

"We are getting stress sensors going off all over the hull." Mathers, who was in engineering, had never been so scared in his life. They were flying through the water at a speed that left him dizzy, racing so fast into the swells; he barely had time to register their size before the ship went through them. But behind them, trying to crawl up their ass was a bloody big fast torpedo. He didn't know which was worse.

Hudson looked across the deck of the bridge. There were a lot of frightened faces. Most of them were looking at him. He smiled and looked at his watch, he made a show of counting numbers with his fingers. "It will be DIW in less than sixty seconds," he said loudly, before sitting casually at a spare PPO station next to him, capturing his coffee from the non-spill container before it flew across the deck, taking a careful sip. The Control Room staff visibly relaxed a little, but not a lot. While slower than the torpedo, the Longreach had forced the weapon into a tail chase. The weapons closure was now only one hundred knots. It had limited range. The seconds ticked by.

"DIW!" the PPO yelled who had been monitoring the buoys. "She is dead in the water!" A cheer went up in the control room.

"Stop cavitators!" Hudson snapped, ignoring the cheers. The hull instantly slowed. "Engines two thirds!" The heavy vibration ceased, replaced by the usual whine of engine turbines and hull noise.

"Steer zero one zero." Hudson hadn't looked at a map but kept a 3D situational picture in his head. The threat was still out there. They had to act fast. USAF Colonel Paul Cyrus was already moving, yelling orders and getting his men moving. Within minutes two Mariners left the deck.

"Fly them straight down the throat of that launch and then drop an active pattern in a two kilometer spread!" He turned to Hudson. "I'm betting that mongrel is going deep and slow." He was right.

The Mariner buoys hit the water and immediately sank, streaming a small wire pinging all the way as they penetrated through the layers the sub might be hiding in. The wire, attached to a smaller buoy, relayed communications on the surface. "We have him," the PPO announced excitedly.

"I'm in!" The AVO of the second Mariner armed with two Mk50 torpedoes steered towards a release point that his own PPO was quickly calibrating. The release signal flashed in his headset and on the screen. "Weapon released," he said.

The PPO turned on the external Mike. They could hear the sonar on the torpedo and the buoy pinging into the deep. "Torpedo has gone active" The pinging suddenly increased in tempo and then stopped. "That's a hit," the PPO said, pulling his head phones off. This was followed by a vague thud against the hull confirming the kill as the explosive shock wave propagated through the water.

Cyrus waited until the excitement had died down. He then walked over to the Longreach Captain and tapped him causally on the shoulder. "That was pretty darn impressive Commander. You have anymore surprises like that?"

Hudson looked at Cyrus chuckling a little. "No, just the fact I didn't shit myself." He had pretty much worked out the scenario in his head to the last foot and second. The part that Hudson did not know, Like Scott Turner, was exactly how long the torpedo had been active when they picked it up, and was their intelligence correct on its capabilities? That part could have killed them. "You know," he said "Without those sonar buoys, we would have had no idea it was coming."

Cyrus smiled. Well those two birds can stay up there almost another day and they both have munitions left. "I reckon we keep those in the air for a while, what you think?"

"Absolutely, Colonel," Hudson replied. "Abso-bloody-lutely."

Vostok Station.

There was sudden activity in the Russians' positions. This was the end game, Brian thought. He had the two switchblades flying a wide orbit around the Russian base. Far enough away so they would not see them. At least that's what he thought until one of the returns blanked out.

A few miles away a Russian NCO snorted in satisfaction as the smoke curled away from the barrel of his favourite shotgun. That is how you deal with sneaky little UAVs he thought. It was the shadow that had given it away; there were few moving shadows at that end of the world. The small Russian patrol he led had been positioned well out in front of the main body. It was only chance that it was situated under the UAV's flight path. As good as the UAVs were; if you could see them, you could shoot them.

"A drone?" the Spetznaz officer asked.

"Something like that Sir -- small, very fast.

Colonel Nibialok didn't have to figure too hard to know what it was. But was there a whole regiment behind it, a Company, perhaps just a few specialists? Or maybe just one man. It was that bastard Hamilton, he knew it. "Its just one man!" he said finally.

"How can you be so sure Sir?"

"I know. I also know who it is. Stand by, I will have further instructions." Immediately after terminating that connection he called in his new 2IC. "Somewhere out there," he said, gesturing to the white wide expanse, "is probably just one, but maybe several U.S. and Australian Special Forces spotting our positions." He looked hard at his junior officer. "I want him or them dead. And I want their bodies here at my feet in thirty minutes. Understood?"

The young North fleet marine officer shuddered. They had all in a very short time learned how to fear the Spetznaz Colonel. Since they were not part of the elite force he treated them with something akin to poison.

From his hide Brian was watching the readouts on the surviving Switchblade. They had spotted one of the UAVs, Brian realized. That was a problem. They now knew he was there. Right then the two inbound FAB's showed up, forty klicks out. There was no sign of the F-111. It was then he also picked up the distress beacon. They were down. But with the two massive Fuel Air Bombs inbound, Brian had to leave that problem to later. With the Switchblade, he designated the southernmost missile batteries where the two bombs' flight trajectories would take them.

As he did this he felt a heavy vibration; he looked down. The ice quivered a little beneath his feet. Christ, they were over time. Armageddon could happen any second. This wasn't good; the Russians had destroyed the F-111 delivery platform and would now have the inbound FABs on radar ready to destroy them before they reached the wellhead. While he worried about this he could hear the sound of the Russian mechanized transports. They were getting closer. He watched his FCC screen to make sure the Microstar Switchblade was still doing its job and keeping the anti-air missile batteries shut down and that some other deadeye shot gun enthusiast hadn't wiped it out. The idea now was to get the tiny Dragonfly situated near the wellhead and lasered to the target while he escaped and evaded. If the flare was too great the missiles would use inertial guidance and home in on the Dragonflies. With the Microstar and Dragonfly on flying their programs he started to move.

Then shit happened. The incoming guided bombs pinpoint telemetry was completely reliant on the Dragonfly UAV and its small laser that designated the target. The centimetre-sized piece of

electronics was hovering within the jaws of hell and having major problems staying on station. Hundreds of feet below a massive chunk of ice cleaved off the side of the shaft, falling into the intense heat and exploding. The shock wave rose up through the ice crater's flume causing the Dragonfly to suddenly spin wildly out of control, smashing it into the wall.

The result was immediate: five miles from target the incoming FABs guiding to the Dragonfly started to become erratic, wandering off course. The SAS Colonel stepping from his hide turned just in time to catch the bombs lose track on the laptop screen and the loss of the Dragonfly. He dived back into the pit, the sound of choppers almost on top of him. It was too late to run now. There was cannon fire to the front; it was the Possum and MULE. He had programmed them both to attack the main position and distract the Russians' attention while he crept away; he wondered now how long they could hold out. He threw the last Dragonfly out the front of the hide and sent it straight up and then down into the ice crater. He would have to monitor it until the bomb's point of impact. He settled back down to watch the FCC and prepare for the inevitable fight that was to come. It wasn't a fight for his life, because he couldn't win it. But fight he would.

It was that Russian Spetznaz officer, the one he saw in the Dry Valleys. He felt that in his bones, this feeling he didn't understand, but it was always right. He had seen a glimpse of his face; he had seen that face before somewhere. The Australian SAS Colonel was now certain he would die that day. But he would take that bastard Russian down as well.

The surviving CUAV Microstar Switchblade was flying on the northeastern flank of the station. As far as Hamilton could tell now, the Wrangler's bombs had no target designation and the southern

anti air batteries were getting ready to shoot the bombs in flight. The bombs would either miss the wellhead or get destroyed.

At the same time, many miles south, the Microstar hunted the emissions of the Russian Radar and launch systems. It was now ready to perform a neat trick that made up for its small size; it called for help from its big brothers. Three QF-45C's, bigger versions of the stealthy QF-45A combat UAV, had just arrived on station honing in on their little mates signal. Needing no rest they were ready to do business as soon as they arrived. The small Switchblade lased multiple targets, a signal was sent to the bigger UAV's who dropped their warloads. The UAV's distributed the bombs between the targets and the Switchblade's lasers guided them in. The bombs didn't hit the targets but detonated above them. The explosions and noise were not spectacular but the resulting EM pulse was enough to destroy hard circuits with a medium sized voltage spike, blinding the big S300 anti air units, disabling their tracking and targeting systems at a critical moment. The little Microstar quickly worked through its list of SAMs and Anti-Aircraft gun units.

As the Russian radar units dropped off the air, Brian's tiny Dragonfly MUAV had dived into the center of the burning well head and began radiating. The smart bomb kits attached to the in bound FAB's picked up the beacon and steered back towards the bomb point.

Unable to determine the exact nature of the strike, Nibialok was on the move; there were bombs in the air, he knew that, his instinct correct. Not content with the preparations of his given staff, he was intent in removing the threat to his responsibility that he knew lay out there somewhere. It was only this that saved his life. The two FABs after being thrown from the doomed Wrangler, flew in perfect synchronization, pitching high and then vertically into the craters mouth, following the laser beam and signal from the Dragonfly. They plunged headlong into the hole, falling over 3000

feet inside before the smart bomb kit's electronic brains matched the location and altitude parameters and detonated the warheads.

The two weapons dispersed their cargo simultaneously, the fuel air mix immediately combining with the rising hot air within the flume. A fraction of a second later the mix detonated. The resulting explosion and over pressure from the blast killed everyone within 1500 feet of the oil shaft, either from the blast effect or asphyxiation. For a fraction of a second the explosion robbed the immediate environment of its oxygen and extinguished the burning oil flame.

The shock wave knocked Nibialok to the ground and for precious moments left him gasping for air. The concussion caused his ears to ring and it was a while before he realized the constant roar of the inferno had ceased. He had expected an attack but was momentarily confused when the target appeared to be the well shaft itself. That didn't make sense. But obviously his enemy was still out there and he was determined to find him.

For Brian, the real problems immediately materialized. The Russian forces, after recovering from the shock of the explosion, were all still in one piece and like a nest of disturbed ants were running everywhere. It would only be moments before they came looking for him. Up until that point the plan despite astronomical odds, had worked. Nobody really thought it would get this far, so the extraction program was a bit thin. At the moment it consisted of 'don't move and wait for the cavalry' or run like hell. If he ran now, he would be seen for miles and hunted down by Russian gun ships.

Nibialok didn't waste time. He made his way to the airfield looking for something to begin the hunt with. This was personal; fortunately a gun ship was already turning its rotors, the hot exhausts shimmering against the background. Nibialok took the gunners position in the back seat. The Russian Mil attack helicopter was

fitted with the latest optical and helmet sensory devices. Any thermal signature on a background of such cold stood out like dogs balls. The big gattling gun under the cockpit was slaved to Nibialok's helmet sighting system because he had taken the place of the weapons officer. He directed two other gun ships and began a methodical search of the entire area out to 20,000 yards.

Brian saw the gun ships, like sporting dogs begin their pursuit. They were coming for him. It was times like this he thought, that he should have watched more of McGyver. His two pack animals as he thought of them were gone, the Possum to lay down some fire and the little Mule on a rescue mission. Far from being just a packhorse, the Mule was fast. Within moments of sending it on its mission, Brian, through his helmet projection was steering the MUV through the numerous ice blown stragis at over 50 miles per hour.

Like the small UAV he had deployed previously, Brian had elected the cable control for the first part of the MUV runout. He wanted to try and communicate with Lance because he could see the F-111s locator bleeping regularly on his field unit control screen.

He looked again at the distance to the emergency radio locator beacon. Encrypted or not, someone would pick it up fast. Hamilton had stripped the MULE of the stuff he needed before sending it off before punching in the co-ordinates to the F-111 beacon. No one else in the world knew what was going on down here, nor could they help. The whole effort would all be pointless if he started a big firefight that might re-ignite the wellhead.

There was the sound of heavy cannon fire in the distance. While the MULE ran, his Combat Unmanned Vehicle the Possum was operating autonomously and was keeping everybody's heads down. It was obviously doing a good job because it kept firing for ages. There was a dull explosion followed by silence. Damn, that was the end of the Possum, but it had done its job; the MULE was well on its way.

Vandenberg AFB.

