tubes."

The two civilians were so intent on watching the machinist drill into the torpedoes they did not notice the arrival of a stormy presence at the back of the

machine shop. But when an engineer's mate entered and announced he had removed the mercury circuit tubes from one of the bulkhead doors, Captain Oates exploded.

"Who gave you orders to do that, Mister?"

"The Chief--"

Oates whirled on the chief machinist. "And why did you order that?"

"I can explain, sir."

"That's good, since you're the one I'm asking."

"Dr. Singleton and Mr. Hart here approached me with an idea to kill the serpents."

"And why didn't you come to me or the first lieutenant before proceeding?"

"Sir... the lieutenant was preoccupied. And we'd heard you were...."

"What? Incapacitated? *Dead*?"

Singleton tried to warn the captain with a glance. If his temper continued unchecked, he stood a good chance of making the rumor come true on the spot. The drugs the surgeon had given him no longer raised his color.

He caught Hart studying the small glass tubes of mercury held by the engineer's mate. They still had much work to do. Familiar with military bureaucracy, the former army lieutenant assumed someone had already told the captain what they were doing. There was very little time to correct the oversight. He stepped forward.

"Captain, the doctor and I think we can devise a way to guide these torpedoes by wireless. It's been done before."

"Gabet did experiments with them in the Antibes," said Singleton, ever ready to drop a name.

"Yes. He attached a paddle wheel and used it as a signal distributor. We need the mercury tubes to open and close the circuits when we key the commands. There's no way around it. We have to have them. You can close the bulkhead doors manually, can't you?"

Oates stared the stranger up and down. The Pacific Commercial employee looked as if he'd fallen off a caboose. "Who are you?"

"HH," Singleton intruded. "Hamilton Hart."

"The one who sent the wireless and made the balloon."

"Yes."

"Someone took your balloon aloft. The line was cut somehow. It started south, but the wind changed. The last our lookouts saw, it was ten miles north of Midway."

"But no one else--" Hart shook his head, perplexed. Then his eyes fell on the torpedoes. "Captain, I don't know who took her up. Right now, it doesn't matter. From what I could see, most of your rapid-fire guns are out of action. And your twelve-inch guns are too slow. This is your only chance of killing the serpents."

It was by chance Oates had discovered what was happening in the machine shop. He'd gone to sick bay to ask the ship's surgeon if he had arsenic or other poison in his stores.

"Yes. But I seriously doubt it would be enough to kill the serpents, if you were thinking of lacing some meat with it. I put more faith in that contraption they're working on in the fo'ard machine shop."

"Contraption...?"

"Of course," Hart continued, "now that you've coaled you can take the survivors off the island and sail away. But what if these things run amuck in one of the major shipping lanes? Isn't it your duty to end this *now*?"

Oates nodded. A gesture of habit, not agreement. They had not brought on board nearly enough coal to reach Hawaii, in spite of the fact that Amos had

handily brought the second barge to bay. A detail led by Ensign Garrett had been unable to save the damaged barge. It sank soon after its coal was off-loaded, leaving only one carrier capable of shipping fuel to the *Florida* in the amount she needed. If sunk, weeks could be wasted salvaging it--if it could be salvaged at all. Equally disastrous would be the loss of the sea tug. The *Iroquois* had brought in another shipment using the last barge. This gave the *Florida* enough to steam a hundred miles and back. No more. Oates dared not risk another load until the transit was secure.

"The ship's carpenters are already working on the floats and masts for us. The tricky part is here. The propelling and steering mechanisms have to operate without interfering with each other. The electrical circuits are aligned with reference to the paddle wheel, which has eight blades. Each blade is fitted with a mercury switch. The shell is turned by a pawl attached to the armature of an electric magnet--"

"I have a question for you gentlemen."

Singleton glanced up, piqued by the captain's tone.

"I see you've chosen two of the Bliss-Leavitts for your experiment. Naturally, since the turbine models have a greater range than the old Whiteheads. At twenty-eight knots the Bliss has a range of thirty-five hundred yards. At thirty-six knots, twelve hundred. Whatever the speed, once you launch them they'll run only a few minutes, once you factor in the added weight."

"Yes?"

"You speak of floats and masts, so obviously you don't intend to fire these from the bow tubes. From what I can see, you're in a quandary. You have to get fairly close before letting them loose, but you can't use the *Florida* to do it. I won't have any wild maneuvering in these reefs."

"We were thinking of the *Iroquois*--"

"Out of the question. We've filled only one stokehold. If we lose the tug, we'll be stranded. Which leaves you one option. You'll have to lash the torpedoes to a motor launch and use that as a firing platform. I'm sure we can find volunteers. I know of at least one ensign who will gladly go out. But you understand. If they fire and miss the last one, they're dead men."

"The last one?"

"The mast spotted the remains of one of the creatures on an islet. I don't know what killed it. But that leaves just one. The biggest one. Are either of you going out on the launch?"

"As for you..." He turned on the chief machinist. "...anything you do, anything you plan to do, shall be reported to me first."

"Aye aye, sir."

"Don't mistake me for the dead. And when I *am* dead, wait a good long while to make sure."

1506 Hours

Amos was about to signal for the *Iroquois'* lines to be cast off when he heard a peculiar sound directly behind him and whirled. It was Ensign Garrett, grinning, the gap in his front teeth forming a ludicrous whistle.

"Pretty funny, eh moke? Bet you got hard as a rock watching this white boy waving the bait. If we didn't need the coal so bad, you'd've left me out there, isn't that right?"

"I don't understand, Mr. Garrett."

"You don't want to play dumb nigger with me, do you? We both know better."

"I hope the ensign forgives me if I state that I take the greatest possible exception to his words."

"See? I knew you weren't a dumb nigger. We've got orders to tie up at Eastern Island until Oates can find a way to sink that critter. We might be together a long time. Fancy that." The whistle pulsed. "Think that skull of yours can stand up to a two-by-four, my dark friend?" Garrett could not see himself or

he would have been the first to recognize the irony of his words. He was as black as any minstrel, having buried himself in the coal to escape the creature, then taken a hand in loading that same coal onto the cargo nets, then raced across the barge's sooty bottom in an attempt to save it.

A bugle-blast overhead caught their attention. They poked their heads out of the pilot house so they could hear the yeoman shouting down at them.

"Mr. Garrett! The captain wants you and the colored pilot back on board. He says Mr. Rich is to take command of the *Iroquois*."

When Garrett had been hauled on board the tug, the stench of fear Amos had expected was absent. Certainly, the ensign had been frightened enough when he was isolated on the barge. But his near demise had not affected him the way his fight with Beck had.

Now the stink rose up like a dead sturgeon on the beach. Something about the order scared the wits out of Garrett. Amos had no idea what it was, but he suddenly knew a great deal more about the ensign who, with friends, had met him by the galley. Garrett was a cold soul. He was afraid of no man and no beast. Death, for him, was a nugatory consideration. No, what terrified Garrett were the small, progressive catastrophes that cumulated in humiliation.

As for himself--Amos could only assume Oates no longer wanted a black man at the helm, even of a tug infested with wood worms. As Methuselah had asseverated in the distant, unviolent past, the whites would not allow them in positions where they might stumble upon glory. Who knew? On the way back to Eastern, the serpent might attack the *Iroquois*. The marines still on board might slay the creature with their three-inchers. The newspapers might have to murmur that a Negro was skipper at the time.

They climbed up the judas ladder. The marines on the tug cast off the lines. As the *Iroquois* pulled away, Amos looked over the calm and empty ocean. Fear gripped him.

They found it, he thought. Somehow, they found it.

1522 Hours

"If they aren't ready before dark, then he'll use them in the dark. The captain was very insistent on that."

Stepping back from one of the torpedoes, Singleton threw Midshipman Beck a look of disbelief and frustration. "So the captain is suddenly interested in our toy?"

"He's afraid that if the serpent attacks the island it might damage the tug."

"Then move it from the island."

