



DESTROYERMEN
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INTO
THE
STORM
TAYLOR ANDERSON



A RCC BOOK



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FOR MY DARLING DAUGHTER, REBECCA RUTH
EVERYTHING I DO IS FOR HER, AFTER ALL
IN RETURN, I GET HER HUMOR, WIT, COMPANIONSHIP
INSPIRATION, AND UNQUALIFIED ADORATION
NOT A BAD TRADE

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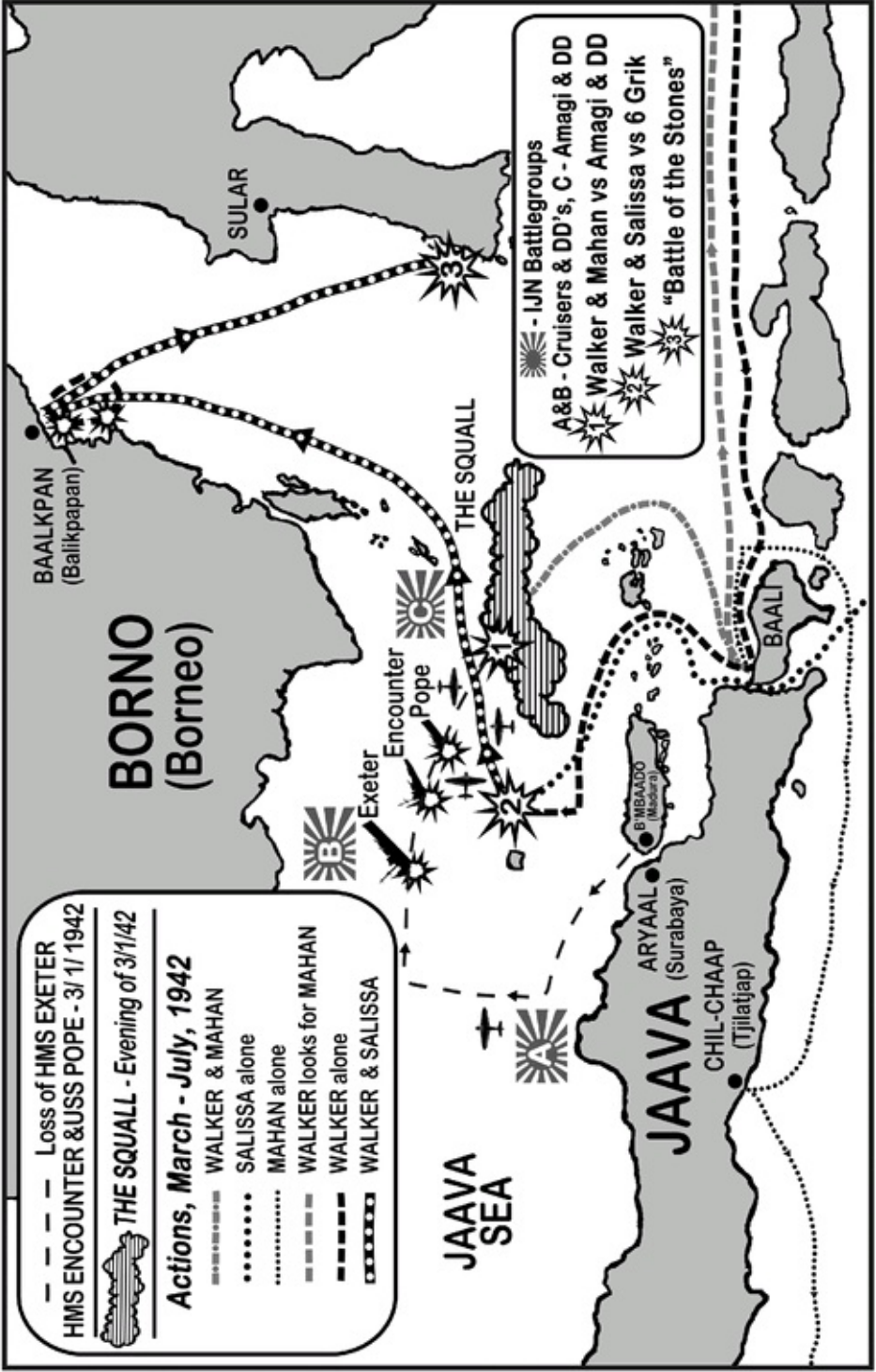
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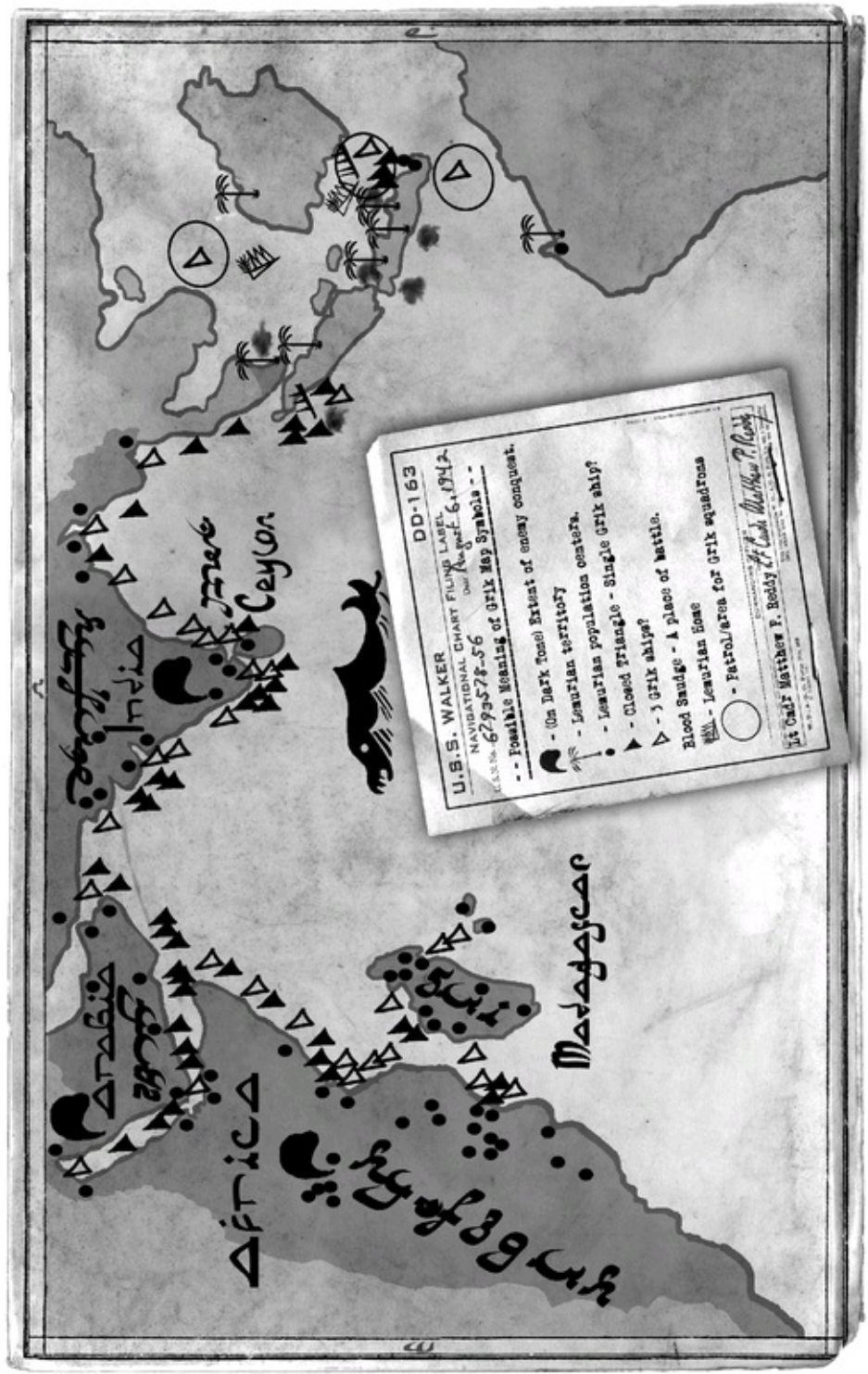
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CHAPTER 1