Almost at the other end of the world, the 30th Space Wing at Vandenberg AFB, part of the US 14th Air force, had ever since the confirmation of the Chinese parasite satellites, been preparing the United States' greatest space lift effort in history. Located on California's Central Coast the 30th Space Wing was responsible for all the launches to polar orbits. They had the priority that day over the 45th Space Wing at Patrick AFB and Cape Canaveral Air Station, on Florida's Central Coast, responsible for launching to equatorial orbits.

NASA, the USAF and U.S. defense forces had known for 36 months they had to replace satellites they suspected were infected by parasitic nano-sized satellites. With virtually the same logic as the Chinese, they had waited before revealing this fact, looking for a place and time of their choosing, secrecy being the backbone of security. Now was the time.

Down under in Pine Gap Australia, the control room was crowded after receiving a warning order from the Space Wing. It deliberately neglected to warn them of what they were there for. That part would become obvious.

"What's going on," someone said. "Why are we all here?"

"Wait," one of the senior technicians answered holding up his hand. Something was happening.

"Christ, will you look at that!" The Duty Officer turned to look at the CO who had just arrived. The monitor covering the west and east coast seaboard of the USA was lit up like a Christmas tree. "That must be, what, twenty...no thirty, forty launches." He looked confused. "What's going on?"

The CO looked at the screen. He felt like a huge weight had been lifted from his shoulders. "I bet we never see something like this again in our lifetimes," he said. He then quickly explained what was occurring followed by what they needed to do. "Of all the birds getting into orbit, the most important are the south polar reconnaissance satellites." He read out the priority list. "The clock is ticking and so is that ice bomb, we need those polar birds badly."

A few minutes later the center's Duty Supervisor quickly conducted a communication and systems check with a new low orbit polar Imagesat, cutting through many normal procedures to command the cameras to look at the Antarctic interior, zooming in on Vostok Station. They could easily see the Russian transports and ground forces. More importantly they could still see the smoke and flame deep inside the crater. The satellite control center was deathly silent. They were acutely aware of the time schedule.

"It's not out," someone said.

The time was overlaid on the screen in the bottom left hand corner. Next to this, a flashing number counted the minutes and seconds that had expired since the predicted time of the event. It was well overtime. Still, the center's CO reasoned, it was after all an estimate. The screen was showing a lot of movement on the ground.

"Something is going on. We are tracking missiles in the air and have gunfire and explosions on the ground," the sensor technician reported. The screen suddenly flashed white. The infrared monitor showed a massive thermal flare. This quickly died away.

"Jeez, that place is cold as hell isn't," the IR sensor operator said. Residual thermal effects of blasts were normally visible for sometime. The extreme environment of the Antarctic interior stole that thermal energy in seconds. "It's out!" The IR

sensor operator suddenly announced. There was a cheer in the control room.

The CIC (Station Commander) let them have their moment. After the cheer died down his deep voice resonated through the room. "It's out for the moment," he reminded them. His mind was still with the second part of the mission and the men and women that made it possible. "We still have people down there; those bombs didn't get there by themselves. Find them!"

"Sir! We have an EPIRB; it's the F-111."

"That means they are down and need any help we can give them," he said. Down, but obviously not before delivering their bombs, he thought. "Okay listen up, we have a crew down, and our designator Colonel Hamilton is stuck between hell and a hard place. We will assume he is alive." Instead of jubilation, the General's eyes were as hard as flint. "What you are all going to do now is move heaven and earth to get our people back and keep that flame out. Understood?" Once again his granite look swept across the room.

"Get to it people. I don't care who we piss off; I don't care whether we all get fired tomorrow. But I do care that we bring our people back!" Under his breath he said, "If anyone gets in our way, I will kill the fucker myself." Having served half his life in Special Forces, the General's words were not empty. As he walked away he didn't realize the last remark had been picked up, everyone believed him. But to the last person, after watching the unfolding conflict through their digital sensors, they were all committed to getting their guys out of hell.

The Russian South Pacific Fleet.

Vice Admiral Vyacheslav Popov knew the moment had arrived. He had driven his fleet down the Pacific through the Tasman into the

Southern Ocean and to the very edge of the Amundsen Sea pack ice. From there he had flown missions around the clock to establish a base just north of the South Pole on the Vinson Massif in central Antarctica.

To his west flank were the Australians and the Kiwis, now engaging with Chinese and Russian forces, and to his east the now allied and friendly Chileans and Argentines. Apart from the disorganized Americans to the north, there were no other threats. He mused, The Kiev class carrier Novorossiysk which supported his Flagship the Krechyet, would be a surprise to the coalition who thought the Krechyet had been turned into scrap.

Surrounding the two large carriers were a thick screen of cruisers, destroyers and submarines. He knew the Chinese Admiral, Wen Jinsong, was attempting to comprehensively engage both Australian and U.S. forces. Russian intelligence suggested the coalition was increasing their operational intensity to retake Antarctica. President Vladimir Petrov had been very succinct in his instructions. Stop them. Popov intended to do exactly that. Short of using nuclear weapons, he was not going to hold back.

As Popov considered his next moves, the Captain of the USS Clinton looked at the recent satellite photos of the Russian Admiral's fleet. Captain McKay was not happy; they were now involved in the beginnings of a heavy gunfight with a very capable force. This would be the first time since Korea that the U.S. had to meet an equal in terms of combat technology and systems.

The Australians and some U.S. naval units were already in the thick of it, the fight like a wild fire spreading rapidly across the ocean. It had turned into a shooting war with no resolution in sight. McKay picked up the deck phone and patched a call directly through to the USS Blue Ridge.

The conversation was short. On the other end of the phone the U.S. Commander of the Pacific Fleet (USACOMPACFLT) hung up after talking to McKay and paced up and down the space that accommodated the Tactical Flag Command Center located on the USS Blue Ridge, a dedicated Command Ship. His task force was at flank speed to provide support to the USS Clinton. He didn't question McKay's capabilities. But the ship had not even been signed off from trials yet; Sundog had diplomatically pointed that out. No one liked to admit they were not up to the job, but only a fool would rush into battle unprepared. There were still civilians on board and a whole lot of green recruits. His thoughts were interrupted.

"We have a message over the six," the comms officer reported. He meant the SSIXS, which was the Submarine Information Exchange System.

The Admiral nodded.

"Texas Sir. POSSUB contact, bearing 083 120nm."

Damn he thought; the Russians and Chinese were being very aggressive. "Prosecute the contact," he ordered. "They have a weapons free."

"Aye Sir," the man said, rushing off to pass the orders.

The Admiral looked at the feed from the RORSAT, Radar Ocean Reconnaissance Satellite. "The Stennis?" he asked.

"Air operations commencing as we speak sir."

Good he thought. They could at least project some defensive airpower to help her. Every minute brought them that little closer.

At an ordered depth of 1000 feet the Captain of the USS Texas read the reply direct from USACOMPACFLT. He didn't smile, but there was a sense of satisfaction in doing the job he had been trained for. He looked around the control room. Unlike LA class and others before them, the Virginia Class had eliminated the traditional helmsman, planesmen, chief of the watch and diving officer, combining all of

them into a small two person watch station. The Chief Electronics Technician and Senior Chief Machinist's Mate, the pilot, operated the ship's control panel. The pilot flew the Texas underwater using a control stick. The commander issued his orders; they were about to show the Russian boat drivers what a Virginia Class submarine could do. There was about to be one less Russian attack boat.

On the roof of the Pacific, the helmsman of the USS John C. Stennis (CVN 74) steered the 97,000-ton carrier into the wind. On the deck far below the bridge where he stood, flight operations were in full swing. At the same time in the bowels of the ship, operations specialists monitored the radar screens on the Strike Control System in the Combat Direction Center (CDC), ready to support the strike package on the deck above. On the flight deck itself, the center-deck hatch operator signaled to the "Shooter" that the catapult steam pressure was at the proper levels for launching a Super Hornet assigned to the "Blue Diamonds" of Strike Fighter Squadron One Forty Six (VFA-146). The hand dropped and the catapult officer fired the attack jet off to join its brethren.

With the Stennis and soon the USS George Bush entering the AOP, Captain McKay steered the massive bulk of the USS Clinton in a tight turn at flank speed, the hull heeling hard to port as she pointed her bow south, closing the distance with the Russian Fleet.

Captain Chris McKay's job was to prevent the Russians joining up with the Chinese. The opposing forces he knew were lost in the subtle difference in what the Americans and Australians were actually doing. The Chinese and Russians believed they were trying to invade the continent. This was an advantage. They would be expecting large forces, concentrated with substantial support to force a wedge through their defense and regain a foothold on the ice.

The Captain of the Clinton would help keep that mistaken belief alive. Even a thousand miles apart, the two forces began moving their chest pieces across the board in an effort to take the initiative.

Somewhere over the Southern Tasman Sea.

The sun streamed through the perspex of the sleek fighter. Out there the pilot thought, it's was minus fifty-three degrees. He would hate to punch out at this height. The pilot and his companion aircraft made up a loose finger-four formation as they cruised north.

The aircraft were Su-51's. To the west it used to be known as the T-50, deliberately led by Russian intelligence to believe the project stalled, an operation headed by Colonel General, Sergey Nikolayevich Lebedev. After the merging of the Russian Mikoyan (MiG MAPO) factory and the Sukhoi stable, the shelved technology from the MFI multi function fighter, known as Mikoyan article 1.42, had been dusted off applied to the T-50 PAK FA and eventually rolled out in production as the Su-51.

Like its Chinese counterpart that had been developed from the same Russian technology, the Su-51 was a bad hair day for any pilot on the other end. Like the F22, it boasted super cruise, super stealth and an extended range.

With refueling, it could go anywhere. In the flight's lead aircraft, Colonel Nafaniel Logvinoch steered the small yoke with his fingers. He enjoyed the luxury of setting the control stick sensitivity to suit the user. At 45,000 feet he sailed under a deep blue sky, confident that aside from visual detection, he was invisible to electronic ears. He wondered amongst all the madness that was happening, where his friend Lance Hamilton was. He hoped his Australian friend Hamilton was not flying an F-111. Against this, his Su-51, Lance would stand little chance. The fifth-

generation fighter boasted powerful AESA that exceeded the Snow Leopards capabilities. It was a marriage of the best technologies from the two famous Russian fighter stables, Sukhoi and MiG.

Logvinoch tapped the stick and pulled back from the refueling probe. The socket unplugged and he could see the parachute basket swing to his left. He was the last to refuel, they were flying CAP for the Russian task group, and he already knew the Clinton was both heading south and into the wind launching aircraft.

In the Russian fleet below, Rear Admiral Popov was considering his strategy. He didn't believe in going into a fight half cocked. He liked to take the initiative. So once again the big Blackjack bombers from Engels Air force Base were in the air. The American attention was focused to the south, so the Blackjacks would give them a bad surprise.

On board the lead Blackjack, Ivan Grigor'ev Nagoi looked outside of the cockpit; he flew the same aircraft as in his previous mission to the south, numbered 07 named after Aleksandr Molodchii. These were long missions, but the Blackjack was at least big and comfortable.

"Ready?" he asked.

"Ready, we have eight in the green," his copilot said.

"Targeting?"

"Set."

Nagai looked at the weapons panel. Sitting in the rotary launchers were eight Moskit/SS-N-37 Sun Blinder missiles. These were the sons of Sunburn missiles, badder, bigger and with a greater range and a lot smarter.

"Do we have target telemetry?"

"Da."

"Missiles hot?"

"Da." This meant the missiles were receiving and responding to data being fed from the aircrafts computers, satellites and any other inputs.

"It's the Clinton?" This time the copilot looked at him and nodded.

Nagoi armed the weapons panel, selected the missiles and with his copilot went through the pre-launch procedures. Then, in an almost anti climax, he hit the attack button. The system took over, controlling not just his, but also the other six aircraft in the flight. The pilots monitored the automated weapons launch, waiting for their rotary launcher to eject the missiles before very happily turning and burning to follow their lead back home.

Logvinoch in his Su-51 switched his large central control screen to the situational mode. He could see that heavy stealth missiles were now in the air heading towards the Clinton, the U.S. carrier unaware of the approaching threat. The missile attack by the Blackjacks was in play. He knew that there would also be TU-22s out of Tierra del Fuego about to do the same thing. Unlike the failed Chinese missiles, he knew these were a different kettle of fish; he felt sorry for their prey.

