

Cage on the Sea



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CAGE ON THE SEA

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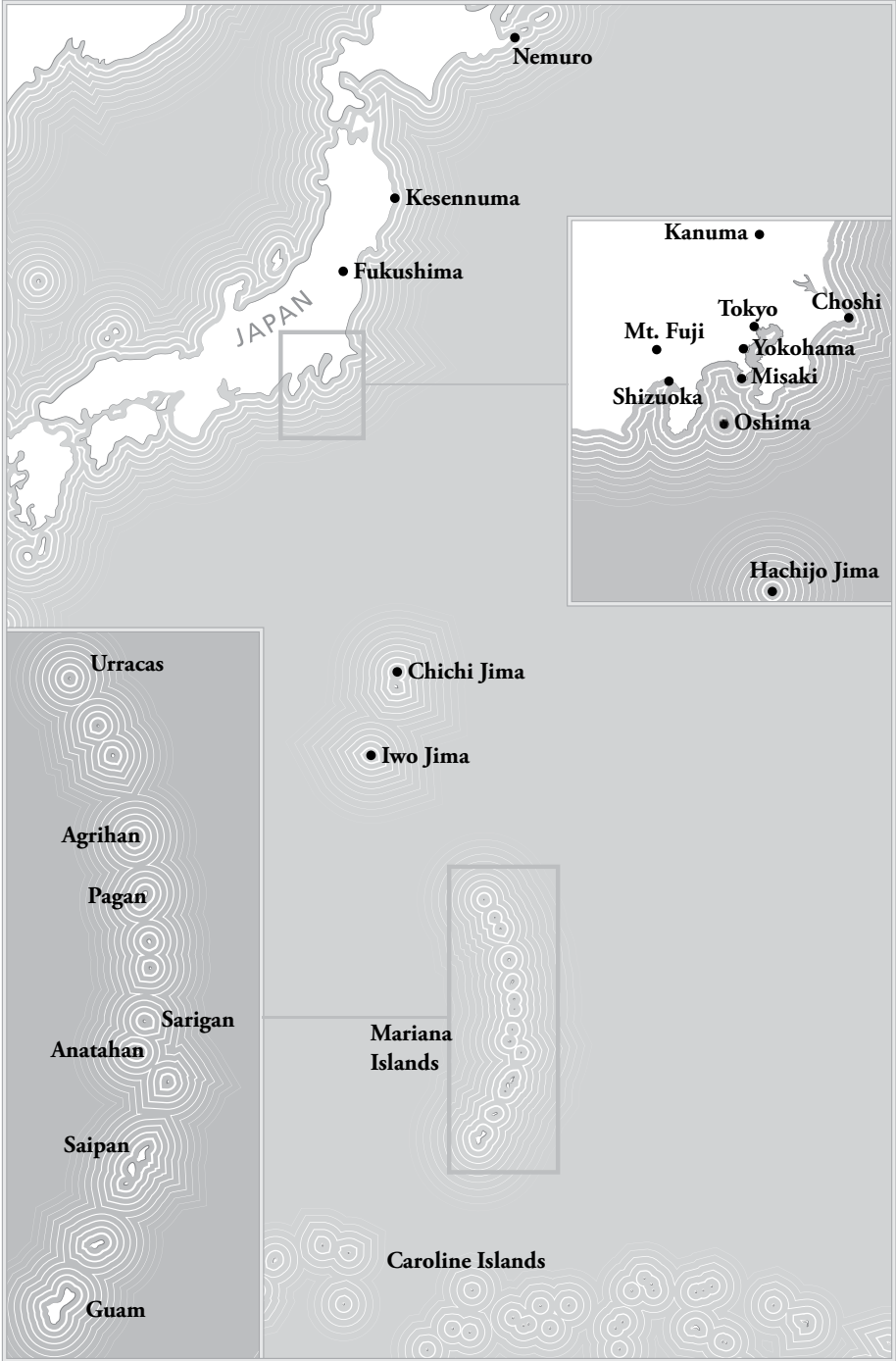
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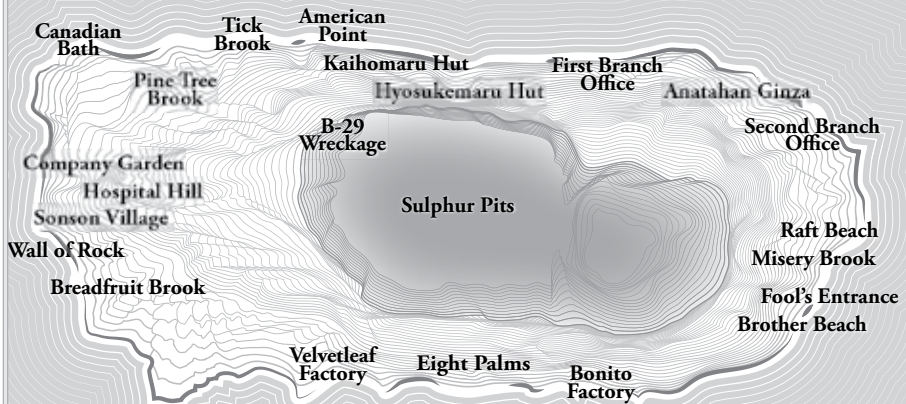
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Cage on the Sea



Anatahan Island



Chapter Two

Washed Ashore

May 24, 1944

Midnight

Thronged of hand-pulled carts hurried back and forth through the darkness, ferrying supplies to the ships from the warehouse beside the wharf. The beacon lights marking the entrance to Yokohama harbor and the lights of the customs office had all been doused. Only the faintest wisps of light escaped from the open doors of the warehouse and the holds of the docked ships. The grunts and shouts of the workers mingled with the crash of waves against the shore.

Sugataro Nakai stood in front of the warehouse holding a small-caliber rifle and a rubberized black bag filled with rice. Whether the bag was supposed to keep the rice from spoiling if it came into contact with salt water or to allow it to be salvaged after a ship sank was anyone's guess. A wooden trunk filled with canned food and dried noodles rested nearby.

"That's everything for the *Hyosukemaru*." The supply officer reviewed the manifest beneath a bare light bulb.

Taihei Gunji appeared out of the darkness.

"Fine times we're in. A fisherman who ain't allowed to fish ain't no better off than a fish outta water." Gunji grumbled to Nakai.

The faint light washed over Gunji's tanned face. This rough-hewn man was captain of the *Hyosukemaru*. Over fifty years old, his voice

was hoarse, and deep wrinkles lined his eyes. His close-cropped hair was peppered with shocks of white.