"It might be sunk then, sir." Beck could not keep exhaustion from his voice. He'd had only a few hours sleep since being pulled out of the water.

Turning away from the middy, Singleton was chagrined to find a cordon of machinists and engineers around the torpedoes. The Chief had hinted to him earlier that his fussy attention to details was delaying completion of the improvised weapons and the doctor had blithely ignored him. This was the Chief's tactful--if not very subtle--method of getting him out of the way. Hart was up in the wireless room knocking together receivers for the torpedoes. Without his moral support, Singleton saw no option but to retreat gracefully and let the machinists proceed with the task. Sighing, he again turned his attention to Beck. The young man looked haggard, with the underlying tremor of someone surprised to be alive.

"It's Midshipman Beck, isn't it? I overheard some of the men talking when you walked in. You saw the creature underwater, in its natural element."

"All I saw was a big blur, sir."

"The waters around here are exceptionally clear. You must have seen more. Did you notice the shape of its flippers? How did it swim? Did it scull, using its tail as a rudder? Or did it--"

"All I saw--"

"Yes, I'm quite sure you had your hands full just staying alive." Singleton shifted around to avoid looking into the glare of one of the battle lanterns

brought in for added light. It was still two hours to sunset, but now less light came through the shop's porthole and the machinists wanted a better look at their mechanisms. Singleton bumped against a lathe. Picking up a fine metal shaving, he worried it nervously between his fingers a few moments--until it pierced his skin. Wincing, he sucked the blood off the cut. "Beck... I know that name. Did you know Midshipman Davis?"

This captured Beck's attention. "I knew him well."

"Then you must be the same Midshipman Beck he talked about on occasion."

"He talked about me? What did he say?"

Singleton gave him a smile that was like a sad admission. "First things first, my lad. If you think back, I'm sure you'll be able to recall details of the serpent. For example, how did it move its long neck underwater?"

Beck could not disguise his anger and just barely managed to bite off words more appropriate to his mood. "It was real big, sir," he clipped, then turned on his heel and walked away.

1530 Hours

"No!" Garrett leaned forward as he anchored his fist in the air. The handful of onlookers thought he was going to attack the captain and positioned themselves to intercede. The first lieutenant raised his eyes from the chart table and looked on coldly from across the length of the wardroom. "Why do you keep torturing me, sir?"

"That's a strong word for doing your duty, Ensign. And the wrong word." Oates took a step and the onlookers were startled by the realization there was an equal chance he would attack Garrett. The captain might be sick and old, but he was big and brawny. If this confrontation degenerated into a brawl, he looked fully capable of landing Garrett on his back. "If you think of doing your duty as torture, perhaps you should never have signed up. It's too late, now, and I'm

giving you a direct order. You will take the motor launch out and attempt to torpedo the serpent. I'll let this insubordination pass--as well as formal proceedings against you--if you succeed. You have an opportunity to clear your name, Mr. Garrett. Don't waste it."

Oates was aware this was not a proud moment. He was treating Garrett like a prisoner--which, technically, he still was. But he was also knocking him about like a condemned man, something that was far from settled. To the captain's thinking, only an inconceivable act of courage, such as battling a sea serpent in an open boat, could erase Garrett's transgression in Number One Turret. He was posing the ensign with his equivalent of a medieval trial at arms. It did not matter if a man was a liar or bore false witness. If he was the better swordsman and dispatched his accuser, he was vindicated in the eyes of the Church--if not in the eyes of God. A nasty bit of jurisprudence that had taken Western man centuries to rid himself of. But in the long run, strength and determination were what mattered. Look at Roosevelt in Panama. That was a trick and guns had settled the issue. But the Canal would benefit all men. If international law had to be snubbed to secure its right of way, who was to say it was wrong?

Oates was honest enough with himself to realize his current treatment of Garrett had as much to do with the chief machinist's failure to tell him what was going on in his shop than any offence on the ensign's part. In fact, Garrett had performed heroically while bringing in the coal. But things were getting out of hand. Nature Herself had gotten out of hand. Garrett's trial by fire would be the trial of them all--because if he failed, they might all die.

"You won't be able to do this by yourself. I'm not sending you out alone." He nodded towards the man standing near the wardroom door. "Pretty handy in the cockpit, Mr. Macklin? You did very well with the tug. You brought up that first barge as well as any master mariner... well, almost. I was on the bridge when you went after the second barge. There was quite a bit more maneuvering than necessary, wouldn't you say?"

"I did what I thought best, sir."

"Which included taunting Ensign Garrett by circling around the barge. You risked his life and our cargo with your stupid dallying. I don't care about your reasons. You're not a darky who doesn't know his place. You're a sailor who

threatened his ship with his irresponsibility. And Mr. Garrett here will be the first to tell you that's something I never forget and rarely forgive. You will report with Ensign Garrett to Dr. Singleton, who will give you instructions on how to operate the wireless-guided torpedoes the Chief is working on."

"The what, sir?"

"Garrett, you use that tone with me one more time, you'll be shoveling shit for pineapples in the Sandwich Islands the rest of your life. Do I make myself clear?"

"Yes, sir," said Garrett more respectfully. From what he'd heard, raw human sewage was used for fertilizer in Hawaii.

Oates dismissed everyone but the first lieutenant. But as they filed out, the captain lifted a hand. "One moment, Seaman Macklin."

Garrett gave the black man a savage smirk as he passed out, then threw a curious glance at the armed marine who remained at Amos' side.

Amos stood silently before the captain's desk. At the chart table the first lieutenant indolently played a compass this way and that over a map, as though his calculations had been made far in advance and he was now toting items far removed. Amos had never had a good look at the *Florida's* third--now second--in command. He was startled by his resemblance to Ensign Garrett.

Sinking into the dark cushions of his chair, Oates tapped the coal log on his desk, then pushed the journal to the side. A strange feeling came over Amos when the old man raised his eyes. There was a peculiar glint in them. Not of fear--but of death on the hoof.

"Macklin, you of course know that your rating is gone forever."

Well, that at least cleared the air. Amos had not known what to expect. He'd half hoped that Oates would make the same kind of conciliatory offer he'd held out to Garrett: *Do well, slay the beast, and the path to Seaman First Class will again be wide open to you.* His disappointment was tempered by knowledge. Now he knew where he stood. Now, for better or for worse, he could make definite plans.

"Why? Did Garrett meet you by the galley? Don't look so surprised. It's my job to know what goes on on my ship." He shifted uncomfortably. *If that's so, why the hell haven't I found that bastard Gilroy?* "Is that why you taunted Garrett like that out on the barge? What I mean is, you had everything a Colored could want, with prospects for more. Once we got back home, you'd've won back your rating. I made that promise to all the stewards on board. I know you were there when I made that speech."

Amos was dumbfounded. Here was a skipper who not only believed it was his duty to know of every little smack of confrontation on his vessel, but who seemed to succeed remarkably at the job. Yet he could not fathom so simple a motive. Did he think blacks weren't human? That they did not contemplate things like justice? Yes, he'd been met by the galley. But there was more, so much more. And Oates was a part of it. Amos felt orphaned. He was no longer at one with the clan of sailors. 'Colors' was no longer a time of day, but the flag of his skin. And so very much more. Amos remained silent before the captain because there was so much to say he could not guess where to begin. And because he knew Oates was about to deliver a mortal command. He was speechless in the face of imminent death.

"But of course, you know the real reason why I'm sending you on this mission?"

For a long moment Amos remained silent. Then his head sank. "I think so, sir."

"Then goddamn you to hell and may God spit on your soul." Oates glared at the marine. "Make sure he gets on that boat. If he tries to get away, shoot him dead."

After they left, the captain pulled out his drawer and stared at a canvas-wrapped package.

The dynamite had fallen out of Macklin's sea chest during the last attack on the *Florida*.