The Sun Blinder missiles took just minutes from launch to target acquisition, their on board radars activated in the terminal phase and were immediately detected by the Clinton and their escorts. The U.S. fleet's highly evolved anti-air systems began to counter attack. But the Sun Blinder's were stealthy, fast, accurate and especially good in evasive maneuvers. The missiles were like pissed off snakes on cocaine. The CIWS rail guns on board the Clinton and her escorts were having trouble targeting. The missiles never flew a straight course, their entire flight telemetry an unending change of directions. Coupled with active radar cancellation they confused the

carrier groups targeting radars. Despite that, the sheer volume of defensive measures delivered from the carrier group wore down the attackers. Most of the attacking missiles were destroyed. All the missiles that dived in their final approach were destroyed, but three weaving sea-skimming missiles struck the USS Clinton one after the other, massive explosions blowing out from the side of the carrier. The forward elevator took a direct hit, the blast blowing through into the hangar deck incinerating 76 men and women instantly. The ship shuddered from stem to stern but kept going. Smoke billowed out from the bowels of the ship spilling into its wake. The Clinton was hurt badly. Any other ship would have been dead.

The Clinton was still afloat for a good reason. While the Russians had been making better missiles, the Clinton had also been made tougher than her predecessors. She was designed for just this type of attack, to absorb and spread the shockwave of a blast while at the same time containing its thermal effect. Only 300-crew were killed in all, instead of several thousand. More important the ship could still fight.

Standing in the CDC, Captain McKay took in the chilling casualty and damage reports. He picked up the overhead mike.

"What shape are you in?" USACOMPACFLT on the flag Ship USS Blue Ridge asked.

"Not great," McKay said "We still have some fires going, the forward elevators out, the hangar wiped out and we have some pretty big holes in the side. You know where that strike came from?"

"Blackjacks out of Engel's AFB."

From the north, damn it. McKay was furious, but bit his lip. They should have been warned of them beforehand. Obviously the satellite replacements still had some bugs in their coverage. "Well, I don't think we could stand another set of hits like that."

"Hang in there Mack. You should have confirmation any minute that the Australians have snuffed that flame out. We just have to keep these bastards busy so it doesn't get fired up again and we get them talking."

Great, McKay thought. Keep shooting until someone talks. He wondered who thought of that strategy.

Colonel Nafaniel Logvinoch monitored the next strike. This time it was comprised of Backfire bombers which carried the same Sun Blinder missile system. The Clinton must have been hurt from the last attack. This one should finish it off. The loss of their most prized carrier would shock the Americans, perhaps make them hold back and reconsider. He could understand Popov's logic. The situational display showed them minutes away from their release points. On orders from the fleet flight controller, Logvinoch steered the Russian fighters to an intercept to cover the bombers. That was when the shit hit the Russian fan.

The clean lines of the HMS Queen Elizabeth, a British 65,000 ton aircraft carrier, steamed past the Chatham Islands at high speed into the Southern Ocean. Nearly 1000 feet long she was one of a kind, stealthy and very fast. She boasted the same onboard all electric technology as the Clinton. As soon as she was within operational range she launched every asset that could make the distance.

The result was a sound the Russian pilot thought he wouldn't hear on this sortie. The Sukhoi threat receiver blared and the red flashing light made it all too real. From nowhere his flight was not only under attack, but locked onto by enemy missile systems!

"Archangel has acquired and initiated attack," the British F-35 VSTOL pilot said calmly, he could have been serving tea. He was 150 miles west of Logvinoch and from his F-35 helped steer a flight of

eight UCAV AVPRO Archangels, a nearly all wing, tailless, canard-configured airplane. It was stealthier, smaller and more nimble than its piloted counter part, which is why they operated far forward. Logvinoch and his entire flight went evasive, waiting for the inevitable missile launches. There were none. The British Archangels, barely visible, blew past and launched on the attacking Backfire bombers. Logvinoch rolled out at 20,000 feet and instinctively went for the controlling F35's. It saved his life. He pulled up, the F35's were squawking to control the Archangels; he acquired and sent four missiles their way, before breaking off and going for the deck.

CHAPTER TWENTY



US Marines PaveLOW Helicopter

Vostok Station

Still in his hide, Brian could see the attack helicopters getting closer. Like a beagle's nose, he could see the barrel of the gattling guns slung underneath the Hind's, swivel and turn, almost sniffing the wind as they followed the eyes of the shooter in the cockpit. In ten minutes they would be on him.

Hundreds of miles away, Global Hawks and more CUAVs that had flown from the Clinton joined the Combat Rescue Mission, peeling off from their assigned orbits and heading towards Vostok Station. The launch bay doors on the bigger Global Hawks opened, the launchers rotating and ejecting high yield ebombs. QF-45C's identified their

own targets, dispersed from the main group, and between themselves rationed the Russian targets and began their approach.

Hamilton's mind was elsewhere, trying to get the rest of his body to the same place as quickly as possible. The Hind MI48 gunship looked as menacing as the first day it preyed upon the deserts of Afghanistan. Equally at home in the cold, the lethally upgraded predator was on the hunt. This is what it had been made for. Its impressive digital sensory array meant that nothing was invisible on the ground. Nothing could hide from this bird of prey. The pilot swung the heavily armoured gun ship over the ice. The gunner, in this case Nibialok, had slaved the weapons to his helmet sights. Where he looked, the sensors and guns looked. It was always just a matter of IF not WHEN.

"There!" the pilot said; the Hind's infrared and EMR sensor had combined to locate Hamilton's position.

"I see it, keep going, keep going, and don't let it look like we have seen," Nibialok said, almost finding it hard to breathe. This was Hamilton, he felt sure of it.

On the ground Brian felt the heavy wash of the Hind's blades as it passed almost overhead. They were on to him he was sure. He tensed and prepared himself.

"You have it locked in?" Nibialok said.

"Da."

"When we turn I want both the cannon and the missiles placed on the target." In response, the pilot grunted. Nibialok armed the missiles, registered the heat source and allocated the target to both the guns and the missiles. The helicopter pitched hard to the right in a 180° degree turn, on levelling out the missiles locked and launched, followed by a steady drum of cannon fire.

The last thing Hamilton saw as he ducked for cover was the plume of the missile exhausts and the flash of the gun as it kicked

in over 4000 rounds per minute of depleted uranium. Both the missiles and the rounds smashed into his hide destroying everything.

Nibialok smiled in satisfaction. The well-camouflaged bivouac was torn apart, small secondary explosions and pieces of metal flying off in all directions. The Hind swept over its prey, small wisps of smoke struggling out of the hole that was once the sanctuary for someone to hide.

"Take it down," Nibialok ordered.

The pilot pulled the Hind into a hard turn, flared the machine and settled it next to the mess they just made. Nibialok was almost joyful as he leapt from the cabin. He wanted to see the corpse.

In Pine Gap, the operators were incredibly impressed with the sharper and more precise images from the new satellites. But what they now showed wasn't what they wanted to see. They could see so much but do so little. They witnessed the cannon and missile fire from Nibialok, which must have been devastating. The fire was out, but they had lost their man.

It was close. The smash of gunfire and rockets made his ears buzz and vision swim. But it quickly passed. He looked up again in time to see Nibialok jump from the chopper. Half buried in a sastrugi, Hamilton had lowered the temperature of his outer garment to avoid thermal detection. From his position he calculated the distance to the Hind.

Nibialok was standing near the mouth of what used to be Hamilton's hideout, gloved hands on hips. Behind him the chopper's blades were still rotating, the collective in neutral, the pilot watching the Russian Colonel. Hamilton began his move. He was up and running hard, shrugging off the piles of snow that had covered him. He was almost to the chopper when the pilot turned and saw him. No point shooting yet. Armour glass and metal plate would stop the rounds. The big gattling gun started to rotate towards him. He dived

towards the open door and fired. The single shot missed the armoured backrest by millimetres driving hard into the pilot's helmet; a cascade of blood flowed from the helmet and the pilot fell forwards against his straps. Nibialok was still looking at the hole, even fiddling around with some of the debris, the sound of the gunshot lost behind the heavy whine of jet turbines and spinning blades. By the time he looked back, the pilot was on the ground, Brian had fire walled the throttle levers and was pulling the collective for all it was worth. He knew Nibialok would have a weapon.

Nibialok did, and pulled the AK47, his favourite for such events. It was old but it pushed a 7.62mm round that could stop things. He fired repeatedly at the chopper.

Brian Hamilton pulled the Hind back hard, offering the belly to Nibialok's shots. For good reason - the belly was heavily armoured. Nibialok emptied his clip. While Hamilton didn't count the shots, he knew Nibialok had emptied the magazine and was searching for another. He quickly dropped the nose of the chopper, pulled his head gear off and smiled at him. He hoped the man would rot in hell. He thought for a moment about giving him a squirt with the gun as the man stood in front of the hovering machine. But he hadn't figured out how to use that yet. Instead, he lowered the nose and once again pulled the collective as the machine hauled itself forwards, the big blades almost cutting the Spetznaz officer in half, leaving him flailing in the snow in anger.

Thirty miles further south Lance and his navigator were extricating themselves from the F-111's capsule, just in time to see the plume of some huge explosions many miles away. They both hoped it was the fuel air bombs on target, but at this distant it was too hard to tell. They only wandered around for some thirty seconds before diving back into the capsule and pulling the canopy shut. The capsule

was their lifeline. In the severe temperatures of the eastern plateau, they would die within minutes without its protection.

Despite the protection of the escape capsule, the bitter freezing temperature quickly robbed them of any warmth. The Squadron Leader and his Navigator were fast succumbing to the cold; Lance knew it would not be long. He wondered whether the bombs had done the job. That was the bad part. He would never know. The minutes dragged by. The cold sapped their life away.

As he began to fall into cold induced sleep, the RAAF pilot was vaguely aware of heavy wind buffeting the small capsule, his tomb. It seemed to pick up in ferocity. With some difficulty he looked at his Navigator and wondered whether he was breathing. His Navigator was expressionless and white. Ice particles covered his mouth and nose. The buffeting outside got worse, rocking the capsule; a small part of his mind that still wasn't totally consumed with the cold noticed that the wind had stopped. Was that knocking he heard?

Minutes later, the Squadron Leader gradually opened his eyes again. There were the familiar sounds of chopper blades and the whine of jet engines; at least it was familiar to him. Lance could hear someone talking, it sounded like his brother but his head felt like it was in a vice and getting his mind working like trying to swim in quicksand? He must be getting delusional, he thought. The voice sounded so much like Brian. He felt someone was moving behind him.

It took a moment to move his head, but he could feel the blood returning to his extremities within the heated cabin. He managed to look behind him. The cabin of the chopper was unfamiliar, he could see Brian hefting his still unconscious Weapons Officer into the rear troop cabin. Brian closed the rear door and climbed into the seat behind him.

"About time," He jerked his thumb pointing to the back, "he's in a bad way, but he should be okay." Brian looked at his brother and

smiled. He had the temperature control running at max and he was sweating, Lance was pumping his hands and arms to loosen them up.

It would have been nice to have chat and congratulate themselves on still being alive. But if they wanted to stay that way it was time to exit stage left and talk later. Brian was thinking as he settled into weapons system. Was there a plan to retake Vostok? He had no idea. He waited ten minutes for Lance's circulation to return to normal, or at least to a point he could hold the stick and collective and move the pedals.

"Let's go," he announced.

"Who's driving?" Lance asked.

"You toot I'll shoot bro. We aren't out of this by a long shot; you good to fly?"

"Yep," Lance said, feeling the energy coming back. "Fact is, never felt better," That was somewhat of a lie but not being dead definitely felt great. "thought I was all over red rover!"

"Me too!" Brian replied. "I had to follow the MULE to find you; if it wasn't for that little gadget we would all be stuffed."

"The bombs worked?" Lance asked.

"Yep." He leaned forward and smacked his brother over the head lightly. "Damn good shooting little brother. The flame is out...for now anyway."

Lance shook his head. "Damn, if people knew how desperate that plan was, they wouldn't need a catastrophe to kill them, the heart attack would."

Brian smiled. "But the bad news is we have to keep it out. That huge crater is now soaked with an oil and gas mix." He paused as he finished strapping in. "We went past the calculated time for the crater to collapse and blow the lake," he continued. "The way I figure it, a sneeze would set that off and rupture the ice casing, triggering the event."