They were running. There was no other word for it, no comforting euphemism to make the sting less sharp. In fact, it seemed impossible to wring the slightest sense of purpose from the confusion, privation, terror, and bone-numbing weariness they'd endured since the very day the war began on December 7. Now, three months later, they were running away ("limping" might be the better term) and they hadn't even had a chance to lick their wounds. The tired men and elderly ships of Destroyer Squadron (Des Ron) 29 had hurled themselves repeatedly at the implacable juggernaut that was the Japanese Imperial Navy while their numbers were ruthlessly slashed by disaster and disrepair. It was tragically lopsided contest, a feeble gesture of defiance against overwhelming odds. In the end, a gesture was all it had been. Now all that remained was to flee—and it was probably too late.

Lieutenant Commander Matthew Patrick Reddy, USNR, the captain of USS *Walker*, stood on the starboard bridgewing and tried to maintain at least a semblance of dignity in his rumpled and sweat-stained shirt. His left hand clutched his hat to his head against the thirty-knot breeze while his right tried to keep the half-filled mug of lukewarm coffee from slopping onto his uniform.

Red-rimmed eyes squinted from what was normally an almost embarrassingly boyish face, but at the moment a general covering of brown stubble and a fatigue-slacked expression made him look older than his thirty-two years. Not quite thirty-six hours earlier, he and his exhausted crew had participated in the largest surface action of the war to date: the Battle of the Java Sea. For once, the forces were evenly matched—in numbers, if not quality—and they thought they'd had a chance. But from the beginning, nothing went right. The battle finally ended sometime in the night with the ruthless slaughter of virtually the entire force under Admiral Doorman's command. While the enemy grew ever stronger, the scattered Allies were picked off in ones and twos.

Walker wasn't there when the poor old *Houston* and the staunch *Perth* were surrounded and hammered to the bottom. All the destroyers had been ordered to Surabaya to refuel and had thus been granted a short reprieve. *Edwards*, *Alden*, *Ford*, and *Paul Jones* departed for Australia as soon as their bunkers were full, and nobody knew if they'd made it through the gauntlet or not. The remaining destroyers were ordered to wait for the British cruiser *Exeter*, the only capital ship to survive the battle, and escort her to Ceylon after she completed temporary repairs. Matt spent that day of short intermission sending out parties to scrounge anything they might use, but little turned up in the bombed-out remains of the Dutch naval yard. The searchers discovered some belted .30 cal, eighty rounds of four-inch-fifty for the main guns, two condemned torpedoes, a little food. It wasn't much. All the while, emergency repairs to *Walker* were under way. Even if Matt had found the time, he couldn't have slept through the racket.