The Greater East Asia War that had begun with the December 7, 1941 attack on Pearl Harbor had spread to encompass Southeast Asia, the South Pacific, and the Aleutian Islands in the blink of an eye. Exploiting the momentum of their first attack, the Japanese Imperial Fleet made a bid for Midway in June of 1942 to strike fear into the American mainland. But the crushing defeat they suffered had changed everything. Now on the defensive, the Japanese Army readied its garrisons across the South Pacific in a line of last defense.

At first, the Japanese military had commandeered large merchant freighters to supply its many outlying bases with munitions and provisions, but most of those vessels had been wiped out on routes that led through dangerous waters under enemy-controlled skies. With few alternatives left, they turned to small fishing vessels used to ferry coastal freight. By this time, enemy submarines infested the waters off Japan, putting a stranglehold on Japanese shipping. To lessen the danger, ships left port under cover of darkness, greeting the dawn only once they had reached the open sea.

The *Hyosukemaru* was pressed into service in January of 1944. She was only a small 32-ton tuna boat with a 105-horsepower hot bulb engine, but in light of the shortage of vessels, the navy had put her to use ferrying freight through coastal waters. Now she and her crew were part of the Fourth Fleet, and they were waiting to set sail.

“Yeah, I guess so.” Nakai answered without giving it much thought. He could certainly sympathize with Gunji’s “fine times.” Nakai himself hadn’t expected to be in the military in his late thirties. Under normal circumstances, simply being the eldest son in the family should have been enough to exempt him from service. Yet in spite of his below-average physical condition, he was drafted as a second reservist. He didn’t think his constitution would have endured marches across the windswept continent, so he enlisted in the navy. That’s how Nakai found himself a military escort aboard this small ship. He didn’t even know where they were going.

Eighteen other small fishing vessels like the *Hyosukemaru* were moored to the Yokohama wharfs. They hailed from ports throughout Japan. Misaki in Kanagawa. Choshi in Chiba. Kesenuma in

Miyagi. Shimizu in Shizuoka. Nemuro in Hokkaido. Once they'd been loaded, all would sail tonight.

Nakai watched with detachment as the coal-black fleet readied itself.

"When you're done out here, everyone's assembling in the break room." No sooner had the quartermaster sergeant spoken than he was gone.

The ships were almost finished being loaded. One by one, they broke away from the darkened fleet and set out on their journey. Each ship was crewed by a captain and ten or so conscripts, almost all of whom were either well over thirty or boys scarce old enough to shave. In addition to these, the military escorts had been divided up two per ship.

"Let's go," Gunji called to Nakai as he walked out of the storehouse. Tamio Suzaki, a soldier drafted the same year as Nakai, was standing near the *Hyosukemaru*. He walked up to them. Like Nakai, Suzaki was in the 32nd division of the 2nd Reserve. He was married, with three children. The men weren't the same age, but they were both seamen first class, and they'd been assigned to the same ship.

"My family said they'd be coming to see me off." Suzaki's white smile flashed in the darkness.

"That right?" Nakai replied. He wondered whether Shizue would come. At this hour, it wasn't likely she'd make the trip from Asakusa. Half giving up on the idea, Nakai went into the break room.

The room was a converted mail ship waiting room. The departure times for the ships were listed on a white board, though the timetable was probably irrelevant now. A curtain covered the ticket window, which was boarded up from the inside. The chairs had been removed, leaving sets of four square depressions in the dirt floor where they had stood. A few electric lights covered with black cloth hung from the high ceiling. For eyes that had stepped in from the darkness of the docks, it was ample light.

Twenty to thirty family members were inside. There were between one hundred fifty to one hundred eighty sailors on the eighteen boats, but at this hour you could hardly expect all of their families to come see them off.

“Sugataro,” Shizue called to Nakai, pushing her way through the crowd. She wore a silk *meisen* over loose trousers of patterned cotton tied at the ankle. Her clothing was simple, but her collar was open at the back, exposing the pale skin at the nape of her neck, and her hair was up in traditional Japanese fashion.

“Hey,” Nakai answered, but there was nothing more to say.

Nakai had thrown himself into the world of Asakusa entertainers, becoming a reciter of *naniwabushi* ballads, for which his family in Fukushima had disowned him. He’d had no desire to carry on the family farm, so he couldn’t blame them for how they felt.

Their meeting had been chance. Shizue was a samisen player, and the paramour of Nakai’s *naniwabushi* master. When his master fell ill, Nakai had taken his place performing alongside Shizue. It was meant to be.

There had been no grand wedding ceremony. Nakai sent postcards announcing his marriage to his aging parents he hadn’t seen in nearly five years, and to his aunts and uncles. Three years had passed since then. They had no children.

“Here, a going-away present from Anrakutei.” Shizue pulled a liter bottle of rice wine from a cloth bag and slid it into the breast of Nakai’s uniform. Anrakutei was a charming old family store, a small stall pitched at the foot of Azuma Bridge. By the way she gave it to him, she didn’t mean for him to share the wine with his friends.

“That couldn’t have been easy to come by.”

After their shows in Asakusa had ended, Nakai and Shizue used to drop in to the stall without telling their master. Since Nakai was still an understudy, he was supposed to pay his master a percentage from each performance, but he’d been skimming a little off the top for himself. They would each get a cut of the day’s proceeds, though the ticket prices varied from venue to venue. Those were the times Nakai had enjoyed most, but he still felt a tinge of guilt about having married Shizue while his master lay bedridden.

“I had them set it aside—for you,” Shizue told him in a low voice.

Nakai’s thoughts went to the time he and Shizue had eaten tangerines his uncle sent them from Shizuoka. There had been no one to wish them well at their wedding; only Nakai’s uncle had been considerate enough to send them a present with a brief note

of congratulation. That was during the first New Year's following the beginning of the war with the Americans. After that, the theater patrons had ceased coming to their show, and life had grown more difficult. Shizue went to work at Anrakutei, putting aside her samisen in favor of selling soba noodles and grilled food drenched in miso sauce.

When the customers stopped coming to the theater, many of the performers in Asakusa were forced to rely on their wives for support. Nakai's career died with his master. Perhaps Nakai should have pushed to perform on his own while he was still alive, but it seemed unlikely that his master would have been generous enough to help launch the career of the man who'd stolen away his lover. His master had been dead for two years now.

