

Prologue

Time: Zero-Three-One-Five

The ship shattered in two.

The forward half was sinking; trapped men were drowning inside. In the lonely, isolated after steering compartment, a desperate sailor tried frantically to control the rudder and re-establish communication with the bridge.

He did not know the bridge was gone.

As the severed bow rolled onto its starboard side, sailors scrambled first to save the ship, then to save themselves and each other. Wreckage jammed the door to one compartment, trapping men inside. As the bow continued to roll, bulkheads became decks and overhead lights became ladders of escape for a few.

Too few.

Sailors in the aft section, brutally jolted awake, rushed forward to their assigned battle stations and skidded to a stop. Astonished, they beheld the open predawn sea where half their ship had once been.

Water surged into the bow section, flooding compartments, corners and crevices, obliterating the last pockets of buoyancy. Violently awakened sailors faced the closing seconds of their lives.

The dying ship's captain, using his bare hands, forced open a hole in the battered steel and scrambled through. Amidst the wreckage in the water, he viewed the scene and thought a bomb had hit the ship.

But no bomb had done this.

Capsized, buoyancy gone, crewmen trapped and confused, the forward half of the ship sank toward the ocean floor. The dark, warm waters of the South China Sea closed over the broken hull, carrying it and a final human scream downward toward oblivion.