Now, standing on the bridgewing, he allowed a huge yawn to escape and hoped it made him look calm instead of just worn-out. The morning sun was bright, and the beauty of the vast, calm, almost violet sea was marred only by the distant hump of Bawean Island and the tiny cluster of American and British destroyers guarding *Exeter's* wounded flanks like battle-weary army ants escorting their injured queen to a new home. As far as Matt knew, he was looking at all that remained of the Allied Forces in the American, British, Dutch, Australian—or ABDA—defensive area. He knew they'd been the last ones out of the tangled mass of wreckage and half-sunken hulks that Surabaya, Java, had become. ABDAFLOAT's initial force was composed of two heavy cruisers, seven light cruisers,

twenty-three destroyers, and about thirty submarines and assorted support vessels. Now all that was left were three battered, Great War—vintage U.S. “four-stacker” destroyers, one British destroyer, *Encounter*, and the badly damaged heroine of the River Plate, HMS *Exeter*. The massive Japanese fleet that destroyed or chased off the rest of their comrades now had them alone to concentrate on. USS *Pope* (DD-225) and HMS *Encounter* screened *Exeter*’s starboard side, while USS *Mahan* (DD-102) and Matt’s own *Walker* (DD-163) screened to port.

He glanced up at the lookout standing in the little tub near the top of the mast. Rodriguez, electrician’s mate 3rd class, appeared transfixed, staring through heavy binoculars at a point far astern. From where he stood, Matt couldn’t see anything yet, but he knew the two Japanese heavy cruisers and the destroyer that had pursued them since 0700 were still behind them. Rodriguez could see their smoke and they were getting closer.

When they’d slipped out of Surabaya the night before, they intended to run the Sunda Strait into the Indian Ocean and make a dash for Ceylon. Blocked by the enemy, they reversed course across the Java Sea to run east along the Borneo coast. Their quick about-face gained them breathing room, but the enemy cruisers launched observation planes. Two circled even now, high above and beyond reach of their meager antiaircraft defenses. All they could do was watch while the planes kited lazily overhead and reported their progress to every Japanese ship within range of their radios.

The convoy was limited to twenty-seven knots by *Exeter*’s damage, but Matt knew *Walker* couldn’t steam much faster herself. The daily litany of mechanical casualties plaguing his ancient ship read more like a shipyard inventory than a morning report. *Pope* and *Mahan* were in no better shape. The stress of constant steaming and frequent combat—in addition to ordinary wear and tear—had placed heavier strain on *Walker*’s machinery and equipment than she’d endured in all her twenty-three years of service. *Walker* had gone beyond her design, and Matt was very much afraid that she, as well as her crew, was being pushed beyond their capability.

He hadn’t commanded her long, only four and a half months. As a reservist, even one from the Academy, he’d been treated pretty rough by the Navy. He’d worked his way into the exec’s slot on a Benson-class destroyer (a major step up in the peacetime Navy), but he’d lost the posting to an older regular officer and found himself on the beach. He knew it wouldn’t last and he was right. War was brewing all over the world, and it was just a matter of time before the United States got involved. When he got the letter, he expected—hoped for—a posting to one of the new Fletcher-class destroyers, possibly as gunnery officer. That would have suited him fine. Much to his surprise, he was given a command. But not of one of the sleek, lethal, modern destroyers he yearned for. No, he was to command one of the decrepit and almost defenseless antiques with which he was familiar, but found far from satisfying. Even more disheartening, his “new” command was attached to the Asiatic Fleet.

USS *Walker* had toiled with the Asiatic Fleet for more than six years and in that time she’d never been back to the country of her birth. She was 314 feet long and not quite 31 feet wide. Her long, sleek, needleshaped hull and the four slightly raked funnels that provided the unofficial moniker for her class gave an impression of speed. And she was fast—by the standards of 1919—having made thirty-six knots on her trials. Even now she wasn’t what one would have called slow, but the effort required to maintain her maximum speed was . . . excruciating.

Her ancient boilers were choked with sediment, and her steam lines sprouted leaks with unpredictable capriciousness. Her wiring was so corroded that most of it didn’t do anything anymore. Much had been spliced or bypassed, and unidentifiable bundles of wires ran all over the ship. Her hull plates leaked rust through cracked and peeling paint, despite constant work by her crew to keep it chipped and touched up. The plates themselves were only two-thirds as thick as they once had been.

She stank of sweat, smoke, grease, paint, fuel oil, steam, and strangely, hot linoleum. Her round bottom made her roll horribly in anything but the calmest seas, and she rattled and groaned and vibrated so badly you could feel it in your teeth. Her blowers produced a loud and decidedly asthmatic⁵ wheeze, and the general cacophony of abused machinery made hearing difficult in the remotest areas of the ship.

