

Prologue

The container ship *Moro Prince*, bound from Manila to Los Angeles, had enjoyed three days of smooth sailing. The last piece of rough weather had been a heavy tropical storm between Guam and Wake Island, kicking up twenty- to thirty-foot seas. Now the ocean was calm, with a three-foot swell and a gentle trailing breeze. The temperature was comfortable, the sky cloudless, the humidity low.

Able Seaman Fidelio Magsaysay had been standing bow watch for the past hour. With the weather clear and the sea empty, he found it hard to concentrate. He scanned his quadrant out to the horizon as slowly and carefully as he could manage, then fixed on something close by to rest his eyes before starting the process again.

After one of his sweeps, Fidelio thought he saw something out there. Dead ahead. Just coming up over the horizon. He raised his binoculars, studied a moment, then lowered them to his chest. He pressed the talk button on his handset and waited till a voice replied, "Bridge."

"Funny-looking cloud bank dead ahead. Low lying."

Fidelio's report came through on the speaker. The captain and the chief mate raised their binoculars almost in unison. "What do you make of it?" the captain asked.

"I don't know," the mate said. "Nothing like that's been reported in this area. Strange cloud. Little bit dirty looking. Probably a local

weather system.”

“Yeah, probably, but then, you know...” The captain paused.

“I saw something like this once before. Java Sea, October of 2010. A week later a whole fucking island disappeared.”

“What was it, like a volcano? You think this...?”

“Looks like we can skirt it, whatever the hell it is.” He turned to the helmsman. “Change course to zero five zero. We’ll run north of it, then correct our heading as we go around the damn thing.” The captain wondered whether this was something that should be reported. To play it safe, he said, “Mr. Mate, fix our position.”

The mate pressed a key on the GPS panel. He announced the longitude and latitude and pointed to the spot on the chart. “That puts us here. One thousand three hundred eleven nautical miles west southwest of San Pedro.”

“Okay,” the captain said. “Make a log entry that we’ve come across a strange cloud formation. Then make a radio report to NOAA in San Francisco.”

Able Seaman Magsaysay first felt the course change in his feet, and realized the bow was swinging slowly to port. Two hours later the *Moro Prince* had the cloud on its starboard beam. The color of the water had changed from blue to milky green. The air was warmer. He took off his denim work shirt, then his T-shirt. He was naked to the waist but couldn’t stop sweating. The humidity almost smothered him. Once in a while the breeze shifted and an odd smell came wafting in from the direction of the cloud. A smell that was not of the sea. A smell of molten heat that came from some other part of the earth.