Nakai may have had little left to lose, but he couldn't help thinking that this was going to be the end of the line. Convoys were sent naked into the Pacific. They didn't have destroyer escorts. There was no point pretending that everything would be all right.

The *Hyosukemaru* set sail at around three in the morning as the dark velvet sky had begun to lighten ever so slightly against the black of the sea. Even so, it was impossible to make out the boat sailing just thirty meters ahead. Small red running lights to port and starboard bobbed ahead in the darkness, beckoning them onward. The ship behind the *Hyosukemaru* must have been following her lights just as they followed the boat ahead. It was a grim way to put to sea.

Most of the commandeered ships were small, wooden boats of about thirty tons. Among the eighteen ships, the only weaponry they had was two machine guns and twelve small-caliber guns. The *Hyosukemaru* was outfitted with one of the smaller guns, but some of the ships were completely unarmed. Nakai had had half a year of training, just like Suzuki, who had joined the same year, but they were both reservists who'd never tasted real battle. How much use could they really be?

"That there's Misaki," announced Gunji, about one hour after they'd set sail. Nakai gazed over at the shadow on his right that was the Miura Peninsula. It was already light, but the *Hyosukemaru's*

home port still slept. The sailors tried to spot their own houses, cheering quietly when they found them. The reddening shape of Mount Fuji was a ghost in the distance. The foot of the mountain was shrouded in mist, and its peak was gradually growing brighter. Then it was gone, swallowed in the morning fog.

“Rough seas ahead,” Gunji spat. Fishermen read the weather from the movement of the clouds and the look of the land. Nakai chalked Gunji’s comment up to that sixth sense as he stared out at the tranquil sea.

The convoy headed south at about ten knots. They didn’t even know the name of the ship at the head of the convoy. All Gunji could do was order their chief engineer, Taro Mizutani, to make sure they didn’t fall behind the ship in front. Mizutani was a calm, quiet man of about forty. He had become a sailor at the age of seventeen, which would give him twenty-three years of experience, give or take.

From time to time Japanese planes flew overhead. As though wishing the convoy Godspeed, they would escort them a short way before banking and flying off.

The island of Oshima was dimly visible in front of a bank of low-lying clouds.

Enemy submarines were known to frequent the waters off Japan. Since reaching open water, Nakai had established a rotation for standing watch. He and Suzaki would take turns every three hours. Of course even if they did spot a submarine, sinking it with small arms fire was another matter.

The ship ahead of them was in visual contact, and at least the *Hyosukemaru*’s engine was running well. The afternoon of the next day they put in at Hachijo Jima. It hadn’t been part of the plan, but Nakai soon learned that they were trying to stay out of the way of an approaching storm.

They lay at anchor at Hachijo Jima for two days waiting for the seas to calm before striking south again. That’s when Nakai learned of their destination. Gunji had overheard someone talking about it.

Truk, that’s where they were headed.

Part of the Caroline Islands, Truk had been under Japanese rule since 1919. The only thing Nakai knew about the place was that it

was the site of the largest Japanese naval base in the Pacific.

On June 2 the convoy found itself at Chichi Jima's Futami Harbor in the Ogasawara Islands. They had been caught in a fierce rainstorm and had only just managed to make port, but not before losing their first ship. They found another convoy already at anchor in the harbor. Boasting ships between eighty and one hundred tons, each equipped with 20mm autocannons, it was in an altogether different league from the *Hyosukemaru* and her companions.

Nakai was surprised to see trees ripe with bananas and papayas surrounding the harbor. He hadn't realized Japan included verdant tropical islands such as this. The sweat beaded on his skin in the moist, hot air.

The crew set off into town to find lodging. The fishermen familiar with Chichi Jima wasted no time heading for the places they'd gotten to know from earlier visits. Shipmates generally stayed together while ashore. The men went off in groups of twos and threes to hunt out booze or women. Nakai felt that yesterday's storm had reduced the gap between himself and the fishermen. They still addressed each other with the polite "-san" at the end of their names, but now they were pals who could share secrets and grumbled complaints.

Including Nakai, the *Hyosukemaru* had a complement of ten men.

Sakichi Mizutani was only eighteen, and part of the engineering crew. He was the son of the *Hyosukemaru's* owner, and the chief engineer's nephew. When he drank, his carefree face flushed bright red. He had a crush on a girl about his age, and even when he joined the others at the pub, he never joined in the conversations of the grown men.

Ryotaro Tomobe was a quiet man married to the elder Mizutani's sister. At forty-seven, he was the chief engineer's senior by a few years. Thirty-eight-year-old Matsuyoshi Umeda, a big-hearted man, rounded out the engineering crew.

Yoshizo Urata was a sailor pushing forty. An experienced fisherman with small, sunken eyes, you could tell at a glance that he was the sort of fellow his shipmates could depend on. When they arrived at Ogasawara, Urata had read the first charts they'd been given. He always kept a level head, and he was even better about watching out for his friends than Gunji.

The boatswain, Ryosaku Kimoto, was a large man of about forty, and the most hotheaded of the lot. He could often be heard shouting threats at the rest of the crew. Then there was Tomoyuki Tsuchida, the inconspicuous nineteen-year-old cook who prepared their meals. At the time of their launch, he seemed a quiet enough young man, though that would soon prove to have been merely a façade.

In addition to the fishermen, there was Suzaki, who'd joined the military the same year as Nakai. He was a stonecutter from Kanuma in Tochigi Prefecture. When he was younger, he contracted a mild case of silicosis from breathing stone dust, which had initially exempted him from military service. In spite of this, his arms were well muscled, and he had a barrel chest, making it hard to imagine he had ever been ill. He was almost three inches taller than Nakai. With a physique like that, you certainly wouldn't want to get on his bad side. Surprisingly to the other members of the crew, he never drank so much as a drop of alcohol.

Their stay on Chichi Jima lasted four days. The captains held a meeting in which it was decided that ships that were able would tow those that had been damaged.

On the evening of June 6 the weather turned for the better, and they set sail again. Before they left, the naval officer from the command ship barked out a grim pep talk, his face flushed. "We're moving into dangerous waters. If even two ships out of the convoy make it through, it'll be an achievement. You only see a war like this once in a hundred years. I wouldn't be surprised if our grandkids are still fighting." Only two ships out of the eighty-ton and thirty-ton convoys combined would make it to Truk? Was the man mad?

Nakai was dumbstruck. Far from being excited, he felt dread well up in his chest. His turns on watch had been nerve-wracking enough as it was. Even after four days' rest, the sight of the ships set his nerves on edge.