Her main battery consisted of a meager quartet of four-inch guns—only three of which could possibly bear on a single target—and none of which could elevate high enough to engage aircraft. There was one little three-inch antiaircraft gun on the fantail, but its range was so short it was used mostly for firing illumination star shells. The only even marginal antiaircraft defenses she had were two .30-caliber machine guns on the fire-control platform and two .50-caliber guns on the amidships deckhouse. Hanging over the fantail where it tapered sharply to a slightly rounded vee were two old-fashioned depth-charge racks. Her real teeth consisted of twelve 21-inch torpedoes carried in four triple-tube mounts between the number four funnel and the aft deckhouse. The torpedoes, and her once-respectable speed when delivering them, had been the reason for her creation so long ago. But like everything else in this new war so far, the torpedoes had been a grave and costly disappointment.

Matt had always heard that new captains often overlooked the shortcomings of their first command. But the first thing that sprang to mind when he saw her riding at anchor in Manila Bay, besides a general feeling of dismay over her apparent condition, was that the white-painted letters “163” on her bow seemed much too large.

Matt had been to the China Station and the Philippines—the Asiatic Fleet’s area of operations—only once before. He’d been an ensign aboard another four-stacker during the buildup over the *Panay* incident, when the Japanese “accidentally” bombed and sank an American gunboat on the Yangtze River. Even then, the men, ships, and conditions of operation in the Asiatic Fleet made quite a negative impression. Equipment- and personnel-wise, the station was the abused, ugly dog of the Navy. The men were considered the dregs of the service, and the ships were third-rate obsolescent relics that, it was joked, were kept in the Asiatic Fleet because they weren’t worth the fuel to steam home to scrap. When he assumed command of USS *Walker* he’d studied the log and fitness reports of his predecessor, Captain Simmons. As expected, the crew’s reputation for hard drinking and carousing was confirmed on the pages he read. But to his surprise, there was also a subliminal thread of tolerance, amusement, and even protectiveness among the author’s words. Discipline had been strictly maintained, but it was quickly clear that Captain Simmons had liked his crew. Judging by the initial reserve with which Matt was received, the feeling was mutual. He wondered at the time how difficult it would be for him to “fill the Old Man’s shoes” and how much trouble he’d have making the men conform to his own expectations. Even on more agreeable stations, change often provoked the most friction when a new captain took command. And he hadn’t “come up” in the Asiatic Fleet.

Despite his apprehension, there was little friction after all. Perhaps it was his quiet competence and uncomplicated, black-and-white sense of duty that left no doubt among the crew where they stood. Or maybe it was his quick discovery that these men were not dregs—at least most of them weren’t. Ever since the Depression, the Navy had been particular about the recruits it accepted. A fair percentage of the misfits may have gravitated to the Asiatic Fleet, but for the most part, the men were at least as professional as their counterparts on other stations. They just led an entirely different life than was the norm in the rest of the Navy. They were forced to cope with worn-out equipment and keep their ships combat ready with little more than the proverbial baling wire and chewing gum. It was only natural that they might vent more steam than their peers on stations with less stress, a better climate, and fewer “diversions” than had been the case in China or the Philippines. He could discipline and punish

them for their rowdiness and debauchery during a night on the town, but in his heart he couldn't condemn them for it. Their ability to fix anything, or at least make it "sorta" work, in difficult circumstances appealed to his sense of independence. Whatever the reason, much quicker than he'd expected, he'd been elevated to the exalted status of "Skipper," and he realized he liked them too.

Now, captain and crew together had been tested in the cauldron of combat, and Matt's black-and-white concept of right and wrong had come under serious assault. They'd dodged air attacks and experienced the unexpected exultation of "victory" in the Makassar Strait. They'd seen the senseless waste of lives in the Badung Strait caused by confusion and miscommunication. They'd lived through the frustration and horror of the Battle of the Java Sea, while their comrades on other ships and in other navies died for a purpose that began to elude them. No one questioned the War; it came without warning or mercy. It was real, it was all-consuming, and it was here. Why they were fighting it here was the unfathomable question.

Leaving the Philippines was tough. A lot of the guys had Filipino wives and sweethearts, and to them it was home. Some planned to retire there. But after the Air Corps was slaughtered in the opening days of the war, the only things left that had wings had red circles painted on them. Clearly, the air belonged to the Japanese, remaining in the Philippines was suicide. No one wanted to leave, not even Matt, who still hated being stationed there. But he hated being "run off" even more. Maybe it was his Texas upbringing, or the "Spirit of the Alamo" or something like that, but he'd been perfectly willing to fight to the last even though the withdrawal made good sense.

Shades of gray appeared when *Walker* and Des Ron 29 were redeployed south to defend the Dutch East Indies. It was clearly a hopeless cause. Air cover was still nonexistent, and there weren't enough ships to stop what was coming. The Dutch oil fields were the Japanese objective, but leaving a few oil ships to try and slow them down would only provide them with target practice. If they had to make an Alamo-like stand, why couldn't they have done it in the Philippines? Their "home" waters, so to speak?