1600 Hours

Singleton continued to harry the machinists and carpenters after the torpedoes were raised through the forward hatch onto the foredeck. He had a fit when the pontoon frames failed to slide over the sleek metal tubes and only cursed more vociferously when the carpenters cured the problem by simply playing the metal loops until they fit.

"Why didn't you do that in the first place?" he complained as he stumbled over the workers. "You've wasted precious time!"

Everyone was relieved when Hart summoned him away to help make final adjustments to the receivers. Nervous eyes were cast seaward. The remaining serpent had not been seen since the marines chased it off the island. Where was it lurking?

The first lieutenant emerged and turned an indifferent back on the ocean. He stood over the torpedoes musingly, like a man viewing a pair of corpses.

Hart and Singleton came down from the bridge, arguing.

"Test it how, Doctor? Fire one of them at the atoll? And even if it worked, there'd be no guarantee the second one would. They'll be tested on the firing line. There's no way around it."

Singleton conceded the sense of this, but continued to blubber protestations. The two men set down the wireless gear they carried, Singleton panting heavily as he stood. The air was muggy and still. In order to preserve their precious coal supply, Oates had ordered the slowest speed possible to make way. The unalleviated heat suggested they were barely moving at all. This did not help the technicians as they bent over to attach the electric leads and eight-sided blades to the Bliss-Leavitts.

Hart's and Singleton's design called for the most delicate part of the torpedoes to be gutted. These were the diaphragms and springs that operated the steering mechanism and controlled depth. Sweat poured from the machinists as they filled the chambers with the operative bulk of Hart's wireless receivers, then began the arduous chore of attaching it to the steering gear astern of the immersion chamber in each torpedo. Although the depth mechanisms were no longer needed, it was obvious the pontoons that replaced them would reduce

their tactical range drastically. Almost as bad was that fact that Singleton was compelled to design an external attachment for the circuit blades, in order to avoid interfering with the central and outer shafts of the twin propellers. This would increase air friction substantially.

"They'll wallow like sick dolphins," the chief machinist complained.

"It's not their looks that matters," Singleton sniffed.

"If you want something streamlined, it does."

They had to be careful not to damage the central chambers--the flasks in which air was pressurized at 2,225 pounds to the square inch. If one of the inner gaskets broke there would be no power for the turbine.

Wires were guided through holes in the immersion chamber shell and hooked up to the horizontal antenna on the pontoon. The antenna was stretched between two ten-foot masts jutting up fore and aft of both outriggers.

The lowering sun informed them it would soon be evening. And they were only now prepared to begin the most dangerous part of the operation. The two warheads were brought up through the hatch. Many mouths went dry as the armorers bolted them to the propulsive systems. Packed with one hundred and thirty-two pounds of guncotton with twenty-five percent moisture, each was covered with a metal cone; these shielded tiny propellers at the tip of the warheads. Once in the water, the propellers would release the sleeves, uncovering the firing pins and putting them in position to strike the detonating primer when the target was struck. The cartridge primer ran through the center of the packed disks of guncotton. Without the improvised cones, the propellers might slip. Once the sleeves were off, the slightest misstep would blow them to hell. More than one seaman wished the cones were welded on, rather than fastened with loose-looking iron bands. The metal dolly wheels squeaked eerily as the warheads were transported across the deck.

Even Singleton kept his peace.

There wasn't a man among them who was not almost dead on his feet. Every ounce of concentration had to be squeezed from their minds and bodies. The armorers frequently towed themselves off, removing sweat and renegade grease. They had to maintain a firm grip. Not only were they tensed against

mishap, but also any shouts from the lookouts. If the creature struck now, the warheads would be sent flying on their dollies.

When finished, the armorers stood back like gravediggers who could not leave the site soon enough. They grinned, laughed nervously, then scurried away. The torpedoes now belonged to the men who would use them.

"You'll have to stay on board," said Singleton, turning to Hart. "You're familiar with the wireless and you already know the signal commands."

The ex-soldier's eyes widened. "You're not going--"

"I have to go." The doctor removed his straw hat and fanned himself. "We're setting out to kill the prime specimen of all time. Its only crime is that it's hungry."

"You think we shouldn't kill it?"

"Oh no," Singleton chuckled. "Not that. If cattle broke out of the slaughterhouse and tried to kill us, who could blame them?"

"Oates won't let you go."

"I've showed the ensign how to operate the torpedoes. But what if something goes wrong? They'll need someone out there who knows how they work. The captain can't refuse. Besides... look at it, Hart. This will make my name. Considering how tarnished that's become, I must say I'm looking forward to a spot of fishing."

Hart understood this kind of thinking. After all, the serpents had also given him the chance to redeem himself. Anyway, he was too tired to argue. He could not remember when he'd last closed his eyes. Probably while he was trapped in the bunker, when there was little else to do but sleep. But there had been nothing restful in that cauldron of nightmares.

He waved to a yeoman standing on the bridge. A few seconds later, the eight-bladed switch on both torpedoes clicked over once. The mercury in the bottom-most switches dropped through the narrow serpentine tubes and connected with the power source. The rudders turned.

"Well I'll be damned," said the chief machinist.

"Yeah, but will they float?" said Ensign Garrett from the side.

It was a good question. The remaining motor launch was only a quarter the size of the cutters that had landed the marines and which were still pulled up on the beaches of Eastern Island. Even so, under ordinary circumstances it could have held over a dozen men, albeit crammed to the gunnels. But as the torpedoes were lowered into the water, then lashed to either side of the boat, it quickly became apparent no such crowd was possible. The pontoons were very large, over twice as big as the torpedoes. But their buoyancy was offset by their very size. Any attempt at high speed would instantly swamp the launch. The crew--added weight--would have to be kept to a minimum.

"Sad to say, this might very well succeed." Singleton wiped his brow. "In which case I have to pay my...."

"Respects?"

"No, Mr. Hart. My dues."

1730 Hours

Captain Oates was stunned by Singleton's demand to go.

"I've talked with the boatswain. He's of the opinion we need no more than a pilot and two men to release the torpedoes. Our torpedo officers are more familiar with the Bliss-Leavitt than you are." He glanced at the acting exec. "Are there any left in one piece?"

The first lieutenant answered with a brusque shake of his head. Oates found this silent response offensive--even mildly insubordinate--but decided to leave it be for the time being.

Oates was taken aback. What bothered him most about Singleton going was that it was so selfishly convenient. All his rotten eggs would be in a single

lethal basket: the annoying civilian, the disaffected black, and above all the upstart ensign. Would someone notice?

He glanced at the first lieutenant.

There was an ugly practical side to Singleton's offer. Oates could not shake the belief that the doctor was fundamentally expendable; he was every bit as much a drag-weight as the pontoons on the torpedoes. His wireless-guided weapons were clever, no doubt, but someone else would have come up with the idea, given time.

Yet there was something also piquant about Singleton's request. He was the only man on board the *Florida* as old as Oates. They were both men who were writing the final chapters of their lives. Fame had bypassed each of them, and each of them had stumbled upon the philosophical curiosity that said fame did not matter. Now, by outrageous chance, the prospect of youth had suddenly become the prospect of old age. One way or another, Oates believed he would go down in the annals of naval lore. There seemed no good reason to deny Singleton the same opportunity. Mortality, after all, was only a secondary consideration.

Oates nodded.

The first lieutenant looked up and eyed both men coldly.

1830 Hours

Not five minutes after their sluggish departure from the landing stage, Singleton turned green and heaved over the side. "I don't understand," he gasped. "I've never been seasick before."

Waves that were small on a big boat were large on a little boat and the doctor was incapable of handling the drastic change in scale. A sick sheen coated the starboard torpedo as Singleton vomited over the gunwhale.

Garrett and Amos continued to look away until the old man had finished

puking. Neither one of them could believe Oates had saddled them with the good doctor. For that matter, they were both finding it hard to comprehend that they were stuck with each other, too.

"You mean I'm going to die with a nigger?" had been Garrett's response when told Amos would comprise a third of the launch crew. This was Oates' lowest blow. It went beyond meaningless vengeance. It was a slap in the face to all the white men who had pooled their courage and talents for this endeavor. And for what? Spite against a common, lowly ensign.