The officer brought his speech to an end with a shout of "Victory!"

The sailors replied, "Yes, sir!" with what little heroism had been stirred in them.

After leaving the harbor, the convoy spread out in a headlong race toward Truk. The *Hyosukemaru* was towing the *Akebonomaru*,

a thirty-ton ship whose engine had blown. They had tried fixing it back at Chichi Jima, but the repairs hadn't done much good. The *Hyosukemaru* was capable of a brisk fifteen knots, but her unexpected burden had reduced that to a meager six. Night came swiftly. They calculated their position with compass readings and the speed of the ship as they pressed southward. Watches were posted on either side, but the night passed without incident.

On the afternoon of their third day out of Ogasawara, the *Hyosukemaru* pulled ahead of her sister ships. Gunji decided they would make a short stop at Urracas, the northernmost island under Japanese rule. It was hard to believe it had taken them this long to leave Japanese waters.

Gunji had already handed the wheel off to Yoshizo Urata, saying, "Let's wait here a while for the others." They dropped anchor in a bay lined with black sand.

"Any luck with that engine?" Gunji called to the *Akebonomaru*. She was a ship out of Hokkaido.

"Nope," answered a bearded, bald man in his fifties. This, they later learned, was Kamekichi Tsuruta, the captain of the *Akebonomaru*.

"Oh well. Just have to make do for ten more days," replied Gunji. Truk had facilities to repair the navy's warships. Getting that far would be trying enough; he didn't want to think about the voyage home.

"No sign of 'em," Urata muttered, a cigarette pressed between his lips. After they'd left Ogasawara and passed Iwo Jima, nearly a full day had gone by without any indication of land before they reached Urracas. From here they would sail south past Agrihan, Pagan, Alamagan, Anatahan, Saipan, Rota, and Guam in the Mariana Islands before heading for the eastern Caroline Islands. The way Urata had it figured, it was an eight-hundred-mile journey as the crow flies. "It's already June ninth . . ."

Someone sighed. Nakai knew just how he felt. Two weeks had passed since they left Yokohama. It was hard to believe Japan was waging a war so far from home.

"It may be early, but I say it's dinner time," called the cook, Tsuchida, from the kitchen at the aft of the ship. He may have been young, but at five foot five he was imposing for a Japanese man.

He had prepared tempura while they were at anchor. Men began eating in the cabin behind the kitchen, on the deck, and anywhere else imaginable. Nakai decided to eat on the aft deck looking out at the *Akebonomaru*. The meal consisted of fried whale meat, green mangoes, and bananas that they had bought at Ogasawara.

“Banana tempura, huh?” It wasn’t a combination of foods Nakai was used to seeing. It made him think of the time he had bought a pair of bananas at a night stall in Asakusa. Shizue had taken the banana he’d bought for her and set it aside for their bedridden master. It made him feel jealous.

At sunset, the *Hyosukemaru* left Urracas with the *Akebonomaru* in tow. The other ships in their convoy were nowhere to be seen.

They reached Alamagan around noon on June 11. Gunji told them he planned to kill a few hours there. He was growing convinced it was too dangerous to travel in broad daylight. Alamagan was a coral island with a small bay. Coconut palms grew above the sheer cliffs that rose from the calm waters.

Atop the cliff, Nakai sighted a Japanese flag. Even here on this small island he had found Japan. Standing at the prow of the ship, Nakai felt strangely moved. He had always resented being drafted, let alone considered it an honor, but now a certain pride stirred within him.

The *Hyosukemaru* came alongside a disused wharf. “I’m gonna take a look around the island. Feel like joining me, Nakai?” Gunji asked.

“Sounds good.”

“Count me in,” added Sakichi, who’d been tying the mooring lines. At five foot nine he was extremely tall, but he still had the body of an adolescent. Seaman First Class Suzaki joined them. The *Akebonomaru* lay anchored in the shallows thirty meters away. Even if she’d wanted to, she couldn’t have docked at the wharf under her own power.

Just then, brown-skinned natives appeared near the boat, five or six children among them. They were nothing like Nakai had imagined they would be. The Pacific Islanders he’d seen in the comics were always black people in grass skirts who pierced their noses with bone and waved spears in the air. Other than the fact these

people were bare-chested and wearing hemp shorts, they might as well have been Japanese.

“My father would like to see you,” said one of the men. His Japanese was perfect.

Nakai and Suzaki exchanged glances. “See, they speak our language here,” Gunji said triumphantly.

The home they were led to was a South Sea Development Company house. The company cultivated sugarcane in the Mariana Islands for processing on Tinian.

Founded in the 1890s, the South Sea Trading Company had a presence in the islands of the South Pacific long before the war. Then at the start of the South Pacific Mandate around 1920, the South Sea Development Company began operations. They sent a vast number of laborers to the islands who set to work producing sugar. In 1943, under the guidance of the Japanese Navy, the two companies were merged, and operations were expanded to include the harvesting of copra and the trade of everyday goods. In effect, they were the logistics arm of the navy.

“It’s nice to have you with us.” A Japanese man welcomed them. He had a wife, also Japanese, and two young girls. After giving Nakai and his friends some papayas, they showed them to a field in the back of the house where they gathered eggplants and cucumbers. “We were about to head home to Japan for a vacation, but things being as they are . . .” He shrugged. “If the enemy comes, we’ll all die here together.” He let out a sad laugh. Nakai felt himself grow tense. Their journey had been peaceful, so it was easy to forget the war, but the man’s words made Nakai’s vague anxieties frightfully real.

They spent the next several hours piling two baskets high with vegetables, coconuts, papayas, and bananas to bring back to the ships. They set sail from Alamagan late in the afternoon.

“We should break east after passing west of Anatahan and make a beeline for Truk,” Urata suggested, reading over the charts. It would be faster to cut south-southeast than to go south around Saipan, Rota, and Guam.

“We won’t see land for four, five days. Oh well.” Gunji gave a firm nod, perhaps encouraged by their recent boon of vegetables.

They passed the small island of Guguan and were about sixty-two nautical miles from Sarigan when night fell. Nakai napped in a small cabin. Gunji had given the wheel over to Urata and was snoring as he slept. *One week to go*, Nakai thought with a sigh as he rolled onto his side. He should have been exhausted, but he couldn't sleep. When the call to change watch came, he stepped out onto the deck. He found Gunji at the wheel.

Stars that seemed close enough to touch winked out one by one. Nakai checked his wristwatch. Fifteen minutes to go. His shift ended at five.