Lance looked at the aircraft instruments. "You know what any of this writing means?" Lance gestured to the panel and displays in front of him. "All the electronics are in Russian."

"Yes...I do, firstly, see the big red Russian writing near your right hand?" He spoke the name in Russian, which meant nothing to Lance.

"It means DON'T PULL THIS KNOB."

"Really?" Lance asked a little surprised.

"Really," Brian replied. "It shuts down the engines in case of fire." Dumb place to put it, he thought; they must have had real engine problems in the past. "Lets switch."

They swapped seats. The gunship, a Mi-24M (Upgraded Hind Mi-24) was a two-place helicopter with a glass cockpit, helmet-mounted sights and "hands on collective and stick (HOCAS)" controls. Brian was now sitting in the forward weapons system, Lance taking the pilot's seat higher and behind.

Looking forward as the MiL's engines spooled up, Lance could see his brother pressing numerous buttons with the strange Russian writing on them. What they did he had no idea, but he conceded, everything seemed to sound fine, generally speaking from his aviation experience, that was a good thing. Bad things were normally preceded by loud noises, big bangs, scraping, rasping, screeching; the type of sounds generated by tortured metal or out of control explosive forces. So things must be okay, the cockpit wasn't in flame, the rotors above seemed to work and the jet turbines while noisy were respectable, for a helicopter anyway, all positive signs. The primary flight gauges were familiar, more so because of his MiG-29 experience.

"Let's get out of here bro," he said.

"Roger that!" The controls, while still feeling a little unusual, quickly slipped into the Squadron Leader's hands and he hauled the Russian iron bird off the snow.

Down below, the faithful little Mule turned around and followed the gun ship back to Vostok.

Nibialok was running hard. The twin rotors of the Ka-50 Black Shark helicopter were already spinning. Code-named Hokum by NATO, but known by others as Werewolf, the high-performance combat machine was probably the most lethal helicopter in the world. Nibialok leaped into the side seat yelling at the pilot to get moving. They were after the hijacked Mi-24M Hind. The Hind was an older design, but still very fast and powerful.

The Werewolf pulled up hard and pitched forwards, rapidly picking up speed.

"I've got him," Nibialok announced, referring to the incoming Hind. He ordered the pilot to intercept.

Washington/Canberra.

As the two choppers sped towards each other the Australian Prime Minister was in discussion with the U.S. President by videophone.

"As you know the wellhead fire has been extinguished, just minutes ago," the Australian PM said.

"Yes, I was in the Situation Room; we managed to get the satellite imagery just in time," said Blaire, still a little astonished at what he had seen. "I can't believe it." He shook his head, "that your guys actually pulled that plan off. It actually worked! I think those boys of yours on the ice need the biggest pats on the back your country can give them, because for damn sure, with your permission, we will."

"We will. It was a complicated plan from hell, but what made it work was a team effort, everyone from David Stringer, the Clinton, to your staff and yourself. Not forgetting those Rosenbridge guys. We wouldn't have been able to even get there without that help."

The President nodded. "Thanks Dennis, I appreciate that, as will the rest of the team." But it was still without doubt the scariest plan to save the world he had ever seen. Actually he had never seen a plan to save the world, but when it was required, this hair-brained inspiration was the only one available, he thought.

The Australian PM, his mind moving past the friendly back patting, looked serious again. The smile disappeared and behind the glasses the cool blue eyes squinted in concentration as he verbalized his thoughts. "What has happened is fantastic, but it's only part of the job. What we need to do now is get Hamilton back." He corrected himself. "Both of them."

"I don't understand?"

"Brian Hamilton is one of our retired SAS commanders, he first raised the alarm and subsequently triggered the operational plan and target designation. His brother, an F-111 Squadron Commander, delivered the warload."

"Brian is the one with the artifact?"

"Correct, if he is still alive. We need to get that back, it might explain what's going on down there."

Yes, the President thought, that's right. The artifact, with all that was going on, he had almost forgotten about that. A bizarre twist in a deadly tale.

The PM continued. "We are going to be placing a lot of trust in Colonel Hamilton, believing that what he is telling us about this artifact or evidence is correct. We have a choice of an all out confrontation because they believe we tried to attack, or we can

prove the whole episode was driven from an understandable confusion over who did what."

The President of the United States looked over to his defense and national security team. The large digital screen over the fireplace was filled with the image of a relaxed but very resolute looking Australian Prime Minister, the knees and shoulders of his staff just in shot. Likewise the Australians saw a similar image of the U.S. Security Council.

"Vince?" The President asked turning to his NSA. "What do you think?"

"I agree with the Prime Minister. But now that we are generating some real combat power we are no longer playing from the bottom of the deck. We are in a better position by the minute to decide the issue by force. I believe much of the Chinese and Russian political strategy was based upon a U.S. mindset established by Finn, a belief we would capitulate afraid of casualties."

"George?" Blaire asked

"Same. We have the WGS back with the satellites, which are crucial to complex combat operations and we have mobilized major resources to apply to the battlefield that will put us back on the front foot. But," Pirelli qualified, "its not overwhelming superiority."

"Yes," Kipper conceded. "There would be a high price to pay. But either way, I don't believe this country can afford to allow the Chinese and Russians to usurp Antarctica by force."

"No we can't, regardless of what other countries may think. That isn't going to happen." He thought for a moment. "We have to show we are prepared to meet them head on. I'm sure they have no desire to get into a major scrap either if they could find a way out of it."

"Hobson's choice again, Mr President," the PM said. The President looked confused. "It means no choice basically," the PM explained, "we try for a negotiated settlement based on the evidence we have, but continue our generation and deployment of forces."

The President agreed. "We stay at DEFCON ONE. But yes I agree, I think we owe it to the guys to give them a shot at bringing the evidence back. They will have a hard job convincing them; the recent action will have only firmed Chinese and Russian resolve that we are trying to take over the oil resource for ourselves."

"Yes, nothing much we can do about that. Getting him out isn't going to be easy." If he is still alive, he thought. "We will have to break through the Chinese naval force again; I believe our JOC is working on that right now." Morel nodded the affirmative, as did Perelli on the other end.

"We have an agreed course of action then. Get Hamilton and the evidence out of Vostok, Keep the flame out and maintain the military pressure on the Russians and Chinese until we see the result of Colonel Hamilton's efforts." He wondered what the hell it was that this SAS Colonel was carrying. He hoped the poor bastard hadn't flipped his lid under the stress. Many men would have with what he had been through in the last 72 hours. But since he had probably helped saved the world he was willing to give him the benefit of the doubt. "If that fails we both need to be prepared to go the next step."

HQJOC Bungendore.

"Our fleet is situated south east of Campbell Island over 3000 kilometers from Vostok." The CJOPS marked the locations on the overhead display with a pointer. "A direct flight from Australia's most southern extremity is over 5000 kilometers. To give the CSAR

team some real firepower, we have to get our own units close enough to utilize the railguns.

"The Clinton TF will engage the Russians North of Scott Island to keep them busy. The CASR objective is to drive between the first and second task force. In our way will be some Air Warfare Destroyers, Chinese fighters and a Russian Mainstay. We will continue to try and draw or hold the Chinese battle group further to the west. From Tasmania, our F-111's are going to fly to here, 70S by 150East, and then direct to Vostok."

"That takes you straight over French claimed territory," someone said.

"Can't be helped."

He looked at the map. To fly a westerly route to Vostok would put them in reach the Chinese Carriers J10's and Sukhois. "We cross far enough inland to exceed most of the air defense assets in Dumont d'Urville."

HMAS Canberra 500 Nautical Miles West of Macquarie Island.

500 nautical miles west of Macquarie Island and 900 directly south of Tasmania, the 28,000-ton LHP HMAS Canberra was into the wind. 14,000 tons heavier than the Aircraft Carrier HMAS Melbourne she was the biggest ship of her type in the South Pacific and second only in size to the Wasp and Tarawa-class amphibious assault ships of the U.S. Navy. She was brand new. Her sister ship HMAS Adelaide followed in station a mile behind. Between them they could land an armoured force of 1800 troops, equivalent to a full Marine expeditionary force.

On the deck of the HMAS Canberra, three V22 Osprey's ran their engines up to full power, the big tilt rotors pitching slightly forward, giving the aircraft a small run before leaping into the air.

Climbing to 25,000 feet the V22's formed up with two C130 gun ships. Called the 'Sons of Spectre' the two C130's carried enough firepower to destroy an aircraft carrier.

Back on the ship's deck, heavily loaded STOL F-35 jets thundered down the Canberra's deck, launching from the forward ski jump on the bow followed by long-range strike UAVs provided by the U.S. Navy. Together, the aircraft flew south towards Victoria Land. 500nm north of the Antarctic coast they joined with an RAAF KC-767 air refueling aircraft. Watching over all of them was an RAAF Wedgetail AWAC's flying large orbits of the area with two USAF 747-400 ABL systems.

From the north a package of F-111's joined to complete the formation of the combat search and rescue package, making it one of the heaviest and most powerful CSAR missions ever flown. But they first had to get past the Chinese naval perimeter. There the F-35's had to turn back lacking the range to target.

Commander Turner lay back on his bunk replaying the last few hours in his head. What would he do if he were the enemy? By now the enemy would be aware of the rail and cavitation guns. What strategy would they employ to defeat those defenses? What would he do in their position? He thought about that for a moment. Go deep, program the torpedoes to dive deep and come up vertically beneath. Pretty simple really, he had to stop them.

The Greenville was crossing the South East Indian ridge and into the South Indian Basin. It was deep, nearly four miles deep and covered thousands of miles. The Australian and U.S. warships had a while to go before their guns came into range. How could he be in two places at once? Once again he gathered his officers together in the wardroom. He switched on the fleet wide area situational map and relayed the latest news and intelligence and then the boats new orders.

While Turner spoke to his crew, the CSAR flight headed directly to the middle space between the two forward Chinese task forces. The fleet had turned about and was heading east. Within minutes CSAR flight started to pick up active search radars from the fleets northern most pickets. Somewhere out there were enemy fighters, stealthy and deadly. Raptors joining the mission went high and wide looking for the enemy.

The Luyang II Missile destroyer pickets, equipped with Dragons eye phased array radar capable of tracking 300 aerial targets and engaging ten simultaneously were quick to pick up the inbound bogies. The information was fed directly into the Chinese Fleet Air Area Defense (FAAD) system.

"Enemy aircraft."

The Chinese Admiral looked at the plot. "Get some fighters on them."

"Aye."

The Admiral watched the plot and the symbols representing the small Australian fleet still pushing down towards him. He was not going to wait all day to deal with them. The tactics still did not make sense, their objective unclear. If he knew what their mission was he could anticipate their next moves. The logic was that in concert with the Americans, they would try to regain ground or just punch it out with them. But what was happening now was neither.

Not far north of the Chinese fleet, a Shang Class submarine Captain looked at the readout from his UUV or Unmanned Underwater Vehicle that was cruising many miles in front of his boat, connected by a thin communication wire.

"Collins Class," his sonar director confirmed. The UUV had been silently searching while its mother ship remained absolutely silent.

"Swim out tubes five and six." Two Yu-7 torpedos, copies of the 324 mm Mk-46 Mod-1, swam silently out from the attack boat directed by the information supplied by the UUWV that still trailed the hapless Collins Class submarine. Minutes later the torpedoes went active. The Australian submarine accelerated but it was too late.

The sound of the HMAS Rankin breaking up as it plunged 15,000 feet to the ocean floor below was heard by attack boats and ships on both sides. The joy of the Chinese crew was short lived.

One of those who heard the contact was the U.S. Virginia Class submarine Jimmy Carter, the most sophisticated hunter killer ever to roam the seas. The noise of torpedoes leaving the tube and the sound of the Captain issuing the orders were immediately isolated. Too late to save the Rankin, the Jimmy Carter closed the range quickly, the onboard attack system able to resolve a firing solution from a single heading. Moments later a MK48 ADCAP detonated just below the Shang's sail. The break-up of the Shang Class boat joined that of its victim plunging into the deeps below her. But just like the Shang, another Chinese sub detected the Jimmy Carters attack.