Java belonged to the Dutch, and it was understandable that they'd want to keep it, but it was impossible. Reinforcements weren't coming. It made more sense to Matt to pull everything out and save the men and ships until they had enough to knock the Japanese on their butts for a change. Of course, he wasn't an admiral or a politician, and the very condition of the Asiatic Fleet proved that survival wasn't a priority to those who were. He admitted he might've felt differently if Java was his home. The Nazis had Holland, and Java was all that was left. He *had* felt differently when the Philippines were at stake, and he hadn't even liked it there. It was all a matter of perspective. He knew he was relatively young and inexperienced, but he couldn't shake the thought that if it was strategically wrong to defend the Philippines, it was wrong to defend Java too. Maybe he was just bitter. The same people who expected them to fight to the last in the Dutch East Indies hadn't lifted a finger to support the United States in the Philippines.

After the disaster in the Java Sea he thought even the Dutch would realize it made more sense to fight their way back in than be destroyed getting kicked out. As far as he knew, they hadn't sunk a single Japanese ship during the battle. Except for *Exeter* and the aged destroyers, ABDA-FLOAT had ceased to exist. He was mistaken. Word was that Admiral Helfrich, the Dutchman who'd replaced Tommy Hart as ABDA's commander, still planned offensive action even after Admirals Glassford and Palliser told him they had nothing left. The Dutch had no monopoly on stubbornness; the British hadn't showed much more sense regarding Singapore, and thousands of Americans were trapped in the Philippines, cut off from any support. But it was past time to leave. ABDA had done its best with what it had. There'd been willing cooperation, but no coordination. Without air cover or reconnaissance, o

even a common language, they'd been like blindfolded kids running around on tricycles with a steamroller bearing down. It was a disaster.

He often reflected on the certainty he'd felt regarding an eventual war with Germany, and he admitted that before he got out here, he'd never given much thought to the Japanese. Evidently nobody had. Now his entire consciousness was devoted to preventing that underestimated foe from shredding his ship and her crew and sending them to the bottom of the Java Sea.

With a gauging glance at the stately *Exeter* off the port quarter to ensure that *Walker* was holding proper formation, he stepped into the pilothouse. The gunnery officer, Lieutenant (j.g.) Greg Garrett, looked anxiously from the port bridgewing and Matt waved him back. The tall, lanky young officer nodded solemnly and resumed scanning the sea toward the dark smudge in the north that was Borneo. A good kid, Greg. He was conscientious and industrious, if just a bit intense. They were still at general quarters, as they'd been since the morning watch, and Garrett's battle station was normally on the fire control platform above the pilothouse. Matt had told him to rotate himself and his team out of the wind and sun periodically. The main battery was useless against air attack, and it would be a while before they were in range of the Japanese cruiser's eight-inch guns. Longer still before they could hope to reply. Even so, when it was Garrett's turn to take a break, he merely descended to the pilothouse and kept doing what he'd done above—watching and waiting. Matt understood how the younger man felt. The atmosphere of anxiety and tension was thick. Everyone anticipated the cry warning of enemy ships or planes.

The stocky, broad-shouldered form of Lieutenant James Ellis clomped metallicly up the ladder from the main deck below, and Matt arched an eyebrow at him. He liked Jim Ellis, and they were as close to being friends as their rank difference allowed, but Jim was much farther from his battle station at the auxiliary conn on the aft deckhouse than Garrett was from his.

"Yes, sir, I know," Ellis said, anticipating the reprimand as he maneuvered Matt out of hearing of the others in the pilothouse. "But those nurses and their flyboy chauffeurs want to know if there's anything they can do. That Army captain"—he tilted his nose up with unconscious disdain—"actually tried to come up here and bug you. Chief Gray said he'd have to wait your convenience." Ellis grinned. "That wasn't good enough and Gray offered to sit on him—physically. Then he sent for me." Matt smiled in spite of his jitters.

Before they cleared Surabaya, they'd taken aboard a rather motley assortment of passengers. First to arrive was an unkempt and harried-looking Australian, a Mr. Bradford, a construction engineer for Royal Dutch Shell. He introduced himself as a "naturalist," but paid his passage by intervening on their behalf with the harbor officials, who didn't want to fill their bunkers. They'd argued that the fuel would be better used by Dutch ships, staying to defend Java. Courtney Bradford countered with the fact that there was only one Dutch ship left, a destroyer, and she was getting the hell out just as fast as she could. Perhaps it was their lingering respect for a corporate superior, or maybe just the final realization that everything really was falling apart. Whatever the motivation, *Walker* left Surabaya with her bunkers overflowing.

Next to come limping aboard was a sergeant from *Houston's* Marine contingent. He'd been wounded by a bomb that had killed dozens and wrecked the old cruiser's aft turret. Left ashore in a hospital with a lacerated leg, he missed her final sortie. He didn't intend to become a guest of the Japanese. Upon his arrival, he was roundly scolded for bleeding on the deck and sent below to the surgeon.

Finally, motoring out to catch them in a "borrowed" boat just as they were preparing to get underway were six Navy nurses and two P-40 pilots who'd escaped the sinking of the old *Langley* the day

before. *Langley* had been ferrying P-40 fighters in for the defense of Java, but she was caught fifty miles short. Bombed into a smoldering wreck, she was abandoned, and one of *Walker's* sisters, *Edsa* was forced to finish her with two precious torpedoes. The majority of *Langley's* personnel shipped south on the oiler *Pecos*, but in the confusion, the nurses and airmen were left behind. They persuaded the driver of a Dutch army truck to take them to Surabaya, and they arrived just in time to come aboard *Walker*.