"There's Anatahan," Gunji called out of the wheelhouse. The outline of an island rose to their left like the back of a whale. The name of the island stirred nothing inside him, other than the vague thought that this would be the last dry land he would see for four or five days.

Nakai clutched the gunwale as a large swell lifted the ship. The *Akebonomaru* trailed fifty meters behind. The *Hyosukemaru* was still towing her, but just seeing her there, a twin at their side, was reassuring.

"Rough night?" asked the boatswain, Ryosaku Kimoto, as he approached. His face was long with plenty of stubble. Kimoto took one glance at Gunji and grimaced. He and the captain didn't get on very well.

"Nothing out of the ordinary," Nakai reported before heading below deck. It was hot and stuffy inside. Urata and Mizutani opened sleepy eyes to wish him goodnight. Nakai's cabin was lower in the ship. "It's already light outside," was his only reply as he walked past. The fact was, he felt relieved.

Kimoto's voice echoed down from the deck. "A plane. One of ours."

"That right?" Mizutani flushed pink. They were finally under Japanese airspace. A wave of relief passed visibly over Urata's face at the thought. "Let's have a look," he said as the two of them went up on deck. Nakai followed. His legs felt lighter as he climbed the steps.

"There," Kimoto pointed in the direction of Saipan.

A single plane flew high in the sky, disappearing in the distance. Their faces were filled with joy. It wasn't exactly an escort, but just

knowing their countrymen were out there gave them comfort. Relief spilled out in broad smiles, and they started preparations for breakfast in high spirits.

“Whoa!” Kimoto, who’d been helping Tsuchida cook, cried out. “Four of them.”

Nakai heard the roar of their engines. A squadron of planes passed over the gap between the *Hyosukemaru* and *Akebonomaru*, their metal skins gleaming in the light of the morning sun.

“Thank goodness.”

“Sure is nice of ’em to come out and meet us.”

“There’s a sight for sore eyes.”

They all spoke at once, and some of the men even started dancing on the crowded deck. Nakai was grinning all over as he looked up at the planes.

The squadron began to circle to the right. Nakai thought they must have come to cheer them on. Two of the planes dropped altitude, taking up position at an elevation of about thirty degrees as they approached the ships. They were twin-engine planes. Mid-size bombers, by the look of it. It didn’t really matter what kind. It was the first air cover they’d had since the Miura Peninsula.

The next instant, the rasp of machine gun fire filled the air as tracer bullets screamed into the ocean. Water sprayed skyward, making a straight line for the *Hyosukemaru*.

Someone shouted “They’re American!” but Nakai had already thrown himself onto the deck. What had happened? The sudden reversal of their fortune sent Nakai reeling. The sound of machine-gun fire and the roar of the plane engines bled together. Close behind, the second plane lined up for attack, a thin line of wing and two great engines bearing down on them. Nakai moved to the gun mounted on the side of the ship, taking aim at one of the engines, but the barrel of the gun was twisted—damaged in the first pass. Bullets from the second plane surged over the *Hyosukemaru*, scattering splinters of wood as they tore into the deck. The force of the impact knocked Nakai off his feet.

The metallic drone of the planes faded into the distance.

All was quiet save the thrum of the hot bulb engine. The boat kicked up waves as it pushed through the water. Nakai rose and ex-

amined the aftermath. He was the only person on the deck. Behind them the *Akebonomaru* drifted on the waves. There was no one visible above decks there, either.

Above them, the four planes resumed formation and finally vanished from view. Nakai was alone. Gunji had been in the wheelhouse, but he was nowhere to be seen. The boat sailed on, oblivious.

Are they all dead? Nakai's right wrist was bleeding, but he didn't feel any pain. There was a first aid kit in the cabin. He stood to go treat the wound and immediately collapsed again. Blood pulsed from his right shin in great gushes. Blinding pain racked his body. Crawling on the deck, Nakai began to move aft. He opened the kitchen door, and after what felt like an eternity he was in the entrance to the cabin.

Still on the floor, he knocked on the door. Clammy sweat dripped from his body. Kimoto poked his head out the door. Mizutani was beside him. Somehow, everyone had managed to cram into the crowded cabin.

"I'm hit. Would you bandage me up?" It took all Nakai's strength to speak. The pain washed over him in waves. He shut his eyes against the stinging sweat.

The squeal of a cabinet being opened reached his ears.

"It's just a scratch." Kimoto smiled as he went to wrap Nakai's hand in a bandage.

"Not that. My leg."

Kimoto looked down and then glanced up at Mizutani, averting his eyes. "This might be more than I can handle. Captain. Captain!" The chief engineer beckoned Gunji over.

"We'll get you fixed up," Gunji barked encouragingly as he hurried over to Nakai.

"*Akebonomaru's* in trouble, captain," called down Sakichi. The *Hyosukemaru* cut her engines in response. People emptied from the cabin like water receding with the tide. There was some sort of commotion on the deck.

Nakai rolled up his trouser leg and examined the wound. It was just below his knee. The bullet had torn right through him, leaving a pomegranate-size wound that spouted blood when he bent his knee. He wrapped a bandage tight around the hole and rolled onto

his side. Exhaustion enveloped him, and his consciousness began to slip away, until knives of pain brought him back.

The *Hyosukemaru's* engines were running again, and she was coming about. As the ship turned, Nakai curled up in a grimace of pain. The doors to the cabin and kitchen were wide open. Gunji stood outside, stripped down to the waist. Nakai could just see the prow of the *Akebonomaru* through the gap between Gunji's legs. Her captain was holding two fingers up in the air—the number of casualties. Nakai closed his eyes and slipped into unconsciousness.

“How you doin’? It hurt much?”

Nakai's eyes opened at the sound of Gunji's voice. He nodded a weak reply. “The towline was cut, but we got it fixed now. We lost part of our engine, but we're coaxing her over to Anatahan.”

“Great,” Nakai muttered. He didn't care where they went, so long as it was someplace that didn't move.

He couldn't say how much time passed after that. Sleep overtook him, and he was haunted by fragmented dreams. The face of his *naniwabushi* master, lying dead. His father shouting as he disowned him. His weeping mother clinging to his father's sleeve. Nakai was adrift on a sea of hallucination.

“A ship. I see a ship.” It was Sakichi. Maybe the rest of the convoy had finally caught up with them. Pain still pulsed from Nakai's knee. “It's the Americans again.”