"Captain, we have some one in our baffles!" the sensor operator on the Virginia announced. "Type 093!" he added moments later, giving it the designation of Master 12.

"Report!" the Captain ordered.

"20,000 yards, five knots." The Captain played the strategy through his mind. Behind, close to launching a torpedo up his ass was a Chinese Nuclear Attack submarine. It looked like it was wall-to-wall submarines down here. This was not a time to panic. He didn't want to make any noise launching his own torpedoes and announce his position. He decided. "RVC Conn"

"Aye."

"Attack procedures, Remote One, Master 12."

"Conn RVC, aye, attack procedure with Remote One, MK-50 Master 12."

Thousands of yards behind the Jimmy Carter and on each flank travelled two specialized Unmanned Underwater Vehicles (UUV's). They were twenty-five feet in length, incredibly quiet and communicated with the mother ship by a streamed cable; each UUV could travel under its own power, but while connected to its parent vessel, drew some power through the cable. Both were equipped with a MK-50 torpedo and sensor suite that worked in unison with the parent, they were simply named remote one (Port side) and remote two on the starboard.

The UUV's replaced the equipment in the SEAL bay normally used for littoral or shallow water operations and Special Forces deployment. The housing was a small hump behind the boats sail. The job of the UUV's in deep-water operations was to monitor the flanks and protect the baffles of the Virginia Class submarine. A strategy they now knew worked.

"MK-50 launched."

"It's gone active! The Type 093 is making turns, cavitating!"

The Chinese submarine Commander was dumbfounded at the proximity of the sudden torpedo attack. He ordered flank, released noisemakers and tried to create a knuckle in the water to hide him from the attacking submarine. He might yet escape it.

"Attack procedures, number one, MK-50," The Jimmy Carter's skipper ordered. The same procedure was repeated.

The Chinese submarine detected the torpedo as soon as it powered up. "Sir, another torpedo, directly on our bow, one thousand meters!" The distress was clear in his voice.

Back on the Jimmy Carter, they continued to monitor the information being fed from the two UUV's.

"Conn, RVC, number two has acquired," the RVC, or Remote Vehicle Controller reported. Seconds later there was the now ugly but familiar crump of an underwater explosion.

"Conn, sonar, explosion and breaking up noises on Master 12."

The Captain acknowledged and ordered his boat to quietly clear the datum. The Jimmy Carter reeled in its two guards to give them the single reload they carried in the SEAL housing, preparing for the next confrontation, which was surely not far away.

Above the water, one thousand miles south of the Great Australian Bight, A single TU-95MS Bear H from the 31st PLAN Heavy Bomber Regiment was flying along the border of the Australian Maritime Zone. The Bear-H was a long range reconnaissance and strike aircraft specifically designed to attack shipping. With a range of 12,500km, six Kent missiles in its rotary launcher bay and several more antiship missiles on wing pylons, she was very dangerous, able to launch missiles long before she could be retaliated against, enabling her to escape to safety.

"Surface contact, we have two Adelaide Class destroyers north east, bearing 324 500km's," the radar operator said, directing the Bear's long-range attack radar to look at the targets.

The weapons operator acknowledged, slaving the big missiles that hung under the bombers wings to look at the targets as well.

Why these Australian ships were so far north the Chinese Bear crew had no idea. Why the vessels were headed away from the fight was also puzzling. But they were coalition ships and that made them a target. Moments later the TU95M's volley of eight anti-ship missiles dropped from their racks and began heading for their target. The four-engine bomber then banked hard, heading back to île Amsterdam and the safety of Han AFB.

The targets were the HMAS Darwin and the Melbourne, travelling in convoy, heading across the Great Australian bite towards Tenix Marine Systems in Melbourne for urgent upgrades. They thought they were out of the fight. But they were wrong.

The Kh-55 Granat (гранат) missiles were faultless in performance. Hugging the waves at super sonic speeds, like wolves they were on to the two lone vessels before the ships had a chance. The Adelaide Class Sea Sparrow Missile Defense and CIWS systems accounted for three of the incoming missiles. But the surviving Shipwreck missiles shared the targets between them; three hit the HMAS Darwin and two the HMAS Melbourne. Without the combined Air Warfare Defense provided by the later built or upgraded ships, they had no chance. The sea boiled on the where spot they both disappeared, the airwaves still filled with frantic calls from HQJOC, no one was going to respond, nobody survived.

If it was any consolation to the lost crew, the Australians were not the only ones on the bad end of a shooting match.

"Pigs!" The Chinese radar crews were becoming rapidly familiar with the F-111.

Wing Commander Wilkie spoke loudly into his mask. "Go, go go!" The strike package of Pigs split and turned in opposite directions. Travelling at over 500 miles per hour they rapidly closed the gap with their respective target task force.

"Ready." There were several responses as the other pilots acknowledged with presses of the comms button.

"Drop!" In unison the jets dropped part of their war load, but this time they were not Harpoons.

"Split!" The F-111's in both groups stood on a knife-edge and plugged their burners for all they were worth, heading north.

The missiles flew low, none of them following quite the same route. Each missile had its own mission and knew what it was doing,

looking forwards, evaluating threats and adjusting flight profiles to avoid them. None of the missiles struck a single ship. But one after the other they exploded amongst them.

In the flag room on the Shi Lang, Wen Jinsong was examining the fight closely. "What are these aircraft doing?" He was looking at the small group still heading south between the task forces. He could see a portion of the force that had not turned into the attack as he had expected.

The numbers of aircraft were not large enough to possibly retake any of the main stations or runways. As he pondered this, the communications suddenly cut off and hissed loudly, the numerous monitors and screens turned to snow. He sat back abruptly, his nostrils flared as he waited.

Were they under nuclear attack? If they were, the crushing pressure wave he expected would be any second. The entire control room froze in time. Moments passed. Nothing happened, but still the screens fuzzed. His close-in weapon systems and sensors appeared fully operational, which meant they could defend against incoming missiles, but he now realized he was blind to what was happening in the vast ocean between his task forces.

The situation was exactly what the coalition forces had hoped to achieve. Behind the F-111's, in the screen of the jamming, a flight of B1's rose up from the deck and emulated the F-111's. Several more flights followed.

As soon as the first EMP weapon detonated, the pilot of the lead C130 in the combat rescue group pushed the nose of his aircraft to the deck, gouging the oceans surface with the wash from four big curved props. The F-111's then reversed course, heading back south again racing to catch up with the strike package as it moved towards the Antarctic coast.

On the Shi Lang the screens eventually cleared. Wen looked at the monitors, the aircraft that had been there before were now all gone, he was furious, he knew what had happened. In the electronic darkness of the continual EMP explosions, coalition forces had fled through his ranks. Even his fighters had lost all contact in the maelstrom of electromagnetic interference. What their mission was still eluded him. Were they going to attack the bases? The force still seemed woefully small to attempt such an undertaking.

Australian Government Press Gallery - Canberra.

The briefing officer looked around the room now filled with media that were almost rabid in their attempts to get a better sound bite than everyone else. The media could be both helpful and dangerous and he wondered which one of these they would be today. He remembered a few years previously when he was in Afghanistan, a Newsweek reporter had reported on the rumour of a Koran being desecrated by American soldiers. This was only an assertion, not proven. But the result was chaos and nearly a hundred killed in subsequent riots and hate demonstrations against the U.S. All over something that may never have happened. But the journalist got his headline. The briefer had learned that the excuse of journalistic integrity might be just another term for greed and recognition in the world of writers. He hoped those gathered before him had greater integrity and understood compassion. The news he was about to deliver was a shock, but could not be delayed. He started reading from his notes.

"We have just received news that we have lost two ships, the HMAS Darwin and Melbourne. Both sunk, we think, by Chinese missiles. We also believe the ships went down with all hands." That was bitter

news; search and rescue had found nothing bigger than a plastic coke bottle. Quite surprisingly the pressroom was quiet. The briefing officer took a deep breath. His brother had been on one of those ships.

"The Prime Minister will address you later, please keep your questions till then. My job this morning is to brief you on the effort to put out the oil fire at Vostok, what we are doing right at this moment." He went on at some length and then got down to basics; the government wanted ordinary Australians to understand what they were facing. "It's called Fleet Air Area Defense. FAAD, We are talking Luyang II Missile destroyers with Dragons eye phased array radar capable of tracking 300 aerial targets and engaging ten simultaneously, ship mounted MINERAL-ME over-the-horizon targeting (OTHT) with a range of about 240nm, complimented with SS-N-22 and SS-N-27B and modern C3 systems."

The reporter from the Australian News looked a little confused. "With this type of threat, why didn't the Americans use one of their aircraft to drop the fuel air bombs?"

"Because the closest U.S. Carrier Task Force (CTF) led by the Clinton was on a shake down cruise," the briefer explained. "None of the aircraft available could carry the bombs or were equipped to handle the targeting kits we used. The Americans have despatched the Stennis Carrier Task Force and are now flying in more operational units to the Clinton."

"What about stealth aircraft?"

"There are no stealthy aircraft that can carry the massive FAB's internally. The only platforms in the U.S. inventory able to deliver the FAB's we used are B52's and B1's. B1's were out, wouldn't be mission ready in time. (Due to cuts, but he didn't say that.) B52's were sitting ducks in that threat environment, which pretty much left us zip. The F32's couldn't carry the weight, neither could

the Super Hornet; we had nothing in the Naval inventory that could. It was the Pig or nothing. Both the F15E and the F117 would need more tanker support than we can muster or safely deliver." He was pissed off he had to explain that. "I think you should be thanking the men and women who just saved your lives, not acting like this."

"Okay. But how can we believe that this threat really existed?" one of the journalists asked critically.

He looked the reporter dead in the eye. "My brother died today, he was on the Darwin. Do you think I would be standing here right now if I thought this was bullshit?" The reporter went beetroot red, and the rest of the room immediately went quiet.

"We have one strategy, to blow a hole through the iron fence to allow our rescue and strike package to reach Vostok. More Australians and Americans will put their lives on the line to achieve that."

"When do you propose to do this?" someone else asked.

The briefing officer checked the time; he wouldn't be briefing the press before the fact. "It's already happening. I don't think I need to tell you we are not in a position to take these guys on head to head. Not yet. Our objective is to kill the wellhead fire. Earlier today (Dec 8), at 11:30 hours, we began operation Mass Distraction, the mission objective being to draw the Eastern Chinese Naval Task Force and air defense assets away from the F-111 strike route. We needed to create a temporary window to get them through. This has been successful. At the same time we began a program designed to confuse and distract the enemy forces.

"Phase three is the exfil of the strike team on the ground at Vostok. To achieve that we needed a powerful combat search and rescue mission to once again break through Chinese and Russian defenses and get our guys out of there."

As he spoke the combat search and rescue mission was nearing the next phase of its mission. Once clear of the Chinese task force,

several medium sized unmanned refueling UAVs from the Clinton arrived to top up thirsty fuel tanks. Hours later, as the package penetrated deep into Antarctica, just a few hundred miles north east of Vostok, the Spectre gun ships and fighters moved their throttles forward. It was show time.

Paris, France. The Salon Doré.

The Salon Doré (gilded salon), the office of the President of the French Republic, situated on the first floor of the Faubourg Saint-Honoré oozed in its European arrogance. The U.S. Ambassador had been brusque. "Mr President, it is my duty to deliver this message to you in person." His voice, normally diplomatic, was edged with anger. He did not disguise it.

This was incredibly unusual. "President Blaire has asked me to convey verbally that the U.S. Administration is coming to the point of view that France is acting as an enemy of the United States. Subsequently," the Ambassador handed the French President a letter, "we view the current activities of France in Antarctica as hostile. Good day Sir!" he said, turning on his heel and leaving the French President's office, no pretence to politeness. He had wanted to do that for years. It felt good. He would tell his grandchildren of this moment.

The French President was too surprised to answer. The Ambassador's exit had left him with his mouth hanging. He read the tightly worded cable and blanched.

'Any hostile act committed or supported from French territory will be viewed by the United States as an act of war. Any such act will result in an immediate reprisal using any such weapon the US forces see fit against any and all French assets below the 60th Parallel.'

They had pushed the Americans too far. With America at DEFCON one, the U.S. Defense Forces were sitting on a hair trigger. This time they were clearly not playing diplomacy. They meant it.