Garrett stood in the cockpit, unwilling to hand the helm over to Amos. The launch wallowed between its awkward load and the ensign had a tough time maintaining her course. The motor launch had not been constructed for this kind of work. From a speedster of the sea it was reduced to heavy labor. The engine barked frequent protests. Two hundred yards behind them the *Florida* moved at a snail's pace.

They were, in effect, acting as external bow tubes for the *Florida*. Using a grappling hook, Singleton would reach out and flip the engine switch superimposed on the immersion chamber. The activated torpedo would be unlashd. From high on the *Florida's* signal bridge, Hart would take over.

"You going to be all right?" Garrett asked Singleton.

Wiping his mouth with his sleeve, Singleton leaned back and nodded. There was little conviction in the gesture.

"We have enough gas to circle the island twice," said the ensign. He warily eyed a patch of coral and put some distance between them. The armorers had had to remove the protective cones before lowering the torpedoes into the water. As soon as the boat started forward the warhead sleeves fell off. The firing pins were exposed. One wrong bump and the launch, with its heavy burden, would instantly become lighter than air. "When we go back to refuel I'm letting you off. All right? I can't take you back this moment. We can't waste what light there's left. All right? All right?"

The doctor nodded wanly, then leaned over for his hat, which had fallen behind the gear box when he became sick.

Amos dourly scanned the ocean. Garrett wondered what the captain had

said to him after the wardroom door was closed. Later, as Singleton lectured them on operating procedures for the torpedoes, the black man had looked away as though bored. Not a good sign. He certainly did not act as if he was watching for brute death incarnate as he leaned against the gunwhale and glowered at the sea.

Turning north, Garrett spotted a knot of marines watching from the beach. They were not signaling or gesturing, so the ensign presumed they did not know where the serpent was, either. What if they couldn't find it?

Glancing back at Macklin, Garrett yelled, "Why'd they have that guard on you, lolly-banger? You take a shit in the captain's soup?"

Amos said nothing. He was too deep in the justice and injustice of the sentence that had been pronounced upon him by Captain Oates.

Fireman Gilroy had told him about the discovery of dynamite in the stokehold after they departed Buenos Aires, a fact that the *Florida's* officers had kept to themselves. This was the secret Gilroy revealed to Amos, while in the South Atlantic, in exchange for a fifth of gin--though of course most of the ship's sailors learned of the imminent danger via the usual rumor mills.

The plague of anarchism continued to dog the Fleet. More dynamite was found after they left San Bernadino. Once again, someone had planted the stick in the coal before it was loaded. Captain Oates again tried, and failed, to keep it a secret.

Then came the hurried midnight coaling in San Francisco. In a rush to answer the distress call from Midway, they had not had the opportunity to perform a preliminary search for explosives before the coal was loaded. Gilroy saw this as his main chance.

His minute search of the coal bins had born deadly fruit. He'd barely discerned the two soot-covered sticks of dynamite in the black heap. Of course, he did not report his discovery. Only one man knew the secret and the secret was power.

The temptation to toss them into the nearest boiler then and there was overcome by his thirst. There were others on board who felt as he did, even if they weren't cognizant of the omnipresent golden scarab. And Amos Macklin

could be counted upon to trade fair.

Hiding the sticks in a canvas pouch, Gilroy passed them on to Amos. Winking, he told the steward: "Things get too bad, just pop it down the funnel and *boom!* All your troubles are gone."

"You're crazy."

"A fifth of conk-buster for each stick, now. A fifth for *each*."

"If I used these you would die, too."

"I don't care," the stoker had waved casually as he walked away. "I don't care."

Instead of reporting Gilroy to the Master-at-Arms, he had done the most foolish thing possible: stashed the explosives with his personal belongings. Later, he considered tossing them overboard at night, with no one the wiser. But as Gilroy had said, they presented an option. And he felt he had too few options to surrender even this one.

Gilroy never received payment for his deadly bargain. As Amos was bringing him his first fifth of gin, the stoker began his drug and heat-induced rampage.

The greater fool deserved the greatest punishment. Watching Singleton wipe vomit off his mouth, Amos concluded the captain was right. He belonged here every bit as much as Garrett and the doctor did.

Garrett sniffed and turned. Fumes were rising from the stern. The engine was already overheating. The resident genius had not calculated *that* into his plans, he thought sourly.

There was no signal from the *Florida*. She had not yet spotted the serpent.

1840 Hours

The same possibility exasperated Captain Oates. He stood next to Hart at the front of the pilot house, where the wireless had been moved.

"They can't circle all night. Once it's dark, I'll have every searchlight left spotted on the launch. But they're bound to hit coral, sooner or later."

"And then..." Hart said gloomily.

"Yes. 'And then....'" Oates glanced at the lookout phone, then thudded the binnacle with his fist. "Where could the damn thing be hiding?"

"We could always chum for it," said the first lieutenant.

"By Godfrey, you're right! Let the bastard come to us, instead of wasting fuel like this. Get down to the galleys and see what you can find. Even if it means going hungry--"

"I don't think buckets of beans will do it, sir. I was thinking... we already have the chum we need, ready-made."

Oates' momentary perplexity was replaced by hideous awareness. "I didn't think we had a monster on board, too."

"Why not, sir? We have to bury our dead some time. And soon. They might even have approved of the idea."

"Those poor dead lads... *approve?*"

"They can still help their mates."

A thunderous silence fell over the bridge as they contemplated sliding their too-numerous dead overboard as bait. The worst thing about it was its plausibility. In their hasty departure from San Francisco they had not been properly vitted. They wouldn't starve, but in all probability they would be reduced to stiff rations before reaching Honolulu--even with so many fewer mouths to feed.

Oates was saved from further grisly contemplation when the phone jangled wildly.

1841 Hours

The sea blurred, became a fuzzy nap on a blue-white carpet. Midshipman Beck drew away from the telescope and blinked to clear his eyes. They still burned from the salt water that had hit them after he'd broken the faceplate against the ram. He had not had much time to count his luck. After a nearly miraculous journey from the bow to the landing stage, he'd barely doffed his diving suit before he was ordered into Number One Turret.

Because of the severe casualties, many men found themselves reassigned to different stations. One of the turret's pointers had been transferred to the aft twelve-incher. This left Beck to take his place. He was only vaguely familiar with the periscope grid and wondered how in hell he was supposed to call out the range. Dare he ask the gun captain for instruction?

He would not get the opportunity. The man in the seat above him tensed suddenly and put a hand to his headset. He was receiving instructions from Central Station.

Which meant they had a target.

1843 Hours

"Signal from the bridge," said Amos.

Glancing back through the failing light, Garrett read the flags, then turned his attention north. Several minutes later he spotted the creature.

It was lolling on the waves, its wounded flipper jutting overhead. From this distance and angle, it looked like a gigantic, basking sunfish

"She's in range of the big guns," Singleton observed. "Why don't they try a

shot?"

Garrett had no patience to lecture Singleton on the skittish art of ranging in on a target. Two or three salvoes were usually needed before an enemy could be bracketed. By which time the creature would be thrashing about at high speed, making a hit virtually impossible.

"Let's start the marbles rolling," he murmured. After a quick scan for coral, he brought the launch about. "Macklin! Get off your black ass! I'm closing to forty yards. You'll have to be quick with those lines. Doctor?"

Singleton raised the grappling hook to indicate his readiness. His eyes were wide with fear and wonder, but neither emotion paralyzed him.

A fine, fat sitting target.

Surely, the serpent could hear them coming...?

On the Cliffs of Time

The world was loneliness--the creep of distance without end and an absence of song.

Of course, the female heard the vessels approaching. She would have heard the massive, clanking *Florida* a hundred miles off. Yet the noise did not annoy her so much as it had before. Almost any sound was welcome, now that the young ones were gone.