Nakai looked at the clock. It was half past nine in the morning. From somewhere faraway came the roar of airplane engines.

The order was given to kill the engine and jump into the water. The crew was dressing the deck to make it look like a scene of carnage. This was the end. The Americans were coming to sink what was left of their bullet-riddled ship.

But nothing happened.

The rumble of the engines drifted down from high in the sky. The sound faded into the distance. Tomobe and Urata entered the cabin looking relieved.

“I think we're in the clear,” remarked Tomobe. “There must have been sixty planes.”

“Still hurt?” asked Urata. “We're practically on top of the island.

Come out and have a look.” They each grabbed an arm and helped Nakai to his feet.

The deck shone brilliantly in the white sunlight. Squinting, Nakai looked at the island. What had seemed a gently sloping hill rose sharply from the water. Among the waves moved the silhouettes of the crew. The sailors on the *Akebonomaru* must have dived into the sea, too. They drifted toward the shore like barrels bobbing on the surface of the water. Some had already reached the glistening white beach.

Nakai rode ashore atop a board pulled by someone from the island. It didn't quite float, but it was enough to keep the top of his body above the water. The salt water stung his wound, sending pain shooting through his body. Tomobe and Urata clung to either side of the board; the two fishermen couldn't swim.

Round stones the size of watermelons lay strewn about what had seemed like a white, sandy beach from a distance. The islander, who Nakai later learned was named José, helped Nakai onto the beach and sat him down on one of the stones. Glad to be out of the water, Tomobe and Urata walked off toward Gunji.

Several other men lay near Nakai, no doubt some of his shipmates who had tried to escape by diving off the deck of the *Hyo-sukemaru*. The swim must have worn them out, because they were fast asleep. The buzz of flies filled the air, the sound of a thousand beating wings, as though someone had kicked over a beehive.

Suddenly Nakai understood. One man lay on his side staring into the distance with unseeing eyes. Another man's intestines spilled out of his uniform. Still another soldier had a hole blasted clean through his chest. And there were more corpses besides, strewn about the beach, each swarming with flies.

Fighting the urge to vomit, Nakai looked away. His eye lighted on a sixty-ton motorized sailboat lying at anchor. Its hull bore the name *Kyokaimaru*. The *Akebonomaru* was not alone. Now that he thought of it, Sakichi had called out that he had spotted a ship. Nakai was certain it wasn't part of their convoy. The corpses must have been members of *Kyokaimaru's* crew.

Sailors from the *Kyokaimaru* came ashore to bury their crewmates. They carried away the bodies littered around Nakai and dug

holes just deep enough to inter them in the stone-strewn sands at the base of the cliff.

After ordering his men to sprinkle sand on the bodies and pile stones over them, a naval officer unsheathed his sword and saluted. Nakai closed his eyes. He wasn't especially religious, but he prayed that the men would find peace.

"Seventeen altogether." Gunji's voice tallying the number of survivors from the *Hyosukemaru* and *Akebonomaru* brought Nakai back to the here and now. They broke into groups of twos and threes, seeking refuge beneath the shade of the trees. José, the islander who had helped Nakai ashore, moved him to the foot of a coconut palm.

"Thanks," Nakai told him.

"Don't mention it. Your leg hurt?"

"Just a little, yeah," Nakai lied. José grinned in reply.

"There are still bodies that need retrieving," called an unfamiliar voice. It was Kamekichi Tsuruta, captain of the *Akebonomaru*. Two more corpses floated on the waves. Three men dove into the water at their captain's command. The *Akebonomaru* was anchored about three hundred yards off shore, her prow facing east from the drag of the current. Beside her, the *Kyokaimaru* was getting underway toward Saipan.

Kimoto spoke to Gunji. "Captain, once the dead are buried, we should get going. Spend too much time here, who knows when we'll get to Truk."

"Yeah—" Before Gunji could finish speaking, a voice cried, "Enemy planes!"

There were two planes at about three thousand yards. The crew quickly scattered, taking shelter in a palm forest that stood at the top of a steep slope above the beach.

The *Hyosukemaru* and *Akebonomaru* were the targets of the strike. Lining up for attack, the planes unleashed a hail of bullets. The three men who had dived into the ocean stopped halfway and began swimming back to shore.

The planes danced in the pure blue sky, climbing, wheeling round, and diving down as though they faced nothing more than targets on a practice run. Machine guns rained down armor-piercing, tracer, and explosive rounds in turn. The tracer shells burned a

chemical that left a red trail in the sky.

Splashes where bullets broke the surface of the water closed in on the *Hyosukemaru*. The glass of her wheelhouse shattered and the roof lifted into the sky, falling in a graceful parabola into the ocean. The bullets that exploded into the deck of the *Akebonomaru* sent buckets and rope leaping into the air. The ship pitched up, leaning forward, as a wave crashed into her above the waterline, knocking her onto her side.

Though missing her wheelhouse, the *Hyosukemaru* remained afloat. Arrows of flame raced sidelong toward the defiant ship. The rail along the deck was wrenched skyward, ragged iron hands raised in grotesque prayer. The enemy planes fired another salvo into the *Akebonomaru*. Her bow destroyed, the gunwales broke away and the wreck washed up on the reef.

As the sound of the planes receded, the sailors slowly crept out of hiding. They were distraught and in shock. The *Hyosukemaru* was a rundown boat, but she had sailed swift and true. Chief Engineer Mizutani had slaved over her engine, squeezing every last ounce of life out of the thing. Now she was sinking before their eyes.

Though no true sailor, Nakai shared the pain they all felt.

But what would they do now? Nakai couldn't begin to imagine. His wound, forgotten in the turmoil, began to ache.

Someone called from behind the downcast sailors in very precise Japanese. "There's no need to worry. Japanese ships come through here all the time." His words had the refined lilt of an educated man.

In silence, they turned to face the man who spoke to them. He was Japanese, five foot six and heavysset, wearing shorts and a shirt to make the best of the heat. He looked to be twenty-eight or twenty-nine. There was something of the gawky loner to him, thought Nakai.

"My name is Kikuichiro Higa of the South Sea Development Company. I'm in charge of copra production on this island."

Nakai and his companions gave no reply. They were in no condition to.

"A shame what happened to your ships," Higa said. "You're wel-

come to join us at our farm. We have food, of course. You must be famished.”

Nakai felt sudden pangs of hunger at the mention of food. He'd had nothing but water since the night before. Thinking it must already be past noon, he looked at his watch. It had stopped at ten o'clock. That must have been when they brought him ashore. Now the sun was directly over their heads.