Still, he was not about to lie down that easily. He considered the request by the Chinese for access to the French polar surveillance satellite. French industry benefited heavily from the Chinese purchasing defense technologies. Granting the request would help the Chinese locate and track U.S. and Australian targets. He picked up the phone.

"Les dire nous donnerons leur accès à au satellite. Nous enverrons les codes d'accès tout de suite," the President said, authorizing the access and the delivery of the codes.

"Oui, ils ont attendu d'urgence," the French Ambassador to the Chinese replied.

The President hung up the phone. baiser les Américains, he thought. Get fucked.

CSAR enroute to Vostok.

In Antarctica the combat rescue team was closing to its target. Ranging in front of the package were Boeing QF-45C and Northrop Grumman QF-47 Pegasus UCAV's. These were split into two missions: the first to attack SAM positions and the second any enemy aircraft on the ground or in the air. The UCAV's were super stealthy, both in design, material and precision active antiradar technologies. They were completely autonomous, using flight telemetry and commands fed to them from an ultra high altitude flying ELINT UAV guarded by dedicated Airborne Borne Laser aircraft.

The wind in the last few hours had completely died away. The day was crystal clear. The coalition had a lucky break.

"Let's move up the schedule on the Spectres," the mission commander said. "Priorities are the long range SAM systems first; we will work back from there."

The pilot of the lead Spectre gunship moved his throttles up to full military power. While his and other aircraft were all flying in passive mode, they were constantly fed situational battlefield data and instructions from the ELINT UAV and satellites.

"We need some bait," the mission commander said after a few more moments. "We need to flush those long range systems out. Move up the F-111's, get them squawking."

Flying at over 600 miles per hour, feet above the deck using their terrain following radar (TFR) systems, the RAAF Pigs plugged in the burners and gained some altitude to deliberately increase visibility. Russian balloon based radar picked up the F-111 flight and took the bait. The data was fed to S400 SAM Batteries, which unlike the S300 could launch their missiles without activating attack radars. Thanks to the French, they were also getting some target telemetry from satellites.

This was a dangerous game. The threat panels on the F-111's remained silent, but the Russian missiles were tracking them. Unseen by the F-111's, the S400 missiles were launched and were steering towards them.

Behind the F-111's and higher, the two spectre gun ships had banked west to allow their MTHEL systems or Mobile Tactical High-Energy Lasers, a chemical deuterium-fluoride laser, to target the missile threat. They had waited for just this moment. While the lasers were still too far out to target the Russian missile launcher platforms, the infrared search and track sensor system, a development from the F-14 Tomcat fighter, quickly locked onto the hot exhausts of the big long range anti aircraft missiles. Once the missiles were acquired, precise targeting was performed by a small 10-kilowatt

laser mounted in the chin of the spectre gunship. The targeting laser calculated the range and its reflected beam to analyze the air turbulence between the aircraft and the target. This data was used to control the systems "adaptive optics" that adjusted a matrix of precision pistons attached to the back of the lasers focus mirror, modifying the shape of the mirror slightly to keep the beam intensity on the target constant even in the presence of atmospheric turbulence.

Once charged, they fired. The combined shots from the two laser cannons were dead on target and fried the electronics on the incoming missiles. The missiles were destroyed without the F-111 crews knowing anything had happened.

Pulling up the rear of the CSAR mission was a Wedgetail Eagle under heavy Escort by F35's. In between were the ELINT UAVs, coordinating the strike and rescue package.

Aware of the total number of shots available and the balance of the mission requirement, the mission commander shared the missile shots carefully between the gun ships and orbiting 747-400 and B52ABL systems.

The F-111's were now less than 300 miles to target and closing. Not far behind them V22, gun ships and above F-22's. The attacking force had established positional data on the S400's launch units and missiles in flight.

It was time to force the Russians to deploy their own high-energy weapons to defend themselves. As soon as the missiles launched from the F-111's closed on their targets, the Russians activated their own COIL based anti missile defense. As soon as they did, an orbiting B52ABL hundreds of miles away responded with its anti-laser system.

The entire package was closing on the Russians. Wearing down the long range SAM batteries, the Spectre gun ships were ready to

deliver their most powerful punch. In place of the 120mm howitzers were airborne railguns. Firing a smaller projectile than the naval versions, the one-pound round was still an awesome kinetic killer, a single round, capable of destroying an aircraft, missile or tank. With precise targeting data, the guns went into action.

The Russians didn't know what hit them. There was no warning. The sudden massive explosions caught them by surprise, the entire launch platform of one of the S400 units disintegrated. With a time of flight of less than 10 seconds and travelling at 14 miles per second, the kinetic energy of the railgun round, fired from one of the Spectre gun ships and headed downhill was transferred to its target. A few seconds later another launcher exploded. There was panic. No one knew what was hitting them, but the precision and lethality made anything like a truck, launcher or trailer a coffin. Men spilled from their vehicles running in all directions. Any direction as long as it was away from the hardware and weapon systems.

The Spectre gun ships methodically moved through the target list. Anything, including missiles that revealed themselves were dispatched. The railgun, within range, had become the decisive battlefield weapon. With the protection of the orbiting B52ABL to handle the enemies laser weapons, there was nothing the Russians could shoot, launch or fire that wasn't immediately destroyed by the railguns.

In front, the F-111's released a cluster of HPM missiles, which, unchallenged, flew deep into the Russian defensive system detonating and completely destroying the enemy's communication and remaining weapon systems with several enormous electromagnetic pulses.

Escape From Vostok.

As the CSAR package approached Vostok, Brian and Lance were ducking lead. There were several heavy thuds in the airframe and the Mi-35M Hind kicked sideways as the snow and ice in front of them exploded from canon shells fired from the Russian helicopter gun ship behind.

"Shit, we have some friends."

"No kidding!"

More cannon shells sprayed the snow in front.

"Why didn't he just fire a missile?"

The SAS Colonel thought about that.

"It must be Nibialok the insane bastard. It's personal."

Lance was throwing the big gun ship around making it as hard as possible for the pursuing attacker to get rounds on the target.

"He's backing off!"

"He's giving up on guns and going for a missile shot."

Nibialok, frustrated, had finally decided to play it safe; he selected missiles while his pilot opened enough range for the missile to arm and acquire.

Lance wheeled the chopper into a steep turn and put his nose onto the attacker. The chin mounted gattling gun followed the helmet-mounted site.

"Brian, give me guns and then a missile."

Lance thumbed the firing button on the switch releasing a stream of canon shells. He punched off a missile. It was way to close for the missile, but the other gun ship had to immediately go defensive. Lance could hear Brian on the radio, transmitting in clear on the guard channel.

"Cease fire, cease fire!" the CSAR mission Commander said urgently over the command channel. The weapons operators on board the Spectre gun ships closed the 'ARM' switches on the guns, bringing the

firing sequence to a halt and allowing the two Russian helicopter gun ships they were just targeting to escape to the west. They wondered why.

Nibialok's pilot recovered quickly from the attack. They were now fighting amongst the snow dunes, long undulating waves of snow sixty to three hundred feet high.

Anticipating the next move, Lance estimated the spot where the Russian would be and charged his gun ship over the brow of the dune to get behind Nibialok. He thumbed the cannon. There was the satisfying recoil of the guns followed by a disturbing quiet whirring sound as the barrels of the gattling gun spun, out of ammunition.

"Oops."

"Oops all right, we have no missiles left either," Brian said, reading the Russian warning lights.

Just as quickly as dropping in behind the other gun ship, Lance Hamilton hauled his own aircraft high before skidding low and to the left.

Nibialok smiled. For a moment he had braced for the impact of cannon fire. But then it had stopped and the attacker had peeled away. "He is out of ammo. Let's take our time here Yuri," he said to the pilot. "Let us make every round count."

Gaining height, Nibialok's aircraft looked down at the helicopter carrying the Australian called Hamilton, desperately trying to evade him in the maze of hills and gullies that had been created by the drifting snow. From his vantage point he thumbed the button releasing another missile. The missile tracked quickly, detonating and severing the tail assembly.

Lance felt the heavy impact of the explosion and sudden loss of the tail rotor. Without lateral control he instinctively rode the

spinning machine into the snow dunes before he lost it completely. The Mil crashed heavily, falling on its side.

Both Brian and Lance were stunned by the crash but the accumulated snow near the bottom of the dune had absorbed a lot of the Mi24's impact energy. His head still groggy, Brian wasn't about to give up. There was something in the back cabin he wanted. He fell out of the cockpit and into the snow. It was hard to think, to focus, but he could hear the approaching killer, sniffing the air and tasting the kill.

Nibialok was ecstatic, now he wanted to see the man who had challenged him die. He directed his pilot to hover near the crashed machine. The prey was down and at his mercy. Someone fell out of the cabin and onto the snow. It was just this moment that he loved. He began to squeeze the trigger when there was a sudden flash.

Brian had scrambled half blind to the rear door of the chopper; he had seen it earlier, but almost forgot it. It was the RPO-A Shmel ("bumblebee"), a single shot, disposable, lightweight, shoulder-fired, recoilless "rocket" launcher. The Shmel was a prepackaged, ready-to-fire system. Brian snatched the cotter pins that separated the individual launchers and cocked them. He fired, but not at the attacking chopper, just below it.

The 93-mm caliber RPO-A projectile was a thin-walled, burnished aluminum, aerodynamically shaped cylinder, fin-stabilized for long-range accuracy. The projectile hit the snow dune, the two-kilogram thermobaric ignited, resulting in a massive thermal effect. The Shmel was essentially a portable Fuel Air Explosive; they seemed to be gaining in popularity. The massive over pressure from the blast followed by a momentary vacuum of air caused the attacking chopper through it to drop, plunging it into the dune.

The Werewolf was a tough chopper hitting hard but not exploding; the rotors flailed wildly, shattered and then came to a

stop as the chopper rolled on to its side. The seats in the gun ship were especially designed to protect the pilot and gunner from a fall in excess of 60 feet per second, the very same seats that had saved Lance and Brian. Nibialok looked to his pilot who was unconscious. No help there. Like Brian, he kicked the door open and fell into the snow.

After the violent chase it was suddenly quiet. There was just the sound of the wind and the hiss of billions of minute slivers of ice sliding over each other. No sign of Hamilton. He was sure he had seen him fall out of the cockpit. It was just one hundred meters. He slugged through the heavy snow.

Brian was gasping for breath. His wound had opened again and he had clearly smashed some ribs in the crash. After the bumblebee shot he had fallen back down the dune. It was cold, really cold, he was lying on his back snow almost covering him. He struggled to his feet, which in hindsight was bloody stupid. But then he wasn't really feeling or thinking that well.

It was the red that caught his attention. Nibialok was well trained; but the blood trail would have been easy for a five year old. Then Hamilton suddenly stood up in front of him, clearly dazed and the Russian was ready.

Hamilton knew he was in trouble as soon as he saw the barrel of Nibialok's gun, already pointing at him. The gun barrel erupted in flame and he felt two massive punches to his chest.

Nibialok had dropped to one knee and fired. Hamilton flew backwards. Got the bastard, he thought, but not the headshot. Hamilton wouldn't be dead until he put a bullet in his brain. He followed through, stumbling until he was on top of the man.

On his back, trying hard to drag air into his shocked lungs, Brian struggled to move. The jacket had stopped the bullets, but the impacts had taken his breath away. He could see the Russian Spetznaz

officer closing on him, coming to finish him off; he was paralyzed, unable to answer his attacker.

At last, Nabialok thought as he stood over Hamilton. He put the barrel against Brian's head and squeezed the trigger; there was a tremendous crash.

He knew, that finite moment before death. He couldn't really tell where he was hit, but he knew he was dead. As he rolled over, no longer in control of his body, he saw images of snow.

Lance staggered backwards. He had never killed anybody up close before. The explosion of red on white reeled his senses. He looked at his brother floundering in the snow. The bastard was actually smiling. He dropped the gun, it was becoming cold, and he knew if he held it any longer his skin would stick to it. "Jesus H Christ!" Lance said. "I tell you, you have just got to make better fucking friends next time. This guy really sucked!" The Spetznaz officer lay sprawled at his feet.

A few minutes later a V22 skimmed over the top of the dunes to pick them up. Once again they were thanking their stars to still be alive. But they knew both knew until they were standing on aussie terra firma, they were not yet safe.