Matt hadn't seen them. He'd been aboard *Exeter* conferring with Captain Gordon's executive officer. When he returned, he was informed of the ship's newest passengers by a leering Jim Ellis and a scandalized Lieutenant Brad "Spanky" McFarlane, the engineering officer, whose strict observance of Navy custom—if not always regulations—filled him with a terrible conviction that women on board would certainly doom the ship. That Army aviators accompanied them would probably send them to hell as well. Matt was inwardly amused by the diverse reactions, and it never occurred to him to set them ashore under the circumstances. He only wondered briefly where they'd be kept. Since then, he hadn't seen them and they'd been forgotten.

"What's his name?"

"The Army captain? Kaufman, sir."

"Very well, send him up, but by himself. And, Exec," he added ominously, "we don't need the distraction of women on my bridge. Clear?"

Lieutenant Ellis grinned hugely and went to fetch their visitor. Matt stepped onto the bridgeway and the Air Corps captain clumsily appeared. He prepared to return the salute he expected, since they were technically out-of-doors. It didn't come. His eyes narrowed slightly and the other members of the bridge crew exchanged shocked, knowing expressions.

"Lieutenant Commander Reddy? I'm David Kaufman, Captain, U.S. ¹¹ Army Air Corps."

The man stuck out his hand and Matt took it briefly. His initial impression was that the lack of a salute and the use of his specific rank instead of the appropriate, if honorific, title of "Captain" were due to ignorance. A Navy lieutenant commander was equivalent to a major in the Army. But the emphasis Kaufman applied to his own rank warned Matt that his guest didn't see it that way and might try to intimidate him if he could.

"What can I do for you, Captain Kaufman?" he asked, placing emphasis on the "Captain" as well, but in a way he'd address a subordinate. Kaufman glanced at the hostile expressions of the seamen on the bridge and modified his tone. His next words were less condescending.

"I just thought if there was anything I or Lieutenant Mallory might help you with, why, just let us know." He smiled smugly, and the patronizing inflection returned as he spoke. He acted like he'd granted a favor.

"What can you do?" Matt asked simply. "Besides fly airplanes. I assume you can fly airplanes."

Kaufman's face reddened, and he realized he might have overstepped. "Yeah, I can fly airplanes," he said with a quick, brittle smile. He held his hands out to his sides. "But I'm fresh out. You don't have one I can borrow?" His attempted joke fell flat and he just shrugged. "I can fire a machine gun."

Matt turned to Garrett, observing the exchange with wide eyes. "Mr. Garrett, perhaps the captain and his lieutenant might assist your crews on the thirty-cals on the fire-control platform? If we come under air attack they'll need to be supplied with ammunition." He grimaced. "Since we lost most of our mess attendants when we left the Philippines, it's hard to spare men for that chore." He looked the aviator square in the eye. "Thanks for the offer. You're dismissed." With that, he turned and peered out the pilothouse windows at the number one gun down on the foredeck. He sensed Kaufman's furious presence behind him for a few moments more, but with an audible sigh and a few muted

chuckles, the rest of the watch relaxed and he knew Kaufman must have left. *I shouldn't have let him rile me*, he scolded himself, but he made a quiet snort of amusement anyway. Then he spun—"Exec!"

Ellis's head popped back into view. "Skipper?"

"Those women are nurses, you say?"

Ellis leered again. "Absolutely."

Matt shook his head. "If they want to help, send them to Doc Stevens in the wardroom. And spread the word! They'll be treated with respect. Any man who inflicts himself on them will go overboard for the Japs. Understood?"

Ellis nodded, his leer now slightly wistful. "Sir."

"Very well. And, Exec?"

"Sir?"

"Keep them off my bridge."

Ellis slid down the ladder, firehouse style, and caught up with Kaufman, who was striding purposefully through the amidships deckhouse. His handsome, square-jawed face was clouded with anger. Ellis touched his sleeve and Kaufman spun. He recognized Ellis and forcibly composed his expression. He stood six inches taller than the burly exec, but Ellis was more muscular. A tolerant smile never left his face. Fitzhugh Gray strode up, adding his pudgy but powerful presence to the group. He handed each man a Coke, already opened, and slipped a church key onto the cap of the one in his own massive paw.

In a service where everyone had multiple "names"—real name, nickname, and sometimes multiple titles—Gray had the most. He was the chief boatswain's mate, and the highest-ranking NCO on the ship. Although he was technically subordinate to the most junior officers, only the captain and the exec would have dreamed of giving him an order. Time in grade, as well as personality, made him the "senior" chief aboard, and he was usually referred to as just "the Chief" by the crew. The other chiefs and officers often used the outdated but still honorific "the Bosun." Only the captain or the exec ever used the respectful diminutive "Boats."

"Going to be another hot one," Gray said, wiping his forehead with his sleeve. "'Course, if the goddamn Nips get us, I guess we'll be swimmin'. Them that can swim. I think I'd rather be sweating than swimmin'. I guess you fighter jocks don't give as much thought to swimmin' as destroyermen do." It was just a friendly jibe, but Kaufman was still annoyed by Gray's earlier threat, and what he perceived as the captain's humiliating treatment of him.

"What's that supposed to mean?" he demanded hotly. Gray looked at Ellis and rolled his eyes. At that moment, Lieutenant Benjamin Mallory joined them. He was already drinking a Coke and he held it up.