“Consider me sweet talked,” answered Gunji. “A fish outta water couldn't ask for much better.” No doubt Nakai wasn't the only hungry man among them.

“We'll take you up on that, too,” added the *Akebonomaru's* captain, Tsuruta.

“José, this man will need carrying. Manuel, go on ahead and tell the others to prepare food.” Orders given, Higa gestured them onward. “Let's be off.”

José easily lifted Nakai onto his back. The islander was bare-chested, and his bronzed skin gave off a peculiar odor—the smell of coconut oil, Nakai soon learned. They traveled half an hour on a path that climbed and dipped its way across rugged terrain before coming to a village on a gently sloping hillside. The village consisted of only seven huts, each crudely constructed of stacked logs covered with palm leaves.

The islander set Nakai down in the lowest of the huts. It was less than five square yards inside, its dirt floor covered by a simple mat of woven palm leaves. Still, it was enough to provide shelter from the burning sun, for which Nakai was grateful.

Nakai rolled onto his left side.

“We should be safe from air raids here,” Suzaki said, entering the hut. Thick palm trees surrounded the village on all sides. Nakai nodded with a grimace. The pain in his leg had grown worse. Without proper treatment, he feared he might even die. Suzaki left Nakai to brood on his mortality.

The rasp of machine gun fire and the drone of engines shattered the silence. Just when Nakai thought they had passed, the rat-tat-tat of the guns began again. Women and children screamed, drowning out the piercing sound of approaching metal. Bullets tore through

the canopy of leaves, bursting rocks that happened to be in the line of fire. The intermittent sound of plane and machine gun faded in and out like a weak radio signal.

Nakai accepted that this was the end, but the throbbing pain in his leg reminded him that he wasn't dead yet.

The gunfire stopped. Everything was deathly quiet. Nakai crawled out of the hut. The women and children who had been preparing food were nowhere to be seen. Smoke rose from the direction of the mountains. The attack must have started a fire.

Just as Nakai began to think he'd been left there alone, Gunji appeared, his other shipmates not far behind. "It's not safe here. We need to move further into the jungle."

The captain of the *Akebonomaru* agreed.

José squatted on the ground, and Suzaki and Sakichi lifted Nakai to his feet and helped him onto José's back. They had no easy roads or trails to follow. Up steep slopes and down narrow valleys, they pushed their way through the dense jungle toward the mountain. It was a journey Nakai never could have made on his own.

They reached the cliff late in the afternoon. José set Nakai down to rest in a small hollow in the ground. Gunji insisted they needed to reach someplace safe before nightfall, but Nakai didn't care. They didn't have so much as handguns to defend themselves, but even if they had, the will to fight had left him.

All seventeen men lay down in a circle around Nakai. His exhausted body screamed for rest, yet it still took a long time before he fell into a deep sleep.

Sometime around midnight it began pouring rain. At first Nakai thought it was only the wind stirring the palm leaves, but then what felt like hail began pelting his face. The rain fell in large, fat drops. A moment later the roar of thunder enveloped him, filling his ears. In a matter of seconds, the ground had become a river, the cliff the head of a great waterfall. For the men lying on the ground, there was nothing to do but grin and bear it. In the darkness above their heads, a pitch-black shadow crouched like an angry god, pummeling them mercilessly.

The rain came down in sheets. It was a night very much like the night Nakai and Shizue had first made love.

Thoughts of that night seven—or was it eight?—years ago filled Nakai's head. The show they had performed at an Inari shrine in northern Kanto had just ended. The people who had laughed at their jokes and cried at their tales removed their wooden clogs and placed them in the folds of their kimonos. This was no night to linger after the show. Donning caps to ward off the cold, they hurried home. No one carried umbrellas or coats to provide shelter from the rain. The clear skies earlier that morning had afforded no warning of the storm to come.

Nakai was on his way back to the inn when he was caught in the downpour. It was the middle of March, and by this time of year the first breath of spring had already reached Tokyo, but in northern Kanto the winds still blew cold and hard. Nakai could still see snow lingering on the slopes of Mount Asama and Mount Akagi. He walked briskly toward the inn, the downpour growing fiercer with each step.

Shizue walked with him, her samisen clutched beneath her arm. Nakai held a leather trunk under one arm, while he draped his cloak around Shizue's small frame with the other. It must have been a good two-and-a-half miles to the nearest town with an inn.

Water fell from Shizue's bangs as though she were standing under a faucet. Before long, Nakai's cloak was soaked through. The shoulders of their kimonos clung to their skin, robbing them of heat. Their tabi socks, sodden from the rain, had left their toes cold and numb. When at last they arrived at the inn, they were both sopping wet down to their underclothes.

"Fine weather we're having, isn't it?" said the innkeeper, greeting them with a sardonic smile. He took their luggage up to their rooms without further comment. They lit three braziers in Shizue's room and then hung their clothes up to dry.

After bathing in the inn's hot spring, they took their dinner in Nakai's room. As apprentice and assistant, they were accustomed to having their meals in the kitchen after their master and mistress had finished eating, so it was not the first time they had dined together. Under the ministrations of their master, Shizue had learned to hold her liquor well. As she and Nakai drank, they swapped grievances about their master and mistress, and before they knew it,

they had discovered a bond they did not know they shared. Though in truth, having lived nearly seven years under the roof of the same master, it had taken little coaxing. And so began the last four peculiar years they would spend together—all thanks to an out-of-season rainstorm.

It wasn't long before the rain stopped. Stars formed small blossoms that bloomed clear and bright in the night sky, an ironic contrast to what had come before. Nakai's thoughts went to the *Kyokaimaru*, which had sailed for Saipan after the crew had finished burying their dead. According to Gunji, the ship's naval officer had wanted to tow the *Hyosukemaru* with her to Saipan. What would have happened to them if they'd come under attack on the open sea didn't bear thinking about.

For a while, Nakai listened to his companions as they snored softly. He couldn't go back to sleep. Hours passed, and one day became the next. It was June 13. In the distance he heard the familiar chug chug chug of a ship. Nakai reached for Suzaki, who was sleeping nearby, and shook him awake. Suzaki lifted his head from his arm and strained his ears to the sound.

"What's that noise?" asked Sakichi, who was sleeping about five people away. Getting to his feet, he answered his own question. "Ship's coming." As he spoke, other dark shapes rose up from the ground.

"She's Japanese," declared the captain of the *Akebonomaru*. The relief was plain in his voice.