Thw V22 along with the rest of the CSAR team headed back to Vostok to RV with the ground attack forces. From the north the Alaskan based Snow Hawks had parachuted into the station along with ten Ospreys carrying a detachment from the Australian SAS regiment.

They had no sooner arrived at the station when they had to leave, not even disembarking but taking on fuel. They could hear the Osprey pilot yelling over the noise of the engines as he transitioned the aircraft from the vertical to horizontal flight leaving Vostok Station behind them. "The Chinese are launching a major strike to take the base back. We still have no control over any of the coastal bases and to get out of this joint we still have to fight through

them and then the fleet defenses. The Chinese and Russians think we are trying to retake and hold the base. Except we aren't interested in a pissing contest, we just wanted to put the flame out and keep it out, thanks to you two guys," he said, "they also still hold a lot of our people on the other bases, which prohibits a direct attack. So, the bottom line is, we were only ever able to hold Vostok temporarily. Overhead we have two-geo synchronous killer satellites equipped with both COIL and kinetic weapons. Their job is to kill anything that even thinks it will get close to the wellhead. That's why we have to leave." He paused for breath. "We also have four CHARC's under our control, just in case we have to leave any of these aircraft near the coast."

"CHARC's?" Brian asked.

"Yes Sir."

"Son of a bitch." He looked at the tilt rotor pilot. "Could you land me on one?"

"Piece of cake," the pilot said.

"Sweet." Brian looked at the map display. "Can we reach the coast?"

The pilot did some quick calculations. "Yes, but if you don't mind me asking sir, wouldn't it be easier to ride home with us?"

"I'm not going home yet. I have to pay someone a visit."

The conversation was fast, but Antarctica was big. It took several hours to reach the coast. A broken white line of ice separated the ocean from the interior. As they crossed over the last sheet, the sea became a confusion of large waves and frothing white caps driven by bitter southerly winds.

"There they are!"

"I see it," the pilot said.

The CHARCs rode easily through the southern swell, making just enough way to keep steerage. The tilt rotor transitioned from flight

to hover. Twenty feet above the lead CHARC, the cargo door of the V22 swung open.

"You ever done this before?" Brian asked his brother over the noise of the engines and wind.

"No."

"Its fun," Brian said, launching himself away from the airframe, the rope running through his hands while he dropped at an alarming rate to the pitching roof of the CHARC below. Lance followed suit but not quite as quickly. Once on the vessels roof they un-dogged the top hatch and dropped into the CHARC's cockpit, giving the V22 crew a thumbs up. The Osprey pitched forwards, the engines rotating to the horizontal as it picked up speed and headed north.

"Holy shit!" Lance exclaimed. "What's with all the gadgets, it doesn't even fly." It was a complete glass cockpit.

"Want a bet!" Brian said smiling. He firewalled the two throttles, the CHARC surged forwards, and Lance fell backwards. Brian laughed as his brother picked himself up from the floor. "Look to port and starboard," Brian said, concentrating on the controls.

Lance looked out the cockpit windows. There were three other CHARC's following them. "They are unmanned, like this was before we climbed on board. This is the lead boat. They go where we go and from the weapons console we direct the firepower for the full group."

"Awesome."

"Swap seats," Brian said. The two men switched. "You are now driving, I'm working the guns, get used to it because we are going to have to fight this thing. It's a jet, two engines, one in each hull, all-electric, so don't panic when I press the guns and the boat slows down. Just means the power is going to the shot." Brian pulled up the situational display, he pointed to it. "It looks like we have a full on engagement between Chinese and Australian forces and now the

U.S. and Russians as well. This is getting uglier by the minute and we have to stop it."

Lance was still enthralled by the CHARCs cockpit. "This is one sweet piece of gear, but I can't see how we can possibly stop a scrap that big?" Time seemed to slow a little as Brian thought about the question. He handed his brother the artifact.

Lance examined it. "That's the evidence you picked up from the center of the burst?"

"Yes."

He was staggered. "You're right, this is certainly intriguing, but will they buy your story?"

"I don't know, I'm hoping so and it still might be the key to unravelling this mess. If we don't try this we will have a real bloody tragedy on our hands. The Vostok crater is still an accident waiting to happen. It will take very little to re-ignite the wellhead. As we talk now, both the Russians and Chinese are laying in strikes to overcome what they see as an attempt by us to retake the station."

"Cruise missiles?"

"Yes, and probably Backfires, Bears and whatever other assets they have. We have to use everything we have here." He pointed at the weapons console. "To delay that until we can get close enough to force a meeting with Admiral Wen Jinsong."

"Oh shit, I was afraid that's what you were going to say. He's the force commander right. You know him?"

"Know of him yes. I hear he's a pretty decent bloke. I'm sure if we can get to him so we can explain the risk of the well head burning again and let him see the artifact he might reason we are not invading Antarctica, have left Vostok and stand the next strike down."

Lance looked at his brother. There were a lot of 'Ifs' in there. If he were wrong about his assessment of Jinsong...well it would be bad to say the least. "This plan's scarier than our first one."

"Got another?"

"No." He wondered what the odds were about succeeding in two bad complicated plans.

"Let's do it then." Brian pulled up a direct link to tHQJOC in Bungendore Australia. Once the visual link came up and he had stressed the urgency of the situation, he pulled out the artefact. It was like dropping your pants at Sunday school and taking a pee on the piano, there was just no doubt about it, that little rod was a real show stopper. With the exception of jaws dropping, the other end of the communication was for a moment silent.

"The Chinese and Russians are currently laying in heavy strikes on Australian and U.S naval forces, as well as Vostok. Naturally they are convinced we have been retaliating to repossess the station."

"What about our killer satellites?" Lance asked.

"They have limited shots. To use them on the coast would compromise Vostok. We are saving shots to prevent anything getting close to the wellhead. We can't afford to go offensive with them. If the fire starts again, we are all stuffed." In between talking to Lance he was also talking to HQJOC via the boats videophone. "Which is why we have to visit the Shi Lang," he was saying. "You know Wen Jinsong Sir. What do you think his reaction will be to the artifact?"

The CJOPS simply nodded. "Do it. We will provide whatever coverage we can. At the same time I will instruct a communication through diplomatic channels. But they will probably just see that as some sort of shifty coalition plot. Your best chance is direct."

"That's what I thought Sir." He went to work on the command and control station. The CHARC, hooked into the Global Information Grid (GIG) provided Brian an immediate view of the Chinese task force. He focused on the flagship.

The Chinese Flag Ship the Shi Lang.

"New Contacts Sir. Moving fast. 60 plus knots."

The Shi Lang's Captain directed aircraft to intercept. Wen looked at the unusual engagement. This was indeed strange.

"Sir, we have a communication from the incoming vessels."

"Put it through."

Brian spoke quickly in Chinese.

You learned something everyday, Lance thought. His brother spoke fluent Chinese.

"Admiral Wen."

"This is Admiral Wen."

"Thank you for speaking to me Sir."

"Who are you?"

"Sir, my name's Brian Hamilton, Colonel, Australian RAR. I carry with me something I think is important for you to see, something that shows what we have been saying about Vostok Station is fact."

The Admiral was listening, but it sounded like nonsense. "Your people have sunk several of my ships and submarines today, shot down aircraft and have killed many of my men. Why should I believe you, even listen to you?"

"Our only objective was to extinguish the flame at Vostok. Now we just want to keep it out. You can see we are leaving there. If you lay in a strike and restart the fire the result will be catastrophic for all of us. Ask yourself why I would take this chance wanting to face to face with you, what do I would have to gain. I could be home

now having bacon and eggs; instead I'm risking my ass wanting to have a cup of tea with you. The decision is yours but take a moment to examine what's happening, does it really look like we have projected enough force to over run the place?"

The Admiral considered. What was this game? He brought up the French satellite again and looked at Vostok station. Indeed the flame was out.

Hamilton could tell by the tone in the Admiral's voice he wasn't yet convinced. He looked at the large situational screen and then the imagery from somewhere on the GIG which looked at the Chinese fleet.

"Admiral!"

"Yes."

"See the Sukhoi on the stern ramp."

The hairs on the back of the Admiral's neck stood on end. The Admiral looked at the sleek jet parked on the rear of the carrier. Satellites, he thought, or maybe a UAV or perhaps this man was just guessing, there were nearly always Sukhois on the deck. But he would play the game. "Yes."

"Is it empty?"

"Yes, it is empty."

"Excellent." A heart beat after the Australian had said those words the big jet fighter disappeared, obliterated in flames and sliding off the side of the deck into wake of the big ship leaving nothing more than a scorch mark on the deck.

"The next shot could be right where you are standing Admiral. No disrespect Sir, but I'm not going to fuck around here. I don't want anyone to die. But if that has to be the case, it is your people that are going to die in big numbers as well, all because you won't talk to me."

The Admiral looked at the scorch mark.

Another Sukhoi launched from the bow ramp. Barely twenty feet from the end of the ramp it exploded. The Australian wasn't bluffing. Hamilton held his breath, he was bluffing, the small pack of CHARC's he commanded had limited munitions, and using precious shots to kill the Admiral would leave them little to be able to defend themselves against a whole fleet. Killing the Admiral would destroy any chance of negotiating with the Chinese force. It was a Catch 22; Brian knew he was giving up the opportunity to put a hole in the Chinese command structure.

On board the Chinese flag ship the Admiral watched the Tavitak display; he knew missiles were in the air targeting the small Australian vessel and its companions. Surely nothing that small could threaten a whole fleet. The system also picked up the heavy sound of rocket torpedoes speeding through the water toward them. He wasn't about to throw up his hands because of a little magic show. The Australians would be dead in minutes, but he had to admit, they had given him a bad fright.

On board the CHARC, things became complicated. "We have torpedoes in the water....and," Lance paused. "We have missiles in the air." He looked at his brother. "I'm hoping you know how to use this thing right?"

"Damn right I do," he said

"Thank god for that."

"Push that lever all the way forward." Lance did as he was asked.

"What does it do?"

"Charges the cavitation guns." Brian then hit a switch, which started an active ping from the boat's forward sonar.

Brian leaned across and hit the 'Automatic' button on the weapons console. "Get ready for some shockwaves. The cavitation gun

is great, but it's short range." Brian then picked up a helmet from under the control panel. "Put this on."

Lance slid the helmet over his head. "Holy shit!" he exclaimed. "This is better than what we have on the F35." The helmet's internal HUD provided real time 3D situational awareness. After the CHARC's active pulse, the head up display in the helmet visor showed three-dimensional views above and below the water. He could see the submarine, the torpedo and the incoming missiles.

The scene was surrounded by clumps of numbers, which he quickly deciphered as target telemetry. These were joined by small cross hairs that attached themselves to the target joined by an alphanumeric designation, which he guessed was the weapon assigned to shoot it. It was all happening very quickly, the scene changing rapidly as the CHARC sped along at over sixty knots.

He found that he could switch modes and view points. The missiles were supersonic and closing rapidly. He could see the chin turret swivel its railgun and begin firing in unison with the other CHARCs. The units combined combat system sharing the targets between them.

The CHARC slowed as the railguns dragged the power, firing one-pound projectiles at over 22,000 meters per second towards the missiles. They were the same size as those fired from the spectre gun ships. They impacted each missile with the force of a Mack truck. The missiles disappeared.

Torpedoes were next. The outer ring of the Chinese defense barrier consisted of layers of Kilo, Ming and Song submarines; they were passing through that now. Even as the attacking missiles were killed, the second barrel on the chin turret began firing, joined by another mounted on the rear of the cockpit. These were super cavitation guns. Unlike the distant demise of the missiles, the experience of this close in defense weapon was a lot more interesting

and far more personal. The cavitation guns needed to wait until the rocket-propelled torpedoes were within 750 yards before opening fire. This meant that when the torpedoes died and detonated just 350 yards away, the shock wave would resonate loudly and painfully through the hull and anyone seated inside.

Suddenly the CHARC to the left heaved in the water, lifted by a huge convulsive bubble that speared the boat on its nose, breaking the legs off and smashing the cockpit into the sea.

Magnetic mines Brian thought with alarm. "Magnetic mines!" he yelled. He slammed the throttles back to the stops. "Range?"

"160," Lance replied. He meant nautical miles. "And we have satellite and GPS feeds."