While she was finding it increasingly difficult to associate the dead giant below the reef as her offspring, the memory of her daughter alive filled her with a sense of loss. She ached for things that could never return. There was no hint of Tu-nel music in the murmuring of the waves. Only traffic and steam cacophony. But at least that distracted her from the profound grave-like silence of her kind.

It did not, however, keep hunger at bay. There was food on the big metal

ship. And the food was coming closer. Overcoming the lassitude of sadness and the pain of her wounds, the female rolled on the long axis of her body and prepared to meet the *Florida*.

1848 Hours

There was always talk of inventions in the navy and indeed a great deal of inventing got done. There had been talk of fitting searchlights with shutters so that they could be used as signal lamps, making Morse a visual as well as electronic means of communication. But that particular invention had yet to be realized on the ships of the U.S. Navy.

Oates wanted desperately to let Garrett know of the ominous discoloration in the water off his port beam. The lookouts in the fighting masts could see it clearly. But to the men on the launch, low in the water, it would be invisible. The lookouts could not determine how close to the surface the coral reached, but all it needed was a bump to send their hopes up in a blast. The captain could run up all the signal flags he wanted, but it would probably be futile. Garrett would be too preoccupied to decipher their block patterns. The only message he could convey was a double flash from the light on the bridge, to be used if Oates thought the ensign delayed firing too long.

Hart braced himself over the wireless key. The battleship had swung out to starboard to avoid the reef, but he could still see the launch clearly. He had so much coffee in him his body trembled, though his hand remained steadier than the improvised antenna swaying over the bridge, the replacement for the downed radio mast. He wanted desperately for the strike to come off before last light. The remaining searchlights could illuminate the torpedoes and target well enough, but coral would be almost invisible. With only two bolts in their quiver, a premature detonation would be a disaster.

"Captain...."

"Yes, I see...."

The serpent was moving.

1850 Hours

"Damn! Any other time it'd be poking its head up for all the world to see."

"She's an air-breather," Singleton called out over the engine noise. "She'll be back up."

"But where--"

The answer pronounced itself dead ahead. The creature had not shifted position, but merely flopped over. She lifted her head and stared at the motor boat.

"Ready... ready.... Okay Doc! Start the port torpedo!"

Singleton bellowed in pain as he reached out with the hook, the gunwale harsh against his flabby midriff. The grappling hook staff, which had been fairly light when held at port arms, proved surprisingly heavy when extended full length. Singleton howled again. The muscles under his arm felt as though they were trying to jump through his skin. He missed the switch twice before finding a way to rest the hook-end on the torpedo and drag it sideways. Abruptly, the propeller began tossing up spray. Amos cast off the line.

Instantly, the motor launch was pulled violently to port. Garrett had to cut back almost to a dead stop before bringing her under control.

The loosed torpedo drew ahead. So slowly that at first it seemed to make no progress. The receiving masts on the pontoon leaned at a perilous angle. Another couple inches and the torpedo would slip completely underwater, immersing the receiver and ruining the electrical leads. But when the creature made a short sideways move, the pontoon turned sluggishly upon its new course.

"Hart's got it!"

1859 Hours

Hart quickly reminded himself there were two steps to a course change, not just one. After the torpedo bore on the creature he had to straighten the rudder, or else run the weapon in a circle. This proved the trickiest part, because the signal switch turned clockwise only. If he over-adjusted, he would have to go through most of the blades again before hitting the proper one. Meantime, the torpedo would be slotting on the wrong course.

"Don't miss," said Oates.

Hart understood he was not merely stating the obvious. He was making sure Hart realized only one try per weapon was possible. If the torpedo missed, the propulsive pressure in the flask would be spent before it could be brought around for another attempt.

The dark torpedo was invisible from the bridge. The white pontoon and the dual masts, however, could not be missed.

"She's dead-on," Oates whispered.

"Yes." Hart hit the wireless key four times to straighten the rudder.

The captain made nervous sounds behind him. The motor launch and torpedo were falling further away as the *Florida* swerved to avoid the shallows. Hart had told him he was reasonably certain wireless control could be maintained over a distance of two thousand yards--possibly even further. The problem was that you had to see the torpedo as well as the creature to know which way to turn it.

"Damn."

"What is it?"

"I told Garrett to open fire at forty yards. Looks like he let go at a hundred."

"How close would you get to that thing in an open boat? Besides, he needs

to survive long enough to get off his second shot."

There was a bright flash. A narrow plume rose high. An instant later the explosion shook the bridge screen.

"The reef...."

1911 Hours

"Jesus!"

Garrett and the others ducked as pontoon fragments and chunks of coral rained down on them. At that instant, what frightened them more than debris or the beast was the reef. Garrett had had no idea they were so close. They were in a minefield of coral.

He reached for the choke to slow the engine.

There was a thud. The centerboard jumped beneath them. The three men gaped in horror at the second torpedo.

There was an explosion--but not from the warhead. A hissing spray of water shot up.

"The flask!" Singleton shouted in dismay.

One of the gaskets had broken. Pressurized air that would have supplied power to the turbine engine instead created a powerful jet through the seam joining the flask to the immersion chamber.

Garrett started to throttle back--and was stopped when a hand clamped on his. A hand that was very large and very black.

"What are you doing? We have to stop!" He tried to pull away, only to find his arm trapped in Amos' grip. Toggling Garrett's wrist, he held up his hand for Singleton to see.

"Look at this tiny white hand. You ever see a hand that small on a man? You really a man, Garrett? Or are you one of those women we read about, trying to do a man's job?"

Garrett tried an awkward roundhouse with his left, only to find himself being thrown away from the cockpit. As he came round, Amos gave him a short, vicious jab. The ensign stood frozen for an instant as blood gushed from his broken nose, then dropped backwards onto the planks.

"I'm going to chew me up a commissioned officer. And long past due, at that."

As he stepped forward he caught a blow on the shoulder that caused him to yelp and jump back. Singleton held the grappling hook in front of him. Amos did not try to decipher what the doctor was blubbering about, but charged. This time Singleton whipped the staff sideways, nearly taking Amos flush on the neck.

"Pretty spry, Methuselah," Amos gasped.

"Yes," the doctor said breathlessly.

Both were surprised by the doctor's prowess. They also knew Amos could take the staff away from him, if he was willing to pay the price.

1915 Hours

After all the *Florida* had been through, it amazed the men in Number One that the turret could still swivel smoothly, the guns decline with massive ease.

"Look for the target, bearing Red Oh-Four--"

A gasp from the second pointer.

Pressed against his eyepiece, Beck exclaimed, "Sir! This can't be right! We're aiming at--"

A hard slap to the side of his head nearly knocked him out of his seat. His earplugs went rattling across the deck.

1917 Hours

"Stay on with Central Station," Oates told his ordnance officer. "If the launch turns towards us before firing her second torpedo, I want a full broadside in her direction. We don't need a direct hit. One close shell will set off the torpedo. At least swamp her."

"Sir, do you have any idea what's happening? Why would she turn on us?"

"I don't know," Oates lied. He raised his Zeiss glass for a closer look at the mutiny Amos was staging on the motor launch.

"I should have known better," he told himself bitterly.

1917 Hours

"You'll hang for this," Garrett shouted, his voice made weird by blood backing through his nose.

"Too late, I've already been hanged." Amos looked towards the spot where he'd last seen the creature. It was gone. Hastily swiveling his eyes, he found it over a hundred yards off the starboard bow. Moving to deeper water. It seemed to be angling towards the battleship.

"I got plenty to say and no time to say it." Leering, Amos added, "What if I turned us back on the *Florida*?"

"Torpedo the *ship*?"

"That would say it all."

"They'd blow you out of the water. Us."

"I'd be under the guns before they knew what was happening."

The plume from the flask began to die as the pressure faded.

"Your little bomb isn't worth shit, Doctor. It doesn't have a brain. Contrary to popular wisdom, I do. This is my ship, now. I want you two off it."