Mizutani wasted no time giving out orders. "Sakichi, take José with you and go have a look."

It was around three in the morning. Light had begun to creep into the eastern sky. If it really was a Japanese ship, there would be no need to hide. An unspoken sense of hope hung in the air.

An hour and a half later, Sakichi returned with fourteen Japanese. "Made some new friends, cap'n." They carried one machine gun and two rifles with them.

A seaman from the *Akebonomaru* smiled at the sight. "Looke there. That's what I call firepower." His name was Koji Sasaki, a muscular man in his late twenties with broad shoulders and an indomitable spirit.

The fourteen newcomers were sailors from the *Kaihōmaru*, a ship from another convoy out of Yokohama. Of the fourteen, two were survivors from the *Ebisumarū*, which had sunk along the way, and two were privates second class from the army, who'd been taken aboard at Sarigan Island. The ranks of Nakai and his companions had swelled to thirty-one souls.

At last the sun rose.

“Everyone, fall in!” The order came without warning, forceful and high-pitched. With scarcely a pause, “In formation, now!”

The quickest to line up were the crew of the *Kaihōmaru*. The person barking orders was a slender man in a white work cap. His cheeks twitched nervously as he surveyed them with piercing eyes. Though close in age to Nakai, he held the rank of sergeant. The chinstrap of his cap was secured tight beneath his chin, and a thin, neatly trimmed mustache perched on his upper lip. It was clear he had never come across a group quite like the sailors of the *Hyosukemaru*, and they left him at a loss. They'd never stood in formation in their lives.

“Move it!” he howled, for want of anything better to say.

The fishermen did their best to line up behind the soldiers. The men of the *Hyosukemaru*—Seaman First Class Suzaki, Captain Gunji, Chief Engineer Mizutani—stood next to one another. Having spent the night sleeping in mud, they looked for all the world like a collection of tar babies. To top off the absurdity, some of the fishermen bowed in a show of respect, while others thrust out their chests, no two men in exactly the same pose. Amused by the turn of events, Nakai tried to struggle to his feet.

“The wounded can stay as they are,” the sergeant interjected. The injured seamen from the *Kaihōmaru* made no move to stir, and Nakai settled back to the ground. The sergeant turned back to face the fisherman and stood at attention.

“North face!” With exacting precision, he faced north-northwest down the slope to his left and then turned sharply to his right.

“Face the Imperial Palace and show your respect!” The sergeant's shrill voice cracked. Unaccustomed to such rituals, the sailors clumsily bowed their heads. The sergeant returned his gaze to them.

“Is this what you call showing your respect to His Imperial Highness?” He launched into a tirade before finally introducing himself as Sergeant Junzo Itami of the Imperial Japanese Navy, stationed in Yokosuka. He told them the very existence of the Japanese Empire was at stake, and that each of their pathetic selves needed to give his all. He went on to say that after seeing the wounded safely to Saipan, they would sail on in glory to Truk. It looked to Nakai as though he was headed for Saipan along with the injured men from the *Kaihomaru*.

Kimoto knelt beside Nakai. “He sure is full of himself.”

“A high and mighty officer, whaddaya expect?” quipped Sakichi. “You’re different, Nakai,” he added hastily. As a seaman first class, Nakai was two ranks lower than Itami, of course, but Sakichi didn’t want him to take his remark the wrong way.

“It’s all right,” Nakai smiled, meaning it. These young men had taken good care of him, and he was duly grateful.

“He’s actin’ too big for his britches if you ask me.” Kimoto’s irritation was obvious.

Nakai worried that Itami had lost them before he’d even started. In reserve training, Nakai had run afoul of a young officer in his mid-twenties. Whatever Nakai did, only punishment awaited. His hands looked like a woman’s, so he was slapped. He ran too slow, so he was caned across the buttocks. Whenever the young officer had incurred his own superiors’ wrath, he took it out on Nakai. This Itami fellow seemed to be cut from the same cloth. Nakai comforted himself with the thought that he would only have to put up with him until they made it to Saipan. It was a pleasant illusion that lasted only until later that afternoon.

At first unsure whether he really heard the rumble of engines, the shaking of the palm leaves removed all doubt. Nakai looked up to see an American plane pass low overhead.

“B-24,” shouted Itami, identifying the plane at a glance. The ground shook as the plane began to attack indiscriminately—they were dropping bombs. The next tremor was strong enough to lift Nakai into the air.

Someone shrieked, “Run!” as they all dashed into the dense un-

dergrowth of the jungle. Four B-24s dove sharply toward the island, one after another. The whoosh of the explosions and the roar of the ground as it shook reached him simultaneously. Nakai sought cover in the hollow at the base of the cliff. Tongues of flame leapt up where the incendiary bombs fell. It was more terrible than anything Nakai had ever seen.

The 20mm rounds from the heavy guns of the B-24s mowed through the thick palm trees. The guns roared as they bore down on their quarry, blowing away anything in their path like paper dolls in the wind. It was a living hell. Smoke from the flames drifted toward Nakai. If the wind didn't shift, the flames would climb the slope, and he would be burnt alive.

Death, a vague and abstract notion until only moments before, suddenly became all too real. Nakai couldn't move. If only he had the use of his leg—but he didn't. If only they'd left the island this morning in the *Kaihomaru*—but they hadn't. He broke out in a cold sweat. The bombing continued without letting up. Then their attack moved to the waters below, the four planes taking turns to unleash their fury on the ocean.

Finally the planes resumed formation in the sky above and disappeared in the direction of Saipan. The fires seemed to be weakening, even if they hadn't yet died out. Black smoke rose from a valley a short distance off, filtering through the trees as it swept up the face of the mountain. Nakai rolled over with a heavy sigh. His companions returned to his side once more.

"Only light damage," Itami declared. "I expect more from you in the next attack, so be prepared."

They were unarmed, so how they were meant to prepare themselves was left to their imagination. In truth, the fisherman held little interest in Itami's orders. It was enough that they were alive, sharing tales of what they'd just witnessed.

"We're heading to the beach. All of you lot, follow me." Reluctantly, the fishermen rose at Itami's command.

"Hey, the *Kaihomaru* caught one of the fire bombs," whispered Suzaki. "She's burning." That ship was their only plan B.

Itami's so-called "light damage" had sealed the fate of thirty-one men. Dark thoughts consumed Nakai. They were stranded on a re-

mote island no one had ever heard of. They could neither advance nor retreat. What would become of them?

The pain in his leg suddenly grew worse.