"Almost out of shots!" Lance announced. "No more cavitation rounds left. Next torpedo sinks us."

Suddenly, flying low and fast, three Su-34 Fullbacks fell onto the small formation of CHARCs. They were jinking hard to avoid railgun shot; with each alternate jink they would spray the attack boats with heavy cannon fire. One of the jets exploded, tumbling directly into one of the CHARC's, both disappearing in a ball of flame. The cockpit of the Hamilton's own CHARC exploded with multiple hits from cannon shells, the two brothers thrown to the floor as the heavy rounds smashed through the side windows and walls.

The two injured CHARCs retaliated and both remaining jets were hit as they tried to escape, both slammed into the sea. But the damage was done.

Almost out of ideas, Brian thought. Almost out of any luck that might have existed. We have to get to the Shi Lang! Somehow?

Lance had advanced the throttles again, but there were obviously some real problems with the engines, the control panel looked like a set of Christmas tree lights, but there were more red than green.

Brian looked at the battle grid. It was full of symbols and numbers, all moving and changing. He looked at one in particular. "We need help..."

"No kidding!"

"Lance!" he yelled over the commotion of firing guns and explosions too close for comfort.

"What?"

Brian indicated to the grid panel. For a split second Lance looked down; he nodded. Brian got on the horn and started speaking quickly.

Scott Turner ran down the corridor to the control room. "Flank speed! Steer one nine zero five." The order was answered. The Greeneville's CO took the conn and steered the ship at best speed towards the engagement zone.

Fifteen minutes later. "Slow to 15 knots, clear the baffles." The Greeneville did a complete figure eight.

"Load tube one with Mk32." This was a decoy torpedo. Turner pulled his XO aside and explained his plan. The XO liked it.

"Open outer door on tube one." He waited till it was confirmed.

"Swim the fish out XO," Scott said, wanting to avoid the extra noise of compressed air exploding into the ocean.

The MK32 swam out from the tube, and like other torpedoes, its control wire unreeled behind it. About the size of an ADCAP, The MK32 Decoy carried no explosives. It had one job, to act and sound like a Los Angeles class submarine.

While the MK32 was steered to its area of operation, Scott reloaded tubes one and two with the remaining Orlovs and three and four with two of the new endurance torpedoes, designed to hunt and kill on their own. The UAVs were launched followed by the two torpedoes that slowly followed the same path as the decoy. Turner was

responding to a desperate request from the CHARC's to clear the front gate of any enemy submarines.

The Greeneville was in position and running silent.

Up ahead, the Captain of the Chinese type 093 Nuclear Attack Submarine the Majong, was closing to intercept and attack the charging pack of CHARC's above him. The torpedoes would attack from deep beneath the small craft, giving the cavitation defense weapons little chance of targeting them. He didn't know they were no longer operational. But that made little difference.

"Contact! Nuclear attack submarine, Los Angeles class, classified as the Greeneville," The Majong's sonar operator announced.

The Majong's Captain who was finalizing firing point procedures on the CHARC's stopped what he was doing.

The Australian Fleet Task Force

It was obvious to the Australian Joint Fleet Commander that the CHARCs were in trouble. One by one they were disappearing from the GRID. He didn't know what their plan was, but unless they drew some fire away, the plan would cease to exist.

The stealthy USS Zumwalt was almost fifty miles in advance of the main body. So it was with complete surprise to the Chinese when she opened fire. The frigates and destroyers to the rear of the Chinese fleet started to take hits immediately. Unlike the missiles, there was little they could do to stop the railgun shots travelling at over 14 miles per second from hitting them.

"Order the fleet to flank!" Wen Jinsong commanded. He looked at the plot. He would put the attackers on his stern; make it harder for them to target the carrier while he worked a plan to deal with them.

The Chinese destroyer Shenzhen, hull number 167, was taking evasive action. She was receiving multiple hits, some going straight through the super structure and out the other side. Holes would just appear as if by magic. The ship's Captain compressed his lips, he was slowly losing his command to an enemy he could not see and could not defend against.

Using the position of the rear pickets, the Chinese Admiral drew a 200-mile circle, somewhere on the edge of that was the culprit. The railguns he now knew were as good in air defense as they were on ship or shore. He ordered any aircraft to keep a minimum distance of 200 miles from the attacker when they found her. Damage reports kept flooding in from his fleet as piece-by-piece the attacker chipped away at him.

The kinetic energy weapon was a real problem. He couldn't stop the rounds but he could do something about the platform. The first of class USS Zumwalt surged forward and supported by the Hobart Class air warfare destroyers Sydney and Brisbane began to lay down more lethal fire. The Chinese ships were taking a hammering. But just when the U.S. and Australian ships thought they had taken the advantage, the Chinese Admiral was ready to deliver another curve ball. He enquired on the position of the Hong, while the Australians were attacking the two eastern Chinese task forces, Wen Jinsong had sent new orders to his western most task force, still out of the fight. Led by the Mistral class LHD, the Chee, it was as powerful as the Shi Lang task force. Supported by the Slava Class Cruiser the Qing Yuan, the third force steered the Hong towards its targets.

Out of range of the coalition railguns, the sea monster was about to begin delivering its own medicine, a mixture of air launched shkval torpedoes and a new antiship missile, highly evasive and intelligent.

"Shit what is that?" the Intelligence Officer said looking at the satellite image. It was several hours old.

"You heard of the Caspian Sea Monster?" Stringer asked in reply.

"Vaguely."

"Well this is her big brother."

"Bigger?" That was hard to believe.

"Unfortunately yes. We are talking 550 plus tons flying in wing in ground effect (WIG), the same as the Manta landing craft. They both exploit the effect of air compressing beneath a wings surface close to the ground. The same affect that causes many aircraft to 'float' above the runway while trying to land. The only difference here is size. This thing is big enough not to worry about the southern rollers. She flies 50 feet above the waves at over 400 knots. The aircraft was developed out of the Russians KM-8 ekranoplan."

Much larger than the A380, this was truly the fast monster of the seas. "The Chinese version is stealthy in design and includes active radar cancellation, making her pretty much invisible unless you are standing next to her."

"Where do you think she's headed?"

"Towards our fleet, let them know. I will talk to Vince." He walked out of the control center in the Situation Room to Vince Kipper's office. "We have to find her before she kills any of our ships."

Colonel Brian Hamilton looked out the port window and down at the two hulls below. They were full of holes. One engine was shut down. In seconds they would be dead. The instrument panel for the second engine was all in the red. He pulled the artifact from his jacket and secured it inside the long zipper pocket on his lower

trouser leg. He then pulled the throttle back on the remaining engine and the CHARC slowed, rapidly developing a list to port, the hull already submerged. She would capsize any second. There was no possibility of jumping for their lives; the freezing water would kill them in minutes.

"The legs! Retract the legs!" Brian slapped the lever that controlled the cockpit elevation as far as it would go. The cockpit immediately telescoped on its legs to sit on the two hulls. It didn't stop the CHARC from sinking but reduced its top-heavy attitude, which was about to flip it over. With the port hull submerged, the cockpit quickly followed, rapidly filling with ice-cold seawater that penetrated the cabin.

"Now what!" Lance yelled. He had already unstrapped, the frigid water almost to his waist. The small vessel was dead and from what Lance could see, so were they.

Brian went to unlatch the hatch in the roof above them but it was stuck. They were stuck. The CHARC was settling in the water quickly, the cockpit windows already beneath the water, and the dark of the endless deep looking way to close.

Brian ran at one of the cabins roof struts, grabbing it and swinging his legs up, smashing the heels of his boots hard into the hatch. It popped and flipped open. The CHARC was slipping deeper into the water. The two men scrambled through the hatch to stand on the roof, surrounded by an angry sea.

"Jump!" Brian yelled, the roof of the CHARC sinking into the water beneath their feet. Both the men jumped for their lives.

With seconds to spare and no time for procedure the two brothers made a leap of faith across the cold water towards a wildly swinging rescue cable lowered from the open doors of a helicopter. With both of them already suffering from the onset of hypothermia if they missed they wouldn't last more than a few minutes in the water. The CASR crew had identified the predicament as they flew in and had already dropped the cable before reaching the sinking Charc. They could see the two men standing on its roof sinking into the water. The chopper hadn't even come to a full hover as the two men below leaped towards the cable.

The two Hamiltons prayed they had timed their jump correctly to catch the rescue cable as it swung past them. With numb hands they managed to grab the cable which for a moment dragged them both through the water before the winch crew quickly started reeling them in. The problem was could they hang on that long. Lance, still recovering from his earlier ordeal and Brian with his own injury both locked hands and feet around their lifeline and hung on for grim death.

Immediately above them hovered a massive 50,000 lb MH-53M Pave Low IV, the largest, most powerful and technologically advanced transport helicopter in the US inventory. The Kadena based MH-53M was a long way from home but was doing what it did best, combat search and rescue. Supposedly retired it had been urgently enlisted into the fight bolstering badly stretched resources. The Pave Lows state-of-the-art terrain following radar, infrared sensors and the ability to operate in bad weather had allowed the helicopter to penetrate Chinese defences at ultra low level in a marathon 1100 mile rescue bid without support.

The choppers electronics suite provided instant access to the total battlefield situation, through near real-time Electronic Order of Battle updates and detection avoidance with real-time threat

broadcasts over-the-horizon, so the crew were able to avoid defeat threats. Australia's new southern facing Jindalee over the horizon radar, with a range exceeding three thousand kilometres had been able to provide the crew real time data on anything still or moving bigger than an albatross.

The winch process seemed to take forever and as the two Australian officers were almost level with the door, they both failed at the same time falling back into the ocean 60 feet beneath them. Brian and Lance hit the water going deep, struggling to swim back to the surface as their already battered bodies succumbed to the cold. Neither of them made it, consciousness slipping away as their struggle to survive slowed and stopped, their brains starved of oxygen, their muscles cramped. The last thought Brian had was the about the rod.

As the bodies of the two Australians disappeared into the water, two more figures leaped from the chopper following them down, the rescue divers not hesitating for a second in their single minded objective of saving the two men.

In just moments they had grabbed the drowning men and secured both bodies in rescue harnesses and had them winched back up again. During this process the two divers had to wait for the return of the rescue cables; chilled to the bone in rough seas. It was dangerous work, but for these men, the rewards out weighed the risk.

After some immediate medical attention both Australians were dressed in dry clothes and wrapped in specially designed warming blankets. It took some time for them to regain consciousness. Lance eventually stuttered between chattering teeth, "Are we there yet?"

For a brief second, a smile flickered across Brian's face, before being immediately extinguished. He spotted his wet clothing and asked the crew chief to pass him his wet trousers.

The Pave Low, nose down was skimming the waves making 160 knots as she raced back to friendly forces. The pilot had already sent a message through confirming a successful extraction via its Interactive Defensive Avionics System/Multi-Mission Advanced Tactical Terminal or IDAS/MATT. On receipt of the message the coalition forces disengaged from the action, their immediate objectives achieved. All they needed to do now was figure out how to get the Chinese and Russians out of Antarctica without another full on war that could risk a nuke exchange.

A little over three hours after extraction the MH-53M Pave Low IV touched down on the deck of the HMAS Canberra, a 27,000 ton large amphibious assault ship. The Canberra's Captain had been instructed to get the two rescued ADF officers back to the mainland as quickly as possible.

The Chinese task force commander reviewed the video sent at the last minute by the Australia before his vessel sank. He saw something he had never expected to see anywhere else in the world, especially not here, not now. He could also see that the coalition forces had turned about and had apparently ceased hostile action, exiting the area of conflict at high speed. This was confirmed by his unit commanders who advised they were no longer taking fire. Wen considered the options; he could pursue and force them to re-engage, which would draw some of his forces closer to Australian waters, or he could dis-engage, cease fire and maintain his blockade. He decided on the latter. He called off the Vostok strike, he now believed they had indeed left and pursuit would achieve no strategic objective, just more blood letting. He gave the order, making sure the Hong immediately confirmed before it fired on the coalition fleet and re-ignited the battle. The guns fell silent but unknown to Wen or anyone else, a new threat was emerging that would make the damage they could inflict on each other look like child play. The fire was out but deep beneath Vostok Station something was moving and the doomsday clock was once again ticking.