"You're fucking crazy. Why are you doing this?"

"*You* ask? You heard me, off now. Both of you can swim, can't you? Well, take those lifesavers off the sternpost. Look lively! Keep the marbles rolling!"

Garrett sprang up. Parrying his fists, Amos doubled him with a shot to the stomach, then tossed him over the side. He nearly went over himself as Singleton brought the staff down on his back. He slipped the next blow and yanked the grappling hook out of the doctor's hands. Grabbing him by the shirt, he "*oofed*" as he tried to toss him the same way he'd done Garrett. But the old man was too heavy, so he gave him a stiff push and sent him over.

Nursing his bruises, Amos stumbled aft, raised the lifesavers off the post, and threw them at the two heads bobbing and gasping in his wake. "They'll blow you out of the water!" he thought he heard Garrett shout. His nose twitched at the smoky fumes rising from the engine. "Last me one round longer," he prayed.

He armed the torpedo with the grappling hook, then stepped into the cockpit and gunned the boat ahead.

1920 Hours

"No, not yet," Oates said tentatively. "He's not coming straight at us. It's the serpent coming on. Ring back two-thirds!"

"Back two-thirds, sir!"

Oates went to the speaking tubes and blew into one of them. "Take us down to sixty revolutions, then back up for ten knots!"

"Sixty revolutions, aye sir!" came the hollow-sounding response.

Turning to the ordnance officer, he said, "We'll give him some space. He may be just running. Either way, you'll have a target. The serpent's coming after us, again. You'll have to try one of your miracle point-blank shots. I'll give you a broadside when the time comes."

Which'll be soon, the ordnance officer's expression said. He nodded grimly. The eight-inch blast that had brought down the green-striped creature had been luck of the highest order. He was doubtful they could repeat it.

"I don't suppose there's anything you can do," the captain asked, going to the front of the pilot house.

Hart shook his head. "We were forced to power the rudders off the same batteries as the receivers. Which means I can juggle her some. But the launch's rudder is a lot bigger and she's under full power."

Oates grunted. He gave no thought to stopping and picking up Singleton and the ensign. His attention was centered on the launch and the serpent.

The creature seemed not to have been alarmed by the torpedo exploding against the reef. It was bearing in on them casually, almost thoughtfully. Trying to decide where to begin nibbling, Oates imagined.

The motor launch streaked north. If the steward was in a warlike mood, he was either moving to intercept the creature or coming about to attack the ship. Oates focused his glasses on the cockpit in an attempt to get a better look at the man's face. Behind Amos the horizon was soft and pink. Oates registered storm clouds at the back of his mind.

Pretty soon, he would have to come hard to starboard in order to present a broadside. Only one question remained: Who would be the target?

"Hart, if the launch turns towards us I want you to do a lot of juggling with that switch of yours. It might help."

Hart nodded doubtfully.

1920 Hours

Amos could feel the captain's eyes on him.

"Son of a bitch is wondering what I'll do," he chuckled desperately.

There was nothing left to go back to. The Navy had been his life. His family had been the files. And now he was in disgrace.

He was caught between two ideas. If he wasn't a sailor--what was he? Just another poor Negro, out of work and out of luck. He could not return to the Second Country, the land of the black man. Its aimless days and menial labor. He'd been at sea too long. In mind and heart, he'd severed himself from his race.

But there was another race, also black. The Heroic Negro. The Negro of Cuba and Kettle Hill. The Negro--

"Hell, what are you saying? You mean the race of the dead niggers!"

He glared at the *Florida*. Night loomed behind the battleship with all the blackness in his heart. He knew the instant Oates saw him throw Garrett and Singleton into the water every gun would be trained on him. Even if he made it past the big guns, a few men manning the rails with rifles could pick him off easily enough. Hell, the serpent was almost harmless compared to--

He whirled.

There it was. So close.

Amos was midway between ship and serpent, each closing in from the opposite direction.

"All right, Methuselah," he murmured, thinking not of Singleton, but the old black crustacean back in Virginia. "Either I'm hanged or I'm a hero. Hanged

either way."

He thought of his black mates back on board and on the island, watching. Did it matter what they thought of him?

No. He was no longer the foe of the white man nor the friend of the black. By holding on to Gilroy's dynamite he had removed himself from the realm of human companionship. Because *everyone* would have died had he thrown it in one of the boilers. There was only one option now: He would accommodate the game.

Oh Jesus, the thing was fearsome. Especially when you were alone, in a small boat...

...racing towards it.

Before he'd been banished from the Fleet with the rest of his brethren, a Japanese steward had told Amos of an old Samurai trick. When they were scared out of their wits and nearly paralyzed by terror, the warriors of old would reach down, grab their testicles, and give them a good squeeze. On hearing this, Amos laughed until tears came. But the offended steward insisted it was not only true, but that it worked. With their courage restored, the Samurais would charge into the fray, hacking their enemies to pieces.

If he could have done so, Amos would have grabbed his balls and squeezed them dry. The serpent... and those eyes! Those fucking eyes! It was looking at him!

But the pontoon and torpedo were battling the launch sideways. To keep his course, he had to keep both hands on the wheel.

So he howled.

"C'mon, Jack Johnson! C'mon, Jack Johnson! C'mon, Jack Johnson!"

The great swell of turbulence that preceded the beast shook the boat. Amos gripped the wheel more tightly.

And there was the head. Raised. Now coming down on him. But too late. The creature had misjudged his speed, never anticipating he would come right at

it. He was under the gun.

Yet the neck stretched forever. Thick, brown, scarred. Until the mighty chest came up, hiding a heart as big as a man.

"C'mon, Jack Johnson! C'mon, Jack Johnson! C'mon--!"

XXXII

June, 1908 — 28°20'N, 177°22'W

From the Deck Log of the USS Florida:

Found this entry in the diary of one of our marines, PFC Henley: "I'm alive! Oh mother, I'm alive! I'll live!" Private Henley died in the last attack.

"Why aren't you at your station?" were Garrett's first words when Beck reached down to help him. The midshipman had raced all the way from Number One to the judas ladder amidships to give a hand to the floundering survivors of the motor launch. The ensign's words hit like stones. There was as much pain as purpose when Beck let go and Garrett fell back into the water--which was surprisingly cold. When both men were finally on board they stood shivering on the deck like explorers caught naked in the snow.

"Ah-ah!" Garrett chattered. "T-towels, t-towels!"

"The captain wants to see you immediately," came a voice once they were finally on board. "Put some blankets on them and bring them up."

Garrett raised his hand against the glare of the searchlights. A silhouette loomed above him.

"Is it dead, sir?"

"We don't know. Up, now. Doctor, if you can't climb, I'll have someone assist you."

"I can climb," said Singleton uncertainly.

The first lieutenant had emerged from Central Station soon after the explosion. To Garrett, he seemed like someone who had just stepped out of a boardroom. He led the way up the series of short ladders to the pilot house.

Inside the wheelhouse, Captain Oates sat pale and exhausted on his bolted-down sea chair. He looked up at Singleton and smiled. "You've lost your hat, Doctor."

"Sir," Garrett ventured, "we couldn't see much."

"The launch and the serpent disappeared at the same moment. We thought that was the end of it. But just before the sun went down the lookouts spotted a blood trail."

The engine room telegraph rang like a firebell as Oates ordered flank speed.

"Why did he ram?" asked Hart, coming up to Singleton. "The torpedoes worked. We only needed--"

"The seal broke," the doctor said. He looked old and sheepish under the battle lanterns. "There wasn't any pressure in the flask."

"Ah..." the captain nodded. "That explains part of it." Noting how the two men shivered, he brushed the air with his hand. "All right, get below. Get some warm clothes and hot coffee. We'll discuss this at length at another time."

Almost three hours later the searchlights picked out something large off the port bow. The ordnance officer had already begun calling his gun captains when Hart leapt up and shouted, "It's my balloon!"

The ship was stopped and a whaleboat lowered. Hart was among the first to jump in.