"How about this, Captain?" he said. "These destroyer pukes have a Coke machine! Far as I can tell it's the only thing that works."

Rebuffed by Kaufman, Gray began to bristle. Ellis recognized the lieutenant's friendly banter, however, and turned to him. "That's right, boy," he said with a grin, "and if you airdales had done your job in the Philippines, we'd still be sitting fat and happy going up and down with the tide in Cavite. Nothing to worry about but keeping the Coke machine stocked while the yard-apes worked on these worn-out boilers." He stomped his foot on the deck for emphasis, indicating the forward fireroom below.

Mallory didn't laugh. "I'm afraid you got me. I wasn't there, of course, but I heard the fellows

didn't do so good." Ellis saw Gray take a breath and prepare his tirade about the ineffectiveness of the Air Corps, a topic much discussed. The Japanese air cover and the American lack thereof had been an extremely sore subject since the war began. Ignored now, and glad to be, Kaufman strode away. Mallory started to follow, but Ellis stopped him.

"By the way, Captain Kaufman asked if we could use a hand, and the captain said if you could keep the ammunition flowing to the machine guns it would help."

Mallory nodded thoughtfully. "Sure thing. Not much else we'd be good for on a ship. Show me where you keep the bullets and I'll haul as many as you need." He looked wryly at Ellis and gestured over his shoulder with his chin. "He didn't like that much, did he?"

Ellis smiled and shook his head. "No, son. I think he expected us to put him in charge."

The corner of Mallory's mouth quirked upward. "Kaufman's really not such a bad guy, but I guess he is sort of—" He caught himself and shrugged sheepishly. "I'll do anything I can to help."

Ellis slapped him on the back, and the powerful blow nearly knocked Mallory into the Chief. "I know you will. Boats, have somebody show this man where we keep the bullets. I better get back where I belong."

Nurse Lieutenant Sandra Tucker pushed aside the pea green curtain and led her entourage into the wardroom. She was petite, measuring only five foot three, and her long, sandy-brown hair was coiled tightly about her head. When it came down, it framed a face that may not have been classically beautiful, but was striking in a pretty, "girl next door" sort of way. Her large green eyes projected an impression of naive vulnerability, but anyone making that assumption would have been mistaken. At twenty-seven, she'd been a Navy nurse since '35, and in that time she'd encountered every excuse, pickup line, real and imagined ailment, injury, and malingerer's complaint possible in a bored but active peacetime Navy. She was smart, confident, and even tended toward an arrogant streak when in her realm of expertise. Her mild conceit was understandable, since she was an outstanding nurse and often made a better doctor than the doctors did. She'd assisted in a variety of surgical procedures and performed everything from appendectomies to amputations by herself, since many of her postings had been in remote areas where emergencies were handled on-site. When war loomed, she and her companions volunteered for the Philippines. She had friends there, and that was where she figured nurses would be needed. She knew she was good at her job and genuinely wanted to be where she could make the greatest contribution. That was why she'd become a nurse in the first place. Right now, although she was the highest-ranking officer in the wardroom, it became quickly obvious that she wasn't in charge.

The ship's surgeon, "Doc" Stevens, was a tall, cadaverous man in his mid-forties. He and Pharmacist's Mate 3rd Class Jamie Miller were sitting at the green-topped wardroom table with the Marine sergeant, Pete Alden, playing dominoes when Sandra entered with the five other nurses.

The wardroom was the officers' dining room, but it also served as a surgery when the ship went into battle. The long dining surface became an operating table, and a large light hung above it by a fixture that could be lowered near the patient. Except for the dominoes, all superfluous articles had been stowed, and various gleaming surgical instruments lay neatly arranged and ready at hand.

The pharmacist's mate looked to be just a boy, like most of the crewmen Sandra had seen, but the Marine was a large, well-muscled, and deeply tanned thirtysomething. He regarded the nurses with a frankly appraising eye. The imposing surgeon grimly played a domino and glanced at them as the nurses crowded through the opening.

"I sort of expected to see you . . . ladies here." His Massachusetts accent was strong and nasal. "I bet you nurses want to be nurses, right?" He shifted in his chair and rubbed his chin. "I never had a nurse before. Not counting Jamie here, of course. Tell me, Sergeant," he said, addressing the Marine, "have you ever had a nurse?" Alden looked at him, astonished. The nurses were, after all, officers. Stevens shook his head. "Never mind, Sergeant. Of course you have. You're a wounded hero, after all. I'm sure you had nurses all over you." Sandra's face clouded and she began to snap a reprimand. Doc Stevens's look momentarily silenced her protest. "I know you're officers and I'm just a lowly Warrant. I don't give a damn. I know about you nurses; wouldn't even give me the time of day if I came squirming into your nice, clean, modern hospital. Well, this is *my* hospital! If you want to stay here and help, that's fine. There'll probably be plenty to do. But if you want to give orders or get in the way, you can turn around, climb that ladder and go play dollies under the depth charges because I don't need you." He stopped long enough to smile at their expressions. "I've got Jamie. He makes a pretty good nurse, even if he looks dreadful in a dress."