The balloon hovered not twenty feet above the surface, yet no one could be seen in the gondola. Rowing under the pillow-like mass, Hart noted the absence of sandbags on the rim.

"He didn't have much longer. He's cast off all his ballast." He cupped his hands around his mouth. "Halloa up there! Halloa!"

A moment later, a face appeared.

"Fritz!" Hart shouted delightedly. "Jump in the water and we'll pull you out. It's not far."

Lieber frowned at them, then raised his eyes to the light-dappled decks of the *Florida*. He said nothing, nor did he jump. Instead, he turned the release valve.

"He's going to come down dry!"

The sailors chuckled. The very idea... to float this far out to sea and come down dry! Deftly, they maneuvered the boat so that it remained under the car.

The moment after the basket touched the centerboard, the deflated balloon began settling down all around them. Hart caught a whiff of coal gas, but most of it had dispersed, and they were safe.

The men in the boat had been under a strain for months and the deadliest kind of pressure for days. First, one man laughed out loud. Then another. Until the entire boat was doubled over their oars in unfettered mirth.

"Fritz! Where are you?" Hart called, battling the baggy muslin.

"Over here. I hit my head. I thought I was asleep and dreaming. Is that you, Mr. Hart?"

Hart found the German and gripped him by the arms. "It's a miracle."

There was no laughter in the rescued man. By the spasmodic jerking of his shoulders, Hart knew he was fighting tears.

Light shown through the balloon envelope. The *Florida's* searchlights, piercing the fabric like an impatient mother at a bedroom door. The petty officer in charge finally got a grip on himself and asked, "You see anything from up there the last few hours? We wounded the serpent. We're looking to finish the job."

"No," Lieber answered in a strained voice. "Before dark I saw storm clouds to the north. I was losing height. There was nothing to do but sleep."

The crewmen's laughter abruptly ceased when he added:

"Wait! Some time after dark... a noise woke me up. I thought it was the *Florida* running without lights and I shouted. It could have been hours ago. Or minutes. Maybe it was a dream."

But the men were already desperately pulling and tearing at the balloon. In a few minutes they were free and rowing like mad back to the mother ship.

"Damn thing must be bled dry by now."

"Twice over."

Oates overheard the whispers of his lookouts, but said nothing. He raised a hand. Automatically, his servant appeared from the sea cabin and handed him another cup of coffee.

The first lieutenant caught the captain's eye and cocked his brow.

"Keep going," Oates said firmly.

"Aye, sir." He made a show of glancing up at the bridge clock, repaired only an hour ago.

"Damn it, man! We have fuel for two, three hours yet before we have to turn back!"

"Yes, sir. But the coal log--"

"To hell with the coal log!"

"If we could reduce speed--"

"*Flank speed!*" Oates shouted hoarsely.

The searchlight beams glared off the water. The blood streak was often impossible to discern in the increasingly choppy water. Only by virtue of keeping a man on the leadsman's platform were they able to follow it at all.

"Keep going," Oates ordered.

"Sir, the blood's thinning out. There's a storm coming."

"Keep going."

"Sir, the Chief reports--"

"Keep going."

"Sir...."

"Sir...?"

At half past midnight the first lieutenant pried the mug from Captain Oates' dead fingers. He looked at the sagging body a moment, then proceeded to finish off the lukewarm coffee.

"Ring back one-third."

The helmsman licked his lips and took several deep breaths. "Back one-third, sir!"

"Right full rudder. Bring us about one hundred eighty degrees. The bastard's dead. Let's go home."

No one dared ask who he was talking about.

XXXIII

From the Deck Log of the *USS Florida*:

Nothing of interest to report.

Fortunately for the salvage team, the storms washed away some of the smell. But the mother Tu-nel had been a sloppy eater. Had she not been lured away by the *Florida's* galley scraps, she would have been more assiduous in cleaning the meat off the dead male's bones and would have broken open the ribcage for the offal inside. In any event, a great deal had been left to rot. The squalls only partially dampened the stench. The men who attached lines to the skeleton and arranged the floats to either side of it were compelled to wear brine-soaked handkerchiefs over their faces. They looked like bandits robbing the paleontology exhibit at the Smithsonian.

It had been Singleton's idea to haul the skeleton on board intact, rather than chopping it up into more manageable portions.

"You want me to ferry that giant stinking corpse halfway across the Pacific?" the first lieutenant had asked him wryly.

"You could hack it to pieces, of course. But look at it this way: Think of how many questions could be answered at a glance if you sail into Pearl Harbor with the serpent draped over your aft decks. Think of the questions that will be answered in the States when people see photographs of it."

There could be no denying there would be plenty of questions. One for each dead man, at least. And a passel more for the damage to the battleship. It did not take much consideration on the acting commander's part to grant Singleton's request.

The doctor was overwhelmed with gratitude. Scientifically speaking, he

was benefit to the boon of all time. Not only would he have the complete skeleton of a denizen of prehistory, he would have it intact. A fact more precious than all the tea and tin and silver and gold in China to scientists who, up to now, had had to deal with incomplete skeletons and conjecture. Now they would know how the joints articulated. They could pickle the serpent's innards and speak of flesh rather than fossil.

And Singleton would be a made man. Rich beyond dreams, sought more than suffered. He wanted to kiss the first lieutenant's hand for his concession. The first lieutenant would probably not have minded.

So the salvage crews were sent out. Once Midway's remaining barge was used to glut the *Florida's* bunkers with coal, it was converted into a sea-going hearse of major proportions. Using the powerful winches of the sea tug, as well as portable donkey engines from the *Florida*, the corpse would be hauled onto the barge, hence to the battleship. A break in the weather had been needed to begin. When it came, every man not at work stood out to watch.

On the aft wing of the bridge, Singleton glimpsed the first lieutenant out the side of his eye and rushed up to him. "This is a great day in history, Cap-- Lieutenant."

"It'll be a long day, that's certain." The officer glanced up at the overcast sky. "If it weren't for the weather, I'd tow it to Hawaii on the barge."

"Too much risk. Believe me, you don't want to lose this. Not this."

From across the water there came a series of cracks.

"Gunfire!" the startled doctor yelled. "What are they shooting at?"

"Calm down. It's only the funeral."

The riflemen on Eastern Island were not only firing volleys over the graves of marines. All of the *Florida's* dead seamen had also been interned on land. No one wanted the sailors buried at sea, now that they knew what the sea could dish up.

"There's the Top Cut," said Lieber, looking up from the barge.

"There's Anderson. And all the others."

"It was a bad time." Lieber scratched his new beard. It had been weeks since he'd last had an opportunity to shave. Now that the beard was in, he discovered he rather liked it and declined the loan of a razor from one of the chiefs. "Victory is the price."

"I think I know what you mean," Hart sighed. "And I think we lost." He peered back at the tug. "You think there's too much slack in those cables?"

The plan was simple. Two sets of pulleys were strung between the outcrop of coral where the beast lay and the *Iroquois*. The barge was anchored aft of the tug, directly under the pulley guys.

Large floats--built by the same carpenters who'd made the floats for the torpedoes--were arranged to either side of the corpse. It would be pulled off the outcrop and semi-floated across fifty yards of water.

"I don't like it. She'll be mostly underwater."

A prediction proven correct as soon as it was pulled into the water. Only a few segments of ribcage showed above the surface. To Lieber, it was as if the creature was slipping into its element. That, in a new and even more ghastly guise, it would rise up to smite them all.

More shots from the atoll. The German half expected to see Ziolkowski on the rifle range again, giving hell to his trainees. But it was just another funereal volley.

"How many more times are they going to do that?" he snapped irritably.

The floats around the creature were bound in pairs. Each pair was held together by large swatches of canvas waterproofed with gutta percha. The float-pairs formed a series of slings under the body. Presumably, this would alleviate much of the strain on the pulley system. But the *Iroquois* jerked violently as her hawsers took the weight. The sea tug had two anchors down, but it was the lines stretching out to the *Florida* that kept her from reeling inland and smashing into the barge. As it was, every few cycles the tug thudded into the fenders. Hart and

Lieber had to grab hold of whatever was at hand to keep from falling. They were not always successful. Both of them were coated by the coal dust powdering the width and length of the barge.