Sandra's eyes narrowed, and for an instant she hesitated. She'd faced this kind of attitude all her life and it was particularly pervasive in the military. Her father had perhaps been the worst, refusing to accept that she might do something with her life other than wait for "the right guy" to come along. Her restrictions and expectations might have been couched more gently than Stevens's, but they were no less corrosive and condescending. And wrong. She'd proven that. She straightened her back and forced a smile.

"Surgeon's Mate Stevens, is it not?" she asked, and her voice held an icy calm. Stevens arched an eyebrow, but jerked an aggressive nod.

"Your captain asked that we report to you and that's what we've done. I know this is your 'hospital' and I'm prepared to defer to you." Her voice took on a dangerous edge. "But since you insist on wallowing in your 'lowly Warrant' status I'll remind you I'm a LIEUTENANT in the United States Navy. My ensigns might not pull rank on you, but I SURE AS HELL WILL! You're clearly not a gentleman, so I won't appeal to you as one, but as a superior officer I insist you get up off your skinned ass and show the respect due my rank or by God, I'll have you up on charges for insubordination!"

Her voice had risen as she spoke, until her final exclamation was uttered as a roar that her small form seemed incapable of producing. Jamie Miller's chair hit the deck as he rocketed to attention. Even the wounded Marine struggled to his feet, his face a study of embarrassment mingled with respect. Doc Stevens remained seated a few moments more, but finally he stood also, an expression of mocking insolence on his face. He threw an exaggerated salute.

"Your orders, ma'am?" The question dripped sarcasm, but Sandra smiled in anticipation of his reaction. She looked at Jamie. "You!"

"Pharmacist's Mate Miller, ma'am."

"Mr. Miller, stow those dominoes and disinfect that table this instant. We could have casualties at any moment." She looked at the blood-soaked bandage the Marine wore. "Are you even fit for duty?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Hmm. I doubt it, but we'll see. We'll have a look at that leg presently, circumstances permitting."

Stevens cleared his throat. "And what about me?" he demanded, surly. Sandra was sorely tempted to upbraid him again, but instead she smiled sweetly and indicated the rest of the nurses.

"You, MISTER Stevens . . . will tell us what you want us to do next. This is your 'hospital,' after all."

Matt had already forgotten his encounter with Captain Kaufman. He had far more important concerns. A Morse-lamp message from Captain Gordon was composed of only three words: "Enemy in sight." *Exeter's* lookouts had a higher vantage point than Rodriguez, but just a few moments later Garrett held his earpiece tight against his head and looked up.

"Sir! Rodriguez sees them too. Still dead astern, but coming up fast. They must be making thirty-five knots!" He sounded incredulous. Matt nodded. Even without *Exeter* slowing them down, *Walker* couldn't outrun them. Not anymore.

"Very well, Mr. Garrett. Return to your station. Mr. Rogers?" he said to the first officer. "Relieve Rodriguez in the crow's nest, if you please. If we can see them, they can hit us. Lieutenant Flowers"—he addressed the navigating officer—"take the conn."

Flowers spoke to the man holding the brightly polished wheel. "I relieve you, sir."

The seaman relinquished his post. "Mr. Flowers has the conn," he responded and looked around, at a loss. Matt motioned for him to put on a headset.

"Sound general quarters again. We've been at battle stations all morning, but somebody might be fooling around in the head."

The rhythmic, ill-sounding *gong, gong, gong* of the general alarm reverberated throughout the ship.

In the aft fireroom, Brad "Spanky" McFarlane, the engineering officer, wiped sweat from his narrow face and shook it off his hand to join the black, slimy slurry on the deck plates. In the space containing the number three and four boilers, it was at least 130 degrees. He barely heard the sound of the alarm over the thundering blower and the roar of the burners as atomized fuel oil was consumed at a prodigious rate.

"Gotta get back to the forward engine room. That's the second time they've sounded GQ. Maybe they mean it this time."

Firemen Isak Reuben on the blower control and Gilbert Yager on the burner nodded, but paid him no further attention. They were both entirely focused on their tasks. Their two jobs, and that of the water tender, required careful concentration. Too much fuel and not enough air, and black smoke billowed from the stacks, earning an instant reprimand from the captain and the scorn of their fellow "snipes." Not enough feed water in the lines, and white steam rose overhead. Too much water, not enough air and fuel, and water instead of steam sprayed into the turbines. That could damage the delicate blades. Isak and Gilbert were magicians at their jobs and the very best he had, but McFarlane didn't know what to think of them otherwise. They were inseparable, but rarely talked to anyone else. They were both wiry, intense little men, and neither seemed to mind the hellish temperatures in which they worked. Even off duty, they lingered in the vicinity of their posts—which annoyed the men on watch. They never caused any trouble, but they didn't make friends and they didn't play on the ship's baseball team. They just kept to themselves. The other snipes called them the White Mice, or just the Mice, because of their similar, almost rodent-like expressions and because they never went above deck if they could help it. Therefore, their otherwise perpetually sooty skins had an unhealthy pallor. The only explanation McFarlane ever got was that if they spent too much time in the "cool" air on deck, they'd lose their tolerance for the temperatures in the fireroom. McFarlane shrugged and stepped to the air lock. They were squirrels, sure enough, but they were his squirrels.

He cycled through the air lock into the forward engine room. He was shaped much like the Mice, and he barely had to squat to step through. The large compartment was filled by the big turbines and a maze of steam lines and conduits, but he moved among them with practiced ease to the enclosed

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