"This is bad," Lieber moaned.

"Stop fretting, Fritz. Look...." Hart pointed towards the outcrop. The men there were waving for them to continue. The lines were still secure at their end.

"Hart?"

"Yes?"

"Did you know my name is Heinrich Lieber?"

"No." Leaning against the barge wall, he squinted aft. "Look at that. You think one of the floats is coming loose?"

They clambered over the side into a small boat and rowed out. Sure enough, the stout canvas had been partly torn out of its clamps. Peering into the water, Lieber said, "It's one of the flippers, I think. It's hanging down--"

The twelve- and eight-inch guns of the *Florida* boomed. The men in the rowboat darted their heads up in horror.

"It's come back."

"Or there's another one."

The shells exploded out to sea, westward. When the spray cleared they saw a disturbance in the water. Coming closer.

"We have to get back!"

"Wait!" Lieber leaned over onto the float and reached down for the loose flap of canvas. If he could only get it up to the clamp....

"Are you crazy, Fritz?" Hart shouted. He had to keep hold of the other end of the float so that Lieber would not fall in.

There was so much weight on the canvas it was like trying to budge steel.

Lieber stretched further to improve his grip. The stern swung out and Hart lost his handhold. The next instant, Lieber was splashing in the water, muttering Teutonic invective against non-German saints and godheads.

"Grab a-hold!" Hart yelled frantically, holding out an oar. "Hurry! It's getting closer!"

"Isn't it going after the ship?"

"No!"

Good swimmer though he was, Lieber was now a thoroughly frightened man. His coordination vanished when he heard a new sound, just under the racket of the donkey engines. Deep and vibrating. The ocean was boiling with life. He took hold of the oar and Hart pulled him up to the gunwhale. Then Hart shifted to the other side of the boat to act as counterbalance.

His hands clamped tightly next to the oarlock, Lieber had just started to lift himself out of the water when he heard splashing directly behind him. Something banged against his legs.

"No, God no!"

Launched by sheer terror, he propelled himself athwartships, clear into Hart's chest. By throwing him to the bottom of the boat, Hart just managed to keep them from capsizing.

There was a loud thudding against the planks. Moaning, Lieber craned his head from his peculiar position, expecting any instant the giant head of death to appear over the gunwhale.

"Hart...."

"Take an oar, Fritz. We have to get out of here."

"What is it?"

"Not the serpent. Almost as bad."

Lieber pushed up onto his knees and gasped. Sharks. All around them. At

least a hundred deadly hammerheads. The veteran shark-killer was appalled. They had not come in with the slow, circular approach they usually employed when investigating a potential victim. They had charged in, drawn by the blood oozing from the noisome mass under the dead creature's ribcage.

It was a colossal feeding frenzy, the freakish-looking hammerheads snapping at flesh, bone and cable. In their madness, they pounded the boat again and again, unintentionally, with no knowledge of the men, the fresh meat, inside. But if the boat tipped over the two of them would be thoughtlessly and instantly torn to shreds, like just about everything else in sight.

The boat was too small to sit side by side and neither man was willing to perch himself on the seat and take both oars in hand. So they kneeled at the bottom and paddled canoe-style away from the scene. Once away from the turbulence, they paused to catch their breath.

"Here comes the cavalry." Hart nodded towards the *Florida*. A boatload of rifle-toting marines was racing in their direction."

"No," Lieber shook his head. "We've lost the serpent."

"No, we can--"

"They can shoot a dozen, two dozen, and that'll only make it worse. The more blood you stir up, the madder they become."

"I've never seen sharks crazier," Hart commented. He was staring at a hammerhead half out of the water, its jaws clamped on one of the pulley cables. More destructive, though, were the sharks coming from below, slashing through the canvas slings to get at the meat. First one set of floats broke loose, then another. The pulley cables were taking on more and more weight.

"They'll have to cut bait."

A series of thunderous cracks bore this out. The *Iroquois* was slamming repeatedly into the barge. The hawsers reaching out from the *Florida* could slow but not stop the backslide. If this kept up, they would snap. Hart spotted frantic movement on the decks of the sea tug.

"There she goes...."

The pulley lines slapped into the water. There was a loud hiss as noxious gases of decomposition escaped from the dead creature's gut. Then the corpse disappeared completely underwater.

The men in the rowboat caught a whiff of the invisible cloud and covered their faces. "So this is 'Rotting in Hell!'"

The marines came up. A few shots were fired, but only in anger. There was nothing else they could do.

"Now what're we going to tell the folks back home?" one of them yelled in dismay.

Hart tossed up his hands.

Beck found Garrett in the night galley, sipping coffee and nursing his bandaged nose.

"The Fust Luff wants to see you in the captain's wardroom, Mr. Garrett."

"What's he doing up so late?" Garrett pushed his mug away, but did not stand. "Son of a bitch, just leave me alone."

"He said right now, sir."

"Do something useful. Jump off the bridge." He paused, then grinned up at the midshipman. "That was one mean nigger, I mean to tell you. He did this--" He indicated his nose. "--with a *jab*. Something you couldn't do in an hour of trying."

"No, I was just trying to kill you, sir."

Garrett began to laugh, but was stopped abruptly by the pain it caused him. "I guess you're supposed to escort me. Then let's do it. I know it's past your bedtime."

As they entered officers' country, they heard someone singing drunkenly down one of the corridors.

"That would be Dr. Singleton," said Beck. "He took it hard when the sharks stole his prize."

"The big one that got away. I'll drink to that."

Garrett knocked on the wardroom door.

"Enter."

"Good luck, Mr. Garrett," Beck smirked before returning down the passageway.

Garrett went in and closed the door behind him. He cast his eyes around the large room where Oates had held court so many times. Up until now, he'd been the *Florida's* only skipper.

"We're alone. Come over here."

A globe lantern cast a cold light on the first lieutenant, who seemed to have all the ship's logs and reports spread out on the desk before him.

"You look like a clown."

"They say we look a lot alike, sir."

"Shut up, Ensign. You sound like a clown, too."

Garrett shut up.

"I'll make this brief. The late commander didn't like you very much. I suppose you know that. What you don't know is that he reserved a special deck log just on you." He tapped a folder at the edge of the desk. Garrett felt his heart pinch. "I believe he had in mind a Court of Inquiry."

"Yes, sir?"

"I said shut up. Now, let's see...." He began running his finger down the line of entries in the open logbook before him. "Last year... December... Number One Turret.... Ah, here it is. 'Failure to arm weapon in the face of a possible enemy attack.' You said something about loose powder. That doesn't seem to

have bothered Oates until he caught you fishing while we were in the Observation Ward. Then he decided to hold the powder incident against you. Petty, wouldn't you say? This is where it begins.... All right." Reaching to the top of the page, he ripped it out in one swift movement. Garrett jumped in shocked surprise. He had just witnessed a court-martial offense. The acting executive officer compounded the offense when he murmured, "I think we can find something a little better to replace *that*."

"Ah...."

"You were about to say something, Ensign Garrett? Don't." He slipped the page from the log into the folder, then handed the folder to Garrett. "Don't thank me. Just burn it. I know I can count on your discretion."

"Sir," Garrett blurted, "I'm sorry, but--you can't be doing this as a kindness to me."

"Of course not. I'm doing it for the good of the Navy. You understand? We go home with a poppycock story about sea monsters, Congress will never let us live it down. And what do you think will happen to our careers? No. From this point on we start over. I want a clean slate. Or as clean a slate as I can get. And I'll need the cooperation of my ship's company to get it. That's all. Carry on."

At the door, Garrett ventured a glance back. The first lieutenant was hunched thoughtfully over the bridge log, as though contemplating what pages to tear out next.